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Closed Borders and Open Minds: Existential Negotiations and Intersubjective Dilemmas

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In a celebrated essay, Vincent Crapanzano compares the ethnographer to the classical figure of Hermes whose stone cairns marked the borderlands between familiar and foreign worlds. Hermes' liminal position made him an obvious candidate for the patron saint of thieves, travelers, traders and heralds and, by extension, of all those who transgress frontiers, stealthily seeking access to the hidden lives of others. Indeed, for all these reasons, Hermes also qualifies as the patron saint of anthropologists, whose border crossings yield a wealth of information that demands translation and interpretation, though the diverse perspectives and different languages of his or her informants, not to mention the ever-changing interpretive fashions of anthropology make this endeavor as endless as it is exasperating (Crapanzano 1992:44-45). In communicating across language barriers and cultural divides, messages all too easily become garbled or lost in translation, and ethnographers often doubt their ability to do justice to those whose lifeworlds they purport to represent or interpret.

While ethnographers have traditionally moved toward the global south in search of field sites to explore and exotic societies to write about, young people from those same societies have been moving in increasing

numbers toward the global north, searching not for knowledge but for new means of making their lives more viable. Though ethnographers have always had to endure a certain amount of hardship, disorientation and discomfort in the field, few if any have had to risk their lives in pursuit of their careers, as migrants frequently do. With this in mind, I propose to shift the focus from Hermes' dilemma, which is one of textual hermeneutics, to the dilemmas of migrants, which are matters of life and death. For in crossing international frontiers migrants risk losing not simply legibility or intelligibility, but *their very humanity* – their lives lost at sea, their claims for asylum rejected, their legitimacy questioned, their worth denied, their hopes dashed, their stories spurned. In exploring what I have elsewhere called <migrant imaginaries> (Jackson 2008), I will also broaden my horizons to encompass individuals and situations that we do not conventionally think of as migratory, yet nonetheless sharpen our sense of the intersubjective quandaries that confront all human beings as they move through life – how to be open to others yet defended against exploitation or abuse; how to respect tradition yet negotiate new possibilities of living; how to balance the loss of leaving one's natal world behind

against the gains of migrating to some brave new world.

Some anthropologists argue that these dilemmas and double-binds are symptoms of globalization and the post-cold war. Where West Africans once appealed to ancestors, djinn or diviners to change their fortunes, they now to turn to Islam, political big men and benefactors, Pentecostal ministries, schools, colleges and NGOs, or set their sights on migration to Europe as their best chance of improving their lot in life. It is claimed that these new sources of empowerment have no precedent in tradition, and that West Africa is pervaded by radically new fixations – a preoccupation with money and mobility, a search for pleasure and personal empowerment, and a prioritizing of self-fulfillment over ancestral values and the common weal. This case for rupture finds expression in Charles Piot's recent observation that Africa is now characterized by «a culture and imaginary of exile» in which everyone is searching for exit strategies that will transport them to a utopian elsewhere, either through geographical migration or occult forms of affective transformation (Piot 2010: 3–4), as well as in Achille Mbembe's pronouncement that Africa «is turning inwards on itself in a very serious way» (Mbembe 2001: 68).

I want to contest this assumption of radical discontinuity by showing how the Kuranko worldview has *always* assumed that existence is relational (according to the Kuranko adage, «God did not create anything single [he created things in pairs – male-

female, life-death, wet-dry etc.]»), and that life consists in a struggle to work out a *modus vivendi* between opposing interests, identities and forces, as well as continual movements between alternative forms of life.

Village and Bush

Let me take you back 45 years, to my second night in the Kuranko village of Firawa in Northern Sierra Leone, when a group of men, women and children gathered on the porch of my newly-recruited field assistant's house to tell stories. I could not understand a word that was being said, but as Noah summarized each story for me, I was struck by recurring scenarios and motifs. A marginalized or maligned individual – an orphan, an oppressed junior wife, a status inferior – journeys into the bush where he or she is cared for by djinn. Empowered and enriched, the erstwhile victim returns to the village that spurned him or her, and receives the recognition or blessings that he or she is due. The djinn therefore resembled the figure of the daemon in European thought: a redistributor of human destinies.

As the days passed into weeks, I began to understand the ramifications of the contrast between village (*sué*) and bush (*fira*) in Kuranko discourse. The bush is construed as a wild but fecund force field surrounding the settled space of a village. This is not only because rice – the staple of life –

is cultivated in farm clearings slashed and burned in the bush, or because medicinal plants are gathered, and game animals hunted, in the bush; movements between village and bush¹ are allegories of life itself, and call to mind the classical Greek antinomy of *nomos* (law) and *phusis* (life). While community coexistence depends on binding legal and moral laws, personal fulfillment in life depends on more than slavish conformity to established norms, dutiful role-playing, or adherence to tradition. It involves going beyond the social world into which one is born, and tapping into life itself, which knows no bounds.

Almost all Kuranko tales involve journeys between village (*sué*) and bush (*fira*). As such the moral customs (*namui* or *bimba kan*), laws (*seriye* or *ton*), and chiefly power (*mansaye*) associated with the town are momentarily placed in abeyance, and the wild ethos of the bush, associated with animals, shape-shifters, djinn and antinomian possibilities, comes into play. Moreover, Kuranko stories are told at night, or in twilight zones that lie on the margins of the workaday, waking world. There is a close connection, therefore, between the evocation of antinomian scenarios, states of dreamlike or drowsy

consciousness, and the narrative suspension of disbelief. Kuranko *tilei* (fables, folk-tales, fictions) are make-believe; they play with reality, and entertain possibilities that lie beyond convention and custom.

Accordingly, Kuranko stories disclose an existential paradox – that it is only through transgressing the boundaries of custom and convention that a person can tap into the vital sources of life itself, without which society becomes an empty shell and personal existence degenerates into the slavish repetition of what has been decided by others at other times. This dialectic tension between what is given and what is sought beyond the margins of the established order plays out in Kuranko stories as a movement between the moral space of the village and the antinomian space of the bush. But this paranomic interplay of duty and desire, constraint and freedom, is not only necessary for the viability of the polis; it answers an existential need in every individual to work out a balance between accepting things as they are and creating a life on his or her own terms – such that a person feels at home in the world.

I hope it is clear that these preoccupations presage contemporary concerns with keeping faith with ancestral values while making the world one's own. Continuity and discontinuity are both entailed. This was as true in the past as it is true today. The *content* of the migrant imaginary may have changed, but the existential struggle that informs it remains

1 This opposition between the spaces of nature and culture exists in many West African societies, and in my earlier work (Jackson 1982) I translated *fira* (<bush>) as <wilderness>, echoing the German contrast between *Wildnis* and *Dorf*. See Förster 1990.

the same. Thus, the wider world has become, for young African migrants, a symbolic bush² – at once a place of peril and of transformative possibilities, lying beyond the moral and legal space of the «town», and signifying a space of ethical questioning and bargaining, comparable to the space hitherto associated with bush spirits and the ancestral dead. How can one open oneself up to the wilderness of the world without being destroyed? How can one tap into the wild and life-giving potential of the bush without losing touch with the moral order of the town? How can one find self-fulfillment yet still meet one's obligations to one's kith and kin? How can one be reborn in Europe without one's roots to Africa withering and dying like tendrils on an unintended vine?

In my recently published study of migration (Jackson 2013), I urge that we see African migration to Europe as a variation on a universal theme, reflecting universal existential dilemmas that arise in our relations with others before they get played out in our relation to the wider world. My argument is that, «the vicissitudes of attachment, separation, loss and renewal are unavoidable aspects of every human life. Our lives oscillate between transitive and intransitive

extremes. Whether planned or accidental, desired or dreaded, the passage from one place to another, one life stage to another, or one state or status to another, often figures centrally in the stories we tell about our lives, and who we are. Though we may hanker after hard and fast differences between self and other, human and animal, man and machine, male and female, these boundaries get blurred, transgressed, and redrawn. We morph and migrate, in and out of our bodies, in reality and in our imaginations.³ Our moments of rest are soon enough disrupted, our settled states disturbed, our minds distracted. *Moveo ergo sum*. Along with all living things, *we move through life*. By this I mean not only that we are all bound to die (it is only a question of when) but that we were all once migrants (again, it is only a question of when). These sweeping statements indicate the existential perspective from which I view migration. Rather than treat the migrant as a singular figure – an interloper, anomaly or alien in our midst – the migrant

2 In contemporary Anglophone Cameroon, «any place where there is money can be called «bush»» (i.e. the West or *white man kontri*), and the dream of migration is known as «bushfalling», Alpes 2012: 43.

3 On *anthropos* as defined by morphism, see Latour 1993: 137. Unfortunately, Latour's comprehensive account of boundary blurring and hybridity is so emphatically objectivist that it fails to consider the subjective, rather than merely discursive, thresholds of tolerance for crossing the boundaries between conventionally separated categories. See Michael Jackson, «Biotechnology and the Critique of Globalization», in Jackson 2005: 111–125.

exemplifies a universal aspect of human existence. Either we are moving or the world is moving – about, under or above us. To cite the logo so often seen on vehicles in West Africa, «No Condition is Permanent». (Jackson 2013:2–3)

Metaphors of Intersubjectivity

Among the Kuranko, the relationship between self and other is expressed metaphorically in terms of a contrast between white (*gbe*, connoting transparency, openness, good intentions, and purity of heart) and black (*fin*), connoting deceit, animosity, hidden intentions, and ill will. The ambiguous, negotiated or contested space between self and other is figuratively «red», signifying uncertainty and potential danger. Fetishes (*kandan li fannu*, lit. «enclosing things») marking and protecting the threshold of a house, or the border of a village or chiefdom, typically deploy this colour triad to give greater definition to self, magically drive ill will from a stranger's mind, or nullify the malice of an enemy. It is not unusual to see twisted threads of these colours placed on the thresholds of rooms or the lintels of doorways. All boundaries, including the skin of a person, the door of a house, the perimeter of a village, or the borders of a chiefdom, are ambiguous thresholds and the focii of fetishistic controls.

Although anthropologists working in Sierra Leone have written extensively about people's preoccupations with

«the underneath of things» – men's fears of women's wiles and anxieties about witchcraft, secret societies concerned with reading the minds of potential enemies, conspiracies within the family and from without, «black hearts concealed by smiling white teeth» (Ferme 2001, Shaw 2002) – I suspect that these anxieties, and the measures people take to alleviate them, are not unlike our own. Phylogenetically, they reflect common evolutionary origins, when overlapping home-ranges rather than well defined territories made hominid borderlands intrinsically ambiguous and constantly requiring negotiation. Ontogenetically, they reflect the psychology of primary intersubjectivity, in which the mother is at once a potential source of affirmation and negation – in Kleinian language «a good breast» and «a bad breast». Not only do we need to realize ourselves through being-with-others; we need to possess some degree of autonomy and separation from others. Not only must we be open to others, from whom we draw everything from nourishment to our own self-image; we must know how to persevere in our own being.

The Kuranko notion of *miran* helps elucidate this dialectic of being present-to-others and being present-to-self.

Mirannu (pl.) refer both to material possessions – particularly those that contain and protect, such as a house, clothing, water vessels and cooking pots – as well as to personal attributes that give one a sense of self-pos-

session, presence and substantiality of being – such as forceful speech, physical skill and social adroitness. But *miran*, in both senses of the term – material possession and self-possession – is never a fixed property or attribute. In practice, a person's *miran* may be bolstered by fetishes that symbolically enclose, contain and protect the vital spaces that define his or her being – body, house, village, chiefdom – in exactly the same way that in a consumer society material possessions bolster and define a person's sense of wellbeing, substantiality and standing. For Kuranko, the notion of a full container is a common metaphor for anyone who is in command of himself and working his utmost to do what is expected of him, to do his duty. But self-possession and morale may be undermined, sapped or lost. Just as a person's property can be stolen, a pot broken and a house fall into disrepair, so a person can lose self-possession and confidence, as when his or her *miran* is «taken away» by more powerful others (such as autocratic parents, forceful public speakers and powerful bush spirits) whose voice and power «press down» with great weight, diminishing the *miran* of those in their presence. Then, it is said that «the container has tipped over and its contents spilled out» – a metaphor for loss of self-control, or for a state of laziness or despair when one has «let oneself go» (*nyere bila*). Ideally, a balance is struck in which everyone's voice, presence, and property is accorded due recognition in relation to his or her

role, age and gender. But some people assert themselves beyond their due station – as in the case of a Big Man who exploits his position to take advantage of an inferior, a senior co-wife who abuses her junior partners, a man whose jealousy overrules his better judgment or a woman whose emotions are not held in check. A kind of intersubjective logic then comes into play, based on the principle of reciprocity, according to which one has the right to counter in kind any action that has the effect of directly nullifying, diminishing, belittling or erasing one's own Being, or indirectly doing so by taking away properties that one regards as essential to and as extensions of one's Being. The Kuranko phrase *ke manni a nyor-go manni* («something happened, its counterpart then happened») reveals the kinship between the social logic of partnership and the abstract calculus of retaliation.

Since *miran* blurs any hard-and-fast distinction between *having* and *being*, it can be augmented through *taking* the wherewithal of life from others – through theft, witchcraft, abuse and humiliation – or through *giving* such things as respect, food, help and protection that will be returned in equal measure at some later date. At the same time «real», symbolic, and fantastic calculations enter into people's notions of what constitutes their due, and Kuranko folktales, like folktales throughout the world, with their magical agencies, supernatural intercessories and miraculous transformations, attest to

the vital role that wishful thinking and imaginary reworkings of everyday reality play in making everyday life endurable.

Illusions of Radical Alterity

The social and psychological dilemmas alluded to above have been dramatically and agonizingly brought to our attention in recent months as the Ebola virus has spread through West Africa, challenging both local and international efforts to contain it. Watching from a distance as this humanitarian catastrophe unfolds in Sierra Leone, I have been struck by the familiar ways in which human beings react to threats of invasion, whether from viruses, germs, witches, terrorists, colonizers, slave traders or foreign armies. First, people are incredulous, and deny the danger. Second, when the threat is so overwhelmingly present that it cannot be denied, people have recourse to tried and tested means to combat it, even though this threat has no precedent. Third, when all else fails, people seek scapegoats on to whom they can vent their anger and frustration. Fourth, a grim acceptance emerges of the new normal.

On October 10, 2014 I received an email asking for my advice on how international health workers could change the local «cultural practices» that were allegedly preventing them from bringing Ebola under control in Sierra Leone. According to Brigadier Mahon, Deputy Director of the

Department for International Cooperation of the British Government's inter-agency task force in Sierra Leone, international efforts to «eradicate» Ebola would «only be successful if Sierra Leoneans put aside tradition, culture and whatever family rites they have and do the right thing.»

The British Army Task Force Commander went on to claim that «the reason for the spread [of Ebola] is these cultural practices that Sierra Leoneans don't want to put aside», and that «if the attitudes of Sierra Leoneans don't change all the manpower and equipment [that the British] and other friends have brought will count for nothing because they will not be able to win the battle.»

My thoughts went back to the years of civil war in Sierra Leone when Western media repeatedly focused on the irrationality and primitivism of Africans. The *reasons* for the rebellion (political corruption, endemic poverty, the alienation of youth under gerontocratic and patrimonial regimes, the exploitation of the country's mineral wealth by overseas corporations) were largely overlooked, and both rebels and their victims were described as driven by unbridled emotions that were compared to natural phenomena such as wild fires, storms, and volcanic eruptions. I also thought back to the AIDS epidemic in East Africa which, like the Ebola crisis, was typically described as «a fight against «cultural barriers» that [were] seen as promoting the spread of the HIV virus» – an attitude that reflected «a long history of Western

prejudices about sexuality in Africa» focused solely on «its exotic aspects (polygamy, adultery, wife-exchange, circumcision, dry sex, levirate, sexual pollution, sexual cleansing, various beliefs and taboos, etc.)» (Gausset 2001:509). In an empathic and ethnographically-informed essay, Quentin Gausset describes how local theatre groups were enlisted to disseminate information on AIDS and promote condom use. The success of this grass-roots campaign indicated that Zambian villagers were open to new information when it was communicated in local idioms, and not irrationally committed to «superstition». Gausset concludes, «What is common across cultures is more important to AIDS prevention than what is different, *even if it is still important to adapt our message to the local cultures with which we engage in dialogue*» (Gausset 2001:517, emphasis added). My response to the NGOs who wrote to me was guided by my experience of the civil war, by Gausset's edifying 2001 essay, and by my sense of personal powerlessness.

«Although I have lived and worked in Sierra Leone intermittently since 1969, my local knowledge is limited to the Kuranko area of Koinadugu District and my knowledge of how Kuranko are coping with the Ebola crisis comes from internet reports, augmented by phone conversations with Kuranko friends in London. Thus, I am aware that from August this year a district taskforce led by John Caulker, the Koinadugu-born head of a nonprofit called *Fambul Tok* (family

talk), donated ten million leones to buying chlorine for disinfectant, as well as rubber gloves and face masks, and urged the closure of all roads and paths leading into and out of the region. Local volunteers with thermal thermometers and chlorinated water staffed checkpoints, the flow of grain and vegetables was carefully monitored, and neighborhood watch teams were organized in every chiefdom to explain Ebola to villagers and educate local healers.»⁴

However, within hours of beginning my letter on October 16, I learned that two cases of Ebola had been confirmed in Koinadugu, and by November 5 between 30 and 60 Ebola-related deaths would be reported. Though loath to offer practical advice, I did think it was important to underline the need to allay people's fears, so that health care workers were not seen as space-suited aliens, bent on cannibalizing body parts for satanic purposes or for sale on the international market; that it was explained to villagers that chlorine was

4 In Pujehun, the first Sierra Leone district to be declared Ebola free, early local initiatives to close markets, as well as suspend public festivities and assemblies in churches or mosques, contributed to bringing the virus under control. But district council chairman, Sadiq Silla paid a heavy price for imposing these emergency measures. He received death threats, and his house was attacked by angry mobs. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/sierra-leone-first-ebola-free-district-who>

not lethal but protective; and that the bereaved were offered opportunities to see the bodies of their loved ones even if they could not have any physical contact with them. If initiations could not be carried out in clinics because of pressure on medical resources, they could be deferred, for years if necessary, as was the case during the civil war. Most vital, I said, was using trusted local intermediaries to help people understand Ebola. «Even we in the global north are ignorant of many things,» I wrote, alluding to Brigadier Mahon's declaration that the «goal of eradicating Ebola ... will only be successful if Sierra Leoneans put aside tradition, culture, and whatever family rites they have, and do the right thing. Indeed, medical staff at the Dallas, Texas, hospital that recently treated America's first Ebola case failed <to do the right> thing, and it has become clear that <tradition, culture, and whatever family rites> we have in America are informed by the same fears of invasion (from terrorists, infectious diseases, illegal migrants, the mentally ill) that are evident in West Africa. Clearly, no matter how many times the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) tells people that only direct contact with the bodily fluids of symptomatic Ebola patients can spread the virus, Americans continue to freak out and take overly drastic measures. In the latest examples of paranoia, two schools in Ohio and three in Texas have opted to close for disinfecting because students and teachers pos-

sibly had some minor contact with Amber Vinson, the nurse who flew between Cleveland and Dallas the day before she showed symptoms of Ebola.» «It's not a rational decision,» Dr. Andrew T. Pavia, the chief of pediatric infectious diseases at the University of Utah, told the *Times*. «And it's harmful, in that it's going to further spread misunderstanding and irrational fear» (Coscarelli 2014).

«Obviously,» I wrote, continuing my letter, «Sierra Leonean customs for zealously protecting self, village, or chiefdom against invasive foreign or occult forces, as well as the tendency to find and blame scapegoats (witches, foreigners) when misfortune befalls a community, and the emotional need for bereaved families to administer last rites to their loved ones and not allow their corpses to be buried by strangers, are all directly comparable to Western reactions to life-threatening forces from without. Though cultural sensitivity is important, so too is sensitivity to the humanity of the other, whose expressions of anxiety, fear, and traumatic loss are not uniquely African but simply human.»

With these remarks, I was hoping to make a case for interweaving our understanding of Africans with a reflexive understanding of ourselves, and exploring the ways in which our stereotypes about others say more about the suppressed and shadowy aspects of ourselves than they say about them. This interweaving of viewpoints is not simply a method of self-enlightenment but of social

healing, and my preoccupation with weaving, healing and quandaries of intersubjectivity came together in unexpected ways when, the morning after my keynote address to the Swiss Association of Social Anthropologists in Basel and the first lecture of the J. J. Bachofen Lecture Series, I took a train to Freiburg, Germany, to interview the artist Carola Faller-Barris.

Weaving the Threads of Life⁵

Carola and her husband Craig (my wife's cousin) had visited us in the

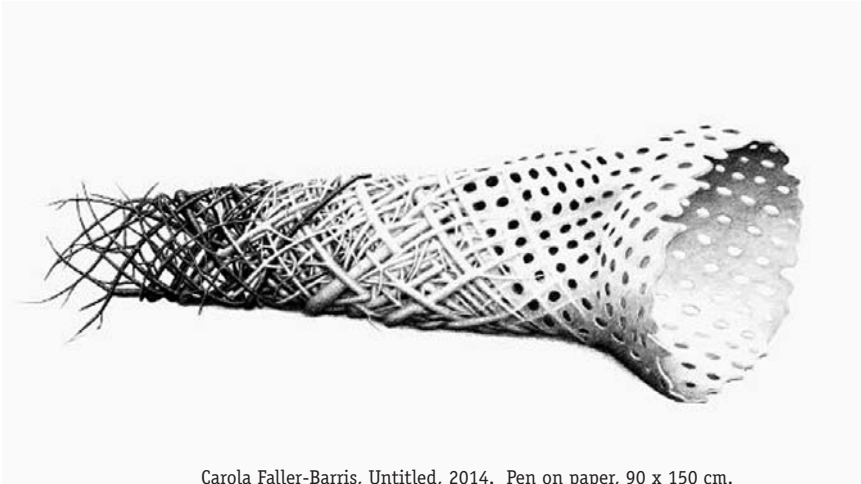
US several years ago, and since that time, one of Carola's graphic images had graced our house. Though this dark dendritic mass sometimes reminded me of the stranglehold of vines or roots over the stone temples of Borobudur or a nest of compacted tendrils from which there is no escape, I was aware that Carola had struggled with depression for many years. It was therefore impossible for me not to discern in her painstakingly drawn images a sense of being buried alive in a black hole, and the defensive attitude of someone in retreat from the world.

5 My subtitle is borrowed from René Devisch's classic study of healing rituals among the Yaka of Southwest Congo (Devisch 1993).



Carola Faller-Barris, Shoah, 2005. Pen on paper, 150 x 120 cm.

It was All Saints Day and when Craig met me at the station he commented that the unseasonably warm weather might dissuade some people from visiting cemeteries and remembering the dead. This offhand remark came back to mind five minutes later when we reached Craig's apartment and Carola opened the door to us, relaxed and smiling. That a cloud seemed to



Carola Faller-Barris, Untitled, 2014. Pen on paper, 90 x 150 cm.

have lifted was confirmed as I looked at Carola's recent drawings, framed and behind antireflective glass in the living room. Whereas her images from the early to mid 2000s are tightly-woven skeins of root, impenetrable balls, interior spaces defended by

thorns, in her more recent work the entangled masses had been loosened, allowing the light to pass through. The woven containers were now open at either end, their sheaths were thin rather than thick, light in texture and riddled with holes.

Marveling at this sea change, I mentioned to Carola that I had sometimes compared her skilled and surreal drawing technique with Escher, but while his metamorphoses were conceptual in character hers were heartfelt and profoundly organic. Carola acknowledged the changes in her work, using the word *Entfaltung* («unfolding, evolvment») to describe it, though a recent exhibition had been called *Metamorphosis*.

«To what do you attribute these changes?»

Carola had been in analysis for several years. This had made a difference. But her religious sensibility had also played a significant role. She had been raised Catholic, and still kept the faith, though her interests had ramified and diversified. A head-like shape encased in a network of brushwood or briar, entitled *Christus*; a ball of entwined twigs resembling an enclosed nest, called *Shoah*; two standing cylinders woven from similar material, respectively called *Oratory* and *Jacob's Ladder (Himmelsleiter)*.

Carola's studio was in a building that had been a barracks for French troops after the Second World War. Another metamorphosis, I thought, as we entered the building. Indeed, I would soon realize that allusions to The Holocaust occurred in several of Carola's works, as if the suffering of the Jews, of Christ, and of refugees from Gaza, Syria, Libya and sub-Saharan Africa were deeply connected, and echoed her own existential struggles.

After Craig had carefully unpacked several large drawings (the dimensi-

ons are generally about 4' x 3', 102 x 76cm), Carola unwrapped a sculptured work called *Entbindung* («birth, delivery»). Suggestive of a broken egg or skull, it was made of wax, and flesh-like in color. Across the top of the egg is a stitched wound; on one side is a gaping red wound from which a carelessly applied bandage («binde») has come away. There is also a tattooed number, such as were inscribed – Carola said – on the forearms of the inmates of Auschwitz. «I find it fascinating,» Carola said, «that people who see this work are irresistibly drawn to touch it, as if in sympathy or out of compassion, as if they wanted to make whole what had been so cruelly broken.»

I too touched the surface of the broken egg, moved by what Carola had shared of her own experience of emerging, unbound, from a dark and confined space and by the historical analogues of rebirth – a nation returned to life after years of war or plague, or refugees escaping tyranny or a war-torn homeland and finding a new life. Earlier that morning, Craig had pointed to a line of dark hills beyond the spires and roofs of the city, and told me that Freiburg lay on the Western edge of the Black Forest. Naturally, I thought of Husserl and Heidegger, who had taught at Freiburg, and particularly of Heidegger's three-room cabin (*Die Hütte*) some sixteen miles away where he wondered at and pondered the question of being, and wrote the bulk of *Sein und Zeit*. A few months ago Heidegger's so-called Black Notebooks (*Schwarze*

Hefte) had been published, raising anew the vexed question as to how an edifying philosophy could issue from the same mind that harbored racist fantasies and became infatuated with National Socialism. It isn't simply that light and shadow are mutually entailed, as Carola's drawings compellingly demonstrate; it is our naive conviction that a person is or should be a seamless whole, and tell a single consistent story, that makes it difficult for us to accept that each of us, as Fernando Pessoa observed, «is several, is many, is a profusion of selves» (Pessoa 2003:327–328).

As Carola leafed through a photographic catalog of her work, I was arrested by a piece that made use of the Trinity (God as three consubstantial persons or essences) to communicate her compassion for the migrants who risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean in the hope that a new life awaits them in Europe. Though originally entitled *Lampedusa*, after the Italian Pelagie island where thousands of migrants first set foot in the promised land, Carola now called this work *Exodus* in order to make explicit the connection between this migration and the Biblical migration of the Israelites out of Egypt. The work consisted of three elongated shapes, placed side by side. Carola explained that the one on the left was a blue sleeping bag, and intended to evoke a migrant sleeping rough somewhere in Europe, homeless, perhaps in fear of his life, and vulnerable as he sleeps to the cold, the hostility of locals, and the police.

The middle shape suggests a coarsely woven shroud, slightly torn open (has the person escaped or been discovered, and taken away?). The right hand image resembles a mummified body, wrapped in bandages in preparation for burial at sea. «Those that drown,» Carola said, «are often never found, and never receive a decent burial.»

I told Carola that my most recent fieldwork had been among African migrants in three European cities, and I had often been told that suffering was the price a human being must pay if he or she is to enter paradise, or even receive his due in this world. The sentiment was reminiscent of Nietzsche's conception of freedom – that «the value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in which one pays for it – what it costs us» (Nietzsche 1968:92). «In many ways,» I said, «we are all migrants, metamorphosing from one self to another, but often – as in these recurring images in your work – cocooned or wrapped in a chrysalid, waiting for release [*Waiting for God* the title of one of Carola's pieces].»

In Carola's work, religious, mythological and metaphorical figures merge. Trinity morphs into Triptych, while three shrouded shapes mark an anonymous migrant's passage from birth, through going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it, to death by misadventure in a place far from home. And all her work touched on weaving as an elemental image of intersubjectivity – the Desert Father,

Abba Paul, who spent long alone weaving and unweaving a single basket, Penelope fending off suitors and arresting the passage of time by weaving a burial shroud for Odysseus's father by day and unweaving it at night, the Greek heroine, Arachne, a skilled weaver who challenged Athena's own abilities at the loom, only to be cursed and transformed into a spider, Eileithyia, the weaver-midwife.

Johann Jacob Bachofen argues that images of spinning and weaving have sexual overtones («the interpenetration of the two sexual principles prerequisite to all generation» Bachofen 1967:56), though I would suggest that a broader existential understanding of this imagery is called for.

Spinning and weaving are perhaps humanity's oldest images of intersubjectivity – the ambivalent interplay of self and other, and the dynamic relationship between one's own inner world (*Eigenwelt*) and the worlds that surround and impinge upon one (*Mitwelt* and *Umwelt*). Carola's knotted, entangled and woven forms had clear analogues in cultures ancient and contemporary, and inadvertently echoed Bachofen's observation that «[t]he symbol of spinning and weaving represents the creative, formative power» of creating life from «the dark womb of matter» (Bachofen 1967:57).

Relationships with other people, with gods and spirits, with material possessions and with abstract ideas such as history, society, fate and destiny, all tend to be conceptualized as

bonds, ties or strings, while wider fields of relationship are compared to networks, webs and skeins, or the warp and woof of woven cloth. For the Yaka of southwest Congo, «Weaving, like dancing, seeks to symbolically regenerate, re-empower, and re-order the life-world,» and as such it involves a «biological» interweaving and «crossing of boundaries, both within and between the corporeal, social, and cosmological bodies» that is «the basis of the healing method» (Devisch 1993:72, 257). Even anthropologists have recourse to such images in their analyses of social relations. One reason for the ubiquity of these images may be that spinning and weaving are closely associated with clothing, which is itself a core metaphor for social being, as in the cognate terms costume and custom. That these same metaphors are commonly used of luck or fate also suggests an intimate link between a person's destiny and his or her primary relationships with parents and close kin, a link that begins with the umbilical cord through which nutrients flow from the mother to the fetus, and continues as a symbolic «tie» or attachment after the cord is «tied» and severed after a birth.⁶ Among the Yaka, the person «is seen as a knot of kinship relations» (Devisch and

⁶ Kuranko refer to the umbilical cord as *bara yile* («the maternal cord»). Only when the umbilical stump had dried is the child said to have passed from the spirit to the earthly world.

16 Brodeur 1999:51). Becoming a person (*wuka muutu*) involves «tying together or interweaving» the various forms of exchange that transmit life, emotions, energies and knowledge among agnatic and uterine kin, as well as between the living and the dead, human beings and nature spirits, people and nature (Devisch and Brodeur 1999:54). Among the Kuranko, a person's most immediate social field is compared to the network of ropes that is placed over a rice farm when the crop is nearing maturity. One end of the main rope is tethered to the foot of a high platform on which children sit with slingshots to scare birds away from the ripening grain. When this rope is tugged, the tributary strands shake, frightening the scavenging birds away. So it is said that «one's birth is like the bird-scaring rope» (*soron i le ko yagbayile*), or «one's birth is like a chain» (*soron i la ko yolke*) since one's fate is inextricably tied to the fate of others. Alluding to kinship relations, it is said that the main rope is the father, its extension is the mother, and the children are the secondary strands. Kuranko also share a well nigh universal belief that kinship, fate, spells, curses and duty are binding. Such bonds often derive from one's birth. They are in the nature of things. They cannot be revoked. «One's duty» (*wale* also means «work») is «that which you have to do» – the actions and obligations that are alleged to follow naturally from being male or female, chief or commoner, father or mother, first-born or last-

born etc. But while Kuranko invoke the notion of innate essences to explain why certain roles are binding and inescapable, classical Indo-European thought takes the notion of human bonds more literally. In Homer, for instance, fortune is «a cord or bond fastened upon a man by the powers above» (Onians 1951:331). At birth the gods or fates spin the strands of weal or woe that a man must endure in the course of his life as invisible threads. (Onians 1951:336) And man is bound to die. Comparable images appear in Norse mythology, where the gods are called «the Binders» and the Norns spin, weave, and bind the fates of men at birth (Onians 1951:381). For the Anglo-Saxons, too, fate was woven, while pain, age, and affliction were spoken of as bonds (Onians 1951:356). Yet in all human societies we find a dramatic contrast between necessity,⁷ conceived of as that which a person is bound to do or that which is bound to happen, and freedom, construed as the possibility of loosening, unbinding or escaping the

7 The Latin term *necesse* is related to *necto* and *nexus*, and refers originally to binding or being bound. While there is no obvious relation between necessity and kinship, «both have a natural point of contact in binding which implies not only constraint but also union and proximity». Onians cites, in this regard, the Sanscrit *bāndhu-h*, «kinsman» and the widespread idea that kinship ties are given in nature and cannot be changed. (Onians 1951: 333).

constraints placed upon a person by virtue of his or her birth and situation. Intersubjectivity is vexed and unstable – a matter of both bonds and double-binds, of fulfillment and frustration – a point that Carola had made in referring to her parents' indifference to her talents and her struggle for recognition. But even a breakdown of communication, a loss of contact, a violation of trust and an absence of love are elements in human bonding, as Aristotle reminds us, citing Heraclitus's adages that «it is what opposes that helps» and «from different tones comes the fairest tune» and «all things are produced through strife» (Aristotle 1941:1059 [1155b]).

As Craig began re-wrapping the framed drawings and returning them to their racks, I reflected on a remark he had made earlier about Carola's nest-like forms as both «protective» and «imprisoning» I found this ambiguity compelling, for it spoke to the anxiety that inheres in all human relationships as we seek to be open to the world while being on guard against its dangers. For Freud, this «anxiety» is present in the most primitive single cell organisms. Even the lowly amoeba needs to draw nourishment from outside its body boundary, yet it also needs to be able to filter and control traffic across this boundary, defended against invasive and life-threatening forces (Freud 1989:30-35). Human beings, of course, may imagine external dangers where there are none, or live in fear of invasion because of some trauma

suffered early in their life. Psychological anxieties also spring from social inequalities. There are few situations more demoralizing than when one finds oneself in an unequal power relationship with someone who acts as though he or she has the right to invade one's privacy, make demands on one's time, or determine the course of one's life, leaving one no option but to suffer in silence, denied the right to react. In such situations, one has recourse to ritual or magical strategies for recovering a sense of being in control of one's own destiny, and changing one's *experience* of an oppressive relationship. But only in situations of utter hopelessness or pain does the option of death arise, though even death may be imagined as a way of recovering one's existence.

On the train back to Basel, scribbling notes, recovering snatches of conversation and fleeting impressions, I kept coming back to Heidegger's comment on Dasein as always understanding itself «in terms of its existence – in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself,» (Heidegger 1962:33) and of his image of a clearing (*Lichtung*), and of the spaces of light and illumination that sometimes appear in the darkness of our lives, moments when we can lower our guard and fully accept, and perhaps wholly embrace, the world in which we find ourselves thrown. These images were in my mind when I entitled my 1989 monograph, *Paths Toward a Clearing*, and invoked William James method of radical empiri-

cism as a way of focusing on relationships rather than relata, and on the transitive and transitional aspects of Dasein – our being-in-the-world.

As the train crossed the Rhine I put my journal back in my briefcase and made my way to the carriage door, ready to alight as soon as we pulled in to the main station. Two blue-shirted border guards (*Grenzwache*) were standing over a young African woman who was struggling to insert a tiny key in the padlock of her bulging suitcase. One of the guards held the woman's passport in one hand, and his cell phone in the other. Spelling out the woman's name, letter by letter, he then waited for a response from his controller. The other guard continued to observe the woman, now wrenching open her suitcase in the cramped space so that it could be rummaged through. I thought of the thousands of individuals risking death to cross the Mediterranean

from Syria or West Africa, desperate to leave a place of darkness, danger and despair and find their way into a promised land, a world of light. Will they make it? Will they see the land of milk and honey of which they have dreamed? And who will be their Moses, leading them out of bondage?

I had observed this humiliating scene many times before, but this time, possibly because Carola's *Exodus* was still fresh in mind, I found it unbearable to remain passive as this woman suffered the indignity of being searched and suspected of being illegal, while I crossed the border as though innocent of any crime. For was I not complicit, simply by being white and doing nothing, in some travesty of justice, and was I not guilty of shrinking into my self, lips sealed, hands tied, safely cocooned like the invisible pupae in Carola's art, while darkness and winter descended on the world around me?

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Die Basler Ethnologie hatte schon lange davor einen gewaltigen intellektuellen Einfluss auf die globale Anthropologie. Zu den **wichtigsten anthropologischen Vordenkern** in Basel gehörte **Johann Jakob Bachofen-Burckhardt**, studierter Jurist und Professor für römisches Recht an der Universität Basel. In seinem 1861 erschienenen Hauptwerk «Das Mutterrecht» stellte er grundlegende Fragen nach der Geschichte und dem Verhältnis der Geschlechter. Er wertete das Matriarchat positiv – damals ein Bruch mit dem dominierenden Patriarchat und entschieden gegen den damaligen anthropologischen Mainstream gedacht. Bachofen wurde mehrfach wiederentdeckt (Ludwig Klages, Rainer Maria Rilke und Walter Benjamin). Seine Thesen sicherten ihm noch in den 1970er Jahren eine intensive Rezeption seitens der Frauenbewegung. Heute werden die Fragen, die Bachofen stellte, anders beantwortet. Relevant sind sie jedoch geblieben. In Anlehnung an diese Tradition stellt die jährlich stattfindende Bachofen Lecture Grundfragen der Ethnologie neu.

