

Proposal

MAIN QUESTION: How do we reconcile the need to make identity claims with the need to critique those identity claims?

I. Introduction:

Within current feminist theories/discourses on identity and identity categories, much emphasis is placed on the ways in which identity categories are problematic. The traditional understanding of the identity “woman” as foundational, singular and descriptive has been critically assessed to expose the ways in which it can both be exclusive and totalizing. In such a way, the identity “woman” has become a politicized category that cannot be unproblematically accepted but must instead be continually examined to uncover the underlying power matrices that have produced it.

As a result of these new understandings, identity is a dangerous category—one that cannot easily and unproblematically be asserted. In light of its problems, it would seem that identity categories should no longer be used. However, as many feminists contend, within current language and political discourses, asserting identity claims is necessary. In order for us to have recognition, both culturally and politically, we must assert ourselves in terms of specific identities, such as “I am a woman.”

Recognizing this situation, this essay will explore ways in which to navigate between the need for identity and the need to critique and be suspicious of that identity. To focus this essay, I will look at the work of two feminist theorists, Judith Butler and Carol Boyce Davies and how they set up the problem of identity. First, I will examine their

understandings of (1) the problem with identity claims, (2) the need for identity claims and (3) the method for asserting identity claims. Then, I will offer my critical analysis of their respective theories. Finally, I will provide my own theory on identity and the need to extend the problematic beyond the necessity of identity to the desire for identity.

II. Two theories on identity/identity categories:

a) Judith Butler:

1. *the problem with identity claims:* According to Judith Butler, identity is not a description, but a normative ideal, one that dictates which behaviors are deemed intelligible (that is, recognizable and identifiable) within discourse and therefore legitimate and which behaviors are deemed unintelligible and illegitimate. This normative process, which is concealed by the presentation of identity as a description of an unproblematic truth, involves both exclusion and abjection, where certain identities are accepted at the expense of others. In discussing this in several of her works, Butler focuses on the regulatory and exclusionary practices that produce gendered identity. Specifically, she looks at the process of asserting a gendered identity, such as “I am a woman,” or a sexual identity, such as “I am a lesbian,” and the implications of these claims for political discourses such as feminist or queer theory. Fundamentally, her concern with identity categories/claims is that they are presented as truth. Instead of asking after the ways in which categories like woman or lesbian have been produced, we unproblematically assert them as a foundation for our discourses/theories/politics. First, this fails to acknowledge the politicized nature of these identity

claims. And, second, it assumes that we have ultimate control over what identity means or can come to mean.

2. *the need for identity claims:* Even though identity categories are exclusive, normative and beyond our control, Butler still recognizes that they are necessary. First, it is through the process of identity that we are created as intelligible subjects. The rules and regulations that dictate those identities shape and influence us and our behaviors. In such a way, to reject identity categories is to reject ourselves. Second, because the political system is based on representational politics, it is through the assertion of identity/identities that individuals fight for their rights. In terms of political movements, such as feminism, the appeal to the identity “woman” is imperative for effecting political change.
3. *method for asserting identity claims:* In recognizing that we need identity categories/claims, Butler contends that our only course of action is to risk identity claims. According to her, it is possible that the identity claims we make will take on meanings and purposes that extend beyond our intentions. When we risk claiming an identity, we become vulnerable, leaving ourselves open to the multiple ways in which our identity can be harmful. Nevertheless, we must still risk identity. In promoting identity as a necessary risk, Butler believes that the ambiguous and risky nature of identity categories allows for a type of radical democracy in which the identities we claim are left open and continuously challenged and reassessed for future (and possibly better) use. Ultimately, identities will be claimed/asserted. However, the claims themselves will not have

any foundational weight. Instead, they will only be provisional identities, ones that are open to resignification.

b) Carol Boyce Davies

1. *the problem with identity claims*: According to Boyce Davies, identity is frequently presented as a singular, monolithic category. It is exclusive and totalizing and is offered at the expense of certain individuals whose voices are silenced and experiences are marginalized. Unlike Butler, who in her writings focuses on theories of gender and sexuality, Boyce Davies focuses on the lived spaces and locations of black women writers as expressed in their autobiographical writings. She believes that current discourses on both “black” and “feminist” identity have failed to account for the rich and varied experiences of black women. In connection with this, Boyce Davies links identity with home and explores the ways in which home, both on a theoretical and physical level, serves as a “principle site of domination and conflict for women” (49), particularly black women. Ultimately, it is her contention that the traditional understandings of identity for black women must not be unproblematically or romantically accepted. Instead, they must be critically assessed to explore the various ways in which they totalize and exclude certain experiences.
2. *the need for identity claims*: In recognizing all of these problems, Boyce Davies does not wish to do away with identity or identity claims. In particular, she discusses the dangers of theoretical and physical homelessness, where the rejection of identities (such as national identity or familial identity) leads to a sense of total displacement and disconnection. Additionally, she emphasizes the

strong desire, among black women writers, to remember and reconnect with their heritage and their history. According to her, the question concerning identity is not: How do we get over it?, but How do we renegotiate it so that our experiences are recognized and our voices are heard?

3. *method for asserting identity claims:* In order to renegotiate identity/identity categories, Boyce Davies urges us to look at identity in a different way. Instead of understanding it as a singular, monolithic category, we should see it as a number of fluid and provisional connections. Drawing upon Gloria Anzaldua, Boyce Davies claims that black women live at the borderlands where “different cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, geographies, races, genders and so on collide or interchange” (16). In claiming identities, such as black women writer, individuals must always be elsewhere. Identity and the process of claiming identity and reestablishing home is involved in a journey, or what Boyce Davies calls a migration, where black women are constantly traveling to different locations, never allowing themselves to be trapped in any of the definitions assigned by others or any of the locations where oppression occurs. In such a way, identity is not something to be rejected, nor is it something that fixes black women in a particular location. Instead, identity is the continual journey between multiple, and sometimes contradictory, identities that can never be “located and framed in terms one specific place . . .” (36).

III. Assessment/Analysis of Butler and Boyce Davies:

Both Butler and Boyce Davies provide effective ways in which to understand the complexities and problems of identity and suggest fruitful ways in which to negotiate the

ambiguities and vulnerabilities of identity claims. In presenting identity as a risk, Butler offers an incredibly rich method for describing how individuals do relate and prescribing how individuals should relate to their claims of identity. By suggesting that identity claims involve risk, Butler provides an accurate description of the tenuous process of identity formation. Additionally, in emphasizing risk, Butler suggests that the very method for dealing with the unstable position of identity claims is to recognize the dangers involved in identity and identity claims and still assert them. By defining Black women writers as migratory subjects, Boyce Davies provides for an excellent way in which to describe their lives and their understandings of identity. Migratory describes Black women's experiences of displacement, their experiences of multiple identities and the particular type of agency that they can use to resist their marginalized and oppressed positions within the dominant hegemony. In both Butler's and Boyce Davies' theories, a more flexible understanding of identity is presented—one that accounts for a variety of different experiences.

For these reasons, the theories on identity/identity categories offered by Butler and Davies are compelling and valuable. However, both projects still raise some troubling questions for me. In her discussion of risk, Butler contends that identity is a necessary error. It is something that must be risked in order to gain representation, both culturally and politically. In describing it in this way, Butler presents identity almost solely as a negative process that is needed. Identity is not something to be desired, it is something merely to accept. To this understanding of identity I ask: What are the positive elements of identity? It seems to me that identity is not just something we need (that is, to be recognized), it is something we desire. As Cornel West argues in his essay, "A Matter of

Life and Death,” identity involves a deep desire for association and a longing to belong. In this way, I see identity as a positive process, one that participates in the creation of community, connection and belonging.

In her discussion of migratory subjectivity, Boyce Davies argues that identity is created on the road, through the process of traveling/ shifting from location to location. Home (which is also read as one’s identity/identities) is never in one place, but travels with black women on their journeys. In defending her position, Boyce Davies contends that “the common approach is to stay and accept subordination. A more interesting option is to locate oneself in the struggle for social transformation” (67). In recognizing the strong desire for identity, Boyce Davies claims that identity is something black women do not necessarily assert, in some definitive way, but subvert, through constantly fluctuating between various identities. To this understandings of identity I ask: (as mentioned in Butler), what about the times when we must assert identity to be recognized? Or when we want to assert identity to be included in a particular community? Additionally, if identity is always about migration/traveling, when do we get to stop and rest, to find comfort and safety? Just as identity includes more than the need for representation, it also includes more than submission and destabilization. As mentioned above, identity involves the desire to belong, and more importantly for this particular question, the desire to be safe, to find a community where you can rest.

In asking these questions to Butler and Boyce Davies, my primary concern is to explore ways in which we can reconcile the problems of identity claims with the desire for

identity. For, although identity is involved in a sometimes totalizing and regulatory process, most of us have a strong connection to our identity/identities.

V. The Desire for Identity

This final section will focus on how we desire identity—and how a desire for identity can be reconciled with the problems of asserting identity that Butler and Boyce Davies each offer. In particular, I will look at my own experiences and what the notion of desiring identity means to me. Drawing upon my experiences of displacement and migration, I will discuss my desire to balance this subversion of identity and this promotion of identity as fluid with an understanding of the specific instances of identity claims and the need for commitment to certain identities.

According to Cornel West in “A Matter of Life and Death,” identity and identity claims involve the desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association—what Edward Said would call affiliation. It's the longing to belong, a deep, visceral need that most linguistically conscious animals who transact with an environment (that's us) participate in. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety (16).

Such compelling descriptions of the desire for identity extend beyond the descriptions of the necessity of identity by either Butler or Boyce Davies. For me, it is true that identity must be left open to new reconfigurations and can never be definitively asserted, but it is also true that the assertion of particular identities provides us with a rich sense of connection and protection. In contrast to Butler, I believe that identity is more than a

necessary error. And, in contrast to Boyce Davies, identity involves more than the constant migration to elsewhere.

In articulating these positive elements of identity there is a danger of falling back into a romantic, nostalgic, and unproblematic understanding of identity. But, in not articulating them there is a danger of failing to see how we are attached to identity. I see the tension between identity claims and the need to critique those claims as existing in a slightly different way than Butler or Boyce Davies. Whereas, both authors focus on the tension between the totalizing gestures of certain identities and the political/cultural need to assert them, I wish to focus on the tension between the desire to belong, connect and to find safety in certain identities with the need to struggle to subvert identities and their creation of a false security. For me, this is a productive direction for future postmodern discussions of identity and identity claims. In terms of Butler and Boyce Davies, it involves taking their excellent analyses of identity and its problems and further nuancing them with an extended discussion of the desire for identity.

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