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Theorizing identity: beyond the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy

NIRA YUVAL-DAVIS

ABSTRACT Yuval-Davis discusses three interconnected questions relating to identity. She first examines whether and in what ways the notion of identity should be theorized, on the one hand, and empirically researched, on the other, focusing on the opposing views of Stuart Hall and Robin Williams. She then examines the contested question of what is identity, positioning it in relation to notions of belonging and the politics of belonging, and in relation to several influential schools of thought, especially those that construct identity as a mode of narrative, as a mode of performativity or as a dialogical practice. Her third interrelated question concerns the boundaries of identity and the relationship between self and non-self. She explores both social psychological and psycho-analytical approaches to that question, and deals with questions such as reflexivity, identifications and forced identities. The last part of the article explores several types of relationships between self and non-self, such as: 'me' and 'us'; 'me/us' and 'them'; 'me' and other 'others'; 'me' and the transversal 'us/them'. Yuval-Davis's basic argument here is that dichotomous notions of identity and difference, when theorizing boundaries of individual and collective identities, are more misleading than explanatory.

KEYWORDS belonging, boundaries, dialogue, identity, narratives, otherness, performativity

Identity is a contested concept. Steph Lawler suggests that a unitary definition of it is impossible, as different theorizations require different definitions.¹ Rogers Brubaker and Letitia Cooper have gone even further and argued that, given its history and overuse, it might be better not to continue to use the notion of identity at all.² They say that 'identity' might tell us too much or too little, and in contradictory ways: it can signify non-instrumental

I would like to thank Ann Phoenix, Erene Kaptani, Margaret Wetherell and Molly Andrews, who all read different versions of this paper, for their insightful and useful comments, as was the case with the editor and anonymous readers of *Patterns of Prejudice*. Responsibility for the article, however, is mine.

1 Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2008), 2.

2 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, February 2000, 1–47.

modes of social and political action; collective groups or categories; core aspects of the self; the development, processual and interactive, of collective self-understanding; or the evanescent products of multiple and competing discourses of self. They suggest that, rather than continuing to use a concept that is so confusing, each of these meanings can be termed differently. Indeed, Floya Anthias has suggested replacing the notion of 'identity' with that of 'location' or 'translocation'.³

This paper takes a different position. It argues that identity is an important and useful concept if it is kept within the boundary of a very clear and specific definition, and that it is important to distinguish it from the notion of 'location' which, according to the theoretical framework presented here,⁴ belongs to a different analytical dimension. I also argue that the complementary use of different theories of identity in the literature can add to, rather than detract from, its validity, as long as their boundaries in specific social contexts remain clear. This article also discusses three interconnected questions relating to identity. It first examines whether and in what ways the notion of identity should be theorized, on the one hand, and empirically researched, on the other, focusing on what might be seen as the opposing views of Stuart Hall and Robin Williams.⁵ The second, contested, question asks what is identity, positioning it in relation to notions of belonging and the politics of belonging, and to several influential schools of thought, especially those that construct identity as a mode of narrative,⁶ a mode of performativity,⁷ or indeed as a dialogical practice.⁸ The third question relates to the

3 Floya Anthias, 'Beyond feminism and multiculturalism: locating difference and the politics of location', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2002, 275–86.

4 See also Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2006, 197–214.

5 Stuart Hall, presentation at the ESRC Identities Programme Workshop, 'New identities', London, 21 June 2006; Robin Williams, *Making Identity Matter: Identity, Society and Social Interaction* (Durham: Sociologypress 2000). As will become clear, I actually argue that these positions are not really in opposition. However, I've found that, here and elsewhere, presenting them in opposition initially helps to clarify the interrelations between them.

6 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. from the Italian by Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge 2000); Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in quest of narrative' and 'Narrative identity', in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge 1991), 20–33 and 188–200, respectively.

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge 1990); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane 1969); Victor Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept 1979).

8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. from the Russian by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press 1981); Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1912).

boundaries of identity, and the relationship between self and non-self. This is explored by looking at social psychological approaches to that question,⁹ as well as psychoanalytical ones,¹⁰ and dealing with issues such as reflexivity, identifications and imposed identities. The final part of the article explores several types of relationships between self and non-self, including: 'me' and 'us'; 'me/us' and 'them'; 'me' and other 'others'; 'me' and the transversal 'us/them'.

In this paper, I argue that dichotomous notions of identity and difference, when theorizing the boundaries of individual and collective identities, are more misleading than explanatory. This argument springs from two different sources. It is, on the one hand, the continuation of theoretical work I have been doing in relation to belonging and the politics of belonging in which, as mentioned above, the notion of identity occupies a specific analytical space.¹¹ On the other hand, while the article is theoretical, it has been greatly inspired by the experience of work on, as well as the findings of, the research project 'Identity, Performance and Social Action: Community Theatre among Refugees'.¹² In this project, we worked with different groups of refugees in East London, using participatory theatre techniques, particularly Playback and Forum,¹³ in order to examine the relationships of collusion and contestation to

9 See, for example, Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*; and George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1934).

10 See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. from the French by Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press 1977); and Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge 1998).

11 See, for example, Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'; and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Intersectional Politics of Belonging* (London: Sage forthcoming).

12 This was one of the projects of the ESRC research programme Identity and Social Action, directed by Margaret Wetherell. The project and its resulting publications (ESRC RES-148-25-0006, www.uel.ac.uk/IPSA (viewed 15 April 2010)), on which this paper heavily leans, would not have been possible without my co-applicant and research fellow Erere Kaptani to whose inspiration, insights and commitment I owe a major debt of thanks, as I do as well to all the other participants in the project. Margaret Wetherell was also a vital and supportive presence and an excellent programme director.

13 In Playback Theatre, members of the audience tell stories based on their own experiences and reflections that are then 'played back' to them by the actors on stage. Forum Theatre allows both actors and audience members to change places during the course of the dramatic action, to 'step in' and to suggest and explore alternative behaviour. See Jonathan Fox, *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing 1994); Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. from the Spanish by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (London: Pluto Press 1979); and Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. from the Spanish by Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge 1995).

performance and performativity in the construction and communication of identity positions by the participants, and how these might relate to narratives of social action both within the group and outside of it in the wider social, economic and political context of contemporary British society.

Theorizing or researching identity?

The first version of this paper was written in 2006 as a response to what had become known in the Identity and Social Action research programme as 'the Stuart Hall challenge'. The challenge that Hall laid down at one of the programme's workshops that year had far-ranging implications for empirical research in general and ESRC programme funding in particular. He argued that virtually all theoretical advances were made by unfunded scholars, and that ESRC research programmes were ending up costing a lot of money and not really producing anything worthwhile or new. The almost opposite view can be found in Robin Williams's book *Making Identity Matter*, published by the British Sociological Association, in which he suggests that, rather than looking for a general theory of identity, a 'preferred alternative is the accumulation of studies and the ways in which such identity matters are implied, inferred and presupposed as part of the texture of everyday life'.¹⁴

Although, as will become clear, I am a great supporter of empirical research, I sympathize more with Hall's position *vis-à-vis* theoretical developments than with Williams. In any empirical study a general (if situated) theoretical position is implied and, while avoiding stating it makes it less visible, it doesn't make it absent. For example, I have both agreed with and had some reservations about Hall's theorization of identity since first hearing him articulate it in the early 1990s. I did not need to carry out new empirical research in order to reach my conclusions; rather, my theoretical approach to identity has determined to a great extent the methodology and methods I have used in empirical research. On the other hand, as well as providing a tool for examining methodological and political issues, empirical research is a useful crucible for testing more abstract theoretical questions. For example, in our research project, a deconstructive theoretical approach to identity was one of the main reasons we chose to work with Kosovan, Kurdish and Somali refugees, three so-called 'Muslim communities'. We wanted to have the opportunity to invalidate, within the systematic framework of an empirical

14 Williams, *Making Identity Matter*, 153.

study, any essentialist fixed constructions of 'the Muslim' and to explore the very different hegemonic constructions of Muslim identities in the three cases.¹⁵ So, while the empirical research did not actually construct our gaze at the identity question, its importance for us went beyond merely the production of a plethora of related data. Rather, within its own predetermined/determining theoretical paradigm, the empirical research has been able to show us in detail, using the tools of narrative analysis, how identity signifiers operate in particular social settings, how they construct, contest and authorize different meanings; it thereby has been able to enrich our understanding of the processes involved.

However, and in this I echo Robin Williams, carrying out empirical research on particular aspects of the daily experiences of particular groups of people in particular times/places can draw our attention to issues relating to the theorization of identity in a way that abstract, floating, generic reflections can never do. The experience of using participatory theatre as a sociological research tool has made clear the multiplex ways that identity relationality (a concept discussed below) works. In addition, as discussed in the project's findings, our empirical research produced much-needed and new knowledge about the ways different groupings of refugees have settled in London and the role of community, society and state in these processes,¹⁶ something that is impossible to obtain without engaging in empirical research. Moreover, as became clear at the research programme's final conference in September 2008,¹⁷ the fact that our project was part of a larger thematic programme enabled the contextualization of our particular findings within those of other studies, and it benefitted from the overall synergy of both theoretical and policy implications for the exploration of identities and social action.

15 In the Kosovan case, we found 'Muslimness' to be one of the markers of ethnic/national identity boundaries and difference; in the Kurdish case, it was one of the common (and therefore, for most, almost irrelevant) collective characteristics that they shared with their national hegemonic Other, namely, the Turks; and, finally, in the Somali case, it was for many a central cultural and religious cluster of collective and individual identity narratives and practices.

16 Erene Kaptani and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Participatory theatre as a research methodology: identity, performance and social action among refugees', *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 13, no. 5, 2008, at www.socresonline.org.uk/13/5/2.html (viewed 16 April 2010); Erene Kaptani and Nira Yuval-Davis, "'Doing" embodied research: participatory theatre as a sociological research tool', *Qualitative Researcher*, no. 9, September 2008, 8–10; Erene Kaptani and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Performing identities: participatory theatre among refugees', in Margaret Wetherell (ed.), *Theorizing Identities and Social Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

17 'Identity and Social Action: Contemporary Identity Practices', Royal Institute of British Architecture, London, 24 September 2008.

What is identity?

'We live in a world where identity matters.'¹⁸ Stuart Hall argues that what he calls 'a veritable discursive explosion' in recent years around the concept of identity is due to its centrality to the question of agency and politics, including identity politics.¹⁹ In my own work,²⁰ I sharply differentiate between identity and identity politics, describing the first as one analytical dimension in which belonging needs to be understood, and the second as a specific type of project of the politics of belonging.

Belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. Belonging assumes boundaries of belonging and is thus exclusive as well as inclusive. The politics of belonging are comprised of specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very specific ways. Central to these projects is the construction and reproduction of particular boundaries of belonging according to some specific principles that can be of many different kinds, from the phenotypical to the social. Identity politics tend to elevate specific location categories of belonging, assume a necessary and homogeneous narrative of primordial or quasi-primordial (that is, 'strategic') attachment to social groupings, which are assumed or need to be constituted around shared locations and demand prioritized political loyalty as a matter of course. This usually includes an acceptance of a particular leadership as the authoritative representative of the identity category/grouping as well as an authoritative interpreter of what it is to be a 'real' Black, woman, Muslim and so on.²¹

Identities in the theoretical framework presented here are conceived as narratives, stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be.²² This construction of reflective identity, treating 'oneself as another', provides the 'narrative component of the comprehension of self'.²³ Margaret

18 Paul Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the detours of identity', in Kathryn Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage 1997), 299–343 (301).

19 Stuart Hall, 'Who needs identity?', in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage 1996), 1–17 (1–2).

20 See, for example, Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Women, ethnicity and empowerment', *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1994, 179–97; Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'; and Yuval-Davis, *Intersectional Politics of Belonging*.

21 Anna Yeatman, 'Minorities and the politics of difference', *Political Theory Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1992, 1–11; Yuval-Davis, 'Women, ethnicity and empowerment'; Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'.

22 Denis-Constant Martin, 'The choices of identity', *Social Identities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, 5–20.

23 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. from the French by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), 201.

Wetherell has argued that identity narratives provide people with a sense of 'personal order'.²⁴ I will argue that identities are not just personal—and in some way are never just personal—and that collective identity narratives provide a collective sense of order and meaning. At the same time, as Adriana Cavarero emphasizes, 'narration reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it'.²⁵ This is particularly important because, as Hall emphasizes, the production of identities is always 'in process', never complete, contingent and multiplex.²⁶ In this sense, 'order' should not be seen as the equivalent of 'coherence', but rather points to a sense of agency and continuity that encompasses changes, contestations, even ruptures within the identity boundaries of the individual and/or collective subject. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out in her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', a narrative of identity is a necessary condition for the existence of any notion of agency and subjectivity.²⁷

Identity narratives can be verbal, but they can also be constructed as specific practices.²⁸ While Alasdair MacIntyre conceives identity practices as 'embodied narration in a single life',²⁹ I would argue that such 'embodied narrations' are even more crucial in the construction and reproduction of collective identities. Not all identity narratives are about belonging to particular groupings and collectivities: they can, for instance, be about individual attributes, body images, vocational aspirations or sexual prowess. However, even such stories as these often relate, directly or indirectly, to the perceptions of self and/or Others of what being a member of such a grouping or collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious) might mean. Narratives of identities can be more or less stable in different social contexts, more or less coherent, more or less authorized and/or contested by self and Others, depending on the specific situational factors, and can reflect routinized constructions of everyday life or those of significant moments of crisis and transformation. They include both cognitive and emotional dimensions with varying degrees of attachment.

Identities, as verbal and non-verbal narratives of self, occupy a different analytical dimension than other components of belonging: social locations, on the one hand, and normative values, on the other.³⁰ Social locations relate

24 Margaret Wetherell, 'The Programme: futures, conviviality and paradigm bending', introductory paper, ESRC Identities and Social Action Residential Conference, University of Aston, Birmingham, 11–12 July 2006.

25 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 3.

26 Hall, 'Who needs identity?'.

27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?' [1988], in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press 1994), 66–111.

28 Anne-Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (Oxford: Berg 2000).

29 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1981), 140.

30 Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'.

to the positioning of people, in particular times and in particular spaces, along intersecting (or, rather, mutually constitutive) grids of social power.³¹ Normative values relate to the ways specific belonging/s are evaluated and judged. These three analytical dimensions relate to each other but cannot be reduced to each other. This is important in order to be able to counter some of the analytical problems that tend to emerge when dealing with identity issues.

One such problem often arises in identity politics discourses and can be summed up as two related kinds of reductionism. One equates social categories with social groupings, and assumes not only that all those who belong to a certain social category also belong to a specific social grouping, but also that, as such, they all have the same attachment and the same understanding of that social category *cum* identity. This comes together with a tendency to essentialize people and their identities by privileging just one social category in which they are located, claiming it as the determining factor that defines that person's identity—as a woman, as a Black, as a member of the working class and so on—or, at best, as a fragment of such a social category—as a black woman, as a white member of the working class and so on. An analysis that separates locations in social categories and membership and/or identification with particular social groupings can also investigate what brings certain people under certain conditions to identify or not with particular identity groupings, rather than constructing social location as social destiny.³²

Another set of analytical problems—almost of the opposite kind—can emerge as a result of certain methodological practices used in studying identities. A debate that took place in a workshop on identity theory at the 2008 ESRC conference 'Identity and Social Action: Contemporary Identity Practices', for instance, concerned the question of whether macro social categories, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and so on, were actually that important for people's identities. Those who argued for this position maintained that, when researchers conducted conversation analysis, people often did not relate to these macro dimensions when they described themselves in everyday life. In complete contrast to identity politics discourses, in which identity categories are reduced to social location categories, such a position holds that they are irrelevant. However, I would

31 Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, 'Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2004, 75–86; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–142; Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and feminist politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, 193–209.

32 For an elaboration of the ontological bases of different social categories of location, their number and the relationship between them, see Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and feminist politics'.

argue, following many other feminist epistemologists,³³ that the fact that identity narratives in everyday life often do not mention people's social positionings does not mean that their gaze at the world is not situated and affected by those positionings, as there is no 'view from nowhere',³⁴ and someone's particular concerns and perspectives are affected by—but not reduced to—their particular locations. Similarly, as discussed below, this does not mean that, when people construct, contest and authorize particular identity narratives, they do not use particular collective cultural resources that are more or less accessible for people in particular social positionings.

The narrative approach is considered in the literature to be just one particular approach to the theorization of identities.³⁵ My position here, however, is that the narrative approach encompasses, as well as being implied by, other major approaches to the study of identity, such as the performative and the dialogical, which are, at the same time, also very different from each other in their understanding of the identity question.

Performative identities

'Man', claims the anthropologist Victor Turner, 'is *homo performans* . . . in the sense that man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, reflexive: in performing he reveals himself to himself'.³⁶ Indeed, in Talcott Parsons's theoretical paradigm, social life is all about playing social roles.³⁷ Parsons assumes a certain separation of 'the person' from the role s/he is playing. The same assumption can be seen even in Erving Goffman's classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in which he analyses the whole of social life as a theatrical occasion. As Steph Lawler argues, identity is understood as performance 'not because it is "false" but because that is precisely how even truthful forms of identity get to be done'.³⁸

In *Gender Trouble*, her influential performative approach to identity construction, Judith Butler, following Foucault and Lacan,³⁹ constructs the subject within the performative discourse. For her, 'performativity' is

33 See, for example, Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1991); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Women* (London: Free Association 1991); and Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Standpoint theory, situated knowledge and the situated imagination', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2002, 315–33.

34 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

35 See, for example, Lawler, *Identity*, and Williams, *Making Identity Matter*.

36 Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage*, 72.

37 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Tavistock Publications 1952).

38 Lawler, *Identity*, 9.

39 See Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?' [1968], in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, trans. from the French by J. Harani (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1986), 101–20; and Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*.

understood not as 'the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains'.⁴⁰ However, the discourse is not just a given, it has a history: it 'accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices'.⁴¹

For Robin Williams,⁴² the greatest weakness of Butler's approach is that, following Foucault,⁴³ she theorizes identity and subject production more as a grammatical than as a speaking entity: 'the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation.'⁴⁴ These quotations demonstrate Butler's anti-humanist stance in which identities as performative discourses do not depend on particular people to narrate them, although, for their performativity to be effective, people need to continue to narrate them. In this sense, the authoritative discourse plays a similar role to a pre-given text of a theatre play that can be performed by any dramatic cast.

But plays have plots, and the plot is what characterizes narrative, according to Paul Ricoeur.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, even in Butler's work, identity narratives cannot be seen as completely consumed by the notion of performativity. Unlike in *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests in *Bodies that Matter* a notion of performance, such as an act of 'drag', that can be subversive rather than performative, as 'it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality'.⁴⁶ As Terry Lovell points out, this is where agency can be found in Butler's work.⁴⁷

In the performative approach to identity theorization, then, identity narratives can be constructed within, counter to or outside predetermined social discourses. What is hardly discussed in performative theorizations, however, is out of what and how—except for repetition and an assumption of social power and authority—these discourses themselves get constructed.

40 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge 1993), 2.

41 Ibid., 227.

42 Williams, *Making Identity Matter*, 78.

43 Foucault, 'What is an author?', 108.

44 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1997), 10–11.

45 Ricoeur, 'Life in quest of narrative'.

46 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 125.

47 Terry Lovell, 'Resisting with authority: historical specificity, agency and the performative self', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2003, 1–17. See also Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity 1992).

Dialogical identities

This last question constitutes the centre of a very different theoretical approach to identity theorization that follows from Bakhtin's work,⁴⁸ but also from that of the Chicago School of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead.⁴⁹ It emphasizes another aspect of theatre practice, namely, dialogue, as the constitutive element of identity construction. To use Bakhtin's words:

to be, means to be for the other and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory, he is always on the boundary; looking within himself he looks in the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other. I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other; finding the other in me in mutual reflection and perception.⁵⁰

The dialogical construction of identity, then, is both reflective and constitutive. It is not individual or collective, but involves both in an in-between perpetual state of 'becoming' in which processes of identity construction, authorization and contestation take place. It is important to emphasize, however, that dialogical processes, by themselves, are not an alternative to understanding identity constructions as informed by power relations. Just the opposite: analysing the processes by which identity narratives are constructed in the communal context is vital in order to understand the ways intersectional power relations operate within the group. Otherwise one can easily fall into the trap of identity politics, which assumes the same positioning and identifications for all members of the group and, thus, understands each member, in principle, as a 'representative' of the grouping and an equal contributor to the collective narrative. This, of course, is virtually never the case. It is for this reason that dialogical understandings of identity construction often lead to studies of identity constructions via conversation or narrative analysis in which the actions and interactions of ordinary people become the primary focus of direct enquiry.⁵¹ Such a

48 See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. from the Russian by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: University of Manchester Press 1984).

49 See Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, and Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*.

50 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 311–12; see also Williams, *Making Identity Matter*, 90.

51 See, for example, Deirdre Boden and Don H. Zimmerman (eds), *Talk and Social Structure: Studies in Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1991); Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, ed. Gail Jefferson, 2 vols (Oxford: Blackwell 1992); and D. Silverman, *Discourses of Counselling: HIV Counselling as Social Interaction* (London: Sage 1997).

narrative analysis was also very useful in analysing the narratives of our participatory theatre sessions.⁵²

Unlike the performative approach to identity, then, the dialogical approach does not necessarily assume predetermined narratives of identities, although, in many cases, common cultural resources and meanings, as well as common signifiers of identity, will be used as building blocks of the narratives. Nevertheless, although the successful dialogical process is accumulative, it provides its participants with the space for exploring new possibilities, changes and contestations, as well as the utilization of the diverse experiences and resources of the participants in the dialogue. Nevertheless, participants do not necessarily allow the development of common transversal epistemologies that step out of existing bounded discourses.⁵³

Whatever kinds of dialogues are involved in identity constructions, authorizations and contestations, the dialogical approach can be seen as assuming the construction of identities as specific narratives that collude or diverge from each other in the on-going process of 'becoming' involved in the dialogical process. In this way, like the performative approach to the study of identities, it can be encompassed by the theoretical perspective that defines identities as narratives.

Beyond 'us' and 'them'

The argument here so far, then, is that identities should be understood as specific forms of narratives regarding the self and its boundaries. And, also, that both performative and dialogical theorizations of identity can be compatible with such a conceptual approach, and can be used to highlight different modes of identity construction and practice. Moreover, one could also argue that the two approaches are often implied in each other: that dialogical processes have been involved in the construction of normative discourses within which identities are performed, and that such discourses are at least part of the collective resources used in the dialogical process of identity construction. The issue, however, is not just the manner in which identity narratives are being produced, but also whether their production implies any particular relationship between self and non-self. Judith Butler argues that the construction of identities depends on excess: there is always something left outside, once the boundaries of specific identities have been constructed.⁵⁴ In this sense all identities are exclusive, as well as inclusive.

52 Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 'Participatory theatre as a research methodology'; Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, "'Doing" embodied research'.

53 See the further discussion and clarification of transversal epistemologies and politics below.

54 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

One might argue that such a statement amounts to no more than a linguistic truism. However, an important counter argument to Butler would be Jessica Benjamin's claim that, by incorporating identifications into the notion of the subjective self, psychoanalysis has put in doubt the clear separation of self and non-self.⁵⁵ Wendy Holloway claims that both the British object relations and the American relational schools of psychoanalysis are radically relational, and that the unconscious does not observe the boundaries of the physical individual.⁵⁶ Moreover, it can be argued that similar reservations about a total separation between self and non-self are implied in the theorizations of the in-between 'becoming' of the dialogical approach. Charles Cooley argues: 'Self and other do not exist as mutually exclusive social facts.'⁵⁷ The way in which identities are perceived to be constructed within predetermined discourses in the performative approach also throws doubt on the clear separation of self and non-self in the construction of the subject.

And yet, psychoanalysis also dedicates a central space in its theorizations to the moment in which the baby, or the child, acquires a sense of a separate self. Similarly, the relationships between 'me', 'us' and the individual or collective 'other' are often at the heart of various narratives of identity. This apparent incongruity can be explained by the fact that the argument regarding the partial non-separation of self and (individual or collective) non-self relates to the original processual moment of the construction of identity narratives. The separation relates to the content of these narratives, what they usually say about the nature and the boundaries of the 'self' they construct.

This corresponds with Lacan's view that the moment of the construction of the subject is also the moment of the realization of the separateness of self from m/other, and that this moment is imaginary, a fantasy, and therefore also the moment of self-alienation.⁵⁸ What Lacan calls the 'mirror stage' is the metaphorical (or real) moment in which the mother/parental figure holds a mirror in front of the child and s/he recognizes her/his difference from the mother as the non-self. At the same time, the mother is also the one who guarantees the validity of the fictitious self to the child. Fictitious, as Stuart Hall points out,⁵⁹ because the image in the mirror is frozen in time,

55 Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*.

56 Wendy Holloway, 'Relationality: the intersubjective foundations of identity', in Margaret Wetherell and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Identities* (London and Los Angeles: Sage 2010), 216–32.

57 Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, 92.

58 Jacques Lacan, 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je' [1949], in Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil 1966), 93–101; Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction II', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (London: Macmillan 1982), 27–58.

59 Hall, 'Who needs identity?'.

a fixed image, unlike the perpetual ongoing movement and change of the actual child. I would argue that the Lacanian mirror image and that of other psychoanalysts—including D. W. Winnicott, for instance, according to whom the mother does not hold the mirror to the child but embodies the mirror herself⁶⁰—is fictitious also in another way, namely, to the extent that the notion of difference and separateness learned at this moment of mirror recognition (or, rather, attribution) is that of sexual difference. The image of the body can (and does, in real social life) teach us also about many other embodied elements of social difference relating to ethnicity/race, age, class and so on, as well as those of sex and gender.

Unlike many psychoanalysts, social psychologists like Cooley and Mead have used the reflexive image in a much more generic social way.⁶¹ In the dialogical manner in which they describe the construction of self, the reflexivity is based on how Significant Others perceive the self, and, in this model, not just 'the mother' but all Significant Others. Or—as in Jean Paul Sartre's play about hell, *No Exit* (1989)—all available Others, under conditions of total institutionalization,⁶² or extreme racialization.⁶³

The need for mirroring, for self-understanding via the gaze of the Other, is profound, among other reasons because, as Hannah Arendt argued, a person cannot reflect on her beginning (birth) or end (death).⁶⁴ As a result, Arendt held, before the moment a person dies, the ultimate meaning, the ultimate story of the person, cannot be conceived. Given the extensive personal, political and scientific contestation involved in the biographies of historical persons, I would argue that, even after death, such unitary ultimate meaning cannot be found. Adriana Cavarero does not accept that a person's identity can be determined only after death,⁶⁵ but she accepts Arendt's point of the ultimate inability of a person to tell their own identity story. Rather, she argues that identity narratives can basically only be told to a person by others, and locates in this the desire to hear one's story from others (mirroring, to use the terminology above) as central not only to constructions of identity but also to social relations.

Whatever the significance for the construction of self-identity, the mere recognition that Others exist creates the need not only to assess in what ways and to what extent one is different from those Others but also for a

60 D. W. Winnicott, 'Mirror-role of mother and family in child development' [1967], in D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications 1971), 111–18.

61 Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, and Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*.

62 See Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1968).

63 See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press 1967).

64 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958).

65 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*.

decision, explicit or not, on how to treat those Others. As Zygmunt Bauman argues,⁶⁶ such a decision is precultural, emerging once there is a realization that Others exist. Although, as I have argued,⁶⁷ the normative dimension, like the social location dimension, cannot be collapsed into the identificatory dimension of belonging, people's values and ethical decisions play a crucial role in the way identities are constructed, contested and authorized.

This is why Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser,⁶⁸ following Lévinas and Benjamin,⁶⁹ call the move from separating from the Other to recognizing the Other, via the mirror stage, an ethical act. However, unlike them, I would argue that recognition is double-edged: rejection as well as acceptance of the recognized Other is possible. Moreover, the act of recognition itself constructs boundaries that can operate among constructions of 'us' as well as those of 'me/us' and 'them'.

Identity theories often emphasize that identities are relational, the necessary 'excess' mentioned by Butler above. However, highlighting the fact that this relationality is not homogeneous, and can be very different in nature, is of vital importance for any theorization of identity, belonging or their constructions of boundaries. I would like now, therefore, to outline briefly four generic relations of the self and non-self in which recognition has very different implications: 'me' and 'us'; 'me'/'us' and 'them'; 'me'/'us' and 'others'; 'me' and the transversal 'us/them'. However, whatever kinds of boundaries are constructed between the 'me' and the 'not me', it is vital to emphasize not only that those boundaries are shifting and contested, but also that they do not have to be symmetrical. In other words, inclusion or exclusion is often not mutual, depending on the power positionality and normative values of the social actors as well as, and in relation to, their cognitive and emotional identifications.

'Me' and 'us'

Reflexivity has been considered a characteristic of modernity.⁷⁰ However, even in modernity, most people at most times would consider themselves 'naturally' belonging to, being part of, particular familial, local, ethnic and

66 Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell 1995).

67 Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'.

68 Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser, 'Thinking, recognition and otherness', *Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 90, no. 6, 2003, 771–89.

69 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1985), and Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*.

70 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press/Malden, MA: Blackwell 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage 1992); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1991).

national collectivities. Michael Ignatieff argues that 'to belong' means to feel safe.⁷¹ Ghassan Hage claims that for a person to feel 'at home' requires the combined effect of familiarity, security, community and a sense of possibility.⁷²

This sense of belonging, of feeling at home, therefore, reflects the existence of a permeable boundary between 'self' and 'us' that, by definition, is not imagined as exclusionary. There can be occasions in which the crucial boundaries for identity construction are those around 'us' rather than those around the individual self, and the boundaries between 'me' and 'us' can even disappear altogether. An extreme illustrative example of this is the readiness of (some) parents to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children or of (some) soldiers to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their 'homeland'. In such constructions there is no possible identity narrative of self that would not be constructed in relation to and as part of the familial or the national 'us'. So much so that the identity narrative (namely, 'me') can sustain the biological end (namely, death) of the individual self rather than the contemplated threatened end of the collective self (namely, 'us').

We found such identity narratives among the political activists in the refugee population we studied. And some interesting intergenerational conflicts in which, for example, the daughter of a political activist dared to claim that the damage done to her and her brother by their father abandoning the family in order to fight for years in a foreign country was not justified by the collective political cause of national liberation.

'Me'/'us' and 'them'

A dichotomous, zero-sum way of constructing a boundary between 'me'/'us' and 'them' is, indeed, characteristic of situations of extreme conflict and war in which the individual's fate is perceived, at least by hegemonic discourses of identity, to be closely bound with their membership of a particular collectivity. In such situations the individual's agency, their value system, their particular location within the collectivity, even their actions, can be perceived to be irrelevant, by one or both sides. In our research, Kaptani and I found such identity narratives occurring whenever the theatre work focused on extreme, racialized situations, whether they involved encounters with agents of the state or with members of civil society. In such cases, the relationality of the identity construction was that of complete

71 Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2001).

72 Ghassan Hage, 'At home in the entrails of the West: multiculturalism, "ethnic food" and migrant home-building', in Helen Grace, Ghassan Hage, Lesley Johnson, Julie Langsworth and Michael Symonds (eds), *Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Western Sydney* (Sydney: Pluto Press 1997), 99–153 (102).

exclusion and negation, and was often accompanied by the demonization of the Other. It is important to emphasize, however, that such exclusionary and degrading identity boundaries can also exist, in Benjamin's sense, within the psyche,⁷³ as Franz Fanon and others have described in relation to black identities.⁷⁴

'Me'/'us' and the many 'others'

It is of crucial importance, however, not to reduce all others to the Other. In our research Kaptani and I also found that, in identity narratives that related to most daily situations, there were no such dichotomous divisions between 'us' and 'them', and that people's social worlds were of much more complex natures, with a whole range of distinctions and relations between people, from close identification and association, to total indifference, as well as rejection and conflict. As we have demonstrated,⁷⁵ the participatory theatre techniques we used proved to be an extremely useful tool in illustrating this. This is not only because of the great variety of stories and illustrative moments with which people shared their lives with us and with each other, but also because of their readiness to assume very different dramatic roles in different theatrical situations, including roles that they did not necessarily feel represented them or their ultimate Other. Paul Gilroy's notion of 'conviviality' relates to the fact that, in many social contexts, identity boundaries between 'us' and 'them' can become banalized and accepted.⁷⁶ Chantal Mouffe talks about agonistic 'friendly enemies' as essential to the functioning of a democratic society.⁷⁷ Moreover, as Ali Rattansi demonstrates, even among racist individuals, not every narrative relating to the Other is racialized in every context.⁷⁸ The relationality of identity narratives is much more complex than that, especially in discourses of everyday life.

'Me' and the transversal 'us'

Discourses of belonging often relate to membership in the 'primordial' collectivities discussed above or to other long-term spatial, professional or friendship groupings. Transversal politics developed as an alternative to identity politics and are often aimed at establishing a collective 'us', across borders and boundaries of membership, based on solidarity with regard to

⁷³ Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other*.

⁷⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁷⁵ Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 'Participatory theatre as a research methodology'; Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, '"Doing" embodied research'.

⁷⁶ Paul Gilroy, 'Melancholia or conviviality: the politics of belonging in Britain', *Soundings*, no. 29, Spring 2005, 35–46.

⁷⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso 2000).

⁷⁸ Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997).

common emancipatory values. As I have elaborated elsewhere,⁷⁹ transversal politics are based, first, on a dialogical standpoint epistemology, the recognition that from each positioning the world is seen differently and that, thus, any knowledge based on just one positioning is 'unfinished' (as opposed to 'invalid').⁸⁰ Therefore, the only way to approach 'the truth' is through dialogue between people of different positionings, the wider the better.

Second, transversal politics are based on the principle that difference is encompassed by equality. The recognition, on the one hand, that differences are important but, on the other hand, that they should be contained by, rather than replace, notions of equality. Differences are not hierarchical and there is an assumption of an a priori respect for the positionings of Others, which includes acknowledgement of differences in social, economic and political power.

Third, transversal politics differentiate—both conceptually and politically—between social location, identity and values. People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or category can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (such as class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle and so on). At the same time, people with similar positioning and/or identity can have very different social and political values. The boundaries of transversal dialogue are those of common values rather than those of common positionings or identifications. As such, the participants in transversal politics constitute one variant of what Alison Assiter calls 'epistemological communities',⁸¹ in which the boundaries of the community are constructed around common knowledge and values rather than membership in collectivities. Another variant of such epistemological communities would be educational and apprenticeship groupings in which teachers transfer knowledge and values to their students, or membership in the same political or religious group in which those who join absorb both by tuition and osmosis the knowledge and values of the group.

79 Yuval-Davis, 'Women, ethnicity and empowerment'; Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1997); Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Human/women's rights and feminist transversal politics', in Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp (eds), *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights* (New York: New York University Press 2006). See also Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter (eds), *Transversal Politics*, a special issue of *Soundings*, no. 12, Summer 1999.

80 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston and London: Unwin Hyman 1990).

81 Alison Assiter, *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge 1996).

Answering 'the Stuart Hall challenge'

This article argues that the notion of identity can be useful once we define it in a specific enough way, namely, as a specific kind of narrative in which people tell themselves and others who they are, who they are not and who/how they would like to/should be. At the same time, for such an understanding of identity to be most useful, it needs to be understood as encompassing both performative and dialogical approaches. The first can teach us much about how identity narratives are practised in counter- and predetermined discourses; the second can teach us how identity narratives are constructed, socially certainly but, as we have seen in the works of relational psychoanalysis, the sociality and relationality—congruent or conflictual—also extends into the individual psyche.

The sociality of identity narratives is produced either within existing social normative discourses and/or dialogically, combining individual and collective resources. These narratives are contingent and are continuously being (re)constructed, reinterpreting the past while moving forwards temporally. They can be more—or less—multiple and complex, contested and contradictory. Identities assume boundaries, but these can be more or less naturalized, more or less individuated, more or less politicized. However, the boundaries of self, or even of 'us', do not necessarily depend on dichotomous divisions of 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them'. Except for specific historical conditions and political projects, the realm of the 'not-me' is much more multiplex and multilayered, in which different 'not-me's go about their business without necessarily constituting a relational role, let alone an antagonistic role, *vis-à-vis* the self. Contemporary boundaries of belonging can, then, be banalized but can also be fixed in particular contexts by various racialized and securitized identity narratives. At the same time, they can also be transcended in various transversal epistemological and political projects. Most importantly, this article points out that narratives of identity are inevitably about boundaries and definitions of the 'not me' as well as the 'me', while they cannot be reduced either to boundaries of social locations or to a set of normative values that determine how such boundaries should be assessed.

Finding out what are the boundaries and the definition of the 'not me' in particular discourses, how they relate to particular intersectional social locations, on the one hand, and particular sets of normative and political values, on the other hand, is the task of social research that no theorization can replace. This is, therefore, the ultimate answer to 'the Stuart Hall challenge' presented at the beginning of the article. It is also the linchpin that connects questions of identity to questions of social action.

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