

**Conference report on "W(h)ither Identity – Positioning the Self and Transforming the Social". International Conference organized by the Research Area 6 'Cultural Identities' and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Giessen**

Justus-Liebig-University Giessen, 23- 24 January 2014

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## Conference report on "W(h)ither Identity – Positioning the Self and Transforming the Social". International Conference organized by the Research Area 6 'Cultural Identities' and the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Giessen

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Identity as a whole and in relation to categories of social difference has been an increasingly contested concept in academic criticism, aesthetic practice, and political activism over the past quarter century or even longer. In the international conference "W(h)ither Identity – Positioning the Self and Transforming the Social" participants discussed how identity is framed as potentially reductionist and as necessary for self-positioning within networks of oppressive power and privilege in political context. Contributors questioned how identity is divergently approached as crucial for interpellation of potentially marginalized subjects; even more so since the concept configures a sense of community/recognition in aesthetic and performative practice. Identity, often criticized as reductive, insular, and/or tied to a dated notion of subjective coherence, is either variously dismissed within the academy as critically

and/or politically unproductive, or defended as at least prospectively necessary or useful as an always partial locus.

The conference gathered researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds. The two days of conference addressed whether the phenomenon of 'identity' has already passed, or is still a critically, personally, aesthetically, socially, and/or politically useful concept. Is identity

necessary for the community, the social life or the transformative cultural practices? Or can these functions be accomplished without such a concept?

In the following report we only give an overview of some key topics discussed at the conference; for the variety of issues addressed, please have a look at the conference outline.

## 1. Post-/Migration, Globalization and a Theory of Racism

The introductory keynote lecture "Identity: Fortress or Paradoxical Space?" was held by MANUELA BOJADŽIJEV, assistant professor at the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt University Berlin. In her lecture she pointed out that different categories of identity could be found at the nexus of debates about a theory of racism, and thus argumentation in the analysis of identity is always political. Therefore, the definition of politics becomes crucial in the debate about categories of identity.

But within conceptualizations of identity, forms of racism are relational; they manifest and control power relations, she stated. In her introductory talk, Manuela Bojadžijev hinted at the 'paradoxical space' as the space between the transformation of the subject form through political practice and the process of disidentification. She highlighted that research should – instead of focusing on modes of exclusion, where racism often turns into an economic issue – analyze modes of inclusion, which would allow us to think about the concept of identity in a different way: "We can't analyze racism through persons or subjects, but we have to look behind pre-constructed categories of identity."

During the conference, concepts and experiences of racism, belonging, and identity were discussed along specific case studies. JOY OWEN (Grahamstown) showed for example how the study of personal stories of migration challenge narrower definitions of identity. In her opinion, the transcendence of a particular national collective presentation of Congolese generates cosmopolitans married to European women and traversing the world, and therefore challenging presentations of Congolese in local media and within the discipline. NOUZHA BABA (Leiden) presented a post-colonial experience of migration, cultural hybridity, and dislocation in Tahar Ben Jelloun's narrative. Referring to Homi Bhabha's concept of a 'third space', she discussed how the failure to locate the Self in a particular cultural and national space illustrates the transformation of post-colonial migrant identity. Nouzha Baba suggested that a post-colonial migrant's self-positioning between two different cultural worlds demonstrates the transformation of social formations in times of globalization and (post-)migration.

## 2. Political and Economical Aspects of Identification and Self-Alienation

There were also presentations that shared a focus on the interconnectedness of economic and political strategies employed in identity constructions and narratives within popular discourses. DAVID SCHELLER (Giessen) presented for example how the 'hipster' became one

of the most famous constructions or rather the driving force of valuation and displacement in cities such as New York, Berlin or Hamburg. He took a closer look at the political impacts of its construction as a political subjectivity within anti-gentrification struggles. ROSEMARIE BRUCHER (Graz) examined the relation of dissociative identity disorder to a late-capitalist, neoliberal society. She showed that economic practices, imperatives, and technologies are enrolled in this psychiatric narrative. Referring to Richard Sennett, she argued that the narrative is so popular because the dissociated subject can be regarded as a specific form of the "homo economicus". Whereas Rosemarie Brucher stated that dissociation is not only part of neoliberal logic, but also brings the subjective and social transformations, CORA ROK (Bonn) claimed that self-alienation could be examined both as a condition and an impediment for a successful identity construction; especially of late, since the appropriation of identity is becoming more difficult in the postmodern era.

## 2. Dis-/Identification and Dis-/Embodiment

JOSÈ E. MUÑOZ'S strategy of disidentification is built upon a performance of dis-/embodiment that is reinserting the active and critical capacity of the everyday agent. This strategy is understood as destabilizing ethical catalysts for the challenging of the normative moral order, having nothing to do with revolutionary counter-fights against the system, but rather being subtle modes of transformation "working on, in, and against the cultural form" (Munoz). Referring to Levi Strauss, BEATRICE MICHAELIS (Giessen) and ELAHE HASCHEMI YEKANI (Konstanz) described the strategies of disidentification as a mode of "wild thinking" and productive form of continuously risking one's own ontological status. In the tribute to José E. Muñoz, contributors asked themselves how to distinguish between these strategies and if there is a need to do so. Performing one's dis-identity has to be necessarily a suspicious act, an ellipse of meaning, making and unmaking sense by scrambling significations already in place. HENRIETTE GUNKEL (Bayreuth) indicated that for José E. Muñoz these 'suspicious acts' need to be studied within art as a serious object of study: such as in artistic practices, queerness can be detected before any gay and lesbian rights movements' arrival on the scene. Again, by scrambling significations, Henriette Gunkel quoted José E. Muñoz's view as: "We always were queer and are still not queer".



Drawing on Nital Little's (2013) idea of the performer in 'Contact Improvisation' as a self-sensing multiplicity, BETTINA WUTTIG (Marburg) asked how C.I. related practices enable to transgress the vaguely bordered self of everyday life, associating the latter with a traumatic dimension. In this context Bettina Wuttig looked behind the concept of the body. Along a reevaluation of Nietzsche's concept of mnemotechnics, Butler's understanding of body, and Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Bettina Wuttig described identities as vectors of power relations, social positions, violent speeches, and socially configured meanings. While she claimed the incorporation of concepts of identity as an issue of proprioceptive memory, GARRY ROBSON and CHRISTIAN OLAVARRIA (Krakow) emphasized the vast influence of social

and digital media on our private and professional daily lives. By discussing processes of disembodiment, they displayed how questions of authenticity, the reinforcing of truth, reality, and desire tackle a different problem in social media: everything one says is true, but the disembodied person isn't real. CHRISTINA BALMA-TIVOLA (Turin) illustrated the characteristics of the notion of cultural identity 'embodied' in personal biographies. She suggested that it is not so much about a withering of the notion of cultural identity, but about how 'embodied' identity is constructed by "free choice and movement, imagination and projection of self to reach one's aims, and mutual solidarity to support him/her in achieving them."



Very much to José E. Muñoz's taste, the first day of conference ended with the performance "A Freak Show for S." by ANNABEL GUÉRÉDRAT/ ARTINCIDENCE (Martinique) on the rehearsal stage of the department for Applied Theater Studies. 'S.' in the title is referring to Sarah Baartman (d. 1815), a woman from South Africa exhibited in European Freak Shows as

'Black Venus' in the 19th century. Annabel Guérédrat performs her piece in honor of S., using a text written out of bodily experiences while improvising. Her voice resonates geographically and shifts linguistically by a mixture of four languages; meanwhile the performer's appearance and abrupt movements were watched by the surrounding spectators. Powerful images of struggle, exclusion, and self-positioning were shown by Annabel Guérédrat through a play with the audience and the performer's 'other'.

### 3. Movements and Social Transformation

On the second day of the conference, OLIVER MARCHART, professor of sociology at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf gave his keynote lecture on "The Groundless Ground of Identity: Political Implications of Social and Cultural Identity". In his speech, he focused on the post-identitarian social movements and their tendency to self-reflexivity and self-questioning. He claimed that the power of post-identitarian social movements is their readiness to self-weakening, which can mobilize and integrate larger groups of people. Such movements not only manage to adapt to changing constellations of forces and power easily, but also contribute to the "democratization of democracy". According to Oliver Marchart, post-identitarian movements are characterized by the reflective relation to subjectivity in late-Foucauldian understanding – in their fight for the right to be different without being isolated.

Oliver Marchart concluded that the traditional ways of making politics and movements are not completely gone, but there appeared new trends within them.

MICHAEL ANNOFF (Berlin), too, cogitated on the question of post-identitarian group movements. In his contribution he asked whether describing queer activism as a social movement is still adequate, or if maybe a new post-identitarian description is necessary. He claimed that diverse identities are no longer considered as an obstacle. Instead, their empowerment is held up as the precondition of collective political action, which has as its main goal avoiding all kinds of exclusion.

#### 4. Contested Terms

NINA HAGEL (Berkeley) and STEFAN APOSTOLOU-HÖLSCHER (Giessen) contributed to the discourse such contested notions as "authenticity" and "aesthetics"; they furthermore endeavored to rediscover the critical potential behind them. According to Nina Hagel, Foucault and his theory of authenticity is not as independent as he seems to be – he put too much attention to one's possibilities, ignoring the



influence of the environment. But without the language of authenticity, she stated, we would lose a tool to talk about that phenomena. Stefan Apostolou-Hölscher focused on the relation between disidentity and aesthetics in the theory of Jacques Rancière, who claimed that "beauty decomposes every power and subject". Rancière, unlike Foucault, deeply rejected the notion of ethics. The French philosopher argued that there are two stamps of recognition – understanding and imagination that develop the aesthetics of the self.

#### Outlook

The conference culminated in the final discussion addressing the question "What to do with identity in a post-identity era?" Appealing the theories of Manuela Bojadžijev, Oliver Marchart or José E. Muñoz, the participants tried to understand and conceptualize the conditions for new forms of fluid subjectivization. Although theoretical writing about marginalized identities could be perceived as a strategy of destabilization, the discussants stated that it should not be seen as a threat for the social body as a whole.

VERONIKA ZINK (Giessen) stated that the paradigm of destabilization is based on the assumption that these subtle acts of performing one's identity-in-differences unfold their social and political potential by challenging power structures: doesn't this point lead to a quite optimistic (and affirmative) conception of the world with an underlying belief in fluid and changeable power structures? She called for being wary of this conjuration of destabilization and the routinization of disorder within current theoretical discourses, because it sometimes itself appears to be a hermetically sealed, authoritarian discourse.

The common ground of all discussions is the permanent endeavor to overcome, deconstruct, and renew given fundamentals of social order, cultural forms, and power structures. So maybe it is not a question of withering identities, but rather of letting our knowledge about identity wither, and not by means of deciphering, but by enciphering.

In line with this, Research Area 6 is currently preparing a publication of selected contributions.