Toward understanding a curriculum of being inhabited by the language of the other

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I feel lost outside the French language. The other languages which, more or less clumsily, I read, decode, or sometimes speak, are languages I shall never inhabit. … But the “untranslatable” remains—should remain, as my law tells me—the poetic economy of the idiom… (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 56).

In the South, the suspense of an autumn harvest shortens, as the southeastern sugarcane fields reach up towards the bluish sky. The cypress and live oak trees, leaning from the levees, shed this season’s greenery into the depths of the Louisiana bayous murky meanderings. A grayness of Spanish moss still dangles from the nakedness. I fall behind, and delay any headings, towards a final arrival at the academic shores of the Louisiana State University instituted general examinations, what Derrida (1980/1983) calls elsewhere a time of a thesis: punctuations. I have difficulty finding, “…the potential values that sleep or play at the bottom…” of writing, on writing, about Derrida’s (1990/2002) philosophies, autobiography as currere¹, the relationships among self, other, institutions, and their housed systems of universal knowledge (p. 4). Often at the end of the night, after trying to negotiate and translate thoughts on Derrida’s various concepts (deconstruction, idiom, aporia, genealogy, trace, difference, différance, language, translation, subject, etc.) into spoken and written words, I close his books which clutter the kitchen table in sweet submission, unable to surrender to the language of deconstruction, his deconstruction of language.

Dawn arrives before me, and as the sun surfaces at the horizon of Louisiana’s wetlands, I struggle to translate their alien landscape. My thoughts continue to tremble with fear in the face of examining the untranslatable poetics
of Derrida’s writing, his birthing of idiomatic conceptions, and their respective excesses of otherness. I long for the arrival of dusk, for the specters of Derrida to whisper a gift of understanding, a translation of his conceptual riddles, the secrets of his aporias, and inscribe this time of thinking into the marks of a written language, always situated, limited, “…on the verge of untranslatability” (p. 41). Under the shadows of the horizon, the following creative energy, electricity, teleports life, its materiality into re-marks, repetitions, and iterations from Derrida’s writings onto the landscape of this textual body.

“Dusk is,” Kohák (1984) reminds us, “the time of philosophy” (p. 32). In this nighttime of writing, its unconscious sleepwalking, its shadows, I am concerned most of all with where to begin a (philosophical, curricular) “complicated conversation,” from where to affirm our departure (Pinar, 2004). This moment of writing then, is a response to questions raised in previous texts, in other academic landscapes, now mapped within the temporal limits of this autobiographical writing, as I “search for a method” of “understanding” Derrida’s curriculum on inhabiting and being inhabited by the language of the other (see Pinar, 1975/2000; Pinar & Reynolds, W., & Slattery, P., and Taubman, P. 1995).

It is the end of August and under its starlit nights, off the shores of language, I continue to sleep and play on the horizon of Derrida’s writing. This paper traces, often drawing on autobiographical examples, the temporal migrations of educational experiences in the language of the other. As a documented Canadian and British citizen, an immigrant with an ex-appropriated proper name traced to Guyana’s indentured Chinese cane reapers, and thus, an imperial and postcolonial subject with certain identity disorders here in America, Canada, and elsewhere, how is a migratory subject subjected to the language of the other? More specifically, how might one learn, via currere, from a migrant subject’s educational experiences of appropriation and alienation in the language of the other? In order to do so, in the first section I examine Derrida’s concept of “deconstruction” and its relationships to deconstructing “the subject” of colonialism, language, and its translations. In the second section I problematize the impossible colonial politics of properly appropriating the language of the other. In the last section, I introduce a curriculum of hospitality towards the language of the other which moves beyond alienation and appropriation. Now, let us open this paper with a letter.

**Addressing a letter on the subject of deconstruction**

…I would say that the difficulty of defining and therefore also of translating the word “deconstruction” stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or to that translation, are also
deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc. (Derrida, 1983a/1991, p. 274).

The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 11).

It is before the thaw of daybreak. Yesterday’s reading, thinking, and writing experiences a certain temporal death. However, the temporality of a yesterday—the writing and understanding of Derrida’s concept of “deconstruction,” its immediacy—is suspended between the lines of these pages, dawn and dusk, life and death. My thoughts continue to inscribe their particular traces on these pages with a universal energy. Today, this paper opens with an addressing, a re-turning, to the subject of deconstruction in a Letter to a Japanese Friend. Derrida (1983a/1991) cautions professor Izutsu,

It goes without saying that if all the significations [on deconstruction] enumerated by the Littré interested me because of their affinity with what I “meant” [“voulais-dire”], they concerned, metaphorically, so to say, only models or regions of meaning and not the totality of what deconstruction aspires to at its most ambitious (p. 271).

These models themselves, Derrida (1983a/1991) maintains, must be submitted to “deconstructive questioning” (p. 271). Derrida (1992a/2001) reminds us, asks us, demands of us in the name of responsibility for the other, to free “deconstruction,” the “subject,” “its human rights,” from the “word,” and its assumed logocentric or phonocentric idiomatic forms. Deconstructive work involves tracing genealogies across academic borderlands, and uncovering the historical layers from which such concepts and their translations emerge, and thus are promised, and made

A gift of death instituting slavery created a historical space for Chinese indentured laborers, known as Cane Reapers, to birth their existence without origin into the margins of Guyana’s national narrative. Britain abolished the slavery of African subjects in 1834. However the West Indies plantation owners’ demands for cheap labor did not diminish. Chinese subjects subjected to persecution, famine, or wanting to escape a feudal system, in search of "common" wealth, migrated to British Guiana (see Sue-A-Quan, 1999). China prohibited such emigration, fearing the possible political revolution caused by those who returned from "foreign" places. A subject, not yet hyphenated, traveled the tumultuous seas, without the possibility of return, in order to become an indentured laborer cutting cane along the tributaries of the Demerara River. No longer with rights as a Chinese subject, or protected by rights as a British subject, Fook Ng, my great, great, grandfather, was now a subject subjected to the power of colonial rule.
Some time after the 1850s, the first ships from China made the arduous journey to the land of many rivers for which the local Amerindians named Guiana. On Fook Ng’s arrival at the gates of the colonial port, a British magistrate translated and reinscribed this foreign subject’s first and last names with the unfamiliar anglicized marks of John and Cyril respectively. His son later reappropriated his Chinese name. Hyphenating his father’s former Chinese title, the family surname became Cyril Ng-A-Fook. The descendents of John Cyril Ng-A-Fook Jr. learned how to embrace the inscription and father the language of this newly named title. Although his title was translated, the subject of Fook Ng’s history continues to survive and surf the postcolonial hyphens between self, other, language, and culture.

The “first thing you have to do is a universal translation” of what “the subject” is and is not (Derrida, 1992a/2001, p. 178). Deconstruction of the word “subject” is then first for Derrida (1992a/2001), among other things, “the genealogical analysis of the trajectory through which the concept has been built, used, legitimized, and so on” (p. 177-178). And to deconstruct the subject is not, Derrida (1983a/1991) makes it clear, to destroy, dissolve, or cancel the legitimacy of what you are deconstructing. Furthermore, “the subject” of which Derrida (1992a/2001) speaks, is not used the same way in the Anglo-American tradition for example, as it is in continental philosophy.

Beyond a dogmatic critique of pure reason, Derrida (1990/2002, 1991a/1992, 1992a/2001) asks us to recall, with care and rigor, our double duty, our inheritance of concepts, and the language which conceives the subject of deconstruction, in order to reaffirm the limitless possibilities illuminated by the philosophical heritage of Husserl, Heidegger, Kant, Descartes, Aristotle, and so on. The “…subject was first,” Derrida (1992a/2001) explains, “in the Aristotelian tradition the hypocheimenon, something which is underneath, identical to itself, and different from its different properties, qualities, attributes; it is the center of an identity” (p. 178). The “speaking subject” performs certain representations of identities—cultural and national—through language, his or her mother tongue (see Derrida, 1967/1973, 1996/1998). Butler (1990/1999) stresses, that “the domains of political and linguistic ‘representation’ set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are
formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject” (p. 4). How might one then reaffirm the structure of “the subject,” within autobiography for example, while questioning the limits of its canonized representations (e.g., a white European male bourgeoisie)? In the name of God, king, queen, country, state, or the metropolis, institutions such as the university guard and discipline the legitimacy of who is (which subjects are) entitled access to the universal systems of Euro-, Ameri, and/or Can-centric knowledge. And, as Butler (1990/1999) stresses, such universal systems work in turn to shape “the subject.”

The American State, albeit not globally alone, continues to invest in a cultural, linguistic and economic capital which attempts to reproduce a common subject, with a common curriculum, and thus disseminates its empire through ideological apparatuses—juridical, educational, medical, religious, media, etc.—which makes the subject of deconstruction, and the deconstruction of “the subject” all the more pressing today. In “Privilege,” Derrida (1990/2002) continues to work, without settling for a resolution, through the oppositions, paradoxes, and aporias of “what is,” and “what is not” philosophy. Who has the “rights” to such philosophical institutions? In following such lines of questioning, what are and what are not, the “rights” of a migrant subject? As a migrant, an indentured laborer, a postcolonial subject, what were John Cyril Ng-A-Fook’s rights of access to the institutions which house a knowledge of citizenship, its language, and in turn his entitlement to, the right to name and to naming his rights? Derrida (1990/2002) makes it clear that

…the title given (or refused) someone always supposes, and this is a circle, the title of a work, that is, an institution, which alone is entitled to give (or refuse) it. Only an institution (the title of the body entitled to confer titles) can give someone his or her title (p. 4).

But who then, entitles an (colonizing) institution? Such institutional entitlement is presupposed, Derrida (1990/2002) explains, for institutions (philosophical, juridical, medical, educational, etc.) are already entitled to give someone his or her title. Institutions entitle themselves through an exemplary system, a system of circular examples, (which, through a tradition of Western logocentrism proves, offers proofs of its logic) originated, established, and privileged by an instituted foundation of what is and what is not.

Deconstruction, therefore, is a “questioning in the sense of search, exploration, reflectivity, rejection of all assumptions, not as an act of demolition, but as striving for awareness” of alterity, heading towards the possibility of otherness which resides at the marginal limits of such institutions (Egéa-Kuehne, 1995, p. 299). Derrida (1992a/2001) suggests that if you call deconstruction “…an ethics of affirmation, it implies that you are attentive to otherness, to the alterity of the other, to something new and other” (p. 180). How does “the
subject” of deconstruction negotiate his or her (human) rights to name, of naming, his or her rights of otherness, his or her citizenship in the language of a colonizing other? How do the institutions of schooling and their languages work in the configurations of such entitlements? What knowledges are privileged and presupposed in (colonizing) educational institutions? Writing towards the impossible terrain of “properly” understanding the answers to such questions is where this paper heads next.

Returning to the shores of a french language: Colonial politics of language


It is another day after yesterday in August. In the South, the humid invisibility, damp and heavy, floats over the landscape’s eroding skin. Birds of flight continue their migration to the refuges of Louisiana’s vanishing wetlands. Once again, nighttime overshadows a place of thinking, reading, and writing. I entangle myself in Le Monde with the textual body of Derrida’s interview. Alien to the climate of this landscape, I sense the estrangement of invisibility coming from beneath the cracks of my apartment door. I struggle to translate, always with a certain amount of violence and death towards the language of the other. How might I then, whisper and breathe life into the words of Derrida? Under the alienating light of darkness and solitude, its shadows, I learn that Derrida’s breathing and his suspension between life and death is shrinking, shortening, slowly ceasing.

He is suffering, internally, with pancreatic cancer. Just before daybreak, before the songs of mourning doves awake me, I am reminded of the parallels between him and my father’s colonial births, their shared encounters with

Through the process of translating Derrida’s interview, I stumble across words for which translation and their immediate understanding are, deferred, not ready-at-hand. Are they ever? But suspended, I am, in the cultural web of the French language. The following sentence, “Le temps du sursis se rétrécit de façon accélérée,” eludes my present comprehension. The words “sursis” and “récit” are alien, and alienate, my ephemeral moment of understanding.

My memories of a language, the only language we had in the French Catholic School system I attended, a language that was never mine, eludes a proper appropriation. Although I find some reprieve keeping a French-English dictionary close at hand, I continue to struggle, while trying to negotiate the violence of universal translation, of excluding and reducing all possible meanings of the other, to a proper English idiom. I settle with the following phrase, “The time, suspended in reprieve, shrinks ever faster.” At the end of this process of translating French writing into language, its inscriptions into thoughts, thoughts back into English language, and its inscriptions into writing, I learn that Derrida’s time suspended between life and death shrinks ever faster.
terminal illnesses, exclusions, separations, and en-titled ties to national
citizenships and their alienating institutions. To be alien, an alien worker, is to
live without title, without the human rights afforded under the language of en-
title-ment.8

Alienation is a certain death of the subject, and yet one’s own death is an
alien moment in autobiographical writing. Can Derrida and my father write a
currere of death, when death precedes such writing? One remains “…un-educate-
able with regards to the knowledge of knowing how to die,” Derrida (2004)
reminds us. Yet, can one write about a certain death of yesterday, of who “I” was
yesterday? There is also death between the hyphenated spaces of alienation and
appropriation, a violence, a loss of meaning, involved in first, and second, and
third, and fourth, …and…and…and, translations of a French language that was
never mine, or an English language that never was Fook Ng’s. But, there is also a
birthing of a language and its otherness in such—hyphenated—“third space”
(Wang, 2004). And therefore, how does one learn-to-live within the aporias—a
language of undecidability—of such hyphenated third space?

In response to this question, Derrida (1996/1998) shares the following:

1. We only ever speak one language—or rather one
idiom only.

2. We never speak only one language—or rather
there is no pure idiom (p. 8).

In Monolingualism of the other, Derrida works to situate our lived experiences in,
and with, a language which moves beyond the hyphenated spaces of appropriation
and alienation. Derrida migrated from Algeria to study in Paris. But even before
leaving the shores of Africa in 1949, Derrida spoke in the language of a country
where he had never been himself. “My language, the only one I hear myself speak
and agree to speak,” Derrida (1996/1998) tells us, “is the language of the other”
(p. 25).

Elsewhere Derrida (1997/2001) explains,

French is the only mother tongue I have, but while
still a child I had a vague sensation that this
language was not really my own. … So I had the
feeling that this language, which was the only one I
had, came from somewhere else (p. 38).

His family migrated to Algeria from Spain before the French colonization. The
Crémieux Decree in 1870 granted French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria. Less
than a century later in October of 1940, during WWII and the German persecution
of Jews, Henri Philippe Pétain’s administration abolished the Crémieux Decree.9
Two years later Derrida was expelled from elementary school. “Here we have a 12-year-old boy,” Derrida (1997/2001) writes, “who, without anyone explaining to him what anti-Semitism is, or what is happening politically, is kicked out of school” (p. 37-38).

Yet, Derrida (1996/1998) stresses, the denial of French citizenship did not prevent an unprecedented assimilation of the State official and institutionally privileged language. Derrida (1997/2001) continues, “a crack is opened in the relative security of the school, the place where culture is offered to him, where languages are taught—especially the dominant models of the French language” (p. 38). As a result of his expulsion, Derrida’s parents enrolled him in a Jewish school. But he still experienced anti-Semitism outside the school, in the streets, and among his circle of peers. The lived experience of not belonging, its alienation, affected his relationship with the Jewish community. Derrida’s (1997/2001) childhood trauma caused him to cultivate “a sort of not-belonging to French culture and to France in general, but also, in some way, to reject” his belonging to Judaism (p. 39).

In reading Derrida’s account of exclusions due to his paternal and genealogical ties to Judaism, cultural Jewishness, I try to imagine how exclusion emerged/erases under the proper surname of Ng-A-Fook and its traces of Chinese-ness, or in turn, how it erases Gaelic-ness under the maiden name Gray.10 Father gained and lost his British citizenship in the land of many rivers. When Guyana was granted liberation in 1966, many former colonial subjects, who where not born on the Queen’s crown land, now occupied a post-colonial status of not belonging, and lost their inalienable rights granted under the title of British citizenship and its entitlements: “citizenship, does not define a cultural, linguistic, or, in general, historical participation” (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 15). Even during the global decolonization of the 1950s and 1960s, institutions in France and Britain continued to define their national identities by the groups they did not—Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Black, Indian, migrants—belong to.

In “Privilege,” Derrida (1990/2002) writes,

The surface of its [the institutions’] archive is then marked by what it keeps outside, expels, or does not tolerate. It takes the inverted shape of that which is rejected. It lets itself be delineated by the very thing...
that threatens it or that it feels to be a threat. In order to identify itself, to be what it is, to delimit itself and recognize itself in its own name, it must espouse the very outlines of its adversary, if I can put it thus (p. 5).

During different historical eras the French and British institutional apparatuses have had to react and redefine their cultural identities and respective national narratives in the “face” of a certain “masked” otherness, by declaring with a politics of language what they were not (Fanon, 1967/1991). This universal system of exclusionary logic, of defining philosophically what the other is, and what one is not, its system of deferral, différance, displacement, worked and still works today to privilege certain national identities associated to the metropolises of a colonial motherland or fatherland.

In the name of responsibility for the other, Derrida (1990/2002) asks us, to question recursively the “essences” and “functions” of language which privilege the foundations of such (educational and colonizing) philosophical institutions. “It is the apparent firmness, hardness, durability, or resistance of philosophical institutions,” Derrida (1990/2002) suggests, which “betrays, first of all, the fragility of a foundation. It is on the ground of this (theoretical and practical) ‘deconstructability,’ it is against it, that the institution institutes itself” (p. 10). Cane reapers, former colonial, colonized subjects, eventually learned the hard secrets, now no longer secrets, about the frailty of colonizing institutions.

Some post-colonial subjects, alien in foreign lands, appropriated the languages of the other and learned to navigate the polyglot, hybrid, and hyphenated spaces between an appropriation of what is and an alienation of what is not colonial culture. Here Derrida (1991a/1992) tells us, “there is no culture or cultural identity without difference with itself” (p. 9). Yet, how does a colonial or post-colonial subject negotiate between the hyphenated spaces of sameness and otherness, alienation and appropriation, the colonizer’s institutional language and one’s native language, the schoolmaster’s tongue and one’s mother tongue, which in turn is always already occupied by the language of the other? What are the limits-situations of such (re)appropriations?

A curriculum of hospitality toward the language of the other

What is happening today, and has been for some time, I think, are philosophical formations that will not let themselves be contained in this dialectic, which is basically cultural, colonial or neo-colonial, of appropriation and alienation (Derrida, 1991b/2002, p. 337).

This mother language with which we are at home is the language belonging to a community—a language of sharing, a language of familiarity, a vernacular
language of daily conversation, a language with a profound respect of the other and self (Aoki, 1987/2005, p. 239).

...language is for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 68).

The sound of morning bells tolls. It is October. The suspension of Derrida’s breathing between life and death has ceased. Today, an unseasonal humidity, its invisibility, still heavy and damp, floats on the surface of Louisiana. I long for seasonal change. Until then, “you” and “I” must host the death foretold of this season’s language. Dawn and dusk, self and other, two strangers in the same sky, share a universal terrain of such seasonal language.

Language is our invisible prosthesis for moving between the shifting terrain of self and other. But language, its promise of a universal terrain, has no material body. Self and other however, are able to perform their accents, intonations, and rhythms—of gender, class, race, culture, and differences—through the body of language. And yet, the universal landscape of language, its invisibility, eludes both a master’s ownership and a colonial subject’s (re)appropriations of a proper terrain called *homo-hegemonic meaning*.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida (1996/1998) maintains, the colonial master, the teacher, “wants to make others believe” in his ownership of the language, of a universal terrain called *homo-hegemonic meaning*, “as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army” (p. 23). A first trick is thus played—a master’s ownership of an invisible place, which hosts language. “Mastery begins,” Derrida stresses, “through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations. ... It always follows or precedes culture like its shadows” (p. 39). Therefore, like a shadow and its visible absence of light, the colonial master’s lack of proper appropriation, ownership of invisibility, moves him to impose his fantasies of possessing the alchemy of a monolanguage, onto the linguistic landscape of a colonized other.
The master’s language of liberation, emancipation, revolution, and decolonization then plays a second trick. “It will provide freedom,” Derrida (1996/1998) asserts, “from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by reappropriating it—but only up to a certain point, for, as my hypothesis shows, there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriating” (p. 24). A master’s performed ownership, proper appropriation of a monolanguage, and the invisibility of its otherness, cannot be fully promised or assimilated by the other.

This lack of promise, the unattainable terrain of homonegemonic meaning, is the madness at the heart of language. Nonetheless, “the language, the only one I hear myself speak, and agree to speak, is the language of the other” (Derrida, 1996/1998, p. 25). Therefore, our responsibility for the other, in the face of a sovereign other, requires hospitality for the other’s inalienable alienable rights to the landscape of a universal language that is never mine. Language is a structure, Derrida (1996/1998) writes, of alienation without alienation. The practices of colonial alienation and of being othered by its language, Derrida (1996/1998) maintains, is language. It is a mother tongue, which is already inhabited by the language of the other. Therefore to be at home with the French or the English language, to inhabit it as my second skin, I must be at home with the other.

Derrida (1996/1998) stresses that the very conditions of unconditional hospitality towards the language of the other “relies upon a foundation, whose sovereign essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressively, to reduce language to the One” (p. 40). “This homo-hegemony,” Derrida (1996/1998) adds, “remains at work in the culture, effacing the fold and flattening the text” (p. 40). Here, the host and the other’s language we receive, house and feed have the dual possibilities of being a guest and an enemy, a
promise and a terror. And, if each of us is born into the concrete language of our mother tongue, as Aoki (1987/2005) suggests, how then does one negotiate a curriculum to migrate through and beyond the hyphenated spaces of colonizer and colonized, appropriation and alienation, the language of the other and a language reduced to the One? In response to this last question, of a yesterday, today, and tomorrow, there are many strategic turns. But, as dusk marks the death of another day, the specters of Derrida return and whisper, language must be a place of hospitality for the invisible movements of understanding between self and other to occur.

Concepts like deconstruction, subject, colonial, colonizer, postcolonial, alienation, appropriation, monolanguage, and their proper place of homonhegemonic meaning, remain in a perpetual movement, a migration of unfinished promises, of expropriation, caught in the in-between spaces of translation, always on the verge of untranslatability. Therefore monolingualism of the other, learning language and its translation, is a promise, Derrida (1996/1998) suggests, which no longer expects what it waits for. And thus, learning the only language I speak, the only language I never speak, unconditionally hosting the invisible language of the other, its landscape of universal translation, welcoming him or her as a friend or enemy remains veiled by the promise of an understanding which can never be fully attained.

**Falling behind: another heading**

It is this language that holds us, as both hostage and support (Chambers, 1994, p. 33).

Wouldn’t this mother tongue be a sort of second skin you wear on yourself, a mobile home? But also an immobile home since it moves with us? (Derrida, 1997/2000 p. 89).

... An irreducible experience of language, that which links it to the liaison, to commitment, to the command or to the promise: before and beyond all theoretic-constatives, opening, embracing, or including them, there is the affirmation of language, the "I am addressing you, and I commit myself, in this language here; listen how I speak in my language, me, and you can speak to me in your language; we must hear each other, we must get along" [nous devons nous entendre]. (Derrida, 1991/1992, p. 61)

So French is my only language. Nevertheless, in the culture of the French in Algeria, there was a way in which, despite everything, France was not Algeria; the source, the norm, the authority of the French language was elsewhere. And, in a certain manner, confusedly, we learned it, I learned it as the language of the other—even though I could only refer to one language as being mine, you see! (Derrida, 1983b/1995, p. 203).

Falling behind: another heading

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Wouldn’t this mother tongue be a sort of second skin you wear on yourself, a mobile home? But also an immobile home since it moves with us? (Derrida, 1997/2000 p. 89).
The language of fall is here. It is November. I witness another season shrinking, shortening, changing. At dusk, during the time of philosophy, my windows and doors are now open to host a different kind of invisibility which still floats on this southern landscape. A language of unions, on this terrain called *homo-hegemonic meaning*, between self and other, Derrida’s texts and my translations, has made its singularities present.

Through death, Derrida gives life to another language, a heritage of deconstruction, now suspended within these pages and the universal landscape of the English and French languages. Memories, or is it the nostalgia of experiencing the language of the other, its alienation, appropriation, exappropriation, always migrating with us, that faithfully keep Derrida’s philosophical inheritance alive?

The responsible inheritance of Derrida’s deconstruction asks us in the name of the other to recursively question “the subject’s” rights to name for example, and to name the rights of his or her institutional language. Responsibilities of guarding this heritage of deconstruction, keeping it alive, also involve questioning any institutional language that presupposes its foundations with universal systems of exclusionary logic. Deconstruction, Derrida (1991/1992, 2004) tells us, guards against Euro- and Ameri-centric institutional, cultural, national, and linguistic incorporations of an official cultural capital.

The autobiographical examples utilized in this paper provide a foil, an exemplarity of singularities that challenges universal claims to a *homo-hegemonic meaning*. The value of exemplarity, Derrida (1991/1992) writes, is that it

... inscribes the universal in the proper body of a singularity, of an idiom or a culture, whether this singularity be individual, social, national, state, federal, confederal, or not. Whether it takes a national form or not, a refined, hospitality or aggressively xenophobia form or not, the self-affirmation of an identity always claims to be responding to the call or assignation of the universal (p. 72).

Each time that Fook Ng, John Cyril Ng-A-Fook, and I utter our differences, the disorder of our cultural identities, we must call upon the universal terrain of language and inscribe its universality in the singularities of our educational
experiences, for example, with alienation and appropriation. In such examples the migrant, post-colonial subject, does not settle for a proper cultural and national identity, but is rather, unsettled, between the hyphenated spaces of colonizer and colonized, alienation and appropriation, the language of the other and a language reduced to the One.

In Monolingualism of the other, Derrida teaches us the impossibility of properly appropriating the schoolmaster’s language. Self and other are caught in the double movement of exappropriation, a hyphenated space of understanding that verges on untranslatability. However, Derrida ask us to listen carefully, and host unconditionally, the language of the other. To do so, “you” and “I” must be open to a possible alienation without alienation caused by receiving each other’s otherness. This double movement of teaching and learning involves a listening, heading towards the other.

The fall suspension of daytime shrinks ever faster. The sugarcane fields have been harvested. A time of darkness grows longer. The Canadian geese are now here taking refuge in the vanishing wetlands of Louisiana. Meanwhile, I fear, the French language that was only mine, never only mine, the language of the other, held hostage inside me, is dying. How might I teach a dying language to survive, and in turn, learn to support a language that says goodbye? What landscape of language did Derrida long for in the face of death? How does one host the language of death? And, how might its invisible terrain greet “you” and “me”? Let us now say farewell to such goodbyes.

Notes

1 Currere is the Latin infinitive form for curriculum and means to run the course. Pinar’s (2004) method of currere consists of the four following intertwining parts: regressive, progressive, analytical and synthetical. In the regressive phase one conducts free association with the memories in order to collect autobiographical data. The purpose is to try and re-enter the past in order to enlarge and transform one’s memories. The second phase, or the progressive, is where one looks toward what is not yet present. In the analytical stage one examines how both the past and the future inhabit the present. How might one’s future desires and/or interpretations of the past influence present understandings of relationships with alienation and appropriation in the language of the other for example? At the analytical stage, how might one bracket such experiences in order to loosen emotional attachments and one’s respective limit-situations? The synthetical is the last stage, where one brings together past, present, and future limitations and possibilities in order to re-enter the present moment hopefully with a sense of greater self-knowledge.
Under one form or another, Derrida’s concept of deconstruction can be found in all his writings. However, within the constraints of this paper, I limit my references to deconstruction to the following texts: Of Grammatology (1967/1976), A Letter to A Japanese Friend (1983a/1991), The Other Heading (1991a/1992), and Talking Liberties (1992a/2001).

Not unlike Pinar’s (1975/2000, 1995) use of currere in the field of curriculum theory, Derrida’s concept of “deconstruction” is controversial in the academic field of philosophy. Although this section begins with A Letter to a Japanese Friend, it is important to realize that Derrida continued to discuss the concept of deconstruction in response to various questions put forth by fellow scholars in different academic fields and the French media until the moment of his death on October 9, 2004.

Derrida traces a genealogy of “the subject” through the Western tradition of continental philosophy. The purpose of this paper is not to trace the essence of what “the subject” is, but rather its relationships with language. For the convenience of keeping this conversation moving, this paper momentarily settles on how Derrida and Montefiore position “the subject” in Talking Liberties. In this interview, Montefiore and Derrida situate “the subject,” among its other determinants, as “identity to itself, consciousness, intention, presence, or proximity to itself, autonomy, relation to the object” (in Biesta and Egéa-Kuehne, 2001, p. 188). It is important to realize that the “subject” is also conceived differently in psychoanalytical and feminist theory, etc. Even if this paper did pursue such a tracing of the “subject,” how might tracing its trajectory through a westernized canon limit our conversation on the “subject”? What might Eastern philosophy have to say on the concept of the “subject,” for example? For a further discussion on Derrida’s deconstruction of the subject see for example Eating Well: or the Calculation of the Subject (1983b/1991), From Speech and Phenomena (1967/1973), and “Différance” in Margins of Philosophy (1972/1982).

In The Other Heading, Derrida (1991a/1992) explains, that it is our national and individual duty to criticize, both in theory and in practice, a totalitarian dogmatism which works to destroy democracy and its European, American, and Canadian heritage. Such a duty, also involves criticizing institutions which institute dogmatism under new guises. Yet this same duty, Derrida stresses, “dictates cultivating the virtue of such critique, of the critical idea, the critical tradition” and submits it, “beyond critique and questioning, to a deconstructive genealogy that thinks and exceeds it without compromising it” (p. 77). Therefore this double duty, according to Derrida, asks us, in the name of responsibility, to affirm our philosophical heritage while also submitting it to a deconstructive questioning.

Here I offer a footnote on a footnote about the etymological closeness between “subject” and “substance.” In Talking Liberties, Egéa-Kuehne (2001) explains, “Subject comes from the Latin subjectum, past participle of the verb subjicere, which signifies to ‘throw or put under, to place underneath.’ The Latin term substantia was constructed from the verb substare which means ‘to stand’ (stare) ‘under’ (sub).” Egéa-Kuehne continues that this word was utilized in order to translate Aristotle’s “…huspotaosis, which signified ‘what is underneath, basis, foundation’ (from hupo, ‘under,’ and stasis, ‘the action of fixing itself’)” (p. 184). The concept of substance was one of the most important notions in metaphysics up to the seventeenth century.

On August 18, 2004 Le Monde conducted an interview with Derrida titled “I am at War Against Myself.” I have translated this interview in its entirety from French to English, yet not without losing some of its “original” meaning. Can one ever? In deconstructive fashion, Derrida avoids his interviewer’s initial question about his war with pancreatic cancer. Yet Derrida moves through the interview to recount his past work and share his current thoughts on various topics and concepts such as the conflict in Iraq, same sex marriages, heritage, and the question of how one learns to live life.
8 In The Oxford American English Dictionary, alien is defined as: “belonging to a foreign country or nation; unfamiliar and disturbing; introduced from another country and later naturalized.”

9 Soon after the initial invasion of France in 1940, and in the absence of the official French government, the National Assembly voted in Henri Philippe Pétain as the head of what was later known as the Vichy administration which controlled the remaining two-fifths of unoccupied France. He then signed an armistice that gave Germany control over the northern landscape of France. During his administration the language of the French constitution was changed from freedom, equality, brotherhood, to labour, family, country. Not all French citizens supported the newly established government. Charles de Gaulle led France Libre (Free France), the French government in exile, from London. In the southern unoccupied terrain and elsewhere in France, the French Resistance continued to fight the Germans and help Jewish subjects escape the genocide of the Holocaust. After France’s liberation by the allies from the German occupation in 1945, Pétain was sentenced to death and expelled from the Academic Française. The following year his sentence was commuted to life in prison due to his old age (see encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com, 2004).

10 Elizabeth Gray is my mother’s family name and her mother spoke the Gaelic language.

11 The hyphen between post and colonial indicates a period of decolonization after WWII (see Boehmer, 1995).


13 Upon arriving to foreign lands and during their colonization, it was common practice for Europeans to systematically re-inscribe the landscape itself, and the animals, insects, plants, and indigenous people who inhabited it, with anglicized remarks. The colonizer, the master, demonstrated his fantasies of ownership through renaming the land, and thus, appropriating the indigenous terrain of meaning. For a further discussion that complicates colonial power, naming, and ownership of land, see Smith’s (1999) Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples.

14 One of the concepts and strategies Derrida introduces in order to problematize an appropriation of a language proper to itself is “exappropriation.” In this deconstructive double movement, “exap-” marks the sense of “-propriation” with an irreducible discordance or dissociation between its two directions (Kamuf, 1991, p. xxiii). “Whereas the proper movement of the proper” Kamuf (1991) states, “can only be in an appropriative direction back to itself, the circle of return cannot complete itself without also tracing the contrary movement of expropriation” (p. xxiii). The more master and colonial subject seek to appropriate, jealously own a language, one proper to itself, and thus uncontaminated by the other, the more “-propriation” loses itself in the “ex-” of an exteriority to itself. For a further discussion on the concept of exappropriation see Derrida’s Of Hospitality (1997/2000), The Post Card (1980/1987), and There is No One Narcissism (1983b/1995).

References


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