A Diplomatic Response

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First, I want to say thank you to my interlocutors, who gave their valuable time in reading the book, contributing to the panel in New Orleans, and writing their comments here. In an accelerating academia where time is a fleeting asset, I am truly grateful. I would like to single out Colin Flint, who organised this from start to finish. But I am yet more grateful for the care, generosity, and thoughtful critique of my work offered here. Three themes are discernible, and I will address each, albeit insufficiently.

Structure and the macro/micro divide

This theme is discerned most clearly in the comments by Flint, Barnes, and Secor. Flint's concern is distinct from Barnes and Secor, in that he is primarily concerned with the relationship between assemblage theory and structuralism, but he ends up at a similar place, wanting more on the 'larger' context – the state system, the Napoleonic Wars, the Cold War, a specific foreign policy decision. I would like to first address Flint's structuralist position, before moving on to the 'macro'.

I concede structuralism is probably caricatured in the assemblage literature, and I welcome the comparative approach Flint pursues. I still think there are significant differences, most clearly the assemblage's materialism and decentring of the human. Flint's references to structure, agency, and desire highlight structuralism's anthropocentrism, where 'conscious though not fully rational agency' produces structures, and Nietzschean desire is a human striving rather than the capacity of all systems (human or not) for self-organization. This overestimates human agency in a more-than-human world. For instance, given the state system is incapable of confronting a dynamic climate system amplified by capitalist

assemblages, we need a theory of politics humble enough to recognize we do not control the earth, but are of the earth (Connolly 2017): a new geo-politics. I see *Diplomatic Material* as opening up state theory in ways that aid that effort. Flint notes assemblage is ill-suited to analysis of long-lived phenomena, such as the state system (a point resonating with Barnes's observation that I only studied *surviving* assemblages). This is fair, but assemblage de-privileges a human-scaled temporality in favour of a multiplicity of (in)human temporalities. The state system is relatively new, with political assemblages seemingly stabilised in this form and globalising for only about the last two hundred years (as my first case study details). This is – dare I say it – ephemeral in the wider political history of humanity.

I appreciate that some greater hook to the 'macro' might have lent more import to the phenomena discussed. Rather, in my theorization the 'macro' appears as events or shocks to the diplomatic assemblage: the loss of the American Revolution leads to a re-organization of Whitehall, the detonation of atomic bombs changes elites' orientation to the future. This is congruent with my attempt to flatten the scalar imagination of international relations, tracing actual and existing relations rather than imagining influence from the 'global' on the 'local'. I would like to go further, and argue that *Diplomatic Material* is about a different 'macro' than that called for here. My assertion is that the expansion and intensification of diplomatic relations (of the materialist kind I highlight) over the last two centuries led to the emergence of a transnational state assemblage (both composed of states, and also a de-centralized, geographically-uneven state formation). This has many different names, depending on which elements of the assemblage are activated: the West, Europe, the Anglosphere, the International Community. *Diplomatic Material* is an effort to make that macro visible through the (micro) moments and spaces in which new connections were forged, and through which affects circulate.

Missing bodies

Another critique, levelled by Adey and Secor, is the absence of fleshy, real bodies, or alternatively the proliferation of a distributed, abstract body through my account. To this I say *mea culpa*. I could argue that my project was designed to overcome the anthropocentrism of Diplomatic Studies, which foregrounds individuals and their agency while ignoring the infrastructure that enables them to act, and think, diplomatically. But that is insufficient.

My theorisation requires attention to differentiated bodies, and yet methodologically I struggled. The archives were full of manuals or policies that imagine an abstract, universal body being made to perform. For example, I documented how the wartime coding of bodies working in signals intelligence limited their spatial and temporal movement, but only via the rules to be followed. Were they followed? This was rarely asked by those producing the documents. Similarly, my interviews with diplomats, NATO officials, and retired intelligence officers were attempts to understand everyday life in the assemblage. While some bodily routines could be glimpsed, they were always from a distance. It is also insufficient to plead the 'security state' defence – that these are governmental sites not amenable to observation, because others have done that so well (e.g., Jones and Clark 2015).

How did this impact my findings? First, as Adey notes, it reinforces the universal (read: male, white, ableist) body pervading the security state. Second, as Secor notes, it undercuts the extralinguistic dimensions of diplomatic practice. But I would go further. My theory asks us not only to see the effects of bodies on the diplomatic assemblage, but also to see how those bodies are affected differentially: stress, anxiety, boredom, purpose. The embodied human costs and benefits of participation in the diplomatic assemblage are left unexamined.

Criticality, violence, and resistance

This final theme is discernible in the comments by Barnes, Meehan, and Adey, albeit differently. Barnes asks what, precisely, is critical about my project, while Meehan notes an absence of attention to violence. Adey asks about counter-currents working against the inclining logic of cooperation embedded within diplomatic assemblages.

To Barnes's point, I argue that for twenty years, scholars of critical geopolitics deconstructed hegemonic geopolitics in hopes that something better would form. I am frustrated by our inability to dislodge even the most basic of geographical canards from the public imagination, such as the civilizational thinking that Steve Bannon helped bring into the White House in 2017. I think we have neglected to give due significance to the more-than-human affective circuits that give these tales force, and – as Flint notes – have failed to offer (re)constructive explanations of the geographic phenomena these canards purport to explain. Therefore, I see *Diplomatic Material* as participating in a discussion of how critical geography can be *more effective* in producing a progressive version of the assemblage I describe. I note, for instance, how my concluding pages discuss time-spaces of vulnerability, such as data storage. More importantly, I argue that understanding the times and spaces of state power gives those seeking change insight into when and where to leverage their political energies. Having said that, I agree that I do not specify a vision of what a more progressive assemblage would look like. More on that in a moment.

On Meehan's point that I occlude violence: this is true, in that when I discuss violence, it is usually discussed as *pouvoir,* which masks its bloody reality. To be clear, the *puissance* of this diplomatic assemblage – which is the primary focus of my analysis – has displaced violence from within the Global North to across the Global South. This appears in *Diplomatic Material* in my discussion of how NATO-Uzbekistan interoperability enabled the 2001 Afghanistan invasion, how shared signals intelligence facilitated the 2003 Iraq invasion, how NATO standardization in the 1950s required that weapons also be useful in Southeast

Asia, and in continued British sovereignty over Overseas Territories used for eavesdropping (e.g., Ascension Island, the Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus, and Diego Garcia).

Perhaps – like a diplomat stationed abroad – I have come to view things from 'their' perspective. But it is also true that this story is a remarkable achievement of *non*-violence, a lesson lost in recent Brexit debates. The latter half of the twentieth century, when most of the book's narrative unfolds, is remarkable in contrast to the bloodbath of previous half century, in part because of the puissance enacted through assemblage. It is easy to take that for granted, although of course we should not be satisfied, either. Structural violence of the type Meehan discusses is certainly exported, currently evident in refugee bodies in the Mediterranean and the asylum-seeking children stripped from their parents in Texas, Arizona, and California.

Adey asks about counter-currents to the inclining logic of assemblage. One such current is embodied by the current occupant of the White House, who after a briefing on the interconnections weaving together the post-war order, replied 'This is exactly what I don't want,' (quoted in Worth 2018). Trump's 'America First' policies have intentionally undercut the assemblage detailed here. Of course, the counter-currents are not all neo-Fascist visions of blood and soil. For long-time critics of NATO, EU and American-led neoliberal hegemony, an alternative vision of a truly democratic, postcolonial world is preferable to both Trump's nationalist vision and the current status quo. As Ingram (2017: 93) notes, 'Other scenarios, long in the making, are now on the table.' My hope is that *Diplomatic Material* would eventually be seen as an historical document describing the militarist neoliberal hellscape we transcended, as we successfully navigated to a new political/environmental order marked by nonviolence to both the earth and each other. My fear though is that it will soon be seen as a relic of a bygone, genteel world marked by concern over trust-building and consensus, in which state-on-state warfare had become

almost unthinkable. The politics of diplomatic assemblage may be complex, distributed, and open-ended, but they are crucial.

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