

## FIGURING OUT THEORY

### *Ethnographic Sketches*

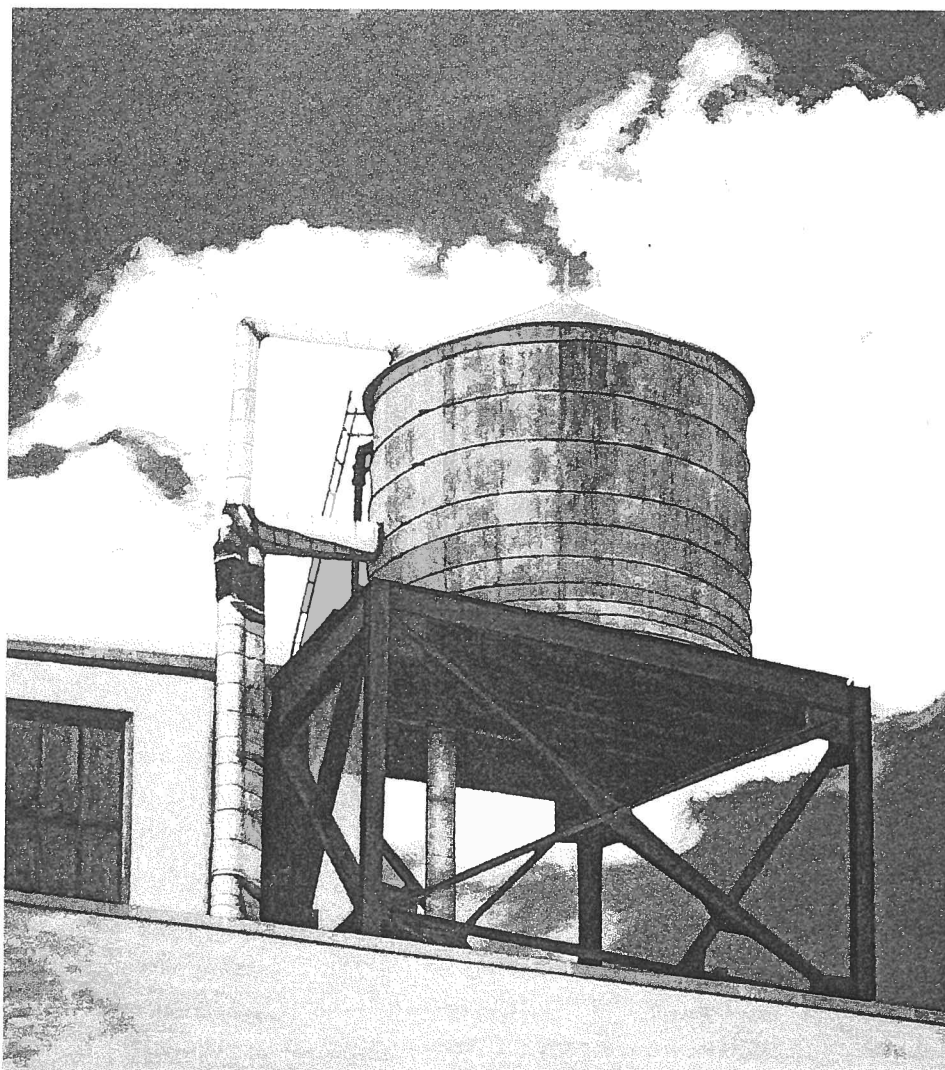
*Kim Fortun*

When I teach ethnographic research design, I often begin by showing students a set of photos of outdoor built structures, asking them what they see. Sometimes they just stare; my favorite instance was when they read the images, with increasing collective momentum, as conveying how the built environment reflects and reinforces race and income inequality. I could not see it, although their narratives were compelling.

I then asked if it helped to know that the images came from a children's book titled *Alphabet City* by Stephen Johnson (1995). Reliably, there are expressions of recognition.

This, I tell them, is one way to think about the work of theory in ethnography. It directs but also delimits what you see. It is productive and constraining.

This can be a good time to read Elizabeth Povinelli's *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002), which powerfully points to the politics of theory and the recognition it produces (and disallows). *The Cunning of Recognition* describes how multiculturalism—a political theory that draws out and

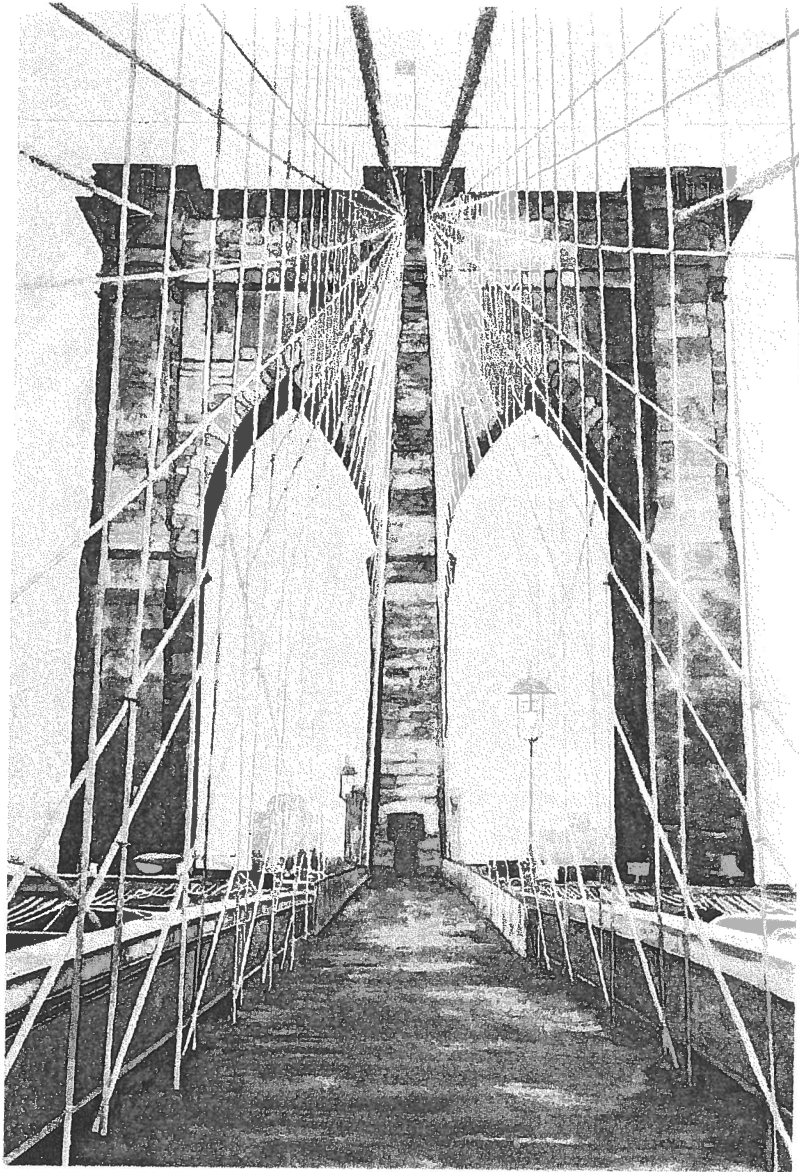


Images courtesy of Stephen T. Johnson, *Alphabet City*,  
Viking Children's Books, New York, 1995.

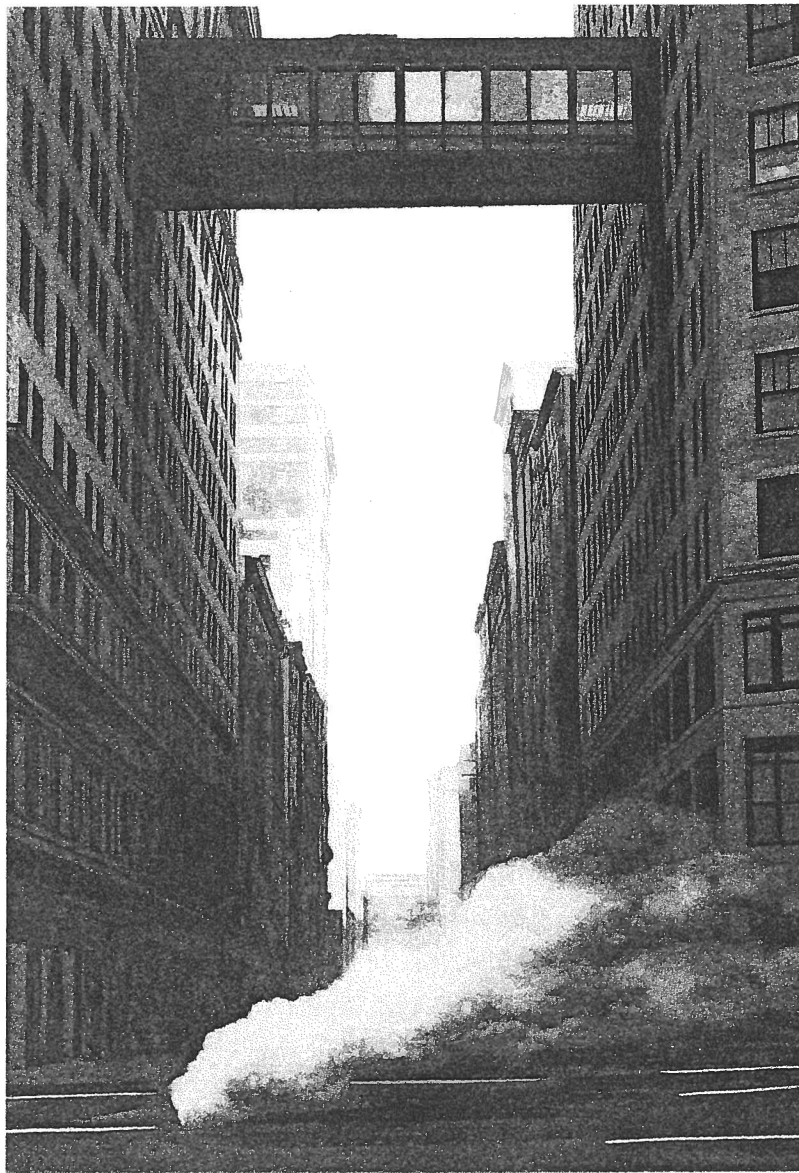
purports to value cultural difference—can actually cut out difference by codifying in advance what difference consists of and looks like. Indigenous Australians, Povinelli shows, can be seen by the Australian state only when they embody what the state has deemed authentic traditional culture. Other forms of indigenous practice do not count. One lesson, akin to that of *Alphabet City*: ethnographers should themselves use theory with fear and trembling, mindful of how it provides perspective and mindful also of what theory obscures and discounts.



It also can be a good time to read Gregory Bateson's *Naven* ([1936] 1958), which—through both argument and textual design—also draws attention to the funny roles of theory in ethnography. *Naven* describes an Iatmul (New Guinea) puberty ritual that involved gender-role switching in a performance that Bateson read to invert or relieve the tension that accumulates through daily interaction between women and men—in a



charged interactive loop that Bateson termed “schismogenesis.” Schismogenesis, Bateson argued, is what happens when there are encounters across difference. Schismogenesis can be symmetrical or complementary: symmetrical when two parties are equal (as in a wrestling match, when two athletes matched in size and ability interact); complementary when the two parties are different (because holding unequal authority, as between a parent and child or because different in position or kind, as between



performer and audience). Both forms of schismogenesis, Bateson (1935, 181–82; [1936] 1958, 175–77) argues, are likely to escalate, furthering differentiation through cumulative interaction.

*Naven* thus illustrates how theory can be *drawn* from ethnographic material, articulating processes or practices that are potentially generalizable, or at least portable (Boyer and Howe, this volume; Boyer and Yurchak 2010). *Naven* also points to the way theory can orient ethnographic

work. An ethnographer can look out for schismogenesis in different settings, at different scales, explaining processes as seemingly different as an arms race, class struggle, family, interdisciplinarity, schizophrenia, and creativity (Feld 1995; Hoffman 1981, 37–49; Bateson et al. 1956).

And then there are the *refractive* implications of *Naven*.<sup>1</sup> Extending from Bateson, one can understand encounters between an ethnographer and the world she studies as encounters across difference, as a schismogenic dance wherein the ethnographer and the world she studies accrue identity through increasing differentiation. The ethnographer knows her subject, in a manner increasingly divorced from it; the very quest for deep understanding and thick description produces an imperial stance, a double bind. There is a structural challenge, this suggests, especially with ethnography over the longer term: extended encounters across difference produce stand-offs rather than the immersion so idealized in ethnography. Epistemological humility—awareness of the difference between observer and observed—only exacerbates the divide. A *Naven*-like exercise that vents and shifts escalating differentiation would seem to be in order. What might that be for ethnographers themselves?

Bateson himself is suggestive. *Naven* is about Iatmul social life and ritual. But it is also, in George Marcus's 1985 re-reading, "a judgment about the adequacy of analytic writing and descriptive rhetoric." In Marcus's reading, Bateson was "firm in his construction of data as observed behaviors" (1985, 68), reflecting the habits of British science in which he was raised. He did not question the epistemological dimensions of empiricism. What Bateson did question—with what Marcus refers to as a "highly developed hermeneutic sensibility" (1985, 70)—was the capacity of empiricist modes of writing to capture what he had observed; for Bateson, it was writing that was limited.

Bateson's solution was analytic promiscuity—reliance on multiple analytic frames rather than only one, using theory to offset the limits of representation. Marcus suggests that we imagine the textual design of *Naven* as a target with three concentric circles around a bull's eye. The center is Bateson's ethnographic material. Each circle is a different analytic perspective on the material in the bull's eye.<sup>2</sup> One sees Iatmul social life but also the ways any particular analytic/theoretical framework orients and delimits understanding. Theory is used to produce one of many possible angles on data-as-the-world.

Theory cannot, however, fix the problem of ethnographic writing for Bateson. In Marcus's reading, *Naven* is a failed essay—an essay “gone hay-wire”—that puts Bateson on the run away from ethnographic writing for the rest of his career. Dialogue becomes Bateson's mode.

Other directions are possible, and I try to draw this out in teaching ethnographic research design—which includes the design of texts to carry ethnographic experiments. There is theory all 'round, at many points in the ethnographic process, carrying out many more kinds of work, than is often acknowledged.

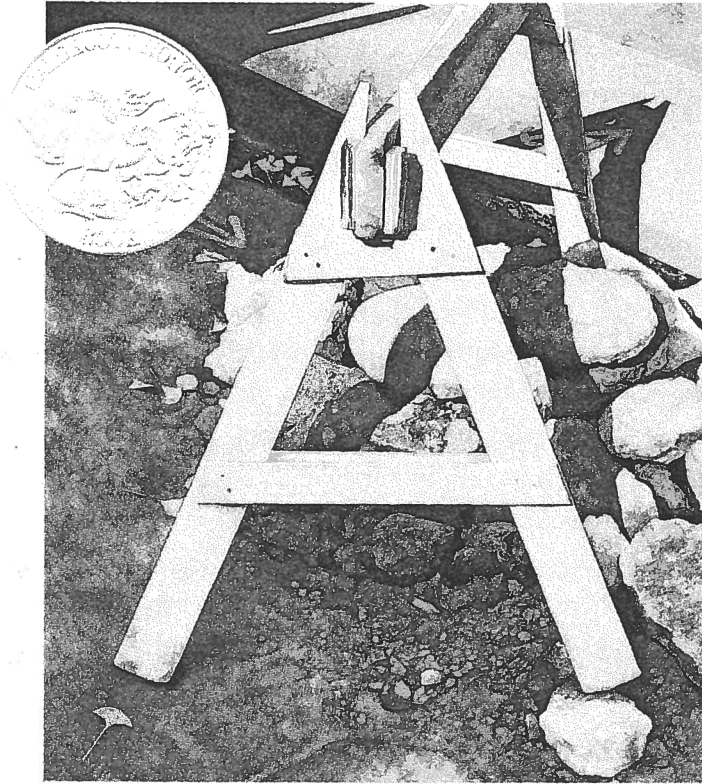
### Sketching Research

I have developed the theory and practice of theory that I describe here over years teaching PhD students research design in a Department of Science and Technology Studies (STS) where many, but not all, students head toward ethnographic projects; all, by virtue of being in STS, have to “figure out methods” appropriate to their concerns.<sup>3</sup> My most ambitious goal is to help students build big research imaginations—and supporting skills—that can see them through many projects, always attuned to the entwined scholarly and political calls of their context. Methodological acuity and adeptness is “the deliverable.”<sup>4</sup>

Over fifteen weeks, students in “Figuring Out Methods” compose about forty “sketches,” each directed by examples and questions that I provide. Each sketch is short—punctuated, in Jacques Lacan's sense<sup>5</sup>—and designed to be replayed, redone. I encourage students to stay with their sketches over time, watching them evolve with their projects. Sketches are meant to be cared for and continually rewritten,<sup>6</sup> providing a space through which shifts in research focus and sensibility can happen as though shifts are *supposed* to happen. The sketches are meant to provide structure without determination.<sup>7</sup>

The research sketches are not intended to add up neatly. As a set, they are something of an end in themselves, a step toward what—via Bateson—we might call an “ecology of research.” But they can feed into a formal research proposal, a genre that I insist has analytic purchase (acknowledging, via Maurice Blanchot, that all effort to be comprehensive, all effort to remember, depends on forgetting and “cuts,” on writing as/of disaster; Blanchot 1986).

# ALPHABET CITY



Stephen T. Johnson

Image courtesy of Stephen T. Johnson, *Alphabet City*, Viking Children's Books, New York, 1995.

The sketches are thus both for and against method, an effort to cultivate what I think of as kaleidoscopic perspective—an ability to see one's world of study through alphabets, numbers, and a multiplicity of other frames (so to speak).



Critical here to articulation of a theory and practice of theory in ethnography is the way a set of structured sketches can lace theory into many moments of the research process in a way that progressively delineates an object of concern and its semiotic field, while—at the same time—multiplying (like Bateson in *Naven*) how the object comes into view.<sup>8</sup>

### Theory in Cultural Critique

There are many ways to land on a research topic or question, and the two are not the same. A research *topic* is a domain of interest, almost inevitably shared with others. A research *project* delineates what a particular researcher or research group will do within a domain. Different disciplines, and different traditions within disciplines, undertake this delineation differently. For ethnographers, especially, the effort is paradoxical—a functional double bind: one is educated to wait, to let research questions emerge from within “the field” and associated material so that predictable, culturally charged conceptualizations are not imposed on a project in advance. One is also educated to recognize that value—what seems important and interesting—is always semiotically produced; one thus must be wary of what seems of organic or essential interest, aware that what a researcher sees—as important, as problematic—is always overdetermined. To simply wait on “the field” to structure a project thus also carries high risk of predictable conceptualization. Ethnographic research design happens in the space between—mindful of risks of both overdetermination and naïve confidence that overdetermination can be avoided. Sketching toward research design is a way to turn (theoretical) recognition of this paradox (and possible impasse) into practice.

A sketch that maps a research domain, its contradictions, and potential points of ethnographic entry illustrates the strategy. Drawn from the core argument in Marcus and Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), the sketch suggests how a project can be delineated by asking where the world is out of synch with the way it is conventionally conceived—whether in popular thought or social theory. Marcus and Fischer describe and encourage ethnographic projects designed to unsettle habitual conceptualization (of the way belief or political systems work, for example)

as a way to open space for new conceptualization. Ethnography is to lay ground for the experimental.

The first question in the sketch is thus counterintuitive, asking what *cannot* be articulated in dominant idioms—what is glossed over, ignored, even disavowed. In my work, for example, I am particularly concerned with incapacity to articulate environmental problems as problems—scientifically, legally, in the news, in everyday interactions. The second question asks for a mapping—at first preliminary—of the discursive formation that characterizes the domain, indicating how it works and excludes, and what risks it poses. Discursive gaps occur when people encounter a problematic condition for which there is no available idiom, no way of thinking that can grasp what is at hand. Discursive risks emerge from a tendency to rely, nonetheless, on established idioms and ways of thinking.<sup>9</sup>

#### **ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: Theory as Cultural Critique**

- From your point of view (experiential, situational, ethnographic, theoretical, political, etc.), what conditions, dynamics, and problems are not adequately recognized in dominant discourses (popular and/or theoretical)?
- What are the discursive habits, gaps, and risks of your domain of interest, and where can they be drawn out?
- What cultural actors are helping articulate the discursive habits, gaps, and risks in your domain of interest, and how can you interact with them?
- How are the questions in your domain of interest social theoretical questions? In other words, how can you conceive of your research questions in a way that can allow your work to be informed by (and contribute to) the work of other scholars?
- What kinds of description, analysis, and representation can draw your concerns into view?
- How can/should you configure the “object” of concern that will center your data collection, analysis, and writing?

The third question takes an emic turn, asking who in the domain of interest is party to the ethnographer's own critique—in some way, shape, or form. This lays ground for ethnographic encounters through which critical understanding of a domain can emerge collaboratively, combining the perspectives of the ethnographer and those she studies.<sup>10</sup> The fourth question asks how the issues and dynamics of a particular domain pose social theoretical questions. This is usually difficult for students to articulate early on; leaving a blank space for later articulation can be an effective way to keep theory in mind, without forcing it. Other sketches, too, will return to the question.<sup>11</sup>

The next question asks for a preliminary (but with time increasingly detailed) description of the *kinds* of description, analysis, and expression one can imagine drawing one's concerns into views. Thinking of oneself as sketching is particularly productive here, licensing the kind of conceptual and creative play called for. The last question also has a sketched quality to it, asking what could and should become figure in one's ethnographic telling. As I have written about previously, play with figure and ground is an important, seemingly interminable dimension of ethnography. It is how and where a research project is literally delineated.

In this sketch, theory operates through a particular conception of how ethnography can be configured for critical effect. It also encourages the ethnographer to really leverage her own situated perspective and expertise; it puts the ethnographer in the game, so to speak. This, too, enacts a particular theory of value and knowledge, lacing ethnography into the complex effort to acknowledge and activate the way observers are part and productive of the systems they study. This sketch (and others) provides space to play out the implications.

### Theory in/as Collaboration

There are also other roles and ways to theory in ethnography. In a sketch titled "Abstracting Essays," students write abstracts for three essays or presentations that could come out of their research material. In another sketch, "Abstracting Collections," students write abstracts for conference panels or edited volumes in which their work could appear, as a presentation or essay. For some students, it is easier to first

write their own essay or presentation abstracts; for some, it is easier to first write the abstracts for the panels or edited collection. It is a matter of style.<sup>12</sup>

The two sketches imply one another but start from different places. In the first (writing three abstracts for essays or presentation), students metonymize, coming up with different ways of framing and articulating their own research, suggesting how each is part of a larger whole (addressing a question shared among scholars—a theoretical question). In the second sketch, students metaphorize, creating a structure that draws out likeness across different research projects and papers, creating a shared (theoretical) space. The challenge is to think theoretically by thinking collaboratively, to advance theorization of one's own project by articulating its relationship to others.

### **ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: Abstracting Essays**

#### **Late Industrialism: Producing Inequalities**

Drawing on long-running anthropological research on the lived experience, science, and politics of toxic chemicals, this presentation will explore the dynamics of today's "late industrialism," a historical period characterized by aging industrial infrastructure, landscapes dotted with toxic-waste ponds, rising incidence of cancer and chronic disease, climate instability, exhausted paradigms and disciplines, and the remarkable imbrication of commercial interests in knowledge production, legal decisions, and politics at all scales. It is a period riven with hazards of many kinds, operating synergistically and cumulatively. The presentation will highlight how late industrialism produces new vulnerabilities and new forms and patterns of inequality. The presentation will also highlight a need for new modes of collaboration to address the problems of late industrialism, drawing together researchers from many fields (including student researchers), other citizens, and activists in legal and political arenas.

### Disaster Analytics

How can one think through disaster, and what kind of analytic purchase results? This presentation will revolve around this question, exploring how and why to pursue comparative disaster studies, and why it makes sense to think in terms of both acute catastrophic disaster and chronic slow disaster—drawing together thinking about Fukushima, Bhopal, and deep-water drilling for oil, climate change, the shale gas boom, and the global asthma epidemic. Mindful of discursive and political risks in apocalyptic gestures, I will nonetheless argue for intensified, strategic engagement with disaster analytics, leveraging what postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak (1987) has called “forced readings.” This is especially important in our current historical period, which I think of as “late industrialism.” Beginning in the mid-1980s, marked heuristically by the 1984 Bhopal disaster, late industrialism is characterized by both acute and chronic disasters, emergent from tightly coupled, ecological, technological, political, economic, social, and cultural systems, many of which are overextended, fractured by serial retrofitting, and notably difficult to visualize, conceptualize, and coordinate responses to.

### Late Industrialism and the Redoubled Double Binds of Expertise

Expertise is blinding; in honing particular thought styles, analytic capacities and ways of solving problems, experts necessarily discount some types of evidence, analysis, and problem solving. Expertise is thus a double bind—both critically important and, in itself, hazardous. This is especially so in late industrialism, a historical period characterized by remarkable high skill and technical capacity, by a need for extremely complex coordination among different kinds of experts, and by problems that involve coupled technological, ecological, sociocultural and political-economic systems. Late industrialism is also characterized by remarkable commercial pressure on knowledge production and expert action. In this presentation, I will map the highly charged conditions of expertise in late industrialism. I will also describe how environmental health scientists have responded, building new collaborations, data infrastructure, and relationships with policy arenas.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: Abstracting Collections

#### Inequality, 2015

Social inequality is produced and legitimated in different ways in different times and places, calling for continually refreshed and nuanced analyses. Papers in this panel will strive to specify the forms and dynamics of inequality that have characterized the first decades of the twenty-first century in different settings around the world. Presenters will question how established theories of inequality continue to have relevance in contemporary contexts—considering, for example, the continuing operation of a general dynamic such as “intersectionality” (theorized in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw [1990, 1991, 2010], legal scholar, to explain how inequality is exacerbated when race, gender, and class combine). Presenters will also consider the evolving effects of market and religious fundamentalisms, environmental degradation, and other phenomena that have shaped life chances and social dynamics since 2000.

#### From Risk Society to Anthropocenes

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* was first published in 1980, a year after the disaster at Three Mile Island. Charles Perrow's *Normal Accidents* was first published in 1984, the same year as the Bhopal disaster. Ulrich Beck's seminal *Risk Society* was first published in German in 1986, just months before the Chernobyl disaster. All these texts (and others of the period) laid the ground for decades of research designed to draw out the technical, environmental, and conceptual risks of high modernity. The frameworks and arguments in these texts remain important today—so much so that changing conditions, and a corollary need for new analytic frameworks, could easily be missed. Presentations on this panel will build on, question, and extend social theory articulated in the 1980s to address environmental threats, considering both new disasters (fast and slow), and more recent theorization (of “vibrant matter” by Jane Bennett [2010], for example, of “modes of existence” by

Bruno Latour [2011], and of “the anthropocene” by a growing body of researchers).

### Practices and Politics of Expertise

Expertise is often cast in opposition to lay knowledge and characterized as rule-bound, instrumental, and narrowly technocratic. This generalization misses critical differences in expert practices and culture across disciplines, historical periods, and geographical contexts. Extending rich streams of work in the history, anthropology, and sociology of science, papers on this panel will describe particular formations of expertise, the genealogies from which they emerged, the ideologies they harbor, and the ways they are reproduced—and questioned—in contemporary educational settings.

As examples, I have provided abstracts drawn from my own project designed to bring what I have termed “late industrialism” into view. My concern with late industrialism stems from years of effort to make sense of environmental problems as *cultural* problems—problems that are difficult to make sense of because of dominant ways of thinking about production, pollution, responsibility, and a slew of other concepts that have carried industrial order. In fundamental ways, my effort to make sense of late industrialism extends from my early research focused on the Bhopal disaster, a disaster that rendered the limits of industrial order starkly visible.

Working on the Bhopal case had a forceful impact on the way I think about theory in ethnography. It called on me to attend to the empirical—to let the gross detail of the story speak, underdetermined by theory, saying something other or more than what any theory could cover. Bhopal also, however, made me painfully aware of the limits of representation and need for deeply critical analysis to make sense of the way Bhopal failed to register—legally, politically, culturally—despite the gross detail, clear negligence, and failures of accountability involved. I thus learned early to think with other people’s work, always tying it back to “Bhopal” expansively conceived, striving to borrow tricks of analysis and description through which the many tragedies of Bhopal could be addressed. Theory became a driver of ethnographic questions, a way to put my projects in conversation with others.

For many students, too, thinking about conversation and collaboration is easier than thinking about theory directly. Once one discerns a shared thematic, one is on the way to theory, understood here as a way of thinking that creates (rather than assumes) comparative relations and perspective. Meaning is not assumed to reside in one's subject but to be created discursively, through the creation of fields of similarity and difference.<sup>13</sup>

### Theory in Research Questions

After sketching abstracts for both one's own essays and for collectivities one can imagine being part of, it is often (somewhat) easier to explicitly articulate one's research question in theoretical terms. Somewhat. In my experience, research questions rarely feel "right," but it is still useful to force them into words. And wording matters. Playing with wording often has considerable import, pointing to different directions of work or to different kinds of material that can be used to address the questions. It is also critical to let research questions iterate over time. Indeed, this could be said to be a signature technique of ethnographic research, wherein empirical material is allowed to really drive a research project. One thus sketches questions rather than trying to nail them down.

A project's research questions can be thought of (and sketched) as a cascade. The top level is a question that is good for your project but also good for others, working with different material. This question is big enough to imply, if not require, a collaborative response and, thus, can be called theoretical. The next level down is a question that one will aspire to answer in the proposed study. The next level down is a place for interview questions.

#### **ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: Cascading Questions**

Working title: *Late Industrialism: Making Environmental Sense*

1. What conditions and dynamics in contemporary societies produce hazards and harm?
  - 1.1 What hazards and harms are drawn into view in conceptualizing the contemporary as "late industrial"?



- 1.2 What legacies of industrial order—ecological, technological, political, and so on—shape and delimit contemporary conditions?
- 1.3 What discursive formations characterize late industrialism, what do they problematize, and what do they occlude?
- 1.4 What forms and patterns of inequality are produced by late industrialism?
2. What initiatives in contemporary societies produce possibilities for well-being and justice in the future—including, but also beyond, what can be presently imagined?
  - 2.1 What initiatives have been pursued to make (empirical, conceptual, and political) sense of late industrialism, what has motivated them, what are their limits, and how have these limits been recognized and strategized?
    - 2.1.1 What kinds of studies have been pursued by scientists, activists, and government agencies, and what has motivated them?
    - 2.1.2 What kinds of organizations and programs have been built (or imagined) to deal with the realities of late industrialism in the near and long term?
    - 2.1.3 What kinds of pedagogies have been developed (or imagined) to enroll people in late industrial realities and challenges?
3. What pedagogies and politics are implicated in the work of (experimental) ethnography?
  - 3.1 What pedagogies and politics are implicated in experimental ethnographic work on/in late industrialism?
    - 3.1.1 What kinds of literacy will help people make sense of late industrialism, and how can ethnographers help cultivate them?
    - 3.1.2 What kinds of governance are called for by late industrialism, and what kinds of roles can ethnographers play in their operation?
    - 3.1.3 What kinds of research can help sustain engagement with late industrialism over the *longue durée*?

Together, this cascade weaves the theoretical and empirical together, and sets up a structure that can remain stable while its content shifts. Field experience revealing the special explanatory purchase of a particular interview question, for example, may suggest that the question above it needs to shift or be re-articulated. Or one can become interested (or obsessed) with a new theoretical or political argument, and this can provoke a new cascade of grounding questions. The challenge is to see many different ways into one's world of study, cultivating kaleidoscopic perspective alongside fine-tuned understanding of how every question and perspective cuts some of the world in and some of the world out.

Again, I have provided an example from my own effort to capture late industrialism—ethnographically and theoretically. The questions have been sketched again and again. Even as I work to pull my material and analysis into a book manuscript, they will not settle down. Sketching allows one to live with this, enacting still more theoretical assumptions about the way ethnography works.

### **Building for Middle Terms**

Still another sketch is expressly deconstructive, laying out the binaries that sustain a particular discursive formation and the ways binaries become untethered and shift, producing what Michael Fischer (2003) has called "lively languages." What could be called postmodern ethnography—ethnography attuned to the collapse of metanarratives—listens for these lively languages. And they can be anticipated through discursive mapping done in the process of ethnographic research design.

To imagine this sketch, I point students to Mike Fortun and Herb Bernstein's *Muddling Through: Pursuing Science and Truths in the 21st Century* (1998). Fortun and Bernstein explicate the difference between idealized and actual scientific practice, showing how science-in-practice can best be described with a set of terms that runs down the "muddled middle" of the binaries through which science is often conceived, pitting science against religion, politics, literature, and history. The consequences of dominant ways of conceptualizing science are sobering.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCH: Binaries and Third Terms

#### Late Industrialism: Making Environmental Sense?

Anterior terms	Middle terms	Posterior terms
Modern	Never subject to law	Never been modern (Latour)
	Soiled states	
Production	Pollution	Consumption
Property	Trespass	
Extraction as value	Ecological as value	Wild as value
Healthy	Chronic, disrupted, body-burdened	Sick, diseased
Native, natural	"Invasive"	Alien
	Crashing pollinators	
Security, control	Normal accidents (Perrow)	
	Compound disaster	
	Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1990, 1991, 2010)	
Science + commercial interests	Science + civic interests	Science versus lay knowledge
Visible	Visualized	Invisible
"Essential, fixed position" (Haraway)	Diffraction, iteration	Refraction, differences
Generalizable	Comparable	Particular
Reductionism	Kaleidoscopic	Situated
Market fundamentalism	Governance, and/as stewardships	State command and control
Expert	Educated, collaborative	

There is no language for a politically responsive science. And no place for uncertainty or ambiguity in what would count as scientific—making it very difficult to deal with the complex causalities of environmental problems, for example. Watched ethnographically, however,

science-in-practice operates otherwise and is more aptly described with a set of terms that points to the ways science involves judgment (rather than strict representation set against construction) and is more “charged” than neutral *or* political. Science, in Fortun and Bernstein’s rendering, operates more like Peircean Thirdness (a matter of interpretation) rather than like Peircean Secondness (a matter of fact) set against a Peircian Firstness (matters of immediate affect and effect). Science is where Firstness and Secondness are brought, through Thirdness, into relation. Science works through signifying practices.

This kind of sketch can be used to create space for describing phenomena that habitual discourse cannot address (as in Fortun and Bernstein’s example). Here, the ethnographer has space to record what *she* observes as difficult to articulate in either analytic or vernacular terms. The same structure can be used to record emergent terms voiced by the ethnographer’s interlocutors. The ethnographer records the “lively languages” that often emerge in communities riveted by change, trying to outrun their own habits of articulation. The example I have provided here is a combination, laying out the discursive formation of what I have called “industrial order,” which systematically undercuts recognition of pollution and other environmental health problems.

### Theory in Teaching Methods

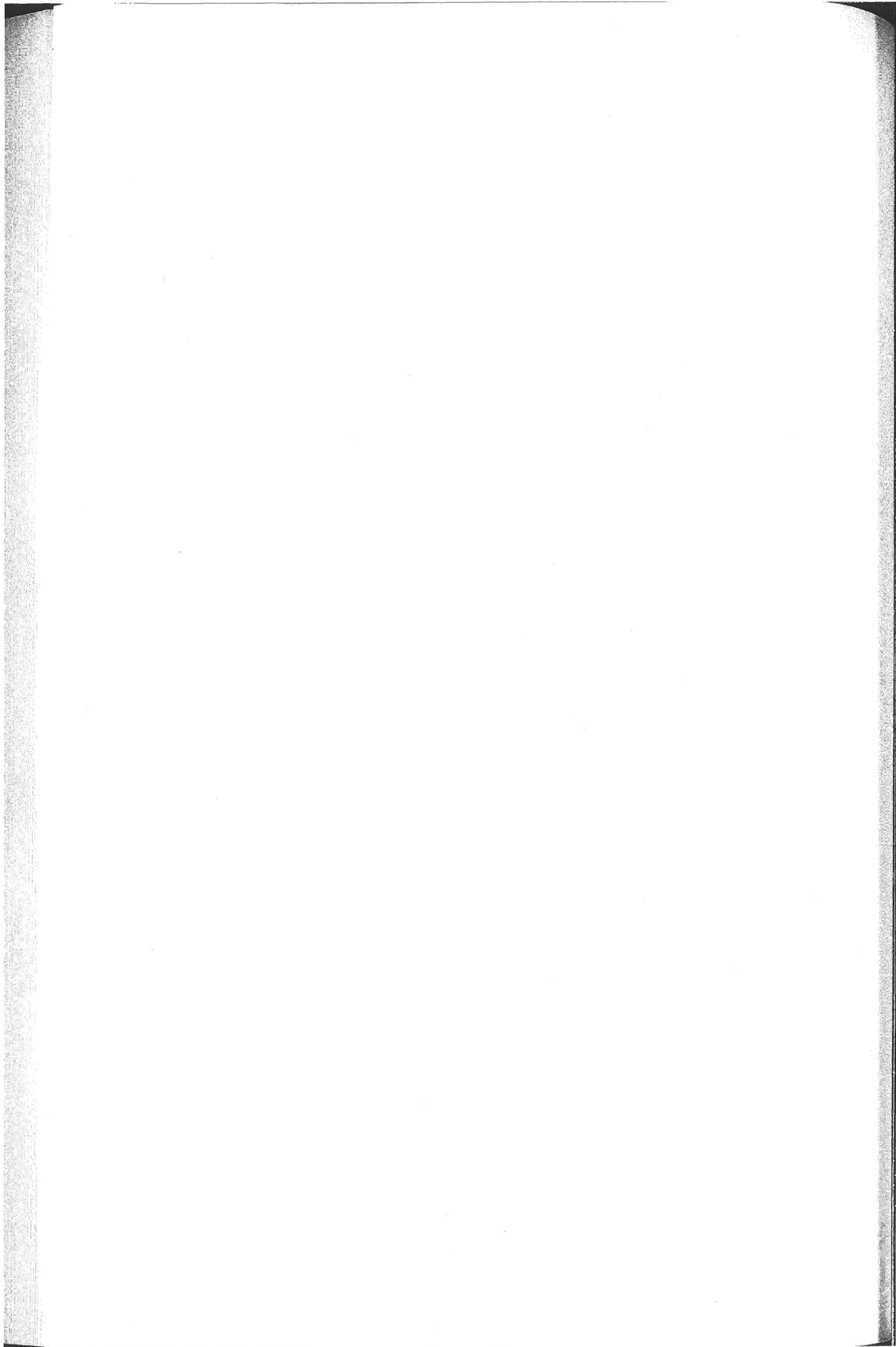
Theory can orient or emerge from ethnographic analysis; theory can also orient the design of ethnographic texts, literally from cover to cover.<sup>14</sup> And theory, as Bateson demonstrated in *Naven*, can be refracting, bringing the research subject/object into view in different ways—offsetting nominalism, animating juxtaposition. Viewed in this way, theory enables *différance* in a Derridean sense (1982).

It thus makes sense to sketch theory, in many different ways, in the process of research design and throughout the research process itself. Collecting sketches enacts a theory of theory akin to a poststructuralist theory of language, privileging the capacity of theory to structure *and* refract, a capacity to settle *and* shift meaning and understanding.

Thinking in these terms can undercut the anxiety that “theory” so often provokes. As Derrida pointed out in his seminal essay “Structure, Sign, and

Play" (1978), the habitual aim of the human sciences is to center meaning and fix it, and thereby reduce anxiety. "The concept of centered structure," Derrida writes, "is based on a fundamental ground, a play which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset" (1978, 279). But mastery comes at a price, especially for ethnographers. Mastery and resolution are out of synch with the change the ethnographer inevitably encounters. Mastery also suggests a satisfaction with available modes of analysis; the restless analytic pluralism exhibited by Bateson embodies something different—a stubborn but ever unsatisfied pursuit of understanding that is by definition experimental.

Sketching toward ethnographic research design, practice, and writing thus does many kinds of work. It interweaves theory into ethnographic practice at many junctures. It can animate thinking about the kinds of theory ethnographic projects can produce. And it works affectively and aesthetically. Both the ethnographer as subject and the subject she studies are put into play. Sketching, the ethnographer subject learns not to master anxiety but, instead, to accept and productively play with decentered, underdetermined, repeatedly transmuting subjects of concern. Teaching theory, then, becomes an exercise in subject formation on multiple registers.



PR 3



THEORY CAN BE MORE THAN  
IT USED TO BE

*Learning Anthropology's Method  
in a Time of Transition*

EDITED BY DOMINIC BOYER, JAMES D. FAUBION,  
AND GEORGE E. MARCUS

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