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Assignment One: Reflections on the First Weeks of Class

On organization: Based on entries and free-writes I've written down over the past weeks, I organized my thoughts based on theme, each of which is titled.

My Experience with Being Porous and Buffered, Embedded and Disembedded

I didn't even notice how porous my familial traditions or superstitions were until a few days ago. As Hindus, my family worships a series of gods and goddess that, similar to the Greek Olympians, are peppered throughout both animate beings and inanimate objects. Every time I drop a book, for example, or accidentally touch one with my foot, I bring the book to my forehead as a sign of respect to Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and learning. To a Hindu, kicking a book would be the equivalent of kicking the goddess herself, simply because we believe her to exist within the physical object.

Although a lot of this has died out in the last couple of centuries, many other cultures and religions held similar beliefs. Native Americans personified the rivers, animals, and weather. The Greeks saw Demeter in their fields and Zeus in their skies. The Maori found their ancestors in the whales. After the first couple of weeks in this class, it struck me that this closely-knit relationship is being torn apart. Whenever lands are developed or forests are destructed, it's not just the physical lands themselves that are being torn apart. People, especially tribal and indigenous individuals, have to watch the homes of their gods -- and perhaps the gods themselves -- be physically ripped apart. This process of an enchanted world being torn apart on a literal level is symbolic of what's been happening on a more figurative level in society.

This tension between porous and buffered selves increases when you find yourself in a part of the world that's not fully disembedded. This happens to me every time I visit India. My grandparents are still firm believers in reincarnation and other ideas that suggest we are more closely connected to the world around us than someone who's buffered might want to believe.

However, part of living in a porous society means sticking to what the ancestors thought no matter what. A lot of places in India, including the city where my grandparents live, still abide by the caste system. Historically, people of varying castes interacted with each other minimally, and looked disdainfully upon people lower on the hierarchy.

Today, with globalization and modernization -- and consequences of disembedding -- people are finding it easier to not let their caste weigh them down, and participate equally with others in society. Unfortunately, because of the plethora of traditionalists, a large number of people in lower castes are just treated horribly because their caste is evident in the color of their skin, day-to-day practices, or job. There's a lot of ontological dizziness here. For some, the social imaginary -- and what the ancestors believed -- trumps any accusations of racism or sexism. For others, the reality that the color of one's skin doesn't determine worth trumps sacred tradition. I think this is the same ontological dizziness that Koro feels in *Whale Rider*, where he has to grapple with his granddaughter breaking a centuries-old tradition of male leadership in his tribe. The social imaginary constructed for him roots for the patriarchy, but it doesn't represent the reality that Pai is just as capable as any boy candidate.

The naive consciousness that these traditionalists embody is, in my opinion, extremely dangerous. After reflecting on what a social imaginary means for the last couple of weeks, I think that although it's helpful for navigating around in a difficult and confusing world, it can also be misleading and repressive. The social imaginary can nourish ideology that's just *problematic* like the caste system or the patriarchy.

Whale Rider and the Rope

The symbol in the *Whale Rider* that struck me the most was the rope. The first time it appears in the novel, Koro describes it as the weaved-together bloodlines of Paikea. Each thread of the rope has to be intertwined with the others in order to be strong. What interested me was that while the villagers are trying to save the beached whale, the rope snaps. I think this was a possible point of disembedding in the film -- or at least foreshadowed one. If the rope represents Pai's ancestors, then it also represents the traditions that went with them.

What's also interesting is that when Pai sits on the whale and tries to get it to swim, it keeps thumping its tail until the rope that was previously weighing it down falls away. On a literal level, the whale -- and Pai -- are no longer stuck, but on a symbolic level, neither are weighed down by the traditions of the ancestors. It is only when the whale pulls free of the rope and begins to swim that Koro is finally enlightened and sees what the damage of his adherence to sexist traditions has done.

What I find special about Pai is her duality; she seems to walk the line between an embedded and disembedded figure. She is embedded in the sense that she is porous; it's clear that she can hear and quasi-communicate with the whales. She believes firmly in the tradition that Paikia will be reborn, and that her people are very closely connected to the natural world. On the other hand, she is her own person. In an embedded society, everyone has their role and each person is defined by his or own job. There is no sense of individuality or breaking away from tradition. Pai breaks this norm. She questions the sexism inherent in her family's belief system and fights to *update* the way things work.

Before I watched *Whale Rider*, I think I've always unconsciously supported some traditions and rejected others based on how they impacted me. Hindu traditions that were sexist weren't traditions that I didn't enjoy obeying, and they weren't given the same sacred treatment as ones that were neutral. After watching the movie, I found this belief reinforced. However, for Koro, everything that the ancestors prescribed is intertwined, and when you disregard one tradition, you deem the whole system unsacred. I believe that what our ancestors dictate should always be taken with a grain of salt. They might have been epistemically privileged when it came to mythology and ancient culture, but we have scientific evidence to overrule some of what they said. For example have the knowledge to say that men and women, and people of differing races, are in no way intellectually inferior to one another, and to disregard this fact would be more detrimental than beneficial.

The Matrix and the Allegory

Immediately after watching *The Matrix,* I was struck by how well it synthesized Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The Matrix was symbolic of the cave and Neo of the enlightened

philosopher who breaks free. People are quite literally *shackled* to the 'cave' (their feeding pods) and are enslaved (to the robots). However, where I thought the two diverged -- and quite subtly, too -- was the how the enlightened people *felt* about the nature of the cave. Plato's philosopher is dazzled but happy about his new superior status as an enlightened man. And it's arguable that Neo -- and especially Morpheus -- feel the same way, too. On the other hand is Cypher, who wants nothing more than to return to the Matrix and live his illusion for the rest of his life. In class, we discussed how the social imaginary is a collection of norms or ideas that have been constructed for us. In that way, it is not unlike the puppets in Plato's Allegory. The social imaginary is not necessarily what's *real* from an objective standpoint, and neither is the Matrix, but characters like Cypher simply don't care. For me, this begged the question: is it wrong to crave the unreal? Is it wrong to know that what you're experiencing is fake and still wish to remain within it?

As an author and book-lover, I think that finding methods of escaping the world around is perfectly valid, whether it be through books, movies, or methods. They not only entertain us, but give us hope when we feel overwhelmed by either the boring routine of normal life or the horrors and obstacles that rise against us every day. I think a lot of other people feel the same way, which explains the popularity of places like Disneyland or Universal Studios. The problem occurs when, in a Don Quijote-esque fashion, we forget what's reality. Cypher was willing to abandon everything real because of this desire to feel happy. Personally, I think it's wrong to do this ourselves.

Everytime we go on cruises, or to Disneyland, or take a "tourist" approach to visiting another country, we're plugging ourselves into our own mini-Matrices. We're ignoring the problems of the real world for a fake fantastical one where everything is perfect. In exchange for a trip on a cruise, we're sacrificing the cleanliness of the ocean and using precious resources to make it luxurious. In exchange for going to Disneyland, we are indirectly supporting the exploitation of its international employees. In desiring his fake steak, Cypher is willing to sacrifice his entire ship and all of his friends. The crux to Plato's *Allegory* is that once a philosopher is enlightened, it is his or her job to rescue the rest of the people in the cave. I think that it's vital that people who are aware of the damage that escapist fantasies can do try to drag

the rest of us away from it, or else we'll end up tearing this world apart just like Cypher almost did to his.

Caliban as a Symbol

This is a sharp transition, but after watching *The Tempest*, I found so many interesting points of intersectionality that I had to reflect on them. At first, I was struck by how closely Caliban's character resembled Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* because of their respective dualities. Caliban, like Gollum, seem to be battling inner conflict. In Gollum, this duality is quite explicit; in chapters of *The Return of the King*, he has arguments with himself in which one side advocates for vengeance against Frodo and the other begs to remain faithful. Eventually, the side of vengeance wins out and Gollum betrays his master, much to the dismay of his other half. A similar conflict appeared to be happening within Caliban. At first, he seems desperate to rid himself of Prospero, and turns to Trinculo and Stephano to get his vengeance. However, at the end of the play, when presented with Prospero's staff, he stands upright for the first time in the play and appears to transform into something less vengeful and more sympathetic.

My primary opinion about Caliban (and coincidentally, Frodo says the same about Gollum) is that I don't sympathize with him, but I do pity him. Caliban is obviously naive (illustrated by how quickly he joins Stephano) but I think that naiveness -- and that of Gollum -- is potentially symbolic of humans in general. On one hand is a general desire to get vengeance on people who've wronged us, and find solace in power. In Caliban, this desire is voiced through his wish for freedom at the cost of Prospero's life. On the other hand is our desire to be part of a group, or even a tribe (more on that later) -- basically, anything but alone. In Caliban, this is illustrated by his immediate attachment to Stephano and willing to become his servant in order to be accepted.

I think the reason Caliban (and Gollum) are such significant characters is because they walk the line between evil or darkness and what I would argue is one of humanity's core traits: the fear of solitude. In fact, so much of our literature revolves around this theme. For example, at the end of the novel, the protagonist of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond Dantès, finally says to himself: "how stupid I was...not to have torn my heart out the day I swore to avenge myself." I

find these characters appealing because I can relate -- and I think a lot of others can as well. Is revenge justified? Is there anything that could be considered an act too far? Do, as Machiavelli might suggest, the ends always justify the means? I continue to grapple with these issues but I found that Shakespeare did an artful job of creating all of that conflict within Caliban.

Rousseau, Hobbes, *Caliban, and Alonso*

The following musing might be a *very, very long* stretch, given that Shakespeare was writing far before Rousseau and Hobbes, but I found the connection fascinating anyway. Last year, in my high school philosophy class, I wrote a paper on whether "dark" traits like vengeance are part of our human nature or whether they are a construct of creating societies. Hobbes' story was that the state of nature was essentially a state of war. To quote *Leviathan*, life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In order to keep people in check and prevent a complete blood-bath, Hobbes recommended the solution of society. For Hobbes, human nature was a desolate thing, full of greed and animalistic lust. In my opinion, this version of human nature is perfectly captured by Caliban's character. At the beginning of the play, he is portrayed as animal-like and brutish, living in a lawless land. He can barely speak, and is accused of raping Miranda. He walks hunched over and lusts for vengeance. It is only towards the end, when he is presented with Prospero's stick, that he finally straightens. I think the stick symbolizes society because it is a man-made tool that often go hand-in-hand with wisdom or maybe even phronesis. Caliban's upright man-like stance, his perfect grammar and his respect for Prospero are transformative and to me, were a (pre-emptive) nod to Hobbes' theory of human nature. Caliban required an introduction to real society to become "civilized" and tame his nature.

On the other hand, Alonso seems to represent the other end of the spectrum: Rousseau's version of human nature. Rousseau believed that "darkness" came from the very thing Hobbes prescribed to save us from it: society. According to Rousseau, we started off in a state of nature that was quite benevolent, filled with mild interactions between generally peaceful people. It was after society formed that our leisure led to corruption, and our corruption to vices like vengeance or betrayal. Hypothetically then, a return to the state of nature be the perfect cure. At the beginning of *The Tempest*, Alonso helps usurp and deport Prospero from Milan. His behavior is

morally questionable and not typical of Rousseau's natural man. When Alonso returns to the state of nature (Prospero's lawless island), he is eventually transformed into someone apologetic and reverent of Prospero. He effectively becomes a better person. In this case, Rousseau seems to be correct; society corrupts our human nature and in order to heal we have to isolate ourselves from it.

Again, this reflection might be stretched too far because Shakespeare was writing several decades before the Enlightenment, but the fact that his characters make these inverse transformations fascinates me as a philosopher.

Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism

Way back in my sophomore year of high school, I competed on my school's We the People team. This competition was similar to speech and debate or mock trial, but was unique in that groups of students within each team were responsible for knowing answers to sets of three different broad questions. One of my group's questions went as follows: "What were the most important differences between the basic ideas of feudalism and the basic ideas that developed out of the Renaissance and the Reformation? In what ways, if any, did new ideas born of the Renaissance and the Reformation give rise to what James Madison called "the new science of politics"? In what ways did natural rights philosophers and Protestant religions contribute to the rise of capitalism?" Immediately, we turned to John Calvin and Max Weber. A large part of the connection between protestantism and capitalism was this idea of disembedding that we talked about in class. Protestantism was all about "stripping man naked" as written in "The Encounter With Nothingness"(Barrett, page 27).

The first time I studied the Reformation and the Calvinists back in high school, I was very sympathetic towards their movement for a couple of reasons. First, their movement encouraged independence and education. With the timely arrival of the printing press just a couple hundred years earlier, people could purchase their own copies of the Bible and no longer had to rely on the word of corrupted clergymen selling overpriced indulgences. Every person could interpret their religious document the way they wanted. Second, it seemed to energize society. Protestantism, through its individuality, allowed people to focus on life on Earth instead

of just life after death. This individualized energy is what kick-started capitalist ideas. A lot of people, especially advocates of capitalism, would be in favor of simplifying religion for the aforementioned two reasons.

Because the Reformation went hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment, a lot of its principles revolved around *boiling religion down to a science*. As such, traditions, festivals, superstitions, and religious symbols were deemed irrelevant. After studying this time period a second time, I find myself questioning whether the Reformation was that positive after all. I think traditions are absolutely vital to the preservation of culture and the success of religion, and losing all of that festivity severely distorted what religion meant in the world of the 1600s. This is one historical issue that I find myself torn on. On one hand, I sympathize with the goal of the Reformation: to bring religion *directly* to the people. On the other, the unintended consequences might outweigh the benefits. Ultimately, forcing Axial practice upon religious people came at a high cost -- one that we might, sadly, not ever be able to understand the full extent of simply because it's been erased out of our history.

The Romance of the Rose

I love reading older literature so the *Romance of the Rose* was much enjoyed. One of the most confusing moments of the *Romance* was when the narrator peers into the Pool of Narcissus to find two crystals. I'm not completely sure what this connection means, but I was reminded of Ariel's song-like monologue in *The Tempest* where he talks about Alonso's eyes: "Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made; Those are pearls that were his eyes"(*The Tempest)*. In both cases, if the stones are symbolic of eyes, both authors could be hinting at either introspection, or something eternal (human flesh eventually fades away but stones are forever). When the narrator looks into the crystals, it's possible that he's looking into the soul of his beloved, but I like to think that the crystals are merely his own reflection eyes. It is only after he looks into the pool that he first sees the roses -- the things he desires the most -- and is consequently shot by the God of Love. I think that the author is trying to say that in order to know what you truly want or love, you need to know yourself (as eloquently phrased in *The Matrix*, "know thyself").

What I thought was especially interesting was what we discussed in class last week: the conflict between reason and love. I am reminded of Plato's Allegory of the Chariot. In this story, he describes the human soul as a tripart system. First is the white horse, who represents spirit, honor, and passion. A second horse, black in color, represents lust and appetite. Both of these horses are kept in check by the charioteer, who represents reason. Plato believed quite firmly that reason was the key to our success and that without it, our opposing feelings (the two horses) would tear each other apart. I thought his derivation of "The Madness of Love" from this analogy was witty; in *Phaedrus,* he explains that the charioteer essentially has to beat his black horse into submission while courting a lover. However, once he finally has her attention, he cannot make an advance because his black horse is too worn out (he's lost his lust) and the white horse takes over (too honorable or noble -- possibly too weak to make an advance). This unhappy ending renders the charioteer destabilized and in this way, devolves the person into madness. What's interesting is that the person who completed *The Romance*, Jean DeMeun, was highly dismissive of love, and believed that any such "Madness of Love" was nothing but delusional. In fact, when the narrator encounters Reason, a very Athena-like figure with sharp, piercing gaze, he finds her frustrated by his behavior and is accused of being foolish.

Again, I am reminded of classic Romantic heros like Edmond Dantès who think with their heart and come to regret it later. However, people who always think with their head are impossible to empathize with and lose something about them that is indescribably human. Perhaps there is some merit to what Plato says about how love can cause someone's undoing, but at the same time, maybe the application of reason is the necessary cure. I remain conflicted on whether the "Madness of Love" is inevitable or if the use of reason in fending it off is worth the consequences.

A General Reflection

I broke this paper into segments because although everything that we've talked about in class so far is interconnected, I found it hard to articulate these large general conclusions without branching out as far as I did. My biggest points of inner turmoil so far have been a) whether the Great Disembedding did more harm than good; b) whether we ought to respect ancient traditions

at any cost, or if there's a point where they can no longer be considered sacred; and c) is it okay for us to live an illusion as long as we're happy, or do we always *have* to pick reality?