Interview

Ted Aoki / Doug Aoki

"Yu" (presence) / "Mu" (absence)—calligraphy by June Aoki

The interview is conventionally a numbers game, or, more exactly, a conjuring trick: it is constituted by two people (the interviewer and the interviewee) but defined by only one subject (the interviewee). It also conventionally orients social space. The interviewer asks questions and the subject answers, establishing a direction from the former to the latter. It is no coincidence that this discursive orientation is recapitulated rhetorically: the interviewer directs the interview and thereby the interviewee. The interview enacts a politics of radically asymmetrical and unequal partners. The irony is that the asymmetry of the interview is conceptually weighted in precisely the opposite direction, for an interview is generally framed in terms of the interviewee. This is why s/he is the only subject. In academic journals, if not the pop cultural worlds of Barbara Walters or Larry King, the interviewer is often rhetorically effaced, becoming so much the representative of an organization or institution that her/his very name is overwritten by the title or initials of the journal involved. But appearances can be deceiving; power is subtle in its discursive moves and disguises.
Judith Butler is pertinent here. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she brings Foucault, Althusser and Lacan together to argue that the subject only comes to exist through her/his discursive subjection. This is the very definition of Butler’s conception of performativity: the conjuring of the subject through the summons by authority, the *interpellation* that Althusser famously figures by the hail of a police officer. The interview, with its only subject generated by the direction of someone who has ceased to be a subject, is a classic exemplification. Years ago, Barbara Frum became uncharacteristically flustered while interviewing Margaret Atwood when the latter started asking her own questions. The evident disruption of the interview, the unexpectedness of Atwood’s inversion, proved that she had turned herself into a *bad subject*.

This text—the one you are reading—is supposed to be an interview of Ted Aoki by Doug Aoki. But you will find no helpful, identifying initials labelling any paragraph; you will be given no explicit distinctions between the “interviewee” and the “interviewer.” Does this interview then fail to be one? Or can an interview productively escape the discursive structures and markers that define it? More generally, what necessity drives the attribution of words to names? Will you “win” something valuable if you determine that one idea is Ted’s and another is Doug’s? Is the demand for attribution motivated by something more profound than the standards of scholarship? Or does scholarship anxiously call for attribution to sustain its own respectability, and thereby lose the chance to be something more than respectable?

Do we so desperately *want* names? Do we so desperately *desire* them? And what do we think we have learned when we have learned them? What do we think we have been taught? When Ted’s first grandson, Alex, was born, Doug asked Ted to give him a Japanese name. Ted’s suggestion was *Tetsuyoshi*, which translates as, “Obligated to philosophy.” The usual response by those who learn that translation is to feel sorry for Alex. What passionate expectations do we have in general for names and other words?

*But there’s this angel in her eyes that tells such desperate lies,
And all you want to do is believe her...*
Oh, she’s the One.
—Bruce Springsteen

Today’s successor to Frum’s interview segment on CBC’s The Journal is One on One with Peter Mansbridge. The title begs the question, what is “the One”? Among other things, “the One” is an abbreviation of “the one and only,” an emphatic advertisement of the subject’s assumption of singularity. The One isn’t just anyone; s/he is the one worthy of (or made worthy by) being interviewed by Peter Mansbridge. More fundamentally, the One is the subject staking claim to its own existence, at least in the constitutively discursive form of its identity. Butler again provides the key, one habitually missed by academic readers: she opposes performance to performativity. For her, the former presumes the subject, while the latter puts into question the very concept of the subject. This is why those who assert she explicates a theory of performance are so very wrong. Instead, she theorizes performativity as the radical undermining of the subject-as-performer, echoing previous declarations by Barthes and Foucault of the death of that definitive academic performer, the author. This is also why every Mansbridge interview should be recognized as performance: not because it is a theatrical “act” and therefore not serious journalism, but rather because it is far too serious. The journalistic interview must be sufficiently serious that its viewers/listeners/readers attend to the substance of its discourse, and thereby never become aware of how that the form of that discourse both produces its subjects and displaces them. The failure of the academics who misread Butler works through a parallel logic. That failure is no mere accident or slip; its necessity is as profound as its error. Professors and students who enthuse over her “theory of performance” are invariably too enthusiastic. Their fervour testifies to how they must misread, mis-teach and mis-learn Butler so their own positions as both subjects and subjects-supposed-to-know are reinforced, rather fatally destabilized. Each of them wants to be the One to Know; each of them needs to be the One.

Before John Carpenter found fame as the director of the definitive Hollywood blockbuster slasher film, Hallowe’en, he made a short science–fiction comedy, Dark Star, the adventures of an eponymous starship. The Dark Star is armed with very smart bombs—so smart that they can converse with the crew. When the technology of the future inevitably malfunctions and one of the bombs decides it is going to blow up while still onboard ship, the commander, unable to disarm the weapon, asks his senior advisor what else he can do:

ADVISOR: Teach it phenomenology.
COMMANDER: Sir?
ADVISOR: Phenomenology.

. . .

COMMANDER: Hello, bomb, are you with me?
BOMB: Of course.
**COMMANDER:** Are you willing to entertain a few concepts?

**BOMB:** I am always receptive to suggestions.

**COMMANDER:** I'm thinking about this one, then: how do you know you exist?

Phenomenology has been historically stuck in its frame of intentionality as the subject conscious of the object, suggesting the possibility of lived experience as absolute knowledge *qua* consciousness. The painstaking attention to what is conscious is an equally painstaking turning away from the unconscious. This is where psychoanalysis meets deconstruction, for the phenomenological metaphysics of presence is the meticulation of making the subject present. Phenomenology is an attempt to break from the objectivity of the subject by attention to intentionality as lived experience. The interview is thus thoroughly—if often crudely—phenomenological: it presents the subject to an audience by provoking the autobiographical narration of lived experience.

The problem is that narration is yet another performance and that autobiography is yet another presumption of the presence of the narrating performer. To put this another way, the problem with the narration of the subject is not the inevitability of its failure, but rather the possibility of its success. The performative caution is not that the narration cannot make the subject present, but rather that narration is *the only way to do so.* That is, the subject is never present in and of itself. In Lacanian terms, before the subject is positioned in the symbolic order—before it is written into social existence—the subject is only present as lack. It is only produced (as present) through discursive gestures whose archetype is the narration of the self. This is the pertinent lesson of the Derridean, “there is nothing outside the text”: the subject only comes to be through its inscription; the subject would fade away without its inscription. This is also why Lacan symbolizes both the subject and the signifier with an “S.” At the same time, Lacan distinguishes between them by slashing the “S” of the subject, making it divided and placing it under erasure. That lexical difference asserts that the subject only appears as fully itself—as an unslashed “S”—in its discursive representation.

The relationship between the lack of a subject and its narration as present is more closely coupled than mere incoherence, however, for it is the very lack of the subject which drives its narrative production. That is, it is *because* the subject is not “there” that its story gets told. For Butler, social identity only persists because it continuously fails. The incessance of failure necessitates the iteration of its recuperation. Hence the characteristically repetitive nature of social life: we need to “perform” the same social gestures again and again, often on a daily basis, to be able to sustain the images of ourselves as female or male, gay or straight, teacher or student. For example, sex may appear to be biologically determined, and it is generally taught as such, but even its factuality demands discursive
support. Alex—our pitied grandson and son—is a six year-old boy with very long hair. Another boy in his swimming class, when queried by a parent, responded, “I don’t know if Alex is a boy or a girl, but he’s got one of these,” and pointed between his own legs. Even what Lacan has most problematically privileged as the phallic signifier loses its categorical power without the support of the social story establishing its signified and significance.

*I think where I am not, therefore I am not where I think.*

—Jacques Lacan

There is a further crucial complication. A discursive representation like an interview only makes the subject appear to be fully itself. In Lacanese, the fullness of social identity is a quintessentially imaginary moment, in which the unifying image of the subject is coincident with its utterly unreal status. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, there is a deep divide between the logics of the image and the word. A celebrated news photograph is compelling because it makes viewers “feel as if they were there”—which is exactly what theory means by presence: the utterly convincing sense of being (in its most fundamental sense) where one is not. The image is the defining instance of re-presentation. The paradigmatic operation of the image is to make the subject appear in words, casually conflating what Lacan is determined to keep distinct as the imaginary and symbolic orders. Making the subject visible means making it enter the discursive scene. Hence the view in interview. Does this mean that the inter-view stages an interchange between views? But appearances, as usual, are deceiving. The two views are mediated and framed by a third, a meta-view, if you will: the humanist view of what it means to be human. The foundational image is the portrait.

The logic of the word is exactly the opposite, as Derrida forced us to recognize nearly forty years ago. Deconstruction is not and has never been an esoteric, academic, literary-theoretical technique. Instead, it is a precise description of how language in its everyday usage (parole) constantly undermines its presumption to communication. For deconstruction, no text or word, in or out of the academy, is immune to difféance: difference and deferral. The psychoanalytic version is that a chain of signifiers always slips away. In either account, language never stands still: it defies every attempt to nail it down. In particular, it defies every attempt to pin it to a subject, to make meaning one’s own—with two crucial consequences: (1) the attribution of words to names, as in a regular interview, must inevitably fail, and (2) we endlessly desire attribution because it is ultimately impossible, and therefore always lacking. The interview is always caught in the basic tension between the conflicting logics of the image and the word, teetering on the brink of the chasm between the imaginary and symbolic orders, between desire and the impossibility of its fulfillment.
The humanist's greatest delusion is that “I am here” and “you are there.”

—Zen saying

I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together
See how they run like pigs from a gun, see how they fly . . . .
I am the eggman they are the eggmen
I am the walrus
Goo goo g’joob
—Lennon & McCartney

The very concept of identity is the exemplary assertion of such an impossibly definitive meaning of and by the self: “I am x” or “She’s the one.” Identity is exactly the presumption that a person can be pinned to a unique and fundamental story. Directly ignoring the insights of a sweeping range of contemporary cultural theories—deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, French feminist theory and queer theory, to name a few—the seemingly self-evident faith in the existence of identity is actually an extraordinarily sweeping semiotic presumption. Not only does it reconstitute the sign by uniting the signifier (the name) and signified (the concept of a specific person), it fastens that sign to the referent (that person in her/his “real-word” existence). Identity therefore constitutes a radically “vertical” space of the subject, as if one’s body, mind, and soul were not only perfectly aligned, but also located in a very specific place on the map of the social world. Hence the notion of the “grounded self,” whose “down-to-earth” appeal masks the ferocious desperation by which identity clings to its defining place. The championing of the liberatory power of metaphor depends on the same disingenuousness, because the verticality of identity also structures that trope. The apparent abandon of metaphor belies the severity of its demand: each of its poetic terms must replace another in the same place, so that every instance of metaphor, no matter how creative or original,
implacably returns to the same place to reinforce it.

The subjective site—the longitude and latitude of the symbolic order, the place from which One speaks, the supposedly postmodern “subject location”—remains the same, regardless of the changes that take place there. Again, it’s sleight of hand: celebrating the virtuosity of performance keeps us from questioning the status of the performer. It is no accident, therefore, that metaphor is the paradigmatic figure of speech, for its paradigmatic place is that of the subject figured in terms of its identity.

Metonymy, on the other hand, is perpendicular to the humanist figuration of metaphor. Metonymy generates a “horizontal” or lateral space of discourse, one that does not fix a “subject location,” but rather enacts the subjective consequences of différence. The curious and revealing thing about metonymy is how people invariably find it much harder to understand than its partner, metaphor. Metonymy, like deconstruction, gets misconstrued as some exotic intellectual abstraction, when it is actually immanent to every utterance ever made. Insofar as one word is spoken after another, “laterally” in time, insofar as one word follows another horizontally on a page, the relation between each of those words is metonymic. Metonymy is the most ordinary thing in the world, the basic spatial relation of discourse, whether spoken or written, “high” academic or everyday. That metonymy nonetheless appears so baffling is powerful testimony to our unconscious perceptiveness, for despite its ordinariness and ubiquity, metonymy’s implications are radical, general, and deeply disturbing to our subjective ground. If discourse is characterized by difference and deferral rather than signification, then the subject, insofar as it is subject to language, is always different and deferred from itself. If the chain of signifiers eludes the multiple–choice/dictionary logic of the correctness of meaning, then the subject always slides away from its own identity. Metaphor grounds the subject; metonymy lets it take flight.

As always, the way we speak teaches us about ourselves. The well–intentioned who valorize that common academic figure of speech, grounding or anchoring—as in “grounded research,” “anchored in the disciplinary literature,” “a well-grounded argument”—demonstrate the deep perils of being blind to the lateral connections of our own discourse. Anchoring and grounding are, of course, familiar nautical metaphors. Yet academics rigorously ignore how an anchored vessel stays in the same place and how one that runs aground mires itself through negligence or bad navigation. Neither can go anywhere until they hoist anchor or un–ground themselves. Even the most conventionalized of academics admit as much when they laud cutting edge research as “ground–breaking.”

The conventional interview broadens into a metonymic space despite itself. The identity of its subject is taken for granted as coincident with the place of the interviewee, but the very success of an interview turns on its ability
to generate a new vision of the subject in the space of its own discourse. This subject thus “appears” in this new light and new place, not in her or his studio chair, but rather in the “lateral” space in-between interviewee and interviewer. The inter-space of the interview is not the empty separation of bodies; it is the paradigmatic discursive space in its performative fecundity and complication. From this point of view, the intriguing spatial aspect of the interview is the distance between the interviewee and her/his appearance, and how that distance is negotiated as an engagement with (and evasion of) the subject. The discretion of the interview lies not only in the courtesy of the interviewer—the distance between Peter Mansbridge and Howard Stern—but importantly in the discreteness attributed to the identities of interviewer and interviewee. To reinvoke and redeploy Butler, this is the discretion of performance.

We can put it this way: the mission of the interview structured by the logic of metaphor is to teach us what the subject (putatively) is. This is the communication of knowledge established (or taken for granted) as truth. The mission of the interview working through the logic of metonymy is to teach us the fraught operation and promise of subjectivity itself. This is much more exhilarating and dangerous than methodologically sound research (the –ology of any methodology defines it as logocentric). This is neither biography nor autobiography; this is not, in fact, the narration of any life. This is living itself.

About the Authors

Ted Aoki has always been proud to be a teacher. His son, Doug Aoki, now a theorist and a teacher at the University of Alberta, has always been proud of him.