THE CONCEPT OF (POST)IDENTITY IN QUEER AND MIGRATION STUDIES
Learning from Kira Kosnick

Silvy Chakkalakal, University of Basel

As a student, I was very interested in how people live together, how they make sense of the world, and how and why they organize their lives the way they do. Fascinated by the little things, the minor matters, the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life, European ethnology turned out to be the right place for me. Issues of racism, of social justice, the impact of social categorizing, power and knowledge as well as the possibilities of resistance and appropriation – all of these brought up burning questions. Back then, my studies were clearly driven by a desire to understand my own positioning in the world. European ethnology offered me classes on media practices and representation, on counter- and subcultures, on how people organize their leisure activities – the whole range of everyday life practices. And exactly this variety of topics also made *Ethnologia Europaea* as an interdisciplinary platform of cultural analysis an important resource for me. I always saw it as a journal presenting not only diverse research material, but also providing a space where international scholars have the possibility to reflect on theoretical, methodological, and political issues. Thus, from a wide range of significant articles that I might have chosen, I picked one that had an effect on me, and epitomizes this possibility for reflection.

Kira Kosnick's piece discusses the theoretical, methodological, and political predicaments of the concept of cultural identity. In her ethnographic study about the monthly party event *Gayhane* in the famous club SO36 in Berlin Kreuzberg, she writes about queer migrant clubbing and the production of semi-public urban spaces. Here, she shifts attention from identities to socialities; in so doing, she points out that especially within migration studies, classic approaches to identity tend to freeze people's subject positions within a classificatory system. The focus on sociality – that is forms of cultural practice and social engagement – instead offers a much more complex picture of group affiliations, relationships, and interactions. In her study about *Gayhane*, Kosnick concludes that looking at how

> different forms of sociality and association arise […] is the very antithesis to the notion of community [as a locus of identity] that always already knows who and what it is speaking of – the "Turkish community", the "gay community" and so on. There is no pre-constituted group here, no pre-given solidarity that can be assumed, no predetermined way of life that seeks preservation, celebration, or integration into the wider imagined consensus of "society". (Kosnick 2008: 28)

We find in this article a double critique: firstly, she detects the reduction of identity to a mere signifier of ethnic and geographical belonging; secondly, she criticizes the reduction of the social to mere structural data such as crime, income statistics, educational performance and diplomas, or unemployment. In

her view, "the social" is characterized by diverse social practices and social affiliations and needs to be connected analytically with forms of cultural expression. By employing the concept of "migrant socialities" (ibid.: 24), she manages to combine these two spheres. Kosnick's evaluation of cultural identity goes even further when she calls for a less static understanding of classificatory categories such as ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation. Yet, at the same time she does not neglect the possibility and ongoing struggle of doing politics from an identitarian position. Instead, she understands self-identification such as "being queer", "being Turkish", or "being people of color" as flexible and fluid, taking into account the many important interventions of postcolonial critics within the anthropological field (e.g. Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983; Abu-Lughod 1991; Palmié 2006; Bhabha 1994). Thus, Kosnick's article stands in the tradition of an ongoing debate inspired by theories of poststructuralism and postmodernity on the concept of identity, which fascinated and inspired me as a student reading postcolonial, migration, and queer studies.

In 2001, just two days before 9/11, I arrived in London to begin my year abroad studying media and cultural studies at Middlesex University. Xenophobia, racism, and institutionalized and everyday discrimination had never been purely theoretical issues to me and my student peers, but after 9/11 they became even more obvious and frequent. The political atmosphere in London changed drastically. Racist media representations, hate crimes, right-wing political initiatives, and increasingly intense debates over immigration provided students and professors with a constant flow of dreadful material. To many, it was clear that a discipline such as European ethnology or cultural studies needed to engage in this discussion, to talk back and to provide theoretically informed counter-narratives. Like many of my fellow students, I visited numerous events and talks, became part of a student activist group, heard scholars like Stuart Hall or Chantal Mouffe taking a stand against racism and islamophobia. One of the big questions we discussed constantly was how to deal with the concept of cultural identity. On the one hand, it seemed

to be a tool used by people to express their belonging to a group; situating oneself in categories such as ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexual orientation, or religion seemed almost like a natural thing to do. On the other hand, however, these very categories, as we were learning as students of "culture", were highly contested constructs. And didn't a climate like the one we experienced post-9/11 show that depending on such constructs for political organizing was a dangerous thing, as it was so clear that those very same categories were being used to exclude and oppress? Shouldn't we much rather reject engagement in a politics of identity that somehow, and often far too easily, concealed the historicity of the categories it depended on?

Kosnick's article makes this dilemma very vivid: How can we investigate and understand self-articulations in the form of identity concepts without relying on them methodologically? The predicament here is how to take the informant's identity expressions seriously, but at the same time not use the invocations of identity as an analytical concept. In the field of migration studies, for example, identity can often function too quickly as a transcendent essence, which puts people together in groups, be they nations, ethnicities, or any other kind of migrant social typology, such as the constant and problematic use of "community" shows:

> Instead, the concept of community carries with it the conceptual baggage it has been burdened with ever since the founding father of German sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies, posited it as a pre-modern, "organic" form of social grouping that predates the rise of modern society (Tönnies [1887]1912). Tight-knit bonds, shared genealogy, clearly defined membership, temporal continuity and lack of individual autonomy are the most prominent elements of what Tönnies and later Max Weber have described as the features of community as a basic type of social formation (Weber [1922]1980). (Kosnick 2008: 23)

Kosnick's article invites us to think about the dialectic between personal and group identity in the

context of ethnographic research. The correlation between the two is again not only a social phenomenon we observe in the field, but also an epistemological one, since cultural analysts must synthesize their empirical observations with the help of analytical categories. In other words, the actions and articulations of the individual will have to be transferred into a bigger picture such as nation state, community, scene, subculture, etc. In my research on early ethnographic practices during the eighteenth-century anthropologization of the senses (Chakkalakal 2016), I have explored how early ethnographic images (e.g. copper plates, drawings, and sketches) of the cultural "Other" do the work of synthesizing empirical comparisons and observations. Early ethnographers understood these visual categorizations as causalities within cognitive processes: They functioned as evidence of important, indeed essential, knowledge that directly addressed the senses. Images of foreign people had to be true to the original, because otherwise the viewer would be in danger of falsifying the causal chains of knowledge production and their content. In the same way, Kosnick's critique of identity-focused approaches opens up the space for a reflective analysis of the methods and practices of ethnography itself and its political investments.

One might think that queer migrant clubbing is a marginalized cultural practice on which empirical research cannot offer sufficient insight into urban spaces as a whole. Kosnick's explanations of how this semi-public urban space is constituted contradicts such skepticism, allowing us to draw conclusions about other such spaces. The figure of the "queer migrant clubber" trespasses certain hegemonic orders such as heteronormativity or whiteness. As border crossers, they constantly disturb and subvert these hegemonic categories, and, by doing so, signify and affirm those very boundaries of the classificatory system, as Kosnick shows by putting the cultural practice of the clubbers, party organizers, and DJs in relation to mainstream categorical ordering. "Queer" or "Turkish" are therefore not to be understood as exceptional cases, but instead as part of a broader social order,

which requires constant acts of boundary crossing for the very boundary to be marked.

Since Kosnick's article appeared, much has happened in the fields of queer and migration studies. In particular, the concept of postmigration has led to an approach that understands migration as a perspective of research rather than an object of research (e.g. Yildiz & Hill 2015; Bojadžijev & Römhild 2014). The shift from migrants to migration as a perspective stems from the above discussed problems with identity, and touches on the very notion of the subject itself. These are essential developments in theorizing and reformulating concepts of identity. Yet, in my opinion, we need to further investigate the subjective qualities attached to this, such as standpoint, voice, and experience (on the concept of experience see Chakkalakal 2014). These are all terms that lie at the operational heart of the social and cultural sciences. Even though Kosnick is not proclaiming we get rid of the concept of identity, she nevertheless calls for careful investigation of our methodological and epistemological research practices, which often derive from such seemingly self-evident concepts and therefore cement the very categories they want to contest. The "post" in postcolonial, postidentity, or postmigration does not mean a mere temporal "after", it does not follow a simple logic of "then" and "now". Instead, it signifies what has come into being in and through colonial, identitarian, and migratory relations and, at the same time, calls for a reconfiguration of the discursive fields and material structures in which these very categories "make sense".

In the end, what I have taken from Kosnick's article is a valuable culture-analytical attitude, which offers a vantage point for historical and ethnographic research in general: It is concerned with a reflective analysis of the classifications and concepts used by the social and cultural sciences. Taking people and their living conditions seriously means not to essentialize them by freezing "I", "you", "them", and "us" into epistemological models such as identity, individuality, and subjectivity. Having said this, we can inarguably observe identity in practice, for example in the form of an ethnographic "I". My own biographical framing of this text in the narrative

form of a self-disciplinary (hi)story of a European ethnologist is the best example. In this light, subjectivity and identity need to be understood as open, dynamic, and in never-ending processes of emergence. These processes are not fully controlled and do not exhaust themselves in being reflective; instead they are haunted by a (disciplinary, political, epistemological) history and a future which are neither "mine", "yours", "theirs", or "ours". By reflecting on *Ethnologia Europaea*'s history, "I" as a writing and commenting scholar take up, inherit, transform, and become part of that history. According to the philosopher Daniel Dennett, the self is more of a "function" than it is a "source": "Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source" (Dennett 1991: 418). It has been a great pleasure for me to merge narratively, biographically, and commentatorily into this great journal's history, and I thank the editors for giving me the opportunity.

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Silvy Chakkalakal, Ph.D., is a senior researcher at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, University of Basel. Her research interests are anthropology of the senses, history of science of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, postcolonial theory, pictorial science, futurology, history of education and childhood studies. Her most recent publication is in press: Indienliebe: Die frühe Ethnographie und ihre Bilder (Berlin: Kadmos Verlag, 2017). (silvy.chakkalakal@unibas.ch)