Re-translating nature in post-apartheid Cape Town:
the alliance of people and plants at Bottom Road
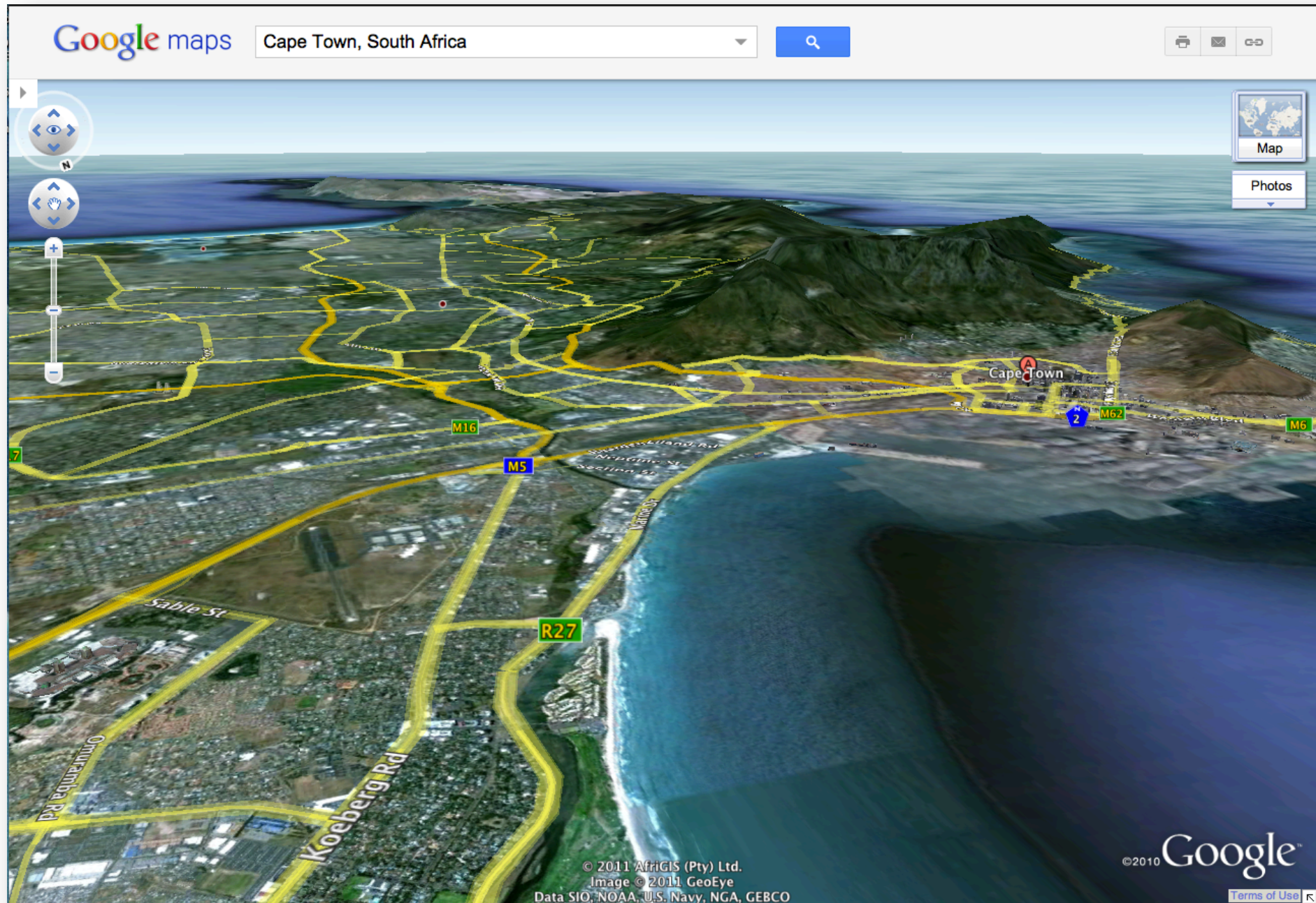
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Introduction: Virtually flying into Cape Town – a 'geography of difference'

Introduction: Short on Cape Town

-One of the most unequal spaces in the world (OECD Terretorial Review 2008)

-Strong legacies from Apartheid: Before Apartheid the most integrated city in South Africa; today considered the most segregated city.

-Rapidly growing – 80 000 new inhabitants per year

-Spatially growing fast – both due to informal settlements, and through planned middle-class developments (incl. gated communities)

-Lying in a water scarce region – water, electricity, and waste sites considered scarce

-Growing within what is considered one of the biological 'hotspots' of the world in the "Fynbos Biome" and the "Cape Floral Kingdom"

Introduction: Re-position urban ecology in Cape Town

The intersection of **poverty, segregation** due to colonial and apartheid legacies, and high records of **biodiversity** have sparked several attempts to re-think biodiversity protection.

A prime example was the **now defunct Cape Flats Nature** that aimed to change nature conservation practice to involve local and poor communities at nature reserves close to marginalized areas (Israelsson 2010; Israelsson & Ernstson in review; Pitt & Boulle 2010; also Ferketic et al 2010; Graham & Ernstson in review)

Cape Town's main approach has still been to use **expert-based Cartesian** methods of controlling space—either in the form of expert-managed nature reserves, and/or as biodiversity mapping techniques that calculates the "value" of green areas through counting the number of different species they contain.
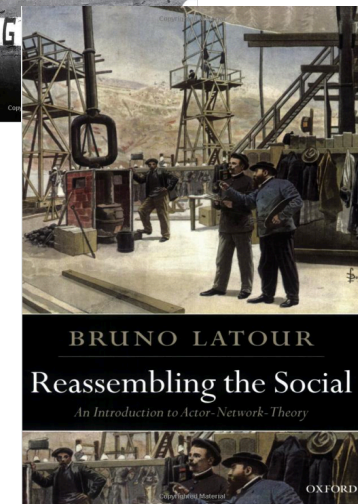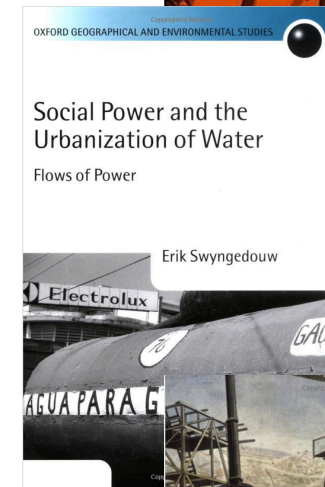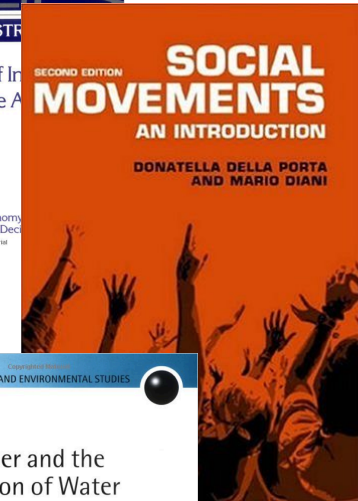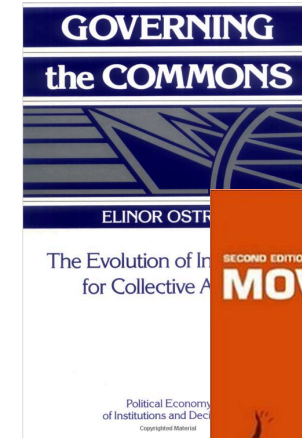
This paper uses actor-network theory (ANT) to trace **how a grassroots' initiative** challenged and "disturbed" this discourse through assembling a network of people, plants and physical spaces that **re-translated urban nature**—not through the experience of being white and/or scientist—but **through being classified as "Coloured" and marginalized during apartheid era Cape Town**.

This seems to open for a more inclusive framing of urban nature that can re-position urban ecology within urban agendas of development of marginalized areas and Cape Town as a whole.

Position the paper within my urban studies on urban development and urban political ecology

- **Project 1: Transformative collective action**
  - Moving from a 'static' collective action theory a la Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2005) to a theory of dynamic or transformative collective action.
  - Explain large-scale institutional change in how ' ecosystem management' is organized and how human-nature interaction is understood and enacted (Ernstson 2011)
  - Especially draw on **social movement theory** and **systems ecology** to understand how collective action can generate cultural, political and indeed ecological changes, but also how urban 'green' spaces can participate in generating and sustaining collective action (Ernstson 2011; Ernstson et al. 2008; Ernstson and Sörlin 2009)

- Project 2: Re-thinking "natural resource management" using a collective action lens – politicizing the practice of 'caring'/ managing urban ecologies
  - Closer reading of Urban Political Ecology (Erik Swyngedouw, Matthew Gandy, David Harvey)
  - Closer reading of literature on 'African urbanism' – a critique of general urbanism and development thought (Edgar Pieterse 2009, Jennifer Robinson 2002, 2011)
  - Closer reading of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, Law, Latour)

- Urban case studies in **Cape Town** (one own case study, one with PhD student, & several others withing project) and case study in **New Orleans** (with PhD student).

Strategy of investigation in this paper

Power, knowledge and Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

Power through relations

- Murdoch (1997; 2005) traces ANT from Foucault's analytical strategy to understand power in confined spaces such as the Prison or the Clinic (fig a). Power here the ability to control behavior and action, but also to internalize norms.

- **Ideas need objects** to generate and sustain power => Power/ Knowledge (and later to discourse and governmentality)

- Callon, Latour and Law took this approach and made it useful to trace power in any space – the durability of ties between actors and spaces are crucial to reproduce power.

- One particular space – the 'centre of calculation' (COC) – is linked to other spaces to which ideas or knowledge of the centre can be translated and transported to influence practice at the other spaces

The unstable nature of Nature

- They also critique modernity, and the "modernist settlement" that has created a way of thinking that depends on that we divide Nature and Society into neat boxes (Latour 2005)

- **In this paper I use ANT to trace how 'grassroots' built an actor-network capable of civic-led ecological rehabilitation** at various non-protected sites in Cape Town and how this has come to challenge the 'normal' way of protecting nature in Cape Town.
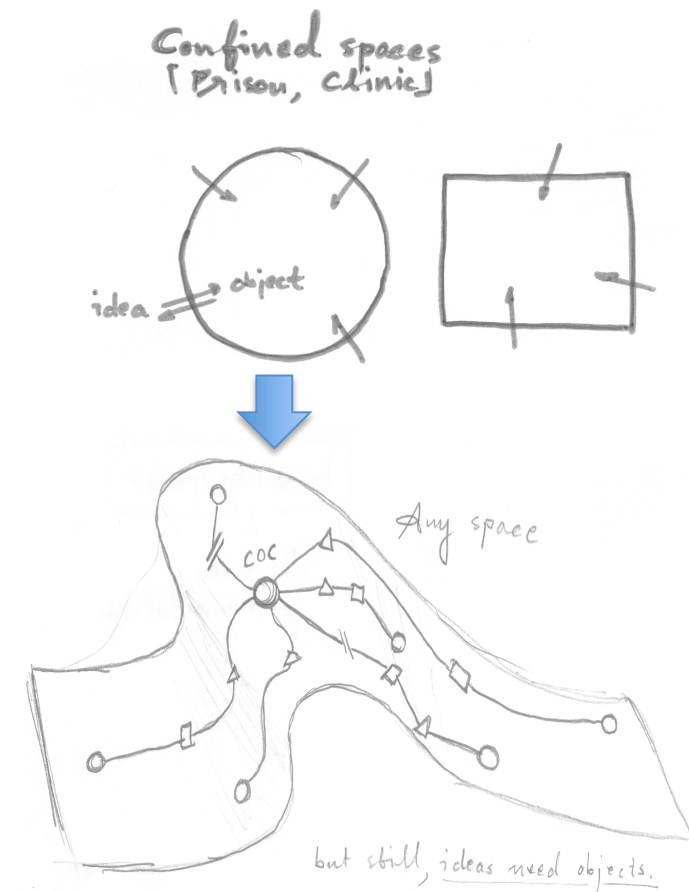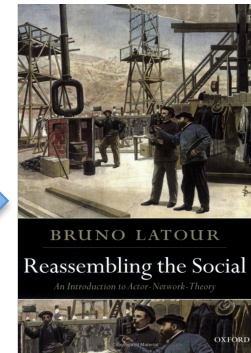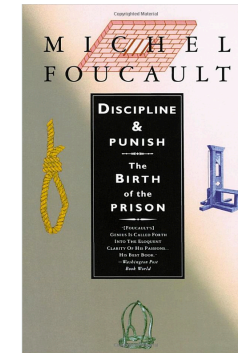
Tracing networks of em-*power*-ment

- ANT has mainly been used to trace actor-networks of the already powerful (scientists, engineer, businessmen...) and less used to understand grassroots struggles and social movements, and how such mobilization can lead to institutional change, novel understandings, and new modes of action.

- In Ernstson and Sörlin (2009, Env&Planning A) we used ANT to understand how civil society organizations used objects and artifacts to stabilize a "protective story" around a large green area in Stockholm so as to articulate novel values of green space in Stockholm leading to a protective law.

- In this paper I use ANT to trace how 'grassroots' built an actor-network capable of civic-led ecological rehabilitation at various non-protected sites in Cape Town and how this has come to challenge the 'normal' way of protecting nature in Cape Town. Key persons and organizations are from areas classified as 'Coloured' during apartheid.

- Reference: Ernstson, H and S Sörlin. 2009. "Weaving protective stories: connective practices to articulate holistic values in Stockholm National Urban Park." *Environment and Planning A 41:1460–1479. [link: http://bit.ly/pqGcsa]*

Two key ideas structuring the account of collective action

- **Trials – Stabilization of relations – Action** : The account strives to "trace those stabilized relations that had generated action, and the trials that these relations had gone through to be made durable enough to carry action (Latour 2005: 121ff)"
  - Cp. Pasteur and his microbes went through various 'trials' to come out as a capable actor-network on the other side.

TRIALS

- **The performance of scale.** Scale is viewed as *performed* by an actor-network through enrolling more actors and more spaces. In increasing the number of stabilized relations to certain spaces, the scale of the project increases, and so its influence. This process of increasing scale is traced in the account. As argued by Swyngedouw (1999; and Swyngedouw & Heynen 2003), all environmental projects are about a production of scale (through which projects can gain influence).

SCALE

Tracing networks of em-*power*-ment: the making of a capable actor of civic-led ecological rehabilitation and the re-translation of urban nature

The account: a growing actor-network through trials and actors

- **Assembling a "blueprint" that can travel**
  - Trial 1: Mikey (a resident of Bottom Road) and Conservation managers meet and find mutual interest in getting plants in the ground – to 'rehabilitate fynbos'
    - Mikey to build a community garden and community spirit
    - Conservation managers to rehabilitate a very special type of fynbos where Bottom Road has the 'correct' soil type for this. Also for showing that they can work with the 'community'
  - Trial 2: Mikey gathers other residents and conservation mangers – a meeting and signing of a white paper agreement (to make ties more durable)
- **Enrolling plants, machines and labour**
  - Trial 3: Enrolling a huge actor to get action started so as to keep residents interested.
    - Conservation managers have access to Working for Wetlands, a state-controlled actor employing low-paid workers to remove 'alien' plants and plant fynbos plants.

A necessary interludium

- To avoid dividing actors into 'micro' and 'macro' we need to un-pack "Working for Wetlands".
- This was an 'actor' originated in the creation of the Working for Water produced as an alliance between biologist and ANC post-apartheid
- A research project "The Fynbos Biome Project" (1977-1989) produced two scientific facts:
    - (1) fynbos vegetation has a remarkable and world-best biodiversity that needs protection;
    - (2) introduced species (later referred to as "aliens") lower river stream flows =>
- Scientists proposed for ANC Government: Create an 'actor' that can **remove** ALIENS and **plant** FYNBOS/INDIGENOUS SPECIES as this will **sustain** BIODIVERSITY, **increase** fresh WATER flows, and **reduce** POVERTY through EMPLOYMENT.

- **Stabilizing community buy-in**
  - Trial 4: Getting the 'community' to participate – monitoring and getting the neighbours to 'behave'
    - E.g. Neigbours were supposed to support workers with food and drinks. Mikey visited those who did not comply, told the others, and sometimes arranged for the food and drinks himself.
- **Negotiations with plants**
  - Trial 5: Weeding (fynbos growing too slow); more workers.
  - Trial 6: Fynbos growing too fast (the problem of a small space)
- **Expanding the actor – adding Last Road and the Ecogreen Park**
  - Re-using the recipe
  - Adding Last Road – new white paper agreement, new residents
  - Adding Ecogreen Park – agreement with City Parks, boumas and brai place filling the square with 'community life'; people celebrating birthday parties, children playing soccer etc.

- **Blueprint finished:** Mikey, residents and conservation managers could point to Bottom Road and tell the world that they had a capable actor that can perform civic-led ecological rehabilitation that can also blow life into dead public spaces.

Expanding again towards a "Dressing of the Princess"

Since 2007 the actor 'jumped' to the much bigger wetland and green area known as Princess Vlei, launching the "Dressing of the Princess Vlei" project pointing at Bottom Road to proove its ability.

City Parks again supporting Many more organizations have joined.

As the city announced the plans to allow **the building of a shopping centre** on the site, which lead to open contestation, media coverage and more middle-class and white-based environmentalist groups joined.
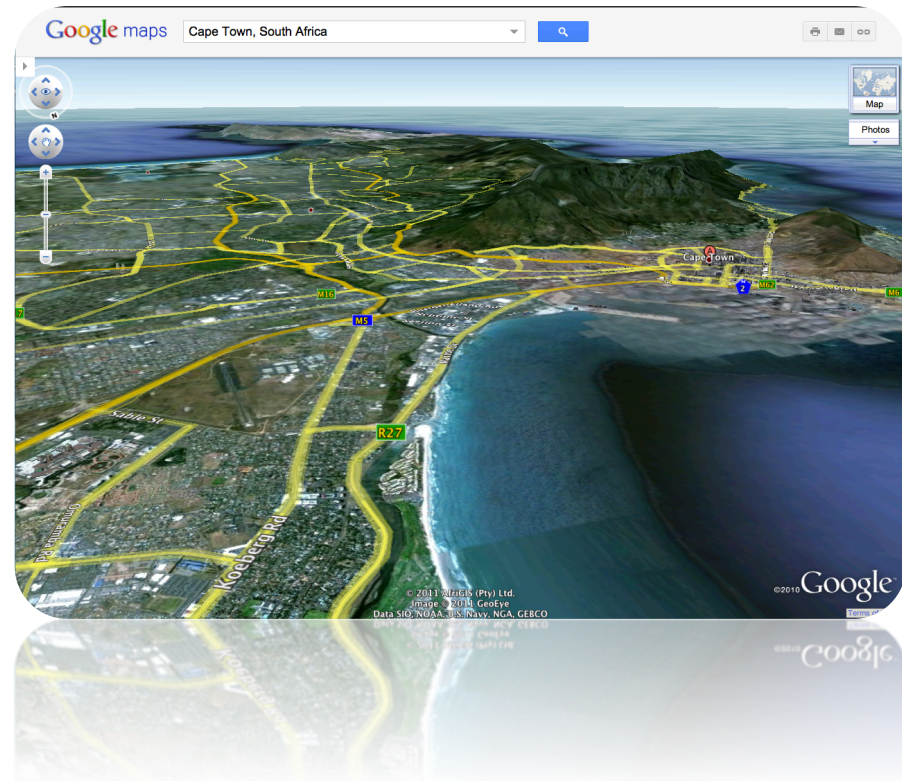
The actor-network changes all participants

		Stabilized as…
Mikey	Baker	Coloured environmentalist
10 Bottom Road	Any address	Centre of operation/calculation; "the centre of Cape Flats environmentalist movement"
Conservation managers of Rondevlei	Any conservation manager	Capable of 'working with the community'
Residents		Feeling pride of their 'green' street Increased their property prices
Working for Wetlands		Capabable (again) of rehabilitation more space, thousands of plants in the soil
Bottom Road neighbourhood	Rubbish dump	Green oasis; use of public space
Fynbos plants		Capable of transporting resources to marginalized community. Capable of participating in modes of empowerment.

When actor are enrolled they are not just 'added', but in stabilizing ties with them, both actors and the growing actor-network change.

ANT as useful for development studies

- **Function – episteme – ontology.**
  - ANT can help to understand how the same actor-network can generate certain functions, make epistemological claims and have world-making abilities (ontology)

- **Function**
  - ANT helps us to trace *how* 'resources' flow from A to B in the actor-network
  - Here it helped us to understand the heterogeneous relations needed for certain 'resources' to flow to marginalized areas in the geography of difference of Cape Town
  - But this fails to engage the whole analytical potential of an ANT account.
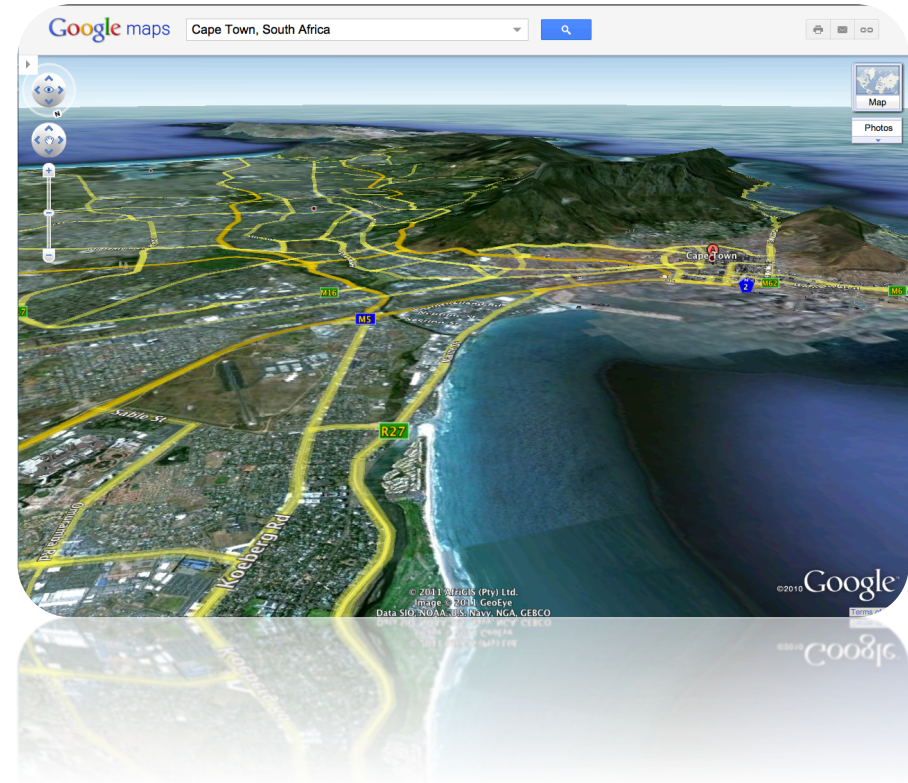
ANT as useful for development studies

- **Epistemological claims**
  - The same actor-network challenged the established actor-network for 'biodiversity protection' in Cape Town built on experts and 'nature reserves'
  - The actor-network challenges **who**, **where** and **how** to 'take care of nature in Cape Town' (not only white experts can 'care'/manage for urban nature, so can coloureds and blacks; not only 'protected areas' can serve, but so can derelict marginalized areas)
  - It seems to make new claims on how to 'compute' the value of a specific green area.

	Established actor-network	*Emergent actor-network*
Who? *[performed by]*	(mainly) 'white' experts	coloureds, black every citizen
Where? *[mobilized spaces]*	Protected areas Nature reserves Nature is found within Cartesian zones.	Any area Derelict neighbourhood areas in marginalized areas. Nature is everywhere.
How? *[produced action]*	Through protecting sites of 'nature' and have experts care for the plants and animal life there. Focusing resources on the protected areas.	By mobilizing residents and civic associations in relation to green public space and move plants into the soil of these spaces. Continuously expanding to new (public open) spaces.
Value claims? *[what is value]*	Number of different plants at a specific site/green space.	The strength of the "socioecological link" between humans, plants, animals and a particular site/green space.

ANT as useful for development studies

- **World-making abilities (ontologies)**
  - Using 'urban nature' and fynbos to address the "imbalances" after apartheid.
  - Striving to show that fynbos is not only the counting of different species, but that these plants also carry the memories of colonization and apartheid.

	Established actor-network	*Emergent actor-network*
Onto-politics in Cape Town	Nature is 'the counting of different species'.	Nature is (also) about apartheid and oppression.

Mikey in an interview:

"You see, when you say fynbos to people, lets take the coloured people. Say fynbos to them, and they tell you, 'what is that'. 'No, that must only grow in the mountain, or it only grows in Kirstenbosch [Botanical Garden].' That's the belief system. Now, one must understand this, that [the reason] they believe that, [is] because that is what is projected."

"[O]ur people can't afford to go to Kirstenbosch. […] No, and why should they, is the question mark I ask. I've always said to them we need to create more Kirstenbosches. Don't come tell me there's Kirstenbosch. […] We need to bring that people or the reserves closer to the people. Let them interact and let them find that peace and tranquillity. You know, that has been my fight. Has been from the day we started at... Bottom Road, like I've always said to you, it's only the alpha; it's not the omega of things."

Re-translating Capetonian urban nature

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Thank you.