"No Idea but in Things" - Ideas for Crafting (Evocative) Theory

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Abstract: *Fiction writers and poets have long been obsessed with the development of sensuous details in their writing. One of the key concepts that fiction writers and poets are taught is that, following a line from a famous William Carlos Williams poem, "There are no ideas but in things." While the craft of theory is different from the craft of fiction -- the point of theory, after all, is to reach for greater levels of abstraction and generalizability -- there are important reasons for developing rich details and a sense of place in our writing. First, a rich understanding of things and places helps to ground our theory. Second, a focus on details helps to give our theory character. And finally, our grasp of "thinginess" and "placiness" gives our theory richness, authority, and authenticity.*

1. Introduction -- Looking for Ideas in Long Dead Things

I look for ideas in long-dead things, hidden places, in the shadows where smells, textures, and sounds are undeniably present.

There is a used bookstore with an owner past middle age, his clothes look three days worn and his eyes tired, the bags underneath like deep ripples in a Japanese rock garden, perhaps with worry about the imminent demise of his business. I look for theory there, both in the books and in the bookstore owner. I look for theory in conversations with friends. Their concerns and alienation manifest in the tapping of fingers or a nervous hand running through thinning hair. The gestures remind me that theory has no purpose if it cannot relieve anxiety or provide hope.

Lately, for me, there is no theory. Theory is dead. A horse that can no longer be kicked. It's a long wait in a hospital office for a doctor who may not see you that day. It's a prescription for a drug that has long ceased to have any effect. Better to dwell on the meaning of three days worn clothes and the tapping of fingers.

In my mind, I whisper a phrase from a poet, an aphorism for writers that I want to make useful in another context: "No idea but in things."

The idea comes from a long poem by William Carlos Williams entitled *Paterson*, published in five parts from 1946-1958, times that seem as strange to me as tablet games and reality TV. But that one line "No idea but

in things" repeated throughout the text says something to me about the dead horses I sometimes find in the writing of social science theorists.

Williams writes: "But who, if he chose, could not touch the bottom of thought? The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity. The thought is Paterson, to be discovered there." (Williams, 1958, n.p.)

For a poet, the world is the rich contexts, the things and places of the world. And through explorations of the "thinginess" and "placiness" of the world, he or she hopes to touch the universal. But to go beyond the thing is to somehow ruin the thing...to do injustice to the thing...

As soon as we try to explain Paterson (the person and the place), we lose Paterson...

Thus, we might think of the poet as an anti-theorist; or, if we dare, we might think of the poet as a theorist of a superior kind.

Why mention this in an article for social science scholars? Because, it seems to me -- though I refuse to cite sources and name names -- that too many academic articles and books begin with ideas and circulate more ideas...often without touching anything. We are left with an endless proliferation of "idea things" that amount to nothing.

Their anti-poetry reads to me like a dead horse that has no kickable mass.

We have lost track of the "thinginess" and "placiness" of our theory. We have lost the touch of tired used bookstore workers and anxious friends who run fingers through thinning hair nervously. We have lost touch of the way interesting details can speak for themselves, can embed ideas in our mind like viruses (or medicine) and resuscitate our souls, making ideas vital.

I'd like to say that I found this old book of poetry in a used bookstore. The facts, unfortunately, are more generic. I looked up the book online. You can find the full text of *Paterson* on this website < https://archive.org/stream/PatersonWCW/Paterson-William_Carlos_Williams_djvu.txt >

The very fact that things come to us on dead computer screens, making us zombie-like in our anti-social social-medianess, says something about our lack of "thinginess" and "placiness" in the modern/post-modern world.

It explains why more writing -- often accessible digitally -- seems content to circulate from idea to idea without actually touching a thing or place. But, for a moment, I would like you to pretend that I have an old volume of poetry in my hand.

Can you feel it? Can you feel the old yellowed paper? Can you run your hands along the creased spine? Can you smell the scent of old paper? What does that look, feel, smell like?

Does your theory have such vibrant textures? Is it something alive and breathing? Or, is it worse than dead?

Cases for Recovering the "Thinginess" and "Placiness" of Theory

Perhaps social science scholars can learn something from one of the most abstract and theoretical disciplines -- physics.

As a sophomore English major taking a "Physics for Liberal Arts" class, I was the least likely person to be interested in the class. And yet, because the instructor started each class with a lively (and often surprising) example of the concept -- usually involving objects and props -- I found myself interested despite myself.

When a student experiences something, he or she is more likely to internalize its lessons. Often, in our classes and writing, we can't recreate events the way physics teachers or others in science and engineering can, but we can get students closer to experience by using rich, sensuous details and story-telling.

Beyond these important rhetorical purposes, things, places, and sensuous details are important because they are the birthplace of ideas. Things carry unique ideas and are the incubators of innovative theory.

Where can we go to find theory that is alive and well -- both "thingy" and "placey"? I suggest we visit a Panopticon. And then, we should travel to the Galapagos Islands.

The "Thinginess" of Theory - Michel Foucault - The Panopticon

A fantastic example of "thinginess" in theory comes from Michel Foucault's use of the Panopticon in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (The section on Panopticism can be read in its entirety on this website <http://dm.ncl.ac.uk/courseblog/files/2011/03/michel-foucault-panopticism.pdf>) The famous example of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a circular building filled with compartmentalized cells for

prisoners with an observation tower at the center, served as an inspiration and vivid representation for Foucault's understanding of power and its evolution over time. It also allowed Foucault to write his theory as a story -- a story of the evolution of power away from labor-intensive inspections to design-enabled surveillance.

Foucault's story begins with a description of procedures laid down for quarantine and inspection at the end of the seventeenth century. Using long excerpts from public ordinances and his own description, Foucault describes what a town was supposed to do in the case of a plague. These instructions involve detailed plans for enclosure, the creation of grids, and assigning duties for surveillance. This description is then contrasted with a description of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a late 18th-century design where confinement cells were organized around a centralized tower structure. In this newest iteration of power, control of designated populations was now near automatic and freed from labor-intensive inspection. Though Bentham's design was never put into practice, Foucault finds its principles permeating modern disciplinary practices in such places as schools, hospitals, and factories.

"There are two images, then, of discipline. At one extreme, the discipline-blockade, the enclosed institution, established on the edges of society, turned inwards towards negative functions: arresting evil, breaking communications, suspending time. At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come." (Foucault, 1997, n.p.).

These two very different organizing principles, quarantine and inspection procedures in the seventeenth century and the use of Panopticism in the twentieth century, symbolize a three-century shift -- from control through inspection to control through surveillance. What's important about Foucault's descriptions is that they are filled with poetry: the theory elements are a climax to rich details and story-telling.

The employment of the Panopticon, however, also becomes important as a means of transmitting the theory. Many students who have never read Foucault's work thoroughly have heard of the term "Panopticon". The thing, thus, becomes not only an important source of theory but also an important transmitter, so much so that the word "Panopticism" is now a Wikipedia entry.

2. The "Placiness" of Theory - The Galapagos Islands

If the Panopticon is a perfect example of the importance of "thinginess" for the creation and communication of theory, then perhaps the Galapagos Islands are a perfect example of "placiness" in the creation of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

As a volunteer naturalist on his voyage to the islands, Darwin observed strange variations in the animals he observed. In particular, he noticed the strange anatomy of finches. He discovered that on the island, finches had thirteen different kinds of beaks (Cohen, 2014, February 12, n.p.). This is a case where a very specific thing ended up becoming a source for a very generalizable theory. But what is also important is that "the Galapagos" became a microcosm that could represent the larger theory. The "placiness" of Darwin's story represents how we can look for theory in the things around us, and that what others take for granted could unlock a secret to the world.

Ways to Make Your Writing More "Thingy" and "Placey"

The motivation for this essay came from several of my own recent reading experiences in social science theory. I don't want to mention names. I feel like there are too many mean-spirited attempts to bash scholars for using vague language or unnecessarily complicated terminology. The point is that any academic article can lose itself in the ether of unthinginess.

But, all is not lost, I have a few ideas about how both things and places can be rescued.

(1) Start Your Classes and Writing with Rich Examples

My first suggestion is an easy one. Use the first few paragraphs or the first few minutes of your class to evoke emotions with the use of a dynamic example or description of place. If you are in a pedagogical situation, allow your students to be participants in the exploration of this thing or place. Use realia, objects from the real world that students can touch and hold, to evoke questions. Use pictures, videos, or short stories. Be like the poet and refuse to go to the bottom of the example at least for a few moments while your students puzzle over the thing or place themselves. Don't be surprised if they don't interpret the example the way you want them to. Sometimes the thing or place is more powerful than the theory it is supposed to represent.

(2) Go Home

Since this article has liberally borrowed ideas from the craft of fiction, I will give you some of the best writing advice ever given to me: go home.

Home has been the reference for some of the best novels ever written. Irvine Welsh wrote *Trainspotting* based on his own experiences with heroin addiction in Edinburgh. The rich details of William Faulkner's writing came from his upbringing in the American South. Likewise, one of the best student papers I ever read was based on that student's experiences working at a grocery store. He wrote about how the lottery desk was responsible for a majority of his store's profits and was also fueling a desperate lottery addiction. His theory: booming lottery ticket sales and addiction were a symbol for hopelessness and powerlessness in his community.

In short, home is where the heart of your theory is.

(3) Question-Posing

As a writer of fiction, I'm always on the lookout for important and compelling details. These details are all around us. I suggest you keep a pocket-sized research notebook.

Start by looking for the detail. Then answer some basic questions:

(1) What do people ignore about the things, people, and places around them?

(2) What draws me to this particular thing, person, or place?

(3) What impact is it having that other people are ignoring?

(4) What plausible explanations can I imagine about this thing, person, or place?

3. Conclusion - No Ideas...

There are important reasons to develop a rich "thinginess" and "placiness" in our writing, just as novelists and poets do.

First, a rich understanding of things helps to ground our theory. Second, a focus on details and things helps to give our theory character, which helps students and readers to grasp it and increases the chances that it won't be forgotten. And finally, our grasp of "thinginess" gives our theory authority and authenticity. For this reason, just as fiction writers often write about home, or "what they know", social scientists should attempt to write from a rich understanding of something they know as well as home.

...there, I have stated my ideas explicitly. They lie dead in front of you to either use or ignore.

I won't kick the horse. Instead, I return to the old paperback of *Paterson* that I started with.

In his poem, Williams (1958) quotes John Dewey: "John Dewey had said (I discovered it quite by chance), 'The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds.'"

At first, this may seem wrong, even blasphemous for a scholar. And yet, there is truth there. Even as scholars, it was usually something very local that drove us to study the social sciences. Something specific to a place, specific to a time, specific to a thing that made the social sciences vital.

When we inhabit the world of pure ideas, even our motive for studying the social sciences refuses to breathe.

Our theory needs to be an old paperback. It needs to feel like the cracks in the spine, smell like the decay of old paper, but I can't hold out a lie -- the book is digital. Internet culture has made everything easier, has made activities like citation organization and thought composition amenable to a thousand different solutions in the form of an app.

So, why do I long for the feel of paper?

Perhaps it is because things -- paper, pencil, the sound of lead scratching paper -- are a symbol for a (local, specific, thingy, placey) way of thinking. Perhaps it is thinking the only way thinking can be -- slow, deliberate, thing-oriented, rooted in place. We go slower, we make observations. There is philosophy in things, just as there is philosophy in our ability to create new relationships with things.

Will a used paperback that doesn't exist become my Panopticon, my Galapagos, will it take me home...or will the lack of things, the realm of pure ideas turn me into a generic "social science theorist" (an anti-poet)?

Do I abandon my goal? Do I leave with the idea instead of the thing? What was the idea again?

...No ideas but in things.

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