

I is Another

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Abstract An auto-fictional exploration and theoretical discussion of the intrinsic difference, multiplicity, and otherness of the self, drawing on various sources within and without the existential tradition.

Key words: difference, embodied critique, auto-fiction, phenomenology, identity.

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Who are I?

In a letter to his friend and former teacher Georges Izambard, written from his hometown of Charleville and dated 13 May 1871, a seventeen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud stated:

I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a *seer*: you won't understand this at all, and I hardly know how to explain it to you. The point is, to arrive at the unknown by a disordering of *all the senses*. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, to be *born* a poet, and I have discovered I *am* a poet. It is not my fault at all. It is a mistake to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought ...

He went on to say:

I is another. So much the worse for the wood if it finds itself a violin (Rimbaud, 1871/1962).

As a young man, I wrote a poem for Pier Paolo Pasolini, titled 'Death of a Poet', written after he was murdered on November 2nd, 1975. I blue-tacked the poem on the wall of my room in my family home with a tiny photo of the film-maker, poet and novelist cut out from a newspaper. The poem was still there when comrades and friends came to visit me the day after my mother's death. How strange that the night of that day in March when she died, we all went to sleep. Her body lying inside the open coffin in the guest room, a room seldom used or lived in, the one with the untouched posh cutlery and tea service on display. *Tu eri la vita e le cose. È buio il mattino che passa senza la luce dei tuoi occhi*. You were life, and the myriad things. Dark is the morning that goes by without the light of your eyes. Hélène Cixous wrote:

I never ask myself 'who am I?' I ask myself 'Who are I? ... Who can say who I are, how many I are, which is the most I of my Is? Of course, we each have a solid social identity, At the same time, we are all the ages, those we have been, those we will be, those we will not be, we journey through ourselves ... as the child who goes snivelling to school and as the broken old man ... Without counting all the combinations with others, our exchanges between languages, between sexes – our exchanges which change us, tint us with others (Cixous, 1994, pp xvii-xviii).

How foreign an Italian voice sounds to me at first when travelling on a bus, how unintelligible and distant. With a sense of familiarity slowly emerging, the shackles of language and grammar also arise, the movable Oedipal cage, *mamma, papà*, the price of things, of rents and mortgages spelled out in pound sterling. The different layers accidentally uncovered, becoming-orphan, or having lost for ever the so-called secure base. A feeling of desolation sitting at St Pancras station munching on a sandwich watching the passers-by. The feeling of elation of being free to feel the joy and sadness of not-belonging. Lost companions in last night's dream, comrades and fellow travellers gone for good and for ever lost. The evening bus gliding by like a ghost ship in the melancholy early darkness of a Friday night before Halloween.

Or for instance that fascination in my early twenties with transvestite and transsexuals. Was that fascination a form of erotic emotional tourism? I loved two of them in their bodies and their remoteness. Walking down the hill like an alley cat, the streets below bending, widening, tightening; a shuffling of shadows as I reach the lights of the city, past the railway. In a ghostly shop window at night I is a pale ghost; I wants to forestall the night, I craves victory against a dusty mirror. Down towards the city, warm air and sounds, then a room, a mouth, love sliding silently by on the ceiling.

Much later I found a correlation in Jean Genet who described trans as angels. Was my fascination *mere* fascination? Did I love in their gestures and dramatic femininity my own deeply buried homosexual longings? Doesn't the choice of one sexual orientation over another always imply the loss of another, a loss that is never mourned? From Freud we learn that unresolved mourning brings on melancholia. And what is melancholia if not being in love with dead objects? Having erased my own homosexual self, I remained in love with dead objects, the verse of a famous tune on my mobile's ringtone.

Candy came from out on the Island/In the back room she was everybody's darling/But she never lost her head/Even when she was giving head/She says, "Hey, babe Take a walk on the wild side"/ Said, "Hey, babe, take a walk on the wild side" (Reed, 1972)

Is this why my phone is constantly on mute?

In Praise of Smuggling

Jean Genet's subversive and poetic writings have often been framed and even canonized within the confines of gay experience and literature: I am thinking of Edmund White's astonishing biography (White, 1993) and of Sartre's masterly doorstopper *Saint Genet* (Sartre, 1952). Recent re-interpretations of Genet's work (Templeton, 2017) justifiably claim a place for him

within trans culture and transgender studies scholarship, asserting the value of smuggling as a methodology of embodied critique that gives precedence to lines of flight over seemingly compact power structures, and that gives meaning through elaborate tangles of connectivity (Rogoff, 2006). Academia is traditionally allergic to the very word ‘smuggling’, let alone the practice, as I have learned when submitting papers to psychology journals. But smuggling is a necessary act. It stems from the understanding that the knowledge inherited by the tradition does not contain the complexities of living nor does it provide a framework for practices of freedom. Irit Rogoff (2006, p. 1) explains:

The term ‘smuggling’ ... extends far beyond a series of adventurous gambits. It reflects the search for a practice that goes beyond conjunctives such as those that bring together ‘art and politics’ or ‘theory and practice’ or ‘analysis and action’. In such a practice we aspire to experience the relations between the two as a form of embodiment which cannot be separated into their independent components.

Smuggling is necessary if we are to champion radical, subversive notions and practices within the stultified environs of neoliberal psychology and psychotherapy trainings. Genet’s is a fitting example and guide, given that some of his early writing in prison was created against prison rules, and later smuggled out for publication. Smuggling allows emancipatory practices and knowledge to slide through tightly built borders and boundaries and respond to the needs of the present. In particular, it may potentially present an adequate and fierce response to the way hatred and prejudice has travelled and continues to travel through the decades: from misogyny to homophobia to transphobia.

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We were revolutionaries with a difference in our 20s. From feminism we’d learned the painful limitations of the macho man model. From Pasolini – novelist, filmmaker, poet, essayist – we learned the sexual tenderness and transgression, the virgin terrain to be explored. And so, we slept in the same bed, me and she and he and when she fell asleep after making love, me and him exchanged tender kisses and fondled each other, the melancholy yellow streetlight weaving warm patterns on the wall and on the poster of Pier Paolo Pasolini, his fierce compassion sending shivers through the best hearts and minds of my generation. Is I a murderer who has killed off homosexual desire?

Hey Ninetto, do you remember that dream we had so many times?

This time you are mistaken/ I am a farmer in the city/dark brown houses against the sky/every night I must wonder why (Walker, 1995).

Helene Cixous writes:

I ask of writing what I ask of desire: that I have no relation to the logic which puts desire on the side of possession, of acquisition, even of that consumption-consummation which, when pushed to its limits ... links (false) consciousness with death (Cixous, 1994, p. 27).

I guess I am talking of bisexuality. But what *is* bisexuality? Cixous (1994) distinguished two kinds:

“(1) Bisexuality as a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference insofar as this is perceived as the mark of a mystical separation ...

(2) Bisexuality [as] the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes ... the non-exclusion of difference ... a bisexuality [where] every subject who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogocentric Performing Theatre, sets up his or her erotic universe (p 41)

What do I fear as a man – whenever I identify as a man? Do I fear being possessed?

Being possessed is not desirable for a masculine Imaginary, which would interpret it as passivity – a dangerous feminine position (Cixous, 1994, p. 42)

For a man, particularly a heterosexual man such as myself, being possessed may be an essential experience. It may be crucial to be penetrated, entered, to experience a so-called passivity without which he is a foolish sad clown standing erect like his penis in a field under the pouring rain. And equally crucial for a human is the experience of sexuality divorced from the evolution imperative. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips express something similar in relation to barebacking. The latter unveils for them one truth about sexuality; it no longer

“conceal[s] from ourselves the fact that we are going nowhere: that we are growing towards extinction, children or no children. That the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like animals, are a project that issues in nothing. Freud’s notion of a death drive was, I think, one way of saying this: we want to die, and whether or not we want to we will. Barebacking shows us that sex is a dead end and it is our consciousness of this – what Bernard Williams refers to in *Shame and Necessity* as the consciousness of loss of power – that makes our human sexuality what it is. Reproductive sexuality shows us that in having children we are making more deaths; and it is this salient acknowledgement, conscious or not, that makes human sexuality possible.” (Bersani & Phillips, 2008, pp.113-14)

Being possessed may hint at the fact that there is something else to human relation than “the collusion of ego-identities” (ibid, p. 117).

In short:

Why do we find it “so difficult to welcome ... the blissful nature of the loss of power of selfhood”? (ibid, p. 125).

Terrone

I is a peasant boy, a terrone for the poorest region of la Bella Italia. Wikipedia describes terrone (plural terroni, feminine terrona) as an Italian term to designate, in an often-pejorative manner, people who dwell in Southern Italy or are of Southern Italian descent. The term comes from an agent noun formed from the word terra (Italian for ‘land’).

I is a *terrone* even though my dad pulled himself up from the low ranks through hard study and Franciscan discipline. I is a flamethrower and I is pretty certain none among you has known the ecstasy of smashing up a venue frequented by fascists nor the joy of seeing an empty police van go up in flames in response to police brutality.

I walks through the snow and leaves no footprints and how to tell others next day? Will they understand? How could they possibly understand?

I is a whole world that will be buried and forgotten when this body will flounder and perish, when this *bodying* will be free and ready for sister death and lover death

Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi
 questa morte che ci accompagna
 dal mattino alla sera, insonne,
 sorda, come un vecchio rimorso

o un vizio assurdo. I tuoi occhi
 saranno una vana parola,
 un grido taciuto, un silenzio.

Death will come and will have your eyes –
 this death of ours, escorting us
 from morning until dusk, restless,
 deaf, like an old regret
 or an absurd vice. Your eyes
 will be a vain word
 a silent cry, a silence (Pavese, 1951)

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I is a rock musician part-exchanging guitars after selling my black Gibson Les Paul and going on to the Jazzmaster and to a semi-acoustic. I forms a band called *Daedalo*, after the Italian word for labyrinth, after Daedalus father of Icarus, for who says that you must live fast and die young and foolishly burn your manmade wings of wax flying too close to the sun when you can live fast and die old like Daedalus architect father of Icarus. But also Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

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I plays with death aged 23, trying heroin three times and at night sitting outside a semi-abandoned country workhouse playing for my friends the Velvet Underground’s song Heroin

I don't know just where I'm going
 But I'm gonna try for the kingdom, if I can
 'Cause it makes me feel like I'm a man
 When I put a spike into my vein

And I'll tell ya, things aren't quite the same
 When I'm rushing on my run
 And I feel just like Jesus' son
 And I guess that I just don't know
 And I guess that I just don't know (Reed, 1967)

I tries smack three times, the first time is heaven – lemon drop, vulva, joy of the morning air every gesture exults burned by the proximity of death; the second time is purgatory – waiting for a blissful state that never comes; the third and last time it's hell, and sickness and the vertigo of nothingness.

I veers towards more acceptable substances, shortcuts to false awakenings and nowadays San Pellegrino sparkling water and the odd glass of Malbec.

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I trains as a therapist and learn the lingo and manners of the white English middle-class with its values of boundaries and property. *Oh I believe in property*, to the tune of the Beatles' *Yesterday*.

What is 'difference'? is it the so-called championing of bland diversity we find in the dominant ideology of our time, that is, neoliberalism, or is it about different colours made of tears?

Strands of humanistic and existential psychology have historically been inclined to universalise subjective identity. But can subjective identity become a prison, particularly when it sings along to the blinkered tunes of nationalism? Or when it fails to be open to societal and political challenges? In the public arena, this has resulted in the championing of identity politics at the expense of soulful solidarity. Writing about racial discrimination, the investigative journalist Asad Haider, defines identity politics as 'the neutralization of movements against racial oppression'. It reflects the replacement of 'mass movements... with a placid multiculturalism'. What once constituted a unitary front against the commodification and exploitation of human life in the name of profit for the few has now splintered into subgroups that cannot see past their own experience. While it was once natural for a marginalised group to feel solidarity with another equally marginalised group, thus creating a united front of women, gays, blacks, the poor and the disenfranchised, it is now customary to think and breathe within the confines of one's own group. To be a subject has come to mean to be subjugated to an existing order that defines my identity before I can begin to define myself. Identity is only partly what I choose.

For the most part, it is assigned to and imposed on me by the ‘Powers’. What is difference? Less the difference of consumer choice than “different colours made of tears” (Reed, 1967)

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I is a mystic child in India, writing devotional songs in the early 1980s and whirling like a dervish and sitting in silent contemplation and having lots of sex and crying a lot and laughing and realizing after 5 years of studying existential philosophy that I have a body, pardon me, that I *am* a body.

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I finds zen, realizing with a shock in 1996 in a barn in Suffolk that this ancient tradition is alive and kicking and not reducible to cute little quotes for middle class mindfulness yogis and yoginis but it has a beating heart and the jaws of a tiger who is going to eat you alive before you eat your last strawberry and draw your last breath of thanks for this life.

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I is married at 24 and separated at 27 and from women I learned and still learns an awful lot and from men too and whoever you think you are don’t apologize darling please and don’t wait for the state and the government to rubber stamp your difference. It is better methinks to practice the freedom you talk about. It’s not just me saying this but Michel Foucault in person: the practice of freedom. Foucault (1984/1990) sees the ethic of the concern for the self as a practice of freedom. Even though the individual is unable to entirely exit power relations, which produce her own self, she can take part in the self-making. In that sense, freedom can be understood as participation in the process of defining oneself and the meaning of freedom.

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I is a dancer at heart, trapped within this face, trapped in a zoom screen pretending to give a talk to an audience of algorithmic ghosts, all of us not dancing but trapped within the confines of a living room all of us lonely and putting the kettle on after the end of the conference.

Some enemies of difference

An enemy of difference is *logocentrism*. What is logocentrism? On a basic level, logocentrism refers to the widespread belief that language translates reality faithfully and effectively. This is because the dominant view considers *logos* – variously translated as discourse, speech, the principle of reason and judgement – to be a superior way of building a theory of knowledge. But this does not take into account the multiplicities of language and speech.

Logocentrism is almost inevitable ... This is partly because logocentrism is inextricably linked to what many of us take as indisputable: a metaphysical notion of presence and the principle

of self-identity. Conversely, differentialism questions the notion that I am I and that whatever is, is. Another enemy of difference is 'Being' with a capital 'B'. Genuine appreciation of difference implies an active forgetting of 'Being' in the name of the concrete 'being' sitting opposite in the therapy room. Another enemy of difference is hermeneutics, the illusion that any particular 'being' or situation or event is legible, interpretable, translatable. What is forgotten in this process that any process of translation implies repression and the positing of an a-priori: for instance, *habitus* in Husserl (2013, p. 66-67) and *Vor-struktur* in Heidegger (1962).

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I is tolerated by the existential therapy world, by the person-centred world, by the world of psychotherapy in general, because I refuses to wear the T-shirt with the face of Rogers or Heidegger printed on it. Also, because I doesn't buy this third-rate ideology that we are free individuals given that everything turns into pound sterling given that our so-called existential freedom is the freedom to be a consumer.

Existential threads

In relation to difference and embodiment, Simone de Beauvoir had some useful and still very interesting things to say from within the existential tradition. But her approach on the phenomenology of the body is far less reliant on either Sartre or Heidegger as it is commonly believed but more congruently aligned with the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Heinämaa, 1999). And when it comes to discussing women's experience, she is less interested in clarifying their subordinate position in a male world or in championing their rights than in the reality called *woman*. Her link with Husserl is straightforward: in the latter's *Crisis of the European Sciences* Husserl (1954/1970), as Sara Heinämaa (1999) lucidly explains, gives a set of phenomenological problems for future study: he discusses death and birth, unconsciousness, historicity, and social life. And then, moving on to what he calls the problem of the sexes, he states that the phenomenologist's project is to investigate the meaning of these phenomena, their formation as different types of realities and objectives, i.e., entities, events, facts, etc. Questions about death are not, for instance What is death? How does it happen? Instead, she goes on to explain:

How does it happen that we experience death as an occurrence (*Vorkommnis*)? Similarly, we can ask, why is the sexual relation experienced as a difference and opposition? Is this necessary? Can the experience have some other structure? (Heinämaa, 1999, p. 127)

It is within the above frame that De Beauvoir poses her questions and in so doing progresses phenomenological enquiry along *differential* rather than universalistic and essentialist lines. This becomes very clear when she gives Levinas, the champion of otherness, a run for his money. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas (1978/1987) had suggested that otherness reaches its full expression in the feminine which he describes as being on the same level as consciousness but with an opposite meaning. De Beauvoir's objection in *The Second Sex* (1997) is that woman too is a consciousness for herself. She attacks his analysis as deliberately taking a man's point of view, disregarding mutuality and the fact that feminine and masculine bodies are variations of embodiment reinventing in their unique ways the ambiguity of human existence.

To tell the truth, man, like woman, is flesh, and therefore a passivity – and she like him in the midst of her carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live in their different ways the strange ambiguity of existence made body (De Beauvoir, 1997, p. 224).

Seen in this way, femininity is a musical theme, Sara Heinämaa comments, which is “not determined by its earlier performances but is living and evolving in the environment created by them (1999, p. 124).

The exile of difference

Ovid died an exile in an area whose present name is Dobruja, in Romania. From a place of exile, the homeland looks like a sweet melodious place of love and joy, but an unbroken literary tradition across the centuries speculates on Ovid's calamitous return to Rome, where he finds much greater misfortune than what he experienced during his life in Tumis

According to traditional narratives, allegiance to a notion of identity and its usual props (integration, belonging, as well as loyalty to a particular deity and/or governing worldview, whether religious or secular, alone deemed to be true) is the sole assurance for attaining prosperity, happiness, and the bourgeois ideal of mental health. It is only by accident or fate that we are at all allowed an admittedly difficult foray into some unknown peopled with monsters and sorcerers, and on condition that we eventually return to the Ithaca of identity and join in singing the tedious anthems of our home turf. This is not only sold a desirable condition but as the only one permitted. High-minded notions of universalism, relatedness, and harmonious interdependence, normally summoned to counterbalance the innate provincialism of identity, do not constitute credible alternatives because they are part and parcel of the very same insidious dominant narrative. Universalism is the main export product of the imperialist's self-same identity.

The ancestral home looks idyllic when contemplated from afar and homecoming may turn out to be disastrous. In his own oneiric variation on the apocryphal medieval theme of Ovid's return to Rome, Antonio Tabucchi (2001) imagines the exiled poet dreaming on a winter night of having become Augustus' favourite poet. A twist of fate (or a miracle of the gods) meant that the poet of metamorphoses has himself turned into a different being, a giant butterfly with yellow and blue wings, and enormous eyes. He arrives triumphantly on a golden chariot pulled by six white horses. But he can't stand up for his legs are too thin under the weight of his enormous wings. He is forced to recline on cushions, his feet kicking in the air, in a picture reminiscent of Kafka's own famous tale of transformation. The cheering crowds mistake him for an Asian deity. When he desperately tries to tell them that he is Ovid, the poet of love and exile, his voice is but a faint shrill. He finally makes it to the palace where Augustus invites him to read the smart and witty verses composed for the occasion. Fearing that only a screech will come out of him, Ovid decides to convey his poetry through movement, gently fluttering his majestic wings in a graceful dance. The emperor, a bundle of uncouth and defensive manliness, is visibly offended by the effeminate display and as insulted by the tender sexuality emanating by the butterfly/poet's dance as he was from Ovid's writings on the art of love. He claps his hands and commands the praetorian guards to cut off his wings which fall on the ground like light feathers. Defiantly, with a sudden movement the poet/butterfly turns around and on unsteady legs makes it to the palace terrace from where he sees a vicious crowd below demanding to rip him to pieces. The dream ends with the vulnerable poet/butterfly's final act of freedom: a spontaneous, defiant dance step down the stairway which conveys that very gentleness that so insulted Augustus. Not only is poetry of his kind stronger than might; it also grants immortality, he tells us, more than the vulgar, pompous monuments and tombs of rulers or the statues of slave-traders and colonial rulers ever will.

Hélène Cixous writes:

Sometimes one has to go very far.
 Sometimes the right distance is extreme remoteness.
 Sometimes it is in extreme proximity that it breathes
 (Cixous, 1988, p. 35)

So: Who *are* I? *Je est un autre*. I is someone else. I is another.

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