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The borders of theory: Towards an artful ontology of knowing in qualitative research

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Abstract

This article considers the ontology of theory as a shaping phenomenon in qualitative research by opening up its intersection with artistic dimensions of knowing and knowledge. We argue that the plurality of practices and perspectives for research hinges on what theory is understood to be. Thus, rather than approaching theory as something predefined, we draw on conceptualizations of the experience of art to articulate the being of theory as an aesthetic renewal of a shared human movement of becoming. We then illuminate theory's potential as a multidimensional artful being by engaging with a subset of photographs of street art collected in Colombia.

Keywords

Theory, theorizing, art, aesthetics, ontology, qualitative research

El arte sirve para no morirnos de realidad

~ Anonymous graffiti in Bogotá, Colombia¹

The words “pienso luego desaparezo” were once rudimentarily written on a wall in Bogotá, Colombia. It would be hard to remember the wall or even the part of the city where the words were written. The phrase has now likely been erased by time and the inevitable weathering of a constantly changing city. Yet, the memory of the words persists,

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evoking renewed meanings. To those unfamiliar with Bogotá, perhaps the most obvious meaning the phrase elicits is an ironic deconstruction of the famous proposition attributed to Descartes: "cogito, ergo sum." To those familiar with the political and war-ridden reality of Colombia, the words may evoke the painful consequences that thinking or raising one's voice may have in a context of violence and oppression; the reality of the many people who have been made to disappear due to the perceived dangers of non-conforming knowing in the realm of power and politics.

In this article, the words "I think, therefore I disappear" serve to indicate the uncertainties and contradictions entangled in what it means to know and to represent knowing, as well as the implications this may have for qualitative research. The phrase signals an awareness of the ways thinking can feel like disappearing when faced with a prevalence of hegemonic knowledges and practices. As a field, qualitative research continues to be positioned as predominantly framed by Western and North American philosophical perspectives (Brinkmann et al., 2014), even when the research focuses on people who do not belong to that group or have been marginalized and oppressed by it (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Smith, 2021). It would be naïve to attribute the prevalence of European and North American traditions in research practices to a lack of knowledges from other contexts that could support research and impart understandings of the social world. This paradoxical reality signals a fundamentally unsettled question about how we may otherwise approach research to invite a broader range of knowledges and ways of knowing.

As research, qualitative inquiry has necessarily been implicated in the centuries-old debate about what counts as knowledge and how to attain it, while contending with an onslaught of narrow policies and practices seeking to legislate the specifications of legitimate research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Although rooted in hegemonic scholarly structures, at its core qualitative research manifests a human impetus to theorize and to make meaning of complex experiences (see hooks, 1991). Across its history, the field has been enriched by a plurality of perspectives and approaches that have striven for aesthetically informed practices to capture complex and often ineffable realities (Clifford, 1986; Eisner, 1991; Richardson, 1990). The symbiotic relationship between research practice and theorizing then illustrates how the field is embroiled in an aesthetic struggle that contends with forms of representation that are themselves legislated through narrow interpretations of knowledge (Richardson, 1990; Smith, 2021).

Qualitative research continues to diversify through aesthetic pursuits and forms of expression, inviting an increasingly broader range of knowledges, identities, and lived experiences (see Knowles and Cole, 2008; Smith, 2021). The aim of this article is to foreground the inherent complexity of theory as a shaping phenomenon in qualitative research through its ontology as a human endeavor that unfolds through aesthetic experiencing. To this end, we discuss some of the ways theory has been situated in the context of qualitative research and argue for the importance of understanding the dimensions through which it manifests. We then foreground how the ontology of theory, like that of art, enacts a capacity to enhance understanding on matters of importance without ever exhausting its potential meaning. In doing so, we position theory as an artful being that restores the inherently aesthetic dimensions of knowing. To foreground the

intricate workings of these dimensions, we draw on a subset of images of street art taken in 2019 in Bogotá, Colombia. To close, we discuss the potential for research to attend to the artful dimensions of theory; opening up its being to knowledge, practices, and identities currently not at the center of scholarly efforts.

Theory

Perhaps because of its complexity, theory in qualitative research is often explained through metaphors. Among others, models, roadmaps, lenses, or worldviews, are used to illustrate how theory functions, and is expected to function, in contexts of research. The notion of theory as a model or framework generally serves to indicate the connections among components that make up a phenomenon, thus delineating a plan or set of relations. Maxwell and Chmiel (2014) describe theory as "a conceptual model or understanding of some phenomenon, one that not only describes, but explains ... *why* the phenomenon is the way it is" (p. 30). LeCompte and Preissle (1993) write that "theories are statements about how things are connected" (p. 118). Notions of road maps or guides also point to the relationality ingrained in theory. When theory is understood as a map, it indicates the overall topological landscape of the constellation of a phenomenon and how it can be read from multiple directions. It signals how theory can support researchers "to see as connected what was unconnected before" (Graue and Walsh, 1998: 25). What the metaphors of a model or a map reflect is that theory is often called on to function as a guide to understand phenomena.

The metaphor of theory as a lens indicates that theory fundamentally mediates knowledge and knowing. In qualitative research texts, theory as a lens is commonly explained as one's paradigmatic orientation; the set of ontological commitments and epistemological procedures embedded in the assumptions and choices made by research communities (Crotty, 1998; Prasad, 2018). Similarly to how a lens alters the transmission of light, a worldview is generally understood to inform "the way in which scholars, teachers and thinkers articulate their sense of life around them, make sense of and order the universe" (Dillard, 2006: 61). The notion of theory as a worldview or a lens then signals that any approach a researcher takes is fundamentally shaped by theory. Yet, as much as theory may be understood as a lens it is not exactly like a pair of glasses researchers can simply pick up and put on to see the world a certain way.

Metaphors of theory denote its complexity and permeating presence in all aspects of qualitative research. Theory informs how research communities design data collection procedures, carry out analysis, frame phenomena, and approach their work. Accordingly, methodology is commonly understood as a theoretically grounded set of procedures (Schensul, 2008) that bring into visibility the dynamic relationship between theory and its application. Yet, the ontological entanglement of theory and methodology can create confusions and has often led to the establishment of organizing categories. Crotty (1998), for example, distinguishes between methods, methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and epistemologies. There is no agreement, however, among qualitative scholars on what comprises the items belonging to each category, nor in the categories themselves. It is not uncommon then to find approaches such as ethnography or participant action research

listed as epistemological stances in one text (e.g. Mason, 2018) and as methodologies in another (e.g. Tracy, 2020).

The impetus to categorize has also contributed to the practice of creating charts that define and describe the most commonly taught research paradigms (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Sipe and Constable, 1996). While there are variations to these charts and the authors themselves caution that these categories are neither settled nor stable, the habitual practice is to depict the paradigms of positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, critical traditions, and poststructuralism. These forms of representation, however, inadvertently reify understandings of what theory is, in that they delimit theory's essential features shaping the criteria upon which one theory can be distinguished and compared to another (see Schaffter et al., 2010). Dillard (2006) argues that the choices and presentation of these ruling paradigmatic perspectives reproduce "a traditionally Western and European worldview that, by its nature, must categorize and separate in order to deem one paradigm good and the other bad" (p. 62). The compulsion to categorize, then, can make it easy to forget that the theories researchers engage with are themselves social constructions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Overall, efforts to clarify and categorize the various components of research parallel an intent to make research accessible to an interdisciplinary audience. Accordingly, researchers also identify and articulate strategies to account for the soundness of their work in its inherent difference (Freeman et al., 2007). A prominent practice has been for researchers to make visible their procedures or, "show their workings" (Holliday, 2016: 44), while also making explicit the theoretical traditions shaping these processes (Freeman et al., 2007). In these contexts, theories are often called upon to articulate and represent the ontological and ethical stances of researchers and explicate the connections made between methodological choices and research findings. Yet, these practices are themselves traces of a hegemony of knowledge that has been difficult for qualitative research as a field to shake off (Pascale, 2010).

Calls for transparency, preconceived understandings, and categorical arrangements of theory easily introduce a sense of cohesiveness that is not inherent to theory itself, nor to the collective of qualitative researchers. Moreover, norms for research practice can often further problematic assumptions such as the belief that any experience can be comprehensively represented or that the evidence from which representations are derived can be commonly understood among individuals or communities. Approaching theory procedurally limits what is recognized as theory and theorizing, negating alternative manifestations and representations. In its current forms and uses then, theory easily forgets itself of its ontology; of the being of theory as a living becoming of researchers' own humanities and communities. Theory is a multifaceted being that eludes the bounds of a cohesive or preestablished corpus. It is itself inevitably created through researchers' experiences, pursuits, and beings.

Theorizing occurs in a heterogeneous weaving that diversifies unique contexts, purposes, experiences, and identities. Theories, then, are symbiotically constituted and reconstituted by processes that are integrally contextual, historical, and relational. Theories are "*human constructions*" (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993: 120), and "are constantly in the process of being created and passed on by communities of practice" (Prasad, 2018: 6).

Due to being social constructions, theories are inherently caught up in webs of power that shape and are shaped by dominant practices. Theorizing can be dismissed when it does not follow the hegemonic "Western form of abstract logic" (Christian, 1988: 68); yet it necessarily extends beyond any singular concept or perspective due to the creativity and complexity of a pluralized existence. Theorizing is unavoidable. It is already happening in everyday living, being, and doing. Attending to the ontology of theory, to its artful movement as an inevitable human impetus, can renew and unbound the researcher's endeavor to know as an aesthetic pursuit. Beyond the work of defining what is legitimate theory and theorizing through hegemonic practices, art and aesthetics invite forms and representations that manifest the human struggle toward meaning and allow for its shared experience.

Artful knowing

Philosophical perspectives predominantly handed down by Western and North American scholars tend to equate theorizing with a rational and logical mode of argumentation supported by adequate and legitimate sources (Dillard, 2006). The prevalence of dominant forms of expression that stand for theory, such as propositional or academic writing, has been brought into question as scholars have argued for the importance of images and the arts in social research. A classic example is Arnheim's (1969) book, *Visual Thinking*, where he challenges the separation of words from images and thought from the senses. Works, such as Anzaldúa's (1999) aesthetic tapestry of felt, spiritual, and embodied words, poems, dreamscapes, and images, erase the separation of mediums and languages as a necessary step in capturing the experience of being. More recently, the book *Unflattening* by Sousanis (2015) foregrounds the importance of images in the presentation of complex ideas, articulating how the visual can be a form of expression that fosters fruitful dimensions through which to theorize.

Underlining the potential contribution of the visual as a form of knowing is the notion that art can materialize ideas or phenomena (Davey, 2013; Eisner, 2008; Knowles and Cole, 2008; Rolling, 2016) and that representation is itself knowing (Davey, 2013; Gadamer, 1989). As Rolling (2016) explains: "Just as a system for interpretation may constitute a work of art, it likewise constitutes a strategy for mediating an initial understanding of an encounter or experience with a natural material, human subject, event, or phenomenon" (p. 5). Thus, art blurs the borders of knowing and knowledge pushing us to renew the dynamic, multifaceted mode of being of theory.

In their introduction to *The Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, Knowles and Cole (2008) delineate the possible roles the arts can play in the social sciences and qualitative research. Though the handbook prioritizes understanding how art can be used as a methodology for inquiry, the section on "knowing" addresses ways in which art, knowledge, and knowing are tied to each other through an impetus to theorize and give meaning to the experiences of people. In one of the chapters in this section, Eisner (2008) outlines the contribution of the arts to knowing through four different processes: addressing nuances, generating empathy, disrupting our worldviews to allow us to see anew, and evoking our capacity to experience in relation to our lived experiences. According to

Eisner, these processes "contribute to the enlargement of human understanding" (p. 11) and are at the core of why art and theory share an ontological structure.

Davey (2013) theorizes how art can both create and represent knowledge, thereby offering a substantial path to think about how the mode of being of art is both knowing and the creation of knowledge. Davey argues that the work of art has the capacity to bring us into a relational network of meaning that furthers our understandings by evoking traditions beyond what is immediately presented. Much like theory then, the mode of being of art illuminates the relationality embedded in the phenomena captured in its movement. As Davey explains: "All artistically communicated meaning involves the material particularization of something more general or universal. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that such analysis confirms the prior existence of the separate elements of such experience" (p. 36). Thus, "the power of art," Davey argues,

does not reside in its ability to displace one field of meaning with another but in its capacity to effect a transformative engagement, that is, enabling us to grasp a familiar field of meaning in unfamiliar ways. This is not to be grasped as an artwork translating commonplace fields of meaning into its terms but rather as its language transfiguring the ordinary so that we come to see it as extraordinary. (p. 12)

Art, then, can present itself as an experience of knowing that may help us interpret and find meanings that transverse experiences and contexts. The potential mode of being of art embodied in the image functions as a medium through which multiple realities become noticeable to us, and as such, discernable, learnable, understandable, and knowable. Art's interpretive contributions, then, become again and again in this movement of understanding. It does this by continuously reworking old concerns, questions, and topics in new, sometimes unrecognizable or unappreciated forms, because these remain contemporaneous to our time (Gadamer, 2006).

Davey (2013) explains the experience of art as one of excess of meaning. This excess is paradoxical in that it presents us with an open potential for creating new truths about the world while simultaneously revealing the limits of this understanding. Davey (2013) notes: "Though final or complete knowledge of a subject-matter or aesthetic idea is impossible, the possibility of further knowledge is not" (p. 112). Art's value is that it does not represent a finished truth, but works through each encounter building "bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it originated" (Gadamer, 2006: 60). In this way, the mode of being of art, like that of theory, is its capacity for new disclosures; disclosures that are made evident when we open ourselves up to what they have to teach us. It is in this space of encounter where "meaning presents itself" (Davey, 2013: 117) that art can be said to be theory.

Street art as theory

To contextually consider some of the ideas in the previous sections, we now turn to street art from Bogotá (Colombia). We explore how and why alternative and artful manifestations of knowing have the potential to be theory and help researchers engage with



Figure 1. Photograph of street art.

theorizing in its plurality. Our inquiry began when Cristina intuited that street art represented profound aspects of her own experience, and thus expressed a way she had learned to make sense of her worlds. During her doctoral studies, she came across an old photograph (see [Figure 1](#)) of street art which juxtaposed the image of an indigenous woman to the side of a colonial house that in turn partially covered mountains so characteristic to Bogotá, where she grew up. The image framed the words "nuestro norte es el sur" [our north is the south] and foregrounded contradictory symbols of peace and war. For Cristina, the image presented itself as a strange moment of recognition, not only of her own self, but of the way she was making sense of theory and the research process.

The excess of meaning that Cristina found in the image of the street art manifested a knowing that she did not perceive to be fully reflected in the theories that she was learning about and that she understood as most common in qualitative research. Over time, this tension rippled into questions about the ontology of theory and the possibility that an image—such as the one in [Figure 1](#)—had the ability to be theory. As she was making sense of the ways that theorizing was central to qualitative research and shaped its practices, the possibility for such an image to be theory seemed to shine a new light into what theory could be and how it was potentially obscured by the way theory is often understood in research. If images and other modes of representation could be theory, what other ways of knowing and being could be invited and centered into the practice of qualitative research?

Amongst many meanings, the tangible manifestation of the north being the south seemed to give new dimensions to the idea that research is not only a process that advances through and toward language and abstraction as forms of theorizing, but that the material and embodied facets of the social world were also fruitful dimensions to theorize.

It was also a recognition that in spite of a diversity of practices, qualitative research remains a space where certain modes of representation are privileged over others. Thus, our intention in this section is not to translate the knowledge in images of street art into written words that can be used as theory, nor is it to propose a methodological path for the way images can be used as theory in the practice of qualitative research. Our aim is to draw on different images of street art to elucidate why we see street art as providing a compelling case for the ways we may re-imagine theory and theorizing.

As we consider the different modes of being of street art that manifest its ontology as theory and theorizing, it is the ways street art is multimodal that first stands out. In considering the multimodality of street art, we are not only recognizing street art's ability to go beyond the oral or written word to express an understanding of the world, but also the ways it is able to go beyond a superficial dialogue between verbal and visual modes. Multimodality is an inherent part of any integrated repertoire or language use that is deployed to communicate or make sense of the world (Blackledge and Creese, 2017; Garcia and Wei, 2014). Moreover, the possible knowing of street art becomes significant in its multimodality as this mode of meaning "relates all the other modes in quite remarkable dynamic relationships" (The New London Group, 1996: 80).

Written texts always have multiple modes that are used to convey meaning, from abstract ideas that are organized into letters to the materiality of the paper and ink that bring the words into being. Yet, street art seems to make the multimodal dimensions of any communicative event explicit in intensely meaningful ways. For instance, the photograph in Figure 2 presents a complementary use of words and images to create multilayered meanings. In it, the artist contrasts the image of girls playing in nature to the words "Colombia libre de minas," bringing into play the different meanings of the word "minas" (bombs/mines/women/girl) with other elements in the art to evoke a sense of freedom, womanhood, and the political realities of Colombia. Meanings and contexts are evoked by the juxtaposition of dimensions, such as the use of yellow and black as colors traditionally used for street or warning signs, and the fact that the slogan is part of a government campaign against the use of landmines.

We previously discussed the idea of theories as a framework or guide to illustrate how theories themselves bring forward relational meanings that help researchers interpret phenomena under study. The photograph in Figure 2 helps us see how theories serve to represent ontological and ethical stances, and because of their epistemological being symbiotically shape and are shaped by the knowledge generated through them. As Graue and Walsh (1998) assert: "The value of theory is that it allows one to see the previously invisible and to see the previously visible in new ways" (p. 26). It is this aspect of theory, to gather entities together to impart significance without exhausting their capacity to mean, that is also inherent to the mode of being of art. As Gadamer (1976) explains: "The inexhaustibility that distinguishes the language of art from all translations into concepts rests on the excess of meaning" (p. 102). Thus, the mode of being of art allows images to capture understandings and perspectives in a pluralistic and indefinite way that continues to invite interpretation.

Street art brings to the forefront the fundamental multimodality of any event of communication or understanding and transforms it into a deliberate medium for meaning.

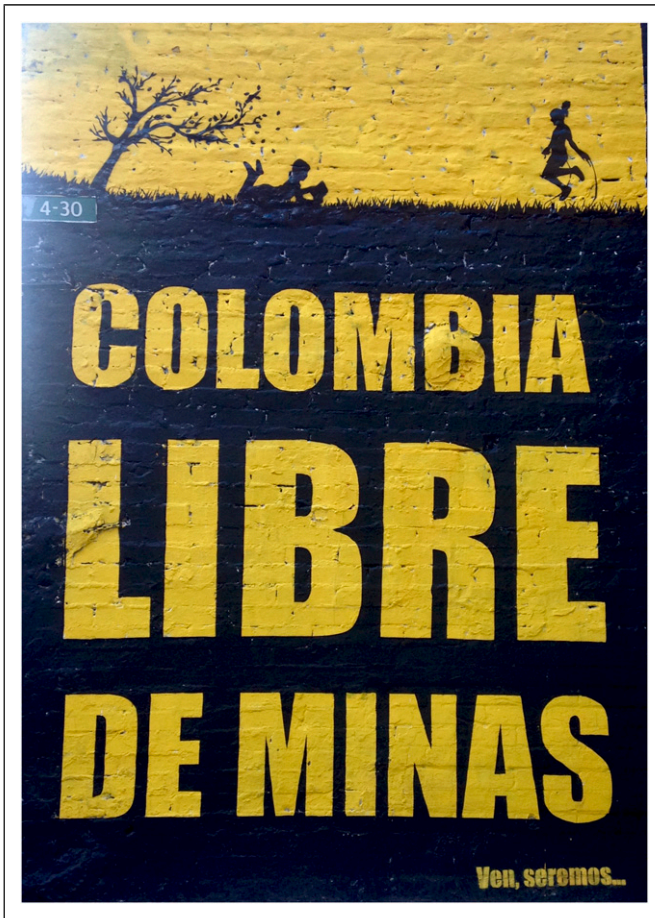


Figure 2. Photograph of street art.

Consider the photographs in [Figure 3](#). Beyond the most obvious way in which street art is inherently multimodal, there are also other modes such as those of space and time that further the meanings of these works of art. For instance, in the photograph in [Figure 3](#), the glued advertising posters peeling off the wall create a background that gives depth and shapes the image itself; evoking the absence of publicity in a space that has been reclaimed by art. In a similar manner, the cricket (in [Figure 3](#)) makes use of the brick wall and plant to create an image that brings attention to the natural and human environments as they interact with each other. The image of the cricket also makes explicit how street art is changed by time; the aesthetic experience of the work of art will change as the plants grow and the bricks crumble. In this way, the world itself penetrates the being of theory, drawing significance from the cultural, political, historical, and physical contexts without



Figure 3. Photographs of street art.

their effects being predefined. [Davey \(2013\)](#) explains: "The hermeneutic power of the image lies in its suggestion of possibilities that could become actualities. The positive power of the image therefore requires a disjunctive relationship to actuality" (p. 130). Indeed, the potential for multiple realities is intensely disclosed in the impermanence of street art. Space and time as integral dimensions of its meaningfulness emphasize a porousness and ephemerality inherent to any social construction or experience.

Drawing on [Newman and Shields \(2013\)](#), [Ulmer \(2017\)](#) poses that street art is a fluid genre with a visual discourse that "engages public visual space through a qualitative inquiry of the street" (p. 491). The underlying question opened up by Ulmer, Newman, and Shields is about the correlation between space and change in the active, situated, and embodied engagement of theorized scholarship. These perspectives talk to the fundamental mode of being of street art as developed in public spaces, and the way these spaces affect how it is experienced. The photos of the diver at different stages of development (see [Figure 4](#)) illustrate the way in which time and space in the public sphere play a role in the experience of street art. Each photograph captures a moment of how the diver was continuously recreated in the underbelly of the bridge transforming the art and space through a communal process. A process that by virtue of being public inherently challenges notions of art and knowing as finished products or conclusive statements of experience.

Street art speaks to the fact that the being of the process of creation is shared, and that time makes inherently visible the way knowledge manifests and is constructed at different stages. In this way, theory and street art manifest a shared ontology through dimensions of space and time that can be transcended. One of [Davey's \(2013\)](#) points about the mode of

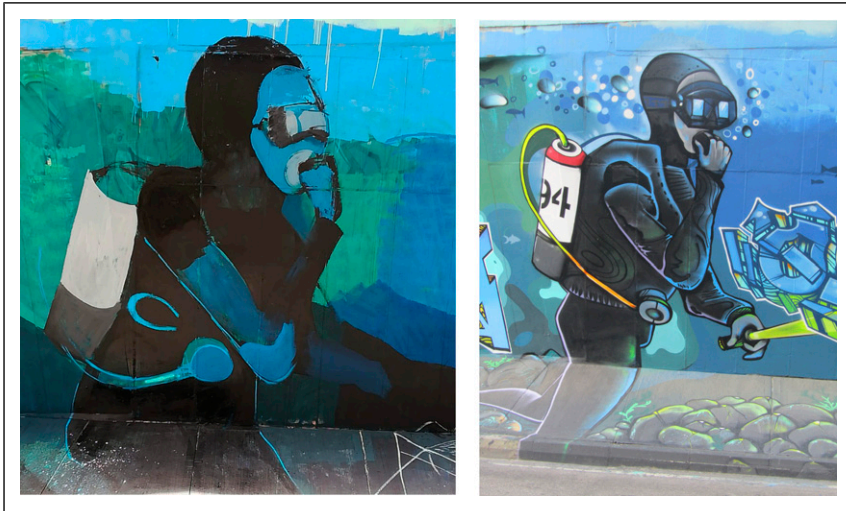


Figure 4. Photographs of the same piece of street art at two stages of completion.

being of art is that it opens us up to the relationality of knowing through the many contexts of previous experiences and the experiences of others. What Davey means is that when, for instance, we look at the image of the cricket (Figure 3) or the scuba diver (Figure 4) and recognize them as such, traditional practices are at play in shaping interpretation and noticing. Thus, akin to theory, the images of street art manifest a mode of being that can function as contexts that participate in our processes of making sense of phenomena and the social world. The artist and spectator are positioned in a world of meanings and make use of its artistic and poetic images to both navigate this world and communicate the meaningfulness of their experiences to others (Davey, 2013).

The photographs in Figure 5 further demonstrate how time and space intersect to shape experience. In Figure 5, the texture, contour, and position of the buildings combine to give perspective and dimensionality to the depicted creature. Art makes explicit its mode of being as created in a uniqueness of space that exists at a single point in time. Figure 5 signal how the work of art is ephemeral, being constantly reshaped and changed through time simply by virtue of being in a space effected by the transiency of humans and nature. Thus, the experience of street art is always variable, limited by space and time, and bound to change; as time passes, images are modified by the rhythms of the communities that shape their existence. Street art then aesthetically captures "the being-in-motion that is life" (Davey, 2013: 166).

By definition street art is always created in preexisting structures. Structures that are shaped by the traces and physical manifestations of the communities that once built them and now reside in those spaces. Through its own mode of being and multilayered performance, street art discloses the movement of communities through time. It presents



Figure 5. Photographs of street art.

as an experience of a collective with the potential to transform relationships amongst people and places (see [Silva García and Palacios Alaba, 2015](#)). [Figure 6](#) portrays an array of images that seem to be by different artists: the face in the middle, the person sitting on a branch, the blue leaking in from the adjacent mural, the face coming out of a door, the bird on another branch, and the person in a web created out of the peeling wall. Although each work is distinctive and carries its own meaning, they all come together, juxtaposed by the physical space of the building and the connections between parts to provide one meaningful aesthetic experience. Accordingly, "what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself be the artwork" ([Lacy, 1995](#)): 19, as quoted in [Springgay et al., 2008](#): 86).

The idea that art, theory, and knowing are relational ([Davey, 2013](#)) also speaks to the fact that these practices create discursive communities among researchers that then build new meanings in each other's work. This again is a mode of being of theory that is also shared by street art. Consider the photograph in [Figure 6](#). In this instance, we see a colonial house adorned with a drawn representation of the historic city where it is located that then forms a background to tags and written words that translated state "in silence to not be silenced." Together they create an image and aesthetic experience that points to the contradictions embedded in social realities that contribute to the movement toward theory and theorization. Collectively, the images that were independently created by different artists bring attention to the city as the space of a community that shapes the way the street art co-constructs meaning and knowledge through multiple agents. As [Grunow \(2019\)](#) observes: "This public commingling opens a space of discussion, or at least calls attention to the contested nature of history" (p. 45). Such moments of understanding provide a transformative experience within the art as well as for potential spectators. The importance of these experiences "lies in their relational ability to initiate change across frameworks of meaning, transforming the nature and direction of personal and cultural narratives" ([Davey, 2013](#): 176).



Figure 6. Photographs of street art.

The idea that theories are explanations as to "why the phenomenon is the way it is" (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014: 30) carries in itself an assumption that the experience of social realities or phenomena can be explicated through reason or purpose. Yet, there are many experiences that are not easily captured through reason or lineal argument. In this sense, the ability of street art to hold seemingly contradictory perspectives while understanding both as equally possible opens up the opportunity for complex theorizing. Consider the photograph in Figure 7, portraying an image of DNA, something conventionally associated with science. However, in this case the image of the DNA is in the hands of a woman who weaves it, which is often an artful practice infused with traditional meanings in Colombia's indigenous communities. The contradictions in the image are an evocative invitation to consider two realities that could be experienced as incommensurable, yet are simultaneously present.

The oxymoronic dissonance captured in the contradictions of seemingly incommensurable worlds speaks to the porousness and fragility of categorizing or dichotomizing social practices and realities that are inherently fluid. Think for instance of the dichotomizing of forms of knowledge into western and non-western, private and public, hegemonic and marginalized. These distinctions have been necessary and yet are often flawed. The dialogic and dialectic dimensions of any dichotomy point to an ontological interconnectedness. This blurring of existing categories and boundaries is in turn ontologically humanizing in its defiance of normative states. In doing so, the oxymoronic being of street art as knowing discloses the inevitable presence of power disparities. It is knowing that disrupts what is taken for granted, dismantles linear logic, and stands outside reason. As MacLure (2010) argues: "The value of theory lies in its power to get in the way: to offend and interrupt. We need theory to block the reproduction of the bleeding obvious, and thereby, hopefully, open new possibilities for thinking and doing" (p. 277). In this sense, the way street art challenges power dynamics goes beyond the contexts in which it is created (Gama Castro and León Reyes, 2016). Its challenge to power leaks in



Figure 7. Photographs of street art.

multidirectional ways through the cracks opened up by its unlawfulness, its effects on the spaces in which it is created, and the way people interact and experience those spaces.

The photograph in [Figure 7](#), for instance, shows an unfinished work that illustrates how street art can transgress established borders through oxymorons, and in doing so subvert power and hegemony. In this instance, the work of art draws attention to different contradictory elements such as the image of the heart placed on top of the child's body, the placing of the window on the child's forehead, the body language of the child depicted in a posture of political defiance, and the way the corn evokes the possibility of a grenade. These contradictions come across through our knowledge and expectations of the social world. In its fluidity, art builds on these experiences and learned meanings to convey the absurdity embedded in outwardly cohesive interpretations. Art and theory then parallel each other in their potential for interruption and incongruence as the movement of realities and knowledges that are seemingly incommensurable. In doing so, the potential of ontology as a borderland is disclosed and invites beings to exist and to be, beyond distinction or opposition of a dissimilar other.

[De Andrade \(1991\)](#) articulated a process of re-signification of knowledge and ideas through the metaphor of cannibalism. He explained that for those who once were colonized the boundaries between “us” and “them” are blurred. Colonized beings are left with the need to make sense and be in the world through cannibalism; a violent process of appropriation of other cultures and knowledge that is a right and a need, a process where individuals are called to eat the other, taking it apart and remaking it as a part of their bodies to be able to make sense of a new reality. If anything, de Andrade's theorization through cannibalism reminds us that the history of knowing is troubled. That troubled history bleeds into research, as practices and structures that also come with a troubled past. It calls us to consider how we may reframe dominant traditions, not for what was or what is, but for what can be.

Street art unveils the potential of creative and aesthetic acts, while also making tangible the risks of voicing defiance or envisioning an alternative society. As [Grunow \(2019\)](#) writes:

The potential to change ‘our lives’, or rather, the social and political realities in which Colombians currently live, is part and parcel of the appeal of urban art.... Graffiti and street art in Bogotá have this potential, in articulating a shared narrative of oppression, not only by visualising it, but already in the very act of spraying. The dangers of (over-) institutionalisation are real, but so are the dangers of continued oppression, both through the city’s policies concerning graffiti (see [Finn, 2016](#)), and for the memories they invoke. (p. 48)

Embedded in street art then is the mode of being of movement as life itself. As a process instead of a product, street art and theory can sidestep the question of what it is or is not, creating an opening towards the iridescent potential of ontology. Street art echoes the ways in which as researchers write theories of the social world, they engage in an ontological return that re-writes and pushes the boundaries of the known universe. In becoming researchers we enter into a process in which human and non-human entities will in turn necessarily re-write us through life’s unavoidable movement. The displacement of borders inherent to a return to ontology then brings with it an ethical responsibility to attend to its paradoxical effects.

Moving forward

Our aim in this article was to renew the inherent complexity of theory through an aesthetic engagement with its potential as an artful being wrought in the shared movement of knowing and knowledge. We posed that artful and visual engagements with theory matter not only for the theory we may generate in the process, but also because of the potential that it has to restore how researchers engage with theory and position it in their work. Rather than reinforce categorical presentations of theory as abstractions that are to guide knowledge in its application, we believe that much is made possible by fostering an understanding of theory as the inherent movement of aesthetically grounded experience and knowing. The active, meaningful, and intentional engagement that art and theory require of us, offers alternative paths for how researchers may address the current prevalence of hegemonic knowledges and worldviews in their fields.

Over centuries, knowing and theory have come to articulate the human struggle toward meaning and the aspiration to capture the movement that characterizes life itself. By exploring the established borders of theory, what is and has been considered to be or not to be theory, we sought to elucidate its elusive ontology. In its ontology, theory stands on the edge of the recognition that the movement of life and our humanities can never be fully captured, yet is worth striving for. Life’s portrayals, however partial or fleeting, can connect us to its rhythms and restore our sense of being and place in the history and future of our communities. Artful representations of this movement then disclose why theory’s aesthetic dimensions matter.

In its aesthetic dimensions theory can no longer be understood as an inert text that presents handed down hegemonic or fixed worldviews. Instead, as a human pursuit, research and theorizing necessarily invite a plurality of othered voices; calling in a multitude of traditions, languages, mediums, and perspectives. What is more, although individual experiences are not totalizing, by individually bringing our own situated knowledges to the co-construction that is theory we advance its heterogeneous and collective being. Aesthetics then reframes the question of what theory is understood to be into the pursuit of forms and mediums that can render an infinite movement into attainable pluridimensional experiences. In its ontology theory carves itself in a moving account of knowing, ephemerally evoking the iridescent possibility of the yet becoming.

Theory allows us to dwell in the excess of meanings that are integral to the human experience of the world. It refuses to reduce these excesses to models of conceptual knowledge. Accordingly, similarly to how categorization and preconceived ideas about theory can hinder researchers' ability to recognize some of its less prevalent dimensions, the separation of different aspects of the research process could also be misleading. As a fundamentally human endeavor, research unfolds as a constellation of relationalities that cannot be reduced or inflexibly organized. The moving ontology of theory challenges the field of qualitative research to confront the impossibility of distinct or established methodological approaches. In re-immersing theory into the artful folds that theorize the existence and practices of researchers we effectively disrupt the borders that have been traced around methodology. Methodology can thus be restored in its complexity and its naming as a practice of belonging and becoming. The moving ontology of theory retraces methodology as a striving towards a shared landscape that is wrought in fluid traditions instead of preestablished paths.

Centering the ontology of theory has profound ethical implications. It is a humanizing plea for an ethical engagement in research in light of a world where survival is not guaranteed and the right to be is both transient and tenuous. The pluralizing of research and its practices matters. It matters for how people are able to engage with research and be represented through it. It matters as an essential form of participating in an act of shared hope; an act permeated with a yearning for expression, recognition, and well-being. Understanding theory in its ontology as a being that becomes in aesthetic dimensions discloses the fact that meaning and inquiry belong to all humans in ways that extend beyond any legitimized conceptualization, naming or practice that have come to be delineated as research.

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Note

1. Authors' translation: Art serves not to die of reality.

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