

Between Area and Discipline: progress, knowledge production and the geographies of Geography

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Abstract

This paper explores tensions that emerge from the injunction to make progress in geographical knowledge production in the globalizing landscape of higher education and research. The paper identifies gaps that emerge between disciplinary Geographical knowledge production and connections to non-western areas on which many geographers work. It suggests these gaps are symptomatic and productive of the discipline's problematically constituted community; the 'we' of Geography's vanguard. The paper charts the precipitation of these tensions within Geography's disciplinary dispositif before suggesting three alternative knowledge production tactics aimed at closing any such gaps and that in turn democratically reconstitute disciplinary Geography's 'we'.

Between Area and Discipline: progress, knowledge production and the geographies of Geography

Like all other disciplines in the modern university, Geography has a geography. And like most other formations in late modernity, disciplinary Geography is implicated in globalization. As geographers we are part of a discipline that is globalizing in a particular kind of way, and we help to drive that globalization as we pursue disciplinary ‘progress’ by transacting across an ever more international landscape of geographical knowledge production. Yet, the imaginary of ‘progress’ has problematic histories (see McClintock 1992). As postcolonial scholars have argued, the historical continuities between colonialism and globalization perpetuate unequal global power relations in the present (see Gikandi 2001; Krishnaswamy and Hawley 2008), particularly between global north and south. Disciplinary geography, and geographical knowledge production – the subjects of this paper – are no exception. Indeed, this paper begins from the premise that, as a community of disciplinary geographers, we should be mindful of the insidious effects of disciplinary geography’s asymmetric globalization, particularly, as I suggest, on the production of geographical knowledge about areas and regions, especially those beyond the discipline’s EuroAmerican heartlands. Likewise, it would be rash for geographers to imagine that we can occupy a diagnostic position outside the newly *imperializing* geographies of our contemporary disciplinary formation, just as it would be disingenuous to deny that the imperial continuities of the discipline’s globalization have very real effects on the formation of the ‘we’ entitled to stage these and other debates on ‘progress’ in geographical knowledge production.

In this context, this paper explores disciplinary Geography's shortcomings in terms of effective and contextualized area studies knowledge production. In what follows however, I not only trace such shortcomings, I also suggest some ethico-political tactics for opening the very notion of 'progress in Human Geography' to the vagaries and contextualities of places and communities situated beyond the discipline's EuroAmerican heartlands, and by so doing to pluralize and, as I suggest, queer Geography's teleology.

The effects of globalization's unequal patinas on disciplinary formation and knowledge production should, symptomatically at least, be familiar. Consider, for example, that in the calendar year 2013 94.9% of the authors of published research articles and progress reports in this journal had institutional affiliations in the global north. Likewise, in the same year 92.7% of the journal *Antipode's* submissions were from scholars whose lead authors were based in global north institutions, and the vast majority of these were from UK and North American based scholars. Though stark, these statistics are not exceptional. A more substantial survey of Geography's top ISI ranking peer-reviewed journals would show similar patterns, revealing how cutting-edge knowledge, what we refer to as 'progress' in geographical knowledge production, is most definitely located; it by and large still emanates from an institutional EuroAmerican core.¹

Pay-wall barriers for those located in the south wishing to access this knowledge have in recent years significantly eased. Research4Life, for example, is a collective that since 2002 has provided the developing world with access to critical scientific research. Its website now claims to give "researchers at over 5,000 institutions in 109 developing world countries free or low cost access to over 30,000 journals provided by the world's leading science publishers" (Research4Life n/d). As

welcome as this kind of initiative is, it does little to disrupt a latent “first in the west, then elsewhere” (Mufti 2005, p.474) logic that underpins tacit understandings of ‘progress’ in academic knowledge production. These rough snapshots highlight the power geometries that build disciplinary Geography from the inside out, just as they show the structural partiality, inequality and EuroAmericanism of the community mobilized by such phrases as ‘our discipline’.

For those of us privileged to be located within the spatial and ideological contours of this disciplinary formation, significant epistemological challenges remain *as a result*, and it is to these that I turn in what follows. In the face of the demand to make progress, to scale up and horizontally connect with an international disciplinary community located across those familiar coordinates mentioned above, the question I pose is how can disciplinary geographers retain fidelities to the local places, regions and communities in and with which many of us work that are nonetheless situated beyond the EuroAmerican heartlands of disciplinary knowledge production? In this sense, I explore how disciplinary Geography’s situatedness impinges on the shape of knowledge produced about places, regions and communities far beyond the west. Even critical geography is swathed in “masked universalisms” that emerge from its EuroAmericanism (Slater 1992, p.309). My interest in this paper therefore, is in the relationships these masked universalisms, these abstractions, have with the politics and facts on the ground of specific places, regions and communities.

Critically engaging the relationships between university space and the politics of geographical knowledge production is of course nothing new (see Castree 2006). I join a number of geographers who have done so, for example, in the context of postcoloniality and responsibility (see Raghuram et al. 2009; Noxolo et al. 2012; Jazeel and McFarlane 2010), geography’s situated universalisms (Peake 2011; Slater

1992; Raju 2006), the implicit Eurocentrism of metropolitan urban theory (Robinson 2006; McFarlane 2010; Edensor and Jayne 2011; Ward 2011), and the relationship between academic work and activism (Pickerill 2008; Massey 2008). Beyond disciplinary Geography, there has been a concerted broadly postcolonial effort to work against the grain of academic culture's humanistic universalism. This can be traced through Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential call to *Provincialize Europe* (2000), as well as Edward Said's concerns regarding travelling theory (1983). More recently, and more squarely within the social sciences, Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007) marked a key critical engagement with the Eurocentrism of social science knowledge production.

All of these texts engage the tension central to this paper: that between the universal and the particular; on the one hand the masked universalisms and metropolitan theoretical claims of disciplinary knowledge production, but on the other the political demands of particular locations that, for those of us working on the global south, are invariably situated far from the EuroAmerican staging grounds of disciplinary progress. As I suggest, this tension is particularly acute in Geography's disciplinary formation, its *dispositif*, where aporias frequently open between the apparently universal demands of disciplinary innovation and the simple fact that many of us continue to work on places where such innovation can struggle for relevance. These are epistemological gaps that open between the 'we' who populate the supposed cutting edge of Geography's disciplinary field, and our non-western field places or areas studies. As I argue, they are gaps, tensions, that emerge all too easily as professional rationalities are cultivated in the EuroAmerican university.

These tensions mirror an ambivalent relationship between Geography and Area Studies, which as James Sidaway puts it, have drifted further and further from

one another in recent decades (2013). In fact, Area Studies today is marked by a distinct lack of input from disciplinary geographers, led as it is by anthropologists, historians, linguists, literary theorists, and political scientists (ibid., pp.985-6). Equally, as Sidaway observes, to claim as a geographer that one is pursuing any kind of regional study – South Asian or East Asian studies, for example – rather than urban, economic or cultural geography, can be enough to consign oneself to the discipline's margins, which itself is testimony to embedded disciplinary hierarchies of theory over case study (ibid., p.992). Sidaway's important essay signposts perfectly the tensions regarding a certain devaluation of the currency of area based knowledge and expertise amongst the reified 'we' of Geography's disciplinary formation. Nonetheless, many of us continue to negotiate that tricky and precarious space between area and discipline; the space where these tensions loom large and require careful, introspective, sometimes counter-intuitive ethical workings through.

In what follows, first, I briefly sketch in more detail the ways these tensions are precipitated by the rationalities our disciplinary dispositif promulgates. As I show in the next section, certain institutional and disciplinary structures enjoin us as geographers to behave as we ought, pursuing progressive geographical knowledge production often at the expense of a deep engagement with areas, places, case studies beyond the west. As I argue, these rationalities instantiate a distinct teleology to disciplinary knowledge production that necessitates queering, making strange, or setting off-kilter. Second, and more constructively, in the last section of the paper I make an argument about what this problematically constituted 'we', situated as we are within Geography's disciplinary dispositif, might do about these tensions in order to produce knowledge that speaks simultaneously to the demands of both disciplinary Geography and the areas on which we work. Specifically, I suggest three alternative

tactics positioned to facilitate a kind of progress in geographical knowledge production that simultaneously cultivates significant connections with the non-western field spaces on which many of us work. These are, first, a conscious transitioning away from what I refer to as authoritarian theorization, second, working through registers and spatialities of translation and untranslatability, and third, the effort to reorient fields of geographical knowledge production. As I argue, the import of these tactics is their ethico-political potential to help reconstitute, open and ultimately pluralize the ‘we’ of disciplinary Geography’s leading edge.

The teleology of progress: the ‘totality of the organized field’

In definitional terms, *progress* strives toward an advanced condition, and insofar as it implies purposeful development, it is teleological. As I suggest in this section, the injunction toward progress in geographical knowledge production (re)produces structural conditions that make it easy for geographers to neglect the particularities of place. As such, the ‘organized field’ to which I refer in this section, refers to disciplinary Human Geography but equally to the university and para-university² systems of publishing, peer review and the vast majority of practices and infrastructures for producing academic knowledge; what Derrida (2004, p.47) referred to as the “totality of the organized field” in his writings on the modern university. To mobilize the teleology of progress in relation to the ‘totality of the organized field’ is thus to critically evoke the trajectory, momentum and purpose of Geography’s disciplinary formation, and moreover the effects it has on those who populate it. I refer here to the kinds of rationalities, normalizations and career ambitions disciplinary geographers are trained to harbour in terms of publishing, conferencing,

esteem, peer review. Moreover, I refer to the potential politico-intellectual costs to the particularity of the places on which we work of these kinds of normalizations.

Standard peer-review practices in the discipline's top ranking journals, for example, enjoin submissions to contribute to the universal terrain of what the prescriptive 'we' so intuitively refer to as a 'broader theoretical literature'. In fact, militantly particular (see Harvey 1995) engagements with field sites, areas, in the global south are never typically enough *on their own* to warrant publication in geography's top-line journals, or for disciplinary monographs; some ambition greater than an intervention in the politics of *a particular place* is typically required. This much is understandable in disciplinary contexts where a spatially diffuse readership coheres not around the micropolitical domains of our own field contexts, but instead around clusters of theoretical debate that circulate in the discipline and to which one's field research might feasibly scale up. Thus, 'what broader claims does this paper make?' is a legitimate editorial question. Nonetheless, as a refrain it is also a question symptomatic of the metropolitan locatedness of the institutions that drive the production, the progress, of geographical knowledge production, and thus configure the accepted terrains of modern critical rationality within our discipline (Jazeel 2009, p.137). As such, it is important to understand the structural conditions that allow this refrain to emerge as perhaps the most legitimate type of question for the production of cutting edge geographical knowledge, and moreover, it is important to grapple with its governmentalizing effects on the rationalities that the 'we' are trained to harbour as a situated disciplinary population in the Foucaultian sense (2007; also see Huxley 2008).

Embedded in the organized field of Geographical knowledge production in the EuroAmerican university is an injunction for knowledge to be international, yet

international on terms that align with the asymmetric landscape of a globalized discipline. This is driven by a whole slew of mechanisms in the university complex. From where I write in the UK, the most obvious driver is the REF (Research Excellence Framework),³ the latest incarnation of our periodical national audit of research across UK universities. Much has been written on the REF and its effects (see Harvey 2006; Smith 2000, p.32; Demeritt 2000, for example). Here, however, I want to point to the sense of scale embedded in its audit mechanism, one which is replicated in other EuroAmerican national contexts, for the criteria the REF uses for assessing units of published output strongly foreground global reach.⁴ For example, for work to be graded at the highest levels, four and three star, it must be “world leading” or “internationally excellent” respectively. Work graded less highly, two or one star, is merely “international” (that is to say, not quite “internationally *excellent*”) or “national”. Furthermore, for work to be unclassified it has to fall “below the standard of nationally recognised work”, which rubric stacks the odds heavily against publications written with the specific intention of intervening in local political or community contexts, whether that is the gentrification of a specific East London community, or an individual village’s rural development in Tamil Nadu. The point is that woven into the challenge that REF poses to British geographers is a tacit sense of scale; the notion that more international is better than the provincial, where ‘our’ top journals and academic publishers stand as something of a proxy for “world leading” or “internationally excellent”.

This logic is neither specific to Geography (REF is a cross disciplinary exercise), nor is it unique to the UK and REF. This is, in fact, but another iteration of a scalar logic that not only pervades European and North American universities, but also hierarchizes the broader global landscape of higher education (see Koch 2014,

p.47). For example, North American universities' faculty review and tenure criteria typically ascertain quality with reference to similar criteria regarding the international repute of scholarship, and so do those universities that harbour global ambition yet are positioned outside higher education's global EuroAmerican hegemon. This scaling up of the knowledge economy, this internationalization, is entirely complicit with the global university's ambition to clamber global university rankings (see Koch 2014; Lim 2009). And as is commonly known "what are considered to be 'relevant' or 'international' journals, are almost exclusively English-language journals in which predominantly native English speakers publish" (Aalbers and Rossi 2009, p.116).

These are structural conditions for the valuation of knowledge production that seem to fly in the face of Chakrabarty's (2000) injunction to provincialize Europe. In essence, they are sector-wide conditions that problematically entangle the hierarchization of scale with assumptions about the significance and importance of knowledge, just as they are conditions that place certain non-western locations, areas, and their grounded politics at a distance from what the unequally constituted 'we' of Geography's disciplinary formation are entrained to collectively regard as 'relevant'. To phrase this differently, scale's articulation with distance here configures the local – particularly those local field places beyond Europe and North America – as perceptually 'distant' from the heartlands of Geography's disciplinary dispositif such that the local, area, becomes particularly vulnerable to neglect within that dispositif. It is important therefore, to ask how the totality of the organized field, the teleology of progress, manifests itself in the architecture of the work we are enjoined to produce as geographers?

To answer that question we need return to that familiar peer-reviewer's refrain: 'what broader claims does this paper make?' Those who have submitted to,

reviewed or edited for any of geography's peer reviewed journals will be familiar with this intellectual demand, driven as it is by the nested hierarchization of scale that so entangles with distance and relevance. The point here is that the effort to be "world leading" or "internationally excellent" demands a scaling up from the particular to the global (read EuroAmerican). It is what our institutions demand of us, and thus it is the disciplinary common sense that 'we' are encouraged to aspire to achieve as professional academic geographers. Career progressions depends on 'us' internalizing this rationality.

All of this is to assert that the totality of the organized field, the injunction for disciplinary knowledge to be "world leading" or "internationally excellent" in a particular kind of configuration, in essence normalizes a certain notion of value in relation to academic work. Published output, or "cutting edge new knowledge in user-friendly packages of printed material" (Collini 2012, p.132), is the EuroAmerican university's most profitable product in a global market place. In this sense, the EuroAmerican university system plays a key role in the commoditization of knowledge within global capitalism (Gidwani 2008, pps.236-7). Research revolves around the global business of producing knowledge, and whatever else knowledge is and may strategically or politically do, it is also marketable intellectual property (Mohanty 2003, p.173; also see Agnew 2007, p.139), turning universities into what Stanley Aronowitz felicitously called "knowledge factories" (2001). My point thus far is that the professional criteria, checks and balances that determine knowledge's value are located firmly within the EuroAmerican university and para-university complex. Derrida went so far as to refer to the structuring effects of the totality of the field as a form of theoretico-intellectual *ensorship* (2004, pp.43-63). Though academic freedom is celebrated in most EuroAmerican university contexts, Derrida points to the

totality of the organized field, “the university and para-university, publishing, the press, the media, the new systems of archiving, and so forth” (ibid., p.47), as “a highly differentiated, indeed contradictory network, [through which] censorship weighs heavily on the university or proceeds from it (for the university is always censured *and* censoring)” (ibid., p.46).

The effect of all this is the play that opens up between, on the one hand, that professional desire and necessity (in career progression terms) to make a contribution to the universal, international terrain of that notional ‘broader theoretical literature’, and on the other, the demands of quite particular social and political vexations in place. In the face of the teleology of disciplinary progress it can become all too easy to forget any obligation toward place and the responsibilities it demands. The finely grained texture of area, the politics *of* particular places, communities and grounded yet distant contexts, are precisely that which becomes subject *to* this kind of censoring. However, places do not, they cannot, exist outside their representations in academic work (see Ismail 2005, p.xxx). Representation does not stand in a mimetic relation to place, to be judged merely on the basis of accuracy. It stands also in a constitutive relationship to place; as we well know, imaginative geographies are produced *through* representation (Gregory 1994), which is to stress that writing about a place also produces it for the implied readerships our texts convene. This redoubles the responsibility toward field-sites incumbent on all of us who work on particular places, even if those places are only accessed textually or archivally.

Queering the geography of critical geographical potential

What I have been suggesting thus far is that there are important questions to be asked about the effects of the silent EuroAmericanism of the ‘we’ embedded in disciplinary

knowledge production. It is because it is so easy for a disciplinary community to mobilize politico-intellectual ferment in the name of the collective personal pronoun, that it remains essential to ask who exactly is this ‘we’ privileged enough to advance a call to responsibility? Moreover, how does this ‘we’ connect to others located in field spaces and communities, and most of all political contexts, situated way beyond the EuroAmerican academy? There is a distinct geography to leftist intellectual politics in disciplinary geography, which necessitates careful thought in relation to how intellectual work connects to area, to places and communities that is.

By way of example, recent work in queer theory has developed convincing and progressive stances against same-sex marriage on the basis that marriage itself is a (hetero or homo) normalizing institution, or as José Esteban Muñoz has put it, a “symptom of the erosion of gay and lesbian political imagination” (2010, p.21). This argument makes good political sense in the New York metropolitan queer theoretical scene, and furthermore it works well to coral politico-intellectual ferment against the naturalization of reproductive orthodoxy, what Natalie Oswin has recently referred to as “straight time” (2012). However, if queer theory takes aim at normalcy, it is important to stress the geographical locatedness of the normalcy at which it takes aim. The politics of normalcy in New York City look very different to the just as radical struggle to be considered normal that gay and lesbian communities in Southeast and South Asian postcolonies like Singapore, Sri Lanka and even India still face (also see Oswin 2015). In these contexts, obstinate colonial penal codes continue to criminalize same-sex relations, such that “straight time” is a progressive and queer utopian aspiration for LGBT communities still demonized via the pervasive sexual logic that inheres in colonial time. Equally, we should be cautious with claims that sexual politics in Singapore, Sri Lanka or India are simply behind the west, that they will

inevitably catch-up, lest this logic reinstates an aspatial and unilinear developmentalism (see Massey 2005). The difference that space makes here is imperative, for it is the irrevocably ‘different’ postcolonial trajectory of sexual politics in South and Southeast Asia that require foregrounding and working through. In this sense, caution must be exercised in the ways that the critique of same-sex marriage is oriented, for it takes aim at particular geographical and political contexts. It is located. It is not universal.

This example reveals just how much care must be taken in the solidarities and theoretical innovations the ‘we’ forge. When global struggles and solidarity are popularized and tied to local imperatives, there are always complex geopolitical constraints, power relations and masked universalisms to work through (see Nasrabadi 2012). Solidarity demands an ethical responsibility to listen to and negotiate the demands of area, for these demands may not always tally with the most current theoretical debates holding sway and accruing value in Geography’s disciplinary formation. Nonetheless, they are real.

In this context, the challenge of competitiveness in the neoliberalizing global university sector becomes relevant, particularly as it is negotiated with relevance, the ‘so what?’ of knowledge production; a question that must always be posed with one eye toward field spaces. This is fraught for all, but especially for those based in elite Asian, African and Latin American university departments keen to benchmark themselves against their aspirant departments within the EuroAmerican academy. In the context of South African Geography for example, there have been recent accusations that South African geographers need to make themselves more relevant to ‘international’ (read Anglo-American) debates and theory building (see Hammet 2012). However, as Mary Lawhon (2013, p.A3) has argued in response, “South

African geographers are engaged with their research context – they speak to the public, write articles for local media, their books can be found in ordinary bookstores and are accessible to and read by non-academics. ... South African geographers are, broadly put, relevant.” What Lawhon’s retort points to is, first, the all-too-common elision of ‘international’ with ‘Anglo-American’ theory building, second, the prescriptive assertion that this kind of internationalization must unequivocally be good for South African geography, and third, the highly contextual geography of critical geography’s ‘relevance’. As Shari Daya (2013, p.A1) also puts it, there is a rich history of critique too quick and keen to lament the “narrowly empirical, local, and a-theoretical nature of Southern scholarship”, which effectively devalues an intellectual orientation *toward* non-western places on which we might work.

These are assumptions that necessitate queering. How then might we do this, and how might the boundaries of this problematic ‘we’ called forth to set about this task itself be opened, queered, postcolonialized? In the following sections I set forth some tactics aimed primarily at enabling progress in disciplinary geographical knowledge production to become more accountable to the non-western areas on which many of us work. As I show, however, these are tactics that in turn aim at democratically reconstituting the ‘we’ of disciplinary Geography given its profound EuroAmerican squint, for it is in the effort to prize open the ‘we’ in always more inclusive ways that the aporetic gap between discipline and area might be bridged.

Tactics: negotiating the totality of organized field

As I have suggested, the EuroAmerican contours of Geography’s perceived disciplinary vanguard make it difficult, even counterintuitive, to tack effectively between the demands of discipline and area. The demands of the particular in the face

of the pursuit of progress in disciplinary knowledge production can seem to come at the expense of career security and progression, consolidation of one's wider standing, and the injunction to get one's name known within the field. Tacking effectively between discipline and area therefore requires due sensitivity to the actuality of the totality of the organized field, the real pressures it exerts and rationalities it produces. In this section therefore, I suggest three tactics *given* these realities; three alternative constitutive itineraries.

Beyond authoritarian thinking, into new problem spaces

Though geographers have long debated theory's role and use, we have generally refrained from discussing what exactly distinguishes theoretical texts from other kinds of texts and materials with which we work. The diverse etymology of the word 'theory' invariably leads back to both Latin and Greek senses of speculation, looking at, viewing, and at least since Heidegger an assumption that theory lends explanation, that it provides a way of seeing correctly. This equation of theory with truth or vision is fairly obstinate, and one of its effects is the presumption that theoretical texts have causal and explanatory powers that stretch beyond the idiographic contexts of their origin. All texts, all ideas, are of course mobile, and we should resist any suggestion that a theoretical treatise can only be of use in its ordinary spatial context. As Cindy Katz (1996) has argued, theory must take flight into the world, avoiding claims of mastery. Nonetheless, to advocate for the mobility of theory can also reify it as discrete object around which certain practices and ways of dealing with the preconstituted theoretical object emerge. It is in this sense that we should be aware of the spatial abstractions that trail in the wake of what Aamir Mufti (2005, p.475) refers

to as “theory culture”: the “*habitus* that regulates ‘theory’ as a discrete set of practices within departments... and the ways that these practices embody Eurocentrism.”

As David Slater (1992, p.314) pointed out over two decades ago now, many of Geography’s conceptual and theoretical debates proceed “without any specification of their pertaining cultural and historical contexts... [implying] ... an underlying assumption of universal applicability.” Slater was referring to the universalizing implications of ideas like ‘the spatial division of labour’ or the ‘hypermobility of capital’, whose located origins somehow get lost in the multiple stages and mobilities of their didactic and deliberative reiteration.⁵ Today, we can refer not just to the situated emergence of theoretical debates current within the discipline, for example, affect, the non-representational, or post-humanism, but also we should remember the located enlightenment origins of taken-as-given concept-metaphors that form many of the building blocks of spatial and social thought and theorization; ‘nature’, ‘religion’, ‘subjectivity’, for example. These more or less ubiquitous concepts appear universal but retain within them very distinct ontological presumptions and binaries pinned to their enlightenment origins (see Jazeel 2013, 2014). All theory and concept work emerges from some spatial and historical context, thus all putatively theoretical work is at once practical insofar as it deals with textual objects that have spatio-temporal origins. However, it is theory’s *projected* universalisms that, first, naturalize a sense that the west is the primary producer of theory culture (Mufti 2005, p.475), and second, unwittingly enlists the rest of the world – and here I refer predominantly to the global south – as a kind of empirical ‘conscript’ to this theoretical modernity (Scott 2004; Castree 2005; Gibson Graham 1994, pps.206-208).

In such instances, where EuroAmerican theories or enlightenment concepts take flight into the world and become unthinkingly applied to the non-west, they risk

becoming “out of place ideas” (Chauí 2011, p.143). The Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí (ibid.) conceives of this kind of misdirected intellectual work, where theoretical discourses become programmatic-pragmatic, as a kind of ‘authoritarian thinking’, wherein:

Facts are reduced to examples and tests, while theory is reduced to a formal schema or, as is often stated, a model. Providing reality with the task of mere empirical example and bestowing on theory the role of an empty framework for changeable contents, authoritarian thought frees itself from the disturbing need to confront that which has not yet been thought (the real thus being the here and now) and of undertaking the work of a theory wherein form and content are not separate. Authoritarian thinking... supports itself in the already seen (an exemplary fact), in the already thought (previous theory), in the already enunciated (authorized discourse)... Incapable of thinking difference, in space as well as time, it needs to feel itself authorized before imposing itself: it lives under the sign of repetition. (Chauí 2011, p.145)

This is not just a warning about the potential that out of place theoretical pursuits will spiral into meaningless abstraction divorced from socio-political context; what Said referred to as the risk of “bad infinity” (1983, p.239). Chauí’s use of the term ‘authoritarian’ consciously draws attention to the sublation of difference resulting from such unimaginative negotiations of canons of theoretical work. The alterity of place – “that which has not yet been thought” (by the investigator) – is what is at stake in the face of authoritarian theorization. Chauí’s warnings therefore bear similarities to Gayatri Spivak’s seminal critique of the unwitting *ideological* subject constitution that resulted from prescriptive diagnoses of subaltern agency in

the Subaltern Studies collective's early work (Spivak 1988; Jazeel 2014). The potential for authoritarian forms of theorization are present wherever theory culture exists as some-*thing* in which to specialize.

Geography provides a disciplinary space where it is entirely possible to transact in the space of theory, to claim progress as that which is evidenced by the development of theoretical and conceptual debates. This is no bad thing, though in such instances the retreat from place is a just as real prospect. In such instances there is the risk that truth claims are generated without tangential connections to grounded political or spatial contexts, despite the fact that, as I have stated above, all theorization is always already grounded. My argument here is not against the importance of speaking "truth to power" (Said 1994), nor is it to advance any kind of anti-theoretical position. Rather it is to stress that to avoid authoritarian thinking we should retreat from simple bifurcations of the 'theoretical' and the 'empirical'; from truth claims made in the absence of particular fields, contexts and place specific political or cultural questions. The discipline cannot be split into those who theorize and those who do empirics, and the authoritarian agenda is only enhanced by work whose contribution aims toward the 'purely theoretical'. The epistemological challenge here is how work (theoretical or otherwise) 'speaks to' rather than 'speaks for' place (see Ismail 2005). This injunction to 'speak to' place effectively opens the EuroAmerican topologies of Geography's disciplinary formation, the problematic 'we' that is to say, to area specialists both within and outwith our extant dispositif.

To achieve this 'speaking to', theoretical work should best be conceived as strategy; that is, as that which can enable a particular kind of disposition toward just as particular problems or questions in and of spaces and places at a variety of scales. This approach is geared toward revaluing theoretical literacy within geography's

global knowledge economy as per what its *methodological* capacity is to be able to frame politically enabling questions and ways of intervening. The anthropologist David Scott (1998, pp.3-20; 2004, p.3-4) has elaborated a conception of temporality he calls “problem-spaces” that is instructive in this capacity. For Scott, problem spaces demarcate historically specific discursive contexts; cognitively intelligible arrangements of concepts, ideas, images (2004, p.4). They are “a context of argument and, therefore, one of *intervention*” (ibid.). The point about them is that, from within a particular problem-space, the terms of that problem-space are not debated; “what the argument is effectively about, is not itself being argued over” (ibid.). Scott’s formulation is a reflection on the discrepant temporalities of postcolonial criticism. It is a way of stressing that the questions postcolonial theorists asked in the 80s and 90s, about anti-colonial nationalism and its requisite essentialisms, are not the right questions to ask now, in this historical present, when the romance of anti-colonial nationalism has given way to tragedy (Scott’s context is the Caribbean). Criticism, in other words, must be dynamic, attuned to the times, both *strategic* and *contingent* enough to generate worthwhile problem-spaces that matter in this present. Scott’s argument has just as much resonance for the geography of criticism. In other words, just as problem-spaces are historically contingent, they are spatially contingent as well. The geographical questions worth asking in the EuroAmerican well-springs of the discipline, may well have little or no relevance or use in field spaces way beyond those EuroAmerican localities.⁶ To work strategically with theory, therefore, is to enable differentially situated problem-spaces to speak to one another, to relationally constitute one another such that the questions (and answers) one generates have relevance between both area and discipline.

Working in the space of translation and untranslatability

As Marilena Chaui has put it, authoritarian thinking lives under the sign of repetition, which is to stress how the adjectival pluralisation of extant concepts and theories invites diversity at the expense of geographically contextual engagements with the alterity of places. For example, as I stressed above, the concept ‘nature’ appears universal but in fact retains within it a very distinct ontological binary – nature/culture – pinned to its enlightenment origin. As such, to investigate the ‘politics of *nature*’ in any geographical field space is to unwittingly reconstitute the nature/culture binary in that place, even if in that specific field space that very binary may not exist amongst local epistemic communities. In this sense, phrases like ‘indigenous *nature*’, ‘universal *nature*’, or ‘Buddhist *nature*’ become adjectival modifications, authoritarian reconstitutions, of the nature/culture binary. This much has been well demonstrated by critical indigenous (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006; Gibbs 2010), ecopluralist (Curry 2008), and postcolonial scholarship (Braun 2002; Jazeel 2013a, 2013b), and the example of nature/culture is just one example of how, as Aamir Mufti (2005, p.478) has written, “the non-Western text [can become]... no longer... readable except through the Orientalist cannon in which it comes already constituted as object.” The lure of mere diversity – in areas, field spaces and historical contexts beyond the EuroAmerican academy – is in this sense something to watch for if geography as a disciplinary community is to move beyond the sign of repetition (Mufti 2010, p.493).

The challenge to move into epistemological problem spaces beyond mere diversity, into the barely discernible shadow of what Chaui (2011, p.145) refers to as “that which has not yet been thought”, is more difficult, and as I suggest in this section necessitates translational work (see Jazeel 2014, pps.98-101). As Sidaway et

al. (2004, p.1037) have suggested, the issue of nomenclature, terminology and language are intimately bound to the continued relative hegemony of Anglophone geography. As they also intimate, however, the problem of translation in geography does not just concern the political economic exclusions of non-Anglophone scholars from the hegemony of the Anglophone publishing world (though this should certainly concern us (see Aalbers and Rossi 2009; Helms et al. 2005)). Translation, methodologically speaking, involves “learning to live another form of life”, immersing oneself into other life-worlds with humility (Asad, in Orsini and Srivastava 2010, p.324). Thus translation is both a linguistic and ethnographic methodological process invaluable for engaging areas in ways that work to retain a kind of fidelity to those places; a fidelity that also necessitates the resistance of authoritarian thinking. For Walter Benjamin, “[t]he translator’s task consists in this: to find the intention toward the language into which the work is to be translated, on the basis of which an echo of the original can be awakened in it” (1923 [1997], p.159). But, the echo of the original demands moving beyond a mere technical translation offering linguistic equivalence. It demands a movement toward what Benjamin refers to as “the incomprehensible, the secret, the ‘poetic’” (ibid., p.152). In this sense, fidelity in language is not necessarily the same thing as fidelity to place or culture, insofar as the faithful reproduction of the meaning of a word “can almost never fully render the meaning it has in the original” (ibid., p.160).

To this extent, and learning from comparative literature, an essential component of the kind of the translational work I am advocating here is one that embraces the untranslatable. Moments of *untranslatability* are immensely productive encounters where incommensurate differences can productively encounter one another. Emily Apter’s recent book *Against World Literature* acts as something of a

guide to “activating untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum” (2013, p.3) for work across the humanities and social sciences that ethically and practically stands in opposition to the expansionism and gargantuan scale of the Anglophonic globalization of disciplinary knowledge production. What I am stressing here is the radical potential of translation *failure*, the pinpointing of which comes from knowing where linguistic equivalences do not exist across different cultures and languages. In such instances, the untranslatable offers, first, a knowledge of spatial difference on terms true to the singularity of those differences, and second, a lucid angle from which to see more clearly the limits of the inbuilt typologies in spatial categorizations and concepts that disciplinary geography routinely takes-for-granted.

For Apter, these inbuilt literary typologies, the limits of which untranslatability highlights, might include ‘epic’, ‘classicism’, ‘Renaissance’, ‘realism’, ‘the avant-garde’, ‘the postmodern’ (2013, p.8), but for social scientists including geographers, we might add such typologies as ‘nature’, ‘religion’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘landscape’, ‘territory’, ‘place’, ‘transnational’ and many more. The key is to not be lead by these concept-metaphors, but instead to work through the ways that apparent equivalents from non-western field-spaces *cannot* be known through these typologies and categorizations. It is this kind of unknowable and untranslatable residue that offers insight into incommensurable difference. Returning to the example with which I began this section, in Sri Lanka the closest Sinhala language translation of the word ‘nature’ – *swabhawadharmaya* – contains within it a reference to the non-dualistic Buddhist metaphysical principle of dharma, the energy that comprises the Buddhist universe. Insofar as dharma is non-dualistic, the word ‘nature’ violently disfigures its semantic coordinates. As such, it is the untranslatability of the word *swabhawadharmaya*, its un-equivalence to the word

‘nature’, that brings sharply into focus the actually existing radical alterity of Sinhala-Buddhist geographical imaginations regarding environmental spatialities in the southern Sri Lankan context (see Jazeel 2013b; 2014). As Apter (ibid., p.121) puts it, “[t]he Untranslatable comes into focus as that x-factor that disqualifies presumptive knowability in matters of linguistic definition.” It reveals itself when our conceptual taxonomies fail, and thus it stretches the tolerance of the discipline’s theoretical languages such that disciplinary geographical knowledge production might orient itself towards non-western areas, embracing an “ontological pluralism” (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006).

For Vinay Gidwani (2008, p.236), hegemonic disciplinary geographical knowledge production is always already at once a process of translation and transportation wherein information is moved from the peripheries to metropolitan locations and given form via a kind of translation into prevailing disciplinary languages, protocols and taxonomies. Working in the space of untranslatability as sketched above cannot claim to halt this extractive structural siphon of information from periphery to metropole, but it can arrest some of the translational violence that accompanies such transfers. Untranslatability invokes important ethicopolitical moments wherein “the prior certitudes of theories and methodologies are confronted by demands that cannot be anticipated or resolved a priori” (ibid.). Translation is thus a most intimate act of reading, an act of surrendering to the text of the other (Spivak 1993, p.201), even and especially when the repetition of equivalences present themselves as easy workarounds for untranslatability.

Inevitably, this is to advocate for more language learning amongst geographers, but it is also more and less in that it is to encourage the development of creative kinds of literacies that can be brought to research endeavours (Mufti 2005,

p.477). As Neil Smith (2010) pointed out, the increasing pressure on PhD students to complete their degrees as quickly as possible (particularly in the UK), means that opportunities for language learning are being squeezed. This much requires structural solutions beyond the scope of this paper. But working in the register of translation is, I would stress, not dependent on language learning alone. Pausing over untranslatables and working carefully through inter-cultural disjunctures of meaning is utterly doable if we can forge the right kinds of collaborations and international conversations with people who can(not) translate idioms, concepts, structures of feeling. This is also to work in the space of translation. As such, what I urge here is as much about the slow process of collaborative and transnational research team building as it is about language learning. It also implies a broader argument about the productivity of awkward encounters with radical alterity in ethnographic and cultural research. Anna Tsing (2004), for example, refers to these zones of awkward engagement via the metaphor of ‘friction’, which means to convey the productive and generative nature of incongruity in field research (also see Dombroski 2011, p.25).

Given translation’s potential, there is much to be said for a kind of universalizing of provincial or difficult-to-translate thought; a kind of “learning from elsewhere” that inverts a “first in the West, and then elsewhere” (Mufti 2005, p.474) structure of global time that pervades established notions of learning. This is not simply a strategy of localization. It is in fact to oppose false dichotomies between the local and the global, showing what it might mean to universalize from heretofore marginalized perspectives. Part of the task is to present texts from different geographical origins to the EuroAmerican readership in ways that effectively realign the axis of global comparativism.

One exciting project in this respect is a new book series edited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Hosam Aboul-Ela called *Theory in the World*. Its aims are to translate non-Anglophone theorists, bringing their work into representation in the English language for the first time. As Gayatri Spivak writes in the preface to the book of essays by the Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chaui (2011), the aim is “to point out how each is singular in the philosophical sense, and thus universalizable, though never universal” (Spivak 2011b, p.i). In the context of disciplinary Geography, she poses a valuable question about what difference it can make to centre politico-intellectual interventions around these radically different theory texts? Working in the register of translation does not therefore depend only upon developing language skills. Projects like this offer a useful kind of intellectual resource. They point to practical as well as intellectual ways of respatializing the organized field of geographical knowledge production, in the process opening the ‘we’ of our disciplinary community.

Re-orienting the totality of one’s organized field

If, as I have argued, the totality of the organized field produces structural conditions that perpetuate global asymmetries in disciplinary geographical knowledge production, then in this closing section I suggest how, faced by this dispositif, EuroAmerican researchers working on non-western places have the agency to re-orient their own engagements with the organized field. Doing so in some of the practical ways toward which I gesture in this last tactic in turn, and again, offers the potential to open the ‘we’ of our discipline’s so-called ‘leading edge’ to the demands of those marginal places and communities on which we work. Having sketched above two itineraries that aim for the production of a more post-universal geographical

knowledge production, here I briefly elaborate on some practical steps to physically orient researchers toward their field spaces.

My aim is simply to suggest that one's organized field as a geographical researcher *can* be radically pluralized, and that in turn each one of us is able to democratically reconstitute the 'we' of which we personally are a part in our knowledge production endeavours. To do so, I draw on Qadri Ismail's (2005) injunction to 'abide by' those places and politico-intellectual contexts with and on which EuroAmerican academics work. For Ismail, 'abiding by' is "to display a *physical* commitment to attending to [a place's] concerns, to intervening within its debates, to taking a stand... even at the risk of what might seem like permanent frustration..., to display patience, to stay with it" (ibid., xxx, my emphasis). To be sure, working beyond authoritarian thinking and working in the space of translation and untranslatability as I have set out above, are both tactics that aim epistemologically to 'abide by' places in these terms. However, Ismail also emphasizes the *physical* effort that 'abiding by' entails. As I have stressed above, the global (again, read EuroAmerican) ambition that disciplinary geography's dispositif embeds in all of 'us' means that research orientation, the validation of progress in human geography, is vastly skewed toward the west (Lii 2010, p.168), towards the AngloAmerican epicentre of what Jennifer Robinson (2003, p.280) has called geography's "knowledge production complex." Although Geography has made good efforts in the last decade or so to do more to incorporate regional scholarship, incorporation alone does little to re-orient our own iterations outwards, towards critical readerships located in the marginal places and in the Area Studies epistemological communities on which we work. As Robinson remarked in her important 'Postcolonialising Geography' essay (2003, p.281), "Even research

published in the west on the places being discussed, or where scholars are based, may be out of reach for economic reasons (the writer never thought to place copies of his [sic] work in the university library perhaps)". This astute observation is one whose implications have remained relatively underdeveloped.

To this end, 'abiding by' means working to make our research accessible to communities of readers, critics and citizens based in those constituencies about which we write, as well as in those area studies communities with which our work connects. Opening ourselves to these differently situated territories of critique means opening disciplinary geographers to differently situated politico-intellectual contact zones; zones where knowledge and the politics of places themselves are made to work together. This is not to suggest *not* publishing in our key disciplinary journals, but instead it is to think seriously about how work might also be disseminated in those area studies and field communities with which we routinely work. If it is beyond our control to influence the exchange value of disciplinary geographical knowledge production in an increasingly neo-liberal landscape of higher education and research, we certainly can control what Gidwani (2008, p.236) refers to as our work's 'social use-value' simply by repositioning and pluralizing the communities to which it is oriented.

The challenge here is of how to go about positioning oneself *inside* not just disciplinary Geography's dispositive, but the area and area studies communities with which we work (Jazeel 2007). This may simply present itself as a choice between publishing in Area Studies journals instead of Geography journals, but as James Sidaway (2013, p.992) has warned, this can be enough to consign oneself to the margins of the discipline. This challenge therefore, requires some nuts and bolts lateral thinking. As Robinson suggests, it may be as simple as ensuring that copies of

articles or books are placed in university libraries in our local field sites. Open access publishing and the Research4Life electronic access to publishing initiative have important roles to play in this respect, simply by making published research freely accessible in developing world contexts. But researchers must also endeavour to actively engage with publics and experts in their respective local contexts. This might be achieved by re-iterating research via blogs and citizen journalism sites, using the variegated potentials of social media, taking steps to organize presentations to local academics and students in the countries on which we do our research, arranging ad hoc teaching, and more generally treating field-spaces as fully formed intellectual communities rather than simply raw data banks. We might also insist to EuroAmerican academic publishers on local co-publication agreements for monographs or anthologies,⁷ and we might offer our academic labour (in terms of review and editing work, for example) just as willingly to local journals and book series as we do to the Anglophone journals and publishing houses in our disciplinary heartlands. These are all possible ways of facilitating the re-orientation of one's own organized field of knowledge production. In short, these are ways to make ourselves relevant, and to connect with a broader 'we'. Indeed, Mary Lawhon's example of South African Geography should serve as an example here, where as she stresses (quoted above), South African geographers tend to "speak to the public, write articles for local media, their books can be found in ordinary book stores and are accessible to and read by non-academics. ... South African geographers are, broadly put, relevant" (op. cit.).

This effort to re-orient the totality of one's field bears similarities to injunctions toward the 'co-production' of knowledge (see Nagar et al 2003; Theodore forthcoming).⁸ Co-production implies a relationship of mutuality with research

subjects wherein those subjects are considered as producers of ‘theory’ as well as simply wells of raw ethnographic data. Re-orienting the totality of one’s field may or may not involve such efforts, but there is a similar foundational ethic at stake: simply that for knowledge about places and communities to be socially and spatially relevant, it must be open to the critical scrutiny of those places and people ‘we’ seek to represent. The point to emphasize is that these steps, these physical efforts, to re-orient our own organized fields at the scale of individual research endeavours, are steps that if followed may just begin to re-subjectify our intellectual rationalities such that the space between discipline and area will become far less aporetic, far more traversable. Working to make oneself accountable to the place or area on which we work, working in the anticipation that one’s research will *routinely* be critically engaged in these specialist and lay contexts, is to work toward a more responsible and plural pursuit of progress in Geography. This kind of resubjectivization, the retraining of our politico-intellectual rationalities as disciplinary geographers, is to move towards producing theoretically rich and richly contextualized research that one can stand behind in multiple contexts. But moreover, it is also to be able to concede one’s work as fallible in the light of dialectical negotiations and conversations with a newly constituted ‘we’, and thus to producing richer and more effective interventions not just in disciplinary geographical debates, but also in debates about the politics of places themselves (see Jazeel 2007, p.296).

Conclusion

This paper has charted a problematic for disciplinary geographical knowledge production in the context of its own globalization. As I have stressed, given the pervasive EuroAmerican orientation and composition of the leading edge of our

disciplinary community, the injunction to make progress in Human Geography can come at the expense of careful connections to the areas, particularly areas beyond the west, on which we routinely work. Theaporetic space between area and discipline to which the title of this paper gestures is a space of tension, ambivalence, and of deep ethical concern in the light of the very real challenge to democratize progress in geographical knowledge production. The effort of this paper therefore has been twofold. First, it has been to enact a kind of “theoretico-institutional analysis” (Derrida 2004, p.47) of the discipline and its disciplinary effects, delineating some of the ways that geography’s dispositif serves routinely to pull us away from the non-western field spaces on which we work. I have argued that these disciplinary effects in turn reify a EuroAmerican ‘we’ within disciplinary Geography that, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate the masked universalisms of Eurocentric geographical knowledge production. Second, and more hopefully, I have set out three alternative constitutive itineraries in the face of these structural inequities and their effects that aim at more effective ways for geographers to retain umbilical ethical and epistemic connections with the areas, the field space, on which we work. These include a conscious transition away from authoritarian thinking and into newly located ‘problem spaces’, working in the domain of translation and untranslatability, and the practical efforts required to reorient the totality of our own fields of engagement.

The collective aim of these alternative constitutive itineraries is not only to foster less extractive and more responsible relationships with field spaces and communities than we might otherwise. After all, many professional geographers and research students already have finely honed mechanisms for ensuring that knowledge and hence favour is fed back to their research participants in the field. My aim in setting out the alternative constitute itineraries above has also been to precipitate ways

of democratizing the very idea of ‘progress in Human Geography’ precisely by opening the discipline’s dispositif to the demands of other areas. Making the leading edge of the discipline’s ‘we’ accountable to the singularities and rigour of area based interrogation is also a way to pluralize disciplinary Geography, allowing the nagging and productive voices of distant others ‘in here’. This ultimately is a way of ensuring that disciplinary progress remains relevant to a world of places, of areas, on which geographers continue to work (see Harvey 1972).

But there is an additional reason why the ‘we’ of disciplinary Geography must make pains to open itself more unconditionally to area. As James Sidaway (2013, pp.985-6) has observed, and as I have stressed above, Area Studies today is characterized by a distinct lack of input from disciplinary geographers. There is a certain irony in the fact that geography, the discipline in the contemporary university perhaps most closely associated with the pursuit of knowledge about spaces and places, has in fact receded from relevance in a great many specialized Area Studies knowledge communities. It seems that in recent years there is something of a return to Area Studies emerging across the social sciences and humanities. Part of a progressive reconstitution of the teleology of ‘progress in Human Geography’ would see our discipline become increasingly relevant and proximate to what seems to be a broader return to Area Studies.

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¹ There is some truth to the claim that geographic theorizing is already influenced by non-western contexts, which in itself constitutes promising developments for the discipline. However, this claim also effectively reasserts the EuroAmericanism of the discipline's leading edge; a vanguard that stands to be influenced by multiple elsewhere does not destabilize its own claim to be the leading edge.

² The term para-university denotes those (usually commercial) institutions and industries that exist to support and facilitate the activities of universities.

³ Previously the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

⁴ Available at REF2014 (n/d).

⁵ Likewise, in developing feminist field methods for Geography, scholars have critically engaged the situatedness of universalizing theoretical claims (see Rose 1993, 1997; Katz 1994; Gibson-Graham 1994; Peake and Rieker 2013).

⁶ To some extent, this call echoes those made over four decades ago by David Harvey with his assertion that "...concepts and categories cannot be made in abstraction. They must be forged realistically with respect to the events and actions as they unfold around us" (1972, p.11).

⁷ One of the deep ironies of Qadri Ismail's bracing manifesto for *Abiding by Sri Lanka* is that the book, published by a North American University Press, has never been available on the local Sri Lankan market. Its retail paperback price (currently US\$26, which is SLRS3,400 at current exchange rates) pushes it beyond the means of many Sri Lankan based Sri Lankanists.

⁸ Also see the virtual issue of *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, compiled by Wendy Lerner, on 'Geographies of Co-Production', <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291475-5661/homepage/VirtualIssuesPage.html?campaign=dartwo|98013050#Geographies>