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IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION: THE CASE OF AFRICAN WOMEN WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1989 - 1994.[1]

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ABSTRACT:

Identity is not a social entity. It is not embodied in a social individual, or social institutions. It is not, further, inscribed on the space of language. That is, language does not create or even contain identity. In this sense, in the absence of the stability of identity in any social form and representation, the question of the social status of identity is raised with a critical awareness that cautions us against any hasty assertion of the reality of identity. These propositions emerge from the research that I have been conducting on the question of the formation of identity among a group of African women workers in the Retail sector. These women live in the nearby African townships of Johannesburg. The majority of them are active members of the dominant trade union in the retail sector, South African Commercial and Catering Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU). The study explores the question of identity formation in their lives, with respect to two significant social spaces, the workplace and vicinity. These are the social spaces within which their lives emerge and are located. Their lives are dispersed within these social spaces.

"Within every society, each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations - not only social production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity".[2]

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[1] This paper is part of a Ph.D project on the study of identity-construction among urban African women workers in the Gauteng province.

[2] Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Towards a New Concept of Democracy", Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 89-90.

PREFACE:

Let me begin by asserting the unproblematic significance of the gesture of a preface.[3] I want to provide the reader with a preliminary outline of some of the critical ideas underlying this paper. First, and this is essential to an understanding of the intellectual history that informs this project, this paper is a critical intervention in the subdiscipline of social theory. Both the project and the paper are exercises in social theory. Both were conceived as critical intervention in social theory. They seek to advance the interests of social theory, which, in this case, are concerned with the articulation of the formation of the social object of identity. [The notion of articulation is at the core of this specific social theorization. Thus, this specific social theory is one deeply embedded in the practice of articulation]. Thus, the character of the material that has been amassed is one of the sort that is directly related to the concerns of the performance of social theory. Social theory is the objective of this project, and through the engagement with the notion of identity, I seek to advance new modes of thinking in social theory on the question of identity. In this sense, the project has a critical, if not radical relation to the question of identity in contemporary social theory. Second, the project was born from a concern with the status of thinking and theorization on identity in social theory, specifically, the practices of Marxism. In this regard, the project engages in a direct critique of Marxisms on the question of identity. The gestures of overcoming, in their facile forms, forms that question their claims to authenticity, the limits of Marxist thinking on the question of identity are performed through the ideas of post-structuralism and other posties (especially, postcolonialism and postfeminism). Specifically, the overcoming of the limits of Marxisms on the question of identity is conducted through the complex theoretical analyses of the following post-structuralists thinkers: Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault. Third, the theoretical gestures of the articulation of a non-marxist, or even post-marxist, and sometimes, an anti-Marxist notion of identity are supplemented through the problematic activity of empirical research and data. The latter, it must be stressed, exists only as a supplement ("The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another

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[3] In Phenomelogy of Spirit, Hegel raises the problem of a preface in relation to philosophy. He writes that a preface in a philosophical work is "superfluous", "inappropriate and misleading". Philosophy can never be prefaced, in that it is not a completed system. Can social life be prefaced? Is our relation to social life, in its many histories, objectifiable through a sense of its completeness? That is, is it possible to imagine a complete understanding of social life, of life itself? Do we also retain the possibility of uttering the tentative word on social life and relations?

plenitude", p. 144, Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1976), because the objective of the project is not a simple insertion of empirical data. In as far as the supplement functions, enabling the project to perform the practice of the articulation, it remains critical to the ideals of the project. The ideal is the possibility to think outside of the categories of identity. Fourth, the main aspects of this project are theoretical and methodological. Any reference to empirical demonstration and data are incidental, or rather supplementary. In this regard, the project is a systematic engagement with contemporary thinking on the question of identity. If there is any contribution which this project seeks to make is in the area of the literature of identity. On the methodological question of the study of identity, the project attempts to problematize the practices of researching identity [what social research methods are appropriate for the research of identity? Is identity a given social fact, if so what social research methods can best capture it, rediscover it, make it representable to us? what are the social forms that embodies identity?]. However, this methodological concern is preceded by a theoretical critique of identity. This is the engagement with the theoretical investigation of identity. Once this is achieved, we then begin the discussion of questions of methodology on the question of identity. Still, what ties both concerns of the project is the underlying theme of the deconstruction of identity. This deconstruction is articulated at both the theoretical and methodological levels. The specific form of the theoretical analysis of identity is the intimate relation it has with the philosophical discourse on identity, the analytics of identity, and the conceptualization on identity.[4] The second level, the level of methodological questions on identity moves towards the issues of the empiricity of identity. Basically, my concern is to examine the question of the social research of identity, the conduct and practices of social research in relation to the question of identity. This is where I begin to touch upon the value of empirical evidence. Thus, the order of the analysis is as follows: theoretical investigations on the question of

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[4] The theoretical concern of this project is to articulate a postmodern analysis of identity-construction within the two most significant social spaces in the lives of African women workers, the workplace and 'community'. However, there is no linear linkage between these two social spaces, or any sense of prioritization. Neither social space is primary to the other. The attempt is to understand the question of identity - what is identity in the lives of African women workers, how is identity possible, when is identity possible, is there a single identity that underlines their lives in the relatively autonomous social spaces? The project methodology is one that is largely qualitative, in that the underlying theoretical assumption concerning the question of identity is that identity is a qualitative social process. The discussion that follows attempts to show the duality of identity-formation and constitution in the lives of certain of these women.

identity; methodological analysis of the study of identity, and linked to this is the question of the empirical orders of identity [what is the empirical reality of identity? what is the empirical distribution of identity? what constitutes the empirical reality of identity? what are the boundaries of this empirical reality - where does it begin and where does it end? what is empirical about identity? what is the social character of this empirical reality? how does one begin to engage with this reality? what forms of representation of identity take place within the logic of this reality?].

CRITICAL DISCLAIMERS:

The following set of disclaimers are important to note. First, this is not a study of trade unionism, or a trade union, in this instance, SACCAWU. The research question that I wanted to investigate does not allow for the study of the organizational structures and dynamics of the location of identity. Through the research, I realized the relative insignificance of the study of an organization, the trade union, to the question of identity formation. This is not to say that identity did not find expression within and through the union, in whatever form. But the union did not determine, or even shape identity in any significant sense. Identity within the union has relative autonomy, a social existence of its own, a presence that is realized outside of the union boundaries. There was a sense in which being a union member was relatively dependent on the capability of the union to meet workers' needs and interests. Thus, according to one worker: "I no longer consider myself a member of the union. The union is now useless. They do nothing for us".[5] Another worker added, when asked about the role of the shopsteward: "These guys are weak. They agree with everything that management says. Who should we trust now?".[6] Alongside such experiences and perception there was a sense in which workers saw themselves as outside of the union, even when they continued to pay their monthly subscriptions. They had given up on the union. The union was seen as a relative organization in their lives, and in this sense we can begin to understand and question the non-union processes that are directly linked to the question of identity-formation.

Second, I would like to note also that this is not a study of the labour process, a study of the organization of work in the retail sector. It is not a study of the retail industry. My interest is not in the relation that African women workers have with the structure of work, their skills in the workplace, the significance and impact of technology on their work, and the

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5 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 1994.

6 Interview, Randburg Pick 'n Pay, October 1993.

differences and distribution in occupations. The issue of the organization of work links itself to the question of capital, its structure and development. To exclude the question of the organization of work in the study of identity is not, however, to deny the relative location of identity in the organization of work. The retail sector is largely operated by women, and the social demography of these women differs from Durban (Indian), to the Western Cape (Coloured), and Gauteng (African). However, the majority of women in this research have a history of working in the Frontline Department. The relationship between gender and work, skills and occupation is important to the workings of the retail sector. The same applies to the social distribution of gender in the workplace, in terms of the potentials of each gender. One worker observed: "Management does not want to put men here (Frontline Department) because they know that men does not stand silly customers".[7] Her view is that "we women tolerate nonsense".[8] "Pick 'n Pay management expects us to nice to rude customers. Sometimes I cant stand it", she continued.[9] Still, identity stands outside of this relation with the organization of work, for the simple reason that the research reveals that what constitutes identity for African women in the retail sector is a process that is linked to other non-workplace developments.

Third, this is not a study of capital/labour relations. Although capital and labour in the retail sector, especially in from the 1980s, have a history of conflict, this is not important to the understanding of identity formation. It is true that SACCAWU is one of the militant trade union within COSATU, and that it has the ability to mobilize its workers into a variety of industrial actions. However, these do not, from the observations that I have conducted, begin to articulate the complex forms of identities that one observes within the union. That is, a particular industrial action is the appropriation of, or the construction of a single identity, from other and multiple identities. A strike, such as the National 1994 Strike with Pick 'n Pay, even in its complex levels, is not the accumulation of and reflection of the union's true identity. Identity is complex a social reality to be contained within capital/labour relation.

WORKPLACE OR WORKSPACE? SHIFTS AND BOUNDARIES.

The formation of identity in the workplace takes place in the social relations which African women workers have with management, the union, other workers, the workplace itself, as a relatively bounded physical structure, and the customers. Within

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7 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 1994.

8 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 1994.

9 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 1994.

the category of other workers, we find, and this is not specific to the retail sector, or the character of the workplace, a diversity of relations and identities, such as gender, ethnicity, unionized and non-unionized workers, political affiliations, differences in social knowledge about contemporary politics, differences in social and cultural tastes [I was told by one interviewee that "women at Pick 'n Pay always dress to kill. They are lookable, and you feel that they are important to themselves"[10]]. The category of workers is no longer a reflection of the same identity, and similar social interests. Management is also characterised by differences in ethnic composition, gender hierarchy, and managerial style. Thus, what constitutes identity in the workplace is not a single relation, or event, if event is defined as dramatic, one-off thing. Identity is formed through what I call the "politics of perception, or "politics of sense". Reference to identity in the workplace is made with regard to modes of exclusion and participation, of discrimination and inclusion.[11] My research impressions reveals that there is no sense of workers identity in the workplace.[12] What seems to be characteristic of the retail workplace, in terms of identity is the social reality of difference, multiple differences. Thus, it is within these differences, differences that come to have relative presence through interviews and observations that we can tentatively situate our analysis of identity.

But then we need to ask: what is the workplace in the physical outlines of a supermarket? In fact, we need to ask further, what is work in the retail sector? I do not deal with the latter question. The workplace in the retail sector is more like a workspace. It is not the "hidden abode" that Marx was concerned about. It is not a production space, which is limited to the uneven co-existence of capital/labour relations. Rather, it is a space that allows and is disrupted by other social relations.

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10 Interview, Rosebank Pick n' Pay, March 1995.

11 In various stores, there is a strong consciousness of racism and racial discrimination. African women workers that were interviewed saw racism as a major obstacle to their advancement within Pick 'n Pay. The social reality of racism is sharply experienced by the majority of them who work in the Frontline Department. "I hate this place. Everyday you have to stand nonsense from both customers and management" (Interview, Ormonde, November 1994). There was a sense in which she felt trapped in this position.

12 Within the structure of work in the workplace, the union can only organize a meeting during the morning tea-break. This meeting, which takes once a week, disrupts non-union workers. What emerges is that in the organization of work, there is no space set aside for the union's activities. The reconstitution of workers identity is difficult to realize, as the daily operation of the union in the workplace is marginalized.

These are social relations that are not limited and defined by class politics of the traditional workplace. It is within this space that identity formation takes place, that it becomes possible to comprehend, especially in its outlines as a social reality of difference. Thus, space is not a physical boundary that contains social relations and identity. The relativity of the following proposition expresses place and space as constraining: "identities are shaped by embodied and embedded narratives, located in particular places and times" (Space & Place: Theories of Identity and Location, edited by Erica Carter, James Donald & Judith Squires, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, p. x). Carter et al. argue that we need to conceptualise identity outside of the boundaries of space, and locate it within places (Space & Place, p.xii). They argue that places play a significant role in the "symbolic and psychical dimensions" of identity (Space & Place, p.xii). This transformation of space into place is possible through the linguistic gesture of naming. Place contains meaning. It is invested with meaning and value. But then their notion of place expresses a desire for locality, home, and presence. However, it is David Morley and Kevin Robins who have argued that **"Places are no longer the clear support of our identity"** (Space & Place, p.5. My emphasis). Place constrains through its reference to a physical presence. The work-place operates with the same understanding. In contrast, space does not confine and limit the emergence and existence of social relations. Space allows for a temporal relation to a physical realm, but what remains significant are the relations that begin to be realized within its shifting boundaries. Certainly, the shift from thinking about work-place to thinking about work-space is an attempt to show the problematic idea of trying to fix identity by giving it a sense of origin.

CASE ONE: IDENTITY-FORMATION IN THE WORKSPACE.

What follows is a discussion of an interview that was conducted in Zulu, which was the language that the interviewee was comfortable with.[13] It was recorded in both Zulu and English. The Interview was conducted at her workspace, and we were constantly interrupted by customers. This was the only space where she had time to speak to me. On that day, she had decided not to go out for lunch. This woman has been with Pick 'n Pay since 1983. She joined Pick 'n Pay from Hyperama. She left the latter because "the conditions were not good. I was not treated properly by the white supervisors". She was hired at the door, when the Ormonde Pick 'n Pay branch was opened in 1983. From 1983 to 1991, she worked as a cashier in the Frontline Department. It was as a result of suffering backpains due to the strain involved that she was transferred to the textile department. She was in the textile department for the whole of 1992. She was kept out of

13 Interview, Ormonde Pick n' Pay, November 1994.

work for over seven months, after she was injured in a car accident [She complains bitterly about the treatment which she received from Pick 'n Pay. "They did not care whether I had medical care or not. In fact, they did not want me back"]. However, in April 1994 she was able to return to work. She now works as cheque and credit cards authorizer. She limps. She fractured her left leg, in the accident. She has never been active in the union, except in the 1986 National Strike. "Everyone had to participate in that one (strike)", she commented. Her reason for not participating in the other activities of the union is that the union requires lots of time and travel: "I stay very far in Sebokeng, and I cant be able to attend many meetings". She is a single mother, with a daughter. She has never been married.

The interview with her raised the issue of race and its relationship to work-related matters. She did not see being a woman as a critical condition for her employment at Pick 'n Pay. She works from 09h00-18h00, if she has to have lunch. Without lunch, she works until 17h00. She moved to Sebokeng in 1988. Before, she lived in Zola, Soweto. The Strikes she recalls are the 1986 National Strike and 1994 National Strike. The 1986 National Strike was one in which sleep-in were conducted throughout Pick 'n Pay stores.

> "The union used to be active, looking after the interests of workers. But now people are dismissed, and the union does not appear to challenge the decisions made by management".
>
> "Pick 'n Pay is involved in "retrenchments in disguise, and the union is doing nothing about it".

She feels discriminated against "Not because I'm a woman, but because I'm [umuntu umunyama] (black)". She argues that "Being a woman at Pick 'n Pay is not an issue. What matters is your colour". Like the other women who were interviewed, the terms black appears to refer to African identity. Thus, Shirley differentiates between blacks and coloureds. Coloured are seen as not interested in the union. They are seen to be paid better. The racism is not, at leats at Ormonde, and in her view, between black and white; it is between blacks and coloureds. [The management, at the time of research was a coloured male. He had been there for over nine months.] But Shirley notes that most of her white colleagues that she started with in 1983 have now moved into managerial positions, they have to other stores: "I've been a cashier, and I was never given an opportunity to train for other better positions". She concludes: "Pick 'n Pay is racist". Her consciousness of the union is not sharp and thorough. Her consciousness is most sharp, regarding her experience at Pick 'n Pay. Her racial identity has a particular meaning in the workplace. It appears to be dependent on the dynamics which she

has with the management structures.

She is committed to the idea of a trade union, in sofar as it advances the basic issues of workers. "Pick 'n Pay treats us (black people) alike. It does not differentiate between men and women". Her consciousness on race reveals an awareness of black, coloured, and white. "The union is for blacks". [The racial composition of SACCAWU differs with its regional context. The marginal group are the coloureds. They are seen as conservative and reactionary. They are anti-union. "We have few coloured members in the union". "I have been with the union for a longtime". "I joined the union so as not to be victimized by management". She has clear views on race relations in the workplace. "Most black never advance beyond the level of supervisors".

IN HER OWN WORDS:

> "Blacks join the union because they seek protection against racism".
>
> "I joined the union because there was favouritism in terms of wages".
>
> "What the union has done for me is to protect me against unfair treatment by management and to fight for wage increase".
>
> "In the early 1980s racism was widespread at Pick 'n Pay. Even now there is still racism. Nothing has changed".
>
> "Coloureds were working during this years's strike (1994)".
>
> "They [coloured] brought their families to work, while we were on strike".
>
> "The money we [blacks] get from Pick 'n Pay is too little: You can hardly furnish your house".

CASE TWO: CONSTRUCTION AND APPROPRIATION OF IDENTITY:

The Interview was conducted in Tswana.[14] The interviewee is a Mofurutshi. She started working at Pick 'n Pay (Randburg) in 1989 as a casual, and it was only in 1992 when she was accepted as permanent staff. She has been injured three times at work, and for all these times she has never been compensated. The first time, she had her finger injured. The second time, she fell and

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14 Interview, Randburg Pick 'n Pay, December, 1994.

injured her back. The third time, she was involved in an accident while travelling in the Company's Staff Bus. She joined the union in 1989. She was active in the 1994 Strike. She attends all the meetings and other activities. She is from Diepkloof, Soweto. She is married with two children. At the time of the interview, she was living in a flat in Hillbrow. She is also an active member of Christian Family Church.

> "In this store things are terrible". "Most people have left, they have taken transfers to go to other Pick 'n Pay Branches"

She stressed the significance of race in her experience at Pick 'n Pay. She has thus sought to escape racism by transferring to another store.

> "White people get their accident benefits quicker, and we do not get them at all". "I work because I am very poor".

She perceives the management at Pick 'n Pay Randburg to be racist. She joined SACCAWU because she saw it as the union which advanced the interests of black workers.

IN HER OWN WORDS:

> "I'm sorry, ... but I must say this: I do not like coloureds!". "They are reactionaries". "For example, during the recent strike, the coloureds did not toyi-toyi, while some whites at the Head Office joined the strike". "Coloureds think that they are whites". "Most of them feel obliged to police black people". "Even here in the Frontline Department, there are no relations between blacks and coloureds". "It is worse among the supervisors".
>
> "This management is terrible". "He wants to have his word as the last". "He listens to no one". "He has no respect for the shopstewards". "When we ask him about permanent work, he tells us that Head Office is refusing". He is racist [the store manager]. "He favours coloureds".
>
> "SACCAWU does nothing for casual workers". "I have decided to stop my subscriptions, two months ago". "We pay our subscriptions, and the union does nothing for us". "The union is dead". "What the union does instead is to believe and report to us whatever nonsense management tells them".

Trade unionism is seen as a legitimate mechanism to advance the interest of black workers; it is likely to attract black workers

much easier than other workers, at leats at Pick 'n Pay. This points out the significance of race; the experience of being treated as a black person, of being denied opportunities simply because one is black lead most black workers to join the trade union.

Racism in the workplace is a significance experience for most of the African women worker who were interviewed for this project. Thus, they join the trade union (SACCAWU) to fight racism in the workplace. Identity, or the experience of another identity, an other identity, an identity they appear to reject, becomes significant in the formation of the union. They see themselves as black workers, some as African workers. But there was no difference from the interviews. Being a worker is not a fundamental experience, it emerged. In fact, I had a sense that there was no clearly formulated concept of worker. The experienced that seemed to count the most was of racial identity. "We are treated differently we are black". It appears that to be black becomes sharp when they enter the workspace. For some of them, gender is not an issue at the workplace. Race becomes an important element in the formation and constitution of SACCAWU. For example, a week strike was launched at Pick 'n Pay, Blackheath over a manageress who had been known to be racist. This was during the second half of 1994.

The narrative construction of race in the workspace is in terms of the categories of black and African. But this happen as a result of a particular and relative appropriation of these categories. It also happens in the context of the absence of a clearly formulated discourse of racism on the part of management. African women workers at Pick 'n Pay see themselves as black, but they do not think that this is an identity category that should be used in the workplace. Thus, whenever, they are engaged in different forms of its rejection, this is usually in response to a particular construction of racial identity in the workplace. This is a construction that denies them access, benefits, and career opportunities. But their challenge of that construction is not to assert it; it is somewhat a denial of race. There is a process of the Africanisation of trade unions in South Africa.

These workers discover (Laclau, <u>The Making of Political Identities</u>, 1994, p. 2) the existence of an identity that operates to exclude them. They then respond to it; but they do not respond to themselves as black; they respond to the black identity that functions to exclude them. In joining the union movement, they see the latter as mechanism to advance their interests as 'black workers" [The meaning of black shifts here. This is the blackness that is constructed; they have to operate with the constructed notion of blackness, in order to respond to racism. There is a direct appropriation, even when it is problematic]. These workers do not lack identity; they are not characterised by identification (Laclau, <u>The Making of Political</u>

Identities, 1994, p. 3). Identification is the precondition for the formation of identity (Laclau, The Making of Political Identities, 1994, p. 3).

CASE THREE: THE PAINS OF IDENTITY.

Interview was conducted in Zulu.[15] The Interviewee is from Mofolo, Soweto. She has been working at Pick 'n Pay since 1985. She is a single mother, and is raising two sons. She works in the Frontline Department as a tillpacker.

IN HER OWN WORDS:

"Blacks are not trusted because management says that we teach each other how to steal". "Coloureds are promoted and we are not". "We teach them jobs, and they instead get promotion". "You see that coloured woman over there?. I taught her everything. She came here from University not knowing anything about the machine, but then I'm told that I have no education". "But I have service".

"We are not treated like this because we are women". "It is because we are black". "Management treats everyone black person alike". "There is too much racism here". "Shopstewards are weak. They do nothing for 'abantu' (black)". "There is also favouritism. This is between management and the black supervisors". "Favouritism is rife among black people". "Coloureds and whites like racism, but blacks like favouritism". "I came to Pick 'n Pay desperate and in need of money. But I was lured by the promise that one, once employed, grows within the company. This has never happen to me. I have been a tillpacker, since 1985". "Before I was in High School".

"SACCAWU is hopeless;, it has failed".

"It is not a problem of all Pick 'n Pay stores; it is this management". "For example, Southgate has given permanent status to all its casuals".

ANALYSIS AND ARTICULATION I:

"I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of

15 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 14 1994.

> the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present".[16]
>
> "We think too much in terms of history, whether personal or universal".[17]
>
> "We (must) begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion - the many as one - shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theories who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences".[18]

There is no sense of history in this project. There is no teleology to the reality of the social phenomenon of identity. The investigation on the question of identity is not conducted narratively, in terms of pattern, structure, organization, or even with the implicit desire to teleologize, to reach an end, to attempt to conclude on identity. There is no beginning and ending to the process of identity. Simply put, my attempt is to capture the social contexts of the manifestations of identity. My attempt is make sense of the conditions of the possibility of identity. That is, the concern is to attempt to show how the reality of identity, in terms of the "history of the present", emerges and develops. But this is a history without beginnings, without origins, without pasts. It is a history without any genealogical traces. The present is past, in as much as the past is present. There is no line which separates us from the past, or another that begins the future. This is identity. There is no single line, but multiple lines without any origins. Writing about the past, writing the past is writing about the present, Each history is its own present. There is no past history. History is always a double present. First, it is the present that pretends to be writing the past, that claims to be located in the past; that claims, on the basis of 'historical' evidence, to represents the past, to deal with the past. Second, it is the present of a repetition, of seeking the transformation of the present context, the context of its own writing. It is in the second sense of this double present that we begin to see the possibility of writing about identity, identity as representation. Indeed, it is as representation that this paper will approach the question of identity, in order to examine the question of its possibility. I do not assume the a priori status, or condition of identity, as a

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16 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 31.

17 Gilles Deleuze, Dialogues, p. 2.

18 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 142.

pre-given entity. The critical question for me is what are the conditions of the possibility of identity, in the context of the multiple desires and attempts to re-present identity.

AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE WORKSPACE: REPETITION OF DIFFERENCE.

The union is not what it appears to be. The union, within Pick 'n Pay, is composed of permanent and casual workers. It is predominantly composed of African women. This is a distinct social group. The age range of this group is between 25 and 50. The majority of them are from the major townships in Johannesburg. Most of them have Matric. However, these women are typical African women workers. They are not office workers. They are not cleaners. They are cashiers and tillpackers at Pick 'n Pay. They dress differently. They live differently. They live in one of the most complex provinces in South Africa. They live in the well-known townships of Johannesburg. They are lookable. They have a public presence. They keep up with latest fashions. They are visible in the shopfloor and also in the union. They work in a department which uses their femininity, the Frontline Department. This is the most visible department in the workspace. The Frontline Department is not hidden; it is not the "hidden abode" of production. It is not even a production-based space. It is an arena of exchange; it is the internal market of the store. In certain stores, it draws the boundaries between the inside and outside of the store. It is the space through entry and exit are possible for the majority of people in a store. Here, African women, through the objectivity of their gender are employed to be kind to customers. These are women who are also are active in various social activities - stokvels, kitchen parties, churches, and so on. [But what is the process of identity-formation in the Frontline Department? At what level is identity formed? What constitutes identity in the lives of this workers? What role does this identity play in trade union formation? Part of this study is to highlight the fact that trade unionism is a complex and most often fragmented process]. The image of Pick 'n Pay in African townships is that of a company that pays well its workers - "everyone thinks because we work for Pick 'n Pay, therefore we are well paid and treated as human beings".[19] "People come to us and ask us to seek jobs for them at Pick 'n Pay, because they think we are earn better".[20] The image is one of success and better-pay. The majority of these African women strike one as young, ambitious, independent.

> Whichever Pick 'n Pay store one decides to go to for shopping, they are the first to be seen. They are more visible than the managers who officially run the store.

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19 Interview, Ormonde Pick 'n Pay, November 1994.

20 Interview, Norwood, Pick 'n Pay, December, 1994.

> Whether it is a busy day, or a slow day, their presence confronts all. It is through the contact that we make with them that we realize the space we stand on. We pass them on our way to the various sections of the stores, and we also pass through them on the exit of the store. They are unavoidable. One can even perhaps state that they are the store. They handle the cash, and deal constantly with a variety of customers. They work under constant surveillance.

ANALYSIS AND ARTICULATION II:

What at first appears to be the identities of African women workers is revealed through further research to be "outside identities", or marginal identities. Identities show themselves to be fragments of other identities, to be other identities, to be displaced identities. What is revealed is the indeterminate practices of identities. This indeterminacy leads to the possibility of the impossibility of the essentialization of identities. Identities remain beyond reach, out of grasp, beyond simple comprehension. Relations which these women with others, the multiple others (friends, colleagues, family, lovers, husbands, supervisors, bosses, union leaders, and with many unnameable others) are not necessarily the constitutive elements of their identities, nor are they the outcome of other relations, past and primary relations. What is impossible to outline with any sense of certitude, in this social space of perpetual relationality, is the pure and natural state of any identity. [Identity is forever displaced, ever postponed. This is the strategic moment of Derrida's **differance**, the moment when ontology is rendered impossible through the activity of undecidability]. Within their lives, in their various forms of multiplicities, dispersed in all facets of social life, identity reveals itself to be an indeterminate element (Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony & Socialist Strategy, 1985).

ANALYSIS AND ARTICULATION III:

Thus the movement of identity, from a particular social space (Pierre Bourdieu, In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology, 1990) to the other, from one space that has proved itself incapable of making a difference on the various elements that circulate within its limiting boundaries, to another that has the potential to provide it with new expression, is never articulated through neutral processes. [Marx writes that capital is a social relation, and regarding his bias on class identity, he writes: "But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests" (Preface to Capital, Volume 1, 1867). The limits of this conceptualization in terms of the denial of the fluidity inherent in social life, or capitalist social formation is clear in the interpretation of the

somehow permanency of "economic categories" and the "embodiments of class relations and interests". What seems to severely undermines Marx social theorization is the invalidity of the primacy that he gives to class identity, especially in its rigid forms. Is there any other form?]. We have long been reminded by McLuhan that the medium is the message. He writes: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" (Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (London: RKP, 1964, p. 15. My emphasis) The past innocence of representation is no longer a possible idea. It is equally true, however, that things-in-themselves, the Kantian noumena, remain problematic to determine, even to articulate. What these thoughts seek to raise is one dimension of the complexities surrounding the question of identity - the dimension of its representation]. The mediation of this shift is itself a process of construction - the construction of identity, but the construction (by the medium, the mediator) of another identity, an other identity, an unknown identity. But identity does not by itself enter into the spatiality of movement ["movement is distinct from the space covered. Space covered is past, movement is present, the act of covering (the act of creating)" (Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, p. 1). Identity is not put into motion by an internal logic, a logic that distinguishes it from other elements that are usually naïvely defined as non-identity. In fact, within this movement, this "act of covering", identity does not enter as an object. Partly, because there are no boundaries that limit the character of the movement, its distance, its duration (Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, p. 2). On a closer examination, however, identity becomes itself this movement, this shifting process, this passage that enables, or struggles to define it as such. In this sense, identity is incapable of entering into any partnership with movement, or even of participating in the logic of transference and transcendence. It is not transported, nor is it the message of the medium. In this regard, the singularity that deserves our attention is the complex relation of identity/movement, of identity as/in movement. What also becomes problematic in this relation of movement/identity - it is a movement of relation, as a result of the impossibility to stabilize the core features of identity - is the attitude of the desires (in the positive sense of Anti-Oedipus) to define identity, to re-present identity, to give to us the social object of identity. We begin to agree with those who wrote before us that the act of representation of anything is impossible, not because Derrida, following Artaud, was the first to highlight this notion, but precisely because the logic that underlies the idea of representation is one that defeats, at the very moment of its origins, the articulation of representation. Identity is not representation. It is not representable, like life itself (Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, 1978, p. 234).

ANALYSIS AND ARTICULATION IV:

The complexity of African identity in the modern social formation is complicated by its location within the ever-variable social space of urbanity. [Marx writes: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed one become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Manifesto of the Communist Party)]. What is identity within this spatiality? Where does identity begins? What are the limits of identity within the complexity of urban space? What forms of relations does a single identity, assuming that this proposition is valid, have with other identities? What is the history of these relations? What mechanisms sustain these relations? Are socio-political, historical, institutional, and cultural factors sufficient to explain the various forms of these relations? We can never begin to start the series of questions around the issue of prioritization of the levels that are said to constitute identity - politics, language, discourse, experience, social relations, communities, social associations, social movements, ethnicity, and many others. Our problem is not one of determination, of trying to grasp, with a blind "frenzied effort" (Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, Preface, 8), the material reality of social identity within spatial arrangements. Spaces do not articulate the complexity of identity-formation. Spaces, themselves, are not a priori given, passive, and systematically productive in the production and constitution of identity. Spaces do not produce anything, least of all the social object of identity. Spatiality is not formed once-and-for all, and its subsequent social expression is that of production. What the concept of spatiality begins to function for our question of identity is the outline of the fragments of the possibility of identity-formation. In a limited relative sense, spatiality is the "condition of the possibility" of identity, itself a problematic notion. Kant is therefore incorrect to define space as a mode of representation through which objects are "determined or determinable" (Critique of Pure Reason, B. 37), even when space itself is not an "empirical concept" (Critique of Pure Reason, B. 38). Space is the inner intution that conducts the possibility of "outer experience" (Critique of Pure Reason, B. 38). Thus, for Kant, space is a "necessary a priori representation which underlies all outer intuition" (Critique of Pure Reason, B.38). What Kant fails to analyse is the question of space as a formation, and not as a "pure intuition" (Critique of Pure Reason, B.39). There is, therefore, no relation between space and identity, in whatever form. What exists is the representational function of space. Identity comes from this function. However, space is not what gives rise to identity. Space does not exists a priori to identity. There is no relation

between space and identity. [The ontology of space is itself rendered impossible by the questions that demands and seek to outline its determinacy. What we must note is that our problem is purely methodological. The truism that facts do not speak for themselves often begs the question of the constitution and subsequent muteness of these very facts. We therefore need to engage with the critical question of the formation of facts, of the objects of our knowledge, of identity, and multiple identities themselves.]. On the question of the urban space and its multiple dispersion, Castells writes: "Cities are living systems, made, transformed and experienced by people. Urban forms and functions are produced and managed by the interaction between space and society, that is by the historical relationship between human consciousness, matter, energy and information" (The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements, 1983: p.xv). In this passage, which opens a detailed empirical analysis of "urban social movements", the objectivity of separate social categories, categories that come to interact with one another through the mutual recognition of differences and conflict, is an asserted without a consideration of the formation of these very categories. This is a form of Kantianism in the disguised of empirical research/data. Thus, we see the metaphor of production taking a role of inscribing what constitutes the the formation of the urban space - urban social spaces are produced through multi-level interactions. But what allows for this production? what initiate the forces of production to enter into this specific practice? What this analysis begs is the question of motion/movement.

ANALYSIS AND ARTICULATION V:

The exercise of outlining and describing the social manifestation of identities is not correlative with the much more difficult exercise of the engagement with the theoretic-methodologies underlying, almost to the point of control, the formation and constitution of identities as social objects. The theoretical tasks that must always confront those of us who are not contend with the descriptive exercise are those that require us to detail the formation of social objects, which are at the core of our knowledge, in this instance the formation of identity. How is this social object formed? How does it come to us? How did it become formed in its own particular manner? What has made it different from other social objects? Is its formation complete, or is it an unending process? We all know that knowledge is of social objects. Social objects form what for us is knowledge, and we do well to listen to Bourdieu's caution: "In the social sciences, the progress of knowledge presupposes progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge" (The Logic of Practice, p. 1). The key phrase here is "our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge". This is a fundamental presupposition. We seek to examine the "conditions of the objects of knowledge". However, the advances made in the domain of knowledge are often devoid of

a correlative progress in the knowledge of the "condition of knowledge". They are never the same thing. But it is critically important that we give attention to the question of the "conditions of the possibility of knowledge", for the simple reason that our interest is not merely to compile a list of new entries in the Grand Knowledge Catalogue, but also, to make visible by means of critical analysis, the means through which our knowledge is possible.

Thus, we find Foucault, in his outstanding methodological treatise in the social sciences, where he notes the complexity that goes into the formation of objects, writing: "(The object of) mental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p. 32). He continues: "this group of statements is far from referring to a single object, formed once for all, and to preserving it indefinitely as its horizon of inexhaustible ideality". There is a multiplicity of objects, and not a singular object. In his well known example of madness, there is no single madness. We thus cannot begin our analysis from the object, as there is no object, but objects. What these objects of madness, for example, have in common are statements: "one should confine one's attention to those group of statements that have one same object" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.32). The focus of the analysis is not on the "permanence and uniqueness of an object", but on the "space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.32). This space is one of statements and discourse. Objects emerge in relations; they emerge through relations. Within a relation, objects are named, described, analyzed, appreciated, and judged" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.32). This is possible through the "rule of successive emergence". Thus, the unity of a discourse on identity, for example, is not "based on upon the existence of the object (identity), or the constitution of a single horizon of objectivity" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.32). The discourse of identity is a result of the "interplay of the rules that makes possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time" (p.32-33). The object of a discourse are multiple and varied. It is not a single discourse. Some objects are "shaped by measures of discrimination and repression"; others are "differentiated in daily practice" in the many social institutions within which they circulate; others are manifest in the signs and codes of social life and relations. Thus a discourse is formed by the "rules that define the transformations of these different objects, their non-identity through time, the break produced in them, the internal discontinuity that suspends their permanence" (The Archaeology of Knowledge, p.33). From this, it is clear that objects that constitutes our social knowledge are not simply given. They do not exist in-themselves, outside of relations. They do not exist in mute forms, and passively wait our violent gestures of

appropriation and representation. What is significant are not the objects themselves, but the processes that leads to their formation and constitution. This is equally true of the social object of identity.

The relation among identities is characterised by different levels of incommensurabilities - "For it is impossible to know what the state of knowledge is ... without knowing something of the society within which it is situated" (Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, p.13) [The multiple, different identities, bespeaks different forms of knowledge, some positivist, others "critical, reflexive, or hemerneutic" (The Postmodern Condition, p.14). Positivist knowledge of identities is directly linked to the notion of its materiality, while the hermeneutic knowledge is concerned with its value, its meaning, its symbolic status, and cultural location. Identity itself is a form of these knowledges, and these are invariably an articulation of power relations. We begin to see identity located with the power/knowledge relation. Identity's level of manifestation reflect a particular form of power/knowledge. Thus, "each of us knows that our self does not amount to much ... but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man and woman, rich and poor, a person is always located at the 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass" (The Postmodern Condition, p.15). At one level of their constitution, social relations (identity) are composed of language games - we move within and through language games. Languages games are the "minimum relation required for society to exist: even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course" (The Postmodern Condition, p.15). Further, even the "question of social bond is itself a language game, the game of inquiry" (The Postmodern Condition, p.15). This adds to the complexity of the formation of identities. It is the field of language games that shows identities to be not as simple as we tend to imagine them. In the empirical form of language games, identities are incommensurable - "an incommensurability between popular narrative pragmatics" (The Postmodern Condition, p.23). "It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge ... All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species" (The Postmodern Condition, p.26). The concern is not to determine the question of meaning, of the meanings of these identities. We can never begin to mourn the "loss of meaning". The realization for us is to accept that "knowledge is no longer principally narrative" (The Postmodern Condition, p.26). [What has subsequently occurred is the relocation of identities from the level of social materiality to the complex level of language

games, as identities come to exist through the narrative form. Through narrativity, the question of the determination of the formation of identities is rendered difficult and problematic. The narratives of identity are not the same as the discourse of identity. The latter is underlined by serious tones of formalism, and the former are simply straightforward. However, the narratives of identities - as reference of what people themselves say, where they say, how they say it, to who they say it to - do not act as the raw material for the formation of the discourse of identity. The latter is a form of abstraction. It is as a result of critical reflection. It is structured by power relations (The Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972). This discourse of identity is not a mere appearance, or reflection of objectivity. The discourse itself has no relation to the complex formation that leads to the emergence of identity. Thus the categories of any social theory are themselves incomplete. We do not as yet possess, in our minds and books, complete forms of social theories. What this means is that identity as an important category of social theory is also incomplete, remains forever absent. However, the form of this specific incompleteness is not comprehensible within a dialectic interpretation of social life. Identity remains undialectic, or incapable of any form of participation in the dialectic logic, through its status as an non-object.

Laclau writes, in New Reflections, "social relations are always contingent ... they are always power relations ... the constitution of a social identity is an act of power and that identity as such is power ... power is the prerequisite of any identity ... power is the condition for society to be possible" (p.31-33). These reflections are problematic in their conception of power and power relation outside of the critical structure of their relationship with knowledge. There is no power, in as much as there is no knowledge. No objectivity of each. These categories do not exist independent of each other. Their formation is not a singular event that through its specific conditions of emergence give rise to them. The originary moment of power is in-itself the birth of knowledge. Laclau continues: "To study the conditions of existence of a given social identity ... is to study the power mechanisms making it possible" (New Reflections, p.32). We see here the simplicity of the notion of the given asserted in an unproblematic manner. How is it possible for social forces, social objects, and social relations to be given? Why do others appear earlier in historical formations, and others later? What determines the givenness of a social object? The contingency logic of social life renders it impossible for the a priori givenness of a social object. A social object can never, at any moment in the structure of social life, exists as a givenness, in the form of this relative condition. The notion of the given in Laclau's assertion precludes any anticipation of the knowledge forms that enable this social object to have an ontological status. That is, power does not come to work on a

social object, such as identity. Power is not independent of identity, as knowledge. Power in itself does not create the social object of identity. Power is not the objective threat to the social form of identity. The objectivity, as a series of perceptual relations, of social identity is not an a priori condition for its existence. There is no possibility of an external appropriation of a social object. That is, power relations do not give rise to social identity. This is too unilinear and causal. Not even the axis of power relations/knowledge give rise to the social existence and objectivity of social identity.] This is the lesson we learn from Foucault: "we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. ... We should admit rather that power produces knowledge ... that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Discipline and Punish, p.27). We have, theoretically, transcended the binarity of power vs knowledge. Our reflections are now problematically located within the relationship of power/knowledge. It is within this structure of social life that the category of identity emerges and exists. Identity, all identities, are located within the matrix of power relations/knowledge. Our analysis of them are informed and likely to give us better insight into the character of identities once we begin to operate through this matrix of power relations/knowledge. Here we cease to speak about the notion of objectivity, even "asserting the contingent nature of all objectivity" (New Reflections, p.31). We cease to have interest in the question of the character of social life - determinism vs contingency; absolute constitution vs relative structure.

Identity does not have a relation to a social context, in that identity is not a social object in a social context. The notion of social context does not exists, in any conceivable form, as a base of the formation and formulation of identity. It is not, in-itself function with an explanatory value. It is not even primary to the other social objects and relations. Social context is itself a social object, in need, desperately of explanation. Thus, to give the notion of social context a certain explanatory value in the study of social life is to ignore the question of its condition of possibilities. This kind of analysis runs into a circular explanation, and never becomes able to break the circle. The question, therefore, is whether social context can stand outside itself, be examined from asocial position? Is it possible to discuss social processes such as identity outside of the much valued notion of social context? Such questions haunt us still.

The primacy of identity in social life and relation is not as a result of an inherent logic located within identity itself.

Identity does not contain anything within its fragile boundaries. This condition comes from the interplay of social forces that, in ways that are disconnected to identity itself, find themselves in mutual reinforcement of a particular pattern of meaning. The resultant is this temporal meaning which we characterise as identity. But this is not a product, something that has been processed and finally delivered. Things remain forever contested through the logic of indeterminacy. What is specific does not happen because of the necessary condition created by social relations and contexts. Issues of specificities are enabled due to the inability of things to be positioned, in whatever manner. This disabling logic in much of social life gives us the formation of social relations, and therefore we do not necessarily absolutize the specificities in themselves, as though they resolve, for us, the problems of knowledge in social life. Specificities lead to, through their relative social force, to focus analytically on the problems of knowledge, and to realize the extent to which we are still far remove from the desire of separating ourselves from all epistemologies. But this does not mean that now we can finally grasp, make tangible through the primitivity of the technological hand, the objects of our knowledge (in fact, the truth is, knowledge is not located in the immediacy of social objects - social objects are the same as Durkheim's social facts. The truth is we never know what counts as knowledge). Therefore, the relative determination of specificities is not a necessary moment of the resolution of the eternal problem of knowledge. Through this, we begin to see the complex web within which the question of identity is located. Its determination through knowledge categories reveals it to be a complex category in social life.

Outside of itself, identity continues to retain its identity. The exteriorized identity of identity, the perceptible perception of another identity, the representation of identity, another identity. Within its own limited, although constantly shifting, boundaries, identity is unsettled; it is uncomfortable. This unsettlement comes from a relative logic strategically situated within the margins of identity. The marginalities within the unsettle limits of identities are never identifiable. What we have is an image of unclassifiable social formation. The imagery is what never leaves us. We entertain and anticipates the images of identity, of identity as an image. We pursue social life through the images of identity. It is these images, which we never know in what form they might appear before us, and thus become further disabled to grasp them, that we have defined to be at the core of the constitution of social life. These images of identity circulate in an never-ending process of obsession. We think we know what identity, but we are never able to specify its limits and boundaries, or even its potentials. Thus, we find ourselves in imagery relations with similar and other individuals and social groups who share our specific obsession concerning the imagery of identity. These relations, in their forms of fluidity,

end up in a state of dispersion. We never know where they are located. Further, it is no longer possible for empiricism, empiricity, the empirical to act as the absolute, or even relative, determination of truth, knowledge, social process and positionality, and identity. The priority given to empiricity, unduly so in certain unclear historical processes, is not a mandate of the eternal recurrence, or repetition of this social value. The critical contest between different forms of epistemologies is far from over, even when certain fluid institutional boundaries pretend to have overcome the struggle. These epistemological struggles are not completed through the assertion of one epistemological value over the other, nor are they fully determined through the violence that continuously accompanies the social act of conformity and representation. Empirical research, regardless of the amount of details that go into its constitution does not solve the numerous epistemological problems that persists outside of epistemological positions. In this sense, empirical data must be treated with the same relativity that other epistemological positions often receive. What remains outside of these epistemological positions is not, as is often wrongly interpreted, their common notion of relativity. It is rather, the character of the question of epistemology itself. This is the question that defies the confining limits of the epistemological positions. As we move to accept this logical outcome, we realize, regarding the question of identity-formation, with its underlying tones of epistemological problematics, that a certain form of reflexivity takes place in the space that has been preserved for identity, the spatiality of the "conditions of the possibility". This reflexivity is one that turns itself against the logics of identity and its possible potentials. The reflexivity begins to move away from the dualism of interiority and exteriority. In this moment of reflexivity, when identity is demobilized, is rendered difficult to articulate, identity becomes a social impossibility. Identity is ruined within itself. Its epistemology, its, rather, multiple epistemologies, are no longer possible. The ontology of identity also becomes obsolete.

Conceptions of identity are linked with certain epistemological positions. In this sense, identity is an epistemological category - its character, its ontology, its relations with other categories. Identity tells us about its knowledge operations, where it is possible for it to operate, how it can best operate. Identity, is therefore, not a neutral social process. It is heavily infused with the intimate relation of power relation/knowledge. The study of identity, or of any social process, is not possible, if we still entertain notion of totality and holism, ontology, through a certain unmediated prioritization of a particular epistemological position. What is at issue in the social study of social processes is not the ways and means of the determination of the social verification of certain social realities, such as identity. What remains

singularly critical is the primary question of the conceptual and theoretical analysis and determination of those social realities themselves. We need to search for a certain theoretical possibility of these social realities. That is, the social category of identity must be posed in terms of the question of knowledge.

"Everything is form, and life itself is form" - Balzac.

The logic of identity is, therefore, defied by its relationality to the space of its possibilities. The relation is neither causal, nor dialectic . The relation is not, further, bounded to the elements that defines it. That is, the relation is not limited to what constitutes it. The question of space and identity is one of relationality, and it is this inherent process that defies, or undermines the possibility of identity. Once constructed by relation, identity ceases to be what we imagine it to be. The imagery is inconceivable. In this manner the question of the formation of identity is continuously deferred. We have no possible means and ways to begin on the question of identity [Said notes that "The problem of beginnings is one of those problems that, if allowed, ... confront one with ... intensity on a practical and ... theoretical level" (Beginnings: Intention & Method, p. 3). Thus, "what is a beginning? What must one do in order to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? (Beginnings, p. xi).] Identity has not been destined to begin, or even to have a place of origin. We remain constantly defeated in our attempts to originate the birth of identity. Identity does not originate in space, from space. It also does not begin from the relationality of space to 'identity'.

Identity as a single social category is rendered impossible by the complex web within which it emerges and have forms of existences. This complexity is heightened by the specific conditions of the urban space/context. This space effectively undermines, as a consequence of its structure and forms of social forces that it allows, the single construction and manifestation of identity. It denies the ontologization of that which we desire as identity. The complexity of the urban space, defined as a set of multiple social relations that inherently irreducible to any specific logic, allows for the continuous displacements of all ontologies. Identity, as another desire, a peculiar modern desire, of ontology, of presence, of existence, of being, of teleology, becomes impossible within the parameters of this complexity. Thus, the character of this space is one of non-ontologies, or a systematic deconstruction of all ontologies. Within this space claims to identity are nothing more that violent desires, the ultimate desire for social destruction.

Identity within this complex web exist in the form of a structured relation. It is an overdetermined social process

(Althusser, For Marx, 1969; Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis", 1983). It is not itself; it is itself. It exists in the discourse of the social relations; it exists in the spatiality and social distribution of social bodies; it exists in the social arrangements of social institutions. Its textured is the structure of the social fabric of social life. It is multiple in this sense. It is, further, multi-layered. It is not located in the structure of what individuals, or social groups say. These are simple attempt to create a binarized social life.

THE EMPIRICITY OF SOCIAL IDENTITIES:

> "(O)ur thought, in its purely logical form, is incapable of presenting the true nature of life, ... In fact, we do indeed feel that not one of the categories of our thought - unity, multiplicity, mechanical causality, intelligent finality ... - applies exactly to the things of life: who can say where individuality begins and ends, whether living being is one or many, ... In vain we force the living into this or that one of our moulds. All the moulds cracks. They are too narrow, above all too rigid, for what we try to put into them".[21]

My aim has been not to intefere with the objectivity of social identities through a prioritization of the practice of representation. I have tried to resist reprensenting the other, the African women workers. Instead, I have sought to present social identities as they are, to allow for the naïve practice of self-representation. What I tried to avoid, although it remains incomplete given the nature of the dominant paradigm which allows for this practice to take place, has been the practice of representation. Not only do facts never speak for themselves, but, whenever they do, they speak through the form of representation. Representation becomes a dominant mediator in the social visualization of social life. It creates for the multifacet imageries of social life.

However, the critical questions that remain with us are the following: what is the character of the empirical data on identity? what data was collected, should have been collected on identity? is this data qualitative or/and quantitative? The nature of the empirical data of this project reflects the inconclusiveness surrounding the question of identity. The data is not the final statement on the question of identity-formation. Rather, the data is an approximation towards the answer of the question of identity formation. In itself, and within its limits, the data is not exclusively concerned with identity. The data did

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21 Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, Translated by Arthur Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. x.

not exist, prior to its discovery, for the confirmation of the question of identity formation. The data that I have been able to gather can be said to be a distorted picture of the social manifestation of identity. What is important is not the data, as a form of value that tends to assume relative ontology, but the reflections and meditations on a form of social life and social relations that operate with a valorization of identity. Thus the essence of this project is a critique of identity, and not, as it might misleadingly appear in this paper, a proof of the social reality of identity, another statement on identity. The aim is to displace our concern with the question of identity, by showing the social impossibility of identity within an impossible category of the social (Laclau, The Making of Political Identities, 1994).

Identity, if it ever exists in the most dominant and violent form of social context, is somewhere located in-between (Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 1994) language, discourse, the body, social institutions, social relations, politics, culture, religion, ethnicity, race, sexuality. It is not a "single sign of difference" (The Location of Culture, p. 219). Identity does not even begin to occupy a specific social space of its own and which it fills with a sense of dominance. That is, identity is not embodied in any of the various societal arrangements. Identity is **dispersed within** these and other social forms. It is **fragmented within** social forms of social life. But it is itself a social form. Focillon writes that all social objects are "part of a system of highly complex relationships" (The Life of Forms in Art, Translated by Charles Beecher Hogan & George Kubler, New York: Zone Books, 1992, p.31). Life is a creators of forms (Life of Forms, p.33). Form is the modality of life (Life of Forms, p.33). For Focillon, forms are at the core of both natural and social lives. Form is a construction of space and matter (Life of Forms, p.33). Identity is similar to a work of art, in that it is constructed in as much as a work of art is. Thus a "work of art exists only insofar as it is form" (Life of Forms, p.33). "We are always tempted to read into form a meaning other than its own, to confuse the notion of form with that of image and sign. But whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only itself" (Life of Forms, p.34). This problematizes identity. Identity assumes an aesthetic form, and its value in social relations is contested through access to cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste, 1984. The aesthetics of identity remind us of the contestation surrounding its representation (Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?; Who speak for whom? Who has the social and political, and even cultural legitimacy to speak for others, on their behalf?) Its aesthetics reflect the diverse ways in which its specific cultural appropriation takes places and is institutionalized. Thus, when its cultural forms are consolidated in socio-political practices of museum, social events, seminars, and so on, we then realize the impossibility of

the gesture to attain, to retrieve the true meaning of identity. We can only be nostalgic about the absence of identity. But we can never ignore the significance of Marx's words:

> "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life".
