

Intermediality: A Paradigm for African Identity in the Twenty-First Century

Fetson Kalua

Summary

One notion of African identity is based on the credo that generally champions the view that so-called Africans should not only celebrate an identity that is predicated on racialised and essentialised blackness, but also seek out (and hopefully render assistance to) any black persons anywhere in the world. Crucially, it was the black experience of slavery, as well as colonialism, that helped to foster such essentialised notions of identity. It is a matter of tragic irony that the very people who were written out of history are architects of some of the continent's worst excesses, notably ethnic wars, genocides and related manifestations of black-on-black hatred and violence. Rather than giving attention to ideological positions that privilege notions of predetermined "Africanness", I situate the debate in the disciplinary positions of history, philosophy and literature, and posit the idea of intermediality, meaning a state of in-betweenness, as a model for articulations of identity that not only promote the reality of our "otherness", but also teach us what it means to be human. I argue that the idea of an African identity that is grounded on an essentialised blackness flies in the face of the history of a continent that has always been defined by "otherness" or difference. In employing intermediality as a core concept of inter-subjectivity on all articulations of identity that put the emphasis on respect for difference, I invoke selected post-structuralist and postmodern discourses to argue for an African identity in the twenty-first century that is more fluid and contested than any transcendent regimes of cultural certainty and legitimacy would have us believe. I insist on the primacy and the relevance of the idea of intermediality and, consequently, Africa's interconnectedness with the rest of humankind.

Opsomming

Een beskouing van Afrika-identiteit is gegrond op die credo wat oor die algemeen die siening steun dat sogenaamde Afrikane nie net 'n identiteit moet vier wat op gerassifiseerde en geëssensialiseerde swartheid berus nie, maar ook enige swart mense op enige plek in die wêreld moet opsoek (en hopelik bystand aan hulle verleen). Dit was juis die swart ervaring van slawerny, asook kolonialisme, wat gehelp het om geëssensialiseerde opvattinge oor identiteit soos hierdie aan te wakker. Die tragiese ironie is dat dieselfde mense wat uit die geskiedenis geskryf is, die argitekte van sommige van die kontinent se ergste vergrype, veral etniese oorloë, volksmoorde en verwante manifestasies van swart-op-swart geweld en haat, is. Eerder as om aandag te gee aan ideologiese standpunte wat die idee van voorbestemde "Afrikaanheid" bevorder, plaas ek die debat in die dissiplinêre

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standpunte van die geskiedenis, filosofie en letterkunde, en postuleer ek die idee van intermedialiteit, dit wil sê 'n "tussenstaat", as 'n model vir artikulasies van identiteit wat nie net die werklikheid van ons "andersheid" bevorder nie, maar ons ook leer wat dit beteken om mens te wees. Ek argumenteer dat die idee van 'n Afrika-identiteit wat op 'n geëssensialiseerde swartheid gegrond is, lynreg ingaan teen die geskiedenis van 'n kontinent wat nog altyd deur "andersheid" of ongelyksoortigheid gekenmerk is. Deur intermedialiteit te gebruik as 'n kernbegrip van intersubjektiviteit aangaande alle artikulasies van identiteit wat respek vir andersheid benadruk, beroep ek my op geselekteerde poststrukuralistiese en postmoderne diskoerse om ten gunste van 'n Afrika-identiteit in die een-en-twintigste eeu te argumenteer wat meer veranderlik en betwisbaar is as wat enige transendentale regimes van kulturele sekerheid en regmatigheid ons sal laat glo. Ek argumenteer ten gunste van die voortreflikheid en relevansie van die idee van intermedialiteit en, gevolglik, Afrika se verbondenheid met die res van die mensdom.

Theorising the Concept of Intermediality

This article attempts to remedy a tendency to overdetermination in the way in which the continent of Africa has been portrayed by so-called Africanists. Such representations have tended to emphasise an artificially coherent and homogenised idea of what it means to be African. Such a homogenisation of experience fails to take into account not only the mobility of the term "Africa" but also the identity of its diverse peoples. As I will demonstrate in this paper, Africa is a trope that is saturated with a restless excess of definition. In order to explore the meaning and wider application of the term "Africa" in history, philosophy, and fiction, I deploy the concept of intermediality and make a case for the continent's diverse cultural formations, demonstrating the extent to which the notion of African identity is not axiomatic or self-evident, and that the continent's claim to historicity is always in question. My argument is that the word "Africa" is not an ahistorical term that can be taken as interchangeable with blackness. What has lent historical equivalence between the word "Africa" and the notion of blackness are various ideological constellations such as Négritude, Pan-Africanism and African renaissance, which base their ideas of African identity on ideology and always in opposition to Western or Eurocentric discourses. As Handel Wright has put it, "African identity is a category that is always already overdetermined and spectacularly overgeneralised and homogenised" (2002: 1). For this reason, I use the concept of intermediality – a notion that calls attention to the importance of embracing difference or otherness – as a theoretical position and narrative direction which can be used to address and transcend the barriers of categorisations such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and religious affiliation. In the face of various demographic shifts and diasporic movements which have taken place over the centuries, it is vitally important to understand the ethical and political force of intermediality, particularly in the way it inflects an African identity which, I argue, is ipso facto fluid and intermedial. I use

intermediality as a trope for reading the text of Africa which, I argue, should not be seen as reducible to racial or cultural fixity. In the light of the insecurities and uncertainties that our world is faced with, notably the ugly or dangerous forms of nationalism and religious intolerance sweeping the globe, as well as changes brought about by information and communication technologies, any idealised and clichéd notions of a pure African identity remains a perfectionist fantasy. For most African or black people, their identities bear little meaning, if anything, with their cultures and traditions only half understood.

Intermediality is term that is rooted in theatre, performance, and the media and is used loosely to refer to the availability of multimedia. As used in this paper, it is a philosophical concept which refers to the disembodied space of the “intermedial” or *in-between* characterised by its insistence on and a tolerance for difference. As an intercultural philosophical concept, intermediality draws attention to respect and tolerance for difference. It reminds us of the need to remove the idea of difference, such as racial or gender, from identity politics. In the context of African identity in the twenty-first century, the deployment of this term is telling because, as Oosterling and Ziarek remind us: “the catastrophic history of the twentieth century forces us to re-examine the auto-productive and auto-destructive character of the modern community” (2011: 12). This alludes to the fact that the twentieth century saw continental Europe plunged into conflict, largely because of belief in or a particular fixation on the primordial idea of identity or community as being based on what was regarded as foundational and transcendent notions of cultural ascendancy and racial purity. It is tragically ironic that, with so many internecine conflicts raging across the African continent, Africa seems to be blind to the lessons of world history.

Within poststructuralist and postmodern discourses, for example, the extrapolation of the term intermediality relates to a mode of ethical and political affiliation which at once rejects essentialised identities and promotes notions of intertwined difference and never homogenised dualities.

As Oosterling and Ziarek have put it, intermediality:

stresses the necessity of situating philosophical and political debates on the new modes of being in common (*inter-esse*) in the context of media theories and the avant-garde artistic practices, on the one hand, and in the context of continental philosophy, feminism and political theory, on the other.

(2011: 1)

Thus in its expansive application, the idea of intermediality is inimical to all articulations of identity – be they personal, cultural, social, or national identity – that are seen as absolutes. Intermediality rejects notions of identity which gesture towards totality or categorical imperatives in favour of the idea of identity as a provisional and mobile way of living out cultural identities which are social constructs. As a spatial-temporal configuration,

the idea of intermediality has gained wide currency in the domains of the arts, philosophy and politics, and allows for a reading of history and identity against the grain. As Oosterling and Ziarek explain,

the inter (in intermediality) is ... a dynamic medium and an unrepresentable atopolos where differences, relations, positions are formed and deformed, where meaning is articulated and re-articulated, where exposure to alterity precedes and decenters subjective and social identities.

(2011: 11)

Crucially, the “intermedial” is not about collective and common identity but rather emphasises sensitivity to difference or otherness. It is an epiphanic moment when the scales fall from one’s eyes, and one realises that our world is divested of all absolutes. It provides a means of challenging and destabilising the notion of culture in purportedly self-contained and self-regulating fields such arts, politics and science (particularly in the discourse of the 18th Century Enlightenment project or modernity) as a totality – a fully rational, hegemonic and coherent category. Intermediality carries a polysemous power that does away with all notions of hierarchy, transcendence and teleology in favour of contingency. It rejects notions of identity based on race, class, gender, religious affiliation or any other quality.

Extrapolated to the notion of what it means to be African, the idea intermediality is an act of liberation; it is an intermedial reading that rejects notions of identity that are premised on how “Africanness” or “blackness” is represented in history through the annals of slavery and colonialism. In the case of the formerly Africa, it fosters an awareness of the need to avoid putting the entire blame on colonialism as the sole cause of Africa’s woes, when experience shows that quite a number of African problems can be blamed squarely on the crassness of its leaders. Thus all the strands of intermediality share an insistence on an ethics which foregrounds the value of what it means to be human. As a poststructuralist philosophy and scheme of ethics, intermediality has resonances of similar terms such as liminality and hybridity – terms which refer to a disembodied form of signification. It is an articulation which allows for the perceptive celebration of difference.

At this juncture, it is worth pointing out that intermediality is not interchangeable or compatible with the idea of liberal humanism which, as Grayling has put it, is “a general label for ethical views about the nature of the good and well-lived life” (2013: 140). As I argue in this paper, such a view that presents ethics as being based on our most generous nature of human nature and the human condition is shot through with an underlying sense of curtailment in the vision of the universe. The concept of intermediality attempts to address various unreconciled strains in varied human lives, showing the extent to which our world is not an exclusive place.

Thus in the last fifty years or so the spirit of intermediality has found expression in Michel Foucault’s text *The Order of Things* in which he reads

history as archaeology, demonstrating the ways in which notions of subjectivity or identity are inextricably linked with the nexus of power and knowledge. In interrogating what society considers eternal and ahistorical teleologies and continuities, Foucault arrives at the intermedial algorithm or dialectic in which representations of history as predetermined are interrupted and deconstructed.

In other words, as Cook puts it, Michel Foucault “estranges us from our own history” (1993: 1) by historicising what many regard as the timeless, and thus he renders visible the extent to which any form of identity is a product of an interplay between various power relations and forms of knowledge. Similarly, Jacques Derrida’s idea of deconstruction remains a dynamic constituent in identity issues in that it announces the “intermedial” in culture and discourse. For example, for Derrida, literature is a site of resistance to all forms of metaphysics and transcendence. Hence, the literary in a text is a form resistance to notions of holism. By extrapolation, Derrida was able to analyse concepts such as hospitality, justice, forgiveness, democracy, to name a few examples, in terms of the “deconstructive”, “intermedial” moment – a moment which renders visible the liminality of such ideas in the daily narratives of existence in our world. Further, the idea of intermediality has been presented by Rosi Braidotti in her 2006 text entitled *Transpositions*. She presents the idea of transposition as a “theory that stresses the experience of creative insight in engendering other, alternative ways of knowing” (2006: 6) – one that “favours the proliferation of differences” (8) and promotes “the creative potential of hybrid subjectivity, in opposition to ... more virulent forms of ethnically fixed identities” (7). In short, she makes a compelling case for a non-unitary or nomadic conception and vision of the subject in contemporary culture, in contrariness to the claims of ideologies which promote exclusivist identities.

In the domain of postcolonial cultural critique, the work by British cultural theorists, such as Raymond Williams and Stewart Hall, rejects “Mathew Arnold’s” notion of culture as a totality in favour of the idea of culture as a construct and thus subject to transformation. In postcolonial studies, some scholars, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, have drawn on the insights and wisdom of Frantz Fanon and poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to grapple with issues such as individual subjectivity and national identity in the wider context of colonial discourse. These scholars not only identify the ironies and contradictions of colonial discourse and its so-called civilising mission, but also locate a disabling ambivalence at its core, an ambivalence which makes it possible for the cultures of both the coloniser and colonised to translate one another.

The Origins of “Africa” and the Concept of an African Identity

I would like now to turn to the idea of African identity. There has always been a spectrum of opinion about this notion. Articulations of African identity in public discourse are almost invariably imbricated in the notions of locality, imagined space, or lived reality. For some, identity is linked to a fixed spatial geographical reality called Africa, while, for others, nothing illustrates identity better than lived reality or experience. As I argue in this paper, identity reflects lived experience and, inevitably, such an approach to identity takes into account the idea of intermediality, or a concern for the “other”.

Admittedly, the idea of a pure and exclusive, African identity looms large and has had a hold in the imagination of many largely black people who live on the African continent. Following centuries of colonial subjugation of its peoples and denigration of their purportedly pure cultures, the notion of “blackness” was always used by both scholars and ordinary black people as the epicentre of an African identity that is pure and authentic. The reasons why the idea of blackness, as an index of identity, has seeped so deeply into the minds and souls of most black people are not hard to find. From the years of European expansionism through to slave trade, European representation of Africa and blackness was informed by the notion of racial alterity or “otherness”, with slave trade being a prime example of racial “othering”.

So, what is Africa? How does one imagine Africa in the 21st century? Does the term Africa reference only the cartographical reality of a continent on the map? What kind of people are called Africans? Does “Africanness” pivot on the racial identity of a group of people called “Africans”? Or is it a shifting construct which was concretised because the majority of the inhabitants on the continent happen to be black? Further, does so-called African culture exist? These are some of the questions I try to address through an analysis and wide application of the concept of intermediality.

The first seeds of calls for an exclusive African identity were planted during European imperial expansion. It was none other than the colonial enterprise that created the myth of Africa’s particularity in relation to other continents. This colonial notion of “Africanness” was not only romanticised, but was also portrayed, fully locked and embedded in Manichean representations in which black people were reduced to stereotypical and invasive images while whites were allowed to enjoy the Manichean delights of racial supremacy. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, as pre-independence wars were raging across the continent, that the quest for “Africanness”, or an exclusive African identity, was given a fresh impetus, an impetus whose manifestations are writ large in rhetorics such as Négritude, Pan-Africanism, the Native Club and the African Renaissance, to mention a few examples.

Most scholars agree that the continent's essentialist identity is traceable to colonialism. Prominent Congolese historian Valentine Mudimbe has reflected on the idea and naming of the word "Africa", seeing it as a product of the Western or colonial imaginary. He says:

Let us not note that the very name of the continent is itself a major problem. The Greeks named it Libya and used to call any black person an Aithiops. The confusion begins with the Romans. They had a province in their empire known as Africa, and their intellectuals used the same word for the "tertia orbis terrarum pars"... that is the continent as we know it, behind third, after Europe and Asia. With the European "discovery" of the continent in the fifteenth century, the confusion becomes complete.

(Kalua 2009, echoing Mudimbe)

Mudimbe's perceptive observation here is that the word "Africa" has nothing to do with blackness. Rather, it suggests, first, the cartographic entity or reality which is the entire continent, and second, any persons, irrespective of colour or ethnic considerations, who live and have been shaped by the "African" experience. Lending credence to this theory is renowned historian Robert Morkot, who writes:

Deriving from the name of a small "tribal" group of part of Tunisia, the Afri, Africa was the name given to a Roman province, and then became widely applied ... as a general term for north-West Africa. It was adopted by Europeans for the same region, eventually being used for the whole continent. Africa is quite literally a colonial name.

(2005: 2)

In other words, there is no equivalence between the term "Africa" and the idea of blackness. But then the term "Africa" has stuck, through centuries, to stand for a continent on a map which was imagined and carved up by scrambling European colonial powers. It can even be argued that the word Africa is not an "African" word, and the two concepts of "blackness" and "Africa" are mutually exclusive. The fact that the word "Africa" is an invention has also been authorised by renowned African philosopher Anthony Appiah, who, like the scholars previously mentioned, locates the origins of the name "Africa" in Western discourses, including slavery. He says:

Whatever we Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary We do not even belong to a common race; and since this is so, unanimism is not entitled to what is ... its fundamental presupposition.

(1992: 27)

Another prominent historian, Ali Mazrui, has presented Africa's fragmented identity as follows:

[t]he symmetry in the form of an inverted pyramid begins with one continent, Africa; two permanent racio-cultural complexes, the Arab North and the black South; three religious systems, African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam; four dominant international languages, English, French, Arabic and Portuguese.

(1980: 92)

Further, Mazrui points out that the continent has "some 805 ethnic and linguistic groups" (1980: 92). With populations that are based on such various experiences and ideological groupings, it is reasonable to describe the continent in what he calls "patterns of identity" (1980: 90). Thus, as opposed to seeing it in unitary terms, Mazrui clearly demonstrates how the very idea of Africa conveys a series of multiple and contrasting "Africas".

For Jared Diamond, "[h]umans have lived in Africa far longer than anywhere else: our ancestors originated there 7 million years ago, and anatomically modern *homo sapiens* ... have arisen there since then" (2005: 377). Little wonder that historians and archaeologists have made a compelling case for the claim that all humanity is African. This has prompted the famous Nigerian author, Ben Okri, to posit probably the most telling and refreshing perspective about what Africa is. In his book, *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri makes the following brave declaration: "There is a realm in everyone that is Africa. We all have an Africa within" (2011: 134). Thus in a typically Derridean deconstructive mould, Ben Okri presents Africa as that moment in deconstruction where a word, in this case "Africa", becomes a free-floating signifier whose meaning overflows the boundaries of the signified. Okri here renders the concept of "Africa" in ways that make it coterminous with the entire human race.

In the foregoing discussion, I have demonstrated how scholars have unsettled and defamiliarised essentialist referents of the term "Africa", and, in particular, its association with blackness. In showing the idea of blackness as an insufficient basis on which to found the theory of African identity, the theorists point to Africa's liminal and intermedial identity. So, Africa indeed exists. In its widest sense, the term refers to both geography and its majority populations, but it remains expansive, open-ended, fluid and shifting. The idea of a pure African identity is always eroded by the drama of competing identities played out across the continent. Thus Africa is a social construct.

African Literature

I now turn to so-called African literature and how it articulates the idea of intermediality. Even though the African literary landscape would suggest

that its literature addresses issues of commonality of identity, in reality nothing could be further from the truth. Even if the idea of “blackness” were used as a marker of a pure African identity, Wole Soyinka has subverted this notion in his famous poem “The Telephone Conversation” – a poem he wrote in 1956 while studying in London. When a white prospective landlady enquires about his identity, his first response is “I am African” (p. 105), meaning his identity is that of a black race. Then in response to the white lady’s challenging question, “Are you dark or very light?” (105), Soyinka uses his rhetorical genius to throw up the various shades of blackness which obtain, notably “milk chocolate” (p. 105), “West African sepia” (p. 106), “like brunette” (p. 106) and “peroxide blond” (p. 106), to name a few examples. In this way, Soyinka is able to demonstrate that even the notion of black identity is multiple and its most powerful signifier, which is skin colour, is not an absolute identifier.

Chinua Achebe’s pioneering and celebratory novel, *Things Fall Apart*, received fulsome praise over the years precisely for extolling the image of “Africanness”. Achebe’s use of the oral form in his text – an aspect of literary aesthetics which was seen by some scholars as one of the defining features of African writing – raised it to canonical status. It was presumed to be foundational in the emergence of African literature in the 1960s. Achebe’s faithful blend of realism and traditional oral forms was perceived to underscore the “whatness” of African literature and, by extension, African cultural identity. By celebrating so-called African culture, as well as attempting to legitimise the postcolonial African nation, this kind of writing was meant to bear witness to the fact that the African “other”, at once created by colonialism and seen as a metaphysical reality, wished to assert its unique difference. The identity of the “other”, so the argument went, would be affirmed through the process of decolonising it from Western frames of reference, and Achebe had managed to successfully re-constitute the black identity in a separate realm from colonial definitions. However, in *Things Fall Apart*, the concept of identity predicated on African traditions is undercut by a counter-discourse in the form of Christian cosmopolitanism, which is writ large through the presence of missionaries who have already won over the main character’s son, Nwoye, who has opted for a new, Christian, intermedial identity. Thus in the face of clashing realities which obtain in the postcolonial context that Achebe portrays in his novel, his attempt to articulate a unique African identity falls short of the ideal.

After *Things Fall Apart*, the cultural terrain began to shift further toward intermediality or hybridity, which was already politically evident. Thus, as Anthony Appiah has put it, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* falls into the category of the “project of delegitimation” (1992: 152) in which Armah neither “writes back” to Empire, nor promotes the idea of nativism nor is in thrall to the concept of nation. In another context, written while she lived in Botswana, Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* is a

cosmic work of deconstruction in which its author disrupts and destabilises various essentialisms, including race, class, patriarchy and religion. Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger* remains a work in which its author's prescient, postmodernist vision of Zimbabwe – a nation he saw as “the house of hunger” – becomes a fitting metaphor for a continent which most African writers would depict as a “dystopian” postcolonial wasteland: Africa as “the house of hunger”. From the 1990s up to the first two decades of the twenty-first century, many African writers' major preoccupations has had little to do with African identity, and more with pressing issues such as genocide, HIV/AIDS, gender, and class. This twist in African literature is telling in that the idea of the “other” now takes the centre stage. In short, African writing has always gravitated towards portraying identities based on difference or the intermedial.

As far as the themes of identity and difference are concerned, no writer has made a more lasting impact than Ben Okri. Touted as the best African writer of his generation, he is a master of literary innovation and experimentation. In most of his recent writing, Okri interweaves philosophy with global myths to provide a distillation of the entire human experience, foregrounded by the unity of the humankind. Characterised by gritty realism, his oeuvre – which consists of short stories, poetry, magical and social realism and literary essays – pinpoints the commonality (rather than differences) of the humankind. In an essay entitled “One Planet, one people” Okri makes the point that “All humanity is really one person. What happens to others affects us” (2011: 95). Rather than being a eulogy to so-called African culture and traditions, African literature, as epitomised by Okri, remains quintessentially “intermedial” both in its form and thematic trends. Thus, in the 21st century, the staple of African literature is neither about “writing-back-to-empire” nor asserting so-called African traditions which colonialism denigrated and destroyed; rather, it concerns the depiction of the changing identities of the various territories and nations within the continent. Such an approach takes cognizance of the fact that Africa is not an exclusive place, and hence its literature now forms a range of canons of understanding and interpretation which point to the intermedial identities as reflected by the diverse continent.

South African Identity

Closer to home, the South African context presents a case for intermediality *par excellence*. From the arrival of the Dutch in 1652, South Africa would become, not just a colonial outpost for the Dutch and British, but also a destination for indentured people of many racial and national groups, including Indians, Chinese, and Malays. Thus, for more than four centuries

now, South African society has been a theatre where the notion of difference has played out.

South Africa has never been short of people who enlarged life and diversified society by embracing difference. Little wonder that scholars, politicians and artistes have presented the country's identity in metaphors which demonstrate how important it is to respect and negotiate the idea of otherness. Deeply aware of the dynamism that difference brings, most of these thinkers have lived their identities in ways that demonstrated the value of difference. To that end, Natasha Distiller underscores the complexities of what it means to be South African in her 2012 text entitled *Shakespeare and the Coconuts: on post-apartheid South African culture*. In it, she presents South Africa as a society which has appropriated Shakespeare for at least the last two centuries. Distiller argues that for years

men of the intellectual elite, notably Solomon Plaatje, used English as a vital resource – a means for upward social mobility in helping to forge their identity, as well as a means for attaining political rights. In particular, Plaatje is seen as an exemplar of the notion of coconutness-the word used to gesture towards the idea of acculturation.

(Kalua 2013: 2)

Even at the height of apartheid in the 1950s, persons of liberal bent embraced the idea of difference in order to forge a South African identity that enhanced a rich humanity. As Lewis Nkosi has put it, the 1950s was a time when

people of all races – though the bulk came from the black community – joined together in a Massive Defiance Campaign conducted along Ghandian lines ... to frighten the government out of its wits. It was a time which saw the birth of Alan Paton's Liberal party dedicated to non-racial policies and individual freedom.

(forthcoming 2015: 7)

That some cultural activists could temper such a harsh social order as apartheid with a tenuous liberalism and humane values attests to the pertinence of the principle of intermediality.

The emergence of Nelson Mandela on the political scene, likewise, epitomises the spirit of intermediality. Mandela's fame is built around his personal philosophy and ideology in which the idea of difference or "otherness" is key. Thus it is not surprising that in his 1964 Rivonia trial speech, he states that he is "an African patriot" (1964: 10) who is "an admirer" of and "has great respect for British political institutions" (1964: 10). Further, he says he "regards the British Parliament as the most democratic institution in the world" (1964: 10). Finally, Mandela's "intermedial" identity finds expression in his absolute belief in the freedom

“to borrow the best from the West and from the East” (1964: 10). As well as fighting for morality and justice, Mandela’s idea of identity avoids overtly nationalistic or patriotic sovereignty, emphasizing our common humanity, and this entails absorbing community, irrespective of race, gender, class, or any other category. This idea of identity entails understanding culture as a mobile and fluid dynamic. In other words, though on the face of it, cultural identity is linked to notions of land, race and ethnicity, human identity is about interconnectedness and lived experience.

In literary discourse, Kopano Matlwa has touched on the idea of intermediality through the notion of coconutness – a state of inbetweenness which she presents in her famous novel *Coconut* as exemplifying the South African society that is undergoing what Homi Bhabha terms “cultural translation” – a term he has appropriated from Walter Benjamin which, for Bhabha, describes “the staging of cultural difference” (2004: 325) – “[t]he jarring of meanings and values generated in the process of cultural interpretation” (2004: 232). “Cultural difference desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy” (Benjamin 2004: 327). For Bhabha, cultural translation points to a process in which the text of culture is reworked and rendered anew in the postcolonial condition in recognition of difference or intermediality. Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* is a brave endeavour to translate her culture’s inexorable march from the clutches of tradition to the allure of global capital modernity which typifies post-apartheid South Africa. Matlwa is a typically postcolonial writer who undertakes the challenging task of translating her postcolonial experience (in this case of apartheid and post-apartheid) by rendering it in a language which is not her own. Often the process demands that she embed lexical items from her mother tongue where the equivalent in English, a foreign language, fails to capture her message. For Matlwa, the paradigm of intermediality or cultural translation is rendered visible through her depiction of the ways in which the culture of modernity is overwritten on her culture and how this state of affairs inflects emerging post-apartheid identities and makes the reality of difference even more urgent.

Trevor Noah

Few artistes have captured this spirit of intermediality or differentiated identities with more masterly skill than brilliantly entertaining stand-up comedian Trevor Noah. Epistemologically, stand-up comedy may project itself onto the contemporary world as pure entertainment, but in Noah’s case, his performances lay bare some of the entrenched contradictions and limitations of racial identity. Through a clever use of language, Noah represents and subverts ostensibly essential and fossilized categories such as race, class and gender and, in doing so, demonstrates the fluid and

intermedial nature of such categories. The gist of his well-attended productions is to pinpoint a South African cultural identity that is based on difference and fluidity. Such a layered vision of identity finds expression in the country's constitution, which states unequivocally that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it" (1996: 1).

In South African letters, no writer has called for tolerance of difference more eloquently than Njabulo Ndebele. The 1990s saw Ndebele propose the concept of *rediscovering the ordinary* (in fiction and literary discourse) in order to draw attention to the fact that

the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all embracing; that they cannot be reduced to a single, simple formulation.

(1991: 55)

For Ndebele, the ordinary lives of the people should be the focus of literature or fiction. Ndebele's idea of *rediscovering the ordinary* has a particular resonance in the concept of intermediality, precisely because the idea of "*being ordinary*" places the human experience above any discourses which privilege fixed identities.

In recent times, Ndebele has weighed in on the topic of identity in a rapidly changing world. Writing in the *Sunday Times* dated 13 April 2014, he places the idea of citizenship above other concerns of race or ethnicity. In an article entitled "*Time to Shed 'Blackness' for New, Human Identity*", Ndebele discusses the sense of at once pride and anxiety that he felt down the years each time a label such as "black" or "African" was used to define him. Towards the end of the article, he has this to say:

It is time for South African "blacks" to no longer put store in "blackness". To continue to do so is to insist on living in a liminal space in which dreams and effort have become disentangled almost permanently. It is time that the South African "black" began to appreciate the value of aspiring towards the universal and then live in it, to become a part of it, to add to the cumulative value of the experience of being free in the specificity of their historical circumstances, where dream and effort are inseparable. So, am I ... "black"? I once was, but no more. Am I an "African"? Yes, but with qualifications. Beyond the typifying singularity of the colonised "African" there is no place any more for that "African". Am I a comrade? Definitely not. That kind of struggle that described "comrades" is long over. Am I a "citizen"? Yes, although my voice and my actions have yet to be strong enough to assert their formative constitutionality. Am I a "human being"? Resoundingly yes!

(Ndebele: 18)

Ndebele exhorts the reader to steer clear of habits of mind in which self-articulation is perceived in terms of loss and victimhood. It is a refusal to yield to the temptation of playing the victim of being black. Ndebele's insistence on the wisdom of learning to transcend barriers, of going beyond

the history of colonialism and race, and of transcending geography, origins and localisation, shows his deepened awareness of what it means to be human.

Intermediality: A Paradigm for a Peaceful 21st Century Africa

The final part of my article considers the ways in which the ethical value of intermediality can find expression in the lives and identities of the diverse peoples who live in twenty-first century Africa. The first proposition is a refusal to return to the past. Such a refusal calls to mind the ruminations of Walter Benjamin on the dissonant temporalities that typify, nay haunt, historical phenomena. One of these temporalities has found expression in the following description of a Klee painting called “Angelus Novus” or the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him to the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin 1973: 218)

Through this portrayal of the angel of history, Benjamin demonstrates aspects of history that contradict the notion of progress. The portrait of the Angel, whose face is “turned to the past” and his back “turned to the future”, points to the astonishing nonlinearity of history. Little wonder that the angel’s attempt to “awaken the dead” – which is to redeem the past – is continually disrupted by the storm “or progress” which keeps on giving him a thrust into the future.

In a different context, media practitioner Marshal McLuhan (whose work prefigures poststructuralist and postmodern discourses) makes a timely prognosis about the role that the communications and technological revolution play in bringing about conceivable futures in the twenty-first century. In such futures, technologies, as opposed to tradition, would bestow cultural signs and identities. His most compelling argument appears in his last work *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, in which he posits a triadic schema for understanding how culture would evolve in the twenty-first century thanks to exponential advancement in technologies and the media. He calls the first component visual space, also described by the metaphor of the *rear-view mirror* – a

state characterised by society's imitation of and obsession with the past and tradition. This would be followed by what he terms the acoustic phase of dizzying technological revolution. The last phase is the tetrad – a time of staggering change and progress. McLuhan argued that the culture in the 21st century would be seen through a synthesis of the triad of these three terms: the visual, the acoustic and the tetrad. He says:

The dominant processes which rise to the surface in the tetrad form are intended to reveal some of the subliminal and previously inaccessible aspects of technology. To the extent that observations reveal the hidden effects of artefacts on our lives, they are endeavours of the art, bridging the worlds of biology and technology.

(1989: 20)

For McLuhan, technology and media, as opposed to geography and biology, would compress human consciousness in the twenty-first century and bring about radical changes in the way we think about place and identity. Technology would be at the core of bestowing cultural signs and, by extension, identities. Writing in the same era, Frantz Fanon inveighed against the tendency for humans to look back to the past. He says:

in no way should I derive my basic purpose from the past of the people of colour. In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognised Negro tradition. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of the present and the future.

(1983: 176)

Both McLuhan and Fanon encourage the kind of pragmatism that one obtains when one decides to cast aside those aspects of one's tradition or culture which reduce humanity to a state of second-class citizenship or barbarism. There is a need to replace repressive values with those which place on a pedestal those who have previously suffered the fate of history. The colonised "other" includes groups such as women, children, and people of policed sexualities.

Secondly, I invoke the wisdom of Emmanuel Levinas on the ethics of Otherness and how it informs agency. For Levinas, Donald Wehrs notes, "the ethical inheres, in encountering the "Other" whose presence puts in question, traumatically, the ego's claim to its own privilege and priority" (2013: 2). The basis of Levinas' argument is the fact that the presence of the other in our midst is a clarion call to us to exercise a sense of responsibility and, by extension, justice. Combining an exegetical reading of scriptures with influences from continental philosophy, Levinas rejects the idea of valorising difference and totalising experience in favour of lived experience. As Homi Bhabha has so memorably put it, "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever a problematic process of access to an

image of totality” (2004: 73). Elsewhere, Stephen Spencer has argued that “identity is always an aspect of an interplay of meanings and interpretation” (2014: xvii). Both Bhabha and Spencer draw attention to the fact that identity is not a given, but a social construct. While issues such as geography and various cultural imaginaries may be central to moulding and shaping our identities, which include categories such as race, class or ethnicity, the idea of a cultural identity still remains a fluid one. Fanon warns us about the dangers of relying on fixed or final articulations of identity.

A final thought is that the axis of our time demands that African societies prioritise education in order to meet the challenges of the digital age in the twenty-first century. To that end, governments have an obligation to provide the kind of education that will awaken their populations so they can attain the kind of empowerment that will put them on a par with the rest of the world. Such an education entails not merely scientific rationality or realism, which places an emphasis on filling people’s heads with facts, but one which involves the training of the mind – the kind of training which does not leave the learner boxed in; it leaves a mind which has been fed wide horizons and is liberated enough to balance rights and responsibilities and perceive humanity as a brotherhood. Crucially, such a mind will cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century, which, among other things, entails embracing an intermedial outlook on life that places an emphasis on the value of human life – the ability to transcend the categories such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity, which continue to be the source of conflict.

In closing, the colonial legacy may still weigh heavily on the minds of most black Africans, but to persist in seeing the world in dualities, hanging onto the outmoded ideal of a unique African identity is to look at the world through the rear-view mirror. As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, rather than promoting the idea of an African identity predicated on notions of essentialised blackness and related deeply entrenched identity positions, I have posited the idea of intermediality – an approach to an African identity that is non-partisan, fluid and layered. Such an approach to identity politics would allow the continent’s diverse peoples to inhabit a state of becoming that refuses to settle into any narrow, false, or seemingly stable categorisations. It is a becoming that is always a state of transition of identity; it is a transformation which may occasionally, if not completely, retreat from tradition, and an experience that gestures towards possibilities of multiple selves and identities; above all, it is an intermedial space of enunciation which gives attention to recognition of difference. As Heinz Kimmerle has put it, “[d]ifferences between people and between cultures can also be based on tolerance, on the expectation of mutual enrichment, and on respect” (2010: 139). Kimmerle sees the salience of respect for difference as being the core of identity politics and the foundation for establishing a more

humane and cultured society in the 21st century. Indeed, as so-called African cultures and traditions continue to lose traction in the face of pervasive transformations engendered by technology and the media, notions of identity that were once considered to be eternal and ahistorical are being tested and found to be arbitrary, fluid and unstable. This is time to face up to the hard reality that, though Africa indeed exists, Arcadian myths about a pure African identity flounder in the face of there being multiple Africas and identities. Thus the perfect lodestar to define the inhabitants of this continent in the 21st century is the simple mantra that continually reminds us what it means to be human.

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Fetson Kalua
Unisa
kaluafa@unisa.ac.za