Introduction

Culture & Identity: an introduction

Jon Austin

There is perhaps no more frequently used word in the current literature in the social sciences, humanities or related new 'discipline' areas such as cultural studies than 'identity'. Identity is a contemporary buzzword, a 'keyword' as Williams (1976, p 13) termed it, and as such has come to assume multiple meanings. Defining identity as a term would appear to be relatively simple: it is who we are, individually and collectively. Commonsensically, identity is the descriptive knapsack that carries all of the elements that reflect, name or constitute us as who we are at a particular point in time. A very common experience for many (perhaps most) people is to identify and be identified in very mundane, unexceptional and thereby unthinking ways: female, young, Generation X, baby boomer, metal head, or whatever. Most of us, thinkingly or unthinkingly, categorize and classify those we encounter in our daily lives in such linguistic or discursive ways. We "sum them up" very rapidly and attach certain expectations and assumptions to our judgments and shorthand labels, despite these often resulting from the most fleeting of engagements. Increasingly, our judgments about who people are are based upon vicarious experiences: that is, we may not have ever met those we judge, but have "experienced" them second-hand, as it were, through various forms of media.

Despite such seeming ordinariness and simplicity, identity is a very complex matter and has attracted the interest of intellectual workers across an increasingly diverse range of disciplines or areas of study. This attention has meant that the unstated everydayness of identity has been subject to very close scrutiny, and, accordingly, our understanding of the nature, impact and effects of identity work has been rendered far more problematic as a result of these interrogations of the process of identity formation and as a result of the exposure of the invisible workings of identifying and being identified as this or that. Janet Helms, for example, working in the area of race theory, described identity as *'a sense of group or collective identity based on one's <u>perceptions</u> that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group*' (Helms, 1993, p 3). Similarly, the social theorist Weeks defined identity as being:

> *about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality…At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others* (Weeks, 1990, p 88).

The assumptive aspect of identity is important to note here - the individual assumes an identity, claims it for her- or himself based on a feeling or perception of commonality with

others whose essential characteristics are able to be identified, named and compared, and ultimately accorded value. In many ways, those shared characteristics are what from some perspectives constitute culture.

Similarly to the word 'identity', culture as a semantic term has undergone considerable development and evolution of meaning over the past fifty or so years. Culture in one anthropological sense means the way of life of a group of people, something people have and live. In this view, culture is that thing that is the focus of social educative processes: education functions to induct new members of the group into the cultural ways of that group. Typically, this *National Geographic* view of culture has tended to see culture as belonging to a 'people', to a reasonably coherent and definable tribe, or ethnic group.

More recently, the notion of culture has developed in two significant directions. Firstly, culture has come to be seen as something people construct in their daily interactions. Rather than being something that exists almost independently of those who live it (that is, culture as reified), culture is seen as organic and intricately connected to social construction processes. This means that culture is always being formed (constructed) and developed, and that such development will display wide ranges of variation across a supposedly uniform cultural group. As such, it becomes quite difficult to collapse diverse experiences of a "culture" into a single description, such as "Australian culture" or "Asian culture" and the like.

 The second development of the concept of culture has been into what some might call micro social groupings: we read of the culture of the street gang; of the touring rock band; of gangsta groups; of corporate interests and the like. As teachers, many of us are urgently seeking to come to terms with the rapidly morphing and transforming cultures of schools and other educational institutions. One interesting example of this micro- exploration of culture is captured in McCarthy, Hudak, Miklaucic and Saukko's 1999 edited text *Sound Identities*{McCarthy, 1999 #503}, wherein various youth identities and cultural groups that are either centred on or achieve voice through various popular cultural musical genres are explored.

This current book is a collection of introductory essays on aspects of many of the faces of culture and the various forms of identity that connect with or are resistant to a number of contemporary cultural contexts. Essentially, the book provides material to assist the reader in coming to personal understandings of identity in three broad categories, each formulated around one of three key questions:

- Who am I?
- Who are we?
- What does this mean for educators?

In responding to the first question, the early chapters present ideas on the formation of individual identity and of the possibilities for personal and professional self-understanding through explorations of the self through autoethnographic research work. While there can be no denying the psychological dimension to identity formation, the tenor of these chapters is one more rooted in contemporary social theory, (including the three posts: postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism) and cultural studies.

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The middle chapters move on to address the question of what it means to be Australian in contemporary times. Historical tributaries of the stream of images of Australianeity are here merged with considerations of what national identity means in a culturally globalising world. The final chapters look to the possibilities for teachers and forms of pedagogy that might take the questions, concerns and uncertainties of identity and turn these into powerful strategies for positive social change.

Australian social commentators have chronicled both the ricochets of rapid social change and the social conditions attendant upon that change. A decade ago, Mackay described the contemporary period as one of '*unprecedented social, cultural, political, economic and technological change in which the Australian way of life is being radically redefined*'; a time when '<u>*all*</u> *Australians are becoming New Australians as we struggle partly to adapt to the changes going on around us, and partly to shape them to our own liking*' (Mackay, 1993,p 6 emphasis in the original).

In attempting to unravel the manifestations of the Big Angst, Mackay asked a seminal question: '*Why, as we move into the middle of the 1990's, should Australia be in the grip of an epidemic of anxiety?*' (Mackay, 1993, p 15). In answering this question, he identifies what he sees as the underlying problem for contemporary Australian society - that is, that the Age of Anxiety is, in reality, nothing other than a symptom of a more apposite description of the era: the Age of Redefinition. In this age - which by Mackay's reckoning commenced over twenty years ago - the very certainties of identity and belonging have been eroded such that '*growing numbers of Australians feel as if their personal identities are under threat... 'Who are we?' soon leads to the question, 'Who am I?'* (Mackay, 1993, p 19).

In the space of a few weeks, prominent Australian mass media outlets carried articles and commentaries about the question of Australian identity: "*Wave away any notion of identity – it's too early yet*"(SMH 26-27 Jan, 2002, p 24); *Australians all let us rejoice, but pick another day* (SMH 26-27 Jan, 2002, p 27). National ABC radio broadcast an interview with environmental scientist and author, Tim Flannery, who argued the point that the only thing Australians really have in common, in identity terms, is the land. This is the physical space we share and develop various forms and experiences of connection to. One suspects that current inmates of the Woomera detention center have constructed different connections to this land than those forged by most other Australia-dwellers.

Prominent Australian artists reflect on the question of Australian identity, and not only through their more usual artistic media (*It's scary, says Carey* SMH 19-20 Jan 2002, p35) Internationally-acclaimed expatriate writer, Peter Carey, twice winner of the Booker Prize, in presenting the inaugural John Batman Australia Day speech, talked of his '[obsession] *with finding out who we are*' and suggested that the quest for such understanding was a highly intellectual endeavour wherein Australian artists and writers have a very important role to play.

In all of this, the critical question, though, remains: "What is the role of schools in this crucial quest for national and personal identification?" While some cultural and educational theorists argue that the social vitality of the school in contemporary society is seriously under

challenge (threat?) from other public pedagogies such as corporate culture and mass media (Giroux, 2000), we would like to make a case for the school to be seen as a vibrant site for deep critical identity work to both begin and to flourish. We would hope that this introductory collection of readings might provoke some thinking about the essential human questions of *who am I?* and *who are we?*

While these are important questions in and of themselves, as educators concerned to ply our trade in pursuit of social betterment, we would hope that the responses to these questions would ultimately lead to the consideration of the crucial question : *Who do we want to become?* Understanding ourselves as individual identities rooted within various cultural and sub-cultural groupings that change over time is a crucial step towards understanding, respecting and working towards the emancipation of alterities that hide within the spaces of our classrooms.

While we hope that each of the chapters in this book contributes to a growing understanding of issues of identity and that each chapter, thereby, displays obvious connections to and commonalities with the others, each of the authors brings their own ideological and philosophical positions – their subjectivities – to the writing process. As such, we trust the differences in approach and position in some way makes for a more varied and interesting reading (in several senses of that word) of the this text.

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Section 1

Theorizing Identity & Self

1. Identity & Identity Formation

Jon Austin

CONSIDERING IDENTITY

It seems that everywhere one looks at present, the notion of 'identity' is being discussed. From very dense intellectual publications to the popular press; from Pete Townsend asking, in the Who's classic 1978 track, 'Who Are You?' to Sandra Bullock's invisibility as a result of identity theft in the movie 'The Net', identity is a topic of contemporary significance.

Our identity is something we deal with and trade in on a daily basis, from the use of plastic cards to borrow books or hire movies, to numerical representations of that identity in PINs to the production of formal certification of our identity. For intending teachers, the importance of establishing our identity for the purpose of establishing our suitability to work with children is but one example of this focus on identity.

Many everyday uses of the term 'identity' fit within the types of scenarios described in the preceding paragraphs. However, when one thinks a little more deeply about this, one comes to realize that what is really meant here is not 'identity' but 'identification' – what we produce and wear, key-in or display more frequently <u>identifies</u> us: we carry and can produce suitable <u>identification</u>. These things are not more than a (very small) part of our <u>identity</u>, and that part is usually only the legalistic, surface-level labeling of each of us as individuals. Our names, ages, perhaps addresses reflect some aspects of who we are, but these things in and of themselves are not <u>who</u> we are. For example, names may hint at the types of background we have (witness the difficulties faced by Australians with 'Middle Eastern-sounding' names after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001). Our birthdate and age may suggest certain characteristics or features of our attitudes, clothing styles and music preferences. Our photograph may promote ideas about our racial, ethnic or cultural location. All of these are but superficial markers of an assumed identity: features or characteristics that other people take to mean that we <u>are</u> such-and-such. We still need to know what is meant by 'identity'.

As it plays itself out across the social landscape, the question of identity at all sorts of levels presents as a very good example of what Raymond Williams termed a '*key word'*(Williams, 1976), a word or phrase that both captures and directs social discourse or discussion. One thing, though, is apparent: '*identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty*' (Mercer, 1990, p. 43). This is perhaps a good starting point for unraveling what is meant in this text by the word 'identity'.

The current era is characterized by a sufficiently large number of features such that many social theorists, including historians, consider it a particular and peculiar period in history.   The most common description of this era is 'postmodernity', and while this is not a book concerned with the particular details of the postmodern period, it is important to understand something of the essential features of this time in history, primarily because they impact on this thing called 'identity'.

THE POSTMODERN ERA: ESSENTIAL FEATURES

Perhaps the single most pervasive feeling about life today is that nothing seems the way it used to be. For the so-called Baby Boomer generation who grew up within seemingly stable and slow-changing social environments (and this is a very large and significant sector of the Australian population, for example), the increasing rapidity of change in all areas of life is frequently difficult to come to terms with. For younger members of the community, however, this feature perhaps is not that important: Generation X has only ever known a world of multiplicities, rather than singularities. (Is the notion of the postmodern really generation-specific?)

Regardless, a central feature of current times is the lack of singularities. It seems as if there are no single anythings – no 'one size fits all'. In contrast to the previous era – the Modern era or Modernity – postmodernity is characterized by multiplicities, diversity and difference. Where once there were accepted certainties in life, there are no longer such monolithic anchor points for understanding self and others. The effects of the increasing deterioration of many of the purported certainties of social life of the modern era have been the subject matter of social theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his 1984 text, _The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge_ , Lyotard identified and described the effects of living in this new era (the postmodern condition), and his explorations of the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of the postmodern turn have been taken further by seeming hordes of theorists.

In trying to capture what it was that was significantly different or distinguishing about this new era, Lyotard's central premise was that the period is characterised by the breakdown of grand narratives – the social stories (narratives) that provide an overarching (meta) framework for communities to comprehend and make sense of the world. In particular, the metanarrative of science as a universal human problem-solver ('_the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole_' (Lyotard, 1999, p 144)) had been shown to be a fiction, a 'language-robbery' in Barthes idea of mythologies (Barthes, 1957, 1972, p 131) . Lyotard pointed to evidence of the betrayal of modernity's faith in science to lead to greater human comfort and emancipation: for example, the human failure of Auschwitz, and techno-sciences as the origin of rather than scourge of disease (Lyotard, 1999, p 144).

Another related grand or metanarrative was that of 'progress'. This story was one of a continual improvement in the conditions of human life, the idea that things will always get better and that progress – forward movement – was an unquestioned fact of human life. The history of the world, within this story, is one of movement forward towards ever-increasing levels of human happiness. It should be apparent where the narrative/metaphor of science as savior fits here. The postmodern era is characterized by the disintegration of this narrative: the forward movement of humanity is by no

means certain, and in many ways it is arguable that social conditions for increasing numbers of people are worsening rather than improving.

With the removal of the modernist notion of progress from the vortex of hope for the human species, a void has been created at the centre (Solomon, 1998, p 39) leading to the so-called postmodern angst - '*a sort of sorrow in the Zeitgeist*' (Lyotard, 1999, p 144). As Stafford maintains, '*we now live in an amorphous frame of time: a 'post' history where both our knowledge of the past and our confidence about the future have been shaken.*' (Stafford, 1996, 114)

Rutherford describes the general malaise of the postmodern era:

> *'Not belonging', a sense of unreality, isolation and being fundamentally 'out of touch' with the world become endemic in such a culture. The rent in our relation to the exterior world is matched by a disruption in our relation to our selves* (Rutherford, 1990, p.24).

In terms of relevance to the consideration of notions of identity, the postmodern era is characterised by:

- A weakening or fading of the absolutist values of the Western Enlightenment;
- The collapse of foundational myths and master narratives of rationality and progress;
- The fragmentation of traditional sources of authority and identity;
- The displacement of collective sources of membership and belonging;
- The decentring of political consensus and the emergence of differentiated subjectivities ;
- The certainty of uncertainty;
- Multiple perspectives on reality;
- The evaporation of claims of authenticity and the Authentic Self,
- The centrality of communication technologies in providing global access to a culture of mass reproduction and simulacra, or copies of which there is no original. (Baudrillard, 1983; Gitlin, 1998; Lyotard, 1984, 1992; Meehan, 1998; Mercer, 1990; Miller & Real, 1998; Solomon, 1998; Weeks, 1990).

Postmodernism reflects a 'cultural attitude', a multitude of ways of engaging with the daily stories of contemporary struggles to make sense of life:

> *In its most general sense, postmodernism represents a new mode of perception fostered by an age of instant communication: by radio, cinema, and most importantly, by TV. Gazing upon the world as if it were one vast variety show, the postmodern eye perceives the course of human events as a narrativeless and nonsensical series of skits, as one long "Monty Python"* (Solomon, 1998, p 36))

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IDENTITY IN THE POSTMODERN FRAME

When there are no overarching explanations or stories of what it means to be human, it is not possible to identify essential identities. In the postmodern worldview, there is no such thing as an essential "Me", no centering self-identity, no in-born character. There are only roles, images we take up in imitation of other images (Solomon, 1998, p48.), and in this way there is a need for the individual to interrogate what it means to Be. This is why the postmodern era seems almost-obsessively concerned with matters of identity, of what it means to be and to belong.

It is these matters that are the focus of the chapters in this book.

IDENTITY

As a word, 'identity' joins the postmodern lexicon in the company of 'difference' and 'diversity' as key terms for the description of a new social reality. This language of uncertainty segues perfectly into the postmodern motifs of displacement, decentring and disenchantment that play at the core of contemporary society (Mercer, 1990, p 49). Identity as a concept, though, needs to be excavated.

In this chapter and throughout the rest of this book, identity is engaged from a socio-cultural perspective rather than from a psychological one. This is not to deny that the process of identity formation is, in the final instance, inherently individual and dependent upon the interplay of processes of cognition and affect that constitute the world of the psychologist. Rather, this exploration of identity derives from an emphasis on the communal, cultural and sociological ways in which individuals come to be positioned at particular locations. By being anchored to the particular co-ordinates of multiple and fluid locations, the individual and the group take on certain identifying features or characteristics. A crucial point here is that the journey to particular locations on an identity matrix is often an unconscious one: we typically just don't know how we got to be where we find ourselves at any particular point in time. For many of us, it really has been a Magical Mystery Tour.

The assumptive aspect of identity is important to note here - the individual assumes an identity, claims it for her- or himself based on a feeling or perception of commonality with others whose essential characteristics are able to be identified, named and compared, and ultimately accorded value. To a large degree, the assumption of aspects of identity is a largely unconscious process, something that is rarely articulated explicitly. In fact, any attempt to overtly take on particular personality traits or to proclaim identification with a group is likely to be more remarkable than the fact that most of us fall into certain identity positions without thinking about it. Take, for example, the case of people who proclaim their indigeneity, perhaps at some time in their adult life: in effect, they "come out". Such people are very often viewed with suspicion, as if such an assumption of this particular identity location is the result of ulterior motives, usually connected to some perceived financial advantage to be gained. At least in part, the incredulity that often greets such self-outing likely derives from the perceived audacity of someone actually and consciously identifying a preferred location and assuming occupancy of it.

Simultaneously, identity is conferred. In naming oneself – female, white, heterosexual - one names the things that one isn't – not male, not white, not heterosexual. As will be explored further in the

next section of this chapter, this process can be seen as occurring through the construction of dichotomous) relationships (the separation into two contradictory divisions: self/other; insider/outsider; normal/deviant; same/different, and as with the assumptive aspect of identity, this is a largely unconscious process. Again, we tend to position others in certain locations seemingly instantaneously, with little acknowledgement that what we are actually engaged in is a process of sorting and labeling. It is in the labeling part of the process that the effects of dominant or hegemonic views of the world – of "how things are" – assume tremendous significance. Individuals and groups will be categorized and labeled according to seemingly "natural" or everyday commonsensical criteria, and attached to the labels applied are certain ideological accoutrements: if someone or some group is named as this (for example, Baby Boomer), then certain characteristics or qualities automatically follow. The role (and power) of language to call identities or subjectivities into existence is clear: by naming, we ascribe (for more on this, see Nayler, this volume).

The conferring process, the process of conferring on others identity labels or locations, is the other half of the assumptive process: as we claim for ourselves, we bestow on others. But this is a recursive process, since much of how we see ourselves is merely a reflection of the ways in which the rest of the world sees us: we come to internalize images of ourselves that have their points of origin externally to us. The importance of understanding this part of the identity formation process, particularly for those whose professional activity places them in a position to significantly influence the types of messages about Self that others receive (educators or teachers would certainly fall into this position) is extreme. If we are repeatedly served up negative images of ourselves, for example, it is likely that we will come to accept these as "natural" and respond accordingly. In short, the capacity of the individual to self-name is seriously impeded by the tsunami-like wave of societal ascription. When how we see ourselves doesn't fit with the way seemingly everyone else sees us, which view is preferred and which view prevails?

Herein lies one of the areas of possibility for genuinely critical and resistive pedagogical work in schools: working with students – as individuals and as members of groups – to interrogate the ways in which they are placed, named and constrained by dominant social interests and to effect a move from position of Object to that of Subject. This requires, in part, an excavation of the ways in which individuals have been and continue to be "directed" into certain positions by various societal forces, by the public pedagogies of dominant sectors of the community {Giroux, 1994 #326; Giroux, 1999 #495; Giroux, 2000 #494}. In other words, it becomes imperative that notions of identity and the cultures within which identities form are actively engaged and deconstructed so as to open up the emancipatory possibilities resident within the arena of what has come to be termed (and not always approvingly) identity politics.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER

The process of identity-formation and identification requires, and of necessity throws up, what has come to be called the Other. This view of the divided, dissected and incomplete nature of identity has attracted the attention of a number of contemporary theorists, but the subject is by no means one of contemporary making. Bellow (2000) relates a Platonic myth of the origin of and imperative driving the search for the Other part of identity :

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Looking for love, falling in love, you were pining for the other half you had lost, as Aristophanes had said. Only it wasn't Aristophanes at all, but Plato in a speech attributed to Aristophanes. In the beginning men and women were round like the sun and the moon, they were both male and female and had two sets of sexual organs. In some cases both the organs were male. So the myth went. These were proud, self-sufficient beings. They defied the Olympic Gods who punished them by splitting them in half. This is the mutilation that mankind suffered. So that generation after generation we seek the missing half, longing to be whole again.(p. 24)

This process of identity formation (individual or group) which involves constructing an Other has been a much-explored phenomenon (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Hage, 1994; hooks, 1997; JanMohamed, 1985; McLaren, 1995; Mercer, 1990; Said, 1978, 1993; Solomon, 1998; Spivak, 1990; Thompson & Tyagi, 1996; Winant, 1998).

From this perspective, the act of identifying requires the simultaneous act of not-identifying. In the act of coming to represent Self, we project the Other, that identity or thing that is not us. This constant comparative process operates along multiple axes of identity-formation (Pitt, 1997, p 128). This is not to suggest that such axes of difference run parallel to and separate from each other: there is obviously considerable overlapping and criss-crossing. This means that identity is in a constant state of flux and emergence, that it is not an absolute, final achievement: 'Identity then is never a static location, it contains traces of its past and what it is to become' (Rutherford, 1990, p 24)

Each axis or line of identity is bookended by a pair of binary opposite locations: male/female; masculine/feminine; black/white; culture/nature; advanced/primitive; rational/irrational; hard/soft; etc. Identity is formed along, between and among these axes. Identity resides within a matrix of potentialities and possibilities that are constantly in motion, with particular axes assuming greater or lesser importance at particular points in time and place.

In a community or social sense, it is typically the case that one end of an axis will reflect, or come to be associated with, a characteristic of a dominant group. This end of the axis comes to constitute the Centre. The opposite end of the axis marks the Margin or the periphery, the place of naming the least powerful. It is from the Centre that universalising motifs and narratives emerge:

Those terms that are pre-eminent and invested with truth, achieve that status by excluding and marginalising what they are not ...[T]he centre expels its anxieties, contradictions and irrationalities onto the subordinate term, filling it with the antithesis of its own identity. The Other, in its very aliennness, simply mirrors and represents what is deeply familiar to the centre, but projected outside of itself. (Rutherford, 1990, pp 21-22).

The Self becomes the Centre and the Other, that '*repository of our fears and anxieties*' (Rutherford, 1990, p 10), is relegated to the Margin. In this alienating and separating process, the fear of difference becomes sedimented into various exclusionary and discriminatory discourses and material practices: racism, sexism, classism are but some examples. From the Centre, the Margin is a feared and reviled place: it is there that the threats to a secure sense of Centred self reside and fester. It is there that all that has been found unacceptable and expelled from the Centre has been embodied, the Gulag of identity. It is '*dangerous territory*' (Roman & Eyre, 1997) because it is at the margins that the

prospect of disrupting settled identities gathers its bravado and hope. It is here that the challenge to orthodox or acceptable forms of identity gathers force.

The boundary between Centre and Margin is difficult to identify: the demarcation of where one finishes and the other commences is not clear, nor fixed and stable. The power of social expectations (for example, what it means to be Boy or Girl) operates as a disciplining mechanism attempting to force clear and clean identity choices – of locating at either end of the axis.

This disciplining process also works to constrain or prevent the emergence of new identities because it is within the uncertain space of blurred boundaries that new identity possibilities are formulated. Locations that are Not Quite: not quite black but not quite white; not quite old but not quite young. For example, drag queen culture is such a blurred space on the sexuality or gender axis. It throws up possible identity locations that are difficult to capture within the either-or structure that the binary opposites of a Centre-Margin model of identity expect.

New forms and uses of language need to be drawn up to name these new identity locations. language itself becomes a site of contestation and struggle. What this means is that 'there are no ready-made identities or categories that we can slip into. Our struggles for identity and a sense of personal coherence and intelligibility are centred on this threshold between interior and exterior, between self and other' (Rutherford, 1990, p 25, 24). At various points in our lives, our identity will reflect configurations of location along different lines or axes of identity. A depiction of these positionings might look not unlike a collection of guitar chord charts. In other words, the person we currently see ourselves as - our identity – will be but one of an anthology of identities that we inhabit either over several points of time (that is, sequentially) or at the same point in time (simultaneously).

Identity, it should be apparent, is a very complex thing to excavate. It gets us where we live. But the importance of engaging in the work of coming to understand Self – and by implication, Others – is such that, for many, this forms the major political project of our times. It is also important to note that, while it is relatively easy to separate numerous strands of identity – race, class, age, etc. - we must view the integrated whole and the psychic health of the individual as the desirable end of identity politics. Audre Lord captures this:

> *As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity*[,] *…I find I am constantly asked to pluck out one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of myself. But...*[m]*y fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all of the parts of who I am ...without the restrictions of externally imposed definitions.* (Lord in Ford, 2005, p 59).

There is probably no better way to conclude this initial excursion into the nature of identity and its formation in the contemporary era than by drawing on the eloquence of the (US)American poet, Walt Whitman (1882) to highlight the inherent tensions likely to be exposed and felt by anyone engaged in the investigation of elements of their individual and group identities:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

(Song of Myself, 1882)

KEY WORDS AND TERMS

Identity
Difference
Postmodern
Dichotomy
Binary opposites
Pedagog**y**

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