The extimacy of space

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Jacques Lacan coined the neologism 'extimacy' (extimité) in order to theorize two interrelated modes of psychical apprehension: first, how our most intimate feelings can be extremely strange and Other to us. Second, how our feelings can be radically externalized on to objects without losing their sincerity and intensity. Attending to the socio-spatial dimensions of extimacy, this paper provides insight into the importance of topology in Lacan’s work. In so doing, the paper challenges the enduring doxa in geography that Lacanian theories ultimately devalue the intricacies and liveliness of space. To substantiate this claim, I explore the extimacy of the most popular vehicle accessory in the USA since the 1980s’ ‘Baby on Board’ signs: the ‘ribbon magnet’. Specifically, I elaborate the extimate contours of two ribbon magnet slogans, ‘Half Of My Heart Is In Iraq’ and ‘I Support More Troops Than You’. Affirming a recent critique that social and cultural geographers have ‘tamed’ psychoanalysis, that is, shied away from working through psychoanalysis’s allegedly unseemly conceptualizations of politics and subjectivity, this paper suggests that we have yet to catch up with some of psychoanalysis’s most fundamental and valuable theorizations about space itself.

Key words: extimacy, psychoanalysis, Lacan, topology, ribbon magnet.

Introduction

You see part of your job is goin’ different places. That’s the beauty of it. We got places all over the place. (‘Nice Guy’ Eddie Cabot, Reservoir Dogs, 1992)

In this journal’s recent theme issue on psychoanalytic geographies, Felicity Callard (2003: 308) justifiably contended that it was time that the ‘truly monstrous’ (in contrast to the grotesquely parodic) figures of psychoanalysis—those of the “repetition compulsion”, the “death drive”, the traumatic neuroses, the Freudian unconscious’ came on to the stage of psychoanalytic geography (emphasis in original). In this paper, I argue that for this theoretical entrance to be productive, social and cultural geographers must take more seriously how and why psychoanalysis is a ‘spatial discipline’ (Pile 1996: 77). Moreover, I contend that the very possibility of finding, gathering and escorting these conceptual monsters out of the green room depends on our ability to effectively clarify the differences that psychoanalytic epistemologies and ontologies...
make for our theorizations about subjectivity, society and space. Much of what Callard (2003) calls the ‘taming of psychoanalysis in geography’, that is, making psychoanalytic concepts wholly agreeable to the imperatives and goals of social constructionist, historicist and culturalist paradigms, is not only concomitant with the spurning of certain grisly figures in the psychoanalytic troop, the taming also involves an uncritical devaluation and outsourcing of psychoanalytic accounts of space.

An important consequence of the taming of psychoanalysis in geography is that psychoanalysis regularly incites two charges: theoretical profligacy and bankruptcy. On the one hand, many geographers surmise that psychoanalysis (as opposed to other theoretical frameworks) ultimately wastes ‘too much theoretical energy on notions such as the antithetical meaning of words, or repression, or the unconscious’ (Copjec 1994: 19). On the other hand, some geographers adjudge that psychoanalysis has insufficient funds to theorize the subtle textures of lived spaces. In this paper, I focus on the psycho-spatial theories of Jacques Lacan which have been criticized by geographers for being too ‘anemic’ (Sparke 2005: 315) and ‘two dimensional’ (Blum and Nast 2000). My concern is that these critiques are themselves too pallid and flat because they do not take into account the ‘accretion’ (Evans 1996: x) and ‘twists’ (Fink 1995: 123) in Lacan’s theoretical development, that is, Lacan’s re-conceptualizations of desire, discourse, love, knowledge, sexual difference, and indeed space itself (e.g. see Žižek 1989 1989: 133).

Now, what is at stake in this paper’s argument? From the outset, I should make it clear that I do not wish to devalue the work that has already been done under the aegis of psychoanalytic geographies, nor do I wish to repeatedly harp on about how theories of space in psychoanalysis have been cruelly neglected or simply overlooked by geographers. Rather, I believe that the re-evaluation of psychoanalytic theory in geography would do well to heed ‘Nice Guy’ Eddie Cabot’s advice (see epigraph): there are places all over the place in texts and paradigms such as psychoanalysis, and, part of our job as geographers is going to these places in order to fruitfully replenish our theorizations. In making this argument, I do not wish to suggest that all social and cultural geographers should assemble in a paradigmatic promised-land wherein we narcissistically unite under the aegis that ‘we’re all psychoanalytic now’! The un-taming of psychoanalysis demands something more akin to theoretical mambos than manifestos. A major worryment driving this paper is the prospect of geographers uncritically delivering a ‘psychoanalysis untamed’ that results in more ‘spaghetti psychoanalytic geographies’ (see Dean 2002: 12), that is, more fodder to the not-so wild suspicion that ‘we have never been psychoanalytic’, as well as more reasons for geographers to doubt the beautifully stated and entirely justified claim that psychoanalysis is the mother tongue of our modernity and the important issues of our time are scarcely articulable outside the concepts it has forged. While blasé souls argue that we are already beyond psychoanalysis, the truth is that we have not yet caught up with its most revolutionary insights. (Copjec 2002: 10)

This paper affirms Joan Copjec’s bold statement not because I believe that psychoanalysis offers the most ‘accurate’ or ‘truthful’ theoretical account of our world’s issues, but rather because I believe that geographers have yet to fully understand and come to grips with the fundamental epistemological, ontological
and methodological propositions and potentials of psychoanalytic theory. In siding with Copjec’s position, this paper is also part of a wider project that seeks to bring to the fore the unique theoretical, ethical and political challenges that the social theories of ‘new Lacanians’ such as Copjec, Slavoj Žižek and Tim Dean pose for contemporary psychoanalytic approaches in geography (Kingsbury 2003, 2005). Moreover, this paper argues that some of psychoanalysis’s most ‘revolutionary insights’ are directly bound up with its theorizations about space (see also Pile 1998). In order to substantiate this claim, I focus on Lacan’s notion of L’extimité (hereafter translated as ‘extimacy’). By focusing on extimacy, I hope to dispel the enduring doxa in human geography that Lacan is an awkward poststructuralist misfit and/or an obsolete structuralist oddball. Rather, I aim to illustrate that on the question of structure, Lacan is a topologist.

In what follows, I first further elaborate on the reasons and consequences of the taming of psychoanalysis in geography. I then turn to the empirical background of the most sought-after vehicle accessory in the USA since the 1980s’ ‘Baby on Board’ signs: the ‘ribbon magnet’. The main empirical context is Colerain Avenue, located in the US Midwest state of Ohio. I chose Colerain Avenue as a field of study mainly because Colerain Avenue possessed the greatest number and diversity of ribbon magnets during my travels in the tri-state region of Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. In addition, my research on the ribbon magnets exemplified how oftentimes our research projects and objects of analysis choose us. Between August 2003 and August 2005, Colerain Avenue was very much a part of the practices of my everyday life. Eventually, as we shall see, Colerain Avenue’s ribbon magnets more than piqued my interest; they also became part of my enjoyment. I should also state from the outset that the empirical origins and reasons for Colerain Avenue are ultimately less important than the theoretical formulations advanced in this paper. That said, as I argue later, Colerain Avenue is indicative of how, in the USA at least, the terrain of political debate and hegemonic activity is increasingly coinciding with the objects, relations and practices of consumption (see also Blum 2002). From this perspective, given that much of Colerain Avenue’s landscape can be understood in terms of consumption, Colerain Avenue is comparable to or representative of numerous other sites of consumption throughout the USA. My main argument is this: much of the ribbon magnet phenomena can be explained by Lacan’s topological concept of extimacy. In order to explicate this argument, I turn to two ribbon magnet slogans, ‘Half Of My Heart Is In Iraq’ and ‘I Support More Troops Than You’. These two slogans allow me to illustrate how extimacy involves the socio-subjective spatialities of external intimacy and intimate exteriority. The paper concludes with a discussion on the enchanting prospects of topologically re-thinking and re-reading Lacan in social and cultural geography, as well as psychoanalytic texts more generally.

Psychoanalytic geographies and their vicissitudes

Since the mid-1990s, social and cultural geographers have used numerous psychoanalytic approaches to critically theorize the spaces of social exclusion, domination and antagonism (see Kingsbury 2004). And yet, many geographers are wary and weary about the question of how psychoanalysis can
enhance our understandings about space and society.

What makes geographers, in contrast to many of our colleagues in cultural studies, literary theory and the humanities more generally, so apprehensive about psychoanalysis? I think there are two main reasons. On the one hand, geography’s paradigmatic commitment to social constructionism and historicism has meant that we are easily disturbed by the allegedly a-cultural and a-historical psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, the drive and desire. In psychoanalytic theory, none of these concepts can be entirely reduced to the effects of discourse, the social, history, culture and biology. Whenever the aforementioned concepts are used by geographers, they often undergo a theoretical conversion so as to accord with our social constructionist and historicist sensibilities. In addition, geographers routinely elide working through the perceived politically unsavoury, methodologically incongruent and epistemologically incommensurable tenets of psychoanalysis. In so doing, we obfuscate not only much of the radicality, but also the very relevance of Freud’s theoretical insights (see Kingsbury 2003).

As noted above, Felicity Callard (2003) makes this argument wherein she likens geographers’ appropriations of psychoanalysis to ‘the taming of psychoanalysis in geography’. For Callard (2003: 295), much of the taming involves geographers’ dissolution of psychoanalytic concepts ‘into something more recognizably psychological’ (see Dean 2000: 9). According to Callard, geographers often dilute psychoanalytic concepts because of their over-concentrated reliance on interdisciplinary and assimilatory secondary literature on psychoanalysis, as well as their adherence to progressive theoretical frameworks that faithfully laud political resistance and transformation.¹ Callard (2003: 299) asserts that much of geographers’ psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic theorizations about socio-cultural difference, regimes of power, political resistance and social transformation uncritically assume a malleable socio-political psyche that is ‘shorn of the encumbrances of an unaccommodating unconscious, of the paralysis of traumatic repetition … and of the virulence and intractability of self-destructiveness, aggressivity and pernicious fantasies’.

Although Callard fails to discuss in-depth the cruelty qua violent colonial racisms of an unaccommodating unconscious in Heidi Nast’s (2000) brilliant exposition, her provocative assertion that ‘genuinely psychoanalytic’ (see Dean 2000: 9) approaches in geography are belated and possible is well-founded (see also Kingsbury 2004: 118–119). It is important to understand that the taming of psychoanalysis infuses much of geography’s uncertainties over psychoanalysis. But where do geographers go from here? How can we usefully muster genuinely psychoanalytic geographies? Merely ushering in, placing on centre stage and spot-lighting the monstrous concepts of psychoanalysis does not automatically mean a useful re-radicalization of psychoanalysis in geography. To be sure, the repetition compulsion, death drive and traumatic neuroses are no less susceptible to becoming psychologically dolled-up than the Freudian unconscious or any other psychoanalytic concept.

It is important to identify what geography loses when psychoanalytic concepts are tamed. In other words, what is at stake when geographers gentrify or simply ignore the diversity of psychoanalytic epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies? While we certainly risk missing out on a genuinely
psychoanalytic model of politics and subjectivity, that is, ‘a more far-reaching critique of sexuality and identity that those currently in operation under the sign of social constructionism’ (Callard 2003: 295), I think there is perhaps something else at stake, something more fundamental, and something extremely valuable for geographers: genuinely psychoanalytic theorizations about space itself.

Let me explain this rather grand assertion. Fuelling geography’s unease with psychoanalysis is the belief that psychoanalytic theories are ultimately spatially challenged, that is, a-geographical. Geographers often allege that psychoanalysis resists and rejects the hallowed spaces of context, history and relationality. Exemplary of this line of critique is Chris Philo and Hester Parr’s (2003) excellent editorial introduction to this journal’s recent special issue on psychoanalytic geographies. In their concluding section, ‘The limits of psychoanalytic geography?’, Philo and Parr reflect on Heidi Nast’s conference-based psychoanalytic critique of Joanne Sharp’s Foucauldian reading of Cold War naturalizations of the Soviet Union qua the ‘evil Other’ in the Reader’s Digest magazine (see Nast 2003; Sharp 2003). Acknowledging the experimental nature of Nast’s critique, Philo and Parr (2003: 290) nonetheless conclude that Nast’s critique typifies psychoanalysis’s peculiar ‘willingness to generalize across vast swathes of individuals and their experiences … making huge assumptions about collective mental lives, almost to the point of identifying repressions and pathologies shared by so many across such large and different regions’. For Philo and Parr (2003: 290), psychoanalysis contra Foucauldian and ‘post-structualist sensitivities to difference’, strays from detail and context because psychoanalysis cannot resist ‘leaping off in search of some great “unsaid” beyond, behind or beneath [the text on the pages of Reader’s Digest]’.

Now, there are at least three ways we can respond to Philo and Parr’s characterization of psychoanalysis. First, we could reject Philo and Parr’s critique because of their willingness to generalize across vast swathes of psychoanalytic texts. Psychoanalysis is ‘always a science of the particular’ (Lacan 1991a: 21). The clinical efficacy of psychoanalysis involves its ability to map the historically and geographically contingent ways a person relates to the world, that is, the singular truth of her or his desire and unique modus operandi. Second, we could remind Philo and Parr about the many studies in geography wherein a psychoanalytic approach neither requires nor results in leaping off or lumping together empirical phenomena. Are not psychoanalytic geographies highly concrete and contextual affairs (see Hook 2005; Kingsbury 2004, 2005; Nast 2000; Pile 2005)?

The best response, however, is to pose a series of dialogical questions: why did Philo and Parr themselves uncharacteristically ‘leap off’ into this caricature of psychoanalysis in the first place? Why do geographers still continue to allege that psychoanalysis, despite possessing the theoretical finesse to shake off the rigid binaries of ‘structure versus agency’ and ‘the individual versus the social’ (Pile 1996), suffers from a bi-scalar disorder wherein psychoanalytic objects of study such as the unconscious are purportedly too general, that is, global and nomothetic (‘swathes of individuals’) and too particular, that is, local and idiographic—buried somewhere in the nether micro-regions of texts and individuals’ heads (the ‘great “unsaid” beyond, behind or beneath’)? And why is it, that after almost two decades of psychoanalytic geographies, there still lingers an obdurate soupçon of shy mistrust that infuses
Philo and Parr’s (2003: 290) tentative response to the psychoanalytic contributors: ‘We can only reply from our perspective that careful listening to and reading of the contributions by geographers more fully attuned to psychoanalysis than ourselves … has convinced us that we should suspend some, if not all our suspicions’ (my emphasis)?

Lest my reading comes across as disparaging and dismissive, it is important to note that much of Philo and Parr’s (2003: 290) reflections primarily seek to echo how ‘for many geographers—even for many social and cultural geographers—there is a definite feeling of unease in the face of psychoanalytic analyses of phenomena for which other “types” and “levels” of explanation already seem quite adequate’. A pressing task for geographers more attuned to psychoanalysis, then, is to dispel the idea that psychoanalysis is somehow a priori less amenable to contextual and effective geographical analyses than other theoretical approaches. Herein lies a major goal of this paper: to initiate discussions on what it is that psychoanalytically oriented geographers ‘get’ or try to get that many other psycho-sceptic geographers do not get or are still waiting to get.

My thesis is this: the un-taming of psychoanalysis is neither possible nor even desirable until the numerous and rich psychoanalytic theorizations about space, subjectivity and society are taken seriously through careful reading and discussion. The taming of psychoanalysis in geography does not simply involve lame dismissals of its allegedly wild concepts such as the death drive. The taming of psychoanalysis in geography does not only involve a garish sunny overestimation of people’s ability to transform and progress psycho-politically. The taming of psychoanalysis in geography also involves a simplification—an over-rapid spatialization—of the psychoanalytic subject and the social (cf. Žižek 1989: 50). I believe a genuinely psychoanalytic theorization about the ‘spatial imperative of subjectivity’ (Probyn 2003) does not simply assert that psychogeographies (Pile 2005) ‘matter’ or declare that psycho-spatial relations between people and places are dialectical, overdetermined, centred, becoming, blurred, dynamic, and so on. Historical materialism and Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, actor network theory, non-representational theories of affect, as well as all the other theoretical approaches in social and cultural geography know only too well how spaces of subjectivity and society are extremely complex and unstable (see Duncan, Johnson and Schein 2004: 49–136). And so, again: what exactly can psychoanalysis offer geographers in their theorizations about society and space? What differences do psychoanalytic approaches make for our understandings of social and cultural geographies? To answer these questions, let us turn to the empirical background of the most sought-after US vehicle accessory since the 1980s’ ‘Baby on Board’ signs: the ribbon magnet.

**Magnetic fields**

Between August 2003 and August 2005, I frequently drove and walked around Colerain Avenue located in Ohio, in the US Midwest (see Figures 1–3). Once a nineteenth-century dirt road that enabled local farmers to transport hogs to Cincinnati’s slaughterhouses, Colerain Avenue has become an early twenty-first-century bustling ten-mile retail corridor and ‘Greater Cincinnati’s best symbol for the worst of urban sprawl [with] close-your-eyes-and-pray left turns’ (Forgrave 2003). During my visits as a researcher ‘and’
consumer, I became increasingly spell-bound by a gradual transformation amidst Colerain Avenue’s ‘sensate’ (Harrison 2000) landscape: the rapid decline in the numbers of small plastic American flags clipped on to vehicles’ windows and the meteoric rise of vinyl ribbon magnets stuck to the backs and sides of vehicles (see Figure 4). Inscribed with messages such as ‘Support Our Troops’, ‘Pray for Our Troops’, ‘Freedom Isn’t Free’ and ‘God Bless USA’, the ribbon magnets were symptomatic of how the initial public outpouring of US patriotism...
in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 had become displaced on to the Bush administration’s ‘war on terrorism’ (e.g. see Ó Tuathail 2003; Scanlon 2005).

The ribbon magnet phenomenon began in April 2003, when graphic designer Derrick Carroll and Christian bookstore owner Dwain Gullion sold a batch of 1,000 yellow ribbon magnets in shops, schools and youth groups around Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Inscribed with the cursive script ‘Support Our Troops’, the original yellow ribbon magnets helped to raise money for local military families and troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Having soon received an order for 500 magnets from the Vietnam Veterans of America association, Carroll and Gullion hastily formed the company Magnet America.2 By the summer of 2004, the demand for Magnet America’s ribbon magnets had reputedly peaked with more than 100,000 orders a week from distributors and retailers throughout the USA. Interviewed by CNN, People magazine and other media outlets, Gullion reflected: ‘it was really out of control. I kept thinking that it couldn’t go any higher. And then it would’ (Leder 2005: 37). By the end of 2004, however, Magnet America’s sales eventually declined with the arrival of for-profit rival companies and their cheaper products.

Figure 3  Colerain Avenue flanked by a graveyard and a gasoline station. Photograph by author.

Figure 4  Sample of Colerain Avenue’s ribbon magnets.
ribbon magnets manufactured in China and Taiwan.

Also by the end of 2004, the vast majority of Colerain Avenue’s gas stations and large superstores sold ribbon magnets that had now begun to colonize its built environment: clinging on to storefronts, cash registers, fuel pumps and customer service desks. It was not uncommon to see two, three or more ribbon magnets speckling the backs and sides of minivans, pickup trucks, SUVs, cars, even garbage trucks and police cruisers. An employee of Colerain Avenue’s Mike’s Car Wash told me that the company used a box to store ‘orphan’ ribbon magnets that had become dislodged inside the car wash. Little wonder, then, that some of these orphan ribbon magnets declared ‘One Nation Under Ribbons’ and ‘Support Our Ribbons’.

The vertiginous magnetic daze of Colerain Avenue, its ‘hysterical materialism’ (Kingsbury 2002) relayed differential forces, motions and charges that involved the conduction of polls. Much of the upsurge in this collectively performed and commodified patriotism was driven by the impending US Presidential elections in November 2004 and attendant questions about the legitimacy and feasibility of the US-led occupation of Iraq. During the months leading up to the election, Colerain Avenue became host to ribbon magnets that contested assumptions that supporting troops meant or necessitated supporting war. For example, the ‘blue ribbon magnet’, sold by the anti-war organization United for Peace and Justice, declared ‘Bring Home Our Troops’, while another ribbon magnet openly stated: ‘Support Our Troops, Impeach Bush’.

Given Colerain Avenue’s location in the ‘battle-ground’ state of Ohio which eventually favoured Bush over John F. Kerry by more than 118,000 votes or 2.5 per cent of the total votes cast, it was unsurprising that these ‘counter-hegemonic’ ribbon magnets were well-outnumbered by the ‘loyalist’ ribbon magnets. Beyond Colerain Avenue’s magnetic fields, the yellow ribbon magnet had become the reviled target of Leftist political satire for its emblematic role in the resurgence of conservative socio-political discourses on nationalism, security and morality (see Figure 5).

In addition to new messages, the ribbon magnets began to engender different hermeneutic practices—the horizontal placement of a ribbon magnet inter-textually signified the outline of a Christian ichthys fish symbol (another popular fixture for vehicles); different designs—the holographic ‘In God We Trust’ ribbon magnet; different sizes—‘mini magnets’ for less certain or more discerning supporters of the troops; different shapes—ribbon magnets with a cruciform outline instead of the standard upper loop hole, as well as the question mark-shaped ribbon magnets inscribed with the message ‘Question War’; different levels of reflexivity—ribbon magnets declaring ‘We Support The Guy In China Selling These Idiotic Magnets’ and ‘We Support The Guy In The U.S. Selling Bumper Stickers That Complain About The Guy In China Selling Idiotic Magnets’; different languages—magnetic reproductions of signs attached to US tanks and Humvees in Iraq with the Arabic and English words: ‘Stand Back 100 Meters Or You Will be Shot: Operation Iraqi Freedom’; different regional identities—the Southern-Redneckian yellow ribbon magnet ‘Git-R-Done’; different target audiences—ribbon magnets declaring ‘Dear Lord Please Watch Over Our Troops: If You Don’t Stand Behind Our Troops Feel Free To Stand In Front Of Them!’; different sentiments—tongue-in-cheek ribbon magnets stating ‘Stop Plate Tectonics!’, ‘Support Our Poops’, and ‘My Ribbon is Better Than Your
Ribbon’; and finally, different causes—ribbon magnets promoting ‘awareness’ about issues such as Alzheimer’s, cancer, animal rescue, autism and Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

Now, I believe the ribbon magnet phenomenon can help revivify a genuine psychoanalytic understanding of space. To substantiate this claim let us turn to Lacan’s topological thinking and the concept of extimacy.

**Psycho-analysis situs**

There are numerous reasons why the ribbon magnets became so popular. The first thing to note is that the ribbon magnets are easily available and cheap (typically sold for several dollars). In addition, the ribbon magnets are practical. According to Magnet America the ribbon magnet is ‘unlike an adhesive bumper sticker that could possibly damage the paint or finish on your vehicle. The magnets also allow for frequent moving of position or switching out of magnets as often as the owner wishes. Car magnets are also perfect for motorcycles, the kitchen fridge, or other metal surfaces’. Also consider how the ribbon magnets deliver a constellation of psychical pleasures, identifications and defences vis-à-vis the ‘war on terrorism’ and the contentious state of US politics, more generally. For example, the exhibitionistic thrill of displaying while driving one’s political beliefs; the narcissistic


Figure 5  Cartoon from <http://villagevoice.com/news/0518,sutton,63595,9.html> . Reproduced with kind permission of Ward Sutton.
gratification of repeatedly seeing one’s convictions adroitly aphorized and reflected on the side of one’s and fellow comrades’ vehicle; the snug behind-the-wheel and windscreen voyeuristic approvals or condemnations of another person’s ribbon magnet; the warding off of anxiety about losing (by maintaining desire for) loved-ones on active military duty; masculine martyr-like identifications of taking the tough stance of dealing with the cold ‘necessity’ of going to war; the celebratory group Egoic satisfaction of commemorating the capture of Saddam Hussein with the ribbon magnet ‘We Got Him! ♠ Operation Red Dawn, December 13, 2003’. 5 But how exactly do these psycho-social processes take place?

I think much of the ribbon magnet phenomenon involves two interrelated processes. On the one hand, the transference of people’s intimate feelings, thoughts and beliefs on to an external object, and, on the other hand, the stirring and blooming of people’s inner feelings, thoughts and beliefs by an external object. Is not this looping process, this boom-a-ranging space that complicates the demarcation of an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ comparable to the structure of ‘a Moebius surface … [where] its outside continues its inside’ (Lacan 1977: 156)? Put differently, if we follow far enough into the ‘depths’ of people’s feelings, ‘we find ourselves suddenly on the other side, in the middle of’ (Žižek 1992: 147–148) Colerain Avenue—on the side of a ribbon magnet stuck on to a vehicle. 6

The Môbius ‘band’ or ‘strip’ is a joined-together rectangular strip with a half twist that only has one surface and edge. Alongside the torus, the cross-cap, Klein bottle and Borromean-Knot, the Môbius strip is one of Lacan’s preferred models for mapping the structure of subjectivity. And this is one of the reasons why I find psychoanalytic theory, especially Lacanian theory, truly compelling: the form of its spatial analysis. I am convinced that Lacan’s emphasis on the topological structure of subjects, objects and discourses can provide tonic for geographers’ uncertainties about psychoanalysis, as well as a pick-me-up for their recent and general ‘sense of exhaustion surrounding the very process of theoretical engagement (and its results)’ (Dixon and Jones 2004: 381).

Briefly, topology is derived from the Greek *topos*, place and *logos*, study and once dubbed by Gottfried Leibniz as ‘*analysis situs*’ (an analysis of place). Topology is a non-Euclidean qualitative branch of ‘qualitative’ mathematics that replaces all references to distance, size, area, angle, scale and dimensionality with concepts of ‘proximity’ and ‘neighborhood’ (see Ragland and Milovanovic 2004; cf. Doel 1999: 161–199). Topology examines how things can change shape or become distorted yet still retain properties of continuity, contiguity and delimitation. Imagine, for example, a ribbon magnet, a tea cup with a handle and a doughnut all made out of soft putty. For a topologist, all these objects have the same structure because they each have a hole and can be continuously deformed, that is, stretched and squeezed without ripping into each other’s shape. While there are few extensive studies on topology in Lacanian studies (e.g. see Granon-Lafont 1985; Nobus 2003; Ragland and Milovanovic 2004), it is nonetheless surprising that geographers have not paid more attention to the importance of topology in Lacan’s work (but see Pile 1996: 143–144; see also Doel 1999). It is important to note that in Lacanian theory, topology is neither an allegorical nor metaphorical expression of structure because there is a ‘*strict equivalence between topology and structure*’ (Lacan 1998: 10).
It is difficult to find a more loaded term than ‘structure’ in contemporary social theories. Very briefly, according Joan Copjec (1994), Lacanian social theory is ‘anti-structuralist’ because Lacan does not equate the concept of structure with symbolic or linguistic structure. For Lacan, structures belong to extra-discursive or non-representational spaces: ‘structures are real’ (Copjec 1994: 11) because they are not entirely immanent to or coincident with the positivity of social spaces and relations. In Lacanian theory, structures are ‘radically unassimilable within’ (Copjec 1994: 12, my emphasis) the social field and thus for Copjec (1994: 13) the Lacanian conceptualization of structure is ‘psychoanalysis’s greatest challenge’ to historicist Foucauldian thinking. Rather than follow Copjec’s complex argument about the divergences between Lacanian and Foucauldian theorizations about social space (an attempt to do justice to the intricacy of her argument requires at least another paper), let us hone in on why topology is so important for Lacan.7 Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche, Lacan asserts that equating the surface with the level of the superficial is itself dangerous. Another topology is necessary if we are not to be mistaken as to the place of desire. To wipe desire off the map when it is already covered over in the patient’s landscape is not the best way of following Freud’s teaching. Nor is it a way of getting rid of depth, for it is on the surface that depth is seen, as when one’s face breaks out in pimples on holidays. (2002: 229)

In order to map part of the ‘patient’s landscape’, that is, the ‘topology of subjectivity’ (Lacan 1992: 40), Lacan coined the neologism extimité (derived from conjoining the adjective intimité (intimacy) with the prefix ‘ex’ from the noun extérieur (exterior)). By asserting that the interior is present in the exterior and vice versa, Lacanian theory problematizes, and this is a crucial point—by rendering topological—a profusion of binary distinctions between, for example, outside—inside, truth—fiction, man—woman, departure—arrival, signifier—signified, container—contained, subject—object, being—appearance and past—future. This is why Lacan argues, for example, that the unconscious ‘is outside’ (e.g. see Lacan 1977: 123), that the subject is not just de-centred but also ‘ex-centric’ (e.g. see Lacan 1991b: 9), and that the gaze is inscribed in the object rather than the subject (e.g. see Lacan 1977: 85). Extimacy, then, allows us understand how subjectivity, society and space take place through the twists and turns of external intimacy and ‘intimate exteriority’ (Lacan 1992: 139). Let us follow these extimate contours through the topological space of people’s varying attachments toward ribbon magnets.

‘Half Of My Heart Is In Iraq’

As I noted earlier, one characteristic of extimacy involves how the heart of our being, the locus of our most treasured feelings, can be radically externalized, that is, transferred on to things that are beyond us. It is important to note that the ribbon qua an extimate object comprises a complex historical geography (e.g. see Milden 2005; Pershing and Yocom 1996). Suffice it to say that numerous scholars trace the extimate function of ribbons as far back to a reference of a folk song about a garland in Shakespeare’s play Othello.8 In the context of the USA, the ribbon’s materialization of support, remembrance and forced separation from loved ones first became popularized in the 1973 best-selling song ‘Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Ole Oak Tree’. This song, recorded by the vocal group Dawn featuring Tony Orlando,
was inspired by the tale of a convict in Georgia who wrote to his lover asking her to indicate whether she wanted him back by attaching a ribbon to a roadside tree. In 1979, yellow ribbons were adopted as a symbol of support for the fifty-two American hostages held in Iran after Penne Laingen famously tied a large yellow ribbon around a tree for her missing husband Bruce Laingen, the then US ambassador to Iran. Twelve years later, during the Gulf War, many Americans outfitted their lapels and front porches with yellow ribbons to support military personnel. Today, ribbons continue to provide a materially conspicuous place for people’s intimate feelings. For example, the website <Half My Heart Is In Iraq>, attempts to show ‘another side to these special people ['our brave soldiers serving overseas in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait and other places'] … a side that had to be exposed!’ For example, we read a story by ‘Proud Marine Mom, Vicki of Indiana (Iraqi Freedom)’:

I have a tree with yellow ribbons hanging in it, 155 to date. I also have a sign that reads a ribbon a day till you come home to stay with his name and marine core emblem. I hang a ribbon every day for him, people have honked, stopped, even the news & media came out. It is a reminder for all to pray.9

Now, the idea that people’s thoughts, feelings and beliefs do not simply take place on a mental level or ‘inside’ people’s heads, but also in social practices has long been recognized and debated in social theoretical literature (e.g. see Althusser 2001; de Certeau 1984; Latour 1987; Lukács 1971; Marx 1976). So, why should geographers take notice of the psychoanalytic concept of extimacy when they have recourse to various concepts from the aforementioned literatures? Extimacy is a particularly useful concept for geographers not because it somehow enables us to describe more accurately or realistically the empirical and ontological conditions that lead to and suffuse the ribbon magnet craze. This is a false path (one that is partially pursued by Parr and Philo) insofar as it leads to ‘the empiricist problem [and] opposition between the infinite wealth of reality and the abstract poverty of the categories by means of which we try to grasp reality’ (Žižek 2000b: 216, emphasis in original).10 Rather, extimacy is useful because it helps orient our thinking about where and why are people moved by discourses—‘given the specificity and contingency of socio-historical conditions and their systems of meaning’ (Glynos 2001: 195, emphasis in original).

Crucially, the ribbon magnets do not simply stand in for people’s support and beliefs, rather, people support and believe through the medium of the ribbon magnets. Such an extimate process is exemplified by the following ribbon magnet slogan: ‘Half Of My Heart Is In Iraq’. Here, the locus of love (the ‘Heart) is not just broken into two discrete parts, that is, one half in ‘Iraq’ and the other half in ‘My’. Rather, love elapses by taking place or spacing through the ribbon magnet. From a Lacanian perspective, it is possible to say that people objectively yearn and love through ribbon magnets because subjectivity does not simply take place when an agent is actively doing something, but rather when another thing (person or object) is doing it for the agent. And it is precisely on this point that Žižek argues:

This is how we should grasp the fundamental Lacanian proposition that psychoanalysis is not a psychology: the most intimate beliefs, even the most intimate emotions such as compassion, crying sorrow, laughter, can be transferred, delegated to others without losing their sincerity. (1989: 34)
Social and cultural geographers have yet to fully grasp or even begin to unravel the psycho-spatial ramifications of this Lacanian axiom. If Lacan is right, then it follows that it is through ribbon magnets that people can be relieved of their duty to support the troops. Thus if we were to do nothing all day, except drive around Colerain Avenue or another magnetic field with a ‘Support Our Troops’ magnet on our car, ‘we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the other’ (Zižek 1989: 35) we supported the troops.

So far, we have discussed one aspect of extimacy: ribbon magnets are a medium through which people transfer and register their innermost feelings. Let us now turn to the second aspect of extimacy: how ribbon magnets can be closer to people’s innermost feelings than themselves, how ‘the most intimate is not a point of transparency but rather a point of opacity ... the intimate is Other—like a foreign body, a parasite’ (Miller 1994: 76).

‘I Support More Troops Than You’

Ribbon magnets, especially the ‘Support Our Troops’ variety, have an uncanny knack of ‘getting under people’s skin’ whether they are treasured or condemned. By the summer of 2004, my visits to Colerain Avenue involved bouts of disbelief about the sheer ubiquity of the ribbon magnets, as well as a repellent fascination toward their pious yet belligerent, alluring yet numbing, deconstructable yet obdurative injunctions of loyalty and allegiance. Many people, myself included, had become consumed by an object of consumption. Much of the ribbon magnets’ ability to ‘get under people’s skins’ or ‘touch a nerve’ is related to their materialization of the contentiousness over the occupation of Iraq. On 20 March 2006, the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the website <Brainshrub.com> (the ‘Political blog with counterpoints for critical thinkers’), launched the ‘Faded Yellow Ribbon Magnets Project’ and encouraged its members to submit photographs of faded ribbon magnets. According to ‘Paul –V-’:

I suspect that one of the reasons the bright yellow magnets caught on so quickly in 2003, was because they subconsciously represented the attitudes and expectations of many Americans towards the impending war: easy to apply and dispose of afterwards ... just like everything else in our consumer-driven culture. The yellow ribbons quietly re-enforced the Bush Administration’s assurances that the invasion of Iraq would be a simple undertaking which will quickly be rewarded with feelings of patriotism and security. Support the troops, and like the magnets, this war will come off without a scratch. Today, the yellow ribbon magnets are weathered to white or beige. They are a physical reminder of the blind trust Americans put into their leaders, and how these leaders abused that trust. I am not posting these pictures as a condemnation of people who want to show support for the troops. The purpose of this series is to respectfully remind Americans how much time has passed since the invasion of Iraq.11

Numerous people in and around Colerain Avenue were either usually extremely proud of their ribbon magnets or decidedly annoyed about them. The ability of the ribbon magnets to become a foreign alien ‘Other who, more intimate than my intimacy, stirs me’ (Miller 1994: 77) is neatly encapsulated in the following irate blog:

‘Support our troops?’ What the fuck does that mean? Support them how, exactly? Do the magnets exude goodness rays that permeate the air and travel to Iraq on the backs of magical red, white and
blue pixie fairies? Are these goodness rays powered by the oil that’s burning in your car? You aren’t supporting anything but the yellow ribbon manufacturers and retailers. And they don’t give a shit about our troops … Promote your favorite band. Advertise your favorite radio station. Whatever. But don’t try and stuff a hotly debated and multi-faceted issue into a ten word cliché …

The damn thing is made in China. I know. I know. You purchased one of the ones that clearly says it was made in the U.S.A., right? I bet you did. See, they started doing that very recently after folks like me pointed this fact out. But guess what … the ribbons are still manufactured in China. They are just PRINTED in the U.S.A. so, surprise! You’re being inconsistent by supporting a known anti-American government with ties to North Korea! 12

From a different perspective, people supporting the troops, as well as the support our troops ribbon magnets—an external materialization of people’s treasured feelings and beliefs—can be easily annoyed by the anti-ribbon magnet magnets. For example, a reader’s comment on the blog ‘Blonde Justice’ reads as follows:

My wife and I have these stickers on both our cars. Yeah, the troops can’t see them. But our friend Susan, whose 19-year old son is in the Marines and headed for Iraq, she can see them fine. She knows we’re there for her, but one more little reminder that we’re thinking of her probably can’t hurt. So, for a buck, I’ll slap a sticker on my car and maybe Susan or some other soldier’s parent feels a little better. (And if the Chinese guy makes a few cents in the process, I’m okay with that). 13

Revealingly, the extimacy of ribbon magnets does not simply reside in their ability to fashion a radical otherness or alterity in the heart of the above person’s feelings. The blog articulates how extimacy also involves how people’s innermost feelings are externalized in ‘far-flung’ things and places such as ‘troops’, ‘Iraq’, ‘fairies’, ‘oil’, ‘Wal Mart’, ‘China’ and ‘South Korea’. Indeed, the above blogger condemningly disavows the very possibility of extimacy!

But what is it about the ribbon magnet that stirs people? While topology helps us to locate where discourses move people, let me propose an important term in Lacanian theory that can help us address the question of why discourses move people. Here is a fundamental Lacanian axiom: what grounds the alterity of the Other, that is, what makes the other Other is the jouissance (hereafter translated as enjoyment) of the Other—the ways in which people organize their enjoyment. What ultimately troubles people about the ribbon magnets (especially the yellow or ‘loyalist’ ribbon magnets), is not so much the idea that the drivers are false consciously deluded, that is, unaware of how their (often gasoline-guzzling) vehicles make the USA more dependent on foreign oil and put more troops in harms way; rather, what really triggers people’s anger toward the ribbon magnets, ‘what gets on our nerves, what really bothers us about the “other,” is the peculiar way’ (Žižek 1992: 165) the other basks and bathes in their enjoyment—their modes of consumption, their noisy patriotic chanting, their over-the-top exhibitionistic displays of ribbon magnets. Little wonder, then, that the differences between US Republican ‘Red states’ and Democratic ‘Blue states’ are so often codified in terms of the practices and objects of consumption (see Baer and Boeke 2005; cf. Blum 2002).

Now, the idea that ‘enjoyment is a political factor’ (Žižek 2002) is evinced by the ribbon magnet ‘I Support More Troops Than You’—a parody on the enjoyment that underpins people’s ostensibly earnest demands to support troops. Thus this ribbon magnet
slogan could also be read as ‘I Enjoy Supporting the Troops More Than You’ or simply ‘I Enjoy Myself More Than You’. I have already described in depth the profound socio-spatial complexities and paradoxes of enjoyment in Lacanian theory (see Kingsbury 2005: 119–121), so let me confine my discussion of enjoyment to the following points. Enjoyment, the literal translation of what Lacan calls ‘jouissance’, is basically ‘an excessive quantity of excitation’ (Evans 1996: 148) that can be likened to the libidinal buzz or charge of ‘getting of’ or ‘getting a kick out of’ something (Fink 1997: 7–8). It is important to note that in Lacanian theory, enjoyment does not refer to happiness or hedonistic pleasure, but rather to the ontologically elusive, antagonistic and allures of pleasure-in-pain and pain-in-pleasure. Enjoyment is the stain of what Lacan calls the register of the Real (see Copjec’s discussion on ‘structure’ above) – a dimension of psychical life that constantly menaces and threatens to topologically erupt from within and without the Symbolic register’s machinations of the signifier.

There are two important points to make here: first, enjoyment is a monstrous psychoanalytic category par excellence not simply because it is opposed to pleasure, but rather because we ‘can never get rid of it, that its stain forever drags along’ (Zˇizˇek 1996: 17). Enjoyment is what we often experience when we try to sustain our desire and thus from a psychoanalytic perspective ‘it is possible to say that someone enjoys their suffering’ (Glynos 2001: 202). The second point is that enjoyment (like so many other Lacanian concepts) takes place topologically: the enjoyment that is experienced as radically different from our own is also registered in the heart of our social groups. From a Lacanian perspective, then, ‘irrational’ social antagonism take place not only because of a contrived rejection or reification of an imaginary ‘Other’, but also because the Other is extimate—it inhabits the heart of us. Thus social antagonisms such as racism are problematic and apparently unsolvable as the Other is the Other in my interior. The root of racism is thus hatred of my own enjoyment. There is no other enjoyment but my own. If the Other is in me, occupying the place of extimacy, then the hatred is also my own. (Miller, quoted in Zˇizˇek 1993: 203)

The extimacy of racism and other psycho-social antagonisms takes place wherein the ‘Other’ is ultimately closer to the core of our being than our-selves (see also Nast 2000). Thus extimacy is a key term that Lacan uses to map ‘the real in the symbolic’ (Miller 1994: 75): how racism and other antagonisms (the Real) emerge from and disrupt race and other categories (the Symbolic). It is to acknowledging the ubiquity and extent to which social antagonisms takes place in the curved space of enjoyment and desire that I now turn in order to conclude this paper.

Conclusion: bend it like Lacan

But you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me. (Saint Augustine, Confessions, 3.6)

Nigel Thrift and Kris Olds (1996: 321) defined the ‘topological propositions’ of several ‘major theorist[s]’ as follows: Foucault—‘bounded regions’; Latour—‘networks’; Deleuze—‘flows’; Bohm—‘two places at once’. To this list we can now finally add: ‘Lacan—topology’. In this paper, I only focused on one aspect of Lacanian topology—the concept of extimacy. In so doing, I hope to alert geographers to a hitherto fore neglected theory
of space in Lacan’s work. While psychoanalytic geographers are acutely aware of the dialectical and complex space between the psyche and the social, that is, the ‘in here and out there’ (Bingley 2003), geographers tend to downplay the spatial forms such as topology through which interactions between subjects and society take place. As a result, psychoanalysis is often viewed in geography as both an extravagant and redundant theoretical detour: psychoanalysis spends too much theoretical time on problems that could be more easily tackled elsewhere.

Alongside other key psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, the notion of extimacy emerges from profoundly complex historical precedents. In the same way that poets were long-aware about the dynamic unconscious, the key to Freud’s ‘discovery’ was his insistence that the unconscious could speak and be interpreted. Similarly, Lacan explicitly borrows many of his ideas—especially his theorizations about love and ethics—from historical events, figures and literature such as Saint Augustine (see especially Lacan 1992 1998). Jacques-Alain Miller notes that Saint Augustine explicated—in a nutshell—the main tenet of extimacy with reference to his relationship to God (see above epigraph). And this is partly why I take heart in Thrift’s (2004: 127) claim that he has ‘no truck with an account of the world as a realm of disenchantment. Instead, I see our current conjuncture as no less full of gods and spirits than the medieval period, though they may take on radical forms’.

Are not the extimacy of ribbon magnets exemplary of a modern radicalization of these gods or spirits? More importantly, I have no truck with an account of psychoanalysis as a realm of a-spatiality, that is, a theoretical hotbed of staged mis-en-abisme and super-organic scenes. I find any characterization of psychoanalysis as a kind of theoretical diving board from which its theoretical practitioners allegedly plunge into sub-socio-textual spaces highly reminiscent and equally as spurious as earlier accusations in geography when poststructuralists, accused of abandoning the concepts of ‘objective reality’ and ‘materi-ality’, were challenged to jump out of windows in order to get in touch with the referent (see Dixon and Jones 1998: 251).

And so, where does this leave us regarding the question of how extimacy and thinking topologically can enhance our understandings of subjectivity and space? What theoretical insights does extimacy offer social and cultural geographers that cannot be obtained from other theoretical approaches? In other words, to what extent do Lacanian theories of space differ from other theories of space currently on offer in human geography?

As noted above, the term extimacy is not uniquely Lacanian. Extimacy also resonates with the spatial theories of other psychoanalytic approaches such as Melanie Klein’s Möbius-like concepts of ‘introjection’ (the internalization of a ‘good’ object inside oneself) and ‘projection’ (the expulsion of aggressive impulses and ‘bad’ objects on to other people) (see Bondi 2003) and also Freud’s writings on the twists and turns of dreamy and ghostly spaces (see Pile 1998, 2005). Now, it could be argued that Lacan does not really offer a theorization of space per se because Lacan’s so-called ‘theories of space’ are strictly speaking a by-product of what he was really doing: rethinking the structure of subjectivity and space. Put differently, it could be alleged that Lacan’s notion of extimacy is nothing but the mobilization of a new spatial imaginary, that is, the construction of evocative spatial figures such as the Möbius strip which enable an alternative way of picturing the structure of subjectivity.
Isn't Lacanian topology ultimately a revamped metaphorical representation of 'real world' processes? In short, isn't extimacy simply another spatial metaphor?

To these important questions we can only reply with an emphatic 'No!' For Lacan, 'topology is not simply a metaphorical way of expressing the concept of structure; it is structure itself' (Evans 1996: 208). Mindful that psychoanalysis is not a TOE (theory of everything) or a totalizing philosophical worldview that claims to possess the key to unlock the Truth of the World and Word (see Kingsbury 2003: 360), Lacan nonetheless 'really does mean it' when he suggests that subjectivity takes place topologically. Lacanian psychoanalysis is not a metaphorical or allegorical experiment. So, then, is Lacanian psychoanalysis in the same lineage as other 'poststructuralist' envisionings of space? Is extimacy to be understood as a concept that is theoretically similar to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'rhizome' or Derrida's notion of the 'trace'? In short, are we justified in assuming that Lacanian thinking is an extension or part of the so-called poststructuralist tradition?

Žižek (1989: 7) asserts that Lacan’s thinking not only belongs to a materialist and rationalist tradition, ‘Lacanian theory is perhaps the most radical contemporary version of the Enlightenment’ (cf. Derrida 2004). For Žižek, the idea that Lacan comfortably fits into a poststructuralist paradigm is wrong. The complexity of the question about Lacan’s thinking is an extension or part of the so-called poststructuralist tradition?

It is important to understand that geographers have, for the most part, not merely adapted psychoanalysis to prevailing theoretical frameworks such as social constructionism. Psychoanalysis has also been adapted to prevailing conceptualizations of space which despite their poststructuralist yearnings, re-readings and convictions nonetheless retain sympathies towards Cartesian geometries of containment. Put differently, while much has been said about how the world is striated by or consists of ‘flows’, ‘rhizomes’, ‘schizoids’, ‘assemblages’, ‘multiplicity’, ‘traces’, ‘decenterings’ and ‘canalization’, to what extent do these disruptions and stutters really threaten discrete spatial distinctions between society and the subject qua a thinking psychological Self? Here, we may be tempted to assert that Lacan via topology offers an anti- or non-Cartesian understanding of space. Such conclusions are misguided. The relationship between Lacan’s and Descartes’ understanding of the subject is not simply antagonistic. We may note, for example, that while ‘both subjects proclaim themselves to be devoid of substantial, determinate existence, only the psychoanalytic subject can be properly described as indeterminate. The cogito, on the contrary, is an instance of certainty’ (Copjec 1994: 148; see
also Žižek 1999). In other words, Lacan topologically reworks, rather than rejects the Cartesian subject. This is why the Lacanian subject’s motto may be summed up as follows: ‘I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking’ (Lacan 2002: 157).

Another question: what is the difference between the Lacanian subject and the subject that is theorized by Michel Foucault? As we know, Foucault eventually abandoned psychoanalytic theory in favour of a Nietzschean genealogical project that emphasized how the modern subject is primarily an ‘effect’ that is produced by uneven and circuitous micro-relations of power and knowledge which always ‘come from below’. Obviously, this question of the relationship between Foucault and Lacan is extremely complex. But for now, we may usefully delineate one key difference between the Foucauldian and Lacanian subject. Copjec, paraphrasing Foucault, notes that

In Foucault’s work the techniques of disciplinary power (of the construction of the subject) are conceived as capable of ‘materially penetrat[ing] the body in depth without depending even on the mediation of the subject’s own representations. If power takes hold on the body, this isn’t through its having first to be interiorized into people’s consciousness’. For Foucault, the conscious and unconscious are categories constructed by psychoanalysis and other discourses (philosophy, literature, law, etc.): like other socially constructed categories, they provide a means of rendering the subject visible, governable, trackable. They are categories through which the modern subject is apprehended and apprehends itself rather than (as psychoanalysis maintains) processes of apprehension; they are not processes that engage or are engaged by social discourses (film texts, for example). (1994: 19, emphasis in original)

Thus, extimacy like any other psychoanalytic category such as the unconscious, repression, transference, identification and narcissism designates a process of psychical apprehension. Extimacy should be primarily understood as a ‘metapsychological concept central to the description of the subject’s psychic engagement with’ (Copjec 1994: 19) apparatuses or objects such as ribbon magnets. My key claim is this: extimacy is an inherently spatial process of psychical apprehension. This formulation does not necessarily lead us to make vast generalization about and across populations. Let me repeat again: Lacan, like Foucault and many other theorists, rejects the idea of privileging depth over surface. And, Lacan does not go in search of some great ‘unsaid’ that gurgles below the superficial façades of the world. Lacan repeatedly acknowledges the dangers of supposing that there is a necessary correlation between the degree or level of theoretical abstraction and the scale of analysis. Buying into big ideas does not mean that we have to make big assumptions about big populations. Psychoanalysis rejects all forms of naïve realism and empiricism (Kingsbury 2003). But how does Lacan’s formulation of the ‘surface’ differ from Foucault’s? Let us return to Copjec:

Whenever we delve below this level [the surface], we are sure to come up empty. Yet the lessons each discourse [psychoanalysis represented by Lacan and historicism represented by Foucault] draws from this conviction are strikingly divergent. Psychoanalysis, via Lacan, maintains that the exclusivity of the surface or of appearance must be interpreted to mean that appearance always routs or supplants being, that appearance and being never coincide. It is the syncopated relation that is the condition of desire. Historicism, on the other hand, wants to ground being in appearance and wants to have nothing to do with desire. (1994: 13–14)
So much for stating what Lacanian theory is not. Let us return to the question of what Lacanian theory can offer social and cultural geographers? To begin with, Lacanian topology has much to contribute to the burgeoning literature on the geographies of emotions (e.g. see Davidson and Milligan 2004; Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005). Obviously, emotions and space matter, but we should also attend to the question of what is the matter with emotions and space, that is, to ask: why do people repeatedly place themselves in situations that are blatantly harmful for themselves and other people. It is precisely on this question that psychoanalysis offers a rich and heterogeneous theoretical vocabulary, numerous empirical case studies, and extensive methodological discussions. Psychoanalysis allows us to explore the fundamental questions of how emotions take place: why and how is it that certain things and emotions move and grip certain people? Take, for example, the relationship between emotions, sexuality and space. There are demonstrable and interesting links between Lacanian and Queer theories. Dean (2000), for example, argues that Lacan is a queer theorist par excellence because he conceptualizes desire as fundamentally impersonal. In addition, I am tempted to assert that taking topology seriously not only ushers in social and cultural geographies ‘without scale’ (see Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005), but also without distance, size, area, angle and dimensionality.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I think Lacanian psychoanalysis warns us about the dangers of theorizing in human geography without poetry. How so? I hope that those geographers who do decide to take up Callard’s pertinent challenge of conjuring genuinely psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the unconscious do so by taking into account that psychoanalytic texts such as Lacan’s read ‘like poetry, not so much in its verbal complexity as in its potentiality, its incitement to further thinking’ (Dean 2000: 25). Perhaps only then will we be able to bend it like Lacan and start to fathom the extimacy of space. Much of the world and all our magnetic fields of desire and enjoyment topologically cry out in murmurs.

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Notes

1 In making this claim, I deliberately avoid delimiting precisely how the problems of the taming of psychoanalysis play out in individuals’ specific works. Such a task requires a separate paper. More importantly though, such a line of critique would do well to proceed from, rather than precede careful theoretical groundwork.
2 For an online history of Magnet America see: <http://www.magnetamerica.com/media.html>.
5 The spade symbol refers to how Saddam Hussein was the Ace of Spades in the US military’s most-wanted Iraqi military cards. Notably, the website <http://www.militarymagnets.com/index.html> not only sells a pack of these cards but also ‘Tough Lookin’
Marine Ts [T-Shirts] depicting slogans such as ‘Peace is dead (you’re next)’ and ‘Give War a Chance! Happiness is a Mushroom Cloud’.

I should note that any resemblance of the ribbon magnet to any actual Möbius strips—Real, Imaginary, or Symbolic—is entirely coincidental.

To be sure, the question of how Lacan conceptualizes the relationship between topology and structure is an extremely important and complex one. Again, doing justice to this question requires at least another paper. I therefore confine my discussion to the above broad theoretical points. One way, however, to further explicate the relationship between Lacanian structure and topology is by exploring the spatial dimensions of extimacy—which is precisely one of the main goals of this paper.

Sing all a green willow must be my garland. Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve (Othello, 4.3.48–50). One is also reminded of numerous other extimate objects such as HIV/AIDS awareness ribbons, medals, rosary beads, commemorative poppies, flags, Everton F.C. scarves, etc.

Evidently, I am skipping over the important conceptual intricacies of how psychoanalysis via Žižek differentiates between the spatialities of the ‘universal’, ‘particular’ and the ‘singular’. From this Lacan-Hegelian perspective, contra Sharp, Philo and Parr, Oedipalization does not take place on a ‘deep’ or ‘superorganic’ level, rather, Oedipalization takes place as ‘concrete universality’ (Žižek 2000b: 235–241). Again, an adequate explication of why this conceptual manoeuvre is a specifically Freudian/psychoanalytic manoeuvre demands another paper.

Happiness is a Mushroom Cloud’. Marine Ts [T-Shirts] depicting slogans such as ‘Peace is dead (you’re next)’ and ‘Give War a Chance! Happiness is a Mushroom Cloud’.

rooted, like an umbilical cord, in a particular content—not only in the sense of hegemony (universality is never empty; it is always coloured by some particular content), but in the more radical sense that the very form of universality emerges through a radical dislocation, through some more radical impossibility or “primordial repression”’ (Žižek 2000a: 110).

References


Abstract translations

The extimacy of space

L’extimité de l’espace

C’est en proposant de théoriser sur deux modes d’appréhension psychique interreliés que Jacques Lacan crée le néologisme «extimité». Le premier mode décrit comment nos sentiments les plus intimes peuvent être pour nous extrêmement étranges et Autres. Le second décrit comment nos sentiments peuvent de manière radicale être externalisés sur des objets sans renoncer à la sincérité et à l’intensité. Cet article examine les dimensions sociospatiales de l’extimité et permet de mieux comprendre l’importance que prend la topologie dans l’œuvre de Lacan. L’article met ainsi en cause la doxa persistante selon laquelle, en géographie, les complexités et la vitalité de l’espace sont dévalorisées finalement par les théories lacaniennes. Pour justifier ce point, j’aborde l’extimité de l’accessoire automobile parmi les plus populaires aux États-Unis depuis que le panneau à ventouse «Bébé à bord» est apparu dans les années 1980: les «rubans aimantés». Plus précisément, je dresse les contours de l’extimité de deux logos que l’on retrouve sur les aimants, soit «Half Of My Heart Is In Iraq» (mon cœur est à moitié en Irak) et «I Support More Troops Than You» (je soutiens plus de combattants que vous). Je m’appuie sur la critique formulée récemment à l’égard de la «domestication» de la psychanalyse par les géographes spécialistes des questions sociales et culturelles qui, dans leurs travaux, n’ont pas tenu compte des conceptualisations apparemment infondées sur la politique et la subjectivité issues de la psychanalyse. L’article laisse entendre que nous n’avons pas encore réussi à prendre connaissance de certaines théorisations psychanalytiques fondamentales et dignes d’intérêt portant sur l’espace.


La extimidad del espacio

Fue Jaques Lacan quien acuñó el neologismo ‘extimidad’ (extimité) para poder teorizar sobre dos modos interrelacionados de percepción psíquica:
primero, cómo nuestros sentimientos más íntimos nos pueden parecer extremadamente extraños y Otro. Segundo, cómo nuestros sentimientos pueden ser exteriorizados, de forma radical, sobre objetos sin que pierdan su sinceridad e intensidad. Atendiendo a las dimensiones socio-espaciales de la extimidad, este papel nos permite comprender mejor lo importante que es la topología en el trabajo de Lacan. Al hacerlo, el papel cuestiona la opinión sostenida en la geografía de que, en última instancia, la teoría de Lacan subvalora la complejidad y la vivacidad del espacio. Para corroborar este argumento, exploro la extimidad del accesorio para vehículos más popular en Los Estados Unidos después del cartel que decía ‘Baby on Board’ de los años 80: el ‘imán de cinta’. En particular hablo de la forma estimada de dos esloganes de imanes de cinta: ‘La mitad de mi corazón está en Irak’ y ‘Yo apoyo más tropas que usted’. Como afirmación de una crítica reciente que dice que los geógrafos sociales y culturales han ‘domado’ al psicoanálisis, es decir, tienen miedo de enfrentar las supuestamente impropias conceptualizaciones de política y subjetividad del psicoanálisis, este papel sugiere que todavía nos queda ponernos al día con algunas de las teorizaciones más fundamentales y valorables del psicoanálisis sobre el espacio en sí.