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## Deconstructing My Library, Unwrapping My Lifeworld

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**Abstract** One of the most frequent ways of narrating everyday life in developed countries has been via the printed book. The invention of printing allowed for an ever-increasing mass production of *documents of life* that systematically established an era of communication and a political economy that had profound implications for the structure of living together. This article departs from the context of my own lifeworld: a lifeworld closely related to printed books.

When attempting to explore and understand the overt and covert meanings embedded in the historical development of our social lives and the objects around us, we can turn for assistance to an analysis of the books on our shelves, books that have been constant companions for long periods of our lives. In this article, I propose that any valid interpretation, understanding, and depiction of social reality need to be, in essence, autobiographical. The autobiographical account I present includes how my personal life trajectory led me to the books that surround me. And how, in turn, these books become a reflection of myself and my roots.

**Keywords** Storytelling; Meaning-Making; Lifeworld; Documents of Life

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### Telling Stories

In today's world, there are strong indications of an increasing interest in narratives. One example of this interest is the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 to the oral historian Svetlana Alexievich for her work in the literature genre of narratives (Alexievich 1992; 2006; 2016; 2017). This comes in the

wake of our need to better understand human experience, human motivations, and the ways in which we impact our social and natural world. Narratives imply memory. In his ground-breaking work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur (2004) reminds us that any phenomenological analysis of memory needs to include two essential questions: “Of *what* are the memories? *Whose* memory is it?” Our narratives center on our appropriation of memory, our capability for self-reflection. To understand how memory works, one must realize that *to be reminded of something is at the same time to remember who you are*. Memory is a complex system of storing information, an experience and a dialogue with the past. But, in the end, memory is an engagement with, and thinking of, the events, the people, the experiences, the beliefs, the truths/lies that we came across or were told about. My attempt at understanding the social reality in which I find myself is related to my autobiography. But, even though it is autobiographical, my memory is not free from collective, social, and institutionalized influences. My memory is an individual mental act, but it is also socially organized and mediated.

From the beginning, humans have found themselves in storytelling societies. We tell our stories; we listen to others’ stories; we story our lives. We are the only creatures to have this capability: to tell and record stories and then pass them on from one generation to another, from one culture to another. And our stories have consequences. They work their way into all aspects of how we live together with other people. Storytelling is a meaning-making activity. It is important in our search to make sense of our lives. Our stories tell of happenings and experi-

ences. They also tell of visions and of dreams. They speak of reality and of imagination, of politics, and of religion. Our stories and our ability to verbalize our lifeworld already at an early stage of our development opened the door to imaginary worlds and to the realms of the spiritual. And, gradually, our ability to make intellectual and emotional connections started to infuse our lives beyond the basic instinct to survive. From images drawn by early humans on the walls of caves it is clear that these were people who could think symbolically, and who could make visual representations of things they remembered and imagined. Not only is ancient art a marker of these shifts in cognitive activity, it also reminds us that the sophisticated ability to think abstractly has not been restricted to one part of the world as we know it today. Whether on the walls of caves in Europe or in artifacts found across Africa, the Americas, and Asia, examples of our unique capacity for imaginative expression and for symbolism are found all over our world.

One can even argue that stories are of such importance that had nobody ever spoken to us from the outside, we might only have had silence within ourselves. It is only by listening to others’ stories that we start to develop the capacity to tell our own stories. By internalizing others’ voices, we come to discover who we are and to discover our fellow humans. We are shaped by the stories preserved in our society. We are molded in such a way by our shared stories that we appear similar to others around us, and for this reason, we can be recognized by people from “inside” and from “outside” as members who belong together in a unique collective: a society. But, no child is merely accepting society’s stories. We

have the ability to resist the stories, we can participate in them, and we can collaborate in the stories. Quite literally, even as a young child we can start to talk back.

## Writing Stories

The use of systems of symbols to capture and to convey meaning is very old. Long before writing as we know it was developed, several traces can be found of encoded utterances that made it possible for others to accurately reconstruct a written message. Although obviously connected, the development of writing and the development of well thought out, coherent texts are not the same. Early on in humankind's history we started to experiment with recording our stories. The moment when the first people started to think and plan for the future, and to remember and learn from the past, they displayed a higher order consciousness. This higher order consciousness gave humans a huge advantage and it helped us to cooperate, to survive in harsh environments, and even to conquer and to colonize. And all along, we have been using our ability for storytelling to record, to pass on, and to add to the narrative. Although the first traces of writing go back to Egypt more than 3,000 years BCE (The British Museum 2017), and many forms of proto-writing can be found on surfaces such as stones, tablets, tortoise shells, scrolls of leather, papyrus, clay vessels, and parchments, it was only by 1450 that the printing press and moveable type were invented (Childress 2008:42). Various political, industrial, and cultural revolutions ignited enlightenment and led to a slow replacement of ignorance by the light of knowledge.

The predecessors of what we call "books" were cumbersome, expensive, hugely exclusive volumes or codices, handwritten and illustrated—the reserve of the rich and the powerful. And even after the introduction of the printing press in Western and Eastern Europe noticeable changes towards rational and democratic knowledge were slow. Books remained the exclusive property of the powerful for centuries—a scarce item in many homes well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, although books were scarce in most ordinary homes of workers and other less literate groups, the gradual increase of literacy brought about by the Reformation, and later the political and industrial revolutions in Europe, slowly led to changes in every aspect of the daily life of Europeans. And as a descendant from Europe, the roots of my life—from my distant past to my not-so-distant everyday reality—were also touched. Telling stories increasingly moved to writing stories and as an adult in the 21<sup>st</sup> century my life is mainly influenced by *documents of life*. I use the concept *documents of life* as a collective noun for materials that have been written or printed or reproduced in any way—materials that have an objective and independent existence. In this article, the term *documents of life* refers to books that were printed or a manuscript that represents a book meant to be printed. I exclude verbally conveyed biographies, narratives, oral histories, subjectively constructed summaries/testimonies, accounts or tales from this use of the concept *documents of life*.

This project of analyzing a serendipitously selected collection of *documents of life*—printed and published books—constitutes a way of making my own life, as well as life in general, intelligible to myself

and to others. I want to understand my own life and the society in which I live by focusing on a selection of printed documents that I have come across over almost 3 decades. These documents—all of them books—deal with many issues. Some deal with the abstract and imaginary world of the spiritual and/or religious, whereas others deal with concrete issues related to the experience of everyday reality. Given the position of religion and the institutionalized churches in the predominantly Christian part of Europe where my roots lie, it is to be understood that a large percentage of the oldest texts containing a documentation of my roots are related to Christian religion. In addition to religion, other important themes that run through my own life history are the themes of colonialism, imperialism, racism, language, identity, and time.

### The Texts on My Shelves

The books in the collection on my shelves—books that I group together and refer to by the collective noun as the *documents of life* that I came across over many years during my travels in Central and Western Europe—have all been added to my collection based on their physical appearance. They are all old texts and they have considerable aesthetic appeal. Some date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; the oldest one is from 1567—printed almost 100 years before the Dutch sent Jan van Riebeeck on the mission to colonize the Cape as a refreshment station for their fleets *en route* to the East. Although these *documents of life* are all old, they were all written, created, and presented in the format that we still associate with a book. At no point do I attempt to deconstruct the material book object. Their deeply instilled custom-

ary forms as objects and as vehicles for conveying their messages via text are largely left unchanged.

The words inside the texts in my collection—as well as the bound pages of these books—originated from and bear witness to the intentions, motivations, hopes, and sometimes even the fears and sufferings of human beings. They tell us something about the everyday lifeworld; they narrate a message or a story. But, in the context of them being a collection of documents, their ability to narrate is undermined: many of the texts in this collection are written in old, inaccessible languages and within opaque narrative structures. So, I cannot merely present these texts; I need to re-narrate, deconstruct, and even subvert narrative conventions. And this happens by presenting the texts in a way that evokes new stories in my mind as “reader” or that prompts my re-membering of old stories in new ways.

Let us for a moment not try to open these texts and not try to translate the languages of these texts—the inaccessible Latin, the High German or Dutch, and the old Czech, Slovak, or Hungarian—or to get a feel for the ancient English of 200-300 years ago. Let us rather accept that these books come from the past and that they contain content that is somewhat closed or obscured to us. These books now require improvisation—a new interaction and experience—in order to be “read.” Let us critically inquire into the aims, objectives, context, and content of the books in this collection of *documents of life*. We can start this inquiry by systematically reading the title pages of the texts; only the title pages. Without opening the rest of the texts and without converting the original print on the inside pages to meaning and message,

let us try to constitute a text for ourselves; remembering the old stories. In this way, we bring the old texts in this collection of *documents of life* into a dialogue with each other. By gathering them together in one area on the bookshelves the books have already attained a different character and the whole collection starts telling us more than what an individual book can do. The collection of *documents of life* brings us into a dialogue with the wider context of time and history. If I choose to engage, then I am obliged to reflect—to look back on and weigh up the motivations, intentions, successes, and sufferings implied by the different title pages, and presumably described on the pages of the different texts. I am also obliged to engage with the wider range of historical and philosophical preconditions they offer for understanding our social reality and its making.

The books in this collection on my shelves tell of things real and imagined, factual and fictional. Each book speaks about the doings, the plots, the characters, and story lines of a particular era and sometimes of a particular moment. And as any serendipitous collection will do, the collection constitutes *documents of life* of only some segments of reality. Some of the texts resonate in a way with the personal, subjective, and autobiographical dimensions of my life. Others belong more to group ideas, to the social world, to a collective—in this case, a collective that I can empathize with because it constitutes my own roots. And yet another part of the texts belongs to the story of humankind, of nations and cultures. The narratives contained in this collection of texts bring the themes individual, the group, and the larger social reality together in an intertextual dialogue. The narratives contained in the different texts and

the themes raised by them shape and influence each other. In addition, my own biography influences how I “read” each text, as well as how I “read” each text in relation to the others in this collection of *documents of life*. When visiting the Edvard Munch Museum in Oslo in May 2017, I was struck by a quote on the museum wall referring to the work of Munch, Norway’s most important visual artist: “Munch was preoccupied with how one picture could alter another picture when placed beside it, how the relationship and context created something greater than the individual works, a resonance, as he called it. And that is how it is with people too. Together we are more than separate individuals...” This notion is also true for books. When bringing a collection of books together in one place, the books start taking on a different character; the collection starts telling us more than what the individual books can do. In the same way as a small private library in an ordinary present-day family home can reflect something about the family, the collection of texts in this project on *documents of life* reflects something of my lifeworld as it resonates with wider social, cultural, and historical refrains.

The *documents of life* in my collection contain many topics—ambitious and wide-ranging moralistic guidelines, histories, rules and regulations, sermons and speeches, diaries and journals, textbooks, dictionaries and encyclopedias, Holy Scriptures, philosophical utterances, commentaries and exegeses, novels, and volumes of poetry. The books range widely in their physical size and shape, and, as I mentioned before, the oldest texts predate the first settlement of Europeans on southern African soil. All these *documents of life* have something in common

with me and my journeys, and—I believe—with the construction and re-construction of my life and its roots, but not one of the texts is South African. The closest to a South African text is the translation into the Afrikaans language of two Bibles containing the Reformed Calvinist Christian canonical books of the original Hebrew Old Testament and the original Greek New Testament.

Although they seem to be unconnected, the set of more than 140 texts in my collection weave and interlink with each other with the result that they create a closely related intertextual panorama. Within this panorama, as author—and as the “reader” of these texts—I am positioned as a White, Afrikaans-speaking, South African male whose secondary schooling, as well as university training took place in Afrikaans-speaking apartheid institutions. My professional career as an academic started at a bilingual university and continued at an Afrikaans higher education institution. I worked at universities situated in the heartland of apartheid South Africa. In the middle of the various states of emergencies proclaimed by the apartheid government during the second half of the 1980s, I was given the opportunity to work for a quarter of a century as a professor and head of department in a cosmopolitan, highly critical, English-speaking segment of the South African academic world. For the first time in my life, I performed my role as academic within the broader parameters of critical rationality and not guided by the many constraints of an ideological political structure. This opportunity opened the door to almost three decades of academic contact with colleagues in, and regular visits to, the Visegrad Group of countries—The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland

and Slovakia—and Western Europe. My first prolonged stay in the Visegrad cultural and political alliance took place shortly after this Group was established on February 15, 1991 (Visegrad Group 2017).

At that point—the early 1990s—there were high expectations that the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 09, 1989 could lead to a worldwide broadening of autonomy and liberation from the shackles of oppression. Several historical events took place in quick succession. The rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union coincided with a series of events in Poland that led to that country’s Communist Party losing its grip on power. For the first time in the post-World War II history of Europe, a Communist government—the one in Poland—handed authority to a non-Communist opposition (Wnuk 2000). Shortly after this ruling, the Hungarian Socialist Party decided that it will no longer be officially called “Communist” (Kort 2001:69), and Czechoslovakia had its Velvet Revolution (Kuklík 2015:217). On April 23, 1990 Czechoslovakia changed its name to the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic with Václav Havel, former political prisoner and leader of the Civic Forum, as its first President (Encyclopedia Britannica 2011).

On the other side of the globe, in South Africa, the process towards democratization was also pushed and smoothed by conditions and causes not entirely unrelated to what was happening in Central Europe. The international success of the Anti-Apartheid Struggle against the ruling South African regime contributed to increasing acceptance of the idea that the National Party’s racist and restrictive domination must end (South African History Online 2012).

Effective disinvestment campaigns, boycotts on cultural, sport, mercantile, and academic levels, and extended lobbying in international council chambers forced the minority government to negotiate on the political future of all South Africans (South African History Online 2012).

When the Cold War drew to a close in the early 1990's, many people experienced a feeling that the world was naturally moving towards democratization and to an opening up of previously closed political structures. Democracy seemed to champion a system of basic values built on the foundation of respect for human life and dignity. South Africa's democratization process contained these sentiments. Reflecting a similar shift in public views as the one when Václav Havel became president of the Czech and Slovak Republic in 1990, many saw South Africa as a world leader in the establishment of justice, reconciliation, equality, and peace when Nelson Mandela—like Havel, also a political prisoner—was inaugurated as its first democratically elected president in 1994.

Now, a quarter of a century later, there are worldwide signs of growing disillusionment and pessimism. The move towards democracy and greater well-being for all is not as smooth or inevitable as previously thought. The world is not moving spontaneously towards democracy. Rather, many signs of democratic decay or anti-democratic reversal are visible. Some argue that in South Africa democracy has become a shell of itself, associated less with aspirational humanistic ideals than with its mundane manifestations in free, fair, and regular elections. Once again the stories are about

our world changing, fragmenting, and dispersing. The stories change because the forms and structures of the living together of people change. On the other hand: sometimes the stories change, but the underlying forms and structures remain defiantly unchanged.

Sociologists widely agree that the concept *social structure* refers to the way in which society is organized to meet the basic needs of its members. The social structure entails all the ways of doing things that have developed over time; it implies a widely accepted way of life, a broadly agreed definition of reality, and a shared view of the overall reality within which we live. Social structure is shaped by dominant norms, but also by their contestation. Layer upon layer of the social structure becomes set and sedimented over years, but also gets eroded. Our stories—contained in *documents of life* such as the collection on my shelves—help us to understand how we construct and reconstruct our lifeworld. Our stories contain and harbor our memories; they reflect the themes of our lives and of our social structure.

### **The Themes from the Texts in My Collection**

Reflecting on the memories and stories in my small library of *documents of life*, four groupings of themes stand out—religion; colonialism, imperialism, and racism; language and identity; and time. These themes are not separate from each other or loose-standing. Political decision-making is often related to religious beliefs and motivations. A well-developed language often facilitates political sophistication and religious acumen. All the

themes above combine to illustrate the underlying principles of social change and of Western modernization—a process deeply ingrained in the notion of progress and one that is dominating my own Western mind (Nisbet 1980). The texts in my collection confirm a widely held assumption (Van Nieuwenhuijze 1982), namely, that the characteristics of modern people have always been related to their abilities to attain sustenance, comfort, peace of mind, material benefits, the optimization of progress, ascendancy, and maximum control. The collection of texts on my shelves—some old and others not so old—tells this well-known story of Western progress, prosperity, control, and wealth. One of the aims of this article is to search for deeply rooted principles of my own development history, as well as of the development history of the broader cultural tradition of Western Europe—from where I originate. Some of these deeply rooted principles might be:

- The acceptance of a single, linear time frame, within which it is possible to improve the quality of life.
- The possibility of social reform that is based on a historical foundation that can impact the present.
- The inevitability of the future, combined with hope and expectations of prosperity.
- The controllability of welfare, stability, equality, freedom, peace, and justice.
- A reciprocal relationship between rationalism and idealism.

- Confidence in the autonomous contribution of future generations.

Most of the *documents of life* on my shelves echo in one way or another the idea that the individual should constantly strive towards cultivation and learning; they praise rationality and a scientific approach. In contrast to the traditional society's restricted capacity to solve problems and to control the physical environment, the books in this collection proclaim that a modern society must strive to control not only the present but also anticipate and eliminate future pressures. These general threads running through the texts on my shelves lead us to focus more specifically on four broad themes.

### Religion

Most of the oldest texts in my collection of *documents of life* are religious books, written mainly by members of religious orders. They deal with all kinds of sacred issues, morality, directives for everyday practices, as well as with guidelines for specific religious festivities. These old religious texts narrate in no uncertain terms how influential and powerful religion and the religious elite were: the texts tell the religious believers even how they should meditate and what the content of their prayers should be.

The religious texts in my collection of *documents of life* contain ideas, on the one hand, on beliefs—the coherent whole of convictions or opinions regarding the transcendent or supernatural—and, on the other hand, on specific practices or actions. These religious texts point out that people who shared convictions, particular forms of faith, and a specific

kind of religious awareness organized themselves together and willfully attempted to experience their everyday lives in terms of their faiths and convictions. This grouping together led to the establishment of structures, prescriptions for behavior, and a spectrum of practices. These structures—often in the form of Christian churches—had an effect on the broader reality of society and had a specific impact on the political, the economic, the educational, and the social levels of societies in the past. And these religious organizations had a strong effect on my own society.

The relationship between religion and society is clear in the collection of texts on my shelves. This relationship is also clear in the history of my country, South Africa. The majority of South Africans describe their religious affiliation as “Christian.” Within this general grouping of Christians, a range of opinions and positions exists regarding the role of religion in society. For many years, the Dutch Reformed Church tradition has been the most influential conventional western church grouping in this country. Within the broader Christian tradition in pre-democratic South Africa, there was little consensus about the roles and responsibilities of the church and of religion to eliminate discrimination and inequality in society, to care for the suppressed in all population groups, and to take a stand against the violation of all people’s rights and human dignity.

From early on in the history of South Africa, up until democratization in 1994, White South Africans determined the content of human rights and the distribution of wealth in the country. During this

entire period religion was connected to particular group interests. Since its formal institution, the Dutch Reformed Church supported apartheid. This church was even expelled from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 because of its role as church of the state. Its congregations were racially segregated and the White segment of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa—the mother church—was constantly in conflict with the members of the daughter churches—the sections for Colored (the Dutch Reformed Mission Church), Black African (the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa), and Indian (the Reformed Church in Africa) members—who all endorsed the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ exclusion of their mother church.

The role of the Dutch Reformed mother church in setting up, sanctioning, and practicing racial segregation—apartheid—is clear for all to see. Even before the National Party came into power in 1948, the church proclaimed and mixed into her teachings ideas on racial purity and White superiority. And as the policy of apartheid gradually became more and more institutionalized with the proclamation of the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act in 1950, the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and its amended version the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950, the separate Amenities Act of 1953 and various other discriminatory laws, the Dutch Reformed Church often provided biblical support for the government in order to carry out its policy of “separate development.”

Many of the books in the collection on my shelves have to do with the importance of religion. Religion and church constitute an institutional structure that

will guide church members' actions and practices. And these manifestations of religion ultimately have an effect on the political, the economic, and the broader cultural spheres of society. The collection of texts on my shelves tells me that, although religion is about the supernatural, about righteousness, and about striving for a better world, religion all over the world—and also in my country—often contributed to hatred, injustice, domination, and exploitation. Many of the evils of this world were conducted in the name of a god and of religion. When looking at these old religious texts, I can only wonder about their role in establishing my society—a deeply divided society.

### Colonialism, Imperialism, and Racism

My collection of *documents of life* contains several books on history, geography, and civil rights from the period referred to by Harry Magdoff (1982) as “old imperialism.” This period started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with European mercantilism in terms of which countries such as Spain and Portugal spearheaded the entry of European commerce onto the world stage—a stage that included the previously unknown continents of the Americas and Africa. One of the texts in my collection, Johannes Mariana's *Historiae de Rebus Hispaniae* of 1605, reflects on *The History of Spain* and on the discovery of new continents. With the blessing of the Catholic Church, the armadas set out to satisfy and expand the early appetite for industrial capital and for conquering the largest possible economic territory. The mission of priests accompanying the armadas was to expand religious conversion and conquer the territory of the soul. So, material and religious expansion went hand in hand.

Other texts in my collection of *documents of life* summarize wide-ranging ordinances, resolutions, orders, and proclamations. They signify the—then new—order of European imperialism and of organized domination and control, of appropriation, and exploitation (Cohen 1973). And if you are a world player in the field of expansionism, accumulation—and almost inevitably—dispossession, you need a well-organized judicial system, reflecting the rational philosophy of age-old Roman-Dutch concepts of justice. In this way, the desire for political and economic dominance can be packaged as a “civilizing mission” and as part of the development of a rational economy. The texts from this genre in my collection of *documents of life* remind me that the beginning of the South African nation was closely connected to international quests for markets and the desire for growing profits of those times. And underlying this was a disregard for the rights of indigenous peoples, their values, traditional laws, and cosmologies. History is written by the victor, and in many cases, by the oppressor. The collection of books in this project are all from Europe—the oral histories of South Africa's colonized peoples are silent.

Closely related to colonialism and exploitation are the slave trade and forced labor. Trading in African slaves began with Portuguese—and some Spanish—traders taking African slaves to their new-found American colonies. British pirates joined in and the British were later given the right to sell slaves in the Spanish Empire after the Treaty of Utrecht (BBC. KS3 Bitesize History 2007) in 1714. By that time this roaring and pernicious trade was well underway.

The Dutch also participated in the slave trade. In Indonesia, the Dutch enslaved entire populations and it was therefore not difficult to extend slavery to the Cape Colony, a process that began soon after the 1652 arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, the founder of the Dutch East India Company's refreshment station. Van Riebeeck's efforts (South African History Online 2016) to get labor from the indigenous population through negotiation broke down. In 1658, the first slaves were imported—captured from a Portuguese slave trader. This group of slaves came mainly from Angola. Later that same year a group from Ghana arrived. A constant supply of slaves appeared to flow from the Dutch East India Company's returning fleets from Batavia. The slaves were not allowed entry to Holland—ironically, slavery in the motherland was illegal—so many officials sold their slaves at the Cape before returning to Holland. Throughout the Dutch control over the Cape—until 1795 when the Cape Colony became British property—slavery was well-integrated into the everyday lifeworld (South African History Online 2011). This situation continued under the British rule of the Cape Colony and until the abolition of slavery in 1834.

At the basis of slavery is racism. Slaves are defined as property; one human being is the legal belonging of another human. They could be sold, bequeathed, or used as security for loans. Laws governed the rights of owners and secured the subordinate position of slaves. The owners were allowed to dish out harsh punishment, to withhold food, to chain, and even to kill a slave—in case of a slave allegedly threatening the owner's safety. All of these were institutionalized in the social structure of the time. Out of slavery grows a culture of domination, control, and

subordination. No doubt the early history of master and slave, of Christian believer and infidel, of rich and poor, of White and Black played an important part in setting up the intergroup relations of our present-day world, including South Africa. The *documents of life* on my shelves remind us that we live in a world that throughout history clearly had the potential to be a better place, but societies did not create conditions for the actualization of each individual's full potential or personhood. Rather, the books remind us of the pro-active role religion and social practices played in the creation and maintenance of institutionalized and unequal lifeworlds. They remind us that the capacity to live a good life goes hand in hand with access to the most basic needs of social justice, humanity, and respect (Coetzee and Rau 2017).

### **Language and Identity**

The *documents of life* on my shelves tell a further story, of the hegemonic power of language. From the early history of the printed book as we know it, Latin played a major role in providing a linguistic framework for and basis of control in as far as the exercise of power was concerned. A significant number of the printed manuscripts of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are in Latin—and a large proportion of these were written by members of religious orders such as the Society of Jesus, whose members are known as Jesuits and who carried large influence in the areas from where the texts in my collection originate.

History has taught us that the ruling class often uses language to manipulate the values and norms

of society. Imperial dominance goes hand in hand with language: the stronger state dictates the way in which the internal politics and the societal character of the subordinate state play out. Antonio Gramsci (1994; 2011), the Italian social theorist, sociologist, and linguist, is best known for the theory of cultural hegemony. This theory describes how the state, the ruling class, and elite members of society use cultural institutions to maintain power. Through a hegemonic culture they use ideology rather than violence, economic force, or coercion. The hegemonic culture propagates and reinforces its own values and norms, which then become entrenched as the common sense values of everyday life. In this way, the generally accepted conceptions of what is desirable coincide with the maintenance of the ideas as expressed by those holding power. And the fact that the vast majority of people living during the times the old texts were written could not read and could not understand a language such as Latin made it easier for the dominant classes to read their own meanings into the texts and then translate their interpretations into directives for living the everyday life. Thus, language was the vehicle to spread ideology and to maintain cultural dominance.

In order to consolidate dominant ideas and spread them into and across different languages, the compilation of dictionaries played an important role. The practice of compiling bilingual wordlists began as far back as the production of the first manuscripts containing text. The development of printing made it possible and practical to compile glossaries with equivalents for Latin words in some of the major medieval European languages. The dictionaries in the collection on my shelves signify the evolution of

language processing: the ability to use language in order to determine meaning, to control culture, and to preserve identity.

Most of the texts in this collection of texts on my shelves are old. The books are visibly old, and the languages in which they were composed are much older. The texts not only reflect the exhaustion that accompanies time, the engagement with ancient languages brings its own exhaustion. My personal biography led me to engage with the classics—with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—and I experienced this exhaustion firsthand. Very little of my proficiency in these languages survived my resolution to move to a career in sociology, instead of the church. What does endure is an almost intuitive interest in how the underlying rationalities and ideologies embedded in classic western languages endure and continue to shape current realities. All the “book works” in my project reflect aspects of aging, of endurance and exhaustion, resolution and dissolution.

### **Time**

In Western thinking, time is mostly seen as linear: a succession of existences or events from the past, through the present, and into the future. The idea of change occupies a prominent position in the way most people interpret their world (Nisbet 1980). Change and the modernist focus on the possibility—indeed desirability—of progress are closely interwoven with a number of other concepts: liberation, peace, justice, equality, and communality. These concepts resound with the ambition to move away from a primitive state towards one of wisdom. And so, the future becomes synonymous with

our desire to eliminate or to reduce problems and shortcomings related to our physical, social, personal, and emotional environment. This thread runs through most of the texts in this collection on my shelves—a thread that runs deep in the psyche of modern Westerners.

The less benevolent underbelly of this idea of progress and its altruistic aims is the ambition towards greater control. Our perception of change is founded in our view of the past and of the past's contribution to the present. But, it is the idea of the future—and the hopes and expectations regarding the future—that drives us to control our welfare, our stability, our freedom, and our peace of mind. But, as history shows, greater control often heralded much darker versions of the future than envisaged or desired.

## In Conclusion

My deconstructing of the collection of old texts on the shelves of my library represents a qualitative attempt to explore and to understand the meanings embedded in the historical development of my social life, our present-day lifeworld, and the objects around us. We constantly participate in establishing our ever-changing social reality and part of this process should involve reflecting on what brought us to where we are. To reconstruct everyday reality and to reflect on how it has come about can never be an objective or value-free exercise. That is why I emphasized at the outset that my interpretations, understandings, and depictions of aspects of social reality—contained in the texts on my shelves—are largely autobiographical. As indicated in the section *Colonialism, Imperialism, and Racism*, the texts in this

collection are all from Europe. The voices of indigenous peoples are silent and their values, laws, and cosmologies largely disregarded. This silence and disregard are not deliberate: it is entirely to be ascribed to the nature of this project. My deconstructing of the texts in my library is an autobiographical encounter with texts that I came across during decades of engagement with Western and Central Europe. These texts were all authored and printed in Western and Central Europe. The unwrapping of these *documents of life* coincides with how my personal life trajectory led me to the texts in this collection—texts that contain elements of the broad historical context of my own lifeworld and that thus reflect and shape the way I make sense of them. The texts on my shelves become, to a large extent, installations that are my creations—in the same way as the books in these installations are the creations of the respective authors or scriptors who originally put pen to paper. I do not engage with the actual content of these books. I simply aim to take note of my collection's content and to situate this content within the context of my knowledge of my social reality and its historical roots. This exercise reveals how deep my social reality at the southern point of Africa is embedded in religious beliefs and practices, imperialist and colonialist policies, racist perceptions, cultures of domination and control, and values and norms that were incubated and nurtured in Europe centuries ago.

Living as a sociologist in a highly segmented South Africa sensitizes me to the ever-present danger of ethnocentrism—a major reason why people are divided and polarized. In a deeply divided society, conceptions of superiority and inferiority are based

on and shaped by race, social status, religion, and language. I was born a member of a specific race that regarded itself as more powerful than any other and that, for a large part of my life, exercised domination and control over other races. I was born into a mother tongue whose speakers wielded political power in an unequal social system where full participation was bestowed only on members of the White race. The church I was brought up and confirmed in is a church that openly declared its support for the unjust political domination by the racial and cultural minority into which I was born. Race, language, and religion clearly determined large parts of my life.

An autobiographical attempt to reconstruct some of the main parameters for understanding who I am and where I came from carries an important proviso—it is an intrinsically subjective exercise. Nonetheless, the books in my collection do not reflect

only the roots of deeply personal experiences. They are artifacts of a shared history, a shared society. They are also testimony to our common humanity: the fear and fallibility that walks hand in hand with our remarkable ability to construct and to unwrap. Although the world in which we live continues to divide us in terms of different racial classifications, we are intrinsically the same—we are all of the human race. There is also no intrinsic difference between the speakers of different languages. Just as there is no intrinsic difference between and within the many different religions and other cosmologies. We are all human. And as a human being I am endowed with the abilities to reflect critically, to encounter dialectically, and to strive towards understanding through inquisitive praxis. These all guide my epistemological journey towards unwrapping and breaking open the often neglected, subliminal meaning of my everyday lifeworld.

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