**Inhabiting the Off-Frame:
Social Workers as Connoisseurs of Ambiguity**

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"I am steering by the torch of chaos and doubt."

Painter Sam Francis

In the early 1990s I found myself intellectually, emotionally and spiritually in Dante's dark wood, somewhat lost, inhabiting haunted playgrounds of the mind. I realized I was in the off-frame of photography dwelling in absences, places/texts that were marginal, uncertain, ambiguous. The hard shell of Enlightenment certainty had been shattered and since then I have been on a long and continuous journey to escape its terrors, oppressions, exclusions, and intellectual thuggery. Other worlds, some bright, some mystical, some unencumbered by 'research and method', all indeterminate and provisional began to whisper and glint with possibility. Many new feelings and thoughts now resonated, including the words of the eccentric science fiction writer Philip K. Dick who remarked that although his days might start out in certainty soon the onset of doubt would flow in and color his mind and emotions. I wanted to abandon words like research, method, measurement, truth, and order and replace them, to the horror of my colleagues(I was teaching in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto at that time), with words such as wandering, unknowing, perspectivism, untruth, and chaos. I craved quiet choreographies of movement, thought, and feelings without an end 'product' (such a dreadful word) and without destination.

Two developments have helped immeasurably on my long leave taking from the Enlightenment. The first was a return to reading the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Samuel Beckett, two authors who had captivated my imagination in the 1960s, and

beginning to read Michel Foucault. All three authors brought me to see that the world is too complex and uncertain to be changed by rationalistic projects, disinterested research and the one big idea such as Marxism. They persuaded me that the Enlightenment project lay in ruins with its wearying discourses of structures, binaries, categories, hierarchies, and grids of regularity. All for me now became thresholds, in-between, liminal, tangential, fragmentation, incomplete, and transformational. Everywhere, if one chose to look, the wounds and fissures in Enlightenment reason were beyond repair, the loss of blood too great, and we were in the presence of a dying god. Nietzsche wrote that truth was nothing more than a "movable host of metaphors…a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force" (Nietzsche, 1979: 84). Beckett had a deep distrust of rational efforts to shape, explain and dispel the chaos of human affairs: "The crisis started with the end of the seventeenth century…the eighteenth century has been called the century of reason…I've never understood that: they're all mad! They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak…one must make a world of one's own in order to satisfy one's need to know, to understand" (quoted in McMullan, 1994: 200). Foucault at his most poetic said:

> I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oevre [sic], a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them,

drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes---all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms (Foucault, 1997a: 323).

I had finally found religion and it was postmodernism.

The second development, and it followed in a lovely way from the first, was getting to know Stanley Witkin in the social work department at the University of Vermont. Stan and Dennis Saleebey were playing with the idea of organizing a gathering of postmodern types who could come together for a few days in Burlington, on the shores of Lake Champlain and through dialogue and activities share common and uncommon thoughts and feelings about social work from a postmodern perspective. Joining this group was a wonderful experience and went a long way towards relieving the isolation of teaching in university social work programs where Enlightenment positivism and social science empiricism controlled the discourse, stifled creativity and colonized and blocked the imagination for students and faculty. Being present at the Vermont gatherings sustained my conviction that it was crucial to continue working in ways I could to secure a release from the tidy shackles of modernism and its baleful constraints. The meetings were a balm to my intellectual loneliness and feelings of marginalization and fuelled my desire to continue searching for portals of access to other social constructions outside the in-frame that I could bring into my classes and writing.

In photography the off-frame effect draws us to an absence, a place/text that has been averted; it is a marginal place of uncertainty and ambiguity. The in-frame, the

photograph itself is the dominant discourse, a place of certainty, what is considered important and continuous. Using the metaphors of the in and off-frames and references to the postmodern novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett I will explore postmodern avant-garde possibilities for a disrupting of the constructed stabilities and coherences of the framing of social work within the Enlightenment in-frame. The idea is to encourage social work to embark on different journeys, artistic ones that now reside in the off-frames, journeys that are beyond instrumental solutions, and to intimate that we no longer are required to participate in the realms of universal reason and objectivity. In ridding itself of Enlightenment remnants social work can cross a border to off-frames of disquieting indeterminacy, to places /spaces that are magical, diverse, and sacred where stable meanings slide into ambiguity.

I was inspired by the Vermont gatherings to continue to think about ways to trouble the rational certitudes of modernity and to try in my teaching to engage in conversations, practices and performances that bring forth ghosts and discourses that were banished by Enlightenment/modernity. The terrain opens up as we make our escape from the drone of statistics and leave the non-mediated facticity of the world as a historical relic. It is evident to the Vermont participants that modernity is coming undone, fracturing, splintering and unraveling by questions it can no longer contain as a more unruly but exciting contingent temporality moves from off-frame status to disturb the assumptions of occidental progress and reason. Western universal truth and empirical knowledge fade as spent foundational categories and are now viewed as metaphorical constructions masking relations of power and strategies of oppression and marginalization. It is possible to replace the 'rigors' of Cartesian and empirical methods

with hermeneutic conversations that are dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense (see Irving and Young). All stories that we tell one another are surrounded by a multiplicity of interpretations and as Stanley Fish has observed, interpretation is not the act of construing but the art of constructing

The plays and novels of Beckett each deconstruct many of the fundamental tenets of modernity and expose the apparent self-evident categories and rational criteria – the dominant social discourses – through which modernity and social work are organized. Beckett provides us with multiple perspectives, a discontinuous reality, the effacing of the boundaries between subject and object, the destabilizing of all positivist conventions, fluid subjectivities, an occupation of the space of 'otherness', the scattering of meaning, decentering and disorientation, a world of contingency, chance and fragmentation, all directed at moving us out of the in-frame of Enlightenment rigidities. Rather than courses on research and statistics, I argue for a social work curriculum that would draw extensively on the arts and humanities to open up alternative spaces to the often brutal, constricting and certainty of forms of rationality and to consider instead a world of provisionality, where visions of both self-reflexivity and interconnectedness can flourish, where clouds of unknowing are not seen as needing immediate dispersal and all totalizing/universal constructs will vanish into the off-frame. Rather than see ourselves as scientist-practitioners why not as practitioners who are connoisseurs of ambiguity?

Before discussing briefly the work of Beckett, a discussion of the Enlightenment as it constructed social work is offered. The eighteenth century ethos of rationalism and empiricism as it embraced ideas of a unified, stable, coherent self, a teleological sense of history and progress, and a belief in the foundations of universal knowledge all shaped

the discipline and profession of social work as it took form in the twentieth century.   The longest running 'soap' in Western culture is the endless retelling of the story of a Garden, a Fall, and a Restoration. It is the primal, archetypal story, the story of the ***Bible***, Dante's ***Divina Commedia***, Milton's ***Paradise Lost*** and ***Paradise Regained***, and Marx's ***Das Capital***. The eighteenth century Enlightenment, staking everything on its promise of a rationalist redemptive method, its posing of a fallen world to be reclaimed and redeemed by the force of reason, is a version of this basic story, and is the perspective that has created and shaped social work. The fall is always a fall away from a golden age where everything is in a state of wholeness and integration to a disintegrated state of separation, strife, fracture, estrangement and anxiety (Blackburn, 2000: 44).

In the fallen condition of disunity and disharmony a way back to wholeness was required and a way back was the Enlightenment projection of a rational epiphany (or a series of these), a world redeemed and reclaimed bathed in the golden Cartesian light of reason. But what if there is no prelapsarian world (a world that existed before the 'fall'), and hence no fall? What if the story begins in a fractured, fragmented and ruined condition and stays there? What if the Enlightenment/modernist idea of a moment of truth, a final metanarrative, that is some over-arching explanation and ground for our beliefs never arrives? Then we have a different kind of story, one told by Nietzsche, Foucault, Beckett and those who work the postmodern side of the street. More than any other writer Beckett conducted, from the 1930s to his death in 1989, a relentless tour of the finely sifted rubble of our post-Enlightenment ruins where there are no ontological or epistemological landmarks. There is no garden, no fall and no restoration, only the purgatorial here and now, a perpetual present. By the end of Beckett's play ***Waiting for***

Godot we at least know that the truth will never arrive for as one of the characters says: "All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which—how shall I say—which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths?" (Beckett, 1954: 91). In his play ***Endgame*** one of Beckett's characters tells a story about visiting a friend in a mental hospital. For the visitor the view from the window of the patient's room was beautiful, overlooking fields and the sea. All the patient sees though are ashes. The ashes of the ruined Enlightenment.

Enlightenment/Modernity's chief pallbearer is the enigmatic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. His assault on the naïve Enlightenment faith in human reason, universal truth and the possibility of secure unassailable knowledge pulled no punches: "In some out of the way corner…of the universe there was a star on which clever beasts invented knowledge. That was the most arrogant and mendacious moment of 'universal history'" (Nietzsche, 1979: 79). In ***The Gay Science*** he writes, "that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge" (p.163) and "over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors" (p. 169). And then the coup de grace: "We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody could now endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error" (Nietzsche, 1974: 177).

Nietzsche condemned the insatiable desire of positivist modernity for certainty and that there existed a "world of truth" that could be grasped once and for all by "our

square little reason" (Nietzsche, 1974: 288, 335). He mocked those who seemed content

to have human existence "reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator and an indoor

diversion for mathematicians."   He called for us to cherish the "rich ambiguity" of

human life and ridiculed those who maintained "that the only justifiable interpretation of

the world should be one in which you are justified because one can continue to work and

do research scientifically in your sense---an interpretation that permits counting,

calculating, weighing, seeing, and touching, and nothing more---that is a crudity and

naivete, assuming that it is not a mental illness, an idiocy" (Nietzsche, 1974: 335).

Not letting matters rest Nietzsche suggested that a scientific interpretation of the

world might be "one of the most stupid interpretations of the world, meaning that it

would be one of the poorest in meaning." For Nietzsche a mechanical scientific world

would be one without meaning. And drawing an analogy to music he asked, "assuming

that one estimated the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be

counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a 'scientific'

estimation of music be! What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it?

Nothing, really nothing of what is 'music' in it!" (Nietzsche, 1974: 335-6). Nietszche

emphasized the role that language plays in shaping human life. It is our languages,

history and the profound ability to create new, imaginative worlds, not our supposed

ability to find truth that marks us as truly human. For Nietzsche language imposes a

shape on the way we think about the world at any given moment. Hegel saw history as a

rational progression towards truth and reconciliation in the world (the high water mark of

Enlightenment/modernity) whereas Nietzsche simply saw societies changing their

perspectives over time but never arriving at a more accurate picture of the world. What counts for Nietzsche is not the world we discover but the one we create.

Nietzsche pinpointed two fundamental problems with the positivist/empirical tradition. First, it disregards the role that language plays in creating and constructing a multitude of worlds and second, it assumes that everyone perceives the world in the same way. This is Nietzsche's famous notion of perspectivism – that every view is only one among many interpretations possible: "facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, 1968:. 267).   Alexander Nehamas suggests that Nietzsche regarded the world as an artwork, a kind of literary text. Just as literary texts can be interpreted in quite different and often incompatible ways, Nietzsche argued that the world is open to similar kinds of interpretation. In *The Will to Power* he remarks that "we possess art lest we perish of the truth" (Nietzsche, 1968: 435). Nietzschean perspectivism certainly says that no particular point of view such as science is privileged but that we have many ways of knowing. He urged us to abandon the desire to find a single context for all human lives. In achieving self knowledge we are not discovering an essential truth within but forging a self creation. Nietzsche exhorted us to create new meanings out of the contingencies of our existence; life is to be fashioned in the fluid process of becoming who one is. We can be poets of our lives. Towards the end of his life Michel Foucault also talked about creating ourselves as works of art.

One of the central figures in the transition from modernity to postmodernity is the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. His late 1920s work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was a last post-Hegelian attempt to construct an overall system of explanation for the world. Subsequently Wittgenstein completely repudiated system building and was

experimenting with what he called language games and the publication of *Philosophical*

Investigations in the early 1950s remains to the present a great postmodern piece---

fragmentary, tangential, and preoccupied with the rules of its own construction.

Wittgenstein's attention to questions of language emphasized the context in which

meaning is produced and rendered problematic all universal truth, knowledge and

meaning claims. The work pointed straight to the postmodern situating of the subject as a

complex intersection of discursive, and social forces: we are created in dialogue.

Wittgenstein argues that the logic of our language changes over time. He suggests that

the propositions about the world we usually consider philosophically and scientifically

certain, the various assumptions that construct our systems of belief and its particular

logic and the established rules by which our reason proceeds alter over time and are not

fixed once and for all. He writes, "the mythology may change back into a state of flux,

the riverbeds of thought may shift…And the bank of that river consists partly of hard

rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now

in one place now in another gets washed away or deposited" (Wittgenstein, 1969:

sections 97 & 99). For Wittgenstein and postmodern scholars who followed an appeal to

reason is never self-validating. All validation, "all justification must come to an end," he

writes, so that at the end of all our justifications we find not self-validating truths but a

groundlessness. "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing"

(Wittgenstein, 1969: section 166).

For a good fifteen years I have been reading and writing about postmodernism,

sometimes its relevance to social work and yet it is only this past fall (2004) that I really

had a conversion to what I call extreme postmodernism, finally departing from

modernism and the Enlightenment, which definitely places me in the off-frame.

Walking to the university it suddenly occurred to me that the whole notion of the rational

and rationality is simply a fiction. Despite our endless attention to making the world

rational in the Enlightenment sense of rational that there exist universally neutral,

ahistorical standards of rationality, and convincing ourselves that it is so, and we

desperately seek this in social work, the world, our relationships, our work is always

wildly irrational, fragmenting, disintegrating, dissolving, shearing off, shifting, strangely

protean, discontinuous, slippery, indeterminate, impossible to arrest in stable postures of

meaning, resistant to the seductive appeal of totalizing theories or any theory and

comprehensive accounts of the phenomenal world. Everything, it seemed to me that

morning, and this has remained with me the past several months, was distending into ever

wider and feebler meanings. Malone in Beckett's novel *Malone*, compares himself to a

dwindling heap of sand and that fall morning I felt the destabilizing vertigo that ensues

when familiar paradigms of knowing and what we thought we always believed warp,

shift and disappear. Foucault writes in his essay '*What is Enlightenment'* that "one has

to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian

alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its

rationalism…or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its

principles of rationality" (Foucault, 1997b: 313).

  I decided not to mention any of this to my colleagues, who I feared would slap a

number of DSM IV disorders on me, and certainly would view my dislocations as a

madness, which in many respects it is. I remembered a comment that the poet Rimbaud

made that to see the world differently, poetically, we needed to engage in a process of

deranging all our senses. I also remembered reading in James Miller's fine intellectual

biography of Michel Foucault how the philosopher, when asked by a group of Berkeley

graduate students in the 1970s for some stable truths and definite answers to perplexing

questions, replied that there were no truths and there were no answers. All we have is the

uncontainable ruckus of the world. The more we look for order the more we are caught

in its sticky webs of evasions, bluffs, and halls of mirrors. The year before (2003) I had

seen a play in New York by Richard Foreman put on by his group known as the

Ontological Hysteric Theater that presents Foreman's work as a theater of heightened

noticing. In the plays things are constantly falling apart, regrouping and falling apart

again, as Foreman tries to open the door to what is here, now in front of us, but all too

often unseen. And I recalled the poet John Keats's idea of 'negative capability' the

ability to live among doubts, hesitations, and uncertainties, as among the most important

of our values. Casting my mind back over all these writings I came to the conclusion, a

self diagnosis, that I wasn't mad just truly postmodern. Of course many would argue that

postmodernism is a form of madness, a point of view I am only too happy to accept.

Once when he was asked what he most valued in his work Beckett answered,

"What I don't understand" (Higgins, 1996: 19). Beckett often spoke of throwing away all

intellectual solutions and moving away from the destructive need to dominate life. "It is

not even possible to talk about truth," Beckett remarked, "that's part of the anguish"

(Juliet, 1989: 17). He had a great admiration for the mystics, for those who viewed the

world and the self outside Cartesian logic: "I admire their disregard for logic, their

burning illogicality ----the flame that consumes the rubbish heap of logic" (Juliet, 1989:

27). All Beckett's work takes us far beyond Cartesian dualism, and Enlightenment

reason, away from the blinding glare of rationalism and empiricism into the night where things, in the process of decomposition, also reawaken our senses, as described in his novel *Molloy*: "And that night there was no question of moon, nor any other light, but it was a night of listening, a night given to the faint soughing and sighing stirring at night in little pleasure gardens….where there is less constraint…Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be" (Beckett, 1965: 48, 49).

For Beckett, Descartes's dualism contains a kind of madness that radically splits mind and body and presents experience in distinct realms----the necessary precondition for rationalism, empiricism, and science. Beckett's relentless deconstruction of the Cartesian paradigm and exploration of the postmodern themes of indeterminacy, contingency, and unfixed forms takes on a new intensity in a sudden revelation he had in 1946. This revelation shattered Beckett's remaining trust in empirical knowledge, when the need to know things intellectually collapsed for him. This vision is given life in his play *Krapp's Last Tape*: "clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire" (Beckett, 1958: 21).

This passage represents one of Beckett's intuitive flashes of a non-Cartesian beyond, a disruption of the wilderness of Cartesian dualism of distinct minds and bodies. In Cartesian epistemology the way to knowledge is through an observer standing in relation to the world, a subject (mind) in relation to an object. The Cartesian mind measures, sorts and categorizes data, organizes material, and scrutinizes validity. Beckett's literary works undermine Cartesian dialectics and all certain knowledge. In his novel *Watt* Beckett gives us a vision of the cogito, the knowing mind come to nothing.

Subjectivity is so enfeebled that it is an absence, a departed presence, where even the certitude of inner existence collapses into nonbeing. The Cartesian self as self-presence, existing beyond all doubt as the foundational starting point for all certain knowledge, in Beckett becomes a nullity (Begam, 1996: 66, 86, 87).

Throughout his life Samuel Beckett would admit to only four certainties: that he had been born, is living, would die, and for reasons unknown and unknowable cannot keep silent. When asked if his plays deal with those facets of human experience with which religion also deals Beckett said: "Yes, for they deal with distress" (Reid, 1968:15). This is what social work deals with as well, whether it is the distress caused by oppressive social conditions or those caught in webs of emotional and psychological turmoil. Reading Beckett can help us focus on distress and compassion and open a dialogue and discourse about how to construct and create communities of caring that alleviate distress. Reading Beckett helps us appreciate absences, loss, waiting, pain, suffering, compassion, uncertainty, the bleached margins of life, surely all more telling words for social work than research, statistics, methods, and helps us to understand how every encounter is one we construct out of the shards and fragments of existence. A question I have been pondering for some time now is whether a major literary figure like Beckett, can be a guide for us in constructing a quite different kind of social work practice? The answer I believe can be strongly affirmative since Beckett's novels and plays deliver us into a world of contingency, a world of imagination and story, a world not of finding but of making.

In a beautiful article, 'Guilty Knowledge' published in *Families in Society* (1999), an article all social work students could benefit from reading, Ann Weick talks about the

'emotion-filled heart of practice', a practice of compassion, caring and hope, embracing those who are hurt, confused, ill, in despair, attending to the almost mystical complexity of people's lives. She encourages us to extend and educate our imaginations and to create 'room at the edges for alternative views to flourish' and to accept working in zones of uncertainty and unresolvedness. Rereading her article recently set my imagination alight with notions of ceremonies of patching, the need to ease the tightness of the chains pinching and constricting us, being attentive to intertextual undertows, endlessly deferring truth claims, opening ourselves to the call of different, marginal, transgressive voices, the desirability of working to forge a less comfortable social work---one that strives to embrace complexity, to break up the textual surface of social work discourse, to move from one provisional encampment to the next, to stand out against the dead air of social work like a solo violin playing out of tune, and to whisper to our colleagues and students that modernism is in ruins, beyond repair. Organize a wake if you like as long as it is Dionysian in nature.

I would like to conclude with a brief lecture I imagine giving to a social work class; I might call it, *Ceremonies of Patching, Rituals of Chaos:*
I suppose you would prefer order, argument, logic, something definite, perhaps truth. But unfortunately, if that is what you want, I'm now so far gone that I concur fully with postmodern novelist Donald Bartheleme who says, 'fragments are the only form I trust.' Let's face it, truth and knowledge are fugitive things open to paralyzing doubt, breakdown and transformation. Truth is only what circulates as such, knowledge as Michel Foucault taught us, is only and always particular, local, shifting discourses of power; everything is a story, all texts are subject to an unknowable multiplicity of

interpretations. Years ago the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche demolished whole walls of the house of western philosophy. In 1873 he proclaimed "truth is nothing more than a mobile host of metaphors…a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically and after long use seem final, canonical, and obligatory. Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are, metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power." No wonder for Nietzsche the history of truth is the history of an error. Now that truth is dead we are free to drop once and for all our flat, bleached, objective social work prose and turn our energies toward the artistic creation of ourselves and our communities.

Please let's give up the modernist project, original texts and solid foundations. What counts for me is not the world we discover but the world we create, for as Nietzsche says, 'this world can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.' Do you think social work will ever get it? Unlikely! But let's not give up. Instead, let's go down the postmodern rabbit hole, and endlessly subvert the hitherto unimpeachable authority and stability of reason. See reason as nothing more than an abandoned and rusting car---both are metallic cocoons of Western culture. Ease the tightness of the chains. Truth is now as ghostly as invention. The world, as playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett said, is a mess, like the etiolated sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, full of harrowing instability so why keep trying to tidy it up? Stop trying to order the chaos and instead find ways to inhabit it, adjust our expectations so we celebrate not meanings but momentary clarities, moments of radiance of how life could be.

Social work is no longer defined by a single evolving historical narrative, but by fragments, multiplicity, contradictory pluralities, anti-doxa. Everything we say or write,

as Nietzsche acknowledged, is really only the personal confession of its author and an involuntary and unconscious memoir. I confess without apology that I reject completely the Enlightenment ideal of the perfectability of the mind and society, the human condition, the absurd idea of a never ending progressing rationality. There simply is no historical telos as Marx claimed, no beginning, no end, only the intense present, clouds of unknowing, a crumbling western episteme, notes of melancholy and sad perplexities. No belief in a timeless absolute reason, rather an allergy to instrumental reason; I'm appalled by the very idea of objectivity and objective values. Words that do appeal: transgression, disruption, disintegration, pluralism, chaos, debris, detritus, decrepitude, failure, disorder, instability. I have an ongoing obsessive desire to go to Turin in Italy and go mad like Nietzsche but I must stop before you call the cops or much worse a dean of social work.

Let's think without foundations or not think at all, but first let's contest an imperious rationalism, and the bludgeoning pragmatics of empiricism. So what if you get egg on your interface! Let's provide that puff of wind to take us out of calm waters. As for research and measurement, banish them forever and while we're at it destroy all boundaries. The baleful discourses of measurement define themselves against a perceived emptiness or disorder----a disorder that is not preexistent but rather one the discourse of measurement has itself already given birth to within its own capitalist structure. The discourse of measurement belittles other alternative discourses and ways of knowing thus displacing counter forms of knowledge construction---thereby creating hierarchies of knowledge and ensuring, as we ought to know, cascading processes of marginalization. So, I would recommend that we have CSWE and CASSW (the

Canadian counterpart) make up huge posters that all social work schools would be required to put up as a condition of accreditation with the words: RESEARCH FORBIDDEN, DISORDER ENCOURAGED. To steal a line from a Wallace Stevens poem, we could be connoisseurs of ambiguity and chaos. If we must theorize, at best a dubious activity, at least let's do it from sites of transgressive, disruptive practice.

The postmodern view is that contradictions are not only inevitable but desirable. To smooth them over in some Enlightenment madness would be bad form, even bad faith. The narrator of Salmon Rushdie's novel 'Shame' puts it this way: "I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile." Perhaps you crave a definition of postmodernism, an operational definition---how quaint! Nietzsche to the rescue: 'Only that which does not have a history can be defined.' But if you insist, and it seems you do, how about postmodernism as a cultural field of brilliant dreck and jocose rubble.

Provisionality and heterogeneity contaminate neat attempts to tidy it all up, to get some kind of unifying coherence. Narrative continuity and closure are contested, there are no centers, only margins, fractures, dispersals. From our decentered perspectives, the marginal, what Linda Hutcheon calls the ex-centric (be it class, race/ethnicity, gender, gender bending, sexual orientation…) we can surely grasp the possibilities open when we refuse to any longer participate in the realm of universal objectivity----or middle class, male, heterosexual, white, western constructions. How limited we've been. Why have we tried to contain everything, instead of embracing the complexity of the world, irreducible to a homogenous vision of single linear codes, single points of view. Let's cross borders, cross thresholds, cross over, cross talk, cross dress, split open the present

and its single all-inclusive manner of knowing. Bring on virulent attacks of ambiguity. Please, I implore you, no more certainty. The rational certitudes of modernity now confront ghosts that were banished by the Enlightenment. Gender, as Judith Butler, so eloquently argues, is not fixed in some male/female binary, something essential, but is constructed through our repeat performances of certain ways of being. These can be changed. Not only is there a plenitude of difference in the world, but we can also ourselves be something different----poets of our lives, artists of our self creations as Nietzsche and Foucault advocated. Let us devote ourselves to repeat performances of non-capitalist acts; forget theory, just perform. Perform repeated acts of social justice, however you want to define it. Find new sites for performance. Let us ghost our present understandings with other stories, with others in endless conversation, dialogue; rewrite the world, redescribe, for as Rushdie says in 'Imaginary Homelands' "it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it." Social justice where is thy sting?

The way back to the modern is sealed for good. I agree with postmodern novelist Kathy Acker who says that Enlightenment reason leaves us susceptible to coercive orderliness, tells us to be constantly forcing ourselves to fit within reason's narrow boundaries. We must escape its clutches. Postmodernism adopts an approach of rupture reveling in rich debris and complexity. One imperative might be to engage in acts to destabilize orderly institutions. Advocate unpredictability, unrestricted play, carnivalize our classrooms, promote endless process and indeterminacy. Dispersal to different sites. Let dialogue replace dialectic. Hermeneutic conversation replaces the rigors of Cartesian methods----there's another word that should be banned – methods. Oh, let it slip from

sight. Universality always excludes. To hell with that. It's all in our acts of framing at the edge of the world. Push against the frames then the poetical acquires its potential. No certainties anymore of a politics built on truth and reason----truth, as Jane Flax has observed, is discourse dependent. Single truths lead to appalling domination. If we are open to, and allow new tenants to inhabit old discourses then class from a Marxist perspective can be understood in our postmodern multi-truthed world as yet one more dimension that constitutes a social formation. Rather than the total, essential determinant.

But we want to think of new sites for social work practice. Disrupt the old codes as do the novels of Kathy Acker and Thomas Pynchon----read biker outlaw magazines, get a tattoo. The sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn can direct us to the idea of new sites for practice. His sculptures are made from detritus the materials of waste and impoverishment; they are a bricolage, made from old bits of aluminum and nylon foils, cardboard remnants, paper fragments, all taken from the non-sites of consumer culture, the negative ready-mades of containers and wrappings, materials in which objects have been packed and shipped; he salvages for his work the discarded evidence of our infinite productions of waste. Hirschhorn places his sculptures which are homages to the tragically failed projects of modernity in out of the way street corners, stairways of public housing projects, where he invites vandalism by petty theft thereby disrupting codes of private property and controlled museum space (Buchloh, 2004).

For a postmodern Marxism can we envision class in a myriad of new sites and a multitude of forms? Class sites occur not only in capitalist industrial enterprises but in households, communities, recreational facilities-----class is local, plural, dispersed,

decentered, fragmented, multiple. Many class modalities can be used, many social actors like social workers can engage in struggles over class. If we see capitalism not as a systemic, totalizing entity but instead as local, dispersed and partial then many sites and spaces open up for creating, performing and enacting non-capitalist communal processes. Let us consider working to establish public projects of establishing in an artistic way a social ethic of care in our communities, our universities, our classrooms.

There it is, the lecture never given----yet. But I feel the time is coming for a wash and a rinse and all that is required of me is courage. When Michel Foucault delivered his inaugural lecture at the College de France in 1970 he quoted one of his favorite passages from Beckett's novel ***The Unnamable:*** "you must say words as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me." This is perhaps our work of social work as we imagine establishing dialogic communities of our own making, of our own speaking, of our own social construction.

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