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Otherness and the Nature of the Multifaceted Self

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Abstract

The other or otherness is the ability to objectify a part of self, another person, and/or a group of people that results in an imbalance of power. The human ability to other allows for detachment to happen in social and personal relationship, which affects the self-perception and identity. Hegel argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the very nature of an interdependent relationship, which expresses identity through the Lord and bondsman. I will argue how extreme detachment and disassociation between human beings has created a complex phenomenon and has redefined what it means to be human in relation to social superstructures. Social superstructures have defined and created norms and morality of societies and cultures, which then creates a division of those who fit these standards and those who do not. Traditionally philosophy and other forms of academic scholarship have focused upon the inequality of power and privilege and examined the relationship of the oppressed to their oppressor. Oppressed groups then have organized to articulate their collective experience, developed academic theory, and social movements to further identify the reality of otherness they experience. I will further explore this through the scholarship of Patricia HillCollins, Peg O'Connor, and Iris Young. This paradigm as power and oppression is also referenced to as political identity; however, I believe this method stratifies the multifaceted nature of the human self and needs to be restructured to uncover a richer sense of authenticity. In this paper I will argue how paradigms of otherness can be used to positively cultivate the multifaceted parts of the self. As an example of someone who lived out of her multifaceted nature of self, I will examine the life of Gloria Anzaldúa. The two primary aspects of social superstructure influences on the self are societal and relational. I will explore how societal influences are the social groups in which an individual identifies based upon social position and life experience. The multifaceted social parts of the self include: class, race, gender, sexuality, physically and psychologically ability, religion/spirituality, age. Relational influences are the intimate relationships, which influence and shape an individual's identity and perception of self. These multifaceted relational parts include: family and friends. Living towards one's authentic self is complete balance and interaction of all multifaceted parts of the self that make up identity in the pursuit of answering the life long question of, "who am I?" The authentic self is one who can identify the social impositions, which oppress or privilege oneself and recognize the balance of all social roles in relation to personal experience and formation. The authentic self is never completely autonomous but conscious of social barriers or privileges that make up one's personal identity, and is an expression of genuine balance. I believe that Anzaldúa expresses this in her life experiences, as a Chicana Lesbian, and so I will reference her experiences to further examine these arguments.

Introduction

Traditionally philosophy and other forms of scholarship have focused upon the inequality of power and privilege by examining the relationship between the oppressed to their oppressor. The human ability to other allows for detachment to happen in social and personal relationship, which affects self-perception and identity. In this paper, I will argue how paradigms of otherness can allow people to cultivate the multifaceted parts of the self. I will further explore this through a philosophical analysis of Goerg Hegel, Iris Young, Patricia Hill Collins, and Peg O'Connor. As an example of someone who lived out of her multifaceted nature of self, I will examine the life of Gloria Anzaldúa, a Lesbian Chicana from South Texas, who was a renowned writer and educator.

Defining other and otherness

The Other or otherness is the ability to objectify a part of self, another person, and/or a group of people that results in an imbalance of power. Hegel argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the process of otherness begins within the self (112). The self experiences otherness in dualistic relationship where one part of the soul is able to look upon the other part of the soul and come to greater understanding of itself (Hegel 111). His ideas then lead into his argument of how people can be objectified in a master slave relationship because one has the ability to have a divided soul and objectify a part of oneself (Hegel 112). The dynamic of power that exists between the master and the slave is motivated by fear and the ability to objectify a human person (Hegel 116). Therefore, the disconnection of power that exists between the master and slave have a dependent relationship for one cannot exist completely without the other just as the soul cannot be split and exist in separate entities.

The work and criticisms of otherness have often been a negative analysis of how an individual or social group ought to live and be out of one particular part of the multifaceted identity. This would include a person being labeled specifically based upon his/her race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. Iris Young, in her work *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, argues “Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces and self identification that define the group as a group” (43). She later continues, “Group meanings partially constitute people’s identities in terms of the cultural forms, social situation, and history that group members know as theirs, because these meanings have been either forced upon them or forged by them for both” (Young 43). Young has articulated the importance of someone recognizing particular attributes of his/her self in order to provide reference to his/her historical and personal experience in relation to his/her a particular social group such as a woman identifying her

difference because of her racial identity and identifying as a woman of color. As a woman of color she is able to identify her experience as unique from that of white women, because she is not only oppressed by sexism but racism as well. Gloria Anzaldúa in “An Interview with Jamie Lee Evans” supports Young’s arguments as she discusses the experience of women of color. Anzaldúa states:

Women of color especially because we’ve been taught to be in this kind of oppressed/oppressor role—slave and slave owner. So when somebody who has control over us is in dialogue with us, we unknowingly fall into assuming a subordinate role. And the other automatically assumes the role of control, the role of the oppressor...Always people fall into the roles they’ve been indoctrinated into. Decolonizing oneself from this kind of oppressor/oppressed role is both personal and political, inner and outer. (Keating 200)

In this statement Anzaldúa brings attention to the complexity of how the Hegelian relationship of interdependence affect self-identity for women of color in their experience of having a dialogue with men or white people. Therefore, not only men oppress a woman of color but also white women, so when Anzaldúa enters into dialogue with a man or white woman it is easy to assume her socialize position as oppressed.

Patricia Hill Collins provides support for Young’s argument; identity is defined and reinforced by one’s social group and status. Hill Collins argues Black women have historically been defined by White male epistemology, which not only incorrectly defines Black women’s identity but socially effects roles and expectations of what it means to be a Black woman. In Hill Collins article “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought” she argues, “First, defining and valuing one’s consciousness of one’s own self-defined standpoint in the face of images that foster a self-definition as the objectified ‘other’ is an important way of resisting the dehumanization essential to systems of domination. The status of being the ‘other’ implies being ‘other than’ or different from the assumed norm of white male behavior,” (S18). Here Hill Collins brings attention to the process of alienation experienced by Black women because of racist and sexist social constructs, which define what it means to be a socially acceptable human being. I would argue that this specific type of othering referred to by Hill Collins encourages the perception of someone being limited to a specific social or political identity.

Necessity of Self-Examination to Recognize Divisions

If one is not critical or aware of oppressive social structures and how they affect his/her identity then he/she cannot truly know his/her self, and can be limited to identifying to a fractional part of his/her self. He/she then lives and perpetuates the Hegelian system

of the Master-Slave dialectic because part of his/her identity is dependent upon the oppressed or oppressor. He/she cannot see the multifaceted nature of his/her self without a critical examination or understanding that race, gender, sexuality, class, age and so forth all make up parts of “who I am.” All of these socially influenced identities affect self-perception and therefore, one must become more self-aware and critical of what societal constructs are being imposed on him/her (Young 45-46).

Division puts the self into crisis; therefore, making it difficult to know the multifaceted nature of one’s self. Returning the example of a woman of color she cannot exist as only a woman or only her race because the two constantly give her a unique experience as a woman of color. This not only applies to one’s personal experience but all because the social forces that influence identity are made up of complex and distinct combinations. Moreover, the White male exists with his privilege just as much as a woman of color exists with her experience of oppression. The key then is to allow for the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, etc. to be recognized and sit with the complexity of their constant interaction.

The problem is that social superstructures have politically stratified the self and this causes one to experience the encounter of otherness within his/her self to be a negative. This for example can be seen in a White homosexual man. He has the privilege of other White men, but because of his sexuality is oppressed by the dominant heterosexual group. Young defines this as double consciousness. She states, “Double consciousness, then occurs because one finds one’s being defined by two cultures: a dominant and a subordinate culture,” (Young 60). Therefore, when a White homosexual man encounters his sexuality for this first time as something other than heterosexual, because of the social superstructure of homophobia and gender expectations of masculinity, this can be a negative internal experience of otherness that leads him to reject or repress this part of himself. In “An Interview with Christine Weiland” Anzaldúa emphasizes this point as she says, “There’s parts of you that are not permissible and therefore they don’t exist. You have to be like the rest of us. We have to recognize the total self, rather than just one part and start to be true to that total self, that presence, that soul,” (Keating 103). In support of the later part of Anzaldúa statement, I would like to argue that the negative structure of otherness can be used for the benefit of uncovering the complex nature of the multifaceted self and allow for a person to realize the complex interaction of his/her identity with awareness of privilege and/or oppression.

Social superstructures and dynamics of privilege and oppression

Social superstructures are a culmination of ideas which have evolved over time and categorize individuals and groups based upon seen and unseen characteristics. Social

superstructures evolve and define social norms and morality. Anzaldúa expresses how social superstructures affected the way in which she self-identified as she said, “I use labels because we haven’t gotten beyond race or class or other differences yet. When I don’t assert certain aspects of my identity like the spiritual part of my queerness, they get overlooked and I’m diminished,” (Keating 77). Otherness comes from social superstructures that presuppose the identity of a person based upon prejudices and stereotypes. Young argues, “Eliminating oppression thus requires eliminating groups. People should be treated as individuals, not as members of groups, and allowed to form their lives freely without stereotypes or group norms,” (46). However, social superstructures such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. influence interaction between people, which leads to psychological social conditioning that determines what it means to be human. Since Anzaldúa identified as Chicana she did not confine herself to whatever stereotypes are implied with that social identity, because those stereotypes come from a racist background, rather her identification as Chicana gives recognition to her difference from other women and Chicano men. Her identification as Chicana also provides context to her unique experience with oppressive social superstructures of racism, sexism, and classism.

Extreme detachment and disassociation between human beings has created a complex phenomenon and has redefined what it means to be human in relation to social superstructures. As Young states, “The self is a product of social processes, not their origin,” (45) she provides an understanding that the self experiences socialization which causes one to react to a part of their multifaceted identity in a particular way. In Chapter 7 of *Oppression and Responsibility* by Peg O’Connor, she provides an example through her critique of collective and shared responsibility of White people and racism to bring further attention to the danger in succumbing to the traditional Hegelian dialectic. O’Connor argues that White people are connected by their racial identity, not because of a specific commonality that makes all white people the same, but because White people are interwoven by overlapping social constructs of power and privilege (127-128). “These crisscrossings include, but are not limited to, light skin color and other physical attributes, family membership, benefits enjoyed in a system of privilege, social history, societal expectations, socioeconomic status, career options, speech patterns, music, segregations, and numerous other things,” (O’Connor 128). This is due to a system of inequality where White people in their relationship to others are able to perpetuate racist social behaviors and attitudes, which continues to reinforce stereotypes and a cycle of racial oppression. Therefore, the socialization of White people comes from a racist background of inequality and no matter one’s experience he/she shares in this collective identity and hence is called to collective responsibility for how he/she acts out of this part of his/her self to people of color.

Multifaceted nature of self

The self has two major social influences societal and relational. Societal are the social groups, which an individual identifies with based upon social position and life experience. These multifaceted societal parts include: class, race, gender, sexuality, physically and psychologically ability, religion/spirituality, age. Relational are the intimate relationships, which influence and shape an individual's identity and perception of self. These multifaceted relational parts include: family and friends.

The authentic self is of complete balance and interaction of all multifaceted parts of the self that make up identity in the pursuit of answering the life long question of, "who am I?" In "An Interview with Linda Smuckler" Gloria Anzaldúa said:

To me spirituality, sexuality, and the body have been about taking back that alien other...I believe you have to incorporate all the pieces you've cut off, not give the ego such a limelight but give some of the other parts a limelight. I need to accept all the pieces: the fucked-up Glorias go with compassionate, loving Glorias; they're all me. To say I'm going to get rid of this Gloria or that Gloria is like chopping off an arm or leg...There are different gradations of otherness. When I got so far from my feelings, my body, my soul I was like—like, other other other. But then something kept snapping. I had to gather; I had to look at all these walls, divisions, gradations of being other other other, and determine where they all belonged. (Keating 40-41)

In this way Anzaldúa was able to encounter the multifaceted nature of her self as other. She used these experiences to bring attention to the points of rupture or tension within herself. Therefore, she was able to understand that she needed to recognize these divisions and barriers to allow for all the complex parts of her self to interact.

The authentic self is one who can identify the social impositions, which oppress or privilege oneself and recognize the balance of all social roles in relation to personal experience and formation. The authentic self is never completely autonomous but conscious of social barriers or privileges that make up one's personal identity, and is an expression of genuine balance. For Anzaldúa she is able to express this in her interview with Andrea Lunsford as she describes her understanding of herself as Chicana. She says:

I try to articulate ideas from that place of occupying both territories the territory of my past, my ethnic community—my home community, the Chicano Spanish, the Spanglish—the territory of formal education, the philosophical, educational, and political ideas I've internalized just by being alive. Both traditions are within me. I can't disown the white tradition, the Euro-American tradition, and

more than I can the Mexican, the Latino, or the Native, because they're all in me. (Keating 254)

In this statement Anzaldúa is able to express the complexity of her ethnic and racial identity as Chicana. She acknowledges the privilege that comes from her Spanish descent, the oppression of being Mexican and Native giving voice to the complex history of Chicano people, but also articulates her position in knowing her community and personal history. This is critical in the formation of self-identity and demonstrates the complexity of each part of the multifaceted self. However, Anzaldúa demonstrates the kind of necessary balance to live authentically in her conversation with Jamie Lee Evans as she states, “ I have a good relationship with my different parts, my different selves, I carry this inner relationship outward and have good relationships with others—with you, my sister, my mother, my love, and the community. But one does not come before the other; they're all simultaneous” (Keating 195).

When one knows or comes to consciousness of the multifaceted nature of the self, including the complex position of privilege and oppression between these parts and can find a means of not only co-existence, but in complete balance, then one can truly live authentically. As Gloria Anzaldúa says, “To be healthy, you must awaken a sense of who you are and keep it strong and assert that you're OK, that you're not sick, that society—religion, political systems, morality, the movie, the media, the newspapers—that they're all wrong and that you're right” (Keating 122). Therefore, self-identity consciousness comes from material and social experience—the otherness defined by society, created over time and established as a background of social human existence, and can be used to further understand the multifaceted nature of the self to live towards authenticity. Every part of one's identity is critical then for humans to exist in the world to achieve justice and ever conceive a common good. A person then can never be defined by one part of one's self such as race, sexuality, gender, class because then one's identity is socially othered and encourages a type of living towards a self, which will never be authentic.

When a person can name all systems of privilege and oppression in the self this not only empowers one's identity but also reconstructs the entire understanding of how one can exist with contrasting social parts of personal identity. The White homosexual man can then understand his position of privilege through his process of self-awareness of his White identity in comparison to other races. He can also understand his gender identity as masculine or feminine as distinct from his sexuality. But ultimately he can understand his position of oppression as a homosexual being in relation to the dominant heterosexual culture, and therefore live out his sexuality rather than repressing its' existence. He has used the initial negative experience of his sexuality as other for his benefit to live towards his more authentic being.

Conclusions

It is critical then to not only recognize or acknowledge the other but the entire social paradigm, which reinforces the understanding of the multifaceted nature of one's self. This is because one moves beyond the structure of privilege and oppression to understand his/her self when he/she not only recognize "who I am", oppressed or privileged, but how the call to a greater self-recognition leads one to responsibility to the nature of the society in which one lives. For the recognition of "who I am" in relationship to society are parts of my authentic nature and critical to my process of self-awareness. One then is not limited to solely politically defining his/her identity because he/she exists as the constant combination of many parts of his/her self: class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. He/she is not confined to the others perception and so must participate in the movement toward the multifaceted authentic nature of the self. When a person can name all systems of privilege and oppression in the self this not only empowers one's identity, rather this recognition reconstructs the entire understanding of how one can exist with contrasting social parts of personal identity. One is not dependent upon a particular social superstructure determining self-identity but the complex intersection; therefore, one can experience how one is other and othered. The complex relationship of privilege and oppression can intermingle because these structures in fact intersect in one's self-being. Gloria Anzaldua has exemplified how one can become self-aware of the multifaceted nature of self through her life experiences as a Lesbian Chicana writer from South Texas. She has expressed that this experience is not only be limited to an internal experience but lived towards authenticity in the world.

Otherness can become engaged with preexisting social superstructures and allow people to positively cultivate the multifaceted parts of the self. One can then realize how societal and relational social forces influence and make up self-identity. One has the freedom and ability to reclaim parts of identity through the development of social consciousness and examination of personal experience, which consequently reconstructs one's perception of social superstructures. Essentially, otherness can also be used to discover greater things about one's self, another person, and/or a group of people if one is not seeking to prove anything more of his/her own identity and existence and can authentically engage in the world.

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