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Identity Politics and the Need for a 'Tomorrow'

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Recent years have witnessed a general backlash against identity politics, both in the academy and the public sphere. This paper recognises the problems in identity politics as arising from an apparent difficulty in conceptualising identity separately from notions of fixity and exclusion. It argues that politicised identities could, instead, be premised upon an explicit affirmation of the provisionality of political identity that is oriented to a "tomorrow" in which the identity will no longer be required.

[M]e and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.

– Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, p 273.

The quotation with which this article begins comes from the end of the novel where the character Paul D is speaking to fellow former slave Sethe of the need to move beyond the terms of a past disfigured by slavery. We begin with this for two reasons. First, it expresses the central problematic addressed within this article: the question of the place of history in the present, and how this helps or hinders the opening up of future possibilities. Second, the novel addresses how the opening up of a new future can also be achieved by shifts in understanding which result from allowing alternative interpretations of the past. Specifically in *Beloved*, Paul D moves from a condemnation of Sethe for her alleged inhumanity in having killed her own child ("you got two legs, not four, Sethe" ((1987) 1997: 165)), to a new understanding of the "gendered division of labour on which slavery was built" (Mohanty 2000: 61) and thus to acceptance of the validity of her claims to have killed *as a human being*, and *as a mother* (to save her own child from becoming a slave like herself, to refuse to be a reproducer of slaves). As such, Paul D arrives at a fuller understanding of their shared historical experience as slaves, and this new knowledge constitutes the basis for developing the "tomorrow" of which he speaks.

In what follows we use the metaphor of "tomorrow" in order to address contemporary debates about "identity politics". Recent years have witnessed a general backlash against identity politics both in the academy and the public sphere (Bickford 1997, Young 1997, Farred 2000, Bramen 2002). Among the various protagonists of this "backlash", Bramen (2002) gives particular attention to work by Wendy Brown (1995) on "wounded attachments". This is her term for a condition in which politicised identities, based upon experiences of injustice and discrimination, begin to "fetishise" (Ahmed 2004) their own wounding. For Brown, this results in a reactionary politics aimed at recrimination, instead of action to redress the injustice. Our intention in the present article is to situate ourselves within this debate about the value of identity politics as well as to engage with the specific issues raised by Brown's work. We will argue that the objections to "identity" raised by Brown and others must be taken seriously, but that this need not lead to a wholesale abandonment of the politics of identity. Rather, we wish to demonstrate that the problem with identity politics is the way in which the "identity" very often comes to replace the "politics". To avoid such a substitution, we argue that "identity" may be re-theorised as that which is continually produced and reproduced by political projects in the present, and on

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the basis of a shared vision of the future. The argument of this article is thus that politicised identities might instead be thought of in terms of an explicit affirmation of the *provisionality* of a political identity that is oriented to a "tomorrow" in which the identity will no longer be required. In this way, the power of "identity" as a site of resistance is maintained, while ameliorating the conservative effects of the entrenched identities that Brown criticises.

As such, this article also addresses the wider contemporary debate in emancipatory politics, which concerns the proper orientation of radical politics in terms of the *tense* of political discourse. The key issue here is that of the extent to which political discourse should be focused around the past – on origins, memory, history, trauma and so forth – or the extent to which it should be future-oriented. Critics such as Brown (1995) and Grosz (2000) have expressed a fear that too great a weight upon the past has proved constraining for radical movements, and that an emphasis upon the future – the (more) just future that political action intends to bring about – is required as a corrective to this (Ahmed 2004). However, such a demand brings with it the vexed question of the place of memory, and specifically, the memorialising of pain and exclusion. As Brown's own equivocation on the issue suggests, "the counsel of forgetting [...] seems inappropriate if not cruel" (p 74) for many oppressed groups who have yet to have their pain recognised, or to understand themselves the deferred effects of a traumatic past (Kilby 2002).

The arguments presented in this paper are threefold. First, we argue for a rethinking of "politicised identities" in terms of a commitment to a desired future, as a corrective to the conservative effects that frequently accompany "identity" (here identified as "exclusionary politics" and "reification of identities"). Second, we argue, however, that such an emphasis upon the future need not and should not entail an abandonment of the commitment to address traumatic pasts. Third, we argue that a productive identity politics is one which understands the identity of the political grouping as provisional, since it is based on the need to respond to an existing injustice, and therefore, oriented to a future in which that injustice, and hence, the need for the identity claim, is no longer present. Central to the development of our thesis will be an engagement with work on experience and identity by Satya Mohanty, and communities and knowledge by Lynn Hankinson Nelson.

This is, then, a primarily theoretical argument; however, we will make reference to examples of particular forms of emancipatory politics from the long-standing feminist movements and the more recent struggles against the oppression of dalits. Finally, the article will take an interdisciplinary approach to the issues of identity, interpretation, politics and community. As researchers in sociology and literary studies respectively, we are committed to the view that these disciplines are mutually informing, and that imaginative fiction is one of the greatest resources a society has for the extending of sympathies and building of solidarities around urgent issues of political emancipation.

1 Exclusionary Politics

It is inexcusable to build analyses of historical experience around exclusions, exclusions that stipulate, for instance, that only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience (Said 1993: 35).

The idea of a politics underpinned by solidarities based on "sameness" has a long history in the critical tradition. Marx's initial conceptualisation of the standpoint of the proletariat (albeit, significantly different from those of subsequent developments of standpoint epistemology) has been used by feminist theorists as well as those arguing for a post-colonial perspective in terms of the subaltern, and, more recently, for a dalit standpoint (Hartsock 1984, Guha 1983, Rege 1998, 2000). However, while using identity as the basis of political action has been seen to be powerful (and effective), it has also increasingly become seen as problematic. The exclusionary politics of movements such as black power, much radical and lesbian feminism, and latterly, movements for ethnic purity and/or religious integrity, for example, have yielded a deep concern with the programme of separation and isolationism that such movements are often seen to be based upon. For many critics, more troubling still has been the usually accompanying claim that only women can be feminists, or only black people can work against racism, or only dalits against caste oppression, and so on.

A position which states that only those who have experienced an injustice can understand and thus act effectively upon it seems to rest upon an essentialist theory of identity which assumes that the possibility of knowledge about particular situations is restricted to one's possession of the relevant (seemingly) irreducible traits (being female, black, dalit, and so forth). Arguably, one consequence of these separatist tendencies is that they perpetuate the individualist fallacy that oppressive social relationships can be reformed by particular subjects without the broader agreement of others who, together, constitute the social relations within which the injustices are embedded. But even where the limitations of a purely exclusionary form of identity politics are recognised, many theorists continue, nevertheless, to argue for a form of "strategic essentialism" (Fuss 1989, Spivak 2003) suggesting that where structures of inequality overlap with categories of identity, then a politics based on those identities is both liberatory and necessary (Bramen 2002).

In our view, however, the claim for a "strategic essentialism" remains fraught with problems, for at least three reasons. First, it establishes an epistemological division between those who assert a particular identity in advancing political claims and the observer who is sympathetic to those claims but "recognises" the limitations of basing such claims on a putative identity.[1] There is something highly problematic in claiming to support a political movement from the basis of being able to "see" something that the individuals constituting the movement do not see, and in then not engaging with them with regard to this. This sets the observer up in a privileged position vis-à-vis other members of the movement and thus makes solidarity difficult to achieve.[2] Second, the claim for "strategic essentialism" posits solidarity, that is, collective identification around a particular standpoint, as a *prerequisite* for collective action to address perceived injustices. This is as against recognising that solidarities can also emerge through the actions taken to correct particular injustices and can include those who recognise the injustice as the reason

for action while not directly being disadvantaged themselves. Third, the assertion of "strategic essentialism" generally occurs in the context of claiming justice through an appeal to the wider community but with no explanation as to why the wider community ought to honour this claim for justice, especially when it is often not deemed possible for them to constitute a part of the movement itself. There is a requirement of inclusivity then – in terms of demanding acceptance of the validity of the claims made – at the same time, as an assertion of its impossibility across what are posited as irreducible, essential traits (for a fuller discussion see Holmwood 1995).

The arguments of this paper start out from a broad agreement that developing a politics from the basis of occupying a particular social position or having a specific (singular) identity is problematic for the reasons identified above, as well as for covertly legitimating – "absolving and forgiving", in Said's (1993: 35) words – the ignorance of those whose understanding and actions are necessary for countering social injustices. It has to be recognised that issues exist *between* people and are not *in* people: that is, problems of social injustice occur in the relationships through which subjectivities are produced and thus, all those implicated in those relationships are involved in their address. For example, sexism is not a problem for women to deal with alone, but is a problem situated in the contemporary relationships of social and material inequalities and requires mutual engagement for its address. This is an address which we consider is best served by the solidarities generated as a consequence of the activities around perceived injustices (that is, solidarities generated through the political *movements* of people working towards equality, justice) as opposed to those activities having to rely on assumed pre-existing solidarities (that is, *being* female, gay, black, dalit, etc). This is not an argument for movements against specific injustices or inequalities to be subsumed within a wider (say, socialist) movement but, rather, an argument for movements to be conceived inclusively as movements where membership is not restricted to those presumed to suffer the injustice or inequality.

As such, a question arises as to what would happen if the "identity" in "identity politics" were rethought along the lines of the solidarities that are generated around the address of injustices rather than the solidarity that is presumed to ensue from being the *victim* of an injustice. Defending "identity" against a variety of critiques from the academic left, Bramen (2002) asserts that identity can also be productive in its construction of moral and other communities. Our question, however, would be why such communities – sites of resistance and the discovery of political agency – need to be constructed around essentialising rhetoric and restricted (this is the implication) to those who suffer the injustice. Indeed, Bramen herself recognises that "identity politics certainly has its limitations, primarily in terms of prescribing modes of behaviour that pressure individuals to conform to certain standards of authenticity" (2002: 7-8). And this surely is a real problem; that essentialist rhetoric establishes belonging to a community, and thus identity, on the basis of presumed shared attributes or experiences that are imagined to be irreducible. As such, not only may the community itself become oppressive to those who do not share those attributes, or who wish to articulate experiences that differ from those expressed by the majority, but the community itself may be weakened in its resistance to other forms of oppression by the distraction of its internal policing against difference.

We suggest that alternative models of identity and community are required from those put forward by essentialist theories, and that these are offered by the work of two theorists, Satya Mohanty and Lynn Hankinson Nelson. Mohanty's ([1993] 2000) post-positivist, realist theorisation of identity suggests a way through the impasses of essentialism, while avoiding the excesses of the postmodernism that Bramen, among others, derides as a proposed alternative to identity politics. For Mohanty ([1993] 2000), identities must be understood as theoretical constructions that enable subjects to read the world in particular ways; as such, substantial claims *about* identity are, in fact, implicit explanations of the social world and its constitutive relations of power. Experience – that from which identity is usually thought to derive – is not something that simply occurs, or announces its meaning and significance in a self-evident fashion: rather, experience is always a work of interpretation that is collectively produced (Scott 1991).

Mohanty's work resonates with that of Nelson (1993), who similarly insists upon the communal nature of meaning or knowledge-making. Rejecting both foundationalist views of knowledge and the postmodern alternative which announces the "death of the subject" and the impossibility of epistemology, Nelson argues instead that, it is not individuals who are the agents of epistemology, but communities. Since it is not possible for an individual to know something that another individual could not also (possibly) know, it must be that the ability to make sense of the world proceeds from shared conceptual frameworks and practices. Thus, it is the community that is the generator and repository of knowledge. Bringing Mohanty's work on identity as theoretical construction together with Nelson's work on epistemological communities therefore suggests that, "identity" is one of the knowledges that is produced and enabled for and by individuals in the context of the communities within which they exist.

The post-positivist reformulation of "experience" is necessary here as it privileges understandings that emerge through the processing of experience in the context of negotiated premises about the world, over experience itself producing self-evident knowledge (self-evident, however, only to the one who has "had" the experience). This distinction is crucial for, if it is not the experience of, for example, sexual discrimination that "makes" one a feminist, but rather, the paradigm through which one attempts to understand acts of sexual discrimination, then it is not necessary to have actually had the experience oneself in order to make the identification "feminist". If being a "feminist" is not a given fact of a particular social (and/or biological) location – that is, being designated "female" – but is, in Mohanty's terms, an "achievement" – that is, something worked towards through a process of analysis and interpretation – then two implications follow. First, that not all women are feminists. Second, that feminism is something that is "achievable" by men.[3]

While it is accepted that experiences are not merely theoretical or conceptual constructs which can be transferred from one

person to another with transparency, we think that there is something politically self-defeating about insisting that one can only understand an experience (or then comment upon it) if one has actually had the experience oneself. As Rege (1998) argues, to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience, or then on claims of authenticity, can lead to a narrow identity politics that limits the emancipatory potential of the movements or organisations making such claims. Further, if it is not possible to understand an experience one has not had, then what point is there in listening to each other? Following Said, such a view seems to authorise privileged groups to ignore the discourses of disadvantaged ones, or, we would add, to place exclusive responsibility for addressing injustice with the oppressed themselves. Indeed, as Rege suggests, reluctance to speak about the experience of others has led to an assumption on the part of some white feminists that "confronting racism is the sole responsibility of black feminists", just as today "issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women's organisations" (Rege 1998). Her argument for a dalit feminist standpoint, then, is not made in terms solely of the experiences of dalit women, but rather a call for others to "educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalised" (Rege 1998). This, she argues, allows "their cause" to become "our cause", not as a form of appropriation of "their" struggle, but through the transformation of subjectivities that enables a recognition that "their" struggle is also "our" struggle. Following Rege, we suggest that social processes *can* facilitate the understanding of experiences, thus making those experiences the possible object of analysis and action for all, while recognising that they are not equally available or powerful for all subjects.[4]

Understandings of identity as given and essential, then, we suggest, need to give way to understandings which accept them as socially constructed and contingent on the work of particular, overlapping, epistemological communities that agree that this or that is a viable and recognised identity. Such an understanding avoids what Bramen identifies as the postmodern excesses of "post-racial" theory, where in this "world without borders ("racism is real, but race is not") one can be anything one wants to be: a black kid in Harlem can be Croatian-American, if that is what he chooses, and a white kid from Iowa can be Korean-American" (2002: 6). Unconstrained choice is not possible to the extent that, as Nelson (1993) argues, the concept of the epistemological community requires any individual knowledge claim to sustain itself in relation to standards of evaluation that already exist and that are social. Any claim to identity, then, would have to be recognised by particular communities as valid in order to be successful. This further shifts the discussion beyond the limitations of essentialist accounts of identity by recognising that the communities that confer identity are constituted through their shared epistemological frameworks and not necessarily by shared characteristics of their members conceived of as irreducible.[5] Hence, the epistemological community that enables us to identify ourselves as feminists is one that is built up out of a broadly agreed upon paradigm for interpreting the world and the relations between the sexes: it is not one that is premised upon possessing the physical attribute of being a woman or upon sharing the *same* experiences. Since at least the 1970s, a key aspect of black and/or postcolonial feminism has been to identify the problems associated with such assumptions (see, for discussion, Rege 1998, 2000).

We believe that it is the identification of injustice which calls forth action and thus allows for the construction of healthy solidarities.[6] While it is accepted that there may be important differences between those who recognise the injustice of disadvantage while being, in some respects, its beneficiary (for example, men, white people, brahmins), and those who recognise the injustice from the position of being at its effect (women, ethnic minorities, dalits), we would privilege the importance of a shared political commitment to equality as the basis for *negotiating* such differences. Our argument here is that thinking through identity claims from the basis of understanding them as epistemological communities militates against exclusionary politics (and its associated problems) since the emphasis comes to be on participation in a shared epistemological and political project as opposed to notions of fixed characteristics – the focus is on the *activities individuals participate in* rather than the characteristics they are deemed to possess. Identity is thus defined further as a *function of activity* located in particular social locations (understood as the complex of objective forces that influence the conditions in which one lives) rather than of nature or origin (Mohanty 1995: 109-10). As such, the communities that enable identity should not be conceived of as "imagined" since they are produced by very real actions, practices and projects.

2 The Reification of Identity

We wish to turn now to a related problem within identity politics that can be best described as the problem of the *reification* of politicised identities. Brown (1995) positions herself within the debate about identity politics by seeking to elaborate on "the wounded character of politicised identity's desire" (ibid: 55); that is, the problem of "wounded attachments" whereby a claim to identity becomes over-invested in its own historical suffering and perpetuates its injury through its refusal to give up its identity claim. Brown's argument is that where politicised identity is founded upon an experience of exclusion, for example, exclusion itself becomes perversely valorised in the continuance of that identity. In such cases, group activity operates to maintain and reproduce the identity created by injury (exclusion) rather than – and indeed, often in opposition to – resolving the injurious social relations that generated claims around that identity in the first place. If things have to have a history in order to have a future, then the problem becomes that of how history is constructed in order to make the future. To the extent that, for Brown, identity is associated primarily with (historical) injury, the future for that identity is then already determined by the injury "as both bound to the history that produced it and as a reproach to the present which embodies that history" (ibid 1995: 73). Brown's suggestion that as it is not possible to undo the past, the focus backwards entraps the identity in reactionary practices, is, we believe, too stark and we will pursue this later in the article.

Politicised identity, Brown maintains, "emerges and obtains its unifying coherence through the politicisation of *exclusion* from

an ostensible universal, as a protest against exclusion" (ibid: 65). Its continuing existence requires both a belief in the legitimacy of the universal ideal (for example, ideals of opportunity, and reward in proportion to effort) and enduring exclusion from those ideals. Brown draws upon Nietzsche in arguing that such identities, produced in reaction to conditions of disempowerment and inequality, then become invested in their own impotence through practices of, for example, reproach, complaint, and revenge. These are "reactions" in the Nietzschean sense since they are *substitutes* for actions or can be seen as negative forms of action. Rather than acting to remove the cause(s) of suffering, that suffering is instead ameliorated (to some extent) through "the establishment of suffering as the measure of social virtue" (ibid 1995: 70), and is compensated for by the vengeful pleasures of recrimination. Such practices, she argues, stand in sharp distinction to – in fact, provide obstacles to – practices that would seek to dispel the conditions of exclusion.

Brown casts the dilemma discussed above in terms of a choice between past and future, and adapting Nietzsche, exhorts the adoption of a (collective) will that would become the "redeemer of history" (ibid: 72) through its focus on the possibilities of creating different futures. As Brown reads Nietzsche, the one thing that the will cannot exert its power over is the past, the "it was". Confronted with its impotence with respect to the events of the past, the will is threatened with becoming simply an "angry spectator" mired in bitter recognition of its own helplessness. The one hope for the will is that it may, instead, achieve a kind of mastery over that past such that, although "what has happened" cannot be altered, the past can be denied the power of continuing to determine the present and future. It is only this focus on the future, Brown continues, and the capacity to make a future in the face of human frailties and injustices that spares us from a rancorous decline into despair. Identity politics structured by *ressentiment* – that is, by suffering caused by past events – can only break out of the cycle of "slave morality" by remaking the present against the terms of the past, a remaking that requires a "forgetting" of that past. An act of liberation, of self-affirmation, this "forgetting of the past" requires an "overcoming" of the past that offers identity in relationship to suffering, in favour of a future in which identity is to be defined differently.

In arguing thus, Brown's work becomes aligned with a position that sees the way forward for emancipatory politics as residing in a movement away from a "politics of memory" (Kilby 2002: 203) that is committed to articulating past injustices and suffering. While we agree that investment in identities premised upon suffering can function as an obstacle to alleviating the causes of that suffering, we believe that Brown's argument as outlined is problematic. First, following Kilby (2002), we share a concern about any turn to the future that is figured as a complete abandonment of the past. This is because for those who have suffered oppression and exclusion, the injunction to give up articulating a pain that is still felt may seem cruel and impossible to meet. We would argue instead that the "turn to the future" that theorists such as Brown and Grosz call for, to revitalise feminism and other emancipatory politics, *need not be* conceived of as a brute rejection of the past.

Indeed, Brown herself recognises the problems involved here, stating that

> [since] erased histories and historical invisibility are themselves such integral elements of the pain inscribed in most subjugated identities [then] the counsel of forgetting, at least in its unreconstructed Nietzschean form, seems inappropriate if not cruel (1995: 74).

She implies, in fact, that the demand exerted by those in pain may be no more than the demand to exorcise that pain through recognition: "all that such pain may long for – more than revenge – is the chance to be heard into a certain release, recognised into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence, losing itself" (1995: 74-75). Brown wishes to establish the political importance of remembering "painful" historical events but with a crucial caveat: *that the purpose of remembering pain is to enable its release*. The challenge then, according to her, is to create a political culture in which this project does not mutate into one of remembering pain for its own sake.

Indeed, if Brown feels that this may be "a pass where we ought to part with Nietzsche" (1995: 74), then Freud may be a more suitable companion. Since his early work with Breuer, Freud's writings have suggested the (only apparent) paradox that remembering is often a condition of forgetting. The hysterical patient, who is doomed to repeat in symptoms and compulsive actions a past she cannot adequately recall, is helped to remember that traumatic past in order then to move beyond it: she must remember in order to forget and to forget in order to be able to live in the present.[7] This model seems to us to be particularly helpful for the dilemma articulated by both Brown (1995) and Kilby (2002), insisting as it does that "forgetting" (at least, loosening the hold of the past, in order to enable the future) cannot be achieved without first remembering the traumatic past. Indeed, this would seem to be similar to the message of *Beloved*, whose central motif of haunting (is the adult woman, "Beloved", Sethe's murdered child returned in spectral form?) dramatises the tendency of the unanalysed traumatic past to keep on returning, constraining, as it does so, the present to be like the past, and thereby, disallowing the possibility of a future different from that past.

As Sarah Ahmed argues in her response to Brown, "in order to break the seal of the past, in order to move away from attachments that are hurtful, we must first bring them into the realm of political action" (2004: 33). We would add that the task of analysing the traumatic past, and thus opening up the possibility of political action, is unlikely to be achievable by individuals on their own, but that this, instead, requires a "community" of participants dedicated to the serious *epistemic* work of remembering and interpreting the objective social conditions that made up that past and continue in the present. The "pain" of historical injury is not simply an individual psychological issue, but stems from objective social conditions which perpetuate, for the most part, forms of injustice and inequality into the present.

In sum, Brown presents too stark a choice between past and future. In the example of *Beloved* with which we began this article, Paul D's acceptance of Sethe's experiences of slavery as distinct from his own, enable them both to arrive at new understandings of their experience. Such understanding is a way of partially "undoing" the (effects of) the past and coming to terms

with the locatedness of one's being in the world (Mohanty 1995). As this example shows, opening up a future, and attending to the ongoing effects of a traumatic past, are only incorrectly understood as alternatives.

A second set of problems with Brown's critique of identity politics emerge from what we regard as her tendency to *individualise* social problems as problems that are the possession and the responsibility of the "wounded" group. Brown suggests that the problems associated with identity politics can be overcome through a "shift in the character of political expression and political claims common to much politicised identity" (1995: 75). She defines this shift as one in which identity would be expressed in terms of desire rather than of ontology by supplanting the language of "I am" with the language of "I want this for us" (1995: 75). Such a reconfiguration, she argues, would create an opportunity to "rehabilitate the memory of desire within identificatory processes…prior to [their] wounding" (1995: 75). It would further refocus attention on the future possibilities present in the identity as opposed to the identity being foreclosed through its attention to past-based grievances.

What is problematic here is that Brown's conception of the "us" in "I want this for us" appears to leave open the possibility that the "us" both precedes and succeeds the want and its fulfilment in the manner of a more or less stable identity. The logic of Brown's argument itself, however, would suggest that the "us" which has been produced by the want *need not* exist in the same way once this want has been fulfilled since the initial conditions of its emergence have altered. There is an ambiguity here in Brown that requires clarification particularly in relation to the following. Despite Brown's insistence that the "I want" "distinguishes itself from a liberal expression of self-interest by virtue of its figuring of a political or collective good as its desire" (1995: 75), her references to Nietzschean notions of "*self*-overcoming" risk individualising, albeit in collective form, both the problem and the potential solutions. In other words, she appears to suggest that injured identities are the "property" of stable, singular collectivities and that the problems they face can be overcome in isolation, without an engagement with others. This is especially problematic to the extent that it could be appropriated as a way of placing responsibility for the failure to advance socially at the hands of the group suffering, and not with the wider communities who are complicit in maintaining the conditions of that suffering. Here we find ourselves in sympathy with Bramen, who notes the

> similarity of this left critique with the conservative behaviouralist's dismissal of black victimage. Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Don't be a victim but an agent of change (2002: 4).

As Bramen notes, such slogans, and Brown's own emphasis upon self-overcoming, "do not address the structural dynamics that continue to victimise and impoverish targeted communities" (2002: 4). Indeed, we would argue there is a significant danger in Brown's argument of appropriation by right wing positions, a danger exacerbated by the absence of specific empirical analysis in her chapter. By not specifying *which* movements she is characterising as "ressentiment" ones, Brown allows this charge to be adopted and levelled at potentially any group.

Conclusion: The Need for a Tomorrow

Social constructionist understandings of identity are often taken to be antithetical to forms of essentialism. However, to the extent that identities, even on the social constructionist account, are understood to be self-referential, they are therefore, posited in terms of a supposed internal *coherence,* rather than being about engaging with others, learning, and potentially changing. In this case, we would argue, coherence can then be seen as a form of essentialism. Brown's understanding of identity as obtaining "a unifying coherence" (1995: 65), for example, does not acknowledge that it is the very attempt to create coherence that can lead to the removal of opportunities for dialogue within and across communities. If something is coherent, in its own terms, there is no overlap with others and no engagement with what is present or missing. Lack of integration, or dissension, can then appear to the identity group as an external "threat" to the identity in question, as opposed to being a measure of dialogue within and between communities making particular identity claims. This is, we believe, an unacknowledged danger haunting Brown's account, since the "us" that she identifies in her examination of politicised identities is the *specific* "us" which is directly suffering. This focus on the specific "us" does not acknowledge the wider "us" who might potentially be engaged with the relief of that suffering; that is, Brown does not recognise here the overlapping epistemological communities that make up any "us". The absence of such recognition is logically contradictory, since any claim to suffering is always implicitly an appeal to others to recognise their implication in its conditions.

Political mobilisation around suffering engenders solidarities between those who are suffering and those who afford recognition of (and then action around) that suffering. Those who suffer generally claim their common humanity with others in asking for people to look beyond the specific circumstances of their suffering, and in doing so, the request is to address those specific circumstances on the basis of a humanity not bound to the

circumstances. The mistake of some forms of identity politics, then, is to associate identity with suffering. While a recognition of historical (and contemporary) suffering is an important aspect of the political process of seeking redress for the conditions of suffering, it does not constitute identity singularly.

"Wounded attachments", we would argue, do not represent the *general* condition of politicised identities, but rather, are *problematic* constructions of identities which fail to recognise (or accept) the processes of change associated with movements. The accumulation of different sorts of challenges around similar issues generally leads to the gradual amelioration of the conditions which generated the identity (and the associated movement) in the first instance. If the emphasis in the movement is on identity then successful reform (even partial reform) reduces the injury and thus diminishes the power of the identity claim based upon that injury. This is because reform is necessarily uneven in terms of the impact it has. This then poses a problem for those within the movement who would wish the reforms to go further and who see in the reforms a weakening of the identity that they believe is a necessary prerequisite for political action. As they can no longer mobilise the injured identity – and the associated suffering – as common to *all* (and thus requiring address because of its generalised effect), there is often, then, a perceived need to privilege that suffering as *particular* and to institute a politics of guilt with regard to addressing it – truly the politics of *ressentiment*.

The problems arise by insisting on the necessity of political action being constituted through pre-existing identities and solidarities (for example, those of being a woman). If, instead, it was recognised that equality for women is not separable from (or achievable separated from) wider issues of justice and equality within society then reforms could be seen as steps towards equality. A movement concerned with issues of social justice (of which gender justice is an integral aspect) would allow for provisional reforms to prevailing conditions of injustice without calling into question the basis for the movement – *for there would always be more to be achieved*.[8] Each achievement would itself necessitate further revision of what equality would look like. And it would also necessitate revision of the particular aims that constitute the "identity" afforded by participating in that movement. In this way, identity becomes more appropriately understood as being, in part at least, about participating in a series of dialogues about what is desired for the future in terms of understandings of social justice.

Focusing on the future, on how we would like things to be *tomorrow*, based on an understanding of where we are today, would allow for partial reforms to be seen as gains and not threats. It is only if one believes that political action can only occur in the context of identification of past injustices as opposed to future justice that one has a problem with (partial) reforms in the present. Political identity which exists only through an enunciation of its injury and does not seek to dissolve itself as an identity can lead to the ossification of injured relations. The "wounded attachment" occurs when the politicised identity can see no future without the injury also constituting an aspect of that future. Developing on the work of Brown, we would argue that not only does a "reformed" identity politics need to be based upon desire for the future, but that that desire should actually be a desire for the dissolution (in the future) of the identity claim. The complete success of the feminist movement, for instance, would mean that feminists no longer existed, as the conditions that caused people to become feminist had been addressed. Similarly, with the dalit movement, its success would be measured by the dissolution of the identity of "dalit" as a salient political category. There would be no loss here, only a gain.

As we have argued, following Mohanty ([1993] 2000) and Nelson (1993), it is participation in the processing of one's own and other's experiences into knowledge about the world, in the context of communities that negotiate epistemological premises, which confers a notion of politicised identity. Since it is an understanding of "tomorrow" (what that would be, and how it is to be achieved) that establishes one as, for example, a feminist, such an identity claim does not exclude others from participation, and it does not solicit the reification of identity around the fact of historical or contemporary suffering. By removing these obstacles to progress, the "tomorrow" that is the goal, is more readily achievable. Identity politics, then, "needs a tomorrow" in this sense: that the raison d'être of any politicised identity is the bringing about of a tomorrow in which the social injustices of the present have been overcome. But identity politics also needs that tomorrow – *today* – in the sense that politicised identities need to inscribe that tomorrow into their self-definition in the present, in order to avoid consolidating activity around the maintenance of the identity rather than the overcoming of the conditions that generated it. That the tomorrow to be inscribed – today – in the self-definition of one's political identity, is one in which that identity will no longer be required, is not a situation to be regretted, since it is rather the promise of success for any movement for justice.

NOTES

1 Here, we are thinking of instances where academics and intellectuals lend support to movements whose aims, in another context, they would (and have) disagree with. One notable example being Edward W Said's support for Palestinian nationalism existing in a paradoxical relationship with his commitment to cosmopolitanism (on this, see Bhambra 2006).

2 For further discussion of the issues associated with standpoint epistemology, see Bhambra 2007: 27-33.

3 To give an example, imagine a scenario in which a woman attempts to explain to a man the experience of receiving unwanted sexual attention in the street. What is required for this experience to be "understood" by the man could perhaps be as follows. First, that this experience is judged worthy of attention and interpretation and is not

dismissed as "trivial" or as a matter of being "oversensitive". Second, that the man shares with the woman certain theoretical premises about the society they are in, which may include most obviously the premise that it is a society in which citizens are treated unequally according to gender. Further premises may include that a dominant cultural understanding of women is that they are of value to the extent that they are judged sexually desirable to men. A common way in which this valuation of women is enforced is through such acts, which far from being trivial or even flattering, are ways of interpellating women into a subject-position that is implicitly inferior to men. Through agreeing to process and make sense of the woman's "experience" through a broadly-shared epistemological paradigm, in the manner suggested above, it is possible for the

man to "understand" the experience in the sense of coming to a recognition of the emotions produced, the effects of such an incident, and its broader societal causes and implications. Indeed, he may be able to assist with the process by which the woman herself makes sense of this experience, and her feelings around it, by contributing to this processing of experience into knowledge his own experiences of being interpellated as male in society.

4 One of the social processes that we consider important is that of narrative fiction which invites identification with subject positions and experiences that may be radically different from the reader's own. Narrative is not only essential to the construction of identity, it also provides a vehicle for the communication of experiences across different identities.

5 "Black", for example, has been used as a political category by mixed, coloured, African, Indian, West Indian, Pakistani and other ethnic groups both in Britain in the 1970s and in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggles.

6 The philosopher of medicine Georges Canguilhem ([1943] 1991) argues that the health of a biological organism is given by the provisionality of its norms and its openness to their future revision. Perhaps, solidarities and communities can be said to be healthy to the extent to which their norms for understanding experiences and producing knowledge are open to revision in the light of new claims. Where communities are resistant to change – such that they refuse to countenance any revision of identity claims, for example, they could be termed pathological in Canguilhem's terms. For, if it is "coherence" that one requires, then dissension is interpreted as a threat, rather than as the opportunity for reformulating norms, principles, or ways of perceiving and making sense of the world (for further discussion see Margree 2002).

7 Enumerating the ways in which a traumatic experience is forgotten, or loses its power, Freud and Breuer ([1893] 1991) mention two of particular importance: there is "association", whereby a traumatic event (such as an accident) gets associated with more reassuring ideas (such as being rescued); and "abreaction", whereby the psychic energy generated in reaction to trauma achieves release through expression by word or gesture. The crucial point is that these processes can only take place if the traumatic memory is present to consciousness. If the memory is instead unconscious, then the procedures of forgetting cannot take place and the patient is doomed to "remember" instead through the language of the hysterical body, and her "present" is reduced to being a repetition of the past.

8 In arguing for the necessary dissolution of political identities we are not suggesting that political identities per se will disappear as we believe that there are always likely to be new issues that arise as present ones are resolved (nor are we claiming that politicised identities are the only form of identity).

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