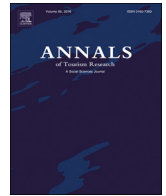


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Research Note

On actor-network theory and anxiety in tourism research

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Anxiety is a pervasive thing. It is erratic, radiant and hot, a rough, rambunctious hum of restlessness that dissipates and repopulates seemingly without pattern or explanation. Anxiety is existential, evocative, ever-present, and unfocused, often experienced as we seek authenticity or acceptance (Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Learning from d’Hauterter (2015), anxiety can be understood as both emotive (a pinpointed feeling) and affective (a dispersed, more-than-representational experience); an upheaval that registers within and around us in ways that seemingly transcend description. Anxiety scatters and diffuses, volatile in its power. Indeed, anxiety affects. And as an affective experience, anxiety is palpable—it has an “unconscious intensity” (Bennett, 2010, p. 114)—yet is also unpredictable in so far as it produces paralytic and motivating responses (Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Anxiety can seem boundless and unrestrained, touching all corners of our lives within tourism, academia, and beyond. It interferes with and is a part of us.

But what does it look like when anxiety infiltrates our research and practice as tourism scholars? In this research note, we want to prompt and engage discussions about how our methodological choices and anxieties influence, interact, and interplay with one another as we participate in tourism research. Historically, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has had challenges incorporating affect and human inclinations, a function of its push towards symmetry and recognizing non-human actors and agencies (Thrift, 2000). In their 2016 paper, Müller and Schurr considered the inclusion of affect within ANT in the form of desire/wish, though they stopped short of extending this inclusion into research practice. We argue that attention to affect should be extended into methodological processes as a productive tool, and show how this possibility can be facilitated by the more-than-representational strength of ANT.

Recently, Tucker and Shelton (2018) invited readers to consider the worldmaking power of tourism as facilitated through narrative and affect, while Vidon and Rickly (2018) suggested that a deeper understanding of anxiety’s persistence in conditioning the tourist experience is necessary. Narratives about the world, as Franklin (2004) instructs us, produce, reinforce, and (de)stabilize tourist orderings. Such tourism orderings—tourismscapes—are more-than-representational: they elude our complete understanding and absolute-knowing (Barratt, 2012; d’Hauterter, 2015, van der Duim, 2007). This is true also of affect—including anxiety—and how it is not consciously directed by any one actor toward any other; indeed affect is “an ‘interface’... between bodies and the spaces they traverse” (d’Hauterter, 2015, p. 80). Our emotions, moods, and feelings contribute to our assembling of tourism narratives—consequently, tourismscapes are flooded with affect (Tucker & Shelton, 2018).

The entanglements of tourism, affect, and ANT have been made manifest to us throughout our academic and personal practices of

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rock climbing. Climbing can be housed in the world of tourism given the definition of tourism as “encounters which generally involve engagement, relations, and/or negotiations” and marked by a sensory-heightened “restless movement, passage, and flow” (d’Hautesserre, 2015, p. 78). Further, climbing is an interplay, an “unruly assemblage” (Rossiter, 2007, p. 304), a continuous negotiation between human and non-human actors, and a performance of possibilities and places, one that gathers in sometimes more-than-representational ways (Barratt, 2012). Climbing is anxiety-provoking in its physical negotiations of danger and also in its disruption of conventional binaries, blurring the bounds of bodies/space and nature/culture, and welcoming interfering nonhumans (Rossiter, 2007). Our immersions with ANT and anxiety began earlier this year while struggling with attending to the ‘voice’ of the rock in rock climbing. On first consideration, no set of onto-epistemological or methodological criteria seemed to usefully describe the socio-materiality of climbing practice and places or give us the language with which to discuss these tensions; we were subsequently relieved to rediscover the ANT work by Ren (2011) and Franklin (2004), among others (Latour, 1993; Law, 2004). With further readings, we were struck by what an earnest attention to the more-than-human could mean for our future work and onto-methodological positionings. It is perhaps an open secret within academia that many researchers experience this ongoing, self-conscious crisis of uncertainty, specifically regarding onto-epistemological engagement and the struggle of knowing and not knowing (see e.g., Berbary et al., 2018).

Exploring such questions was especially jarring for Michela, whose early-stage academic career became wracked with an unyielding fear as both scholarly and lifestyle pursuits were ruptured and renegotiated. Simultaneous to exploring the prioritization of the more-than-human in academic literature, Michela was caught up in a complex ethical discussion surrounding her own climbing practice and access to a local climbing area—including an examination of the defacing and degrading of rock and land. Such uncertainty and discomfort—fear of what we will (or will not) find through our work and in our lives—can feel paralyzing. As researchers, we are conditioned to avoid discussing unsettling feelings or the self as the subject, worrying about failure, loss of control, and (not) knowing, all of which jar with structured academic practice (Berbary et al., 2018). Anxiety in this light is *value negative*: a warning, a loss, something that takes away from our propensity to do good, to ‘know’.

But there is an alternative to casting anxiety solely as negative, one we feel is encouraged in critical, posthumanist writing, and which we find welcomed within ANT. This alternative—*anxiety as value expansive*—is just as pervasive and rife with uncertainty. Value expansive anxiety is uncomfortable yet illuminative, crucial in negotiations with authenticity and alienation (Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Though destabilizing, value expansive anxiety can be harnessed to shift our worldviews, upset presupposed positionalities, and assist us in carefully thinking with theory (Berbary et al., 2018). Value expansive anxiety is not a detriment to successful and innovative research—it is a motivator. Anxiety pushes us to search for truth/s, stasis, knowledge, and balance, even if we know such ends are tentative, never achievable (Vidon & Rickly, 2018).

Our field has come to grips in recent years with how research methodologies enact our socio-material worlds by restraining, fixing, and defining possibility (Beard, Scarles, & Tribe, 2016). The contested terrains of ‘posthumanism’ have been especially influenced by such insights and have marshalled challenges to embrace creativity, uncertainty, and a restoration of balance to material-discursive practices (Kumm & Berbary, 2018). Throughout ANT work, it is clear that ambiguity and uncertainty are not methodological limitations, but instead part of the enactment of ordering through research that is inherently situated, interventionist, and productive (Bille, 2015; van der Duim, Ren, & Jóhannesson, 2017). Our assembled, multi-realities are not considered in an affective vacuum; rather, research narratives and affect inform and are informed by one another, and both are recursively bracketed by methodological choice. An anxious researcher acting in a precarious network; this seems the im/perfect rendering of Latour’s “slight surprise of action,” or an entangled and emergent *affect* of colliding more-than-humans (Latour, as cited in Bennett, 2010, p. 27).

Constantly colliding with uncertainty throughout every part of the research process is hard work. We have found that the methodological possibilities opened by ANT relieve us of some of the emotional burden that accompanies this work by welcoming and legitimizing anxiety within our methods practice and ourselves. Considering research as a practice allied with uncertainty can lead us to accepting anxiety itself as a point of increased understanding: a tool of orientation that—like reflexivity or critical thinking—leads to usefully enabling and legitimizing certain methods choices. Crouch (2010) suggests that uncertainty gives us space to feel new joys, flirt, explore, and consider strange juxtapositions of materials and experiences. So, if “the issue [with method] becomes how to make things different, and what to make” (Law, 2004, p. 143), welcoming uncertainty means we can experiment with embodiment, conversations, climbing, and landscapes *as methods*—we may even consider our “human apprehensions” like anxiety and affect to *be method* (p. 146). Indeed, early in Michela’s data generation process, tormenting weather and unexpected rock conditions resulted in many ‘lost’ days in the field and an onslaught of anxiety. However, this elemental interference opened Michela’s network to an entirely new method (a intimate, tactile feeling and fumbling of rock ‘removed’ from climbing) and actor (the gradual, creeping shift of climate change). Through and with anxiety, Michela was moved to alter her methods assemblage—the result is a generated data of climbing far different than originally expected.

Rossiter (2007) suggests that through fear, a climber’s “volitional capacities and imagined fixed boundaries are thrown into the sharpest relief” (p. 299). Whatever our vocation, by knowing the bounds of our praxis and convictions we can choose to renegotiate them, creating space for a broader range of voices—even that of the rock. Discomfort can thus be a compass (Lowman & Barker, 2015) in conducting a myriad of critical posthumanist work that addresses power, representation, materiality, and not/knowning (Kumm & Berbary, 2018). Value-expansive anxiety does not directly correlate to that which is blindly hopeful or that which seeks comfort and stasis. Instead, value-expansive anxiety welcomes us to upset the casting of humans as the sole arbiters of meaning—a struggle that does not assume a valence between disenchantment or blind, pithy optimism.

Affect and anxiety change how we interact with and in the world at large; they have the power to dictate how we participate in and with tourism, tourism-scapes, and assembled spaces. If affect and socio-material orderings both operate and vibrate in more-than-representational space, and both are crucial to a richer, more nuanced understanding of tourism, then we have a clear and critical

bottom line: we must become comfortable with discomfort, both within our tourism spaces, and within our research practice. Using ANT as a methodological lens can encourage a disruption of valence, and help us move from a value-negative, paralyzing anxiety toward a value-expansive, productive anxiety—an uncertainty beneficial to our research practice. There is room for anxiety in ANT. Ultimately, we argue that not only do the links between tourism narratives and affect be explored in relation to the tourist-subject, but that related lines of inquiry also extend to researcher subjectivity and methodological practice.

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