Pictogram: Identity and the Myth of Sexual Difference

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Abstract

Piera Aulagnier’s concept of the pictogram elaborates the way in which the body’s morphology is determined by erotogenic zones, and how, from the outset, these zones are highly tied to the Other. In this paper I will use Aulagnier’s concept of the pictogram as a heuristic device (2001), in the case of S, a 49-year-old male-to-female transsexual involved in mutilation and gender oscillation. The case of S is used to examine the relationship between the development of a pictogram and later sense of the gendered body in the attempt to consider the question of identity development as a felt sense that always occurs in the context of a relation and yet is an unconscious registration of otherness. This conceptualization attempts to shift the notion of sexual difference from deterministic genitality or act of conscious decidability to a psychic ability to hold onto the ambivalence that is inherent in embodied subjectivity. This paper poses a link between the construction of a pictogram of unity and the development of a sense of self-cohesion that manifests through gender embodiment as an imaginary unity based on a collapse between phantasy and social reality.

Keywords

pictogram, identification, embodiment, sexual difference, linking
Piera Aulagnier’s concept of the pictogram elaborates the way in which the body’s morphology is determined by erotogenic zones, and how from the outset, these zones are highly tied to the Other. The pictogram is a fictive way to imagine how before language, expulsion and incorporation involves perceptual, pictographic images that link perception and sensation to the Other (e.g., the breast), where the “Other” refers both to the concrete other and the “totality of their message” (Verhaeghe, 2004). The pictogram as an unconscious representation is, for Aulagnier, a primal attempt to bind the spaces of the body and the outside world. However, it carries a trace of what language will later become, an attempt to make meaning of inchoate spaces. The pictogram is used in the analysis to begin to represent a mind without words, where a poignant image gives access to a primal scenic enactment. This is also an encounter that repeats the primal inscriptions in the analytic setting.

In the analytic encounter, what is available to the analyst is only the patient’s defensive structure. In turn, the pictogram, as an expression of this structure, may provide the analyst access into the patient’s mind. I therefore ponder how the patient’s enactments in place of words, which give rise to an image in the analyst’s mind, also provide access into a primal scenic impression of violence and disjointedness that bring the patient to attack her linking capacity, and hence her identificatory project.

I will present a way to think about the problem of sexual difference through the unconscious act of linking and its failure. I use the concept of the pictogram as a lens through which to consider the constant interweaving of primal and primary
modes of relating—a relating that predates language and history. I would like to emphasize that this paper will be limited to the function of the pictogram as an entry into the analyst’s speculation about the mind of the patient. In this way the pictogram is viewed as structuring but it is also a conceptual apparatus for understanding how a phenomenon like the pictogram is structured as a precursor to identity.

A case example will be used to examine the relationship between the development of a pictogram and later sense of the gendered body. The question of identity development will be considered as a felt sense that occurs always in the context of a relation and yet is an unconscious registration of otherness. This conceptualization attempts to shift the notion of sexual difference from deterministic genitality or act of conscious decidability (being a man or a woman) to a psychic ability to hold onto the ambivalence that is inherent in embodied subjectivity. This paper poses a link between the construction of a pictogram of unity and the development of a sense of self-cohesion that manifests through gender embodiment as an imaginary unity based on a conflation of phantasy and social reality.

**Narrating origin.**

Every narration is marked by a search for origin; a starting point. Where did “I” come from? In every narration there is a struggle towards cohesiveness, a movement from splitting to clarity, from doubt to certainty. The difficulty of creating a narrative for the self is universal. Soon enough the story reveals its
inchoateness in the very place it sews the parts together. Between the pieces of our narrative, meaninglessness, strangeness, and gaps in the inchoate reveal the fragility of identification—fragility that, for Freud, characterizes the “origin of emotional tie to the object” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Indeed, language creates a link to the (M)other that is also an acknowledgement of the (M)other’s absence. Language is closely tied with identity, which requires a movement away from the singularity of the maternal discourse and towards the group.

The origins of the “I” has been closely tied in psychoanalysis to the “original form of emotional tie to the object” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 336) and takes as its model the mother–infant relation. The meeting of the infant and the outside world has been imagined as a state of war but also of union and peace. Freud (1914/1961) used the term *primal narcissism* to denote an intrinsically omnipotent mode of relating to external reality that repudiates any registration of difference through wish fulfillment. Through absence, representation occurs as a way to handle loss. Freud thought of primal phantasies as “organizers of sexuality: castration, seduction and, lastly, the Oedipus complex itself” (Green, 1997, p. 19) that are linked with phylogenetic inheritance.

In “Negation” Freud observed, “What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external, to begin with, are identical” (1925, p. 237). In other words, the encounter with otherness (what is unknown, painful, or alien) generates defences of omnipotent de-differentiation in the form of identification and symbolic equation, an attack on “psychic space” where symbolic equation becomes a “derivative of the death drive” (Bass, 2000, p. 175). The force towards and away
from otherness is contained in the drive—the pleasure principle must contain inherent failure (Verhaeghe, 2004). The drives receive an “intersubjective dimension” from the start, where the infant is totally dependent on the Other and has to take the passive stance and is subjected to separation anxiety—the absence of the Other (p. 6). The experience of tension and its relief is closely tied to identification.

Winnicott, on the other hand, imagined a space of “being,” a space before the development of the ego as a separate self-agency. It is a space marked by the timelessness of the unconscious where the outside feels part of the inside, where internal states are indistinguishable, and hence what is sensed on the body is felt as if created by the infant. What Winnicott calls “a primary state of being” refers to a “pre-primitive” state, “an area of peace” (Eigen, 2009, p. 21), “an experience that precedes me / not me duality” (p. 22). It was Winnicott who linked “being” to the future ability to have a cohesive sense of being, hence to the project of identification that is capable of representation as symbolic “identity.” For Winnicott, identification, projective identification, and introjective identification are linked to this state of oneness that is linked with the “female element”—a sense of cohesiveness that is transferred generationally with no need for action and is a foundation for “simple being.” The state of the infant in this merged space cannot be characterized as omnipotent defence, as there is no “otherness” to defend against; and yet it is a relic of omnipotence—its archeological fragment that is re-found and put to use in the service of return to a wishful state of bliss.
that never truly existed. It is this remnant however, comprised of sensorial images
that carries a potentiality for generativity.

The state of “being” for Winnicott relies on the mother’s containment, a capacity
that Bion identifies as essential for representation. Bion terms alpha elements
pictograms that are capable of containing primal anxieties or “proto-sensorial and
projected proto-emotions (Ferro, 2010, p. 2) by linking experience to affect and
forming a “contact barrier” (ibid.) between conscious and unconscious, helping to
create a phantasy of cohesion. The pictogram is a first attempt at such linking and
will be marked by the ability to hold “things” in unity or repel any attempt at
linking, which will be interpreted as a threat of annihilation.

Like Bion, Eigen (2009) offers an abstract fantasy of primal beginnings as a non-
chronological mystical state, beyond the duality of self/other that can take many
forms and is made up of a summation of fragments carried through the
unconscious of the mother and the child. In this way, it is a meeting between two
unknowns—a meeting that gives rise to contradictory states of peace and
persecution “succeeding and merging with each other” (Eigen, 2009, p. 21).

Reading “maternal” as a vast state/space opens the child–mother dyad to query
beyond the observable infant–mother relation. The illusion of oneness is ruptured
not only by the Other (which gains significance retroactively), but by one’s own
“developmental drives” (p. 27). The weight is placed not on the concreteness of
the mother as good or bad, violent or benevolent, but on a sense of being, which
can be known only in retrospect though the patient’s narrative, spaces of
enactment, or fragments of images that mark a failure to narrate.
It seems that for Bion and Winnicott and Eigen, primal identification—this mystical oneness that holds the seed of a future sense of cohesiveness—is highly dependent on the maternal function of mediating the infant’s encounter with experiences of pain and pleasure that relates to the mother’s actual functioning but is also beyond the mother herself. However, in one’s mind, history is always narrated with one mother in mind, so the relationship with “this” mother becomes the object of analysis. Sight, touch, pain, and pleasure become fused in a mystical way with this maternal sea, which prior to language brings the experience of “being” and “seeing” closer as the mode of primal representation that becomes a relic for identification, a fixed, fused, unmoving image that becomes an imaginary aspect of self-coherence. The mother of our retroactive construction becomes the Other, to whom we appeal, and who ensures our projections.

To the reader, the “pictogram” may seem like an alienating concept, and indeed it speaks to the alienation inherent in subjectivity that in the primary mode of relating is experienced as a persecutory outside. In the absence of language, experience becomes a series of pictograms, disconnected images that carry the impact of an impression that casts a “shadow” over the subject in a sense that it enacts a trauma that is not yet known, and perhaps may never be known. The rudimentary quality of the image in the absence of language, and the failure of the image to unify discrete spaces, makes words into objects that are stuck in the timelessness of the primary, that attack linking and render existence meaningless. The “maternal” function and the pictogram are inherently tied, as mental representation becomes dependent on the function of joining, which, in turn,
depends on the mother’s own containment and becomes a container for thoughts. Images turned to narratives become frames through which meaning is given to experience and thus to one’s existence. An image becomes thought through joining that embroiders a placenta-like wrapping of cohesion. With the entrance of language, identification with the signifiers of the Other expands as the Other’s “message” is identified with or repressed. Through the image of the mirror, Lacan imagines the mother as if presenting the child with an image that becomes a primal identity that is never neutral, as it is formed around the mother’s own interpretation of the child’s arousal. This interpretation is tied to her own desire. Identity, the very thing we often think of as our core, is conceived as an image handed to us from the outside. Identity for Lacan becomes a function of identification with the Other’s desire, but it also becomes a process of “drive regulation” (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 8) as a way to cope with arousal, pleasure, and unpleasure. The image of the body often seduces us into believing in its cohesion. Yet with identification, the body and experience of a self reveals a tenuous place of suspense between an image and a symbol. Our body in this way can be imagined as a writing pad on which stories are written but also where scenic impressions are branded, where stains of unknown origin accumulate. Sensation gives rise to embodiment through a history made by linking memories of pleasure and pain. Through contact with otherness, identity springs in unpredictable ways, fusing and diffusing materiality and phantasy through pictographic representation and language. The child may hold an image of the mother as a whole, and yet, at the level of the body memory reveals alienation
where repetition compulsion enacts some aspects that are not comparable to any
experience the child has of itself (Copjec…). So identity is a slippery felt
experience, ambiguous like the image itself, subject to its sexuality, diffusing the
distance between the other and the self. This is the paradox of identity, as it is the
paradox of the image, where perception allows for distinction between the self
and the other. However, perception is also a collapse of outside and inside, a unity
of planes where the question of the “primacy of the perceiver or the world”
(Solomon, 2010) is an impossible one. The bodily ego is a projection of a
surface, making the body a “production of a shape” (p. 30).

Thinking of identification and development through image and imagination, the
Oedipal scene, as a theory of exit from maternal dyad through a third; a paternal
figure, can be imagined as another primal narration. As a secondary story of
origin it enables a wish for a future. It is in a way, an escape rout from the
fantasized maternal grip and yet, its resolution relies on the ability to hold an
image of unity between the two parental figures. Through oedipal phantasy the
subject also comes to find that there’s no guarantee for the reciprocity of
maternal desire and his own, and so there is no certainty of identity. The
identificatory wish of the “I” is indeed defined by castration—its ability to take
into account the fact that what returns to the self is forever changed (Troisier,
1998).

If the idea of castration can also be framed as the points where identity breaks
down, where the self becomes unrecognizable to itself, then identity will be
marked by trauma of difference. The failure of recognition opens the space to the
possibility of an “elsewhere” where the mother’s voice can no longer provide certainty. It becomes a place where subjectivity begins to form. However, to remain a placeholder for identification, the “I” requires a theory of origin, a phantasy link to a history that provides meaning to the self though the meaning invested by the mother (or the phantasy of such investment): a history of its foundation that gives meaning to the pleasure and pain of desire. But if pain exceeds pleasure in this primary phantasy, the very act of linking will be fraught, preventing the capacity to form a pictogram; that is both an internal and an external link, between emotions, touch, perception and the vastness of the environment, that through this link is both separated and united at once. I argue that this phantasized primal unity is a potential for the formation of a necessary phantasy of cohesion that prevents fragmentation and that in its absence, the very sense of embodiment will be directly affected.

**Linking apparatus, Gender and sexual difference**

The conception of the pictogram as structuring the body is in line with the way social theorist Gayle Solomon conceives of sexuality as “one’s intentionality towards the other and towards the world” (Solomon, 2010, p. 50). The pictogram as a structuring preverbal precursor to the identificatory project is akin to how the theorist Merleau-Ponty conceives of the “flesh” (Solomon, 2010): the distinction between the body and the world ceases to have meaning and the relation between the two is neither a union nor the composite of two substances. Yet it is this very vague location of the body that marks the inherent estrangement in the heart of the pictogram and of the body—estrangement that allows for movement at the same
time that an encounter with absolute difference is impossible. The fictive image of
the unified body relies then on a myth of pure sexual difference.

Through gender, in its diverse embodiments, sexual difference is conceptualized
here as a link to the Other that is highly dependent on the Other’s ability to
metabolize primal anxieties and thus enables the formation of the pictogram as the
apparatus for linking. Hence, an experience of gender embodiment as a place of
suffering (where any kind of gender identification is rejected for its fluidity) will
also signify difficulties with subjectivity. Imagining the pictogram as the basis
from which embodiment and its expression through gender relates to the unique
way in which erotogenic zones become linked with the other through desire.

The pictogram, like the flesh, is a place of linkage that relies on difference—a
phantasy of limit that acts to prevent the collapse of the “I” into the Other
(maternal other, group, culture). For Meraleau-Ponty, sexuality is like “an odour
or sound,” which, “without being the object of any intended act or consciousness,
can underlie and guide specified forms of my experience” (cited in Solomon,
2010, p. 50). In this conception there is a recognition that, like sexuality,
identification is accidental (Gozlan, 2008). If we think of sexuality as a sound or
odour, the boundaries of embodiment as in the establishment of sexual difference
through genitalia or social constructs are no longer adequate and we begin to see
the telegraphic power of the body that, just like airways, cannot signify intent.

This conception of sexuality helps us understand the accidental nature of linkage
to the other and hence of identification and gender.
Pictogram of destruction: Case example.

The connection between sexuality, identity, and the pictogram of unity opens up the question of “sexual difference” to a realm beyond a simplistic binary. Imagining a connection between the development of a pictogram and identity illuminates the way in which identity is fragmented from the outset and relies on a narrative of origin that is made up of traces of images loosely embroidering as a fiction of fragile coherence.

I illustrate the possible connection between maternal environment pictogram and embodiment with the following case:

S, a self identified male to female transsexual whose external presentation is masculine, but who wished to be addressed as a female. S came to see me after moving to Toronto from another province to start a new position in her company, where she was employed as an electrician. She brought a suitcase full of women’s clothing, which she intended to wear after work, as she had done for the past 10 years. Her decision to accept the transfer to Toronto involved what she described as a new hope of finally becoming what ‘she’—really was, a woman. She planned to announce her intent to transition at her workplace and start transitioning within the year. However, six months after her arrival in the new city of hope, her suitcase remained closed. She described being “unable to play” and feeling “encased in concrete.”

S’s appearance was quite masculine and there was no hint of her desire to be a woman. It was indeed as if her femininity were encased in the concrete that was her body. She wore plaid shirts and work boots, kept her hair short, and wore
square glasses that are typically worn by men. When I looked at S I immediately identified her as male, despite my conscious attempts to change my perception of her, as she proclaimed, “I am a woman inside.” I felt captured by the masculine image she reflected and experienced a mixture of irritation and anxiety in having to address her as female—irritation over what felt to me as a demand to be recognized as one thing while presenting as another, and anxiety over offending S, by treating her femininity as invisible, perhaps repeating her own attack upon something she identified as “feminine” that was well hidden.

S agreed to see me three times a week but refused to lie on the couch. When I asked about her association to the couch, she could not understand what I meant, and her face twitched in a way that seemed to reflect a strange combination of anger, disgust, and incomprehension. This “twitch” became a common response to most of my inquiries or interpretations, unless they were concrete and self-evident. She came to sessions armed with a report of the preceding day, which she delivered in a matter-of-fact manner. When I attempted to link her difficulty in “playing” during the session and her difficulty in opening her suitcase, she again responded with a grimace. She had no clue how the two could be related. I felt drained and controlled in the analysis with S, by the deadening atmosphere between us, by having to be on guard when addressing her gender, by the predictability that characterized her reporting, and by my restrained responses. Despite this seemingly unbearable space, S rarely missed her sessions and became extremely angry over any need to cancel or move the time of our sessions. It seemed this was the only space she felt she could control.
S expressed a desire for the changes to occur in her body “quickly.” On the other hand, she felt angry at herself over what emerged as her own resistance to the transition, feeling that she must not reveal her transitioning at work, or go out in public in women’s clothes. I struggled, quite successfully, to address her as female. However, something in me could not quite feel settled with S and I kept feeling anxiety and anger during our sessions. I wondered about my difficulty imaging S as a woman and wondered if being a woman was something she herself resisted. S dismissed this idea, stating that the only thing that held her back from fully transitioning was her worry over job security.

As S’s features softened as a result of taking estrogens and starting electrolysis, she started experiencing anxiety over losing her “masculinity,” which she equated with social status and safety. She expressed feeling trapped in a male body, feeling disgusted by her penis and bodily hair, and yet feeling trapped in her female body, a body that she associated with weakness, vulnerability, and inferior status. She felt as if neither gender embodiment was liveable and described her masculine embodiment as “familiar, old, and useless.” At the same time she described her feminine embodiment as feeling vacant and “lacking.” She described looking at herself in the mirror and feeling “not quite the woman she imagined herself to be.” Being a woman felt like “loss, a not-being.” She felt like an “unattractive, grotesque woman.” When she walked in the street she felt that others could see her “lack” and was hyper-vigilant about anticipated attacks.

S persisted in expressing a desire to continue her transition but delayed filling her prescription for hormones, missed her electrolysis appointments, and continued to
dress as a man. At the same time she became highly defensive when I suggested that perhaps a part of her wanted to hold onto her masculine image, at least socially. S expressed a hatred of having to “choose her gender.” She hated being a man and hated being a woman. Neither felt herself, although femininity seemed to her more in line with what she wanted – “to be attractive, to be taken care of,” to be handled.” However, femininity was also equated with being “vacant,” “unsuccessful,” “grotesque,” “passive,” and “vulnerable.”

S had been thinking about transitioning since the age of 35 but had been unable to decide whether she should initiate it. When I tried to find out more about the difficulty in making up her mind, S answered blankly, “I don’t know.” S remembered looking at women’s magazines at the age of 13, wishing she looked like the attractive women in the journal. She put those thoughts out of her mind until the death of her mother, when S turned 35. She had no clear recollection of being occupied with thoughts about gender before her mother’s death. I tried to get a sense of S’s associations with femininity and masculinity but she seemed confused and angry, unable to say much. S said she felt liberated after her mother’s death but had difficulty describing their relationship, saying, “She was just there. She was dead for me.” I wondered if S’s wish was in fact to revive her mother through becoming her.

I sensed that S was frightened by the process of transitioning, could not quite comprehend its significance, and was very ambivalent about the physical changes she was planning to undergo. In the session, any attempts to question S’s feelings or thoughts were met with a perplexed yet angry look, making me feel like an
intruder. My impression and interpretations felt wasted. She denied any ambivalence or anxiety and blamed her demanding work for leaving her no time to dress as a woman or attend electrolysis. She was angry at me for questioning these simple “facts.” My questions seldom made sense to her. Sitting with S, I felt she was hollow, devoid of psychic life.

In the sessions I felt numb and tired, unaffected by S. It seemed that each session replicated the next and I wondered why S decided to come for treatment. S had trouble articulating what she was seeking. She said that she was not sure what she wanted or why she came but thought it was a good idea to see someone to whom she could talk about her intended transformation.

There was something about S’s mode of relating to me that made me feel uneasy, suffocated. I could not say much for fear of confusing her or making her feel attacked. There were no symbolic meanings or associations to play with, only concrete “facts.” I felt, however, that her enactments bore meaning that might associatively give access to primal scenic impressions that she was left with and for which there were no words. In the absence of memories and a history that wove her theory of becoming, I wondered if S’s scenes of binding and torture were an enactment of a story that could not be told, made of a string of repetition of pre-verbal pictographic traces—one of rupture, of the inchoateness of her self and of violence, a psychic disjoining that brought her to attack her own linking capacity. Was her use of “rope play” an attempt to hold what felt like fragments of herself—a fragile attempt at linking that defended at the same time that it enacted an attack on the linking process itself?
I felt as if I was presented by S with an inchoate primal pictogram that was enacted through destructive repetition of endless tying that de-linked any ties as it was wrapped around S’s body in a tight grip. My attempts to link her experience to a past, to find some semblance of a construction of history, fell apart. I thought of S as stuck in a time before history could be made, before the birth of the self, which requires language. It is also a time when a trace of cohesion is made from a percut of unity (e.g., Winnicott). S’s spasmic reaction to meaning as reflected in her visceral rejection of ideas, interpretations, or meaning exemplified her primal attempt to limit the difference between her internal and external space. It was as if the incipience of her gender, the lack of coherent history, and her grimace were ways in which she refused to leave a primary space.

S had very few fragments of memories—none before the age of seven—and those that she had were also devoid of affect. S’s responses to inquiries about her past and her relationship with her parents were flat. When I asked about her relationship to her mother, she responded in a disaffected way, in a monotone: “I don’t even know how I feel towards her. I don’t remember how I feel towards my mother.” However, there was a clear sense that she imagined herself to be a waste product of a toxic union. S remembered the atmosphere in her family as vacant and cold. She felt no love or attachment to her parents, now deceased, and never felt loved by them. She struggled to describe her father to me, stating only that he was a “drunk” who spent most days in the tavern. She did not recall an actual conversation with her father and felt she never knew him. What she did recall
were violent fights between her parents, which she imagined were initiated by her mother, who would hit her father in a fit of rage.

In the session S preferred to report events of the week concretely, matter-of-factly, without being interrupted. There were daily repetitive scenarios involving sado-masochistic ties, one relating to her workplace where she presented as a man, and the other relating to her “night life” where she presented as a woman. She followed a “ritual” at the end of each workday in which she dressed up in women’s clothes, put on makeup, and masturbated to her reflection in the mirror or to photos of transsexuals. Since starting her hormone treatment one year before, S began phantasizing about being involved in bondage and found a master with whom she carried out sessions in which she would be tied up, flogged, beaten, and penetrated with an anal “plug”—experiences that she found enlivening. She reported the content of each beating session in detail and engaged in them compulsively, daily.

S described being “exhilarated to the point of orgasm” by being tied up in all sorts of ways and described an elaborate range of bondage techniques involving being suspended by her ankles, or being tied to a bed for few hours at a time. Her sado-masochistic sessions involved several feminine artifacts, besides her wig and feminine clothing, such as a pearl necklace, which she inserted anally, and pins, which she inserted through her skin. She also wore shoes with stiletto heels to which she strapped dildos, which she inserted into her anus.

When I tried to access the significance of these objects associatively, S looked puzzled. I commented on the image I had in my mind of S beating up a woman,
perhaps her mother. S became enraged and confused, reiterating that it was a pleasurable game that at times gave her “body orgasms”—a sensation she described as “sub-space” where she felt dissociated and laughed for hours. She didn’t know why she laughed; it was a “total release” in the face of torture. I did not get a sense that S was trying to shock or titillate me. I felt, rather, that I was the recipient of dry reporting of daily events that were indeed her routine, which she felt compelled to repeat in a senseless way. When I asked what she meant by “enlivening,” she said, “Alive.”

S often became annoyed by my inquiries, which seemed intrusive and confusing, requiring an effort that she could not bear, judging from the grimaces with which she greeted my comments. Any question or attempt to make meaning was greeted with disgust and incomprehension. She became repelling and impenetrable, as if the very act of linking two thoughts that might give birth to a third was a revolting act in which she wanted no part. It was a though the very conception of thought became a horrific sexual scene in the primal theory of a child. Linking pleasure and pain at the level of the body replaced making links in her mind. Any link became a site of pain but also a triumphant dissociation of pain. Any contact, whether physical or emotional, left her untouched, unscathed, and was devoid of meaning. It seemed as if S confused sensations with meaning: when enacting painful contradictory scenes of pain and pleasure, pain turned to pleasure and pleasure turned to pain. Meaning-making seemed to be a painful or even impossible task requiring a coming together of spaces that for S were still fused to
the body in a powerful adhesive way, preventing a space where language could come about.

As I began associating to S’s “scenes” I was thinking about a narrative of self that might be “tied” in this visual scene: a fractured story of origin, of failed speech, an image of disjoining. It was as if her roping enactment tried to rope together chaotic fragments, linking the body as it de-linked her thoughts. Was it an act that performed what S could not bear to remember? Perhaps a concrete knotting that also destroyed linkage in thought, an attempt to both replicate and reject maternal tie though a scene where pain and pleasure were so bound. I thought of the holding together of the literal body through the concreteness of being tied, accompanied by a grimace, a way of becoming tongue-tied that tore apart signification—the close contact with the Real—a phantasmic abyss, and a move away from language. Were S’s beating scenes like imprinted images of what at once registered as violence but also as her mother’s desire? S’s story of origin felt disjointed and marked by absences and gaps of memory. What, I wondered, kept S’s narrative fragmented and foreclosed?

What I knew of S’s history was starkly limited. However, she felt tyrannized by her mother, who kept S at a close range at all times because S experienced unexplained seizures into her teenage years. She was not allowed to visit friends and, outside of going to school, spent her time with her mother. Most of S’s recollections involved sitting next to her mother in the kitchen, in silence. During these times she did not recall being talked to or nurtured by her mother and remembered despising her. When she left home, the seizures disappeared.
During sessions, S described how she enacted a scene that combined her mother’s feminine body and her own masculine body, a scene in which her mother’s pearls (the mother pearl) were inserted into her anus one by one and were then stringed together, like an umbilical cord, perhaps an act of tying and expelling maternal fragments. S dressed in female clothing, only to be beaten in them. She enjoyed being tied up and left for hours without ability to move. At work, S felt that her expertise was exploited, that others called upon her and relied on her “too much.” She took no pleasure in being told that her skills were extremely valuable and felt used by co-workers’ dependence on her skills. At the same time she could not foresee herself leaving her workplace because finding a job in her field would be difficult and she could never imagine herself in a different kind of occupation.

Hearing S’s vignettes of torture, beating, mutilation, fire-play, and near-death suffocation, I felt I was granted entrance as a witness to a site of horror, only I did not feel horrified or shocked. Instead, I found myself numbed to her psychic pain, drifting into boredom. I wondered about my participation in S’s internal world and the way in which both of us were caught in a dead end, unable to play or transition because the analysis was unable to become a ground for play or a transitional space. I felt tied up in the session, as any attempt to have S elaborate on her feelings, images, or associations was met with a blank look or grimaces of misunderstanding and impatience. S refused to use the couch and reacted angrily to any attempt I made to talk about her association of lying down on the couch. She denied having associations and refused further discussion on the matter. I thought about S’s inability to transition as a reflection of this difficulty in using
transitional space and wondered if I too had become completely wrapped in her hopeless, cut-off existence. Where was my affect or hers?

Whenever I pointed to this absence of affect as she described beatings, I was met immediately with a grimace, as if she could not understand my meaning. She often repeated that these beating scenes were an enjoyable “game” that gave her a “high.” Her looks of puzzlement and flat responses drained me. I thought of them as a way to disavow psychic pain and attack the potential meaning that could be made from her repetitive scene. In the session I also found myself disavowing any effect her words had upon me by tuning out. Was this the purpose of the repetition, to erase the trace of its own memory?

I was immobilized in my interactions with S, as if fused in an uncanny way, unable to play with words, unaffected by images of torture and descriptions of pain. Her experience was marked by paradox of fusion and diffusion. On the one hand there was utter chaos where things could not touch. Femininity and masculinity, ideas and feelings, she and I were as if disparate objects in space, in a constant incommunicado. Yet, paradoxically, these same objects were tied together as an unrecognizable mash. For S, it seemed, any joining of two spaces, any connection with otherness, brought with it an excess of violence and enjoyment, of consuming and expelling, of killing and being killed, which was contained through the controlled scene of beatings. Perhaps like the fantasized deadening union of her parents, I was cast in the analysis in both roles: the dead mother and an absent father, bored and numb, an onlooker drawn to a crash scene watching without words, terrorized without thoughts. The image of grimace,
which de-links any contact between us, and the tight rope, which holds together fragile parts of herself, brought me to a mythic narrative as I attempted to imagine a story of origin for S. Through this imagined story I felt I was attempting to give birth to a child who was refusing to come out. S refused to come out in gender, to acknowledge my separateness, to be released from her tight rope. Her failure to give meaning to experience was also a way of being stuck in the timelessness of an inchoate image—indeed, as a failure of imagination. Anything that stood for the mother, including the analysis, had to be refused, cut up, and expelled in the guise of autonomy. Instead, she needed to rely on the concreteness of a rope at the level of symbolic equation that attempted to bind the fragments of inchoate identificatory markers.

Reflecting on S’s repetitive practices, I wondered if the rope play “scene” gives us as spectators a glimpse into S’s objectification, being forced to choose between two positions enacted in gender—a non-reciprocal identification with either the agent of beating or the victim, constructed retroactively as a dichotomous male/female split that could not meet through desire. It was a disjointed scene in which all links were broken, where unions became deaths. The onlooker, like her father, was a passive observer, an appendage. It was a scene of fragments of relationships and part objects that collided violently in acts of intrusion—a well-orchestrated torture scene whose origin could be traced to the maternal desire and S’s fantasy of her mother’s absolute control over her body. It was as if the scene revealed a hidden compliance with the maternal discourse, an after-effect of the trauma and a way of making the world around her comply with her reality, at the
same time that it signified an attempt to represent separation from the maternal union. It was an enactment in which the mother’s “elsewhere”—a point of reference outside the dyadic tie—had but a minimal presence as the person who was observing the beating.

S came to sessions twice a week without failure but refused to come a third time, stating financial limitations as her reason. Two years into the analysis S ended the session with a proclamation, “Oh, by the way, I am going to come only once a month from now on because my electrolysis is going to cost me a lot. I cannot afford the two.” I told S that we would have to talk about this in our next session. “There is nothing to talk about,” she told me. “This is what I have decided.” I told S that I also had to make my decision, as I do not see patients once a month. S became enraged. She could not understand why I could not see her whenever she wanted to, as she paid for her sessions. She expressed a need to keep coming to see me, despite not knowing why it was so important to her.

I felt paralyzed by S’s request and was aware of my desire to end the therapeutic relationship for reasons of inconvenience, for having to keep a space open for one hour a month, and the limited kind of work that such an arrangement allows. I felt that her request might be a way to flee from painful affect aroused in the session through her tie to me and our work. After all, like the pain she endured in turning to sado-masochistic enactments as a way to struggle with and control psychic pain, here she turned to the pain of electrolysis as a way to avoid painful longings. I thought about S taking on the role of her mother, punishing me for any attempt to break the tight knot that characterized the analysis where any interpretation or
new idea became a threat and was met by a sort of punishment S inflicted on me, through concreteness, silence, and twitching her face in disgust. I decided to share the image I had an image in my mind of a little girl being tied up and beaten. I suggested to S that I had this image when I thought of her fear of being tied to me. S responded with a grimace, but I could see that the image of being tied to me evoked some deeper reaction. She associated to a memory—indeed, S’s only memory prior to the age of seven. The scene involved one of S’s rare attempts to rebel against her mother’s demand that S not leave her sight. S remembered sneaking out for a few hours, and upon her return was beaten and kept in the kitchen, by her mother’s side. Her punishment involved being tied to a table, for which she supplied the rope to her mother. She could not recall how she felt during those times and seemed to have cut off from a sense of time or affect. She could not remember how many days or weeks this punishment lasted. However, she could talk about this image in the present, where being tied would mean “having to hide in sub-space”—a way to dissociate from pain into a state of ecstasy, by the very thought of being tied.

**Working through and psychic bridgespace**

S’s enactments reflect the ways in which the erotic body resists language. Indeed, language cannot represent the experience of sexuality, and it is only through repression that words can replace sexuality (in its complex disruptive forms). What is resisted in her case, I believe, is a repression of an omnipotence fantasy where she is the originator of herself, one that excludes an “Other” and hence refuses loss. Identity, on the other hand, as a spoken representation of
identification, requires a narrative, that is both protective of and a contradiction to the “I,” the individual within the group. To represent means to give something up, so there is a risk of loss in being—a risk that for S meant separation from an imagined maternal tie that she phantasized as the only link with reality. But if in every narration there is a trace of missed speech, of estrangement (Ofrat, 2008), any attempt at representation through language is also a sentencing of exile, alienation, and difference. If experience and meaning are always estranged, the project of analysis transforms from attempts to decipher the unconscious into creating conditions for a narrative as a ground for imagination and human freedom. The analytic engagement gives language to pictographic scenes. Analysis is described by Kristeva (2002) as a work of revolt, where both analyst and analysand attempted to turn a concrete picture of certainty into a question and refuse to be bound by a discourse that duplicates the concealed, violent, non-desiring maternal discourse. The transference becomes the unspoken that can be open to questioning through pictographic associations and that enacts scenes that are held together by a fragile thread, like a dream—a story that hides a story that can be told only in pictures. Representation through speech inherently prevents a return to origin, but something of the scenic collapse paradoxically acts as origin, joining scenes through a fantastical story of desire. Imagining a scenic collapse as phantasmic origin elaborates the paradox of sexual difference, which relies on the ability to hold the body in relation to its surrounding, so that estrangement and unity are no longer held in opposition but rather that subjectivity itself resides in a phantastical and tenuous space between unity and estrangement.
Access to the pictographic traces in the analysis, through images and enactments, gives a glimpse into an individual’s identificatory “project”—an endeavour that defines one’s sense of agency but also inherently involves submission and passivity, for identification is elicited in relation to an Other on whom we depend. It is a fragile project at best, its fractured journey often veiled by an image of coherence that at certain moments collapses into concreteness. If identity can be imagined as a psychic space where one is caught in one’s own image that resists its own estrangement, it will always carry a trace from the discourse of the Other that will return as a stranger to the self. There is an illusory sense of ownership over one’s self that is at once an enactment of someone else’s discourse—and so never belongs to the self—and a preservative facade. Identity is always subject to language, as it has to be presented to others. When presented through language, it grants access to the group and prevents collapse of individuality into this group. However, the subject’s encounter with the group, outside of the confines of the child–mother dyad, must never be fixed, placing identity always in a state of tension.

In the analysis, S maintained a primary relation to external reality, one where difference was equated with maternal violence and was actively disavowed. S was guided by her wish for external reality to mirror her projected wish. She could not tolerate gaps in our relation and could not allow for pleasure or desire that might take her by surprise, offered by an external object. We can imagine S, as she indeed imagines herself, as encased in a claustrum, devoid of speech, where any movement is a circular one, which returns the subjects to its
psychic source: S’s phantasized abject origins of rejection, disembodiment, and pain.

This inherent estrangement that is part of identity was experienced as annihilating for S, and was disavowed at all costs. And yet, in observing this very split marked by disavowal, one bore witness to the way is which her mind was as if colonized by a foreign discourse, preventing her from having her own speech. In the analysis S tried to hijack the analyst’s mind in a sense that she rejected any signifiers of otherness expressed by the analyst, including the analytic constraints of time. It is as if the possibility of joining of spaces that relating requires was felt as noxious and dangerous. One can hypothesize whether any relating was equated with a parental intercourse that was phantasized as invasive and deathly, where any link becomes the site of destruction and therefore free association a deadly task.

We may say that S was captivated by the catastrophe of her past but was unable to link her past to her present or future. Being caught in the image with limited outside recourse also means that the image ceases to be a representation and collapses into the chaotic Real. She lived her history on her body—a concrete history that could not be written. There were no anchoring moments to her story; it was a story repeated as if it were a single event captured in a maternal grip. Her identity felt adhesive and relied on an obsessive ritual that ensured a phantasy of certainty. She lacked curiosity or introspection.

S’s enactment was an empty narrative, a non-story. It was as if her existence was marked by rejection of experience, hence of desire. In the analytic situation,
pictographic images were equated and reproduced in my relationship with S as an attempt to undermine desire, which S experienced as frustrating and dangerous. The impossibility of revolt and the tie to what was inscribed as maternal discourse acted as imaginary ropes, preventing S’s picture from leaving its original scene and becoming speech that attaches affect to ideas. It was as if she had to maintain a tie to the maternal discourse in order to exist.

The concept of a primal, pictographic representation that is always present in the spaces between our words reminds us how fragile the work of analysis is and how it relies on a paradox at the base of identification: analysts and patients return to the site of trauma to draw another link, while at the same time—like a creative composition of art—our narrative “subverts the link’s very ability to function as foothold in existence” (Omer, in Heiman, 2008, p. 198). Between the pieces of our narrative, the gaps of nothingness reveal the fragility of identification. Identity in this way is revealed as repetition: “That which repeats does no return to itself” (Ofrat, 2008, p. 14). S played out a fragment of an affect that was once attached to an idea—a scene that hides its actors.

If psychoanalysis is the working through of meaning making and of mourning inevitable meaninglessness, it is work that relies on the analyst’s containment that makes loss bearable over time. The analyst’s ability to tolerate incoherence, chaos, and attacks on meaning becomes a potential space for thinking that, through its insistence on difference, allows movement and diffusion of concretized symbolic equivalents and becomes a form of revolt. In turn, thinking of S’s enactment as a fragment of a pictogram helped to contain my own sense of
chaos and incoherence in my encounter with S and shifted my focus from making interpretations to find meaning, but using the image to create a frame that brings cohesiveness to thinking and allows for meaning to be made.

Throughout the analysis I struggled to untangle the visual tie, to create some space between images where words have to be placed. However, I too became beholden at first to the concreteness of S’s presentation, her urgency to “transition,” which I took on as the task of the analysis. I had to fight becoming seduced by images of sadism, vulgarity, and violence all too exhilarating to abandon. I became concrete in my attempt to convince S of the difference between pleasure and pain. But the pictographic image depicting a scene of immobility and violence also marked the place that hinted at a different meaning—at the impossibility of transitioning, which inherently involves movement. If the pictogram is a trace that is left after dissociation between inscription and affect, this affect is bound to be repeated through the transference.

In the analysis, I was the one who experienced the affect and turmoil, while S stayed unmoved, unable to differentiate pleasure from pain.

S’s enactments involving being tied and suspended paradoxically mirrored the function of the image, to which her enactment gives rise in the analyst. The image is a fused spectacle that maintains an allegiance to the Other’s discourse and so stands in opposition to one’s “I,” and at the same time functions as fantasy hold that preserves the collapse of the “I” into the Other. On the one hand, identity is a visual fantasy of cohesion between two poles, the maternal and the group, which are always at risk of collapsing into each other. It is as if her inability to reside in
this “suspended place” was enacted at a pre-verbal register. The violence that is inherent in the maternal discourse that forces an interpretation through words and touch is the very act that keeps the infant both tied and repelled. Without a representation that joins violence and pleasure in a bearable hold, there will be no thinking, only repetition that fuses pain and pleasure in a toxic, static mould.

Thinking of identification through the concept of the pictogram, brings us to a conception of identification as marked by inherent contradiction, an imaginary stable hold that allows for separation. Sexual difference is then conceptualized as a link or signification that inscribes its own resistance—a wholeness or unity that is enjoyed precisely because of its impossibility. Gender (in whatever form it takes) becomes the embodiment of a link to the other through desire where the interaction with the other constitutes experience. We may say that S’s hatred of embodiment, hence hatred of representation and meaning-making, reveals her belief in the unity of the image (e.g. masculinity/femininity as true and complete categories from which the patient is forced to choose). To believe the image means one can no longer identify with it, as identification is always partial, unconscious, and ambivalent.
References


**Publications**
