

## **The sexuality-assemblage: desire, affect, anti-humanism**

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## **Abstract**

Two theoretical moves are required to resist the ‘humanist enticements’ associated with sexuality. Post-structuralism supplies the first, showing how the social produces culturally-specific sexual knowledgeabilities. A second anti-humanist move is then needed to overturn anthropocentric privileging of the human body and subject as the locus of sexuality. In this paper we establish a language and landscape for a Deleuze-inspired anti-humanist sociology of sexuality that shifts the location of sexuality away from bodies and individuals. Sexuality in this view is an impersonal affective flow within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, which produces sexual (and other) capacities in bodies. Assemblages territorialise bodies’ desire, setting limits on what it can do: this process determines the shape of sexuality, which is consequently both infinitely variable and typically highly restricted. We illustrate how this anti-humanist ontology may be applied to empirical data to explore sexuality-assemblages, and conclude by exploring the theoretical and methodological advantages and disadvantages of an anti-humanist assemblage approach to sexuality.

## **Keywords**

affect; anti-essentialism; anti-humanism; assemblage; Deleuze; desire; sexuality

## **Introduction**

Efforts to re-theorise the humanist ‘enticements’ (Grosz and Probyn, 1995: xiii) that have associated sexuality<sup>1</sup> with notions of agency, individualism, free will, identity, intimacy and even humanity have led philosophers, social theorists and sociologists to augment notions of an agentic sexual subject with post-structuralist perspectives on how the social produces specific sexual knowledgeabilities (Cixous, 1990; Grosz, 1995; Kaite, 1988). Among these, Foucault’s (1984, 1985, 1986) totemic studies of the cultural production of sexuality and a sexual subject have been influential within feminist and queer theories of sexuality (Butler, 1999; Probyn, 1999; Robinson, 2003; Youdell, 2005).

While this move may establish how sexuality, sexual subjectivity and sexual orientation are shaped by socially-contingent systems of thought (Grace, 2009: 54), this does not in itself challenge ‘anthropocentric’ (Braidotti, 2006: 40) conceptions of the human body and human ‘individual’ as the privileged locus where sexuality happens (along with other aspects of human ‘being’). Such doubts over the prioritised status of the body and the human subject in the social sciences have fuelled interest in anti-humanist approaches that move beyond both agency/structure and animate/inanimate (Ansell-Pearson, 1999; Braidotti, 2006; Buchanan 1997; Clough, 2008; DeLanda, 2006, Gatens, 1996a; Grosz, 1994). An anti-humanist turn supplies ontological status not to a body or conscious subject, but to the ‘pre-human or even non-human elements that compose the web of forces, intensities and encounters’ (Braidotti, 2006: 41) that produce subjectivities, bodily capacities, and by extension, sexualities.

In this paper, we wish to explore what might be gained (and lost) by a sociology of sexuality that takes this ontological step; establish a language and landscape for a Deleuze-inspired anti-humanist sociology of sexuality; and how this may translate into a strategy for empirical research that produces novel sociological insights into sexuality, untrammelled by either anthropocentric or deterministic biases. This approach shifts the location of sexuality away from bodies and individuals, toward the affective flow

within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, and the (sexual) capacities produced in bodies by this flow.

### **Sexuality and ontology**

Sexual desire, sexual arousal and sexual pleasure seem so personal, so *interior* to a body, so typically focused ‘outwards’ on to objects of desire that are not the body itself, that it might appear self-evident that sexuality is an attribute of an organism, be it plant, animal or human (for critical discussion of this ‘interioristic’ perspective, see Ahmed, 2004: 8; Butler, 1990: 25; Grosz, 1994: 189; Lambevski, 2004: 305; Weeks, 1998: 36). Psychology and sexology explored the links between physiology, neurology and sexual experiences (Diamond, 2004; Hines, 2006: 119; Hird, 2000: 356), while commentaries upon the ‘human sexual response’ and the medicalisation of sexual ‘disorders’ established sexuality as an attribute of the human body (Garfinkel, 1984: 123; Gatens, 1996a: 5ff.; Gordo-Lopez, 1996: 171; Potts, 2004: 21).

Social theorists have suggested that internalised accounts of sexual desire and sexual identity have strongly influenced lay and social science ontologies of sexuality (Butler, 1990: 28-9; Gatens, 1996a: 77; Gordo Lopez and Cleminson, 2004: 81ff.; Grosz, 1994: 10). For example, arguments that religion represses sexuality while Western liberalism or secularisation emancipate, posit an essentialist subject whose sexuality is buried and/or released by culture (Rasmussen, 2012; Wekker, 2009). As Burman (2003), Grosz (1995: 62), and Weeks (1998: 36-7) have noted, essentialism has supplied an underpinning for aspirational and liberationist identity-politics and struggles for social change among some feminists and lesbian and gay activists in the West: sometimes uncritically, sometimes applying Spivak’s (1990) strategic essentialism as a pragmatic approach. Such emancipatory accounts can be problematic: celebrations of inclusive sexual citizenship following struggles for same-sex marriage rights have established new homonormativities, while notions of ‘authentic’ subjectivity in interventions to counter homophobic bullying define lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender young people as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘special’ (Monk, 2011; Rasmussen, 2008).

Critiques of an essential sexual subject have developed from strands within post-structuralism, post-colonial studies, feminist and queer theory, psychoanalysis and critical psychology (Flax, 1990; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990; Spivak, 1988). Foucault's (1984, 1985, 1986) histories of sexuality undermined a view of sexuality as prior, unproblematic and apolitical, and revealed how discourses on sexual bodies shaped understanding of sexuality in the contemporary period (Foucault, 1984: 103-5).<sup>2</sup> Queer theory has built on these post-structuralist approaches (Butler, 1990, 1999; Eng *et al.*, 2005; Grosz, 1994, 1995), replacing an emphasis on desire (which may constrain or regulate identity) with 'pleasure', which is diffuse, intense and opens up possibilities (Allen and Carmody, 2012: 462; Butler, 1999: 11; Jagose, 2010: 523-4), and highlighting how gender identity and a notion of an essential sexual subject are 'performatively' fabricated from acts, gestures and desires (Butler, 1990: 136; Renold, 2005).

Sociologists have been circumspect concerning sexual ontology, although Giddens stated bluntly that the body is 'plainly enough ... the domain of sexuality' (1992: 31). In many ways the gamut of sociological theories recapitulate debates over the relative significance of agency and structure. Humanistic, phenomenological and ethnomethodological perspectives within sociology emphasise the importance of experience, interpretation and reflexivity upon sexuality, sexual desire and sexual identity (Garfinkel, 1984: 117; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Miriam, 2007; Plummer, 2001: 14), while social constructionist accounts consider sexuality as culturally-contingent: 'a fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviours that we construct from the images, values and prescriptions in the world around us' (Kimmel, 1990: 97).

A specific outcome of anthropocentrism has been to define quite narrowly what counts as sexuality and sexual identity (Lambevski, 2004: 306). In the modern period, the sciences and social sciences reify Foucault's (1984) four societal conceptualisations (or problematisations) of sexuality, incorporating normative perspectives on gender roles, child sexuality, identity, monogamy and gendered mental health. Biomedicine and health technologies have contributed to a narrowing of what counts as sexuality, for

example through the development of treatments for erectile dysfunction (Potts *et al.*, 2003; Fox and Ward, 2008a) and aesthetic plastic surgery, while consumerism and communication technologies have added to the commodification of pornified bodies and body-parts (Gordo Lopez and Cleminson, 2004: 106; Kaite, 1988). Masters and Johnson (1966, 1979) documented the sexualities of Americans in the last half of the twentieth century, while Kahr's (2007) survey of contemporary sexual fantasies suggested that for most people, the limits of contemporary sexuality are typically drawn within constraints of narrow genitality with a bit of BDSM thrown in.

An attempt on our part to offer a broader definition of sexuality, sexual conduct and objects of desire at this point would inevitably struggle with these ontological issues. But instead of debating what a sexual subject is, we wish to move in a different direction, to consider the assembling of sexuality and what a 'sexy body' (Grosz and Probyn, 1995) can do.<sup>3</sup>

### **Bodies, Assemblages and Affects**

Recent social, feminist and queer theory scholarship (Braidotti, 2003, 2006; DeLanda, 2006; Gatens, 1996b; Grosz, 1994, 2008; Probyn, 1995) has discerned a basis for an anti-humanist ontology of social life within the Spinozist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari. In this perspective, all social production emerges relationally as entities affect each other (Deleuze, 1988b: 127; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 149-51), and from the consequent capacities and desires deriving from these relationships (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 1-8). The following brief review of key Deleuzian concepts provides a toolkit (Malins, 2006) for an anti-humanist sociology of sexuality, to be developed in the following section.

Deleuzian ontology is uninterested in what bodies, things, ideas or social institutions 'are', seeing them instead as *relations* that interact (Deleuze, 1990: 207; Gatens, 1996b: 169) to produce specific capacities for action and desire: 'what a body can do' (Deleuze, 1990: 218, Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 256). For example, a 'chemical compound' is

pharmacologically significant only in relation to a 'body-tissue', and whether it acts as a 'medicine' or a 'poison' depends both upon how a tissue is affected, and how that effect is judged by human observers. In this example, the relations between chemical, tissue and observer comprise an *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 88).

Assemblages of relations develop in unpredictable ways around actions and events, 'in a kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections, always in flux, always reassembling in different ways' (Potts, 2004: 19). Every aspect of life comprises such assemblages - at sub-personal, interactional or macro-social levels (DeLanda, 2006: 5), and have an existence, a life even, independent of human bodies (ibid: 40, Ansell-Pearson, 1999: 157-9), and of the relations they comprise (DeLanda, 2006: 10). Assemblages are desiring-machines (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 5, 1988: 88) that 'operate without our noticing them, to produce the desire that we do' (Ballantyne, 2007: 27), but are processual rather than structural, and may be quite fleeting, comprising elements that simultaneously contribute to many different assemblages (DeLanda, 2006: 40).

The conventional conception of human agency is replaced in Deleuzian ontology by *affect* (Deleuze, 1988b: 101), meaning simply the capacity to affect or be affected. An affect is a 'becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 256) that represents a change of state of an entity and its capacities (Massumi, 1988: xvi): this change may be physical, psychological, emotional or social. Within an assemblage, any relation or combination of relations may affect, or be affected by another element in the network (Buchanan, 1997: 80). Affects are 'projectiles, just like weapons' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 400) that produce further affects within assemblages, producing the capacities of bodies to do, desire and feel, in turn producing subsequent affective flows. However, because one affect can produce more than one capacity, affects flow 'rhizomically' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 7), branching, reversing flows, coalescing and rupturing. The flow of affect within assemblages is thus the productive means by which lives, societies and history unfold, by 'adding capacities through interaction, in a world which is constantly becoming' (Thrift, 2004: 61).

In a theory of sexuality, *desire* must play a part. Desire is conventionally understood as a gap, lack or void waiting to be filled by the acquisition of a desired object, be that a lover, a tasty meal or a new purchase (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 25-26). However, while Deleuze and Guattari acknowledged that desire *can* be a lack, they suggested a radically different underlying principle for desire, as not acquisition but *production* of action, ideas, interactions, and thence reality (ibid: 26-27). Productive desire is a creative capacity (Jordan, 1995: 127) of a body to act, feel or otherwise engage with other bodies and the physical and social world; the conditions of possibility for ‘what a body can do’ (which *inter alia* makes it possible to desire food or sex or shopping) (Buchanan, 1997: 88). Put another way, it is nothing more nor less than the capacity of a body to affect or be affected: productive desire makes affect flow in assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 399).

Flows of affect change a body’s capacities in one direction or another (Duff, 2010: 625), and may combine or cancel each other out. Every body, object, idea, subjectivity or other relation is consequently a *territory*, produced and fought over by rival affects within assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 88-89). When an affect territorialises a body’s desire, it shapes the potential for that body to affect other relations in the assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari contrast what they call *molecular* assemblages, in which relations combine in ways that ‘represent nothing, signify nothing, mean nothing other than the desire they produce’, with *molar* assemblages that are ‘stable forms, unifying, structuring and proceeding by means of large heavy aggregates ... organizing the crowds’ (1984: 286-288). Sociologically, the latter include systems of social or economic organisation, discourses, orthodoxies, evaluative categorisations, codifications, cultural norms and so forth (Potts, 2004: 20).<sup>4</sup> Although molecular and molar flows of affect are both productive, the former de-territorialises: opening up possibilities for what bodies can do and desire, and may produce a *line of flight* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 9) from a stable state or identity, while the latter imposes order, re-territorialises and defines what bodies can and cannot do.



At this point, we flag two aspects of this ontology that suggest utility when applied to sociological exploration of sexuality. First, human agency is replaced by flows of affect (and desire) within assemblages as the force that produces and transforms the world (Currier, 2003: 332). These affective flows produce, connect and territorialise bodies, things, social constructs and abstractions within assemblages, and also produce specific capacities to act, feel and desire in bodies. This establishes a fundamental difference of focus between anthropocentric and anti-humanist ontologies: between exploring the social interactions of active, sense-making human agents and mapping impersonal affective flows and territorialisations within assemblages.

Second, the ontology opens up a means to theorise resistance (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 55; Deleuze, 1988a: 71) without recourse to ideas of agency, free-will or voluntarism. While affects territorialise, they can also de-territorialise a body, producing new capacities that free it from the constraints of coercive or disciplinary forces. De-territorialisations of desire can produce a line of flight into a novel state, identity or sexuality (Fox, 1993: 132; Renold and Ringrose, 2008: 333), which may be socially as well as individually transformative (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 341). This emphasis on resistance is important for the study of an area such as sexuality, where deterministic or structuralist frameworks sit uncomfortably alongside experiences of creative and transgressive sexual desires and experiences.

### **The Sexuality-Assemblage**

We will now use this toolkit of Deleuzian concepts to explore the possibilities for an anti-humanist sociology of sexuality, drawing both upon the discussion in *Anti Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 291-4), and recent theoretical and research-oriented studies of sexuality that have used this approach (Gatens, 1996a; Grace, 2009; Grosz, 1994; Lambevski, 2005; Renold and Ringrose, 2008, 2011; Ringrose, 2011).

In an approach that focuses on how bodies affect and are affected, rather than what they are, analytical attention is upon the 'relations between bodies, their configurations

within specific assemblages and the dynamic of the interrelations of their intensive capacities' (Gatens, 1996b: 170). As noted earlier, assemblages connect multitudinous relations from physical, biological, cultural and abstract realms, while the flows of affect between and among these relations produce bodily desires and capacities. So sexuality-assemblages can be understood as 'machines' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 90) that produce sexual desire, identity and conduct, and in so doing, also contribute to producing the social world (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 30). A sexy body may do this or that: it can be attracted and aroused, it can kiss and suck and fuck, it can come; it can fall in love or leave the next morning, it can propose marriage or have a bit on the side; it can do hetero or homo, camp or butch; it can dominate or submit, it can exhibit or conceal; it can do things that might not seem sexual at all. These capacities are products of flows of affect within assemblages, creating the conditions of possibility for sexual desire, sexual responses, codes of sexual conduct, sexual identities and so forth.

To illustrate the sexuality-assemblage and the flows of affect between the multitude of psychological, emotional and social relations it may comprise, consider a 'kissing-assemblage' involving two bodies: 'A' and 'B'. At its simplest, we could represent this as:

A's lips – B's lips.

While the affects within this assemblage are in part physical, sensually stimulating the tissues of lips and mouths, perhaps producing arousal and pleasure, the flow of affect may link the physical event (the kiss) to many other relations: personal and cultural contexts; past events, memories and experiences; codes of conduct and so forth. So a kissing-assemblage is typically far more complex, and could comprise (at least):

A's lips – B's lips – past experiences and circumstances – social and sexual norms – A and B's personal attributes (e.g. physical appearance, personality, job) – dating conventions - immediate material contexts.<sup>5</sup>

The affective flow associated with this kiss links these relations rhizomically (for instance, between some characteristic of A or B, a memory of a past lover and a

stereotype of masculinity or femininity), producing capacities in A and B to do, to think, to feel and to desire. These capacities and desires in turn produce further affects leading to sexual arousal (territorialisations of body tissues, physiological and psychological responses), mutual attraction, desires for intimacy, and positive or perhaps negative emotional reactions in one or both parties. This flow might extend the sexual encounter beyond a kiss, assembling previous sexual and non-sexual events, cultural codes of sexual conduct, physical relations of arousal and orgasm, public decency laws and so on. From a kiss, flows of affect might eventually assemble A and B within a sexual relationship, in which the assemblage could comprise the accumulated interactions, emotions, experiences, social networks, cultural norms and epiphenomena of sexuality, potentially family-life and child-rearing, further territorialising the flow of sexual affect. If only in a small way, a kiss is productive, not only of desires or intimacies, but also of the social world.

This example suggests how, in an anti-humanist perspective, flows of affect in sexuality-assemblages connect bodies to other relations, and how sexual desire territorialises further affective flow. In this sociology, sexual development is the progressive complication of the sexuality-assemblage during childhood and adolescence (Duff, 2010). Assemblages of biological, psychological, cultural and socioeconomic relations produce body capacities including compartments, identities and subjectivities that establish 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Sexual attraction, sexual preferences and proclivities are similarly territorialisations toward particular objects of desire, consequent upon the particular mix of relations and affects deriving from physical and social contexts, experience and culture. Sexuality-assemblages establish the capacities of individual bodies to do, feel and desire, and shape the eroticism, sexual codes, customs and conduct of a society's members, as well as the categories of sexuality such as 'hetero', 'homo' and so forth (Linstead and Pullen, 2006: 1299). Sexuality assemblages bridge 'micro' and 'macro', private and public, intimacy and polity; and while flows of affect in the sexuality assemblage can produce an endless variety of sexual capacities in bodies, 'molar' forces may highly territorialise sexuality into very limited manifestations (Beckman, 2011: 9).

Figure 1 sets out the key elements of this comparison. Beginning with sexual desire, this reflects one of the most substantive differences: between desire as lack and desire as productive capacity. Desire affects other bodies and things, but above all, it produces the sexual body and all its anatomical, physiological and cognitive capacities: this body is not pre-existing, but entirely produced (territorialised) out of materials in the sexuality-assemblage. The areas of sexual arousal, attraction, preferences and conduct (variously understood as the interaction of biology, psychology and culture in an anthropocentric sociology) are all territorialisations that produce specific capacities in this body.

*Insert Fig 1 about here*

Sexual codes territorialise flows of affect in sexuality-assemblages, reflecting aggregating or ‘molar’ affects that accrete around sexual actions and desires, to produce and reproduce social relations, including capitalist production and consumption, patriarchy, and the Oedipal family (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984). Sexual identities (for instance, heterosexual, polyamorous (Barker, 2005) or queer) are reflexive capacities produced in bodies by such affective flows.

Sexuality itself, in anthropocentric sociology often almost synonymous with sexual identity, we radically re-conceptualise, following Deleuze and Guattari (1984: 294) as *the flow of affect in a sexuality-assemblage*. Sexuality thus has two manifestations. First, it refers to the de-territorialising, nomadic and rhizomic flow of affect between and around bodies and other relations, a *socially productive* flow that allows Deleuze and Guattari (1984: 293) to claim that ‘sexuality is everywhere’: in political movements, in business, in the law and in all social relations. As such it has the potential to produce any and all capacities in bodies, different sexual desires, attractions and identities, and those not normally considered sexual at all: this nomadic sexuality has nothing to do with reproduction or even genitality (Bogue, 2011: 34), and

consequently may produce ‘subversive and unforeseeable expressions of sexuality’ (Beckman, 2011: 11).

However, in a second manifestation, the rhizomic flow of affect is continuously subject to restrictions and blockages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 293), often produced by molar, aggregating affects that codify, categorise and organise.<sup>6</sup> Thus territorialised, sexuality loses its nomadic character, channelling desire into a relatively narrow range of sexual capacities, fusing it to lack (ibid: 342), and at the same time depriving nomadic sexuality of its capacities to radically affect or transform social relationships or social formations (ibid: 341). Despite this, new affects still have the capacity to re-establish the rhizomic flow, creating possibilities for a line of flight. Whereas anthropocentric approaches evoke liberal-humanist notions of an ‘authentic’ sexuality lost or distanced by social and cultural forces (Kitzinger, 1987), in this anti-humanist perspective, the production of an individual ‘sexy’ body is always a territorialisation of an impersonal, non-human and nomadic sexuality.

What kind of empirical sociology of sexuality might emerge from such a Deleuze-informed anti-humanist understanding of sexuality? Before critically evaluating the model we have set out and the consequences of its divergences from an anthropocentric model of sexuality, we wish to consider how this novel ontology of sexuality may translate into a useable sociology that can be applied, to research and develop new insights upon sexualities.

### **Researching the sexuality-assemblage**

In their ‘schizoanalytic’ study of mental health, Deleuze and Guattari (1984: 3) set out two tasks for empirical social inquiry that flow from their ontology. When applied to an anti-humanist sociology of sexuality, these are a) to take a manifestation of sexuality and ask about the mix of relations and affects that produced it; or b) to examine a sexuality-assemblage and assess the sexual capacities and desires it may produce. Both suggest a shift of focus, away from subjects’ sexual experiences, behaviours, identities

or desires, and toward the assemblages of human and non-human, animate and inanimate relations, the impersonal affective flows within assemblages, and the territorialisations of bodies, subjects, collectivities and desires that these flows produce.

To date, relatively few empirical studies have explicitly adopted an anti-humanist ontology, mostly favouring qualitative designs. For example, Renold and Ringrose (2008: 320-1) and Holmes et al. (2010) used interviews and ethnographic data; Potts (2004) drew on semi-structured interviews; Fox and Ward (2006) and Ringrose (2011) gathered data from online ethnography and interviews; while Youdell and Armstrong (2011) and Lambevski (2005) both have a strong auto-ethnographic element, based on data gathered during participant observation. This choice of designs and methods may be somewhat arbitrary, if the critical issue when choosing a design for an anti-humanist study is whether a data source provides researchers with the means to identify assemblages, relations, affects and territorialisations. There is consequently an argument that any and all research designs adequate for collecting suitable data might be appropriated for anti-humanist inquiry. Certainly, non-experimental methodologies such as surveys could be usefully incorporated into a data gathering strategy, supplying data on the incidence and prevalence of particular relations within assemblages (Fox and Alldred, forthcoming).

So long as collection methods are capable of gathering adequate and relevant data, then the method of data analysis may be more critical in anti-humanist inquiry. With analysis seeking to expose impersonal flows of affect through assemblages and the productive capacities these create (Youdell and Armstrong, 2011: 145), the methodological challenge is to move beyond the interpretations of respondents, who may have only limited awareness of the relations, affects and assemblages that produce their actions, feelings, desires and understandings, and are shriven of any inherent validity based on their purported 'authenticity'. Furthermore, as assemblages and affects typically bridge micro and macro, analysis must be able to associate relations at the 'level' of the body and bodily behaviours with the broader social, economic and

political relations of societies and cultures (Beckman, 2011: 10), to expose both ‘molecular’ (de-territorialising) and ‘molar’ (aggregating) flows of affect.

The analytic methodologies used in some empirical studies have been informed by ‘schizoanalysis’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 273ff.), a kind of deconstructive or nomadic strategy towards assemblages that in Deleuze and Guattari’s hands melded social critique, therapy and radical politics. In a study of sexualised identities in social networks, Ringrose (2011) used schizoanalysis to ‘map how desire flows and power operates in the relationships between ... assemblages and bodies’. Renold and Ringrose (2011: 394) explored ‘the molecular processes of becoming as girls re- and de-territorialize their space’ and moments of becoming when ‘normative molar segments are ruptured’. Masny and Waterhouse (2011: 293) described a ‘rhizoanalysis’ that explored connections within educational assemblages, while Alvermann (2000; 119) sought out ‘discontinuities and ruptures’ in data on literacy among adolescents.

We will devote some space here to a systematic methodology for analysing assemblages and affects and the capacities these produce in bodies, developed by the first author (Fox and Ward, 2008b) and founded upon Deleuzian ‘ethological’<sup>7</sup> principles (Deleuze, 1988a: 125; Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 3). In this approach, empirical data sources, including interviews, ethnographic observations, documentary evidence, survey data and so forth, may all be ‘dredged’ to identify relations and affects in an assemblage of bodies, things and social formations, and also to assess the capacities that emerge from this assemblage. Thus, to gain understanding of a sexuality-assemblage, we might draw upon various data sources: from interviews, ethnography, data from surveys such as those conducted in the past by sexologists such as Kinsey, from cultural documents such as ‘lads-mags’ or media representations, or from our own reflexive engagement with the assemblage.

In this analytic approach, the work required to piece together assemblages and affective flows is iterative, hermeneutic and synthetic. It is based upon close reading of data sources to identify possible relations (which may be human, non-human or abstract)

within assemblages, and how these affect or are affected by each other. Reading across and between field data (for instance, interviews or observations in a series, or even multiple data sources and studies) can progressively build understanding of the assemblage and flows of affect. Some data from a series of qualitative interviews about the academic, sporting, leisure and sexual activities of young men <sup>8</sup> can be used to illustrate this method. The analysis that follows is preliminary and partial, and is intended neither as offering conclusions about young men's sexuality, nor as a justification of the ontology set out in this paper.

Reading the transcript of a first interview (with 'Andrew', a 20-year-old white student) uncovers a multiplicity of relations, including football, fitness, 'pretty girls', his male friends, his mother, university, social position, past and present sexual partners, illness, doctors, hospitals, clubs and pubs, alcohol, money and social norms. These form the basis for a sexuality-assemblage. The interview transcript can also help to piece together the affective flows between these relations. For instance, in the 'Andrew-sexuality-assemblage', a move from Scotland to London, a chronic illness, his small stature and a background in competitive sport flow together with nights out with his 'mates', alcohol and Andrew's physical attractiveness and attractions to others to produce multiple sexual encounters. These produce duplicity as Andrew juggles sexual relationships, which in turn elicits criticism from his mother. Finally, the transcript can also disclose capacities: 'what Andrew can do and feel and desire', which in the context of a sexuality-assemblage, are capacities for sexual desire, conduct and preferences. For example, Andrew's capacities included serial sexual encounters with the 'pretty girls' he met in clubs and pubs, cheating and deceitful behaviour towards women, and sexual competitiveness with his mates.

Caution is required when using respondent accounts to speculate about affects and capacities, lest analysis of a single interview falls back into an anthropocentric account of individual sexual desires and conduct. However, as further transcripts (or data from other sources such as observation or documentary evidence) are subjected to similar dredging for relations, affects and capacities, the analysis shifts its focus toward the



flow of affect within a wider assemblage that incorporates multiple bodies and collectivities of bodies. A second and a third and a fourth transcript may provide novel assemblages of relations, but they also disclose elements and affective flows that locate the 'Andrew-sexuality-assemblage', and assist the researcher to explore the broader sexuality-assemblage within which such young men and their desires and capacities are located.

Although these data provide the raw materials for discerning assemblages, affects and territorialisation of capacities, the method also requires an analyst possessing theoretical and cultural sensibilities. As in other 'schizoanalytic' methods reviewed earlier, these sensibilities open analysis to flows of affect that produce 'molar' cultural forms or assemblages, and to the aggregating capacities such flows produce (Renold and Ringrose, 2011: 402). In sexuality-assemblages, the products of these molar flows are social formations such as heteronormativity, hegemonic ideas and ideals of beauty, gendered stereotypes and cultural codes of sexual conduct. They may also reproduce capitalist relations of production and consumption, for example, where a sexuality-assemblage incorporates retail industries or venues that supply the backcloth for sexual actions and desires.

A full-blown analysis of this interview series and other relevant data (for example, ethnographic studies, surveys or documentary evidence), has the potential to show how various molecular and molar flows of affect both territorialise and create conditions of possibility for sexual desire and conduct. As a desiring-machine, the affective flow in a sexuality-assemblage defines what bodies and collectivities can do sexually, linking intimacy and polity, kisses and commerce. Territorialised by molar, aggregating relations that codify and organise affective flows, desire is channelled into specific capacities and identities, to produce a very limited range of sexualities and sexual desires, and marginal consequences for the production of the social world. At the same time, molecular flows of desire deriving from a sexual attraction or encounter always offer possibilities for these molar forces to be resisted, making possible a line of flight toward a more nomadic sexuality, and a more profound effect on both bodies and the

social. The powerfulness of sexual desire may indeed make it a 'royal route' to de-territorialisation of molar assemblages. As such, the anti-humanist approach offers both a means to theorise the production of specific sexualities, but also how these may be resisted, re-shaped and transformed.

In this section we have sought to translate an anti-humanist social ontology into a sociology of sexuality capable of interrogating empirical data. We have suggested some methods that can focus attention away from subjects and individuals and towards the flows of affect in sexuality-assemblages. It explores sexuality not as an attribute of a body but as a processual flow that links the human and the non-human, and assembles the most intimate aspects of human life with a multitude of other relations, including broad social and economic relations. In the rest of the paper, we discuss the issues raised by the development of such approaches for empirical social inquiry, along with other issues raised by the anti-humanist perspective on sexuality.

## **Discussion**

Our intention in this paper has been to explore the framework for an anti-humanist sociology of sexuality that focuses on relations, assemblages and flows of affect and desire, rather than upon human bodies, subjectivities and social interactions and practices. The notable features of this approach, as set out here, are first that sexuality is not a characteristic of a body or an individual, but a productive flow of affect that links human and non-human; second, while sexuality is potentially unbounded and rhizomic, in practice it is highly territorialised into a limited repertoire of practices, identities and registers; third, resistance may be theorised without recourse to essentialism or individual agency; fourth, sexuality-assemblages link the public and the private, macro and micro. Together, these features suggest a sociology of sexuality with a capacity to generate novel insights that are limited neither by a focus upon the experiential or the social structural, and that explore the part that sexuality has, and can have, in producing and transforming bodies and the social world. We have also explored how this position may translate into a methodology for exploring sexuality-assemblages that generates insights into how sexualities emerge and mutate, and that

links public and private, human and non-human relations in the sexuality-assemblage. We have argued for methodological pluralism to explore, document and analyse sexuality-assemblages and their relations and affective flows. In this final section we look critically at some issues arising from these theoretical and methodological elements.

In the study of sexuality, sociology's disciplinary focus on the social milieu has been tempered by efforts to acknowledge the personal and political significance of sexuality, sexual identity, sexual conduct and sexual emancipation for the individuals and specific social groups it researches, as the latter struggle against repression and seek sexual agency and authenticity (Bernasconi, 2010: 873; Carpenter and Delamater, 2012: 29). An ability to theorise resistance has been important for the study of sexuality (Renold and Ringrose, 2008), in which deterministic or structuralist frameworks sit uncomfortably alongside experiences of creative and transgressive sexual desires and experiences (Lambevski, 2005: 579; Robinson, 2003: 130-135).

By side-stepping questions of structure and agency, anti-humanist sociology has an opportunity to avoid both over- and under-socialised models of sexuality. Sexual 'agency' is de-centred from bodies and individuals on to the affective relations between human and non-human elements. This enables new insights into the part that flows of affect (including flows of sexual desiring) contribute to the production of the social world and human history. Now the struggle is not between an internal sexuality and a moral order that suppresses its free expression. Rather, 'human' sexualities are always already highly territorialised flows that produce specific sexual desires and specific 'sexy bodies'. Despite this, the model also suggests that bodies can be de-territorialised to produce nomadic and rhizomic sexualities, supplying an ontological basis for resistance (Deleuze, 1988a: 71) that does not depend upon ideas of free-will and voluntarism. While this enables direct engagement with emancipatory struggles to break free from constraining sexualities, gendered rules of sexual conduct and restrictive conceptions of sexuality (McCormack and Anderson, 2010; Russell *et al.*,

2012: 75), this Deleuzian conception of politics has been subject to two specific critical commentaries.

First, as noted earlier, Deleuze and Guattari replace conceptions such as class struggle with a dynamic between the 'molecular' and the 'molar' (1984: 286-288). The principal molar assemblages identified in *Anti-Oedipus* are capitalism (ibid: 303) and Oedipal familial forms (ibid: 311), but elsewhere Deleuze and Guattari also implicate 'major' or 'state' forms in science (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 373) the arts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986) and thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 375), which they differentiated from 'minor' or nomadic creative products (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). To this we add patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, biomedicine and other systems of thought that territorialise bodies as social or organic entities. In this perspective, resistance happens by elevating molecular affects over molar forces. This may be seen as a 'de-politicisation' of resistance, replacing specific struggles to overthrow capitalism, heteronormativity and so forth with a generalised emphasis on molecular 'becoming'. As such, Deleuze and Guattari's work could be evaluated (and/or dismissed) as emblematic of Western (Spivak, 1988) or postmodern disillusionment with grand narratives of class or gendered struggles, while their distinction between 'major' and 'minor' forms of creativity and celebration of the nomadic and rhizomic may be regarded as avoiding criticism of their theoretical framework as itself a molar, aggregating territorialisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 24).

Both Grosz (1994) and Braidotti (1996) address a second, feminist objection to Deleuzian anti-humanism. This concerns the replacement of the possibility of forging an identity-position ('woman', 'homosexual' and so forth) that counters patriarchal or heteronormative hegemony with rhizomic, fragmenting 'becoming'. This might be considered a male power-play, which depoliticises women's struggles to carve out a distinctive space, and denies the possibility of sexual difference (Grosz, 1994: 163). As Braidotti comments:

Only a subject who historically has profited from the entitlements of subjectivity and the rights of citizenship can afford to put his 'solidity' into question.

Marginal subjectivities, or social forces who historically have not yet been granted the entitlements of symbolic presence - and this includes women - cannot easily relinquish boundaries and rights which they have hardly gained as yet (Braidotti, 1996: 310)

Although this criticism has predominantly focused upon the anti-humanist dissolution of the category of 'woman', it is pertinent to this paper's project, to the extent that theorising a rhizomic sexuality bypasses the notions of sexual difference and identity that have occupied much feminist scholarship (Grosz, 1994: 162), and which have been the basis for anthropocentric understanding of sexuality as identity-practice. However, Grosz suggests that feminism may benefit from a cautious engagement with Deleuzian ontology, to 'clear the ground of metaphysical oppositions and concepts' and invoke 'a difference that is not subordinated to identity' (ibid: 164). Despite these broadly supportive reflections, there remains a question concerning whether adopting an anti-humanist ontology inevitably separates sociology from the struggles of people for 'self-actualisation' or emancipatory identity-positions.

We turn now to another aspect of anti-humanist sociology of sexuality: its capacity to link human and non-human, private and public, micro and macro. This supplies a novel means to bring biological, inanimate and social entities into theoretical and methodological association, with flows of affect between these relations not constrained by scale. So, for example, treatment of erectile dysfunction is produced by a flow of affect that links a penis, a pill, an idea of 'normal' sex, the bedroom, and the economic relations of the global pharmaceutical industry (Fox and Ward, 2008b), drawing micro- and macro-sociology into one assemblage. Sociologists can track the flows in assemblages empirically, exposing unexpected and unexamined relations and affects, and show how these produce the sexualities that locate bodies in contemporary society, for instance in studies of minority sexual identities, sexual violence, sex education, and

so forth. The multitude of empirical sociological data on sexuality and its expressions are the material for this project.

More radically, this also opens the way to study and conceptualise alternative, de-territorialised sexualities. Deleuze and Guattari's (1984: 293) proposition was that sexuality is one part of the broad flow of affect that surrounds human bodies, but one that typically manifests as an already highly territorialised flow. Molar forces in sexuality-assemblages constrain what a sexy body can do by territorialising desire into a lack, and the consequence has been to turn sexual expression into a bleak, genitally-focused pursuit of fantasy objects (Bogue, 2011; Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 18). In a DeleuzoGuattarian perspective, there are no boundaries to human sexuality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 293), and the pages of *Anti-Oedipus* are replete with desiring-machines at the edges of what is commonly considered sexual (see also Jagose, 2010; Robinson, 2003).

However, it is no easier for sociologists than anyone else to conceive of a sexuality unencumbered by the usual baggage of attractions, arousals and orgasms, and find it also in creativity, sports, shopping and so forth. Indeed, what is 'sexual' and what is 'non-sexual' anyway, if all there is are flows of affect and desire within assemblages? Perhaps all sociologists can do is to document and re-connect all the ways in which de-territorialisations, becomings and lines of flight produce new desires and new engagements between bodies and their assembled relations. This is a 're-sexualisation' that is also a 'de-sexualisation', distant from and contrary to the pornified fetishising of body parts limiting contemporary human sexuality (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012: 304; Gill, 2009), and which re-invests the gamut of desiring with rhizomic sexuality.

A final issue concerns the translation of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy into a workable empirical sociology. We have made a plea for a more inclusive choice of research designs, and the use of multiple sources of data. However, this is an issue that requires more critical discussion among scholars applying Deleuzian and anti-humanist approaches to empirical social inquiry, for example, to assess if distinctions between

‘positivist’ and ‘naturalistic’ methods retain any utility when viewed through the anti-humanist lens, or whether methodologies such as experiments and quasi-experiments might also contribute usefully to social inquiry into relations, affects and capacities (Fox and Alldred, forthcoming).

The analytical methodology that was explored earlier uses a mix of data dredging to identify the relations and affective flows in assemblages and the desires and capacities they produce, and a sociologically-informed, rhizomic synthesis of data and contexts to identify aggregations and molar influences. As in any interpretive approach, this analytical process is not objective, and while the use of data extraction forms, team-based analysis and analytic induction (Robinson 1951) can reduce researcher ‘bias’, from a Deleuzian perspective the synthetic work involved in analysing assemblages and discerning affective flows introduces what could be described as a ‘research-assemblage’ with its own affective flow, one that produces sociological knowledge.

This leads us to the uncomfortable recognition that, while anthropocentric sociology – from an anti-humanist perspective – is assembled, and shot through with affects and territorialisations that privilege human action and experience, anti-humanist sociology is also an assemblage, although here the affective flow favours the rhizomic and deconstructive, and analysis that dissolves nature/culture dualities and privileges flux and instability. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988: 3-25) extended justification of their own work as rhizomic (and thus on the side of de-territorialisation) cannot de-contextualise their readings or set them outside culture and history. Every de-territorialisation is also a re-territorialisation (ibid: 54), a caution that anti-humanist sociology must take to heart as it explores the affective flow of the social world. Consequently, post-structuralist cautions and feminist reflexivities concerning a search for ‘truth’ in data must inform this methodology.

Despite these reservations, we would suggest in conclusion that the features of an anti-humanist sociology offer new possibilities for exploring sexuality and the flows of affect that produce sexual desire and sexual identities. They make sexuality both

infinitely more complex than in some sociologies, but also intrinsically political, suggesting an agenda that fosters deterritorialisation of desiring, challenges to the territorialisation of bodies and body-parts, and encouragement into lines of flight that abolish the scarcity of the sexual, in our own bodies and those of others with whom we engage professionally and personally.

## Notes

1. Sexuality has been understood as the biological, psychological and social processes associated with sexual desire, sensation, arousal, attraction and pleasure. This paper problematises these scientific and social scientific understandings of sexuality.
2. These are: the recognition of the female body as 'saturated with sexuality' and thus prone to psychiatric disorder; the discovery of an immature sexuality in children that must be regulated; a focus on the economic and political consequences of reproduction for society and thus for parents; and a clinical view of sexual instincts as separate from other biological or psychological drives.
3. We do not use the term 'sexy body' normatively or evaluatively, but to denote any and all body-capacities produced by a sexuality-assemblage. The usage recalls Grosz and Probyn's (1995) collection *Sexy Bodies*, which sought to describe bodies that are 'sexy in ways that were never considered before' (1995: x).
4. It would be wrong to consider molar assemblages as 'higher' or 'macro-level' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 32), although they do operate on a larger scale (ibid: 342). Molar assemblages such as capitalism, patriarchy or heteronormativity are produced and cohere as a consequence of the powerful affective flow between the elements they comprise (for example, between capital, labour and goods, or between men and women). It is the strength and direction of these affects, and the consequent affective power the molar assemblage confers that together enable its continual reproduction when its constituent elements assemble around actions or desires.
5. This notation does not imply a linear sequencing of relations in an assemblage.
6. Molar affects thus have a similarity to Foucault's (1977: 199) 'discursive formations'.



7. 'Ethology' is the study of 'capacities of affecting and being affected' (Deleuze, 1988a: 125), named in recognition of its foundation upon Spinoza's *Ethics*.
8. This was a dataset of 32 interviews with men aged 19-22 years, gathered by Roger de Visser and Jonathon Smith as part of the ESRC-funded Young Men, Masculinities and Health study (2003–2004); UK Data Archive, University of Essex (UKDA 5371).

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**Figure 1. A comparison of anthropocentric and anti-humanist conceptualisations**

	<b>Anthropocentric sociology</b>	<b>Anti-humanist sociology</b>
<b>sexual desire</b>	body's aspiration to acquire what it lacks	body capacity to affect/be affected sexually, usually highly territorialised but can be de-territorialised by affects
<b>sexual arousal/response</b>	innate, learnt or conditioned physiological/cognitive body response	body capacity to affect/be affected sexually, territorialised by affect
<b>sexual attraction</b>	culturally-conditioned response to a stimulus	body capacity to affect/be affected sexually, territorialised by affect
<b>sexual preferences</b>	agentic or learned choices that lead to sexual pleasure	territorialised desire
<b>sexual conduct</b>	behaviours constrained by personal, societal and cultural codes/systems of thought	territorialisation of nomadic sexuality by molar cultural relations
<b>sexual codes</b>	culturally-defined moralities	molar cultural relations in the sexuality-assemblage
<b>sexual identity</b>	a relatively stable formation deriving from some mix of biological, learnt and socialised factors	reflexive capacity produced by affects in the sexuality assemblage
<b>sexual assemblage</b>	--	all the relations that territorialise or deterritorialise a sexy body
<b>sexuality</b>	a formation of preferences, desires, behaviours,	rhizomic flow of affect typically highly territorialised,

	dispositions and identity	but continually fracturing to produce specific desires, attractions and identities.
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