Actor-Network Theory and the ethnographic imagination: An exercise in translation

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Using a slogan from ANT, you have "to follow the actors themselves."

– Bruno Latour

But beware: as you walk nobody will hold your hand, there are no assurances.

– Annemarie Mol

The publication of Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005b) was a remarkable event, which capitalized on the steadily growing interest in the works of Latour, Callon, Law, Mol, and others assembled, willfully or not, under the label "Actor-Network Theory" (ANT).[1] For those unfamiliar, *Reassembling the Social* charges that sociology's over reliance on a particular metaphor of "the social" has blinded it from the much messier and heterogeneous practices of association that constantly make and remake what we have lazily come to think of as "society." Turning towards its etymology, Latour defines "the social not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling" (7). Marshaling over two decades of research and theorizing—his own and that of his colleagues—Latour makes the call for carefully descriptive accounts of this movement. At times a polemic and sweeping broadside against what Latour dismissively calls "traditional" and "critical" sociology, at other times an accessible review of the ANT corpus, and still at others an elaboration of its "amodern" philosophical underpinnings, the book ends with what seems like false modesty:

> It's not for me to say if anyone will end up using these tricks in any trade. At least now nobody can complain that the project of actor-network-theory has not been systematically presented (2005b, 262).

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[1] The origins of the phrase belong to Michel Callon. See Mol (2010).

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In fact, even before the publication of the book, the "tricks" had been put to use in many quarters. And yet, while its take-up in U.S. sociology has been perhaps slower than in neighboring disciplines, *Reassembling* itself has found its way onto many a respectable sociological theory syllabus alongside its "traditional" counterparts, like Durkheim and Marx. As Rowland et al. (2011, 95) note in an insightful review, it is "peculiar that a non-theory and anti-method became canonical."

As an exercise in translation, this special issue was conceived as a way to take stock of ANT as "a workbench on which new tools can be built" (Rowland et al. 2011, 97). ANT certainly has a fashionable allure: it has its own attractive language and terminology; it is often ironic, always clever, and sometimes very "French;" and its obsession with sci-fi like networks, machines and objects, of course, seems of the moment. All that aside, we explore the potential capacity of ANT to generate and inspire new work, specifically with respect to ethnography and qualitative research. To foreshadow our argument, we believe ANT is here to stay, and for good reason. Despite some specific limits we describe later, ANT, to invoke Lamont's (2012) recent assessment of Bourdieu, is "good to think with." But, as John Law and Vicky Singleton argue in the afterword, it may also provide some valuable ways to act *in* and *on* the world. As a set of sensibilities, a disposition, or an attitude—rather than a rigid framework—ANT's skepticism towards "catch-all" explanatory theories and pre-defined field sites, as well as its attention to the sociologies of non-sociologists and practices of world-making opens up important vistas about the ethical and political nature of research.

Attentive readers will note that we take a slightly different tone than that of *Reassembling*. We find more value in broad sensibilities, as scholars like Law, Mol, and Singleton pose it, than in the specific methods and tricks found in that book. And we think there is much to be gained from the engagements with other bodies of sociological theory and the productive tensions this can occasion, rather than the wholesale jettisoning *Reassembling* seems to playfully call for.

We come to ANT as outsiders. Our training and interests are in sociology, "traditional" and "critical" sociology even: culture, civil society, the state, knowledge, development, Bourdieu, Marx, critical race theory, real utopias, censuses, ethnography, cities. Our interest in ANT grew out of a curiosity about its promise to up-end sociological assumptions and stagnant theoretical debates. Indeed, our current overlapping research interests in the circulation of expert knowledge and contemporary political projects seem fettered by more conventional sociological and anthropological treatments and the prescriptions they invite: top-down vs. grassroots development; the state vs. civil society; institutional monocropping vs. public deliberation; global neoliberalism vs. local resistance. Unsatisfied by these clunky dichotomies, ANT's resistance to structural metaphors and inherited divisions (i.e. human versus nonhuman) appeared to us as a way to investigate the messy thickness of social and political life. In the words of Latour (2005b, 137), the ostensible spokesperson and high-priest of the approach, ANT was designed to break with the practice of "taking a free ride through all-terrain entities like Society, Capitalism, Empire, Norms, Individualism, Fields, and so on." In a characteristically iconoclastic way, ANT writings have sought to replace these "vague all encompassing sociological terms" with descriptions of "more realistic and smaller sets of associations" (Latour 1996b, 2). Captivated but unsure about its political and methodological implications, we proceeded to read, reflect, and engage ANT in our respective projects.

In the spirit of ANT accounts, and in particular the respective contributions of Law and Singleton and Passoth and Rowland found herein, the remainder of this introduction narrates the formation of this special issue on ANT. We begin with the work of attracting and enrolling potential submissions for the special issue with the creation and circulation of the Call for Papers. Next, our narrative turns to our dealings with *Qualitative Sociology*'s

submission management system. We then shift to our initial reading of submissions, which raised the difficulty of conceptualizing ANT in the singular. The following sections document the review process and the content finally assembled in the issue. In the final section, we conclude with a broader reflection on ANT and its promise for sociology's ethnographic imagination. Although our objective is not to provide a comprehensive review of this intellectual movement, this ANT-inspired introduction explores a number of important ANT concepts and sensibilities, as well as offers some specific entry points into various conversations within and about Actor-Network Theory.

A Call for Papers is Born

Almost two years ago, on September 23rd, 2011 to be exact, David Smilde, the current editor of *Qualitative Sociology*, received the final version of the Call For Papers (CFP). The CFP crystalized an idea for a special issue we had presented to David many months before. In its final form, the CFP bore the mark of conversations and negotiations between David and us. David, for instance, had expressed concern that the original language of the CFP ran the risk of inviting meta-theoretical commentary about ANT. We were in agreement with him that the special issue should contain empirically grounded papers that made "use" of ANT to address or rethink some germane sociological problem or topic.

We hoped the CFP would attract potential submitters—allies, which would help us *translate* Actor-Network Theory (ANT) for a broader sociological community of ethnographers and qualitative researchers. As a practice of "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983), the CFP characterized ANT as distinctive, but also in some ways resonant with "revered sociological traditions of ethnography." Furthermore, the special issue was framed as an opportunity to "examine how ANT enriches our theoretical and empirical understandings of social phenomena, beyond its familiar domains in science and technology." Moreover, the CFP asserted that, "in keeping with the tradition of *Qualitative Sociology*, we seek theoretically-rich, high-quality empirical studies that will push us to reflect on the limits of ANT, and devise ways to harness its benefits." Embedded in these sentences were not only David's concerns, but also three major aims of our own.

First, the CFP called for sociological works that took ANT outside of the lab, so to speak. ANT emerged within the Paris Group of Science and Technology Studies in the years following the publication of Latour and Woolgar's (1986) classic lab ethnography, *Laboratory Life*. Early works by founders Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law largely (although not entirely) focused on scientific and technological innovation (e.g. Latour 1987; Law 1986).[2] In the decades since, an interdisciplinary ensemble of researchers has taken ANT in all sorts of directions: to development projects and policymaking (e.g. Greenhalgh 2008; Mosse 2004; Tsing 2005); nation-building and identity (e.g. Candea 2010; Oppenheim 2008); state formation and governance (e.g. Carroll 2006; Curtis 2001; Mukerji 2009); urban infrastructure and architecture (e.g. Fallan 2011; Farías and Bender 2009); geography and spatial politics (e.g. Müller 2012; Murdoch 1998; Thrift 2008); economics and markets (e.g. Hawkins 2011; Mitchell 2005; Bockman and Eyal 2002; Ban 2011); post-colonialism (e.g. Anderson 2002; Verran 2001); knowledge production and consumption (e.g. Benzecry and Krause 2010; Camic et al. 2011; Ruppert 2011; Eyal and Buchholz 2010); the social

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[2] As one reader noted, it is critical not to overstate this point. From its inception, ANT was neither confined to the lab nor did it focus exclusively on matters of science or technology (see, for example, Callon and Latour 1981). Nonetheless, it is with STS and its attendant field of inquiry that ANT is most identified.

effects of everyday objects (Molotch 2005), and animal studies and inter-species relations (e.g. Nimmo 2012; Whatmore and Thorne 2000), to name but a few.

Along with this scholarly uptake across the social sciences, the founders of ANT have also moved beyond their original foci. For instance, Callon in recent years has focused on economics (e.g. Callon 1998; 2007), as well as democracy (e.g. Callon et al. 2009), a theme Latour has also explored (e.g. Latour 2005a). Law has concentrated on, among other things, the topic of methods and politics of research (e.g. Law 2004). In addition to exploding the concept of the "social" (Latour 2005b), Latour has shifted towards an examination of "modes of existence," such as law (Latour 2010a) and religion (Latour 2013). In our view, these developments open up greater space to explore the purchase of ANT in relation to longstanding and defining sociological concerns. As readers of the CFP may recall, submissions were encouraged in substantive areas such as, but not limited to, civil society and civic associations; cities and urban life; policy-making and statecraft; sociology of knowledge; race, ethnicity, gender, and class identities; politics and social movements; and inequality and stratification.

Second, in keeping with our original concerns, the CFP invited *critical* engagements with ANT. We wanted submissions that would engage very specifically if not critically with ANT, rather than wholesale and uncritical adoptions. Moreover, we desired works willing to seriously discuss—via some empirical problem—the limitations of ANT, such as those persuasively raised by feminist scholars (Haraway 1997; Star 1991; Wajcman 2004). In addition, we hoped that potential contributors would take the issue as a chance to place ANT concepts and assumptions in conversation with other theorists or traditions. Recent sources of inspiration for such an effort include attempts to draw ANT (and the broader interest in materiality) into conversation with political theory (Braun and Whatmore 2010) and state theory (Passoth and Rowland 2010), as well as recent comparisons between ANT theorists and other theorists, for instance, Bourdieu (Eyal 2013; Schinkel 2007), Boltanski (Guggenheim and Potthast 2011), Dewey (Marres 2012), Foucault (Pyyhtinen and Tamminen 2011), Haraway (Asdal 2003), and Beck (Saito 2011). We wondered what kinds of insights might these sorts of encounters produce in relation to concrete, empirical research. In short, we were not looking for blank endorsements of ANT. Instead, we encouraged authors to be "creative in their application and engagement with ANT."

Third and finally, the CFP sought to enroll submissions that would explore the usefulness of ANT for qualitative research and ethnography. Of course, ethnography itself is not new to ANT or science studies. To begin, even a cursory reading of early texts (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Law 1994) and more recent examples (Latour 2010a; Mol 2002) make this evidently clear. And yet, with few exceptions (e.g. Blok 2010; Glaeser 2011), ethnographers in sociology have not made much use of ANT.[3] This contrasts sharply with the active presence of ANT and ANT-influenced ethnographies in anthropology, geography, urban studies, and cultural studies (eg. Greenhough 2011; Candea 2010; Mosse 2004; Oppenheim 2008; Farías and Bender 2009; Tsing 2005) In our view, this lack of engagement among sociologists is regrettable given that ANT may have something to offer recent discussions and debates about the need to reinvigorate sociological ethnography (see Fine 2003; Glaeser 2005; Lapegna 2011; Tavory and Timmermans 2009).

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[3] This assertion should be qualified in two regards. First, sociological engagement with ANT has been especially sparse in the United States, in contrast to other intellectual contexts oversees. Second, sociological ethnographers working close to STS have, unsurprisingly, drawn upon and conversed with ANT more than those inhabiting other epistemic cultures.

Once the CFP was written, confirmed and transformed into a PDF, David started to send it out, as did we. Soon after, the CFP began to surface elsewhere, sometimes in the text of an e-mail or as an attachment, other times printed out and tacked onto departmental bulletin boards. It also circulated on ASA listservs for cultural sociology, political sociology, science, knowledge, and technology, among others. Some posted it on facebook, twitter, and even a number of blogs. We also personally reached out to sociologists that might be sympathetic to this effort or who were ethnographically engaging with ANT. In some cases, we asked these presumed allies to pass on the call to their students and to consider the issue a possible outlet for their own work. Nonetheless, we were worried, especially early on, that our CFP would fail to enroll colleagues, near and far, to fill the issue. On our minds, we confess, was the fact that, as Michelle Lamont (2012, 232) recently stated, ANT continues to be "viewed as a somewhat peculiar and suspect endeavor" in mainstream U.S. sociology, despite the fact that, in her estimation, it stands "at the center of the incredibly dynamic transnational field of Science and Technology Studies."

As months passed with little indication if submissions were in the works, we re-circulated the CFP, this time actively sending it out to international contacts, which in some cases inhabit intellectual fields more familiar with and open to ANT. Since, we could not travel, the CFP traveled in our stead and was charged with task of making connections beyond our sphere of contacts. In effect, the CFP was now an "inscription" (Latour and Woolgar 1986), a kind of document that allows for "action at distance" (Latour 1987). Although it is debatable to what extent our CFP was an "immutable mobile," the term Latour (1987) gave to inscriptions that travel without transformation, our special issue would not have come to fruition without the circulation of the CFP and the enrollment of authors, reviewers, and special contributors. Of course, as inscriptions tend to do, the CFP rendered largely invisible the negotiation of interests, personal curiosities, aspirations, and the labor of the multiple actors involved in its assembly.

Although out of view from us, potential authors responded positively to the CFP and began crafting or revising manuscripts to submit for this special edition. An actor-network, composed of many other actor-networks, began to form.

Enter QUAS: "This Assignment Needs your Attention"

After our CFP circulated for some seven months, we began to receive the first emails from Editorial Manager®, the submission management system used by *Qualitative Sociology*. In the course of assembling the edition, we interacted frequently with Editorial Manager®, a black box we came to refer to simply as "QUAS"—the name it assigned the journal.

Editorial Manager® or QUAS was an actor or rather an "actant" in our emergent actor-network. This assertion articulates arguably the most controversial, even infamous, propositions of ANT: agency is not a unique or innate characteristic of humans.[4] By refusing to

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[4] ANT theorists conceptualizes agency, as we elaborate below, in a distinctive way, which requires no intent or sentient properties. Agency refers simply to the ability to affect and be affected. Although frequently misread, objects are not understood to have "agency" outright; rather the agency of nonhumans (as well as humans) is a distributed effect of relations among other heterogeneous entities.

privilege humans over nonhumans in its accounts of action, ANT writings attempts to unsettle one of the foundational distinctions of "modern" European thought (Latour 1993b).[5] Callon (1986) characterized this position "generalized symmetry," a concept that built upon but radicalized the meaning of symmetry given by the Strong programme of sociology of science (Bloor 1976/1991).[6] Unlike the Strong programme, as Law (2009a, 145) notes, ANT's symmetry refers not simply to matters of "truth and falsity, to epistemology, but to ontology, to the different kinds of actors in the world."

Each of the earliest ANT case studies, for example—whether Callon's (1986) famous essay on the domestication of scallops at St. Brieuc Bay or Latour's (1993a) celebrated account of the pasteurization of France—advance a symmetrical approach. This prohibits changing "registers when we move from the technical to the social aspects of the problem studied" and an unwillingness to respect the inherited division between "human" and "nonhuman" entities (Callon 1986, 200).

QUAS was a quirky, and not always predictable, entity. At first, because we were unfamiliar with the system interface, we were confused with how to enter comments and ensure authors would receive them. A couple times, we inadvertently caused QUAS to send out unintended emails. And because QUAS would instantly generate emails to reviewers telling them that a decision had been reached, we were often anxious that maybe something had been inadvertently emailed to the wrong person. Other times, QUAS would remove the papers from view, causing us to panic and call Rebecca Hanson, *Qualitative Sociology's* managing editor, who kindly made them reappear shortly after.

ANT invites much more than descriptions of our clumsy interactions with objects or how people use technologies. More important is understanding the often-ignored ways that these seemingly passive and inert objects act upon us and shape our subjectivities and actions. As Latour and Venn (2002) argue, "Technologies bombard human beings with a ceaseless offer of previously unheard-of positions—engagements, suggestions, allowances, interdictions, habits, positions, alienations, prescriptions, calculations, memories." This perspective helps us appreciate that QUAS powerfully *mediated* our relationship to reviewers and authors, serving both as a constrainer and enabler. Only articles submitted through QUAS were reviewed, and only through QUAS were reviews accepted. QUAS formatted submissions, stipulated what actions could be taken at a given moment, and generated particular channels of communication. For example, QUAS was insistent: If we were slow to make a decision on a reviewed submission it would tell us, with increasing frequency, "this assignment needs your attention." Far from a passive, background element, QUAS did not simply manage the articles; it also helped to manage interactions and rapport between human actors. This technology formatted, in particular ways, the production of this special edition, and—to invoke a classic ANT concept—functioned somewhat like an "obligatory passage point" (Callon 1986).

A hallmark of ANT, implicit in our brief description of QUAS, is attentiveness to relations among heterogeneous entities. Similar to other relational sociologies (Bourdieu 2000; Elias 1978; Gramsci 1971; Smith 1987), ANT aspires to reject substantialism—the tendency to take "discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points for sociological analysis" (Emirbayer 1997, 287).[7] What ANT distinctively introduces to relational sociology is

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[5] Other "great divides" targeted by ANT are the "macro versus micro" and "actor versus structure." ANT thus represents an alternative attempt to transcend or depart from the dichotomous logic that pervades sociological thought. Other alternatives include, most famously, Bourdieu's corpus (c.f. Bourdieu 1977; 2000).

[6] In efforts to break with Whig histories of scientific progress, the Strong programme insists that the same explanatory framework must be applied regardless of whether a scientific fact is ultimately deemed true or false.

[7] As one example, we could take Norbert Elias' (1978) "figurational sociology," an approach that bears some family resemblance to ANT, but maintains the very anthropocentrism that Latour and other ANT scholars seek to abandon.

"material semiotics": the extension of semiotics to the study of objects, nature and things "out there." ANT embraces the idea that entities matter only in relation to other entities, but expands this insight beyond and discourse.[8]

In this respect, QUAS was no different from other actants. It was a consequence or effect of relations with other entities, both human and nonhuman. For instance, without Rebecca's regular intervention, involving accepting submissions, choosing and contacting potential reviewers, making decisions about when to drop unresponsive reviewers, and corralling guest editors towards the system, QUAS would not have been QUAS. At the same time, as we describe above, QUAS also affected the making of this special issue. To assume the role and responsibility of "guest editors" required interacting and negotiating not only with David, Rebecca, reviewers, and authors, but also with QUAS and a host of other objects.

ANT Multiple

As the original deadline, March 2012, approached, QUAS began to receive a steady stream of submissions. After authors uploaded their papers and reviewers were confirmed, we were granted access to a QUAS formatted submission. While awaiting reviewer comments, we created a google.doc to post and manage our own assessments. Each of us would individually post our comments and then revisit them as reviews slowly came in. Over phone, skype, and occasionally in person, we discussed the quality, clarity, and "fit" of each submission. Almost immediately, we began to notice several patterns.

First, we did not receive many meta-theoretical musings. Maybe the language of the CFP deterred such papers, or perhaps the available pool of potential contributors was more empirically oriented. Certainly in a few cases, such as the Passoth and Rowland essay, in our early communications we warned them that this was not desired, and asked them to submit an empirical study.

As expected, authors attempted—with varying degrees of success—to position their papers in line with the special issue. This entailed as we could tell, a few tactics, such as claiming research as "ethnographic" and "qualitative" and employing ANT concepts like "mediators" and "actants." But several submissions were wanting in both regards. We found ourselves frequently urging authors to provide more descriptive detail and texture. Curiously, a number of ethnographic submissions resorted to "telling" rather than "showing," an issue also noted by reviewers. Conceptually and theoretically, only a subset of submissions initially conveyed a deep and serious engagement with ANT. We began to ponder and debate to what extent ANT invites or lends itself to impressionistic analyses. We also asked ourselves: Had our CFP contributed to this situation?

We were further surprised by the lack of challenges or critiques of ANT. It seemed that most submitters were unaware of, or uninterested in, the many debates sparked by and criticisms made against ANT. Of the papers that did express a command over ANT, there was a tendency to treat empirics as secondary to theoretical or conceptual explication. These submissions seemed, above all, concerned with proving the novelty or utility of ANT. A task that, we might add, was not the motivation behind this special issue. In a sense, these papers

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[8] Latour (1996b, 7) writes, "What really matters is that [material semiotics] is an elevation instead of a reduction and that the new hybrid status given *to all entities* both the action, variety and circulating existence recognized in the study of textual characters and *also* the reality, solidity, externality that was recognized in things 'out of' our representations" (italics in the original).

resembled much STS and ANT scholarship, where case studies are routinely used to make broader theoretical claims, such as the agency of objects. Our hesitation towards these papers stemmed from what we saw as a lack of investment in the empirical specificity and substantive import of their respective cases. For as Law (2008, 630) notes, "abstraction is only possible by working through the concrete." Notably, most of these kinds of submissions seemed to be written by converts speaking to a presumed audience of other converts, and as a consequence devoted little effort to translating ANT for the uninitiated.

We thus envisioned this special issue as an exercise in *translation*. The concept of translation, as many readers will recognize, has been central to ANT. As with other ANT concepts (and the meaning of ANT itself), its definition is slippery and has received different accents by different authors and at different moments in ANT's life course. At its most basic, translation refers to techniques or practices that establish connections through equivalence. In an early essay, Callon and Law (1982, 619) describe translation as a process by which "different claims, substances or processes are equated with one another: where, in other words, what it is in fact unlike is treated as if it were identical."

But translation is also treason (Callon 1986; Law 2006). A translation is never an exact replica; there is always some degree of displacement. Thus as Latour (1987, 117) famously described it, the act of placing one's interests in the form of another person's involves "at once offering new interpretations of these interests and channeling people in different directions" (Latour 1987, 117). Accordingly, it is quite possible that some will find our discussion here or throughout the issue a betrayal to what ANT *really* is. Of course, such a conclusion sits at odds with one of the major contributions of the "after-" and "post-" ANT universe.

In her innovative "ethnography of disease," Annemarie Mol (2002) examines the multiple practices through which atherosclerosis is enacted or realized in the hospital. Atherosclerosis, she insists, is not a singular thing that just so happens to *mean* different things to different people (i.e. doctors, patients, insurance companies); rather it is multiple, enacted by a diverse number of coordinated practices. Similarly, ANT itself is not one thing (Law 2009a)—although our treatment up until now may have suggested this.[9]

Submissions enacted, through practices of research and writing, different ANTs. In part, this multiplicity is a consequence of the eclectic philosophical and theoretical traditions of which it is composed, such as post-structuralism, American pragmatism, ethnomethodology, and post-Kuhnian sociologies of science, and those against which it has developed, such as Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and Bourdieusian sociology (c.f. Latour 2005b). As Law (2009a, 142) writes, ANT is better understood as "a diaspora that overlaps with other intellectual traditions." In addition, ANT has undergone significant changes and transformations since its inception nearly 30 years ago. Submissions tended to locate themselves, implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, within particular phases. Some, for example, bore affinities to what has been temporally described as "early" or more reverentially "classic" ANT, in which the themes of stabilization (and destabilization) and scale were given priority (c.f. Callon and Latour 1981). Drawing on later works and iterations, other papers emphasized issues of fluidity, multiplicity and performativity (c.f. de Laet and Mol 2000; Law and Singleton 2005). Finally, different ANTs were enacted as a result of whether ANT was taken as a "theory," a "method," or something different altogether—a theme to which we will return. In essence, ANT is a kind of "boundary-object," a formation "plastic enough to adapt

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[9] We have not missed the irony here. While signaling here an appreciation for multiplicity, our introduction cannot avoid generating a particular reading of ANT. But the fate of our reading, per ANT, is no longer in our hands.

to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393).

Our own readings, of course, were themselves multiple, and changed over the course of these past two years. As guest editors, we strove not to steer papers toward our readings or to legislate a "correct" reading of ANT. We did insist that authors identify which aspects and sensibilities of ANT were being mobilized, and in the spirit of translation pushed authors to provide greater conceptual clarity. It is worth recalling that it is through practices of translation that the few come to speak for the many—the predominant conception of power that animates early ANT writings. As guest editors, who exercised some (although not exclusive) influence over the content of the issue, our explicit interest in *translating* ANT to a largely U.S. sociological community involved conditionally assuming the role of a "spokesperson" (Callon 1986, 223). As an attempt, perhaps a futile one, we resisted this position by choosing not to flatten or excessively purify the varied ANTs populating submissions. In any case, we were not alone in deciding the fate of papers. Reviewers, of course, played their part.

Allies and Dissenters

Sometime early in the spring of 2012 Rebecca asked us to send her a list of potential reviewers who might be familiar with ANT. These reviewers would be added to the reviewers identified by *Qualitative Sociology*. We carefully organized a list of 15 US and international scholars in sociology, anthropology, and STS. About half were ANT scholars while the other half was comprised of imagined and potential allies: scholars working in related traditions and thus perhaps open to ANT, as well as scholars actively critical of ANT. We imagined that these critics would help push contributing authors to defend and clarify their particular readings of ANT, engage critically with ANT alongside other frameworks, and help render ANT's limitations explicit.

As we waited for reviews to return, we wondered how a somewhat controversial intellectual movement within much of U.S. sociology would be received by reviewers unfamiliar or antagonistic toward ANT. In mind from the very beginning were the litany of criticisms and apprehensions that have been leveled at ANT writings—some with merit and others without. What articles would survive the review process and how would they change in the course? In ANT accounts, "trials of strength" are at the crux of scientific production (e.g. Latour 1987; 1993b). In the process of fact-making, scientists must enroll allies—colleagues, inscriptions, citations, or well-disciplined bacteria—to help support the veracity of their claims. Likewise scientists must fend off competing laboratories, unruly scallops or other dissenters, usually colleagues not immediately convinced by a scientific text. Effective defense against dissenters hinges not on the truth or objectivity of a particular fact but on the ability of the scientists to "demonstrate" the strength of a claim by calling on allies—often in the form of effective use of scholarly citations.

Indeed, the process of peer-review from which the articles included in this issue emerged unfolded like a trial of strength. Reviewers played a very important role both as allies and dissenters. Reviews from those more sympathetic to ANT revolved around three issues. *First*, and to our delight, reviewers almost always challenged authors for fuller explanation of ANT concepts. *Second*, reviewers often remarked that the contributions seemed to only superficially engage ANT. Those sympathetic to ANT often wanted more ANT. They remarked that ANT concepts seemed "peppered" or that ANT "bookended" empirical accounts without properly being put to use, and that the deployment of ANTs infra-

language seemed "strained." We say this much above. *Third*, and here sympathizers acted as both allies and dissenters, reviewers questioned authors' readings of ANT. Some authors were accused of "gross mis-readings" and inappropriate usage of ANT terms, often these reviews called for the submissions to be rejected. What these reviewers seemed to require were deeper engagements with the "right" or "real" ANT.

Some reviewers suggested that ANT was "not doing anything" other frameworks could not do better. A number of reviewers invited authors to revisit other theorists—from Becker and Goffman to Beck and Haraway. Occasionally, reviewers suggested a long list of citations of literature they felt had been ignored. Sometimes these included ANT accounts but mostly they did not. These reviewers often tried to steer authors away from ANT, and in other directions, or by suggesting their own work, enroll them as allies in their own scholarly actor-networks. Throughout this process, authors were not passive but active participants, sometimes pushing back on reviews and recruiting additional supporters for their claims and interpretations, such as additional citations and response letters.

As conventional practice, our recommendations (final decisions belonged to David) were shaped and informed by reviews, though this is not to suggest we were always in agreement. The papers that were ultimately given revise-and-resubmits were each subjected to several revisions—through which representations of ANT were transformed, in subtle and not so subtle ways. Slowly but surely submissions became articles and together began giving shape to an issue yet to be.

An Issue Assembled

In the interplay between dissenters and allies, near, far and imagined, we helped to assemble this special issue of *Qualitative Sociology*. In its present form, this issue is composed of one introduction, seven articles, and a concluding essay by John Law and Vicky Singleton. As is custom, a number of submissions we received do not appear, but we do not doubt they will make their way into other journals, other actor-networks. The seven peer-reviewed essays that make up the core of the issue tackle a wide range of substantive topics including the emergence and decline of civil associations and social movements, scientific fields and social problems, the making of sacred spaces and affective and aesthetic meanings, and even the problem of reflexivity in sociological "account-making." Readers will immediately notice that the issue's thematic diversity is matched by diverse engagements with ANT. In this issue, we see "classic" ANT frameworks and post-ANT sensibilities, as well as the mobilization of concepts and traces from the work of Latour, Law, Callon, Mol and many others.

Central to ANT, as noted above, is the insight that actor-networks are accomplishments that must be explained rather than assumed. Assemblages are composed of long chains of translation: "The whole is not an undisputed starting point but the provisional achievement of a composite assemblage" (Latour 2005b, 208). This special issue is no exception. In addition to the binding, title, photograph on the cover, and this introduction, there are theoretical and methodological threads that stabilize this assemblage. So what holds this issue together?

To this question, readers will undoubtedly draw their own connections. Nonetheless, it is useful, perhaps, to signal two coordinates we believe give this admittedly eclectic issue a coherent shape. In the spirit of ANT, the following articles unsettle taken-for-granted concepts and essentialist categories, whether "civil society," "post-Fordism," or "politics,"

to name just a few. Instead of relying on these conceptual shortcuts to explain the empirical reality they describe, these articles set out to open black boxes. They often then put these insights to productive work within particular debates, whether it be the sociology of art or of civil society. In addition, this issue is held together by an attempt to expand our ethnographic and qualitative horizons. Some works trace interview narratives and the circulation of documents. Others engage in symmetrical observations of humans and nonhumans in action, while still others meditate on their own inscriptions and accounts.

Although assemblages appear singular, they are at closer inspection, multiple, made-up of other actor-networks. Each comprising actor-network is complex and dynamic in its own right. Readers will find in these articles different potential points of entry, sources of creative tension, and insights for further exploration—both in terms of empirical and theoretical issues. Each makes unique contributions that will far exceed any reading we three can give. And yet, the genre of introduction writing imposes upon us the task of enumerating some of these contributions. To quote Annmarie Mol (2002, 7), what follows "does not claim to capture everything. Instead, it is intended to suggest some ways of traveling through" the articles in this issue.

To begin, Wendy Griswold, Genna Mangione and Terrence McDonnell stage an important conversation between ANT and the sociology of culture through which they theorize how objects, words, cognitive locations, and physical positions shape the museum experience and meanings attached to art. In doing so, they invite cultural sociology to consider the role of materiality in shaping meaning. Shifting from art to electoral campaigns and journalism, C.W. Anderson and Daniel Kreiss explore the politics of representation. By tracing socio-technical objects, they show how devices afford and constrain particular political capacities. Importantly, they conclude their paper with a discussion of the normative and political implications of bringing ANT into the study of democratic life. The political relevance of ANT is also a central theme in Seio Nakajima's contribution. In this article, we see how cafés, underground venues, fans of independent film, discourses and shared understandings contribute to the making of China's "civil society." With an eye on these diverse kinds of associations, Nakajima draws attention to the limitations of narrowly conceiving civil society as simply a discursive accomplishment.

Isaac Marrero-Guillamón's contribution, on the other hand, turns a critical eye toward ANT. Marrero-Guillamón's uses the case of the urban conflict occasioned by the refashioning of the Can Ricart factory in Barcelona to deepen Bruno Latour's (2005b; 2010b) recent embrace of Durkheim's predecessor and archrival, Gabriel Tarde. Marrero-Guillamón, in particular, sets out to resist the parliamentary impulse within recent ANT theorizing on democracy and politics more broadly (c.f. Callon et al. 2009; Latour 2005a). In her article, Catherine Bliss also mines ANT and returns to Callon's (1986) famous four moments of translation to track the role of the U.S. federal government's OMB Directive No. 15 in the seemingly sudden emergence of race in the field of genomics. In contrast to Callon, Bliss shows the existence of not just one, but multiple obligatory passage points. Marrero-Guillamón and Bliss thus artfully take up, in very different ways, the post-ANT invitation to surpass "traditional ANT," without simply leaving it behind (Gad and Jensen 2010).

In his contribution, Michael Guggenheim addresses the question of specificity in ANT. Through a comparison of how German churches are repurposed into libraries and factories sacralized into mosques, Guggenheim not only addresses the transformation of buildings, but also stimulates critical inquiry into how specific objects are differentially enacted. Lastly, the penultimate empirical article in this issue addresses a matter of concern for science studies and sociology more generally—the question of reflexivity. In a creative and provocative essay, Jan-Hendrik Passoth and Nicholas Rowland narrate how in the veritable

sociological laboratory—the academic conference and the journal—reflexive, messy accounts wax and wane. Seen both as a necessary hindrance of sociological accounts, getting reflexivity "just right" is a matter of passing through trials, amassing allies and sometimes distancing ourselves from them.

At the conclusion of this special issue readers will find a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay by John Law and Vicky Singleton. Employing a familiar technique within ANT writings (e.g. Callon and Law 2005; see also Latour 1996a, 2005b), Law and Singleton reflect on and push forward ANT through a dialogue interspersed with vignettes from a collaborative ethnography on Norwegian Salmon farming.

This dialogue offers an "insider" perspective of sorts, as John Law, as noted above, is one of the founders of ANT, but is also recognized as a broader social theorist. Indeed Law's recent work addresses ontological heterogeneity and world making(s) through empirical studies of post-colonial encounters and knowledge spaces (Law 2011; Law and Lin 2011); the relationship between policy, technology and interspecies enactments (Lien and Law 2011; Singleton and Law 2013); and the performativity of social science research methods (Law 2004; Law 2009b; Law and Ruppert 2013). Vicky Singleton, a long time collaborator of Law's, has published on a wide range of empirical topics and has extensively contributed to an "after" ANT project, in particular through productive encounters between ANT (and related material-semiotic traditions) and feminist theory (e.g. Singleton 1996). Singleton's own recent work turns around complex enactments of health policy and patient subjectivities (Singleton 2005, 2007), and farming regulation and nature (Singleton 2010, 2012). Their afterword further develops Law and Singleton's shared concerns through a dialogue that meditates on the origins, weaknesses, and above all, the politics and performativity of ANT. We were fortunate to enroll them in this exercise in translation.

Along with this introduction, these articles compose this special edition. Many more translations than we have the space or effort to describe made this possible. Now all this nascent actor-network needs are readers.

Sensibilities and Afterlives

Some readers of this introduction and the articles herein will find traces and resonances with other ways of imagining the "social," while others will find ANT at odds with their own understandings. Some ethnographers will claim that ANT is just good ethnography. Perhaps. It is tempting for us, having assembled the issue together, to ask if we have done it "just right," that is, did we make the right choices and mobilize the right "networks"? Certainly, astute readers will find absences in this issue and introduction.

It is worth recalling here Latour's (1996a) stylistically transgressive work, *Aramis,* which narrates the conception, life, and death of Aramis, a Paris-based automated train system. To understand Aramis' failure, Latour goes beyond "social factors" to explore the contingent association between human actors and the technological devices and material objects that, like their "human" counterparts, must be "recruited, seduced, modified, transformed, developed, brought on board" (57). The book is a wonderful account of the failure of a great idea, partially because it was too loved in the abstract, but not loved enough in its actual implementation. The actor-network that is this "special" issue may ultimately fail to translate, to take hold. This is an experiment and nothing more.

The two-plus years of work on this issue—framing it, enrolling authors, working with authors, critics, QUAS, Rebecca and David, writing this introduction—afforded us an opportunity to closely engage with various ANTs, their offspring, their allies and detractors.

We have over the last several months had the opportunity to re-read and probe much of what has been written about ANT in English, ranging from the relatively straightforward take-up of early ANT in nearby disciplines to the less accessible philosophical exegeses related to post-ANT. The caricatures of ANT, which we did run across and hope we have not reproduced, never quite held sway, but more sober critiques continue to resonate and demand attention, such as questions of power and exclusion (Lee and Brown 1994; Star 1991) and meaning and affect (Krarup and Blok 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Vandenberghe 2002), as well as the ensemble of criticisms Latour (1999, 16) once named the "managerial, engineering, machiavelian, demiurgic character of ANT."

These issues and concerns are perhaps impossible to fully address entirely within the parameters of what is typically understood as ANT. It is worth recognizing that recent works—both from within the "network" if you will and those beyond it—have begun to engage some of these blind spots. Much of the "post-ANT" scholarship, led in some respects by John Law and his colleagues, has initiated a more explicit conversation with critical feminist scholarship, post-colonial theory, and other "material-semiotic" and post-humanist approaches, such as Haraway's work, to confront some of the limitations and excess of earlier iterations. Parallel and intersecting with these earnest attempts is the work of a growing number of U.S. sociologists building on, extending, and transforming ANT. Among the most exciting works, to our minds, is the burgeoning encounter between cultural sociology and the material turn, of which ANT is an influential part (e.g. Bennett 2007; Carroll 2006; McDonnell 2011; Mukerji 2009; Zubrzycki 2013). Another promising line of inquiry is Go's (2013, 43) recent proposal for a postcolonial sociology, in which he argues that ANT helps advance a "critique of and alternative to metrocentric accounts that attribute agency and innovation in modernity to the metropole alone." Other examples include Gil Eyal's (2013) attempt to integrate Bourdieu's notion of fields and Latour's concept of network, and the recent volume by Camic et al. (2011) on the making of social knowledge, which draws inspiration from STS and ANT. We hope this special issue serves to contribute to these recent developments, and specifically to the renewed interest in ethnography among sociologists.

As we noted at the beginning of this introduction, a number of recent articles have registered a desire to reinvigorate and reanimate the craft of sociological ethnography. This special issue reflects and partakes in this preoccupation. It explores the potential of ANT to help fashion a deeper, wider, and more robust ethnographic imagination. We hope this issue serves as proof that ANT has something to offer.

What then is the purchase of ANT for ethnographic and qualitative sociology? In our view, the answer to this question depends to an important extent on how ANT is approached and conceptualized. Is it a theory, method, or something else? Taking cue from Law (2009a, b) and others, we approach ANT as an ensemble of sensibilities for research. Mol (2010, 261) elaborates that, at its best, ANT can give researchers "ways of asking questions and techniques for turning issues inside out or upside down." In our minds, it is in this way—as a set of *sensibilities*—more than anything else, that ANT holds real promise.

In the preceding sections, we introduced some of these sensibilities, such as skepticism towards taken-for-granted divisions, categories, and concepts; attention to processes of circulation; interest in the relational interface between humans and nonhumans; and appreciation for uncertainty and multiplicity. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list and others can be teased out and developed. Notwithstanding, the sensibilities we have emphasized (and rather abstractly listed here) invite certain ethnographic engagements and entanglements. Briefly, we will sketch four.

First and foremost, ANT sensibilities encourage particular kinds of descriptions. Contrary to some readings, ANT does not pursue "merely descriptions" or details for detail's sake. Instead,

ANT strives for descriptions of a very particular and foundational activity: the assembling, disassembling, and reassembling of associations. Following human and nonhuman actants and their translations, ethnographers are charged with describing the dynamic, though not necessarily successful, work of enacting particular realities. For example, in a recent ethnography, Matei Candea (2010) draws on certain threads in British anthropology and ANT to explore the question of "difference" on the island of Corsica and in the discipline of anthropology. Questioning the false distinction between "essence and social construction," he invokes Latour to "take seriously the ways in which the solidity of (id)entities emerges not through the magic of social fiat, nor from the collective imagination of people, but from real, historical, traceable assemblages of people, things, places, and ideas held together by links and relations of different kinds." For Candea, the question is not whether "Corsica" or "the French Language" is real. Rather the questions are: "Have they been realized?" and "Of what are they made up?" (Candea 2010, 4). In a sense, ANT sensibilities resembles Geertz's (1973) semiotic approach to culture, except that "webs of significance" are not simply meaning, but also inscriptions and materialities of all types. As a consequence, ANT expands what is worthy of description.

Second, ANT sensibilities embrace a different relationship to theory, particularly when compared to "theory-driven" ethnographic approaches, such as Burawoy's (1998) influential version of the Extended Case Method (ECM). As Mol (2010, 262) understands it, ANT approaches theory as "a repository of terms and modes of engaging with the world, a set of contrary methodological reflexes." This differs greatly from the use of theory to "explain" and "contextualize" ethnographic descriptions and social reality more broadly. For example, Burawoy (1998) suggests that researchers delineate "the *social forces* that impress themselves on the ethnographic locale" (15, italics in original). These social forces are theoretical constructs, a shorthand device, used, he admits, as "methodological expedient and experiential reality framing and confining social processes" (15f). This theoretical shortcut is necessary because social forces are understood to "lie outside of the object of investigation" (16). For ANT theorists, the reliance on theory to "frame" reality does not constitute the success of research, but rather its failure to sufficiently trace associations and connections.[10] This perspective challenges the commonplace practice of mobilizing theory as a priori or post-hoc shortcut, and as a consequence *explaining away* the very complexity and messiness of reality. Ultimately, although we might question the feasibility of just "following the actors" (Candea 2007; Strathern 1996), ANT sensibilities invite researchers to trace ethnographically what ethnographers often abdicate to theory or other methods entirely.[11]

Building on the previous two points, ANT sensibilities positively impact the ethnographic imagination in a third way. Drawing on ethnomethodology among other traditions, ANT accounts seek to allow all actors to speak their sociologies and even contest the sociologies of professional sociologists. As Law (Law 2009a, 2009b, 142) puts it, ANT "is not a creed or a dogma and at its best a degree of humility is one of its intellectual leitmotifs." As such, it is especially concerned with the discursively and materially heterogeneous "world-making" activity of actors. One concrete consequence of

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[10] From this angle, ANT expresses an affinity with Institutional Ethnography. Similar to ANT, Smith (2005) criticizes ethnographers, and explicitly critically oriented ethnographers for turning to theory to understand what could be ascertained ethnographically. Instead of a pre-selected theoretical framework, Smith advocates starting from an "everyday" problematic, often expressed by disadvantaged individuals and groups. Although we do not have the space to elaborate on the differences and commonalities, it is worth noting that both approaches challenge theory-centric approaches like the extended case method.
[11] To avoid misinterpretation, this stance towards theory does not mean that ANT boils down to pure empiricism (although this charge has been made). Rather it rejects the top-down mobilization of theory to explain, rather than to facilitate further examination.

this reflexive position for ethnographic research pertains to the field. Of course, ANT inspired ethnographies are not alone in rethinking the boundaries of the field (Burawoy 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995). What ANT distinctively adds to the conversation about "global" and "multi-sited" ethnographies is the "making" and "unmaking" of fields by actors themselves, that is, "what actors achieve by *scaling, spacing,* and *contextualizing* each other" (Latour 2005b, 184; see also Blok 2010). Breaking with the "macro" versus "micro" divide, ANT sensibilities recognize that not only the researcher engages in "scale-making." Actors themselves invest and struggle to create the "contexts" in which they act (Blok 2010).

Finally, ANT sensibilities help to elevate the question of politics in research. This elevation is inseparable from the question of performativity, a concept that has been given new life throughout the social sciences and humanities (e.g. Bourdieu 1993; Butler 1993) and expanded far beyond the writings of Austin (1962). Performativity, as elaborated in ANT writings, moves beyond discourse into material semiotics. The formation of assemblages or associations creates or enacts worlds. Knowledge itself is an actor-network, a compositional entity. Law (2004) has stressed that social scientific methods are performative, that is, they realize the realities they seem to only represent and describe. Recognition of this state of affairs contributed to the development of the concept of "ontological politics," which Mol (1999) defines as attention to the ways that the real world is constantly and actively re-shaped by our practices.[12]

In the end, this may be one of most important lessons to take from ANT. Ethnography, qualitative research, or indeed any kind of social science, is inescapably a political project in this specific sense. ANT calls for a kind of social science that is neither enchanted nor disenchanted, but one that reflects on its own enchantment. Though sometimes decried as apolitical, ANT has the potential to open the door for more subtle kinds of political engagements premised on reflecting on what our social scientific work actually *does*. It encourages questions about the kinds of worlds we are helping to make and legitimate in our accounts, and the ways in which we are helping to compose and reconfigure the very communities, processes, and actors under our ethnographic gaze. As Law and Singleton explore in their essay, ethnographic research acts *in* and *on* the world—a fact we must take with great responsibility.

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[12] Mol (1999, 74–75) elaborates, "Ontological politics as a composite term. It talks of ontology—which in standard philosophical parlance defines what belongs to the real, the conditions of possibility we live with. If the term ontology is defined with that of politics, then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term politics works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested."

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