

'I is an other': Encountering the Self as Other in Expressive Arts Practice

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Original abstract

'I is an other', I is many others: encountering the self/selves as other in expressive arts practice

In 1871, the poet Arthur Rimbaud declared in a letter 'je est une autre' [I is an other] – an articulation which has resonated in literary history ever since. The materiality of art allows one to encounter oneself as other, and this distance enables perspective, insight and understanding. I want to approach the central questions of the conference from the point of view of a poet moving into interdisciplinary artistic practice as a dancer, and also involved in projects relating to the role of expressive arts in therapy. What is gained in the transition from one art form to another? How is otherness re-encountered, re-exposed, to be made available for critical and personal reflection? Some of these questions have been made possible by my reading of Daniel Stern's notion of vitality dynamics, but Carrie Noland's critical poetics of gesture has also been useful for developing a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the textual and the embodied self. I want to trace this journey through poetry, dance, theory and practice to propose a vision for art and the artist's role in culture which sees no divergence between wellbeing and cultural practice, and which cultivates radical empathy through a committed practice to encountering otherness through creative work.

In 1871 Arthur Rimbaud wrote in a letter to Georges Izambard:

I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a *Seer*: you will not understand this, and I don't know how to explain it to you. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses*. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, to be born a poet, and I know I am a poet. [...] This is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: people think me.—Pardon the pun [penser, "to think"; panser, "to groom"].—I is someone else. (Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Georges Izambard, 1871)

In another letter written two days later to Paul Demeny, Rimbaud developed this idea of the poet as a seer who arrives at vision by a 'long, gigantic and rational *derangement of all the senses*', again reiterating the notion that 'I is someone else' [*Je est un autre*], which has also been translated as 'I is another', 'I is an other' or even 'I am another', as if this seer-dom depends on a kind of self-displacement. Rimbaud's powerfully critical take on the history of poetry and the work of his contemporaries was widely influential, and an example of the long ongoing conceptual dance between literature and psychology.

As Hubert Hermans describes in his introduction (co-written with Thorsten Gieser) to the *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory* (2011), DST brings together the concepts of self and dialogue with their respective philosophical roots in North American pragmatism (James, Mead, Peirce) and European traditions (Buber, Bakhtin):

By bringing the two concepts together in the combined notion of 'dialogical self', the between is interiorized into the within and reversibly, the within is exteriorized into the between. As a consequence, the self does not have an existence separate from society but is part of the society; that is, the self becomes a 'mini-society' or, to borrow a term from Minsky (1985), a 'society of mind'. (p. 15)

This conceptualisation goes further than Rimbaud as if to propose 'I is many others', although it also seems to resonate with Rimbaud's statement 'people think me'. As a consequence of this integration of the concepts of self and dialogue, society is not seen as outside the self, surrounding it, but 'the self is in society and functions as an intrinsic part of it' (p. 15). Hermans and Gieser define the key term *I-position* in the following manner:

The notion of I-position acknowledges the multiplicity of the self, while preserving, at the same time, its coherence and unity. The I, subjected to changes in time and space, is intrinsically involved in a process of positioning and is distributed by a wide variety of existing, new and possible positions (decentring movements). I-positions have their relative autonomy in the self, have their own specific history, and show different developmental pathways [...]. At the same time, the I appropriates or owns some of them and rejects or disowns others (centring movements). (p. 25)

John Rowan usefully describes the work of narrative therapists David Epston and Michael White in creating characters for I-positions such as 'Fear Monster, Sneaky Wee, Sneaky Poo, Concentration, Tantrums, Misery, Guilt, Bad Habits' etc (in Rowan, 9) and it might not be difficult for any of us to come up with characters which represent different I-positions or subpersonalities within the self.

The celebrated New York poet Frank O'Hara's great poem 'In Memory of My Feelings' also goes beyond Rimbaud in his acknowledgement of the multiplicity of the self:

My quietness has a number of naked selves [...]
I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don't know what blood's
in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist in which a face appears
and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana (O'Hara, 1991: 108-109)

And Walt Whitman declares in 'Song of Myself' 'I am large, I contain multitudes'. Crucially for the focus of this conference, it is a key feature of DST that each I-position receives 'a voice to speak from his or her specific point of view and is given the space to express his or her concern in its particularity and uniqueness' (p. 20). As Hermans and Gieser point out:

Therefore, dialogical relationships require the responsibility of all parties involved to contribute to a democratic society in such a way that voices are not silenced, denied or suppressed on the basis of race, gender, age or any other social or personal characteristic. (p. 20)

Hermans and Gieser recount Cooper and Hermans' (2007) analysis of the literature on alterity that refers to 'the acceptance and respect of the "otherness" of the other'. Cooper and Hermans reject the designation of the sameness of the self as they detect it in Levinas's work for example, arguing that the notions of difference, otherness and alterity can be usefully extended from 'the inter personal realm to the intra personal one.' (p. 20) Thus

In this way, alterity can be found and experienced not only between the self and the actual other, but also between different I-positions within the self. The introduction of the notion of self-otherness is not to suggest that alterity exists within a self-contained, isolated monad. Rather, it is to emphasize that otherness enters the self from the most explicitly 'external' realms to the most seemingly 'internal' ones, whether expressed by the voices of actual others, imagined others or the different voices of 'oneself'. (p. 20)

The political charge of this thinking, and its relevance to creative practice as well as therapy, should be clearly evident by now, as well as showing a continuity between literary thinking and psychological thinking about the self and its multiplicity (Bakhtin developed his ideas of dialogic from his studies of Dostoevsky's novels). I want to refer to my own practice as a poet making a journey into a more embodied way of working as a mover/dancer and into interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration with dancers and therapists to generate an example of 'how we can reimagine identity, otherness and the possible in today's changing world' (conference CFP), and resist the hegemonic discourses of polarisation that abound in political life across the globe and which ceaselessly construct otherness in an attempt to legitimise a racist, sexist politics, whether it be Trump's characterization of Mexican immigrants as rapists, or Bolsonaro's anti-indigenous peoples rhetoric, or Putin's stoking of inter-ethnic conflict in Ukraine. I concur with the conference CFP statement that a progressive response to otherness (or at least increased divisions in Western societies) should be based on our 'capacity to revisit our own perceptions, to imagine where we are, to create new realities, to be able to empathise and be open to new emotional experiences' – all of which I think are as essential characteristics of creative/artistic practice as they are of therapy. It's my intuition that if we can strengthen the creative aspects of therapy we enhance its efficacy and can thus help others to develop a more flexible relationship to the othernesses within (and without) so that these tensions have less of an impact socially and enable a greater sense of possibility in personal and social life.

As a writer I think I've always had an intuitive sense of the way in which my practice as a poet – and also my keeping of a writer's notebook – has enabled me to develop a complex and flexible relationship to my experience and sense of self. I have explicitly identified I-positions or parts of self, and have dialogued with them through an almost constant journalling practice over many years. This has also enabled a lot of on the spot processing of various emotional experiences which I believe has contributed positively to good mental health and well-being in adulthood.

Growing up as part of a lower middle-class family in the South of England in the 1970s and 1980s, I came to poetry early through the education system. One of my school teachers – Sue Appleby – supported me by sending me on a creative writing workshop and a teacher I met at a further education college – the poet Robert Sheppard – introduced me to the avant-garde poetry scene in London which revolved around the influences of major figures such as Bob Cobbing, Allen Fisher and Eric Mottram. A journal note that I made in my diary around that time reads: 'it's as if with the other kind of poetry I was writing, I looked in the mirror and saw myself, whereas with this kind of poetry I look into the mirror and see something else' (c. 1990). I developed fast in this environment and began publishing my poetry from about the age of 16, with my first pamphlet of poems appearing at the age of 18. Following a degree in English Literature, and a stint teaching English in Poland, I began a PhD in Creative Writing in 1997, and got my first lectureship teaching Creative Writing in 2004. Thus poetry, and in particular the commitment to experimental writing, has been the mainstay of my personal and professional life for around 30 years.

I realise that this is also a particularly privileged journey. To the extent that experimental poetry has enabled me to encounter the wholeness and multiplicity of my self/selves as projected in the form of the various voices that articulate my poems – whether I identify closely with these narrators as a lyric

poet, or not – this activity is enabled by certain aspects of my background and is also part of a larger cultural history in which the kinds of abstraction that can emerge in an experimental writing practice are inextricably intertwined with the perspective of white culture (as explored in the dance world for example by Miguel Gutierrez in his article ‘Does Abstraction Belong to White People?’) The work of US poet Claudia Rankine, for example in her book *Citizen*, ostensibly adopts some writing strategies associated with the avant-garde, but the politics of the book are precisely engaged with articulating the lived (and/or positional) experience of racism and the deleterious effects it has on a sense of self:

Sometimes ‘I’ is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it.

This makes the first person a symbol for something.

The pronoun barely holding the person together.

Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper knowing we couldn’t win.

You said ‘I’ has so much power; it’s insane. (Rankine, 2014: p. 71)

That said, it’s clear that Rankine recognises the power that creative practice has to facilitate a dialogical process in which different parts of the self can be voiced, can be heard and take their place in the larger society of mind:

Words work as release – well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. [...] What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid – what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise – words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains. (p. 69)

Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity here which points to the nature of language as that which can release but also obscure (‘cover’) the embodied origin of what is felt if not said. But, despite the depredations visited upon it by discriminatory discourses of race, gender, class, disability, age, the body indeed remains.

After fifteen years of creative work as a poet, in 2004 I began practising the Five Rhythms – a movement practice invented by Gabrielle Roth (1941-2012) in the 1960s. My initial experience of improvisationally moving through the structure of Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness was of a radical opening towards my embodied experience which I immediately began to utilise in my writing as it brought me material not just in terms of new experiences but also formal and theoretical ideas. I feel that my Five Rhythms practice (and later a whole other series of embodied research enquiries into Contact Improvisation (Paxton 1972), Authentic Movement (e.g. Whitehouse 1956), Movement Medicine (Darling Khan 2009), Qi Gong and Alexander Technique) functioned as a way of resisting what I felt to be the more disembodied approach of most contemporary avant-garde work in poetry. I found myself combining my regular writing appointments with Five Rhythms classes: writing first and then dancing. My movement practice became a way of continuing the writing process and I was fascinated with the sense that the experiences I was having in movement were in some way akin to the experiences I was used to having in poetry.

As I re-read Roth’s own writings on the Five Rhythms across her books, it becomes clear that certain aspects of her teaching correspond interestingly to Dialogic Self Theory through her use of various Judeo-Christian archetypes. As she describes her approach in *Sweat Your Prayers* (1997):

When ego is directing the show, we’re mere character actors. When the soul is empowered, we have an infinite repertoire of possible roles. We are huge; the only thing that limits us is

our own narrow minds – our fixed ideas of who we are and our fears of innovation and experimentation. In spite of what Shakespeare says, none of us is merely ‘a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.’ We are the whole theatre company – actors, director, producer, costume designer, lighting engineer, ticket agent – and we can choose what we want to perform on any given night: comedy or tragedy, drama or romance. If you’re true to yourself and practice all the parts, every performance can be the performance of a lifetime. (p. 43)

Whilst Roth’s approach is based on an entirely different kind of non-psychological model of the self and its selves, the dynamic interplay here between the multiplicity and coherency of the self seems very much in tune with DST. The specific archetypes that Roth incorporates in her teaching include mother, father, mistress, son, madonna, holy spirit, artist, lover, seeker and alchemist. While such terms carry an extraordinary weight of meaning – of a different order than perhaps the examples cited in John Rowan above, which would seem to relate to more idiosyncratic characteristics – the Five Rhythms can provide a safe container in which to explore one’s relationship to these archetypes and to find the specific qualities of one’s connection to them.

The benefits of this creative dance practice – and the way it has complemented my writing – have been very much compatible with therapeutic goals and aims: helping me to extend my personal repertoire of action and behaviour; improving my aptitude for embodied action and helping me to accept the wholeness of my experience. Importantly it has also involved becoming part of a diverse community of dancers – which means I can feel at home in this practice whether I’m dancing in Manchester, Warsaw or New York City. I find myself with more fluid, flexible choices available to me as I negotiate the othernesses I encounter both within and outside myself. It has also offered a more sustaining and nurturing kind of personal support than the increasingly competitive, career-conscious environment of the avant-garde poetry community, now largely operating within the contemporary capitalist university.

I also have a sense that my creative practice in poetry has influenced my creative capacity as a dancer because of the way that the underlying vitality dynamics of one’s experience can be explored across the boundaries of artistic disciplines (see Stern, 2010). Awareness of this principle in the context of Natalie Rogers’ work on the creative connection (see *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*, 1993) has also been enabling in understanding the usefulness of a multi-modal arts based approach to therapy both for myself but also in helping to promote such an approach in the UK (see Arts for the Blues: www.artsfortheblues.com) — in that it can create a more powerful and effective way to encounter one’s othernesses and develop a more informed, more flexible and more integrated way of being with them.

To end I want to show a brief clip of a recent performance I gave in Berlin. I worked with a poem I wrote which attempts to do the Five Rhythms in language – it begins with a warm-up and then moves through each of the rhythms, exploring them formally but also in terms of the images, feelings and meanings that attach to them. For this presentation I asked five members of the audience (poets and writers known to me, three of whom live in Berlin, a mixture of men and women) to read each section of the poem dealing with a different rhythm whilst I improvised a dance in response. Whereas I have previously performed this poem as a solo reading, and as a solo dance to a voice-over of myself reading the poem, this presentation enabled me to find new material in the diverse, unpredictable deliveries of my readers. It brought the experience of performing closer to a sense of each rhythm and each reader as embodying a different I-position – both familiar and strange at the same time – a kind of drama therapy meets poetry reading. I offer this as just one example of how we might be able to encounter otherness using creative means.

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