

The Academic Writing Centre and the
Academic Communication Centre warmly
welcome you to the
IOE Academic Writing Seminar Series

#IOEWritingSeminar



Speaker: Julia Molinari

Chair: Jackie Tuck

Thursday 25 January, 2024

Critical realism and academic writing: on why theory matters for practice

#IOEWritingSeminar





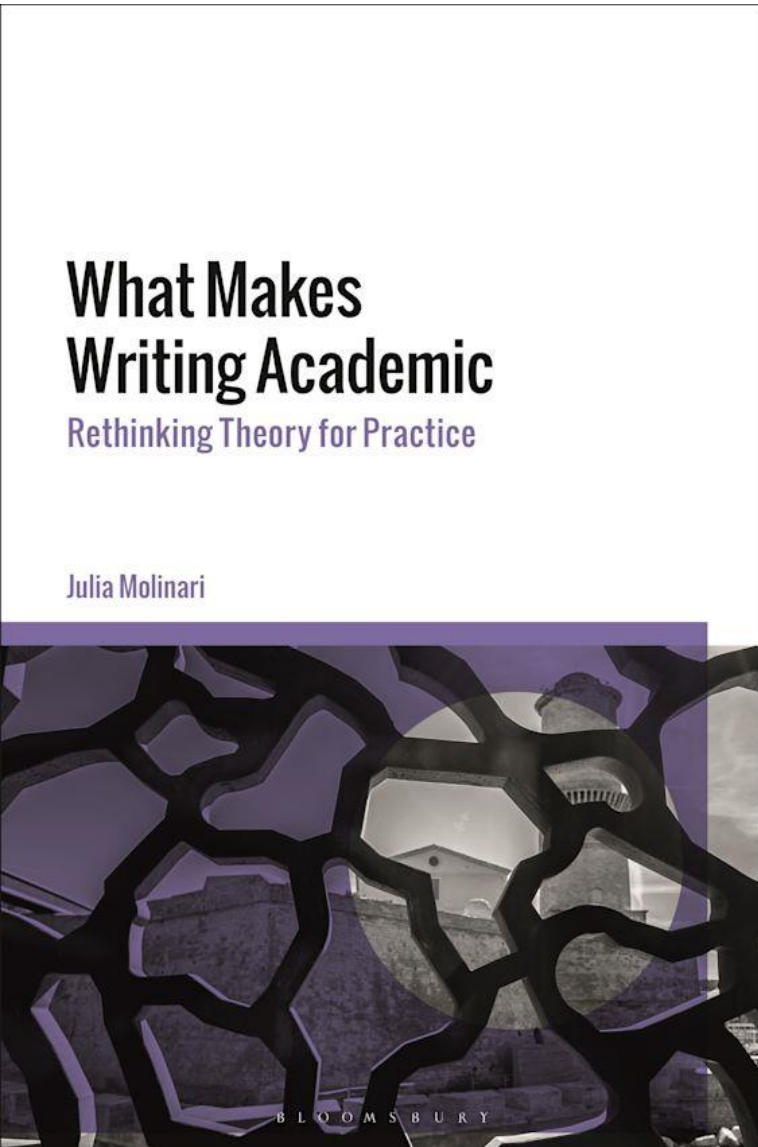
Overview

- Some context
- What theory is and why it matters
- CR theory and why it matters to academic writing
- Practicalities: CR as an ‘underlabourer’

Some context

Why does academic
writing even matter?

Some context



Because if higher education is to be transformative, ie able to change our knowledge of reality in the interests of social justice, then academic writing needs to be educative.

To be educative means creating the conditions for writers to be knowledgeable.

A critical realist writing pedagogy advocates that writers must work retroductively from knowledge of the world (i.e. knowledge of the topics they are interested in) to making decisions about how best to *re-present* that knowledge in their texts

p. 116



Some more context

1. Expressivist theory and voluntarism: too individualistic, subjective transitive knowledge
2. Cognitive rhetoric and empirical positivism: too mechanistic, deterministic (input-output), sequential, form over substance
3. Socio-constructivist rhetoric and super-idealism: too relativist, incommensurable, incorrigible

Critical Realism and
Composition Theory

Donald Judd

Some more context

Critical Realism and
Composition Theory

Donald Judd

Routledge Studies in Critical Realism

1. we need knowledge to further human emancipation: an IELTS essay does not do this
2. Knowledge is interdisciplinary and should always be about stratified social reality: not individual opinion, a cognitive process, or a relative stance, but about the deep structures that give rise to the social phenomena being written about (e.g. capitalism, poverty, climate injustice, colonialism, racism)
3. Knowledge is corrigible: through self-reflexivity and an ongoing quest to understand why things are the way they are, we can correct mistaken beliefs. Writing pedagogy should be educative in this respect, i.e. it should lead students away from mistaken beliefs and provide them with authentic and meaningful tasks to ensure they are always writing from a position of knowledge.

What is theory?

- Wikipedia: a rational type of abstract thinking about a phenomenon
- Andrew Sayer: a conceptualisation, a way of thinking about something in order to explain it (1992, p. 50)
- Pierre Bourdieu: a programme of perception that severs adherence to the world of common sense (1992, p. 128-129)
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: a way of ensuring that signifiers are not left to look after themselves, the word 'representation' being a case in point (Loaiza and Spivak, 1985, p. 15)
- Edward Said: 'vigilant' knowledge, the parent of practice (Said, 1991, pp. 128-132)



Theory can be ‘offensive’ but:

- we need it to block the reproduction of ‘the bleeding obvious’, of banality, and thereby, hopefully, open new possibilities for thinking and doing;
- theory’s capacity to offend is also its power to unsettle, to interrupt – to open up static fields of habit and practice;
- theory stops us from forgetting that the world is not laid out in plain view before our eyes or that things ‘speak for themselves’;
- it can bring about change.

MacLure, 2010

Theory is also ‘offensive’ because:

... in virtue of ‘blocking the reproduction of the bleeding obvious’, it becomes a political act.

“Politics begins with the denunciation of [a] tacit contract of adherence to the established order [...] political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world” (Bourdieu, 1992, pp. 127-128)

“[...] politics [are] practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human co-existence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political [which is antagonistic]” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9)

NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR ENGLISH
FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Social Theory for English for Academic Purposes

Foundations and
Perspectives

Edited by
Alex Ding
Michelle Evans

Why theory matters

Genre Theory – focus on text

AcLits – focus on *theorising* the **writer** and ethics of process

SFL – focus on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual

LCT – focus on knowers and knowledge

SR – focus on knowledge

CR – focus on **agencies**, structures, and change

Bourdieu – focus on field, capital, and power

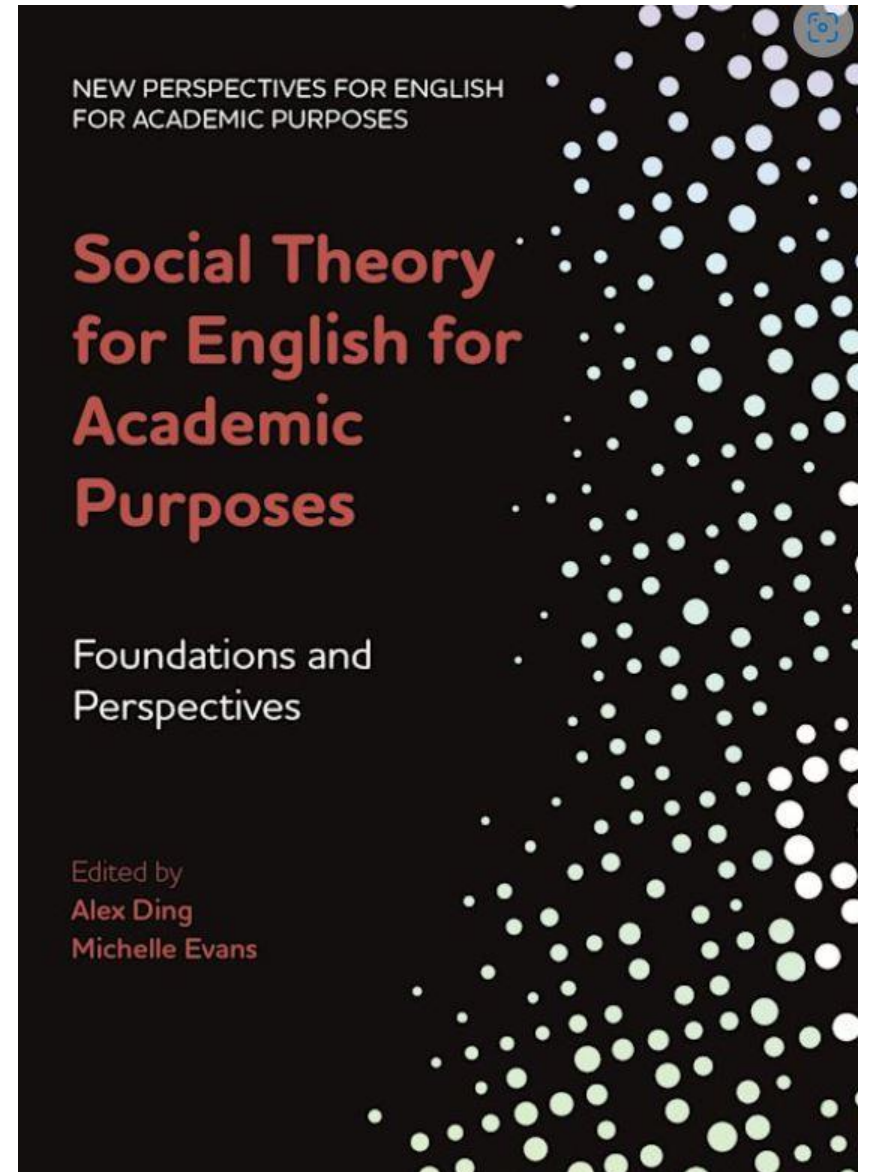
Ethnography – focus on creative non-fiction as method

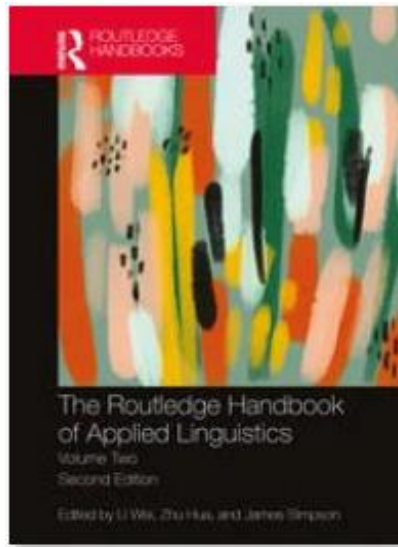
Feminism – focus on reflective and reflexive writing

Academic Literacies: theorising language as a social practice, Jackie Tuck, Chapter 2

A critical and social practice perspective on writing and reading in the academy [...] series of influences, debates, overlaps (p.39)

A disposition to questioning rather than something which provides 'answers' (p. 40)





Chapter

Critical discourse analysis, critical discourse studies, and critical applied linguistics

By Karin Zotzmann, John P. O'Regan

Book [The Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics](#)

The possibility of rationally grounded truth and a commitment to human emancipation
Ch 5, p. 4

Edition	2nd Edition
First Published	2023
Imprint	Routledge
Pages	11
eBook ISBN	9781003082637

What is Critical Realism?

- a scientific and social theory about the nature of reality (Realism)
- reality includes language but is not reduced to it: there is a reality to which language and other semiotic systems refer (reality is not constructed by our language but our choice of language does reflect how we view/experience reality)
- reality is *independent* of our experiences even though we experience reality *through* subjective experiences (racism is real)
- we make reasonable, valid, and corrigible judgements based on *the most likely* explanations (interdisciplinarity and historiography)
- deep explanations reveal causes and powers at the structural level, knowledge of which affords socially just change (Critical)

- a macro-theory: it seeks to explain *complex* phenomena
- a compatibilist theory: it accommodates relativism and foundationalism by focusing on the structures and mechanisms that explain the emergence of phenomena. CR is concerned with the 'the generative complexes at work' (Bhaskar RTS, p. 48)
- an open and stratified approach to reality (or ontology, what there is):
 - REAL – structural & intransitive (objective but corrigible)
 - ACTUAL – manifest & transitive (possibilities)
 - EMPIRICAL – subjective & transitive (relative but corrigible)
- an interdisciplinary theory: it looks for 'transfactuals' (i.e., multiple explanatory causes, including history and absences/omissions)
- a non-reductive, non-deterministic but emergent theory: novelty is possible
- a critical theory: it seeks change, emancipation, justice



Why CR theory matters for understanding academic writing practices

What must **academia** be like for our theories and practices of **academic writing** to be fallible, correct, corrigible, and reasonably better than others?

A critically realist approach:

- Historiography & interdisciplinarity: to highlight contingency and where change is possible
- academic writing as an ‘open and stratified system’
- critical realism as its ‘underlabourer’

Several critical answers depending on what you think of academia:

... formal, objective, linear, social, knowledge-oriented, critical, diverse, inclusive, humble, ideological, just – a **university** and a **pluriversity** ...



Historiography and interdisciplinarity afford criticality

Academic writing 'in the wild' is diverse (Reality/fact)

- A.D. Carson; HipHop thesis on Sociology and History - extreme
- Nick Sousanis: Comics thesis on Education and Science - extreme
- Piper Harron: multi audience thesis on Mathematics - extreme
- Laurel Richardson: Poetry in Sociology and Feminism - unacceptable
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Essays on Feminism & Critical Theory - bad
- Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction on Linguistics and Philosophy - charlatan
- Ludwig Wittgenstein: aphorisms on Philosophy & Language – exception
- Galileo Galilei Science: Dialogues on heliocentrism - heretic

Why are some forms privileged over others? On whose practical, historical, theoretical, political, ideological, commercial watch is writing yoked into a blinkered binary of 'good' or 'bad', spawning belligerent metaphors (cf. 'literacy wars')? (Molinari 2022, Ch. 2 & 4) (Criticality)

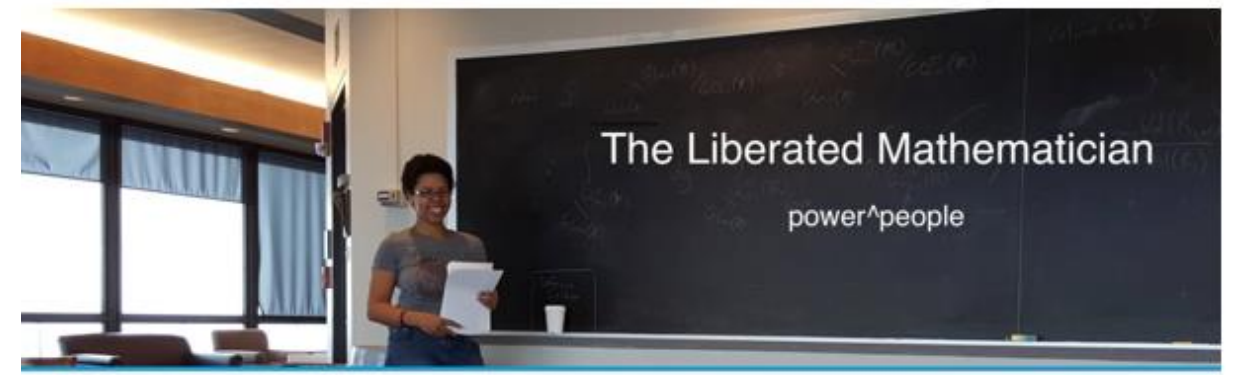
**What Makes
Writing Academic**
Rethinking Theory for Practice

Julia Molinari





on, P. (2016). *The equidistribution of lattice shapes of rings of integers in quintic number fields: An artist's rendering*, PhD, Princeton University





Historiography and interdisciplinarity afford criticality

The Uses of Argument

Stephen E. Toulmin

Updated Edition

CAMBRIDGE

On whose watch was the epistemic virtue/vice of 'objectivity' hailed as the hallmark of good academic writing when other EVs are available, such as 'trained judgement' and 'subjectivity' (aka the gaze from somewhere)?

On whose watch were 'logical' and 'linear' arrogated to describe 'good' academic writing when other classifiers are available, eg 'substantive', truthful, recursive, just?

Lorraine Daston
Peter Galison

Objectivity

ZONE BOOKS



Historiography and interdisciplinarity afford criticality

The Scientist's Guide to Writing

How to Write More Easily
and Effectively throughout
Your Scientific Career

Second Edition |



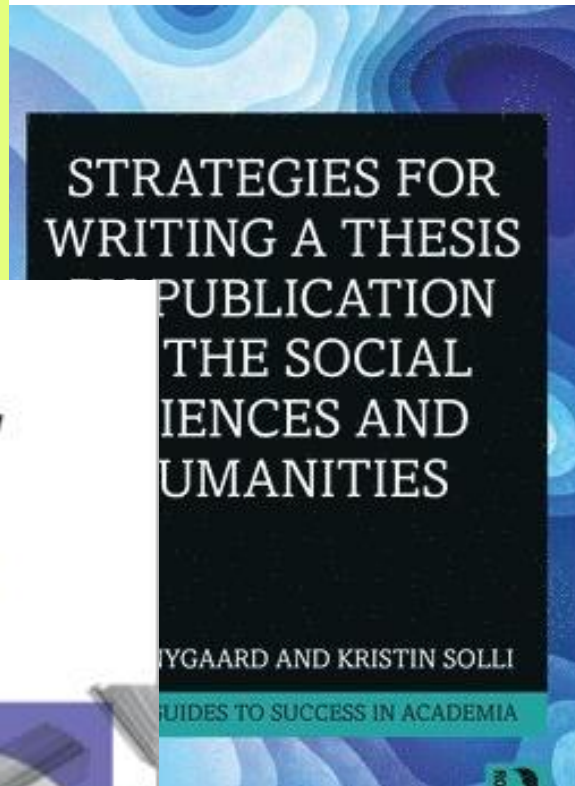
Stephen B. Heard

Legions of undergraduates have been told that scientists should write in the passive voice (and never, ever, write “I”). This advice is wrong. The passive *is* prevalent in the literature – but it hasn’t always been, and the tide is shifting back towards the active (Heard, 2022, p. 174)

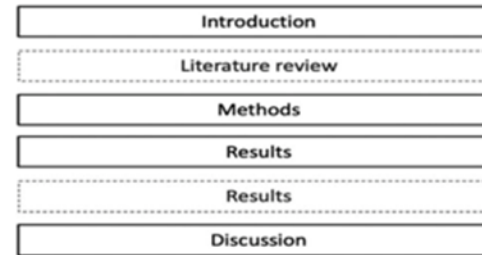
Historiography and interdisciplinarity afford criticality



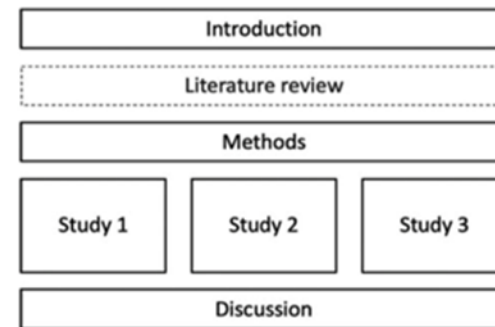
Re-imagining Doctoral Writing



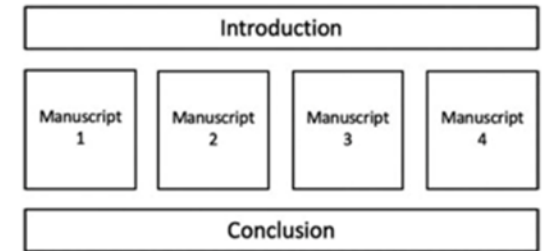
Traditional-simple macrostructure



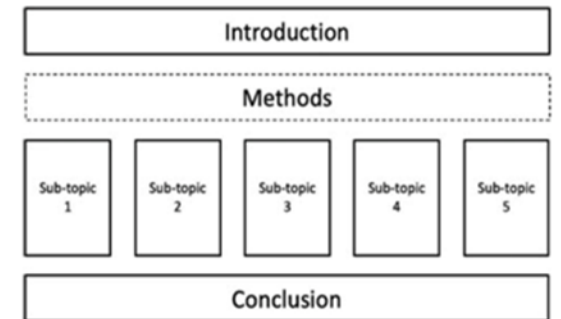
Traditional-complex macrostructure



PhD by publication macrostructure



Topic-based macrostructure



(Anderson, Saunders & Alexander, 2021b)



Academic writing as re-presentation (*Darstellung*)

METHOD IN
**SOCIAL
SCIENCE**

2nd EDITION

A REALIST
APPROACH

ANDREW SAYER

academic knowledge takes [a] textual form, which textual form may have a largely hidden influence on how we *re-present* knowledge and how it is read (Sayer, 2000, p. 258)

words are 'placeholders', 'proxies' for reality, they *defer* and *re-present* reality, they are not copies or portraits of reality in the sense that 'represent' (*vertreten*) suggests (Loaiza and Spivak, pp. 16-20).

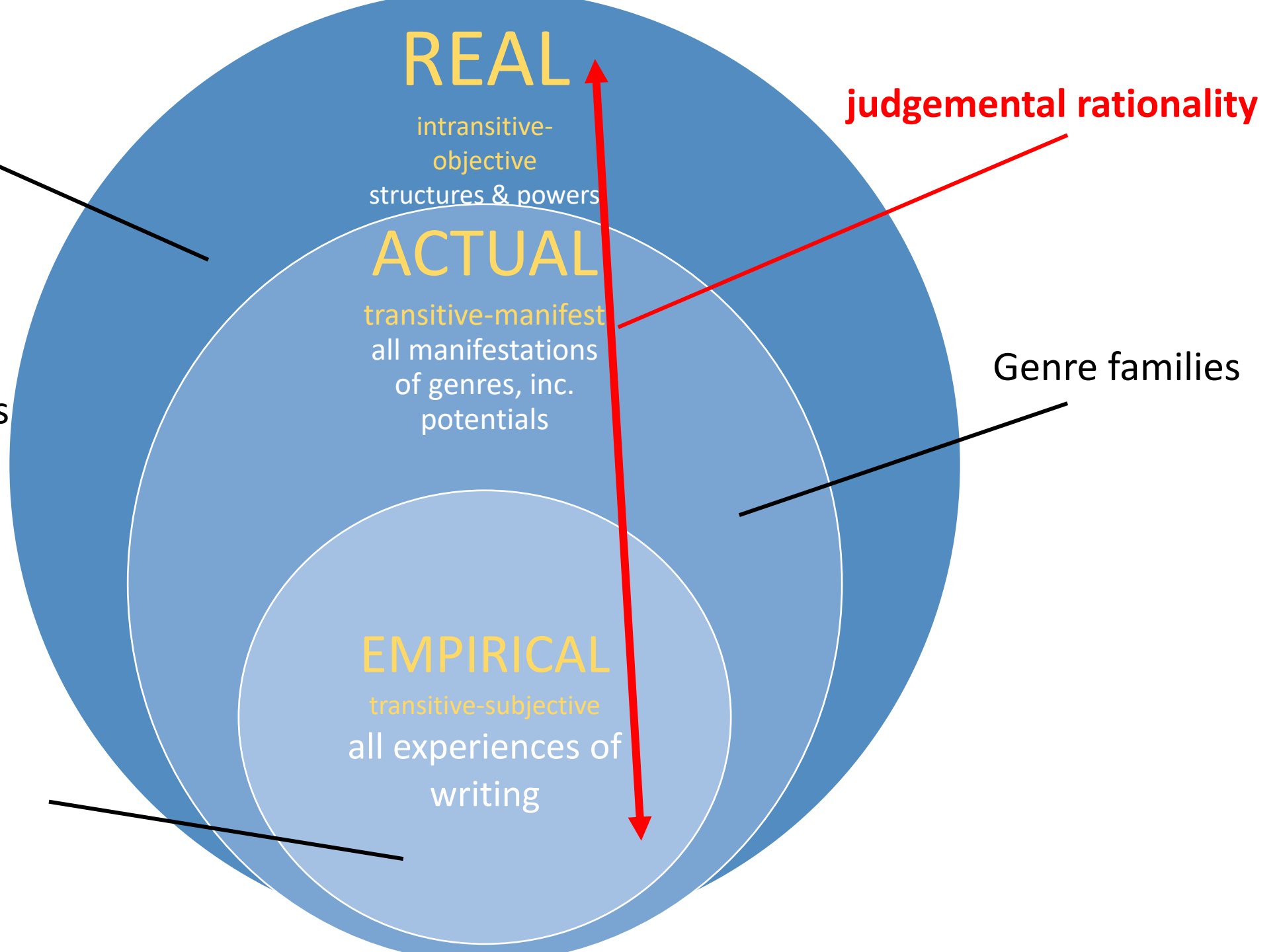
CAN
THE
SUBALTERN
SPEAK?

Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza
/
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Two Works

social & academic practices; epistemic virtues; history; threshold concepts; multidisciplinary; standards of excellence and conventions; readers

writers; language; skills; methods of enquiry; situated knowledge; multidisciplinary

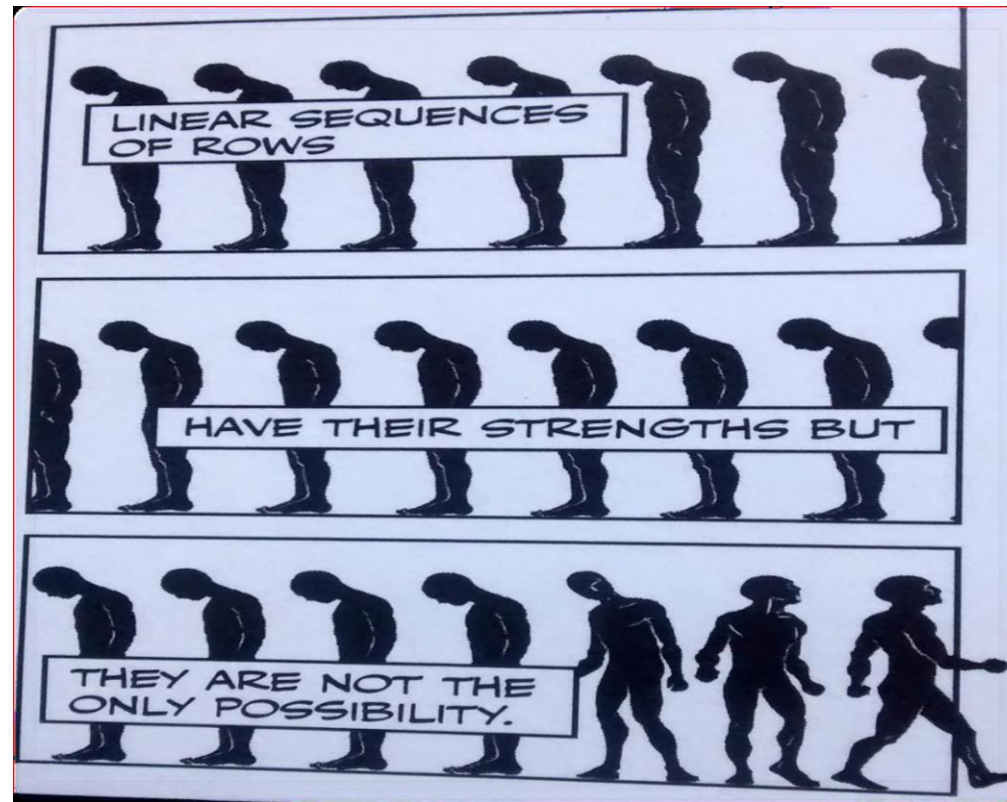




Practicalities: critical Realism as an ‘underlabourer’

- Retroduction: *What must higher education be like for writing to be academic?*
- Abduction: inference to the most likely explanation includes transfactuals (interdisciplinarity and history)
- Knowledge of the REAL and the EMPIRICAL affords the emergence of the ACTUAL
- Rational judgment rather epistemic relativism to justify our preferences
- Humility to stand corrected: knowledge is corrigible
- Reduce the risk of stymieing knowledge

Concluding remarks



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