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Introduction: special issue of FORUM on Identity

Denise deCaires Narain

'Identity' is a word that we have learned - with good reason - to be wary of. Its suggestion of solidity and fixity makes it a dangerous and divisive concept that elides the flux and instability that characterizes selfhood. In academic discourses, identity has been theorized exhaustively and the idea of the subject as de-centred and constantly shifting is taken-for-granted. But still 'identity' won't go away. Indeed, in some arenas of public culture, 'identity' remains a *necessary* concept around which to consolidate ideas of selfhood that may not be so readily accommodated in prevailing definitions of the self. As the editors of this edition of *FORUM* put it in their call for papers:

> Much has been made of the freedom and power of fluid, shifting, and multiple identities, yet the notion of an authentic and essential identity remains. Such contestations are part of the language used to discuss identity, as the phrase 'identity crisis' indicates. Identity can be 'found' and 'lost', disputed, negotiated, and subverted.

In contemporary British culture, reminders of the sense of identity crisis alluded to above are pervasive in the popular media as concerns about an embattled 'English identity' keep surfacing, most often articulated in the thinly veiled language of 'concern about immigration'. This anxiety is registered in endless anecdotes about being the 'only white face' at the bus stop, post office, high street and in narratives of 'swamping'; an emphasis on the scopic that presumes the 'obviousness' and intractability of 'visible difference'. Recently it was buttressed by David Coleman's widely reported calculation that by 2066 White Britons will be in a minority in Britain. Sometimes it is posed in relation to questions of national loyalty: Norman Tebbit's cricket test scenario. More recently and dramatically, the bombing in London on 7th July 2005 raised profound questions about political and cultural affiliations as local and global identities intersected simultaneously in complicated and intense ways. Ideas of Britain as 'multi-cultural' and the world as a 'global village' continue to have currency at the same time as fierce battles are being waged over particular ethnic and cultural identities in specific locales. Meanwhile, the internet is invoked as

revitalizing ideas of a global village as it generates new modes of social networking and political activism (– though only for those who have unhindered access to it).

Within the academy, 'identity' has been a defining principle in feminist, gay and lesbian and postcolonial discourses *and* a fracturing one. In response to shared histories of marginality and exclusion, these distinct groupings generated corrective/restorative narratives to enable the assertion of their distinctive identities. But, perhaps inevitably, these groupings were themselves fractured by differences *within* that primary difference, as it were. Questions raised by black and lesbian (and black-lesbian) women profoundly fractured the feminist movement in the 1970s, as has been widely and well documented. The 'lessons' of this period might easily be applied to other categories that have defined themselves against a normatively white, male, middle class identity: how can difference be granted recognition but not be *defined* exclusively by that difference? How can the safe spaces that group solidarity provides be prevented from becoming too tightly prescriptive and exclusionary? Do concepts like identity politics and 'solidarity' already imply a language of combat which necessitate defence and insularity in response?

Answers to these questions can be found in the proliferation of feminist, postcolonial and queer interventions of the past decade (and longer). These interventions are too many and varied to catalogue here but frequently the best of these, to my mind, are those that work at the interface of several discourses simultaneously and signal multiple affiliations. To take one example of many, Jacqui M.Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2005) critically deploys queer and black feminist discourses of various provenance to productively foreground the points of intersection between them. In doing so, she revisits the histories of these categories (queer, black feminist and others) not only to retrieve what is useful and dump what is not, but to provide a map of the criss-crossing identifications *between* critical trajectories. This approach suggests that critical practice involves tacking backwards *and* forwards temporally, as well as traversing *across* supposedly distinct critical identifications. Feminist, postcolonial and queer discourses share an investment in 'progressivist' narratives, a tendency, that is, to posit a 'better' feminist, postcolonial and/or queer identity in the future – somewhere in 'the beyond'.

Alexander's tacking backwards to go forwards suggests we relinquish this desire and engage with the entangled and messy identities we live in and with *now*, accepting that, in any case, they trail behind us willy nilly. In this spirit a return to Stuart Hall's comments on Caribbean culture seems timely. The Caribbean remains a context in which questions of cultural and racial identity continue to be contested intensely and in a manner that embraces hybridity at the same time that it insists on specificity. In his essay, Hall rejects the lure of an archival approach to identity and insists on identity as *process*, constructed dynamically out of particular histories and material contingencies. About this process in the Caribbean context, he says:

> If identity does not proceed, in a straight, unbroken line, from some fixed origin, how are we to understand its formation? We might think of black Caribbean identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, *simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture.* Caribbean identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes.
> ('Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed., Jonathon Rutherford, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp.226-7, my emphasis)

The essays included in this issue of *FORUM* negotiate their way around 'identity' in diverse and often unexpected ways. They suggest fascinating possibilities for extending the critical mileage of the term beyond the 'usual suspects' associated with 'identity talk' and in ways that resonate in spirit if not in designated focus, with the work of Alexander and Hall. In her essay, 'Creating Oneself as a Mother: Dreams, Reality and Identity in Doris Lessing´s *The Fifth Child* (1988)', Anna Casablancas i Cervantes explores that aspect of female identity that was a key a focal point in 1970s feminism (and beyond): motherhood. Cervantes navigates nimbly between Jungian ideas of motherhood as archetype and Adrienne Rich's powerful critique of motherhood as institution, to track Lessing's excoriation of the logic of such myths and ideologies as they impact on one woman. Cervantes shows how identity collapses under the weight of these expectations which though generated externally become deeply embedded within the psychic landscape of the protagonist. Mother and son (the eponymous, 'fifth child') become monstrous reflections of each other in a relationship of spiralling rejection. There is a sense here that identity is recognized as mutually definitive and relational but it is a tense and combative relation in which identities become sealed, orbiting each other and colliding, but never intersecting. In

her essay, Cervantes includes a quote from the protagonist's mother where she comments on the 'misfit son' thus, "He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are." This evocative statement to my mind conveys succinctly the dilemma at the heart of debates about identity.

Sophie Gray, in 'Blazoning Mary Magdalene', also explores the construction of female identity but her focus is a play published by Lewis Wager in 1566, *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*. Mary Magdalene is a significant figure in Christianity precisely because of the dualism of her identity as the abject sinner who becomes a saint; this resonates of course with the familiar dualism feminists noted in patriarchal representations of woman as 'Madonna or whore'. Gray argues persuasively that Wager's play re-signifies Magdalene's identity so that it is her *mind*, rather than her *body* that is the focus. In so doing, Wager creates a more acceptably Protestant version of Magdalene's identity than the more lurid Catholic one. Wager rehabilitates Magdalene so that the emphasis shifts from physical intimacy with Jesus to her role as attentive listener. But Wager achieves this re-signification by using the poetic conceit of blazonry, a conceit associated with an *anatomizing* of the (usually) female subject as metaphors of her beauty are piled up, allowing men to gorge safely on the language of the erotic in place of the body itself, which decorum deems out of bounds. Gray's discussion elegantly demonstrates that identities, however monumental, can be reconfigured and that genres can be mobilized differently – even those such as the blazon that, as she argues, traditionally facilitate 'men talking to men about women'.

A similarly revisionist impulse animates Meaghan Thurston's ''At Home in Dust': Francesca Woodman's *House Series*, Revisited'. Woman's identity is again the focus: the photographs are by a woman, feature women subjects and have been read as expressions of the frustrated woman-artist refusing the domestic space as woman's place. Thurston nuances this reading by arguing that space and how we occupy it may determine our subject position, but not definitively. So she argues against the idea of Woodman's photographs as evidence of entrapment in the home - 'woman's place' - and suggests that they be read as a way of seeking to *adapt* domestic space into a more accommodating environment. The woman (Woodman herself) in Woodman's photographs tampers with the physical materiality of rooms and walls in ways that the

technologies of exposure make possible, concealing and revealing in the artist's orchestration of light and shade: the woman in the pictures 'blends' with walls, insinuates herself between the fireplace and the wall to present herself as at home in dust, disorder and mould. Thurston argues that these photographs dramatize possibilities for prising open a gap between placehood and selfhood in art, if not in life, that has significance for *all* subjects, regardless of gender. Thurston concludes that the transgression represented by Woodman's art "transcends feminist discourse". I wonder if suggesting that it *traverses* feminist discourses might allow recognition of feminist work in gendering ideas of what constitutes 'the human' so that we can agree (as I certainly want to) without unease with Thurston's evocative concluding lines, "*House Series* is a kind of visual argument about *human* desire: to feel connected, to find our place in the world and to feel at home." (my emphasis).

In 'Appropriating Identity: William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, and Britain's Myth of the Self-Made Man', Jayme Yahr also discusses a 'visual argument', this time in relation to configurations of English masculine identity in portraiture. He demonstrates how middleclass businessmen in 'the great masculine renunciation of 1750-1850' hi-jacked the visual language of aristocratic portraiture to present a different definition of 'true' English manly identity, that of the honest, hard-working man-of-industry, while also challenging the aristocratic monopoly on 'taste'. Replacing the elaborate, 'foppish' dress that characterized portraits of aristocratic males, the hardworking English man dressed *down* in sober clothes with tools of his trade to hand. Clothing performed a crucial signifying function here. As Yahr argues, the elaborate dress of the aristocratic man may have been deemed inappropriate for the 'self-made man' but their wives and daughters increasingly took on spectacularly elaborate dress to signal the wealth of their husbands and fathers. The construction and performance of identity in Yahr's discussion involves mimicry of hegemonic forms that appear simultaneously challenging *and* complicit.

Women authors and subjects are the focus of two other essays in this volume. James Bailey's, '"What a story it could be": Identity and Narrative Strategy in Ali Smith's *Like*', attends to Smith's exploration of narrative identity in a novel in which Ash and Amy, the two main protagonists, attempt in different ways to construct narratives of their lives – and selves. Memories must constantly be edited and revised

as the idealized narratives they construct are disturbed and interrupted by events in the 'now' of the text. Bailey's intimate engagement with the text teases out the ways that the battle for selfhood is staged in the novel to underscore the relentless tussle between self and other(s) that renders identity an ongoing and always unstable process. The uncertainty that characterizes the recollections Ash attempts to narrate necessarily infects the reader who must learn, too, to give up ever grasping 'the whole story'. Bailey concludes that, "as its title suggests, *Like* can offer only approximations of the past, demonstrating that, through narrative, identities can be remade but never retrieved." These 'approximations' and the promise of 'what a story it *could* be' suggest, like Woodman's images, that the threshold is a powerfully resonant space for considering and tentatively constructing identities.

Travis Martin's 'The Sparrow's Fall: Self's Mergence with Identity in Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*', explores the slippage between the fictional and the autobiographical in relation to the specific circumstances in which Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* were written and published: letters were edited into sketches for the Boston paper, *The Commonwealth* and then eventually revised and published as *Hospital Sketches* in 1863. Martin interprets Alcott's introduction of a fictional narrator, Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle for the published collection as a strategy in which the author, "systematically redesigns her personality to prepare herself for what she will re-experience through narration". The deployment of Periwinkle makes trauma readable (and 'writable') for Alcott and for the reader in turn. If, as Martin quotes G.Thomas Couser as saying, "identity hangs by a narrative thread", then Martin's essay tracks the complex warp and weft of Alcott's production of the textual identities necessary to narrate the unspeakable. In shifting restlessly between the autobiographical and the fictional, he suggests that Alcott produces a narrative form that allows her to experiment with identities and affiliations which she may not have experienced, or may have experienced but felt unable to narrate *without* a mediating fiction. Here Alcott provides *narrative identifications* where the autobiographical cannot always deliver. Martin's essay thus shows how the criss-crossing threads of autobiographical and fictional identities can be read productively for their ethical impulses.

The texts and images in the essays discussed this far, have treated identity in ways that engage with identity as an ongoing process in which the internal and

external are intricately connected. This engagement is a particularly heightened one in the context of surrealism where language and voice are under intense scrutiny. In 'Surrealism and the "Fissured Subject": Breton, Éluard, and Desnos', James Leveque offers a comparative reading of these poets as they seek modes of apprehending and representing self-hood that might evade the fiction of a known 'self' and/or identity. Drawing on Freudian and psychoanalytic theories of the self, Leveque distinguishes between the three poets who, under the sign of 'surrealism', offer a range of possibilities for *losing* identity in writing. Leveque cites Roland Barthes's famous formulation, "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing." He argues persuasively that these three poets' works be read as evidence of their struggles to connect pure aestheticism with social praxis and to make the language of surrealism available to all. As Breton puts it, "this language which is not in any way supernatural, and is a vehicle, for each and every one of us, of revelation". A fragment from Éluard's 'Nothing Else' perhaps conveys this sentiment even more powerfully:

> Even when we are far from one another
> Everything unites us

Leveque's concluding sentence reads, "Though the methods and goals often diverged and conflicted, in every case, surrealism accepted the individual as divided, messy, contradictory, and open." This acceptance of the messiness of individual identity is the kind of conclusion that Jonathon Lewis's essay, 'Identity and Identification in Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* and *Béni ou le Paradis Privé*' might be read as yearning for. His discussion of Begag's novels (published in 1986 and 1989) ends with a section starkly titled, ''Conclusion : No Escape''. Lewis suggests that, 57 years after the publication of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and 23 years after the publication of Begag's first novel, the French Republic's constitutional definition of nationhood remains hostile to cultural difference. In the novels discussed, visible difference is crucial as bodies become signs of unacceptable cultural and racial identities. Begag's young protagonists *must* fail in their efforts to discipline their Arab-French bodies into conformity just as, Lewis implies, France must fail in its denial of its Algerian past; a 'past' that cannot be sealed off and repressed but is always pushing against the 'now' of French identity

as the Beur presence in France becomes increasingly vocal and visible in contemporary cultural debates. Lewis concludes with pessimism about France's inability to accommodate hybridity in ways that characterize "the plurality of identities engendered in the contemporary, post-colonial period". But perhaps his own reading of these novels might be read as challenging, if not transforming, fictions of French identity, at least as they are manifested in novelistic discourse. A more significant intervention than perhaps Lewis acknowledges.

The essays in this volume show how varied and mutable the idea of identity has become; this is a welcome development for those of us involved in postcolonial feminist studies where 'identity', despite the exciting critical interventions alluded to at the start of this introduction, can still resonate in rather prescriptive and limiting ways. The essays all in different ways suggest interesting navigations across the meanings of 'identity', usefully derailing the emphasis on *difference* (of whatever kind) as the basis for identity and suggesting that it is an idea which can be productively deployed to re-read the canonical as well as the (supposedly) marginal. Identity, as these essays argue is constructed out of many spaces, places, desires, voices, socio-political contingencies and cultural and representational structures. It may be an elusive and fleeting process - and pursuit - but it remains a necessary fiction.