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Creative and Critical Reflexivity: Queer Writing as an Ethics of the Self

Abstract:

Michel Foucault advocated an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity that constituted a kind of self-bricolage; a making and re-making of subjectivity that he saw as an aesthetic struggle towards an artistic ideal. Foucault described this process as an *ethics of the self*. The purpose of this transformative self-bricolage is to make philosophy a “way of life”.

One of the examples Foucault gave of a technique used in such an ethics of the self—implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject—was reflective writing. To put it simply, for Foucault certain kinds of writing are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self. This can be said to be more so when that writing is informed or organised by a philosophy of some kind that is applied as a way of life.

This paper explores the ways that writing informed by Queer Theory can be used as a technique in a Foucauldian ethics of the self. The paper further argues that Creative Writing is an appropriate site for ‘ethical interventions’ into subjectivity and for explorations into how philosophy, in this case Queer Theory, can be applied as a way of life in which new forms of subjectivity are explored and produced.

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Keywords:

Ethics of the self—Foucault—Queer Writing

The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity.

- Michel Foucault (cited in Martin et al 1988: 27)

Introduction

Michel Foucault argues that who one is emerges out of the problems with which one struggles (Foucault 1997). Foucault advocates an ongoing investigation or struggle with the self—an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity—that constitutes a kind of self-bricolage; a making and re-making of subjectivity that can be seen as an aesthetic struggle towards an artistic ideal (Foucault 1997). Foucault describes this process as an ethics of the self (Foucault 1986). He illuminates the purpose of this process when he writes:

...the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self (Foucault 1997: 208).

The purpose of this creative self-bricolage is to make philosophy a “way of life”, and an aesthetics. In this sense, subjectivity itself can be seen as an aesthetic practice; the making of the self is an art. Foucault refers to this process, this ethics of the self, as an *aesthetics of existence* (Foucault 1997, Thompson 2003: 123). It could be said that the creative artefact emerges from this struggle as well.

In fact, much of the work of self-(re)making has traditionally occurred in the creative arts which have historically been a domain of self-enquiry, self-exploration and “self transformation”. Indeed, the Foucauldian subject and creative texts share fundamental characteristics: they are both discursive, they both pursue aesthetic goals and, perhaps most significantly, they are both creative not only in form but also in the ways that they are constituted. Given this, creative writing can be seen as an appropriate site for *interventions* in subjectivity and for explorations into how specific philosophies or theories might be applied as a way of life.

One of the principle examples Foucault gives of a technique used in such an ethics of the self—implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject—is reflective writing (Foucault 1997). This writing produces the desired subject through a process of self-analysis or reflexivity, of questioning the condition and conduct of the self in order to construct a subjectivity in line with one’s ethics (Ambrosio 2008). To put it simply, for Foucault certain kinds of writing are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self. As Faust (1988) argues, this can be said to be more so when that writing is informed or organised by a philosophy of some kind that is applied as a way of life.

This is a direct reversal of the dominant model of the writer whose genius produces creative texts that are a direct reflection of that writer’s identity (Weisberg 1993). In this Foucauldian model, it is the practice of writing, and the reading of texts and discourse, that produce the writer’s subjectivity; a subjectivity that reflects not an essential, inner identity but rather the discourses with which it has engaged (or struggled).

This paper explores the ways that writing informed by Queer Theory can be used as a technique in a Foucauldian ethics of the self (or self-bricolage). The paper further argues that

creative writing can be used as an ‘ethical intervention’ into subjectivity and for explorations into how philosophy, in this case Queer Theory, can be applied as a way of life in which new forms of subjectivity are explored and produced.

The Aesthetics of Existence: A Productive Ethics

Ramos (1994) argues that in Foucauldian thought there is a clear distinction between moral and social codes (rules and precepts) and the practice of ethics. For Foucault, ethics is concerned with the kind of relationship one has to oneself, how one constitutes oneself as an ethical subject (Foucault 1997, Rabinow 1997). Thompson (2003) argues that Foucault saw freedom as a prerequisite for the practice of ethics and saw the practice of ethics as constituting a kind of freedom. By freedom, Foucault means simply the ability to choose one action or direction over another (Thompson 2003). In this context, freedom is the ability to choose between one subjectivity and/or life trajectory over another.

A Foucauldian ethics of the self is a ‘direct political response to normalization’s effect of blocking us from asserting an identity, a self, and a future of our own making’ (Infinito 2003: 160). Infinito argues that underlying a Foucauldian ethics is the fact that the ‘discursive construction of identity as internal and enduring serves to perpetuate existing power structures’ (2003: 163). Therefore, Foucault proposed an ethical practice that was a reworking of subjectivity. This subjectivity was one that was perpetually reforming itself and that capitalised on its own mutability and discursiveness.

Foucault’s model of ethics is not focussed on an external moral or social code but rather on subjects’ relationship with themselves (Rabinow 1997). This relationship has at its heart how subjects conduct themselves (Thompson 2003) and critically contemplate their own and others’ lives (Infinito 2003). In Foucauldian ethics, the subjects’ attention to conduct and contemplation or reflection on life is linked to the notion of *critique* (Thompson 2003). Foucault posits that the purpose of critique is ‘to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the type of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries’ (cited in Thompson 2003: 122). This critique is harnessed to a process of self-formation, or self-bricolage (Rabinow 1997), in which subjects fashion for themselves ‘a mode of being’ that emerges from their own history and their own ‘critical and creative thinking and action’ (Infinito 2003:160).

Although Foucauldian ethics rejects external moral codes (Thompson 2003), and therefore is not extrinsic in character, it is not wholly internalised or obsessively introspective either. A Foucauldian ‘care for the self’ does not exclude a concern and acknowledgement of the contribution to our own being—especially with regards to its constitution—of others. Thompson (2003: 125) illustrates this point when he writes:

An “aesthetics of existence” means then that just as any technician, artisan, or artist, always crafts a new work under the guidance of critical scrutiny, examining what has been achieved thus far, recalling the rules of the art itself, and comparing the former against the latter, working under the direction of critical inspection, reminding ourselves constantly of the fundamental rule of this unique art, the principle of autonomy, not, of course, as a judge, assessing guilt, but as a craftsperson shaping new forms of existence, always comparing what we’ve made for its fidelity to the project and activity of self-formation itself.

In other words, an ethics of the self is a socially embedded creative practice that, though without an overarching moral trajectory, does have some aspects of “normalization” (Thompson 2003), though a normalization harnessed to the autonomy of self-formation.

Thus, Infinito argues, ‘the locus of ethical activity is not in the solitary mind, nor even the will, but rather in the critical and creative capacities brought forth in praxis’ (Infinito 2003: 160). The critical and creative practice that Foucault saw as the principle field of this ethical activity, this aesthetics of existence, was reflective writing.

Queer Writing: An Exemplar of an Aesthetics of Existence

Creative Writing as a discipline offers a clear example of the relationship between discourse and writing and the constitution of subjectivities in a Foucauldian ethics of the self. John Ambrosio (2008: 264), citing Faust, describes how writing acts on and with subjectivity when he argues:

As a form of reflection and experimentation, writing is a technology of ethical self-formation that views the subject as a work of art and the self as an artefact, as an ongoing work in progress. When conjoined with a philosophical “attitude of resistance that incites new ways of thinking about the forms of experience”, writing enables individuals to begin to “question and modify those systems which make only particular kinds of action possible.

Queer Theory is such a ‘philosophical attitude of resistance’ that ‘incites new ways of thinking about... forms of experience’ (Faust 1988: 188) and which makes a wider range of actions and performativities possible.

Queer Theory has its origins in Poststructuralism (Jagose 1996) and employs a number of Poststructuralism’s key ideas (Spargo 1999). As Spargo (1999: 41) argues, Queer Theory employs:

Lacan’s psychoanalytic models of decentred, unstable identity, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures, and... Foucault’s model of discourse, knowledge and power.

Queer Theory’s principle focus is the denaturalisation of categories/norms (Sullivan 2003, Jagose 1996, de Lauretis 1991) and abrading the borders between binary terms like male/female, natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black, self/other.

The work of Queer Theory is one of deconstruction (Spargo 1999, Jagose 1996); to dissect and alter how we think about and *live* core aspects of human subjectivity such as identity, sex/gender, race and sexuality. This work is undertaken in the context of a culture steeped in heteronormativity – the discourse and practice of presumed and privileged heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 106).

Queer Theory works to undermine the privileged position of heteronormativity by exposing the ways in which sexualities and genders are produced in/by discourse and the ways in which non-normative genders and sexualities resist, transcend and trouble normative notions of sex, gender and sexuality categories that would otherwise be widely (mis)understood as somehow natural, essential or incontestable. From a Queer Theory perspective, genders and

sexualities (and subjectivities) are fluid, permeable, mutable and largely the result of repeatedly performed utterances, rituals and behaviors; or *performativity* (Butler 1993).

Queer Writing, then, is a writing practice that foregrounds the performativity of subjectivities (especially in regard to genders and sexualities) and that produces texts which also foreground the performative whilst simultaneously denaturalising categories or norms and abrading the borders between binary terms. Significantly, Queer Writing does not frame the creative text as an expression of the internal identity of the author (Stephens 2009). Instead, the queer (or homoerotic) content of a creative text is seen as a discursive sexual non-normativity mobilised within the text to disrupt heteronormativity rather than as the (autobiographical) reflection of the author's sexuality or identity/subjectivity (Stephens 2009).

Queer Writing also displaces the entrenched and essentialist model of creative genius whilst simultaneously 'disrupting the notion that discursive subjectivities appearing within literary texts are representations of the internal, stable identity of the creator' (Baker 2011: 8). Instead, Queer Writing foregrounds the appearance of subjectivities within texts as a *deployment* or intervention into discourse for a critical or creative purpose (Baker 2011). Thus, the writing of queer subjectivities into literature is not seen as a reflection of a writer's identity, a representation of some imagined 'internal' self, but rather 'as a deliberate inscription and dissemination of non-normative discursive subjectivities' (Baker 2011: 8).

As mentioned in the Introduction, Foucault (1997) uses reflective writing as an exemplar of a *technique of the self* implemented to produce a desired non-normative subjectivity. Foucault (1986) demonstrates how certain forms of reflective writing produce the subject through a process of critical self-analysis of one's conduct and of one's historical and social position. This self-analysis, or critique, aligns the self with one's ethics that are themselves formed in response to, and indeed in resistance to, dominant forms and norms of subjectivity (Ambrosio 2008, Thompson 2003, Martin et al 1988). This critique is undertaken principally in the act of writing. One's analysis is written down, reflected over, and these writings are then used in the refinement of the self; in the production and maintenance of a new ethical subjectivity. Foucault demonstrates how this writing as self-formation has historically been tied to a philosophical or moral tradition in which the desired subjectivity was one in line with specific moral or philosophical tenets (Foucault 1986). This being the case, a reflective writing informed by Queer Theory can also be used in the process of self-formation, as a *queered aesthetics of existence* applied as a way of life, in order to constitute new (and radical) queer subjectivities.

According to Foucault (1996), 'there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere' but rather the subject/subjectivity is 'constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty... on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment' (452). There is no 'authentic, foundational or necessary self waiting to be discovered and liberated' (Ambrosio 2008: 253). Subjectivity (in particular gender and sexual subjectivity) is constituted in the interplay and correlation between 'types of understanding, forms of normativity and modes of relation to oneself and others' (Foucault 1986: 4). Furthermore, 'subjects can occupy a variety of positions both "subject to" discipline

and capable of “self-constitution”; albeit within the resources offered by his/her culture, society and social group’ (Foucault cited in Bailey 2005: 122).

In this sense, self-bricolage through writing is a practice of liberty or practice of the self that, as an aspect of the queer cultural environment, informs and alters the way subjects actively constitute themselves. In other words, creative and critical texts arising out of a queered aesthetics of existence ‘are “models” that strongly influence the ongoing *becoming* of queer subjectivities’ (Baker 2011: 11).

Drawing on Foucault, Judith Butler writes that ‘to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effect of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life’ (1990: 184) (emphasis original). Subjectivity, like creative writing, is a practice that is dynamic, reflective and creative.

Butler (2004) further argues that an experience of an alternate or different subjectivity can ‘undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one’ (1). In other words, an experience of a non-normative subjectivity in discourse or creative text can, to use Butler’s terminology, ‘undo’ one’s personhood and facilitate the emergence of a new subjectivity. Foucault described a similar process by which new subjectivities formed through the ‘appropriation, the unification, of a fragmentary and selected already said’ (1997: 209). In the context of Queer Theory, this process of undoing and/or (re)constituting subjectivities is an act of resistance against heteronormativity. This resistance, this re-making of identity, is not without limits or challenges; it is not total voluntarism (Butler 2004). As Ambrosio (2008: 255), pointing to some of these challenges and constraints, argues:

We cannot transform ourselves through a simple act of knowing, through critical reason or reflection alone, but only by *risking* who we are, by... seeking out and testing ourselves in situations that illuminate the contours of our subjectivity, that destabilize our certainties.... Transforming the self requires that we act with personal courage and develop a tolerance for uncertainty and vulnerability. (emphasis original)

This exposure to new subjectivities or discourses (the ‘already said’) can occur at the point of reception but also, significantly, in the performative moment of production. The practice of writing can provide ‘a means by which individuals... transform themselves, reconstitute themselves as ethical subjects through reading, ...reflection, and practical experimentation’ (Ambrosio 2008: 265). This process of ‘undoing’ in which new subjectivities emerge can be described as a ‘queering of the self’.

It can be extrapolated then that a ‘queering of the self’—facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory in the context of an aesthetics of existence—can enrich and inform writing practice and research; in effect bringing them into operation as a mutually interconnected self-bricolage.

This queering of the self/subjectivity is in effect a *denaturalising* of the self – a decoupling of identity from notions of the natural. In other words, a queered self is one in which subjectivity and identity are not conceived as somehow natural and stable but rather understood to be ambiguous, ephemeral, fluid and largely produced by discourse in relationship with socio-cultural factors. This conception of the self and subjectivity opens up the possibility of the writer-researcher occupying a wider range of reading and writing

'positions' in ways that enrich both the creative act and research processes. Movement into and out of these reading and writing positions is facilitated by the practice of writing and reflection (on what has been written) which are both techniques of a critique of the self. This practice of reflective writing opens up new possibilities of experience, and facilitates the emergence of new forms of subjectivity, as Foucault (cited in Martin et al 1988: 28) describes with relation to the practice of reflective writing in the Classical era:

A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent.

A queered aesthetics of existence can also provide writer-researchers with tools to explore notions of sexual and gender difference in ways that produce more than a theoretical understanding. As Foucault (1978) argues, in his groundbreaking text *The History of Sexuality*, any strategy aimed at resisting the discursive mechanisms of power that are engaged in the deployment of a narrowly defined sexuality, including mechanisms of repression, must involve a transgression of laws, a dismantling of prohibition and an 'irruption of speech' (5). Therefore, Foucault writes, 'one cannot hope to obtain the desired results simply from... a theoretical discourse, however rigorously pursued' (1978: 5). Thus, it is apparent that using non-theoretical ways of exploring and communicating the knowledges produced in writing research and practice are appropriate and, furthermore, a means of equipping queer writer-researchers with 'technologies of the self' (Ramos 1994: 21) that resist heteronormative discourse and normative models of subjectivity.

Conclusion

To summarise, a queered aesthetics of existence is a set of entwined practices including research, creative writing, reflection, engagement with theory and subjectivity that lead to identifiable outcomes that include critical and creative artefacts exploring and expressing performative genders and sexualities but also new or emergent subjectivities.

There are certain limits to positioning subjectivity as a core element to creative practice. It is crucial that the model of subjectivity used in a subjectivity-centred creative practice is not one that entrenches rather than disrupts the notion of subjectivity as stable, lasting and unified. For a queered aesthetics of existence to be effective, the model of subjectivity deployed 'must be one that destabilizes the notion of identity/subjectivity as unitary, fixed and somehow natural' (Baker 2011: 15). A subjectivity-centred approach that views identity as natural and inherent to the subject, and sees the creative artefact as a direct reflection of the creator's identity, is little more than a return to the essentialist model of the creative genius (Baker 2011).

By deploying a model of subjectivity that destabilises the notion of identity/subjectivity as unitary, fixed and somehow natural, a 'queering of the self'—facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory in the context of an aesthetics of existence—can enrich and inform writing practice and research; in effect bringing them into operation as a mutually interconnected Foucauldian self-bricolage.

An ethics of the self, or self-bricolage through writing, is a practice of liberty that has the potential to inform and alter the way subjects actively constitute themselves. Furthermore, creative and critical texts arising out of a queered aesthetics of existence can act as 'models' that strongly influence the ongoing *becoming*, and ethical refinement, of queer subjectivities.

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