THE UNLIVED LIFE IS WORTH EXAMINING:

NOTHINGS AND NOBODIES BEHIND THE SCENES

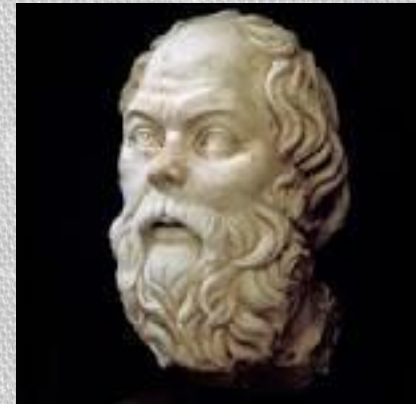Susie Scott
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The other side of the self

- Public and transgressive role of sociology (Mills 1959)

- Ethical duty to study the 'underdog' (Becker 1967)

- Relational self and personal life (Smart 2007)

- "The unexamined life is not worth living"
  (Socrates)

  … the unlived life is worth examining?

The Road Not Taken (Robert Frost 1916)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And **sorry I could not travel both**
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having **perhaps the better claim**,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, **I kept the first for another day!**
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
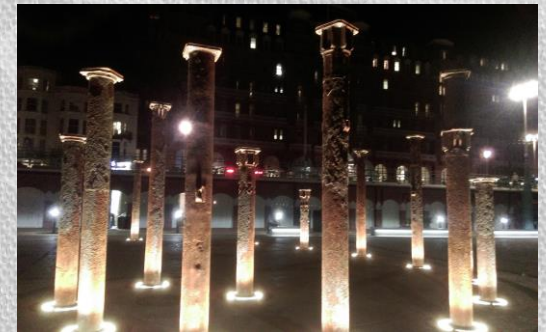And **that has made all the difference.**

Parallel worlds, undone selves, unlived lives

- Quantum physics: Schrödinger's Self?

- Popular culture and everyday talk
  - what if? / if only…

- Psychoanalytic theories (Jung, Freud, Campbell)
  - alter ego, shadow, persona, archetypes

- Existentialism (Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard)
  - thrownness, randomness, absurdity and chaos
  - nausea, nihilism, fear and dread
  - freedom and responsibility: the pain of choosing
    - *"Alternatives exclude… for every yes, there must be a no…"* (Yalom 1980)

Nothing to do with sociology?

- Mathematics, physics, natural sciences (Barrow 2000)
- Performing arts and humanities (Green 2011)

- Phenomenology (Heidegger 1927, Husserl 1937, Fink 1930, Sartre 1943, Merleau-Ponty 1945, Levinas 1961, Schütz 1972)

  - How things (don't) appear to us in the subjective lifeworld
    - what seems real or possible?
  - Manifestation (shining forth) vs occlusion (fading)
    - illumination and unconcealment
  - Presentification: making present
    - imagining absent/unreal objects
  - Depresentification, clearings, openings
    - spaces from which hidden objects can emerge

Sociology of nothing

- **Unmarked phenomena** (Brekhus 1998)
- **Negative symbolic social objects** (cf. Blumer 1969)
  - no-things, no-bodies, no-wheres, non-events
  - social ontology and trajectory
- **Meaningful social action** (Weber 1904, Mead 1934)
- **Interactional conditions and consequences**
  - how does nothing happen? (encounters, relations, processes)
  - what does nothing do? (produces some-thing/some-body new)
- **Experience and identity**
  - ghost-selves and haunting
  - biographical sense-making (non-Me)

Two ways of accomplishing nothing

Acts of commission

- active decision *not* to
- motivated by conscious intentionality
- avoiding something
  - disengagement, disinterest
  - dis-identification, disavowal
  - refusal, rejection
- doing nothing, being a non-, having nothing

Acts of omission

- passive neglect/lack/failure
- default position, through external circumstances
- something didn't happen
  - non-participation
  - non-identification
  - non-materialisation
- non-doing, non-being, non-having

Narratives of nothing

- 25 written personal stories, collected online
  - https://nothingnarratives.wordpress.com/about/

    "Please tell me about something in your life that you have not done, that hasn't happened, or that you do not have. It can be anything from a small detail to a major life event, as long as it feels important to you."

- Analysis
  - Themes (non-identity, silence, invisibility, emptiness, stillness)
  - Dimensions (temporal, aural, visual, depth, spatial)
  - Modes (not being, not saying, not showing, not having, not doing)

Lost opportunities (no-body identities)

Reverse career trajectories (cf. Strauss 1969, Becker 1952, Goffman 1961)

- sequential stages of non-progression
- contingency factors
  - fateful encounters with significant others
- announcements and placements of identity claims (Stone 1962)

Dis-identification (commission)

- some-body is denied, refused or rejected
- ex-roles (Ebaugh 1988), never identities (Mullaney 2006)
- *becoming a non-*

Non-identification (omission)

- no-body develops
- *non-becoming* (Scott et al 2016)

Dis-identification (becoming a non-)

The decision [to turn down a job offer] was hugely upsetting. I felt I had let myself, my parents, and my proposed supervisor down. I spent the summer regretting my decision not to move to China and pondering my next move.... [Meanwhile] I was receiving photographs from my China-based friends... I was gutted that my friends were living in a different country working short hours and spending the rest of the time travelling around Asia... At times, I was jealous of their lifestyles.

Hywel, 28

Non-identification (non-becoming)

If I had married a man who wanted children, I would have been persuaded. I really was indifferent, not antagonistic. But I didn't... So we are happily childless and have been for the 34 years of our marriage. We have had adventures – emigrating, returning – that would have been materially different if we had had children.

Rachel, 60

Silence (no-things left unsaid)

Saying nothing (commission)

- some-thing is kept quiet
- political protest, resistance, survival (Laing 1960, Ahmed 2010)
- secrets and lies (Smart 2011, Morrow 2015)
- muted and civilised emotion displays (Flower 2016)

Not-saying anything (omission)

- no-thing to talk about
- neglecting to speak: shyness and quietness (Scott 2007, Cain 2013)
- being silenced, lacking a voice, not being listened to
- failing to speak up, out or for (non-response – calling in)

Failing to speak up, out or for

One day I was in London. I was riding the Tube. At one of the stops someone got on that was the spitting image of Julia Roberts… [But] his person was 'not' a woman.. this person was male, with perfect makeup and a skirt and blouse on, and maybe a wig…. I continued to stare at this person, making eye contact, I kept trying to get the courage up to say, "*I hope you don't mind me saying but you are the spitting image of Julia Roberts. I nearly died when you stepped onto the train thinking you were her!*"

However, I felt awkward saying such a weird thing to a stranger on a crowded and noisy tube train, I felt embarrassed and a little silly… I didn't manage to say anything and instead continued to stare and glance at this person… They looked back at me uncomfortably, their body posture as if they were retreating as much as possible into themselves. their hands fidgety, a hint of pain and sadness in their eyes.

My silence in this moment I deeply regret. I considered in retrospect the pain I caused this person who probably experienced from their view intense stigma… For all I knew this was the first day they went out properly as themselves to gain courage… perhaps that day they went back home and never left as themselves again.

I wonder who they are today, how they would like to be, how they are, how they would like people to see them. I may have missed being able to do something simple yet powerfully positive for someone by not speaking… I just continue to wish I could go back, or find her, and tell her I thought she was beautiful.

(Zam)

Invisibility (non-present forms)

Disappearing acts (commission)

- some-body vanishes / does not show / is deliberately ignored

- tactful blindness (Goffman 1963)

- hiding, withdrawal, removal, camouflage

- absent presence

  - role distance, boredom, conspicuous absenteeism (Goffman 1961, Barbalet 1999, Åkerström 2018)

Non-appearance (omission)

- no-body emerges

- being unseen

  - non-persons and social death (Goffman 1959, Sudnow 1967)

- misrecognition and non-belonging (May 2016)

Conspicuous absenteeism

In the last few years it has become increasingly common practice for a small number of colleagues to bring laptops along to staff meetings and spend the time catching up on work unrelated to the agenda. (I know this because I have often looked over their shoulders and I have also seen people organising personal photos on laptops during meetings)…

Most of us find staff (and other) meetings less than thrilling and time can be wasted when we could all be doing other things, but they are a necessary and important channel of communication and part of the job.

Someone working on their laptop throughout and only surfacing if given a direct prompt by the Chair or if they have an immediate, personal interest in an agenda item seems to signal that the person is far busier and more important than the rest of us who can therefore afford to give our full attention to the mundane business in hand.

Penelope, 50

Lack of company

When I was growing up as an only child it always seemed that our family was incomplete and different from other 'proper' families. I always felt that someone was missing and would have loved an older brother…

Without siblings, children can feel isolated and lonely. At Christmas, it was disappointing to be given games 'for 2 to 4 players'.
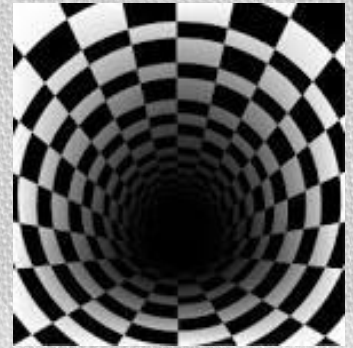
Only children have a difficult time when their parents are ill and are without support from siblings to share the responsibility of physical and emotional care.

Imogen, 67

Emptiness (holes, gaps and spaces)

Loss or extraction (commission)

- Some-thing is lost, given up or taken away – missing objects
- surrounding containers of nothing
- vacuum (everything is sucked out)
- black hole (everything is sucked in)
- nuclear hole (core part of self/body is lost)

Unrealised potential (omission)

- no-thing comes into being / is formed
- clearings and openings (Heidegger 1927, Levinas 1961)
- void (anything could happen)
- liminal gap (suspense and waiting)

Nuclear hole

Over the past three years I became a runner. Not just a jogger, but a runner. An ultra-runner. One of those nutters who runs a marathon, and then a bit more. This consumed my life, taking time away from family, friends and job... Then I became injured. And I couldn't run.

To start with this was a soul-destroying, identity-changing event. If I was no longer a runner, who was I?... I no longer had an excuse to flee for 1, 2, 3, 4 or even 5 hours at a time. I no longer had a goal to train for: the next race. And, I had a level of fitness that I had worked hard to attain, that was slowly slipping away for each day I was out of action. The hole in my life was gaping.

Socially, I had a group of, if not friends, then like-minded others who I could discuss running, races, reading and all other ultra-related things. Now it hurt to read the comments of others completing races and enjoying a long run. Then there were colleagues and friends who would regularly ask me if I had run to work that day... Having to explain that I was injured each time was a re-opening of the wound which I didn't always have the energy to meet with the appropriately polite response. It was a constant reminder that I was no longer who I once was.

Hanna, 39

Nothing produces something new

Ghostly figures and phantom forms (Gordon 2008, Roseneil 2009)
- the everyday uncanny (Waskul & Waskul 2016)

Receptacles, residue and remains
- shells, boxes, fossils, markers, memorials

Substitutes and replacements
- stigma objects, proud trophies, battle scars

Alternatives and 'instead' options
- Plan A or Plan B?

Self-haunting and existential guilt (Rank 1936)

- Mirror selves and reflexivity (cf. Cooley 1902, Strauss 1969)

- Negative and positive counterparts
  - Undone vs done self
  - Unlived vs lived experience
  - Unreal vs real objects

- Latent agency of phantom forms
  - inferred existence from indirect effects
  - traces, ripples, shadows, reverse images, silhouettes

- Parallel trajectories – shadow tracks

I often -- weekly? -- think about the lives I am not living and will never live. The life where I became an artist, rather than a psychologist. The life where I didn't have children. The life where I took the job in Michigan instead of the one in Oregon (yikes!). The life where I recognized my passions earlier. I even think about the kind of life I would lead if I did it all over again, knowing everything I know now - like, I'd use my adolescence to read all the books I don't have time for now. How smart I would be! ... I think there was a point in my early twenties, when I stood on the precipice of adulthood, and all the possibilities really did seem open to me. It was hard, in my early thirties, to recognize that the moment had passed.

Maddie, 37

Why should we turn over the mirror?

- Nothing is *something* that matters
  - negative, unmarked phenomena form part of social reality
  - origins, processes, consequences

- Socially emergent from interaction
  - meaningful social action, oriented towards negative symbolic objects
  - defined through negotiation with significant others
  - relationally produced by somebodies / productive of something

- Reverse biographies of unlived lives
  - we perform identity work on the self's negative mirror image (non-Me)
  - knowing our no-bodies helps us understand the some-bodies we are

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