



Tactile topologies of the rural



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ABSTRACT

Innovative and exciting research by critical human geographers has brought tactility into focus. Seen against the backdrop of recent theorizing about power topologies, the prospect of novel analyses of contact, touch, and intimacy raises demanding questions for spatial theory. Action in rural space deserves attention within this emerging literature: if 'tactile topologies' are constitutive of space, a matter for research is how they emerge – and are drawn upon and re-produced – in the rural. This article's intervention is based on an exploration of the centrality of tactility to topological transformations in rural space during the first years of the Union of South Africa. Using archival materials alongside diverse contributions from historians, the article demonstrates how 'tactile topologies of the rural' animated and therefore shaped a wide range of calculations and actions. By focusing on 'intra-actions' between human and non-human actors within numerous 'microcalities,' the article prompts scholars in rural studies to imagine how a focus on tactility might enrich analyses of a wide range of other topological scenes.

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1. Introduction

Recent developments of topological thinking in critical human geography seek to explain how power – authority, say, or seduction – is made effective despite distances between affected actors (e.g. see Allen, 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Allen and Cochrane, 2010, 2014). Subsequent contributors have called for research that recognizes and theorizes the significant ways that humans and non-humans alike draw upon and create 'microcalities' and 'tactile topologies' that are necessarily constitutive of space (Dixon and Jones, 2015). These prompts for innovative research should, one might expect, bring rural spaces and the action unfolding there immediately to mind, although the broad thrust of topological theorizing in general and the more specific turn towards thinking about tactility have both displayed an implicit (and perhaps an unintentional) urban bias. Does a focus on tactile topologies offer anything for research in rural studies?

Toward providing an answer, the following article examines a case in which tactile topologies enlivened and shaped social debate, political deliberation, and economic calculation regarding rural change. My focus is on South Africa in the early twentieth century, which I access via use of contributions from diverse literatures, as well as materials held in the archive of Herbert J. Gladstone (1854–1930), who was Governor-General of the Union of South

Africa from 1910 to 1914. I use these materials to demonstrate the relevance of tactility, contact, and intimacy to processes of socio-spatial change in general and rural action in particular. I argue that 'tactile topologies of the rural' animated state- and farmer-led actions designed to create a functioning settler capitalist space economy. Producing rurality meant negotiating contact.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. I first discuss the idea of tactile topologies in relation to topological conceptualizations of power, and then consider whether rural research on these issues should anticipate peculiarities regarding the importance of touch and contact. Second, I introduce and justify my use of Gladstone's archival materials, and then use them alongside insights gleaned from literature on this period of South African history to illuminate how tactile topologies came to matter. Finally, I draw conclusions from the preceding materials and highlight some ways that tactile topologies of the rural might be further researched in other contexts.

2. Topology, power, touch, and the rural

Understanding how power gets worked out in the context of shifting spatial arrangements is the crux of the matter when it comes to topological thinking in critical human geography. At issue are questions such as: How might a government official based in one place get something done in another place, even on the other side of the world, and amidst changing constellations of social relations? The point is that, despite vast distances and a wide range of

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unstable geographical configurations between them, some 'distant powers' are still able to dominate, manipulate, seduce or exert authority over others (on the different 'guises' of power, see [Allen, 2003](#)). The key to grasping this: their 'powers of reach,' that is, their capacity to alter social action from afar, even when interactions are stretched across space – when distances between objects grow – and when a process of circulation hooks up and enrolls others ([Allen, 2011b](#): 298). Authority or influence may still be made effective, almost as if distance does not matter. Reach is powerful. The argument, therefore, is that scholars need to question how social relations are reconfigured, folded, or twisted into an arrangement that “enables distant actors to make their presence felt, more or less directly, 'here and there'” ([Allen, 2011b](#): 290). Consequently, the concept of 'power topologies' ([Allen and Cochrane, 2010](#); [Allen, 2011a, 2011b](#)) presents a way to think about and apprehend the sorts of arrangements that close the gap between here and there, reconfigure presence and absence, and allow actors to make change happen within complex and changing geographical configurations. Thus, when a non-governmental organization campaigns against sweatshop exploitation by linking working conditions to branded retailers, it works to dissolve distance and extend the 'reach' of consumer responsibility ([Allen, 2008](#)). This power topology of twists, stretching, or compression is fundamental to the way politics is played out. Focusing on power topologies can help us understand the roles played by those who have the capacity to decide how spatial arrangements are reconfigured, as well as those who oppose or subvert reconfiguring processes (e.g. see [Allen and Cochrane, 2010](#)). Topological approaches complicate but improve analyses of the production of space.

Against the backdrop of theories about power topologies – and the scope they present for analyses of the complexities of creating arrangements and configurations that enable presence/absence or reach to occur – a more recent development by [Dixon and Jones \(2015\)](#) has argued for attention to matters of contact, touch, and tactility. This line of inquiry proposes that topological thinking in critical human geography takes seriously how humans *and* non-humans draw upon and create 'tactile topologies' that alter calculations about contemporary life. Using an analysis of the Hollywood film *Contagion*, Dixon and Jones bring to light the way in which “various materials and forces” come into contact, “grab onto each other,” and then become the “engine of topological transformation” (p.223). What matters in these 'tactile topologies' is, per [Hinchliffe et al. \(2013\)](#), not so much the “shape and size of things or the distance between them [but rather the] relationships that tie them together” (p.538). In other words, it need not matter whether the relations are between humans and bacteria, bacteria and other bacteria, or between security arrangements and governance practices. Rather, the analytical question is how the relations respond and give rise to 'microcalities' ([Dixon and Jones, 2015](#)) that negotiate the fact and necessity of tactility. Such microcalities, in turn, generate to research questions about the “the ethico-politics of intimacy” with which humans must grapple, as well as numerous “corporeal vulnerabilities produced by irruptive, non-human life forms” ([Dixon and Jones, 2015](#): 231), which constitute and surround human action but which have tended to be neglected amidst a widely-practised anthropocentrism in geography and the social sciences as a whole; in response, then, Dixon and Jones call for research that avoids adopting a “mind's eye [that] will tend to gloss both human and non-human tactilities and the swarming micros that pass between and among them” (p.231).

2.1. Tactile topologies and rural space

The tactile topologies [Dixon and Jones \(2015\)](#) prompt us to

consider necessarily cross over and cut through urban and rural space. The same goes for power topologies more generally. Indeed, a novelty of topological thinking in geography is precisely the invitation to eschew 'bumpy' topographical concepts such as rural/urban and instead embrace a flat ontology ([Marston et al., 2005](#)) that prioritizes relationality and asks how “relations are formed and then endure *despite* conditions of continual change” ([Martin and Secor, 2014](#): 431; emphasis in original). Some scholars in urban studies decline that invitation and continue to embrace and theorise 'the city' (e.g. on urban density, see [MacFarlane, 2016](#)). Others use 'the city' and probe the meaning of urban politics, but emphasize how that politics reflects demands emanating from elsewhere, which therefore “suggests a different spatial register for the politics of the city; one that does not merely imagine that what happens elsewhere is connected to the polis, but rather conceives of the 'outside' as already folded into the political practices of the polis” ([Allen and Cochrane, 2014](#): 1619). A 'different spatial register' also might have purchase in a topological approach to rural studies, especially in the context of a 'global countryside' ([Woods, 2007](#)) constituted by overlapping and entangled networks, and flows. Howsoever a rural politics takes shape will no doubt reflect this sense of relations from elsewhere 'folding into' the rural scene. Ultimately at issue are the relations connecting things together and how we might best approach an analysis of them.

Yet, although topological approaches in geography present the possibility of moving beyond a rural/urban frame, entirely jettisoning 'the rural' (or the urban) seems churlish in the face of an enduring politics – indeed, precisely a 'politics of the rural' ([Woods, 2003](#)) – shaped by diverse and contested representations, not to mention relations around rurality (or urbanity), that illuminate “material and discursive permanences [that] matter in people's everyday lives” ([Heley and Jones, 2012](#): 215). As [Enticott \(2011\)](#) demonstrates regarding the neutralisation of badgers, for example, 'rural identities' and 'articulations of rurality' can meet up with and alter the state's powers of reach. And as examined in [Jönsson's \(2016\)](#) research on a Donald Trump golf course in northeast Scotland, the contested global countryside and representations of rurality shape how stretched and twisting power plays get worked out. Like the city, therefore, 'the rural' has an enduring politics which, precisely because it is a politics configured relationally, means it should remain open to topological approaches.

With regards to matters of tactility, I suggest there is another good reason for considering the rural in a topological frame. Livestock is reared in urban areas today, as indeed turns out to matter in *Contagion* ([Dixon and Jones, 2015](#)), but it is overwhelmingly a rural phenomena, even if some concentrated animal feeding operations are industrial in scale and radically depart from many taken-for-granted notions of what rurality entails (e.g. see [Weis, 2013](#); also [Allen and Lavua, 2015](#)). In turn, the possibility of disease spreading between animals shapes how rural space is governed. Authorities, agencies, and government departments monitor, report, and intervene based on so-called 'biosecurity' threats (e.g. see [Enticott, 2008](#); [Hinchliffe et al., 2013](#); [Hinchliffe and Ward, 2014](#); on biosecurity processes and 'circulations' more generally, see [Barker, 2008, 2015](#)). At stake in times of 'biosecurity' crisis is the viability of diverse and (varyingly) interconnected actors in a livestock industry constituted by many farmers operating under “economic duress” ([Hinchliffe and Ward, 2014](#): 140). In play is a set of relations that mobilises farmers, processors, retailers, as well as insurers and intermediaries extending credit or supplying feed or pharmaceuticals to act ([Enticott, 2016](#); on similar pressures in the poultry sector, see [Wilbert, 2006](#); [Allen and Lavua, 2015](#)). Material interests create pressure on the state to deploy its unique powers and, if needs be, intervene to reconfigure the topological scene.

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