



## **Evaluation of the MA Thesis *Autobiography, Subjectivity, and Agency: Dorothy Day's The Long Loneliness* by Elisabeth Pederson**

In this thesis Elisabeth Pederson examines the 1952 autobiography of American Catholic socialist activist and writer Dorothy Day (1897-1980) in the societal context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, anarchism, Catholicism and more. Drawn to Day's 'resisting capitalist policies ... and providing alternative forms of community' (p. 4) Pederson notes ambivalence or fluctuation between some of Day's nonconformist actions and her affirmation of traditional gender and sexual politics. This propels the inquiry into her 'gendered self-identity' (p. 47), more specifically, into how 'Day positions her identity/subjectivity through discourse' (3) in her autobiography and what moments of agency, resistance and potentiality for change emerge in this process.

The thesis is fluently written and covers impressive terrain in feminist theory. Aside from historical information on Day, it includes two literature reviews, one providing an overview of the published literature about Day (19 pages, no subheadings), and the other on the genealogy and genre of autobiography in feminist theory (13 pages). Inspired by Foucault, Scott, Gilmore and others Pederson adopts a feminist performative approach to autobiography, gender and self-presentation, one that examines how the 'autobiographical "I" is produced discursively' (49) through conflicting historical and cultural contexts and 'discursive calls' (40) in which it acquires meaning. Pedersen also offers biographical information to make her own position visible (50) and critically notes the absence of 'analysis [of] the system of whiteness that Day was embedded in' (ibid.).

The analysis of Day's autobiography evolves around themes and passages related to gender and sexuality, organised around four foci taken from Smith and Watson's work on feminist autobiography: relationality ('significant others'); contradictions; embodiment and silences. Placed in the context of McCarthyism, Pedersen makes unexpected connections between sexual politics (the silence around abortion) and the societal denigration of socialist activism ('Red Scare'). She further shows how Day was achieving and redefining femininity, through performing care for others, thereby refiguring 'family values' to include political action - manoeuvres through which she holds together the sexual and the spiritual, the sensual and chaste.

Here I would like to pose some critical comments and queries. With respect to the detailed literature reviews, it would have been beneficial for the reader, and the flow of the argument, to pose more pointed questions (other than what research is out there) and to more explicitly flag concepts or modes of attention emerging *through* the review (e.g. contradictions, 'fluidity of gender performance', 'female feeling' p. 26, 27, 34) rather than introducing these

in the empirical analysis through Smith and Watson. It is not clear why we look at length at different conceptions of an ethics of justice and care (Kohlberg, Gilligan, Noddings), for example, if care and ethics are not analytical categories or themes to be explored in autobiographical analysis.

Conversely, I wonder to what extent the materialist approach of autobiographical discourse analysis is attentive and hospitable to that which exceeds personal and historical knowability. There is a surprisingly little attention paid to excess, affect and pleasure in the autobiographical text; silences are considered in terms of what Day (strategically) withheld, not that which is not, and perhaps cannot, be integrated into existing frames of memory and history – including perhaps, the history of poor Black lives. Cixous' call to 'write your self!' (38) – echoed in Trinh's (cited) call to write your body – might illuminate material modes of body writing, affect, energy and indeed bodily agency that give further leads for analysis (with possible resonances to Gilmore's attention to 'writing [...] and the gendered connection of word and body'" (40)).

With this in mind, I would like to ask Elisabeth to address the affective (now addressed in terms of shame that is productive) and traces of what might escape knowability in her material – including perhaps trace of race/racialisation – i.e. the limits of discourse analysis.

This also relates to the author's positionality, which as Rose (cited) argues is not merely available through introspection and reflection (this would be the Goddess trick) but often through collusion and collision with one's research bodies. How is the author dis/affected by particular 'scenes' in the autobiography in ways that shape her positionality and the analysis undertaken?

Given the initial interest in political action, spirituality and resistance, what is the contribution of the type of analysis suggested, and of Dorothy Day, for feminist politics today?

I recommend the grade 1

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