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What's in a Name?

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ABSTRACT

Sam Guzzardi's essay bridges cultural, political, and clinical registers in his discussion of a dense and heartfelt treatment of a genderqueer subject, who comes increasingly into their multivalenced subjectivity as the years unfold. The therapy is rigorous, creative, and poignant.

Every time I read this thoughtful and ambitious essay, an unexpected feeling of sadness and receptivity grows.

The piece *acted* on me, slowing down my usual habits of reading (pen in hand, ready to mark up the copy with my evaluative “Notes to Self”). Instead, as I surrendered to the action of the text, I felt a state shift, moving from the “*yes, but*” stance of a discussant to the “*yes and*” of a colleague, who is standing in “communion” with author and patient (though I did wonder where Nicholas went when Nicki took his place in sessions – but more about that later).

Guzzardi is an artful storyteller and a rigorous thinker. He wears his theory lightly, distilling quite a lot of it by finding the very best quotes from the very best minds to help him advance his project: theorizing play as a serious, therapeutic project, highlighting the transformational politics of the bid to be renamed, psychoanalyzing subjectivity and gender as both fluid and embodied, knitting the reemergence of traumatic material with the work of *apres coup*, and so on.

Many of these ambitions are encapsulated in Guzzardi's pitch perfect and enviable move at the outset of the essay – the moment when he grants subject status to “Nicki” in one tender, playful, and heartfelt act of recognition. (“I wouldn't dream of calling you anything else.”) This seemingly effortless acknowledgment of Nicki's right to live outside of his imagination and among other human subjects is of course momentous. Indeed, we might think of the bid to be renamed as the moment when a misgendered/misrecognized child or adult seeks a fresh start for which they convene a new scene of address.

It took 2 years of treatment for Nicholas to request this re-set from his therapist “Bobby,” and for “Nicki” to become his patient of record (after which Nicholas does seem to have disappeared from view). It is surely no accident that Nicholas made this request in the very same session where he reported the “haunting and horrific” incident where, as a third grader, his gender fluidity incited a murderous response from other children on the school bus. (“That was the last day I let anybody call me Nicki.”)

The pairing of Nicholas' report of that traumatic "haunting" with Nicki's poignant reemergence in the same session is a testament to Guzzardi's sustained "concern" for both of them (*cf.* Loewald, this essay) – that stoic "analytic love" that paved the way for "Nicki," a soft assembly gathering dust in the closet, to finally make a comeback.

But we do not know enough about Nicholas' first 2 years of treatment to know just *how* he kept Nicki out of sight (if not out of mind). We know that Nicki had been rendered "inaccessible" and "foreclosed" after the school bus trauma, but we do not know anything about the therapeutic process that slowly "defrosted" him.

Was Nicholas, the patient, aware of Nicki waiting in the wings? If so, was he being kept under wraps until the treatment was safe enough – a posture that would surely have deformed the work in one way or another? Or was Nicholas introducing a Nicki who had only just "collected" his bits and pieces, and was now ready to talk – but only if Guzzardi was willing to speak his name, take him into psychoanalytic treatment, and (through months of dedicated – and playful – recognition) bring him into the light?

This is, of course, exactly what happened, and the "Nicki" who is the subject of this essay will come to be mesmerizing. But before he takes center stage, I do want to give Nicholas a proper goodbye. Nicki came to *unseat* Nicholas, as N's primary identity, but where did Nicholas go? Did the two of them change places, I wonder – Nicholas now becoming the one who was sequestered, if not foreclosed? Or did "Nicholas" remain intermittently in treatment, holding on as a strand of continuity, even though he might have been serving primarily as the hollowed out host for Nicki, who had become his Desire? Did Nicki consider Nicholas to be a "failed self," or was he something more like a public facing "false self," whose days were numbered?

Remember that no gendered subject literally reproduces gender categories since each gender position is a *personal interpretation of a gender category*. ("This is what *I* mean by masculinity/femininity/non-binary, genderfluid, etc.") In this regard, consider that Butler called gender "a copy with no original," a play on the anthropologist Geertz's (1986) foundational insight that "it is the copying tht originates." In other words, using Nicki as our lodestar, we can see that genders are not only "copies of copies with no original" like inert photocopies. Rather, they are "handmade" copies that breathe with desire and intention. (As Butler has written (Butler, 2004), and I have discussed elsewhere (Goldner, 2003, 2011) gender can best be understood as a "circulating improvisational possibility" one that uses a "Yes, *and*" practice to make genders that are culturally intelligible, but also idiomatically unique.)

In tracking Nicholas, I know it can appear as if I am insisting on a prequel to the paper we have before us. But my goal is to thicken this essay, not to derail it. I am cleaving to "Nicholas" in the hope that he might flesh out Nicki's "improvisational multiplicity:" those "varying embodied gender presentations" Guzzardi references but does not discuss them. Were these other "presentations" like soft assemblies that were more floaty, perhaps, more transient, apparently not yet cohering as identity positions? Or were they just eclipsed by Nicki's magnetism, as Nicholas seems to have been?

What makes the difference between those potentials that float on the transgender edge, and those that cohere enough to be granted a name, and maybe even given a chance to be introduced in public? (Although we can presume that Guzzardi made contact with N's "individual subnarratives, enabling negotiation to take place between them," as Bromberg advises, he does not share that aspect of his work with us.)

Indeed, as this essay moves along, “Nicki” became more and more compelling, coming across as a singular *someone* (rather like a “central,” if not “true” self), despite Guzzardi’s insistence that there is No Such Thing). Nicki may be just one setting on a kaleidoscopic mosaic of fluid self-states, but under Guzzardi’s tender and containing gaze, he lingers, like the scent of that old perfume Guzzardi wore without initially knowing why.

That Nicki, wafting through aromatic space, is the one I now want to consider, as I take up the topic of “play,” before switching back to some further thoughts on self-state multiplicity. Firstly, I want to remind us that “Nicki” was *born in play*. Remember that the “Nicki” personification came into being from the depths of a young boy’s imagination, a boy who would not concede to gender’s normative conventions (“I was not a girl or anything, I was just . . . Nicki”).

How inventive – especially when we consider the sophistication behind the name “Nicki.” Remember, Nicholas did not coin a brand-new name for his emergent alter, as if the character was there to serve as a lonely child’s imaginary friend. “Nicki” is a diminutive of Nicholas, a nickname of sorts, and as such is a “Yes, and” iteration of a conventional boy’s name, one that opens space around the confines of his interpellated masculinity, but does not seek to erase it.

With Nicholas’ help, “Nicki” could eventually insist on playthings appropriate to his girlyboy sensibility. (“No More Trucks!,” “I need dolls to play with – and maybe also play *as?*” – curvaceous *Barbie*-dolls, who can perform all the femininities I am longing to inhabit.)

Clearly, these were demands that required a major concession from the adults who ran Nicholas’s world. Parents, maybe even teachers, had to be willing to operate in a transitional “as-if” play space, where a “Real/Not Real” binary did not have the Last Word. But remember, too, that characters like “Nicki” are only available for a short while. Children must renounce such novel figures before too long and submit to Reality’s regime.

So what should we make of the fact that it was *a bunch of 8-year-olds* who could not tolerate the fact that Nicholas was bent on having it all. He had the temerity to occupy conventional reality while daring to deputize Nicki to live his truth. This idiomatic solution was probably far too threatening to the kids on that bus, for whom binary gender was a concrete fact of their still uncertain, softly assembled personhood – a feature of identity that could not be “toyed” with. Boys and girls were *opposites*, gender “overinclusiveness” (Fast, 1999), was for babies! Playing with gender, even via a consensual “as-ifness,” was a betrayal, punishable by “death.” (Remember it was not the flesh-and-blood Nicholas they threatened, it was “Nicki” whose “existence” had to be snuffed out.)

In this regard, we should not gloss over the fact that Nicki was not revived until Nicholas brought him into therapy – a venue with transformational potential when analyst and patient allow themselves to play in the transitional space it affords. It was Guzzardi’s whimsical acceptance of Nicholas’ request to be renamed “Nicki” (“I not sure, now, I could call you anything else”) that opened the floodgates for Nicki’s rebirth.

Could we all have moved that quickly, I wonder? Throwing caution to the wind, and diving into those uncharted waters? Or is Guzzardi just inherently, dispositionally, temperamentally less intimidated by tradition, less cautious, more mischievous? I think so.

Play is infectious, laughter contagious, a limbic system response that transcends the action of ordinary relating, allowing the analyst to discard the posture of “knower,” for that of a “facilitator of emergence,” as Guzzardi describes. Is it not the history of just such analytic play that paved the way for Nicki to ratchet up his femininity with that terrific retro summer chic outfit, complete with breathy one-liners?

Guzzardi's discussion of that moment is quite masterful. He explains that Nicki's "as-if" rendition of himself as a languid, scene-stealing patient was both "performed and authentic," a condensation that made it possible for many deeper truths of his psyche to emerge.

But I also think that Guzzardi clearly trusts in the psychic action unleashed by the "thirdness" of play; the way it invites a relational surrender that leaps over the obvious, spilling out into something freer, maybe even something revelatory (see Corbett's (n.d.) paper on play to see just how transformational adult therapeutic play can be).

Consider, for example, the time these analytic partners played off each other, anticipating the birth of their future, as yet unrealized selves, via a "clang association" game of naming (Robert/Roberta, Nicholas/Nichola, etc.). Or those song lyrics! Was trading those lyrics and feeling the beat not a joyful, giddy Third that let this analytic couple declare their love for each other, without anyone having to blush?

It is here, in the transitional space made possible by the joint creativity of these analytic partners, that I return to Nicki. Guzzardi has been so evocative in his crafting of this patient that I did not want this beautiful man to become nothing more than an abstract instance of multiplicity, even if he is just "one self-representational schema" among many. We all know the experience of hearing from *that* someone, the one who has always been "*in there*," not as a reigning identity, but as a continuous "*felt self*," instantly recognizable – "standing in the spaces" perhaps, but also speaking from a Ground Zero position of "I" ness.

It is, of course, very important to consider all gendered selves, parts, and wholes, to be "As-If" propositions. (In fact, early in our writing careers, our original C-R study group (Benjamin, Dimen, Goldner, and Harris) coined highly similar two-word phrases, unbeknownst to each other, that were meant to capture the paradoxical indeterminacy inherent in any and all gender positions.) I called gender a "false truth," Harris offered up the notion of gender as a "necessary fiction," Benjamin argued that gender was a "real appearance," and Dimen, allowing herself a few more words, landed on the notion of gender as "a force field of dualisms" (Goldner, 1991).

But that said, I want to suggest that our relational field's current aversion to a dated, developmental credo that over-values integration and cohesion as the sine qua non of mental health has left our theorizing lopsided. While Guzzardi himself reluctantly acknowledges that "we can coalesce around an identity for the sake of coherence," he is quick to reiterate that this "coherence" is ultimately dependent on the vagaries of the moment. Lew Aron, whom Guzzardi also quotes in his essay, is a bit more balanced when he writes that "we need an emphasis on people as both unified, stable cohesive subjects and also as multiple, fragmented, and different from moment to moment" (p. 179), an insight that Bromberg made even more precise and elegant, with that last-word-on-the-subject line: "the goal of treatment should not be integration, but 'the capacity to feel like one self while being many'" (p. 210).

But while this "both/and" position is our "official" relational point of view, the "unified" side of Aron's statement does feel "old" – it is not where the party is. However, in light of Guzzardi's extensive consideration of subjectivity's flux and movement, I hope he would consider offering some illustrations of how "the one and the many" play out in Nicki's internal world. How do Nicki's parts co-exist with over-arching, standing-in-the spaces I-self (who recognizes himself to be "one self, while also being many")? Did it seem, at least some of the time, that his relief in having (finally!) *become* Nicki would have led him to feel awash in the pleasures of "True Self 'ness'?"

Can we track Nicki through the range of his analytic self-states, as for example, via Davies' description of her "multi-dimensional" theory of mind? She writes,

Each representational system includes a self-representation, an object representation, a predominant affective tone, an experience of somatic body-self and a level of cognitive organization in keeping with the age and developmental sophistication of the internalized self-other dyad. (p. 179)

No wonder Guzzardi leans into this statement! It is just what we need for an analytic deep dive into Nicki's internal word and relational history. What better way to probe his gendered multiplicity than to follow him, in dense psychoanalytic detail, as he moves among his self-states, via a process Harris called "a molecular, finely grained experience – near vantage point."

Guzzardi alludes to this aspect of Nicki's self-organization in his brief account of how Nicki "(re)found" a more "cis-centric aspect" of himself in his giddy identification with cis gay male men. Might we think of his internal process in their company to be an object-relational dialectic between his more familiar femme masculinity and his newer gay femininity?

In this regard, we should probably question Guzzardi's brief remark that Nicki's use of the "he" pronoun was due to the fact that he "loved his penis" (perhaps to contrast him with, trans subjects who often suffer extremes of genital dysmorphia). But nonetheless, this concrete equation still makes the genitals the hegemonic "last word" on gender – Freud's originary mistake and one which is still prevalent in popular culture. Would it not be more consistent with Guzzardi's vision to say that while Nicki did indeed love his penis, he was actually seeking to *expand* the category of masculinity, not *reduce* it to his genitals.

It should be clear by now that I am in the thrall of Nicki's various self-states, and want to get into the weeds of their psychoanalysis. But while *I* cannot stop thinking about Nicki, I see that Guzzardi is up to something different: he is *thinking about* thinking about Nicki. *His* genderqueer Nicki is not being served up to me as an object of fascination, nor is he meant to be the subject of the case presentation I seem to be looking for. Rather, his Nicki is "*Just* Nicki," a deceptively modest appellation that belies its magical powers. (Consider how names are "performatives," bringing into being whomever it is they have chosen to name.)

Guzzardi resists the Foucauldian impulse to categorize, analyze, or diagnose Nicki, which is part of the paper's psychic impact. Where I might want to fix Nicki in my sights to satisfy a gender scholar's desire to take him apart, Guzzardi never lets Nicki become the object of my gaze. Of course my "pure" intentions cannot simply be presumed. Sexual and gender minorities have served as objects of diagnosis and clandestine exoticism for far too long. Those who wish to pick up the scalpel need to demonstrate their good will. I hope my queries will stand up to that scrutiny.

In ways, I cannot quite specify, the Nicki I want to know better seemed to be held at a distance. When not hidden behind those massive sunglasses and terrific hat, he still remains elusive. I suppose I *do* want to know Nicki as an analyst would, but it remains to be seen whether that way of knowing will necessarily lead to his pathologization or fetishization.

It sounds like Nicholas' mother did eventually give in and call him "Nicki," but how did she feel about it? Was his father in the picture? If so, what was his reaction to this gender-expansive girlyboy? Was Nicki ever caught in a crossfire of worry, conflict, and unspoken disapproval at home? Who was it who bought him that Little Pony collection, complete with Lunch Box?

Before the school bus incident, was Nicki *never* shamed in school as a gender-fluid child, growing up in a homophobic/transphobic culture? (That seems rather late for his first and only encounter with gender prejudice.) And what about that "psychic collapse" as an 8-year-old? It sounds catastrophic. What form did it take, and what were the psychic mechanisms the young Nicholas employed to "foreclose" and render "inaccessible" the Nicki persona he loved so much? Indeed, was *that* Nicki really wiped off the map – or was he still in the picture, stripped of his name perhaps, but showing up in novel forms of dress (the move that settled it for Guzzardi), in sexual gender play, or just in the privacy of Nicholas' imagination?

What about Guzzardi's countertransference before and after N's disclosure? Did he find "Nicholas" to be so "tightly held" during the first years of therapy that he was virtually a patient unable to play? Is that why all these wonderful illustrations of play occur only after Nicki came into the therapy room? And how could Guzzardi have fostered that play so effortlessly once he knew Nicki's backstory? Was there a shadow over their playground, even as they squiggled their way into the pleasures of not knowing where they were headed?

Had Guzzardi himself managed to sequester/compartmentalize Nicholas' trauma history so that he could stay in some kind of alignment with the present-day Nicki he had agreed to name? In other words, (how) was Guzzardi able to hold so much traumatic material while simultaneously celebrating the genderqueer man Nicki had become?

That is why I wondered about the fact that these analytic partners appear to be so close to termination – were they? It appears that Nicki had just finally begun to have the where-withal to grieve his mother's death and dying, 3 years out. And similarly to be able to dream the terrifying *apres coup* dream, one that could only be dreamt of by a dreamer able to bear its contents.

Hardly any evidence of a "flaw" in the treatment, the nightmare does seem to be a reflection of the profundity of their work to date. The genderqueer Nicki, who has slowly and artfully assembled himself over the course of treatment, seems to have unraveled in this dream. Those gendered bits and pieces, no longer serving as elements coalescing on the transgender edge, seem to have become competing gender clichés that spoil, rather than play off, one another. (Hard to imagine, in real life, that the casually dressed dream guy, in his easy-living sports garb, would have shared a social presentation in real time with that vibrant drag queen, face full of over-the-top femme makeup, out for the night.) The dream figure is not only scary but also kind of ridiculous ("we" still *do* want our gender performances to be consistent even if they are wild).

The menacing nothingness of those empty rooms underscores the point, fueling Nicki's desperation. But in repeating the dream, night after night, is Nicki not trying to make sure that he does not forget it before the next therapy session? And in that wish to speak it, is he not inviting the therapist to help him find the room where all the pain is hiding, and "face" it?

Would this not be a piece of work that could help in Guzzardi's healing as well? Remember how he writes about the "visceral" response he feels, every time he thinks about that hand-drawn noose? Until now, Guzzardi has been alone in consciously carrying the emotional weight of that traumatic, compartmentalized "unthought known" in Nicky/Nicholas' history.

But while play has finally positioned that trauma to become available to a relational focus, it is witnessing these partners need now.

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