

CHRISTINE MARKS

“I am because you are”

Relationality
in the Works
of Siri Hustvedt

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 244



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REINHARD R. DOERRIES
GERHARD HOFFMANN
ALFRED HORNUNG



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For my parents,
Ulla and Peter Marks

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1 Introduction

As such, we cannot understand ourselves without in some ways giving up on the notion that the self is the ground and the cause of its own experience. (Judith Butler, *Dispossession* 4)

The focus on the individual, on genius, on expertise may well be outmoded. (Jack Halberstam, “Unlearning” 11)

In her essay “My Father/Myself,” the American novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt ponders the pervasiveness of American individualism and juxtaposes it with a relational model of subjectivity:

Americans cling desperately to their myths of self-creation, to rugged individualism, now more free-market than pioneer, and to self-help, that strange twist on do it yourself, which turns a human being into an object that can be repaired with a toolbox and some instructions. We do not author ourselves, which is not to say that we have no agency or responsibility, but rather that becoming doesn’t escape relation. (*Living* 70)

This passage exemplifies one of the most urgent objectives Hustvedt pursues in her writing: to dismantle the privilege of individual power that has been so foundational to the construction of American identity. As the epigraphs I have chosen for this introduction illustrate, Hustvedt’s approach reflects a rising trend in the academic *Zeitgeist* of contemporary American society. In the twenty-first century, many Americans simultaneously experience a continuation of free-market individualism and a disillusionment with the failure of such individualism to keep its promises of success and happiness. The American Dream persistently haunts the American imagination. Yet the alternative dream of a shared, communal identity evoked by academic figures like Jack Halberstam indicates a sense of renewal, a rejection of ideals that have become increasingly complicated to defend. Halberstam, in his contribution to the Modern Language Association’s 2012 Presidential Forum, envisions a generation of people who “stop thinking in terms of

singularity and self and start thinking in terms of the many and the collective” (15). Judith Butler, in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), a book co-authored with Athena Athanasiou, objects to the “valorization of possessive individualism” (7) and develops the concept of dispossession as a model of identity that embraces relational dependencies. She promotes the idea that “we do not simply move ourselves, but are moved by what is outside us, by others, but also by whatever ‘outside’ resides in us” (3). Yet alternatives that focus on relation and community remain difficult to conceive of in large parts of Western society. Siri Hustvedt, as I intend to illustrate in the course of this book, finds intersubjectivity to be the basis for a healthy development of the self and scrutinizes the detrimental effects of American society’s failure to promote relational identity formation.

In an era of increased tension between ideals of connectedness and independence, Hustvedt’s work exhibits the inevitable interrelatedness of the human experience while advocating self-other relations based on dialogical intersubjectivity. Her novels, essays, and lectures stand as a defense of mutuality and interconnection in a culture that thrives on appearances, technological advancement, and consumer objects, a culture that fosters “the lapse or break that occurs in people when empathy is gone, when others aren’t a part of us anymore but are turned into things” (Hustvedt, *Loved* 346). In her writing, she illustrates the fatal implications of this tendency toward objectification as well as the redeeming moments of human connection and affirmation. The tensions between her characters are indicative of the conflictive state of identity conceptions in contemporary Western culture. While the ideal of personal autonomy has lost its ground in a variety of discursive fields that have promoted a reorientation toward relational identity concepts, the specter of the independent Cartesian self still dwells in American society, which has always cherished the ideal of unbound individuality and independence.

In the Cartesian tradition, human identity relies on the dichotomy of self and other, on the partition between inside and outside. The very definition of identity, in the sense of a distinct, single self, is grounded in the exclusion of otherness and difference. Dichotomies, however, are subject to deconstruction, and partitions are rarely as impermeable as envisioned in their ideal form. Although this definition of identity presupposes distinct boundaries vital to the formation of an intact subjec-

tivity, human experience is full of moments of indecisiveness during which identity borders are disrupted. Today, the Cartesian ideal of a self that is pure and autonomous, safely detached both from the body it inhabits and from other selves, has been shaken to the core. Through the cracks in the Cartesian shell, from the very center of the self, emerges the other. Rather than stressing individual power and independence, contemporary approaches in various disciplines outline an image of identity as relational, focusing on the interdependencies that shape identity and the physical connectedness between self and world. Models of relational identity envision self and other as interwoven in a web of mutually constructive relationships. Many philosophers, deconstructionists, psychoanalysts, feminist scholars, and ecocritics have challenged, from their respective perspectives, traditional Western conceptions of an autonomous subject. Hustvedt has picked up elements from these various fields and integrated them into her own approach to identity. The author conjoins personal experiences with philosophical, medical, aesthetic, and neurobiological discourses in her fictional and nonfictional works to shed fresh light on self-other relations and subjectivity. The great achievement of Hustvedt's works is the creation of relational models of identity by way of interconnecting these various disciplinary discourses, thus opening up new avenues to understanding the self.

Twentieth-Century Theories of Relational Identity

Siri Hustvedt has published a number of essays in which she underlines the relational traits of psychoanalysis. In "Freud's Playground," for example, an essay she first wrote as the thirty-ninth annual Sigmund Freud Lecture (May 6, 2011), the author focuses on the field of play between the analyst and the patient, and stresses that "*the between* is a road to wellness and realism" (*Living* 197). Freudian psychoanalysis has unveiled the split between the conscious and the unconscious, leaving the self torn in a struggle between irrational drives and defensive mechanisms of repression. The practice of psychoanalytic therapy, with its emphasis on the relation between analyst and analysand through transference, focuses on the interactive field of struggle between self and other. In the 1940s and 1950s, object relations theorists such as Melanie Klein, Ronald Fairbairn, and D. W. Winnicott shifted the focus in psy-

choanalysis from the investigation of inner drives to the child's relation to his or her¹ environment, to the external and internal objects shaping her development. John Bowlby's attachment theory further heightened the awareness of the infant's primary need to relate to other people. The increased interest in the child's relations with others coincided with a centering on the mother-child relationship as the principal object of research. As Hustvedt underlines in “Borderlands: First, Second, and Third Person Adventures in Crossing Disciplines” (2013), “Primary intersubjectivity [a post-Freudian concept] is a pretheoretical, preconceptual interpersonal relation that precedes mirror self-recognition” (123), and this relational development of the infant is gaining importance in child psychology. Yet even before the specific emphasis on mother-child relations and intersubjectivity, psychoanalysis was situated in the intermediate field between self and other.

From a different vantage point, poststructuralist theories have focused on the breaking down of rigid boundaries and the deconstruction of binary distinctions such as inside-outside, self-other, presence-absence, prevalent in the dualistic logic of modern Western philosophy. Poststructuralist thought has contributed to redefinitions of selfhood as a fluid and flexible entity mediated through continuous interaction with the environment, undermining established conceptions of atomistic autonomy and self-coincidence. As Susan Stanford Friedman underlines in her definition of relational identity, it “depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity” (*Mappings* 22). According to Friedman, “structures of power” (22), especially those delineating identity borders with regard to gender and race, determine the shifting nature of the self, and the contours of the self are shaped by interpersonal relations. The deconstruction of the self-sufficient, intact, and centered subject is based on “an ontological rejection of the full subject,” and a refusal of “the tyranny of wholes” (Hasan 37). The self thus has come to be defined as “a synthetic construct, a crossing point of public interpretation where waves of cultural and linguistic meanings intersect” (Fox 25). The postmodern self, as Jean-

¹ For readability's sake, I will hereafter switch between “his” and “her,” “he” and “she,” etc., kindly asking the reader to imagine that whenever I refer to the self or the other or the child or other non-gendered concepts, both genders are included in either the masculine or the feminine form.

François Lyotard describes it in his *The Postmodern Condition*, “doesn’t amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (15). While Siri Hustvedt’s writing goes beyond an exclusively postmodern framework—especially in her emphasis on identity as grounded in embodied, material existence—, she shares with the postmodernists a fascination with existential fragmentation and an emphasis on ambiguity over clear binaries and absolutes. Indeed, her work is becoming increasingly driven by the author’s inclination to undo epistemological certainties, which becomes particularly evident in her recent essay collection *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012), her memoir *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves* (2010), and her forthcoming novel *The Blazing World* (2014).

Hustvedt’s work, while not always explicitly labeled as feminist, also partakes in gender discourses and targets simplified constructions of gender identity, connecting with recent developments in gender studies. For instance, her writing frequently makes reference to attachment studies and the particular relationship between mothers and their children. The focus on the role of the mother as a nurturer and caregiver discovered in relational psychoanalysis has become a central asset in second-wave feminist critiques of autonomous, male-dominated ideals of identity. Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982), for instance, define feminine identity as being in principle more relational than masculine identity. Both works emphasize that social constructions of feminine identity promote compliance, relatedness, and permeability. Yet Hustvedt also goes beyond traditional assignments of gender criteria; for example, in her first novel, *The Blindfold*, she creates a cross-dressing protagonist who is a perfect illustration of Judith Butler’s performativity of gender.² Hustvedt here allows her character to live out masculine fantasies that lead to a destabilization of her gendered identity and a breaking down of the boundaries between male and female. Gender roles and their paralyzing effects on women’s creative potential and their reception in society become Hustvedt’s central concern in her forthcoming novel *The Blazing World*, which holds up the mirror to

² See Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).

American society’s—and particularly the New York art world’s—preconceived notions of gender and, like *The Blindfold* and other works, tests the limits of such gender distinctions.

While feminist scholars of life writing were first to apply relational identity concepts to women’s autobiographical writing in the 1980s,³ the exclusive allocation of relational traits to feminine identity has been revised and extended to a gender-transcending concept. Paul John Eakin, who established the concept of relational identity in autobiography studies in his *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), claims that, although the “myth of autonomy dies hard” (43), “*all* identity is relational” (43; emphasis in original). Eakin quotes the German sociologist Norbert Elias: “‘The interpersonal functions and relations that we express by grammatical particles such as ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘he,’ ‘she,’ ‘we’ and ‘they’ are interdependent. . . . each ‘I’ is irrevocably embedded in a ‘we’” (*Lives* 63).⁴ The interconnectedness of self and other and the interpersonal component of identity are thus foregrounded in autobiography studies. Mark Allister follows Eakin’s approach, underlining that both men and women may have relational identities: “The extent to which humans view themselves as having autonomy or being entwined in a network of relationships is a spectrum (not an either/or box), and individual men and women fall across this spectrum” (16). The posi-

³ See, for example, Mary G. Mason’s “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” (1980) or Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” (1988).

⁴ Elias, in the postscript to his *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, throws a critical glance on Western civilization’s privileging of the individual and the idea of a “homo clausus”: “The conception of the individual as *homo clausus*, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside, determines the image of human beings in general. . . . his core, his being, his true self appears likewise as something divided within him by an invisible wall from everything outside, including every other human being. . . . But the nature of this wall itself is hardly ever considered and never properly explained. Is the body the vessel which holds the true self locked within it? Is the skin the frontier between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’? What in the human container is the container, and what is the contained?” (472).

tioning of the self within a dialogical and collective social and linguistic environment is also highlighted throughout Hustvedt's works.

Frequent references to neurobiological discoveries such as mirror neurons in Hustvedt's fictional and nonfictional works moreover reflect a shift towards relational identity concepts in neurobiology. The discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s has had significant impact on debates over intersubjective identity formation and, while contested, may continue to gain importance in the future. The existence of mirror neurons shows that the mirroring of self-consciousnesses displayed in Hustvedt's novels—for example, between artist and model, doctor and patient, mother and child—indeed finds its origin in the human brain. Comparatively young fields like neuropsychanalysis or psychobiology work towards an understanding of human identity grounded in both the body and the mind. Hustvedt, who has engaged in public conversations with notable neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio, Vittorio Gallese, and Jaak Panksepp, notes the emergence of “a psychophysiology of the Between, which involves neither nature nor nurture, but both at once, merging without demarcation—genetic temperament and a specific human story become *personality* over time, a personality shaped by its affective story” (*Living* 208). It is this field that Hustvedt further explores in her writing, combining scientific inquiry with a writer's imagination and the courage to pursue ambiguous and conflicting viewpoints.

Siri Hustvedt's Background

Hustvedt's work interrogates the crossing points between self and other and highlights the “fabric of relations” (Lyotard 15) from which selves emerge. Hustvedt's fascination with relationality, ambiguity, and the between may well be anchored in her identity as a Norwegian-American writer who grew up in the Midwest and chose to move to New York City. As she writes in her essay “Some Musings on the Word *Scandinavia*,” “It is a legacy of my childhood that I am a Norwegian-American who doesn't feel quite American but who doesn't feel quite Norwegian either” (*Living* 59). In her first essay collection, *Yonder*, Hustvedt thematizes the idea of being neither here nor there, which may have its source in the various places she feels connected to and shaped by. Having lived in Bergen for a while as a teenager and still speaking

fluent Norwegian, the writer was influenced by her parents’ heritage and grounded by her Minnesota childhood, yet also eager to explore the urban flexibility of New York City and the intellectual challenges of graduate student life at Columbia University. Hustvedt was born in Northfield, Minnesota, in February 1955. Her parents, Lloyd Hustvedt and Ester Vegan, both have Norwegian roots; while her father grew up in Minnesota, her mother lived in Norway until the age of thirty, when she immigrated to Minnesota. Hustvedt has three sisters: Liv, Asti, and Ingrid. Early on, she became deeply immersed in literature, reading classics like *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *Wuthering Heights* at the age of thirteen (cf. *Yonder* 27). She attended St. Olaf College in Minnesota and moved to New York in 1978 in order to get a Ph.D. in English at Columbia University. In 1982, Hustvedt married the writer Paul Auster, with whom she has a daughter, Sophie, who is now a singer and actress. Hustvedt and Auster live together in Brooklyn.⁵ She has published five novels, four essay collections (one of which deals exclusively with painting), a book of poetry, a memoir, and a number of contributions to periodicals, online magazines, and anthologies.

During her studies at Columbia University, Hustvedt acquired many of the ideas she later developed in her fictional writing. In her unpublished dissertation thesis, *Figures of Dust: A Reading of Our Mutual Friend* (1986), she examines Charles Dickens’s novel for elements of fragmentation, ambiguity, and boundary dissolution. She names Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage⁶ and M. M. Bakhtin’s *The Dialogical Imagination*⁷ as two of the major influences on her interpretation of Dickens—both thinkers have continued to influence Hustvedt in her later writings. She also quotes Mary Douglas’s reflections on the metaphorical danger of margins, which the British anthropologist famously developed in *Purity and Danger*—another key concept of Hustvedt’s later works.⁸

In *Figures of Dust*, Hustvedt notes that in Dickens’s fictional worlds, “[t]he border between self and outside world is often blurred” (5) and

⁵ Most of the information is available through Hustvedt’s own autobiographical essays and interviews.

⁶ See Chapter 3 of this study.

⁷ See Chapter 2.

⁸ See Chapter 4.

reads *Our Mutual Friend* as a novel in which personal identity “is a very delicate thing, caught up in a drama of sliding borders and meaningless signs that calls into question the notion of an a priori self” (5). Hustvedt furthermore already states what is to be one guiding concept of all her future work to this point: “There can be no ‘I’ without a ‘you,’” and “a whole identity is dependent on the recognition of another person” (9). The same observation can be made about Hustvedt’s own fiction, which is consistently concerned with the fragility of identity boundaries and the negotiation of subjectivity in self-other relations. In her work, Hustvedt sets out to dive deeply beneath the surface of this seemingly simple statement, into an intriguingly dense space of philosophical, neurobiological, and aesthetic discourses, always coming up with new material to be woven into her construction of intersubjective and relational identity.

A Philosophy of Mixing

In Hustvedt’s novel *What I Loved* (2003), the character Violet advances a theory of “mixing,” according to which self and other overlap and cannot be separated. In a key passage, Violet makes the observation that “‘It isn’t: I think, therefore I am. It’s: I am because you are’” (91). This defiance of the Cartesian self lies at the center of Hustvedt’s writing project, as she regularly discloses the self’s relatedness to the world and others. I have chosen to include Violet’s formula in the title of this study as I seek to explore the repercussions of the idea of mixing in Hustvedt’s negotiation of relational identity and the boundaries of the self. She highlights the fragility of identity constructions, always showing the self in relation to the other and emphasizing moments of transgression and undecidability, moments in which the ‘I’ cannot find a clear distinction from the ‘we’ of its personal past and social environment. Hustvedt’s interest lies in those moments when what is usually perceived as a barrier established between inside and outside collapses and when identities get absorbed by the outside and overwhelmed.

However, rather than confirming the death of the subject proclaimed by postmodernist registers, Hustvedt nevertheless allows for and insists on the necessity of an inner core of the self. There are many instances that illustrate the need for protective boundaries of the self against too

much mixing. Hustvedt’s ideal concept of identity can safely be termed relational and intersubjective, and intersubjectivity also implies certain limits to the desirability of mixing with others. Hustvedt’s repeated emphasis on the importance of a protected inner core and the recurring attraction that characters feel to other characters’ secret, unrevealed inner places show that she does not idealize a complete merging of self and other. A dialogical model of selfhood requires a degree of separation between two subjects in order to create a space *in between* in which dialogue happens. In her writing, Hustvedt thematizes the movement between isolation and coalescence, closed and open bodies, autonomy and heteronomy. At times, the other is shown to be a potential source of terror in its penetration of the self; at other times, there are instances that display mutual love and affirmative interdependence.

The author’s sensitivity toward the fragile and relational nature of the self is anchored in an embedding of the self in the body, fostering a conjunction of philosophical and biological investigations of the self. In her writings, Hustvedt reinforces “The notion that the body [i]s both an agent and an object of individual self-positioning” (Brandt 17). She complicates this idea of self-positioning by drawing attention to the precarious instability of the subject’s position—her characters’ identities are frequently disrupted by the breaking down of the border between self and other. The body constitutes a medium of exchange between inside and outside, of communication between self and other. The author draws on phenomenological approaches to embodiment as well as medical discourses to elucidate the interconnections between embodiment and relational identity. Hustvedt’s interpretation of the body and identity will be of particular importance in my reading of her reconstruction of hysteria and anorexia as disorders related to the boundaries of the self. Hustvedt furthermore pays tribute to Edmund Husserl’s suggestion that the relation between self and other can either be characterized by an acknowledgment of the other as *Leib*—a lived being—or by reducing the other to a *Körper*—a dissectible object ready to be seized and controlled (see Hustvedt, *Shaking Woman* 90). Whether self-other relations are portrayed as a struggle between subject and object or as a reciprocal exchange between two subjects oftentimes depends on the approach to the other as either *Körper* or *Leib*. In her fictional work, Hustvedt introduces both moments in which characters find themselves objectified by

the other and moments of mutual acknowledgment of the other's lived being and celebration of intersubjective identity formation.

The Novels

Hustvedt's first novel, *The Blindfold* (1992), stars Iris Vegan, a young Columbia graduate student, who finds herself on a quest for her own identity during which she goes through a series of relationships—all of which fall apart—and ends up fleeing from the novel “like a bat out of hell” (*Blindfold* 221). As the name Iris Vegan—Iris is Siri spelled backwards, and Vegan is Hustvedt's mother's maiden name—reveals, the protagonist is an alter ego of the author. The novel's plot is divided into four interlinked narratives, which are not organized chronologically. The novel starts out with Iris working for the mysterious Mr. Morning, who asks her to record descriptions of objects that belonged to a woman who was murdered in his building. As Iris's suspicions over Mr. Morning's involvement in the death of the woman grow, she ends up quitting the job without being paid. In the second narrative, Iris is involved in an unhappy love affair with Stephen, who introduces her to his friend George. George, a photographer, takes a picture of Iris that she later perceives as an assault on her identity, a complete distortion of herself. The episode centers on the photograph's effect on Iris's identity and her relationships with Stephen and George. The novel's third part describes Iris's struggle with a long and extreme bout of migraine. Her illness sends her into Mount Olympus hospital, where she has a moment of connection with Mrs. O, a deranged old woman. The last episode deals with Iris's relationships to Michael Rose, her professor, for whom she translates a German novella, *Der Brutale Junge*, into English, and Paris, a mysterious character who moves in and out of her life. The translation of the novella gradually takes over Iris's life and leads her to dress up as a man at night and behave like Klaus, the story's protagonist. The various assaults on Iris's identity leave her destabilized and fragile—she is an example of a self unable to find a healthy balance between self and other. Her attempts to relate to other people result in a decomposition of her own identity, which illustrates the need for an inner core that is protected from outside forces.

The Enchantment of Lily Dahl (1996) is set in Webster, an imaginary town in Minnesota. The protagonist Lily, a young actress who works at the Ideal Café, starts an affair with Ed Shapiro, a painter from New York taking temporary residence in the small town to do a series of portraits of Webster locals. The story develops into an uncanny mystery embedded in town folklore, as mysterious sightings of a man walking around with a corpse that looks like Lily are reported. Lily sets out to solve the mystery, which does not come to a happy ending. A coming-of-age story, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* interrogates identity, representation in art, the voyeuristic look, the meaning of language, and life in a small-town community. Hustvedt explains that the narrative “is organized by Lily’s menstrual cycle, during which she misses one period, a traumatic absence” and “everything relates to everything else” (Interview by Nissen 123). This study will focus on the novel’s revaluation of the voyeuristic gaze as a mode of breaking down the boundary between self and other.

While Hustvedt’s first two novels are told from the point of view of young female narrators, her third novel, *What I Loved* (2003), introduces an aging male protagonist, the art historian Leo Hertzberg. The novel is set in the New York art world and deals with questions of identity, love, loss, art, social disorders, and perception, among other themes. Leo recounts his friendship with the artist Bill, which is shaped by their common love of art. Both men become fathers at almost the same time, and while Leo suffers the terrible loss of his son Matt at age eleven, Bill sees his son Mark grow into a lying and cheating, inapproachable adolescent. While Bill finds fulfilled love with his model and lover Violet after divorcing Lucille, Mark’s mother, Leo’s wife Erica moves from New York to California after their son’s death. Violet writes books about hysteria and anorexia nervosa,⁹ which lead her to develop her theory of mixing, which is the centerpiece of this reading of Hustvedt’s works. Hysteria and anorexia, according to Violet, are disorders that relate to

⁹ Violet’s dissertation on hysteria is based on Hustvedt’s sister Asti’s then unpublished Ph.D. thesis, “Science Fictions: Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s *L’éve future* and Late-Nineteenth-Century Medical Constructions of Femininity” (see Hustvedt’s Acknowledgments in *What I Loved* 370). Asti Hustvedt has now published her research in a book called *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (2011).