

Crafting cultural theory at the Gates of Heaven

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In this lecture, I ask what it means to craft cultural theories that are ‘site-specific’ and ‘localist’, as opposed to ‘imported’ or ‘parachuted’. I will consider the merits of theory building through thick description, and ways to traffic theory that do not break faith with the provincial texture of a place. In essence, I want to know what happens to academic norms and standards when we try to find ways of writing that *really* value the streets of *that* town (the way it smells... and those muted colours... in just that light... and how people speak of it in soft voices). To give these questions some traction, I will talk about one exercise in place-portraiture that has been preoccupying me of late. The audience will join me on a site-visit: to a pet cemetery like no other, and its striking setting on the edge of a Scottish seaside village. Faced with 1001 human tales of animal loss, I will describe doing discovery and exploration in a miniaturised landscape dedicated to faithful companions: touring the cemetery’s paths and plots; studying pet paraphernalia and commemorative gravestones; striking up conversation with grieving owners, old and new; listening to stories of afterlives and underworlds. “How appropriate is it to trade in cultural theory”, I ask, “when the cemetery already seems to contain the truths of life and death?”