

Feeling Like a Fraud, Part IV

The Psyche As
Singular and Plural

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Feeling Like A Fraud, Part IV: The Psyche As Singular and Plural (2019)¹

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Multiplicity is a theme of our age, not new but newly obvious. When the noted psychologist Jean Baker Miller said there was no such thing as a self – only a self in relation – she was portraying the relational world of plural connectedness in human relations. I conceive the mind as plural, too. We are multiple inside, and experience the world in so many different ways that it can be hard to think of ourselves as being unitary persons. Our bodies are singular, but I think our psyches are plural, and that seeing the psyches as plural is going to become more accepted as time goes on. We who are white in the United States have been encouraged to see ourselves as individuals, and to recognize and develop our singularity. Now, on every side, a diverse mix of voices, channels, and connections calls into question the feeling that we are singular. For me, the time has come to recognize that my psyche is plural. I suggest that we claim many different identities as part of our internal complexity. The Moebius Strip paradox for this essay is that one side of a strip of paper reads “I am singular;” the other side of the strip reads “I am plural.” If you hold one end, twist the other end once, and tape the ends together, both messages will be now on the same side, part of the same analysis. You can pull the strip along between your thumb and forefinger and you will cover both statements without changing sides.

The sensibilities of two revered 19th century Americans, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, hover encouragingly over this paradox. Emerson urged us toward singularity and Whitman urged us toward pluralness. Both, however, believed in an encompassing Oversoul that includes everything in the universe. Beyond the matter of the Oversoul, they differed. Emerson (1841): “Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Whitman (1855): “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” I believe that the sense of being both singular and plural are in most of us in the U.S. today and that our psyches give us both messages: be yourself, and be part of the ocean of life.

The singularity that Emerson recommends is commitment to what feel like our own multiple thoughts and observations, and no one else’s. In recent decades, white U.S. culture has developed so strongly in the Emerson path toward individuality that I think it has given us license to be ignorant of history, unable to see systemically and, in adulthood, to be rather short on empathetic connection. Whitman, in his way, commits to the idea of being immersed in the lives of others as they are enmeshed in his life. He comprises others’ lives and holds them all in his psyche. His identity is the identity of the includer. I think he is better than Emerson at seeing history, seeing social systems at work, and seeing

commonalities of human effort and suffering. But the two men admired each other and did not see themselves as opposites. On first reading *Leaves of Grass*, fifty-two-year-old Emerson wrote to thirty-six-year-old Whitman,

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

Leaves of Grass testifies to plural connection.

I feel that our human psyches are mirrored by both Emerson's idea of uniqueness and Whitman's ideal of interconnectedness. These form the paradoxical opposites of the Moebius strip: I am single and I am plural. I feel that the part of us that is singular, and feels unique to us, is as real as the part of us that has plural affinities, and kaleidoscopic variety. Being asked to narrow down our sense of identity too much can distort and damage people.

At a small college in the U.S., I met three African American students who told me that white students do not accept them as American. So they were happy to go on an exchange visit to Ghana where they had high hopes of being embraced for their Africanness. It didn't work out that way. They were deeply upset by being rejected there, too, when they learned the Ghanaians saw them as American, not African. I felt that they had been persuaded by oversimplifications of identity to feel that they were stateless persons, people without a country. They were in great pain. They felt fraudulent. As I saw it,

You are complex. Part of you relates to America, part of you relates to Africa, and each of you is whole. You all have many other aspects of identity as well. You are not defective variants of anybody else. And you are the way of the future.

But their longing to belong to a nation was poignant. I feel mainstream U.S. culture has visited several problems onto these students. They have been asked to accept others' versions of who they are. They have been led to believe that other people are sure of who and what they are and where their place is. And they are suffering under the cultural imposition that they should settle for simplified senses of their identity. I feel they should be allowed and encouraged to use all of their accumulating experience toward a sense that they are valid, complex people with plural psyches.

Many of the Stone Center papers² and *This Changes Everything*, Christina Robb's book about Jean Baker Miller's and Carol Gilligan's relational theories, explore ideas that point towards seeing the psyche as plural (Robb, 2006). Miller's colleague, Jan Surrey, paraphrases therapist Carl Rogers on how a client in psychotherapy "discovers previously unknown parts of him or herself." Surrey writes of the capacity for open, evolving psyches. She writes of flexibility, responsiveness, receptivity, and changing because of making connections. The connections can be with others, but can also be with inner parts of the self (Surrey, 1984). Miller's colleague and successor at Wellesley's Stone Center, Judith Jordan, writes about reconnecting with rejected aspects of ourselves or the "disavowed aspects of the human condition which women often carry" (Jordan, 1989). She defines *self-empathy* as "bringing an empathic attitude to bear on [ourselves]" (Jordan, 1983).

In one of the Stone Center's Working Papers, Maureen Walker refers to Starhawk's statement that there are prisons and battlefields within the self. I feel these too, as a key aspect of pluralness. One of my Phase Theory papers, *Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race*, dwells on the poignancy of being made to give up the plural affinities of one's early character. I wrote,

The multicultural worlds are in us, as well as around us. Early culturally conditioning trained each of us to shut off awareness of certain groups, voices, abilities, and inclinations, including the inclination to be with many kinds of children. Continents we might have known were closed off, were subordinated within us.³

I now feel we can reconnect with these lost continents, and that when they do this, we are more whole. I concluded *White Privilege, Color and Crime* by carrying the thought further. Continual dominance can imprison the psyche of the dominator.

White oblivion about and inculturated denial of white privilege acts as a psychological prison system that costs white people heavily, in terms of preventing human development. Walking obliviously through our own racial experience may perpetuate the imprisonment of the heart and the intelligence in a false law and order of tyrannizing denial about who, what, and where we are. So the societal systems of color and crime may reside also in the psyches of white people where an equivalent of bad race relations or white supremacy damages the civic health and plural balance of the soul.⁴

While systems of racism and privilege subject people of color to external (and internalized) oppression, these same systems force white people also into fraudulent and fractured versions of ourselves. Excluding the parts of ourselves that were once plurally responsive to others creates space for bigotry to take root.

In his writings on pragmatism, the American philosopher William James suggested that the validity of an idea rested in how far it could take one. The idea that the identity is plural takes me to many places. James has been a great model of pluralizing, having himself extended his roles from naturalist to psychologist to philosopher to student of religion. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1936) and in his philosophical work *The Pluralistic Universe* (1909), James repeatedly describes severalness, distinctiveness, and interior differences. For James, the soul has many facets, is never quite pinned down, and never quite sure of itself.

I am not writing about the mental illness called Dissociative Identity Disorder. I am writing about conscious daily pluralness and about *conscious ambivalence*. I completely believe a person who says, "I am of two minds" about something.

Writer Nancy Mairs took ambivalence, which could be felt by any of us about anything, as a positive sign of intelligence and maturity. In Mairs' (1996) book, *Carnal Acts*, she wrote:

To view your life as blessed does not require you to deny your pain. It simply demands a more complicated vision, one in which a condition or event is not either good or bad, but is, rather, both good and bad, not sequentially, but simultaneously. In my experience,

the more such ambivalences you can hold in your head, the better off you are, intellectually and emotionally [emphasis added].

Mairs essentially says she believes in our conscious pluralness, our ambivalence. I know that its opposite, unconscious ambivalence, results in many kinds of unfinished business, procrastination, rationalization, denial, dishonesty, apology, and remorse. I feel that Mairs was pioneering when she insisted that what I would call *conscious ambivalence* was for her a key to honest living.

I feel that the pluralities are in us as well as around us in the institutional world. There is understandable political pressure toward seeing singularly, for the sake of the image of national unity. For example, the Latin inscription engraved on the U.S. penny, “E Pluribus Unum,” means “Out of Many, One.” I feel that to help the U.S. make good on its plural promises, we should make the other side of the coin carry a message of plurality: “Within the One are Many,” or “Intra Unum Plures.” I feel the United States needs to educate citizens to see our nation as both singular and plural.

At the University of Denver, team teaching in the 1970s, four colleagues and I offered American Studies courses that intentionally gave students differing versions of U.S. culture. The final exam always asked students to “compare the versions of U.S. culture that you got from the first three weeks of the course with the versions that you got in the final eleven weeks.” We still get love letters thanking us for teaching that history is versions. I now recognize that when we taught that history is versions, we assumed also that each student already had the capacity, within themselves, to comprehend a plurality of versions. We were teaching them to recognize pluralness in their own experience of the world. I think that what we did is obvious, but is not yet widely accepted or practiced as a form of teaching. This is partly because we as teachers have probably never been encouraged to see ourselves as having plural psyches. And as teachers, we have also been taught we owe it to students to simplify life, clarify complexities, and teach the next generation to argue pointedly in a competitive, win-lose society. Even the most mindful and sensitive teachers serve an educational system that chiefly fosters individualistic, non-plural minds.

As Emily Style pointed out in her well-known essay “Curriculum as Window and Mirror,” the United States’ liberal arts college curriculum rests on the assumption that human beings are capable of many different mental actions, which are featured in the fields of the humanities, the social sciences, science, math, and technology (Style, 1988). The reason that there are distribution requirements in liberal arts colleges is that the student is asked to become a “well-rounded person” by spreading his or her attention to a number of different fields. The intellectual pluralness that ideally results is not envisioned simply as that of a single self, but rather a self-in-relation to all of the fields it touches and that touch it. The liberal arts curriculum and its distribution requirements postulate that in every student, there is the potential to become competent in many different fields of knowledge. The whole scheme rests on an implicit, though not articulated, model of the mind as potentially plural.

Intellectual history of the 20th century America reveals increasing attention to multiplicity. Anthropologists describe people’s use of code-switching, i.e. using differing manners and linguistic modes situationally, as called for. Howard Gardner (1983) describes multiple intelligences. Brain researchers describe multiple regions of the brain with

different and overlapping functions, and with mental plasticity developing through age and experience. As a child, I was always thrown off by well-meaning adults' single-minded questions: "What is your favorite color - favorite food - favorite book?" "Who is your best friend?" I respect the pluralist Margaret Mead's coaching of her daughter not to feel that she had to have a favorite color or a favorite book.⁵ She told her daughter that one could be equally in love with two people at the same time. This is education in plural thinking and feeling. Wallace Stevens (1917) writes "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," all emanating from him. John Dos Passos (1938) in writing *U.S.A.* conceived the nation as pluralistic mosaic of life. Audre Lorde self-describes as "poet, warrior, woman, lesbian, black, activist, mother, sister." This is plural identity.

In the National SEED Project, we encourage participants to fill in a chart with many circles around a central circle. The chart is entitled "Circles of Our Multicultural Selves." Most people have no trouble filling in multiple circles, naming different aspects of themselves. One thing this exercise has clarified for me is why so many people hesitate to speak in public. Given our complexity, it is not surprising. We would need to censor, evade, neglect, ignore, distort, or exaggerate aspects of our complex selves in saying anything at all.

Once in the National SEED Project's training week in the early 1980s, Emily Style and I created an exercise which was too simple, though we didn't know it at the time. So that they could exchange views with each other, we asked all of the "white people" to line up on one side of the room and all the "people of color" to line up on the other side of the room. Gene Tey Shin, a Korean American man, walked down between the two lines and told us he refused to repudiate his mother, who is white, or his father, who is Korean. Chastened and corrected, we created a third affinity group for people who identify as bicultural, biracial, or multicultural. We are indebted to Gene Tey Shin for staying with the pluralness of his psyche.

When I told a Japanese colleague that because I am not a psychologist, I was fearful about writing that the psyche is plural (I was in fact, feeling like a fraud), my colleague told me, "Well, I am a psychologist and the reason I chose to become a cultural psychologist is that I read a 1991 paper about East/West differences in construing the self." She gave me the research and theory paper by Markus and Kitayama (1991) that spells out some key differences in how the self is construed in East Asian and Western cultures. This paper was instrumental in launching the subfield of cultural psychology. According to the authors, East Asians construe the identity as contingent on relationships, situations, and traditions. The Western, especially American, paradigm of the self is that of an individual, autonomous entity. In the authors' view, the Eastern construal of the self consists of multiple aspects of the self, in contrast to the singular dimension of the Western construal of the self. In this conversation, my colleague told me that when she asks her students in a Japanese university to respond to the question, "Who am I?" they often struggle to come up with ten statements. The American students have no trouble in answering the question, listing their personal attributes and characteristics with ease because they see their attributes transcending relationships and contexts. East Asian students find the question "Who am I?" artificial as it fails to specify a context or relationship to which their sense of self is contingent.

Psychologist Carol Gilligan had interesting things to say about gendered contexts and plural mindedness in her book *In A Different Voice* (1982). Gilligan as a researcher found

that women did not conform to Lawrence Kohlberg's typology of moral development. In his studies, Kohlberg had asked a sample of men and women questions regarding moral decision-making, e.g. whether it was ethical to steal a drug if it might save someone's life. In seeing apparently equivocating responses from women, Kohlberg put their responses in the back of a file drawer and built his typology primarily from his male respondents. When Gilligan opened the neglected files, she noticed in the women's responses some patterns that constituted "a different voice." The women in the research sample kept asking for more information before they could make a moral decision. They were not so concerned with the letter of the law as with how a given decision might tear or mend the social fabric. Gilligan later named the tensions in the women and men's decision-making as the difference between what she called the *ethic of care* and the *ethic of justice*. It seemed that the women were revolving many variables in their minds when considering the ethics of a situation.

In some quarters, Gilligan was pilloried for complexifying the simpler model of moral development which Kohlberg had generated. In further studies, she complicated the picture even more by suggesting that one mind could hold both the ethic of care and the ethic of justice. This implied that the dilemma for complex minded people is not to reject but to choose which of their perceptions to deploy in their actions, using situational ethics. The ethic of saying "it all depends" takes into consideration the question of what avenue of action might do the least harm.

In 1976, I was bowled over by reading *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976). I was impressed by Jean Baker Miller's gutsy, street-wise sarcasm on the subject of the "not too glorious record" of humankind. I loved the way she reconstrued women's "weaknesses" as strengths and was so clear and steady in saying that psychological theory by men about men's experience did not apply to women. I admired the humility of her book's title, not *The Psychology of Women* but ***Toward a New Psychology of Women***. I loved her choice of a humble and tentative word, "toward." This tentativeness presaged her openness to change when women who were not in the economic class or race of her psychiatric sample widened her awareness to the point where she reconceived and renamed the relational model as the relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1987).⁶

Miller's most radical and useful ideas from my point of view are about the "self." There is no such thing as a self; there is only a self-in-relation. Human beings are born into relationship, being literally held by adults, especially mothers. According to Miller, they do not outgrow connection and interdependence with other people as they mature, but well-known psychological theory before her work had posited independence and individuation as mature adult norms and ideals. When Miller made the observations about the self-in-relation, she knew that her theory was far-reaching and could potentially revolutionize thinking about people, policies, and the whole world. "This changes everything," she told her collaborator Christina Robb (2006). It will, however, still be a long time before individualist readings of human psyches stop prevailing in U.S. psychology and economic theory. The dominant political theory of capitalism holds that the *systemic* conditions of people's lives do not much impact *individual* outcomes. Capitalism fosters the myth of meritocracy, which as I have defined it has two parts: that the individual is the unit of society and that whatever one ends up with must be what one individually wanted, worked for, earned, and deserved.

If we are to see the psyche itself is plural, we can take Jean Baker Miller's entire relational paradigm and turn it inward. In that case, we could say that the relationships and the connectedness that she stressed in the social world are obviously found within the content of the mind and heart. In this reading, the relational world of one's interior is filled with multiplicity. And then the psyche itself can be understood to be plural. For many readers, examples will probably present themselves. Who doesn't know the feeling of being "of two minds" about something, or having many interior voices on a given dilemma? Or, as poet Mary Oliver, wrote, "I am, myself, three selves, at least" (1995, p. 2). She was referring to the child, the social being, and the creative being in her.

In *The Mind's I*, by psychologists Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett (1981), Hofstadter writes, "It is a common myth that each person is a unity, a kind of unitary organization with a will of its own. Quite the contrary, a person is an amalgamation of many subpersons, all with *wills of their own* [emphasis added]" (Hofstadter and Dennett, 1981, 342). His co-author, Dennett, writes,

So far there is no good theory of consciousness... The mere fact of such a familiar feature of our lives has resisted for so long all attempts to characterize it... suggests that our conception of it is at fault... What is needed... is a careful rethinking of the assumptions that lead us to suppose that there is a single and familiar phenomenon, consciousness... Might a human being harbor more than one conscious subject or ego or agent within one brain?

(Hofstadter and Dennett, 1981, 8).

If you go back to the founding of Psychology, you will find both Freud and Jung had pluralness in their models of the psyche. They simply could not figure out the psyche without seeing separate elements in it. For Freud: there are the superego, the ego, and the id. For Jung: there are the four psychological types, as well as the anima and animus, and many archetypes. Both men lacked awareness of how overarching systems of power affected their clients' lives. As the field of Psychology developed under the influence of Freud and Jung, many kinds of privilege were ignored in their writings: patriarchy, white-European colonial privilege, and privilege related to sexuality, class, religion, nation, geography, age, and ability. It is odd to me that both founders of Psychology as a field lacked an understanding or willingness to notice the crucial role of circumstances of birth in affecting a human life within systems of power. They lacked the systemic insights of Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center, and of Carol Gilligan, which came from putting women at the center. Nevertheless, Freud and Jung, in context of their time, were quite plural-minded.

The American assumption that the identity is singular is crucial to individualism, capitalism, and the myth of the independent male adult. In the plural self, there are important and useful irreconcilables; the effort to get them all together may be the same old singularity error - the manufactured ideal. My case for seeing identity plurally corresponds to Freud, to Jung, to Miller, and to my own experience of what feel like interdependent actors in my psyche. The singular identity probably is accompanied by an existential sense of isolation, whereas a pluralized sense of identity comes from a relational, contingent sense of existing within multiple communities.

My liberal arts education was partially successful in pluralizing my mind, though its contents were all framed by white European and American males. My talk about Rugged Individualism at University of Denver in 1976 performed pluralism through its twenty chairs labeled with parts of my psyche.⁷ My second Fraud paper rejected the academic genre of the outline and substituted instead a list, a tour of the plural rooms of my psyche. The Madwoman's poem is about four different elements of creation. Working toward a new definition of consciousness as plural has been a relief to me, validating my sense of multiplicity within myself and giving me more curiosity about other people's minds.

I believe that Jean Baker Miller was right: we are born into relationship and we stay there. So to me it makes sense to conceive ourselves as plural. We never outgrow relationality, though we may think we do. Relationality in our outer lives has created relationality and variability in our inner lives, just as external institutions, like family life, school, and employment, have created relationality and variability in our minds. We may as well go ahead and posit that the psyche is as plural as social life itself. Physically, we are singular; in our hearts and souls, we are plural. When teachers urge a student to follow the Delphic teaching "Know thyself," I think it would be more useful to urge, "Know thyselfes."

To students I say: Trust your complexities. You are the only authority in the world on your own complex experiences. Nobody knows more about them than you do. Track your complexities, sort them, study them, and honor them as sources of your knowledge and actions in the world. You are singular; no one else in the world is like you. At the same time, your experiences hold countless different threads, themes, patterns, sensations and mixes of feeling and thought that constitute your plural soul. I define the soul as everything that has ever deeply touched you regardless of its source. No one else's soul has your particular set of complexities. Your plural soul and your singular self are both unique in the history of the evolving world. Trust their complexities, take an interest in them, and be curious about them. Study your own inner and outer worlds, how they are hurt and what would be good for their healing. You may be better respected by others as well if you have done a lot of work toward plural self-knowledge and compassion for your own complexities. Others may see you as helpful because in taking yourself seriously you have given them confidence in doing so themselves. This is not the false leadership of self infatuation that loves only those who grovel at its feet, but leadership of the many faceted soul, trying to act in ways that are in harmony with its own complexity, and puzzling out what might be the greatest good for the greatest number.

I get brought up short in trying to express this, for in the matter of words and communications I have limited faith. You can answer the question of who you are, who any person is, in a thousand different ways. Some people do this confidently in words. But I do not think that reality comes in words. I feel that words and sentences are blunt instruments invented to communicate some senses of reality but not finely successful in accomplishing understanding. Music, art, color, and motion may be able to take over where words leave off.

It may seem odd that a person who earned three degrees in the field of "English" and taught English for three decades is so skeptical about the effectiveness of language. I am writing the words I want to read and they were not in all the hundreds of thousands of lines I have read in "English." I wish the next generations of students well in bringing language around more satisfactorily to their experiences of their lived lives.

I am left wondering whether feeling that the psyche is plural helps in matters of social justice. I think so. It increases compassion, honors ambivalence, encourages generosity, and rewards vicarious experience. Seeing plurally widens the heart. Plural thinking makes ego boundaries less rigid. It makes empathy and modesty and self-awareness more possible. It strengthens courage by removing the idea that courage is straightforward and that bravery consists in being sure that you are right, and in the right. The soul that knows its own pluralness is more modest than the soul that does not; it has let more influences and experiences touch it.

Along these lines, a very notable TED Talk in the U.S. by brain researcher Jill Bolte Taylor (2008) underscores pluralness of the psyche. She discovers her right brain after a stroke. It had been there all along, a place of halcyon peace, hidden behind the activity of the left brain. After the stroke, her right brain became as real to her as her left brain, but it was absolutely Other. Which person is Jill? The left or the right brained person? Answer: Both. Though she was a brain researcher, this was the first time she actually experienced the double nature of her psyche.

Pluralness is so much a part of the life of young people today in the 21st century that I will not attempt to describe in any detail the glimpses I see. There is fluidity of many kinds - gender fluidity, technological fluidity, fluidity in language, manners, and in all of the arts. There is a willingness to explore new paths, invent new ways of being in the world, and seek out information from multiple sources simultaneously.

I cannot speak for young people, but will simply end with a quote from one. Zoe Madonna, of the *Boston Globe*, interviewed Emi Ferguson, a young musician, about her bluegrass and jazz-inspired Bach arrangements and her involvement with the daring, deliberate arts collective American Modern Opera Company (Madonna, 2018). Madonna asked, “If you could change something about the music world, what would it be?” Ferguson responded,

The first thing that comes to mind are these boxes! Classical music is one thing, pop music is another thing. Things should be fluid to encourage listeners to continue to explore ... To try and break down some of those imaginary marketing walls that we’ve built, to have a lot more fluidity ... “You play the flute and you sing, but the singing is pop and the flute is classical? And what genre do we put you in!?” I don’t know what a better way is. How to better address the minutiae of the metadata, to encompass a human being who is not one thing ever, but many things all the time?

Notes

1. McIntosh delivered this essay first as a keynote address for the American Psychological Association on August 5, 2017 and has refined it since. McIntosh first published *Feeling Like a Fraud, Part IV* as an essay in 2019. It is also chapter 10 in *On Privilege, Fraudulence, and Teaching As Learning, Selected Essays 1981–2019* by Peggy McIntosh (Routledge).
2. The main mode of the Stone Center was discussion among therapists and with the Wellesley Centers for Women community. Many things were said that were not formally recorded, though they were part of the working terminology and conceptualizations at the Stone Center.
3. See Chapter 13, *Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race*.
4. See Chapter 4, *White Privilege, Color, and Crime: A Personal Account*.

5. Talk by Mary Catherine Bateson at a Radcliffe reunion. See Bateson (2001) for more about her relationship with her parents.
6. See also Jordan (2001).
7. See Chapter 8, Feeling Like a Fraud, Part II, for more on this talk.

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