

Will “getting theory” admit you into the big leagues?

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Abstract. This paper responds to Jane Tompkins’ statement “Not long ago... I urged a large roomful of women to ‘get theory’ because I thought that doing theory would admit us to the big leagues.” I propose that what is called “continental theory” provides some schemas which are helpful. One can perceive through them and try to fill out the details, such as a deconstructive schema.

Draft version: Version 2 (25th November 2022, examples in italics added).

I fear I shall have to pay the cost

Of my professional status being lost

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate some advice from Jane Tompkins:

Not long ago, as organizer of an MLA session entitled ‘Professional politics: women and the institution’, I urged a large roomful of women to ‘get theory’ because I thought that doing theory would admit us to the big leagues...
(2001: 2130)

I think what is called “theory” or “continental theory” provides some schemas which are helpful for improving one’s position. (This seems quite an obvious point; perhaps someone else has realized it.)

I read about deconstruction and learn of this situation where there is a contrast between two terms and what one term picks out is valued more while what the other term picks out is depicted as parasitic, and how deconstruction argues that the supposedly parasitic is essential (Derrida 1977):

Speech / writing

Assertion / pretence

Literal use / metaphorical use

Present object / inferred object

And then, aware of this pattern of contrasts repeatedly observed, having this general schema I suppose, I might observe an instance and try to do the deconstructive trick myself, filling out the details in my own way. That might lead me to an interesting argument that I would not have otherwise realized, improving my standing in some people's eyes. Recently I tried to do this between anthropology in exotic places and anthropology at home (2022).

I am not sure if presenting such courses of action will admit me into the big leagues, however, or you. I imagine a series of interactions, which are mostly loaded with wrongful prejudices I should warn readers; they are not really mine. The dialogues may be of use for revealing some of what a person from my position knows of certain continental theorists, perhaps a lot of what is known.

ME: I have a deconstruction. Will you admit me into the big leagues?

MICHÉLE LE DŒUF: The big leagues? No, no, no. The little leagues for you.

ME: But you write on Francis Bacon. Is he in the big leagues?

LE DŒUF: Of course.

ME: You stuck up French woman!

...

ME: I have a deconstruction. Will you admit me into the big leagues?

LUCE IRIGARAY: The big leagues? Don't you have problems with water?

ME: Water?

IGIRARAY: Too many problems with water.

ME: You evil Belgian witch!

...

ME: I have a deconstruction. Will you admit me into the big leagues?

HÉLÈNE CIXIOUS: The big leagues? Is it a proper deconstruction?

ME: What are you so fussy about proper for? Are you even a proper French theorist?

...

MILAN KUNDERA: No, not the big leagues.

ME: But I have written many imitations of you.

MILAN KUNDERA: There are imitators of my novels in every writing club in the world.

ME: You racist misogynist!

References

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