Thinking Post-Identity

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Post-Identity, the journal, began in the late-1990s, its appearance spurred by a sense of the exhaustion of identity politics, the possibilities of new technological and global formations, and the rumblings of fresh insights into old questions. The term "post-identity" reflects the impetus of other "posts"—postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-capitalism—all of which imply a cocky ambivalence. On the one hand, like the concept of the avant-garde, they suggest a leap ahead, a departure from older ways of thinking into more radical concepts that overturn assumptions and question established "truths." On the other hand, all "posts" are dependent upon and entwined inextricably with the concepts implied by their root words. The very significance of the "post"-ing gesture depends upon large-scale familiarity with an older concept, the prefix signaling a hopeful shift in perspective. "Post's" inherent optimism (we can change the way we think), which is often read as pessimism (there is nothing left), picks up on subtle changes in cultural attitudes, working on weaknesses and gaps to suggest unconventional ways of re-imagining the axioms of analysis. "Posts" act on restlessness.

As another "post-," post-identity shifts the assumptions which underlie a particular concept of politically consequential identity. This formation of discrete, visible, legally-significant categories, which has grounded political action and modes of interpretation at least since the 1960s, combines oppositional notions of power derived from Marxist analysis with existentialist evocations of the "other." "Others" belong to categories defined by skin color, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and other similar differences, generally on the disempowered side of the dialectic. These oppositions operate meaningfully in specific organizations of ideology such as civil rights, formations of community, and the patriarchal family to alibi uneven distributions of power. As a site of individual organization and interpellation, identities operate as cultural and psychical support for the oppressive othering necessary to nourish the dialectical, them/us systems subtending capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racial privilege.

While categorical identities are produced through the complex processes of ideology, they gain significance of their own as discrete, identifiable, and culturally "true" categories. In relation to the glaring examples of social disenfranchisement and suffering manifested in racism, sexism, coloniality, homophobia, and capitalism, identities form the basis for analyzing and acting upon social and material oppression. They provide a

site of solidarity, pride, counter-analysis, and advocacy within the system that produced them. The problem is, of course, that if identities are produced by an oppressive oppositional system, using identities to confront that system is difficult, resulting usually either in a reaffirmation of the opposition or a challenge to the category itself. American feminism's rapid splintering into factions arguing about the political primacy of class, racial, and sexual differences in the 1970s is a good example of how identities have difficulty sustaining challenges to the context in which they were engendered. This isn't the "fault" of the identity; the category of women is not simply politically incompetent. Rather, the dissolution of the category is an effect of the purpose for which it was defined as a category in the first place—in the case of gender, as the "other" securing patriarchy and masculinity.

Identities are constructions, even though they may have a real, material role in subject formation, the production of community, and the assignment of rights and access to privilege. But while we tend not to assail these categories as categories (since to do so would be to acknowledge the "truth" of their disempowered positioning in open complicity with oppressive systems or to assail the subjective identities formed in relation to them), we are also well aware that identity categories are neither singular nor internally consistent. Individuals exist within multiple, intersecting, competing identity categories. Categories themselves screen a vast range of differences that, if recognized, would dissolve categories altogether. Insisting on the material integrity of categories—women, for example, are always only women and all women are alike—produces a paradoxical oppression of its own in the often unwitting policing of norms, and, as became widely evident in 1980s feminist self-scrutiny, in the categorical elision of other differences such as race, class, sexual preference, ethnicity, age, ability, etc. Unfortunately, in relation to the larger dynamics of power asymmetry, the maintenance of discrete unified categories actually supports the dialectical systems which produced them, (but now in the name of liberation), endorsing the modes of thought which produced the oppressions in the first place. Using identities as a means to fight the ideologies that underwrite oppressions is not so much an example of using the "master's tools." Rather, it is an acceptance of the master system, which can never result in anything more than the oppressive recirculation of the same categories, playing one off against the other (women v. blacks, blacks v. Jews, first world v. third world), producing temporary reversals (affirmative action), inspiring reactionary behaviors (white supremacy, Promisekeepers, fundamentalisms), constituting consumer target groups (gays, hispanics), and providing a distraction that preserves the status quo.

In the face of this recycling, post-identity challenges both the notion of

categorical identity and ideas of oppositional othering. More important, it challenges the dialectical habit of thought that perpetuates the structural repetition of the system itself. In this system, identity categories can only reproduce themselves on one or the other side of power. Post-identity looks both at the ways identity categories are deployed to sustain the status quo and at the ways alternative notions of identity already exist that defy, deconstruct, or perversely alter power asymmetries. The idea, following Foucault's attempts in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is to avoid the structuralist, binary thinking that can only reproduce itself—and the sets of empowerments, oppositional epistemologies, categorical generalizations, and economies that inhere.

Models for thinking otherwise have been available for understanding the complexities that identity categories screen. The post-structuralist understandings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, evocations of systems theory, and the glaring presence of various "trans" phenomena—transnationalism, transgender, transsexuality—provide instances in which conventional identity formulas clearly do not apply. Analyzing the viral wanderings of contemporary internet practices or perverse vicissitudes of commodity culture also suggests instances where the dialectical solidity of identity categories no longer holds sway, having given way to some other mode of organization, practice of poaching, or habit of transgression so long ingrained that it has become a workable concept. Post-identity operates at these sites, breaking open and exposing both the oppositional method and the stakes in preserving it, challenging, pricking, launching, playing, cultivating other modes of intelligibility that have existed all along, bringing them to challenge the ossified truths of defensive otherness.

The essays that follow all undertake some aspect of this analysis. Some, like Dennis Allen's, focus on the intersections between theorizing, commodity culture, and simulation cultures. In "Rtmark: Viral Activism and the Meaning of 'Post-Identity'" Allen explores the ways Rtmark, "the anarcho-aesthetico-activist organization," conceptualizes activism in post-capitalist, post-industrial transnational economies. Rtmark's opportunistic interventions, from placing detailed manufacture cards in shoe boxes that inform consumers how much of the purchase price actually went to individual workers to funding the Barbie Liberation Organization's switching the voice boxes of GI Joes and Barbies (so that the Barbies said "Dead men tell no lies"), illustrate the situational tactics necessary in the floating displacements of global capitalism. Their "creative subversions" invite reconsiderations of the nature of corporate power and the savvy of consumers whose participation in (or resistance to) commodity systems is no longer a choice. Rtmark's activities also, as Allen suggests, point both to the futility of oppositional approaches and the possibilities of other, more

diffuse modes of intervention. Rtmark's viral activism finally also assails older notions of the activist as a grounded categorical representative—as an identity politician—showing the ways anonymity and false identities may be the most useful, if themselves temporary, tools to confront a faceless corporate culture that insists on identity categories in its sales efforts.

Focusing on a slightly different activity as an exemplum of "thinking *as* post-identity," Charles Stivale examines Gilles Deleuze's and Claire Parnet's 1977 *Dialogues*. Looking at the ways this (and other) collaborative projects engage modes of "thinking otherwise which would eliminate the importance of saying 'I'," Stivale works through the ways friendship, distant relationships, and dispersed community enable the "mutual resonances" that push into new ways of thinking that dispense with (or "falsify") conventional truths. "Thinking otherwise" is enacted through enunciation, and, as Stivale demonstrates, "post-identitarian strategies" ultimately result in post-identitarian concepts and logics.

The possibilities of radical collaboration are also enacted in Jessica Baldanzi and Kyle Schlabach's multi-vocal analysis, "What Remains?: (De)composing and (Re)covering American Identity in *As I Lay Dying* and the Georgia Crematory Scandal." Playing on the collapsing parallels between Faulkner's novel and the tangle of uncremated bodies found at the Tri-State Crematory in Georgia, Baldanzi and Schlabach demonstrate the inevitable links of decomposition in narrative, material abjection, national fictions, the fiction of subjective identity, and the spectacular dissolutions of history. Employing two simultaneous voices, their essay encourages the discourses of literary criticism and cultural critique to resonate against one another, performing suggestive inter-relations, dissonating parallels, and demonstrating the unconventional coherence of disarticulated strands of American experience that return uncannily to the site (sight) of the unburied.

Continuing with an examination of the ways American literature brings identity into question, Christa Albrecht-Crane's "Becoming Minoritarian: Post-Identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*" shows the ways Morrison's novel illustrates both how identities are produced and how they might be transformed. The essay suggests that starting with a concept of agency as process rather than with the conventional dual crags of binary systems might break apart inevitable ossifications and demonstrate the systemic effects of post-identity understandings of causality. Morrison's linguistic experimentation, the author shows, enables a different imagination of language and racial categories. Returning to Deleuze and Parnet's *Dialogues*, Albrecht-Crane looks at the ways Morrison's novel shifts the terrain of subjectivity as that is embedded in language and categorical systems and as subjectivity is finally never anything but contingent.

Contingency is also a dynamic Craig Owens examines in his analysis

of the 2002 M/MLA Convention's performances of Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* and *Catastrophe*. Taking an alternative approach to questions of identity as staged, Owens asks whether it is possible to represent anything other than identity—"Whether staged representation does not threaten to recover the elusive, original identity deconstructed by the performed texts." Looking at the ways the plays' technological interruptions force sudden reconsiderations of character integrity and the place of the audience, Owens shows that character identity is a tantalizing if useless cipher in performances that enact alienation, that mercilessly recall the difference between character and actor, stage and audience while seeming to pull them together. Alienation, he concludes, is thus enacted otherwise; it is performed rather than asserted, an observation that confirms the suggestion made by Allen and Stivale that post-identity gestures are primarily performative.

The final post-identity essay, James L. Maynard's "'I find / I found myself / and / nothing / more than that': Textuality, Visuality, and the Production of Subjectivity in Tom Phillips' *A Humument*," looks at the ways a postmodern retranslation of a Victorian work enacts a series of conflicts, intermedial clashes, and multiplying subjectivities that enact a textual and subjective heterogeneity. The book's hypertextual performativity—the ways that it forces readers to produce relations among disparate scripts and media—decenters any notion of privileged or unified perspective. Its multiple and disunified lines emphasize "the material structures that constitute meaning and subjectivity" and invite a constant reconsideration of the possibility of any single perspective.

Although these six essays suggest ways in which logics of categorical identity begin to fall apart, none of them argues for the end of identity as such. Rather, such questions work only in relation to an order and practice that has persisted past the point in history when the sense of alternatives to identity began to infect discourses and the strategies of commodity culture. Post-identity is only an opening, but it is a glimmer through a tear in what once seemed to be the very fabric of culture.

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