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Grounding Better Big Words: Evaluating “Theory” through Self-Conscious Authorship

[Abstract & Disclaimer: This paper is an attempt to explore the word “theory” through its connection to reality, ethics, politics, and knowledge in an honest, respectful, and responsible way. I am a student at Lewis & Clark College taking classes in the departments of English and Environmental Studies. This paper is meant for the completion of a course called Environmental Theory taught by Dr. James Proctor. Much of my academic background in my undergraduate career has been investigating the connections between environmental studies and science (ESS) and discourses in English literature, particularly in the realm of language and narrative. This paper is a part of that investigation.

I draw from the thoughts and publications of those listed in the bibliography, as well as others who may have indirectly influenced the content or framework of my thoughts. I wish to communicate that these are not the only people who have written significantly about the topics addressed in this paper. This project touches only the surface of the debates about objectivity, knowledge, power and will thus remain non-comprehensive to the topic due to time limitations in the research and publishing process. This background may be helpful in situating my paper in the landscape of academic and popular treatments of what theory is and does.

I wish I could disclaim in this preface each of my assumptions about the world that might help you situate me, the author, in a time, a place, and a body. I am writing this in late spring of 2016 in Portland, Oregon. I am a heterosexual, cisgendered, female who uses the pronouns she/her/hers. Perhaps these details are a start to situating myself in the power differentials that prioritize certain standpoints over others in the acceptance of rational knowledge. In this disclaimer, I ask: is there a systematic way to identify the politics and hierarchies of knowledge production in publications of theory, criticism, and academic thought? Is this disclaimer a possibility?

This is not a fully realized manifesto, but more of an exercise and a practice. Even if it were fully realized to the point of submission to a peer-reviewed journal however, it would still be an exercise in using language to render thought, observation, and perspective. Because this piece of writing is an attempt to practice situating knowledge and academic discourse in order to make it responsible, and transparent, I hope this disclaimer allows me to become answerable for that which I’m learning how to see.]

First, this is not your everyday academic journal article. I am not an abstract author who claims to have figured something out about the world. I am a student who wishes to continue the conversation about perspectives of knowledge through an exercise assigned by my professor. Further, this paper is an experiment about the transparent and accessible presentation of ideas.

I have chosen to interrogate and investigate the word “theory” in order to move somewhere in the realm of environmental studies and sciences. Theory as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* means several things including “the conceptual basis of a subject or area of study, contrasted with practice” and stems from Latin *theoria* which speaks to speculation, contemplation (*OED Online* 2016). Theory is something abstract, a concept as opposed to a practice. Yet, it comprises the “basis” of all areas of study which are conducted through practice: scientific experiments, writing, reading, statistics, surveys, etc. Do these definitions of theory as conceptual, speculative, and explicitly not practical mean that theory is therefore not tangible? Or perhaps examples of theory are tangible, as are the pieces of paper that contain writings of Marx, Foucault, Latour, etc, but theory at large which encompasses all of these and more is abstract and intangible. If theory is abstract and intangible, can it and does it matter on an everyday, non-academic, lay-person scale? The answer I offer is yes.

One of the core principles of how I am being trained to engage with theory is attempting ground theory in things outside of the academic papers we read for class. I approach this project with the concept of theory as a “vehicle towards practical ends” (Proctor et al 2013, 335), which I find to be particularly useful when confronting the foci of solutions and actions often dwelt upon in the environmental studies and sciences. Because my interest in theory lies in the those which form the basis of the environmental studies and sciences, this process of grounding has its own theories in the definitions of place, space, and nature, as well as important overlaps with

social theories about societal change and crisis response. A question often found in ESS is the definition and scope of the environment. Is studying the environment an attempt to study everything? In a field built upon the questioning of boundaries, the outskirts of the field itself seem never ending. In this way, when researching the theories of the environment, I have found it difficult to create a bounded library. Between theories about the environment and theories about theories, the body of work that feeds the development of these theories is incredibly large and diverse. However, for a short term project, this extensive survey was not possible. I acknowledge that my bibliography is only a fraction of what it could be and that my arguments are not original. However, I hope that by looking closely at language and interrogating the various forms that my project uses, I can communicate my thoughts about theory in an accessible and equitable way. That alone is a worthwhile project.

In order to carve out a manageable territory, I began by asking: what do people *do* when they *do* theory? My initial instincts were that people (but which people?) write and publish words that then become theory through a process of academic acceptance, criticism, and citation. These theories then become the basis for more theories and future production of knowledge. Authors of theories categorize, name, differentiate, organize, and they do so through language. What they categorize, name, differentiate, and organize is knowledge of various types (scientific, popular, historical, sociological, quantitative, qualitative, etc.). In doing so, theory communicates knowledge through the manipulation and construction of language to render and represent reality. By choosing how to use language to communicate and organize knowledge, authors of theories have a lot of power to influence what emerges as this represented reality. As Elizabeth Bird writes, “every aspect of scientific theory and practice expresses sociopolitical interests, cultural themes and metaphors, personal interactions, and professional negotiations for the

power to name the world” (Bird 1987, 256). Power is often a zero-sum game where some people (or some ideas) can have it while others don’t, and are thus rendered silent or invisible. The process of which and whose knowledge, language, and reality becomes accepted and portrayed through theory therefore has a lot of potential for (and a lot of history of) imbalances. These can contribute to the subjugation of people and knowledge and their systematic exclusion from accepted reality (Foucault 1980). This might be bad, and if so, there is room for the production of theory and accepted knowledge to be more fair and more inclusive. This might make what becomes accepted reality more representative of a greater number of experiences, which might be (dare I say) better. The role of theory as a vehicle for powerful and potentially oppressive knowledge and language is the fundamental query and argument of this paper.

Before I go further, I want to establish several distinctions. I want to distinguish between theory, criticism, and knowledge. I interpret knowledge to be the broad term that encompasses both theory and criticism, but also countless other things. Relevant to my discussion are history and language as forms of knowledge. Criticism and theory are not nested in one another in the same way that they each nest inside of knowledge. Instead, the relationship between theory and criticism is that of hierarchy. Theory, as defined by Michel Foucault in his lectures on power and knowledge, is widely accepted knowledge which is approved by “established regimes of thought” (Foucault 1980, 81). Therefore, certain theories might fall under the category of “totalitarian knowledge” (Foucault 1980, 80) depending on the role of that theory in reinforcing power relationships. Foucault goes on to define criticism also as a type of theoretical production, whose validity is not dependent upon the approval of those thought “regimes.” That is to say that criticism engages with, and perhaps take issue with, established theories using types of knowledge that might rank low on the hierarchy. These types of knowledges Foucault

categorizes as “subjugated knowledges” which include historical knowledge that has been buried or disguised by formal systems as well as the many types of knowledge that have been “disqualified” in the ranking of sufficiently scientific or objective knowledge (Foucault 1980, 80-82).

Using these distinctions, I wish to establish that this paper, my attempt at making the big word of theory better, likely falls under the category of criticism. I am engaging with theory and attempting to make it better by using popular and historical knowledge to highlight the aspects of theory that might be improved, or at least recognized as imperfect, subjective, and power-laden. While there are many realms of popular or disqualified knowledge I could use to practice this type of criticism, I choose to use urban displacement narratives known as gentrification. This is only one example. Other examples in different places would provide different lessons and resonances with my questions regarding theory.

This background about theory is meant to illuminate the following simplistic formula: $\text{knowledge} + \text{power} = \text{theory}$. These theories, made powerful by determining the production and recognition of future knowledge, actually determine what is accepted as reality. This is probably most clear in the realm of science, where observations and experiments which become codified as theory, such as gravity or plate tectonics, in turn describe and define reality. While objectivists might argue that reality in fact shapes theories, I tend to fall under a more constructivist umbrella that understands science and knowledge as reliant on observation, which itself relies on sensation, perception, and perspective, and is therefore inherently subjective. As a budding scholar of the British Romantics, I am very partial to the subjectivity of perception, and I acknowledge my bias. For this paper, I will take a constructivist standpoint on science and knowledge because this is something I believe is plausible and worth deriving meaning from.

However, I also keep in mind the following quote: “deconstruction without proposing an alternative perspective and practical foundation will not improve the substance and impact” (MacMynowski 2007, 2). Thus, I will attempt to ground theory in two practical foundations: reflections on the process of writing this piece of theory as well as an investigation into the theories, knowledges, and words at work in the landscape of gentrification. Further, I will question my own belief and evaluation that theory *should* be inclusive and consider alternatives to that stance.

Theory describes reality through language and words, which categorize space and thought. Power and ethics are embedded in the process of authorization and the decisions about which words to use and how to group ideas into categories. This process is not confined to the realm of academia. In literature, city planning, social media, and education, words are also carefully chosen to construct narratives to describe reality. This occurs in the naming of street signs, monuments, character development, memes, curriculums, and essentially every mode of communication in academic, professional, educational, popular, and entertainment settings. I choose to focus on the city planning example because of its overlaps into the questions in ESS about space, place, and human engineering of landscapes. Likewise, city planning and development is the site of a recently popularized term with vague notions of unethical power dynamics: gentrification. Gentrification itself is a big word, and one that many would argue is a euphemism for its more sinister character: colonization. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines gentrification to mean “the process by which an (urban) area becomes middle class” (*OED Online* 2016) but this doesn’t quite capture the perceived badness of the term. I will instead define gentrification as the process of by which an area becomes middle class through the displacement of lower-class inhabitants through financial pressures. I wish to use the example of

gentrification in Portland, Oregon to demonstrate how the use of words can reveal structures of power, values, and accepted versions of reality.

Portland has recently topped the nation as the most gentrified city in the United States (Maciag 2015). Much of this gentrification is occurring at the expense of African American communities in Portland, particularly in Northeast neighborhoods. In her article *Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000*, Karen Gibson gives a history of the process by which the neighborhood of Albina became predominantly African American, and subsequently these residents were displaced to the periphery of the city through urban renewal projects, civil engineering projects such as the interstate highway system and convention centers, as well as rising property taxes and rents due to demographic and commerce shifts (Gibson 2007). I mainly wish to examine the landscape of commerce in the neighborhoods of Portland. Using the medium of film, I captured scenes of Portland's downtown Pearl District and the street of Alberta deep in Northeast. I chose these two places because of the recent infusion of trendiness in these places that have been historically occupied by Asian-American and African-American populations, respectively. By trendiness I mean the presence of a Salt & Straw ice cream parlor and a proliferation of public murals on Alberta Street, the presence of Whole Foods and the high end retail clothing stores scattered within the city blocks of the Pearl, and general aesthetics that are highly valued. Please take a moment to watch my video linked here and available below.

Just the presence of words, such as the street signs can indicate certain values (such as the memory of Martin Luther King Jr) and construct the reality of a place. It is through language that we characterize our reality in a spatial setting, by saying "I am in the Pearl District" or "These are the Park Blocks." Language and words represents the reality of where we actually are, or

where we are going, and allows us to communicate this. When words or names of places change, such as when businesses are replaced by new commerce is often the case in gentrified neighborhoods, the name change of that building represents a change in reality. In the same way, this name change might also represent a change in power as a new demographic of middle-class gentry arrive and occupy a space formerly inhabited by a historically disempowered population.

I chose the medium of film for several reasons. First, I wanted to communicate my thoughts about theory in a more accessible and engaging way than only through a written paper. While the audience of the video is likely to be very small, if this project were to become larger I think it important that my thoughts on theory reach an audience outside of the academic world, particularly those that might have claim to Foucault's subjugated knowledge. My argument about theory is that it doesn't include enough voices and especially excludes those voices and knowledges which are historically silenced. Thus, making critical engagements with theory in an accessible medium might have the potential to bring voices that might not have a JSTOR account or a PhD into these conversations about knowledge, power, and reality. Secondly, I wanted to visually represent the words in the landscape of gentrification because I felt that this would be a more effective and efficient way to demonstrate the lessons about theory that we can derive from gentrified landscape analysis. Thirdly, I wanted to use the camera lens as a metaphor for my perspective in the authorship and origination of my ideas. The video, like this paper, is an intentional representation of specific words and images that I decided to portray. I take full responsibility in choosing the footage, editing it, cutting it and cropping it in order to direct my audience to pay attention to certain things over others. Both language and film enable this

powerful role of author, but perhaps film is a more obvious, tangible, and transparent metaphor for my attempt at self-conscious scholarship.

Another way of explaining the perspective illuminating by using film is to explore Donna Haraway's argument about the importance of vision. By exploring my own vision in a systematic and intention way, I attempted to learn "in [my body], endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name (Haraway 1998, 582). In the everyday act of naming exists a relationship between space and language, a relationship that renders reality, or attempts to. Film accentuates the position of vision in creating this relationship through representation and therefore metaphor. Like theory, names in the landscape, reinforced by my use of them, categorize and differentiate space and knowledge. While Wendell Berry states that "there is a tendency to equate [a thing] with the formalized knowledge of it" (Berry 2000, 61), the representation of theories, films, and vision falls just short of equation. It is the organization, differentiation, and representation of knowledge through language that ties a "thing" (be it gentrification, nature, the Park Blocks, carrots, etc.) to the formalized, institutionalized, accepted reality of it. It is through this organization, differentiation, and representation that the author is able to get close and intimate with their subject. This intimacy, as argued by Berry, is necessary for compassionate and holistic knowledge. While I don't accept the notions of compassion and holism as inherently necessary or ideal for the creation of theory, I think that these goals help us move towards more just power arrangements and invite silenced voices and subjugated knowledge to the discussion. I believe this is a good thing.

Importantly, despite this authorial intention there is still the possibility that my audience members will interpret my film (and this paper) differently and connect to theories, concepts, or ideas they have read or learned in their own lives and seen through their own vision. Despite careful construction and intention of a product like a film or a paper, different eyes will see things in different and novel ways. In this way, the film itself is a metaphor for the subjectivity of theory, its authorship, and the possibility, purpose, and utter importance of interpretation. While MacMynowski warns that deconstruction alone cannot dismantle power structures inherent in theory, I argue that to empower voices historically silenced, one must first identify which voices and perspectives are predominant. From here, we can begin to reimagine, reconstruct, and reinvent accepted knowledge and the process through which theory becomes canonized. As Foucault explains, the work is done through criticism and its ability to communicate popular and subjugated knowledge (Foucault 1980). This does not have to be done in peer reviewed journals. This can be done on Twitter, YouTube, in coffee shops, on streets, through murals, and via other forums for discussion and argumentation. These knowledges and the forms they take do not need to be validated by Harvard University in order to be fair game for someone's interpretation or representation of reality.

Perhaps this sounds like chaos. Perhaps, like Bruno Latour in his book *Politics of Nature*, you think this application of democracy to theory is a will make consensus impossible (Latour 2004). Perhaps like Donna Haraway you question my evaluation of diversity as an inherently good thing for theory. After all, as she states in her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question of Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," "the standpoints of the subjugates are not "innocent" positions" (Haraway 1988, 584). Am I arguing for an idealistic version of democratic production of knowledge that arbitrarily values Foucault's "subjugated

knowledges” (Foucault 1976, 81) higher than they deserve? No, but I think that there is room to increase democracy (that is encourage and acknowledge more voices and mediums of theory) and empower the subjugated in the production of theory. I think this begins by acknowledging our own biases in writing and authorship and using them to invite further discussion.

The final question (besides the thousands of unanswered questions that remain) is this: was my method of doing theory a successful example of responsible, situated criticism with self-acknowledged bias? It is certainly a partial treatment with a lot of assumptions, but might this actually make it more objective. Both Haraway and Sandra Harding discuss the ways to maximize objectivity, while Harding questions the legitimacy of objectivity as a realistic or ideal goal (Harding 1993). If objectivity is the goal of producing theory and knowledge, perhaps Haraway’s claim that “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway 1988, 583) reifies my work. Between my disclaimer and constant reminders to my reader of my presence as an author, and specifically a biased author, I hope to have laid out my partial perspective quite plainly. My acknowledging my perspective, perhaps this allows my reader to localize and situate this paper in something tangible, and thus through the subjectivity of author and place, my writing and filming emerges more believable and reliable. Another possibility however is that between my tone and extensive self-acknowledgement, I have focused too much on the production of theory and the content of my argument has gotten lost and convoluted. Perhaps for the sake clear, concise, and digestible communication of knowledge (the expectation of academic writing), the personality of the author is too distracting and unnecessary.

I think that the form and content of this paper has accurately reflected the goals of my experiment in writing theory. Although I have attempted to pose some answers to my questions, these answers merit further questioning. In this way, I believe I have contributed to the

conversations about theory, conversations to which the end goal is not necessarily answers, but more experiments and more questions.

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