Conference Report on "Disrupted Identities in the Light of 'Post-Everything'"

Interdisciplinary Conference at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Giessen, May 14–16, 2024

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Conference Report on "Disrupted Identities in the Light of 'Post-Everything'"

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The question of what identities are, how we conceive of them, and how to use them analytically has long perplexed academic thought. In the quest to engage with identity studies, the Research Area 6: Cultural Identities of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) decided to examine not only shifting or changing identities – which may often presuppose some form of continuity – but also identities that are disrupted, severed, or newly (re)shaped. In this vein, the international conference "Disrupted Identities in the Light of 'Post-Everything'" took place in Giessen from May 14 to 16, 2024. It was organized by Morteza Azimi, Erzhena Dugarova, Farouk El Maarouf, Sandra Engels, and Anastasiia Marsheva. The conference aimed to create a platform for discussing the evolving landscape of identity studies with a particular focus on articulations of disrupted identities within the context of the increasing influence of post-concepts. It also aimed at addressing how drastic events such as wars, regime changes, and forced migration have a disruptive impact on identity constructions.

The conference began with a presentation by ANDREI BELIBOU (Freie Universität Berlin), who opened the first day by examining the construction of whiteness, whose centrality as a category of analysis can at times be overlooked in identity studies. He presented a compelling argument that the construction of whiteness in Romania has historically depended on the racialization of the Roma people and, more recently, on South Asian migrant workers following Romania's integration into the European Union and the subsequent substantial outmigration of Romanian workers. Belibou argued that despite Romania's membership in the European Union, it has yet to prove its 'civilized' European identity in either symbolic or factual terms. Andrei Belibou analyzed this state of affairs as an underlying issue of Romania's

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ascension to Europeanness and as an example of how local histories of racism are intertwined with the core of structural whiteness and racial capitalism. The presentation aimed at shifting the focus from peripheral situatedness of Eastern Europe in global structures of whiteness, and presenting the region as a site where the tuning and (re)configuration of whiteness is continually taking place.

Following Belibou's insightful analysis, GAYATRI BERRY (University of Delhi) continued the discussion of disrupted identities, focusing on Kumaoni people and their migrant experiences, their relation to surroundings, corporeality, and ecology. Analyzing short stories from Mahara's *Bhauji* (2006), Gayatri Berry showed how Kumaoni identity is situated in a liminal space between the hills of Kumaon and the regions people had migrated to, between the human and more than human, between traditional and modern. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Gayatri Berry exemplified how the corporeal rootedness of Kuamoni identity in their natural environment and land enables the extension of self-centered identification practices to encompass relationships with the community, thereby shaping the formation of collective identity. Additionally, through the analysis of one poem, she illustrated the concerns of the Kuamoni community regarding their deserted villages, brought about by a constellation of ecological factors and economic hardships. Gayatri Berry introduced the term "econo-logy" to explain the interplay of economic and ecological challenges, which simultaneously drive migration and reinforce the conditions that prevent individuals from returning. Thus, this presentation encouraged the audience to reflect on the intricate and complex experiences of the Kuamoni people and their identity practices in the face of forced migration and a fast-paced 'modernizing' world. She concluded that an analysis of Kumaoni identity must consider the perspectives of post-memory, post-migrant experiences, and the post-human relationship with the world.

FIONA AMPONG QUAST (Justus Liebig University Giessen) built upon these themes by examining the disrupted identities of Afro-diasporic people with a case study of the 2019's Ghanaian Year of Return, a tourism campaign and a commemoration of 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the state of Virginia. In this case study, Fiona Quast addressed the following questions: How do Afro-diasporic people engage with their disrupted

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identities? Which coping mechanisms does the state of Ghana propose for support? And what are the broader implications for the construction of Afro-diasporic identities? Underscoring varying diasporic constructions or imaginings of what Africa is, the presented analysis demonstrates how the campaign can be seen as a coping strategy for the Afro-diaspora through the offered return, becoming acquainted with Africa and its cultures, constructing a shared African identity, commemorating the past, and restoring knowledges. In her conclusion, she posited that the Year of Return should not be considered as a process of identity consolidation, it should be seen as a means of conferring greater discursive power upon participants, enabling them to construct new identification practices through healing and engaging with Ghana and the broader African continent.

The first day concluded with a keynote lecture by BÁYÒ AKÓMOLÁFÉ (Pacifica Graduate Institute). Akómoláfé's talk, entitled "Spirited Away: Identity, Loss, and \cracks\ in Posthumanist Times" questioned the current conditions under which identities have become possible. The keynote addressed several fundamental questions, such as the identity of AI based on an example of his conversation with an AI chatbot, or the difference between morality and ethics. Báyò Akómoláfé suggested that the conditions that make identity a moral tool for claiming territory are being overwhelmed by new deterritorializing forces at work. With his lecture, he encouraged the audience to critically assess these conditions and not to fear being lost in order to embrace current crises. In his opinion, unexpected solutions can be found if we do not follow the usual paths and get lost.

Starting the second day of the conference, REIQA SALEM QUBAILAT (Justus Liebig University Giessen) dived into the discourse on displacement to counter the common concern of refugee status determinations about 'who is a refugee' with the little considered question of 'who *identifies* as a refugee.' She focused on non-identifying refugees from previous host societies. Introducing the concept of 'displaced hosts,' she explored whether people's ability or willingness to embrace the refugee identity was influenced by their country's history of hosting foreign refugees as some form of embodied experience. Shedding light on the 'post-host effect' for (non-identifying) refugees, this highlighted not only the connections of self-

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identification or external perceptions of refugeehood, but particularly the importance of lived experiences and encounters for accepting or acclaiming identity shifts.

In her presentation "Contours of Identity in the Eastern Himalayas," RANU SHERPA (Indian Institute of Technology Mandi) discussed literary representation of linguistic dynamics among the Nepali-speaking Indian population. She explored how the linguistic and cultural choices made by Indian Nepalis are used by both the government and the broader community to either 'foreignize' or 'nationalize' the Nepali-speaking community. From a literary studies perspective, this expanded among other things upon the discourse of borderland communities, issues of language standardization, and questions of migration for self-identification. She also provided further insights into the way (linguistic) markers of identity reflect broader socio-political dynamics, exploring fluid and 'situational identities' not only as an expression of cultural diversity but as a resource to countering perceptions and labels of marginalized communities.

Concluding the first panel of the day, MORTADA HAIDAR (Justus Liebig University Giessen) discussed the idea of a "Changing Identity in a Changing World" through the work of Arab-American writer and artist Etel Adnan. Tracing Adnan's life across borders, language, and geographies, they illustrated how her identity never seemed fixed but was shifting in response to the changes in the world around her. This journey through her life exemplified vividly the tensions that arise within identity markers that are on the one hand ascribed by others, and on the other hand perceived by oneself. The way that Adnan, in her writing, has reflected upon her own disrupted identity highlights the many layers of identity – and the way identities on the move carry positive as well as negative baggage. This offered an alternative to the common understanding of Adnan's identity defined as a 'nomadic life' by emphasizing the entanglement between identity and its environment and the different ways they can both get out of sync with each other.

Continuing the exploration of identity, DANIELLE DROZDZEWSKI (University of Stockholm) highlighted the spatial nature of identity in her keynote lecture. She suggested that our sense of self is tied to physical spaces. She encouraged the audience to engage in thinking with the body across different spaces as a means to better understand and embrace their identities.

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Additionally, she recommended the use of multimodal research approaches to study identity and spaces effectively. She delved into the concept of hope, cautioning that it can sometimes lead to disappointment, referring to it as "cruel optimism" in the sense of Lauren Berlant. She argued that language is a potent tool for shaping identities, emphasizing the influence of words on our self-perception and our perception of others. Danielle Drozdzewski emphasized the significance of comprehending space, citing the example of "stumbling stones" in Berlin that are frequently overlooked by passersby. This example served to illustrate the necessity of paying attention to overlooked details of our surroundings, as they may contain valuable historical memories.

The discussion then moved with KATHARINA STURM (University of Bayreuth) to Catharine Malabou's ontology of the accident as an approach of coming to terms with identity. Sturm argued that identity is a product of accidental effect that bears itself; that is, the "human brain acts as a sculptor on itself." In this way, she connects trauma to identity formation, suggesting that trauma prompts a transformation into a new self that may not revert to its previous state. Similarly, she views plasticity in identity formation as both destructive and constructive as the brain is not flexible but plastic. Meaning, plasticity "is a lifelong metamorphosis that is an indispensable part of self-enactment. But it also highlights instability as bodily characteristic and every alteration affects the self to some degree."

Following this, IAN BOES (independent scholar) shifted focus to Namibia and the German colonial past in the country. They visited the remnants of old German colonial institutions, and the lack of awareness tourists often have when visiting those sites. As such, Boes regards identity as compostable, zooming in on the concept of compostable humanity. Boes argues that urbexphotography (urban exploration photography) has the potential to be a tool for decolonial and queer-feminist counter-remembrance and resistance, but it needs to be approached critically and ethically to avoid perpetuating colonial and exploitative practices.

Taking the audience from Namibia to Guinea, SAIKOU OUMAR SAGNANE (University of Bayreuth) shifted focus to the impact destructive events have on personal and national identities. Oumar looked at the destructive French colonial discourse in the nation's identity. In the wake of its independence, Guinea was confronted with a multiplicity of disparate tribal

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identities, which proved to be a significant challenge for the nation to navigate at the national level. In the light of these considerations, Oumar turned his attention to the question of identity among Guineans, examining the ways in which this abstract collective identity is often portrayed sarcastically.

The second day of the conference ended with the workshop "Weaving Belonging: Unpacking Notions, Practices and Power Dynamics" by GIOVANA DE SOUZA POSSIGNOLO (Justus Liebig University Giessen). After a theoretical introduction to the multifaceted concept of belonging, she presented the findings of her research project on the subject. She argued that belonging manifests itself on three levels: within a territory, through feelings, and through discourses. The second half of the workshop was enriched by a lively dialogue between Giovana Possignolo and two of her interlocutors who participated online. The participants then had the opportunity to ask questions.

The final day of the conference started with a presentation by ADARSH YADAV (University of Exeter), who examined how illness, identity, and belonging interact to reshape traditional kinship structures in post-colonial India, influenced by colonial legacies, caste, and class, as discussed by scholars in critical caste, feminist, and queer studies. She analyzed literary texts like Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden* (1993), Aman Sethi's *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* (2011), and Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2022) to explore the political identity of illness and the disruption of traditional kinship through concepts like contagion and border crossing. Her study integrated critical disability studies and Mad Studies to contribute to health humanities in India, grounded in health/medical humanities, migration studies, and critical caste studies.

NIHAL QUAZZANI CHAHDI (University of Bayreuth) presented her paper titled "The Strata of the Sufi Ḥaḍra: Gender, Authority, and Identity Formation," in which she delved into the intricate layers of the Sufi ritual *ḥaḍra*, a spiritual performance aimed at achieving an expanded consciousness and divine presence through collective meditative recitation. She noted that for the *Wazzānīyya* disciples in Morocco, the *ḥaḍra* serves as the aesthetic embodiment of their *ṭarīqa*, or Sufi path, in the absence of a detailed and generalized doctrine. In her opinion, the *ṭarīqa* embraces a postmodern approach to self-identification as

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it opposes the idea of a fixed identity and instead adopts fluidity and renewal as its core principles. Chahdi employed the metaphor of the palimpsest to explore the complex structures of power and authority within the *ḥaḍra*, highlighting the constant acts of re-inscription and erasure that characterize the Sufi practices of textual production, transmission, and performance. This process of meaning-making significantly contributes to the identity formation of the Wazzānīyya community. She argued that the palimpsest, a document written upon several times, often with remnants of erased writing still visible, symbolizes the layered and dynamic nature of the *ḥaḍra*. Furthermore, Chahdi problematized the roles of female scribes and performers, positioning them as the scriptio inferior (the 'underwriting' of the palimpsest), and examined how they destabilized authority through their acts of epistemic production and preservation. These acts continually reshape the identity of the *ṭarīqa*, challenging traditional power dynamics. Chahdi concluded by establishing the act of translation as a disruptive superstratum, necessitating an awareness of the palimpsestuous nature of the text and entailing inevitable acts of inscription and erasure.

In her presentation "Incoherence in a Late Transition: Workers of a Post-Soviet Orphanage in Pro-Family Russia," ANNA ALTUKHOVA (Humboldt University Berlin) drew on her fieldwork in a peripheral Russian orphanage to illustrate how reforms and institutional change have affected the working conditions of the workers and the impact of these changes on the children. Her interlocutors experienced a loss of collectivity as a result of the reform of the orphanage, which remained an island of socialism until the reform in 2015. To describe this, Anna Altukhova suggested the term post-coherence. As a result of the reforms, her interlocutors could no longer understand their role and place in the present and feared that they were even contributing to a more negative future.

Final speaker SANDRA ENGELS (Justus Liebig University Giessen) gave a presentation on "Beyond the Master Narrative: Shifting Identities and a Post-Heritage Framework in Spaces of Memory." She argued that heritage, like identities, is shifting. It is contingent on the context and the gaze. Using the example of St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt and a postcolonial critique voiced by the Decolonize Alliance in Germany on its portrayal as a seemingly uncontested site of democracy, she showed how the master narrative of a heritage site can be challenged by

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more inclusive and multidirectional narratives. Using a post-heritage framework, she suggests that reimagining heritage beyond the master narrative may turn heritage spaces into arenas where diverse and constantly transforming (hi)stories and identity constructs can be navigated and embraced.

In conclusion, the conference provided a rich and multifaceted exploration of identity in various contexts, ranging from the construction of whiteness in Romania to the disrupted identities of Afro-diasporic people. The presentations and discussions underscored the complexity and fluidity of identity, highlighting how it is shaped by historical, social, and cultural forces. The diverse perspectives and case studies presented offered valuable insights into the processes of identity articulation.

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KEYNOTES
„Spirited Away: Identity, Loss, and \cracks\ in Posthumanist Times"
by Báyò Akómoláfé (Pacifica Graduate Institute) | **Tuesday May 14, as part of the
GCSC Keynote Lecture Series**

"What can 'post' do? Thinking-with the post through memory, place and identity"
by Danielle Drozdzewski (Stockholm University) | **Wednesday, May 15**

WORKSHOP
„Weaving Belonging: Unpacking Notion, Practices, and Power Dynamics"
by Giovana De Souza Possignolo (GCSC) | **Wednesday, May 15**

May 14 - 16

Disrupted Identities in the light of 'Post-Everything'

organized by Research Area 6: Cultural Identities

GCSC
International Graduate Centre
for the Study of Culture

GGK/GCSC | Conference Room
Ground Floor
Otto-Behaghel-Straße 12
35394 Gießen

Full programme:

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Program

Tuesday, May 14

Individual Presentations I

Andrei Belibou (Berlin): "White Anxieties of Labor and Migration" (online)

Gayatri Berry (Delhi): "Cultural Effects of Migration on Kumaoni Identity" (online)

Fiona Ampong Quast (Giessen): "Between Roots Tourism and Homegoing: Ghana's Year of Return and Its Implications for Afro-diasporic Identities"

Keynote Lecture I

Dr. Báyò Akómoláfé (Santa Barbara): "Spirited Away: Identity, Loss, and \cracks\ in Posthumanist Times"

Wednesday, May 15

Individual Presentations II

Reiqa Salem Qubailat (Giessen): "Displaced Hosts: Embracing Refugee Identity among Displaced Persons from Post-Host Societies" (online)

Ranu Sherpa (Mandi): "Contours of Identity in the Eastern Himalayas: Literary Representations of Linguistic Dynamics and Cultural Choices among Indian Nepalis"

Mortada Haidar (Giessen): "Changing Identity in a Changing World: Etel Adnan's Nomadic Life"

Keynote Lecture II

Dr. Danielle Drozdzewski (Stockholm): "What Can 'Post' Do? Thinking-with the Post Through Memory, Place and Identity"

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Individual Presentations III

Katharina Sturm (Bayreuth): "Identities of Destruction: Catharine Malabou's Ontology of the Accident"

Ian Boes (independent scholar): "Composting Ruins and Ruinous Spacetimes: Decolonial and Queerfeminist Counterremembrance through Urbexphotography"

Saikou Oumar Sagnane (Bayreuth): "How Do Disruptive Events Transform Identities"

Workshop

Giovana De Souza Possignolo (Giessen): "Weaving Belonging: Unpacking Notions, Practices, and Power Dynamics"

Thursday, May 16

Individual Presentations IV

Adarsh Yadav (Exeter): "Rethinking Identity through Illness: Fiction in Post-Colonial India"

Nihal Ouazzani Chahid (Bayreuth): "The Strata of the Soufi Ḥaḍra: Gender, Authority and Identity Formation"

Individual Presentations V

Anna Altukhova (Berlin): "Incoherency in a Late Transition: Workers of a Post-Soviet Orphanage in Pro-Family Russia"

Sandra Engels (Giessen): "Beyond the Master-Narrative: Shifting Identities and a Post-Heritage Framework in Spaces of Memory"