TROPISMES

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The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

La pensée du desert
The Paradox of "Theory" and the Narrative of Boom and Bust in Cultural Studies

Darwin quotes
From Shelley, that forever floats
Over all desert places known,
Mysterious doubt—an awful one.
He quotes, adopts it. Is it true?
Let instinct vouch; let poetry
Science and instinct here agree,
For truth requires strong retinue.

(Herman Melville, Clarel, 168)

Towards the end of *Empire*, Negri and Hardt described an epistemological condition whereby the philosophical projects of the beginning of the 20th century remained trapped between the decline of European empires and the "illusion" of American empire. This liminal position for the Hegelian Self-Consciousness between an empire that no longer is and an empire that is not one was expressed by "voices crying out in the desert... [which] anticipated life in the desert." (Negri & Hardt 379) But if this desert condition opened Negri and Hardt's work on the category of the "multitude", a symptomatic social formation of *bare space*[1] or the virtual site of global capital in the cybernetic era; this

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1 *Bare space* is a pun on Agamben's concept of bare life. If bare life consists in divesting the natural body of its political garment or right of citizenship, or refers to the act of banishment and exclusion from the social communal

same condition was for Donna Haraway a portal onto the post-human where agency pertains to a collective of human and unhuman actors. Following the peregrinations of the protagonist of *Pilgrim's Progress* and his commitment to "skirting the slough of despond and the parasite-infested swamps of nowhere," (Haraway 295) Haraway's reopening of the question of "theory" is also topographical and spatial in so far as it is grounded in a *topos* or a common place, a site of "construction, artifact, movement, displacement" (Haraway 296) as well as a *tropos*: an act of "turning away." Could the examples from the work of Haraway, Negri and Hardt be indicative of a prevalent trend in many recent critical projects that intentionally or unintentionally detach themselves from a consciousness grounded in history to embrace a different critical configuration defined by space? In the late 60s, Michel Foucault predicted that "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space." (Foucault 22)

In order to address the question of "theory"[2] and assess its current condition and future development, the article draws on selected references to the desert. Such disparate but recurrent references that

space and the judicial order; *bare space* has a similar ambiguous position with regard to the law, the State and society. It is 'space' without 'place' and the mirror image of a sovereignty or pure violence without logos. Bare space captures the paradox of a post-modern primitive space where advanced technoscience meets a network of pre-human or post-human sites and heterotopias.

[2] This article does not endorse a homogenizing idea and understanding of the thing called "theory" and neither does it assume that it is acceptable to bring together a diverse body of thought from the Cold War period or so until the present time under the generic term "theory". Following Rorty, Jonathan Culler explains how "works regarded as theory have effects beyond their original field" while the thing called "theory" is itself "a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define." (Culler 1997: 3) The fact that it is difficult to define or control "theory" within and without, that is to say in what it seems to say and in what it seems to be applied to, made it even more visible and recognizable rather than elusive and unidentifiable. The word "theory" is an act of branding and a stigma, rather than a proper name. The ineffable consensus around the meaning of "theory" deserves a separate study altogether. I have chosen to put this word between quotation marks throughout the essay in order to contest and reject the habit of thought which subscribes to this consensus. This punctuation is dropped in the last section of the essay where I use theory in its etymological sense of "seeing".

bring thinking to the desert and the desert to the act of thinking are intriguing in themselves and the project of building a critical and comprehensive inventory of their usage and deployment in philosophical and other discourses is beyond the scope of this article. By way of narrowing the focus of this paper, thinking *in* the desert and thinking *the* desert seeks to highlight an essential paradox in "theory": the immateriality of sound (its resonance) and the pragmatics of applicability (its relevance). The demand on "theory" to be applicable to tangible research and scholarship with quantifiable output reflects a persistent ignorance about and at times oblivion to an intellectual and cultural project of resistance structured around *vacuity* and which deploys this viral vacuity in various media forms from written texts to visual images. When in the late 70s, The Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" visceral cacophony comes back at the end of 2008 in the guise of an art exhibition at London's Transition Gallery[3], the thin line between hollow sound and hollow content seals off the prophetic irony in Jamie Reid's illustration of the Sex Pistols' single version of "Pretty Vacant": two buses, one with the destination label "Nowhere", the second apparently heading to "Boredom". The rage against "theory" and the hunger for "theory" proved to be not only boring but in a more disconcerting sense, the repercussions and implications of these extreme reactions have little or nothing to do with bored academics or their boring culture wars and petty skirmishes.

There is however, a great confusion as to the role of "theory" in relation to the ongoing process of restructuring plans in higher education. Robert Scholes summed up this confusion in his comparative reading of Guillory's *Cultural Capital* and Eagleton's *After Theory*. "For Guillory theory was an attempt to bring the humanities into alignment with an increasingly technobureaucratic culture. For Eagleton, on the other hand, theory was an attempt by the humanities to think their way out of a co-option by military and industrial structures that had already taken place." (Scholes 726) Both a collaborator and failed revolutionary, "theory" is a rhetorical

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[3] "Pretty Vacant": exhibition at Transition Gallery, London by Nina Ogden, Keara Stewart and Rachel Potts (Saturday 23rd August 2008 - Sunday 7th September 2008).

portmanteau of irreconcilable interpretations on a shared condition of crisis (often an imaginary one). The study of the rise and development of cultural studies in Britain from an intellectual movement to an institutional and disciplinary formation is a practical case study on the close connection between "theory" and the politics of higher education. The narrative of boom and bust in cultural studies and by analogy in area studies is in a wider sense indicative of the sealed fate of many other disciplines that drew heavily on "theoretical" discourses. Although this development is not quite obvious or has not yet materialized in every part of the world with the same nuances and intensities, I think that there is enough evidence to predict that a homogenized and global configuration of the idea of the university is coming into shape. One of the indicators on the pervasive nature of these radical mutations is reflected in a now popular and accepted version on the history of the thing called "theory". If the anti-theory movement has been growing stronger since the late 90s, the intensification of managerial trends and corporate configurations in secondary and higher education also seem to be relentless and irrevocable. This paper seeks to explain that these two developments pertain to an on-going project whose aim is nothing other than the effective neutralization of all sites of resistance and critical thinking in the "exposed, tendered citadel of the university." (Derrida 2002; 206)

1- Media studies in the wilderness of culture

In my first introductory seminar to media and cultural studies in the UK, I took my students on a short walk around campus and asked them to look for culture, take notes and come back to the seminar room with some definitions on the subject of their degree. This seemingly ridiculous and absurd exercise reflected a great behavioral consistency in the students' understanding of the word culture. The students started taking notes only when they left the building as if in the meantime they were walking in a cultural vacuum. Their attention was captured by posters and various shops around them. Then, they followed each other to the centre of campus, a big square named after

the university's first chancellor, Princess Alexandra. The university's official website describes the square as the "hub of university life... a natural amphitheatre [where] students could deliver theatrical performances or just meet together."[4] Since all walkways seem to converge from all directions towards this "natural" centre of campus, students did not feel any need to go further or explore the premises and vacant lots beyond the square.

Arrangements, forms, manifest and underlying structures seem to reflect some meaning when in reality and in the final analysis they are predicated on the availability of empty space, vacuous forms and absent contents where these supposed meanings take shape and become visible. Among a variety of ever growing challenges and dilemmas with which scholars of cultural studies may be faced, the most rending one perhaps is their intellectual awareness about the vacuity of the keyword in their subject of study[5]. Incredulity towards culture is not just a safeguard measure against the pitfalls of an evangelical belief in the exceptionalism or supremacy or even peculiarities of a given culture that we isolate as an area of specialism rewarded by a university degree. This incredulity is perhaps similar to the incredulity of theologians towards their subject of study in the manner of the Kafkaesque gatekeeper of the Law.

As far back as the late 1950s, Richard Hoggart thought that unlike American scholars who were doing American studies while "believing in America... a British scholar would never be heard saying, I believe in Britain."[6] The narrative of origins in British cultural studies from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* through the work of F.R. Leavis and beyond with the emergence of the first institutional formations of cultural studies departments, reflects an understated consensus that culture is an empty signifier in itself. It can only take shape in material and tangible media forms and in a variety of social

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[4] http://www.lancs.ac.uk/unihistory/growth/alexsquarelink.htm

[5] Williams conceded that there are times when he wished he "had never heard of the damned word. [He has] become more aware of its difficulties, not less, as [he has] gone on." (R. Williams 1979; 154).

[6] Cited in Leo Marx, "Believing in America. An Intellectual Project and a National Ideal", *Boston Review*, 28 (2003).

formations. To use a pun on McLuhan's famous phrase, the medium is culture and culture is nothing more or other than the medium. The long history of ideas around the meaning of culture and the scope of cultural studies is a history of paradigm shifts little concerned with the meaning of culture in and for itself. Debates in British cultural studies represent ongoing and continuous attempts at defining modes of communication, and at bringing to light a variety of misrecognized or marginalized media forms: visual and textual, technological and organizational, social and institutional[7]. In the preface to the second edition of *Criticism in the Wilderness*, Geoffrey Hartman endorses Matthew Arnold's prophesy at the end of "the function of Criticism". "Arnold identifies the critics, of whom he is one, with the generation that was destined to perish in the Sinai desert." But unlike Arnold who cast his eyes beyond the wilderness, Hartman concedes "what if… we are forerunners to ourselves? Perhaps it is better that the wilderness should be the Promised Land." (Hartman 15) The critic's awareness of the significance of vacuity in culture was an essential premise to formulate critical projects of resistance that speak to power although this awareness has at times been dismissed as an aesthetic position and a variant of romantic excess[8].

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[7] For Raymond Williams, culture has to be understood as a complex structure of feelings and the theory of culture as "the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life…. It is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns… that general cultural analysis is concerned." (R. Williams 1961; 63)

[8] In *The Destruction of Reason* (1962), Georg Lukács acknowledged the proximity of the Frankfurt School's critical project to an abysmal vacuity without, however, suggesting that this constitutes a critical position in its own right. He reiterates this same idea, verbatim, in his preface to the 1968 edition of *The Theory of the Novel* and remains dismissive of "a considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, [that] have taken up residence in… a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity… The daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered." (Lukacs 22) Similarly, Karl Popper formulated his "defense of science and rationality" against Adorno and Horkeimer's "trivialities in high-sounding language". He found Adorno's tragic and pitiful voice an expression of "philosophical pessimism without philosophical content" while he described Horkeimer's critical

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, new degree programs in media and cultural studies in Britain, followed the lead of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham and focused on a critical project structured around the dialectics of struggle and resistance in social and cultural formations. Without simply reducing the history of British cultural studies to the history of the Birmingham school, the closure of the department in the summer of 2002 marked a new era for area studies in Britain[9]. More recently, emerging programs in this field of study tend to distance themselves from counter-hegemonic discourses especially when they maintain their independence as separate research units dealing with subjects not covered by more established disciplines such as Sociology, English and Contemporary Arts. A more nuanced understanding of culture conflates an old version of cultural studies with cultural policy and public relations. Universities competing for funding and students promote programs in 'cultural industries' and 'material culture' and align themselves with the so called 'creative industries' as defined by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport[10]. In Britain, the departments of media and cultural studies attract overseas and home students who will ultimately work in the creative industries. This sector is endowed with a paramount strategic significance and as such the cleansing of media and cultural studies programs of any critical project of resistance and of any critical focus on struggle becomes imperative.

theory as "empty and devoid of content." (Popper 79) Popper, like Lukács failed to identify the critical power of vacuity in theory when it becomes "socially irrelevant." Popper believed that "the theory becomes vacuous and irresponsible if [the promise of a better future] is withdrawn, as it is by Adorno and Horkeimer" (Popper 80)

[9] The closure of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham was a managerial decision informed by the poor score (3A) of the department in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. This exercise defines the ranking of Universities in the UK and by implication it determines the amount of research funding they will receive over the next five years.

[10] The comprehensive map of activities *incorporated* within the Creative Industries' sector reflects the growing significance of the "knowledge economy" and the primacy of intangible commodities.

This process of cleansing is often conducted through coercive and intimidating practices[11]. When a student is introduced to various theories which uncover the distortion in the news or the deceit in adverts, what would be the fate of such knowledge in the care of a future news anchor or an employer in an advertising company? The research-teaching nexus is becoming increasingly untenable in a discipline like cultural studies because it poses serious ethical issues on various levels. Although Stuart Hall's unflinching commitment to the Gramscian "organic intellectual" is undermined by the prevalence of the corporate manager of knowledge and transferable skills, new "voices in the desert" can be heard every now and again preaching a hopeless attempt to resuscitate "cultural studies".[12]

[11] Recently, Professor Philip Esler (Chief executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council) warned academics that "research in a vacuum is of no benefit to anyone. That's why we are changing the rules for funding." The model scholar who can successfully bid for the AHRC's support and endorsement is a knowledge worker and knowledge manager integrated within a wider professional network way beyond the university. Esler thinks that researchers "should publish research of their work as widely as possible, looking to reach not only their academic peers but also public audiences and other potential users, be they policy makers, third-sector organizations, businesses and museums and where appropriate, they should exploit their results in order to secure social and economic return to the UK." (*The Guardian*, August 13, 2008) The AHRC's *Delivery Plan 2008- 2011*, lists "strategic research priorities" giving a clear hint to scholars as to where they should orient their research interests. The current trend is in favor of research on religion and society, museums and galleries, new media studies, migration and aging. Besides controlling scholarship through funding and various assessment practices: at the level of individual performance (appraisal, and staff development), departments and research units (Periodical quality Review) and at the level of the university (Research Assessment Exercise); a more comprehensive system of supervision and control will become possible with the use of "bibliometrics".

12 See Gary Hall and Claire Birchall's preface to *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* where they acknowledge that cultural studies "is a politically committed field" and that despite the assault on "theory" and the crisis in cultural studies, "historical and social movements of some kind... *do indeed continue to be possible or at least desirable.*" (3) Their conclusions, however, resonate with Negri and Hardt's "multitude". The discipline is capable of reinventing itself not as a school with a recognizable methodology but as a "mobile... fluid, flexible and spatially diffuse" (5) critical force.

2- Pedagogical literature in HE and the branding of "theory"

If in cultural studies "theory" was initially understood as a discourse that uncovers the vacuity in culture and the emptiness that inhabits various media forms, the creative industries turned this critical vacuity into a brand. The mere existence of a generic word that homogenizes a diverse body of thought as "theory" is the direct consequence of seemingly distinct and unrelated developments. Once again, we need to cast our gaze way beyond the confines of disciplinary boundaries to make sense of radical shifts within a given discipline. One of these far away realms is the sphere of pedagogical literature in higher education, a relatively new unwelcome guest within the walls of the university in Britain. The establishment of various centers for the enhancement of learning and teaching in HE and the integration of teacher training programs in staff development and in the processes of appointment and promotion determine *what* can and cannot be taught rather than simply dictate *how* a subject should be taught. There are at least two major principles which are currently promoted by the pedagogical literature on HE in Britain.

Constructive alignment (CA) is a highly regimented model applied in curriculum development and design whereby a course's aims are aligned with its content, modes of assessment and feedback, which are also aligned with other courses within a department, which all must be aligned with the degree specification document. The latter must be aligned with the discipline's benchmark statement generously provided and periodically updated by the Higher Education Academy. The navel of this regimented structure is a potential employer who must be supplied with a comprehensive, accurate and precise list of quantifiable skills of each and every apprentice. In this model where, as the song goes, "il est plus humiliant d'être suivi que suivant," the demand on "theory" to give evidence of its relevance and applicability in terms of quantifiable outputs fomented a profitable machinery of translation and publication. In the heydays of "theory" from the mid 80s to the mid 90s,

the proliferation of anthologies, textbooks, readers and dictionaries of keywords and key concepts turned "theory" into a brand[13]. This process of segmentation was paralleled by the proliferation of area studies around identity politics. Here, too, pedagogical literature has some efficient teaching- learning activities (TLAs) to help disoriented students and frustrated teachers. The idea of "threshold concepts" which consists in compartmentalizing and dissecting "theory" into a catalogue of themes, key concepts and keywords invites students to invest their 'emotional capital' and culture of 'affects' into the study and discussion of identity politics. The student centered approach to teaching and learning is another pedagogical principle aimed at meeting the challenges of the digital economy. As facilitator of knowledge and supervisor of the website or learning log of a given course, the tutor needs to develop managerial skills rather than just scholarly expertise.

"Theory" is a syndrome. It is "the meeting place or crossing point of manifestations issuing from very different origins and arising within variable contexts." (Deleuze 1989; 14) Between the chorus of unhappy students, the regimentation of curricula and the packaging and marketing of threshold concepts to feed the voracious emotional capital of the customers of HE, the thing called "theory" is framed by resonance and relevance in the literal sense of "sympathetic prolongation of sound" and the cold impatience of applicability. But hollow drums produce sound and applicability is not always applicable *of* as much as applicable *to*. The absence of content of what is applied can easily be concealed by the visible form to which it is applied. The relevance of "theory" does not attest to the actual existence of "theory".

3- The question of foreignness in "theory"

The recent resurrection of the culture wars debates of the 1980s signaled by the publication of the tome-like collection *Theory's Empire: an Anthology of Dissent* edited by Patai and Corral (2005) suggests that

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[13] See J. Williams, "Packaging Theory".

the existence of "theory" is important for 'traditionalist' defenders of national culture. The relevance of "theory" is here to sustain, through its 'foreignness' identified by the usual French and German names (Adorno, Barthes, Benjamin, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan), an idea of national culture grounded in a mystified appreciation of English literature and its canonical names. Institutionally in Britain, literature departments in older universities like Oxford and Cambridge, in alliance with their graduates in the Metropolitan media, may hope to uphold the ideological function of literature and their own hegemonic position through fetishizing 'Englit' in the face of "theory". The corpse of "theory", therefore, is used as ballast in an attempt to keep literature from losing its significance in the face of the immediate gratifications of popular and visual entertainments (the object of interest in media and cultural studies) and new Labour's emphasis on the vocational and practical usefulness of education. A similar development can be identified in the context of neo-conservative thought and the assault on "theory" in American studies.

If the history of "theory" has already exhausted its dialectical trajectory from resistance in the late 60s to institutionalization and anthologization throughout the 80s, to the "post-theory" phase in the 90s; it is the most recent phase that is rather indicative of its eternal strangeness or rather foreignness. As such, the *Anthology of Dissent*, unwittingly perhaps echoes current political and cultural trends that Julia Kristeva associates with the phenomenon of the invention of the stranger. The stranger we create, she says, has something to do with "the crises of religious and moral construction." The 'little England' resistance to theory in the name of Englit and Shakespeare is no doubt partly an effect of its ambivalent relation to continental Europe, itself an effect of its geographical situation as an island. "That England is populated will always come as a surprise; humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents. Islands are either from before or for after humankind." (Deleuze 2003; 10) Like desert islands themselves, the imagination that invents them is caught in a perpetual double movement: drifting away from then drifting towards the continent. "An island does not stop being deserted simply because it is inhabited… humans bring the desertedness to its perfection and

highest point" (Deleuze 2003; 10) because they make it "sacred" and a subject of faith. Deleuze thinks, in this respect, that when we fail to understand the myths we invented, we resort to literature.

Similarly, "theory" "is deserted more than it is a desert" (Deleuze 2003; 11) and the more inhabited it is, the more its desertedness rubs off on those who come to occupy it. Is this Anglo-American return to literature an attempt to understand the myth of "theory", a myth to which they brought their own desertedness, a myth that is deserted more than a desert? Antoine Compagnon reminds us in the beginning of *Le Démon de la théorie* that "les Francais n'ont pas la tête théorique." French literary studies remained for a long time indifferent to the resonance of Russian formalism and to the relevance of Anglo-American New Criticism. Ironically, the French contribution created a stir in the 60s and 70s, again according to Compagnon's diagnosis, then by 1980 it has already gone out of fashion. At this point, the demon of "theory" represented itself in at least two important aspects. The Anglo-American approach to "theory" before French "theory" has always been characterized by its tendency towards institutionalization and canonization of theoretical contents. It is something inherent to a specific approach to pedagogy. If the Anglo-American take on the question of "theory" does not hold any surprises, it is the French change of heart that worried Compagnon more than anything. "Avons-nous atteint assez d'ignorance et d'ennui pour désirer à nouveau de la théorie ?" (Compagnon 13) The persistent appeal on a fundamental return to literature, in the *Anthology of Dissent* is paralleled by a demand to purify literature and intellectual life from politics by cultivating the spirit of disinterestedness. In this respect, identity politics in general and post-colonial studies in particular are identified as the major failing and most dangerous offspring of "theory". It is a point at which "French allure blended with third-worldism" (Patai & Corral 315)

A careful study of the blacklisted names that are commonly associated with 'French theory' (as *chose française*) and any other theory (as *chose peu française*) reveal that most of the names belong to exiles. Kristeva identifies two irreconcilable categories of strangers: "ironistes et croyants." The ironists are those who are consummated by

and trapped between "that which no longer is and that which will never be: the disciples of the neutral, the partisans of the void" (Kristeva 1988: 21). The believers, on the other hand, are infinitely projected in the beyond, a land that is always promised but never reached. The Nietzsche of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, was he an 'ironist' first who then became a believer or was he a believer who became an ironist? In any case, he too, ended up in the desert in the company of its daughters. "Deserts grow, woe to him who harbors deserts".

4- *Nous sommes tous grecs*[14]

"Theory" invents its deserts; it does not just imagine or dream them. As such, "desert thought", or to borrow the title of Dominique Sigaud's novel, *l'hypothèse du désert* extends beyond the "discovery of an emptiness that invests everything" (Negri & Hardt, 380) to build on the Heideggerian definition of "The Thing" in terms of a void that "holds in twofold manner: taking and keeping." (Heidegger 171) Vacuity in "theory" is understood in the last part of the paper as emptiness that contains interpretations and readings rather than one that invests itself as such in various contents, disciplines and area studies. Perhaps, this is how "theory" continues to resonate with modern thought even when its critical vacuity as a project of resistance has been defeated through applicability. "The Desert is, one can see it, in the succession of my previous books," claims the 'fictional' author of Albert Memmi's 1977 novel *Le Désert.* Then he adds, that's "ce qu'en disent les historiens." In the beginning of this novel, Prince Joubair Ouali El- Mammi, dethroned and banished from his Kingdom "le Royaume-du-dedans" is about to leave the barren land of "sand and light" where he spent the first part of his exile to embark on a lifelong adventure in an attempt to regain his throne. And yet he remained "*un éternel étranger.*" (Memmi 17) Similarly, the loathed, resented and discredited thing called "theory" is a fiction that the historians will write about as that "eternal stranger" dethroned from "the kingdom- of- the Inside" not much sure about its

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[14] A pun on *Le Monde*'s editorial titled: "*Nous sommes tous Américains*" (September, 13, 2001)

legitimate birth. "Personne n'est jamais sûr de sa naissance" (Memmi, 18) says Prince Joubai. "There is no place for the man whose steps head toward his place of birth" (Jabès 166) writes Edmond Jabès in *The Book of Questions*. Prince Joubair's initial hatred and resentment towards his desert exile, his sense of paralysis and impotence gradually gave way to a sudden realization: "il faut faire la paix avec soi." (Memmi 19) The memory of having nothing and depending on no one accompanied the estranged Prince everywhere. This is what the prince calls "*la pensée du désert.*" (Memmi 19)

Theory is not just about thinking *in* the desert it is also, and essentially, the act of *thinking* the desert or *seeing* the desert for the word theory to me, personally, still evokes its radical root in Arabic. When stripped down to the three letter word that rhymes with *fa-a-la* (also a verb meaning to do or to act) used in Arabic grammar to identify the etymology of words, *natharia* becomes *na-tha-ra* which literally translates as "to see". This shared etymological kinship may prove that we're all Greeks after all and that we may not escape this Greek lineage even in "a desert within the desert."[15] Theory is not a body of thought; it is rather a way of thinking, a way of seeing, a looking glass onto something other than itself, a projection into another space beyond the site and position of the observer. The question that concerns theory and its resonance is perhaps the following: how far, how much can theory see? As Donna Haraway once realized while listening to "the promises of her monsters," theory's "optical features are set to produce not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build here." (Haraway 295) When we raise the issue about the relevance of theory, the limit and scope of its applicability, the question becomes even more radical: is one allowed to theorize, that is to say is one allowed to see, to make seen and to be seen bearing in mind the perils of *thinking the desert* and *thinking in the desert*, i.e., that "there's

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[15] Derrida describes a conceptual "desert within the desert" as a neutral space beyond theological discourses of revelation as well as philosophical discourses of metaphysics from Greek philosophy down to Heidegger and beyond. (Derrida 1995; 1-78)

no possible return if you have gone deep into the desert. Come from elsewhere, the elsewhere is your twin horizon." (Jabès 166)

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