

SPEAKING FOR OTHERS: Finding the "Whos" of Discourse

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IN A PUBLIC speaking class, a male student spoke about the benefits of female birth control. He discussed only the benefits for women, and he argued that every woman should learn how to practice it. He did not say anything about a man's role in such a practice, nor did he acknowledge his domineering stance. Many audience members said they found his speech offensive, particularly since it originated from a man's mouth (whereas if a woman delivered the same speech, it would not have offended as much since she, as a woman, would implicate herself in the discourse). Much of the audience discounted the male student and his message because of the identity he appeared to embody; the identity of "man" colored his presentation as well as the audience's response to it.

At a recent conference, a friend persuaded me to not attend a panel titled "Are Gender Roles Changing?" He noted from reading the conference program that the panelists came from a "religious college" where he had previously worked. Based on the panelists' collegial affiliation and my friend's experience with the school, he said that the panel discourse would likely consist of conservative Christian rhetoric and reflect a desire to maintain patriarchy. My friend thought that this might make me, a liberal, non-religious feminist, uncomfortable; his perceived identities of the panelists colored their presentation for me, and I decided to avoid the panel.

On television, individuals often receive criticism for playing identities to which they do not belong "off the screen." For instance, many actors on the program *Queer as Folk* identify as het-

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erosexual outside of the production, but the characters they play on the show do not. The tension surfaces when we ask, "From whom does the gay discourse in the program originate?" Does it stem from an actor's "real personality," since it is s/he who must make personal decisions on how to play the role? Do we take the character itself and its role within the story as the originator the discourse? Or, do we take the author of the program as the crafter of the message? When it comes to role-playing such as this, any attempt to locate the "whos" of discourse becomes messy.

In this project, I interrogate discourse — any communicative act, text, and/or utterance that originates from our bodies — in order to find the "who" that speaks; as Calvin O. Schrag notes, "the who of discourse remains present to itself in its multiple forms of speech, diverse language games, and variegated narratives" (*Self* 33). I argue that every time we speak, we speak on behalf of others: others who align with groups with which we identify, and others who align with groups listeners perceive us to identify with (to which, most often, we remain unaware). To support this, I use Martin Heidegger's notion of a "they-self," Edmund Husserl's and Alfred Schutz's accounts of monadic intersubjectivity, and Heidegger's and Schrag's discussions of discourse. This is an attempt to discern tenets of "speaking for others."

THE "THEY-SELF"

We make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society We do make choices, but we don't determine the options among which we choose.

— K. Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity"

Heidegger argues that we spend most of our time dwelling in a "they-self," a self that tacitly follows along with and often unquestioningly adheres to cultural customs and everyday interpretations of the world. In other words, as Beings-thrown-into-a-world-with-Others, we typically conform to the environments in which we find ourselves immersed. Heidegger deems this dwelling "inauthentic" in that we do not, most of the time, realize our ownmost possibilities in life. He does not consider this a negative form of existence, as the term "inauthentic" may imply, but

rather suggests that Being-with-Others and inauthenticity are conditions for living.¹

So we are "thrown *into existence*" (Heidegger 321, emphasis added). We do not choose when to enter this world, nor do we have much say about the cultures to which we claim membership and their affiliated norms: "We always find ourselves already caught up in a concrete context, which preshapes how things can show up and what stances make sense" (Guignon 172). However, thrownness does not imply that we lack agency or act as cultural dupes. Rather, it suggests that we cannot choose to live without or outside of a world. And this thrownness, a condition infested with norms and values, makes the "they-self" possible.

Dasein, our individual existence,

stands in *subjection* to Others. It itself *is not*; its Being has been taken away by the Others. *Dasein's* everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. These Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. (Heidegger 164, emphasis added)

For example, we come into this world classified as "male" or "female." Others label *us* as one or the other. We must also fit into one of these categories, or there are often serious ramifications (for example, a person born with both male and female sex organs may undergo surgery to have one of the organs removed); we cannot easily move between "male" and "female," and our rigid placement into these "they"-discerned categories follows us throughout our existence (see Garfinkel; Butler, *Gender*). Moreover, we cannot "blame" any "definite Other" for creating these categories or placing us into them; as Butler suggests, our identities become continuously constituted through discursive practices, all of which lack specific authors (see *Excitable*).²

By dwelling in a world of author-less structures, Judith Butler believes we come to understand ourselves according to categories that the abstract, cultural Others prescribe: "Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality" (*Psychic* 28). She also notes that we are "given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one's own" (*Psychic* 28). Heidegger expresses the same idea when he says that "[t]he everyday interpretation of the Self . . . has a tendency to understand itself in terms of the

'world' with which it is concerned" (368). He further describes what immersion in the "they" looks like:

Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The "they," which supplies the answer to the question of the "who" of everyday *Dasein*, is the "nobody" to whom every *Dasein* has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-another Proximally, it is not "I," in the sense of my own Self, that "am," but rather the Others, whose way is that of the "they." In terms of the "they," and as the "they," I am "given" proximally to "myself." (165-67, emphasis added)

If I want to find the "who" of discourse — that is, if I seek to understand "who" speaks in a particular situation — I come to rely upon socially established categories, upon those categories espoused by the "they." And if I claim certain identities represent who I am (for example, "I am gay"), I utilize terms and everyday understandings Others have chosen for me. The "who" closest to me is the "they-self."

Thus, when interpreting a text, act, or utterance, we must rely on established structures (for example, how metaphors work, what words mean) and categories, such as "man," "student," "African-American." We rely upon the world of the "they": "The 'they' prescribes one's state-of-mind and determines what and how one 'sees'" (Heidegger 213). However, while the "they" influences our interpretations of discourse (the discourse that originates from our bodies and the discourse we encounter from others), we can never definitively know how established categories impact the crafting of a speech or the interpreting of another's work.³ The "they" prescribes common ways of moving through the world, but these ways remain concealed in most of our everyday affairs.

MONADIC INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Heidegger ontologically positions us as "they-selves," individuals who speak from and rely upon everyday interpretations of the world in order to function. This implies that we can know each other — our thoughts, actions, and possibilities — by uncovering the "they" qualities of the communities in which we participate. This view positions us as they-constituted entities first, individuals second. So, if I identify you as a member of a particular community, then I can know about you by discerning the community's

shared structures of meaning. Such an account privileges a they-subjective rather than an I-subjective view of existence.

However, Husserl ontologically positions us as "constitutively interrelated monads" (*Cartesian* 128), internally closed off from each other, impenetrable Beings who come together and establish communities. This positions us first as individuals and second as they-constituted entities. Following this logic, we can only know others — their thoughts, actions, and possibilities — by how they appear for *us*: I can only know about you based on how you appear for *me*. Even if we try to know each other via dialogue, our subjectivities will still color our interpretation of one another. Perception is "simply a mental act of mine" (Husserl, *Idea* 16), and "one's own subjective meaning can never be laid side by side with another's and compared" (Schutz 165).

Husserl argues that, "[b]y means of the alien [foreign] constitutings constituted in my own self, there becomes constituted for me . . . the common world for 'all of us'" (*Cartesian* 87). It is here that intersubjectivity surfaces: We become socialized into "thereness-for-everyone" (*Cartesian* 92) structures in the world, shared systems of meaning that make possible our interactions with and understandings of each other (such as identity categories). However, our inner realms remain inaccessible to others (and, some would say, to ourselves [see Peters]); we are psychically separate Beings who meet by way of the thereness-for-everyone qualities of a community.

Schutz, expanding on the work of Husserl, presents a similar argument. He suggests that

"Intended meaning" is . . . essentially subjective and is in principle confined to the self-interpretation of the person who lives through the experience to be interpreted. Constituted as it is within the unique stream of consciousness of each individual, it is essentially inaccessible to every other individual. (99)

He further notes:

My lived experience of you, as well as the environment I ascribe to you, bears the mark of my own subjective Here and Now and not the mark of yours. Also, I ascribe to you an environment which has already been interpreted from my subjective standpoint When I become aware of a segment of your lived experience, I arrange what I see within my own meaning-context. But meanwhile you have arranged it in yours. Thus I am always interpreting your lived experience from my own standpoint. (105-06)

I can only know you through the lens of my experience. I must rely on common, thereness-for-everyone structures in order to interpret your acts, but I can never definitively grasp you, your intentions, or the standpoints from which you speak. You can also never definitively grasp the standpoints from which I interpret. And we, as speakers, can never definitively make known the identity categories to which we belong since some of these identities remain concealed to us.⁴

For instance, someone may classify me as a “man.” I may also speak for all individuals this person classifies as “men.” The term “man” reveals many intersubjective, communal structures of life: ideas about gender (why did someone classify me as a “man” and not a “woman?”), and the desire for certainty (presently, we must classify individuals as either “man” or “woman,” but never both). We can try to steer Others’ understandings of gender in various ways (for example, I could identify as a female-to-male transsexual), but we must work within the already established, familiar structures of the community (since I must use the common terms “female” and “male” to describe my “transformation”). We know about gender categories because they are valued by the communities in which we reside. However, we all have our own experiences with and thoughts about gender classifications, specifically what the categories of “man” and “woman” entail.

Consequently, when we hear or see someone speak or read a person’s writing, we will interpret this person and her/his discourse from clues present in her/his act of speaking or writing, from our lived experiences with the topic, speaker, and context, and our ideas about the future. We will also interpret and understand others based on categories relevant to the communities in which we find ourselves immersed. A discoursing individual may not agree with the way *we* constitute or label her or him, but this labeling remains a process that none of us can ever grasp for certain. As Schrag suggests, “The question about the who thus becomes a question about the questioner” (*Self* 12). If we desire to know the “whos” of discourse, we must take it upon ourselves to acknowledge ways in which *our* standpoints influence our interpretations of others as well as how our standpoints impact the discourse that stems from our Being.

DISCOURSE

I refer to discourse as any act, text, and/or utterance that originates from our bodies. This includes nonverbal gestures, written documents, and everyday talk.⁵ While such acts rely upon language systems for expression — in order for the act of waving to signal a “hello” or a “come here,” we must know about the nonverbal communication systems of a community — “only discourse, not language, is addressed to someone” (Ricoeur 202).⁶ I broadly define discourse to include many activities, not just events involving verbal communication. Furthermore, in this project, I use “discourse” and “speaking” synonymously.

Heidegger argues, “In discourse as communication, [*Dasein*] becomes accessible to the *Dasein*-with of Others, for the most part by way of uttering it in language” (317). It is in discourse that we — our accompanying identities, bodily characteristics, and thoughts about the world — become accessible to others. It is in discourse that “the subject is implicated” (Schrag, *Praxis* 11). And it is in discourse that the “whos,” the identity categories, of a person appear. On the most basic level, we learn about ourselves and each other by what we “say,” that is, by what we do, speak, and write.

However, identities remain uncertain in discourse. We can never know for “whom” we speak: “For the most part *I myself* am not the ‘who’ of *Dasein*; the they-self is its ‘who’” (Heidegger 312, emphasis mine). We can never know “who” others will perceive us to be:

In expressive discourse a complex of social meanings embedded within a linguistic system is put into play. These sedimented social meanings, in both the spoken and written word, transcend the episodic speech act, and may indeed come to expression unbeknownst to the speaker or author. (Schrag, *Praxis* 36-37)

Also, we can never know to whom we speak: “The writer’s [and speaker’s] audience is always a fiction” (Ong 9). Our discourse consists of an undetermined and diverse number of “whos,” all of whom, for the most part, remain unclear. This “identity-work” occurs on different levels in any discourse. It includes making known any personal identities, tailoring my discourse to whomever I think listens, and others’ labeling of me in specific ways. This is as true in an everyday, phatic communication (such as

asking one, "how are you?") as it is in a formal business presentation.

In discourse, speakers and audiences also rely upon identity categories applicable to the situation-at-hand, and we, as speakers and audiences, must use identity categories with which we are familiar to interpret the author of a text; we cannot return to a past time in order to observe previous ways of classifying and interacting with people. We can, via texts from another period, attempt to understand an author's discourse environment, but we can never definitively grasp or understand it. As Charles Guignon notes,

Interpretation is an ongoing, open-ended "historical" process. It evolves through time and is subject to revision with changing interests and orientations toward life, yet it is also embedded in a concrete historical context from which it draws its possibilities of understanding and to which it must be faithful in its readings. (184)

We must, as best we can, understand the historical context in which discourse originated, but we need not exhaust ourselves in doing so.

For instance, an "environmentalist" identity probably did not exist a century ago. However, when I encounter a pro-environment text from that period, I may apply the category to the author. So, I may label Theodore Roosevelt an "environmentalist" for his assistance with habitat preservation, but he may not have identified himself as such. I may also consider him to speak for all environmentalists. Applying this label to him will color my interaction with him and his work, and I must acknowledge that this identity may not have existed when he lived. (Hacking refers to this as "semantic contagion"; also, see Bochner.)

Whenever we discourse, whenever we produce (non)verbal utterances and texts, we let ourselves be seen in particular ways: "As ways in which we 'make explicit' . . . [,] discursive expressions constitute our own identity as subjects and sustain the forms of life circulating in our public world" (Guignon 174); our they-self identities inflect *every* text and utterance we craft. Like Guignon, who suggests that "[t]here is no vantage point for discovering *the* authoritative or final interpretation of a text" (184), and Roland Barthes, who claims that all texts are polysemic, I argue that we can never find the authoritative or final whos embedded in dis-

course. The identities I deploy when speaking or interpreting a work may not be the same as those from which you listen or speak.

SPEAKING FOR . . .

The text is the very place where the author appears.

— Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text?"

Heidegger ontologically positions us as Being-with-Others, as thrown into communities where we become constituted. He argues that we most often dwell in the "they-self," a self rooted in common interpretation and a self that follows along with and adheres to author-less social customs. Husserl and Schutz ontologically position us as monads connected through communities, as distinct individuals who do not have complete and certain "access" to each other. They argue that we only understand an/other in the way s/he becomes constituted in *us*, and through analyzing inter-subjective "thereness-for-everyone" aspects of life. While Heidegger and Husserl present contrasting views of our positioning in society, both present two ways to view our presence, our identities, in discourse.

Having said this, I argue that, in all discourse, we always already speak for others. This occurs in two ways. First, as "they-selves," as beings bound up with each other, we speak, whether intentionally or not, for those who claim identities similar to ours: "When the 'I' talks in the 'natural' [everyday, common] manner, this is performed by the 'they-self'" (Heidegger 368). For example, I often identify/appear as a gay, white male. Thus, when I discourse, I often speak for others who identify with the categories of "gay," "white," or "male" (or any combination thereof). While I may use the disclaimer that "I only speak for myself," listeners may still cast me as speaking for or representing others who fit into such categories. In my opening example of the "Are Gender Roles Changing?" panel, my friend and I cast the panelists, based on their college affiliations, as "conservative," "religious," and "patriarchal." Prior even to listening to their message, I steered clear of their presentation because I assumed that they would speak for and similar to other conservative, religious, and patriarchal individuals (based upon my prejudice towards these categories).⁷ The labels I placed on the panelists — my at-

tempt to find the “whos” that would surface in their speech — colored my interpretation of what they would say.

I also suggest that we can be understood as speaking for other groups without knowing it. As monads, we can never definitively grasp the identities for which we may be held accountable; we do not know who others will (or have) interpret(ed) us as. Here, we still operate as “they-selves,” since we rely on they-based categories; yet we remain, for the most part, psychically inaccessible to each other. For instance, when I discourse, I may speak for individuals who identify as “gay,” “white,” and “male,” but audience members may interpret me as speaking from the categories of “privileged,” “sexist,” or “young.” Furthermore, I may speak for others whom these individuals consider privileged, sexist, or young. Such classifications, in turn, will color their interpretations of who I *am* and what I *say* (for example, “he does not recognize his privilege,” “he hates women,” or “he is very immature”), and I can never know, for certain, how I am interpreted or the identities for whom I represent.

Linda Alcoff argues that, “in speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position, having certain characteristics and not others, and so on” (10). Occupying a (they-based) subject-position carries with it certain characteristics. It also implicates others who share this same subject-position. We cannot create a unique subject-position with which others can identify (because of how the “they-self” operates). Thus, every time we speak from a subject-position, we speak for others who align with such positioning. Furthermore, we can only minimally direct others towards interpreting us in particular ways. We can use disclaimers or identify subject positions (“As a gay male . . .”), but we can never control who receives our work or the identities for which interpreters may hold us accountable. As Alcoff further suggests,

Speakers may seek to regain control . . . by taking into account the context of their speech, but they can never know everything about this context and with written and electronic communication it is becoming increasingly difficult to know anything at all about the context of reception. (15)

We, as speakers/authors of texts, can *never* know exactly how others perceive us. We can, of course, attempt to curb an/other’s

interpretations by using disclaimers, but we can never know, for certain, how our discourse has become colored by her/his labels.

RESPONSIBLE DISCOURSE

Our interaction will never be a meeting of *cogitos* but at its best may be a dance in which we sometimes touch.

—John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air*

I am a volunteer at the Florida Aquarium. For this work, I am given a shirt sporting the logo of the facility. Aquarium authorities have told me that I cannot wear this shirt when I am not working because the act of wearing it and the activities in which I engage will *speak for* the facility. Even if I use the disclaimer that “I only speak for myself” in a conversation, the aquarium and everything that it signifies will still rest upon my shoulders (pun intended); by wearing the shirt, I cannot avoid speaking for others affiliated with the venue, and the shirt colors the meaning of all of my acts. Aquarium authorities know that I, specifically when wearing the shirt, speak *for* them, the facility itself, and other workers. By trying to control when and where I wear the shirt, they try to control when, where, and for whom I speak.

In this essay, I have tried to discern ontological dimensions of our presence within discourse. In Being-with-Others, in dwelling in the they-self, we always already speak, via intersubjectively created categories, *for* others. Furthermore, every (non)verbal utterance, text, and talk positions us as representatives of communities to which we may or may not claim membership. By understanding that we (as monads) can only minimally control the communities and identities for which others may hold us accountable — we can better understand the necessity to make known explicitly our allegiance to the categories that we embrace. We can also use such knowledge to remain socially ambiguous and intentionally to disrupt the commonly shared codes associated with they-based categories.

We can also reflexively ask, “Am I doing my best with my discourse, based on my thoughts of how best to live, to help certain groups and humanity in general?” Foucault encourages us to focus our attention on discourse itself, to spend our energies on the content and potential interpretations and appropriations of a work rather than on identities embedded within or deployed against it. If, as Peters suggests, communication is a dance of dif-

ferences where we may sometimes touch, then I believe discourse should focus on welcoming and navigating these differences rather than on deciding *if* differences exist, debating about whether or not we psychically touch, and/or exhaustively learning *how* to achieve a thorough and certain "meeting of *cogitos*."

And while many scholars discount the relevance and usefulness of categories (Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, for example), we still must work and interact with them. Categories are social constructs, but that does not make them or their effects "fictional" or any less "real." Moreover, whether or not our interpretations of others possess "truth" is beside the point. If we act *as if* our interpretations are true and valid, this is *our* reality in a specific situation, individual, and community. So, linguistic and communal constraints impact our interactions with others, but it seems that our task, if we choose to act as socially responsible individuals, involves an always-on-going awareness and navigation of these limits according to our values. We also possess the ability to deconstruct linguistic and communal constraints. We must remember, though, that every deconstruction is simultaneously a reconstruction.

I present this essay as a call to acknowledge possible identities we evoke when speaking, to value uncertainty that infiltrates interaction and interpretation, and, based on this heightened awareness, to alter our discourse to promote (our version of) a just society. We should not worry about whether we *do* or *do not* speak for others. Rather, we should do our best to acknowledge when and how we (intentionally) speak for certain groups, understand ways we may harm particular communities with our communication, and realize that we can never "control" discourse and its affiliated replies. We should also refuse to remain silent if our sole concern is that we may represent others since behaviors, like silence, speaks for communities, too (see Alcoff; Conquergood). The potential to speak for and represent others always exists. We should craft discourse accordingly.

NOTES

I thank Art Bochner and Charles Guignon for their assistance with this article.

1. Heidegger argues that "[a]uthentic Being-one's-Self takes the definite form of an *existentiell* [individual] modification of the 'they'" (312). He further states that resoluteness, taking a stand on and firmly negotiating the they-interpretations of the world, is the prerequisite to authenticity:
Resolution does not withdraw itself from "actuality," but discovers first what is factually [presently] possible; and it does so by seizing upon it in whatever way is possible for it as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being in the "they." (346)
Heidegger thus positions becoming-an-individual an accomplishment, rather than something ontologically given. However, I do not foreground authentic Being in this essay; I focus on the "they"-qualities of our existence.
2. Heidegger notes, "The 'who' [of the Others] is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The 'who' is the neuter, *the 'they'*" (164, emphasis added); Judith Butler, in describing possible intersections between power, the legal system, language, and identity, says that "power cannot be easily or definitively traced to a single subject who is its 'speaker,' to a sovereign representative of the 'state'" (*Excitable* 78); in another work, Butler contends, "The desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be)" (*Psychic* 28). Elsewhere, Butler also contends, "The 'I' who cannot come into being without a 'you' is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the 'I' nor with the 'you'" (*Precarious* 45).
3. I do not contend that we lack agency to create our own interpretive tools such as new language. However, in order for this new language to (effectively) function socially, that is, in order for it to "do" things in the world, it must be recognized, accepted, and utilized by *others*; the they must validate our creation in order for it to have any impact.
4. Charles Horton Cooley, with his "looking-glass self" theory, suggests that we come to know ourselves by observing how others act and react to us. Thus, learning about ourselves is a continual and contextual lifelong process.
5. Schrag describes discourse
as a multifaceted event, comprised of speaking, writing, and language. Speaking not only has to do with the multiple forms of verbal communication, but also includes the deployment of gestural meaning and articulations through body motility. (*Praxis* 33-34)
6. Ricoeur makes it seem that discourse is intentional in that it is "addressed to someone." However, I argue that discourse, especially a mundane gesture such as facial expression, does not have to involve such intentional address. An act becomes discourse if someone interprets it in a particular way, whether or not this act is intended for her/him.
7. Some individuals may contend that I should rid myself of such prejudice. However, Hans-Georg Gadamer maintains that we can never free ourselves from prejudice (from a pre-judgment of the world), and Heidegger suggests that pre-understanding always exists when we approach phenomena.

Thus, I find it important to become aware of when prejudice surfaces and how it operates rather than try to rid myself of it altogether.

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