Mirroring Back on the Inscription of Divergence: An Inquiry into Other Women

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Dusk. I stare at my ghost in the window. Nothing apparent separates me from her; she is merely a creation of the vanishing light outside. She wasn't there a moment ago, when I looked up, I saw out the window, bare trees, dead leaves, my neighbor's fence. Now when I look up, I am somehow doubled. A boundary went up when I wasn't looking, a boundary that would not be visible to anyone else entering the room—he or she would only see me, whole and intact. But I don't exist there, only my reflection in the window. The questionnaire asks, "Among women, do you consider yourself an other?" Check yes or no (MS 45). My sarcastic self responds quickly, sneering, "No. I feel I am homogenized. Interconnected. Dreadfully interchangeable. Tits and cunt—what more do you want?" Why not ask instead, "Do you/can you ever find yourself among people who—for a moment—allow you to forget your otherness?" Ask, "When you see your reflection in the darkness of a window do you attempt to avoid the otherness between yourselves?" Again I look up from my desk to meet her gaze...she is always staring at me.

The questionnaire continues: "If so, how?" Here the choices offered are age, class, weight, sexual preference, disabilities, national origin, and religion (Jewish, Muslim, or other). Pick one. Again my sarcastic self is the first to react, questioning the point at which all these relativities become stabilized. Glancing at the rest of the MS magazine survey, "Race and Women," it does seem to be concerned with the problematics of assuming some female "norm" by which everyone else may define themselves. Stumbling on these first two questions, however, I find myself wondering about the assumptions MS has made in constructing its framework for discovery. Does the magazine want to know how many women regularly place themselves in positions of otherness relative to other women? Perhaps. But it would seem from the second question of the survey that some kind of base-line identity has already been assumed from which Others may draw their terms. As if such issues aren't obfuscated enough, my purpose here is to add to the veils of language and sight that shroud this idea of defining otherness. Of course here I must nod to my male reader—the most painfully obvious of all others. MS. and I may operate within a phallic economy that binds us even in our thoughts, but this essay isn't directly con-
cerned with the restrictive reverence generally paid to the male gaze. Allow me to negotiate a trade, 
because when I reached up, I realized the blindfold around my eyes was tied with a slip-(k)not. While I remove it, if you'll just turn around I can fix this scarf around your eyes...

The play of surfaces

Baudrillard suggests that no latent meaning exists beneath the play of surfaces (1988:150). The surface as a place of identification operates primarily according to sight. The way surfaces play, the way we play with surfaces, the way our eyes play with surfaces, the way surfaces play with our eyes—these exchanges suggest the multiplicity of manipulations in which we may engage our surfaces: masks, masquerade, illusion, naked, bare, stripped messages signifying meaning. Daily entrance into social atmospheres is mediated by sights; not only of other women in their assorted masks, but of the technological representations of them/us in omnipresent media forms. And if we are to entertain Baudrillard's premise, it would seem that our self-concepts are capable of being defined in almost purely ocular terms. Our selves are our surfaces. Otherness can be understood in terms of the physical masks of our bodies. Though an over-simplification, certainly Oedipus, the patron saint of human development, indicates a common acceptance of this idea. As Freud led his disciples to the worship of Oedipus, he succeeded in implying sight as crucial for self definition. The self denial Oedipus engages in as he tears out his eyes was perhaps the least of his acts to entrance Freud, but nonetheless critical for Freud's theorizing. In Freud's economy, however, no room exists for female sight. While he creates strange arguments for the (male) ocular (male) development of (male) fetishes, I/eye, feeling a bit like Coppelius in Hoffmann's tale, steal my eyes away from his palsied grasp.

OUT-Lines

Outlines, tracings, traces. My body contains a trace of her body, and the similarities of our (out)lines are the most Real(ity) we have to offer one (an)other. Through our (out)lines we sense the split, the otherness that desires its destruction into an imaginary whole. Erase the boundary, pull down the blind. In the creation of boundaries, the creation of traces also occurs; a trace of the exterior can be found on the interior, a trace of the interior can be found on the exterior (Derrida 1981:26). Are we attracted or repulsed by the haunting of these traces? By the possibility that even the boundary of our skin is not distinct?

The trace that signifies the possible existence of both in and out brings me in to the readership of MS. But even as MS. places itself on one kind of boundary, its survey threatens other boundaries: the boundary of the "embarrassed etc." as Judith Butler would say, existent, yet only on the margin unexpressed by MS. (Butler 1990:143). These boundaries act as barbed-wire, etching a desire for symmetry into the sex that straddles it. To question MS.'s impetus to put this survey together is to question the desire to quantify otherness, to quantify symmetry. Lacan would say that desire always comes from a split place (Lacan 1977:5). Desire is essentially a craving for wholeness. That wholeness, however, is already a split term: am I referencing personal wholeness within a personal skin, or wholeness in connection with others? Touch that image in the window.

The infinite games we could conceivably play without the constraints of our physical beings are made finite through our bodies. Our bodies establish the rules of the game (Carse 1986). You, they say, must be other. One rule. At times, we embrace that otherness; that total separation that makes us wonder about the limits of our bodies. How strong can they be? How fast? How pleased? How skilled to some task? How much can they endure? Tiring of that game, we search then for the moments when we can suspend our otherness. Lost in laughter, orgasm, hallucinogenic drugs, death games we play with the boundaries that establish our finite game. We seem to desire unbounded otherness; at times IN, at times OUT—time's out, suspend the play, stop being other. We don't accept this one rule. Somehow we think we are infinite players; we prefer to play with boundaries rather than within them.

The questionnaire leaves dangerous and seductive room open for me to not be an other. Check the "no" box, and at once my form functions in my place. Complete absorption into singular global feminine identity, like phase distortion with mirrors, the images double again and again into static darkness. The chaotic confines of fragmented female flesh never allow woman to be a singular subject. She is/I am always split, as Luce Irigaray asserts, never wholly one, never fully integrated (irigary 1985:120). The idea is only once removed from the correspondence between the word woman as signifier, and woman's signified flesh (Gallop 1982:11). Check "no" and flesh signifies woman—an abstracted category upon which other("")s will inscribe(s) definitions. Check "yes" and describe your abstraction. Age, weight, color, a sense of similarity that can go un(re)marked. Shatter that image in the window.
Ritual Illusion

When I had pink hair, a hat brought me in; strip it, and I was out. Otherness I defined, Otherness I controlled—to the extent that such power was mine.

To think of the body as a mask can be somehow reassuring; images of games can be conjured from this place of illusion, even if they rely on the worn "all the world's a stage" cliche. Bodies are theatre—we perform, and simultaneously we watch the performance. We paint them, tattoo them, pierce them, refine them; revel in their charade, even as we comprise the audience, the voyeurs. The idea of performance may immediately create a gap between viewer and viewed, but the separation that occurs at the line of sight does not necessarily distinguish a subject/object relation. The viewer may see herself in either position, as may the performer, and in this manner they cancel each other out; never fully subject, never only object. As each position remains, however briefly, distinct, each holds an element of control. On one side are the watchers, who usually travel in audiences. Encourage the audience quality in any social group in a way that breaks down their resistance, and they will mimic you; simulating their vision for themselves, in some form as themselves, a parasitic re-structuring. In their screened imaginary realm, watchers remain in the audiences, calling their new-found images style, and waiting to resist or become the next image they see. In a forum that splits the performer from the consumer, an affinity for single-vision abstractions is necessary; the consumer must either conjure the illusion of being like the performer, or reject her. 

The tattoo that can pull me into one crowd can drive me out of another. Where do I want to be? Out in a crowd, or in a crowd?

On the other side, the performer, in recuperating some element of feminine desire through her masquerade (Irigaray 1985:76), can either command her stage as a place of free-definition—the self defining herself on the body—Or can create a form of cancellation—hiding the self behind the facade of the body.

The construction of a masquerade, however, runs the risk of becoming parody, an unRealistic definition based on over-used images; the waste of sights too often seen. In itself, the parody answers "no" to the question of otherness. Though it may be playful, parody speculates on the story too often told. As such, parody is rampant, but the fight it encounters with individual assertion weakens it; allowing a space for the masquerade to continue as something unique—either, again, to hide or reveal. In this manner, masquerade exists on a number of divergent levels; for instance, a masquerade is no less so when the bodies are stripped. This theatre never closes; the masquerade perpetually presents an "appearing that makes itself convincing as a being" (Butler 1990:47). By internalizing watchfulness and mimicry we can forget the masks are there at all.

I appeared to be the only woman in New Orleans with pink hair—and on the stage at the Storybook, the singer was naked. Put on a hat, put on a shirt—go unRemarked. Stay, stripped with markings. What does a striptease reveal if a body can pull one in or drive one out? The question is perhaps one of layers; take them off or put them on until the similarities erase the otherness. Pull off the Reeboks and Levis, remove the Rolling Stones tee-shirt and Guess? jacket, wash away the Lancome lipstick and Vidal Sassoon hairspray, renounce the Pepsi expectation and Nike dictum—Victoria's only secret is the color of her G-string. It is probably safe to say that the performing of a strip-tease is not engaged in with the intention of erasing an otherness—the tease, after all, is the wonder of what may be found beneath the next layer. This is the paratactic logic of masquerade, the game of both/and, removed from, but always intertwined with the syllogistic logic of either/or. Are you with me or not? Are you watching or being watched?

Visually defined otherness may be thought of in terms only operating within the realm of the Symbolic. The body both represents, and is what is represented, "identity is asserted through a process of signification, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses" (Butler 1990:143). The ocular defining of the body fixes it within the Symbolic economy that has the potential to be either bounded or unbounded, depending on who names the symbols, and who listens to the naming.

Body Language

The (re)mark of difference, the marking of difference with verbal acknowledgment, or even perhaps the non-verbal communication of stares, head shakes, unintelligible mutterings under one's breath; these bind the question of otherness to language—voicing the recognition of otherness. Language that communicates a recognition of another's Otherness reinforces both the speaker's otherness from that of the person seen, and incribes the Other in silence. The innocent link between image and language threatens confrontation between the two. Rarely will they carry equal weight; either her image rules the language, or the language rules her image (Foucault 1983:32). Language and image struggle for signifying control. If the image gains control, signifying language will ei-
ther offer an adequate re-presentation or fictively fail. If the language gains control, the weakness or dis(at)traction of the image fails to avoid being locked into signification by the language of the other. In this scenario, the issue of power is most apparent. The otherness of words may offer a convergence between inscription and inscribed, but don’t count on it. As simple as this statement may sound, the attempt by MS. to offer a range of terms for defining one’s otherness is hopelessly inadequate—unless one checks the “no” box.

Despite these criticisms, by engaging issues of otherness MS. gestures toward a third possibility, the poetic space of negative capability: a transformative position that creates a symbiosis between language and image. At this point, where language and image liquify, metaphor allows sight through many eyes, rather than looking at many eyes. Poetic forms allow words their symbolic potential, recognize the constraints of linear language forms to describe non-linear continuous images, and offer the promise of using words to communicate about previously unspeakable places. MS.’s discourse, by raising questions of otherness, seems to be an effort toward the poetic that nonetheless assumes that the power of defining oneself can be done using someone else’s sterile terms. Can spaces for feedback be opened on these, or any specific issues, in useful poetic forms?

The surface play alone, with its variables of language and sight, spirals signifiers which almost seem to mock understanding. In the transferential space of posing questions, the respondent’s performance becomes locked into a fluid chaos that requires her to relinquish her words to the available answers. The scene smacks of court-room semantics; the law of language demanding logic in a testimony subpoenaed by her sex. What drama. From this same stage, the question of an internal otherness that doesn’t visibly manifest on the skin is concealed, hidden under the skin, where the inadequacies of language itself—and these questions in particular—offer the players no release from their scripts.

But those are words...

This layering of persona: game-playing, stripteasing, magazine-mirroring, breast-tracing, masquerading, marking the self with marks on the body, bodies flickering in the pauses of prime-time all the time t.v.; exteriors responding to sight where wom(a)n as always already divided, split; others even to ourselves (Jardine 1985:64). The sterile scientific landscape of positivistic dualism seduces sociology (the MS. version or otherwise) into thinking that traditional discourses are vehicle enough to traverse this multi-dimensional terrain. These methods fail to recognize the mirage in which they move, hallucinating travel toward understanding in the streamlined speed of “Do you consider yourself an Other?” We are/I am/she is left behind, choking in the dust, squinting at the fabrication, wondering what words will eventually give full recognition to the experiences on which it is built.

My eyes are still adjusting to the light. I’d offer to remove the scarf from around your eyes now, but I can’t bear myself away from the view. You don’t mind do you? Wear the blind for just a bit longer, I can see that it doesn’t really bother you.

Works Cited


Gloria Anzaldúa is a Chicana tejana lesbian-feminist poet and fiction writer from south Texas now living in Santa Cruz, California. In the past decade she has helped to change the complexion of North American feminist theory and literature through her personal writing; her organization, editing and spiritual guidance on two collections of creative pieces and theoretical essays by women of color and her continued encouragement of aspiring women writers. We are tremendously pleased to be able to include her thoughts on boundaries and Borderlands.

The intense energy released in Gloria Anzaldua’s first edited collection, This Bridge Called My Back (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983) is still being felt within the literary and feminist communities. In 1990 she edited the expansive Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras (Aunt Lute Foundation Books: San Francisco). Its essays reflect on both the tremendous advances over the decade and the still considerable challenges facing women writers of color. Between these two collections, Gloria Anzaldua published a book of her own work, the genre-bending, multi-lingual Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Co.: San Francisco, 1987). Widely hailed and awarded for its innovative combination of poetry, autobiographical essay, and enabling feminist theory, Borderlands fills in the outlines of the “left handed world” Gloria first sketched in This Bridge Called My Back. Borderlands is an extended meditation both her childhood along the Texas-Mexico border and the historic migrations of “pre-Aztec Indians from what is now the U.S. Southwest to central Mexico and, then, back centuries later as mestizos, blood mixed of Indian and Spanish Conquistadors” (back cover). It is a treasure-trove of evocative, resonant symbolism and dream imagery for people making the dangerous passage beyond static boundaries. One of the crucial images in the book is la nepantla, a long tube or birth canal one moves through in a liminal, post-identitarian state.

La nepantla is a dreamplace, in-between nodes of stability, where identities are multiplied, fragmented and finally shaken off like a snake’s skin. The borderlands dweller is the nimble trickster, la mestiza, as Gloria calls her enabling