

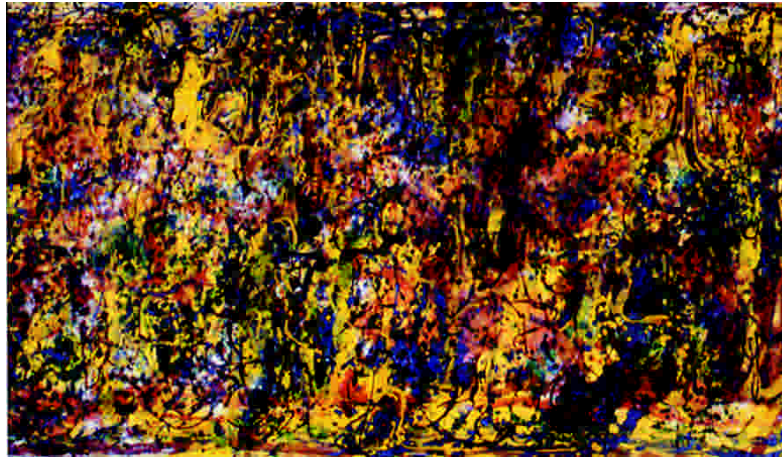
Liquid Identities

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The Invention of Cultural Identity by means of Hybridisation

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Introduction



“Fragments I”, David Koloane, 1988

Our time is marked by the fact that it's getting more and more unlikely that one can regard identity as an individual characteristic one gains through birth and is never to lose again. Identity used to be seen as something stable and solid, which is not influenced by the local events or changing ideologies the individual person is exposed to during a lifetime. But who would dare guarantee that people used to have these kinds of identities, before some “bad and ugly monster” called globalisation came and stole them through putting on mass media and a homogenous cultural language and code? As if the good old days consisted of undisturbed stable and peaceful times, where no one was ever forced to cope with something new.

On the other hand, how can one assume something like a “liquid identity”, something which is fluent and flexible: simply liquid; something, which just flows around obstacles or is mixed up with other identities and so produces something new – like blue and yellow produce green. It's hard to think of an identity, which no one can define as clearly as one could tell its state of aggregation, like something you can even grasp or feel. But a concept like the hybridity of identity is by no means an unknown term in the postcolonial discourses of Homi K. Bhabha or Stuart Hall.

To use Hall's words: "The completely standardised, perfected, safe and coherent identity is an illusion. In the measure, in which the systems of the meaning and the cultural representation multiply themselves, we are confronted with a confusing, flowing variety of possible identities, we could at least temporarily identify ourselves with every single one of them."¹

Nevertheless, how precisely are personal, national, and cultural identities composed? I think, to answer these questions, we have to start with the analysis of the contemporary concept of the individual identity. But for a full comprehension of the global concept of identity, we have to equally consider collective identities. Being children to the era of the nation state the national identity surely is the first candidate that comes to mind, when thinking of collective identities. Due to the growing uneasiness with the concept of the nation state, we cannot leave it there. With the concept of *cultural* identity a more promising candidate is ready at hand. The analysis will thus concentrate on the clarifying and, where necessary, the re-definition of this concept and its connected notions and primary patterns of thought which will finally enable us to examine the special case of a South African cultural identity.

In the second part, I want to identify a *kaleidoscope* of cultural identities, enabling the fragmented identities to create and to recombine into new hybrid perspectives. I will thereby make use of the theories of two highly renowned postcolonial thinkers – Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. The former pointing out that the differences are the

¹ My translation from the German: „Die völlig vereinheitlichte, vervollkommnete, sichere und kohärente Identität ist eine Illusion. In dem Maße, in dem sich die Systeme der Bedeutung und der kulturellen Repräsentation vervielfältigen, werden wir mit einer verwirrenden, fließenden Vielfalt möglicher Identitäten konfrontiert, von denen wir uns zumindest zeitweilig mit jeder identifizieren könnten.“, Hall, Stuart: Die Frage der kulturellen Identität, in: Rassismus und kulturelle Identität, Hamburg, 1994, p. 183

engines, and also the substances, for the individual to produce, join, and mix different cultural identities; the latter developing new and creative opportunities for the global citizen to act under conditions of contemporary political agency by means of his “in-between space”. Okwui Enwezor, last but not least, provides us with the specific creative potential of the growing African “megacity”, employing the term throughout the platforms of Documenta11, and thus reintroduces us to the urban spectre of Johannesburg.

While we have up to this point been occupying ourselves with the theoretical conditions of the constitution of liquid identities, we shall in the third part focus on the practicability of this approach in a vibrant urban space like Johannesburg. Lindsay J. Bremner not only discusses the “making do” in a world of informal settlements but she poses a useful example for the interdisciplinary revitalisation and repossession of the highly transitory inner city districts of Johannesburg. The public arts projects to be considered in this part include among others the Creative Inner City Initiative, the Metro City Mall, and the Joubert Park Project. The treatment of Berlin, considered as a universal blueprint for this re-inhabitation of inner city precincts, will finally supply us with a European point of comparison.

After having passed these dialectical steps, we will in the end be in the position to answer the question if the concept of liquid identities is a practicable one for the abolishment of the neo-colonial structures inherent in the eurocentric concept of identity. Furthermore, we will be able to consider the constitution of a heterogeneous global community, that surpasses the constraints of nationalist approaches, and leaves behind once and for all the binary logic of the eurocentric hierarchy erected during the era of colonialism.