

Identity, Culture, Environment

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Proposed question for individual inquiry:

‘How does one perceive their own identity and culture when linked to their current environment?’

An Independent Research Document Proposal

Before delving into the depths of this literacy, one must understand that the context begins with the exploration of three key words with the addition of a minimum of three images, of which will link to three artists/ thinkers. This research is intended to explore and link the three keywords; identity, culture and environment, in order to pose a question in preparation for the dissertation, to analyse ideas of personal inquiry through the use of lectures, written works and politicised pieces. In support of those chosen key words, artists and theoreticians that work within the parameters of these concepts will be explored, including classicist Mary Beard (identity), and artists Zanele Muholi (culture), and Fern Thomas (environment).

Identity

Identity viewed through a societal lens is largely based on ingrained stereotypes. Who one should attempt to be in order to fit in to what society deems as a worthy or suitable person. Gender makes up a large part of this with many discrediting those who experiment or explore their gender or even image. A criticism rightfully made by feminists on T. H. Marshall's theory is that it is gender blind:

“citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All those who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which they are endowed” (Beaumont, 2013)

Not only that but it also suggests that a person who does not fit in with these guidelines and is not bestowed this status is therefore not part of the community and cannot demand respect or expect to be given rights, making them unwelcome, an outsider. The structure of the Western World is created around the idea of man, specifically white man, in power. Thus, making it seemingly impossible for a woman, trans, non-binary or person of other gender to fit into this puzzling world without being held back, deprived or entirely neglected. Mary Beard, a

professor, writer, and voice for women noted early on in her book *Women and Power a manifesto* “*the further up the career hierarchy she went, the fewer female faces she saw*” (Beard, 2014) which is largely still seen today with certain jobs aiming for more men to be within the upper echelons or at least with a better role than their female counterparts. From an outer perspective, Beard most definitely used her own personal experiences and griefs of being a woman to enable this literary work to be born, including those of her mother who “*felt frustrated that her views and voice were not taken as seriously as she hoped they would be*” (Beard, 2014), as well as the lack of control she had over her own path. A notable moment selected for this essay from today’s contemporary culture was when MP Tracy Brabin was “called out” for wearing something others deemed as inappropriate for parliament due to it being off the shoulder. Brabin stated “*women are being demeaned every day because of what they wear*” (Brabin, 2020).



Figure 1, (Denison, 2020)

After facing this unprecedented controversy that need not have occurred since “*there is no exact dress code: usual business dress is suggested as a guide*” (Speakers, 2018), Brabin has

since auctioned off said inappropriate item of clothing as pictured in figure 1 at £20,000 in aid of the charitable cause Girlguiding.



Figure 2, (Rawlinson, 2019)

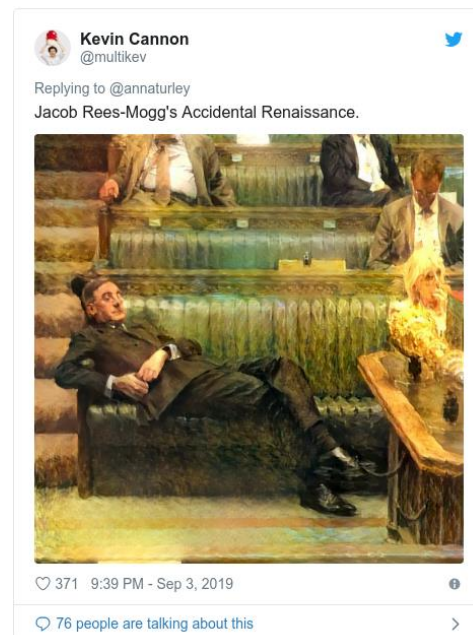


Figure 3, (Cannon, 2019)

In contrast to this suppression, as seen in figure 2 we have MP Jacob Rees-Mogg lounging on the front bench during a debate, seemingly uninterested and inattentive to his duties of at least listening to what one would assume to be an important debate regarding the fact it was about Brexit. Other than a few memes being created of Rees-Mogg (see figure 3) in this scene of disrespect and disregard for our countries future, there was no real consequence or online abuse in comparison to the trolling and hate received by Brabin. Leading on from this, there has been research conducted in which advertisement for jobs' descriptions have been written, some unconsciously perhaps with a gender bias in mind. This however is only when looking at male and female genders, putting those who have found their identity's elsewhere into thin air. An article by citywomen.co.uk made reference to Totaljobs research into gender bias within advertisements found that the top five “*most common male-biased words used in UK job descriptions are: Lead, analyse, competitive, active, confident*” (city, 2020) which are all typically masculine devoted words, in comparison to what one typically expects a woman to

traditionally be such as “*support, responsible, understanding, dependable, committed*”. (city, 2020). This has previously been reflected upon as Beard researched into the history of such sexism dating back to literature from around 3000 years ago from Greek poetry where a mother is corrected or in Beards words silenced by her son,

“mother, go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household.” (Homer, 8BC)

This kind of sexism, silencing, belittling of women continues throughout households, workforces, religion, art, and life itself even with the world around us adapting and evolving it is one thing many are unwilling to let go of, as it is addictive to hold a position of hierarchical power over another, with having its beneficial qualities connected to wealth and class.

One twitter user has even managed to source one of the many products available to what one would think be everyone and not just a specific gender, and it really goes to show that people are raised with the sense they must be labelled as something to be somebody, even from a young impressionable age.



Figure 4, (Sullivan, 2017)

In figure 4, we not only see the generalised gender stereotype that the colour pink is only for girls but also a huge pricing difference which truly reflects the issues behind sexism and even the ongoing wage gaps in today's workforce. In conjunction with this there have been past attempts to raise awareness of sexism directed at children by a group of performance artists dubbed 'The Barbie Liberation Organisation'. Their work took the form of switching or in the New York Times terms "surgically altering" Barbie Dolls and Talking Dukes to have their voice boxes switched, leaving its consumers with a *"mutant colony of Barbies-on-steroids"* and *"emasculated G.I. Joes"* (Firestone, 1993). This was the organisation's approach as a way to raise awareness and to ridicule the sexual stereotyping in toys, to *"startle the public into thinking about the Stone Age world view that the dolls reflect."* (Firestone, 1993).

Culture

A continuous battle that still rages throughout the world and devastates countries is racism and the unacceptance of another's culture. The Western World is in fact one of those that is still trying to distance itself from those that are of colour, are immigrants or not of a certain background or religion. An artist that majorly focuses on the "undoing" of racism and brings awareness to their culture is Zanele Muholi. A quote that greatly relates to the culture in the West is *"If genius is a natural attribute, why have there been no women geniuses? No geniuses of colour? All of the geniuses in Western culture were men."* (Staniszewski, 1995) From a recent online Lecture directed by artist Tim Davies, our class had the opportunity to learn about some of Muholi's work and goals such as her aim to *"undo racism in mainstream and media spaces"* (Muholi, 2020). For context, Muholi is a South African artist and activist born in 1972 who has recently chosen to adjust their pronouns to they, them. This is Muholi's identity from an outsider's perspective, and until one looks at Muholi's artwork, reads their statements, views their performances, they will never truly understand what they have been

through or grasp Muholi's own experiences of racism and unacceptance. A quote from Muholi that shows their frustrations yet embodies hope and change is:

"I want to rewrite a black, queer and trans visual history for the world to know of our existence and resistance" (Muholi, 2020)

This is reminiscent and an almost updated version with the inclusion and recognition of the LGBTQIA community of Martin Luther King Jr's 'I have a dream' speech'. Particularly the part most children would have learnt in their history and religious education lessons:

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream... I have a dream that one day in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with words of interposition and nullification, one day right in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." (Jr, 1963)

Muholi's work is most known from their ongoing archive of portraits of South African black lesbians, faces and phases 2006-ongoing. Some of the pieces from Muholi's powerful collection were displayed last year in the Venice Biennale as seen below in figure 5, they were bold, in black and white and truly reflected her archive of intimacy and knowledge with historical significance. Culture is of vast importance to understand the history between an artist or in this case activist and their artwork, with:

"The work of a number of black women artists has brought issues of race and gender into the central frame of artistic production and aesthetic discourse in Britain and contested Eurocentric notions of history, identity and sexuality." (Tawadros, 1995)

It provides us with a background, a meaning, an insight into this person's life. That kind of intimacy is deprived when we do not allow or accept the culture that is brought forth by the

artwork, setting that boundary only inhibits one's knowledge and further suppresses those trying to express themselves.



Figure 5, (Muholi, 2019)

Muholi adjusts their artworks to fit the space in which they are going to be displayed, with their works varying from extremely large to small and framed pieces, all crisp and clear and beautifully captured. Muholi's work encompasses one thing that many of us more privileged whites can never understand, and that is racism from their point of view- we will never have to experience this. As quoted by art historian Pamela Rydzewski in reference to Western and Central Africa's traditions of sculpture, *"unfortunately many Europeans look on these sculptures as quaint curiosities, made by people who would have created carvings more like the naturalistic art of the "Old Master" periods of European history"* (Rydzewski, 1967) To be told how to look and to be and follow the ideal white beauty standards is the suppression of an identity that was never intended to be subjected to such cruelty. Muholi knew that their body, soul, identity and sexual identity were being continuously suppressed, even being within a community and building on the importance of its freedom, they still see racism

against others and themselves occurring in well developed places where one would assume it was safe.

Environment

With the current restrictions of lockdown in place due to Covid-19 it has become apparent to many of us what our environment really is. Whether it is artists being reduced from studio spaces to cramped corners or parents being furloughed or forced to work at home alongside their families, we have all come to realise how important our surroundings and environment are to us individually. We have a certain connection to both our identity and culture but that can not be made whole without our environment. It is our past, present and future, perhaps displaying cherished items, or being minimalistic in one's approach, we all share a connection between ourselves and our space. One artist who works particularly well with her environment focusing on the connection of locality and the difficulties of motherhood is Fern Thomas. Infusing her work with the rich culture of Wales whilst figuring out the complexities of parenthood has likely been challenging. Thomas explains that she finds herself *"returning to the principles of social sculpture, seeking out connections with citizenship, civic spaces, play, and 'making kin'."* (Thomas, n.d.) When looking at some of Thomas' work its majorly performative with elements of sculpture and spoken word usually documented by video, if not photographed to preserve and capture snapshots of her artwork that give insight into her identity. It greatly interested me that Thomas was intrigued with re-enlightening rituals which are stereotypically known to be drawn from religion however, the term ritual is slowly becoming more related to habitual behaviours as defined here: *"A set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony."* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020)

For example, many people have their morning ritual of coffee, listening to the news, breakfast etc. Thomas has found this word within her practice linking to the traditional folklore of welsh rituals and movements, combining into an array of pieces that reflect her innermost thoughts and dreams as that is what she draws inspiration from. Something that Thomas “feels that everything links back to” (Thomas, 2020) is her degree show ‘Creation stories’, which was put together in an old dairy. It was a small image held within a dark space of which Thomas reflected upon- “what is revealed, what is hidden? Other words”. (Thomas, 2020)

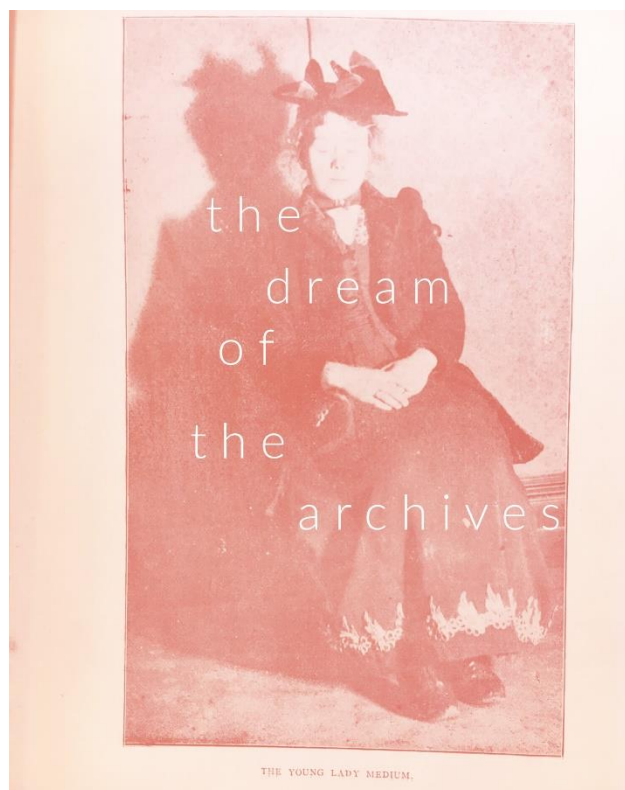


Figure 6, (Thomas, 2018)

Another artwork that continues to discover the past and how we have historically gathered as people was Thomas’ collaboration into the Glamorgan Archives (see Figure 6). Finding carnivals in Cowbridge documented within the archives and how the town gathered as one, as a community is immensely different to how we may find ourselves gathering as a community now. This is something that Thomas questioned, “*how can we connect and gather now?*”

(Thomas, 2020) With our environment changing ever so rapidly we almost find ourselves at a standstill, stuck with the rules and rituals of the past but advancing into the future technologically our environment is a mixture, a brew of different identities, cultures, and environments refusing to blend as one, and struggling to compliment one another's own values.

After much exploration of the three keywords it is natural that they work alongside each other to form multiple questions when viewing their history and relation to one another. However, in consideration of the current times, the most fitting question would be 'How does one perceive their own identity and culture when linked to their current environment?', as we collectively must analyse who we are is not necessarily where we are from or where we will go, but where we have been, what we have learnt, who we have grown to be, as that has been derived from a blend of our environment, identity and culture. Nevertheless, there are still other sub-questions that lead on from this such as, 'where does the idea of identity truly stem from?', 'what makes one's culture so vastly different from another's?', 'how does our environment evolving coincide with our change of identity?', 'are we fully aware of our own identity with the presence of our culture?', 'would ones identity change if the world was collectively equal in all aspects?'. Some concepts that have been considered for further exploration within next year's independent research document are; equality, sexism, feminism, masculinity, documentation, archive, future, therapy, art in therapy, and politics.

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