

INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming Identity

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WHY IDENTITY?

The bitter truth is that in a racist society where a brown skin (along with other colors) can cost lives, people will embrace any ideology that seems to offer the hope of change. Even when that ideology proves counter-productive, the hope persists. . . . [N]ationalism, then, has to be seen as a complicated, two-edged sword. It can't be fully understood if we just dismiss it as "identity politics."

Elizabeth Martínez,
De Colores Means All of Us

"Identity" remains one of the most urgent—as well as hotly disputed—topics in literary and cultural studies. For nearly two decades, it has been a central focus of debate for psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and cultural materialist criticism in areas ranging from postcolonial and ethnic studies to feminism and queer theory.¹ Oddly enough, much of what has

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1. Because detailed bibliographic leads pointing to the debates about identity are available in the essays in this volume, I will not attempt to provide comprehensive citations in the notes to this introduction. Instead, I will provide a few important references for the purpose of assisting an interested reader. For fairly comprehensive bibliographies together

been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimize, and in some cases eliminate, the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations. Activists and academics alike have responded to essentialist tendencies in the cultural nationalist and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s² and to the violent ethnic conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s by concluding that (social or cultural) identity, as a basis for political action, is theoretically incoherent and politically pernicious.³ Because we intend to reevaluate—even to reclaim—identity and because we want to rescue identity from the disrepute into which it has fallen, the authors and editors of this volume take seriously the criticisms that have been directed against the concept of identity. Therefore, I begin by reviewing the substance of the critiques to which identity has been subjected before I explain how French poststructuralism—arguably the most influential intellectual trend in the humanities during the past twenty-five years—has provided crucial theoretical support to scholars attempting to dismantle the concept of identity. I then address the question of why we feel the need to recuperate such a troublesome concept and introduce the postpositivist realist framework from which we have attempted to do so.⁴

with helpful analyses of the issues at stake in debates about identity, see Fuss; Dean. Important collections that highlight debates about identity include Gates; Smith, *Home Girls*; LaCapra; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres; Nicholson; Anzaldúa; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Appiah and Gates; Abelow, Barale, and Halperin; Nicholson and Seidman; McCarthy and Chrlow; and Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*.

2. In fact, the judgment regarding whether the different social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were truly “essentialist” deserves further consideration. Alcoff, for instance, argues in this volume that what is often seen as the locus classicus of identity politics, the “Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective, is more realist than essentialist. Similarly, Henze, also in this volume, uses the examples of two identity-related feminist projects from the 1970s to disprove the validity of essentialism. The various projects involved in maintaining an allegiance to a racial or gender identity for the purpose of honoring and engaging lived experience may have been too summarily reduced and dismissed by poststructuralist-inspired critics without a sympathetic understanding of the epistemological processes involved. I do not mean that essentialist notions of identity do not exist (certainly nineteenth-century scientific racism depended on an essentialist notion of identity), nor do I deny that some social movements of the 1970s had essentialist tendencies. Consider, for example, the claim in “El Plan de Aztlán,” “We, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán . . . declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny,” and the assertion, “Nationalism as the key to organization transcends all religious, political, class, and economic factions or boundaries. Nationalism is the common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree on” (Alurista et al. 4, 5). I do mean to suggest that not all projects involving claims to identity are the same, nor are all the claims they might make equally justified.

3. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Alcoff’s essay in this volume, esp. the section “Problems with Identity.”

4. The postpositivist realist theory of identity, as it has been formulated, elaborated, and tested in this anthology, emerged from a collective of scholars working together in and

The first problem with essentialist conceptions of identity, according to critics, is the tendency to posit one aspect of identity (say, gender) as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual's experience. The difficulty, critics of identity point out, is that identities are constituted differently in different historical contexts. So, for example, a slave woman living in antebellum America might experience her "womanness" very differently from a middle-class housewife living in Victorian England. Moreover, the social meanings attached to each woman's gender might be so different as to render the project of describing one woman in terms of the other meaningless. Even two women living in close proximity to each other (such as a Zulu maid and her Afrikaner madam) might be so differently situated in relation to the category of gender that their experiences, and the social meanings inscribed in those experiences, cannot be usefully described in the same terms. These examples illustrate that, contrary to an essentialist view, identity categories are neither stable nor internally homogenous.

The instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories (such as gender) have prompted critics of identity to point to a range of additional problems. They remind us that insofar as every woman differs from every other woman in more or less significant ways, it is impossible to determine the (racial, class, cultural, etc.) identity of the "authentic woman" and thus to unify different women under the signifier "woman." And because women's experiences are so varied, there can be no such thing as an authentic or exemplary "woman's experience." This situation, the critic of identity suggests, creates an epistemological difficulty: as we do not know exactly what experiences of women can be taken as exemplary, we cannot know with certainty what criteria to apply in analyzing and understanding women's actions, intentions, and emotions. As a result, "women's experience" can only be understood as an arbitrary construct. Indeed, any account of "women's experience" risks naturalizing one group of women's experience as normative and thereby marginalizing that of another group's.

This difficulty, in turn, gives rise to a variety of political predicaments: if no one woman can know and represent the experiences of all women, on what authority can she speak "as a woman"? At best, she might be

around Cornell University during the 1990s. The scholars who initially came together did so partly in response to the excesses of the widespread skepticism and constructivism in literary theory and cultural studies and partly because they were interested in formulating a complex and rigorous theory of identity that could be put to work in the service of progressive politics.

able to speak accurately of her own unique experience of being a woman (and some postmodernist critics would deny even this)—but then she would be speaking as an individual, not as a woman. The issue of authority of experience is thus intimately tied to the problem of representation: if even a woman cannot be trusted to speak accurately for and about “women,” then how is it possible to speak for or about “women” at all? In fact, some critics of identity tell us, it is not possible: to speak of “women” in a substantive way is to risk projecting onto all women one socially dominant construction of “woman,” thereby distorting the meanings of the lives of more marginalized women. It is to engage, they warn us, in the practice of ideological normalization and exclusion.⁵

These critiques of identity have been articulated by activists and academics coming from a wide range of perspectives. Activist women of color, conservative pundits, postmodernist theorists, and feminists of all colors and theoretical perspectives have noted the very real challenges posed by the concept of identity. The answer to the question of how to respond to these challenges, however, has varied widely. Some critics have retained an allegiance to the concept of identity and have attempted to reformulate or complicate their understandings of it. Ethnic studies scholars and members of various student groups, for example, continue to deploy identity as an organizing principle in their scholarly, political, and activist endeavors. Such scholars and activists have insisted that identity categories do not devolve into essentialist programs. Instead, identity categories provide modes of articulating and examining significant correlations between lived experience and social location. Other critics have advocated the abandonment of the whole enterprise of determining who belongs to what group or what that belonging might mean to the lives of social group members. On the one hand, conservative critics argue for this abandonment on the grounds that paying attention to particular identities will unnecessarily balkanize our society and obscure our shared human attributes. On the other hand, postmodernists claim that it is an error to grant ontological or epistemological significance to identity categories.

The centrality of French poststructuralism for postmodernist critiques

5. For some academic critiques of identity that point to the problems I have just enumerated, see Fuss; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Culler; Spelman; Nicholson and Fraser; Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; Alarcón; Michaels; Suleri; Martin and Mohanty. For an essay that presents a way of going beyond some of these critiques of identity in feminist theory, see my “Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory.” Popular press critiques of identity include autobiographical accounts written by neoconservative minorities. See, e.g., Rodriguez; Steele; Carter.

of the concept of identity is exemplified by the way deconstruction has been applied in social and cultural theory.⁶ Postmodernist critics inspired by deconstruction, for example, have tended to analogize and thus understand social relations with reference to linguistic structures. The deconstructionist thesis about the arbitrariness and indeed indeterminacy of linguistic reference led many U.S. literary theorists and cultural critics to understand concepts like experience and identity (which are fundamentally about social relations) as similarly indeterminate and hence epistemically unreliable. Such critics argue that, inasmuch as meaning is constituted by systems of differences purely internal to the languages through which humans interpret the world, meaning is inescapably relative. Meaning is never fully present because it is constituted by the endless possibilities of what it is not and is therefore at least always partially deferred. Because meaning exists only in a shifting and unstable relationship to the webs of signification through which it comes into being and because humans have no access to anything meaningful outside these sometimes disparate webs, there can be no “objective” truth. The desire for “truth” or “objective” knowledge is therefore seen as resting on a naively representational theory of language that relies on the following mistaken assumptions: first, that there is a one-to-one correspondence between signs and their extralinguistic real-world referents; and second, that some kind of intrinsic meaning dwells in those real-world referents, independent of human thought or action. Knowledge, insofar as it is mediated by language, cannot be said to be objective.

As a result of the influence of poststructuralism, the terms of the debate in the academy regarding selves and cultural identities have shifted considerably. Broadly speaking, U.S. scholars in the humanities who have been influenced by poststructuralist theory have undermined conven-

6. Poststructuralism is a philosophical movement that emerged in France in the late 1960s as a critique of phenomenology and structuralism. It is primarily associated with theorists (who were themselves trained by phenomenologists and structuralists) like Derrida, Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault, and Barthes. Although poststructuralism includes a variety of perspectives deriving from the different theories of its principal thinkers, it is characterized by an opposition to structuralist principles (condemned as “totalizing” and “deterministic”) and a focus on (sometimes a celebration of) difference and multiplicity. It has been credited with the textualizing of the social world, the critique of subject-centered thought, and the demise of grand narratives and general truth claims. It is distinguishable from postmodernism insofar as it is an “essentially theoretical shift, not a claim that anything in the external world had changed to necessitate a new theory” (Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory* 114). The significance of poststructuralism for my discussion is that postmodernism, as a theoretical and/or critical position, derives substantially from it (Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory* 100).

tional understandings of identity by discounting the possibility of objective knowledge. Instead of asking how we know who we are, post-structuralist-inspired critics are inclined to suggest that we cannot know; rather than investigate the nature of the self, they are likely to suggest that it has no nature. The self, the argument goes, can have no nature because subjectivity does not exist outside the grammatical structures that govern our thought; rather, it is produced by those structures. Because subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification and because they constantly differ from themselves as time passes and meanings change, the self—as a unified, stable, and knowable entity existing prior to or outside language—is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse. Social and cultural identities, it is argued, are similarly fictitious because the selves they claim to designate cannot be pinned down, fixed, or definitively identified. Moreover, identities are not simply fictitious; they are dangerously mystifying. They are mystifying precisely because they treat fictions as facts and cover over the fissures, contradictions, and differences internal to the social construct we call a “self.” Inasmuch as the desire to identify ourselves and others remains complicit with positivist assumptions about a fully knowable world—a world that can be described, hierarchized, named, and mastered—identity as a concept will serve oppressive and reductive ideological functions. In this view, to speak of identities as “real” is to naturalize them and to disguise the structures of power involved in their production and maintenance.

This “postmodernist” critique of identity that I am describing⁷ should be understood in part as a corrective to a prior social and intellectual

7. Postmodernism is a more diffuse, and so harder to define, cultural phenomenon than poststructuralism. Most critics agree that it can be characterized in at least three (analytically separable) ways: (1) as an aesthetic practice; (2) as a historical stage in the development of late capitalism; and (3) as a theoretical or critical position. I am not concerned here with postmodernism as either a historical period or an aesthetic movement. While I will describe the (often implicit) epistemological underpinnings of “postmodernist” theoretical conceptions of identity, I am aware that postmodernist theory does not constitute a unified intellectual movement. Nevertheless, the arguments of many prominent figures in contemporary feminist, postcolonial, antiracist, and queer theory (some of whom reject the term I am using to describe them) share important commonalities; they are characterized by a strong epistemological skepticism, a valorization of flux and mobility, and a general suspicion of, or hostility toward, all normative and/or universalist claims. It is this theoretical bias, recognizable in much of the work done in the humanities today, that I am pointing to with the use of the adjective “postmodernist.” Readers interested in learning more about postmodernist theory and the critiques to which it has been subjected should consult Nicholson, esp. introd.; Nicholson and Seidman, esp. introd.; Eagleton; McGowan; Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, esp. chap. 4. For more about postmodernism as a historical or cultural phenomenon, see Jameson; Harvey; Best and Kellner; Waugh; Anderson.

tendency toward “essentialism.”⁸ Cultural critics drawn to the postmodernist approach had seen the epistemological and political limitations of essentialist conceptions of identity; in the absence of attractive alternatives, postmodernist deconstructions of identity seemed to be the safest, most progressive, way to go.⁹ The progressive political activist’s or theorist’s task, postmodernists have insisted, should be to undermine or “subvert” identities in order to destabilize the normalizing forces that bring them into being.¹⁰

Why, then, do the authors and editors of this volume want to reclaim the concept of identity? How, if the concept has been deconstructed and debunked, if it has been shown to be conceptually flawed and politically pernicious, is there anything left to say? There are several answers to these questions, but the brief response is that prevailing theories of identity lack the intellectual resources to distinguish between different kinds of identities. We contend that a theory of identity is inadequate unless it allows a social theorist to analyze the epistemic status and political salience of any given identity and provides her with the resources to ascertain and evaluate the possibilities and limits of different identities. Neither “essentialist” nor “postmodernist” theories of identity can do this. As a result, critics who have adopted either of these two approaches have tended to overestimate or underestimate the political salience of

8. “Essentialism” here refers to the notion that individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable “essence”—a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature. As a theoretical concept, essentialism expresses itself through the tendency to see *one* social category (class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.) as determinate in the last instance for the cultural identity of the individual or group in question. As a political strategy, essentialism has had both liberatory and reactionary effects.

9. It would be an impossible task to determine the true motives of all critics who attack identity. A generous reading demands that we take postmodernist critics at their word and that we accept the possibility that they believe all but the most strategic claims to identity to be essentialist and therefore politically pernicious. A less generous reading, but one that also deserves consideration, is that the charge of essentialism might also result from a racist counterstance to the agency of newly politicized minorities.

10. This was the program advanced by Butler in her influential book, *Gender Trouble*. See especially her last chapter where she argues the following: “The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. . . . The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (147, 148).

actual identities. I will return to this point when I discuss the postpositivist realist alternative in the next section. Let me first discuss additional responses—some practical/political, some epistemological—to the questions I posed above.

The contributors to this book have undertaken this collective project at least partly because we believe that the recent negative emphasis on the violence of identification/subjectivation is overstated. Cultural identities are not only and always “wounded attachments.”¹¹ They can also be enabling, enlightening, and enriching structures of attachment and feeling. Much of the postmodernist writing on identity loses sight of this and, consequently, fails to explain significant modes by which people experience, understand, and know the world. The significance of identity depends partly on the fact that goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories. Who we are—that is, who we perceive ourselves or are perceived by others to be—will significantly affect our life chances: where we can live, whom we will marry (or whether we can marry), and what kinds of educational and employment opportunities will be available to us. Another reason we are working on this issue is because we contend that an ability to take effective steps toward progressive social change is predicated on an acknowledgment of, and a familiarity with, past and present structures of inequality—structures that are often highly correlated with categories of identity. This correlation undoubtedly accounts for why identity has been a fundamental element of social liberation as well as of social oppression.

Finally, we have undertaken the task of reclaiming identity because “identities” are evaluatable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences. Who we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world. Our conceptions of who we are as social beings (our identities) influence—and in turn are influenced by—our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences in that society are likely to be. The point, however, is that our different views about how our society is structured and where we and others fit into that totality are not all equally accu-

11. This formulation derives from Brown's book *States of Injury*, in which she draws on Nietzsche to argue that politicized identities are structured by *ressentiment*. In Brown's view, people who organize on the basis of identity become invested in their own subjection through their paradoxical attempts to relieve their suffering. They are fueled by humiliation and driven by impotence to exact revenge on those who, by virtue of superior strength and good fortune, do not suffer the “unendurable pain” of the historically subordinated. Revenge, by this account, is achieved through the production of guilt and by making a social virtue of suffering. See chap. 3, esp. 66–76.

rate. So, for example, a white man who identifies as a white supremacist might experience his job layoff as a direct consequence of a federal government or Jewish conspiracy rather than as a result of corporate consolidation or economic restructuring. In this case, his understanding about the way society is structured is more erroneous than accurate—as are his ideas about his putative racial superiority. Identities are thus not simply products of structures of power; they are often assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated. Moreover, identities have consequences for the kinds of associations human beings form (such as white supremacist churches along the lines of Christian Identity) and the sorts of activities they engage in (such as blowing up federal buildings or shooting random nonwhite or Jewish people).¹² So, while the authors and editors of this book do not take the reification of existing identities as our goal, we insist they must be thoroughly understood before they can be either transformed or dismantled. To understand them, we need to be able to distinguish those identities that provide more promising perspectives on the underlying structures of social conflict from those that do not. We need to take the epistemic status of identities seriously enough to make such distinctions.¹³

12. Within four months of the time of this writing, in 1999, white boys and men espousing white supremacist ideology were charged with the following crimes. On June 18 arsonists set fire to three synagogues around Sacramento, California, leaving behind anti-Semitic literature. Two brothers, Benjamin Williams, 31, and James Williams, 29, were later accused of the crime. These same two brothers have also been accused of the July 1 murder of a gay couple, who were found slain in their bed in Redding, California. On July 3 Benjamin Smith, 21, killed an African American father walking with his two small children and a Korean graduate student leaving church. He wounded nine other nonwhite or Jewish people in a series of attacks in Illinois before killing himself the next day as police tried to arrest him. On July 5 a soldier at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, who had been harassed by his fellow soldiers because he was gay, was beaten so severely that he died the next day. Pvt. Calvin Glover, 18, and Spec. Justin Fisher, 25, have been accused of the crime. On August 10 Buford Furrow, Jr., 37, allegedly fired seventy shots at a Jewish community center in Los Angeles, wounding four people, before killing a Filipino American postal worker. Furrow turned himself in to the FBI in Las Vegas the next day, saying he wanted the attack “to be a wake-up call to America to kill Jews.” On August 29 Vincent Prodbarger, 19, and two 17-year-old juveniles allegedly fire-bombed the home of Judge Jack Komar in San Jose, California. According to police, Judge Komar’s home was targeted because the three suspects believed him to be Jewish. Judge Komar is Catholic.

13. The argument here is that postmodernist theory does not provide the intellectual resources to either acknowledge the epistemic significance of actual identities or distinguish between those identities that provide more promising perspectives on our social world from those that do not. This deficiency, in turn, seriously limits postmodernist theorists’ ability to formulate effective projects for political change. The difficulty postmodernist theorists have had in formulating and/or justifying their political and intellectual projects has led some theorists to advocate the practice of “strategic essentialisms” (Spivak, “Subaltern Studies”) or the invocation of “contingent foundations” (Butler, “Contingent Foundations”). While the solution of a pragmatic appeal to a framework- or tradition-specific justification

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When we say that a thing is real we are simply expressing a sort of respect. We mean that the thing must be taken seriously because it can affect us in ways that are not entirely in our control and because we cannot learn about it without making an effort that goes beyond our imagination. . . . As a physicist I perceive scientific explanations and laws as things that are what they are and cannot be made up as I go along. . . . [A]nd I therefore accord the laws of nature (to which our present laws are an approximation) the honor of being real.

Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*

Recently, discussions about identity have become predictable and unilluminating, partly because their terms have remained fixed within the opposing “postmodernist” and “essentialist” positions (where the latter is construed as the basis for naive identity politics). Neither of the two opposing positions has proved adequate to the task of explaining the social, political, and epistemic significance of identities. Essentialist conceptions, which tend to see the meanings generated by experience as “self-evident” and existing identities as “natural,” are unable to account for some of the most salient features of actual identities. They have been unable to explain the internal heterogeneity of groups, the multiple and sometimes contradictory constitution of individuals, and the possibility of change—both cultural and at the level of individual personal identity. In turn, postmodernist conceptions—which tend to deny that identities either refer to or are causally influenced by the social world—have been unable to evaluate the legitimacy or illegitimacy of different identity

tends to satisfy those critics already committed to postmodernist precepts, others remain unconvinced that postmodernist theory can be politically efficacious or intellectually useful.

For an illustration of the poverty of postmodernist theory for formulating an intellectual project, consider Keith Jenkins’s attempt in *The Postmodern History Reader*. In his introduction to that anthology, Jenkins admits that he does not know what a postmodern history would actually look like. All he can tell us is that postmodern histories “(if they exist) . . . will not be like ‘histories in the upper case’ [or] much like lower case histories either in their old realist, ‘for its own sake’ formulations” (28). My point here is that someone who wants to dismiss (as ideologically misguided) the tested methodologies of a discipline should do more than gesture toward some “postmodern-type histories” that have been identified by a few “trend-spotters” (28). At the very least, Jenkins should show that postmodern methodologies enable historians to produce better histories than do the “realist, empiricist, objectivist, documentarist, and liberal-pluralist” methodologies that he likes to deprecate.

claims. Because postmodernists are reluctant to admit that identities refer outward (with varying degrees of accuracy) to our shared world, they see all identities as arbitrary and as unconnected to social and economic structures. This renders postmodernists incapable of judging the male patriarch (whose identity claims might include a belief in his own gender superiority) as being more or less credible than, say, a woman (whose identity claims might include a belief in her own disadvantaged position vis-à-vis a “glass ceiling”). My point (at least for now) is not to say which one of these individuals’ identity claims is more justified but simply to suggest that the issue is at least partly an empirical one: the different identity claims cannot be examined, tested, and judged without reference to existing social and economic structures. Although increasing numbers of theorists have voiced their concerns about the poverty of the opposition between these essentialist and postmodernist approaches to identity,¹⁴ no one has offered a richly elaborated alternative theoretical framework that can transcend it—until now. This volume represents the first coordinated effort to present an alternative theoretical approach to identity that can take debates about the concept to a new level.

The alternative approach to identity that this volume develops and expands was first articulated by the literary theorist Satya P. Mohanty in his 1993 essay, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition.” Both in that essay and in his subsequent book, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, Mohanty draws on the tradition of American pragmatism and recent developments in analytic philosophy (in particular, epistemology, social theory, and the philosophy of science) to explore the contours of a “postpositivist realist” approach to identity.¹⁵ In the process of working out a sophisticated and nuanced alternative to current conceptions that see identity either in a deterministic way or as purely arbitrary (or, at most, “strategic”), Mohanty reveals the opposition between “postmodernist” and “essentialist” theories of identity to be both false and unhelpful. His postpositivist realist theory of identity solves the central challenge confronting

14. See, e.g., Alcoff; Sedgwick; hooks; Singer; Zammito; Lugones; de Lauretis.

15. As an intellectual trend, the postpositivist realism Mohanty defends emerges partly from within the philosophy of science and from analytic epistemology more generally and is particularly indebted to the work of Charles Peirce, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Boyd. In extending postpositivist realism into the realm of identity, Mohanty also draws extensively on the work of Toni Morrison, Immanuel Kant, Charles Taylor, Naomi Scheman, and Sandra Harding. For more specific bibliographical references, see S. Mohanty’s essay in this volume and *Literary Theory*, esp. chaps. 6, 7.

theorists of identity today. It shows how identities can be both real and constructed: how they can be politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other.

Just as the postmodernist dismissal of identity is based on a denial of the possibility of objectivity, so Mohanty's realist reclaiming of identity is based on a reaffirmation of the possibility of (a postpositivist) objectivity. Contra postmodernists, realists contend that humans can develop reliable knowledge about their world and about how and where they fit into that world.¹⁶ But postpositivist realists are not naive empiricists; they do not hope to flip the poststructuralist critique on its head and return to an uncritical belief in the possibility of theoretically unmediated knowledge. Rather, they refuse the definition of terms such as "objectivity" and "knowledge" as postmodernists have conceptualized them. Postpositivist realists assert both that (1) all observation and knowledge are theory mediated and that (2) a theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable. They replace a simple correspondence theory of truth with a more dialectical causal theory of reference in which linguistic structures both shape our perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world.¹⁷ And they endorse a conception of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry rather than as a condition of absolute and achieved certainty.

What really distinguishes postpositivist realists from postmodernists (and, for that matter, positivists) is that realists have a different understanding of what "objectivity" is. The reason postmodernists deny the possibility of objectivity is that they have an impoverished view of what can count as objective. For postmodernists (as for positivists), objective knowledge is knowledge that is completely free of theoretically mediated bias. And because postmodernists rightly conclude that there is no such thing as a context-transcendent, subject-independent, and theoretically

16. While disagreement exists among those who would call themselves realists, the most sophisticated and nuanced versions of realism today entail a postpositivist conception of objectivity, together with an acknowledgment that the world cannot be reduced to our ideas about it. Indeed, realists argue, "the real world" is causally relevant to our epistemic endeavors, since it shapes and limits our knowledge of what is around us. For an exceptionally clear exposition on what makes a theory realist, see Collier, esp. pp. 6–7. See also Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist." For a discussion in this volume, see Alcoff's essay, esp. the section "Realisms."

17. For more on causal theories of reference, see chap. 2 of Mohanty, *Literary Theory*, esp. 66–72; Devitt and Sterelny, esp. pt. 2; Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change"; Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" and "Explanation and Reference"; Field. For a short but helpful discussion in this volume, see Hames-Garcia's essay, esp. the section "Realism."

unmediated knowledge, they therefore conclude that there can be no such thing as objective knowledge.¹⁸ Defenders of a postpositivist conception of objectivity, by contrast, stake out a less absolutist and more theoretically productive position. They suggest that objective knowledge can be built on an analysis of the different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest. Such an analysis “distinguishes those biases that are limiting or counterproductive from those that are in fact necessary for knowledge, that are epistemically productive and useful” (Mohanty, “Can Our Values Be Objective?”).¹⁹ Realists thus do not shy away from making truth claims, but (following C. S. Peirce) they understand those claims to be “fallibilistic”—that is, like even the best discoveries of the natural sciences, open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information. In fact, it is realists’ willingness to admit the (in principle, endless) possibility of error in the quest for knowledge that enables them to avoid positivist assumptions about certainty and unrevisability that inform the (postmodernist) skeptic’s doubts about the possibility of arriving at a more accurate account of the world. Just as it is possible to be wrong about one’s experience, postpositivist realists insist, so it is possible to arrive at more accurate interpretations of it.²⁰

Another feature of realists’ understanding of objectivity is their rejection of the positivist idea that objective knowledge should be sought by attempting to separate the realm of hard facts from the realm of

18. The postmodernist critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith, for example, employs a positivist conception of objectivity in her discussion of the feminist legal scholar Robin West’s response to Smith’s earlier book, *Contingencies of Value*. In that discussion, Smith understands the “rhetoric of objectivism” as involving “the invocation of self-evident truth and objective fact, of intrinsic value and absolute right, of that which is universal, total, and transcendent” (5). Later in the book, Smith defends a standard for evaluating theories that is similar, in some crucial ways, to a postpositivist conception of objectivity. She suggests that theories can be “found better or worse than others in relation to measures such as applicability, coherence, connectibility, and so forth.” She notes that these “measures are not objective in the classic sense, since they depend on matters of perspective, interpretation, and judgment, and will vary under different conditions” (77–78). She insists, however, that her standards are “non-‘objective.’” Unfortunately, because Smith lacks a complex theory of reference, she is unable to fully exploit the implications of her insight regarding the epistemically normative significance of “applicability, coherence, and connectibility.” After all, in order for a theory to be “applicable,” or “connectible,” it must be applicable or connectible *to*—that is, *with reference to*—something outside. As long as Smith retains her extreme and limited notions of objectivity and reference, she will be limited to the defensive posture she adopts in *Belief and Resistance* and will be unable to develop further even the contingent standards she thinks are necessary for deciding between different theories or political or ethical positions.

19. For a fuller discussion about postpositivist objectivity, see Mohanty, *Literary Theory*, esp. chap. 6.

20. For a fuller discussion in this volume of the relationship between error and objectivity, see Hau’s essay.

values.²¹ Because realists understand that all knowledge is the product of particular kinds of social practice, they recognize the causal constraints placed by the social and natural world on what humans can know. Moreover, because humans' biologically and temporally limited bodies enable and constrain what we are able to think, feel, and believe and because our bodies are themselves subject to the (more or less regular) laws of the natural and social world, realists know that what humans are able to think of as "good" is intimately related to (although not monocausally determined by) the social and natural "facts" of the world.²² Consequently, realists contend, humans' subjective and evaluative judgments are neither fundamentally "arbitrary" nor merely "conventional." Rather, they are based on structures of belief that can be justified (or not) with reference to their own and others' well-being. These judgments and beliefs, thus, have the potential to contribute to objective knowledge about the world.

Over the past few years, a number of scholars have responded to Mohanty's work by taking up, from within a postpositivist realist framework, the challenge posed by the concept of identity.²³ These responses to Mohanty's work incorporate the best insights of challenges to older theories of identity (e.g., the social construction of identities, the challenge of multiplicity, the epistemic status of identity) while theorizing new and critical conceptions of objectivity, epistemic privilege, and universalism. In reply to postmodernist contentions that the process of identification is arbitrary and illusory, they demonstrate that such critiques fail to provide an adequate account of the causal and referential relationship between a subject's social location (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality) and her identity. As part of this effort, the editors of this anthology have collected a number of these essays here to make this emerging "postpositivist realist" approach more accessible to academic and activist communities.

21. For more on the realist position regarding the necessary interdependence of facts and values, see Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, esp. chap. 6; Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, esp. chaps. 9–12; Collier, esp. chap. 6; Mohanty, *Literary Theory*, esp. chap. 7; Nguyen (this vol.). Nguyen provides additional bibliographical references regarding the relationship of facts to values.

22. The social theorist Craig Calhoun, whose epistemological approach is substantially similar to the postpositivist realist approach we advocate in this volume, provides a pithy example of how knowledge is tied to social practice when he says that "it is not imaginable that Marx would have developed his theory of capitalism had he lived in the ninth and not the nineteenth century" (*Critical Social Theory* 86).

23. Published examples of this response include my essays, "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity" (reprinted this vol.) and "Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory," as well as Hames-García, "Dr. Gonzo's Carnival." Other essays that take a postpositivist realist approach to identity include Roman; Babbitt; Barad.

GOALS OF THE ANTHOLOGY

I am speaking my small piece of truth, as best as I can. . . .
[W]e each have only a piece of the truth. So here it is: I'm
putting it down for you to see if our fragments match any-
where, if our pieces, together, make another larger piece
of the truth that can be part of the map we are making to-
gether to show us the way to get to the longed-for world.

Minnie Bruce Pratt,
"Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart"

One of the intentions of this volume is to meet the challenges posed by the concept of identity by introducing the postpositivist realist theory of identity to scholars working in a variety of fields. In addition, this volume seeks to contribute to the theory's development and elaboration. We do this by bringing together essays written by scholars in several disciplines (literature, philosophy, and history) and a variety of fields of study (Chicana/o studies, Asian American studies, feminist theory, African American literature, gay and lesbian studies, intellectual history, postcolonial theory, political philosophy, and continental philosophy). All the essays proceed from a postpositivist realist theoretical framework and elaborate one or more aspects of the theory, even as they explore the implications of the postpositivist realist approach for a variety of issues and concerns. Some essays also explore the compatibility of postpositivist realism with other critical traditions. Readers will discover a unique feature of this multiauthor book: each essay builds on the work of Satya Mohanty and engages with the other essays to achieve a kind of intellectual synthesis that is usually attained only in single-author volumes.

The editors have chosen this systematic approach for several reasons. As a practical matter, we sought to put together a volume on identity appropriate for use in an upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminar in literary theory, feminist theory, political philosophy, literary criticism, women's studies, ethnic studies, or cultural studies. The volume is also meant as a critical commentary on postmodernist (and essentialist) accounts of identity, since, in elaborating an alternative theory of identity, the essays highlight those features of the earlier theories that are inadequate. What we hope to make evident is that understandings of the concept of identity derive from (often tacit) theoretical assumptions about experience, knowledge, and the possibility and nature of objectivity. Whether or not a critic thinks identities should be celebrated or subverted,

paid attention to or ignored, will depend to a great extent on the epistemological underpinnings of his or her work.

Moreover, by theorizing in a variety of contexts the political and epistemic value of identity and nonessentialist identity politics, the authors and editors of this book hope to advance discussions about identity in literary and cultural studies, social theory, and the humanities in general. We have chosen this interdisciplinary and multifield format to demonstrate the potential theoretical reach of the postpositivist realist theory of identity. Because our approach defines the concepts of identity, experience, and knowledge in ways that go beyond the understandings of those concepts widely accepted within the humanities today, it has the potential to bring the humanities back into conversation with the social and natural sciences. We thus position postpositivist realism to stand alongside competing theoretical paradigms—to show ours as a viable alternative approach to a variety of practical and theoretical issues. So, while this volume focuses on the concept of identity, the consequences of our work are potentially quite far-reaching and extend beyond the consideration of identity as such.

Although scholars in literary criticism and theory have been deeply influenced by strains of continental philosophy, the field as a whole has been unfamiliar with the theoretical contributions of analytic philosophy. As a result, some very productive approaches to understanding natural and social phenomena have been ignored or prematurely rejected by literary scholars. There have, of course, been exceptions to this trend: Paisley Livingston's 1988 book, *Literary Knowledge*, and George Levine's edited collection, *Realism and Representation* (which grew out of a 1989 conference of the same name), are two notable examples. Both volumes make valuable contributions to the field by exploring the relevance of various forms of critical (as opposed to positivist) realism to the practice of literary criticism. In *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, Mohanty advances this project and extends it by demonstrating (in the essay reprinted in this volume) the relevance of a postpositivist realist approach for the question of identity. In "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity," Mohanty provides a nuanced reading of Toni Morrison's novel in which he shows how postpositivist objectivity, theory-mediated experience, and a causal theory of reference are relevant to something as personal and everyday as cultural identity. Transcending the limitations of both postmodernist and essentialist approaches, Mohanty makes a powerful argument for the epistemic significance of identity. He ar-

gues that we can adjudicate the validity and usefulness of different identities by viewing them as theoretical claims that attempt to account for causal features of the social world. In the process, he demonstrates that a good theory of identity does more than simply celebrate or dismiss the various uses of identity—rather, it enables cultural critics to explain where and why identities are problematic and where and why they are empowering.

One of the central claims of this anthology is that the realist theory of identity provides a better account of what identity is and how it is formed. In his essay, “Is There Something You Need to Tell Me? Coming Out and the Ambiguity of Experience,” William S. Wilkerson demonstrates this and contributes to a postpositivist realist understanding of the relationship among social location, experience, and identity. He does this by presenting some phenomenological considerations about the experience of coming out as lesbian or gay. He shows how experience is not immediate and self-evident but mediated and ambiguous, so that it is possible to be wrong about one’s experience as well as to arrive at more accurate interpretations of it. His discussion reveals how a “gay identity” is tied to existing social and political structures and enables an accurate understanding of a “pre-gay” individual’s experience. Bridging the divide between contemporary continental philosophy and the Anglo-analytic philosophical tradition, Wilkerson explains how the realist theory avoids the pitfalls of foundationalist epistemologies without having to go the route of postmodernism.

Realists about identity believe that subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but is constitutive of it. From a realist perspective, particular (i.e., racial or gender) identities are not something to transcend or subvert but something we need to engage with and attend to. This necessity is elegantly demonstrated in Michael R. Hames-García’s essay, “‘Who Are Our Own People?’ Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity.” Hames-García seeks to understand the challenges made to the theorization of identity by “multiplicity,” for example, the multiple construction of the self by race, gender, and sexuality. He develops the notion of “restriction” to describe the social processes by which selves come to be (falsely) understood in relation to a single aspect of identity. In showing how a postpositivist realist theory of identity better accounts for multiplicity than do other theories of identity, Hames-García indicates the knowledge-generating value of paying attention to how certain identity categories are privileged and others are occluded. He shows that realism provides a subtler, more complex, and more com-

plete picture of how any given identity is formed—a picture that includes that identity's excluded other, its formative context, and its historical character and social function. Hames-García includes in his essay realist readings of Michael Nava's book *The Hidden Law* and the House of Color video *I Object* in which he demonstrates that, when their messages are taken seriously, cultural productions by people of color can offer transcultural insights into ethical questions of human value, community, and solidarity.

Realists also contend that knowledge is not disembodied, or somewhere "out there" to be had, but rather that it comes into being in and through embodied selves. In other words, humans generate knowledge, and our ability to do so is causally dependent on both our cognitive capacities and our historical and social locations. In my own essay, "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherríe Moraga and Chicana Feminism," I draw on Mohanty's work to extract the basic claims of a postpositivist realist theory of identity. I then situate and effectively "test" the realist theory within the realm of Chicana/o studies by articulating a realist account of Chicana identity that theorizes the connections among social location, experience, and cultural identity. Through an analysis of Moraga's "theory in the flesh," I show how the historically constituted social categories that make up an individual's particular social location are causally relevant for the experiences she will have and demonstrate how identities both condition and are conditioned by individuals' interpretations of their experiences. I then develop the implications of the realist theory of identity for the notion of epistemic privilege and use it to argue for the significance of the embodied knowledge of women of color.

A consequence of the realist acknowledgment of embodied knowledge is a recognition of the importance of individual agency. In his essay, "Who Says Who Says? The Epistemological Grounds for Agency in Liberatory Political Projects," Brent R. Henze argues that a discussion of agency, which is primarily the province of individuals, should not drop out of any discussion of epistemic privilege. He opposes essentialist conceptions of identity—in which the common experiences of the group take priority over the unknown or unique experiences of individual members—on the grounds that such conceptions fail to develop the most accurate frameworks for interpreting experience precisely because they deny individual agency. Using as examples the project entailed in *This Bridge Called My Back* and the feminist consciousness-raising group described by the philosopher Naomi Scheman, Henze shows that it is, in fact, individual

agency that provides the most epistemically and politically effective grounds for the collective agency of an identity group. The essay concludes with a programmatic analysis of the role “outsiders” can play in liberation struggles. In keeping with his general project, Henze argues that this role must be one that acknowledges its own position vis-à-vis structures of oppression but that also can participate in the collaborative process without impinging on the agency of oppressed actors to speak for themselves.

The elaboration of the way humans develop reliable knowledge about themselves and their world presented by the essays in this volume deepens the realist understanding of the link between “facts” and “values.” In her essay, “‘It Matters to Get the Facts Straight’: Joy Kogawa, Realism, and Objectivity of Values,” Minh T. Nguyen offers a realist reading of Joy Kogawa’s novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka* to explore the affective and collective dimension of objective knowledge. Nguyen argues that much recent criticism of Asian American literature has tacitly accepted certain postmodernist premises (including a radically skeptical stance toward the epistemic status of experience) that have resulted in crucial misreadings of many Asian American texts, particularly those of Kogawa. Against postmodernist interpretations, Nguyen reads the uncertainty of Naomi (the central character) not as leading to a postmodernist skepticism regarding her ability to know the world but rather as being a necessary position in a dialectic that leads her to a fuller and more objective understanding of her situation. According to Nguyen, Kogawa’s novels offer a postpositivist conception of objectivity, especially objectivity of knowledge and values. Using Kogawa’s work as an example, Nguyen argues that the personal experiences and racialized perspectives of people of color should be seen as significant social and political theories—and that, as theories, they provide fallible normative accounts of social reality and values.

The insights generated by a postpositivist realist approach to culture and identity present interesting implications for how we might act in the service of progressive social change. In her essay, “Racial Authenticity and White Separatism: The Future of Racial Program Housing on College Campuses,” Amie A. Macdonald addresses the controversy surrounding racial program housing on college and university campuses. She traces arguments in opposition to racial program housing to misleading theoretical premises that fail to elucidate the links among cultural identity, objectivity, and knowledge. Grounding her argument in liberatory struggles such as the civil rights movement, Macdonald revisits

the unique features of race-based program housing by providing a post-positivist realist examination of the political and epistemic significance of self-segregation and cultural identity. She argues that we can better understand the role ethnic community houses play—not only in regard to the affective needs of ethnic community members but also in regard to the epistemic needs of racially diverse university communities—when we remember that such houses can foster the preservation of alternative communities of meaning. In the course of her argument, Macdonald makes two crucial points: (1) that the existence of a plurality of perspectives secures the continued diversity of interpretations of the social world and ensures a richer array of knowledges from which to construct social, political, aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific accounts of our experience; and (2) that as long as social subordination is a central feature of our society, the intellectual analyses of people who are marginalized and oppressed are crucial to an accurate account of social power and the possibility of political transformation. On the basis of these two contentions, Macdonald defends voluntary self-segregation of people of color as the best social condition in a white-dominated society for creating alternative and affirmative cultures.

One of the most troubling issues for progressive political and social activists, especially for those influenced by poststructuralism, has remained the problem of representing, or speaking for, others. Caroline S. Hau addresses this issue directly in her essay, “On Representing Others: Intellectuals, Pedagogy, and the Uses of Error.” She begins by tracing a theoretical trajectory through the writings of Mao, Fanon, and Cabral to show that the role these three thinkers assign to the intellectual in a struggle for liberation is informed by varying assumptions about the possibility of representational error—the ineradicable risk of intellectual activity. Hau connects this problematization of intellectual authority within the discourse of decolonization to broader contemporary concerns, commonly articulated by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists, about the impossibility of objectivity and the social constructedness of truth. She argues that a postpositivist realist account of knowledge (with its corresponding accounts of objectivity, experience, and error) provides a way of resolving some of these problems by transforming error into an important component of the evaluation of theory-dependent knowledges. Hau concludes by suggesting that the task of the progressive intellectual is not to abjure the responsibility of representing others but to work toward the gradual identification and accommodation of error by continually interacting with (and learning about) the people she hopes to rep-

resent or influence. Only through her social practices and her active theorizing about the world, Hau argues, can an intellectual develop a more accurate understanding of how she is related to the others she is attempting to represent.

The methodological implications of postpositivist realism for intellectual inquiry are usefully demonstrated in John H. Zammito's essay, "Reading 'Experience': The Debate in Intellectual History among Scott, Toews, and LaCapra." Zammito draws on the postpositivist conception of objectivity he finds in Mohanty's work to suggest a workable and defensible standard of historical inquiry that could form a shared horizon of understanding for intellectual history. He begins by resituating the historian Joan Scott's influential essay "The Evidence of Experience" within the intellectual and historical milieu out of which it emerged. By putting it back in dialogue with John Toews's earlier essay, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn" (to which Scott was responding), Zammito makes a crucial contribution to the debate in intellectual history concerning the significance of experience to the formulation of shared disciplinary standards. He takes issue with Scott's hyperbolic poststructuralist claims about experience in order to defend a postpositivist conception of objectivity that allows both for the "historicization of the historical subject" and for the dialogic search for a commonality of critical appraisal among historians. He argues, *contra* Scott, that the practice of attending to the linguistic constitution of experience need not entail rejecting the possibility that experiences can provide evidence either about the past or about the world we currently share. In the process, Zammito proposes a postpositivist standard of empirical inquiry that could provide points of mediation between his own hermeneutic-historicist concerns and the poststructuralist approach of Dominick LaCapra.

In the volume's final essay, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?" Linda Martín Alcoff makes a philosophical clarification and defense of the new realist account of identity developed by the other essays in the anthology. By tracing what "went wrong," that is, how an antiessentialist theoretical trend created a situation in which the links among identity, politics, and knowledge became increasingly nebulous until it looked as if none existed at all, Alcoff clarifies what is metaphysically and epistemologically in dispute between theorists who have been associated with postmodernism and those who call themselves realists. By discussing approaches to the self developed by Hegel, Freud, Sartre, and Foucault, among others, that have had a major influence on current accounts of identity, Alcoff helps us to understand how the critique of identity in con-

temporary literary and cultural criticism can be traced to a desire to deflect the power of the other over the self. She concludes that the solution to essentialism is not the rejection of identity but a more robust formulation of identity such as that offered by a postpositivist realist theory.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we discover (or uncover) things a theory as formulated did not know about or attend to, we have occasion to further elaborate or develop the theory in the light of what we now know. Sometimes a theory can absorb new things; sometimes not. Whichever, we do best if we make the effort and see what happens to the theory under strain. Its success may suggest we have misunderstood the theory all along. Its failure can only instruct if we are scrupulous in finding the source of the fault. The fact that a theory as traditionally understood omits something should be the beginning, not the end, of inquiry.

Barbara Herman,
The Practice of Moral Judgment

Realists about identity have begun the difficult project of figuring out not only which identity claims (and identities) they should accept as justified but also what related methodological and political strategies might lead to progressive outcomes. In the process, they have had to abandon the role of the skeptic to the postmodernist, and the mantle of certainty to the essentialist, in order to undertake a difficult and uncertain task. The task is difficult not only because to defend identity, as Alcoff reminds us in her contribution to this volume, is to swim upstream of strong academic currents but also and primarily because deciding between different identity claims is a deeply contextual and theoretically and empirically complex enterprise. Judging well requires an appreciation for the situatedness and embodiedness of knowledge, together with an ability to abstract from relevant cultural particularities. The task is uncertain because, as Hau reminds us in her essay in this volume, error is the ineradicable risk of intellectual activity: to posit something is to risk being wrong about it. But to say either that all identities are epistemically valid or that none of them are is to take “the easy way out” (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 238). Realists understand that as long as identities remain economically, politically, and socially significant, determining the

justifiability of particular identity claims will remain a necessary part of progressive politics. Taking the easy way out is thus not something they are willing to do.

The contributors to this volume do not imagine that we will have the last word on matters of identity. We do, however, believe that this volume succeeds in presenting an alternative theory of identity that solves some of the key problems of current theories of identity. Moreover, we believe that the postpositivist realist epistemology that underlies our conception of identity has the potential to push intellectual inquiry (especially in the humanities) in theoretically productive directions. In the spirit of cooperation, then, we invite our readers to take seriously our various claims and to show us where we—individually or collectively—might amend, revise, or advance our thinking about the task we have undertaken.

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