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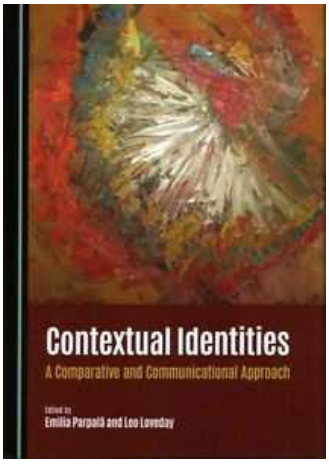

Emilia PARPALĂ, Leo LOVEDAY (eds.)
Contextual Identities:
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Towards the end of last year, *The New York Times Magazine* deemed it appropriate to dub 2015 as "the year we obsessed over identity". It was also the year in which Nell Zink's novel *Mislaid* was published to eager reviews. A novel at whose heart stands the figure of a woman who forsakes her marriage and flees with her daughter to "assume" an identity both racially and socially dissimilar, *Mislaid* tackles the issue in a way that is not without precedent: contemporary literature brims with such transient figures. The ease with which the protagonist plays it, however, is almost symptomatic of a society ready to concede to the futility of its formal identitarian constructs.

Considering all of these aspects, *Contextual Identities: A Comparative and Communicational Approach* fits right into this whole discourse surrounding the notion of identity, to which the present volume adds an even more provocative comparative twist. Edited by Emilia Parpală and Leo Loveday, this collection gathers essays whose scope ranges from cultural studies, gender studies, to close readings of literary texts.

In line with current debates on the topic, what these essays appear to be implying on the whole is that there are no short answers when it comes to identity, and that it is high time to admit the fact that individuals are constantly subjected to and are a part of an unremitting flow of interchangeable identitarian constructs: people, be they fictional or real, draw their identities from the places they inhabit, the jobs they perform on a daily basis, their daily social interactions, and even the varieties of language they use in particular situations.

Interestingly enough, notwithstanding this flow of interchangeable constructs, the volume seems to rebuff the idea of a common core of features that could circumscribe an individual. With very few exceptions, that common core is never even assumed, not even in idealistic form, and the notion of identity is never discussed from an assumed center, but viewed through its many occurrences. The only hint at that common core is perhaps the notion that individuals are merely *vessels* through which various identities pass: as the persona of the pound-keeper, compared to a "theatrical mask" in Rosemary Lucadou-Wells and John F. Bourke's essay, identities become mere overlays.

Still, these transient identities are not stored permanently in the individuals that assume them, but like the silt in Swift's novel *Waterland*, discussed comprehensively in Alexandra Roxana Mărginean's both *Revisitations of the Suburb in the Context of Identity Construction via Use and Abuse of Space* and *Grotesque and Abject Bodies in Graham Swift's Fiction*, the individuals themselves are perpetually in motion. This dual fluidity, of both individuals and identitarian constructs, can only expose our naïveté in thinking that identity is static. Albeit this mutability is a social prerequisite – one that not only betrays the hypocrisy behind, say, the construction of gender roles, but also blows the whistle on the fact that gender itself is socially constructed – it is a

facet that further strengthens identity's alterability.

Limitations to this malleability are implied but are never explicit. As the hybrids and cyborgs in Cătălina Ioana Petre's essay *The Human Body: Are We Becoming a Hybrid?* the only restraints that keep a particular body from a complete transformation into an*other* are those imposed by the physicality of that body, and even those represent a set of limits that come to be transcended by technological means.

The rather gloomy *denouement* these pieces seem to lead to, one that resonates fully with Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that identity can better be accounted for through the concept of an *assemblage*, is that identity cannot be perceived sequentially. That would only imply the existence of a center. Individuals cannot be who they *really* are not because they are not permitted to do so by the invisible hand of a marketplace of identities, but rather because there *is* no quintessence that defines who they really are. They are constantly (re)defined by the roles they assume; the spaces they inhabit; the language varieties they use.

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