

# **Identity, Multiplicity and Interactivity**

**By Sandra Stephens**

## ***ABSTRACT***

Exploring issues related to identity, I first examine ideas on its social and political construction. I also explore the influences of the politics of identity and difference on the concept of identity and the re-theorizing of subjectivity by postmodern theorists. I am interested in how theorists identifying with the group identities of class, gender and 'race' have been calling for a rejection of the essentialist identities of the past and have been re-theorizing their politics through a politics of difference. In conclusion, I relate the dialogical nature of identity to interactivity.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

As a Jamaican immigrant of mixed descent, through my art I have been exploring issues concerned with the construction of identity. My explorations have taken on a personal nature through the conception of various self-portraits and still lifes of personal possessions. The isolation of the subject present in these self-portraits and the images I have done of others, reveals the importance I place on investigating individual identity. However my work has also drawn on issues concerning social and thus political identification. I have been interested in how social identification, a person's identification within a particular social group, works with or against the construction of individual identity. This has led to further interest in how one's questions of identity fit within the uncertainty and multiplicity of postmodernism. How does the aim to construct a new politics that works with and through difference affect the collective identities of class, gender and 'race'?

My research direction follows from and elaborates on these ideas. In the following sections I will first summarize Madan Sarup's comments on identity from his book, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. This will give a clear introduction to some of the issues concerning matters of identity. It will also introduce the idea that one's individual identity cannot be separated so distinctly from his or her social or collective identity.

The next section focuses on the interest within postmodern theory on identity politics and the politics of difference. This interest has emerged from a re-theorizing of subjectivity as multiple and layered and are influenced by the new movements of the 1960s; environmental, feminist, sexual liberation, black and brown power, Native American, peace, and local citizens' action groups (Kellner/Best 1991). The third section focuses more directly on three such groupings of difference; class, gender and 'race' and how, as processes of identity formation, they have redefined identity through the politics of difference.

In the third section, the first subsection on class will be explored by looking at the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The second on gender will look at the questioning of the category of "women" and the essential, unified identity it implies. Chantal Mouffe will be helpful in this respect through her insights into feminist theory and its possible relation with postmodernism. bell hooks will also be discerning for this

investigation as well as for her insights into 'race' and black identity. Her views on black identity will lead into the last section on 'race' and will be summed up by the insights of Stuart Hall. However, first within the history section I will explore the work of Adrian Piper and David Rokeby and their ideas on identity, the audience and interactivity.

## ***HISTORY***

Adrian Piper's thoughts, ideas, meta-art and art have been very influential to my work. She has directly confronted her complex, multiple identities by exploring the boundaries of her personality. In the mid-70s, she assumed an alter ego, the "Mythic Being," a young man who walked the streets in shades with Afro and a pencil mustache. Lucy Lippard, a noted art critic, describes this cross-sexual, androgynous identity as offering Piper, "A way of being both self and other, of escaping or exorcising her past and permitting her to re-form herself."<sup>1</sup> Over the years, Piper's work has increasingly shown the self as politically constituted. In a set of three Political Self Portraits, she presents autobiographical information to provide devastating commentaries on American racism, sexism and classism. She has used the concept of "the expanding self" as "a metaphor for the process of moving the borders of one's identity outward to encompass other women and eventually all people."<sup>2</sup>

Piper has written extensively on art and the art world. I have been very interested in her reflections on her relation to her audience. She views performance art as a dialogue among artist and audience members that when successful leads to the project of transformation. "Artist and audience can collaborate in the project of transformation, when the artist must work to communicate and the audience must work to comprehend -- not too hard, of course, for fear of aesthetic enervation, but hard enough to require of the artist a refinement of her beliefs and impulses, and of the audience a restructuring of its response habits."<sup>3</sup> Piper believes that performance art by situating human subjectivity in the role of an art object invites the audience to engage with it, and with its own subjectivity, and to transcend them both.

Piper's work has elements of interactivity. Her political work confronts the viewer, calling for a certain amount of interactive collaboration for its construction. She believes that direct representation of political content is usually unsuccessful, because by taking

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1 Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 44.

2 Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays in Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 158.

3 Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 102.

the viewer to some other space-time region that may not relate to the viewer's circumstances it directs the viewer's attention away from the immediate politics of her own situation. Thus, Piper believes that political content should be collaboratively constructed through an "interactive process in which the object explicitly confronts the viewer with her own condition, and the viewer reacts to that confrontation by constructing an interpretation of it that expresses her own particular level of political self-awareness."<sup>4</sup>

My interest in interactive art stems from Piper's influences as well as my knowledge of myself as a political and social being. I find the interactive form a useful tool for examining these questions concerning the relationship of individuals to social groups in the construction of identity. Through interactive artworks an indirect dialogue occurs between the artist and the viewer. This dialogue works against the tendency of 'high art' and the art world towards ostracizing the general public. In many cases artwork seems to be constructed for a very specialized audience. One has to be within the art world in order to enjoy its art. I hope to produce a more accessible work of art where the spectator, the work of art and the artist have a more collaborative relationship. With a further aim of having the viewer explore his/her identification with the art world as viewer, and his/her relationship to other possible social groupings in the world including the artist's or the subjects of the art work being observed.

This interest and its relation to questions of identity has been further fueled by the work of David Rokeby. He sees interactive technology as a mirror, providing us with a sense of self through reflection and a relation between this self and the experienced world through refraction.

... an interactive technology is a medium through which we communicate with ourselves... a mirror. The medium not only reflects but refracts what it is given; what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed. To the degree that the technology transforms our image in the act of reflection, it provides us with a sense of relation between this self and the experienced world. This is analogous to our relationship with the universe. Newton's First Law, stating that "For every action there is an

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4 *ibid.* p.177.

equal and opposite reaction," implies that everything is a mirror. We discover 'ourselves' in the mirror of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

In his work, Rokeby holds up a mirror to his spectator creating a feedback system where, "the implications of an action are multiplied, much as we are reflected into infinity by the two facing mirrors of a barber shop."<sup>6</sup>

In "Watch", a section of the exterior public space, is captured by a surveillance camera, processed in real time and projected onto the walls of the installation space. In one projection people that are moving are fogs across the image while people that are still are seen clearly. The second is the opposite of the first, people are only visible if they are in motion. They float as outlines in a black void, and disappear as soon as they are still. The second projection is flipped horizontally and projected beside the first, serving as a mirror to the first projection. There is a motion sensor in the installation space. It senses key moments, such as stillness within the space and triggers the changing of the processes within the projections. With this piece, Rokeby creates 'a live perceptual filter' through which one sees the multiple ways of looking and thinking. Due to the 'feedback-loop of perception', as referred to above, this looking is transformed and for Rokeby also becomes a transformation of "meaning".<sup>7</sup>

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5 Simon Penny ed., *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, (State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 133.

6 *ibid.* p. 137.

## ***THEORY***

Madan Sarup, an immigrant from India to England, reveals the influence of Marxism, 'race' and Lacanian psychoanalysis throughout his book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. He attempts to integrate these influences and through this integration provides a full, succinct examination into the complex nature of identity. In this search for a theoretical, as well as personal identity, Sarup argues that we do not have a homogeneous identity but instead we have several contradictory selves. He thinks of identity as a process, difficult to grasp, rather than something we find, or have once and for all.

In his chapter on identity and narrative he distinguishes between the 'traditional' view of identity in which all the dynamics of class, gender and 'race', operate simultaneously to produce a fixed, unified identity and the more recent model of identity as fabricated, constructed, in process, with both psychological and sociological influences. Although he views neither of these models as capable of fully explaining the fragmented and contradictory nature of our identities, his opinions are closer to the later model.

Sarup posits that when we are asked about our identity, we start thinking about our life-story: constructing our identity at the same time we tell this story. He believes that our identity is not separate from what has happened. Reminding the reader of the components of a narrative: a story (*histoire*) and a discourse (*discourse*), Sarup sees the story as the 'what' and the discourse as the 'how'. In other words, he sees the story as the content, what has happened, and the discourse as how the reader becomes aware of what happened.

However, though we tend to emphasize what happened and what we did, social dynamics such as class, nation, 'race', ethnicity, gender and religion are implied throughout the telling of our story. In the shaping of our identities, Sarup believes that the discourse of our life-stories -- dependent on the vocabulary, the accent, the place the narrative is spoken, the medium used, etc. -- is controlled and organized by society. Thus, these stories are reshaped in/for the public sphere.

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7 David Rokeby, "Installations: Watch," from <http://www.interlog.com/~drokeby/watch.html>.

In the chapter, "Identity and the Unconscious," Sarup clarifies his position on the permeability between the individual and society. He believes there is no well-defined border between the two. For Sarup, identity is a mediating concept between the external and the internal, the individual and society, theory and practice. A tool to be used to understand personal, philosophical and political aspects of our lives.

Similar views are held by Charles Taylor and Anthony Appiah in, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, a collection of essays edited by Amy Gutmann. Taylor believes that a conception of one's identity is developed through a dialogue with other people's understanding of who that person is, "The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his her own, but dialogical."<sup>8</sup> Appiah takes this further by arguing that ones identity is also crucially constituted through concepts and practices made available by religion, society, school, and state, and mediated to varying degrees by the family. Appiah believes that we make up selves, "From a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society. We do make choices but we do not determine the options among which we choose."<sup>9</sup>

Appiah posits what he sees as the connection between individual identity and collective identities. He believes that each person's individual identity can be seen as having two major dimensions. A collective dimension, the intersection of their collective identities, and a personal dimension, consisting of socially or morally important features -- intelligence, charm, wit, cupidity. What Appiah elucidates is that our individual identities are also in part political and social identities.

These theories of self and identity as fundamental dialogical, interactive and social have been present in the work of artists. Lucy Lippard, a noted art critic uses this idea of the interdependence of the political with the personal to argue the need for and the importance of feminist art. She takes the feminist credo "The personal is political" and turns it around to make the point that it is also important to see that "the political is personal". She notes how in the late 1970s progressive artists began to look carefully at, "The ways in which our lives, our relationships to other people, to our work, to our dreams and nightmares, to our aesthetic and psychic developments are affected by the

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8 Amy Gutmann ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 32.

9 *ibid.* p. 155.

history taking place around us."<sup>10</sup> This is revealed in the art of such artist as Adrian Piper as discussed in the History section of this paper. Lippard sees feminist art as, "A way of life, a state of mind, a political commitment to other women."<sup>11</sup>

### ***Identity and Postmodern Theory:***

The importance of the political to issues of identity and vice versa have also been revealed through postmodern theory. Re-theorizing subjectivity, the self is no longer essentialized but is read as multiple, contradictory and constituted out of and by difference. Henry Giroux in *Postmodernism, Feminism and Cultural Politics*, believes that postmodern theory has revealed subjectivity as a site of both liberation and subjugation. By doing this, he believes the self is taken far beyond the self-consciousness of the humanist subject of the Enlightenment and has formed a basis for a cultural politics to open up and include the issues of identity. "How subjectivity relates to issues of identity, intentionality, and desire is a deeply political issue that is inextricably related to social and cultural forces that extend far beyond the self-consciousness of the so called humanist subject. Both the very nature of subjectivity and its capacities for self- and social-determination can no longer be situated within the guarantees of transcendent phenomena or metaphysical essences."<sup>9</sup>

However, while Giroux reconstructs this re-theorizing of subjectivity as an aide for and necessity to political struggles, other postmodern theorists dismissing the category of subjectivity completely have tended to have very weak political theories. Pauline Marie Rosenau in *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, considers these theorists skeptical post-modernists. Recognizing the various orientations of postmodernism she delineates between these post-modernists and affirmative post-modernists. She sees the skeptics as offering a negative, pessimistic gloomy assessment of the postmodern age and the future. They argue that the age we live in is fragmentary, disintegrated, meaningless, with vague moral parameters and societal chaos. Speaking of the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth, and the nonexistence of the Order of

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<sup>10</sup> Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays in Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays in Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), p.231.

Representation, these theorists believe that no social or political project is worthy of commitment. Contrary to this opinion, affirmative post-modernists, though they agree with the skeptics' critique of modernity have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age and tend to be more open to positive political action (struggle and resistance).<sup>12</sup>

Michel Foucault, who it could be said falls somewhere between these general categories created by Roseau (probably closer to that of the skeptics), has spoken much on the demise of the subject. Foucault interprets subjects as constituted by language, a mere 'effect of discourse' (Flax 1990). He considers the subject an illusion, an invention of liberal humanism, no longer possible in a postmodern age. He calls for new forms of subjectivity in refusal of the normalized individuality he believes has been imposed on us for centuries. He argues against the modernist notion of a unitary subject and the view that identity must have some 'core' or essence that must remain the same. He sees the individual not as a pre-given entity but as 'the product of a relation of powers exercised over bodies', powers that do not simply repress the individual but carefully fabricates the individual to fit within the social order. Throughout his work he has revealed how power is prevalent within all aspects of social and personal life, pervading the schools, hospitals, prisons and social sciences. Schools, for example, not only determine what people do but also what they are and what they become. Furthermore, he believes that the social sciences' focus on the subject as an object of knowledge allowed for a new form of political control.<sup>13</sup>

However, although Foucault's work has been valuable for sensitizing theorists to the pervasiveness of power and highlighting the problems of rationality, knowledge, subjectivity, and the production of social norms, he has been criticized for the limitations in his work which have led him to disregard the political agency of the subject. Madan Sarup sees the determinism of Foucault's theory as contrary to his interpretation of identity as constructed, in process and always changing. "In his work, there is no reference to the interpretation of events or the construction of a plausible, ever-changing

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<sup>12</sup> Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-modernism and The Social Sciences*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this discussion of Foucault see Madan Sarup "Foucault: Discipline and the Self" and "Foucault: Sex and the Technologies of the Self" in *Identity Culture and the Postmodern World* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), pgs. 67-93.

narrative by a human subject of his or her identity. Foucault is rather weak and inadequate on the question of agency and the subject and finds it impossible to deal with identity as experienced."<sup>14</sup>

Douglas Kellner and Steven Best have similar criticisms in Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations. They reveal how Foucault's earlier work, with its focus on technologies of domination, tends to ignore how subjects can be active and self-constituting. Furthermore, this over-concentration on how subjects are dominated and constituted causes him to ignore the ways in which subjects through self-constitution can resist these technologies of domination. They call for a genealogy of resistance, a description and analysis of resistance that would approach Foucault's analysis of technologies of domination.

Foucault's difficulties in adequately theorizing the political is due in large part to his inability to rethink political agency in relation to the new forms of subjectivity. According to Ernesto Laclau in "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity," these new ways of considering the subject has evolved from a complete "death of the subject," to a widespread interest in multiple identities, identities of difference. Theorists identifying with three major groupings of difference (class, gender and 'race'), have been attempting to do what Foucault could not. They have been struggling with balancing the need to posit a strong group identity to protect and fight for their interests against making this collective identity too restrictive. They have realized that a narrow group identity tends to work against solidarity and political alliances with other groupings as well as repress individuals within the group who do not completely conform to this identity.

The next section deals directly with this issue by looking at the writings from theorists of these separate groups. As is evident, the theorists themselves do not fit neatly into any particular group but tend to speak from a certain position that associates them with a particular group. However, before an examination into the different positions on social and political identities of these collectives I would like to clarify what is meant by the politics of identity and the politics of difference and how the two differ.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 74.

The politics of identity or identity politics is defined by Sarup as an allegiance to one of the social movements which emphasizes one element in the construction of identity over all others be it gender, sexual orientation, 'race', ethnicity or nation. The political movements of the 1960s challenged the classical Marxist idea of the unity of the working class as the agent of universal emancipation. These new movements (environmental, feminist, sexual liberation, black and brown power, Native American, peace and local citizens' action groups) revealed the various sites of power irreducible to class exploitation. The politics of identity developed in part from the idea "the personal is political" in feminist theory. This stress on the importance of the political to everyday lives. However, this identity politics also is used to refer to the disciplining effects created by a unified, repressive, essentialist group identity. Postmodernist as well as theorist identifying with political groupings have been instead positing multiple, heterogeneous, composite identities through the politics of difference.

### ***Identity and Marxism/Class:***

The differences, fragmentation and heterogeneity celebrated by Foucault and other postmodern theorists, resulting in part from ideas developed from the "death of the subject", has been both beneficial and damaging to a creative restructuring of modern theory and politics. As revealed above, Foucault's complete disregard of all totalizing theories has made it difficult for him to develop cogent forms of radical politics. Fredric Jameson as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have been more successful in this regard. These theorists, unlike extreme apolitical postmodern theorists, stress continuities between the present age and modernity drawing upon modern emancipatory theories and values. In contrast to Foucault who completely rejects Marxist theory as totalizing, they find value in the relation between Marxism and postmodernism. However, while Jameson believes Marxist theory as 'supreme over all challengers' and attempts to update it with the best insights from poststructuralist and postmodern theory, Laclau and Mouffe turn more towards postmodern theory in an attempt to surpass Marxism, redefining the socialist ideal in terms of a 'radical plural democracy'(Kellner/Best 1991).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), p. 182.

The importance of these theorists to my research lies in the efforts they have made to align the agency of the subject with an alliance politics that does not ignore difference. Kellner and Best illustrate that Laclau and Mouffe emphasize political plurality but unlike Foucault they also stress the importance of constituting political identities within a radical political alliance. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe are both receptive to a politics of identity and one of difference. On the other hand, according to Kellner and Best, Foucault's political project could only be seen in terms of a politics of difference since he champions heterogeneity, multiplicity and marginality but not in terms of a politics of identity since he tends to equate identity with 'social normalization and psychic repression'. They believe, his failure to address the importance of developing radical forms of political consciousness and identity stemming from his lack of positive notions of the social as discussed above, is a central problem in his work.

I have been more interested in the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe because of the reasons stated. Kellner and Best also argue that Fredric Jameson although he also sees the importance in a politics of identity and difference is unable to resolve the tensions in his work resulting from his commitment to Marxist theory. In his attempt to produce an alliance between classical Marxism and extreme postmodernism he is unable to resolve the contradictions between a traditional class politics and a more pluralist alliance politics. They believe that Jameson needs to recognize the fragmentation of 'the working class' and that, "Any further clarification of his position should state how the 'proletariat' can be expected to become a unified subject again (if indeed it ever was) and why it should remain the epicenter of political struggle."<sup>16</sup>

It is for this reason I turn to the work of Laclau and Mouffe. They have expressed invaluable critiques on Marxism. Drawing on the work of, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, they have been developing a new theory of subjectivity that attacks all forms of essentialism. They argue against Marx's beliefs of the pure human essence as embodied in the proletariat and of history eventually producing a homogeneous free society. For Laclau, a homogeneous society would not be free. They reject the 'class essentialist logic' of Marxism and are against the privileging of class in Marxist analysis. They oppose the Marxist view that class is the primary form of collective agency and that other oppressed groups such as women and blacks should be subsumed to class. They challenge Marxism to explain the existence of national, racial, gender and ethnic

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 191.

oppression to illustrate the fact that the straightforward oppositional structure of capital and class does not work anymore. They see the need for and the existence of other oppositional structures and realize that forms of oppression and resistance do not only overlap but may also differ or even conflict.<sup>17</sup>

They propose a 'radical plural democracy' for reformulating the socialist project. Within this reformulation Mouffe attempts to answer the question of the kind of political identity this 'radical plural democracy' should aim to construct in "Citizenship and Political Identity". As she sees it this project would entail the construction of new political identities in terms of radical democratic "citizens". However, the main problem Mouffe finds is the conceptualizing of our identities as individuals and as citizens in a way that does not sacrifice one to the other. She tackles the need to resolve our identification with different communities of values, language, culture and others against our "common belonging to a political community whose rules we have to accept"<sup>18</sup> and posits what she sees as the main features of the solution.

Mouffe believes the political community should be seen as a 'discursive surface'. She conceptualizes it as unstable, forever being subverted and transformed by a "variety of articulatory practices," -- discourses within the field of politics as constantly attempting to establish "historical, contingent and variable links" between various "subject positions." She posits the political community as a surface where a "we" is constituted without a fixed idea of the common good. She conceives of the common good as a "vanishing point, something to which we must constantly refer but that can never be reached." Rather than fixed, she sees it more as a 'grammar of conduct' coinciding with allegiances to principles of modern democracy: liberty and equality for all. Furthermore, she proposes citizenship as a form of political identity, constituted through identification with these political principles. Thus, Mouffe sees citizenship as a common political identity of persons who though involved in different communities and have a different conception of a common good are bonded together by a public concern for liberty and equality for all. She also recognizes the fact that a fully inclusive political community can never be realized since these principles of liberty and equality for all are open to various interpretations. However, she continues to stress the need to construct a

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<sup>17</sup> For further discussion see Madan Sarup, *Identity Culture and the Postmodern World* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), pgs. 54-60.

<sup>18</sup> Chantal Mouffe. "Citizenship and Political Identity," *October 61*, 1992. pg. 30.

collective political identity articulated through the principle of democratic equivalence, an equivalence that does not eliminate difference.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Identity and Feminism:***

These principles of radical and plural democracy are used by Mouffe to inform feminist politics and more specifically the question of identity in feminist discourse. In "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics" Chantal Mouffe, calls for the deconstruction of essential identities as the necessary condition to understand the various social relations where the principles of liberty and equality should apply. She perceives how the deconstruction of the category "woman" would change the very question of what a feminist politics should be. The aim to try and unearth such a category would no longer be necessary and the central issues for Mouffe become, "How is 'woman' constructed as a category within different discourses? How is sexual difference made a pertinent distinction in social relations? And how are relations of subordination constructed through such a distinction?"<sup>20</sup>

Mouffe proposes the project of radical and plural democracy in answer to these questions. She argues that such a project would require abandoning the essentialist idea of an identity of women as women as well as the attempt to ground a specific and strictly feminist politics. "Feminist politics should be understood not as a separate form of politics designed to pursue the interests of women as women, but rather as a pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands."<sup>21</sup> Mouffe believes these goals should aim at changing all the discourses, practices and social relations where the category "woman" is constructed through subordination. Thus, Mouffe sees feminism as the struggle for the equality of women but not as a definable group with a 'common essence and identity.'<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, following from her belief that an inclusive political community could never be realized due to the various different

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* pgs. 28-32.

<sup>20</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics," In *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Nicholson, Linda and Seidman, Steve. Cambridge University Press, 1995. pg. 319.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* pg. 329.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* pg. 329.

interpretations of liberty and equality for all, she stresses the fact that these feminist goals can be constructed in many different ways, according to the many ways they can be framed -- Marxist, liberal, conservative, radical-separatist, radical-democratic and so on. Thus, she believes, rather than trying to find the "true" form of feminist politics by proving one form of feminist discourse as corresponding to the "real" essence of womanhood, one should show how feminist politics informs an understanding of women's multiple forms of subordination.

bell hooks has also written on the need to discard essential identities within feminism, challenging the notion of a fundamentally common female experience. hooks work calls into question, feminist politics that ignore women's differences, particularly with regards to race and class and thus the forms of domination associated with these categories. She calls for the revision of feminist theory and the direction of the feminist movement with the acknowledgment "that sexism, racism and class exploitation constitute interlocking systems of domination -- that sex, race and class, and not sex alone, determine the nature of any female's identity, status and circumstance, the degree to which she will or will not be dominated, the extent to which she will have the power to dominate."<sup>23</sup> Here, hooks reminds us of the fact that women are dominated in various ways and as important that women themselves do dominate. She points to the need to examine the role of women in the perpetuation and maintenance of systems of domination.

hooks' and Mouffe's work share further similarities. Although, hooks places more of an emphasis on feminism's own particular struggle against patriarchy, both see feminism as a liberation struggle that is a part of the larger struggle to eliminate domination in all its forms. Growing up in a southern black working-class household, affected by race, class and gender oppression, hooks is cognizant of the fact that patriarchal domination cannot be eradicated while these systems remain intact. hooks recognizes the need to connect feminist politics to a politics of solidarity. She problematizes the powerful feminist slogan, "the personal is political," that stresses the important connection between the self and political reality. She sees how this stress on the personal allowed for the disregard of the political. The naming of one's personal pain in relation to structures of domination "was not just a beginning stage in the process of coming to political consciousness to awareness but all that was necessary. In most cases, naming one's personal pain was not sufficiently linked to overall education for critical consciousness of collective political

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<sup>23</sup> bell hooks *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989) p. 22.

resistance."<sup>24</sup> Thus, hooks sees theory and discourse as important for connecting women's pain with broader notions of solidarity, struggle and politics.

### ***Identity and 'race':***

hooks uses this nonessentialist view to critique the construction of black identity. In "Black Identity: Liberating Subjectivity," she presents us with ways in which black identity has and continues to be constructed by black liberation struggle. She critiques the traditional reliance on a unitary representation of blackness and the identity politics that results, whereby rather than seeing the development of multiple black subjectivity as a positive for black liberation struggle many African Americans view it as deeply threatening. According to hooks this view, developing from racial integration and the new class divisions that created a black identity crisis, is strengthened by black nationalism that bolsters static notions of black identity having more power in segregated neighborhoods of poor and working class blacks than one which insists that our identity is fluid and always changing.

hooks calls attention to the links between patriarchal thinking and black nationalism. She recognizes that its emphasis on a unitary representation of blackness with notions of patriarchal family life and nationhood, re-inscribe rather than transform patterns of domination. She sites an example of the nationalist call to build nations and "pure" races as indirectly implying the controlling and policing of women's bodies and sexual activities. She argues against the Enlightenment vision of the "natural" order, present in contemporary black-nationalist writing, of a world where men are inherently caretakers and protectors of women and children.

Instead she proposes as a resolution to the crisis of black identity an acknowledgment of multiple, fluid subjectivities. Believing that a re-theorizing of black subjectivity and a revision in understanding the conditions necessary for a politics of solidarity will effectively oppose white supremacy. Recognizing African-American subjectivity as always in process she stresses the necessity of 'progressive education for critical consciousness' to lead to the construction of radical black subjectivity.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 32.

Assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic other are not the only available options and never have been. This is why it is crucial to radically revise notions of identity politics, to explore marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory black liberation struggle.<sup>25</sup>

Stuart Hall, shares similar views with hooks. He believes in the importance of recognizing identity as constructed through difference always in a state of becoming, "It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference."<sup>26</sup> An immigrant from Jamaica to England he relates the point that before the 1970s Jamaicans never called themselves Black. It was through the influence on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae that Jamaicans began to take on a Black identity, revealing Black as an identity historically and politically formed.

Furthermore, Hall like Sarup relates identity to narrative. He conceptualizes identity as "the unstable point where 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history." He sees the colonized subject as being positioned in relation to cultural narratives which have been expropriated and thus "always 'somewhere else': doubly marginalized, displaced always *other* than where he or she is, or is able to speak from."<sup>27</sup> His belief in himself as constituted through an "absent-present contestation with something else, with another self that is and isn't there, " relates strongly to interactivity where you have various options to choose from which are as valid as any other. The one you do choose is never stable as there are others ever-present in the background. I will conclude by relating this idea of the self with interactivity.

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<sup>25</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990) p.20.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves", In Appignanesi L. ed. *The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ICA Documents 6, London, ICA, 1987, pgs. 265.

## ***CONCLUSION***

My research has explored individual and collect identity. However, in conclusion I would like to extend Hall's and Sarup's relation of identity with narrative to issues of interactivity. I also would like to extend this idea of interactivity as analogous to the dialogical nature of identity. The fact that our identities are constructed through a relationship with the 'other' is for me comparable to the process that takes place between the creator, the participant of an interactive artwork and the subjects present within that work. The participant confronted with the work sees the objects he/she interacts with as other but at the same time as reflecting his/her actions or movements within the interactive installation or piece.

I believe strongly that a successful interactive structure can develop through a mirroring of the complex, multiple nature of our identities. As my research shows, our identities are intrinsically dialogical and multiple. Different layers or selves to choose from are always present but only one is foregrounded, isolated but in a sense still a part of the others. This piece is an extension of my view of identity where we as individuals tend to display on the surface a distinct identity but below there will always be nascent identities that will be choices in the constant process of identity formation.

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 264.

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