

## George Herbert Mead's Theory of the Self: Applied Film and Literature Analysis with Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place

Barbara J. Lowe, St. John Fisher College

*This essay explicates and then employs George Herbert Mead's theory of self in order to highlight not only the usefulness of this theory for understanding self development but also to underline what it implicitly suggests; namely, the right to self and the implications this has for a right to place or "home" for all human beings, including undocumented immigrant workers. I establish this argument through the analysis of two characters drawn from contemporary film and literature. More specifically, I focus on the character Calogero in Robert DeNiro's film A Bronx Tale and Abdu (Ibrahim ibn Musa) in Nadine Gordimer's novel The Pickup. In both cases, the chosen character is struggling to establish a sense of self in an environment full of conflict and turbulence. The analysis of Calogero demonstrates the usefulness of Mead's theory for explaining and understanding self development. The analysis of Abdu does this as well but goes further by establishing how self formation can be stagnated when meaningful entry into the larger community is thwarted or otherwise denied – as is the case with Abdu and undocumented immigrant workers in general. I argue that this denial of entry, because it is connected with the development of the self, is a human rights issue and demands rectification.*

### Introduction

In Robert DeNiro's film *A Bronx Tale* and Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Pickup* the readers in the first case and the viewers in the second are immersed in a story of an individual's struggle to find himself in a world that, in the case of *A Bronx Tale*, pulls the main character (Calogero) in multiple, often conflicting directions and, in the case of *The Pickup*, refuses to recognize the central character's (Abdu's) existence even while human and societal practices serve to embed him and even invite him into the practices of the culture.

*A Bronx Tale* is a film set in the 1950's and, in addition to exposing the race and class tensions of that time, also tells a story of a young person's, Calogero's, process of establishing a coherent identity and coming to be a self. Throughout the film, Calogero, affectionately referred to as "C," struggles and eventually succeeds in finding himself in and through the conflicting dynamics, pressures, and influences (parents, peers, gangster culture, Italian culture, African American culture, etc.) of his environment. C's challenge is to find himself even while being pulled in often conflicting directions by these divergent "worlds." All groups vying for C's allegiance welcome him into their web of existence but none are exactly right for him and none easily permit a

blending of the various influences. He manages to find himself, doing so by reconciling the conflicting worlds in a process that, despite its struggles, ends with C establishing a strong sense of self and unity in and through the membership in "worlds" that would otherwise collide. We see this with C's statement at the end of the film, the content of which is replicated below.

Sonny and my father always said that when I get older I will understand. Well, I finally did. I learned something from these two men. I learned to get and to give love unconditionally. You just have to accept people for what they are. And I learned the greatest gift of all. The saddest thing in life is wasted talent. (A Bronx Tale 1993)

When, at the end of this film, Calogero shares the reflection above, we know that he is now on solid ground, ground that has been enriched by the conflicts and clashes of his dynamic young life. This ground serves as the soil for the self that C has become and that he will become in the future. In George Herbert Mead's terms, we see that C has progressed from the state of being a disunified self to a unified self whose "I," "me" and the generalized other have harmonized (at least for the time being) and, as a result, this self is free to emerge and, eventually, flourish, even as it continues the ongoing process of growth and change. According to Mead, the self is

... not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it is, so to speak, an *eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current*. It is a process in which the individual is continually adjusting himself in advance to the situation to which he belongs, and reacting back on it. So that the "I" and the "me," this thinking, this conscious adjustment, becomes then a *part of the whole social process and makes a much more highly organized society possible* (Mead 1972: 182, my emphasis).

In contrast, Ibrahim ibn Musa (Abdu), an undocumented immigrant living in South Africa and one of two central characters in Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Pickup*, offers an example of a self that has not yet realized harmony of the "I," the "me" and the generalized other. While on the surface, a much different work than *A Bronx Tale*, the novel *The Pickup* also offers a transcendental story of an individual's search for himself. However, the story of this novel is different than that of *A Bronx Tale* not only because of the medium through which it is told (literature instead of film), but also

### **Lowe: Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place**

because it explores this theme as it is experienced by an undocumented worker in a foreign land who is searching for himself and doing so, importantly, without the benefit of having any “home,” place, or group that unconditionally embraces him in the process. More broadly, this is a story about the struggle of undocumented immigrant workers, highlighting the tragic human story of existing in a world where the idea of having a place to call one’s home and to grow and to thrive in that home is assumed by many but not granted to all.

In the case of Abdu, in contrast with Calogero, the communication requisite for the emergence of the self is not only discouraged but is also risky for Abdu, threatening to endanger the meager sense of place or “home” that Abdu has achieved, and any hopes for doing so more fully in the future. As a result, the self that Abdu becomes, is not a true self as defined by Mead. We see this captured in the novel when Abdu makes statements such as the following:

Even this I’m wearing, this dirt....even whatyoucallit, a shed, a corner in the street to sleep in, that’s his, not mine... whatever I have is his. That’s how it is. Whatever I have is his.... (Gordimer 2001:54).

Here Abdu explains, albeit not exactly in these words, how he cannot exist in relationship to the generalized other as a self who’s “me” has fully absorbed aspects of the generalized other, nor can he exist in open dialogue with the generalized other. He is not, in terms Mead also uses, allowed to know even the rules of the game, even though he is expected to play the game without being seen.

As we learn Abdu’s story and reflect on statements like the one above, we see that both Abdu’s and Calogero’s lives are characterized by attempts to resolve conflicts between competing conceptions of how life should be framed and lived. However, their lives are also significantly different. Abdu does not and cannot exist as an “eddy in the social current,” whereas Calogero can and does. Further, Calogero’s position as this “eddy within the social current” offers him a kind of privilege or power that Abdu is not afforded. Unlike Calogero, who has a place where he belongs, Abdu’s status as an undocumented immigrant leaves him unwelcomed, without a home to call his own and, worse, in a position that, in order to exist at all, he must exist in hiding, incognito, or

better yet, invisible to others, as “not-seen.” To make waves – to be an *eddy in a current* – would be, and eventually is, the end of any kind of place, though not exactly a home, that Abdu is able to achieve.

This essay, using both C and Abdu as contrasting examples, explores how Mead’s notion of the social self can help to explain the process of self formation and will also explore how, despite similarities, the implications are different for each individual primarily because of different positions of power and privilege had by each in society. In the case of Calogero, the analysis exemplifies a complicated yet eventually successful formation of a self as Mead intends it. In contrast, in the case of Abdu, dynamics outside the control of Abdu thwart his self formation.

While I apply the analysis in this essay primarily to characters in one particular film and one particular novel and therefore limit the audience to those who have viewed *A Bronx Tale* and who have read *The Pickup*, the actual appeal is broader, drawing also on those individuals who are interested in the normative implications of what might be called a right to self. This “right to self” has particular import for those not readily welcomed into the social structure and, importantly, not permitted to engage in dialogue with the community. This has significance in our contemporary society when we consider the lived situation of individuals, like Abdu, who can only exist if they do so quietly, without making waves, and, ideally unseen and unheard by most others. In this way, the analysis of Abdu lends insight to the life of contemporary individuals who live with the status of being an undocumented immigrant and to any others who, like Abdu, exist necessarily only in the shadows of society. More specifically, this analysis suggests that, if we all have a fundamental right to a self, we should revisit how we respond in policy and in practice to the issue of immigration, documented or otherwise. Further, in terms of what we can learn from the analysis of Calogero, we learn the import of a sense of place and acceptance, even if conflict ridden, and how Mead’s theory of self may offer some insights as we try to understand conflicts and struggles across boundaries of race and class, looking for possible avenues for resolution and ameliorative growth for all individuals and for society as a whole.

I will begin by offering a brief explication of Mead's notion of the social self as developed in *Mind, Self and Society*. I will follow this with further application and critical analysis of the formation of the self that is Calogero in *A Bronx Tale* and Abdu in *The Pickup*. This will serve to support my central argument, namely, that Mead's theory of the self is insightful and, importantly, has normative implications for how we think about situations such as that of undocumented immigrants and our response to this in terms of basic human rights for these individuals, as well as others in similar situations.

### **GEORGE H. MEAD'S ACCOUNT OF THE SELF**

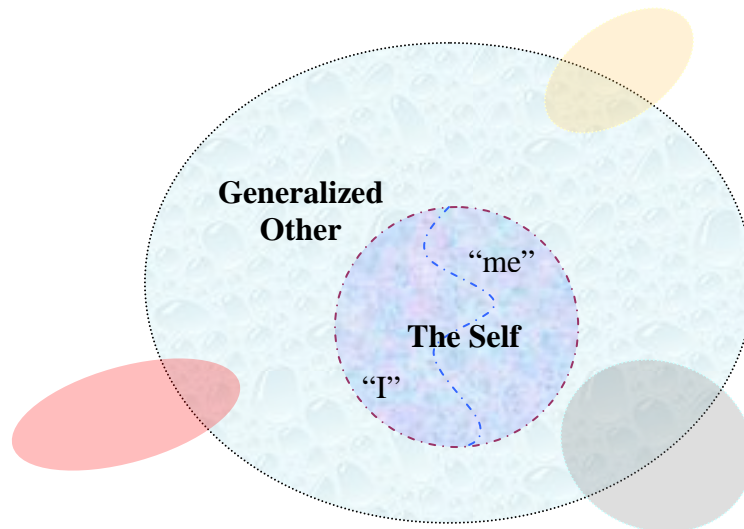
With his assertion that the self is necessarily a social self, George Herbert Mead rejects an atomistic conception of the self and offers instead an understanding of the self as a social entity that comes to and continues to exist in on-going transactional relationships that occur between the self and the environment, the self and other individuals and groups of individuals, and the self and various types of institutions. Mead's social self is composed of an "I" and a "me" and these transact, resulting in the particularly unique nature of every individual. The "I" and the "me" make up the self as a whole, but only conceptually in that Mead does not intend to suggest that the "I" and the "me" are physically distinct. Instead, they are conceptual distinctions, helpful in understanding the "coming to be" and "continuing to be" of the self.

More specifically, the "me" represents the conventional or habitual aspect of the individual and, as such, is socially constructed, mediated into existence via transactions between the currently existing self and the generalized other (Mead 1972:175, 198). Distinct from the "me," the "I" is the aspect of the self that responds to the conventional, both in terms of responding to the "me" and the "generalized other." This response is done through the "I" and it is therefore the "I" that offers novelty to our existence and our transactions in that existence that is also the source of our sense of possibility, individuality, and freedom (Mead 1972:177).

The generalized other is the "organized community or social group which gives to the individual his [or her] unity" (Mead 1972:154). For Mead, the generalized other is "[a]ny thing – any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or

animal, or merely physical – toward which he [the self] acts, or to which he responds” (Mead 1972:154, n. 7). The “I” responds to the generalized other in that the “I” is the “answer the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him [or her] when he [or she] assumes an attitude toward them” (Mead 1972:177). In this way, we can say that the generalized other is a construct that we, as selves transacting in the world, create as we engage in and with the world and in response to how we perceive the world sees us. We do not necessarily embrace all aspects of the generalized other or all values we take the generalized other to represent, but we exist and develop as selves in communication and in transaction with it.

One way to represent the relationship among the “I,” the “me,” and the “generalized other” is pictorially, as I have done below.



Here we see that, as described above, the self is made up of the “I” and the “me” and these exist within and in relationship to the generalized other. All aspects are always “in-process” in that they are always changing (as represented by the dotted lines and fuzzy boundaries) in and through transactions with each other and with other selves. Boundaries between the elements described certainly exist, but are permeable and changing. Further, the self and the generalized other are always in the process of integrating new experiences and new transactions with other selves and other entities that are more or less integrated into the generalized other as a whole. This integration

of new experiences within the self's conception of the generalized other is represented in the diagram by the "bubble-like" entities shown to be at various levels of integration.

**MEAD'S THEORY OF THE SOCIAL SELF APPLIED TO CALOGERO AND ABDU  
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

We can see that, when applied to Calogero in *A Bronx Tale*, Mead's notion of the social self is helpful in explaining and accurately representing the process that C goes through as he struggles to create a sense of a unified self in and through the conflicts he experiences and as he attempts to reconcile different aspects of his lived-experience into a unified whole. We see that, for C, it *is* the case that he must bring together what seem to be conflicting communities in order to achieve this sense of unity of the self. In fact, in many ways, C creates one generalized other out of many in order to achieve the unity of self he requires.

The Calogero self that we know early in the film and into the mid-to-late aspect of the film is a unified self whose worlds collide, making what are appropriate reactions and interactions in one world in conflict with what would be appropriate in others. This is in contrast with the Calogero we are briefly introduced to at the end of the film, where C has responded to these various and often conflicting cultures and, in the process, has created a unified generalized other that is entirely new, yet also informed by the three conflicting others (his family, his friends, and the gangster world lead by Sonny) in connection to which he originally lived. The film is about the struggles C has had to endure and to resolve in the process of giving his lived experience and his own being some form of unity. This is, of course, an absolute necessity if C is to eventually succeed in finding and creating himself. It is also characteristic, albeit with typically much less trials and strife, of many individuals as they transition from teen to adulthood, a process that requires taking one's various experiences and life lessons and finding a way to reconcile conflicts among them into a unified whole so that the individual can emerge as a unified self and, as such, as his or her own person. The life and the path of self realization C follows is perhaps quite illustrative of the struggles

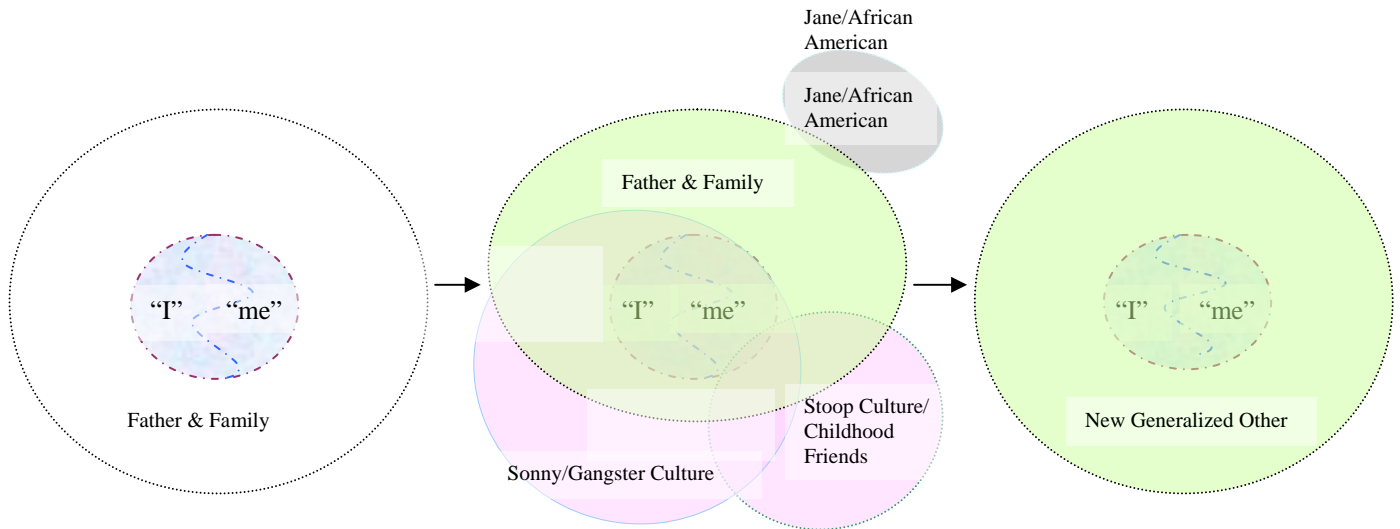
young people in many areas of our society go through as they deal with the culture of peer groups (sometimes gangs), family, and larger society. These all pull the individual in different directions – directions that are not always compatible with each other, and that bring with them life and death decisions. The relationships involved and the level of place the young person feels in each are central to the individual feeling or not feeling a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is a fundamental need of all individuals and is, as Mead's theory illustrates, tied intimately with self formation.

This is consistent with Mead's conception of the social self in that Mead's theory of the self is contingent on the existence of that self within and in communication with the generalized other. In C's case, he succeeds at this self creation, though certainly not without obstacles and conflicts a long the way. He ends up with a generalized other that recognizes the conflicts among the component parts, while also managing to find a way to exist as a unified self within and even through the existing conflicts. His self has absorbed into his "me" those aspects of each world (his family's, his friend's, and those of Sonny's world) that give him uniqueness by pulling together parts (principles and values) of these worlds that were seemingly conflicting, but have commonalities when removed from context. As shared in the opening of this essay, C creates his own guiding principle of his newly formed generalized other when he states, "I have learned something....I have learned to get and to give love unconditionally. And I have learned the greatest gift of all. The saddest thing in life is wasted talent." With this, C has created a guiding principle that pulls together otherwise conflicting worldviews, represented here by Sonny's gangster world and his father's working class world. With this principle, C creates a new worldview that unites what is the most salient aspect of each, allowing him to reconcile what might otherwise seem to be irreconcilable differences.

We can represent how C comes to develop as this particular self with this particular guiding principle with the diagram below. As we examine this diagram, we should note that many individuals, unlike C, stagnate, continuing to struggle at the equivalent of the middle diagram, unable to find a way to resolve the conflicts between the various aspects of the generalized other.



## Low: Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place



With this we see that, as C's life becomes more complicated, with increasing influence from the outside, his unity of self is threatened. However, he, unlike those stagnated at the equivalent of the middle diagram, is able, eventually, to create a new generalized other, one that his "I," in conversation with the "me" and the various groups that contributed to his generalized other, gives meaning and definition to his world, creating a new generalized other in the process. This new generalized other, though not the same as any of the separate entities, manages to unify them into a whole. Here we see how Mead's notion of the social self can be helpful in explaining the process by which C became a self as well as how others might fail to do so. C, like all selves, will continue to organize his world and define his world in an on-going way.

We could similarly apply this analysis to many accounts of young people coming to "find themselves" (or not) in and through conflicts among competing forces in their lives (peers, parents, various interests, passions, and group affiliations). The formation of the self in these types of situations is often bumpy yet the struggle is primarily an internal one and it is a matter of the individual coming to terms with these conflicts and choosing how he or she will or will not give them meaning and will or will not integrate them into his or her self concept. In these cases, the power to define the self and the meaning and values of the generalized other is, at least mostly, in the individual, even if not without complication, conflict, and a certain amount of luck of good fortune, which

C certainly had in his favor. This does not mean it is easy or that it will go smoothly or even that all will successfully achieve this, but it does mean that the individual makes choices (good and bad) and, for the most part, communication is open between the individuals and those that make up the generalized other.

As the film unfolds, we travel with C from one incongruous aspect of the generalized other to the next, sharing the angst and pain with C as he tries, as a young boy and then as a teenager, to understand what is required of him to fulfill the conflicting morals of the various worlds in which he must operate. We follow him too as he begins to engage critically different aspects of these groups, creating his own unified reference point and community mores out of various principles he experiences within each. It is with this creation of a new generalized other, a more broadly inclusive generalized other, that Calogero's "I" gains full expression, but not by rejecting or eliminating the "me" or the various worlds in which he functions, but instead by finding a way to express his interpretation and meaning of his world as a whole in a new way. We see this exemplified in various scenes in the film. For example, when young C converses with his father on street after his father confronted Sonny (the gangster boss). Here C is trying to make sense of the conflicting emphasis in life that he sees in his father (respect gained through hard work and honesty) and in Sonny (respect demanded through fear, loyalty, and tradition). We also see this when teen C confronts Sonny after a date with Jane, asking him if he trusts anyone unconditionally, including C himself and thereby challenging Sonny's assertion made earlier in the film that it is better to be feared than loved and, in the process, carving out his own "me" more definitively than before. In both cases, C sees the gray in what is presented to him by his father versus what is represented by Sonny and, over time, finds a way to negotiate between the two worlds. This is possible in part because those who care about him make an effort to understand him and, though they often disagree with him, they also respect and love him enough to hear him fully and find compassion for him in his struggle.

The end result is a meeting of the minds, even if not yet with full understanding or agreement. The conflict comes out of a desire to connect with, to find common

### **Lowie: Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place**

ground, and to reconcile differences in order to bring each party closer to the other. In Mead's terms, drawing from a later part of *Mind, Self and Society*, Calogero is met with and meets others primarily with an attitude of neighborliness and this allows, even though conflict persists, the unified self to emerge. With the attitude of neighborliness (also referred to by Mead as the "attitudes of kindness," "tenderness," and "helpfulness"), "one calls out in the other and in himself the same attitude...[with this attitude] everyone is at one with each other in so far as all belong to the same community....One's interest is the interest of all....Within the individual there is a fusion of the me with the I" (Mead 1972:274). This attitude is present when, as Mead describes, we are all "working toward a common end and everyone has a sense of the common end interpreting the particular functions which he is carrying on" (Mead 1972:276).

The common end, in this case, is the full actualization and growth of Calogero. Key individuals involved (Calogero's father, Sonny, and Calogero himself) are invested in this end. They do not always agree about how to get there, but they do agree about the goal and this allows Calogero the space to bring the various aspects together into a whole. It is this, that marks C's maturation as a self.

Here it is perhaps important to note that this kind of common goal of competing groups is not always present for all individuals. Many individuals find themselves with such divergent and competing groups that the resolution of the incongruencies is seemingly impossible. While a less happy ending than offered by the analysis of C, such a dynamic still shows the value of Mead's work in helping us understand dynamics that often occur as the self emerges (or attempts to) in and through transactions, and perhaps helps to answer questions one might have about why the strategies one attempts and efforts one makes toward resolution are not always realized.

In the case of C, this analysis and account of his coming to be is consistent with Mead's notion of the social self. Mead's theory can explain how C exists in and through conflicting aspects of his generalized other and how growth is marked by C's ability to reconcile these conflicts. This work is the work of what Mead would call Calogero's "I." The "I," in this case, travels along the current within the generalized other and, because

of the already existing incongruencies within the current, it exists as an eddy within but also as part of the current. Thus, we can see how Mead's notion of the social self is helpful in explaining the process that C and others like C, must go through in order to thrive as a unified self and, further, when this process is unsuccessful, what and how it may have occurred.

In contrast, the problematic implications inherent in this conception of the social self come out more fully when applied to a situation flavored by different kinds of power dynamics and, importantly, different kinds of attitudes - attitudes that are not the attitude of neighborliness or the like. More specifically, Mead's conception of the social self – the idea that there is no self without being situated within and in relationship to a generalized other – may point to some deeper normative issues for society. This is the case especially when one reflects on the situation (ubiquitous in contemporary society) where individuals are displaced or otherwise shunned, rejected, or, at the very least, received as second class beings and always with the unspoken threat of possible deportation if they fail to play by the rules of the game. As mentioned above, we see this with the immigrant population in contemporary society, especially in the case of undocumented immigrant workers, workers like the character Abdu in the novel *The Pickup*. This group of individuals necessarily exists in hiding and, as much as possible, invisible to the generalized other. Yes, it is true that these individuals (like C) exist necessarily in relationship to the generalized other and are therefore "social" selves in this sense. However, this relationship is not of the quality necessary to achieve a harmonious relationship between the individual and the generalized other, which is also necessary for the formation of the self. Mead indicates that the attitude of neighborliness is necessary if the self is to form as a unified whole. We see this to be the case for Mead when he discusses how the self must behave in connection to the social in order to be ethical. He argues:

But if the social relation can be carried on further and further then you can conceivably be a neighbor to everybody in your block, in your community, in the world, since you are brought much closer to the attitude of the other when this attitude is also called out in yourself. What is essential is the development of the whole mechanism of social

### **Lowe: Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place**

relationship which brings us together, so that we can take the attitude of the other in our various life-processes (Mead 1972:272).

With his discussion of the attitudes and their effects on self formation and his related discussion of the attitudes and their effects on the communities in which these selves form, we see Mead beginning to touch on, though not in great depth, how a self comes to be not only through harmoniously existing relationships but also in an environment that is antagonistic to the individual rather than welcoming or otherwise embracing. In contrast to being received with the attitude of neighborliness, these individuals are received with the attitude of exchange. With this attitude, "one passes over, so to speak, that which he does not need for something which he does need" (Mead 1972:290).

Mead speaks of the attitude of exchange primarily in terms of economics and in terms of the exchange of products within business. As such, he does not develop it in relation to the emergence of the self. However, the germ of this connection is present in his work and we can draw upon the work of María Lugones, a contemporary critical race theorist and philosopher, to tease this concept out a bit further. Lugones calls this antagonistic perception or attitude "arrogant perception." With arrogant perception, one is "alone in the presence of the other" and it involves denying the other independence, robbing the other of his or her own identity a part from the identity imposed by others (Lugones 156-157). This is the situation Abdu finds himself in and it is the attitude with which dominant and powerful nations (such as the United States) receive undocumented workers.

Like undocumented workers in general, Abdu is an individual whose "social self" never forms because he is never able to find unity in his response to the generalized other and, importantly, in the response of the generalized other toward him. Further, he is unable to find this unity in the terms that Mead requires because he is never adequately received by the dominant other, never allowed to enter into, in a full way, the social process. In other words, even though Abdu wishes to and succeeds at taking on the attitude of the dominant other (doing this as an essential part of his survival as

well as his efforts to assimilate into the dominant culture), this can go only so far because the other is not willing to meet Abdu in this process. Unlike C, there is no effort by either party to find a resolution to conflicts that exist; rather, conflict with the generalized other for Abdu is likely, even surely to lead to his erasure. Abdu has no set place nor can he be at "home" in the generalized other in which he lives. He is simply not welcomed there. Because of this, Abdu's existence is always a reactionary one - one in which he is not afforded the opportunity or power to engage and respond to the generalized other.

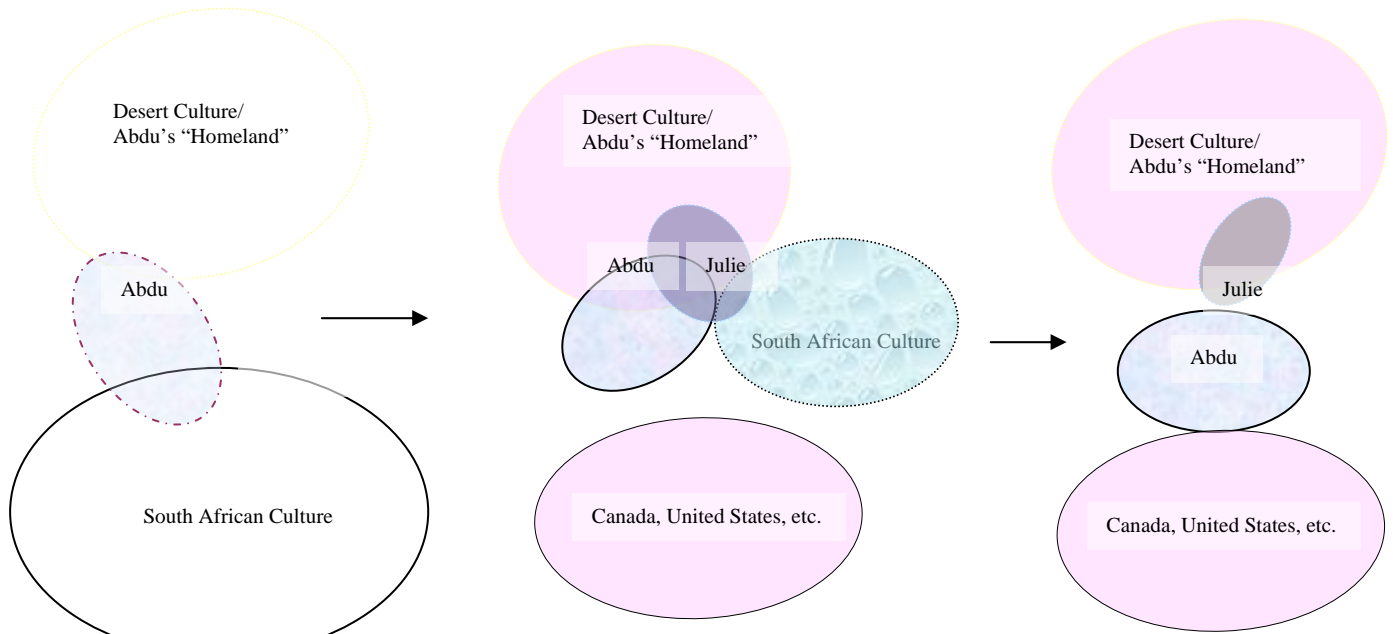
Thus, with Abdu we see that, while the self sometimes finds himself thrown into the "social current," it is not necessarily received within this current or even seen as part of the current and cannot exist with the kind of harmony implied and seemingly required by Mead. Instead, due to power dynamics beyond his control, Abdu exists not through the achievement of a harmonious relationship with the generalized other but instead by carrying out an existence, albeit a precarious one, in the wake that the waves of the current leave behind. Nevertheless, Mead's theory implicitly charges Abdu with the responsibility of integrating himself within "the pattern of organized social behavior," yet this "pattern" is such that it does not welcome his integration or contributions. This puts Abdu in the odd position, if we embrace Mead's notion of self, of having to "not be" in order to be and of being responsible for his failure in having a place and a fully formed self with which to occupy that space.

In contrast, Calogero's conflicts eventually serve him well, giving him power and gaining him the respect of family and friends. Calogero is able to become "a part of the whole social powers and [as such] make a much more highly organized society possible" (Mead 1972:182). From conflict, C gains power and insight, allowing his full unified self to emerge. C is both drawn to and resists various elements of each group and his successful achievements of a unified self results from this push and pull within himself as well as without, creating, in the end, a new generalized other in which he can exist as a richer self with wisdom and freedom of movement.

Conversely, while Abdu is drawn to certain aspects of the dominant culture (the individualism, the entrepreneur mentality, the intellectualism, etc.), he is not permitted

### **Lowe: Implications for a Right to Self and a Right to Place**

entry into these realms of the culture, at least not on his own terms, and further, he cannot afford to resist or push away other aspects of the culture he does not admire but in which he is expected to participate (the classism, the racism, the social rules of engaging with others from different classes, etc.) without risking the removal of any tacit granting of place for his existence that he is temporarily granted. The "place" he is temporarily granted comes without rights, not even the right to be recognized as an existing realm of being within the culture as it currently functions. In other words, Abdu is not welcomed into the dominant generalized other in connection to which he must exist. He is not, nor can he be an "eddy within the social current and so still part of the current"; rather, he must assume a sense of identity that is not his own and that allows him to move on the perimeter of the "current" and certainly not within that current. It is true that, to exist, Abdu must become a master of the larger culture, taking this culture into his own and into his way of understanding, seeing, and being with the world, but this is not reciprocal and it is necessary in order, primarily, to know how to negotiate his existence in it without being seen. Abdu's mastery of the culture is a matter of survival and it is in response to a perception that receives him only to deny him his existence. Even in the one case where Abdu seems to enter into the "current" (this being when he enters into a relationship with Julie – his white, privileged, South African girlfriend – and joins her social circle), he is viewed and views himself as peripheral to this group and seeks to remain, as much as possible, incognito in personality and history when in their presence. Even then, his entering into this social group is a dangerous adventure, as it would be for him with any group. Yet, it is also not something he can choose not to do because, as Mead acknowledges, our existence as a self requires social relations and transactions for its fulfillment. In the end, any sense of self that Abdu manages to create is created in negation and it is easily lost as soon as he dares enter into the current of the stream of the larger social structure. The unsuccessful progression of Abdu's struggle for self fulfillment is directly connected to his inability, despite his efforts, to enter into the dominant culture as a fully recognized member of society. I attempt to represent this in the diagram below.



With this series of diagrams we see that, in Mead's terms, Abdu never successfully creates a unified self and the hope for him doing so is not on the immediate horizon. In fact, the novel ends with Abdu once again severing ties with his homeland (where he never feels quite at home) and with Julie (now his wife, someone who is more "at home" in his home than him) in the hopes of finding a true home for himself in another culture (this time Canada). With this step, Abdu leaves behind the only place which welcomes him, though here too conditionally and therefore not sufficiently to fulfill his need for a sense of place in which to develop himself to his fullest. Abdu is without "self" and the pull to develop this is so strong that he is propelled, once again, to uproot himself in the hopes of finding a place in which he can be and become who he needs and wants to be. Unfortunately for Abdu, he is never fully in the midst of nor in open communication with any of the worlds in which he must, nonetheless, exist. He, like many immigrant and migrant workers in today's society, bounces from one "home" to the next without being able to call any place his own. As a result, Abdu is denied full realization of the social self as defined by Mead.



**CONCLUSION: DRAWING IMPLICATIONS BEYOND CALOGERO AND ABDU**

As I have suggested above, applications of these concepts are possible beyond this analysis of Calogero and Abdu. For example, we can speak of this in terms of the experience of undocumented immigrants and in terms of human rights for these individuals and others in similar situations. If we accept Mead's notion of the self as necessarily social, a self necessary growing and thriving only in relation to a generalized other, denying a relationship with the generalized other is to deny an individual his or her most basic right, i.e., the right to exist as a self, as defined by Mead, at all.

As it is with undocumented immigrants in general, Abdu does not have a "home" and, even if creating a sub-culture "home" would be possible in abstract terms (e.g. a community with other undocumented immigrant individuals), this is certainly more difficult than one might initially expect because of various dynamics, including the necessity of this self to exist in relationship to the oppressive culture yet also invisible to it, making forming a community of any number of such selves a risk. Thus, not only do undocumented immigrants exist only in a negative way (ideally as invisible), they must do so in isolation or only within a collective group that is careful also to be unseen, unheard, and unremarkable to the dominant whole.

The central question we must ask is, "What value does Mead's theory of the social self offer when describing the above problematic type of situation; namely, what help can Mead's work be to a self that can exist only by being invisible to the dominant generalized other even while necessarily existing and functioning within its confines?" The answer is that Mead's theory can be of significant assistance in our analyses of these situations and similar ones. However, we must be careful to recognize the implications of accepting Mead's theory of the self for human rights and we must highlight the connection between developing a social self and the need to have and to be received with the attitude of neighborliness rather than the attitude of exchange or, borrowing from Lugones, an attitude of arrogance. If it is the case that the self can only exist in connection to and in genuine communication with a community of others, then the failure to make a place for communication within and meaningful connections to a community is a human rights issue at the most basic level, the level of the right to

have and to be a self at all. As such, it calls not only for a right to basics such as food, water, and shelter, but also a right to be seen and heard within the larger whole. As already mentioned, this is not a guarantee a life without conflict, as illustrated by the analysis of the character C. In fact, the right to self implies a right to conflict, albeit in a context that receives all others with a willingness to dialogue and view the other with the worth and value that is implicit with the attitude of neighborliness.

Analysis of the characters Calogero and Abdu, with the help of Mead's conception of the social self, is fruitful as it provides an example of how Mead's theory of the self and its formation can help us understand ourselves and others better and can offer guidance as we seek out the normative implications of this understanding. In our society, as was the case during the 1960's (when *A Bronx Tale* was set), tensions between race, class, and nationality have heightened, even if with a different face. Understanding how these dynamics are constitutive of the self as well as of the generalized other suggests that there is both an opportunity and a need for attention to these transactions. The issue is not merely one of harmonious existence, but is also a human rights issue with implications for society as a whole.

## References

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1993/1998<br>A Bronx Tale. Dir. Robert De Niro. DVD. New York: HBO Home Video. | Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.   |
| Gordimer, Nadine.<br>2001 The Pickup. New York: Penquin.                       | Mead, George Herbert.<br>1934/1962/1972.<br>Mind Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Ed. Charles W. Morris. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. |
| Lugones, María.<br>2003 Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes:                              |  |