

**STRANGERS TO OURSELVES: THE DECOLONIZING POTENTIAL OF THE DISPLACEMENT,
LOSS, & “HOMELESSNESS” OF MIGRANT EXPERIENCES**

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[Begin by playing track form CD: *The streets of New York*]

The song you have just heard, *The streets of New York*, performed by the Jolly Beggarmen, an Irish folk group, is one of a million Irish emigrant tales. This one, though, with tongue firmly in cheek, and the pathos laid on so thickly, could well be heard as a satire on the genre – or perhaps doubles as both. I laugh at its facetiousness. I cringe at its naivete. I revel in its optimism and triumph. But mostly, like all songs of exile, it is filled with longing and loss, and thus it brings my father into the present. Having lost all of his siblings as emigrants to London in the worst of circumstances, he stacked up the economic benefits of exile against the lifelong loss he lived with and it just simply didn't add up. I never could find the words to explain my decision to emigrate to my dad. He wept profusely every time I left. I, in turn, am left perpetually to wonder if Kristeva wasn't correct when, in *Strangers to ourselves* (1993) she suggested that all of us who choose the path of exile are running away from – and no doubt toward - alienation: "Or should one recognize that one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within?" (1991, p.14). Kristeva also recognized how this alienation played out in conversation with parents:

And nevertheless, no, I have nothing to say to them, to any parents. Nothing. Nothing and everything, as always. If I tried – out of boldness, through luck, or in distress – to share with them some of the violence that causes me to be so totally on my own, they would not know where I am, who I am, what it is, in others, that rubs me the wrong way. I am henceforth foreign to them. (1991, pp. 22-23).

Philip Noyce's film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (see Pilkington, n.d.), tells the story of the flight of three aboriginal girls from Moore River Settlement - a mission school for *half caste* children born as the result of liaisons between white fencers and aboriginal women - to which they had forcibly been removed, fully 1200 miles from home. As I watched the story of the systematic attempt by the Australian government to *whiten* Aboriginal people I was struck by the layers of complexity and complicity in the colonizing enterprise. The three girls are tracked relentlessly by the Australian police, and while they are betrayed by some whites on their twelve hundred mile trek, they are assisted materially by others, Their most formidable opponent is one of their own,

Moodoo, an Aboriginal tracker who gives them a run for their money. Yet he, himself, is coerced into working for the government, and his own daughter is also incarcerated in the school. Like all *good natives*, he has cultivated an inscrutability that allows us to project onto him whatever we choose. Consistent with the colonial narrative, Christianity, and racism are conjoined in the persons of the angelic white nuns who run the mission school, scrubbing the children white, policing their language use, and tutoring them in Kiplingesque ditties for the benefit of their white benefactor Mr. Neville/Mr. Devil.

As I read postcolonial reconstructions of the history of India, the Caribbean, the Pacific, countries in Africa, and of course of Ireland itself, I am increasingly struck by the unvarying sameness of the narrative*:

- Economic colonization and military repression in the service of capitalism
- Racism through processes of inferiorization and dehumanization
- Cultural and literal genocide
- Prohibition on schooling and native language
- Development of a planter class – local bourgeoisie - who through mimicry crudely ape their masters, implement their will, and aspire to inherit their power
- Use of Christianization as a tool of subjugation, except in Ireland, where Otherness had to be reinforced through the imposition of Anglican Christianity
- The elimination of indigenous knowledge-making through installation of a univocal, Eurocentric worldview and master discourse
- All of this ultimately leading, in an oddly anesthetized way, to participation of the oppressed in their own subjugation, often in late capitalist “democracies,” all the while believing themselves to be free. Gramsci would be proud!

* Mashaweta Devi speaking of American general knowledge of oppression of Native American peoples makes the following comment in *Imaginary maps*: “Only in the names of places the Native American legacy survives. Otherwise entire tribes have been butchered. Their land has been taken away... But I say to my American readers, see what has been done to them, you will understand what has been done to the Indian [i.e., in India] tribals. Everywhere it is the same story.” (1995, p. xi)

I come from Ireland and I spend a great deal of time meditating on the ways in which colonization, class subjugation, and Catholicism have interpellated and split my being. I will begin with some autobiographical meditations that will hopefully help locate myself. I will then introduce a few brief excerpts from writers whose capacity to capture some of the splits in Irish identity I find useful. I will then offer some meditations on history, memory, subjectivity, and the possibility of occupying the margin subversively.

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And now... a cautionary note from Trinh Minh-ha:

How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naïve whining about your condition? ...Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing the ground is narrow and slippery.

- Trinh (1989, p. 28)

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“And what about your origins? Tell us about them, it must be fascinating!” Blundering fools never fail to ask the question. Their surface kindness hides the sticky clumsiness that so exasperates the foreigner

Kristeva (1991, p. 29)

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My God! I’m split!

Around approximately 1940, one of my fathers’ five sisters became pregnant out of wedlock. As was the custom then, as Peter Mullan details in a film soon to be released in the U.S. entitled The Magdalene Sisters (Magdalene, 2002), girls who had sinned in this way were essentially ordered into permanent servitude under the auspices of Catholic nuns. They lived out their lives scrubbing floors and operating commercial laundries on behalf of the nuns, in conditions that were appalling. Their bastard children were either fostered or sold to the U.S. for adoption. My father’s sister was thus consigned to the local workhouse as an indentured-for-life servant. My father saved enough money from his own meager income for her boat passage to England. He bribed the night watchman,

climbed the gate, extracted her from the workhouse, and sent her to England. He never set eyes on her again. Her child - fostered out to a farm family in another form of indentured service in the Ireland of the period – died in his teenage years.

My father continued to be a devoutly observant Catholic to the very end of his life. The child was fostered to a family less than five miles from my family home... but we were not to learn of this until well after his death.

“C’mon. Hurry up. We’ll miss our lift to school,” my brother urged. I ran furiously . P.J. and Frances, older than I, knew that if we were there he’d let us pile in with all the other kids. What kid wanted to walk the mile to school in the frosty winter of 1958? We arrived at the van out of breath, with thank-yous on the tips of our tongues. We were on the tail end of the group as I scrambled after my brother and sister into the back of the blue Ford van. That was when the hand shot out and Hogan’s voice rasped: “Are you an O’Loughlin? Get out. No O’Loughlins or Macs. I don’t want to see the likes of you again. [From O’Loughlin, 1997]

The story of my early life is in large part a battle against sanctioned inferiorization. I grew up as a member of the working poor in a rigidly class-stratified society. In Ireland, municipal authorities bought plots of land from farmers and built subsidized houses - we called them laborer’s cottages – for the working poor. They put special red tiled clay roofs on the houses so that they were distinctive. ***A ghetto of red-roofed houses, scattered across the rural landscape.*** I guess they felt that we were not sufficiently marked by poverty, and God forbid we might rise above it and conceal our origins. The red roofs served as a powerful reminder to all of our abject origins. My mother lives in that house to this day. She is still marked as Other by the tyranny of bureaucratic architecture. I can recall returning from the only college visit I ever made, and asking the coach driver to stop a quarter mile from my home so that my abject origins would not be found out.

I grew up in a society that endured British colonization for over eight hundred years. British colonialism in Ireland continues to this day. Since the British erased our language in a purposeful campaign of cultural genocide, most of us grew up speaking only English. However, as Homi Bhabha reminds us in his discussion of mimicry, while

the British forced us to speak their language for purposes of domination, there were limits to how well we should speak it: “[T]o be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English” (Bhabha, 1994, p.). Our English was actually meant to mark us as inferior, in the same way that Indian English and Caribbean Englishes mark their speakers as other. It worked. I can recall attending a conference a few years ago and, by chance, sitting next to a colleague from Oxford University who spoke in the perfect cadences of Oxford English. In spite of my best efforts to carry on a collegial conversation, I became overwhelmed with a sense of inferiority and was tongue-tied throughout the meal.

Growing up working-class, I often feel mystified as I try to live the life of an academic and try to understand the pretensions, aspirations, and mysterious ways of my academic colleagues. Ryan and Sackrey’s Strangers in Paradise (1995) and Sennett and Cobb’s Hidden injuries of class (1995) comfort me that the class dislocations I experience are not uniquely mine, but are in fact typical of the contradictions and tensions people experience as they try to cross boundaries in a class stratified society. Must we hide? Do we have to become impostors to our selves? Or can we make room in our society for hybrid identities that allow us to minimize loss as we move across class, gender, race, and national boundaries?

Although I was not conscious of my racial formation, I now realize that the signs of otherness were always present. In our small town people commonly referred to the occasional Nigerian intern at the county hospital as 'the black doctor.' The Catholic Church abetted our racial formation through ubiquitous collection boxes soliciting pennies for 'black babies' in Africa. There was a collection box in every classroom, with a destitute 'black baby' staring vacantly from the photograph pasted on the front. Colonialist images of African blackness as destitute, ignorant, and *other* were promulgated in glossy missionary magazines such as The Far East and Africa, which we sold door to door to help Irish missionaries in 'darkest Africa' and South America. When television came to Ireland we also received our share of images of exotic black otherness from National Geographic type documentaries. I would go to a neighbor's house on summer evenings to watch television. In a country in which Catholic bishops had the power to suppress all images of sexuality, we were permitted to gaze without shame on the dark nakedness of the African Other in National Geographic specials. As Franz Fanon

remarks in his analysis of the effects of colonialism on the black psyche: “In Europe, that is to say, in every civilized and civilizing country, the Negro is the symbol of sin. The Negro represents the archetype of the lowest values.” (1967, p.).

I sit here, more than forty years later and wonder what effect these unexamined representations of otherness have on my psyche. When my mom was in New York for her annual visit last year we got to speaking of my sister, and her newly adopted child from India. We were discussing how well my sister was prepared for raising an ethnically Indian child in Ireland. My mother acknowledged that the child would have problems, and went on to cite widely publicized incidents of racial harassment involving a family of Indian origin. Then she said: *'It's just as well your father is not alive. He'd never speak to her again.'* She went on: *"The baby's too dark. Dad would never accept him. He was always dead set against blacks."* My father had only a fourth-grade formal education. He had limited access to literacy and no interest in television. He rarely traveled beyond a forty mile radius of home. What could be the source of his hatred of 'blacks'? Did his father before him hate 'blacks' too? Did his neighbors and friends? What effect did this unacknowledged hatred have on my racial formation? Are such sentiments handed down unconsciously from one generation to the next through the inferiorization of the psyche or through the transmission of historical memory? What does knowing this do to me?

As for my nephew, he was beaten up on the first day of kindergarten, this Fall in his neighborhood school in a rural area of Ireland.

Shadows of memories: Exactly who do you/I think I am?

Racism & Colonization

In *The Irish mind*, Richard Kearney notes:

The British historian Charles Kingsley provided further justification for the cultural and military oppression of his Irish neighbours, when he composed this racist portrait in 1860: “I am daunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe that there are not only many more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so

much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.” So much for the colonial calibanization of the Irish. (1985, p. 7)

Famine and exile

In her epic work on the Irish Famine, *The great hunger*, Cecil Woodham-Smith (1962) offers many reminders of the genocidal famines that yielded over a million deaths and forced millions more into exile as indentured servants in the mid-1800s. From a passenger’s journal here is how one such *coffin ship* voyage was described:

Most of the passengers were from the South of Ireland; provisions and water were short and of execrable quality, but the captain, Thompson, was kind. Ship fever appeared before the *India* was a week out and Captain Thompson caught it and died; twenty six passengers also died, water ran short and the ration was reduced to a pint a day, three of the passengers became lunatics, and one threw himself overboard. Two ships were hailed and implored for a little water; they replied that they had none to spare – ship fever was raging in their own holds... when, after a voyage of more than eight weeks the *India* arrived at Staten Island he [the journal author] and 122 others were taken to the hospital... the patients were cruelly treated: the beds, grids of iron bars with a little straw laid on the top inflicted torture on the sick, who were reduced by fever to skin and bone; the doctors were negligent and indifferent, the male nurses took a delight in abusing and thwarting the helpless and struck patients for innocent errors; food was uneatable and conditions horribly insanitary. (Woodham-Smith, p. 251)

Whitening

Tragically, the Irish who made it to the U.S. were greeted with an onslaught of prejudice. They might have responded to this by making common cause with free Negroes and by supporting the movement for abolition. Instead, they edged out blacks at the bottom of the social ladder, and, on the basis of racial bonding, claimed those jobs for themselves, as whites: “The Irish, who at home readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro” (Frederick Douglass, 1853, cited in Ignatiev, 1995, frontispiece). Ignatiev goes on:

In 1853 Frederick Douglass noted: “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly-arrived emigrant from the Emerald

Isle, whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor...” ...To be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found.” (pp. 111-12)

Catholicism

In *The gatekeeper*, literary theorist Terry Eagleton, raised in an Irish family in England, summarizes another key marker of Irish identity, Catholicism, this way:

The boy who first revealed to me the facts of life was clearly a Protestant, since he seemed to have read a little scripture. As the hair-raising news of human reproduction assaulted my scandalized ears, I resorted to the only defence available to me. ‘Well,’ I rounded on him, ‘maybe that’s how *Protestants* do it....’

Just as the convent bore only a tenuous relation to reality, so did Catholicism as a whole. Its esoteric doctrines seemed no more applicable to everyday life than trigonometry was applicable to pressing your trousers. Like magic, it was a highly determinate system, but entirely self-confirming, with all the exceptional clarity of an hallucination. Catholicism was less about good deeds than about how to keep the charcoal in your thurible alight or knock about fifty years off your allotted time in purgatory. It was less about charity than candelabras. We were pious and heartless, strict-minded and mean, pure-living and pagan. There was a crazed precision about the Church’s doctrinal system... It resembled the insane exactitude of the psychotic whose mathematical calculations are impeccable, but who is carrying them out perched on a window ledge thirty floors up.”(pp. 30-31)

Child-rearing

Another deeply embedded dimension of Irish culture, and one of special interest to this audience, is a certain hardness when it comes to children’s emotions. This is evident, for example, in Frank McCourt’s widely read *Angela’s ashes* (1996), a work, that was received in parts of Ireland with considerable resentment. Writing in 1991, Anthony Clare, one of Ireland’s leading psychiatrists, characterized Irish culture as “A culture heavily impregnated by an emphasis on physical control, original sin, cultural

inferiority and psychological defensiveness” (p. 14), and he quotes an Irish psychiatrist writing on Irish child-rearing practices in 1976:

The family home in Ireland is a novitiate for violence. Even from the cradle the child is made to feel rejection, hostility, and open physical pain. The infant is left to cry in his cot because his mother does not want to ‘give in to him.’ Later he is smacked with the hand or a stick. He is made to go to bed early. He is not allowed to have his tea. He is put in a room by himself... and in order to invite this morale breaking treatment from his parents, all the Irish child has to do is to be *normal*. It is the normality of childhood that sets parents’ teeth on edge. They take no joy in childishness. (pp. 15-16).

Self-effacement & inferiority

In her recent memoir, *Irish Times* columnist Nuala O’Faolain tackles another great Irish legacy – one that has been interpellated both by Church and colonizing power – a latent sense of inferiority and a demand that everybody practice self-effacement. From school playground to public life there appears to be little room for the show-off, the adventurous, or even the merely successful:

I’m fairly well known in Ireland I’ve been on television a lot, and there’s a photo of me in the paper, at the top of the column. But I’m no star. People have to look at me twice or three times to put a name on me. Sometimes... when I’m in the grocery store someone who has just passed me by turns back and comes right up to me and scrutinises my face. “Are you somebody?” they ask. Well – am I somebody? ...I imagined the hostile response I’d get in my little Irish world. “Who does she think she is?” (1996, p. 5)

Stage Irishness

And finally, for those of you raised on stage Irishry, including an abundance of greenery on Saint Patrick’s day, Irish Spring advertisements, and movies such as *The quiet man* (Quiet man, 1952), consider noted Irish writer Brinsley MacNamara’s (1890-1963) comments on how this contributes to inferiorization:

[Brinsley MacNamara] first came into prominence in 1918 with the publication of his satirical novel, *The valley of the squinting windows*. [He] had grown tired of the portraits of his countrymen as a lot of cheerful buffoons whose main function

was to entertain the tourist, the more civilized fellow who bought colour postcards of the Irishman with the caubeen and the shillelagh and hurros in his mouth. He looked around for another type of Irishman, not as cheerfully idiotic perhaps, less of a joke, but more likely for all his frailties to be capable of self-respect and self-government, and he set him down as a counterblast to all the amiable fools.

(O'Donnell & Kiely, 1964)

On homelessness, marginality and the decolonizing potential of loss and otherness

My return to my native Ireland this summer was unsettling. I went “home” – yes, I still call it “home” - but everywhere I went I felt that people silently coded me as Other. I wandered through Dublin trying fruitlessly to find myself in a sea of Irish faces. At the conference I attended I felt pierced by an Irish gaze. This contemptuous gaze, with which I was all too familiar, was the one that we – oops, “they” - reserve for pathetic Yanks coming back to find their roots. As Eva Hoffman (1990) and others (e.g., Aciman, 1999) have noted, a journey into subjectivity is also a wrenching journey away from subjectivity. Gains come through losses. Voice emerges from muteness. Mobility from paralysis. As Kristeva (1991) notes, border crossers – and here I include gender, class, and ethnic border crossers as well as migrants and exiles – become strangers to themselves. This painful location – one of displacement, ambiguity, hybridity and loss – which may be increasingly a feature of the alienated global capitalist world we inhabit (cf. Cushman, 1995), while likely a part of all our subjectivities, is etched in sharp relief in the migrant’s search for home.

To try to pull this together theoretically, I would like to offer some brief thoughts on three aspects of what Leo Spitzer (1988) calls “the predicament of marginality”. I will focus on subaltern memory, doubleness, and the origins of subjectivity in alienation. This, in turn, will lead me to some brief concluding thoughts.

The possibilities of subaltern memory

In *The burden of memory*, Wole Soyinka (1999) describes the capacity of an ancient piece of Yoruba music to call up fossil memories from within his psyche, the kinds of memories that offer some hope for a better world:

It was a dirge of ancestral severance, of loss too great to quantify, only numbing, yet filled with evocation of a quiescent triumph that is an extract of human resilience, of a shedding of individuation into a tide of universal affirmation of a humane oneness... The Sosso-Bala becomes an unsolicited metaphor for the near intolerable burden of memory, a muse for the poetry of identity and that elusive “leaven” in the dough of humanity – forgiveness, the remission of wrongs, and a recovery of lost innocence. (pp. 193-94)

I share Soyinka’s faith in the possibility of memory, and I have found books such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988, see also Plasa, 1999) and Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1982) pedagogically valuable for engaging my students with their own historical constitutedness.* However, we should not be fooled. Stepping outside of a Westernized/ Eurocentric/ enlightenment/ rational bubble is not an easy task. As Spivak (1988) aptly queried, “Can the subaltern speak?” Trinh Minh-Ha (1989) describes the dangers of “false incorporation” and “hegemonic dis-ease” thus:

A conversation of “us” with “us” about “them” is a conversation in which “them” are silenced. “Them” always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence... The privilege to sit at table with “us,” however, proves both uplifting and demeaning. It impels “them” to partake in the reduction of itself and the appropriation of its otherness by a detached “us” discourse. The presence of a (grateful) witness serves to legalize such discourse, allowing it to mimic, whenever necessary, the voice of truth... All admittance of “them” among “us” is hence a false incorporation that leaves “them” barer than ever... (p. 67).

This is why, despite the risks of narcissistic excess <*Who do I think I am?*> I thought it wiser to focus on my own Irish borders today rather than the inviting Latino and indigenous struggles that surround us here in Arizona. The issue is not one of ignorance or evil intent. Rather, as Ashis Nandy (1983) points out, it has to do with *the enemy within*: the interpellation of our subjectivities with particular ways of being - an “imperial consciousness” which speaks our subjectivities. Referring, for example, to the

* See O’Loughlin (2002a) for further discussion.

problematic of a Westerner attempting to understand Indianness, he suggests – and this is reminiscent of Lacan – that we are actually peering at our own otherness in the mirror:

India has always been a separate world, hard for any outsider, *Eastern or Western*, to penetrate. Such a culture becomes a projective test; it invites one not only to project onto it one's deepest fantasies, but also to reveal, through such self-projection, the interpreter rather than the interpreted. All interpretations of India are ultimately autobiographical. (pp. 79-80).

Nandy notes that rationality is the “first strand of consciousness to be coopted by any successful structure of institutionalized oppression” (p. 113), Indian historians such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) make similar arguments. Chakrabarty states, for example, that because of the dominating power of western imperial consciousness,

Europe remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these histories become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history. (p. 27)

The real crux of the matter, as Chakrabarty is well aware, is that Western modes of being are tied up with “the practices, institutions, and discourses of bourgeois individualism,” such that for an Indian “to be a ‘modern individual’ was to be European” (p. 33). Chakrabarty argues that the kind of confessional, private archeological inquiry that typifies Western subjectivity [e.g., that this paper may represent] – and that is inherent in bourgeois psychoanalysis, for example, of which I am a practitioner[†] – is alien to Indian epistemology and subjectivity.[‡] Can all of this mirror-gazing and projection ever get us outside the circle of imperial consciousness? He frames the issue thus:

[†]Referring to psychoanalysis, Jacques Derrida notes that “there is practically no psychoanalysis in Africa, white or black, just as there is practically no psychoanalysis in Asia or in the South Seas. These are among those parts of ‘the rest of the world’ where psychoanalysis has never set foot, or in any case where it has never taken off its European shoes.... African psychoanalysis was European, structurally defined in the profoundest way by the colonial state apparatus.” (1998, p.690)

[‡] See Paula Gunn Allen's *Off the reservation* (1998) for a critique of U.S. universities from the perspective of a Native American woman who finally left her academic post because of the predicament of marginality.

This modern individual, however, whose political/public life is lived in citizenship, is also supposed to have an interiorized “private” self that pours out incessantly in diaries, letters, autobiographies, novels, and, of course, in what we say to our analysts. The bourgeois individual is not born until one discovers the pleasures of privacy. But this is a very special kind of “private” self, as Jurgen Habermas has reminded us, “always already oriented to an audience...” Indian public life may mimic on paper the bourgeois legal fiction of citizenship... but what about the bourgeois private self and its history? Anyone who has tried to write a “French” social history with Indian material would know how impossibly difficult this task is. It is not that the forms of the bourgeois private self did not come with European rule. There have been since the middle of the nineteenth century, Indian novels, diaries, letters, and autobiographies, but they seldom yield pictures of an endlessly interiorized subject... Autobiographies in the confessional mode are notable for their absence. (p.35)

The double bind of exile

I belong nowhere, and everywhere am a stranger, a guest at best.

- Stefan Zweig (quoted in Spitzer, 1989, p. 171)

This means that settled within himself, the foreigner has no self... I do what they want me to, but it is not “me” – “me” is elsewhere, “me” belongs to no one, “me” does not belong to “me,” ...does “me” exist?

- Julia Kristeva (1991, p. 8)

Eventually, of course, one does stop being an exile. But even a “reformed” exile will continue to practice the one thing exiles do almost as a matter of instinct: compulsive retrospection. With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they’re also seeing – or looking for – another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile, the point being that exile, like love, is not just a condition of pain, it’s a condition of deceit.

- André Aciman (1999, p. 13)

What is to be the fate of the exile, the migrant, the hybrid, the border crosser? Are these writers unduly pessimistic? The in-depth case studies of the lives of three very successful nineteenth century border crossers, Stefan Zweig, Cornelius May, and André Rebouças, as reported by Leo Spitzer (1989), offer little comfort that even assimilated second-generation migrants can stop looking over their shoulders. Spitzer tells us that despite the extraordinary success of these men in their adopted lands, assimilation and acceptance were highly contingent. Cornelius May, son of a freed slave, was raised in bourgeois respectability in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and accomplished his parents’ dream of assimilation by becoming a newspaper publisher as well as mayor of Freetown. “Throughout his formative years,” Spitzer notes, “Cornelius May found the British colonial system, of which he was a subject, generally acceptable, and viewed himself as different from – and superior to – Africans who had not experienced or taken advantage of prolonged cultural contact with Europeans in order to ‘better’ themselves” (p. 143). André Rebouças a mulatto child in Brazil rose to a position of major importance in Brazil’s government as well as in industry through a “willingness to become totally identified with the values of the predominantly white Brazilian elite” (Spitzer, p. 115). Stefan Zweig, one of the most widely read and translated authors of his time (Spitzer, p.73) was a Viennese Jew who experienced immense success until the rise of Hitler, when “for perhaps the first time... Stefan Zweig, European, was being *defined from without* as Stefan Zweig Jew” (Spitzer, p.167). Two of these highly accomplished men (Rebouças & Zweig) became despondent at their ultimate rejection on racial grounds after years of successful assimilation, and committed suicide, and the other (May) was turned upon and imprisoned for becoming what we would now, no doubt, term an uppity

(= educated and black) Black man in a British colony. What these case studies demonstrate is the permanent insecurity many border crossers feel. Otherness and difference are continually marked and the race [*gender/sexual orientation/ class/ religion/ migrant/ exile/ alien/ terrorist/Muslim/Of Middle Eastern descent/illegal alien/suspicious looking/shifty/different...*] card can be sprung at a moment's notice. Spitzer sums it up this way:

Ultimately, however, even members of this second postemancipation generation found no guarantee in the assimilationist process to ensure their continued acceptance and security in the world of the dominant. With racism on the rise as a potentially negating barrier, it did not matter that André Rebouças, Cornelius May and Stefan Zweig were more comfortably rooted and more thoroughly integrated within the dominant society than their parents. When they eventually perceived themselves rejected and excluded by racism...[t]hey were then plunged into a period of considerable psychological uncertainty about their identity: a crisis period of inner conflict and disorientation during which they became conscious of their marginal position between two worlds. (p.145)

Kristeva sums up the perpetual anxiety of the foreigner thus in *Strangers to ourselves*: “Civilized people need not be gentle with foreigners. “That’s it, and if you don’t like it why don’t you go back where you came from!” (1991, p.14). A graduate student in my class last Fall sent me a note with similar sentiments after a class discussion that explored social inequalities and the workings of white privilege in the U.S. Small wonder we keep looking over our shoulders.

The origins of subjectivity in alienation

“Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.” Thus Genesis, on humankind’s first exiles. Since then, is there anyone who does not- in some way on some level – feel that they are in exile? We feel ejected from our first homes and landscapes, from childhood, from our first family romance, From our authentic self. We feel there is an ideal sense of

*belonging, of community, of attunement with others, and at-homeness with ourselves,
that keeps eluding us.*

- Hoffman (1999, p. 39)

While my remarks thus far may have induced in you some reverie about your own border crossings, or some speculations about the challenges facing indigenous, bicultural, and migrant children, as well as all children who are seen as other in our world, Eva Hoffman's statement is a reminder that this comes much closer to home for all of us. Both Kleinian theory (cf. Rose, 1993) and Lacanian theory (Fink, 1995; Lacan 1968, 1977, 1978; Van Haute, 2002) address the onset of otherness in the formation of subjectivity, though, in this aspect, Klein's emphasis is more narrowly on the psychic scars of the birth trauma itself.[§] Here I will discuss Lacan's understanding of the alienation caused by entry into the social world, beginning perhaps at six months of age. For Lacan, the journey into self is, in many respects, a journey away from one's originary sense of being – the primordial "I." Lacan argues, as does Althusser (1971), that *becoming a subject* is a process of *becoming subject to* the prevailing discursive practices of society. The paradox is that what we consider to be a *self* requires giving up much of the primordial "I," and constructing a sense of self by entering the linguistic and discursive practices of society. Thus, *self* is shaped through the responses of *others*, and is thereby a fundamentally alienating experience. More precisely, a child's subjectivity is shaped both by explicit *demand* as well as unconscious *desires* of the Others in a child's life. When the infant's first encounter its own image in a mirror it sees the primordial "I." The mirror image rapidly becomes objectified through the linguistic structuring of the Other ["Oh look at the baby. Baby. Say baby! B-a-b-y!]. Gradually the child internalizes identification with the object and eventually becomes a speaking and indeed *spoken* – hence alienated - subject:

The *mirror-stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from

See Rose (1993) and O'Loughlin (2002b) for further discussion. Psychoanalytic inquiry into the origins of autistic and schizophrenic states in children, conducted at the Tavistock Clinic, London, includes study of the effects of the trauma of initial separation (cf. Alvarez, 1992; Tustin, 1992) as a contributing factor in the development of those conditions.

a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development (Lacan, 1977, p.4).

The young child is in an impossible position. To refuse to enter the world of language and to refuse identification with the Other in an attempt to preserve the primordial “I” leaves the child in a psychotic state of the kind discussed by Alvarez (1992) and Tustin (1992). Fink notes that “A psychotic child may very well *assimilate* language, but cannot *come to be* in language the same way as a neurotic child” (1995, p. 55). Accepting language, however, and entering the symbolic world, while clearly necessary for interpersonal functioning, as well as for the symbolization of subjective psychic experience, comes with a cost - alienation. The *coming to be* of the child is in response to the linguistic structuring of the child’s experiences by its parents [e.g., A parent responding to a baby’s image in the mirror by saying “Baby” or “Jane”]. Lacan suggests that it is the sum of these collective linguistic structurings that causes a child to build up a sense of self. What makes Lacan’s theory especially interesting, however, is a focus on the unconscious rather than the ego. While a mother, for example, may repeatedly tell her son that he is a model son, this is not necessarily what enters the child’s unconscious. As Fink, from whom this example is drawn, notes: “‘You’re a model son’ – is, like all communication, prone to miscommunication: the son may understand/misunderstand that appraisal in terms of model cars and planes, viewing himself thereafter as but a miniaturized, plastic version of the real thing, instead of a genuine son” (1995, p. 37). In addition, since the child is taking in mirror images of reality through the Other’s discursive practices and desires, many distortions, including obviously reverse <mirror> images, are introduced into the child’s construction of self. Thus, each of us gains a sense of existence by subscribing to a symbolic order that has begun structuring our subjectivities well before we are born, and even before we are conceived: Lacan is clear, however, that while we develop a sense of self through entry into language and the capacity to symbolize, human agency rests not with a *self* or ego, but in the unconscious. And he gives numerous examples of how the unconscious plays

with language to express meanings and desires through slips and slides that offer tiny windows to our inner subjectivity or state of being.

Lacan also believes that a child's desire is structured through the Other's – often mOther's desire- and that in effect “*the subject is caused by the Other's desire.*” (Fink, 1995, p.50). Philippe Van Haute summarizes the workings of desire in the child this way:

What then does the mother want? What makes her repeated absences necessary? Or yet again: What does she desire that apparently I cannot give her. To the degree that the little child remains caught in the logic of the unconditional demand for love, it can think of only one solution to this situation – it tries to be or become the object that can fulfill the desire of the mother, and thereby tries to finally assure itself of the mother's love. (2002, p. 113).

However, as Van Haute notes, “As long as the little child remains caught up in the logic of the unconditional demand in this way, and can only understand itself in terms of the (desire of the) mother, there is no place for the development of its own desire.” (p. 114).

Lacan suggests that the omnipotence of the mOther's desire is a significant source of anxiety, and that the child needs to break free from the mOther in order to develop it's own desires. Lacan argues that through entering the symbolic the child can break free from this reality, and he suggests that transitional object serve the function of symbolizing this break, inevitably accompanied by alienation:

According to Lacan the appearance of the transitional object is a process of metaphorization... through the process of metaphorization, direct access to the object is closed off, and the relation to the object is henceforth necessarily mediated by language. In this way, meaning can arise, but at the same time something is essentially lost. No matter how much we might try to express it fully, the object can never be totally integrated into the symbolic. (Van Haute, p. 121)

The way forward, according to Lacan, is not through the ego, or through conscious processes. Our conscious self allows us to exist, but the unconscious – which Lacan calls the *real* – is where being resides: “While existence is granted only through the symbolic order (the alienated subject being assigned a place therein), being is

supplied only by cleaving to the real” (Fink, 1995, p. 61). The challenge for therapists, teachers, and parents, therefore, is to try to get real where possible in the interests of psychic growth.

Thinking madly: Ode to Spike Milligan

*Being deframed., so to speak, from everything familiar
makes for a certain fertile detachment.*

- Eva Hoffman, 1999, p. 50

Trying to find the other by defining otherness or by explaining the other through laws and generalities is, as Zen says, like beating the moon with a pole or scratching an itchy foot from the outside of a shoe. There is no such thing as a “coming face to face once and for all with objects”; the real remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. In writing close to the other of the other, I can only choose to maintain a self-reflexively critical relationship toward the material, a relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject, undoing the I while asking “what do I want wanting to know you or me?”

Trinh Minh-ha, 1989, p. 76

Lacan argues for the benefits of hysterical discourse over conventional hegemonic discourses. As Trinh suggest in the quote above, rational analysis will hardly get the job done: “Understanding is ultimately a form of defense, of bringing everything back to what is already known” (Fink, 1995, p.149). However, since we are stuck with words, Lacan argues for using a hysterical sensibility to detect the tears in the fabric of the symbolic order and to reach through for revolutionary possibilities:

Whereas the university discourse takes its cue from the master signifier, glossing over it with some trumped-up system, the hysteric goes at the master and demands that he or she show his or her stuff, prove his or her mettle... the hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective division, the contradiction between conscious

and unconscious, and thus the conflictual or self-contradictory, nature of desire itself. (Fink, 1995, p.133)

The late Spike Milligan with his mad capacity for seeing the world from upside down and inside out might be a better guide to getting close to the real than the kind of intellectual imprisonment that much of university discourse provides.

I believe that those of us who live consciously with the predicament of marginality can work to complexify and decolonize our students' understandings of these processes. By becoming sensitive to the exquisite losses involved in border crossings we can engage our migrant, ethnic and class border crossing students and our gender bending students in hysterical conversations that rupture rationality and reveal the socially constructed and hence hegemonic nature of the symbolic realm of language use. We will never be able to assure them of comfort but at least we can let them know that they are not alone (cf, hooks, 1990). The margin is actually a pretty crowded place - thankfully! And this Reconceptualizing Conference is just such a margin, laden with possibilities of mad conversation.

One final question

If, as Lacan suggests, language is such a powerful structuring experience in the formation not only of our *selves* but particularly in the formation of our unconscious and hence of our *subjective sense of being*, what is the fate of migrants or exiles whose lives and subjectivities are encoded in one language, yet lived out in another? In *Lost in translation*, Eva Hoffman describes how she left Cracow for Vancouver at age 13 and discovered that in losing her language she lost contact with her very being:

The worst losses come at night. As I lied down in a strange bed in a strange house... I wait for the spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself, my way of informing the ego where the id had been. Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experiences; they don't coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private

conversation could proceed... Now, this picture-and-word show is gone; the thread has been snapped. I have no interior language. (1989, pp.107-08)

Hoffman's explanation of how therapy helped her re-symbolize her inner life has important pedagogical and therapeutic implications for how we think about working with bilingual and bicultural children and adults, and indeed with border crossers of any stripe:

For me, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiation: initiation into the language of the subculture within which I happen to live, into a way of explaining myself to myself. But gradually, it becomes a project of translating backward. The way to jump over my Great Divide is to crawl backward over it in English. It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; It is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (1989, pp. 271-72)

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**“On being homeless”: The decolonizing possibilities of displaced lives
and fractured subjectivities**

SESSION ABSTRACT:

For border crossers there is no “home,” no unitary subjectivity. As migrants from diverse parts of the world, crossing language, class, and cultural borders, we have found ourselves homeless both “at home” and in our “new” homes, our subjectivities literally “lost in translation.” Using autobiographical narrative and theory we explore how experiences of displacement, loss, and “homelessness” impinge on the lives of border children and how our own experiences as border crossers lead us to imagine the decolonizing possibilities of a pedagogy of multiple subjectivities.