

Thesis Works in Progress

Harrison Blackman

Delta Thesis, not Double Thesis: Crafting your Evolving Argument Without Letting your Essay Start Talking about Buffalo

Crafting a cohesive argument is hard. Doing so with an argument that grows more complicated with additional evidence is even more difficult. This phenomenon, known as the “delta thesis,” is one of the trickiest academic writing techniques to pin down. The risk is that if the delta thesis is not successful, it can become more of a double thesis. That is, your paper might become two papers, with two tangentially related arguments, weakly linked and hindering the success of both. It can even sidetrack your paper with a digression on the historic range of the American bison (buffalo).

This happened to me once. My second research paper for my writing seminar, “Cultural Landscapes,” was hampered by its dual and somewhat contradictory aims.

What exactly was I trying to say? A little background: in cultural landscape theory (let’s run with this, please), there’s this idea of fossil landscapes, which are landscapes modified by cultures that have since disappeared. This idea came into conflict with the ideas of the famous geographer Carl Sauer, who thought that landscapes were modified by humans, but more critically, landscapes evolved on their own without human influence. Because no landscape can remain “unchanged” after human de-settlement, the UN’s World Heritage Committee was wrong to have a category called fossil landscapes, because it confirmed human-centric biases in landscape ecology. Sounds great, right? Or at least ultra-specific. Take a look at my introduction and thesis paragraphs:

The World Heritage Committee (WHC) defines cultural landscapes as the “combined works of nature and humankind,” and explains that certain cultural landscapes, termed *organically evolved landscapes*, evolve based on the interactions of humans and the landscapes they inhabit over time.¹ Of organically evolved landscapes, the WHC makes a distinction between *fossil landscapes* and *continuing landscapes*, the former consisting of landscapes that have stopped developing because the inhabiting culture has disappeared, and the latter, where the roles of culture and landscape continue to develop in contemporary societies.²

¹ UNESCO and World Heritage Centre, "Cultural Landscape," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, last modified 2014, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#2>.

² UNESCO and World Heritage Centre, "Cultural Landscape," UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

The WHC definitions come into conflict, however, with the theories of the geographer Carl Sauer, who believed in an anthropocentric view of landscape succession³ and landscape evolution based on perpetual variation and divergence.⁴ Applying Sauer's theories to the WHC's definition of fossil landscapes reveals a startling paradox—it is impossible for fossil landscapes to exist, since landscapes will always evolve through continuous variance, regardless of human agency.

The contradictions inherent in the definition of fossil landscapes reveal the anthropocentric worldview prevalent in landscape studies, a perspective that does not recognize the natural agencies that also exert influence on the land, and in turn, develop the cultural landscape in question.

I hit a lot of the right beats here. Defined key terms (fossil landscapes, continuing landscapes) motivate a conflict by contradicting each other (nature continuously modifies landscapes, not just human activity). The conflict tees up the thesis, which leads to an explanation of why the argument is important (the anthropocentric worldview is problematic for conservation). Great. Well, guess what happens two-thirds of the way through the paper:

Though natural agency's divergence and variation is continually present, it is more readily apparent when the obscuring human influence is taken out of the picture. The depopulation of native North Americans following Columbus's arrival in the New World provides a telling example of the limitations of the WHC's definitions through its anthropocentric perspectives and highlights the influence of natural agency in landscape evolution. In particular, an examination of the landscape evolution of the North American Great Plains and its bison population can demonstrate the limitations of anthropocentricity in landscape studies firsthand.

³ Carl Ortwin Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," in *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley: University of California, 1965), 333.

⁴ Carl O. Sauer, "Man-Ecologic Dominant," in *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals*, Bowman Memorial Lectures 2 (New York: American Geographical Society, 1952), 2.

The North America that European colonists settled was completely different from the Pre-Columbian North America, causing the settlers to misinterpret the landscapes' previous level of development. According to historian Charles C. Mann, "the Americas seen by the first colonists were teeming with game," and according to Mann's quotation of early 20th century naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, following the Columbian Exchange, the Great Plains region was home to over sixty million buffalo.⁵ Despite the perception during the colonial era of the Great Plains as naturally abundant with game,⁶ when we follow Sauer's suggestion to assess a landscape at its first time of human occupation,⁷ we discover that the landscape of the Great Plains at the time of European settlement was the direct result of a 'fossil landscape' transformed by the divergence of natural agency, agency that was inversely correlated with the decline of Native American agency. The dramatic change in perspective from the traditional interpretation of North America's abundance of 'wilderness' demonstrates the inaccuracies afforded by a purely humanistic history of landscape evolution.

What do you know? The paper starts talking about buffalo!

The first paragraph here is strikingly similar to an introduction. A conflict is set up as more easily resolved when a change is made (human influence is removed from the picture). The transition phrase, "in particular," begins to set up a new example, one that is quite tangential from the discussion of cultural landscapes (buffalo populations before and after colonization). Even though the example eventually leads us back to the main idea of the problematic aspects of a "humanistic history of landscape evolution," it does so by tapping into another academic dimension altogether—pre-Columbian ecological history—which is far out of the scope of an eight-page midterm paper. The effort to complicate the argument with a cross-pollinating example fails to bolster the argument and instead directs the paper's energies into two slightly-related, mostly-distinct areas.

If I wanted to rewrite this paper now, how would I do so? How could I avoid the problems of a dual thesis?

For one, the buffalo case study could have been the primary point of focus for the paper. Or it could have been absent from the paper completely. Since this paper was mostly engaged with theory, a paper entirely devoted to theory might not have been a bad choice. A complex

⁵ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the World before Columbus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2011), 367.

⁶ Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the World*, 370.

⁷ Sauer, "Historical Geography and the Western," in *Land and Life: A Selection*, 46.

meditation on landscape theory (which is where I started off) followed by a case study on pre-Columbian buffalo populations (where I ended up) are so different, and they're much more difficult to set up together than they would be as separate entities. There's a rule in creative writing that William Faulkner propounded: you have to "kill your darlings." Sometimes phrases, scenes, and entire characters have to go, even though you like them.

The same is true for academic writing. Kill your darlings. Craft a singular thesis—unless you know you can handle the intricacies of a delta one. Don't kill the buffalo—they are considered a "near-threatened" species—but by all means kill the section about them, if it's taking over your argument.

Works Cited

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