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**Circular Metaphors of the Self:  
Toward a Transformative Epistemology:  
An Autoethnography**

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A Dialectical Approach to the Intellectual's Dilemma*)

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Contents

Abstract -----p2  
November 1997, Bethesda, MD -----p3  
Introduction ----- p4  
Webs, layers, circles: Re-situating the Self phenomenologically and  
autoethnographically----- p7  
Thesis: Ideas, potential, circles-----p11  
Antithesis: Shifting(s), drifting(s) and fragmentation ----- p16  
Synthesis: Deconstruction, convergence: Back to the Circle(s) -----p31  
Conclusion-----p42  
References -----p43

Abstract

In this paper, I place myself at the center of an inquiry into the possibility of social transformation and explore the dynamics between my desire to contribute to social change through education and my actual impact on the world.

Through narratives of a diasporic childhood and youth, I re-visit the construction of my epistemology and my problematic and often misplaced position in a world which I am both eager to understand and compelled to transform. Borrowing techniques from critical (auto)ethnography and action research, I adopt a values-based approach to the dilemma between my aspirations and practice, and attempt to discover and tackle the contradictions and dissonances between those polarities. As I examine my values, reinterpret my lived experiences and search beyond imposed models of identity to understand who I am, where I am and what I can do, I look at possible dialectics between the dilemmas of theory and practice, Self and Other, local and global.

In the first part of this essay, I outline the focus of my inquiry and discuss ways to theorize the Self and its connection to various social, philosophical and cultural dimensions. After a series of autoethnographic narratives in which I depict various events of my life that illustrate the politics and poetics of my location and knowledge, I dedicate the final section of this paper to a critique of the philosophical problems that are linked to my dilemmas.

November 1997, Bethesda, MD.

In the back of the emergency room, there is an elevator. When I am done giving my biographical details to the tired overweight woman sitting at the computer, she clicks ‘print’ somewhere and produces a form and a pen. I ask her what day it is, and sign the form. A nurse, neither old nor young, is summoned. I say goodbye to my mother. The nurse leads me to the elevator and presses the call button. We wait in silence. When the elevator is here, we walk in, she presses ‘7’, and the doors close. She smiles. “...so, *Samuel*..” she says. We haven’t spoken yet, but she got my name from the lady at the computer. “...*what do you wanna do for a living?*” I find her question a little sudden and out of context. But I reply. “*I want to change the world*”. She doesn’t add anything. But why would she? She is escorting me to the psychiatric ward. On the form I just signed, in bold typescript, next to “reasons for admission”, it says: **depression**.

When we get to the seventh floor, more questions and forms await. The nurse leaves me in the company of another nurse, older, with more paper. It is past midnight. We sit at a large table in the big and empty dining room. I am asked to tell my story. It is a story that has taken 18 years to construct. I go back six months and begin with Africa.

### Introduction

This paper revolves around the following question: *How can I, as an individual with intellectual tendencies and humanitarian aspirations, prevent my knowledge, values and skills from remaining trapped in the cognitive realm, and instead learn to share and use those gifts actively and effectively to contribute to greater social justice and transformation?* In other words, how can I transcend cognition, theory and ambition, and ensure that they become action, or practice, and that they have a positive impact on the world? Inherent in this question is the core Marxist principle which states that as social theorists, our role is not solely to attempt to understand the world, but to change it. (Cohen et al, 2001, p226). In his *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* (1845), Karl Marx wrote: “the reality and power of thought, must be demonstrated in practice. [...] Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, but the real task is to *alter* it.” (Cited in Russell, 1946, p748).

It is this precept—or the desire to draw upon my understanding and experience of the world to contribute to the construction of just societies—that brought me to the science and practice of Education, and more recently, to sociological, anthropological and ethnographic dimensions of education.

I chose to become an educator and educationalist because of my desire to contribute to the possibility of a world in which, as Dewey put it, “the ultimate aim of production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another in terms of equality” (Cited in Chomsky & Macedo, 2000, p37).

With all that in mind, I should stress that the purpose of this paper is not to theorize about a utopian society but to examine my position and participatory potential in the world.

My research question, therefore, is focused on myself, or on what Jack Whitehead, a prominent British theorist the field of educational Action Research calls the ‘living I’ (McNiff, 2002, p22).

Jean McNiff (*ibid*), who worked and published extensively with Whitehead explains that research usually involves the following:

*Ontology*: The way we view ourselves and understand our reality; a theory of being

*Epistemology*: A theory of knowledge; ideas about how we construct our understanding of reality.

*Methodology*: How we do things; how we organize and conduct our research and reach conclusions.

Here, McNiff is implying that we all bring particular philosophical assumptions and positions into our research and practice. Along with those assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge, she could have added that we implicitly carry along a whole body of beliefs about what is good, bad, just and unjust, about “the good life” and how it should be lived (ethics), and how we should organize the world and societies accordingly (politics).

In light of the inextricably philosophical nature of inquiry and the various layers of credos and ideologies that cohabit within the philosophical realm, I must attempt to locate “the living I” within such philosophical space and become aware of those dimensions within my-Self, the world-as-I-perceive-it, my knowledge, my values, my skills, my potential, and my actions. Action, I should reiterate, or the possibility of seeing these numerous layers of Self and philosophy contribute to a transformation of the world remains the ultimate objective of this inquiry. Thus, the desire to see research become action brings me to the sphere of Action Research as it is conceptualized by scholars such Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (1998; 2000).

While Action Research has often been reduced to a depressingly mechanical problem-solving toolbox that has been used and misused across a broad spectrum of praxis from democratic improvement of teaching methods to ruggedly individualistic corporate agency, McNiff and Whitehead have imagined a values-based approach that situates research and the role of the researcher within generative transformational processes of social change. In their view, Action Research entails “reflecting on the experience of practice, deciding whether the practice [is] in line with our espoused values [...] and deciding on future actions as a result of the reflection” (2002, p18).

In this project, I am looking at my practice as an individual, a parent, a partner, a citizen of the world, an educator, and a cultural and educational theorist with philanthropic aspirations. As for my practice, it began the day I was born, and my

research also began that day, as I started to gather sensory, cognitive and symbolic information which I have accumulated and transformed over the years to construct my understanding of the world.

Let us go back to the question that drives this inquiry: Theorizing the “living I” from a Western cosmological standpoint, I ask whether my impact on the world belongs to the metaphysical realm of potentiality or to that of matter and actuality. In more minimal terms, I am trying to find out whether my impact on the world actually exists outside my head. Whether it *is* or *is not*, whether it is actual or merely potential. I am trying to identify the gap between my theory and my practice, and thus, acknowledge myself as what Whitehead called a ‘living contradiction’ (McNiff, 2002, p22 ) and find ways to transcend that conflict.

Contradiction, dichotomy and paradox, therefore, are central to my inquiry. This is why I have chosen to use the term dialectical in the title of my paper. The idea of a dialectical approach to my dilemma is underpinned by Hegelian logic. Hegelian dialectics, named after the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher Georg Hegel is generally defined as a “warring between thesis and antithesis with the result being a synthesis”. (Osmond & Craver, 2002, p25) It is the battling process of opposites in motion towards synthesis; towards a transformed, more perfect condition formed by the merging of the polarities. Hegel belonged to a school of idealists who, like Plato’s successors, believed in the supremacy of ideas, essence, and potentiality over matter, existence and—one could argue—practice and action . But unlike his predecessors, he believed a final synthesis was inevitable.

My research question is dialectical because it hints at the existence of opposing, contradicting forces between my potential and my actions, and directs me towards a necessary synthesis.

Webs, layers, circles: Re-situating the Self phenomenologically and autoethnographically

Before looking at synthesizing possibilities between different strata of philosophy and action it seems important to stress that there are many more dimensions within the living-I, and within which to situate the living-I. If the Self, in its inquiry, and in its Being cannot be separated from the layers of philosophy from which it sees the world and wishes to shape the world, then the Self can only be theorized in relation to other Selves without whom these webs of meaning and beliefs could not exist. In other words, the Self only exists and defines it-Self from within such webs of meaning and Selves: from within Culture. The Self, like a sign/word in Saussure's linguistics, depends entirely on a complex relationship with other elements of a system in order to have a name, meaning and existence. (Edgar & Sedwick, 2002; Saussure et al, 1966) Thus, the Self cannot be conceived as anything other than an intrinsic and dynamic component in a cultural system, or a web of culture, which we might define in the Boasian sense as:

...the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself." (Franz Boas, 1911, p. 149)

The Self, therefore, must be theorized within multiple layers of cultural, philosophical and natural phenomena: it must be theorized phenomenologically. In this paper, the Self (*auto*), culture (*ethnos*) and writing (*graphos*) are brought together unhyphenated and are amalgamated under the sphere of Autoethnography. Literally, then, autoethnography is the writing of one's culture. In Carolyn Ellis' sense of the term, it is "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness and that connects the personal to the cultural" (In Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), to which I would add: "the philosophical and its multiple layers". Thus, I am conceptualizing autoethnography as a form of writing and inquiry into the cultural spheres and narratives that shaped the researcher's ontological, epistemological, ethical and political location. Yet, autoethnography is infinitely more. It is also an endeavour to understand and

articulate one's own identity by looking beyond what Stuart Hall (2003) calls "dominant regimes of representation" and "artificially imposed" models of identities. Hall's complex understanding of Identity is of crucial relevance to the autoethnographer interested in transcending her perception of Self and her impact on the world, because it redirects her towards the dialectic and the reality of movement, process and Becoming. Hall speaks of "identity" as becoming, as the dialogical process of continuity and rupture between the shared history of one's community and individual contextual deviations from that history. This view was expressed in his seminal essay on the cultural identity of members of the African and Caribbean diaspora, but I find its emphasis on process and contradiction very relevant to the investigation of any identity. First, the idea of becoming is of fundamental importance: if the Self exists in perpetual movement and change, then so do the cultural spheres that shaped it. Consequently, the proper tense is not *shaped*, but *shape*, or *are shaping*. The autoethnographer must thus look at culture as a process that *is constantly shaping her*, not as a static artifact "transmitted" to her during her formative years. An awareness of the reality of Becoming renders impossible any static representation of Being in the frozen present and equally obsolete the idea of a static, unchanging point in the past from which we define ourselves. Therefore, the descriptive present tense in which we wrap our-Selves, our environment and our cultures is flawed because it cannot capture the reality of becoming. This paradox is at the root of Stuart Hall's concept of "rupture", or contradictions and discontinuities between a fuzzy collective idea of history and culture, and individual perceptions and expressions of it informed by constant motion. Once again, the paradox directs me towards the dialectic.

After introducing autoethnography as a genre and locating the focus of autoethnography, more should be said about autoethnography as a methodology. In *Returning(s)* (2003), the critical autoethnography of a transnational *métisse* feminist, Jayne Ifekwunigwe crafts what she calls "photopoetic narratives" that depict moments of her childhood and "pivotal points" in her life to "reinterpret her lived experience" and the shaping of her "complex subjectivity"(in Manur & Braziel, 2003). My epistemology and subjectivity differ from Ifekwunigwe's because they are informed by different ethnic and transnational backgrounds and gendered and lived experiences, but I can both connect to

and learn from her photopoetic narratives. I like the narrative approach and the poetics of it, and the honesty of her ideas of “reinterpretation” and “subjectivity”. Ifekwunigwe’s narrative-interpretive-subjective approach to autoethnography is in line with James Clifford’s (1986; 1988) contention that ethnography is essentially a textual practice that is subject to the metonymic and polysemic aspects of any form of writing and should be interpreted as such. In other words, her narratives explicitly and authentically echo the poststructuralist claim that texts cannot produce objective portrayals of reality, but merely offer subjective accounts of an author’s vision that are open to multiple interpretations (Schwandt, 2002). I share Ifekwunigwe’s insistence on subjectivity, and hence situate my idea of autoethnographic methodologies within critical and interpretive paradigms of ethnography, which, in the words of Clifford Geertz (1986) cannot provide true renderings of other people’s way of life, but simply subjective “accounts of other people’s subjectivities”. I feel that the fundamental value and importance of autoethnography lies precisely in its most challenging problem: the impossibility of absolute truth, objectivity and quantification in description. Indeed, I can’t help finding authenticity, transformative potential and enormous political implications in a process of inquiry that rejects objectivist and archeological views of autobiography that treat memories as artifacts to be excavated, deciphered, examined empirically and classified. This positivist view echoes dominant perceptions of history, knowledge and reality in which an absolute truth can be “discovered”, frozen in the present tense, described, and labeled through expert scientific examination. In my interpretive view, memory is treated as a more dynamic realm which can only be revisited, reinterpreted and re-imagined. Autoethnographic re-imagination is no more accurate or objective than our descriptive relationship with any other layer of reality, but it carries the benefit and the authenticity of articulating one’s own reality from one’s own perspective without relying exclusively on “dominant regimes of representations” and the subjectivity of others. In this sense, autoethnography becomes a subversive act of ontology, or auto-ontology: an act of self-definition.

The risk of solipsism—or the uncertainty of any reality outside individual perception brought about by such a worldview—must be acknowledged, but also confronted by

retaining the phenomenological picture and remembering to situate the Self within a hermeneutic circle of cultural and physical phenomena.

Thesis: Ideas, potential, circles

My potential begins with inquiry, with a desire to understand, to explore, to retain and transform information, to interpret the world.

As a child, I spoke ceaselessly and pestered adults with questions. This drive to understand was *important*, it was a need. My interest in the world bordered on obsession. It was initiated, when I was five or so, by geography, by the emergence of a concept within which almost everything I knew could be classified and which seemed to host an infinity of novelties to be discovered: the World-Map.

On my mother's wall, in the living-room, there was a big rectangular plywood board on which a scroll of paper of similar shape was glued. The result was a flat screen with a strange amalgamation of sinuous shapes and blotches, filled with jigsaws of varying shades of browns, greens and yellows, surrounded with vast areas of pale blue.

The overall picture was beautifully ordered, harmonious, awe-inspiring.

I learnt that the shapes and blotches were small versions of the land; continents and islands. The browns, greens and yellows represented forests, mountains, plains, deserts, jungles, savannahs, tundra, taiga. The areas of pale blue were water; seas, oceans. Darker blues indicate variations of depths. Mother explained that the Marianas Trench in the North Pacific had a depth of 12km. "*Imagine going from the house to the Spanish Galleon beach. That's how deep the trench is*". 12km. I remember shivering, picturing myself floating in the dark blue; an insignificant speck on the surface, with a dozen kilometres of obscurity below me.

At that time, a white-haired man with a red scarf had been hired to look after my sister and me. Before long, he had become a family friend whom we learned to call Captain Cook. For years, he had lived on a sailboat. On the seas. Between Brittany and Tahiti. With her finger, mother would show me Captain Cook's journeys on the map. Via the Panama Canal, the Marquesas Islands.

Alone, I would retrace Captain Cook's travels on the map, and imagine all the other possible voyages, through all the other capes, seas and canals.

Later, I learned to read, which I did voraciously, and I discovered other dimensions. Through Tintin graphic stories, I looked inside new countries and people. My parents

were quick to point out that Tintin books were a flawed and racist reflection of the reality of those countries. Then I wanted to know about people, and thus, I discovered Anthropology: a global study of the human being. This was to be decisive. My mother had shown me many dimensions to interpret the world. She liked zoology, ornithology, she showed us animals, birds, botany and took us to the forest to find mushrooms and name the trees and plants; she liked geology and brought us in search of fossils; she taught us the names of shells and fish, types of winds, tides, clouds, soil, rocks. She read to us. My step father liked physics and mechanics, the way things worked, and he liked the sea. My father showed me constellations and read Greek mythology to me. I was receptive to all that. But from the beginning, *my* dimension was the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the study of mankind, our nature, our origins, our place in the universe. After my discovery of the humanities, my cosmology never ceased to expand. I found new facets: philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, linguistics, systems theories, cultural studies. We traveled, we moved, I traveled, I moved, I learned new languages, more ways of seeing the world

But there were more dimensions, more layers to my worldview. There was art, and especially music, especially Baroque music, in which I was immersed by my father. Music is a vital aspect of my life. My most absolute and ideal representation of beauty is musical, and it is contrapuntal, it lies somewhere between the choral music of Palestrina and the fugues of Bach.

And lastly, there is an ethical dimension, intrinsically connected to my sense of aesthetics, a notion of right, wrong and ideal, accompanied by a desire to model my actions on the basis of what is right. I began to see the link between this notion and my cosmology when I was eight or nine, after an incident at a supermarket. Wanting to help my mother, I picked up a bag of oranges and threw it in the shopping cart. My mother looked at the label, and seeing that the oranges came from South Africa, told me to put them back on the shelf. I was perplexed, was my mother a racist? I asked. She told me about apartheid and about the criminal Afrikaner government. She explained that by refusing to buy the oranges, we were helping the people of South Africa and putting pressure on those that subjugated them. This was my first lesson in emancipatory pedagogy and non-linear dynamics.

All these components: knowledge, values, aesthetics, ethics, politics had to be mentioned because they are the essence of my cosmology. My cosmology is my worldview, my culture, my own private collection of mental representations, symbols, signs, beliefs, values and attitudes. All these parts form a giant system, *my* system. They are connected, and interrelated. They are me.

In his magnum opus, *The Glass Bead Game*, The German novelist Hermann Hesse (1969) speaks of “the dream of capturing the universe of the intellect in concentric systems and pairing the living beauty of thought and art with the magical expressiveness of the exact sciences.” In this sentence, I believe Hesse has articulated the ideal cosmology.

I like the idea of concentric systems or circles: The idea, as Carl Leggo (2002) beautifully phrased it, of “and infinite enfolding and unfolding of circular possibilities”. The idea of a construct that expands *ad infinitum* from one circle. I have always thought of my first memory as that first circle.

Like my story, late in the hospital, Africa is where my memories begin. But it is a different Africa, in a different time and a different place. My memories begin in North Africa. In Algeria.

We live in a house on the edge of a small village in the province of Kabylie. A steep path in the dunes –*un raidillon*, as my parents calls it—separates our house from the beach. We came here from northern France before my memories began. My mother teaches French and biology at a public high-school in a mountain town, 75 km to the south. At first, my father stays at home with me, but he soon finds a position as a math teacher in a local school. Sometimes, mother brings me with her, up the dry and windy mountain roads.

I sit in her classroom.

There are days when the shepherds lead their sheep down the mountain. Then, mother stops the car and we let the long river of sheep submerge us.

Often, I get road sick.

At night, jackals roam around our house in search of food. They grunt, and sometimes howl. I am terrified of them.

One November, there is an earthquake, and then, unexpectedly, snow.

A bush fire, on both sides of the road.

A trip to the desert, to Tamanrasset, to the tropic. I hide in the shade, in the van. I am given water. I have a fever. Outside, everything is white; the sand and the heat, the sky.

The house is white, too. Inside and outside.

Outside, there is another white house. Neighbours. The mother wears dark clothes, loose. She is always moving, talking. A dark mass in motion with an indefinite shape. She calls out to her children. Her words are hurried, loud.

The children move faster.

Sometimes, I play with them.

At night, my mother finds me in my room, in bed, muttering sequences of words to myself. In the *Kabyle* dialect.

The village grocer, Kader, gives me apricot juice. Because milk is rare and the water is not to be trusted, apricot juice has become my drink of choice.

In the shop, Kader invariably greets me with a glass bottle of apricot juice. And there are biscotti. Biscotti, for lack of a bakery, replace bread. During the bumpy way home from Kader's, with the pot-holes on the dirt track, the biscotti break, they shatter, they are turned into crumbles.

To this diet of broken biscotti and apricot juice, there are sporadic supplements. On occasion, a wild boar ventures to the fields from the mountains, ravaging the crops. At night, the farmers get together and hunt the beast down. Later, in the morning, we find the swine, massive and inert, lying before our front door. A present. A gift from the

village people, whose religion forbid the consumption of such meat; of the pig's untamed cousin.

My father manoeuvres the beast away from the door and ties a rope to its legs. He throws the rope over a beam and hauls, until the dead mass is left dangling in the air. With a diving knife, he sections the boar's stomach and releases a thick, bubbling stream of entrails and dark blood. Then, the bloodless, gutless animal is skinned, and its head and feet are severed and discarded. The red meat is quartered, salted and left to dry.

At night, sitting on my highchair, I am fed a soft, greyish slice of fibrous meat.

An uncle from France, one of my father's younger brothers is called upon to look after me. He arrives. There are no more trips to the mountains. I spend time with my uncle and the other young expatriates he befriends. One of them is another French teacher with long hair and a Viking moustache.

They disappear in the waves with spears and harpoons and come back with giant fish.

They go up and down the *raidillon* with their motorcycles.

They take me to a beach where a dead dolphin dries in the sun.

Often, I ask to be taken there, to see the dead dolphin.

My mapping of concentric circles begins there, on the Dead-Dolphin-Beach. It becomes my first solid point of reference beyond my immediate surroundings. At first, my awareness of that beach is not visual in a photographic or cinematographic sense. It is purely mental and spatial. I associate it in my mind with a bright, pulsating orange sphere.

Today, I still don't understand the symbolic significance of that sphere, but I know it remains the earliest of my memories. Other recollections from that time are, it now seems, more difficult to trust. So many of them are reconstructed from photo albums, from family stories, from fantasies, from more or less voluntary associations with literary clichés...But the orange sphere is real. It is the foundation stone of my cosmological construct, the first piece in what was to become an ever-expanding mental and sensory representation of the world, of my world

Antithesis: Shifting(s), drifting(s) and fragmentation

There are more stories from Algeria: more reconstructed recollections.

A trip to France. Snow. My father and I are driving to the hospital, to see my mother, and my new sister. A sister. Laure.

In the hospital, Laure is smaller and uglier than I expected. Her eyes are closed and puffy. She doesn't look like a girl.

Another plane journey, with a stopover in Rome. We are back at home, in the white house, above the *raidillon*.

I want to play with my sister, but I am told she is too little; she cannot play yet. When will she know how to play?-I ask. "When she is big", "*quand elle sera grande*" I am told. But that doesn't answer my question. All this answer produces is more questions. When does one become big? How does one become big? How does one know when one is big?

Relentlessly, I ask: Is Laure big today? Is Big-Laure here yet?

Mother responds. It takes time, bigness happens gradually, But I cannot understand.

One morning, my sister is dressed with a green skirt and black stockings; her skirt a funny bulge above her diaper. She looks like a girl. I am overjoyed. Big-Laure is here, I cry out.

The reply comes. Not yet. She is getting bigger, but she is not big enough to play, not old enough.

I am puzzled. What is big enough? What is old enough? By comparison, I am big; old enough to play. But what is bigger? What will I be like, look like, when I am bigger? What will Laure look like?

My father makes a drawing. With a pencil, he begins with my sister. He draws a woman, naked, with protuberant breasts and a triangle of hair where the inside of her legs meet. On the right, he draws a man, taller, angular. Above his penis, there is

another triangle of hair. This is what you and Laure will look like when you are big, he explains. *Quand vous serez grands*. Like mother and father, I think, except that Laure has brown hair, like father, and I have blond hair, like mother.

The threshold of my concept of bigness has been pushed farther, but I still do not grasp the idea, the process. One doesn't wake up big; bigness happens slowly. But how can one get so tall, so hairy, without noticing? How will someone who is immobile in one's crib, unable to speak or sit up learn to laugh, run and play without there being visible change one morning? And what happens after the drawing? Does one still get bigger?

Once again, our belongings are packed and shipped, the house is closed, and the sea is crossed.

Of the crossing, there are no recollections.

All there is left is a colour picture of my father with his white cotton shirt tied around his shoulders, sitting on the metal floor, on the boat. *El Djezair*. Below the picture, the hand-written caption says: *Retour d'Algerie*.

*Retour*- return- signifies that we are coming *back* to something. But back where? I have just left my home.. What are we coming *back* to?

Another house by the coast. Another steep path to a beach. The path is steeper and overgrown with ferns and thorns. The beach is littered with pebbles. This is Brittany, my father's house.

I live further south, also on the coast, with my mother, sister and the French expatriate teacher with the Viking moustache who is now a civil engineer. I am visiting my father. His house is big, old, dark and damp. There is no real village; just a small number of scattered houses; and fields, fallow land, grass, grey granite rocks with yellow lichen, cliffs, and the sea. This part of Brittany is the westernmost department of France, it is called *finistère*. *Fini*: ended, end, and *terre*: soil, land, earth. *La fin de la terre*, the end-of-the-land, the-end-of-the-earth.

From this indefinite cluster of adobes before the end of the land, my father's house seems detached, farther. A muddy path with a streak of grass in the middle leads to

the house. Along the path: an untidy hedge of white and blue hydrangeas. In the summer heat and humidity, the hydrangeas emit an overpowering odour of urine. The house is white; it has a black slate-roof and yellow shutters, like the lichen. The paint on the shutters is cracked and flaking.

We park behind the house. The front door is at the back. One has to walk around the house, past the wooden cabin that houses the toilet and the metal jug for flushing, and along the edge of a corn field.

My father still teaches mathematics, at a vocational high school. He is alone.

The two of us in the big house.

My sister, not yet big, is not here.

My father tucks me in bed. I ask him about death. He tells me it is like sleeping without ever waking up. But it's not exactly like sleeping, he continues. At the end of one's life, one stops living. One gets old until one dies, then there is nothing, forever. Death never ends. I ask about 'ever', about 'never'. He can't explain it. No one can, he says, we cannot conceive infinity. *Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais*, never, never, never, never, never, never. I try to visualize it but I cannot.

Later, I lay in bed, awake, terrified. Never, never, never, never, never. Never wake up. I try to picture a string that grows and grows and swirls around for ever, forever. But I can't imagine what it is like not to stop, to go on forever. I try to envision nothingness, but I can't. No noise, no image, no thought, no sensation. I can't do it. One day, I will never wake up. I can't understand. I can't accept.

This is what happens after one stops growing, at the far end of the growing continuum: One stops living. Life, like the land, stops. The-end-of-the-earth. The-end-of-life. Then nothing.

I don't want it to stop. I cry. My pain cannot be soothed, my anguish cannot be appeased. There is no solution, no compromise. Nothing anyone can say or do can ever relieve me of my distress, of my fate, of my growing, my living, my decay, my end.

Never, always, ever, nothing, death. They are the same thing. They are equally inconceivable, equally inevitable, equally horrifying. There are no more Jackals to

keep me awake at night. What there is instead is so much worse it cannot be told, it cannot be understood, it cannot be escaped. I am five years old.

Already, images of Algeria are beginning to fade. My points of references are shifting. The orange sphere is still here, but it is no longer central. Or rather, it retains its centrality in my cosmology, but it is I who drifted away.

In the geography of my mental cosmology, there are now two solid points of references.

There is my mother's house—or does it belong to the man with the Viking moustache?—where I seem to reside permanently. A grey house, with orange tiles on the roof. The sea is still present, but it is out of sight, out of immediate reach.

And there is my father's, at the end-of-the-land.

In between; an indefinite lapse. Yellow and red car lights, a dizzying slideshow of white bands and stretches on the black asphalt, and a wet and grimy frame with wavy contours on the parts of the wind-shield where the wipers don't reach. A nauseating smell of gasoline.

There is a third landmark, a third substantial area in my geography. It is somewhere in the middle, between the two houses, between two lapses. There is an immense suspended bridge, with metallic cables. After the bridge –before the bridge the other way—we stop at a crêperie. When I am transferred from one world to the other, stopping at the crêperie becomes customary, it becomes a ritual. Images, noises and tastes from around the metallic bridge become engraved in my memory. The bridge and the crêperie become imprinted in my spatial construct of the world.

Gradually, I become aware of more locations; bubbles of information around me. The bubbles are isolated, disconnected at first, they exist as standalone moments or perceptions indistinctly situated in time and space. Then the connections between the bubbles and their location in my cosmology become clearer.

Links and interrelations between places, instants and people are etched deeper; like the receding grass on the path before my mother's house that turns into dirt as it is stamped upon.

There are more beaches.

By my mother's, the sky is high and blue, and the coast extends as far as one can see. Miles of sand. High dunes, wind-swept. And pines. Long and deep forests of tall stone pines, some of them inclined, deformed by the wind. We gather pine cones; many as big as my head. At home, in the fireplace, they make crackling sounds and release a sweet, comforting smell. .

By my father's, the sky is lower, greyer, foggier. The shore is rockier and the sea colder.

When the tide is low, the sea retracts beyond my view, leaving an endless stretch of grey sand, with small scattered pockets of salt water, speckled with bright green algae. With a pair of Wellingtons and a bucket in hand, I follow my father into the grey area. In the small ponds, under black rocks, inside the sand, we find yellow winkles and limpets, purple razor clams, green and dark-red bits of polished glass, orange crabs, maroon urchins, silver clams, blue mussels. All vibrant with colour. When we get home, the treasures dry and the colours grow fainter.

Staring at the World Map:

I grasp the idea rapidly. A little above the middle of the map, at the tip of the green stem that ends with finger-like protuberances; is my father's house, the fog, and the yellow lichen on the rocks. Below, past the point where the stem merges with the mainland, just above the notch where the Gironde river merges with the sea, is my mother's house, in which I stand, looking at the map. Lower, across of the oval-shaped Mediterranean sea, is Algeria, the village in Kabylie, and the Dead-Dolphin-Beach. An unmarked dot in a thin strip of light-green at the very top of Africa. Beneath, the green turns into a reddish brown that becomes yellow, then burgundy, and light-green again, and dark green. The Atlas, the Sahara, the Sahel, the savannahs, and the jungles of the Congo.

On both upper-hand corners of the maps, the antennas of Siberia and the Aleutian Islands are duplicated. I inquire. I know the earth is round and the repetition is a mere reminder of that fact. On the real earth, however, there cannot be two Siberias and

two Aleutian archipelagos. On the map, therefore, one of the two representations must be false, and the other must depict the real places. Which side of the map is the true one?

Mother replies that both sides are true. There are two depictions that represent the same place; the purpose of the repetition is to highlight the proximity, the connection between the two ends of the map. But I still cannot comprehend. If there is one place in reality, and if that place is shown twice on a map, one of the depictions is necessarily superfluous, fabricated, untrue. But which one? This question causes me great anxiety.

There is a similar dilemma involving multiplicity. My mother reads to me. A Tintin graphic story; *The Secret of the Unicorn*. In the book, Captain Haddock recounts the story of his seafaring ancestor and the brawl with the pirate Red Rackham. A narrative within a narrative. This, I can follow. On page 25, there is a drawing of Captain Haddock's rendering of the fight between the two opponents. To draw attention to the movement, the author drew the captain with eight arms and sabres. This, I can follow. But the real Captain Haddock can only hold one sabre, with one unique arm. Seven of the arms on the picture, therefore, must be illusory; they are merely portraying velocity. Only one of the arms on the drawing can be the real one. I question my mother. I ask her to point to the *real* arm on the image. There are all real, she insists, the picture is like a photograph capturing the speed of the captain's arm in motion. They are all real, and they are all the same, single arm.

I am anguished beyond measure. There is no flaw in my reasoning, yet, my question cannot be answered, my dilemma cannot be solved. The feeling of distress and powerlessness is similar to that which I experience when I am faced with the two Siberias or the problems of death and infinity. With these predicaments, it seems I have reached the confines of my reason, the boundaries of my intellect, the limits of my ability to comprehend. The sentiment is unbearable.

More uncertainties

I share a room with Laure, who sometimes accompanies me in my games. But at night, Laure drifts in a quiet sleep, and I am left alone. Alone with more questions, more things I can't understand, more unexplained noises, threatening stains and shadows on the ceiling, and with the unsounded void under my bed, and even more of that void all around, beyond my perception, beyond my comprehension.

I carry all these uncertainties into my sleep.

Uncertainties follow me into daylight. Outside the village, between the road and the dunes, we walk into the swamps, across a desert of white oyster shells, razor-sharp, on which I fall and cut my hand. In the dunes, the swamps, and elsewhere, too, there are burrows. Gaping black holes. Inside, beyond my mental grasp, I imagine sinuous mazes of darkness, swarming with rodents and other unidentified specimens of sharp-toothed fauna. If my feet are bare, I feel a shudder in my toes and rush away from the dens. It is the uncertainty of what lies beyond that terrifies me.

On the shore, I am uncertain about the sea, about what lies offshore and what the sea may bring. Mother tells me about Tsunamis. About the giant waves that rise above the horizon to sweep and swallow up everything up to sixty kilometers ashore. She says the safest place to be in the event of a Tsunami is at sea, offshore. The beach, therefore, is not a safe place. Neither is our house, nor my father's. Both houses could be engulfed at any time; we could all get swept away in our sleep, without any hope of salvation. Tsunamis occur because of earthquakes below the sea. I know there is no risk of earthquakes in Western France, but I know that beyond the horizon, the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is in constant volcanic turmoil. I know that the Azores islands—where my mother and step-father traveled and where my step-father left his long hair—are just a few protruding dots from a volcanic spine that extends north to south, across the length of the ocean. During talks of sea voyages, I have been shown the line on the map above the submarine topography, with a few sporadic islands that resurface arbitrarily. St Peter and St Paul Rocks, Ascension, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha.

In my cosmology, the existence of this volcanic backbone is not a mere abstraction. It is a frighteningly real variable in an equation over which I have no control, but of which I have no choice but to be a part. These temperamental volcanoes under the sea

are connected to the piece of land on which our house was built. If that is what marine volcanoes do, why wouldn't they send a tidal wave that would submerge Western France?

I fear volcanoes too, though I know I live beyond the reach of an eruption. Many times, I have stared in awe at the pictures of bright red spurts of hot lava in the books about Aroun Tazief, the great volcanologist mother admires. I have also listened—with horror and admiration—to her stories about sleeping in open craters in the Azores. In *Geo* magazine, I have seen photographs depicting shabby townships with corrugated iron rooftops on the red volcanic hills of St Helena, wondering about the minds of the men and women who were born into this life of scarcity and uncertainty. When night comes again, if I manage to forget all the uncontrollable variables beyond my room and the horizon, I shift my focus inward. It seems I am subject to more uncontrollable phenomena. I have already discovered that I am forced to march along the axis of time, along that continuum of growth that leads to nothingness. Over this, I have no control. Deeper inward, I still have no control over the mechanisms that make my body change. I can't even control my sleep. It is as obscure as the process of becoming big. One moment, one is awake, thinking about Tsunamis; and an unperceivable lapse later, one is asleep, unconscious. When does it occur, how does it occur? The only thing, the only vital thing which I can control at present is my breathing. I know there is no life without breathing. Breathe in, breathe out, inhale, exhale, etc. I become conscious of my breathing. I become master of my breathing. Soon, if I don't command it, my breathing stops. I become uncertain, then frightened. What if I forget to breathe? What will happen in my sleep when I lack the consciousness to control my respiration? What about now, as I await sleep, what if I grow weary of thinking "in, out, in, out," and simply give up, will my body and the laws that govern it take over again and relieve me of my duty? What if they do not?

Sometimes—often—when the uncertainties become unbearable, I cry. Most nights, I am too distressed to face the uncertainties of the dark corridor that leads to mother and Jacques' room. I call out to them. I scream.

Years pass, we shift.

We now live in Southern France, a small village in the Languedoc. My step-father shaved his Viking moustache and cut his hair long ago. He has an important position in the ministry of infrastructure. He and my mother had a little boy. My father also lives nearby and had a little boy with another woman.

My circles are expanding, but my cosmology is private. It is not something I can share easily.

There are concentric circles everywhere. Around me, people's identities are organized in concentric circles of geographic allegiances. To the people of southern France, geography is identity. They belong to their village, to their department, to their region, and then to France, and perhaps to Europe. There are newspapers and rugby teams for every circle of their concentric identity. Language, dialects, accents, betray geography. There is little diversity and little racism. There is regionalism, parochialism, villagism.

The circles of my identity are fragmented, disjointed, blur. In the village, I am an outsider. I am a *Parisien*, but I have never lived in Paris.

I am nine years old.

In the village, there are other outcasts: sons and daughters of Moroccan immigrants, who carry around them the spatial disjointment of their parent's exodus. They too, seem condemned to define themselves around a skewed focal point they have never known or cannot remember. They are sentenced to walk around in a bubble of exclusion that comes with the price of dislodged allegiances. They are sentenced to live "*à l'intérieur de l'extérieur, et inversement*" (see Foucault, 1972), Inside the outside, and vice-versa.

How can that be? How can we all be sharing this space and reality, and yet, not be? At home, in my room, with my world map and my books, in my head, my circles are clear and vibrant. Outside, at school, in the streets of the village, they come undone, they are nothing. I am nothing.

I am taunted, mocked, bullied.

My own private Algeria, around which I had defined myself, has almost ceased to exist. I know I can no longer claim allegiance to a land that is still bleeding from the pillage of its resources and the rape of its people inflicted by my ancestors. I know I can no longer define myself around a land whose tongue, sounds, and smells I have forgotten.

As for memories, I no longer know how to trust them. My own private Algeria exists as a fuzzy image in the back of my mind when I ask my parents about it and listen to their stories or when I look at the photo albums.

The photo albums are organized sequentially; they document a chronology of frozen moments in my parent's and my life, and are silent about so much more.

Flipping through the thick folders at my mother's, I can retrace the outline of our story. The beach, the house, and the man with the Viking moustache. He appears, as a peripheral character at first, on the far side of an image, displaced from the central focal point; working his way toward the center as the pages unfold.

There are two pictures, in separate albums, that defy the laws of my cosmology and that I can only view in absolute privacy. The second one, chronologically, is set on an Algerian landscape, with acacia leaves in the background. My father and the man with the Viking moustache, playing chess. How symbolic is this game? How much of a real battleground is captured here?

The first one precedes my birth. On the background, brown rocks on a Scottish beach. A close-up of mother and father, kissing. Their touching lips slightly open. My mother's eyes are closed and father looks skyward. This picture joins two realities that cannot exist simultaneously; two universes that can only collide. Two separate and incompatible cosmologies of which I, incomprehensibly, am the product, the outgrowth.

The distress.

At my father's, there are no photo albums. When I inquire, father replies that he does not trust photography. He tells me about Thamus, the Egyptian King who rejected the invention of writing presented to him by Theuth, the inventor God, because he said writing would impair humanity's ability to remember (See Plato 1999, Phaedrus, p844) One shouldn't rely on cold, lifeless external signs to remember; one can only

lose memory if one relies on such signs, and photographs are such signs. One should cultivate one's inner memory. Thus, when there are no lifeless signs to suggest a story, I rely on my father's memory. But memories conflict. Mother's memories tells different stories. *"No, no, it was I who gutted and skinned the boars, your father didn't have the stomach for this..."*

Which story is true then? Whose story is true? Whose memory is true? If all I have left is lifeless signs and conflicting memories, how can I know where and when my own story begins?

Two years pass and I befriend a popular boy. He too, has a secret world, but he also firmly belongs to the world outside. I learn mimetic skills. I learn to imitate the local accent when I venture in the outside world. I do not divulge anything from my world. The people from the world outside forget to torment me. I am camouflaged, I am a safe, but I know the real world, the most important world remains my world.

Years pass and I go off to middle-school. My friend the popular boy goes to a different school in the city. We drift apart. On my first day in middle-school, I try to start again as the real me. I display my real accent, my real voice. But I sound off-key, I don't fit. I clash. It is too late to revert back to my camouflage. After a year, it gets too hard.

I change schools. In the city, things are easier. I make friends, I become popular in my jazz band. I am invited to parties.

More tensions between my parents about custody. More lawsuits.

I drift.

More schools. Boarding school: I retract to my private world.

A beating.

I escape.

A new boarding school.

I am fourteen years old.

When the day kids go home at five, the boarders have two hours of compulsory study.

*Etude*. Speaking during *etude* means detention. After dinner, from 8:00 to 9:00, there is one more hour of *etude*. At 9:30, lights out, no talking

The boys sleep in one big room. Two beds. Space. Two beds. Closets. Two beds, Space, Two beds, Closets. Etc. Wednesday afternoons, there are activities, movies, sailing

In eight months, I do not go once. I am always on detention: for getting caught smoking or talking in class, *etude* or detention. More time in my head.

There is a day kid in my class who likes to interpret the world. We do not seek each other out outside, but in class, we write notes to each other. We write quizzes about our cosmologies. “What is the capital of Burundi?” “What is the longest word in the French language?” Sometimes we get caught. More detention.

Eleven years later, my reality is still divided between my world, or my ideas, and the world outside. I still find the world imperfect and flawed. I still do not trust it.

I now understand that my dilemma reflects a duality between mind and matter that has plagued Western ontologies and epistemologies for millennia.

I understand that as Fritjof Capra (2000) put it in the *Tao of Physics*:

Descartes’ famous sentence ‘*Cogito ergo sum*’ - ‘I think therefore I exist’ has led Westerners to equate their identity with their mind, instead of with their whole organism. As a consequence of the Cartesian division, most individuals are aware of themselves as isolated egos existing ‘inside’ their bodies.

I understand that, as Macmurray (cited in Reason, 1980) argued, a dualism between theory and practice is inevitable in any philosophy which takes *Cogito* as its starting point and centre of reference, and thus renders action inconceivable.

I understand that my knowledge and aspirations are nothing to the world if I don’t ACT on them

I understand that my idealism—and with it my critique of the outside world, loathing of philistinism and alienation with popular culture—promotes a certain elitism that is in profound discordance with my egalitarian, democratic and pluralistic values.

I understand that my idealism sometimes causes me to have a quasi-monastic relationship with my body and the material world. I often get lost so deep in thought that I can forget to eat, sleep, wash the dishes, clean, buy food, I can read a book during dinner with my wife, forget to change my son's diaper, forget to show up somewhere, never change light-bulbs, forget the laundry, miss my stop on the metro, stay mute for two days or rant incessantly, and get exasperated when I am asked to bring my attention away from my thoughts and back to “futile mundane matters”.

What good is that to the world? How beneficial are my knowledge and aspirations if they only exist in my head and if I cannot even be considerate to those that I love the most? What is the utility of a self-centered pseudo-intellectual who lacks the social skills to be a good father and husband and is doomed to spend his life in the dusty bookshelves of academia?

What is there beyond my cowardice, my complacency, the emptiness of my discourse, and my shame? Is my shame all I can contribute?

If the only world I know and influence is *my* world, and if everyone's world is their world, how can I really contribute without imposing my worldview anyway? What do my “egalitarian” and “philanthropist” aspirations mean beyond imposing my ethics and politics on a world in which I am already politically, economically and epistemologically dominant and in which the quantitative majority of humanity suffers from the consequences of such dominance?

In my narratives, I have compared myself to the excluded and deracinated because of my inability to link my identity to the different geographical surroundings of my upbringing. Yet, the privilege of my constructed whiteness, my maleness and the comfort of my family's material asset prevent me from experiencing the full consequences of contested selfhood. The bubble that surrounds me is one of inclusion and access and I am always welcome *à l'intérieur de l'intérieur*. Behind my non-local and non-national “accents”, the languages I speak are those of the affluent classes: the clinical varieties of so-called “standard” language (see Lippi-Green, 1997). Who and what, then, do I represent, to the

individuals I hope to help through education whose backs are crushed under the weight of a system in which I enjoy comfort? What does education even mean, if it is just a way of imposing my bourgeois culture and forms of knowledge as the only necessary, true and important way of knowing and being in the world, and confining to the margins all those who resist to this enculturation? (see Gramsci, 1992; Apple, 1990; Althusser, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Is my beloved world-map anything more than a dominant Western mystification of space that legitimates our view of the world, our imperialistic impulses and our neo-colonial division of our conquered and renamed territories? (see Ashcroft et al, 1998 pp 31-34; pp 90-92; Rabassa, 1985). Is my craving for the study of mankind and anthropology anything more than a colonial enterprise in which I use my academic authority and epistemic power to re-name, misrepresent and rewrite the stories of others I end up owning through *my* research? (see Assad, 1973; Said, 2000; Smith, 1999)

What good is this poststructuralist *satori* if it only leads to a dismantlement and fragmentation of the world into myriads of mutually unintelligible epistemologies and free-floating semiotic systems that are wholly unmoored from any physical reality (see Baudrillard, 1972; Deleuze & Guatari, 1977) and in which any effort to reach out is oppressive? Thus enlightened by the poststructuralist (un)truth(s) I am left to wander in a world of dispersed schizophrenias where my own schizophrenia and the fuzzy consensus of my socio-political group's schizophrenias happen to be imposed as truth and reality. (See Foucault, 1980)

Sometimes, it seems that the only *real* effect of having dismantled my cosmology into poststructuralists "unrealities" is further alienation from my family, friends and fellow humans who are both perplexed and exasperated by my constant jargonizing and "deconstructing of everything".

So it seems all I have is my epistemology, my way of seeing the world, and my stories. But then again, I also know that my stories aren't my stories and that my memory is nothing without the memories of others. If I can't trust my own memories, how can I trust the memories of others? Marianne Hirsch (1997) encapsulates this pernicious dilemma in what she calls "postmemory", or "the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their births" (p22). Her view of postmemory seems to be limited

to intergenerational stories of trauma that shape one's subjectivity and sense of Self; what I feel, however, is that postmemory unites us all through the narratives we take for granted from before our own memories begin. That in itself, it seems to me, is enough of a trauma because it ushers everything we accept as reality and the cultures and histories from which we define ourselves into the foggy realm of postmemories.

If our histories, and my stories within them, in their multiple layers of spatial, temporal and sensorial movement can never be recovered and accurately retold, how can they ever be translated into the dead signs of written language and still retain a ring of truth? If, as Roland Barthes (1967) posited, there is no access to reality independently of the language from which we interpret it, which in turns re-creates reality (so the signifier doesn't refer to the signified, but creates it), then there is no access to truth from either speech or writing (See Egar, 2002, pp16-18). Following Barthes (1977) even further with the conviction that any of my attempts at producing signs is merely an act of postmemory that results from my enculturation and historicization within inescapable sign systems, then I, as author create no meaning of my own. I carry the untrue memory of others and renegotiate them, in the language that constructed me, into a skewed account of "reality", but I generate no true meaning. In this sense, Postmemory becomes another word for hegemony in its most perverse sense: the all-persuasive narratives about reality and our place within it, formulated by others, which we have no choice but to accept; the view of the world we perpetuate through our consent. (Gramsci, 1990; Chomsky, 1998; 1989; Chomsky et al, 1992). Then, "plagued by postmemory", as Hourig Attarian (2005) so eloquently puts it, or by hegemony itself, constructed by it, we lose the possibility to recover any "essentialist" version of our true nature and our true Selves; in a word, we lose voice (see Ashcroft et al, 1998 pp77-80). And thus, I now feel the weight of Gayatri Spivak's (1988) fateful question, "can the subaltern speak?" as I reach the conclusion that I, plagued by postmemory, constructed by hegemony, cannot speak.

If want to remain true to my aspirations, then, if I want to remain honest and authentic, I can neither wish for the world, nor speak about the world. All I can do is follow Wittgenstein's (1974) honourable conclusion about the problem of language: "what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence"

Synthesis: Deconstruction, convergence: Back to the Circle(s)

When I began to conceive this research project, I knew that the contradiction between my espoused values and practice would be central to this paper. Right away, I knew that the splits, schisms and dualities would fit nicely in a dialectical conceptual framework. But the synthesis was far away. I had to think about ontology, epistemology, antithesis. The synthesis would come later. But for awhile, it didn't. I kept casting it farther and farther away. It was blur, did it even exist?

My narratives continue

In May 1996, my unruly behaviour and constant questioning of authority is about to get me expelled from another school. In his office, one Monday morning, the principal asks me what I want to do for a living. He is the first figure of authority who ever genuinely questioned my motives for rebelling instead of punishing me. I tell him I want to work in the international development sector to contribute to humanitarian projects. He gives me a telephone and a directory and challenges me to find work as a volunteer for a local organization with humanitarian aims. He asks me to reflect on my experience and contemplate whether or not I am suited for such a career. This, he says, is to replace school time for now.

I spend the month of June volunteering at a homeless Emmaüs community. I ride in a truck around the network of local towns with a veteran from the foreign legion, collecting donated furniture for the community. Driving through the country roads I thought I knew, I bombard the veteran with questions about Africa, about War, about his life, motives, impressions and time on the roads of France as an itinerant. He tells me his stories. At every corner of asphalt, he shows me new dimensions I had never suspected. *“see the white van parked under that bridge? That's Sylvie [a prostitute] 'been working that spot three years now”*.

Entering villages I thought I knew, he exposes layers of reality I had never imagined. *“They are real fascists in this village y'know? They have a strict policy against vagrancy and loitering and they always call the police to expel us.”* Or later. *“This village has the only truly socialist mayor in the region. This is the only village with a*

*charity soup-kitchen. It's really rare to get anything else than a 'get outta here-message' around here"*

In July, I go to Slovakia to attend a youth environmental workcamp.

I am 17 years old.

In August, my step father gets a position in Washington DC. We follow.

School is different. People have different notions of geographic allegiances. In the schools of Montgomery County, over 100 languages are spoken. We are all outsiders, we all belong.

My notions of English expand.

The circles of my identity expand. I make new friends, read new books. I become increasingly uncomfortable with my privileged position in a colonized land, and the colonizing narratives and histories of my cultures.

I turn 18 and legally inherit a sum of money—about \$3000—that had been destined to me and had sat in a bank for 10 years. I grow restless. I now have the legal and financial means to go where I please and do what I please. Half way through second semester, I announce that I want to quit high school and go to Africa to volunteer my time and energy and contribute to something I find meaningful. I find a workcamp in Zambia, from April to June of 1997.

I speak to my mother and counselor at school. We meet with the vice-principal, and it is agreed. I will go to Africa, but upon my return, I will have to attend summer-school and write a report about my experience. So I go.

I call home once from Johannesburg, and disappear in the bush for two months. The project is going to be a food security project. A team of international volunteers will get training in Lusaka, and then teach food safety to the people of a local community.

I turn out to be the only non-African volunteer. They have eagerly awaited the first volunteer from America. But I open my mouth, and they know; I am a fake American.

We don't get much training, and end up doing a lot of work in the fields. The experience, however, is immeasurably formative. I connect to people, learn their stories, attempt to live their life.

I come back altered, slim, sick. The last few weeks have been difficult, I have been ill; I have had a difficult experience in a public hospital.

I drift out of summer school.

I sleep.

A few months later, past midnight, on the seventh floor of Bethesda Suburban Hospital, I tell the nurse about Zambia.

Recovery happens slowly. In group therapy, I enjoy giving my input and sensing I am helping others. Later, I begin to work at a pre-school for Autistic children. I have a purpose, an impact. Somehow, I finish high-school. I want to leave again, to work overseas. I write to many organizations, but they want older, experienced people with diplomas.

In June of 1999, my family goes back to France.

I go to Peru, to work for an adventure travel company.

There, the circles of my identity expand. My notions of Spanish from summers in Spain expand, I learn. During the long treks, I work with the local crew, learn to utter a few words of Quechua. But many distrust me. At first, to them, I am one of those men whose bags and loads they carry, whose excrements they scrub from the portable toilets, whose dishes they wash, whose tent they pitch, whose tea they serve, whose leftovers they eat. One of those men who take pictures of dirty, ragged indigenous children for exotic effect in the family album. One of those who offer to buy hats and ponchos from people's heads and backs to hang them as trophies in their living rooms.

I try to share their chores and present myself as different from the French tourists. But I am weak, I can't bear the altitude.

I question the effects of my impact on the world.

The French tourists we lead up the mountains are, for the most part, rich, dynamic executives. They want outlandish experience, territories and people untouched by their civilization. We take them to such places. But soon, we come back, with other groups. The people of the remote valleys are no longer scared or intrigued by the inexplicable

procession of white men in flashy Gore-Tex gear. They learn to sell the hats off their heads and the ponchos off their backs, to parade their children in traditional attire and ask for money in exchange for photographs.

Again and again, I examine my position, my impact on the world.

Part of my role here is to learn the trekking routes. I must befriend the dignitaries of local villages so I too, one day, can lead a group to these isolated parts of the Altiplano. One night, we become acquainted with the chief of a small community. The French tour guide and I are invited to his mud-house. A shaman, well known in the valley, is here. All night we sit with the men, we chew coca-leaves and drink an unnamed alcohol, strong, locally produced. The shaman makes blessings, calls for the protection of man and livestock, in the name of the *apus*, the sacred mountains. Every time he invokes an *apu*, a bottle cap is passed around, filled with the unnamed spirit. We drink. Cap after cap. Every time, the drink is poured on the ground, on the earth, as an offering to the *pachamama*. We gain their trust. The chief and the tour guide become *compadres*, brothers. The white men can come back and stay in the village, the chief says. My *compadre* and his friends are always welcome. The following night, the shaman performs a *pago-pago*, a blessing ceremony for the group of trekkers, who watch and listen as he pours smoke over them and calls upon the sacred mountain. *Apu Ausangate*. They watch and listen like a documentary, some are amused, some stare in disbelief. Cameras flash. This isn't anthropology, I think, this is zoology.

My role, my impact....I am a spy, a double-agent. I am prostituting and colonizing this country and its people.

When I am working with the crew, we mock the tourists. I try to share their bitterness. But how true does it ring to them? Sometimes, I am called *waiki*, brother, but how false is it all?

One man from the crew has toiled all his life. He was a *portador*, one who carries supplies and bags –up to fifty kilograms—often barefooted, up the scorched mountain, for the trekkers who paid for adventure. Then he became a cook, then he organized logistics, then he became the guide's assistant. He sleeps in a tent, which is pitched for him. He wears flashy Gore-tex. In halting French or English, the learning of which he paid for with hard-earned money, he tells stories about the places and people

we visit. The stories are imaginative, with indistinct dates. He is not taken seriously. The crew, who used to share his chores, despise him. He is bitter. He gives orders. We should work faster, harder, longer. One night, we set up camp at 4700 m. For the first time, he complains about the altitude. He becomes sick. That night, I too, have vomited. Secretly, I am delighted by his failure. I despise him, and I despise myself, as he no doubt, despises me. Why wouldn't he? My being a *gringo* has granted me more power, authority and access than he, an inhabitant of this land, has gained in years of immeasurably strenuous labour. In Cusco, the place of his ancestors' birth, I am sought and welcome at no cost into an array of trendy clubs around the *Plaza de Armas* where, he, as a native, must pay exorbitant cover-charges and is often denied access.

Between trekking jobs, in Cusco, I spend time with the street children. I learn their stories. It is a friend, an anthropology student from Switzerland who introduces me to the street underworld of Cusco.

Sometimes, on cold nights, we hire a big taxi and gather children to bring them to the public *dormitorio* where they can sleep for a few cents. But most of them don't like it there. They say it is haunted, by the ghost of boy who was stabbed to death in a fight that took place there.

One day, my Swiss friend gives a boy his sweater. Two days later, we find the child. Shivering, shoeless, sweaterless. Where is the sweater, we ask? "*Me lo han quitado*", they took it, he replies. Who did? They did.

I speak to the director of the *dormitorio*. An old, chain-smoking French woman who rides a bicycle in spite of her years and the altitude. She says the real task is not to keep the kids off the streets. Most of them have fled violent homes or even near-slavery in the countryside. If we send them back to their homes, to any home, or even to school, they will escape. The point, she argues, is to organize them into cooperatives where they can work, learn a trade become autonomous and interdependent. That day, I understand that I can't apply and promote my western paradigm of freedom and happiness in all situations and locations.

I understand many things, or rather, I ask myself new questions: about class conflict, about culture clashes, about the dynamics of poverty and exclusion, about the problem of universals.

I can't stand the impact of my job and position anymore. I want to do something for the children. I could volunteer, but I don't know if my influence would be beneficial. I don't agree with the religious missionaries, or with the Marxist-Leninists, or the Maoists, the Guevarists, or the western NGOs who see any kind of work as child labor. I want to help them gain autonomy, develop their potentials, but I don't know how that can be achieved.

I decide to leave, but resolve to come back; with more money, and answers to my questions. So I leave.

I try the US, then France again for about two weeks each, but am unconvinced, unsettled.

I spend Nine months in England. At first, I try to live out the cliché of the chain-smoking would-be novelist who rents a room in a run-down part of town. I end up working with disabled adults, and later as a special needs classroom assistant. I work and save money to go around the world.

I leave.

My first stop is São Paulo, in Brazil. There, at the University of São Paulo, I find a young woman who studies Arts and Education and organizes literacy programs for street children.

I fall in love.

I stay.

My Spanish expands into *Portuñol*, then into Portuguese.

I frequent more university intellectuals.

She accompanies me to Europe, we get married.

We spent more time in England, where I work in special schools again. Then we go to Ireland. We both work in special Ed. She teaches Portuguese, paints and sculpts. I earn a B.Sc. in Education and Training.

Then we come to Montreal, where we both pursue more studies.

Our son, Johann, is born.

If I look back on the last 9 years of my life, I seem to have drifted in and out of practice.

If am not employed as an educator right now, am I only in a theoretical phase of my dialectic?

Perhaps the only real problem remains epistemological. Perhaps, the problem is the dialectic itself, or my starting point in the dialectic

Back to the beginning: I theorized the location and impact of my Self dialectically, beginning on the metaphysical side of the Platonic/Cartesian split. I began my motion, hopping the great divide into opposite territories in order to reemerge on new shores, altered, ready for another turn. By beginning my inquiry on the far edge of a schizoid cosmology, I have acknowledged the existence of a split between binary realities, or rather, I have consented to its existence, and thus, created its existence. Later, when I experienced my so-called poststructuralist *satori*, I deconstructed the dualism and binarism of my Western cosmology into myriads of dispersed dualisms and an infinite fragmentation of artificial realities separated by uncrossable fractures. What hope is there in such a worldview? If the *Cogito* cannot be transcended, then how can billions of untranscendable *Cogitos* ever construct anything meaningful?

How did I wander off my original goal of reconciliation between opposite tendencies?

It now seems to me that my deconstructive endeavour, however laudable and directed toward the Other, was doomed to fail, because it operated from within the very epistemological and cosmological tradition it sought to undermine in the first place.

I am beginning to see that a poststructuralist, postdualistic critique should challenge the binary structures of epistemological systems by doing away with binarism altogether, and not by creating more separations. How did that happen? Structuralism recognized that the idea of difference was central to systemic organization but created the illusion that all of existence could be explained and measured through the empirical analysis of such systems. Poststructuralism did away with all objectivist delusions and pointed out that the relative value of difference was central to the sustainable organization of any system.

Alas, poststructural thought often tends to perceive the very idea of the system as oppressively universalizing, and thus tends to “deconstruct” systems into the qualitatively

equal but irrevocably separate entities that characterize the uncertain grounds of the postmodern condition.

How, then, can I reconcile humanism and cultural relativism, universalism and particularism, mind and matter, theory and practice, Self and Other, and Local and Global? How can I escape the epistemological determinism of my cultural tradition? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in Derrida's conundrums and what we have made of them. I am reminded of his explorations of ontological and epistemological "undecidability" (Collins & Mayblin, 2000), or the unnamable terrain at the convergence of binary opposites, where the Either/Or equation becomes Neither/Nor, and yet, both entities at the same time. This uncertain middle-ground at the junction of two universes is unnamable because it defies the very conventions of those universes, and thus, in the Western Canon, often becomes a source of Taboo and rejection: The androgyne, neither male nor female, and yet both at the same time; the Zombie, neither dead nor alive; the hybrid "mulatto", neither White nor Black, etc. The point is that the very concept of an "undecidable" middle-ground totally destabilizes the notion and validity of fixed boundaries and debunks the idea of separate binary entities located on either side of those boundaries; the undecidable highlights the existence of gradual shading; of a continuum, or rather, of a full circle that connects the opposites. Two points taken arbitrarily at opposite diametrical ends of a circle will seem irrevocably disparate in most cases. As in the colour wheel, however, one can follow the continuum of shading and go back to one's point of departure, via one's "opposite" without ever experiencing a sharp split, and, most importantly, without ever leaving the circle. All elements of the circle are both different and alike; interdependent and irreplaceable. What Western metaphysical epistemology has often done, it seems, is chose its own point in a circle, legitimize it by subordinating its "opposite" and deny any connections between the two by erecting uncrossable boundaries and banning access to the "unspeakable" middle-ground. Problematically, the human condition, organic matter and the flesh were often ushered dangerously close to the middle-ground and even beyond—or below—while the "central" point of reference to be emulated shifted skyward and remained unattainable and disconnected from the circle. And thus, we have had Plato's forms, Augustine's God, Descartes' *Cogito*, Kant's Pure Reason and Auguste Comte's Positive Science as the

ultimate—and ultimately inaccessible—realities. Turning those split realities upside down, as is the case in Marx, Lenin and many forms of structuralism, hasn't solved any epistemological crises because it has retained the Manichean dynamics between two impermeable realities.

I now see that destabilizing dualisms is made possible by exploring converging possibilities and placing them along a circular continuum. This seems to be a much more insightful deconstruction and reconstruction of our ontological and epistemological problems than the mechanical deconstruction that leads to fragmentation. The realities of shading along the circle remains faithful to the important project of valuing a plurality of positions and epistemologies, but the ultimate reality of the circle enables the existence of a common language and a common project. As humans, becoming aware of the circles begins by acknowledging the Earth, the big circle that unites us all, and the multitudes of converging circles of life and culture of which we are a part. This metaphor of converging circles reminds me of a quote on Polynesian epistemologies by the Fijian scholar Konai Thaman (2002). He is worth quoting at length:

...as such, culture *is* life itself. In most of our (Pacific) languages, the words used to describe culture, life and environment are often the same, indicating the connectedness of these ideas in the indigenous minds. [...] within each notion, "environment" [...] is what surrounds, embraces and permeates all that we do, know and are, which, collectively, amounts to our heritage, our culture.. (2002, p233)

Undoubtedly, we are all positioned differently along and within these circles and experience them differently, but the ultimate reality and interdependence of the circles *must* direct us toward a common project.

I can continue my inquiry knowing that I am the world, that the world affects me and that I affect the world in everything I do, feel and think. I cannot be separated from the world, my actions cannot be separated from my aspirations, and thus my practice and actions are permeated by theory and intent. All these dimensions are inherent to the same process and couldn't exist without the other.

In the same way, my cosmology is my own, but it cannot be separated from other cosmologies, other Selves and other circles of phenomena. Therefore, I am Self, Other and Neither, just like the lifeless photograph of my parents' kiss reminds me that I am my

father, mother, and neither, and that our circles and cosmologies diverge, converge and expand within the same circle(s).

As for theory and practice, I continue my inquiry knowing that they form the same circle as I remember the words of Paulo Freire about epistemological curiosity:

Curiosity about the object of knowledge and the willingness and openness to engage theoretical discussions and reading is fundamental. However, I am not suggesting an over celebration of theory. We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would be to reduce theory to a mere verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, [...] is to run the risk losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. It is for this reason that I never advocate either a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. (Cited in Macedo, 2000, p19)

If I have gone thus far in my reasoning, I must challenge my uncertainties about the oppressive potential of universalizing my position and must decide that I can, after wish for the world, speak about the world and actively alter the world. And thus, I must continue my inquiry, no matter how flawed and myopic it proves to be, and I must continue to expand my understanding of our circles, my circles and how they connect, converge and merge. As for the potentially oppressive and arrogant potential of choosing a humanistic course of action, I am reminded of the famous televised debate between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky (Chomsky et al, 1992) in which they exchanged thought and doubts on the “ideal just society”. In the dialogue, Chomsky spoke of his vision of decentralized anarcho-syndicalist societies in which individuals would no longer have to be “coerced into becoming cogs in the machine” but would be encouraged to cultivate the “creative urges of human nature”. In response, Foucault expressed skepticism about the idea of “human nature”, its inevitable construction from our European bourgeois cultural traditions, and the risks of building social projects, however noble, based on such notions. To this, Chomsky replied that he was, indeed, aware of the risks associated with such choices and their consequences of humanity, but maintained that he saw a greater risk in *not* making choices. “In the face of those considerable uncertainties”, he continued, “one has to choose a course of action”. While I respect

Foucault's honest silence about the ideal project, I must, in the end, follow Chomsky's critical Humanist way and decide to take a course of action.

Similarly, I admire Roland Barthes' thoughtful and courageous comment on my historicized incapacity to produce any meaning of my own, but ultimately, I choose to take what I can from the multitude of semiotic systems within which I am forced to operate in order to create connections within and across systems, and produce combination and renegotiations of signs that become, in the end, my own. In the same way, I remain in admiration of Wittgenstein's ascetic conclusions about Language's incompatible relationship with reality, and I still revere the intellectual integrity of Gayatri Spivak's statement about the subaltern's lack of voice and agency. In the end, however, I choose intellectual dishonesty and choose to re-construct a partly essentialist version of the World, my-Self and Others in my writing. Thus, I chose to express a partly dishonest, but *strategically* necessary essentialism, which Spivak herself recognized as inevitable, (Ashcroft et al, 1998), and by the same token, I acknowledge the inevitability of a strategic rebirth of the author.

In the end, I also choose to believe that the Author can be honest and authentic, and that she is also immeasurably important. For this reason, I will never tire of searching and probing for autoethnographic voices who explore multiple layers of lived experience to make sense of the infinite realities—and of the ultimate reality—of the human condition.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I loosely followed the theoretical and methodological backbone of an Action Research project to explore my potential contribution to the world and social justice. Searching for ways to theorize the Self and its connection to various layers of philosophical, social, cultural, symbolic and physical phenomena, I discussed the role of critical and interpretive autoethnography and its importance for defying hegemonic definitions of identity and reality, understanding one's Self, and one's Place.

Through narratives of my transnational childhood and youth, I revisited and reimagined the construction of my cosmology, my epistemology and my perception of my place in the universe. As I explored geographical and epistemological shifts, connections, and disconnections, I delved in destabilizing questions about the problems and politics of Knowledge and Place. Following my humanitarian aspirations into the dismantlement of my worldview into poststructuralist debris, I explored more episodes of my life inside and outside my head in which these realities collided and amalgamated and finally adopted a different deconstructive outlook to try and reassemble the pieces of my political and epistemological puzzle.

I ended up returning to metaphors of the circle and to the phenomenological ties, connections and interdependences between myself, the world and others. From there, I theorized a return to Inquiry, Voice and Agency within these interrelated worlds which, I concluded, we must endeavour to explore deeper and reshape in more sustainable terms.

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