Foreword

The pleasure of peeking behind the curtains ...

Fred Dervin

At a recent event for master's students planning on pursuing a PhD, I was asked to talk about my career and how I came to be the researcher I am today. One student wanted to know if my work had had any influence on my personal life and if my life had, in a way, inspired my work. I replied the usual, "I wouldn't be the researcher I am today without the life I have had and I wouldn't be the person I am without my research." In other words, like many other scholars, *I live my work*. A colleague who had been also invited to the event found it very difficult to answer this question. For her, her work was *her work* and her life *her life*. She did not come from any field related to the intercultural, but from a discipline where, she claimed, reflexivity is unfamiliar to its scholars.

Born in a multicultural family, where people used to fight over and with their identities, languages, and cultures (and even with their passports!), I used to be convinced that I had to have a clear identity *for* other people. In my early twenties, I would become very annoyed (and somewhat demoralized) when people asked me repeatedly about my origin (note the singular), and I would often prefer not to meet new people so as not to have to face a situation which, to me, resembled what I perceived to be a police inquiry into my genealogical tree. When I started reading critical work about hypermodernity, identity, and interculturality and came to do discourse analysis, I felt relieved and born again. I understood, like author Taiye Selasi (2015), that "*that* question, innocent as it often is in the hearts and the mouths of the questioner, [I think] has become code for a lot of other conversations that are a lot more difficult to have" (also see Zhu Hua's captivating Chapter 11). I also realized that it is *normal* to have plural identities and to adapt my discourses on who I am to different people and different contexts and situations. I then started developing strategies to avoid such situations if I felt uncomfortable or to orient the discussion in a different direction. Without my research, I probably would not be the person I am today.

When the editors of *Crossing boundaries and weaving intercultural work, life and scholarship in globalizing universities* asked me to write a foreword for their excellent interdisciplinary volume, I did not hesitate a minute.

In his coming-of-age epistolary novel, *The perks of being a wallflower*, American writer Stephen Chbosky (2013, p. 28) makes one of his characters write: "It's strange because sometimes, I read a book, and I think I am the people in the book." This is precisely how I felt when I read through the excellent chapters that compose this volume. I consider these chapters to be a blending of travelogues, memoirs, reflexive essays, and theoretical discussions. While reading them, I was transported back to Claude Levi-Strauss's (1955) *Tristes tropiques* (*The Sad Tropics*) or Roland Barthes's (2011) accounts of his travels in China in 1974, which had contributed to showing these French intellectuals' more personal and human sides. For example, Barthes's book revealed different facets of the writer which are not exhibited in his other writings. In the China book, he appears to be bored most of the time and is not shy about his gay feelings towards young Chinese men.

With every page I turned that the reader has now before her eyes, I became excited; I was peeking behind the curtains of international academia, and it all had to do with my interests in interculturality, identity, language, mobility-migration, and integration. What I was reading was also mirroring very much my own experiences. I knew many of the authors either personally or by name, and it was fascinating to see beyond their scholarly tags, to see humans.

The editors asked these inspiring *homo viators* to analyze their successes and challenges by using their own or others' concepts, theories, and methodological tools. Although I may not agree with all the theoretical and methodological elements present in the chapters, I feel strongly that the reader will appreciate and learn from the richness of analysis, criticality, and reflexivity. Some of the concepts and theories used include, amongst others: *acculturation dynamics, culture shock, cultural adaption, identity making, the ritual theory, and theories of encounter*. Another important aspect of the book is represented by the fact that the authors have very different profiles, some have always worked abroad but never in their country of birth, while some moved abroad at a later stage in life. Besides, some of the authors found themselves in awkward positions when they moved to the country where they were residing when they wrote their chapters because of the bad political relations between their country of origin and the host country (see Chapter 8, Maryam Borjian, from Iran to the USA).

Regardless of the diversity of characteristics and profiles, what the authors all reveal is that working abroad as a scholar can arouse ambivalent sentiments in oneself and in others (*deception, liminality, shock*, and *frustration*, but also *pleasure, belonging, happiness,* and*self-actualization*). It is clear in the different chapters that institutions of higher education around the world, though extremely diverse, witness both mixophilia and mixophobia, the appreciation or fear of *mélanges* (Bauman, 2003). The academic world can be harsh and not as global as we would like it to be. In some of the chapters, one clearly sees that some authors felt less privileged than others in their host institution because of their first language(s), skin color, and/or national origin. Yet all of the authors have had to "walk a tightrope high above the ground without

the net afforded a person by the country where he has his [sic] family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood" (Kundera, 1984, p. 71). I like the way Elif Shafak (2012, p. 8) puts it in her novel *Honor*: "Adapting to their ways was like trying to embrace a hedgehog. There might be a secret tenderness, a gentle core underneath, but you couldn't pass the sharp needles to tap into it." The metaphors of the *tightrope* and the *hedgehog* symbolize well the chapter authors' challenges and successes, be they cultural and/or linguistic (see Chapter 9, Bönisch-Brednich, and Chapters 12, Ahn, and 4, Liu-Farrer, in this volume). Some authors even report experiences of laissez-faire and symbolic racism, while others have felt frustrated by how their foreignness is often seen as a sin (Rushdie, 2012) (also see Machart's thought-provoking Chapter 7, and Dewaele's Chapter 10).

The other side of the coin relates to the fact that our worlds (note the plural to emphasize their complexities) are so densely textured and interlocking that the differences between "the normal and the abnormal, the expectable and the unexpected, the ordinary and the bizarre, domesticated and wild" are blurred, as are those between "the familiar and the strange, 'us' and the strangers." (Bauman, 1997, p. 25) In their accounts and analyses, the authors show that they represent a "union of contraries," like any other postmodern subject (Maffesoli, 2014). This is why I enjoyed reading David L. Sam's research in Chapter 5 on the experiences of university students in Norway and how he compared both domestic and international students' experiences, claiming, "The assumption was that these domestic students in a way were also 'international' students because they had moved from another part of the country to Bergen." This is a very laudable approach, which I have been promoting through my work, too (Dervin, 2011). In a similar vein, Adam Komisarof's Chapter 2, on him "breaking the rice-paper ceiling" in a Japanese university, questions and minimizes the often held but unfounded view that the Japanese are xenophobic—at least more than "us." Finally, what many chapters show is that experiences and feelings of otherness and strangeness not only fluctuate with time, but also with the relations we create and the authority we have. Deepa Oommen, for example in Chapter 6, explains how her shift from life as a graduate student in the USA to faculty member has led to a major difference in her sense of integration.

Before we let the actors onstage and raise the curtain, I would like to commend the authors' and editors' valuable efforts to reveal some secrets and share very useful advice with the reader. As such, I discovered the potential of Anita Mak's sociocultural competence training program for academic expatriates in Australia in Chapter 3. I am also positively intrigued to see, for instance, that "critical self-analysis" is often recommended as a way of easing one's way into a host institution, different academic tribes, and larger contexts. Critical (intercultural) self-analysis is a skill and a privilege that exceeds all others in the experiences of strangeness in today's global academia.

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