The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen (Part Two: Riddle and Accident)

Melba Vélez Ortiz

Grand Valley State University, velortme@gvsu.edu

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The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen (Part Two: Riddle and Accident)

Melba Hoffer

Abstract

This article is the second of a three-part series entitled: The Veil of Esteem: On Seeing Oneself Being Seen. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s “reflection through vignette” method, the author inquires into the notions and interconnections between memory and esteem. Esteem is the truth of oneself through the eyes of the other, and any truth of esteem must be told from the perspective of that other, through the spectating other. Thus, the author finds that any story of esteem is veiled. This second part, Riddle and Accident, explores unconditional love as maintained without the merit-worthy, yet it is its esteem that catalyzes it. The story is narrated not as a representation of a person or of people but the discourse through which the author has been lent her voice. The author is the translator through whom she is now speaking. The translator is the producer of the discourse that suffocates her and allows her to breathe in gasped breaths, the producer of the discourse that both takes away her voice and gives her voice. The first part of this series, Fragment/Never Thinking of Tomorrow, appears in International Review of Qualitative Research, Volume 5, Issue 1; the third part, A Loan, appears in Qualitative Inquiry, Volume 18, Issue 4.

Keywords
Esteem, ethics

To see oneself is to see through the eyes of the other, but this other is not another who stands outside of one’s own mind. This other is the other through which one is oneself, through which one is made oneself. I am but a fiction, as is she. This is not to say that we are not. We are indeed, but the we presented here are a fiction insofar as all truth must be told as a fiction, for all told truth has the structure of narration. Narration must be narrated from a point of view. One might have chosen to narrate the truth of oneself through the first person, but the first-person narrator cannot tell the story of esteem.

Esteem is the truth of oneself through the eyes of the other, and any truth of esteem must be told from the perspective of that other, through the spectating other. Thus, any story of esteem is veiled. The truth of one self is always hidden to oneself when esteem is concerned, for there is no such thing as self-esteem. Esteem must come from the other who is in one’s own mind. What is mistaken for self-esteem is but a translation of the discourse of desire. And it’s for this reason that I must write of her. And who, exactly, am I? I am not one person, nor am I an amalgamation of people who have loved her. I’m not a representation of a person or of people but the discourse through which she is a woman longing for air. I have been lent her voice. I am the translator through which she is now speaking. The translator is the producer of the discourse that suffocates her and allows her to breathe in gasped breaths, the producer of the discourse that both takes away her voice and gives her voice.

She herself is not who she is, though she is indeed another who is. She must exist, but it must be that she remains veiled to both of us who are presented in this discourse. She must remain veiled, and she is indeed veiled by this discourse, which is not, in actuality, my own.

Riddle and Accident

Auspices

She’s very aware of the landscape. When I’m around her, I can only be very aware of her. When we were sitting on her porch, she pointed out a cardinal—or what must’ve been a cardinal. I only saw a small red spot perched atop a wire. As a child, I had a pair of binoculars. I received them on the

1 Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Melba Hoffer, School of Communications, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan, MI 49401, USA
Email: hofferm@gvsu.edu
pretense that I had wanted to watch birds. From time to time, I’d use my gift as intended. Bird watching, however, proved to be difficult. It seemed that the birds knew they were being seen. I had convinced myself that watching them made them fly away, but perhaps they flew away on their own. As an adult, I’m not fully unconvinced. Still, I think the ancients were right. With keen interpretation, how the birds fly can tell you something.

**Caesarean Birth**

One of my favorite jazz vocalists is Beverly Kenney. Her voice is special. It has sophistication, although if you’ve heard it, you might describe it as girlish. This, however, is only one side of Kenney’s voice, the surface. There’s another side, a side of depth, a depth that’s perhaps best left deep and undisturbed by those uninvited, a depth that should be left on its side of the veil.

There’s a fascinating article about her by Jonathan Schwartz from which I’ll quote liberally. It appeared in the November 1992 issue of *GQ*. The title is ironic, referencing the same quality one hears if one listens only superficially. It’s called “Girl Singer.”

A friend, Millie Perkins, describes Kenney this way:

> Everyday life was difficult for her. You see, she knew things I didn’t know. She was the only person who knew who I was inside. She was somehow haunted, and at the same time so kind and so unselfish, with so much patience for other people. She had an amazing awareness of what the human condition really was.

Next, is the most touching description of a one-night stand that I can imagine. It comes from Ivan Mogull, reminiscing at age 70:

> Then Beverly and I went back to my apartment. We’d never touched each other before. I was just knocked out by her singing. We listened to music. I remember exactly what we listened to. The guy was a Chilean singer, Lucho Gatica. He really turned us on. And Sinatra’s “Wee Small Hours.” And Nat’s “Love Is the Thing.” And we danced, and then Beverly took me by the hand. It was the greatest night of my life. She was just so natural and gifted. It wasn’t vulgar or anything. You know something? One of the things I remember the most is Beverly licking the rim of her glass. She did that all the time, and she did it that night. That was our only night.

This is Kenney herself. It’s an unpublished poem:

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**On Cesarean [sic] Birth**

I curled my body small

in hiding

to escape the view

of those who sought to start the flow

of waters long since overdue.

And watched in horror

Cautious silver

part the roof of my Capri

And heard the cry of anguished protest,

The first of many wrought from me.

It isn’t the subtlest poetry, but it isn’t awful. One gathers that she couldn’t stand to be looked at. She has a point about forced birth, though.

What I won’t quote, maybe because it bothers me, is the stuff about her time with Milton Klonsky, the poet. He inspired her, and she was deeply in love with him, but apparently he left her. There’s some speculation that this was the reason for her suicide, but I think that this, too, is only the truth of the surface. She used alcohol and sleeping pills.

Lastly, there are five photos in the article. She’s smiling in all of them, but she looks to be at peace in only two. There’s a picture of her on a beach, the only picture where she’s looking far into the landscape rather than into the camera. She’s looking, but not returning a look. The second happy picture shows her arm in arm with George Shearing. Shearing, of course, was blind.

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**Unforgettable**

The exigency of the lost does not entail being remembered and commemorated; rather, it entails remaining in us and with us as forgotten, and in this way and only in this way, remaining unforgettable. (Agamben, 2005, p. 40)

If forgetting exists, it can’t be something accumulated, something gathered together to form of a collection. Never can I recite a litany of things that I’ve forgotten. But how is it that the lost should remain with us as forgotten, for forgetting, it would seem, is something that doesn’t remain with us? The lost can only do this if the lost object becomes for us something unforgettable, and the unforgettable itself must be an object that’s emptied of its qualities. The unforgettable object must be a shell, a surface, a veil that remains after the object partitioned from us has gone away. The unforgettable is the empty signifier, a mute signifier that stands in for I know not what. The unforgettable is the proper name belonging to an object. The proper name rigidly designates an object through a primal baptism, not through a collection of descriptions. But what produces the unforgettable?

Is it mourning that makes the lost object unforgettable? No, for mourning is what disinvests us from the lost object. Mourning doesn’t gut the object of its essence. It removes
the part of ourselves that we had put into the object. Is it nostalgia that gives the lost object the status of being unforgettable? No, for nostalgia is a type of commemoration, an act of memorializing. Furthermore, it installs the temporal veil of used to be or has not yet been. This veil isn’t the empty signifier of the unforgettable.

What makes something unforgettable is unconditional love. The love object transforms into the unforgettable in the midst of loss. And if the unforgettable must be an object that’s emptied of its qualities, it must’ve been this way before the occurrence of loss. There’s no need to empty the qualities of an object that’s no longer accessible. In fact, if the love object had not been emptied of its qualities at the time of loss, this would be an obstruction to mourning. Mourning empties the love object of one’s investment. To take the qualities of the love object as what’s to be emptied out is to be mistaken about how to mourn.

Unconditional love loves the love object without recourse to its qualities. Unconditional love is the love of an idea of the love object. But is this to disparage unconditional love? Is this to make unconditional love but a nonsense? Not necessarily. To dismiss unconditional love as nonsense is to misunderstand how it comes to be. Remember that though unconditional love doesn’t have an object, unconditional love is caused. That which is esteemed is the object cause of unconditional love. Thus, though unconditional love is caused by qualities, it doesn’t take those qualities as its object. It loves the love object such as it is, as whatever it is. It empties the qualities from the object insofar as loving the object with all its qualities makes those qualities external to the object. Unconditional love loves, but it can’t take the object as an object, for its end is to perpetuate itself, not to arrive and captivate. Unconditional love is maintained without the merit-worthy, yet it’s esteem that catalyzes it.

At bottom, unconditional love is there because one is smart, attractive, and knows a joke about a panda. Those are things that cause one to be unforgettable. And because those qualities become external to the love object insofar as they aren’t what maintain the love, it wouldn’t matter, for instance, if one screws up the punch line and says that the definition for panda reads that it eats leaves and shoots.

**Symposium**

And why all this longing for propagation? Because this is the one deathless and eternal element in our mortality. And since we have agreed that the lover longs for the good to be his own forever, it follows that we are bound to long for immortality as well as for the good—which is to say that Love is a longing for immortality. (Plato, *Symposium*, 1961, p. 207a)

Like a good Irish stout, ancient Greek drunk talk is really heady. The head of this vignette is what Diotima teaches Socrates about love. Love is a longing for immortality, and this longing is fulfilled through propagation. In other words, what forestalls death is perpetual birthing. But this doesn’t really work. Although she claims that propagation is the one deathless and eternal element in our mortality, it’s deathless and eternal for humanity as a whole, not for any particular human. This is to confuse the totality for what’s universal. What all humans share is that their lives are a sum of forces that resist death. So what can we say about love for the particular human?

If we’re to conceptualize love in terms of immortality, we should take into account two important contravening components constituting immortality. First, immortality in the human is achieved only when the potential for death has been exhausted. Second, if immortality is to be experienced deathlessly as Diotima suggests, then it must be the experience of a nonbecoming being, the experience of a being that’s changeless. The individual human can only exhaust the potential for death by dying, but nonbecoming can only be experienced by living through repetition. The compulsive drives are the closest that these contravening tendencies come to being resolved. The drives seek the immortality of death and try to forestall the inevitable through their repetitive, just-once-more, nature. It’s for this reason that all drives are death drives. To blindly follow the drives is in some way to stop resisting death. Still, the drives can’t achieve their end. It’s for this reason that the drives are only ever partial. They’re partial because they must take partial objects. Otherwise, they’d achieve the death they aren’t supposed to. It’s in this way that the drives differ from desire. Desire doesn’t take an object, and unlike the plurality of drives, desire is unary. One might describe the drives as longings, but desire isn’t really a longing. Longings always take an object. The drives can be longings because they do in fact have objects. Desire, rather than being a longing, is often characterized by an unanswered question, a riddle, an enigma. What is this question? It’s the question of “Who am I for your desire?” In what Diotima describes, the lovers don’t really have a question. They know what they want, or at least they’ll make concerted efforts in that direction: At bottom, what Diotima offers isn’t a theory of love, but a theory of the drives, a theory of sexuality.

It’s interesting, we might note, that the kind of sex that can result in propagation can be an unnecessarily risky behavior nowadays. Best not to get so drunk at symposia lest we fail to remember this.

**The Sphinx**

What the Sphinx proposed was not simply something whose signified is hidden and veiled under an “enigmatic” signifier, but a mode of speech in which the original fracture of presence was alluded to in the paradox of a word.
that approaches its object while keeping it indefinitely at a distance:

Like the Sphinx that utters it, the enigma belongs to the sphere of the apotropaic, that is, to a protective power that repels the uncanny by attracting it and assuming it within itself. (Agamben, 1993a, p. 138)

Agamben is right here. Often, what’s focused on in the myth of the Sphinx is her monstrosity, her cruelty of eating those who can’t answer her. This, however, is to miss the point. The Sphinx is apotropaic, protective. It’s part of the tragedy that Oedipus destroyed her by connecting the signified to the signifier. Because of his destructive answer, Oedipus left no one to protect Thebes in her absence. Oedipus’ entrance into Thebes, of course, wasn’t exactly a glorious homecoming.

One lesson we can learn is that it isn’t that the enigma just veils in the hiding kind of way, but in the partitioning way, and sometimes the enigma must be left intact as an enigma. The enigma installs a necessary distance. Sometimes distances are necessary. Without distance, for instance, we wouldn’t be able to experience the aura of nature. The will to truth isn’t always a virtue.

The Veil of Isis

For Nietzsche, to will the truth at all costs, to wish for knowledge for its own sake, and to renounce vital illusions would be to risk destroying humanity. The will to truth is fundamentally a will to death. (Hadot, 2006, p. 286)

In the above passage, Pierre Hadot is reflecting on Nietzsche’s own reflections on lifting the veil of nature. Hadot’s book in general traces reformulations of a fragment from Heraclitus, a fragment often translated as: “Nature loves to hide.” Nietzsche equates nature with the Sphinx, and to lift the veil of nature is to cause destruction, to break nature’s most sacred laws. Of course, this is what Oedipus does.

Giving us a reading of the preface of The Gay Science, Hadot tells us, “The refusal expressed there to unveil what is hidden leads to the resolute decision to stick to that which veils, that which is not hidden” (p. 291). Yet another lesson we should take from Oedipus is that there’s a superficiality the comes from a profundity, from an understanding that the will to truth can be a will to death.

The Uniqueness of Commonality

In the Symposium Plato tells us about the full original resonance of the word poiesis: “Any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before is poiesis.” Every time that something is pro-duced, that is, brought from concealment and nonbeing into the light of presence, there is poiesis, pro-duction, poetry. (Agamben, 1999, pp. 59-60)

She has a Duchamp lithograph. When we were loading her bicycle into my car, she had to take the front wheel off to make it fit. I almost made a joke about her having a reproduction of Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel. I decided not to on account that I had already failed with my misfired joke about a Balzac who didn’t exist. Anyway, I’m wondering whether she wrote the poem she gave me on that bike. She said she thought of it on her bike ride home, but she has two. This one was a gift from an ex. But Duchamp’s readymades.

The aura of an original work of art, the aura of the result of an instance of poiesis, is a distance. There’s not only the distance between the work of art and its spectator but also the distance of the work of art to its origin. “Originality,” Agamben notes, “means proximity to the origin. The work of art is original because it maintains a particular relationship to its origin” (p. 61). If the aura of an original work of art degrades in the mechanical reproduction, then the ready-made, being something mechanically reproduced already, inverts those distances. First, the proximity of the work of art to its origin is transposed to the distance between the spectator and the work of art. Being a common object, there’s no ritualistic distance that we must keep to it. We’re more proximate. However, the distance normally occurring between the work of art and the spectator finds itself transposed to the space normally occupied by the work of art and the proximity to its origin. Instead of this distance being a close one, the ready-made estranges itself from its origin.

In the readymade, Duchamp’s contribution was to make poetry—poetry in the broad sense that we find it in the Symposium—from the re-produced. In other words, he produced—brought to the light of presence something that had remained partitioned away as concealed—something that’s impossible to re-produce. Re-production is made impossible because in order to produce the ready-made, he went round the screen. He brought forth something not there from the side of the there already. The ready-made isn’t special. In some sense, it isn’t meant to be spectated, isn’t meant to be looked at aesthetically. There can be no poetics of the ready-made.

Thus, the opposite of her lithograph, there can be no mechanically reproduced ready-made. The ready-made is unique because it’s common. Its uniqueness owes to the context in which we find it. Namely, Duchamp took it from the other side of the partition, put it on display, and thus baptized it as art. And isn’t this what we find in singularity? The singular has the same quality that makes the ready-made not a mere re-production, but an instance of poiesis. In the singular, we find what we might call the uniqueness of commonality.
I'll Remember All Winter Long

The early morning hike, the rented tandem bike, the lunches that we used to pack. We never could explain that sudden summer rain, the looks we got when we got back. (“The Things We Did Last Summer”)
The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. (Bergson, 2005, p. 2)

I love to hear her laugh. It had been a rare pleasure, though. I wasn’t often able to elicit it from her. Inexplicably, my usually charming self-deprecation had turned into sarcasm. Perhaps it was nervousness. I don’t know. Also, what would’ve been otherwise good jokes—jokes that weren’t mere snippiness—were ones making allusions to things that don’t actually exist, things, for instance, like Henri de Balzac. Yet she’s gracious, patient.

When I’ve heard her laugh, it’s genuine, tempered with an almost imperceptible hesitation. It’s almost as though she feels obliged to moderate her beauty, as though it would be too overwhelmingly. In a way, it is. Her laughter is forgettable. With regard to the expression on her visage, she wrinkles her nose, both unforgettable and adorable. This is the visage, but what of the laughing face? One would naturally have “more than one” for the reason that the face is never captured by the accumulative, by collectible instances, but by the amalgamated dissolved into totality.

If in the face, one exists singularly, existing while retaining all of one’s properties only as points of nonidentification, if in the face what comes to be exposed is the open communicative potential behind which we hide and stay hidden, then our question should be, “What is communicated by the laughing face?”

Laughter is a gesture. Gestures are generally indexes pointing to the ineffable, but laughter as a gesture could point to the fact that there’s nothing to say. The gesture of laughter communicates not through symbolization but through the natural index. Just as smoke indicates fire, laughter indicates that communication has been able to point to the ineffable, but laughter as a gesture could have “more than one” for the reason that the face is never captured by the accumulative, by collectible instances, but by the amalgamated dissolved into totality.

Naming and Necessity

The nature and character of a love is most sharply defined by the fate that links it to someone’s name—the person’s first name. In this sense the Divine Comedy is nothing but the aura surrounding the name of Beatrice, the most powerful representation of the idea that all the forces and figures of the cosmos arise from the name born of love. (Benjamin, “Short Shadows—I,” 2005, p. 268)

What she finds in the man she loves is her image and her name as a woman. Beatric. (Leclaire, 1998, p. 25)

To live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote: unapparent—so unapparent that his name contains him entirely. (Agamben, 1995, p. 61)

Two people who are in love are attached above all else to their names. (Walter Benjamin, One-Way Street, 2004, p. 467)

1. Why the first name? This is the person’s proper name. It isn’t the family name that one can share with, let’s say, a linguist. It’s a rigid designator, and if you’re familiar with Saul Kripke’s Naming and Necessity, you know that rigid designators point to their referent without any reference to qualities. Proper names are often common, but the one iteration of it still rigidly designates. The singularity stuff fits here well. So that whole unconditional love thing? A shorthand for it could be “I love you, Mel.” And oh yes, I’m writing you a book, too. Yes, I know Divine Comedy is technically an epic poem.
2. I think Leclaire is referencing the same thing as above. But being the psychoanalyst that he is—and sort of a Lacanian—he adds the image. The image here is the one in the dualistic imaginary—imaginary having nothing to do with the imagination, but with the three orders of the real, symbolic, and imaginary. The imaginary is what’s at play in the mirror stage, hence the finding her image in the man she loves part. Remember that whole, “What’s the color of a mirror” thing? It was a riddle. I guess I’m sort of a Lacanian, too.

3. Uh-oh.
5. Pellegrino

What is Aura? The experience of aura rests on the transposition of a form of reaction normal in human society to the relationship of nature to people. The one who is seen or believes himself to be seen [glances up] answers with a glance. To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability [to pitch] to respond to a glance. This ability is full of poetry. (Benjamin, 2007, p. 45)

The passage above is similar to what Benjamin will claim in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” However, it’s taken from his archive. Interestingly, these words are written on advertisement stationery for S. Pellegrino, and it’s hard not to interpret this as at least minimally significant.

In “The Work of Art,” he notes the devaluation of the here and now in the technologically reproduced, things such as “a landscape moving past the spectator in a film” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 254). With regard to the aura of nature specifically, he writes:

The concept of the aura can be usefully illustrated with reference to an aura of natural objects. We define the aura as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (p. 255)

And what’s bottled mineral water but this same degradation? One can imagine drinking at the springs themselves. No matter how close one gets to the natural object, it remains distant. There’s always something just beyond our vision, something that we may breathe—in our case, drink—but not see. Nature remains veiled, remains on the other side of the partition. But when we bottle the water, the distance becomes degraded. The here and now of the springs comes conveniently to us in a green bottle with a red star. S. Pellegrino’s logo has apparently not changed. There can be no exchange of glances with the bottled water for the reason of the lack of distance. It’s too close to see.

But when aura remains, what of this ability that’s full of poetry? It’s the poetry in the sense of poiesis. For instance, becoming more aware of how she responded to my glance did in fact bring forth what I’m now writing. She has her own muse, but she’s mine. She’s my muse for the reason that she’s hidden, for the reason that she’s in the distance beyond the partition. Romanticism aside, I don’t want a muse, but a fellow musician. The muses sing through you because they dictate; a fellow musician breathes with you. And when the breathing is in sync, there, too, is music—just like Waldron and “Lady Day.”

Speaking of glances, though, she once asked me why I kept offering her beers, the beers she herself bought, actually. Did I think it made her easy, she asked. No, beer always makes me more handsome. Mutatis mutandis, I only needed the mineral water, the mineral water she suggested I bring for what was to be our missed beach rendezvous. Though I usually prefer Perrier, for some reason I had chosen S. Pellegrino.

The Muse

That a hiddenness be maintained in order that there be disclosure, a forgetfulness maintained in order that there be memory, this is inspiration, the rapture of the muses which brings man, word, and thought into accord with one another. But this hiddenness is also the infernal core around which the obscurity of character and of destiny thickens; the non-said, growing in thought, precipitates it into madness. (Agamben, 1995, p. 59)

Infernal indeed. Just as infernal as the first part of Divine Comedy. Well, there’s always hope or getting drunk. Both work. I shouldn’t have let her finish off so much of that beer.

30 and Singular

To love another being means to desire its species, that is, to desire the desire with which it desires to persevere in its being. In this sense, special being is the being that is common or generic, and this is something like the image or the face of humanity. And special being does not mean the individual, identified by this or that quality which belongs exclusively to it. On the contrary, it means a being insofar as it is whatever being, a being such that it is. “Whatever being is desirable” is a tautology. (Agamben, 2007, p. 58)

Agamben opens The Coming Community, as I said, in an oddly Lacanian way. I said oddly not because it’s odd to be a Lacanian, but because Agamben is thoroughly
non-Lacanian here, in Profanations. Below, again, is what he says in The Coming Community:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one, but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality. The lover wants the loved one with all of its predicates, its being such as it is. (Agamben, 1993b, pp. 1-2)

If one compares the passages, it’s as though they come from two different minds. In the first, love is directed toward the special being, and this is a being that’s common or generic. In the second, this same idea is derided as “an insipid generality” toward which, among other things, love isn’t directed. But where’s the mistake?

The mistake, I think, lies in two places. First, Agamben has a strange understanding of desire in Profanations. In the chapter before, he places desire in the realm of images, what’s in Lacanian parlance the imaginary, in the order of dualism and identification. Desire actually belongs in the symbolic. The symbolic order is actually tertiary in structure. The third element is the signifier, that which makes possible communicative potentiality—this isn’t present in the imaginary space of images and reflections. Second, Agamben goes wrong in trying to assimilate special being to whatever being, this when he had already connected whatever being to singularity. In other words, he conflated by association the idea of specialness and singularity. They’re different.

Admittedly, I had made the same mistake. I had mistaken her for special, but what she is is singular. Special and species both derive from the Latin spectare, to look. Agamben knows this, and he’s right to put both in the imaginary order. As I said, he’s gets it wrong only when he puts desire in the imaginary. It’s identification that has the dualistic character of the look. In identification, the question is, “Who am I?” This is a question involving specialness. There’s an ideological pressure to be special, and often, strangely enough, those who feel the pressure of the question find the look of the other to be invasive. Think of Beverly Kenney’s poem, for instance. Furthermore, the question I asked her about the color of the mirror was a riddle. The answer isn’t a color that’s in the spectrum, for the mirror is absolutely reflective, and color is the absorption of certain wavelengths. So, like the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, the answer here is man. Leclaire knows this, too. But again, this is the answer for someone asking the question of a special being, a being who’s spectated, a being who’s looked at.

The question of someone desiring is different. Here the signifier is introduced. To borrow a term from Laplanche—though Lacan wouldn’t necessarily agree—the signifier is an enigmatic one. In desire, that enigmatic signifier is the question of, “Who am I for your desire?”

This question mustn’t have an answer. Like the enigma, it’s a seductive question. Many will try to answer it, but it, too, is like the question of the Sphinx. If the question is answered, it’s generally only answered incorrectly. It’s possible that one bores of those who try to answer only ever in vain. If there’s a correct answer, it mustn’t be spoken. The answer must be a gesture. Let’s remember that answering her riddle with discourse was to destroy the Sphinx. So what’s to be done? Two gestural responses occur to me, only one of them good.

One thing to do is to merely hear the question. The question may be posed often and in various iterations, but one can choose to only hear. In other words, one hears with understanding, but remains unresponsive. This is the irresponsible way. Lovers have responsibility toward each other, and inattentiveness is a shirking of a duty. Unresponsiveness might captivate, keep her from becoming bored, but this isn’t the way of desire.

The other response is to listen to the question. Listening is an attentiveness. To listen requires the symbolic order, that which makes communication possible. One should understand that what the question of desire indexes is a need for communication, not necessarily the need for an answer of certitude. Listening is, in fact, responsive communication. It’s responsive communication insofar as the listener is moved to act upon the said insofar as that listener strains toward a possible meaning, one that isn’t immediately accessible, one that’s accessible only through the mediation of the veil. Listening can be a type of waiting. Furthermore, one must listen until the question no longer needs to be posed, until communication can achieve a comfortable inoperativity, until there can be laughter because there’s love.

At bottom, she can stop asking the question of specialness. To be special is to be suffocated by the look. I know she doesn’t like that. Furthermore, she’s already singular. In singularity, there’s no pressure to avoid being common, for the common isn’t merely something in which one partakes, but creates. It’s from her that originality springs, for within her is an origin. True, she’ll have the question pertaining to desire for the next person she’ll be involved with. With some luck, that person will know how to listen, knowing that it’s wrong to force her to the other side of the partition if she isn’t ready to be there. Like the Sphinx, her enigma is apotropaic, and she should be protective. That’s important. And last, if I can be allowed one instance of conflating mythological flying things, both part bird, I hope that she becomes reborn from the fire that she’s endured. Birds have song because they belong to the element of the air.

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Bio
Melba Hoffer is an assistant professor of communication studies at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. Her primary area of research is communication ethics. More broadly, she is interested in the intersections between aesthetic and moral communication.