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# Relational places: the surfed wave as assemblage and convergence

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**Abstract. Taking the lead from social science moves to frame places as "open-ended, mobile, networked, and actor-centred geographic becoming[s]" (M Jones, 2009, "Phase space" *Progress in Human Geography* 33, page 5), this paper introduces how the 'surfed wave' can be understood as a relational place. Drawing on commentaries from surfers on the practice of wave riding, the paper will show that the surfed wave can be usefully understood in two ways: as an 'assemblage' (see Delanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* 2006, Continuum Books, London 2006), and as a 'convergence' (see J Anderson, 2009, "Transient convergence and relational sensibility" *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 120–127). Whilst the notion of assemblage suggests that surfers, boards, and waves are 'connected' together to form one coherent unit for the lifetime of the ride the notion of convergence suggests that the surfed wave becomes a place whose constituent parts are not simply connected together; rather, their thresholds are blurred into a converged entity/process. Theorising *from* the sea in this way is an important move. It demonstrates how the relational turn can encourage us not only to consider traditional places in new ways but also to consider new (watery) 'coming togethers' as 'places'. I argue that these theorisations from the sea offer new perspectives on more traditional (terrestrial) places and human relationships with them.**

**Keywords: relational, assemblage, convergence, surfing, place, emotion**

## Introduction

Until recently it could be argued that much of human geography has effectively been terrestrial geography. As Lambert et al (2006) suggest, human geography could be described as a " 'landlocked' field".[(1)] It is the aim of this paper not to offer a comprehensive explanation for this terrestrial focus (for this see Peters, 2010) but, rather, to discuss its consequences. It is argued here that the particular theorisations developed to understand the terrestrial world have served to not only marginalise the marine world from scholarly attention (after Steinberg, 1999a) but also inhibit ways of conceptualising this watery world appropriately. Not only have geographers developed theories *for* the land but also these theories describe and in some ways create a terrestrial world that is understood to be static, permanent, and durable. These 'land*locked*' theories, therefore, shed little light on the fluid, mobile, and liquid nature of the sea (see Alexander, 1968; Steinberg, 1999b).

However, the intensification of change within the terrestrial landscape and its recognition—primarily the economic, human, institutional, and pollutant mobility associated with an era of severe globalisation—have led to an evolution of social science theorisation that has sought to take this change and its implications seriously. One perhaps unintentional side effect of this evolution in theory has been the greater understanding and appreciation of the sea (see, for example, Cooney, 2003; Steinberg, 2001). Due to changes wrought by the era of intensive globalisation, geographical and social science theorisation has shifted to

[(1)] Even the use of the term 'field' is terrestrially loaded here.

see (terrestrial) place not as static or bounded but as mobile and in process. The notion of (terrestrial) place has thus changed from one that is sedentary and stable to one that is open to conditionality and emergence. I begin this paper by outlining this change—a turn towards what have been termed 'relational places'—before going on to discuss its implications. I argue that the relational turn not only encourages us to consider traditional (terrestrial) places in new ways (eg, towns, neighbourhoods, parks, or plazas) but also enables the consideration of new 'coming togethers' as 'places'. It is in this light that I suggest that the 'surfed wave' can be considered as a relational place. I make this case by drawing on primary research on surfing in Wales, UK, and on extended secondary analysis of surfing activities worldwide.[(2)] I argue that the surfed wave demonstrates how by theorising *to* the sea (by using terrestrially oriented concepts) we can gain useful perspectives on the watery world. However, I also demonstrate how if we theorise *from* the sea additional theoretical insights can be gained that not only may be useful to our understanding of the human interaction with the oceanic world but also can offer a different perspective on terra firma when we theorise *back* to the land.

As Hemingway (1952), London (1911), Melville (1851), and Twain (1872) have noted, there is something special about the sea. The radically different materiality of the ocean (after Steinberg, 1999b) makes a difference not only to human relationships with this medium but also our understandings of it. Often beyond our 'everyday consciousness' (Peters, 2010, page 1262), the sea's chemical and physical composition enables our immersion within it (see Ingold, 2008) yet at the same time precludes our extended presence within it. As a consequence, for many the sea is exotic and other, yet it both reflects our civilisations and mimics our (secret) lives (see Malone, 2011). Thus, however different the ocean may be the sea and the land are never wholly separate from each other (see Mack, 2011). By taking a new look at the sea, in particular through surfers' interactions with this strange environment, we have an opportunity to engender a new perspective of the geographies of which we are a part.

Drawing on commentaries from surfers on the practice of wave riding, I will show in this paper that the surfed wave can be usefully understood in two ways: as a (territorialised) 'assemblage' (after Delanda, 1996) and as a (fluid) 'convergence' (after Anderson, 2009). Whilst the notion of assemblage suggests that surfers, boards, and waves are 'connected' together to form one coherent unit for the lifetime of the ride the notion of convergence suggests that the surfed wave becomes a place whose constituent parts are not simply connected together but, rather, become blended and blurred into a converged entity/process. Theorising to and from the sea in this way demonstrates how the relational turn can encourage us not only to consider traditional places in new ways but also to consider new (watery) coming togethers as 'places'. I argue that these theorisations from the sea offer new perspectives on more traditional (terrestrial) places and human relationships with them.

**Changing places: land(and)locked geographies**

The processes of globalisation have focused attention on the ways in which key geographical terms are conceptualised. It has become crucial to adapt and reformulate notions of space and place so that they remain appropriate and insightful for the context of the (post)modern world. In short, it has become crucial to make sure we have the best ways to 'think geographically' so that a range of disciplines, including geography, remain relevant to the 21st-century condition.

[(2)] The initial research for this paper was funded by the Sports Council for Wales in 2009 and aimed to investigate surfing spaces and practices. The research is based on: an online questionnaire which was completed by 134 surfers in Wales; interviews with the proprietors of 14 surf schools in Wales; interviews with 6 surf club secretaries; and 20 in-depth interviews with people who surf in Wales. It is supplemented by extensive secondary accounts of surfing worldwide taken from magazines (including *The Surfers Path*, *Surfer*, *Carve*, *Drift*, and *Wavelength*) as well as books, autobiographies, and biographies of surf culture. The author is a (kayak) surfer.

As Massey points out: "the way in which space is conceptualised is of critical significance for the conduct of social sciences ... the way in which space is conceptualised is of fundamental importance. It *matters*" (2006, page 89, original emphasis). Globalisation and the repositioning of geography in relation to other disciplines (see Agnew, 1995; Lossau and Lippuner, 2004; Lévy, 2004; Martin, 1999; Warf and Arias, 2008) have led many geographers to challenge conventional concepts of space and place. As Gustafson puts it:

> "as people seem to be increasingly mobile, and their social relations and other everyday experiences are increasingly disembedded from physical locations ... social theorists are [becoming] sceptical about the importance of [traditional notions of] place" (2001, page 668).

This scepticism has made place the focus of renewed interest, and the perceived "static and rigid conceptualisation of space" that has defined traditional approaches to (terrestrial) geography has been 'disrupted' (Pugh, 2009, page 579). Traditional approaches to geography have tended to frame geographical sites as fixed and static. According to Cresswell such static configurations are part of a 'sedentary metaphysics' (after Malkki, 1992) which seeks to "divide the world up into clearly bounded territorial units" (Cresswell, 2004, page 109). It is from this sedentary metaphysics that our 'commonsense' categorisations of the world are argued to originate (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991); our geographies are established in "things like nations, states, counties and places. Thinking of the world as rooted and bounded ... actively territorialises identities in property, in region, in nation—in place" (Cresswell, 2004, page 110). Many terrestrial places are, of course, static in the sense that they are stationary in terms of their grid reference and location. From this sedentary perspective, however, places are also considered static in the sense that they are changeless, preserved, and constant. They may grow or contract but remain more (or less) of the same. From this view if places are "carved out of space" (Sack, 2004, page 244) then it makes sense that places come to be defined when such processes occur over a long period, stabilising place identities and making them durable so they are widely recognised and their values compounded. As Tuan argues, from this perspective, place: "is essentially a static concept. If we see the world as process, constantly changing, we would not be able to develop any sense of place" (1977, page 179). And, as Relph offers, it is every geographical site's "persistent sameness and unity which allows [it] to be differentiated from others" (1976, page 45). From this perspective, therefore, the process of placemaking involves the "carving out of '*permanences*' " (Harvey, 1996, page 294, my emphasis). In the words of Dovey places come to be "identified with what does not change; their 'sense of place', 'character' or 'identity' is seen as relatively stable" (2010, page 3). Such a sedentary and static approach to place encourages explorations of how these permanences are produced and maintained. The geographical imagination is thus oriented towards issues of social, economic, and spatial power: how identities are formed, orders given, and borders controlled (see, for example, Anderson, 2010; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Sibley, 1995).

Such a sedentary approach to place thus formulates a world of closed, bounded, and stabilised places. Place identities and the cultures that create them are deemed to be coherent and preserved, with any narrative of change being framed around the threat of 'foreign' ideas, peoples, and commodities "rupturing and contaminating" local places and values (Coleman and Crang, 2002, page 1). Although this narrative may be appropriate for many places it has also produced a limited geographical imagination in a number of ways. Due to the radical difference in physicality between the terrestrial and the oceanic (after Alexander, 1968; Steinberg, 1999b) these perspectives served to not only marginalise the marine world from scholarly study but also preclude theoretical innovations that may help to conceptualise this world more appropriately. This sedentary approach thus produced both

a 'land' geography and a 'locked' geography (after Lambert et al, 2006). As such it also produced a geography that was unable to account fully for many of the terrestrial changes associated with the contemporary era of globalisation. Characterised by industrial change, capitalist reorganisation, environmental risk, and economic, not to mention human, mobility; globalisation has meant that many alternative relationships between people and place have been generated that easily exhaust the sedentary narrative. Watson sums up the limited appeal of this traditional (terrestrial) approach in an era of intense globalisation:

> "Conventional academic conceptualizations of place ... have become moribund, tending to be blind to trans-local processes and the inequalities that result from them. Place as it has been dominantly formulated in academic discourse has recently been judged as too sedentary, static and parochial for social sciences that are increasingly concerned with tracing the flows, processes and hybridity of subjects, identities and spaces" (2003, page 145).

As a number of disciplines turn towards the geographical in order to fully explain the changing economy, society, and culture (see Lévy, 2004; Lossau and Lippuner, 2004; Warf and Arias, 2008) this approach to place is being jettisoned for a new, more fluid, constitution of the world.

**Changing places: relational geographies**

> "What is the common place?
> "It is the ever-becoming place."
>
> Pred (1984, page 292)

Enabled by the rise of postmodern cultural and social theory (after Oakes, 1997, page 509) geographers have disrupted and challenged the stable, coherent, and static approach to geographical sites favoured by sedentary metaphysics. Influenced by the broader processes of globalisation and the theoretical impetus from other disciplines the notion of place has changed from one that is sedentary and stable to one that is provisional and emergent. Approaches that adhere to such a new notion of place are loosely aligned and often disparate in their specifics—see, for example, the geographies of Doel (1999) and Murdoch (2006) or the actor networks of Callon (1986) and Latour (1999). However, as Jones identifies, they all approach the notion of place in a *relational* way:

> "recent years have witnessed a burgeoning work on 'thinking space relationally'. According to its advocates, relational thinking challenges human geography by insisting on an open-ended, mobile, networked, and actor-centred geographic becoming" (2009, page 5).

Relational thinking marks a shift away from the independent conceptual categories of a sedentary metaphysics and the modern constitution more broadly (see Latour, 1993). No longer do the 'noun chunks' of this constitution hold sway (after Laurier and Philo, 1999). The fixed and essential notions of 'physical', 'human', 'culture', or 'economy' and their associated binary framings (eg, 'A–not A') give way to an *inter*dependent epistemology where things are always acting and being acted upon by everything else. In Doel's words these theories approach the world as if it is "a verb rather than a noun"; rather than something fixed it is something in the making (2000, page 125). These amodern approaches thus opt to focus on the relations and interactions that continually form the world, on how no longer isolated categories are bound together in networks or 'relational complexes' (Rouse, 1996). This thinking marks a rejection of a static ontology of 'being-in-the-world'—associated with Heidegger (1956), for example—and an embracing of a more emergent and emerging ontology of 'becoming-in-the-world'—associated with Deleuze (1985; 1993).

In respect to (terrestrial) places, therefore, such an approach insists that geographical sites are "never stabilised, normalised, sedimented or structured [rather] they are always in a process of dynamic unfolding and becoming" (Rose, 2002, page 385). In the words of Doel "place is nothing if it is not *in process*" (1999, page 7, original emphasis). From this perspective, therefore, place is not a given but something immanent, forever forming, and in progress; as Dovey states, "all places are in a state of continuous change" (2010, page 3). From this perspective, therefore, place is far from a static, stable, or fixed entity. Place is no longer reliable, consistent, or necessarily coherent; it is wholly provisional and unstable. Place, at any moment, emerges in time and space from the web of flows and connections meeting at a particular node. Place becomes the 'point' in this motion, a temporary pause. However, this pause is not solely geographical but also temporal. A place is *now*. It is permanently in the present, only temporarily 'fixed', and now something else. For Ingold (2005) these coming togethers are not static or 'finished objects'; rather, places are 'dots' (ie, pauses) in '*trails of action*'. For Ingold when one is configuring place it is crucial to remember the movement that brought various components together at a geographical site, where they came from, and where they are going next. In this view the *meeting* (see Massey, 1993, page 153) cannot be separated from the *movement*; the 'dot' cannot be separated from the 'continuous line' (Ingold, 2005). In Ingold's words, even though

> "we are now more inclined to think of [place] as a complex of interconnected *points* [it is useful to think of place as a complex of] interwoven *lines*. ...The lines of the meshwork ... are the trails along which life is lived. And it is in the entanglement of lines, not in the connecting of points, that the mesh is constituted" (2005, page 47, my emphasis).

From this perspective place becomes "a constellation of on-going trajectories" (Massey, 2006, page 92), with each component (eg, trade flow, human, policy, weather process) contributing its continuing 'story' to this constellation. Place therefore is the geographical and temporal "dimension that *cuts through* stories/trajectories ... [place] is a simultaneity of unfinished, ongoing, trajectories" (page 92, original emphasis). Here place has become a moment and a location, concurrently shot through with lines of movement that constantly (re)combine to change its form and substance. Our 'stories', activities, and practices are not outside place or played out on place; rather, they meet and move together to form place, however provisionally. Sheller and Urry put it this way:

> "Places are presumed to be relatively fixed, given, and separate from those visiting. ... Rather, there is a complex relationality of places and persons connected through performances ... . Activities are not separate from places ... . Indeed, places ... depend in part upon what is practised within them" (2006, page 214).

From this relational perspective we and our practices are on lines of flight to elsewhere and 'elsewhen', and place itself becomes a trajectory with a constantly changing destination. Relational places are made up of material objects, living things, and natural processes, alongside the practices, cognitive responses, and emotions that produce and are produced by this intersection. From this perspective places are constituted by, and themselves are, coming togethers that are by definition relational. Places enjoy a relational agency (places have effects that are beyond the simple aggregation of the sum of their parts), they incur relational risk (the component parts within places can affect the broader network), and they produce relational sensibilities [emotional reactions are generated within humans as a result of being part of these relations (see Anderson, 2009; see also Davidson et al, 2005)]. What places are like thus depends on these practices and on the relational effects/affects they produce. From this relational perspective we need to ask of place not simply 'where is it?' but 'what is this place like?' (Of course, this latter question should be framed not in terms of any (spurious) essential nature of place but in terms of what this place is like for you, for them, for now, and for then.) Places are thus no longer definitive and fixed (we no longer see static towns,

buildings, countries, or parks) but actor-centred and practice-centred becomings—we have skied hillsides, walked streets, taught seminar halls, slept doorways, etc. Places can be plural and provisional; place is no longer sedentary and stable but evolving and emergent.

**The surfed wave as a relational place**

> "The hollow of the wave was smooth and sucked out. I raced for longer than I expected, but then the whole lip threw out and over me. I was locked inside, racing along, just waiting to get nailed. I went further and further. The wave was like a tunnel, and I was way back in it. Ahead of me, the darkening sky was an oval framed by the moving water; time seemed to stand still ... . It was all clear to me now: Surfing was the thing to do, and this was the *place* to be."
>
> Kampion (2004, page 20, my emphasis)

The relational approach to place has, therefore, disrupted traditional understandings of geographical sites. Places are no longer solely considered as static and sedentary but also seen as formed through the meeting of movements and the pausing of practices. As a consequence, not only can traditional places be considered in new ways but new coming togethers can also be considered as 'places'. The nonterrestrial world has thus been opened up to the geographical imagination. Not only has our 'aerial life' gained increased attention (see, for example, Adey, 2010) but also the watery world is moving in from the margins of geographical inquiry (see, for example, Peters, 2010; Steinberg, 1999a; 1999b). It is in this context that I argue that the surfed wave can be understood as a relational place. Surfing—let alone the surfed wave in particular—is not generally considered an accepted focus of academic study. As Hill and Abbott (2009, page 276) suggest, there are "concerns about the legitimacy of researching surf culture." These concerns may be due, in part, to the marginal and easily dismissed stereotypes associated with surfing participants (see Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003) but can also be traced to the wider silencing of the sea as an accepted subject for academic research.[(3)]

Surf itself is clearly both a fluid and a temporary phenomenon and, as such, would not necessarily be considered to be a place from a sedentary, terrestrial perspective. The location of the beach or the site where surf is likely to occur—for example, an established reef or surf break (see SurfingBlog, 2009) is more commonly studied as a place (see Shields, 2004). [These places are where surf is (more) predictable and located; they are where the transience and fluidity of waves have a degree of permanence.] However, I would like to argue here that a specific surfed wave (as opposed to a surf break or even a set of waves) can also be considered as a place from a relational perspective. A single wave may be difficult to predict, let alone locate, as its existence depends on a range of factors; as Raban points out, "a single wave is likely to be moulded by several forces: the local wind; a dominant, underlying swell; and, often, a weaker swell coming from a third direction" (1999, page 93). In the same vein Shields notes that the presence of rideable surf is "highly dependent on the nature and pattern of incoming waves—their height, undertow, whether they break parallel or at an angle to a beach, and so on" (2004, page 45). Thus, for the place of surf to actually exist requires the interdependent and provisional coming together of a range of components: sea, swell, wind, continental shelf, reef, tide, etc. At its essence, therefore, the place of surf is never stabilised or normalised but conditional on the intersection of a range of changing factors. Due to the fluid and mobile nature of a wave it is "always in a process of dynamic unfolding and becoming" (Rose, 2002, page 385). The place of surf is the very definition of a place that is unreliable, inconsistent, wholly provisional, and unstable. It is a place that, at any moment, emerges in time and space from the web of flows and connections meeting at a particular node.

[(3)] Notable exceptions, of course, exist including the excellent overview of surfing by Ford and Brown (2006), the work of Evers in Australia (2006; 2009), and the work of Preston-Whyte (2002) in South Africa.

These factors have encouraged both scholars and surfers to consider the phenomenon of surf in relational terms. Sheller and Urry, for example, note that the general location of surf (where the beach and the sea meet) should not be considered a unitary object but can be seen as a "complex system of diverse intersecting mobilities" (2004, page 6). Surf-writer Doherty (2007), meanwhile, describes the creation of surf as a "magic amalgam of rock, sand and saltwater". Here the place of surf is described not simply in terms of it 'final' state—as a rideable wave—but in terms of its constituent origins and their storied trajectories; this amalgam is 'magic' and mobile in terms of its components' histories and the unlikely coincidence that their trajectories intersect to create this particular place. Yet for the surfed wave to exist these components also need to be conjoined with a surfer. As Shields describes, "surfing is the art of standing and riding on a board propelled by breaking waves" (2004, page 45); or, as Ford and Brown put it, "the core of surfing has always simply been the embodied, raw and immediate glide or slide along a wave of energy passing through water" (2006, page 149). Surfing can be practised in many ways including long boards, short boards, body boards, surf kayaks, or surf skis. In this paper I will focus on those who conjoin the place of the surfed wave through board riding.

For the place of the surfed wave to exist a surfer needs to time his or her intersection with the rising and breaking of a wave appropriately. As Twain narrates in *Roughing It*, this meeting is not inevitable or straightforward, as he experienced at first hand: "I got the board placed right, and at the right moment, too; but I missed the connection myself—The board struck the shore in three quarters of a second, without any cargo" (cited in Duane, 1996, page 20). The need to time this intersection correctly, along with the skill required to ride the board on the 'magic amalgam' of sea, swell, and shore, makes the practice of surfing an expert one. The creation of the place of the surfed wave, therefore, involves a number of interdependencies coming together at the same time. The surfed wave emerges through a *meeting* of surfer, sea, and swell, which itself cannot be separated from the *movement* of its constituent parts. The surfed wave is a 'dot' (a 'pause') in a 'trail of action'. The surfed wave is *now*. It is fixed only temporarily. And when, following the *floomph* of the broken wave, it is over, its constituent parts disengage and move on to become something else. The place of the surfed wave is, therefore, generated through practice; it is only through the act of surfing that the surfed wave exists yet this coming together produces meanings, (re)presentations, and emotional affects that outlive its existence. The emotions form a constituent part as well as being a product of the surfed wave and are commonly expressed as 'stoke'. As Evers outlines, 'stoke' "is this feeling of intense elation that ensnares a board rider. ... If one is stoked, they experience a fully embodied feeling of satisfaction, joy, and pride. You will tingle from your head to your toes" (2006, pages 229–230).[4] This stoke can be seen as a key aspect to the surfed wave. Due to the stoke produced by surfed waves, these places are lived and photographed (see for example, Fordham, 2007), yearned after (see for example, Rensin, 2008), mythologised (Doherty, 2007), and turned into component commodities for other networks and systems (eg, surf trips, surf clothing and equipment, and lifestyle fashions, amongst other commodities (see, for example, www.reef.com, www.billabong.com, www.quiksilver.com).

The relational turn can, therefore, enable us to consider traditional (terrestrial) places in new ways. But it can also open up the geographical imagination to sense new watery coming togethers as 'places'. Theorising from the land to the sea in this way can, therefore, secure insight into human interaction with the oceanic world. The surfed wave as an "actor-centred

[4] This stoke is almost universally felt as the following anonymised commentaries by wave riders in Wales outline: "The feeling of being out on the waves; the rush of catching the wave and surfing; the whole sensation—it can be relaxing and adrenalin pumping all in the same session." "Nothing else like it, I love it. It's better than sex. The feel good factor." "Nothing feels better than catching a peachy wave." "I have always loved the sea and love the thrill of surfing, the pleasure of the slide."

geographic becoming" (Jones, 2009, page 487) can be understood by focusing directly on this interaction from the perspective of the surfer. As we have seen, surfers' commentaries on what the surfed wave is like for them often refer to the experience of stoke. Each surfer will experience and define this stoke differently. By paying attention to these key differences we can define the surfed wave in two key ways: (from the land) as a (territorialised) assemblage and (from the sea) as a convergence.

**'Flow' experience and the surfed wave**

> "When you go into a deep barrel you certainly feel as if time's expanded. Life is slowed down. I felt as if I could curve that wall [of water] to my will. I really felt that. It's a magical, magical moment."
>
> Shaun Thomson, Surf World Champion in 1977,
> reflecting on the riding of big waves (quoted in Gosch, 2008)

For many wave riders the stoke experienced when being involved with the place of the surfed wave is theorised as a 'flow' experience (see, for example, Ford and Brown, 2006; Shields, 2004, page 50; and Stranger, 1999). This flow experience leads to understanding the surfed wave as an assemblage. The flow experience is defined by Csíkszentmihályi (1990, page XI) as the joy and creativity registered through a "process of total involvement with life". It is an "optimal state of experience in which an individual feels cognitively efficient, deeply involved, and highly motivated with a high level of enjoyment" (Asakawa, 2009, page 123). To experience flow is to have a sense that

> "one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, page 71).[5]

The flow experience is thus focused on the practice, execution, and improvement of skills in order to meet the challenges set successfully, with concentration so focused that other issues, or even a sense of time, no longer seem important (as expressed by Thomson, above). Flow is often experienced by surfers because of the skills necessary to 'catch' a wave and thus ride it. Many surfers express experiences similar to flow, as the following anonymised respondents recounted in interview.

> "I wouldn't say that I am hunting for that most awesome wave—I am just happy if I can get up and manoeuvre my board and feel like I am sort of controlling my ride on the wave if you like—I am content with that."

> "The reason why I carry on surfing is just the pure challenge, you know that you can ride waves from 2 foot to 10 foot and everyone is different and also you want to get better at it—it is a sport that you are doing with nature and everything like that and you just really do want to get better at it all the time."

> "Surfing is an amazing sport which always challenges me physically and mentally. I have learnt about the weather, the environment, my own physical ability which is always challenged when surfing."

> "It saves my sanity, it really does. Its gives me focus, it helps me focus. Like if you ever feel a bit, you know when you've got a lot on, and your head feels a bit battered, then you go out in the water and it just makes you feel better instantly. It energises your head. I feel absolutely knackered when I come out but I always feel so much better in myself and in my head after and that's why I do it."

[5] The term 'flow' was coined by Csíkszentmihályi's interviewees, who (although not surfers) described a feeling of concentration and enjoyment as like being carried along by water. An equivalent and perhaps more appropriate phrase used by many athletes is 'being in the zone'.

**Question:** "Is it the adrenaline or the freedom of it or just being in the sea or, I don't know ...?"

"I think what it has to do with is the fact that when you're out there and when you surf you've got to focus on what you're doing so you're in that time and place right there, you're there. There's nothing else going on in your mind at the time. Whereas when you're at home or you're at work you can still have four or five different things going on in your head like multitasking and stuff but when you surf you can only have that one thought in your head, and that is what you're doing right at that moment. I think that's probably why."

"I love being in the water, total relaxation and it clears your mind. Big waves are a good test—you have to commit or get a pasting! I enjoy the rush I get from sticking a new manoeuvre that I have been trying for a while or taking a big bomb or a nice deep dark pit."

From being part of the surfed wave, surfers experience the sensation of flow. At these moments the place of the surfed wave is defined by the surfer's total concentration and mental immersion in the task at hand; the wave demands his or her immediate and present involvement. The challenge presented by catching the wave and contributing a particular practice to it (eg, a specific cutback or manoeuvre) means that new flow sensations define each surfed wave. The surfed wave is defined by the transient, provisional, and interdependence of each coming together, alongside the flow experiences produced by it. I would argue that this flow experience thus not only is an outcome of the surfer being part of the surfed wave but also goes some way to defining the surfed wave: in this case as an assemblage.

**The (territorialised) assemblage**

As Phillips (2006) outlines, the notion of the assemblage has gained academic currency as a key way to conceptualise relational (terrestrial) places (see also Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). The assemblage displays many of the key aspects of an amodern approach: it is relational, provisional, and interdependent in its formation. As Dovey suggests:

"In the most general sense an 'assemblage' is a whole 'whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts' (Delanda, 2006, page 5). ... The parts of an assemblage are contingent rather than necessary, they are aggregated ... ; as in a 'machine' they can be taken out and used in other assemblages" (2010, page 16).

An assemblage is, therefore, a component that is formed by the coming together of many other parts. These parts do not come together necessarily by intention or design or have an essential permanence that makes their connection insoluble; rather, their aggregation keeps their coherence as an individual unit intact but, nevertheless, forms a larger whole through their connection with others. The notion of the assemblage is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1981). This paper is not the place for a detailed exposition of the rudimentary theory of assemblages put forward by Deleuze and Guattari and then expanded by Delanda (but see Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Marcus and Saka, 2006; Phillips, 2006), suffice it to say that, according to Delanda,

"A theory of assemblages, and of the processes that create and stabilize their historical identity, was created by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze in the last decades of the twentieth century. This theory was meant to apply to a wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts. Entities ranging from atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species and ecosystems may be usefully treated as assemblages" (2006, page 3).[(6)]

[(6)] As Dovey puts it, for Deleuze the assemblage is "a kind of hinge for what he terms 'assemblage theory'. Philosophically this is an attempt to avoid all forms of reductionism—both the reduction to essences and reduction to text. It is empirical without the essentialism of empirical science; it gives priority to experience and sensation without the idealism of phenomenology; and it seeks to understand the social construction of reality without reduction to discourse" (2010, page 16).

In terms of the scope of this paper Dovey has directly applied the notion of the assemblage to the geographical imagination, arguing for the "conception of place as a territorialized assemblage" (2010, page 17). As he explains, for example:

> "a street is not a thing nor is it just ... a collection of discrete things. The buildings, trees, cars, sidewalks, goods, people, signs, etc. all come together to become the street, but it is the connections between them that makes it an assemblage or a place. It is the relations of buildings–sidewalk–roadway; the flows of traffic, people and goods; the interconnections of public to private space, and of this street to the city, that make it a 'street' and distinguish it from other place assemblages such as parks, plazas, freeways, shopping malls and marketplaces. Within this assemblage the sidewalk is nothing more than a further assemblage of connections between things and practices. The assemblage is also dynamic—trees and people grow and die, buildings are constructed and demolished. It is the flows of life, traffic, goods and money that give the street its intensity and its sense of place. All places are assemblages" (page 16).

For Dovey (terrestrial) places can be considered assemblages as they are not discrete, essential things in themselves but, rather, are formed by the coming together of more or fewer random component parts. It is how these component parts relate, connect and interact that forms particular places. These relations are not permanent and, therefore, places may change, decay, and transform. Similarly, component parts can become detached or removed and the place become something else. Places as assemblages are constituted not simply by 'things' but also by practices (eg, the building of houses, the movement of people, the 'flows of life'). As a consequence these places are also constituted by the experiences of those involved in these practices, the meanings they bring to these places, and the intensities of affect produced by their interactions with the other connecting parts. As Dovey suggests, "change any of these and [the street] would still be a place, but not the same place" (2010, page 24).

From this perspective, therefore, places are assembled (with differing degrees of intention); they are assemblies of a range of component parts. Like a child's toy world places are connected together part by part (or 'brick' by 'brick'). As places become assembled the connecting 'bricks' can still be identified or removed, or become part of something else, but through their assembly they also come together to form something larger: the territorialised place itself.[7]

**The surfed wave as assemblage**

When territorialised into a fixed, locatable site such as the street (as Dovey outlines) the notion of the assemblage is used to demonstrate the interdependent and transitory nature of places traditionally considered as discrete, durable, and permanent. However, this notion can also be used to understand more obviously fluid and temporary places such as the surfed wave. Taking the territorialised notion of assemblage to the sea has, to date, been undertaken by Ford and Brown (2006) in their theorisation of the surfing body as assemblage. In their insightful account of the ways in which both the surfer and surfing can be theorised the surfing body can be seen to involve the interrelation of "genetics, neurophysiology, tools (surfboard, wetsuit, wax), life history, personal dispositions, encultured narratives from the surfing subculture and media, and so on" (Ford and Brown, 2006, page 162). However, this assemblage conspicuously omits the place of surfing action. Thus for a surf*er* to be surf*ing*, the physical constellation of water, swell, weather system, continental shelf, sand bar, and reef (artificial or natural) are required to be part of this assemblage too. This coming together that constitutes the surfed wave as assemblage is, therefore, not simply a "phenomenon but

[7] Assemblages may also be compared to 3-D scientific models used to create molecular forms. In these each element or atom can at once be identified, removed, or conjoined, retaining its identity as well as forming a larger composite molecule.

[also] a relationship between phenomenon" [after Virilio (1995, page 140), cited in Rinehart and Sydnor (2003, page 11)]; it is a constellation of 'things' into what Thrift (2004) might call a 'transient structure'.

Theorising from the land in this way, we can see how the place of the surfed wave can be understood, from the perspective of the surfer at least, as one of assemblage. As with any assemblage it is how each component part relates, connects, and interacts that forms a particular territorialised or watery place. In one proximate location on the sea a number of different places may occur one after the other: it may first be a place of flat calm then a place of a wave, a place of a surfed barrel, a place of a surfed wipeout, or a place of a ducked-under wave. Each assemblage will produce a different relational agency, risk, and experience before the constituent parts disengage and dismantle. This perspective emphasises the changing nature of place in one location: due to the different combination of components in every instance place is always disassembling and reassembling.

**The surfed wave as convergence**

"There is a tremendous complicity between the body and the environment and the two interpenetrate each other."

Shields (1991, page 14)

Whilst some surfers suggest a connection between mind, body, and sea in the assemblage of the surfed wave, others express their stoke in very different terms. Although the surfed place remains a coming together of the surfer (himself or herself an assemblage of board, wetsuit, wax, life history, etc) and the nonhuman, physical world (including water, tide, weather system, fetch, continental shelf, reef, etc) many surfers describe their experience not in terms of *connections*, but in terms of *convergence*. Here, as Shields suggests above, surfers and waves are not simply connecting but interpenetrating each other. This is described by surfers in the following ways: "[it is] the ideal of *merging with the medium* … of a now-expiring-and-never-to-exist-on-this-planet-again miracle" (Duane, 1996, page 66, my emphasis); "I love the feeling of being in the sea and of riding a wave. I love the sea and so being able to spend time in it, and *be one with sea* is fantastic" (interview respondent, their emphasis); "It provides a unique way of enjoying myself that is *intimately connected to nature*" (interview respondent, my emphasis). These surfers express their involvement with the place of the surfed wave in terms of being 'at one' with the amalgam of sea and swell, of 'merging' with this 'medium', of being 'intimately connected' to it. These affects do not refer to the execution of skills or to displaying the intense concentration that is associated with flow experiences; rather, they refer to a sense of union with the component parts of the surfed wave, a sense of losing a coherent sense of self in being part of something larger. This is possible due to the radically different materiality of the sea in contrast with that of the land (Steinberg, 1999b). This fluid materiality enables immersion within it (see Ingold, 2008) and facilitates a new sense of place emerging as a consequence. The following respondents express this sense in this way: "A sense of being a part of something that is timeless and much, much bigger than yourself, waves have been breaking since there has been water on the planet and that knowledge can ground me in a period of unease" (questionnaire respondent).

"I am sitting waiting there,
With each rise and fall unblinking stare,
I disappear and sense the motion,
Close your eyes, become the Ocean" (poem written by questionnaire respondent).

For these surfers being part of the surfed wave is adequately described not by being one part of a larger assembly of components but, rather, in terms of being subsumed by a larger entity. As Scheibel notes, when one joins a surfed wave, "there appears to be a disorientation in time and space where the surfer temporarily loses perception of all external boundaries.

There is an intensive and emotional reaction felt by the rush of adrenalin to the muscles, with the resultant feeling of emotional catharsis and the joyful sensation of having been so close in union with the ocean" (1995, page 256). As Ford and Brown put it surfing produces a "co-constituted sense of the surfer being surfed, rather than surfing" (2006, page 162). These experiences, I argue, point to something beyond the assemblage and, although this practical experience is often difficult to articulate, this coming together is identified by surf writer Capp:

> "Whenever I tried to pin down what this 'at oneness' felt like, one particular moment in the surf always came to mind. ... I remember the water swelling beneath me and how I was perfectly in tune with its rhythm. I remember a surge of energy lifting me high above the hollowing water, the thickness of the shoulder, the glowing, desert-like appearance of the shore. Above all, I remember the instant at the top of the wave, just as I rose to my feet to 'take the drop', poised on the brink with the weight of the inrushing ocean behind me and the wave unfurling beneath me. The spool of my memories always froze at this last split second of clarity and separateness before the screaming descent where mind, body and wave—became one" (2004, page 11/86).

The affective intensities produced through involvement with the place of the surfed wave indicate a new way of framing such a place: not as an assemblage but as a convergence. Those surfers involved identify relational interdependence and coconstitution; their experience is expressed not in terms of 'this is how I feel in the face of ...' (after Game, 1997) but, rather, in terms of 'this is how I feel being coconstituted by ...' or 'this is how I feel being converged with …'. This coconstitution is, therefore, the key difference between the surfed wave as assemblage and the surfed wave as convergence. As Anderson and McFarlane reiterate "assemblages are *not* organic wholes"; their different parts are not "subsumed into a higher entity" (2011, page 125, my emphasis). For these surfers, however, although the components of the surfed wave may not have actually merged in their ontological form there is a sense that they have done exactly that. The different parts of the surfed wave have been subsumed into a higher entity. There is no longer a surfer and a wave but only a surfed wave—for a short space of time this is now a singular entity/process, ontologically joined from the perspective of the actor involved.[8] This framing, therefore, cannot be identified or experienced from the outside. To an onlooker, photographer, or academic these places would seem like an 'ordinary' assemblage. However, for those who are a direct part of them this coming together *feels* different and unified.

**The implications of convergence.**

In this paper so far we have seen how the surfed wave can be seen as a relational place. As an "actor-centred geographic becoming" (Jones, 2009, page 487) this place can be understood as an assemblage from the perspective of the surfer. This framing takes a territorialised or land-based theory and applies it to the fluid world of the surf. However, for some surfers the surfed wave can also be understood as a convergence. The notion of convergence suggests that the coming together of surfer, board, and swell effectively blends and blurs the thresholds between each unitary object, forming a converged sense of union for the duration of the ride. This framing of the surfed wave can, in a sense, be seen as a theorisation *from* the experience of the sea *to* the experience of surfing. As such, it offers a new perspective to our understanding of places at sea as well as potentially to our understanding of places on land.

[8] The term 'convergence' therefore, resonates here with the idea of 'agencement' (Phillips, 2006), from which the notion of assemblage was originally worked. Convergence reemphasises the crucial aspects of blending and subsumption that have been lost in the dominant reworkings of the notion of assemblage.

As such, the notion of place as convergence provides an alternative way of framing place, one that also sidesteps a critique that is often levelled against the notion of (territorialised) assemblages. Despite the change of emphasis from isolated categories to relational networks the (territorialised) assemblage is criticised for failing to abandon the categories adopted by the modern constitution of the world. Kirkby, for example, argues that a 'one plus one' logic remains central to these approaches (see Kirkby, 1997; Whatmore, 2002), with preexisting categories not wholly rejected but merely bolted together. This situation may be caused by the representational paradox involved in new ways of conceiving the world (see Bondi, 1997; Lacan, 1968) yet Braun insists we should attempt to frame the world not in terms of discrete, pregiven forms that come together but rather as "flows and connections within which things are continuously (re)constituted" (2004, page 171).

Braun's insistence on the importance of flows and the continuous (re)constitution of place is interpreted here as an attempt to take seriously the ontological implications of a relational approach to place. These implications bring forward a world not of ontological stability (however manufactured and imposed by the sedentary metaphysics) but of ontological instability. Instead of a world where clear ontological entities act on other clearly categorised entities (as is still discernible in the 'brick' by 'brick' connection of the assemblage approach) the world is now composed of flows and mutual interferences: of 'beings' that are also 'becomings'—to use the words of Whatmore (2002)—or of 'entities' that are also 'entities/processes'—to use the words of Harvey (1996). This world and the modern categories that we have used to understand it, including 'place', are no longer as isolated, durable, or static as was previously accepted. These entities/processes are constellations that continually merge and emerge. From this perspective it is more appropriate to think of place not as something formed by the assembly of stable component parts which are connected together but, rather, in terms of unstable entities/processes which converge. Where place as assemblage would be formed through a coming together or an 'assemblage of differences' (Dovey, 2010, page 26) a convergence produces something unified where the component parts are no longer different or even discernible; they have become (for a short time at least) part and parcel of the converged entity/process. In a convergence, connections are not made but boundaries blended and dissolved. A convergence is not simply a locking together of separate entities within a passive context; rather, it is a coming together of mutual interaction and interference. The meaning of any 'thing' in this convergence can be known only marginally if taken in isolation.

In the case of the surfed wave the difference between the connection of the assemblage and the blending of the convergence is significant. Once experienced the blending of convergence affects a person's worldview and aspiration. Surfers who have experienced convergence view the world as ontologically unstable, with the possibility of merger being both realistic and possible as Californian surf-writer Weisbecker states: "surfing forge[s] our perception of ourselves and of our relationship to the world around us" (2001, page 11), with many surfers desiring "ideally to merge with the medium, this [is] our 'way of being in the world' " (Duane 1996, page XIV). This aspiration to merge and emerge as part of a surfed wave, however temporarily, is known by 'Fuz', a South Walian surfer, as 'joined-up surfing'. He states:

> "metaphors determine how we see the world, they influence our kids and life in general. You can become oblivious to your environment if you uncritically accept a language system ... . You become dull to the world. The point is to become aestheticised, to use your senses, to notice things" (Wade, 2007, page 58).

If we pay attention to the experience evoked by convergence we see that a new type of relational place is experienced through the surfer becoming part of the surfed wave.

**Conclusion**

Until recently it could be argued that much of human geography has effectively been terrestrial geography. As geographers developed theories *for* the land these theories described and in some ways created a terrestrial world that was understood to be static, permanent, and durable. These 'landlocked' theories, therefore, shed little light on the fluid, mobile, and liquid nature of the sea. However, processes of globalisation have focused attention on the need to reformulate notions of space and place so that they remain appropriate and insightful for the 21st-century condition. This has produced the displacement of the sedentary and static approach to geography through a relational turn, framing places in terms of the processes, flows, and mobilities that come together provisionally at particular sites. Such a turn has not only deemphasised the fixed and permanent aspects of territorialised places but also enabled a more appropriate understanding of the inherently more fluid watery world.

In this paper I have taken the opportunity provided by the relational turn to explore one particular human interaction with this watery world: surfing. By focusing on the surfed wave as an 'actor-centred geographic becoming', I have shown that the stoke experienced by the coming together of the surfer and the wave can be usefully understood by using the notion of the assemblage. Theorising *to* the sea in this way (by using this terrestrially oriented concept) provides a perspective useful to understanding the connections between surfer and sea. The notion of assemblage frames both territorialised and watery places as provisional assemblies of components joined together like parts in an engine or bricks in a child's toy world. In general this notion has gained a degree of currency as it enables us to adopt a relational approach without completely dispensing with our ability to conceive of place as if not wholly permanent then, nevertheless, durable, with some components remaining 'in place' as apparently 'still points' around which to focus life (after Thrift, 1997). The assemblage thus encourages a new way of looking at traditional places whilst also encouraging the framing of new coming togethers as places (for example, the surfed wave). The introduction of these new places extends our exposition of the relational as such places emphasise, both theoretically and empirically, how places can be seen as unreliable, inconsistent, wholly provisional, and unstable. These are metaphorical and literal places that, at any moment, emerge in time and space from the web of flows and connections meeting at a particular node.

However, I have also demonstrated how by theorising *from* the sea (by using the experience of convergence sensed by many surfers) we can garner additional theoretical insights that not only may be useful to our understanding of human interaction with the oceanic world but also can offer a different perspective on terra firma when we theorise *back* to the land. The notion of convergence suggests that when the component parts of the surfed wave come together they do not connect straightforwardly; rather, their ontological form blends and blurs from the perspective of the participant. As Thomas (2007, page 25) outlines, "convergence fuse[s] thresholds". From this actor-centred approach the thresholds between subject and object, surfer and wave, are fused to make a coalesced, unitary entity/process. Although this convergence is transient the emotion formed through it lingers and becomes part of the worldview and aspiration of those who experienced it. These experiences and the wish for further transient convergence become the 'still point' around which surfers orient their lives.

Viewing the surfed wave as a relational place, therefore, reminds us that any place is not only geographical but also temporal. The trajectories that come together to form relational places, and then leave to form others, operate at different velocities. The timing of their coming together and their relative pacing and synergy combine to influence the concord or turbulence experienced in that place. Further research is necessary to explore the importance of the relative velocities of meeting and movement in defining the nature

of places. Can different velocities combine to produce a sense of assembled flow, on one hand, or of blended convergence, on the other? Is convergence a desired experience and, if so, what coming togethers can produce it? Can convergence be experienced on land—through similar activities such as skateboarding or through other coming togethers of place and practice such as angling or mountain climbing (see Eden and Barratt, 2010; Macnaghten, 2003)? Can convergence also be identified in group experiences such as band or team sport participation or in familial or romantic relationships? Exploring new types of relational places, therefore, raises a different set of questions about the geographies of our lives. The coming together of different components, on a range of trajectories and velocities, forms the (im)permanence of place. How is place 'fixed' and why might we still want it to be? Can more ephemeral places such as the surfed wave give us an apparently ironic but, nevertheless, more permanent anchor in a globalising world? There remains the possibility that relational places such as the surfed wave as both assemblage and convergence can root/route us with a sense of identity and purpose which moves us usefully beyond the political problems of (b)order control derived from a sedentary version of place.

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