Sequential Selves: Unraveling Personal Identity in Literature, Philosophy & Film

The former U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, has written these lines about past and present selves: "On the dock/ where you board the boat for Ship Island/someone will take your picture:/ the photograph—/who you were—/will be waiting when you return." Trethewey is reviving an idea that Michel de Montaigne expressed more than four centuries earlier. Montaigne wrote that someone who received a dinner invitation yesterday and arrives today at the time specified will turn up uninvited; for the dinner guest who knocks on the door is not the same person who received the invitation.

Despite Montaigne’s observation, the dinner guest will probably not have the door slammed in his face. For most people do not ordinarily operate on the assumption that our identities are constantly changing, or even that they change periodically. Instead, we tend to accept some version of the notion that there is an inherent identity independent of the corporeal self—that our bodies change, but not our identities. This traditional view is to be found almost wherever one looks: in Platonic philosophy, in Christian theology, and even in recent transgender narratives that describe personal realizations that one’s self was born into the wrong body and that the body (or its presentation) needed to be altered to put it in accord with the essential, underlying self.

Such assumptions about unified personal identity that persists over time are so familiar that they may seem unavoidable. How can we take responsibility for past actions, or hold people responsible for crimes committed in the past unless we assume that the person taking responsibility or being accused is the same person who committed the action in question. And when we remember our own past actions, thoughts, and feelings don’t we experience the unity of past and present selves?

It turns out, however, that assumptions about continuous personal identity are not as inevitable as they may seem, and that views like those expressed by Trethewey and Montaigne are not as eccentric as they may seem. In fact, one can find an array of literary and philosophical works and films that make powerful cases for seeing oneself or someone else as a sequence of distinct selves. And while memory may seem to demonstrate the continuity of unified selves, it may also be seen as providing a record of past selves—including selves that one may wish to discard or repudiate.

We will be discussing several works that analyze or dramatize the relationship between past and present selves and ultimately the dynamics of selfhood. Some of the works will provide classic statements of traditional views concerning personal identity, while others provide versions of the view that ostensibly unified selves are really compounds of sequential selves that span time—and space. In addition to selections from the philosophical works of Montaigne, John Locke, and David Hume, and from Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time, the list of readings and screenings will include the following:

- Boys Don’t Cry, (written and directed by Kimberly Peirce)
- Plato, Symposium
- Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”
- Nabokov, Lolita
- The Bourne Supremacy; The Bourne Ultimatum (screenplays by Tony Gilroy/directed by Paul Greengrass
- Charles Baxter, The Soul Thief
- Douglas Hofstadter, “A Brief Brush with Cartesian Egos”
- Being John Malkovich (screenplay by Charlie Kaufman/directed by Spike Jonze)