

Identity

One of the things that distinguishes modernity from—what we have come to call in the last thirty years—postmodernity, is what Nietzsche referred to as the death of God. Or more generally, the death of the Referent. That is to say, the guarantor of all Meaning.

Traditional, Aristotelian logic dealt with statements about the world of lived and phenomenal experience. Meaning resided in the relation between words and things. The word chair, for instance, corresponds to the object that the community of English speakers have baptized with the name “chair.” The very simplicity of such a world view would maintain that the word chair had been glued to the object on which we have been sitting. But things began to come unglued sometime in the seventeenth century with Galileo and Leibniz, and continued on through Wittgenstein, Boole, Shannon, and the founders of symbolic logic. And then some years ago—or so the story goes—Derrida and friends—through Saussure—discovered the signifier, drifting, alone in a vast horizonless ocean—to use the Nietzschean metaphor, without its signified. Nietzsche, like it or not, is our philosopher, the philosopher of our age. The very witty Nietzsche who pronounced: “At bottom, I am all the names in history.” A statement, which ironically has to do with all of us living, literally in the last days of the twentieth century. It is a statement about identity, or to put it in Heideggerean terms, the implicit difference in the concept of identity. Sartre’s “I” which is a consciousness-for-itself only through the eye of the Other, and so on, and so on.

But what about me? Where do I—this particular consciousness, writing this particular essay (to be perfectly Cartesian)—fit in? Where do I stand in the world?

Suppose we begin with my passport. In it is my name and my date of birth. So we know there is a ROLANDO PEREZ who was born on MARCH 10, 1957. Further, the passport itself is proof that I, being the ROLANDO PEREZ in the passport, am an American citizen. And more, to the left of the information above, is a photograph, presumably of the person named ROLANDO PEREZ. Think of this photograph, then, as an ICON that stands for the person, ROLANDO PEREZ, answering to the words written to the right of it. The same “individual” who is a citizen of the United States of America, but who for some strange reason has a Spanish surname. Not to worry; the text of the passport offers an explanation. This ROLANDO PEREZ was born in CUBA. And to prove it the information appears simultaneously, in English and in French. So now at last we have the full identity of this individual, photograph and all (without the present beard).

Two years ago, I, the ROLANDO PEREZ above, was stopped and interrogated at the Ciampino Airport (a quasi-military airport), outside of Rome. The officer looked at the passport, questioned it, brought me into

an office for interrogation, and harassed me for forty-five minutes before letting me go. The Italian officers for some reason doubted the authenticity of the passport, and by extension, of course, my authenticity, and my “claim” that I was who I said I was. Picture René Magritte as an Italian customs officer, saying: “This is not Rolando Perez.” I am not exactly sure why this happened, the Italians being one of the least paranoid people in the world, but I have my suspicions; and the most obvious one was my place of birth. For when they saw “CUBA” all kinds of bells must have gone off in the minds of the military personnel at the airport. How strange: a citizen of the United States, born in Cuba, taking off from a quasi-military airport outside of Rome—not even Fiumicino, on a flight to Barcelona on a small British airline.

CUBA. This tiny little country in the Caribbean that people either love or hate: generator of countless geo-political mythologies in our century. During the Cold War, Cuba represented a major threat to the U.S., one, because of its proximity to North American soil, and two because in 1961, as a satellite of the Soviet Union, this Caribbean island was setting up its missiles to point in the direction of the United States, home of the free and the brave. The confrontation arising out of this led to the event commonly known today as “the missiles of October,” the one crucial moment in twentieth-century history that the world was perhaps minutes away from nuclear holocaust. To right-wing Americans, Cuba remains a symbol of this historical threat, and for communist political oppression of its citizens. It is, with China, the last bastion of the old communist order, which refuses to go away. To the military officers at Ciampino Airport, Cuba might have represented something very similar. Or perhaps they thought that I was either a spy, or an illegal immigrant, like so many Albanians, running some kind of illegal operation.

“You like Castro?” the Italian officer kept asking me. And no matter what I answered, he’d say tauntingly: “*Castro il maximo. . . Castro il generalissimo. . .*” He repeated this phrase over and over again, confusing Castro with Franco. Very interesting, because I was flying back to Spain, land of my grandparents; back to Barcelona, city of the Catalans Franco oppressed during his thirty-seven years in power. This is Castro’s forty-first year in power, Castro, the son of a Gallego, a Galician, who shares a cultural background with the Generalissimo the Italian officer kept referring to.

But again, I was at a military airport, and one could understand this behaviour given the context. The Italians like the Spaniards like the French like the Germans like the Dutch, like the Americans on the left, all like Castro, and have the greatest admiration for Cuba and the Man that controls it. At the airport in Madrid, a conservative city in comparison to Barcelona, you see countless ads advertising trips to Cuba. Europeans, like the American left, can’t get enough of Cuban culture. If Castro’s Cuba for

the Cubans of Miami, supporters of the embargo, represents nothing else but Evil, the opposite is true of the capitalist Europeans benefiting from the European Union, living better than anybody else on the planet. For them Cuba is the sound of Afro-Cuban music, for them Cuba represents racial harmony, for them Cuba represents happy, colourful people, for them, and for a large number of Americans on the left, Cuba represents the little guy who stood up to the big guy, and WON! In other words, every child's dream in the world of grown-ups, or what amounts to the same, political romanticism for adults. But of course, there is some truth to this. After all, American presidents have come and gone over the last forty years, and Castro is still in power. Everyone thought Castro's days were numbered with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Castro is as powerful today as he was forty years ago. In fact, these days, he often appears in elegant suits instead of his uniform, looking healthier than ever. You can understand why Barbara Walters wanted to do him. So what is Cuba? Has Cuba ever been a country for-itself? Has it ever had its own identity?

Who is a Cuban? Is a Cuban someone of African descent brought to the island as a slave? Is that a Cuban? Cuba had a large Asian population. Weren't the Chinese living in Cuba, who speak both Spanish and Chinese, also Cuban? How about the Spanish who came over and stayed like my grandparents, weren't they Cubans? The native populations were wiped out early on. The Europeans would like to believe that Cuba, unlike the United States, is a country of racial harmony. What a myth that is! Yes, there were no racial wars in Cuba, because the white population was the population in power, and those of African extraction "knew their place" in the republic. Even today, forty years later, Castro does not have a single black person in his cabinet. So again, what is Cuba, apart from someone's demonization or idealization of the country? If you visited Cuba would you then see the real Cuba and return to the U.S. with knowledge of "the real Cuba?"

Perhaps the deconstructionists are right, and Cuba is an empty signifier: a text that may be entered from a multiplicity of directions: none of them any more privileged or impoverished than the other. However, we know that there is a physical land by the name of Cuba, which according to the passport detained at the Ciampino Airport, is the birthplace of the subject, ROLANDO PEREZ. So is ROLANDO PEREZ a spy? Or is he merely another dislocated Cuban-born American citizen travelling in Europe? Who is ROLANDO PEREZ? And what was he doing at Ciampino? Fiumicino is the international airport in Rome. Supposing that during the interrogation ROLANDO PEREZ was given a test to see if he was really Cuban and he was given, as in the old World War II movies, three questions to answer: one, a question about contemporary Cuban music; two, a question about the exact location of the province in which he was born in Cuba; and three, the name of a famous Cuban baseball player. And suppose that he

was not able to answer any of them? What then? Would this prove that he was, or was not Cuban? What would this prove about his identity? Perhaps the questions were too difficult and rather than have him answer questions, he could write something in Spanish. And when asked to do so, ROLANDO PEREZ was able to produce two pages of prose, not very well written. On the other hand, when asked to write something in English he could do so effortlessly and without orthographic mistakes. Would this prove that ROLANDO PEREZ is not Cuban but American, or English, or God-knows-what? We know from the movies that a good spy can be so many things. What could any of this point to that one could localize?

Given the information in the passport what could we really know about ROLANDO PEREZ? What would we know about the UNITED STATES except that it was the country that apparently “issued” the passport? A country which despite its name is not very united at all, and is more of an icon of an infinite number of things, than anything else we can say of it. The postmodern country par excellence, without a uniform national identity or history. And CUBA—What does anyone know about CUBA, except for whatever myths of this country they have in their heads? Aren’t these words in capital, just that, words? Signifiers without a stable referent that guarantees their MEANING? Has the information age really given us more in the way of knowledge? When you do a search for ROLANDO PEREZ on the Internet you may come up with a number of hits referring to this ROLANDO PEREZ, or to a large number of other ROLANDO PEREZs in the world. Suppose you get the one you wanted: the one who is the author of this essay and of a number of books; the one who was born in CUBA on March 10, 1957; and suppose you managed to get your hands on all the information in the world concerning ROLANDO PEREZ, could you then say, that at last you know ROLANDO PEREZ? How about Cuba? Surely you can get some definitive information on Cuba from the Internet? But can you, really? Who’s webpage is it? Who is putting out the information? What is their affiliation? And if it is an individual (like ROLANDO PEREZ), who really is this individual that put the information on the webpage for everyone to read. A leftist? A right-winger?

Since we’re on the issue of the Internet, let’s take the question of identity in cyberspace. HUNK4U or XZYBABE69, may very well be the screen names of two individuals chatting “on the net,” their gender easily recognizable from their screen names. Or perhaps not, as anyone who “chats” online will admit, either because they have experienced it second-hand, or because they themselves have adopted a “different” identity than the one they normally project. There is no way to tell from the screen name HUNK4U alone whether this name actually refers to a man—a male who looks very much like a “hunk,” or a four hundred-pound man wearing a ketchup-stained tee-shirt, kicking his dog as he talks to you. “His” claim

that he is twenty-two years old may be true, or false, just as easily. In fact, “he” may very well be a woman who has taken a male identity for purposes of “chatting” on the Internet. And conversely, XZYBABE69 may either be a “sexy” woman or a man, fifty years old, not twenty-one, who likes to play at being a woman: dressing-up in women’s clothes in the privacy of his own space. At work he is a “respectable,” conservative, family man, who votes Republican on every election, and against “obscenity” on the Internet. But which one is the “real” identity of XZYBABE69, the public one or the one “he” keeps secret? Is the secret identity the “real one” because it is secret? Is truth a necessary attribute of secrecy? What about the body of the person behind the screen name, you say. What about it? Is the body any more of a measure of identity than psychology, because of its solidity and extension in space? What constitutes the body of an individual, or a certain consciousness? Is it our “physical body” (weight, height, hair colour, eye colour, etc.) or is it the body we conceive for ourselves?

It is as impossible to arrive at a fixed, determinate identity for ROLANDO PEREZ, the subject in the passport, born in Cuba on March 10, 1957 as it is to arrive at a determinate identity for XZYBABE69 or HUNK4U. Like Magritte’s “pipe,” a person’s “real name” may be no more real than that of a screen name. For the question of identity is the question of difference, and this in turn is the question of truths, or the unverifiability of correspondence between word and meaning, between “self” and the “world.”

One of my favourite first lines of any book, are the first three sentences of Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s *On The Line* (Semiotext(e), 1983). They write: “We wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. As each of us was several, that already made quite a few people.” Yes, there are so many in all of us. To speak of names as representative of who we are is ridiculous. “Why have we kept our names? Out of habit, solely out of habit... Not to arrive at the point where one no longer says I, but at the point where it’s no longer of any importance whether one says I or not. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been helped, inspired, multiplied.” And the realization of the multiplicity in all of us is our century’s most liberating event, for at bottom, we are all the (screen) names in history.

—Rolando Perez

Insomnia

[These sleepless nights] began in my youth, at about nineteen. It wasn’t simply a medical problem, it was deeper than that. It was the fundamental period of my life, the most serious experience. All the rest is secondary. Those sleepless nights opened my eyes, everything changed for me because of that... [There] was a precise period, about six or seven years, when my whole perspective on the world changed. I think it’s a very important

problem. It happens like this: normally someone who goes to bed and sleeps all night almost begins a new life the next day. It's not simply another day, it's another life. And so, he can undertake things, he can manifest himself, he has a present, a future, and so on. But for someone who doesn't sleep, from the time of going to bed at night to waking up in the morning it's all continuous, there's no interruption. Which means there is no suppression of consciousness. It all revolves around that. So, instead of starting a new life, at eight in the morning you're like you were at eight the evening before. The nightmare continues uninterrupted in a way, and in the morning, start what? Since there's no difference from the night before. That new life doesn't exist. The whole day is a trial, it's the continuity of the trial. Well, while everyone rushes toward the future, you are on the outside. So, when that's stretched out for months and years, it causes your sense of things, your conception of life, to be forcibly changed. You do not see what future to look toward, because you don't have any future. And I really consider that the most terrible, most unsettling, in short, the principal experience of my life. There's also the fact that you are alone with yourself. In the middle of the night, everyone's asleep, you are the only one who is awake. Right away I'm not a part of humanity, I live in another world. And it requires an extraordinary will to not succumb... to the temptation of suicide. In my opinion, almost all suicides, about ninety percent, say, are due to insomnia. I can't prove that, but I'm convinced... I was very tense, in a feverish state, and ready to explode. Everything took on another intensity, no matter what it was. I was far more violent, I quarreled with everyone. I couldn't put up with anything. And I found everyone idiotic. Nobody understood what I understood. It was the feeling of not belonging. Then too, this feeling that everything is a comedy, that it all makes no sense. The future was meaningless for me, the present as well. And so, philosophically—because one is always a philosopher—it's a sort of exasperation, an intensification of the state of being conscious. Not selfconscious, conscious. The state of consciousness as the great misfortune, and in my case the permanent misfortune. Normally, it's the opposite, it's consciousness which is our advantage. I arrived at the conclusion that no, the fact of being conscious, of not being oblivious, that is the great catastrophe. Because I was conscious twenty-four hours a day. One can be conscious several hours a day, five minutes, but not all day, all night. People are conscious by intervals, but there it's a matter of acuteness, all the time.

—E. M. Cioran

Excerpted from an interview with Jason Weiss, *Public 17: Talk*, 1998.

Institution

A loose aggregate of objects, practices, persons and any combination of the three that grew out of Enlightenment theories about the separateness of forms of knowledge. In contemporary culture, the term exists as a general reference point for any sizeable organization or canon. It has a museological reference in art; the term “Institution of Art” came to replace museum and gallery as a concept that incorporated potential exhibition spaces for art. In contemporary critical theory, institution, and specifically, the “Institution of Art” has come to designate a set of power relations that traverse ideological and physical spaces and defines something as art. Not to be confused with curator. (*see* “Curator”)

—Tom Folland

Institutionalization

A high school might exemplify an “institution,” yet if we try to understand the meaning of the institution as the object of the violence of gun-wielding students, as occurred in 1999 in Colorado, our understanding of this term is gravely radicalized. Available guns are of course an important material factor. Yet the students also chose to pull the triggers, in some cases with the guns trained on themselves. What was their target? Indeed, other students and teachers were their targets in a physical sense. But I suggest that their real target was “institutionalization.”

Perhaps the destructive desire of gun-carrying students reflected the perverted desire of the institution’s self-interested duplicity. Or perhaps this duplicity itself crashed through these students’ bodies as they became its vehicle: mutual destruction became a “shared goal.” The twisted fantasies of these children were perhaps mirrors of the institution’s own contradictory authority, which produces failure in the guise of success.

—Shu Gilbert Nakamura

Intelligence

Although its meaning is unknown even to scientists, it was the most coveted commodity of the late twentieth century.

—Janine Marchessault

Interesting

1990s equivalent to groovy.

—Janine Marchessault