Exploring Cross-cultural boundaries

Erika Apfelbaum writes that "the issue of communicating across cultural boundaries is a major challenge to the very foundations of our dominant theoretical frameworks" (2001:32). While Apfelbaum's focus is on cultural boundaries associated with articulating, and listening to, traumatic narratives, the issues which she raises have a wider applicability.   We are, all of us, individuals who have come to be as we are not as isolated beings, but as social animals who live, breathe, and survive in particular historical, social and political contexts. None of this is new. But the implications of Apfelbaum's statement for cross-cultural narrative work are profound. How is it that we access, interpret and analyse stories which, at their heart, are distant from experiences which we ourselves may have encountered not only in our own lives, but in the accounts of others which are part of our own narrative repertoire?   How do we prepare ourselves for the very demanding task that listening must be if it is to be anything?   And how is our own sense of identity affected by opening ourselves to the very different realities which are encountered by others? Is it desirable or even possible to remain unchanged when we come to know, however indirectly, the worlds that exist beyond the radar of what has always been familiar to us?

In this chapter I will discuss my own experience of conducting narrative research in a range of different cultural contexts. I wish to argue that cross-cultural narrative

research is predicated upon narrative imagination (Brockmeier 2005); put simply, if we wish to access the frameworks of meaning for others, we must be willing and able to imagine a world other than the one we know. I will argue that narrative imagination, which Donoghue describes as "the seeing of difference" (cited in Brockmeier 2005), lies at the heart of cross-cultural research. The argument that I will make here is not new; indeed, Marcus Aurelius, in the second century AD, claimed that "to become world citizens we must cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination" (cited in Nussbaum 1997: 85). In this chapter, I will explore what comprises that imagination, and through a discussion of some of my own research, will discuss what happens when our imaginations fail us, as inevitably they do from time to time.

Let me first give you a very brief overview of my entry into this discussion. I was born and educated in the United States. In the mid-1980s, I came to England to register for a Ph.D., and I have remained in England for most of the time since then. When people hear me speak, they often ask about my accent, unable to place it neatly onto either side of the Atlantic. The one-line response which I have developed over the years offer the explanation that I was dropped in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, somewhere between the east coast of the United States and England. My cultural placement lies in this vast body of water, which encompasses both the country of my origin and that of my current life, as well as all my journeys in-between and beyond. Bhabha (1994) describes a process of cultural hybridization which entails "the migrant's double vision", whereby an individual moves with "psychic uncertainty across boundaries of cultural difference" (cited in Selby 2004, pp. 2-5) What is particularly appealing about Bhabha's description, and Selby's use of his work, is that the product of the hybridization is a new entity, one

which is not reducible to its component parts. It is, rather, an integration of two or more worlds which are integrated one into the other. This wandering between cultural borderlands thus affords for a ripening of creativity.

Over the past two decades, I have been involved in narrative research which has brought me not only to England and the United States, but to East Germany and South Africa as well. In England, I examined the phenomenon of lifelong socialist activism as displayed in the lives of fifteen British women and men who had been politically active on the left for 50 years or longer. In the United States, my research shifted to an exploration of the meaning of patriotism, as expressed in the political activism of a small group of anti-war protesters. Three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I spent six months in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), speaking with forty women and men about their views of what had happened to their country, and how this affected their own sense of self. This research, which included a series of interviews with one of the architects of East Germany's truth commission, led to another project; using the transcripts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation, I explored negotiations of forgiveness in highly public and politicized contexts.

The four projects outlined above, while all very different, did nonetheless have some common ground between them. First, and fundamentally, they were all conducted by me, and as such were guided in some sense by the same, or at least similar, meaning-making framework. In producing the narrative about my own narrative research, the connection between the projects is highlighted; there is a clear relationship between my interests and I can, in hindsight, identify the subsequent imprint of one project upon another. Second, the central focus for each of these projects is the study of individual

lives in highly politicized contexts. I have always been interested in the ways in which people make sense of the historical times in which they live, and have taken C. Wright Mills' injunction very seriously in my work:

> continually work out and revise your views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect. Keep you eyes open to the varieties of individuality, and to the modes of epochal change. (Mills 1959:225)

This is the problem I have returned to, and will always return to, in my research. How does this individual with whom I am speaking reflect wider social and historical changes which form the context of his or her life? I am convinced that if I can listen closely enough, there is much to learn from every story that one might gather. For society really is comprised of human lives, and if we can begin to understand the framework which lends meaning to these lives, then we have taken the important first step to being able to access the wider framework of meaning that is the binding agent of a culture.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his classic *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) argues that culture cannot be separated from meaning.

> Culture… is public, like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid… The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is …what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said (p. 10).

For Geertz,, culture and meaning are accessed not through the universal and generalizable, but through exploration of fine detail. "We must", Geertz advises us, "descend into detail" (p. 53), for "Seeing heaven in a grain of sand is not a trick only poets can accomplish" (p. 44). Apfelbaum, too, makes a similar claim: "The singularity of experience offers one of the possible ways to confront the universal" (2000:173). Geertz argues that good interpretation "takes us into the heart of that of which it is an interpretation" (p. 18).

My research has always been guided by a similar outlook, and this journey "into the heart" has most often taken the form of in-depth life history interviews. Paraphrasing Robert Jay Lifton's explanation of the methodology he used in his research on Nazi doctors, "my assumption from the beginning, in keeping with my twenty-five years of research [in my case slightly shorter] was that the best way to learn about [a group of people] was to talk to them" (1986: 6). Geertz describes the goal of his research in the following way:

> We are not … seeking either to become natives… or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that. We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized (p. 13).

I have spent many hours, over many years, conversing with a small group of people about their lives. The framework of my research projects has invariably changed in the course of the research, as I encounter new systems of meaning, and of making sense of the

world. Rosaldo (1993) describes this 'interpretive approach', associated with Geertz, in the following way:

> Ethnographers begin research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions than they started with. One's surprise at the answer to a question, in other words, requires one to revise the question until lessening surprises or diminishing returns indicate a stopping point (p. 7).

This approach contrasts with more traditional methodology which has been employed to learn about other cultures. Ember and Ember (2001), for instance, produce a seven-point set of guide-lines which are meant to assist researchers in cross-cultural research. The first of these reads; "Ask a clear *one-sentence* research question" (p. 136; italics in the original). Steps two and three consist of "Formulate at least one hypothesis to test" and "Operationalize each variable in the hypothesis" (p. 136). In contrast to Geertz, the focus of these authors is on that which can be generalized across cultures. For me personally, such an approach does not help to transport me to where I want to go: someplace that I have not been before, and where I may well not know what questions might be relevant until I am well on my journey.

And so my route has been a different one to that prescribed by Ember and Ember; mine has been an attempt to converse, in the deep sense identified by Geertz earlier, with women and men from different cultures. Some of these conversations have been very concentrated, typified by my encounter with Sebastian Kleinschmidt, an East German philosopher and literary critic, who was the editor of the well-known journal *Sinn und Form*. I had been given his name and contact details by someone who knew the area of

my research project. Kleinschmidt agreed to be interviewed, and my translator and I arrived at his home early one afternoon. Once I turned on the tape, he did not stop talking. Not for more than five hours. It was as if I was standing at the base of Niagra Falls, capturing on tape the flood of thought and emotion which spilled forth from Sebastian Kleinschmidt, as he described in much detail the life he had led in his country which was no longer, and the implications of the momentous changes which had happened in his own life. Here, surely, was a transforming self in a transforming society. But as intensive and engaging as this meeting was, we were never to meet again. He had said what he had to say. We had his life history, and ultimately this would become part of a much larger data set, his individual story only one small part in the fabric of this community's collective memory.

But my relationships with those I have interviewed have not always been so transitory. Indeed, at the time of writing this chapter, I continue to be in conversation with some of the women and men who participated in my study of lifetime British socialist activists which I began twenty years ago this month. I have written elsewhere about the importance of these ongoing conversations in my life (Andrews 2003a). The question of what constitutes data becomes rather blurred when researchers develop ongoing relationships with those who participate in their projects. Using the icon of the tape recorder as an ultimate arbitrator of this murky area, however, my interviews were almost always conducted one-on-one. That is to say that regardless of the social context that often formed the backdrop of my visits (including sometimes staying in their homes, visiting friends with them, and often becoming integrated into the larger family gatherings), I was guided in my life history work by the sense that people's abilities to

think and talk about the events, as well as the overall meaning, in their lives are most developed when they are on their own – or rather on their own with me, the researcher.

Life histories and cultural practice

Although I can still see some reasons for conducting life history research in this fashion, I now see that this very method is itself indicative of my own cultural lens. Why is it that we assume that social animals such as human beings make the most coherent, or most meaningful sense of their lives when they are virtually stranded on their own with a stranger and a recording machine? Qi Wang and Jens Brockmeier describe autobiographical remembering as form of cultural practice (Wang and Brockmeier 2002). They argue that the very notion of autobiographical memory is itself a cultural product. They cite the work of Greenwald (1980) who states that individuals who are socialized in the West "remember their past as if it were a drama in which the self is the leading player; moreover, in the drama of one's personal history the self acts in an all-determining, 'totalitarian' fashion" (Wang and Brockmeier 2002: 46). This way of thinking about autobiographical memory emphasizes "individuality, autonomy and power in explicating and evaluating human lives" (p. 47). Wang and Brockmeier argue that

> … the Western notion of autobiographical remembering as intimately connected to the development of an autonomous self is only one possible form in which individuals remember their pasts. There also exist other cultural genres of remembering, such as genres that are connected to a process of increasing social interrelatedness (p. 47).

In the West, there is a strong undercurrent of asking individuals to account for themselves as selves, to display ways in which they stand out from the rest of the crowd. We orient ourselves towards that which is unique about each individual, often while ignoring the social fabric which forms the framework of a person's life.   Effectively, life history methodology enhances the salience of the distinctive boundaries between this self, the interviewee, and all others.

My choice of the one-to-one life history method, with its emphasis on the unique life story, can be interpreted as a cultural signifier of my own socialization. There were several occasions during my research on lifetime socialist activists where it became clear that some respondents felt somewhat ill at ease spending so much time talking about themselves. While the descriptions of the events of their lives which they offered me challenged the notion of an isolated self (and indeed one can read these interviews as evidence for the social interrelatedness of individual identity), most of them, most of the time, nonetheless did what I asked them to do, which was to talk to me about their lives, and to do so on their own.

Eileen, one of the respondents in this study, writes to me after reading transcripts from our first interview:

> I found it rather shocking because I felt it was very self-indulgent. I think that's what hit me and I think after our discussion I had felt the same… my reactions were "Oh dear, we do try to get away from our egos – how do you break out of the circle of your ego- and here I am locked into it."

But it was the very methodology which I had chosen which had caused her to be so "self-indulgent." Ironically, once she had agreed to the interview, she was strategically

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positioned to provide an individualized account of a life which had been guided by acting, as part of a collective, in the social good. Other respondents in the study remarked upon my use of the word identity: "I don't really think of myself as having an identity" Mary told me. "Perhaps you as the younger generation think more in that kind of way. I wouldn't think many people go on consciously thinking about themselves really." But that is precisely what the life history asks of those who participate in our research.

Interestingly, my respondents had their own creative ways of circumventing this overly-individualistic orientation which underlay my chosen methodology. First, they gave me feedback such as that quoted above, communicating their discomfort with this overly narrow lens. Upon occasion, they would invite a spouse or family member to sit with us while we spoke. Their accounts were almost always peppered with "ghostly audiences" (Langellier 2000): all of those people, and political movements, which had been critical to the selves they had become. And finally, nearly all of them expressed much curiosity about the others in my study; how did they respond to this question or that? What did they feel about a certain current event? How had they balanced responsibilities to their political work and to their families? The questions persisted for such a long time that I decided that I owed it to all of them to arrange a meeting for those who were able and/or wished to attend. Many of them made the journey across England, to come for afternoon tea in the home where I rented a room. There we sat and talked, and talked, and talked. They behaved as if they knew one another intimately, though this was their first time meeting, and expressed a desire to keep in touch. They joked that if

they did not see each other on this side of the heavenly divide, they would meet in the not too distant future on the other.

The individualistic focus of the method was less apparent in other settings, perhaps due to the content of the research projects. It is not wholly surprising that people who have devoted their lives to social movements would experience some discomfort with the individual accounting I was asking of them. All of the interviews I conducted in East Germany were with at least three people present (myself, the interviewee, and my translator). The addition of the translator had a number of effects on the conversations which we had (Andrews 1995), including enhancing the sense that we were participating in a social gathering. The multiple directions of communication - between myself and the translator, the translator and the interviewee, and even at times the attempts at direct communication between the interviewee and myself - added to the semblance that we constituted a micro-community, an example of the 'three or more' basis of group life. My primary translator was also my close friend, who had generously offered me space to sleep on her floor for several months. In the midst of conducting our interviews, I celebrated my birthday, and through her instigation, we invited a number of the interviewees to my party in her loft. It is unlikely that I would have made such a gesture had I conducted the interviews on my own.

My research in East Germany included interviews with three women - Irene Kukutz, Barbel Bohley, and Katja Havemann - whose group, Women for Peace, had been a very effective voice for political change in the years leading up to 1989. In the summer of 1989, as thousands began to pour out of East Germany through the Hungarian border, these three friends sat together in the garden and promised one another that the

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following year they would travel together to Italy, a place which for them represented all that had been previously forbidden to them. Indeed, the following summer they did go, together. Kukutz describes the experience:

> When we were crossing the Alps, I had the same feeling as when the border was opened. Total collapse. I was thinking, by what right, with what justification did they imprison us for years and why couldn't I see that [the view from the Alps] earlier… One somehow felt cheated.. over a chunk of one's life.

They had been through much together in the years, and it was important to them to make this trip together. Two years later, in 1992, the files of the East German secret service (the Ministerium fur Staatsicherheit - or "MfS" – more commonly known as the "Stasi") were made public. (See also Andrews 1998). On the second day that the records were opened, these three friends went to see what their files contained. Although it had been stipulated by the Gauck Commission (the body responsible for administering the Stasi records) that the files must be read only by individuals, these women disregarded this and insisted on viewing their files together. Irene Kukutz, in our interview together, explains the reasoning behind their determination: 'We are all in the files together, and we are going to look at them together!' I had versions of this same story told to me by each of the three women, but ironically, the context in which they were giving me their accounts was, once again, as isolated individuals. Logistically it may have been rather difficult to coordinate an interview including the three of them. Nonetheless, it is quite possible that in opting for the methodology which I did, I inadvertently stripped away an important framework of meaning which they not only shared, but which had been nurtured by their close friendships with one another.

Ethics and cultural positioning

We as researchers are influenced by our culture not only in our expectations of the conditions under which people might feel most inclined to give an account of their lives, but also in ways in which we are taught to go about gathering this information. Specifically, our professional training teaches us that there are certain universal ethical standards which one must adhere to when conducting our research. Like a number of other researchers engaged in multi-cultural projects, I have found that what might be considered ethical in one context may be something very different in another. Riessman (2005), candidly discussing some of the challenges she faced in conducting research on non-fertile women in South India, offers a powerful critique of "the inherent and practical risks associated with ethical universalism—applying "universal" moral principles that have been constructed (that is, derived) in one cultural context and exporting them, without modifications, to another." This point seems at one level so trivial that it should hardly need expression. And yet, as Riessman and others have argued, it is not something which has been taken on by Institutional Review Boards in the United States and the United Kingdom. Again, I will use examples from my own research.

When I began my interviews in East Germany, it was made clear to me immediately that the ideas which are implicit in an 'informed consent' form are entirely inappropriate in the East German context. Invariably, the effect of showing this form to interviewees was to call attention to myself as a foreigner. Not only had no one ever heard of such a thing, but when I began to explain its function, and why it might be

beneficial to them to sign it, the situation only worsened. They explained to me, with varying degrees of incredulity and patience, that in their culture no one felt that they 'owned' someone's words. Not only were they not at all worried about what I might do with the transcripts of our conversations, but the very exchange between us on this topic made them somewhat suspicious of me, personally.

At first I wondered if this rejection of the consent form was particular to the first person with whom I encountered this reaction, and so I persisted in the next few interviews. Each time I found that this piece of paper produced the same tension between us. I knew then that I must either abandon the consent form, or keep it and accept the cost that it might have on future publications. I decided for the former. Moreover, interviewees wanted me to use their real names. These were their words, about their lives: why, they asked me, should they not have their names identified? Fine, I would use their names, and not require consent forms; in fact this felt like the only option open to me that would sit comfortably with what these men and women felt about the representation of their lives.

Mostly, this choice was without consequences for me. However, several years later, an article which I had written using some of this data had been accepted by an international, refereed journal. Just before the article was due to go to press, the editor of the journal contacted me querying my use of names. I explained the situation to him: yes, they were their real names, and no, I did not have consent forms. He nearly pulled the article from the journal, but instead made what he considered a significant concession: he would publish the piece if I would withdraw the real names. Although I was uncomfortable changing names when it had been the clear preference of my interviewees

to be accurately identified, I decided to concede this point as this particular publication was dependent upon it. When I offered the revised article, with altered names, this too was rejected, however. Ultimately the only version which was acceptable to the editor was one in which there were no names at all, but rather initials, and those with no correspondence to real names. Who did these ethical guidelines serve? While they may have been appropriate in a litigious society such as the United States, they were contrary to the preferences of those whom they were meant to protect. The rigidity of the guidelines – indeed, in this case they proved not to be guidelines at all, but rather pre-requisites for publication – seemed to me to be an indication of an inability to imagine that others may perceive the world in a different way than we do; one manifestation of this may be that they wish to tell us about their lives differently from the way we think they should. The inflexible imposition of a 'universal' set of ethical guidelines is evidence of cultural hegemony combined with a lack of narrative imagination.

In another context, that of working with the transcripts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa, I felt that the guidelines were not sufficiently sensitive to the needs of those who had given personal testimony to the TRC. Women and men who agreed to tell their very painful stories in the presence of the truth commission did so for a wide range of reasons (see Andrews, forthcoming). They were advised, at the time, that in participating in this process, they were agreeing to share their stories with the general public. There were also a number of incentives (some imagined, some real) for them to offer their stories. What is not clear is if people who came in front of this national body and recounted the horrors which had befallen themselves and their loved ones actually understood what 'public access' to their transcripts actually would

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entail: their testimonies would be available online literally to anyone in the world who has internet access. (See Gready, forthcoming). Of course for those of us who work in personal narratives, this data set is at one level an extraordinary resource. But when one begins to read what is actually being said, and to allow oneself to contemplate the intensity of the anguish experienced by many of those who gave testimony, one begins to question if one's perusal of this material for research purposes is sufficiently respectful of the women and men whose words are displayed on the internet, as one scrolls through screen after screen after screen. I have grappled with this issue for some time, and ultimately decided that while using this material was considered to be ethical by Western academic bodies, in fact my own comfort zone told me something different. These stories were not meant for my eyes. I was never part of the imagined audience for these speakers as they broke down and told of their last embrace with their children. Here, our accepted ethical guidelines are inadequate to address the potential of academic voyeurism.

Yazir Henri, a former anti-apartheid activist and a former officer in Umkhonto We Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress, describes his experience of giving testimony to the TRC: "It took me almost a complete year to recover psychologically from my testimony and the form it took publicly after having testified" (2003: 264). He then elaborates on the source of the pain which followed from his public testimony.

> At the time of my testimony I had no idea what the consequences of 'public' could have meant in the context of public hearings. The fact that my testimony could be appropriated, interpreted, re-interpreted, re-told and sold was not what I

expected… Serious thought needs to be given to the ethics of appropriating testimony for poetic licence, media freedom, academic commentary and discourse analysis. Arguing these lines and 'It's on the public record' are too easy positions to take since they do not address the rights of self-authorship and the intention of the speaker, the reclamation of one's voice and one's agency (2003: 266).

The argument being made here is not strictly one of cultural specificity, however; that is to say, Henri's thoughts on this subject are not a product of his cultural upbringing, or at least not only a product of this. Rather, I think they are a very understandable reaction to seeing one's words used for purposes wholly outside of their original intention, and having to encounter this misrepresentation of oneself time and again in a range of public forums. I have had direct experience of having a personal interview made accessible online, and it is a chilling feeling to encounter one's own personal history, problems, joys, and challenges, on display for anyone who can be bothered to read it. The experiences which I have had in my life are not comparable to those of Yazir Henri; nonetheless, the feeling of exposure and vulnerability which engulfed me when I inadvertently came upon this interview was most illuminating for me. I never contemplated that relinquishing copyright to this interview data would involve such public vulnerability.

Jane Selby discusses the complexity of conducting responsible research across indigenous setting. Echoing the work of Jouve (1991), she argues that 'writing is never innocent". Her research, involving children in a remote indigenous community in Australia, explores candidly some of the intractable challenges which are incurred when working across divides of disadvantage. Observing that "… we use traditional methods

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and practices to help avoid experiencing the difficulties of working with others. But in such 'hiding' from uncomfortable experiences we do our work less well" (p. 3), she argues that cultural difference "can be brought into play as an interpretive resource" (p. 9). While working "fairly with disadvantage" may be "an ideal [which] is impossible, a fantasy of good research/teaching or good politics" (p. 4), there is, nonetheless, much to be learned in exploring what lies beyond one's cultural boundaries." (p. 4). "Cultural uncertainty affords creativity" (p. 11).

While most of my research was not across divides of overt disadvantage (other than that incurred by the power imbalance inherent in the structure of research interviews) Selby's argument is relevant to the point I wish to make here: most cross-cultural research is guided by a set of ethical considerations which are either irrelevant, unrealistic and/or possibly inappropriate and insufficient to address the complexity of such encounters. We are better researchers when we push ourselves to confront those aspects of our work which cause us discomfort.

Narrative and national identity

It is not wholly surprising that my work which has been based in several countries, and sometimes simultaneously so, has led me to think about how people position themselves vis a vis the country of their birth and/or the country of their residence. I have spent hundreds of hours listening to people tell me stories about themselves and their countries. Sometimes these conversations have taken the form of history lessons – teaching me about events that it was assumed that I, somehow constituted as 'other' either through nationality or age, would have little knowledge. But

more often, the stories of the nation were interwoven as part of the fabric of the individual life. Historical events, as it were, would form the backdrop for personal biography. People would explain to me, for instance, the effect that living under certain social-historical conditions had exercised on the choices which they made in their lives.

In preparation for the data gathering phase of all of my research projects, I have spent considerable time familiarizing myself with the social history of the community which I was exploring. In conducting my project on British lifetime socialists, for instance, I spent more than a year sitting in the library reading books on the social history of Britain between the world wars, a fertile environment for the radicalization of significant portions of the population. I would not have been able to understand much of what was said to me if I was ignorant of the political ferment which accompanied the vast unemployment of the 1920s in Britain. By December 1921, eighteen percent of insured workers were unemployed (Branson 1975:69). Only one year earlier, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had been formed, and the devastating effects of massive unemployment, combined with the international rise of fascism, meant that this political group attracted a great number of sympathizers.

One such sympathizer was Walter Gregory, a participant in my lifetime socialist project, who was laid off from his job as an office worker as a young man. He joined the National Unemployed Workers Union (NUWM), and participated in the Hunger March to London in 1934. Walter developed a political understanding of the circumstances which had led to massive unemployment, of which his own job loss was but one statistic. He explained the effect of this lesson: "The things I learned in 1934 on the Hunger March … I hold fast to this day… I was never the same after that Hunger March. I could never

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go back to being just the same person." Indeed, Walter returned from the march, only to volunteer several years later with the British Battalion of International Brigade, fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, where he became a lieutenant.

Time and again in my interviews, it was clear that personal biographies could only be understood in the wider context of these harsh living conditions. As Aldous Huxley once commented, experience is not what happens to you, but how you understand what happens to you (quoted in Kegan 1982). Not everyone who lived in this society at this time emerged with a similar, left-wing political explanation of it; and all of those who were dedicated to the left did not necessarily encounter these conditions in the same way – indeed, class was not a predictor for political radicalization. But the social conditions were ripe for a particular political narrative, and the comprehensive explanation offered by the CPGB did appeal to many. Christopher Cornford, one of the respondents in my study, explained the situation to me in the following way:

> You can see it, can't you, how unemployment, fascism, war preparations, political reaction… one knew that all the right-wing conservatives were really anti-semetic and pro-Hitler in their heart of hearts, and they really wanted Hitler to attack Russia… one saw in Russia this wonderful, creative, just, egalitarian society with infinite potential, and everything seemed to add up, and everything seemed to cut the same way.

Christopher describes the dramatic effect of his political conversion:

> you suddenly see the world in a different perspective, the world becomes much more luminous and exciting and comprehensible and involving and significant

and you feel that you have a sort of function in the world, as distinct from being a

little dry lead that is blown around in the world.

One can hear in Christopher's words the pronounced shift in his sense of agency; this

political understanding is not merely something abstract, but rather for him a blueprint for

action, and one which will stay will him for all of his years. For Christopher, his political

radicalization was part of a growing sense of belonging to a community who would fight

for social justice and change, even or perhaps especially in conditions of such social

disparity as that which characterized Britain in the interwar years. Looking back on

nearly eight decades of his life, Christopher tells me that he feels he has found "a path

with heart."

For Walter and Christopher, as with all of the respondents in my study, their

identity is anchored in being part of a larger community who refuse to accept that the

government of the day is the ultimate arbitrator of national interest. They look to help

those whose needs have been neglected, and they feel that this emanates partly from their

responsibilities as citizens. (One is reminded here of Marcus Aurelia's comment, cited

earlier: to be world citizens, we must have the capacity for sympathetic imagination).

Walter and Christopher come from vastly different social backgrounds. Walter's family

was working class, and they experienced "chronic economic hardship". Christopher, in

contrast, was a direct descendent of both Charles Darwin and the Wedgewoods, and the

environment in which he was raised was very privileged. Yet, these two men, with very

different sets of personal circumstances, arrived at a common political narrative which

was to stay with them for all of their years. The stories which they told me are much

more than just their personal stories; they are also national stories which cast light on the condition of life in Britain in the 20th century.

My research in East Germany was very different in a number of ways to that which I had carried out in Britain. When I arrived in East Berlin in February 1992, East Germany no longer existed. However, during my six months there, it occurred to me that it may be easier to wipe nations from globes than it is to wipe a sense of national identity from individual consciousness. It is ironic that, as some researchers have observed, times of political upheaval are particularly ripe conditions for collective narrative reconstruction (Roβteutscher 2000:62). The political demise of East Germany created the possibility for the revitalization of national identity, of the collective story of what it meant to be East German. Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously described the nation as an imagined community. There is evidence to suggest that the imagined community of East Germany held a far deeper attachment for many than the actual state; the disappearance of the latter created a possibility for the enhancement of the former. One can see in this example the power of narrative imagination as it applies to the internalization of national identity. Brockmeier (2001) examines the cultural fabric of national identity, arguing that the latter is

> one of the strongest threads to bind the individual into the cultural whole of a social community. Miraculously enough, there is a sense of national belonging that turns Kang and Margy, Gyorgy and Ana, Tadashi and Hanife, you and me into a Spaniard and a Basque, a North and a South Korean, a Canadian and a Quebecer, a member of a ruling elite and a resistance fighter" (p. 216)

For Brockmeier, then, national identity is "a symbolic construction…a process of continuous cultural interpretation and reinterpretation" (p. 215). National identity, according to this view, is something which is never finally arrived at, but is part of an ongoing process which binds the individual and his or her community across time and space.

No where was the imaginative and transformational potential of national identity more dramatically symbolized than in the chants of Autumn 1989, "We are the people". Prior to this time, the East German government had an unusually concerted programme inducting its population in civic education. Young people were effectively required to join groups (first, the Young Pioneers, then later the Free German Youth) in which they received instruction relevant to their national identity. Failure to participate in such groups came with a serious price, for instance the foreclosure of schooling opportunities. Due to this very rigid and formal tuition, many East Germans complied with the activities required of them, while failing to internalize any compelling sense of national belonging. It was something that was required of them, and as such, a site of psychological, if not physical, resistance.

In the years immediately following 1989, all of this changed rather dramatically. In 1990, 66% of East Germans identified themselves as more German than East German, whereas by 1995, this figure had dropped to only 34%. Correspondingly, in 1990 28% identified themselves as more East German than German, while in 1995, this figure had climbed to 60% (Yoder 1999:204-205). The effect of the demise of the country was an increase in the sense of national belonging. Jennifer Yoder explains the causes for this phenomenon:

… eastern identity has been rediscovered as a response to the encroachment of west German norms and rules for behaviour and the devaluation of eastern culture and identity. This rediscovery can also be interpreted as a positive/proactive development … a process of self-assertion, an expression of pride and autonomy, and a recognition that the east was and is different from the west (1999:209).

In my own research, I asked respondents how they would answer the question "When you are asked where are you from, what do you say?" The reactions which this question triggered were often emotional, and sometimes dramatic. In my article "Continuity and discontinuity of East German identity following the fall of the Berlin Wall: A case study," I summarize the answers I received:

> Most interview participants paused over their response, but eventually gave some form of the answer "the GDR," in the present tense, with comments such as "throughout my life I will remain a citizen of the GDR." (Variations on this included one respondent describing himself as "coming from the east of Germany" and another saying she was from "the other Germany.") Several respondents said they did not feel German at all, but rather European. Virtually no one responded that they felt they were from "Germany (Andrews 2003: 114).

In this article, I argue that in the ten years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German identity is not as wholly changed as some have suggested. Rather,

> … East Germans living in a unified Germany experience neither a total transformation of their fomer existence, nor an idenity which is unaffected by the profound changes of the context in which they live their lives. Rather, such

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research reveals a continuity of self co-existing with a profound sense of personal and political change. … Undeniably, the events of the German autumn have precipitated profound psychological change for East Germans, but importantly, this change has occurred within a relative constancy of identity. As MP Ingrid Koppe comments to me "…the past ... is not as past as we assume. We are the result of the past and the past is in us" (Andrews 2003: 120-122).

The enduring and evolving East German identity has taken a number of forms. In recent years, a new industry has emerged around consumer items imbued with national identity, such as the Trabbant (the car long associated with East Germany), and new board games which rely on cultural knowledge of life before 1989. For some this is regarded as a rose-tinted nostalgia, but others write of the "multiple meaning of *Ostalgie*", claiming that it stems not from an identification with the former GDR state, "but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory" (Berdahl 1999:203). It is an expression of belonging to community which experiences itself as under threat.

The stories which I heard were framed around an existence which was lived within the physical and psychological confines of the Berlin Wall. At the time of my interviews, very little of the actual wall still remained (apart from a small segment which had been retained as a form of memorialization, and which had been designated as an outdoor gallery). But the wall had not disappeared from the psyche of those who had lived with it for so many years. Many people spoke to me about the significance of the wall, both its presence and now its absence. This 'wall inside the head' was also an

enduring legacy of what it meant to be from East Germany. Far easier to expunge it from the landscape than from the soul.

The women and men who I interviewed communicated to me stories about their national identity in a number of ways. Sometimes, they directly addressed feelings they had for their country, and what its demise had meant to them personally. Sometimes, the significance of the physical landscape permeated the narrative (as in the omnipresence of the Berlin Wall). Still another way of communicating national identity was in the overt integration of personal biography and social history.

My research in East Germany, for instance, clearly demanded that I familiarize myself with the critical events of the social history in the country's forty years of existence. One such event that assumed massive importance in the lives of the people with whom I spoke was the expulsion of Wolf Bierman from East Germany in 1976, in what became known as the "Biermann-*Ausbürgerung*".   Biermann, East Germany's answer to Bob Dylan, was a political folksinger who enjoyed a wide base of popularity both in East Germany and beyond. Like Dylan, he was considered by many to be 'the conscience and the voice of the people.'   In November 1976, Biermann was granted a temporary exit visa to perform a series of concerts in West Germany. While out of the country, the East German leadership officially expelled him, based on the critical content of his performances. (Significantly, these performances were viewed by millions of East Germans via television satellite). This expulsion marked a significant turning point in the tensions between the state and the critical intelligentsia. Signatures were collected in East Germany protesting the decision of the party to dispel Biermann, but those who added their names did so at high personal and professional risk to themselves and their

families. People anonymously left wreaths at places across the country that featured in Biermann's songs.

Before beginning my research in East Germany, I had never heard Biermann's name (despite his widespread popularity across Europe). However, in my interviews, I encountered time and again stories which revealed the importance of this moment in history on the biographies of those with whom I spoke. One example of this was in my interview with Werner Fischer, a leading opposition figure in the decade before the opening of the wall, and the man who ultimately became responsible for the disbanding of the Stasi. When I asked Fischer about the awakening of his political consciousness, he responded by speaking of the Biermann affair.

> … this was for me as well as for many others a test case, the expulsion of Wolf Biermann… the first time when I publicly… protested. There were naturally repercussions… I was summoned, there was an interrogation by the Stasi, they threatened sanctions and dismissal… I knew I had to make a decision whether I wanted to be a normal law abiding GDR citizen. It was also important for me insofar as I realized then that my opposition could not just rest with my refusal to acknowledge the system but that once having made a commitment, I had to attempt to delve further into this system and find its causes.

Fischer is recounting for me a moment of deep personal significance, a turning point in his own life when he knew that he must decide where he stood in relation to the state, and how far he was willing to go to act in accordance with his beliefs. I hear his story as both a personal and a political narrative. Fischer clearly does not place himself

alone in his experiences; he describes the Biermmann affair as something which was "for me, as well as for many others, a test case." It is, then an East German story par excellence. In this example, I think we can see the strength of Geertz's argument that accessing a culture is more than an ontological exercise. To understand a culture, one must explore the meaning(s) embedded in its rituals, its history, its institutions. The very deep and enduring disaffection which resulted from the Biermann affair of November 1976 can thus shed much light on the underlying causes of the bloodless revolution, thirteen years later.

The third and final example which I will use to explore narratives of national identity is the research I conducted in the United States. As mentioned earlier, I returned to the United States, after living abroad for four years, only days after Iraq had invaded Kuwait, in the late summer of 1992. My "homecoming" thus coincided with the months leading up to "Operation Desert Storm", better know as the Gulf War. My new home was to be in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where, at that time, 55% of the total economy was involved in the defense industry. Here I interviewed a small group of anti-war activists who kept a 24/7 outdoor vigil to express their opposition to the war, as well as two leaders in the community who helped to organize the city-wide event "One Hour for America". I was led to this research by my curiosity which was raised by the display of the American flag at the anti-war vigil. What did this flag, my flag, have to do with the message of these people who chose to live outdoors in the bitter winter months to express their opposition to the war?

William Carlos Williams (1948) has written that "There are no ideas but in things". Janet Hoskins, in her book *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of*

people's *lives* argues that objects play an important role in the personal narratives we tell and hear, and that indeed histories of objects and life histories of persons cannot be separated: "People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled" (1998:2). Hoskins is an anthropologist whose work focuses on the Kodi people of the Eastern Indonesian island of Sumba. Hoskins argues that stories of individuals and their societies can be recounted through the exploration of the meaning of certain objects, such as the betal bag, "a sack for souls and stories" (p.25). Betal bags are "the most portable of Kodi items…almost inseparable from its owner. The deep, pleated inner pouches of the betel bag are a place of secrets and can stand for certain forms of hidden knowledge" (p.25). My research in Colorado Springs could be described as an exploration of the meaning of a particular object, the American flag. What did this symbol, these thirteen red and white stripes with the 50 stars on the blue background, mean to those who displayed it? Part of this exploration was a journey inwards: what did this flag mean to me? Is it important that people who display the same symbol share their understanding of its meaning, or is meaning to be negotiated by each individual according to their own needs, aspirations and limitations?

The anti-war activists used the language of love, responsibility and civic duty when they spoke about the motivations for their actions. They had the flag at their vigil because, they said, they loved their country. They knew that they were regarded by many in the community as being 'anti-American'; questioning their country's decision to go to war was, for their critics, a straightforward expression of disloyalty. "Go back to Bagdad" passersby shouted at them. Those who stayed at the vigil, which was located on a median

in the middle of city, had to contend with being the target of sustained physical harassment:

> The people of Colorado Springs… pelted us with snowballs, bottles, beer cans, tennis balls, you name it…they spat on us… tried to run us over… There were a couple of times in which people with huge American flags tried to hit us over the head with the actual flagpoles and sort of drape the flags over our heads… There was another time when this pickup truck with some rednecks stopped next to the vigil and they harassed us for a while and then they ran around us with their flag in a circle.

Clearly the protesters' attempt to tell a different kind of story of what it meant to be a good, responsible citizen created in others a response which was difficult to contain. One of the organizers of the vigil explained to me the source of the anger which their protest provoked.

> We were clearly 'un-American', right? And our attempts to prove that that wasn't the case, having an American flag there for instance, served to make them, if anything, more angry… How could we hold up the American flag? We were 'bad Americans.'

In terms of learning about other cultures, my research in Colorado Springs was amongst the most educational for me of any I have ever conducted. It is interesting that here I was 'returning home' but to a culture I could not recognize as my own. If national identity is, as Brockmeier (2001) suggests, a cultural sense of belonging, what could I say about my national identity in the cultural context of a place like Colorado Springs? We were, all of

us, Americans: the protestors, their tormentors, and myself. But what did we have in common? One thing which we did not have in common was a shared understanding of what this national identity meant. If culture is, as Geertz suggests, inextricably bound to questions of meaning, then in a very profound sense, those who physically threatened the anti-war protestors were operating within a different cultural framework from me, a framework which alienated and saddened me in equal measure. It was a contest over the meaning of national identity – my national identity - more than anything else, which was being physically fought over with the weapon of the US flag.

My interviews with two of the key people who organized the event "One Hour for America", approximately twenty-five thousand people who gathered together for one hour to show their support for the US troops, were very illuminating for me. One of them in particular framed the current conflict in the Gulf War in terms of what it should not be. Specifically, the spectre of Vietnam, and what he felt was the lack of the support showed to US military at that time, loomed large for him. I was intrigued by the way that the public perception of one historical event helped to frame subsequent events. This explicit correlation was exhibited not only by my respondent, but also taken up by the anti-war movement itself, which made public pleas to "support the troops by bringing them home," an inversion of the alienation expressed towards the 'baby killer' soldiers who fought in Vietnam. Indeed, everyone, from the president to civilians, appeared to be in agreement that the US did not want to have 'another Vietnam,'although the lessons to be gleaned from the conflict in Southeast Asia two decades earlier were still a point of significant departure.

What has this to do with accessing and understanding cross-cultural narratives? It is not because I was American that I could understand what my respondents were saying to me regarding their wishes to "avoid another Vietnam." But if one is conducting research outside of one's own community (however large or small that is to be defined) it is imperative to obtain a sense of what the larger narratives are which guide the self-understanding and therefore self-presentation of that group. Being American, having grown up in Washington DC during the late 60s and having been brought by my parents to anti-war protests on the mall, were all part of myself as I tried to listen to what was being said to me. While my personal background may have assisted me in accessing the relevant national narrative (for instance, the importance of Vietnam to the public discourse surrounding the Iraq war), it is also probable that this also contributed more significantly to the way in which I processed meaning in my research in Colorado Springs.

Welch and Piekkari (forthcoming) refer to another researcher's self report, in which the latter "explained that because she could not take anything for granted in the foreign country, she is consequently 'a better listener' there than in her home country" (p. 17). Perhaps the same could be said of me. In all likelihood, my 'insider knowledge' probably assisted me in my interviews with the protestors. While it is possible that they may have wished to articulate positions which were in subtle but important ways different to my own, generally we shared a political viewpoint, and they were aware of this when we spoke together. However, in my conversations with the two respondents who had organized One Hour for America, it was difficult for me to listen, non-

judgmentally, to what they were saying to me, as I have longstanding and deeply felt beliefs about the militarism of the United States. In East Germany, I had been very open to being educated about events of which I had no knowledge, for instance the expulsion of Wolf Biermann and its importance to the dissident movement in East Germany. This is not true for my work in the United States, and it is ironic to me that in some sense I felt more of a stranger in the land of my birth than I did in my research conducted in other countries.

Cross-cultural research and the construction of the 'other'

I began this chapter by citing Erika Apfelbaum's statement: "the issue of communicating across cultural boundaries is a major challenge to the very foundations of our dominant theoretical frameworks." The language of boundaries invites questions of who is allowed in, and who must remain outside,questions which occupy both individuals and states. In some sense, these boundaries can be seen as defining features of identity – for who am I, if there is no not-I? Our sense of self (both individual and social) is built upon the premise of the existence of an other, and it this critical construction of boundary which lies between them.

If this is so, then the veracity of Apfelbaum's statement becomes apparent: our dominant theoretical frameworks are ones that emphasize the importance of boundaries, which function to distinguish between 'us' and 'them.' Our socialization leads us to be deeply invested in the meanings attached to these boundaries, and we come to believe in the moral superiority of the position from which we emanate. The discourse of autonomy

and individuality, a defining feature our culture, is built upon the assumption that such boundaries are and should be impermeable. To cross boundaries is to risk the self. Cross-cultural research is, at its heart, a deeply risky venture.

When I began thinking about writing this article, I conducted a review of the existing literature on living and being in cultures other than one's own. Although I had myself been doing this for approximately twenty years, I had never really encountered this large 'self-help' genre of writing, aimed at those who find themselves having to live abroad. The review made me aware of other's basic assumptions regarding the nature of living in another culture: 1) it is assumed that this experience will be traumatic, and as such the literature is full of suggested mechanisms for minimizing shock; and 2) writers, and presumably consumers, of such books and manuals regard the 'home community' as one which is primarily homogenous, a group with shared values, understandings, and communication styles, not to mention taste in food and dress. What seemed to characterize most of the articles and books which I read (e.g. Shames 1997; Sorti 2001; Sorti 1994) is that there is a shared assumption that encountering 'others' is problematic, and the aim of these materials was to put coping mechanisms in place.

Not only have I never shared these two basic assumptions (regarding the traumatic nature of cross-cultural encounters and the homogeneity of the home community), but they are in conflict with my own models of understanding. How is that we define our home community, what is it that binds us together? What is the stuff of cultural belonging? Where we derive our most profound sense of belonging, that community which helps to define for ourselves who we are, is a place in flux, not only across our lifetimes, but even across our days. I believe that the construction of a static

'home' community, marked by shared values, is just that, a construction, albeit it one of deep personal and social significance, which resides in the imagination of individuals. Many of us experience our home, and the meaning of home, in conflicting and sometimes even incoherent ways. The reality of who we are, and where we belong, is rarely so simple as the picture of static homogeneity would suggest.

If we accept that home is a more fluid category which might be the location of a range of contradictory social practices, then our understanding of the other is also made more porous. For part of accessing the world of an other is the critical realization, that the way we see and understand life is a function of our own narrative imagination, something which is itself profoundly affected by cultural location and practices. In *Gone with the wind*, the character Scarlett O'Hara finds ultimate solace in the brown earth of the grounds of Tara, the plantation on which she grew up. But while home is or can be a physical place, it is more often than not something which resides within us, a composite picture of where we have come from, which lends strength to us as we set out to explore other new places.

When, in 1990, I first knew that I would be moving back to the United States, after living abroad for several years, I constructed this as going 'home.' In fact the reality was far more complicated than that. I had been forever transformed, the embodiment of Bhabha's "cultural hybridization", by the experiences I had had while living away from my 'homeland.' I had very little in common with many of the residents of Colorado Springs, my new 'home'. I could not understand how they could assault their fellow citizens, our fellow citizens, physically harming them with broken glass bottles or attacking them with a flag pole, simply because they had a different idea of what it meant

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to be a responsible American. Home for me was both smaller and larger than the country of my birth.

The self-help literature on how to survive exposure to, and possible immersion in other cultures was perplexing for me in its depiction of such experiences as essentially traumatic. Why should this be so? Genuinely opening up oneself to listening to any other person, and even on occasion to oneself, is a raw experience. Ryen, (2003) notes the recent growth in cross-cultural research, much of which emphasizes the "methodological difficulties of transporting experiential data across cultures (2001:335). Ryen herself documents some of the "communicative hurdles" (p. 336) which she has encountered, but not all of these seem unique to cross-cultural research. For instance, problems associated with "erotic experiences in the field" (p. 338) have been written about by other researchers operating within their "home culture" (eg Kong, Mahoney and Plummer 2002). However, one key challenge which Ryen identifies is to "get hold of the data in the form they are stored in the interviewee's cultural reservoir" (p. 226). This can be particularly problematic, for as researchers we have been trained to orient ourselves towards obtaining findings which must fit within the framework of understanding which we have constructed in advance. But this very process limits the possibilities of emerging oneself in wholly new ways of thinking, which is the essence of engagement with the other. If we are unable to release ourselves from the frameworks of meaning with which we are already acquainted, then we stand little possibility of learning something new.

Equally, in this journey to understand 'the other', we must accept that what we learn, and what we 'uncover' about their experiences, as mediated through our own interpretive lens, will always and can only ever be a partial knowledge. Sometimes those

experiences which lie most deeply within the self "defy narrative expression because they are not completely known, grasped, nor understood" (Apfelbaum 2001:2). This 'non-narratability' can be especially common in cases of severe trauma, "the analysis of the difficulties of communication across traumatic boundaries is equally relevant when people attempt to communicate across cultural boundaries" (Apfelbaum 2001:31). Once we begin to explore the potential of our imaginations to expose us to new and different realities, we soon encounter "the limits of each person's access to every other… The habits of wonder… define the other person as spacious and deep, with qualitative differences from oneself and hidden places worthy of respect" (Nussbaum 1997:89-90). It is then incumbent upon researchers to attend not only to that which is said, but to that which is not said, "the silence and the 'unspoken'('le non-dit') (Apfelbaum 2000:172). We must be comfortable knowing that we do not, and can never, know all about another; equally, we must resist the temptation to over-interpret those empty spaces which lie within our conversations

The possibility, and the limits of the possibility, of conversing with others, through speech and through silence, needn't only be explored on journeys to distant, 'other' cultures. There are potentially new partners for dialogue within one's own neighborhood, perhaps even within one's family. When we acknowledge that there may be much we do not know even about those with whom we are most intimate, the possibility of listening, and of being able to hear something new, becomes more promising. All the while, we accept that our "interpretations are provisional" and that our own life experiences "both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insights" (Rosaldo 1989:8).

This chapter is written from the viewpoint of one who has lived outside of her native homeland for fifteen of the last twenty years. Although I was asked to write about cross-cultural narrative research, this has expanded to a larger discussion of living between cultural boundaries. Interestingly, when I first moved abroad to conduct my doctoral research, my intention was to return 'home' after three years. But my understanding of myself and of my home were themselves transformed by my experiences in those three years. I believe that anyone who is genuinely touched by dialogues with others will be forever changed by that experience. The book *The art of coming home* (Storti 2001) begins by describing the 'complicated and usually difficult experience' of the reentry to the home culture. The phenomenon now known as 'reverse culture shock' is reputably 'more difficult than adjusting overseas ever was.' (p. xiv) The introduction to the book opens with a quote from Somerset Maugham's *The gentleman in the parlour*: "When I go back I know I shall be out of it; we fellows who've spent our lives out here always are." (p. xiii) Maybe those of us who live and work between cultural boundaries are forever destined to be 'out of it' or perhaps more accurately, simultaneously occupy the contradictory positions of insider and outsider. Our narrative research – in terms of what we choose to explore and how we make sense of the phenomenon we observe - is at least partially a product of our narrative identity, which is itself located at the intersection of different cultures.

Our narrative imagination is our most valuable tool in our exploration of others' worlds, for it assists us in seeing beyond the immediately visible. It is our ability to imagine other "possible lives" (Brockmeier 2005) – our own and others – that creates our bond with "diverse social and historical worlds" (Brockmeier 2005). Without this

imagination, we are forever restricted to the world as we know it, which is a very limited

place to be.

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