Patchwork and embroidered stories: ‘Playing at/as being authentic’

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Introduction
To be authentic is to be true to oneself in how one conducts oneself. Thus authenticity - being authentic - is a serious business: a matter of high moral purpose and integrity. It is lucky for those of us who aspire to seriousness and high moral purpose, but who do not wish to be stuck with solemnity and earnestness, that the achievement (and continued re-achievement) of authenticity may be found in play. This is the suggestion made in this article.

It is true that achieving authenticity is indeed difficult, and that realising it may be the product of some earlier pain. Indeed, difficulty and pain are often felt precisely as a result of being forced to be inauthentic: to play false by oneself; to play out a part instead of being open. At the same time, an individual can use her difficulty and pain to come to authenticity through an ability to be playful when playing false, and to take playing a part as role-play. This play is naughty, rather than innocent.

Women’s selves and identities are affected by their sex and gender. Four possibilities for this are to be found in feminist ontologies of self. First, that authenticity (finding a real self) is only to be achieved by undoing the adverse effects of conditioning on the core self. Second, authenticity and a connected self are damaging fictions of humanism. Third, authenticity is to be judged precisely in relation to political formations such as gender or race: the politics of identity. Fourth (my own view) authenticity and a connected (real but changing) self are possible for constructed, unified but non-unitary selves. The possibility of such unification is also a necessary pre-condition of

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authenticity.

The argument for my view of the self is based on a method explained in my book, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity*,\(^1\) which draws on autobiographical narratives while maintaining a reflexive, critical distance from them. It is predicated on attention being paid to: the voices of personal experience; the politics of whose voice gets heard (and then becomes woven into large-scale theories); and the importance of weaving personal accounts into a perspective capable of challenging coercive orthodoxies of the mainstream. The method depends on an iterative process of using two sources in conversation with each other: these two sources are autobiographical narratives and academic theories, including, but not only, orthodox ones. Autobiographical material is chosen to include material written from a number of different political positions: for instance in relation to race, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, ethnicity, disability, and age.

A theory of self has emerged from my use of critical autobiographies. I have named it a patchwork self: that is, neither a unity nor fragmented. It is a patchwork in which new patches join, adjoin or obscure what is already there, changing it in the process. It is never possible to throw away the whole construction and start again. This web or patchwork self has agency and connection.

**Questions of Authenticity: Patchwork stories**

The idea of a patchwork self is one which sheds light on the framing of key questions for women about authenticity. In the course of a struggle for justice, urgent questions for us women (as for other Others), are related to individual and collective changes of identity. As individuals change, they are faced with questions of the kind: ‘Is this still really me? - after changes to my feelings; and changes to my ways of understanding and reacting to them.’ ‘As I change, am I being true to myself?’

**Method**

I begin with myself and pieces of my own autobiography. These are pieces of autobiography that are told at this particular time in my life, against a understanding of my life and how incidents in it fit into the whole. Most obviously, they are theoretically informed by the theory of the self that I
have been describing in this article: a theory which was itself informed by some of these pieces. This is well explained by Maggie MacLure:

> They involve a kind of retrospective search for the prospective significance of events and decisions, in which the seemingly innocent temporal relationship between past, present and future is confounded and displaced.²

Other autobiographical narratives have been chosen partly because their subjects are not full members of the (relatively more male, more rich, more white) groups which give rise to the mainstream voices of orthodox theory.

**Stories of changes and connections**

> Let me tell you where I come from. When I was a child I lived in East Africa in the country now called Tanzania. It was a colonial childhood. My father was in the British Administration of the country. I was the third generation on my father’s side, and the second on my mother’s, to be born out of England, and to be born in a different country from my grandparents. My mother and father were born in South Africa and my paternal grandfather in India. To continue this story of migration, my paternal grandmother was from Scotland, my paternal great-grandfather from Wales. Only my mother’s parents were born and raised in England, the country I have always regarded as my own - although I have a Welsh name and now call myself ‘British’. Recently I made a brief visit to East Africa. I ‘came home’ to the sights and smells of my childhood - but I was not at home. But nor am I at home in England, at least not compared to English friends (white and black) who are inclined to argue passionately about which part of England is theirs. (Is this an English obsession? It is not mine!) Or compared to those whose siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins are mostly in England, not, like mine, in three other continents.

*This is not just a story of geography or citizenship. It is also a story of different migrant cultures and the movement from one to the other. I notice that as a small child of four or five I must have been actively working to understand the social position of my family in my world of colonial administrators, in spite of my parents’ principled resistance to*
the enterprise. I asked my mother ‘Who is higher, Daddy or Mr Clarke?’ My mother, understanding very well what I meant, tried to head me off by answering in terms of physical height. I relapsed into silence, wondering why she couldn’t understand such an obvious question. I wondered: Had I perhaps misphrased it? When I was ten I moved to England. Not surprisingly, I did not understand the class system very well, nor the politics it engendered. Here my parents were of limited help because they did not relate to it particularly clearly either. In fact British politics in general were not of great interest in our household. On the other hand, for me as a young teenager, South African politics had a peculiar salience. My mother expressed horror at Sharpeville and admiration of Mandela, and did so with a feeling that British politics did not arouse.

I also had to learn a new everyday culture: What was Wimbledon? What was the top ten? I pretended interest and kept my mouth shut until I gained enough knowledge to pass. Much of my own childhood culture of, for instance, turning pumice stone fragments into boats in the irrigation furrows, or explorations in the coffee plantations became something peculiar to me, which bore little relation to life in England. I don’t remember missing all that earlier life; it was, rather, that it became irrelevant, out of place and unspoken. For a short time, I invented a more exotic set of stories to please my new friends, who expected Africa to be more extraordinary. Then I ‘became’ English. It was much later that I learnt to acknowledge and use this past, (as I am doing now, writing this article).

As with any personal account, my autobiography of migration is unique. It is, at the same, I believe, commonplace. Migration across countries, societies and continents has become ordinary. A few decades ago poor people were encouraged to migrate to countries with fast-growing economies. They were joined by refugees from wars and cold wars. Although immigration controls have tightened, migrationary pressures of war and poverty ensure that the peoples of the world continue to move across it. Visible minorities can be seen in most European capitals, many of them born in Europe of migrating parents or grandparents. Alongside them are the less visible
minorities from Australia, Europe, New Zealand and North America. A marker of this is that in many inner city London primary schools, the English language is used alongside twenty or thirty other languages, including Polish and Greek as well as Hindi and Yoruba.

Eva Hoffman’s lovely book, _Lost in Translation_, describes her transition to ‘life in a new language’ when she emigrated as a girl of thirteen from Poland to Canada. So happy are her memories of her Polish childhood that she entitles this section of the book ‘Paradise’. The rest of the book traces her movement from exile to living in a new world (though this is New York, not Canada): a mode of living with which she is comfortable, but which includes her continuing ambivalence about it, about her family home in Vancouver; about Poland when she goes there; and about her own life in more than one language. In writing a self-analytic book about her identity she includes the puzzlement of her Polish émigré friends in New York with the obsession Americans have with self-analysis and identity. Ironically, she records that this puzzlement is also her own, is also her own minority, migrant voice.

Grace Nichols’ collections of poems draw on her emigration to England from Guyana when she was already in her late twenties. In turns ironic and serious, and sometimes both together, she uses everyday images with both Guyanean and British overtones (of food, supermarket trolleys, bubble baths) to talk of ‘the power to be what I am/ a woman’ while at the same time she talks of the women in me’ and how they ‘slip free’. Like Hoffman she is concerned with language, especially with the language - tongue - of exiles:

from the root of the old one
a new one has sprung.

A piece of critical autobiography which I have found particularly helpful is Maria Lugones article about what she terms ‘world’-travelling. Lugones writes from her position as an Hispanic American philosopher. In this article she explores her own coming to consciousness as a daughter and as a woman of colour. As part of the exploration she introduces her concept of a world: ‘a real place inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people’, including ‘the description and construction of life’ of the people in it. She analyses what it is that makes her at ease in the
different worlds she inhabits, some of them Latin-American and some of them Anglo-American; some of them female, some of them mixed sex. She notes that in some of them she is a serious person, while in others she is playful. And it is this, the personal characteristic of being playful or not, which is at the centre of her analysis:

My problem is not one of lack of ease. I am suggesting that I can understand my confusion about whether I am or am not playful by saying that I am both and that I am different persons in different worlds and can remember myself in both as I am in the other. I am a plurality of selves.

The autobiographical pieces I have described may be used to criticise, extend and work with Lugones’ theory of world-travelling, in order to gain a better understanding of a patchwork self and the possibility of authenticity. There are two main points to be made. First, Lugones’ theory is ambiguous about the degree of distinctness of the different selves that form the plurality. Secondly, her idea of worlds is too narrow. The general idea is, however, strengthened by these two points, rather than overturned. I shall take each one in turn.

The two selves Lugones describes could be seen as distinct fragments. In one world she is playful, and in the other she is not. Using the metaphor of strands, rather than of fragments, she begins the article claiming that the paper weaves two aspects of her life together, and that this weaving ‘reveals and affirms the plurality in each of us and among us as richness’. Her arguments indicate that the weaving metaphor is an appropriate one for her theory, because the strands connect but do not merge. The connections between them are made only by memory. She talks for instance of having memories in one world of her playfulness in the other. Further, she points out that it is in the world where she is not playful that she is writing about and advocating playfulness. Thus she seems to be arguing that memory connects the strands, but they remain little changed by the encounter. If these strands are as separate, as she describes, with only memory joining them, the weave will be one which could, in principle, unravel, in order to be re-woven. This is in contrast to my own model of the construction of self which is a much more layered, connected affair. In my model, the effects of living in the Latino world, where she is playful, persist and continue into the Anglo world, where she is not; and would do so, even if the Latino world
disappeared. Or vice versa. To continue her metaphor, the threads may start separate, but as they become woven, the strands of one thread may become interchanged with the strands of the other, changing both threads in the process.

I mention the possibility of disappearing worlds. However, Lugones talks only of persisting worlds. This is one way in which her idea of worlds is too narrow. Worlds change, and they can - and do - disappear. Sometimes they change, but do so while we, ourselves, are not inhabiting them. All this is shown in the autobiographical accounts I described. They speak of moving from one physical and social context to another and the adjustments of losing one and gaining another. Lugones gives an account of the Latino world as if it encompasses both her childhood in Argentina and aspects of her present life in the United States. She remains a member of both this world and of the Anglo world where she is a producer of feminist philosophy. In contrast to this is my own colonial childhood world, which has gone completely, living on only in memories and history books. Hoffman’s paradisical Poland has also gone, but not completely. She describes returning to Poland, and her reaction to what it has now become: something to which she still recognises, but not quite the world of her childhood. Both of us describe how our lost worlds continue to affect the threads of our new worlds. We do not have the selves we had then, but neither are the selves of our new worlds unrelated to those lost ones, springing from the roots of the old.

There is another way in which Lugones’ idea is too narrow. She fails to acknowledge how far the existence of worlds is dependent on perceptions as well as on material existence. Self-perceptions and perceptions of the world can alter without any other changes of history, geography or other material circumstances. This process irrevocably changes the world that is lived in. The old world can go as completely as colonial Africa or it may remain, in some form, like Poland. Autobiography will again help to show this. I reported an incidence of this kind of change in Feminisms and the Self, which I tell again here (See Griffiths 1995: 23). This is a story of changing self-perceptions.

*I took a degree in physics, but I did not enjoy it very much. I found that my interests were more philosophical, and, moreover, I did not much fancy the kinds of employment*
open to me as a scientist. I moved into primary education, and then went back to university to study the philosophy of emotions and their relevance to education. By then I was in my early thirties, and was, for the first time, becoming increasingly involved in feminism as I came to see the relevance of emotion to how girls and women related to computer technology. I submitted a paper on the subject to the first international ‘Girls and Science and Technology’ Conference.

It was the first time that I had attended a conference at which women were in the majority. At the suggestion of the facilitator, the seminar group in which I found myself began the session with introductions. Each of us was to explain why we were at the conference, and something about our personal or professional interest in the area. I was very anxious indeed. Now, I thought, I would be found out. My credentials for attending such a conference were shaky, I thought. I was no longer ‘in’ science. I had no history of activism in feminist politics. I would be shown up as an outsider, as a charlatan, even. I was not a real scientist, a real feminist or even a real philosopher.

There was no escape. I explained myself to the other women. I found that they were listening with interest and respect. The facilitator smiled. ‘A typical women’s career’, she said. With an intense relief I realised that I was all right. I did not need to pretend. It turned out that the other members were no more typical of my imagined ideal conference-goer than I was. I was a bit of a scientist, a bit of a feminist, and a bit of a philosopher and that was all right.

In this narrative I describe how I moved from perceiving my self and my world as one in which I was ‘a bit of a scientist, a feminist and a philosopher’, rather than ‘not a real scientist, feminist or philosopher.’ At the same time, I adjusted my view of a career; the place of women in the world of paid employment; and my relationship to other women. All these things happened simultaneously. In terms of worlds, and of world-travelling I had moved from one world to another, keeping not only memories, but also some reactions (and skills, emotional habits, pleasures, associations) from the old one, which was now lost to me. The new one was my world, even if nothing material had
changed. Moreover, this episode could be told as part of a longer story, in which I became feminist. By stages my understanding of the world changed, and so my world changed. Indeed, my world changed so much that I, like other women who had made the same journey, wondered how we had ever lived in the old one. This is part of a story that has taken place in stages, and at least partly with a sense of my own agency in how far, how fast, and in which direction I move.

The same process can be seen in Lugones’ account. She claims that she lives in a Latino world. However, this world is not the world of her childhood, for the very reason that she now understands it differently. Her article chronicles how Marion Frye’s article on loving perception has helped her understand her position as a woman, both object and subject of arrogant perceiving: this being something that is common to Anglo and Latino worlds. She also chronicles how she has learnt not to be an arrogant perceiver, especially in relation to her mother. To this extent her world has changed. To use her own terminology she now inhabits a society given a nondominant rather than a dominant construction: she has travelled to a different world.

The autobiographies and their theorisation can be understood as ways of achieving narrative continuity. At this stage I turn to an article by Maggie MacLure about life changes, as part of the iterative process of turning from theory to autobiography and back to theory. She uses life histories told to her about the move from being a teacher to an academic. The people involved do not see themselves as a plurality of selves as Lugones does. Rather, they appear to be searching for connections which will allow them to demonstrate the continuation of a constant, single self between the different worlds they have inhabited. These narratives can be read as similar to the others described in this article: my own, Lugones, Hoffman, Nichols. Choosing a form for the narrative is to make judgements about how to understand the self, identity and the achievement of authenticity.

**Playing and achieving authenticity.**

It is the argument of this section that the theory of a patchwork self allows the possibility of understanding how to achieve the kind of coherence which leads to authenticity. This is in contrast to more usual strategies from other theories of self. MacLure argues that her respondents tell the
story of their lives as tales of victory and redemption. This is a narrative which arises out of the unitary theory of the self. However she argues, I think convincingly, that people using this mode are doomed to disappointment as they find that the boundaries refuse to remain safely crossed. This is reminiscent of the dilemma faced by Lugones’ plural selves, which face the continuing problem of how to get this plurality to stay connected, but not too connected: neither immured in a unitary world, nor afloat like flotsam in a sea of fragments.

The patchwork self does not face the problem of staying connected. It does, however, face the problem of how to keep the different patches in a unified (though not unitary) whole: that is, authentically itself. The changing self is marked by its history. It is a patchwork, made over time, of patches upon patches, continually worked over, but with no possibility of being thrown out or erased in order to start afresh. On the other hand it is lived now, not across a life. Spontaneity and ‘how I feel’ is significant in assessing ‘Is this me?’ Phrases like ‘This is really me’ typically get their purchase in situations where the experience of individuality and spontaneity of feeling is important. However the experience of immediacy and individuality cannot possibly be giving the whole story, since it masks the process of construction: agency, structure and time (being and becoming). A complication is that if the self is a patchwork, then each patch is marked like this, just as the whole set is. Further, the way the patches are constructed with and over each other may - and does - mask the processes of construction.

**Play and playfulness**

I am indebted to Lugones’ article not just because it introduces the idea of world travelling but also because it introduces the idea of play. Again, I want to criticise and extend her description. Indeed I think she is implicitly working with two ideas of play, even though she only acknowledges one of them as valuable, and is, I argue, working with an unacknowledged ambiguity. At the beginning of her article she says that she recommends shifting across contexts, what she calls this willful exercise^{12}:

I recommend this willful exercise, which I call ““world”-traveling’, and I also recommend that the willful exercise be animated by an attitude that I describe as playful.
Lugones advocates playfulness as an attitude. She describes playfulness as fun, not necessarily rule-governed, undertaken in a spirit of ‘openness to surprise’, to ‘being a fool’, to ‘not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight\textsuperscript{13}.

Lack of playfulness is not symptomatic of lack of ease but of lack of health. I am not a healthy being in the ‘worlds’ that construct me unplayful.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time it is striking how her article is full of references to other kinds of attitudes associated with being playful. She talks of how women of colour refer ‘half jokingly’ to schizophrenia in travelling between worlds. She describes how the ambiguity inherent in an intentional animation of a Latin-American stereotype is funny and also survival-rich\textsuperscript{15}:

So we know truths that only the fool can speak and only the trickster can play out without harm.

These examples surely show the double-edge of play which is associated with foolishness, trickery and transgressive joking. These examples are all too clearly born out of pain and difficulty, even though all of these kinds of play can be fun, and not dependent on previous pain. They are, literally, child’s play: playing a role, animating stereotypes, and saying or doing something acceptable only because it is play. But Lugones is drawing attention to the other edge of the double-edge: to ways of dealing with the pain of pretence and of living ‘as if’: to the fact that role-play and foolery can be can be done for fun, playfully, but also for grim necessity. In \textit{The Web of Identity}, I draw attention to the implications for self-identity of black people ‘acting white’, gays passing as straight, or girls in secondary schools trying to play the exacting role of being neither a slag nor a drag.

\textit{Naughty play and its possibilities.}

There are some rich possibilities. Here is one way of mapping them.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Role play}: Schizophrenic travelling between worlds. Playing the role, but knowing you are doing it. Surviving somehow, ducking and weaving. Flouting the rules. Trespassing beyond the boundaries, and then claiming the space.
\item \textit{Playing with stereotypes}. Activating stereotypes Reclaiming them. Refusing them.
\end{itemize}

Imagination: Playing one persona against another: Entertaining forbidden fantasies.

Imaginative performances. Dreaming up and doing the unexpected.

However, I do not want to place the dead hand of category on what is, or ought to be -and indeed, must be - fluid, unfixed, imaginative and creative. Instead it can be seen how these possibilities are realised in particular examples. The one I am choosing to use is Fatima Mernissi’s wonderful evocation of harem life in Morocco in the 1940s, *Dreams of Trespass*.

Let me remind you, Mernissi is a feminist, Islamic scholar, world famous for books on democracy, the veil, and women rulers in Islamic history. Her narrative of childhood is vivid, affectionate, political, feminist - and full of lessons on naughtiness. Her Mother gave her some of these with the help of her own mother, Grandmother Yasmina. Her mother had ‘always rejected male superiority, as nonsense and totally anti-Muslim. “Allah made us all equal,’ she would say.’ She was worried when her little girl just admired her cousin when he ‘staged his mutinies against the grownups’, and let him do her rebelling for her. The little girl was told by her mother: ‘You have to learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk. Crying when you are insulted is like asking for more.’ Mernissi goes on: ‘She was so worried that I would grow up obsequious that she consulted Grandmother Yasmina, known to be incomparable at staging confrontations.’ These confrontations were playful and political as well as dangerous. ‘What always saved Yasmina was the fact that she made Grandfather laugh,’ even though she asserted her wish to climb trees, go swimming, do acrobatics and name the farm peacock Farouk after the Egyptian king who had unjustly divorced his wife. Yasmina explained: ‘The more masters one had, the more freedom and the more fun.’ ... ‘Figuring out who has authority over you is the first step,’ said Yasmina. ‘That information is basic. But after that, you need to shuffle the cards, confuse the roles. That is the interesting part. Life is a game. Look at it that way, and you can laugh at the whole thing.’

Embroidery was another lesson in dreaming and getting freedom. The traditional women in the harem - led by the most senior woman Grandmother Mani - believed that all embroidery should be of the tedious traditional kind. They disapproved of modern designs which, explains Mernissi,
were pure fun, meant for personal enjoyment. But she makes clear the traditionalists were right to see danger in the modern designs, which were symbolic of more than personal enjoyment. It was not by chance that the modernists used the freedom of ‘unexpected designs and strange colour combinations’ to stitch birds with wings spread in full flight. The less powerful of the modernist women had to hide when embroidering their birds. But, as her favourite among them, Aunt Habiba, told her: ‘The main thing for the powerless is to have a dream. ... Your Grandmother Yasmina’s dream was that she was a special creature, and no one has ever been able to make her believe otherwise. ... Your mother has wings inside, too, and your father flies with her whenever he can.’

It seems that play and the possibilities of play can be born out of the ambiguities and double-vision of injustice. This is a difficult balancing act, carried out on the edges of dominant worlds, but one which leads to authenticity when it is achieved. This can never be a fixed achievement. It depends too much on the movement of creative energy and lively imagination. Authenticity is continually created, achieved, lost and re-achieved, through playing precariously on the edge.

References

9 ibid. page 281
10 ibid. page 286
11 ibid. page 275
12 ibid.
13 ibid. page 288
14 ibid. page 286
15 ibid. page 285
ibid. pages 152-3
ibid. page 209
ibid. page 215