

Part III

**Being, Interculturality and New Knowledge  
Systems**



## Chapter 13

# Recovering Unrecognised DeCentred Experience

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### Abstract

This chapter begins with the premise that much that has been considered 'new' within Centre-Western institutions of research and learning has already been there outside the West but not recognised as such. A reconstructed ethnographic account, using creative non-fiction, of the experience of a doctoral student abroad in a Western university shows how she struggles to recover the unrecognised 'new' from her own deCentred past. The element of struggle is made harder by powerful Centre narratives of denial that she meets and also brings with her. This analysis follows a postcolonial, critical cosmopolitan approach informed by the social action theory of Max Weber. This is embodied in my grammar of culture, at the centre of which small culture formation on the go brings intercultural experience from the everyday past. However, this deCentred, hybrid, third-space process is constantly derailed and truncated by Centre discourses and narratives that seek to segment and rationalise learning and research processes within positivist and neoliberal structures and false essentialist conceptualisation of hybridity and third space. The chapter also addresses my own positionality as a Western researcher and educator and how I am able to write about the deCentred Self struggling against a divisive Centre Other. I claim insider knowledge of the workings of Centre structures and a neoliberal West as steward discourse that covertly Others beneath a seductive yet false veneer of well-wishing. My own interculturality is enriched by a personal struggle to find hidden realities. The reconstructed ethnographic account will therefore also demonstrate how false perceptions from the Centre make it difficult for all of us to arrive at deCentred understandings.

*Keywords:* DeCentred; interculturality; hybridity; action; recognition; margins

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This chapter begins with the premise that much that has been considered ‘new’ within Centre-Western institutions of research and learning has already been there in the global South and East but not recognised as such. I demonstrate this point with a reconstructed ethnographic account informed by my professional interaction with research students and supervisors from diverse backgrounds who have struggled to recover the ‘new’ from their own deCentred pasts. It is the story of a fictional doctoral student called Mira, who, like many students, has struggled with research methodology and theory and the contradictory narratives that she has both brought from home and found in her new ‘study abroad’ location.

The reconstructed ethnographic account follows the principle of creative non-fiction in which constructivist ethnographic disciplines are employed to create a fictionalised representation of observed events, conversations and experiences that cannot be pinned down in normal data collection (Agar, 1990). A number of characters, each with a different viewpoint, enable a discussion that takes the account away from the author’s own initial preoccupation to unexpected meanings (pp. 77–78).

While Mira’s story attempts to represent the struggle for recognition among colleagues and students I have encountered, struggle is also implicit in my own researcher understanding in writing it. I have been brought up with powerful Centre grand narratives to which I have also contributed in my own professionalism. Who therefore am I to write about the deCentred Self struggling against a divisive Centre Other? My knowledge base comes from an insider experience of the workings of Centre structures and narratives and the prejudices that they generate that enable me to write (Holliday, 2005). I shall come back to this at the end of the chapter in my discussion of my own small culture formation on the go.

On a point of terminology, throughout I use narratives to mean the stories that we construct or draw from as we position ourselves – grand when they construct the, usually, Centre image of the world and which speak ideology, and personal when they are our own, but sometimes splintered from the grand (Kell, 2013; Lyotard, 1979, p. 22; Mannheim, 1936, p. 52). I use discourses to mean the language formations, spoken and visual, with which narratives are expressed (Hall, 1996b, p. 202; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

### **Act 1: Travelling to ‘A Western University’**

In this first act of Mira’s story, she tries to make sense of being at ‘a Western university’.

Mira is a doctoral student at what she perceives to be a Western university because it’s north-western European with English as the medium of instruction. She has also noted on its website that it celebrates, in its own words, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘self-directed’ learning. She is well-aware that there are issues with these terms. One of her teachers on her BA programme at home told them a number of times that they should be wary of these ‘Western slogans’ and that this Western concept of individualism was alien to them and their culture.

However, since she's been here, she feels she's been encouraged to discuss these terms critically. Some of her friends at home are surprised and annoyed at what one of them calls her 'showing off with foreign thinking' when, whenever 'the West' comes up in their FaceTime conversation, she questions what they mean by it. She has thought a lot about this. They are right. A lot of the time she feels she is being seduced by what her friend, Tamra, who is a PhD student also from one of 'their countries' as she calls them, says is the Western way of keeping power – not letting you say anything without endless questioning. She says that not every Western person she's met have been quite as obtuse as the type that they have found here. Tamra has lived and studied in three Western countries.

Here we can see Mira immediately being caught within a degree of confusion. On the one hand she is just away from home doing doctoral research which is difficult for everyone. However, she has come 'to the West', which carries with it already carries with it a narrative that conflicts with the allegedly positive aspects of being there. She immediately noted that the university made a positive statement about the individualist criticality that was thought to be corrupt where she came from. She was being seduced by it while being warned away.

I use the term individualist criticality to refer to a group of discursive terms 'critical thinking', 'self-direction', 'autonomy' and 'individualism' that have often been attributed to an exclusive image of 'Western culture' in opposition to 'other' national or civilisational 'cultures' as related to the internationalisation of the university, English teaching and intercultural communication. This opposition to individualist criticality is implicit in the essentialist construction of 'collectivist' and 'high contact' national or civilisational 'cultures' (Hofstede, 2003; Lindholm & Mednick Myles, 2017). While the imagined and indeed neo-racist nature of this phenomenon has been recognised and pulled away from, it is still very much present (V. Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; Collins, 2018; Dervin, 2011; Kim, 2005; Kubota, 2002). The implication here is that while individualist criticality is not confined to any particular national or civilisational culture, Western academia continues to claim exclusive ownership.

## **Act 2: Competing Narratives of Research**

This can be seen by between-the-lines association in the next act of Mira's story.

For her doctoral research, she decides to investigate students' performance in learning how to write in the first year English programme at her home university. This is a topic that she brought with her from her masters course there. Her teachers there were very good at suggesting researchable topics.

Her supervisor here however is insisting that she 'get rid' of this 'outdated, positivist, experimental' methodology and to do something more exploratory and qualitative. She finds these ideas difficult because they don't seem objective and scientific. She blames

her country's education system because it hasn't taught her how to be creative and critical of established methods. Perhaps, she thinks, it was because new methods were thought to be too individualist and Western.

She is getting annoyed about lots of things. There is all the prejudice about people with her background that everyone has told her to expect. There are endless questions from people she lives and tries to socialise with about where she comes from and the position of women there. It isn't an obvious sort of prejudice; but it always lingers between-the-lines. She wonders if this was why she's also annoyed when her supervisor goes on about how her PhD study should be about women students from her country. Mira does want it to be about 'her context', but because she feels some loyalty to her country and wants to solve its problems. Isn't this after all the main advantage of coming here to study – to learn how to do things better.

Tamra tells her that she's right to feel uneasy about it because Western scholars liked to commodify 'their women' as though they need liberating or are some sort of exotic phenomenon. She says it is all part of the same lingering racism – pretending to want to help them because they are culturally inferior. Is this why Mira just doesn't think her supervisor is being sincere when he stops her every time she says something negative about her own system. 'I'm fed up', he says, 'with all these students who are constantly saying "there isn't", "we don't" when they talk about where they come from'. She knows he's referring to other international students who come from outside the West.

Individualist criticality is implicit in the 'creative qualitative' methodology suggested by Mira's supervisor. I am assuming that it acknowledges the critical, personal intersubjectivity of the researcher. It is constructed as Western in that it is demanded quite harshly in opposition to the 'outdated' positivism that has to be 'got rid of'. It is quite possible that the supervisor is not aware that he is framing his preference as Western. It is Mira who does this through a series of associations. She associates her positivist methodology with 'her country's education system' which 'hadn't taught her to be creative and critical of established methods' and the 'new methods' as Western and 'individualist'. There is also the opposition between her wanting to solve the problems of 'her context', which he connect with 'all these students', who she knows to be international students and who she frames as non-Western, who he accuses of being disparaging about where they come from, and him wanting her to research women from her country. It is Tamra, in the third paragraph, who connects the supervisor's preference with the racist commodification of 'their (non-Western) women' as inferior.

Fairclough (1995, p. 36) argues convincingly that we are 'standardly unaware' of the discourses in which we are implicated. I am here defining the narrative

as the parole of the discourse. But it is not just the supervisor who may be unaware. While it is Mira's associations that make the individualist Othering of the 'non-Western' evident, she also seems, unwarily, complicit in this Othering. The supervisor might be falling into the trap of framing the non-Western students' negativity about where they come from as a commodification of who they are; but it does seem true that they are being negative about where they come from. However, there is a breakthrough in the next act.

### **Act 3: Breaking Through to a New Old World**

Here, Mira is able to see through to another way of thinking.

When she returns home to carry out her fieldwork, Mira has to get permission to access the university. She goes to see the Director of Research with a letter from her supervisor. This very senior woman asks her what her research is about. Mira had indeed dreaded this meeting because she knew she'd be asked didn't think that the Director would like her Western 'qualitative' research approach. Her supervisor had tried to reassure her, but just made her feel annoyed and confused again when he said something about not needing to feel intimidated by 'the authorities' in her country who wouldn't understand what she wanted to do anyway – that it was 'just an administrative thing'.

However, Mira is surprised when the Director says that her research approach is 'nothing new' and doesn't go far enough. She asks Mira if she has read any of their own social theorists who talk about the development of creative qualitative approaches a long time before they'd been thought about in the West. There are also some theorists writing about this development in the sixth century. She mentions several references, which Mira quickly writes down.

The references from the Director open up a new vista for Mira. They do indeed connect with some of the postcolonial writers her supervisor has recommended. Somehow, Mira finds that this is a sort of breakthrough for her. She has no problem with complex theory and reading difficult literature; which she was taught to read critically in her university programme at home. The problem has instead been the feeling that she is not allowed to go beyond what she now begins to see are limiting social science models, which some writers say were imposed by the West as some sort of 'false modernity'. She also finds it liberating to read theory in her own and other languages that she knows.

This also opens up possibilities for her data collection. When she begins to interview the students, she is able to open up and interact with them in creative ways that somehow encourage them to open up to her and tell her things about their lives she hadn't imagined and which also teach her things about herself that she hadn't thought about before. In the future she would remember

the Director looking over her glasses at her and saying that she hoped that she wouldn't waste this opportunity – that their university students had so much to say if only asked the right questions.

She does though also see dangers, where some of the writers recommended by the Director do seem to fall into the trap of allowing the notion of 'false Western modernity' to marginalise themselves. They try so hard to resist 'Western individualism' that they fail to see its richness in their own civilisation. Later, she is fortunate to meet the Director again to tell her about this. Mira is amazed when the Director looks over her glasses again, smiles, and tells her not to believe anything that she reads. But by now she isn't phased by this and has found her ability to deal with the intersubjective complexity of things.

When Mira begins to write about her fieldwork and the new literature that she's finding, her supervisor is amazed at the really amazing improvement in the quality of both her writing and her thinking to the extent that he was also taken to places he hadn't expected. He feels that he seems to be a completely different person and indeed one of his best ever doctoral students.

Here we see Mira getting, for her, an unexpected message from an unexpected source. The Director represents an authority figure with her own educational system who expects to put her down. The people who asked Mira in Act 2 about the position of women in her country would be interested to note that the Director is a woman. It would be sensationalist for me to note that a woman in this position is as much as normality in education systems from China to Central America with which I have some familiarity as it is in the West. The best response would be 'why not?' What surprises Mira is that the Director not only approves the individualist criticality approach but claims it as part of a heritage that precedes its adoption in Western scholarship. It is significant that, once Mira is introduced to this concept, she has 'no problem with complex theory and reading difficult literature', which also dispels her prior accusation, in Act 2, that she has not been educated to understand individualist criticality. Indeed, this accusation now begins to look like an excuse.

The meeting with the Director is inspired by Honarbin-Holliday (2005, p. 45) meeting with the Director of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art to get access to the two university art departments where she carried out her fieldwork, and, after being interrogated about her research approach, being told how important it was and being given huge support. She later told me that he said her qualitative approach had a long tradition in Iran. A personal way into this is my memory of being told in my first undergraduate sociology lecture in 1968, that the fourteenth century North African Ibn Khaldun was the Founding Father of the discipline. A research student from North Africa tweeted me to say how good she felt when, in a seminar presentation, I mentioned this and also how my recent use of postcolonial fiction in my research was inspired by an academic from her country (Mami,



2014). This was one of the inspirations for my blog (Holliday, 2020) where I described how student in one of my classes recognised the iconic café from her country, in which students were engaged in discussion, on one of my slides. In each of these cases, the students in question caught a glimmer of recognition of where they had come from while studying in Western educational contexts where the importance of such references might easily be missed.

The postcolonial literature that Mira reads might have included Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini's (2010, pp. 223–224) description of how the Quranic principle of simultaneously engaging with 'forms and meanings' of texts through poetry is more suitable for Iranian primary school children learning language than the Western 'scientific method' that over-simplifies and 'subdues' nature 'rather than understanding and living with it'. Another example is Sibanda's doctoral thesis where he roots his 'qualitative interpretive' research methodology in the indigenous Zimbabwean concept of ubuntu which 'is cyclical, recursive and open' and begins with the self of the researcher as an integral part of the research context. He contrasts this with the 'Euro-Western ... linear closed approach in data collection' (Sibanda, 2019, p. 37). While the first record of ubuntu is reported to be 1846 (p. 47, citing Gade), this understanding of the presence of the researcher is relatively only recently established in Western scholarship (J. Clifford & Marcus, 1986). At a more generalised level, Asante (2008) notes the alternative truth of 'Afrocentric' thought. Mira might also have read another doctoral thesis where Duan (2007) uses ancient Chinese Taoist philosophy to understand the layered discourses in his data.

Mira's supervisor's amazement at the improved quality of her writing and thinking is based on my own experience with a number of doctoral students. They began with what I believed to be very limited positivist research proposals. Then, when I asked them to read just one article from a very different, individualist criticality paradigm, within a day, they came back with completely different thinking. It was as though, as Mira says, they had been given the 'permission' to think more freely, and then to make different use of intellectual resources that they had indeed been provided with within aspects of their prior education that perhaps they had forgotten due to the recent or more memorable prominence of positivist teaching.

## **Competing Worlds**

Connected to the difficulty of breaking away from Centre structures, Mira also notes that there are elements in some of the literature that she looks at of people marginalising themselves by essentialistically separating themselves from individualist criticality, having bought into the false idea that it belongs only to the West, instead of claiming ownership of it. These competing narratives that run throughout Mira's story are represented as three worlds in Fig. 13.1, which I have developed over a number of years in response to different empirical circumstances (Holliday, 2011, p. 188; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 10).

The established world is 'the West' and its Centre image of everywhere else that Mira has heard about from her teachers and finds represented in the University

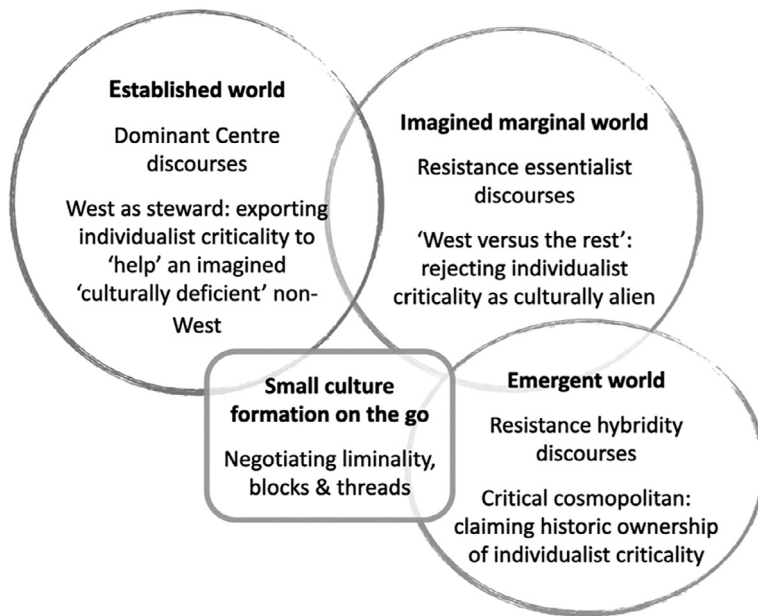


Fig. 13.1. Negotiating Competing Worlds.

prospects. It attempts to define everyone in its own image. What I have termed a West as steward discourse (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 17) hides racism under a veneer of ‘helping’, developed from critical cosmopolitan sociology (Delanty, 2006; Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008). This hidden racism can be seen in Mira’s supervisor and other people she meets being interested in the status of women in her country, which Tamra suspects of being exoticist commodification. It is also in the monopolisation of individualist criticality, which universities claim they need to ‘help’ students from ‘other cultures’ to achieve, implying their cultural deficiency.

The emergent world represents the rich cultural realities of the South and East that have been marginalised and unrecognised by Centre definitions of who they are coming from the established world. This positioning is emphasised in the work of postcolonial sociology, beginning with Orientalist demonising exoticism (Said, 1978). Stuart Hall (1991, p. 53) then talks about how ‘the margins begin to contest, the locals begin to come to representation’. This is exemplified in Mira’s story by the Director’s revelation that individualist criticality was already present and owned in their own scholarship before being monopolised by the West. There is also a hybridity in the richness of marginalised realities of the South and East that resists imposed Centre stereotypes by showing that they can be as diverse and complex as anything in the so-labelled ‘individualist’ West. Hybridity is thus the normal in the emergent world (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56; Delanty, 2006, p. 33; Guilherme, 2002, p. 128; Hall, 1996a, p. 619).

However, the realities of the emergent world are also hidden by the imagined marginal world. This is where Mira is led to believe that individualist criticality

is alien to her culture by her past teachers, her friends at home and even Tamra. Hence, her fear is that the individualist criticality demanded by her supervisor will go against her culture. This is a tricky issue because hybridity means that there can always be different viewpoints. Indeed, Mira's realisation that there continue to be multiple and conflicting narratives is confirmed by the Director's advice not to believe anything that she reads.

However, this rich sense of hybridity is threatened from the inside if the 'West versus the rest' resistance against the essentialist West as steward discourse is itself essentialist. This insider essentialist is an emphasising opposite characteristics in polarised negation instead of an ownership of individualist criticality. Kumaravadivelu (2016) building on the work of Gramsci and Foucault, talks about this with reference to English teachers' failed attempts at 'epistemic break' from the hegemony of the so-labelled 'native speaker'. He says they need to stop the schizophrenia of comparing themselves with imagined 'native speaker' attributes and instead think beyond the structures of difference imposed upon them. Kumaravadivelu's point also resonates with how Chinese students and scholars have used a Western inspired, limited interpretation of Confucianism as an essentialist 'excuse' for not engaging with individualist criticality, even though this interpretation is now being questioned (Li & Dervin, 2018; Tan, 2017; Wu, 2013). Essentialist division is also encouraged by neoliberal university structures everywhere, in which respectability, success and careers depend on lip service to easily quantifiable 'hollow' proofs of educational and research progress (Holliday & MacDonald, 2020; Kubota, 2016; Mills, 1970, pp. 62–63; Shahjahan, 2014), which include Western universities' essentialist commodification of individualist criticality as their exclusive offer (Collins, 2018). Asante, Miike, and Yin (2008, p. 3) suggest that a 'communication imperialism' makes it hard to break away from the essentialist boundaries set by Western academic structures.

### **Small Culture Formation on the Go**

In the concluding part of this chapter, I want to look at the process that Mira, and, indeed, I also employ in writing her story, to make sense of these three competing worlds. In Fig. 13.1, this mediating location is small culture formation on the go. This is a transient site 'where we all engage with, construct, resist or change culture every day' (Holliday & Amadasi, 2020, p. 8). Within an intercultural experience such as Mira travelling to the West, her lifelong experience of small culture formation on the go is her best resource. However, it can draw on essentialist grand narratives of the exclusivity of national or civilisational culture that she has been fed through media and education that draw her to the blocks, implicit in the established and imagined marginal worlds that pull us apart from each other. It can also help her to see through these blocks to find threads that bring us together. This requires her also to negotiate the liminal spaces between the three worlds. The threads come from more personal narratives – the personal cultural trajectories through which we can negotiate the whole grammar of culture (Holliday, 2018). For Mira, the thread that she eventually finds is drawn attention to by the Director, but then runs back to the criticality of her earlier

education and enables her to put the imagined marginal world in its place and to stamp her identity on her supervisor's advice in the established world – to see that the apparently new is rooted in her past. This backwards and forwards, deep-digging and indeed political process contributes to a deCentred interculturality that finds Self in Other and Other in Self as implied by Dervin (2016).

Small culture formation on the go is also the basis of my own ability as a Western researcher to make deCentred sense of Mira's trajectory and not to be seduced by my own implicatedness in the West as steward discourse. There is much of me in Mira's supervisor; and in writing her story I see how I also fall into the trap of Othering 'all' students who do not go with the individualist criticality that I prefer. I have also had to struggle to find hidden realities; and my own interculturality is enriched in this process. Recovering unrecognised realities and seeing around Centre structures is good for all of us. The reconstructed ethnographic accounts will therefore also include perceptions from the Centre which might help to explain how difficult it is for everyone to arrive at deCentred understandings. My choice of using reconstructed ethnographic accounts rather than interviews is because there is a bigger picture at play in an interpretation of experience which also involves my own trajectory.

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