

# To the Origins of Thinking : A Human Paradox

A Setting Bird

To Marie-José

To Daniel

## Introduction

*An idea doesn't belong to anyone  
When it comes from and answers to the experience of many.*

We have tried to answer, for quite some time now, the same question : what if ? What if we had one valuable and possible answer to one of those questions that tickles us since humans were being human ? What if we had one possible response to the question : where did our capacity to think come from ? There has been much ado about the many ways that we have tried to explain where a species such as ours could have evolve from. There has been over centuries of various cultural traditions and many passionating and beautiful insights, scientific explorations and creativity. Yet, let us just stop there and take a moment, for time is now running out. What if we could suggest one possibility, one single hypothesis that would provide us with a better chance at sorting all those questionings out ? What if, as the expression says, it was only in our hands all along and we missed it out ?

It is time to take a strong and gentle step. It is not only about knowledge. It is about a choice, a choice to make some space for imagining differently the starting point to the course of our entire common history. Some years ago, we started to develop and discuss a theory of anthropogenesis, called the 'sensorimotor paradox theory'<sup>1</sup>. The idea was quite simple : according to biologist Gerald M. Edelman, what the human brain would have needed to develop the capacity for self-consciousness is the capacity to 'delay or lag neural responses'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if I automatically respond to a situation, I don't take the time to think first about whether I would or not respond in the first place and how. Then, let us try something. Try to look at your own hand for a minute. Just open it in front of you and look at it as if it were any other object in your surrounding environment. Now, try to catch it without using your other hand and without withdrawing the one that stands as the object of your consideration. As much as you want to, you can't. The need for a response is there, but forced to a delay, suspended. An image, the one of a possible action that you would like and feel the urge to do and resolve, but denied. An image, that stands for itself, as an only possibility for imagination.

The idea is simple and all the elements were there at the time of our prehistory, before engaging any semantics that would come later on with symbolic elaboration.<sup>3</sup> The latter would not come from nothing, but be supported by an experience in the empirical world, that would develop

1 Read <https://threeparadoxes.com/the-book/>

2 In Gerald M. Edelman, *The Remembered Present : a Biological Theory of Consciousness*, Basic Books, New York, 1989.

3 Read Ellen Dissanayake, « The Artification Hypothesis and Its Relevance to Cognitive Science, Evolutionary Aesthetics, and Neuroaesthetic », *Cognitive Semiotics*, Issue 5 (Fall 2009).

alongside bipedal stance.<sup>4</sup> The possibilities in the world as we perceive it would change dramatically. Our hands would become as useful as they are alien, identified to their objects, transforming the way that our body has to engage in an effort to touch and enact them.<sup>5</sup> And, when it comes to enacting an impossible possibility, we get to a paradox, that opens room for an abyss – an abyss that only imagination and projection can fill. An abyss that we could stimulate and sustain just for the sake of its effect on ourselves. An abyss for stupefaction and the experience of the extraordinary.

Without even unravelling the whole chain of how we would have then developed symbolic and linguistic capacities, along with the transformation of socialisation and collective meaning, it seems important to stress that a robust founding hypothesis should be worth considering, if it means revisiting the whole paradigm that we use to rest our knowledge on. It means as well that we have an ethical responsibility to decide where we would like to go with such a scientific and philosophical proposition, what we would do with it and why. Most of all, it may remodel many categories that were historically built on throughout the development of Western societies, very much entangled with cis-patriarcal<sup>6</sup>, capitalist, colonial, imperialist and pervasive ableist views. Our work leans then as much on Chilean biologist Francisco Varela's work on proscriptive and permissive systems, as on intersectional social and political analysis concerning gender, race, class, sexuality or ability issues. For they are interpenetrated into the way that we make society and come to develop individually into seeing and participating of a shared world of meaning.

We will try to expose here the essential of what we need to know in order to evolve another gaze on things as they came to be where we are now. More importantly, we will try our best to make it accessible for the most, indulging the urge to overcome the exclusion of disabled and marginalised groups of people from the conversation. We will try to be thematic and as clear and interactive as possible. For this is collectively that the journey must resume.

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4 Which happens to be more relevant as a criterium for our evolution than the size of our brain. Read André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole – Tome I : Technique et langage*, Ed. Albin Michel, 1964.

5 On our strange relation to our hands, read Darian Leader, *Hands*, Hamish Hamilton, 2016.

6 The 'cis' prefix stands for 'cisgender', as opposed to 'transgender'. A cisgender person broadly identifies without discomfort with the gender assigned to their body at birth. It is a matter of fact that the gender binary canvas as a mean for rigid identification was very much imposed throughout the extension of Western and capitalist societies during the colonial and industrial era. The 'rectification' and uniformisation set onto the diversity of gender expressions as to shape them according to Christian but also medical, social and political normative views impacted as much pre-colonial societies in the other continents as the European ones (read Alok Vaid-Menon's *Beyond the Gender Binary*, London – Penguin, 2020 ; Lexie's book *Une Histoire de Genre : Guide pour comprendre et défendre les transidentités*, Paris – Marabout, 2021 ; or the collective work directed by Michaëla Danjé, *AfroTrans*, Paris – Cases Rebelles, 2021).

## I – 'The natural order of things'

There are two ways of interpreting the evolution of anything, whether an individual or collective trajectory like the evolution of the various species on Earth. You can say that it happened this way but it was one possibility among many others, or that it *had* to happen that way. Biologist Francisco Varela argued that the second option was the one supported by neo-darwinist thinkers (like the computationist current in cognitive science), that he called a *prescriptive* vision of evolution.<sup>7</sup> We know this interpretation of Charles Darwin's theoretical work well by the expression : *The survival of the fittest*. In other words, it should mean that through a period of time, only the individuals of species that would adapt in an *optimal* way to certain environmental conditions would be the ones that eventually survive. This means that to this kind of doctrine, not only is it critical that nothing would impede the individuals' capacity to survive and reproduce when the conditions change, but they should also do it *in a certain way*.

The major problem of this kind of perspective is that it takes the way that species did evolve and thrive – as much as we can observe it – as the way that *had to be* given the circumstances. It also gets along with the idea that all physical traits or behaviours of such or such species necessarily are or have to be adaptative. Konrad Lorenz, one of the founding figures of ethology (though controversial for his ties with Nazi's racist ideology), warned the readers of his work about misunderstanding what he called the 'teleonomy' of evolutive trajectories.<sup>8</sup> Observing the result of a trajectory would indeed be very different from expecting a specific result, which expectation may distort interpretation. Moreover, he pointed out many examples of some species with remaining physical traits or behaviours that did not apparently offer any adaptative or evolutive advantage, but did not seem to bother them either. The criterium of their 'utility' would depend much on whom it is useful to.

This joins with Francisco Varela's proposition that we should switch paradigm, from a prescriptive to a *proscriptive* vision of evolution. According to him, so long as nothing threatens the two criteria of their survival and reproduction (that is proscribed), there is no imperative that the individuals of a given species should adapt 'optimally' to arbitrary rules given from the outside. They would simply create their own relation to their environments of interaction as they perceive them and in a way, recreate them constantly by interacting with them as to, so to speak, live their lives. They would do so without having to mind what researchers would come to think about it maybe centuries later with their own perspectives, imperatives and goals. (We may remind by the way that in the field of epistemology, philosopher Thomas Kuhn already suggested that Science did not form itself in an abstract or blank canvas, but by the grouping of scientists, which means actual people tied to their times, societies and belief systems.<sup>9</sup>)

One key element to the shift proposed by Varela is the concept of sensorimotricity. The sensorimotor system describes the way that each individual constantly adjust their movements to their senses. The way that those stimulations inform them of their own situation in time and space shapes their relation to their surroundings and to a world of others. If I want to move my hand or my head to catch or smell something, I should do so by guiding my body through my own perception of my hand or my head moving (that I sense and see). That means that the way that I perceive my environment is also dependent on the way that I interact with and within it, by enacting

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7 In F. Varela, E. Thompson & E. Rosch, *The Embodied Mind, Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press, 1991.

8 In Konrad Lorenz, *Les fondements de l'éthologie*, Paris – Flammarion, 2009 (1978).

9 In Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2012 (1962).

the possibilities at hand and being embedded inside them. To Varela, the concept of *enaction* illustrates that adapting to one's surrounding environment is not abstract and impartial, but that the individual commits to it and actually realises something that they only could do with their own body, situated in one particular moment and space. It has to do with *agency* even before being conscious that a story could be told about it. In addition, the very perception of space and time is relative and co-dependent on the scales of our capacity to perform such or such action, what we are in the capacity to perceive and grasp, limited by the measure of our own body. We tend to forget that because urban infrastructures have been designed for certain types of bodies, with a certain size and ability to evolve inside them. We even come to an anthropomorphic interpretation of how other species interact with our shared environment as we witness them be, in the way that we tell the stories that we imagine that they live. However, a spider has a very different perception of what a leaf is to them than we have, as well as somebody in a wheel-chair has a very different perception of stairs than physically abled people have, or autistic people would feel when it comes to neurotypical forms of interaction.<sup>10</sup>

This means that we have to be careful with the way that we describe possible processes of evolution, if we don't mind our own situated perspective. Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway developed in this sense the concept of *situated knowledge*<sup>11</sup>, that means to deconstruct the very preconceptions that we have about knowledge, the context where it takes place and emerges, the social biases that we might be subjected to without being fully aware of or daring to think them (being part of a group that exercises an influence on our judgment). This methodological principle would apply to many fields of research and dynamic analysis, to which a proscriptive approach could benefit. What does say that Imperialist, White Supremacist, Capitalist Cis-Patriarcal and Ableist societies such as ours (to take up from Black American scholar bell hooks' terms) necessarily *had* to acquire hegemony over the way that we practice, make society today and treat our living ecosystems ? The practice of scientific research doesn't escape that question. To what aim and what kind of living together do we want reality to adapt to ? Because in the end, it is not only about knowledge, it is about a decision : deciding how we want to interact with our surrounding environments, for whom and, importantly enough, for how long. And this is a political issue, for the way that we describe our lived reality says a lot about what we omit to say about it and spend time and energy to silence.<sup>12</sup>

As any species does, we make our own reality by experiencing it with the means at hand, and now is the time to lift the veil.

Therefore, why is that distinction between the prescriptive and the proscriptive so important ? Because when you state that something must be this or that way, you should better find how to justify that assumption. Most of the time, the justification of prescriptive systems such as '*Only those who adapt optimally to the current conditions survive*' hides the motive of defending one's own privileged position, which they feel could be threatened, whether in a direct or indirect way. German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel illustrated this kind of relations of power in an allegory called, at the time (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), the 'Dialectic of the Master and the Slave' – that would later inspire Karl Marx's work. According to him, not only the 'master' comes to be dependent on the work of the 'slave' that they subjugated, but also on the pressure maintained on them so that they would not revolt and try to liberate themselves. Relations of power never stand by themselves, they have to be reinforced and maintained in time. There, a strategy is needed.

For instance, the way that we describe a world that should serve as a common-base

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10 'Neurotypical' means the way that uses and norms of social interaction are standardised in a way that benefit people at ease with certain social capacities, but harm people who can't perform them without an additional effort.

11 In Donna Haraway, « A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century », in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York – Routledge, 1991, pp.149-181.

12 A salute to Abigail Thorne and her *Philosophy Tube* YouTube channel.

understanding for all is very much dependent on who gets to produce such a description and impose it as a collective truth. It should be reminded that the vision of Darwin's theory that we exposed earlier served the elaboration of what is commonly called Social Darwinism, since English philosopher Herbert Spencer's work in the 1850's. Social Darwinism applies the idea of the 'survival of the fittest' to the organisation of capitalist societies, promoting a minimum implication of the State into the economy and social organisation. According to the supporters of the ideology, if we only let things go and did not intervene in social and economical issues, the latter would simply solve themselves out and achieve balance according to some 'natural order of things'. The 'fittest' would then 'naturally' occupy the top of social hierarchy, because this was, in a way, 'meant to be' and fit to their satisfaction. To this view, best is not hindering those who are fitted in their access to privilege. Except that the actual state of political and social organisation is not neutral and already dictates the norms according to which some should have access to the spaces where power and its distribution are given, and many others would not. To say that those with the capacities to produce wealth and achieve a higher social position should have the liberty to thrive without restriction shouldn't mean that most of the others, on the sole basis of their birth place and social identity (gender, race, class, ...), should be denied any of those opportunities and would not even get to the doorstep of that competition or even to a sustainable living. In the end, what is at stake is often not less than the very material and moral means for their mere survival.

Defending such a vision of how a society should work eludes that there is already a social hierarchy built on inequalities, political injustice and discriminations. In fact, it would only tend to favour mostly those who already benefit from them (check the regularly updated Oxfam reports), if it were not for the institution of adequate social and regulatory policies (when they are not turned back against the already most precarious of the concerned populations, as it is often the case). Most of all, such a position likes to forget that the ruling of the privileged only comes from a particular history of establishing and maintaining the very structures of privilege that would back up the heroic striving of the fittest. Those mostly resulted from a history of violence, systematic oppression and debt contract. In fact, most people's position of subordination to those systems of power and oppression only holds because they are taken by the economical debt for the access to a relative peace and material services, even the vital ones – as capitalism creates value from exchanging and lending them for some virtual currency. There is always someone, an intermediary that we never see that eventually sums up the bill, as we don't directly own the means of production for those goods and services.

So we are borrowing some comfort, in exchange for an agreement to certain practices that we don't always understand, whether concerning the way that our consumption goods and primary services are produced or the financial cost of 'tax avoidance'. And even if we don't accept those terms, most of the times, we are not in the position to bargain with what our States choose to close their eyes on or actively promote. In France, for instance, the 'Yellow Vests' movements of 2018 against anti-social policies and growing precarity resulted in brutal police repression, that ended the hope to eventually be heard by politics when going to the streets. According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it is because we can be deprived of that which is vital to our survival by an organisation of political power – in many cases, the State, which holds the legitimacy of the use of physical violence (police repression, imprisonment, confiscation of goods, ...) –, that we are compelled to accept its imposed legitimacy in the use of symbolic violence (having us accept inequalities, even the most brutal).<sup>13</sup> That is how it makes system.

There is always an ideology that then appears as a mean to justify inequalities, in order to go on making profit from them. It allows some to exercise political domination, even coming from people that do not hold the means of decision, but that are dependent on the slightest power that

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13 Read Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l'État, Cours au Collège de France (1989-1992)*, Paris – Seuil, 2012.

such a political system grants them in exchange for their obedience.<sup>14</sup> Even oppressed people may have to accept the intolerable and 'play the part', sometimes reproducing onto those below them what they have to suffer, just so that they would survive themselves. Black studies, for example, from (but not limited to) W. E. B. Du Bois to Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Paul Gilroy, Toni Morrison or Maboula Soumahoro, analysed in that sense the impact of slavery on the colonised soul. On another subject, self-advocacy groups on neurodiversity regularly point out the effects of over-adapting to the pressure of certain kinds of normed social interactions that autistic people, for instance, are the least comfortable with. The notion of 'masking' was notably developed to show how performing codified social cues was both a way to (over-)adapt to others' expectations and to avoid negative reactions towards their autistic traits. Disability studies are also passionating when they come to cross with intersectional issues such as gender, race, class and sexuality (Crip Theory).<sup>15</sup>

All this detour is important because often, issues that are relative to social identifications have been subjected to strictly moral, then (pseudo-)medical interpretations throughout the history of Western societies and their colonies. French philosopher Michel Foucault described them as systems of control over the bodies, in the 1970's. Thus, indigenous people, notably on the African continent, were the object of European colonisers' curiosity, at the age of 'biological racism' or 'anthropometry', a pseudo-scientific endeavour that, for instance, promoted the measurement of skulls in order to establish an essential difference between races. Intersex people, in their turn, were (and are still in many countries, like France) mutilated and their gender scrutinised, for instance, by Neo-Zealand-American sexologist John Money in the 1960's.<sup>16</sup> Only in 1973 was homosexuality removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorder (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association, then from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1990 – but transidentity had to wait until 2018 to be finally removed from the same list.<sup>17</sup> Those examples are all tied to the same prescription : one better be a cisgender heterosexual and able white man from an upper class than anything else ; and the more one diverts from that privileged model, the more difficult their road might be to access the same spaces and rights.

That is why we speak of systemic oppressions, that those who benefit at any level from them try to justify by means of statements over the 'natural order of things', so long as they are not impacted themselves. Feminist YouTuber Natalie Wynn analysed something interesting, by the way, concerning transphobic bigotry.<sup>18</sup> She suggested that the slogan 'Trans women are women', serving as a defence of trans women against public attacks, apart from the fact that it excluded trans men and non-binary people, would focus very much attention on a metaphysical inquiry : 'What is a woman ?' Engaging that kind of question would surely lead to granting those who intended to do so in the first place the liberty to eventually deny womanhood to trans women. Instead, if we took another slogan such as 'Trans Liberation Now', this would rather stress the common political issues and discriminations that most trans people face, whether trans women, trans men, non-binary people and intersex people. Again, as long as someone's identity is not threatening another's physical, psychic or emotional integrity, why would anyone feel the urge to oppose and deny them the same essential rights than anyone else ? What kind of prescription is going on here ?

As well, a question that is supposedly posed as an elementary scientific conversation is

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14 This motivated German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of the Eichmann trial, to say that there was a 'banality of evil' in the way that Nazi's 'Final Solution' had been orchestrated so to assign every protagonist to a specific part of the chain of command and make them able to keep themselves unaware of their responsibility.

15 Read Charlotte Puiseux, « *Criper la théorie queer : un nouvel enjeu des études sur le handicap* », 2015, <https://charlottepuiseux.weebly.com/alter2015.html> .

16 Read Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York – Routledge, 1990.

17 Read Delphine Montera's work on social medias (@Autistequeer\_le\_docu), on the connection between ableism, cisheteronormativity and the practice of psychiatry.

18 « J. K. Rowling », on her channel *ContraPoints*, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2021.

merely hiding the attempt at denying and silencing the voices of minorities and their demand for social justice. It requires from marginalised groups of people to justify their own existence, already reduced to precarious conditions.<sup>19</sup> It prevents us from recognising that their very means of living are threatened daily by discriminatory social and political infrastructures, practices and prejudices – which, in most capitalist and social class representations, mean to already objectify and alienate them into a source of disgust and rejection, inducing into others the fear of being assimilated to their distress.

Instead of saying to marginalised groups – whether they are marginalised on the basis of their gender, race, social class, of their sexual orientation or disability – : 'We have other priorities. Why would you need to exist in public spaces and within social and political participation already?', we should be asking : 'Why don't you want us to exist and be public as well as you do ? And why would you address issues concerning our lives without even consulting us or having us invited to take part in those decisions ?' If another example was required, on both American continents, indigenous people are dying or facing major harm, again, for asking this kind of question, whether they defend the Amazon from deforestation or sacred lands from a pipeline project.<sup>20</sup> And they are not the only minorities that we are willing to sacrifice worldwide.

That is why such a concept as proscriptive systems is capital, precisely in order to open our vision of a shared reality to all narratives, points of view and histories that are intricate and which we depend on, especially in a globalised world. Scientific interpretation is never far from the political and never disconnected from a perspective on the kind of making society together we want to get to on this only yet livable planet. Eventually, a statement on how evolution works doesn't only affect scientific research. It tells us something about the hierarchies that we create between living beings – those that are granted the spaces where decisions are made and those that are not. Our current competitive vision of the evolution of species tells us something about how we *dare* justify the destruction of our whole ecosystems with the idea that human species *had to be* on top of others. This vision of a 'natural law' to the reckless struggle for survival roots imperialist white-supremacist capitalist and ableist cis-patriarchy into defending a few people's right to hegemony, under the pretense that otherwise, someone else would crush them first. 'Better us than them, right ?'

Then, knowledge is indeed political, because some production of even a pretense of knowledge and its access could either benefit the inclusion of all voices, experiences and perspectives, or on the contrary, maintain the exclusion of the many to the privilege of the few. Black American lesbian poetess Audre Lorde, on that matter, stressed very well how the fact that the history of the minorities' struggles was not compiled and transmitted in the official telling nor even that much inside the communities participated of a sense of dispossession. To her, in the context of Black feminist issues that she worked on, it was like they had to 'reinvent the wheel' and start it all over again from scratch at each generation.<sup>21</sup> Further more, we cannot separate the production of knowledge from its material ends. Notably, to be visible and validated in capitalist terms, whether in the medias or in the sphere of scientific research, means that we be granted fundings. Whether those fundings depend on public or private investments, we can still ask who owns them and who decides of their attribution and to what end ? How could it orientate ongoing representations, studies and decision making ?<sup>22</sup> It is not enough to address an issue, it should also be listened to and discussed in such conditions so it could eventually result in concrete material

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19 Read « 2021 on pace to be deadliest yet for trans and gender non-conforming Americans », *The Guardian*, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/14/us-trans-transgender-deaths-2021> .

20 Read « At least 331 human rights defenders were murdered in 2020, reports find », *The Guardian*, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/11/human-rights-defenders-murder-2020-report> .

21 Read Audre Lorde, « The Master's Tools won't Dismantle the Master's House », *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London – Silver Press, 2017.

22 Read A. Fabbri, A. Lai, Q. Grundy & L. A. Bero, « The Influence of Industry Sponsorship on the Research Agenda : A Scoping Review », *Am J Public Health*, November 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6187765/> .

policies that would do justice to all parts. If the end of producing scientific knowledge is not to improve individual and collective shared means for living, what is it for then ?

That is why proscriptive systems are so important, because as long as the physical, mental and emotional integrity of each part engaged is respected and they are granted an equal right for participation, there are no reasons why we should prescribe any compulsory conduct onto them that would be preferable from establishing local and fully chosen agreements, taking the necessary time to find every moment's balance at each place and for each situation. We need to be specific about the complexity of human and all the living's realities. Nevertheless, in the context of societies that claim to be democratic, but developed throughout a history of colonisation, land theft and slavery and still perpetuate them through the geopolitics of global and neoliberal capitalism, we could only resist the pressure, keep thinking alternatives and wonder for the best...

All the questions raised before open to an ecological vision of knowledge, defined by Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers as 'a milieu where livings with divergent interests cohabit in an intricated way'.<sup>23</sup> According to her, rather than clinging on exclusionary oppositions, for instance between the 'rational' and the 'subjective', we should invoke spaces that would be open for various situated experiences to be heard and considered in their participation to a same object of collective interest. They would in fact all create a different object altogether that would enrich our common perspective.

Such a separation between the 'rational' and objective, and the 'emotional' and subjective often conceals an attempt at removing oneself from the possibility of being denied an affirmative position and being hurt by doing so – especially when they are not used to being criticised or rightfully suggested another possibility. It is a very prescriptive and moral attitude : 'It is not me, it is the rule, that all must follow.' Except that, as we saw, this affirmation almost never questions the founding grounds of those rules, nor whom they benefit to. We actually live under political systems that maintain themselves from the principle of being the tradition and inalienable law, no matter how unequal they may be. They are not supposed to be questioned since they benefit to some, and that is why there has been such a brutal backlash against movements of liberation, whether (trans)feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, ecologist, ...

Most of the time, the resistance from tradition to self-questioning is the least rational thing. There is a symbiotic nature to our relationship with our environments of interaction that affects every part of our experience since childhood. It goes with sensorimotoricity as with what English psychiatrist John Bowlby called *attachment*. Whatever skills that we develop in time, we develop them from a need to be granted a comforting grasp on our closest reality, notably our parents and primary caregivers. Our capacities or incapacities to formalise language and symbolic manipulations enable us, according to psychoanalytical theory since Sigmund Freud, to sublimate our insecurities towards an affective and positive response from our figures of attachment. Whatever ideal of adulthood might be this imperative to control one's emotions, we are still built together through our sensory and emotional experiences, that means : trauma. And trauma affects and shapes what we allow ourselves to face in our daily lives.

Therefore, even observing the stars and the laws of physics cannot evade the question of whom the observation is meant *for* and to what purpose. The question of *who* receives a proposition as knowledge is both social and political, epistemological and hermeneutical, as the context of its emergence may inhibit or favour ways of expression over others. The general frame and world of meaning in which we conceive ideas may be fertile as the limits from which to create forms, as they can be disastrous as to their social implications if they come to impact political decisions in critical ways. If everything or anything cannot be taken and available as knowledge and valid as such for a vast majority of people – that means that knowledge itself is adaptable enough to various conditions –, then the contrary – the compliance of this variety of conditions to one unique set of knowledge – may resort to ideologies that may also be prejudicial. As we saw, a proscriptive frame to the production of knowledge, on the contrary, by protecting first the physical, psychic and emotional integrity of all the variety of people that may be impacted by its occurrence, would leave the door open to the conversation without threatening the very means that there would be one.

There is always a motive and conditions to the elaboration of a discourse on the reality that we try to share that is both produced by and for sentient people with a rich, diverse and often contradictory emotional experience. If one's integration within the communities that concentrate the production of knowledge and its means of recognition appears to be a higher motive than the actual

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23 Read « Isabelle Stengers. Philosophie activiste, récits spéculatifs et ouverture des possibles », *Le Carnet et les Instants*, <https://le-carnet-et-les-instants.net/archives/entretien-avec-isabelle-stengers/?cn-reloaded=1> . My translation.

attention given to the task, relations of power within the group might cast some rigidity upon the very scope through which we conceive some discourse as knowledge or not. Then, if the general understanding of the group actually denies some portions of living experience as potentially conditioning their work field, it might result in a very partial vision of what reality is or should be. It is to forget that our very capacity to produce mental images and manipulate language structures relies on memory, that is constantly generated by our body on a sensorimotor basis and thus, always approximative and subjective. English psychoanalyst Darian Leader explored, in his book *Jouissance* (Paris – *Stilus*, 2020), 150 years of scientific literature on how the experience of pain, to whatever degree, fundamentally participates to our psychological growth. It cannot be perfect. The pretense to the production of knowledge may be of attaining a form of objectivity, but any language in itself is only a set of signs. Their interpretation, on the other hand, can never be cut off and extracted from the context through which one perceives their own world of experience to the intersection of others', that is, in the end, always rooted in traumatic inscription.

## ***II – Let us talk about collective trauma***

We cover bodies and objects with meaning, signs that we identify as familiar, friendly or not. The idea that some thing or sign is familiar or friendly, or on the contrary, unfamiliar or unfriendly, seems to come with the more intuitive sense of feeling safe or not around them. The sense of security or insecurity prescribed onto some objects or figures might often be established by association though, rather than from direct experience with one particular person or object. Being afraid of being bitten by a dog might not necessarily mean that one has ever been bitten by a dog or this dog, but knows what it means to be bitten. Moreover, if a sign or figure is collectively pointed out as dangerous, ordering the members of the community to address their fear and insecurity at this designated cause – whether imaginary or based on experience –, we get to channel all the painful experience of a group of people into a collective traumatic response. Collective imagination would be fed by the need to respond to aggression and trauma, but designated an arbitrary expedient.

This collective response to a shared trauma finds its rationality in the cultural, political and social structures of what founds the organisation of a society, its internal hierarchies and justifications.<sup>24</sup> It structures the elaboration of laws, whether official or not (it may be considered a kind of law within a family and taught to children that every dog bites, no matter their shape and apparent behaviour). It is true when we talk about large, deep and obvious traumas, like a terrorist attack or an economical crisis, but it is also true of slightest impressions. If attacks in the United States or in France claimed by islamic organisations did, for instance, foster the targeting of Muslim people more or less as the root of a radical opposition and problem, it was also reflecting a deeper conditioning of how we associate certain signs on the bodies (a beard, a veil, the colour of one's skin) as a source of threat. Further more, such dynamics impact the way that stigmatised people would anticipate those associative reactions of fear toward them, affecting their relation to their own body in public spaces.<sup>25</sup>

The way that we create homogenous categories reveals the kind of oppositions that is supposed to unify a group. This is well known when we study the elaboration of racial categories throughout a history of colonialism and slavery. The political and economical goal of exploiting the bodies of the colonised and enslaved could not bear considering them as subjects capable of self-determination and free will. Even though people on the African continent before colonisation did not consider themselves as 'Black', for example, but as belonging to one kingdom or to one tribe or the other, all those different people were assimilated as one homogenous group, 'Black people', when displaced altogether on the American continents. They would become the 'Black people' as opposed to the 'White people', no matter how different those people are among each other within those arbitrary categories.

When collective trauma is used as a mean to justify discriminatory politics, whether on racial, gender, class or other basis, it durably shapes the way that a society produces imaginaries and justifies our narratives of justice, especially when it erases the traces of its own history, as the United States did with the history of Indigenous peoples. When one group casts a stigma and stereotyped attributes onto another, being associated with the stigmatised group casts onto you those presumed attributes with no regard for your own personality and experience, but as a pre-requisite to that question : 'Am I safe ?' Something that Black American writer James Baldwin analysed so often, is that the oppressing group evolves motives to fear you *because* they don't want to face that they are taking advantage of your situation as being oppressed by them. Therefore, it projects onto

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24 Read, for instance, Deborah Tollefsen, « The Rationality of Collective Guilt », *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXX, 2006.

25 Read Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

you the duty to *prove* that you are *not* a threat, that there is no need to feel in danger near you and retaliate. It shapes the perception that one has of themselves and the mental and emotional charge of adapting oneself to the gaze of someone else that doesn't understand nor want to see them for what they are, of what kind of relation binds them together in a same though conflictual world of meaning.

In fact, the idea that trauma only affects the deeply wounded and the broken and diverts them from 'normality' is a very ableist view. It obviates the fact that trauma affects us all and sometimes, not in the most overt ways. We elaborate our identity as a function of what we can allow ourselves to express among a society of others. That is why in identity issues, the personal is always tied to the political. As we saw earlier with Hegel, policies of domination often work as a contract, an exchange over someone's life : 'If you work for me, I'll spare your life or won't send you in prison and you will be able move within a certain limit'. The extent of that limit might be useful for a while when it relies on an equal treatment. It is not so salutary when it serves the domination of a group over another, not on the basis of their actions towards them, but for the simple fact that they are there.

Starting her *Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston – Beacon Press, 2014), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds that the history of US settler colonialism is 'the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.'<sup>26</sup> As James Baldwin argued, it could not be so without alienating in the mind of the oppressor those whose existence, culture and history that they destroyed : as the 'natural', essential enemy. According to him, nothing was more frightening to 'the white man' than the terror of his own guilt<sup>27</sup>, especially when it comes to white people of popular classes, who lived next to the slaves and the segregated with only the colour of their skin to tell them apart. The proximity of their social class would make their cohabitation less bearable as it would require more personal effort from the white person to push away the pain of identifying with those that they force into slavery and extreme precarity.<sup>28</sup> French scholar Maboula Soumahoro explained that it was one of the main differences between racism in France and in the United States : French people did not *have to* cohabitate with the slaves that they sent to the American continents on the same territory as people in the US had to, so it is still easier to pretend that racial issues do not exist or are neglectable in France, an 'universalist' and colour-blind country.<sup>29</sup> However, what the establishment of the United States and their extension was even more radical, according to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, as they had almost totally erased all the traces of the Indigenous life and history before colonisation – if it weren't for Indigenous peoples' resistance to only survive and manage to preserve and pass on their culture.

That results over time into a system of intergenerational oppression and trauma that would establish the oppressor's law : 'Such category of people has always worked for us or others, it is in their nature to be servile, so this is the way that things are and any other way would be subversive, dangerous and unnatural.' Of course, this goes on as well for discrimination and oppression against women and gender minorities, popular classes, disabled people, ... If we question our 'traditions', we might sometimes discover actual skeletons in the closet. How to build one's own identity in that kind of context ? When thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, for instance, analysed the effects of colonisation on the colonised mind – as well as the coloniser's –, they precisely stressed those mechanisms of sustained oppression that came to alienate the very perception that they had of themselves. And we can extend that to the other oppressive dynamics, as intersectional analysis

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26 She also refers to anthropologist Patrick Wolfe's work, p. 2.

27 Read James Baldwin / Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*, New York – Penguin Random House, 2017.

28 Natalie Wynn called that the 'proximity effect', on her *Contrapoints* episode on « Envy », <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPhrTOg1RUk> .

29 French-speaking people may listen to the *Kiffe Ta Race* podcast episode #49, « 2020 : Et l'on découvert le racisme made in France », where Black French scholar Maboula Soumahoro tracks back this process, <https://soundcloud.com/kiffe-ta-race/49-2020-et-lon-decouvrit-le-racisme-made-in-france> .

show, that imply that the access to resources that are essential to our survival and well-being are being dependent on our compliance to abusive systems of power concentrating and administrating them. We have to shape our personality, for instance, knowing that the access to those resources is dependent on our capacity to produce work in certain ways prescribed by preset relations of power that are maintained and that we are not in the position to discuss. The very fact that we are not part of the discussion about those matters, that the distance is too far from the source where the decisions are made for all, is participating to the tension that one has to bear in order to live with the violence that they induce. If we were to be participating subjects of such a system that would organise and distribute the resources available, we could name and ask whether their use is adequate to the benefit of all. If we are not and those resources are still being abusively exploited and our governing systems unchecked and uncontrolled as they damage the very ecosystems that we depend on, then it means that in a way, we are as much objectified and alienated, as we require to objectify and alienate those whose oppression we still benefit from. That ground has been a motive for anti-psychiatry movements in the 1960s and 1970s (R. D. Laing, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Bruce Alexander's 'rat park' experiment<sup>30</sup>, ...), as some perceived that a strictly institutional and drug-based approach was insufficient to tackle socially-conditioned aspects of mental distress. How to build and choose oneself as a person when the least of your daily action depends on the perimeter of your cage, exploiting the lands and seas that we dry off and poison or precarious workers here and in other countries ?

Anyhow, we manage to keep on functioning or trying to, although we experience trauma on a daily basis, repressing the guilt that we are told not to have already. And that is it : *trauma*, in a large sense, means how we adapt to radical changes in our sensory and emotional experience and appreciation, from the slightest encounter to the most violent injury. In its etymology, it means as much 'the wound' as 'the defeat'.<sup>31</sup> It is how we surrender to the change in our reality and try to draw a livable map of our daily interactions around that. It is the story that we tell around the wound, hoping that we would not awaken the pain of its memory. The deepest is the pain, the more distance we would try to create between what we tell ourselves and its remembrance. We can do it despite its psychological cost and most have had to be resilient for a large part of their lives, even if it means functioning differently. (By the way, we can also be and function differently from the prescribed and expected norm in the first place and manage to still 'function' anyway, despite the frictions that it would create to the outside world.) That is where we come to the interesting part, that trauma irrigates our whole experience, that it is the intersection, the merging of sensorimotoricity and meaning – that it can be reclaimed, as so many minority-assigned communities have done since there were domination and oppression structures.

In their testimony at a TEDxUMN event, Two-Spirit scholar from the Rosebud Sioux tribe Nicholas Cetanzi Metcalf explained how they managed to navigate during their youth and life as an adult between two separate worlds of meaning : the 'American' and the Indian one.<sup>32</sup> It became even more delicate when it came to gender issues. Though Two-Spirit people – who identify as men, women, both, in-between or as a third-gender on the gender spectrum, although assigned differently at birth or not – used to exist and hold important social and spiritual positions in almost all the 566 Indigenous Nations on the North American continent, the arrival of European settlers and the colonisation of the lands broke their internal organisation – as it did on other continents.<sup>33</sup> Forcing the subjugated populations to a Christian education participated to a sense of confiscation and shame over their indigenous cultures, calling Two-Spirit people *berdache* – as 'male prostitute' –,

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30 Mia Mulder's YouTube video « What If Psychiatry Is Fake ? » is an interesting introduction to the subject of social conditioning in mental illness and psychiatry issues, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK7M1NRcCAI> .

31 Source : <https://www.etymonline.com/word/trauma>

32 See Nicholas Metcalf, « Why We Need Gender Fluidity », TEDxUMN, august 6<sup>th</sup> 2015, on YouTube. The transcript can be found here : <https://www.coursehero.com/file/102057755/PSY-211-Transcript-for-Why-We-Need-Gender-Fluiditydocx/> .

33 Read Lexie or Michaëla Danjé's introductive work on those matters in the books quoted above (in French).

prescribing the Western binary conception of gender onto them. As Cetanzi confesses, it is still a struggle to feel safe while affirming their cultural and gender identity – trauma that they were passed on through their parents and that they still pass on to their children, by warning them about the dangers of affirming their parent's gender non-conforming identity.

We may think that this is only a matter that concerns minorities, pertaining to who they are and not a result of how they have been treated for centuries, in the same way that psychoanalytic and psychiatric theory and practice still mainly individualises and pathologises such issues as deviances. But trauma and its consequences are never only a matter of being wounded and failing to respond to the wound as any 'normal person' would. It is always deeply interpersonal and intricately into the very notion of *meaning*, which is inscribed into the collective sense and transmitted that way. If we cannot give back meaning to an experience and integrate it in the way that we project into possibilities, a way that could be heard with attention and dialogued with, if we keep on being isolated in our means to try to *make things right* – that is, that a collective guilt could also be addressed and not denied its reality and consequences on future generations – then, how could anyone be alright and feel up to the task of healing ?

### III – Difficult diagnosis

*'The illusion of safety is as frustrating as it is powerful.'*  
Roxane Gay, « *The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion* », *Bad Feminist*, 2014

There are many reasons why trauma shouldn't be seen solely as an individual issue. We have tried to analyse so far how the dynamic structures of trauma could be conceived and maintained collectively. One may object that it is too much taking from people their responsibility for their own lives. In a sense, maybe ; but maybe the choices and decisions that we make are choices amongst possibilities. We would like to stress here that any responsibility taken, moreover, depends on what one is asked for and what story is willing to be heard and most of all, understood. One is often well aware of the kind of stories that, on the contrary, cannot be told and the risk if we tell them of not being believed.

The world of meaning and comprehension that is collectively conceived and maintained, participates of what James Baldwin called 'a system of reality'.<sup>34</sup> Depending on how one situates themselves inside of a shared system of reality would not only affect the way that they would perceive the world around them, but the roles attached and expected from such a point of view and perspective upon their self-expression. What are the stories that we are usually told that we come to tell ourselves and *to* ourselves, because we expect that those are the stories that most people are used to hearing and ready to hear ?

In an essay called « *The Careless Language of Sexual Violence* », Haitian-American writer Roxane Gay reacts to the way that the shocking rape of an eleven year-old girl by eighteen young men in Cleveland, Texas, was covered. In fact, most newspapers emphasised on the fact that those men's lives and the town's would be impacted, without seeming to care that much about the girl, if not blaming her or her mother. Roxane Gay questions a culture of numbing toward the notions and representations of rape and rapists – whether in literature, newspapers, films and series, music, ... –, pertaining to what we usually call 'rape culture'. Such a way of depicting rape turns it as if it were an inevitable part of how our societies function – not a question of 'if' a person identified as a woman, or assimilated to that position, is likely to be raped, but of *when*. She says, 'I increasingly feel that writing is a political act whether I intend it or not because we live in a culture where [careless reports and articles of such facts are] permissible and publishable. I am troubled by how we have allowed such intellectual distance between violence and the representation of violence. We talk about rape, but we don't carefully talk about rape.'<sup>35</sup> In that context, many stories are not likely to be heard, at least without being distorted and used against themselves.

When we talk about trauma, we don't only talk about someone being hurt and trying to recover from it, we talk about how we allow people that are hurt to tell their stories. Do we help them situate their experience into rightful meaning and redirect their lives on to new possibilities in a welcoming way ? Trauma is both about the repressed memory of the hurt *and* the strategies adopted by the person to avoid such a memory, go round it and keep on living in a way or another. We can learn otherwise, but only if we can stage the source of the pain in our sight. Trauma is about how we make room around the wound so that we can recover from it, should we feel allowed and safe enough to face it again. Buddhist traditions call it *Dukkha*, all the tribulations of everyday life that are 'hard to face'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, there are two sides of trauma : one that we tell and one that we feel,

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34 In his 1965 debate speech at Cambridge University's Union Hall, <https://youtu.be/oFeoS41xe7w> .

35 In Roxane Gay, « *The Careless Language of Sexual Violence* », *Bad Feminist*, Great Britain – Corsair, 2014, p. 132.

36 See American psychologist Mark Epstein's presentation « Working with Trauma: Integrating Psychotherapy and

to which we can hardly find the words.

In her reflection over the way that we usually talk about rape, Roxane Gay quotes scholars Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver's book *Rape and Representations* (New York – Columbia University Press, 1991). They argued that 'the act of rereading rape involves more than listening to silences ; it requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body : restoring, that is, the violence – the physical, sexual violation.'<sup>37</sup> However difficult it is to hear and admit that one's body can be violated, to live it in our own body, we need to understand that no one is immune to trauma, to the kind of contact that forces you to change your perspective, for the better or worse. But, how to tell in the most accurate way and share the reality of what is least communicable, that is, sensory and emotional experience ? They are both inalienable to our body's most intimate reality, that is the experience of change and transformation that we cannot control, but only hope to guide. We can hope for better approximations. In the Buddhist view, it may be complicated as well to tell a story that would resemble 'the truth', in a world where everything is utterly changing and impermanent, close but never the same again<sup>38</sup> ; therefore, one should better make peace with the way that their own body feels pain, discomfort and fear by accepting them in the first place. If the source of the pain is staged, one could change their own position toward it.

However, it is more difficult to let go of a wound when the causes are structural and persistent. The point is that, as many intersectional thinkers put forward, we should step out of an 'either/or' perspective – one that would state that if you fall short of the expected and prescribed norm, then you necessarily are to be antagonised. In that case, it is not that people can't be resilient enough to live in a way or another with trauma or their disability in any matter – they don't have the choice –, it is not because they do manage to live or survive through that they *should* still. Again, to observe people struggling with disabling pain in a certain context that doesn't help nor is offering other acceptable solutions, doesn't say more about them being hurt than it does about their being or feeling abandoned by the sense of community and support, of meaning and possibilities. That means, there might be a danger to the symptom and its diagnosis, in any kind of therapeutic or pseudo-therapeutic space that actually comes to hurt people who resort to it. Most disciplines would take the symptom as belonging to the individual's responsibility and failure to adapt to the way things presumably are and should be, rather than acknowledging that the way that we say they are could or should in fact be different.

Interpretation is based on a frame of reference, a language to its code and the limits of what it can express. If our frame is expecting too much, too rigid and excludes some possibilities, refuses to acknowledge a large piece of people's actual experience, we take the risk of missing out what their experience is all about. We should listen first and try to understand ; yet, we should also be ready to put the very structures that found our expectations at risk as well. We should change the frame. If the system of reality and political system that we are living through are failing our comprehension and help to what many living beings are actually living on this planet, we should be ready to risk the pretend security of being held in debt to the power that it wields on them and all of us. That means, an unequal system of making society that is likely to induce hurting the people and living beings that are subjected to it, cannot be permitted to endure if we want to help those people durably and our shared ecosystems. At one moment in time, we should just stop putting bandages

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Mindfulness » at the Family Action Network, January 23<sup>rd</sup>2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJuWsiBQnZI> .

37 *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

38 In the main Buddhist traditions of *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*, one of the central ideas is that even one's own self cannot be consistent with any essential entity. It only appears as a delusional fabrication that would be tied to its objects of identification. One's own name would, for instance, be such an object bringing the illusion of a stable identity, because of its recurrence, while all of our experiences are constantly changing, being born and let go of. '*What we call a "being", an "individual" or "me", is a convenient word, a label that we attach to the combination of the five [constituents of experience, called the Five Aggregates].*' (The Five Aggregates being : Matter, Sensations, Perceptions, Mental Formations and Conscious. In this sense, the core of Buddhist philosophy is based on a phenomenological approach that does not necessarily resort to the belief in any external and invisible deity.) *In* Walpola Rahula, *L'enseignement du Bouddha*, Paris – Seuil, 1961, p. 45. My translation.

over wounds that find their causes still vivid and administering damage. There is a rage to trauma when it is bound to the injustice of political domination, that endures. It is not an individual failure : it is an attempt at surviving collective submission.

Nevertheless, they are not subjugated ; they are made by force.

Speaking of a change of frame, it seems now bewildering that most people have managed to get a sense of unlikely balance out of one of disruption. It is and at the same time, if we consider the theory of the sensorimotor paradox, they had and still have to. We probably have been passed on the habit of struggling, learning and normalising the disruption of one of our basic function as living beings, throughout some hundred thousands of years : sensorimotricity. The trauma of its constant contradiction – as is the hypothesis of the theory – may be at the core of our ability to elaborate meaning as a response, so that we would not find ourselves in complete disarray.

But, this must yet seem obscure as to how we came to make such a statement. We mentioned the sensorimotor paradox theory in our introduction without entering deeper into the subject. It is a complicated one, though rather simple, because it exposes a contradiction that is not to be resolved, a tension and chain reaction. The main idea is that seeing one's own hand and staring at it as if it were any other object in our surrounding environment – especially when it is open in front of us – disrupts sensorimotricity. Something there is impossible to get beyond without hurting oneself or removing the object and ending the scene. For this object – the hand – to remain, we have to momentarily freeze ourselves to a certain extent, suspending our liberty to fully respond to any other object and most of all, to *this* very object – a part of our own body that we are willingly alienating from ourselves. It is a situation, a specific setting where the very hand that we are used to invest in order to fetch objects *cannot* move if we want *this* particular object to be. For this object to be, we have to deny our own capacity to act toward it : we are to be the witness that cannot participate other than in our potential imagination.

The experience is quite unique and prototypical, in fact, and provokes a dizziness that has no parallel with looking at any other part of one's own body. It leaves the person with their sole capacity to witness the impression of their own senses and emotions, without being able to do anything about it – bodywise. Something, in that particular situation, blocks the capacity to *enact* any consistent interaction involving the whole body, but only the *sense* of that body, some level of self-consciousness (that is the condition of Edelman) – that is entropic, generates an internal and physiological disorder, because we want to but cannot *enact* the situation that stimulates us. Sensorimotor memory is generated without being able to go through it either. It is only but an *image*. It is the image of a moment, of a possibility without an end, circling and waiting for an unlikely outcome. We say that, but of course, such a habitual thing as living with one's own hands can seem futile and hardly enough to make any suggestion about the origins of our capacity to think and elaborate imagination into narratives, especially if we think about those without hands or that cannot actually see. But, is it ? What about the way those people thousands of years ago would have felt like in such moments of self-exploration ? How could it change our bodies over a very long time ?

We reminded earlier that there should be a tighter connection between the depiction of an event and its bodily experience, how social conventions and norms of interaction have taught us to put a distance there from the expression of pain and distress, or even of pleasure – in fact, from the reality of the body. Imagine that you are frozen into a situation from which you need to get out, escape and try to resume your usual life – you could still call out for help, or try to break the spell that has you frozen. Staring at your own hand is much of the same : you cannot enact this situation, and you cannot simply eat your own hand – but you might still want to get out of it eventually. The situation is the image that you are stuck in, and the way out is the call, verbalisation or at least, the signifying of your distress that no one else can see. Psychoanalyst Darian Leader observed, in that sense, all the ways that our hands constantly have to be busy and fiddle with something when we are least aware, as if some part of us desperately had to express something out of it.<sup>39</sup>

The state of paradox makes everything strange around you, as you have to recover some

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39 In his book *Hands* cited above.

sense of physical engagement, and marks in the world that you perceive. And yet, the dizziness is intoxicating, feels like a surreal moment. The experience is deeply personal, yet it might shape the urgent need to communicate something about it : a sense of one's own self, palpable, concentrated, present and yet, impossible to extract. Even in order to say 'Me' and try to say something about yourself and the feeling of yourself, you have to do it so that others would understand, including their perspective, using a sign rather than transmitting the non-communicable reality of your experience. Yet, it feels like you are standing out of your own body, cast off, detached.

Paradoxes are hard to solve out. Their contradiction concentrates much energy that would find no solution, except a way out. They are traps that we can only give up. No matter how hard we try, it is as stimulating as it is frustrating. From there, such energy could fuel the need for a resolution, if not of the paradox itself, at least of other things that could find easier relief. As we try to understand some vision that cannot be, a dead end, we slowly elaborate ways round it : we elaborate the trauma of the impossible.

The proposition of the sensorimotor paradox as an evolutionary drive is difficult to present without resorting to the reader's own experience of such a paradox. We are trying to make available to representation something that is fundamentally an impossibility for literal resolution. It is a state of tension, that drains the mind and body. We cannot rest on a paradox, that is why such a psychoanalyst as Jacques Lacan used to say that signifiers (the sensory support of words : phonetic, scriptural, gestural, ...) worked as a chain, always referring to another and never seeming to find an end – because it can't. We think because we can't rest on a paradox, and that a paradox is what keeps us on the edge of releasing everything that we contain into an acceptable conduct. Something *must* have been interrupted in our earliest ancestors' daily lives and interactions, so to provide enough energy to sustain this specific need, the one for diving into an imaginary experience, suspending all the rest for a moment of sheer dissociation. Because it is dissociative, it is hard to picture. It rejects its self-observation. And else we believe in a supernatural intervention, our own body, others' and the experience of our environments were the only things that could provoke such a radical shift, to push us beyond the limits of interaction. It happens within the perimeter of our own body's self-experience and is a break in its capacity to provide a primary response, only to invest a secondary kind of responding : the one that is not acted out loud, only figured in one's own mind – a representation of what *could* be enacted.

So, when we actually ponder the idea that such a simple fact as staring at one's own hand could *disrupt* the very basis of sensorimotricity, it doesn't take long before one actually considers that it could be a reliable starting point for supporting such a change. Our hands were one of the primary means for interaction and engagement in the world, first as a locomotor support, then as a relational one. It is elementary and radical enough to leave one no other choice but to confront themselves with what is hardest to face : the incapacity to respond, though in the urge to react, to a situation of discomfort. And gazing at one's own hand is uncomfortable because one cannot solve it, as it is fundamentally contradictory : the hand with which one would first be tempted to grasp the object in question *is* the very hand that has to stay still, so that the object of one's interest could remain available. Lest we lift the spell off.

As we saw, trauma such as an experience of distress is not only the memory of the experience, it is also how one would react and re-adapt to the existence of that memory and the way that it affected their sensory and emotional expectations in the long run. The fact is that in this case, the experience is unique as it gives us only two options : leaving the situation by resuming bodily interaction (and releasing the objectified hand), or sustaining it, along with its emotional turmoil, wondering about all the dizziness of a new world of experience. For imagination is an effort that needs to be sustained and first, could not reasonably be sustained without a little help from one's own body. Imagination is born out of a violence against oneself, and it is in itself, a difficult diagnosis.

## IV – Is anyone responding ?

Thinking, and notably the constant flow of conscious thoughts, is mostly born out of a certain urgency to resolve a tension that is difficult to distinguish and tell apart. To stop or try to stop thinking confronts us to the reality of such a suspension that we were talking about earlier. Thoughts cover up the silence and incapacity to close the fracture up. Thinking mostly is a resort, in order to vent an anxiety and energy that have been building up from stopping one's own body in their spontaneous and careless interactions, inside of their surrounding environments. We are being taught this fundamental notion of social adaptation since childhood up to adulthood : what are the objects that we can or cannot touch, what is appropriate as an expression or behaviour, ... But those rules come with internalised representations, that of experiencing a welcoming or rejecting response to our attempts at communicating the desire to reach others.

We can't always get what we want in the time and space that we want it. Psychoanalysis, notably since Freud, spent considerable time and insights studying how such desire was to be sublimated into substitutive conducts. The latter would combine particular sets of body expressions, verbalisations and social activities – in agreement or not with social contracts, although mostly tacit. This process of substitution, mostly evading conscious planification, can work as an escape from literal and bodily confrontation with the entities denying us access to what we desire or demand, whether justified or not. We are often found in the tension between an aggressive response to our discomfort and fears, and the need to feel reassured, connected and supported, held whenever we lose touch with the ground. That is, by the way, what the sensorimotor paradox does : it makes us lose touch with the ground, that we try to figure out another way, from memory. It also opens a space in-between for imagination to replace the enaction of a conflict into symbolic narrative structures, whether they are conscious or not (anymore).

But, for this space to open, we first needed a crack in our commitment to responding and being responded into continuous interaction and feedback, so that we could then *delay the response* and escape into imagining it. It is important to say that according to the point of view that we choose, the fondness for imagining and thinking could even be seen as pathological on strictly sensorimotor terms (it is not 'working' and functional in its first use), that should require some adjustments and a great deal of learning. To some kind of purist, the sole act of thinking itself could be seen as a deviance to, say, the 'laws of nature', like thrusting a stick in a bicycle's wheel. After all, it took us thousands of years to elaborate an alternative and make up for it. We are still younglings at the scale of evolution.

As we saw, the sensory and emotional image of our experience is all that remains available when it comes to the sensorimotor paradox. The time of sensorimotricity – of the instantaneous response – is suspended into opening to another kind of time, closer to a mystical and absolute experience – absolute because no response is possible to that particular situation, on the sensorimotor level, other than being a witness to it. As Ellen Dissanayake stated, the feeling of making something *special* – in our relation to an object onto which we leave our imprint – may be more significant than its symbolic content. Here, the possibility that there is a relation opens in itself to the ways that then give it a shape. There has to be a content to be chosen *because* of the experience. The loss of ground creates the need for some kind of meaning ; but the interpretation, its justification and formalisation come after.

In psychoanalytic terms, the repression of the event that strikes the body comes before its symbolic substitution – and the ways for symbolising it have to find meaning in other sources of inspiration. As Darian Leader investigates it in *Jouissance* (2020), the experience of pain informs us of the existence of some limit to our body's expansion, whether physical or symbolic. The way that

we will compose with those limits would take part of the inscription of trauma within our perception of what is surrounding us. In every move that we make, our traumatic memory is charging and alerting the possibility of a wound. On the symbolic level, the memory of the wound is its own alert, and we often try our best to avoid it and cover it with another kind of meaning, representations and social performance. The latter often constitutes the opportunity to not address the sense of insecurity that we may be inhabited with. Our social identity, the way that we appear to others and come to appear to ourselves, is woven in trauma.

It is curious then that while we may be struggling with our own inner trouble, others often seem to be just fine, living their lives ignorant of our own worries – and of course, they do have worries of their own. Maybe that is why we substitute so easily experiences that are difficult to face and their memories with forms, attitudes and sceneries that we witness and that seem to go on happening in the most natural and effortless way for others. We may not have or be able to intervene into others' affairs and conduct that take place in front of us. Especially if we are a child surrounded by our parent-s or caretaker-s, the hopefully relative stability of their behaviour could be a source of support to our demand for a resolution. So long as everything is happening around us in all appearance of normality, of some form of stability and enough consistency, we can manage to learn to *be alone with* ourselves in the presence of others, as English psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott put it. In fact, more distressing than not being able to respond is that we would not be responded back. A silence for the mind because, again, we are losing our ground. There is nothing to replace and fill our own paradox with. In the very case of the sensorimotor paradox, as our own hand cannot respond to us, even the imaginary response that we could give by producing memory images could not undo the situation : our hand won't respond until we break the scene. We have to give it up.

In the same way, it is because we know that anyone is not supposed to respond to our constant solicitations for interaction – although we learnt the ways to do it and the modalities of verbal exchange – that we have to compensate with overthinking the very fact that we had to condition ourselves on to the end of maintaining an appearance of 'normal' conduct. We cannot get constant voluntary interactions and at the same time, we cannot let ourselves be with our own bodies in any way that would seem unfit to social expectations. We cannot vent our need for interaction by climbing on tables or dancing ecstatically in the streets without raising worry and suspicion, for example. We cannot address out loud the traumatic memory of being refused total expressive freedom in a certain social context – maybe sometimes for good reasons, especially when aggressive to others. So we have to channel that energy into thinking and mostly, phantasising the response that we would give to the violence of having to remain silent. The energy that we have to contain cannot be spent by simply interacting with our environments at will, as children do spontaneously. That energy has to go to compulsive thinking, that is irrational ; because thinking is rooted in the emotional, not the rational (that psychoanalytic theory and practice usually acknowledge, although often neglecting certain relations of power and constraint that push harder on some people). As it is compulsive and immediate, it is the first means that we tend to use to cover up trauma as soon as we have learnt that expressing our pain and distress could be responded and perceived negatively as annoying.

In a way, our early ancestors may have had to learn how to be alone in the presence of others with their own experience ; that is, having them as a limit to what we can express and thus, soon after, a likely substitute to the very primary paradox itself, in order to sustain the capacity for imagination. In the seek for a response, not knowing how to adequately express their awkward emotions to others, maybe that is where objects intervened, to make sense out of their urging hands, deriving attention onto something else ; that means, their fabrication, their invention, their appropriation into something personal and their elevation to the status of the artificial, and the way others can see them too – *artefacts*. The object is here, silent, transcends and marks the call.

## **V – Trapped into thinking**

One thing that we could learn from the ideas mentioned above, is that maybe thinking functions mostly as a traumatic response to a form of aggression. We mostly think compulsively in a restless way. Getting a rest from one's own thoughts is often difficult to achieve for many people, especially if the context and conditions in which they are living is precarious in some or several ways. The few moments where we get to make sense out of this constant flow of thoughts and think that we achieved a kind of stability are usually very brief and swiftly swept away by another movement of thoughts that gets out of our control. Thinking happens, mainly, out of a sense of instability. It is a way of engaging sensorimotricity by simulating it, to get a grasp back at our body's situation out of an utter dizziness. Somehow, because of social self-control, the enaction of sensorimotricity, to a certain extent, can only be imaged mentally. Because of the control that we exercise over ourselves, we have to virtually evacuate the tension of not being free and able to respond spontaneously to our surrounding stimulations. Imagination is the escape from the neural blocking. We are trapped into thinking.

This is something that we tend to forget, notably in our Western societies and cultures, but we may have used to think a great deal more with our hands in the past than we are now. Our hands, as they progressively liberated themselves from mainly locomotor functions with the increase of bipedal stance, were one of the first means for us to relate, reach and explore what was surrounding us. They were our mediation to experience. Our hands are more intimate to our way of seeing the world than we like to think, not only because we use them or not (if or at least, when we can), but because they carry the epigenic memory of our agency. They are both control and relation, and if the sensorimotor theory developed here is correct, they may be at the core of some blueprint that made our mind. The difference now is that we have to learn faster to show less of them than we talk. We are, since birth, stimulated that way (René A. Spitz, 1965)<sup>40</sup>.

We are solicited, progressively in our socialisation as children, to replace active and physical enaction to actual situations with alternatives, some kind of distance and restraint, so to privilege speech, observation and conversation. Some gestural forms of expression are proscribed or regarded as socially inappropriate, sometimes regardless of the actual harm that they cause. As they are perceived negatively, we learn to control them and discard them. In a whole, it has to do with social class : the higher someone is in the social hierarchy – if we refer only to Western societies –, the more control they are supposed to have over their own body, that also means that the least physical effort should be dispensed. In a model of mass society based on the idea of the middle-class, which is supposed to aspire to what the upper-class has – even if an ersatz of it –, speech, social representation and the increasing pursuit of evading all physical effort which can be delegated, participate of masking our dependence on sensory and motor integrity and reliance. Body autonomy becomes a privilege. Then, it goes without saying that performing certain social norms of conduct is supposed to prevent us from being associated with any form of disability, that have a history of stigmatisation and social outcast.

Our sensorimotor memory is the first that we get to explore, that shapes the rest of our interactions. Our mental representations are rooted in those memories of engaging physically and emotionally, of speaking or actively participating, if only as a witness, to someone else's speech or action. Even if we don't consciously picture some action while thinking through formalised language, the effectiveness of speech and the sensation of control that it provides derive directly from sensorimotor engagement. Thinking and our ability to language come from speech that eventually, is enacted through and as a sensorimotor feat. Moreover, it creates and participates of a

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40 In René A. Spitz, *De la naissance à la parole : La première année de la vie*, ed. Puf, coll. « Bibliothèque de la psychanalyse », 1965.

collective scene, as the act of speech is being taught and sanctioned by the authority and participation of others, their stimulation, approval and understanding of our attempts at speaking or not. By the act of thinking, we engage all that memory that is bodily and affective at the root. We seek that effectiveness that, we hope, should result back into the primary participation of others in the play of words.

In that light, we could say that trauma is what prevents us from doing or imagining to ourselves what we could not do or enact without exposing ourselves to harm. It conditions our perspectives, what we intimately keep as a knowledge of where we cannot go. So, all the constant flow of conscious thought is mostly conditioning us to *absolutely* not go there, to not bring back those memories of a certain kind of situations where we are and feel exposed, especially if we can't voice our pain out. We usually think our thoughts through a voice that, on the contrary, seems to embody a certain kind of confidence, force and assertiveness, that would be able to erase and contain fear. They work as an imperative to *not go there* where it is not safe, where others might hurt us, but also an imperative to look and appear a certain way that comforts the preset order of things.

Trauma, again, is not the hurt. It is the constant effort to not be exposed again to the hurt. Trauma is all the mental and body conditioning that we carry in order to not find ourselves in the situation where we would be wrong, found offensive to others (even when their reaction is unjustified) and disempowered. Trauma is the force and pressure to make things appear as positive and pro-active as possible, still in control and having us not likely to be told off by anyone and discarded from our agency. There is a lot of anguish in trauma as it is, for much of it, socially constructed, because there might not be that much safe (whether public or private) spaces for people to breathe out of it.

Therefore, thinking is not at all neutral. It is compulsive and for most of it, built over fear, sublimated and derived away from our body and mind's harm. Not only that, but the fear of being harmed may be even less important than the fear of being found powerless, robbed of one's agency and own projection into living. One field of experience that is interesting in that matter is the practices of BDSM. Though often regarded as a pathological mean to sublimate trauma (into the 'sado-masochistic' frame), what has mainly been discarded in that outside interpretation is the importance of consent within those practices. That means that trauma can, in non-abusive cases, be addressed within controlled boundaries (Simon Z. Weismantel, 2014)<sup>41</sup>. As Roxane Gay put it : 'when you say, in some form or fashion, *stop*, the pain or humiliation or domination stops, no questions asked. [...] There is nothing better than knowing the suffering can stop'.<sup>42</sup>

YouTube video maker and artist Kat Blaque made a series of videos on her experience of BDSM<sup>43</sup> – notably as a Black trans person. She also stresses the fact that what matters most to her is the empowering agency that comes with the importance of consent, to be able to set the limit to what would be done or not to and with her own body. Pain there is mostly a sensation that can be experienced within a safe and predictable enough environment and with skilled and concerned partner-s – in best and proper cases. But, how much do we really consent to the terms of our inclusion or exclusion within most of social spaces in our daily lives ? That remains largely conflictual. In that context, the prevalence of the choice given to the practitioners over what is done to and with their bodies and in what conditions gives more clarity to the balance between pain and control, between aggression and agency. Is pain really the problem in trauma, or is it the incapacity to respond to it in a closing and meaningful way ?

Most of many people's traumatic hurt comes less from the first physical and emotional pain than from the incapacity to mutually recognise and set boundaries to it, to the conditions in which the subject of their body and psychic integrity will be addressed with others. In such a taboo subject as incest and pedocriminality for instance, the incapacity for the victims to feel that they would be heard by others is far more alienating than resisting and bear resilience to the pain.<sup>44</sup> The traumatic

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41 In Simon Z. Weismantel, « From sado-masochism to BDSM : rethinking object relations theorizing through queer theory and sex-positive feminism », Smith College, 2014.

42 In « Dear Young Ladies Who Love Chris Brown So Much They Would Let Him Beat Them », *op. cit.*, p.184.

43 In her playlist « Sex Positivity and Trauma ».

44 Listen, for instance, to Charlotte Pudlowski's podcast « Ou peut-être une nuit », Louie Media, 2020 ; or Axelle Jah

conditioning of our thoughts often comes with the anxiety over whether we would actually have the spaces and time to tell who we are, our experiences or at least, discuss the terms of any exchange that we might participate to when meeting with other people. That is also very pregnant in the critique of neurotypical norms, which mostly imply the implicit nature of the terms given to social interactions, even when they are not supposed to include any explicit consent, for they are deemed to *go without saying*.

In fact, the arbitrary classifications supposed to rule our interactions with the world and others are most of the time taken for granted. They help maintain what sociologist Charles Tilly called 'durable inequalities', should they be theoretically inconsistent, though structurally persistent and mediated by collective and inter-individual representations as well as social practices in rather different spaces and on different levels (Gayle Rubin, 2012)<sup>45</sup>. There can be a discrepancy between the performance of social interactions, especially when contrived, and the social context and relations of power pressuring the individuals to act a certain way – as there would be, for instance, a difference between cinema and the actual relations of power or collaboration between the people producing it, as there is between representation and the institution. What matters in the end is the impact in the long run of both performance and the structural motives for those social practices, whether or not they are sanctioned and privileged by social hierarchies, and whether we are to participate and get to choose their terms. Every space has its own rules, and within those spaces, any relation should be as carefully and mutually decided and chosen, whether stigmatised or not.

But unfortunately, we have to limit the breadth of our own minds to what appears safest in a social context where consent is often carelessly disregarded and broken. In « The Careless Language of Sexual Violence », Roxane Gay again points out, on a subject mentioned above, that 'Perhaps we too casually use the term "rape culture" to address the very specific problems that rise from a culture mired in sexual violence. Should we, instead, focus on "rapist culture" because decades of addressing "rape culture" has accomplished so little ?'<sup>46</sup> It is something that is much discussed in feminist circles, that the mention of the perpetrators of assaults is often eluded and their victims held passively accountable for their own situation – as if it fell from the sky. In the way that we keep telling those stories and kind of event, we often focus on the result – the person that has been hurt – but, without an agent – the actual person that committed the assault, the ones who *put the landmines* out there. Here, 'the language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that involve injuries to bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or "work" of other bodies.'<sup>47</sup> For example, we regularly count how many women and trans people have been murdered for the past years, but we are often unable to stress that it is mostly cisgender men who murdered and still murder them, that the problem is not the victims but the assaulters and a system of violence that supports them. How can we put limits to something that isn't there, hardly summoned to the recollection, that doesn't appear in the terms of our understanding ? What if the same story is told over and over with a whole where an action should be ? Narratives matter.

What there is to understand is that we live in universes of representation that accompany each and any one of our movements and thoughts, and that we enact rather unconsciously at any moment. In that sense, Judith Butler's idea of *performativity* is consistent with Francisco Varela's of sensorimotor *enaction*. If *pain*, as philosopher Sara Ahmed recalls, has an object, is deeply subjective and complex and 'is not simply the feeling that corresponds to bodily damage'<sup>48</sup>, though experienced through our body, so is our response to it in the short and long run. The recognition of pain *as pain* that 'involves complex forms of association between sensations and other kinds of

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Njiké's « La Fille sur le Canapé », Nouvelles Ecoutes, 2020.

45 Gayle Rubin, « Une conversation avec Gayle Rubin », realised and translated by Rostom Mesli, in *Raisons Politiques*, 2012/2 (n°46), pp. 131-173.

46 *Op. cit.*, p. 133.

47 In Sara Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

"feeling states" underlines that it is inscribed in a world of meaning. We respond to it with means available to us from our current and ongoing experience, both solitary and relational. Our response may even inhibit certain sensations of pain in order to uphold its immediate consistency. It may even generate something more emotionally disturbing in itself than the previous sensory event.

The recognition of pain would also be, in that perspective, the recognition of the surface of our body being a source of contact and vulnerability to others out of our control. Indeed, our skin, the borders and surface that '[separate] us from others also [connect] us to others.'<sup>49</sup> Sara Ahmed as well quotes from philosopher Drew Leder's *The Absent Body* (1990), when suggesting that in the absence of pain, 'the body is "absent" only because it is perpetually outside itself, caught up in a multitude of involvements with other people.' Dysfunctions such as pain would draw back attention to the body itself, or else, *intensify* its awareness. Experience is a spectrum that has some of its aspects reinforced and others seemingly muted – or not signified in ways that could allow us and others to be acknowledged.

Those considerations are interesting, because of the paradoxical nature that we suggested of the human mind and the apprehension of pain within the structure of trauma. This apprehension comes to have us over-preparing, orientating and narrowing our own capacity to respond to various situations accordingly where our body would be exposed to others, whether physically or virtually. All the ways that we try to respond to pain or any sensory disruption would eventually form a consistent ensemble of apprehension through which we would try to navigate as safely as possible in relation to other bodies and beings – with and to which we also hold on an experience of interaction and response. The way that those interactions are framed into narratives shape the way that we would carry our own body into a world of possibility or impossibility, in full or lack of awareness of our constant adapting to its surroundings.

The response of others to our pain, whatever it might be, is still a response that we could work from in order to express some part of what we would need to express in that moment. At least we try, or submit to an incapacity to do so. This creates a network of possibility or impossibility for us to express what we feel in various spaces and times and in relation to the probability that others would show themselves available to a (hopefully) positive listening and response. In return, witnessing someone else's pain can also be a moment when *I* can open up, being available and releasing control to those trusting us with their vulnerability or not. Sometimes, we are just waiting in the world for the moments when we can finally relinquish that control and open up to others in ways that we feel are impossible or unlikely in our daily lives. Lacking control over the latter makes us even more eager to seizing those moments where we could finally let out our urge to be heard. Pain is waiting, lingering and trying to connect and release its charge, if not constructively, at least compulsively. We may be only looking for solutions that would permit us to find that interactive and enacting contact again – what Sara Ahmed calls *contingency*, word that shares the same Latin root with the word *contact* (that is, *contingere* : *com*, with ; *tangere*, to touch).

But, the precise location of pain can be rather difficult to point out at times. It creates some mental environment of seeking and easing the source of the pain and all the process to that seeking that brings us to its relational, repositioning and narrative aspects. It comes to mediate our interactions with others in pervasive ways. When it cannot be told and seen in its continuity, it might find other ways to express itself in and through the body, coming in-between our relations to others and our own body. The perception of our own body becomes relative to those relations as sometimes, the response that we give is less about the pain than it is about mending the possibility that we could have shared our situatedness with a world of meaning that would have us evolve.

Can we possibly grow a space for that ?

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

## **VI – Of objects and subjects**

The formation of an object of experience or thought depends much on whether we are projecting any sort of action to it or not. Objectification goes with instrumentalisation. It does, whether actualised and enacted or only left hanging as a retained potentiality and an imaginary projection. To turn an experience of another body (any kind of body, whether living or inert) or one's own into an object of experience means that we project, at some point, some kind of motor development. Even if it is internalised, repressed or delayed, we apprehend objectified experiences through the very deep memory of enacting some possible sensorimotor engagement to it. To mentally grasp an object, a form, is to mobilise such a memory. We have been trained and training for so long since childhood that we may not even notice the substitution of the mental image for the actualised action – though it is there.

Hence, the sense of alienation when we face other people, that we cannot objectify and physically interact with them at our will so easily. We become subject to the inalienable part of their presence, as we are unable to move them according to what we expect, as far as we may try as children, teenagers or adults. When we talk about human phenomenology (the spontaneous analysis of perception), we cannot escape a complicated dialectic between an active or passive position that cannot exist. What we expect from others depends a lot on what we know may be expected from us, that affects our interaction with them. Alienation then becomes moral when we fail to let another be the subject of a relation at the same level as us, when the other fails to accept being a subject with us, or when we feel incapable of being worthy of participation ourselves other than as the object of someone else's expectations. To be subject to something is somehow to accept receiving something that is else, that is *other* than ourselves into a shared world. Resisting this, for fear of failure, hurt and trauma, pushes us to react on the level of a protective reaction ; that is, on the level of trying to turn our experience, or any part of it into an object that we could act toward and somehow control – even if it means alienating the very other that we fail receiving or that fails us.

Of course, the balance is tenuous to the structure of dialogue : not a confrontation between two objects, but a shared space opened between two subjects that are open themselves to acceptance and to a gift of oneself. All the reactions born of fear, such as rejection, or hate, or the delusional desire of possessing someone else, objectify and alienate those other than us (should it be within our own conception of ourselves) that we cannot welcome nor be welcomed by. What we repress in ourselves is precisely what we cannot allow ourselves to be welcomed by, that is a feeling well-known by many minority-assigned people. Trauma lingers in-between, creating non-objects, unrealisable and forbidden objects to which we cannot act nor relate to, leaving only contrived possibilities around them. All objects around us appear in contrast to those that we cannot see or form, because enacting them would seem far too painful to bear. In the mean time, valuable shared spaces for dialogue, care and collaboration find their pathways collapsed under the weight of traumatic and often repeated and systemic hurt. We are subject to a trauma for having been the object of a hurt – that is the shock –, but all violence in human societies is systemic as it is born of intricately contexts. Violence is not random aggression : it is aggression or self-aggression out of a collective restraint.

Such is the matter of all life and experience, for trauma isn't only about the big things that hurt us the most as it is also about all the little things, all the small encounters and situations of contact that continuously shape our perception of the world around and push us to change and transform. Trauma is never linear, for experience is the least linear thing. Such an idea is at the core of most Buddhist traditions and is also a motive to question the categories in which we encapsulate reality and compartmentalise our failures at being subjects of balanced dialogue into objects of control. From this sense of what is in our hands, we could do much. We could, for example,

degender our relation to our own bodies and others', as advocated by non-binary writer and performer Alok Vaid Menon, as well as we could try to heal the traumatic fabric that tears our societies apart. We could step out of a binary between nature and culture, the urban world and the other ecosystems for an intricate perception and comprehension of what and where we are. But, unacknowledged pain still creates new objects for a delusion of control that we never had.

This is to understand that pain alienates us and others when we are not capable and willing to accept that being a subject is to let relations happen with bodies, ideas and perspectives that we cannot control and might not understand fully. But it is not more about optimal adaptation and appropriation. The boundaries that we can set are those that could help each part of the encounter accept that a shared space needs two subjects, and that neither is to be the object of the other without their share of consent. It is then about being *open enough* so to be able to let other than us happen, with the trust that they would do the same.

We exist as much as we are let to be. Now, let us make it mutual.

Of course, when we talk about trauma saying that it can be tied to the slightest experience of contact, it doesn't mean that all trauma has the same 'value' or impact, but that it differs mostly in degree. Trauma is not equally invalidating or not. It is relative to the wound, that can have various proportions and degrees of severity. However, a severe wound doesn't necessarily mean a severe trauma. It depends on whether or not the person can or cannot face it and go through its altering effects.

One can make more sense out of a grave injury than of less self-evident but deeper motives for desperation and helplessness. The whole mythology of the hero is based on that pattern. Trauma, in fact, is more about a collapse in perspective than it is about pain itself. Pain is mostly an organising sensation, whether occurring next to a physical encounter or a strictly internal motion or memory. In some sort of way, pain is but a situated memory of the body being imprinted into neural connections. It doesn't tell much yet about the position of the individual toward the experience of pain – that tells the trauma. We saw earlier that the practice and culture of BDSM specifically allows a high degree of pain to be supported within a consensual system of projection, perspective and support that integrates pain as a consistent part of its sustainability. It is because we know that pain can end that it should not evolve into trauma. Because trauma is about how one can project themselves into enacting their own alternative perspectives inside of a set context that would make enough sense within ; or on the contrary, how one would find themselves unable to have those perspective and meaning formed in the first place. You cannot conceive a path in trauma, only create derogatory ones around it.

Trauma forms around that collapse in possibilities, which suddenly stop seeming within our reach, but out of touch. From there, we are forced to find new ways and shape new perspectives, but that demands work and the capacity to change or at least, to do with the resources available at the time. We often do things by default, for changing oneself can imply facing an adverse environment. That is why trauma is political. The objects that we have around us that we feel able to use and relate to are often the ones toward which we have less fear of being punished for. We build dependence over micro-sanctuaries, things that we like or are only able to eat or watch or do compulsively because outside of those spaces, many other things are difficult.

As pointed out by Darian Leader in *Hands*, the micro-space of our own hands forms one of such primary sanctuaries – maybe the first –, that can then welcome other objects. From that, we have a measure of our own limits. It can be hurtful, as it can be a start in order to build something else. Within such spaces, we become subjects to our own insecurities, which can be built and reinforced by structural forces, both external and internal. Those insecurities are often tied to experiences that involve some surrounding environment in the face of which we feel hampered or crippled. *Crip theory* is by the way a salvatory tool to imagine new spaces and times for our relations to them to be reconfigured through the experience of trauma as a private and collective

issue as well. Trauma is then less about living with oneself in pain than it is about living with oneself amongst other people, in a network of relation within which we struggle to fit. It tells more about rejection and helplessness in the face of the ultimate perspective of institutionalisation and the denial of basic rights, than it informs us about what a person could do or not on their own and with the adequate support.

In the end, it is always a matter of having internalised the one perspective of being denied a voice of our own and the deprivation of the right to self-actualise and self-determine, despite all prescriptions. It is about casting upon someone a version of themselves from which it has been prescribed that they could never leave or change. It is about stating as an unalterable fact that one could or could not possibly evolve, even if we let them. It is about not even caring that anyone could.

Such is trauma, as a hermeneutic and moral issue, that means that some people are not supposed to grow out of a certain depiction of themselves where they are hurt, hurtful to others or dependent on someone or something else's presence, that they should be stuck there forever. Can we change from our pain if we don't allow others to change from the pain that they have done, yet, whatever their gravity? Trauma is something woven, around which we grow the rest of our selves' possibilities that are available and doable, until the memory of the pain is outgrown and we have to break up with the fear of that pain. But, can we do that if we know that some others won't be able to because they are not supposed to? It is a narrative, but we are not its only writers. We are, somehow, somewhere, part of a same story and memory, only through different angles. It eventually brings up the complicated notion of justice and whether it should be retributive and individual or not.

If the only response to trauma is a pay back, how could we ever change our collective imagination without the perspective of mutual hurt as a fatality? Ultimately, the theory of anthropogenesis that we suggested brings an interesting response to that question: there will always be an unbalance, that is part of how maintaining humanhood would work; but we still need to address all the intricate ways in which we are pressured and keep pressure on ourselves and others in return, whether directly or indirectly by our actions. It is counter-productive – if it ever should be productive – to try to resolve issues of power, trauma and justice by seeking an immediate sanction that would absolve us from the ongoing and collective work of healing.

We can have a better understanding of stable structures than we have of the immediate reactions that they solicitate from us. We need a clear way in order to experience the present moment. To focus on whether or not we participate to structures of power and oppression and in what measure is far more stabilising to the body and mind than seeking for short-term reactions to provocations. It is not easy, because we are not all in a position of material and moral security that can allow that. Our relation to our own body can be an unfathomable trap – that is the paradox – within which we can rapidly lose ground. Because our main daily effort and energy goes to standing and sustaining predictable conducts, working with clear and readable structures for analysing the world that we live in and participate of is a good way to navigate all the uncertainties that lie ahead.

Reproducing formalised patterns of behaviour to look alike amongst others and avoid rejection is but one of the ways in which we try to forget and oblivate how much we broke our own bodies into a social mimic, or alienation for those who can't. Social and cultural reproduction would not be a problem in itself, if it weren't for the possibility or not of a choice. The possibility of choice is often constraint and broken by relations of power, pressure to conform and trauma. We internalise social norms as a source of possible danger, whether or not we benefit from them to some extent.

Justice should, in a sense, be mostly about being able to make our own choices and that it should be a mutual and reciprocal basic right. We have to be regulated. Our whole existence being rooted in a sensorimotor disruption calls for regulation. But, sole externally-based regulation, one that works from the threat of exclusion, is not the same thing as teaching and accompanying living beings into being able to self-regulate their insecurities and open to actively listen and understand,

or at the very least accept other people's perspectives. Such a structure as the idea of a proscriptive conception of making society and thinking oneself amongst others is, for example, one very simple way and structure through which to envision our place in a shared world. It goes with understanding that someone hurting you may simply be reacting to a universe of hurt. It doesn't diminish the impact and gravity of their actions towards you, but it also tells very much about how we are made unable to perceive ourselves outside of a network of hurt and reaction that engage our compelled responsibility – trapped in a cycle of direct or indirect retribution and with our own limitations, that being stigmatised instead of being acknowledged as a start from which to work and grow.

## ***A way to conclude***

We are constantly making some mental effort to remember the world that we live in and what is expected from us inside of it. Understandably, we don't want to be caught off guard. We want to be prepared to drive away in advance any reason to be told off and brutalised. We know that our universe of action is dependent on the world of understanding that is generally shared or at least, that most people are encouraged to perform. It may be alienating, but there is much at stake. Not performing the right conduct or response, what is socially taken as being the 'right way' to live and express oneself, can lead to harsh consequences. For some, it may lead to death. It is as simple and plain as that. The stakes can be very high ultimately, indeed.

We often forget that when we consider the activity of our human mind that we are not – as intersectional analysis never cease to stress – born out of a vacuum world. We are born out of pressure, since the moment that we are pushed away into the clear air, and though there are some forces that try to soften the weight of that pressure, with as much love and care as there can be, this pressure still orientates the way that we evolve in the world that we manage then to perceive. Most of us try to be seen in a positive and valued light, in spite of what it may cost to attract that light, some kind of care. Many of us struggle to know how. Many others try to pretend otherwise.

Imagine how it could have felt to be on the edge of something as disturbing as conceiving an object of imagination to the mind, before there was even a first human community, before there was any formalised and symbolic structure for language. What to do with such an overwhelming feeling of being related to something else than us that could suddenly bear *some part* of us that no one else could possibly know about? How could we be our first of worlds? This kind of *imprint*, in the sense of Ellen Dissanayake's work, is at the heart of what we seek: creating connection. But, the connection is fragile, it is delicate. It is a perfect vulnerability.

There are only two absolutes: that we live and experience, and that we die. Within that measure is the desperate seek for meaningful encounters, with any beings or feel-like beings, so that we *feel* alive – or that it feels like we are living. However, we also depend on material sustenance, and we depend much on others, and if we are to be excluded from others, we might get lost. There is this pressure of not getting lost, because everyone fears that. Seeing someone lost reminds us of feeling lost ourselves with them: we lose the map. One second of distraction from that constant effort to keep our mind mapped within our socially-based response system is enough to feel a sudden loss of ground. What if we are never capable of coming back to the common world that conceived us as valid-enough beings to be let wandering, unasked? In what world are we living in that could ask us to justify that we do try to keep on living without further questioning of our rightful belonging? What kind of clue are we to give in to testify of that right?

Our constant stream of thought and self-imagination is the most dreadful way through which we try to keep the compass. Our ability to think is not a merry road, but a condition. It is of terror and hurt of being left alone in the wild or desert land that we try to surround ourselves in imagination with some kind of security and certainty, of a grasp on reality, from figures of inspiration that seem to embody the confidence that we wished that we had and that sometimes is past onto us or given away. Somehow, if we are lucky, there are beings that love us enough to give us that. Then, if we didn't acknowledge that we are terrified, would we really be 'human' and need the love that fosters our imagination, for the better or worse? And by what kind of magic trick are we made to convince ourselves that we are in control, though that form and figuration of control is

but a wishful performance that we play on and on in our own head to keep us on track ? Are we really so sure that it will all be okay ? And if it is in some measure, to what cost if we don't challenge all the unnecessary crushing over our heads ?

Somehow, we need to let go. We need to take that moment, to pounder the fact that we will never clear out the fracture from which we grew a mind and soul. And that is alright. We are a paradox at heart. Let us be proud of being alive anyway. We may not always know what keeps us alive, but that is okay too. All that we should resolve ourselves to do, is to work on releasing the pressure points that are in and out of ourselves. Some are little. Some are driving our whole societies to a point where there seems to be only to forsee a brutal end. As philosopher Hannah Arendt said, we have to learn how to move in the breach (*Between Past and Future*, 1968), but we could also fight for more than settling for the slightest piece of dignity. Which ever way, we are here to stay, for a while. So, it better be good. Let us sit down for a moment. Let us breathe. Let us take that hands of our own that would say that we will work together. Let us be resolute that we will never solve the unsolvable of our mind. Let us just walk round it for a while, and that will be good enough. Let us set a centre to dance for.

Or finally, let us try to make society all together again.