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The Other in The Self: The Ontological Metaphoricity of Language

Cristina Valencia Mazzanti & Melissa Freeman

Abstract

Through text and illustrations, I (first author) theorize language as a being that becomes and revels in its plurality, illuminating the inherent and necessary aesthetic and multimodal dimensions of any struggle toward meaning. To do so, I start by foregrounding my own experiences with the diversity that characterizes language to portray the significance of studying its ontology and plurality. I then identify philosophical hermeneutics as a practical metatheory that centrally positions language as a medium for understanding. From a hermeneutic perspective, language manifests as a network of meaning that is constituted through an ontological metaphoricity that echoes a capacity to both present and represent phenomena. This metaphoricity of language is then discussed in terms of its linguistically, speculative, and dialogic dimensions. I pose that language discloses an otherness in ourselves that is fostered in a capacity for renewed understandings and meanings that are yet becoming.

Keywords

Language, philosophical hermeneutics, aesthetics, ontology, metaphor, language diversity, multilingualism

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I remember.



I remember being around three or four sitting in my grandfather's lap naming fork, knife, and spoon in as many languages as I could and after that him saying them to me in as many languages as he could.



I remember my grandmother speaking French. She spoke seven languages, and one of her goals was for her grandchildren to speak as many languages as possible. She hoped I would learn French since I was already familiar with Spanish and Italian and she believed that I would end up learning English, which she often described as a necessary language. Her pedagogical approach to accomplish this goal was to give me instructions and scold me exclusively in French. I never learned French but as far as I remember I was always able to understand her, even if I did not know the words and she had to repeat herself from time to time.



I remember how in my earliest years of school when I was yet to learn to read and write, my work and things were identified by a specific image that I got to choose at the beginning of the year. As time passed, that image became folders filled with my work, my chair, my pencil case, and many other physical manifestations of my learning. I never thought much about it until I entered a classroom from the perspective of a teacher and saw that each child had his or her name and picture just as I had the image. I understood then how images, names, and pictures can be a symbol and a language. Having one image that belonged to me gave me a right to exist and belong.



I later understood through books and philosophy that we only name what is important to us. In having a name, I was creating my existence in those spaces. In several of his books, Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges rekindles the timeworn idea that words are originally symbols and metaphors that we forget are symbols and metaphors. I continue to find that explanation defines my relationship with words. My words are my metaphors, my words are what explains my reality, my words are what gives meaning to my actions and allows me to tell my story. My language may not only come from Spanish, Italian, English, Latin, or even some French and Portuguese, my language may not be the same as any other

person, but it is mine and has a little bit of everyone that has touched my life in it. Language then is the bridge I have to the world.

Multi? Lingual

How would you describe the experiences with language I just portrayed? How about your own experiences with language? Would you use words such as bilingual? multilingual? polyglossic? plurilingual? heteroglossic? multimodal? monolingual? monoglossic? trilingual? polymodal? translingual? polylingual? As the plethora of words listed indicates, the task of describing, categorizing, and understanding the language practices of people is complex. Language is socially constructed and positioned, and as such it is bound to be constantly re-constructed through an array of individual and shared experiences. The inherent ubiquity of language then ladens it with a complexity that informs our understanding of it.

As a social practice language inherently involves power; it enacts other structures, worldviews, and biases inherent to the contexts where languages are learned about and used (Rosa, 2019). The task of understanding language has always intersected with other aspects of social experience and identity as all are inseparable from the power structures that shape how humans relate to one another (Flores & Rosa, 2015, 2019). The power dynamics of language only become more intricate as we acknowledge that as people we are in a world that is increasingly linguistically diverse (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and in its majority multilingual (Stavans & Hoffman, 2015). Yet, frequently the tensions of describing and understanding language still stand on perceived dichotomies between pervasive monolingual ideologies and marginalized multilingual practices.

García and Wei (2014) drew on the heterogeneous contributions from earlier scholars (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Mignolo, 2000) to critique the predominance of monolingual ideologies that has characterized the study of language, highlighting how it is tied to historical, political, and ideological constructions of nations. Accordingly, Gramling (2016) argues there is a need to theorize and clarify what is actually meant by monolingualism as a concept that is regularly used in studies of language and yet is currently understudied and often misunderstood. Gramling's argument hinges on the understanding that both the multilingual and monolingual experience necessitate a recognition of languages as distinctive repertoires and categories. This point revisits the idea that any divisions are in themselves limited and that what is often recognized as languages (i.e., English, Spanish, etc.) are socially constructed categories to which we associate certain linguistic features and practices (see Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015).

The boundaries imposed to language have then been used to delineate distinct experiences of language that rely on social constructions, reinforcing a hierarchization of language that privileges certain linguistic features and language practices over others. Any ethical engagement with language then requires an awareness of how it symbiotically inhabits and reproduces the harmful structures of the social world that demand the assimilation or dismissal of diverse language practices of people who are minoritized. The categories that have highlighted the multiplicity and diversity of language are then called into question, inviting a study of language in its ontology.

Lingual?

The different perspectives of language so far outlined signal the underlying power dynamics and tensions that situate language simultaneously as a distinct and heterogeneous phenomenon. Overall, the abundance of incongruous arguments to position language in certain ways indicates that across disciplines its study is an unsettled process that continuously contends with hegemonic perspectives. Yet, the complexity of language is not simply given by the multiple manifestations or experiences that we have of it, nor by the fact that those are steeped in power relations. On the contrary, plurality is the mark of the ontology of language and thus in trying to conceptualize the different ways language is experienced there is an underlying unresolved question about the being of language itself. More so, because language has the distinctive capacity of both being able to capture and create meanings that constitute phenomena and our experience of the social world (Davey, 2006, 2013; Gadamer, 1960/2013).

The ontology of language and our perception of it revolve on the ability of language to both present and represent phenomena, reminding us that we inherently draw on it for thinking, theorizing, and knowing the world around us. Gadamer (1960/2013) explained that

what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. (p. 491)

The ability of language to function as a medium for communication, representation, and understanding then makes it so that its being disappears into other complexities entangled in the knowledge and knowing it captures. Accordingly, language has a “forgetfulness of itself” in its ability to forge understandings into being; “it expresses one thing while at the same time silences another thing, and it is unstable, constantly open to re-interpretation” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 130). The ontology of language then is entangled in the movement of life through its inherent being as an in-between, through all that it can represent, through its creative potential, through all that we can become, through all its meanings and silences.

The Ontology of Language and Philosophical Hermeneutics

The questions and perspectives so far outlined point to a fundamental complexity in the being of language itself. I have briefly discussed language in relation to my own experiences, the study of language and multilingualism, as well as outlined its role in understanding social realities and phenomena. As much as it is disclosed across contexts that language profoundly matters, it would be hard to infer an encompassing definition that could help us understand what language actually is. The idea of language has been studied from multiple disciplines and traditions; still philosophical orientations afford the opportunity to go beyond instrumentalist perspectives. Through my own experiences, I came to understand anew how philosophy’s orientation towards a serious practical reflection on principles affords a rewarding path to attend to the complexity of understanding the being of language.

Over time, I found that philosophical hermeneutics as developed by Gadamer (1960/2013) and Davey (2006; 2013) provides a fruitful and pluralistic orientation to attend to the complexities of language diversity in its ontology while grounded in its practice. Simply put, philosophical hermeneutics offers a theory of understanding that requires us to intentionally theorize its process. Hermeneutics emerged as a field for the study of traditional or difficult texts, such as religious ones, expanding to all interpretive processes through hermeneutic theorists such as Schleiermacher who argued understanding is never given; rather it requires an intentional process (Grondin, 1994). Heidegger (1927/1996) and Gadamer (1960/2013) developed the discipline into philosophical hermeneutics by advancing comprehensive theories of understanding and its ontology:

They argued that the experience of being in the world is the basis for understanding and interpretation, not a separate event. Humans do not first look at the world and then understand it, but they live out their understandings every day. For this reason, interpretation cannot be reduced to a predetermined method, but it occurs interpretively during the interpretive process itself. (Freeman, 2008, p. 387)

Philosophical hermeneutics then brings an awareness of the “limitations that exist within the dominant, scientifically oriented perspective with its tendency to reduce human experience to the law of averages. Interpretive hermeneutic understanding is born from the recognition that all human experiences are both rich and complex” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). Hermeneutics continues to advance as a defined orientation across disciplines and perspectives, contributing not only to the theory itself, but also to other practices such as qualitative research (Moules et al., 2015) as well as other traditions such as poststructuralism (Caputo, 1987, 2000) and feminism (Code, 2003). Most significant to my argument is the way Davey (2006, 2013) has advanced hermeneutics through a focus on aesthetics to position it as a practical theory that renews the constituting intricacies of life and language.

At the core of Gadamer’s (1960/2013) and Davey’s (2006) contributions to philosophical hermeneutics is the idea that language is a medium of understanding, which I envision positions hermeneutics to contribute to understanding language in two ways. The first contribution is the hermeneutic theorization of the ontological metaphoricity of language, which I explore more extensively in the next section. The second contribution of philosophical hermeneutics to understanding the being of language and its role for meaning making in social *representation*¹ is the ability of hermeneutics to function as a practical metatheory. As a metatheory philosophical hermeneutics can offer a substantive approach to study complex phenomena by bridging across traditions, paradigms, and disciplines thus encouraging dialogue in the study of multifaceted phenomena that manifest across contexts. In doing so, hermeneutics is well positioned to help us understand and transform the being of language and its relation to the *representation* of knowledge across theoretical perspectives, disciplinary practices, and contextual manifestations while celebrating its plurality and becoming.

In its practical orientation towards understanding life’s original difficulty (Caputo, 1987) and its embodiment in language, hermeneutics provides an approach that then grounds plurality in practice. Drawing on Aristotle, Gadamer (1998, 1960/2013, 2007) positions knowledge in the social sciences as closely intertwined with application and context. Accordingly, what is generated in the pursuit of

¹ I use italics to highlight that representation always carries within it a presentational capacity (see Davey, 2013).

understanding is a practical philosophy that defies the dichotomizing of theory and practice. In its practical orientation hermeneutics presents a path to theorize through being and a plurality becoming in heterogeneous manifestations. Hermeneutics offers a form of understanding that involves itself, foregrounding lived experience as the dimension where the individual as a part of the community is re-constituted. Each experience weaves its own being in practice and language building filigrees of meanings that frame all that we have been and all that we can become.

The Ontological Metaphoricity of Language

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2013) wrote “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (p. 407). As I return to these words, I find they evoke many of the central ideas that Gadamer developed around language and its ontology. First and foremost, is the idea that language is the medium in which understanding occurs and thus that the being of language is inherently tied to understanding. Accordingly, the realities that people encounter are interpreted, understood, and made meaningful through languages that belong to people as temporal selves and that belong to communities through shared experiences. Language then is not only the medium for understanding, understanding takes the form of language and is theorized as language itself. As Gadamer further articulated:

Understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language. It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself. (p. 386)

Understanding and language co-construct each other in the experiences of people, the world around them, and the networks of relations that inhabit the shared meanings of a becoming language. Language is neither created for understanding nor a tool used for understanding. Palmer (1969) explained:

World is more aptly seen as *between* persons. It is the shared understanding between persons, and the medium of this understanding; and what makes it possible is language. Language, as a realm of interaction, is not really a constructed “tool” for understanding. (p. 206)

Language becomes in our being, yet carries the mode of being of many others whose being has also become in that language; as such language carries the experience and possibility of a continued othering in constant renewal. Language then is centrally positioned as a medium that opens us up to all that is possible through a creative movement that holds potential for transformation.

Freeman and Vagle (2013) interpreted Gadamer’s theorization of language, explaining that meaning in language arises from the concrete experiences we have with it. They pose: “Language itself has meaning that is contained in it and gets shifted whenever it is alongside other language or experiences ... language and world co-construct each other” (p. 732). Gadamer himself (1986) theorized: “Words do not stand on their own account. Whether they are spoken or written, their meaning is only fully realized within the context of life” (p. 132). As such the being of language is the being of life itself. Language

transposes and illuminates our in-betweens as becoming beings forgetting borders created in our struggles toward meaning. The ontology of language then becomes in the plurality of its manifestations, shining forth as a being that is beyond the constraints of false dichotomies imposed through the transient articulations of what is language and what is not, what is multilingual and what is not, what is multimodal and what is not.

The ontology of language is constituted through a fundamental metaphoricity that delineates its being as a network of meaning that is enacted in its linguisticity as well as through its dialogic and speculative being. Drawing on Aristotle's philosophy, Gadamer (1960/2013) posed that language has a "fundamental metaphoricity" (p. 488) that foregrounds the relationality that is inherently embedded in the social world which is itself constructed in previous interpretations. As such, the metaphoricity of language is essential to its capacity for understanding and interpretation (Davey, 2000). Vedder (2002) explained that Gadamer's theorization of metaphor is based on perspectives that align with broader thinking that points to the fact that in every enactment of language there is something working metaphorically. Vedder then articulated that metaphor "installs a new order; in effect it is the discovery of meaning. One might thus wonder whether metaphorizing is not perhaps the basis of all talking and speaking, since the beings grasped in words reflect themselves in metaphor" (p. 198).

The ability of metaphor to carve out meanings as both an act of unveiling and creation gives language a multifaceted relationality that brings forward the movement of understanding that echoes life and our humanity. The metaphoricity of language gives it capacities to create narratives (Fitzpatrick & Farquhar, 2019), provide renewable and complex interpretations (Zuñiga, 1995), delineate phenomena (Vallega, 2002), undermark similarities (Vedder, 2002), point to the relationality across phenomena (Veit, 1984), destabilize and bring forward contextual meanings (Peters, 1978), stipulate a model of how phenomena are being understood (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), as well as open us up to all that we have experienced and can experience (Johnson Sheehan, 1999). Through the metaphoricity of language, particular experiences or phenomena are brought forward and woven into our individual and collective traditions and contexts in ways that help them come into meaning in the pursuit of an impetus for completion that can never be achieved.

The idea that language works as a network of meaning has been considered by Davey (2006, 2013) in his study of the hermeneutic theorization of language. Davey has used the term "network of association" (2013, p. 147), "networks of meaning" (2013, p. 150) and has expressed that what can be known stands in a "network of relations" (2006, p. 193). Language as a network of meaning then encompasses the idea that language delineates and relates beings, experiences, and phenomena, making them discernable to us and, as such, learnable and understandable. The idea of a network of meaning then manifests in the glimmers of light of an unattainable whole that comes through in the threads of our being in time and space as a shared embroidering of our passing through the universe. Yet, the idea that language is constituted as a network of meaning that manifests through its fundamental metaphoricity is not absolute.

It is important to understand that Gadamer's philosophy does not provide a decisive or unified idea of language; it leaves open many questions about what language actually is and can be. Grondin (1994) posed that the hermeneutic theorization of language is often the most misunderstood aspect of Gadamer's philosophy, particularly in the way some scholars have suggested that Gadamer narrowly

defined language as a verbal exchange. This is to say that they interpret that “Gadamer’s main thesis in relation to meaning, understanding, and language, as expressed in *Truth and Method*, is that language, or to use Gadamer’s own terms, verbal experience, determines the object as well as the achievement of understanding” (Kertscher, 2002, p. 142). However, the messages in Gadamer’s writing about the prevalence of verbal uses of language are contradictory and his theory actually points out that language can happen beyond the verbal word in actualizing meaning (see Vilhauer, 2016).

Gadamer (1960/2013) himself elucidates this tension foregrounding the relation between understanding and language as a verbal one while also highlighting that this is a relation that transcends itself through our being in community and history as expressions of meaning. As he explained:

The essential relation between language and understanding is seen primarily in the fact that the essence of tradition is to exist in the medium of language, so that the preferred object of interpretation is a verbal one.... Linguistic tradition is tradition in the proper sense of the word—i.e., something handed down.... What has come down to us by way of verbal tradition is not left over but given to us. (p. 407)

We can understand then that a value of language is its ability for renewed becoming that restores both contextualized and transcendent interpretations to the openness of what they can be, thus making the world around us understandable and meaningful. In language, our heritage as part of histories and communities becomes, and in doing so, brings about a transformative movement of what was and what will be.

Gadamer’s discussion of the actual interaction of multiple modes of language is often limited and centered around issues of translation; his main claim being that the act of translation is one of interpretation itself (Gadamer 1960/2013, 2007). Although limited, Gadamer’s perspectives on translation undermarks once more the fundamental recognition that words inherently bring their own meanings; words echo through the relationality of the modes of language that we experience. In this sense, the process of translation is the process of coming into language or understanding. Davey (2013) suitably contends that it is “the process of becoming different to oneself by learning to think about oneself in the language of one’s other. Transformation, not translation is the issue” (p. 7).

Philosophical hermeneutics then does not provide an effective theory of what language is; hermeneutics offers a philosophical ground from which to theorize the ontology of language in its practice and the multiplicity of its modes of manifestation. To better understand how and why language is centrally positioned as core to the human impetus for knowing in its constitution through a fundamental metaphoricity that shines forth as a becoming network of meaning it is helpful to consider three central aspects. First, the linguisticity of the being of language as a theorization of a capacity to transpose experiences and connect us to the meanings that have been and will be weaved into language. Second, the speculative being of language as the indeterminacy that signals an ability to point beyond itself and evocatively create meanings. Third and finally, the dialogic being of language as the authentic expression of its practice as the echoes of our communal being that opens up to the movement of understanding.

The Linguisticity of Language

Linguisticity captures the idea that the ability of language to foster understanding occurs because of what is evoked through it in the process of embodying ephemeral meanings in repeated metaphors. Language therefore brings forward a set of connections across contexts and experiences that take their meaning from our individual and collective experiences. These meanings are weaved through and into the metaphoricity of language. In his interpretation of Gadamer's philosophy, Palmer (1969) noted the power of linguisticity and how it manifests in language:

One does not, in some kind of knowing or reflection, transcend language or the world; rather 'the linguistic experience of the world is an absolute.' This experience of ties and relationships in which beings might show themselves; every object of knowledge is encompassed within the world horizon of language. We may call this the linguisticity of human experience of the world. (p. 206)

Thus, when we reach understandings and learn, we do so through language; the linguisticity of language is what supports us in understanding and supports us in the journeys toward meaning.

When taking into consideration the communicative and mediating quality of language, the way its linguisticity is shaping our understanding, and even what we can understand, becomes even more significant. Linguisticity suggests that meaning in language becomes iteratively. Through the cyclic use and repetition of linguistic features in multifaceted ways and across contexts, webs of relationality are built that allow for the articulation of individual instances to ourselves and to others steeping us in the meanings that are given in the temporality of human experience. Linguisticity then marks the rhythm in which experiences and phenomena become distinct, interpretable, understandable, and come into the potentiality of meaning in language. As Moules et al. (2015) wrote:

To live in a world of meaning in the first place is to live in a world that is understood and interpreted through language. For Gadamer, this does not mean that things do not exist until they are put into words but that 'the speculative mode of being of language has a universal ontological significance'. (p. 36)

The Speculative Being of Language

In the quote above Moules et al. (2015) cite a statement made by Gadamer (1960/2013) in the closing section of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer's original passage reads:

The speculative mode of being of language has a universal ontological significance. To be sure, what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. (p. 491)

Therefore, linguisticity is actualized and bounded by the speculative becoming of language; language has the capacity to draw experiences and contexts that are evoked within the immediacy of words and beyond it. Words themselves carry horizons and bring forward meanings through which language matters as an opening up to the potential of our becoming and the becoming of language. The speculative being of language sculpts itself in the hope of becoming meanings evoked through the honest effort to communicate and understand. As Vedder (2002) explained: “The matter spoken of “reflects” itself in the words that are spoken. As speculative, language is not a reproduction of an already given meaning, but a coming to language of the matter itself” (p. 196).

Davey (2006, 2013, 2017) has extensively drawn on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to theorize the speculative being of language. He posed that “when language works, when it brings things to mind, it works speculatively and when it does so, it also operates synchronistically” (p. 25). Language then presents in the duality of the movement of a temporal and asynchronous being that embodies what has been, therefore evoking the meaning of what can be. Words have histories, they have been used before and they will be used again, as such they inherently carry meaning. When humans use language, they are ingrained and weaved in the fabric of life through the potential of their humanities. Languages open the possibility of communicating with others different than ourselves, to delineate our being shining forth in meanings that have already grasped our being in a movement of transformation that we are yet to experience. Thus, when we draw on language there are always contexts and meanings that are being evoked beyond what is immediately presented; that come from the contexts in which the words originated, that arise in the encounter with others different from ourselves, and that are transformed in our transformation through them.

Davey (2013) foregrounds that, for language to work speculatively, it depends “upon unspoken reservoirs of culturally embedded meanings. These hermeneutical aquifers do not defy speech but, like tradition and social imaginaries, they antedate and can never be rendered fully explicable in propositional terms” (p. 28). In this sense, the speculative nature of language makes it inherently open and dialogical; the meanings evoked in words will never be fully actualized retaining their impetus and potential for understanding. Moules et al. (2015) explained:

Understanding-in-language presents a horizon of infinite possibility – not as a system of signs that can be endlessly reorganized but as ‘an act that is linguistically creative and world-experiencing’ (Gadamer, 2007, p. 87). Precisely because language as such is endlessly proliferative, any given word, statement, text, or interpretation is finite within the world of meaning. (p. 36)

Hence, because of the speculative mode of being of language and its inherent meaningful interpretative nature, hermeneutic language and linguisticity open the possibility of creating understanding that can potentially continue to expand the horizons of meaning.

The Dialogic Being of Language

For Gadamer the most authentic practice and manifestation of language is dialogue. Language’s linguisticity and speculative being are symbiotic manifestations of the dialogic ontology of language.

Linguisticity points to the fact that language brings meaning and the speculative being of language points to its ability to openly evoke meanings. The dialogic being of language then also points to its contextual constitution in the co-construction of meaning. Grondin (1994) explained that Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue needs to be understood in opposition to propositional logic prevalent in Western thought. He argued:

against propositional logic in which the sentence consists in a self-sufficient unity of meaning, hermeneutics reminds us that a proposition can never be prescind from the context of motivation – that is, the dialogue – in which it is embedded and which is the only place it has meaning. (p. 118)

The being of language then is its renewed becoming through experiences, building itself through individual moments in which dialogue opens us up to the intuition of all the experiences that have been woven into language and weave themselves in the renewal that is embedded in each communicative instance as a striving for understanding (Gadamer, 1992). Dialogue is a reminder that our language is the living trace of the many others we have encountered and engaged with in an effort to connect and understand.

Thus, dialogue is always a contextual and transient engagement from which meaning shines forth to be experienced and understood. In dialogue, we open ourselves to all which is other, and in the necessarily incomplete act of translation into our own language and being, we understand. In doing so, we are ourselves transformed in the recognition of the moving limits of our being that restore difference not as something to overcome but rather as the ontology of language, as the embodiment of our humanity, as the signal of all that we have been, are, and can become. Language then is not simply an instrument of communication, it is

a dimension that is independent and constitutes the space of understanding....to understand an utterance is a matter of being able to translate its sense in one's own words. According to Gadamer this is only possible if the speaker succeeds in embedding the utterance to be understood within a dialogical context. (Kertscher, 2002, p. 142)

Meaning and understanding are necessarily co-constructed in the encounter of an otherness. This is to say the interpretation is ubiquitous in a world that is shared “with others with whom I communicate, so my descriptions of the world are always subject to modification on the basis of what I share communicatively” (Smith, 1991, p. 32).

Constructing and experiencing language's dialogic being is never reductionist, rather it is the becoming of openness. Fundamentally, “becoming-together is dialogical in its generative movement without being dialectical because it rejects a conception of the movement of understanding as a cumulative and progressive fusion of contradictory positions” (Freeman, 2020, p. 8). Hence, the fundamental hermeneutic ontology of language embodies its dialogical being, as Davey (2006) explained:

Philosophical hermeneutics opposes the instrumentalist (nominalist) view of language which maintains that a knowing subject (individually or collectively) determines the meaning of words. The language ontology of philosophical hermeneutics insists to the contrary, that whatever our chosen usage of terms, it will always convey or mean more than we imagine or intend. (p. 28)

The dialogic encounter is the space where words and terms will be actualized and infused into meanings, thus establishing language as openness through its ability to pull us into the movement of understanding as the contextualized and transient sign of who we are and cease to be.

The dialogic being of language indicates the in-between, the space where we delineate the borders of our being as we come into language bringing about a transformative process where we distinguish the other in ourselves. This border space is supported in the becoming of language and world as they co-construct each other and are co-constructed in our encounters with all that is unfamiliar and the experience of the unfamiliar itself. Davey (2006) reminded us that “as language speakers, the ‘other’ (the implicit network of linguistic and cultural connections embedded in our language) is already in us just as we are in the ‘other’” (p. 176). Thus, the process of understanding others us, but also pushes us towards self-understanding, othering us and making us more ourselves; as Gadamer (1992) wrote: “There will always be a grain of self-recognition involved in all encounters of humans with humans and with their creations. This strain of speculative identity is innate in humans” (p. 43).

Metaphoricity and the Movement of Understanding

In the previous section I offered an outline of some of the ways Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics theorizes language through its fundamental metaphoricity and interconnectedness with understanding. I posed that the speculative and dialogic being of language is what keeps us in the movement of understanding. Its fundamental metaphoricity constitutes it as a network of meaning that manifests through the experience of linguisticity; as such, “understanding is unavoidable, because we are born or ‘thrown’ into historical contexts that already have been interpreted” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). As an unfinished event and process, the experience of understanding is also one of openness. Jacobson (2018) explains that within a hermeneutic perspective, “openness means being ‘positioned’ toward an Other, open to them really saying something to us, even something against us, because we know our understanding of a subject is always limited” (p. 1356).

Understanding then demands an openness to the possibility that there is always something beyond what we can discern or what is being presented at any given moment or context. There are always more experiences, more perspectives, more ways of being that transcend the immediacy of experience. The possibility of something other that is yet to come then makes the being of understanding the experience of openness and indeterminacy itself. Understanding is the hopeful engagement towards other realities, other experiences, other beings that present to us as the recognition of our own horizons and the whole of everything that is still unfamiliar. The being and openness of hermeneutical understanding necessitates its instability. “They require the challenges of having to think again, of having to confront the emergence of difference and of allowing oneself to be questioned by the disclosures of change.... Understanding is always restless, unquiet understanding” (Davey, 2006, p. 100).

The experience of understanding is always the opening up in recognition of the limits and potential of our beings and the world around us, as such it necessarily pushes us into a transformative process charted in our individual and collective human journey of meaning. As such, the experience of understanding is always shaped by language and is always one of meaning, the meaning that we co-construct in “the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter” (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 305). It is the metaphoricity of language that gives expression to the movement of understanding as the rhythm of our lives and beings. The metaphoricity of language illuminates the duality of its ontology as a pluralistic becoming with the ability to be both presentational and *representational*, to both capture the thing and be the thing itself. The being of language then revolves around its core as dual yet not dichotomous, as dialogic yet not dialectic, thus foregrounding the relationality ingrained in any act of meaning pursued in our being woven in the communal filigrees of time.

Positioning understanding as a manifestation of our relationality with the other through language creates a trail for the hope and need in its theorization as a movement. As the experience of the other, “Understanding is entering into play where we are not in control of the movement, but rather are changed by the play” (Johnson, 2000, p. 71). In encountering the unfamiliar we will be transformed in ways that we cannot yet know, opening up to networks of meaning embodied in language that extend beyond us. Language then is the point of departure and arrival, it is the borders that shine forth with the potential of renewing meanings constituted in a beautiful experience of othering that delineates and becomes in the in-betweens that appear through contradiction, paradox, or difference.

Unfamiliar Understanding

This text started with fundamental questions about the language diversity inherent to people’s beings and lived experiences, and a question about the complexities of how to understand and represent them. I posed that philosophical hermeneutics may provide a fruitful and pluralistic orientation to attend to these complexities in its ability to foreground the ontology of language while grounding it in its practice. So far, our discussion of language has centered around the hermeneutic theorization of language as the medium for understanding. I have discussed relevant ideas about the hermeneutic theorization of language as a network of meaning whose being is dialogical, speculative, and shaped by linguisticity. Collectively these aspects of language speak to the idea that the ontology of language is constituted by a fundamental metaphoricity that turns on itself and revels in plurality.

Identifying language as a constituted network of meaning encompasses the idea that through the metaphoricity of language phenomena, our beings, and the being of the other appear as frayed seams in the fabric of life. As horizons, the porous membranes wrought by language will illuminate the becoming borders of all that is fleetingly discernable in an anticipatory movement toward understanding as the rhythm of the universe and our struggle as people in a journey of meaning. Palmer (1969) wrote:

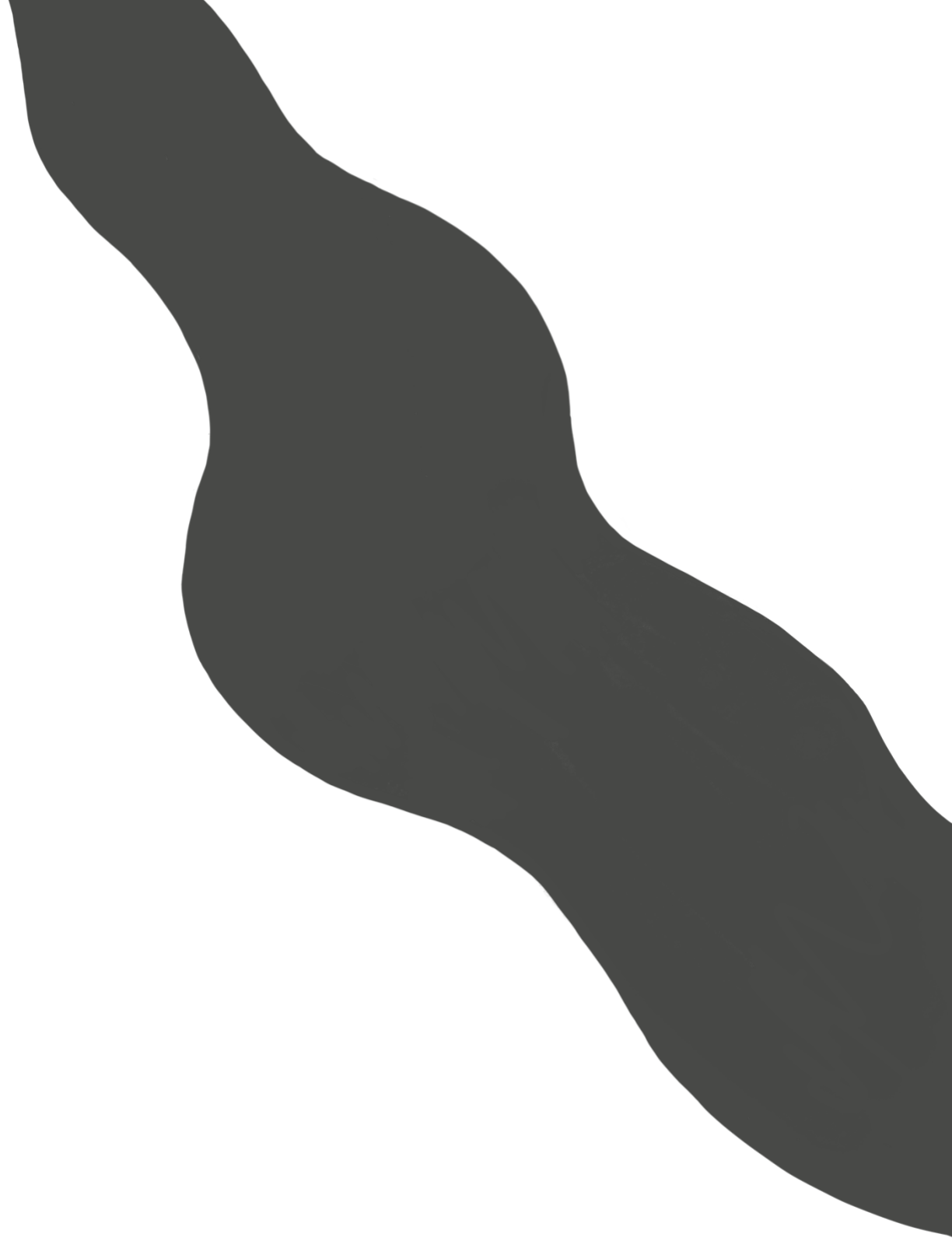
Such is the saying power of language that it creates the world within which everything may be disclosed; such is its comprehensiveness that we can understand the most diverse worlds that have come to expression in language; such is its disclosing power that even a relatively short text can lay open a world different from our own yet one which we are able to understand. (p. 207)

If language functions as a medium that expands our being and discloses our horizons, then what is possible depends on its plurality. In any instance in which language is in abundance, where there are more modes and dimensions, more ways of coming into understanding, of expanding our world, the horizons of who we are and who we can become will be expanded and renewed as intrinsic to our becoming being. Plurality carves out the possibilities ingrained in the recognition that understanding is a coming into language that others us, illuminating our becoming in the multiplicity of the modes of language as iterative, multifaceted, and aesthetic.

Thinking of the ontology of language as wrought in its metaphoricity and plurality provides a broad impetus to its ethereal being as it embodies itself in practice and context to then be carved out in its primeval relation to knowing. Ponder for a moment of how you and I are communicating now. The words and letters in this paper dis/appear to us as images and meaning. Through experience and tradition, we have learned to see them as language, we bring them forward into a relational network, and draw on them to make meaning through words. Those words will metaphorically evoke and create experiences and meanings. The experiences and meanings that I evoke as I write will be different than the experiences and meaning that you will evoke as you read. Still there is a shared meaning and an impetus for completion for both of us as we labor through these words. The way we are communicating is then an aesthetic engagement with another that signals how, in its ontology, language will forget itself in its becoming thrusting us back into the rhythm of life that symbiotically echoes indeterminacy, transience, and multiplicity. Beings entangle themselves in a shared primordial movement that shines through the reveling plurality of language in all its beauty and modes. We become

life becomes
the universe becomes
the human becomes
language becomes

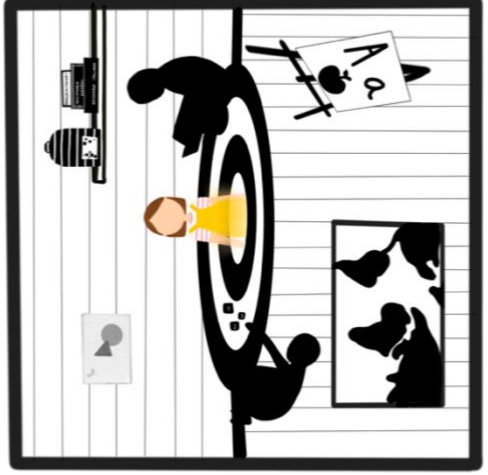
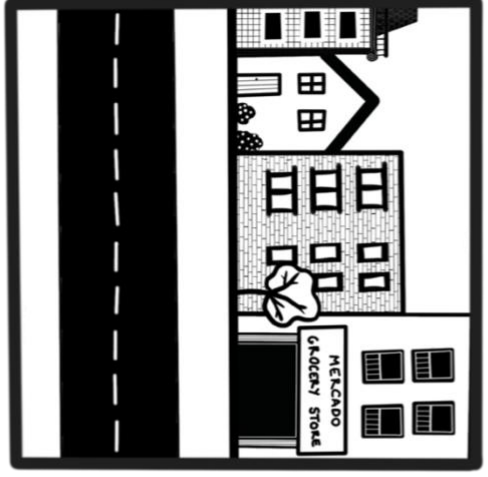








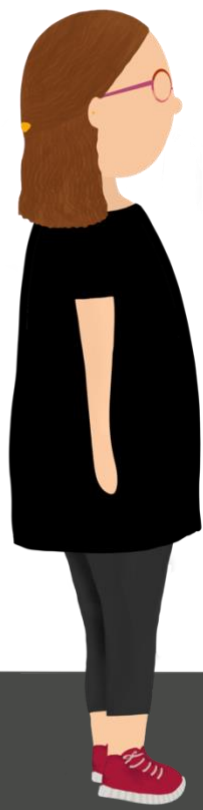
The world is not monolingual

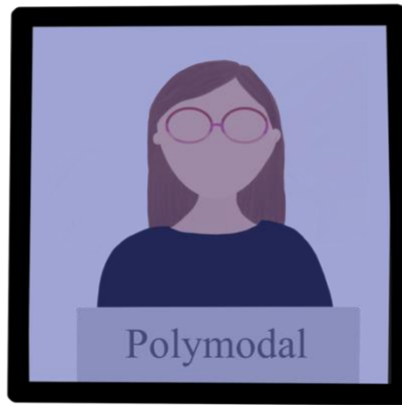


El mundo es multilingüe

















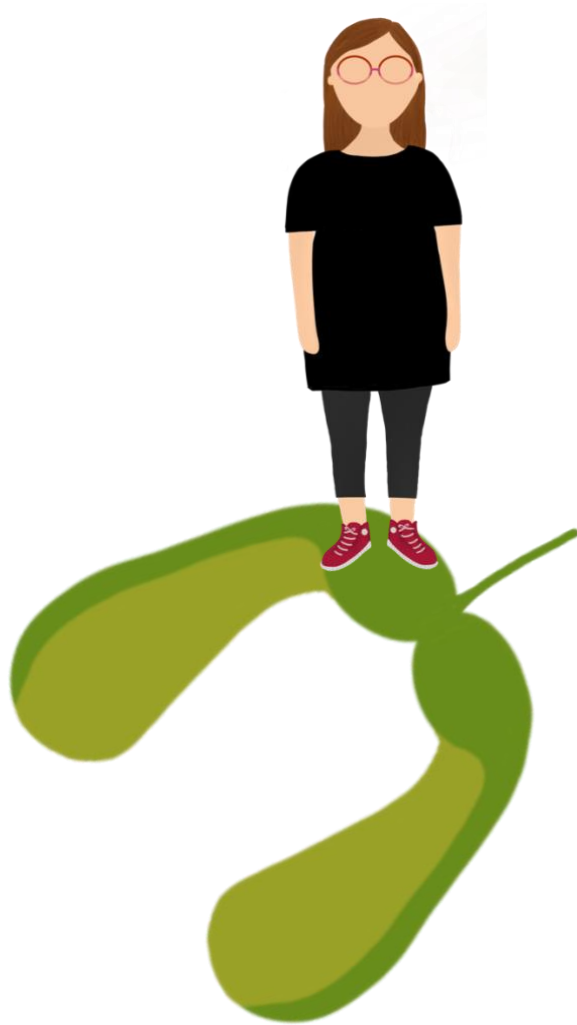


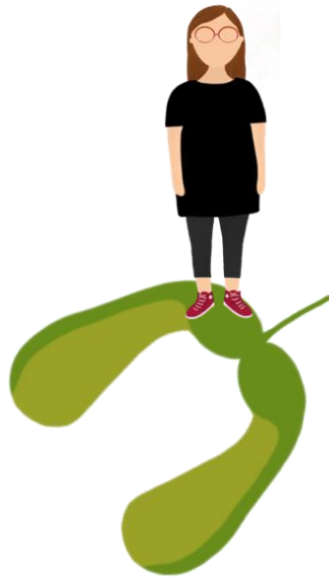


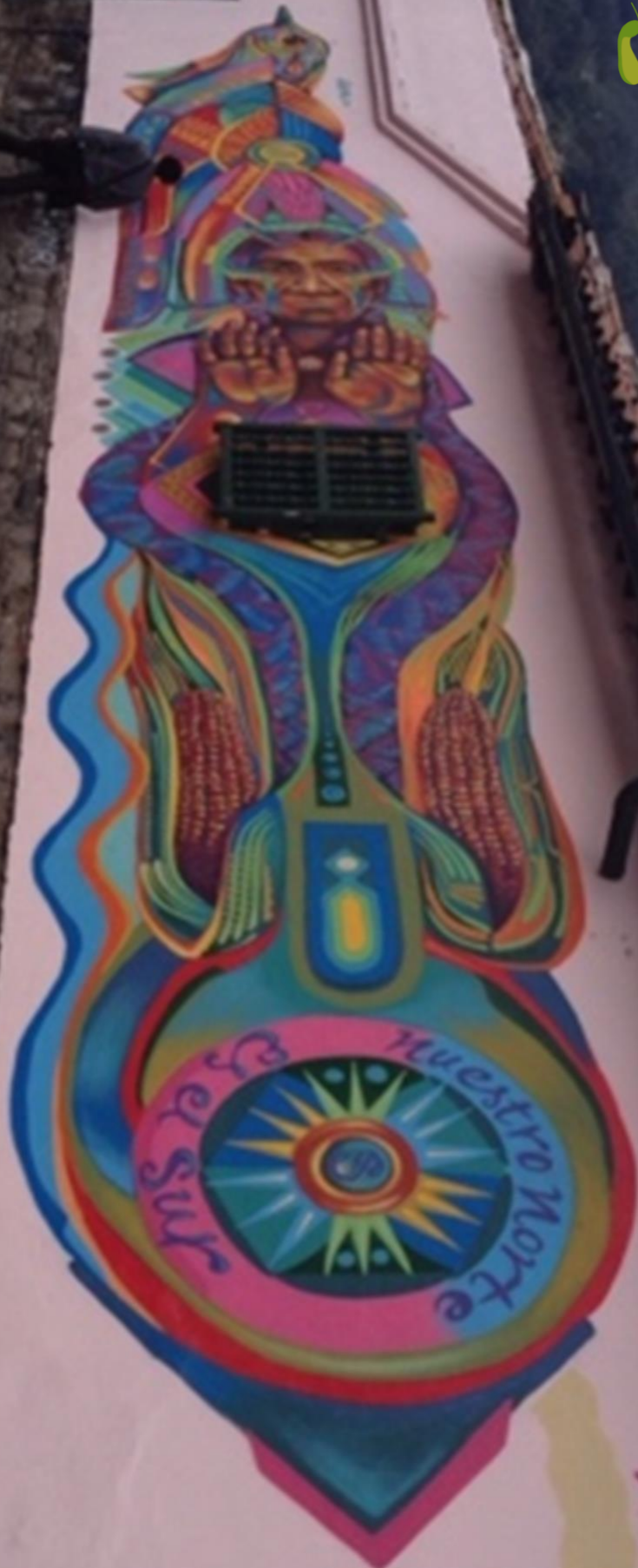




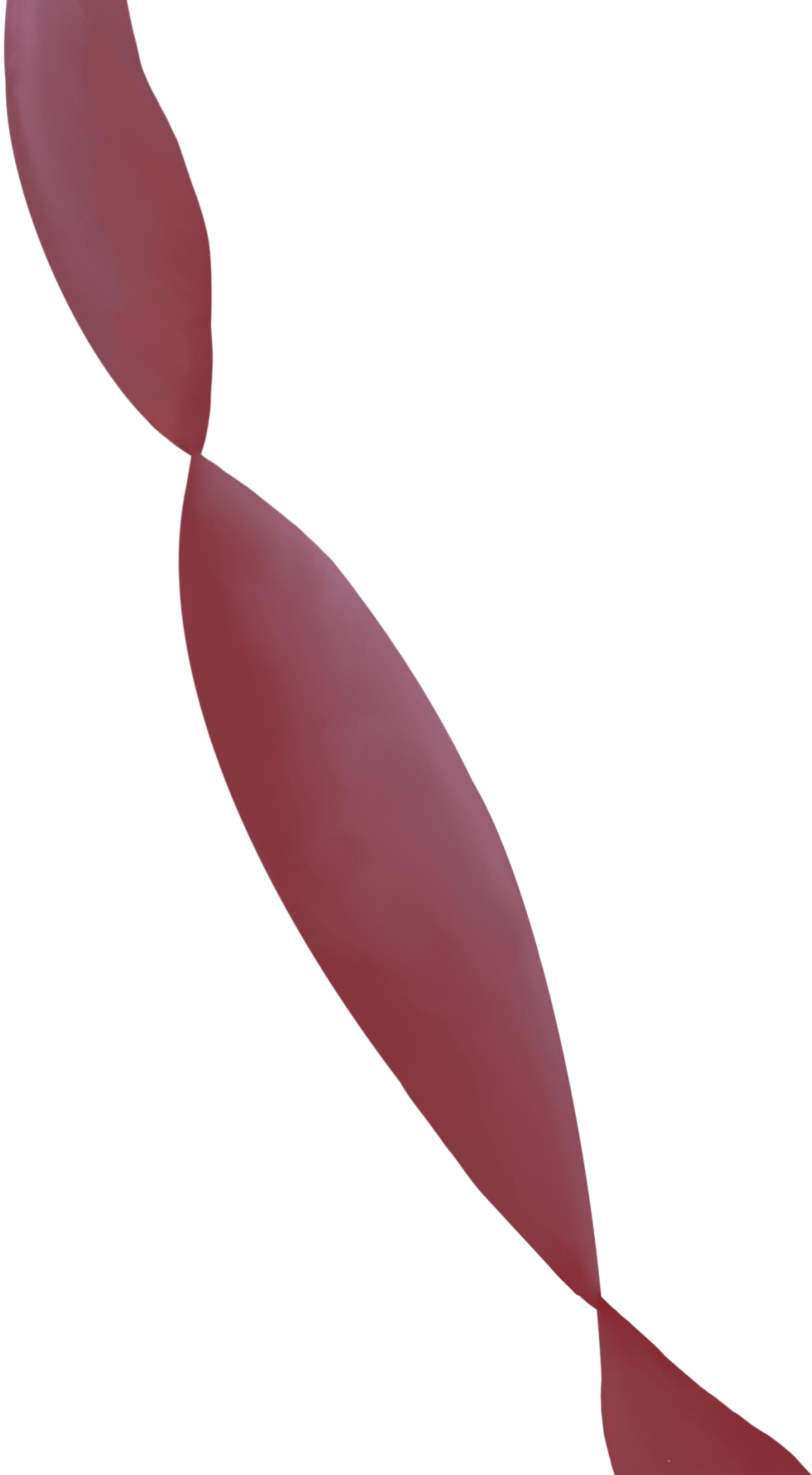


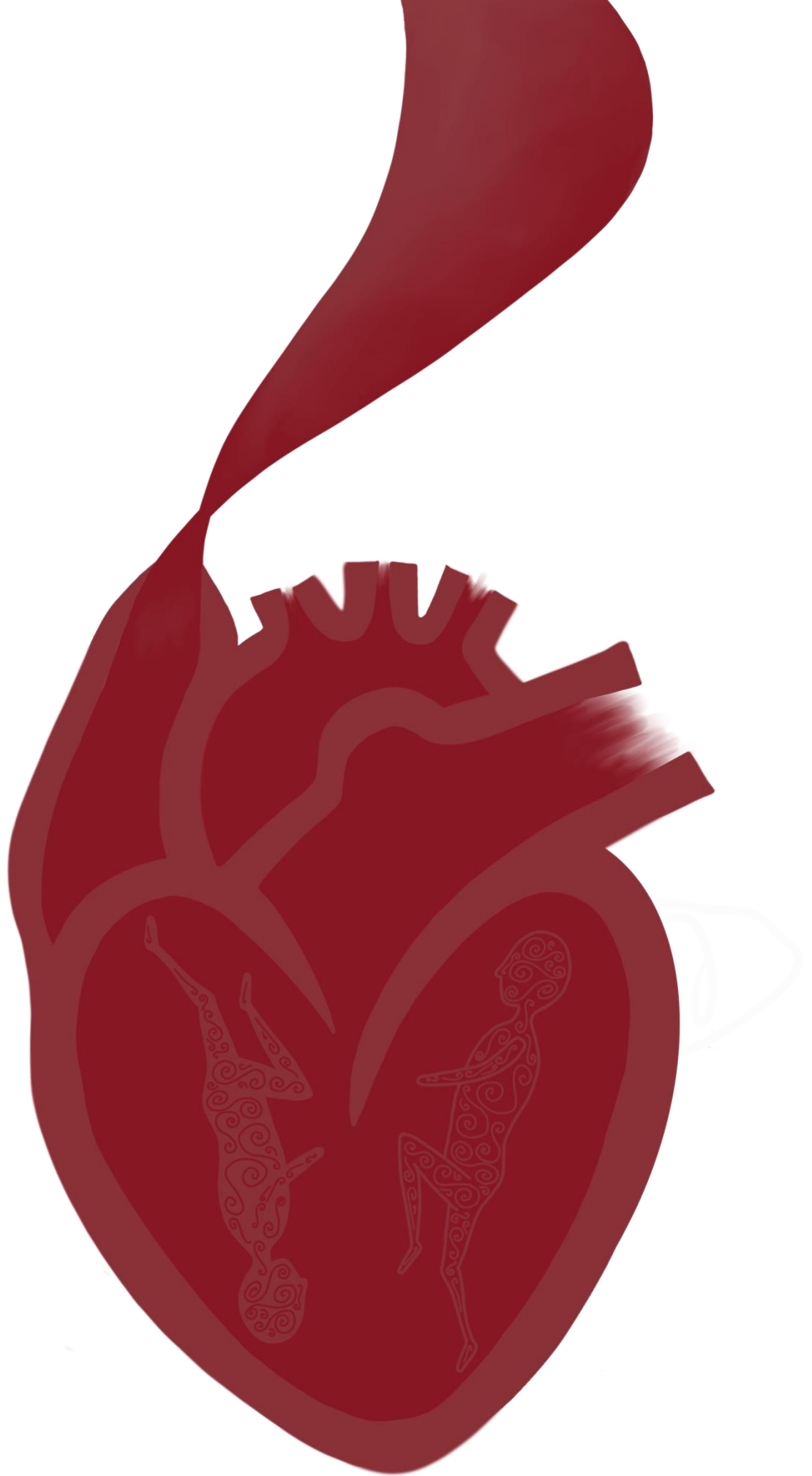


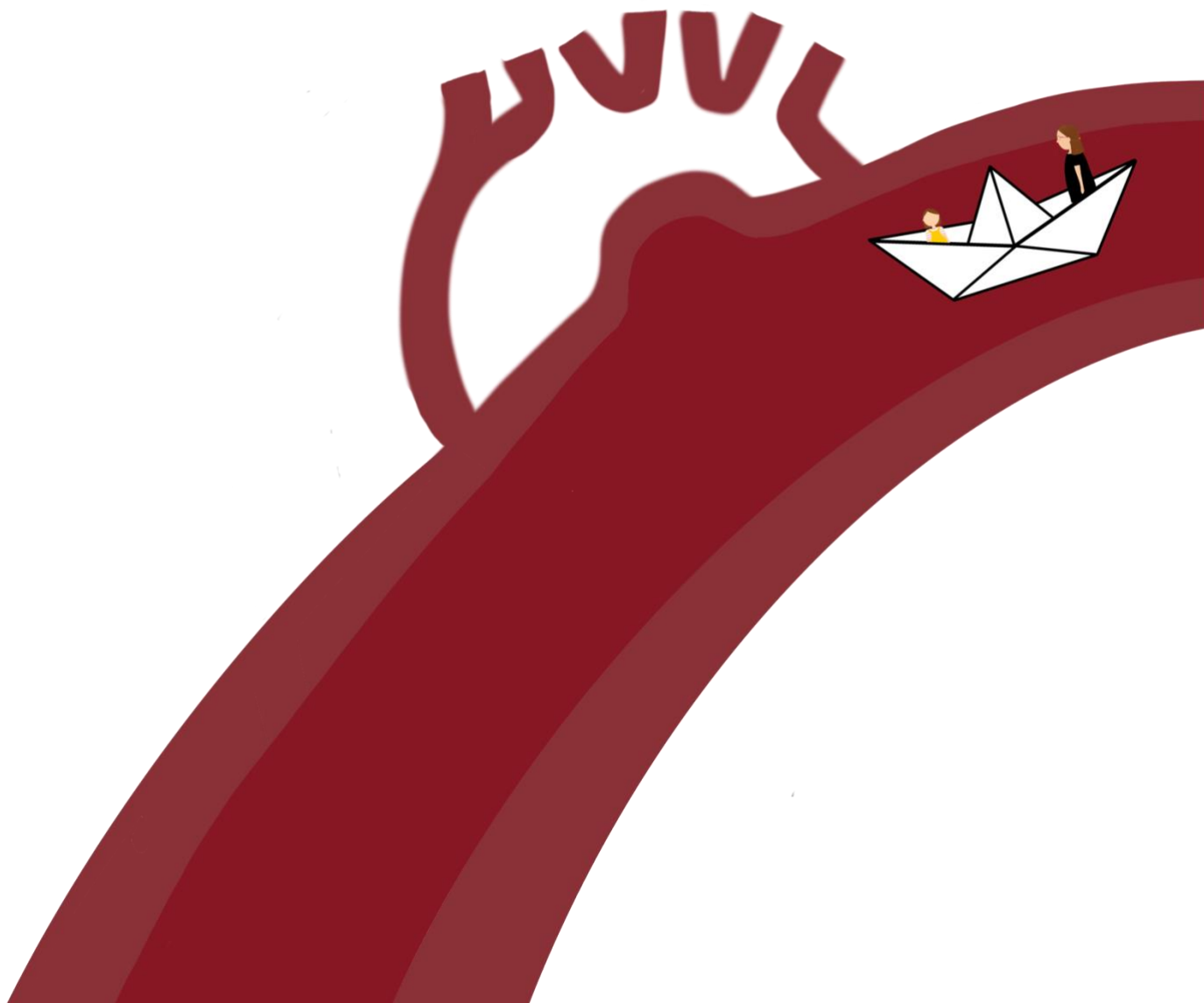


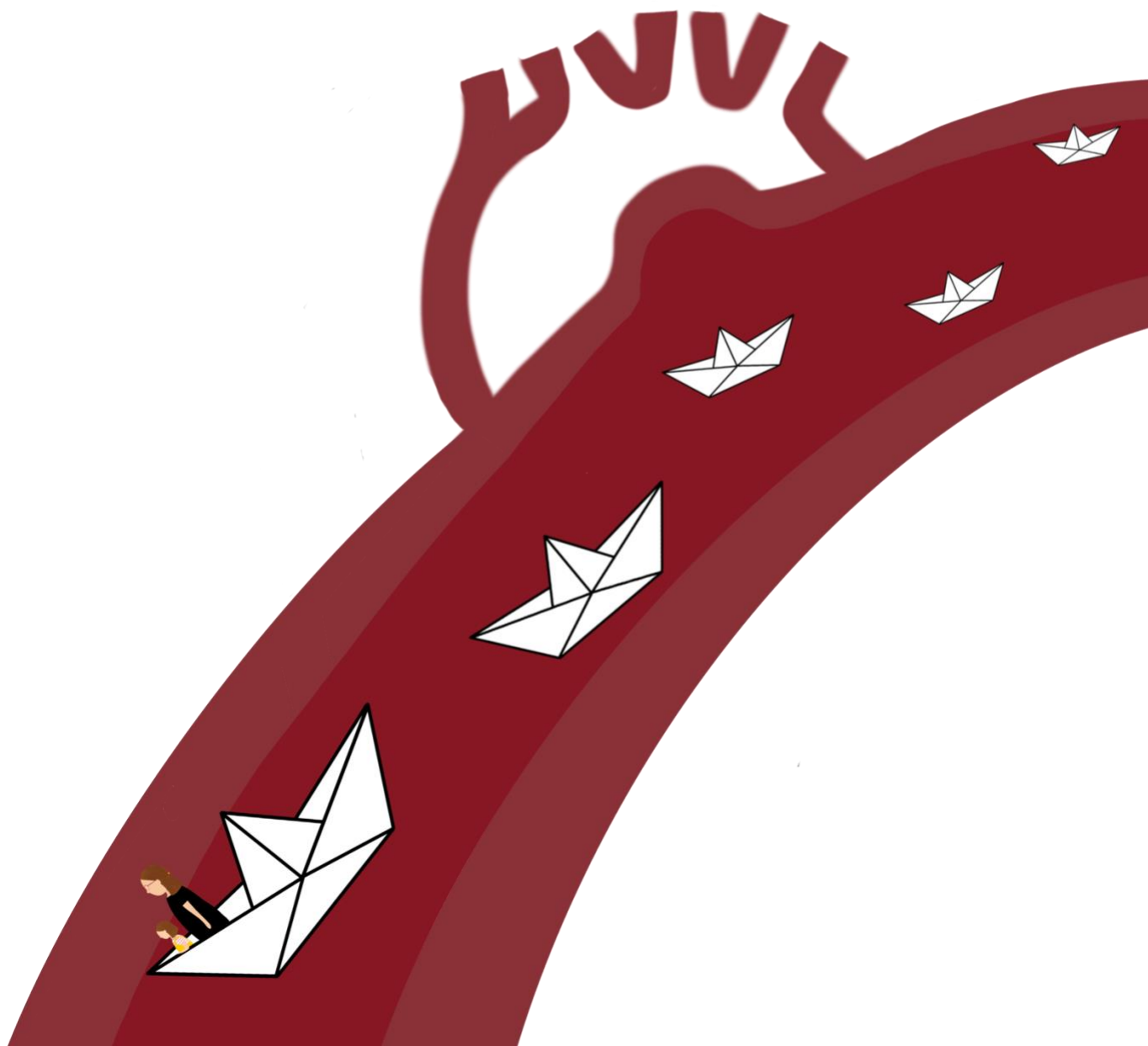




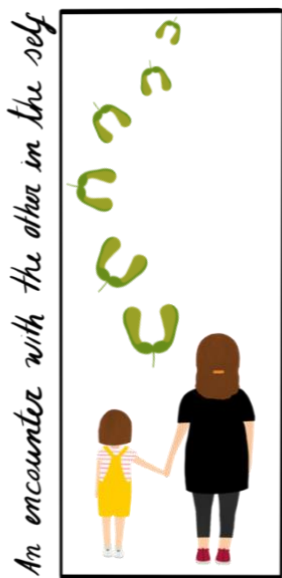








Authors' Note



This article was developed as part of my (Cristina) dissertation study. As my advisor, Melissa Freeman became a dialogic partner in my journey to understand language and philosophical hermeneutics. Because of her generous intellectual contributions, she is now second author of this text. Together we decided to keep the text as it was originally written, in the first person, to indicate how the article grounds on my intellectual explorations of language and my personal experiences with it. The presence of my experiences is also reflected in the way I intertwined text and illustrations. The images portray the journey of my adult self to understand language and how it required a reencounter of an otherness within myself; an encounter with my own language and thus with my past selves, focused on the self from childhood. These encounters with otherness renew and diffract into the many dimensions that constitute experience and learning to forge an unavoidable becoming. The excess of meaning captured in the illustrations is then intentionally left open and is meant as an invitation to *representation* and *reinterpretation*.

Acknowledgments

The two photographs of street art integrated into the illustrations in this manuscript were collected as part of research with the support of the TINKER LACSI field research award. I took the photographs in public spaces in Bogota (Colombia). Based on consultation with a copyright specialist, I understand that I may use the photographs under fair use since I am using them for educational purposes and modifying them as part of research. The copyright of the art portrayed in the photographs remains with the artists.

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