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ABSTRACT

In teaching international students in Britain and students in the United States in multicultural and multiclass classrooms, a common resistance was found to the consideration of how culture and society shape identity. Even international students from collectivist cultures, who see their identities as inextricable from their communities in their countries of origin, resist the idea that the new society in which they find themselves is busy defining them, regardless of their actions or responses. One approach to this problem is to encourage students to write in a way that engages the societal expectations and identities of the culture surrounding them. While the central mythology of the United States is that of an immigrant-receiving nation, Britain is considered a post-colonizing nation fundamentally hostile to the idea of immigration. Paradoxically, much of Britain's popular writing of the last 15 years has come from novelists who are immigrants, novelists such as Caryl Phillips, Hanif Kureishi, Sunetra Gupta, and Jan Lo Shinebourne. In interviews, these four writers respond differently about their conceptions of identity, and their answers may reverberate differently in a multicultural classroom. Cultural differences and classroom requirements will necessitate different kinds of writing with different focuses. Yet students should consider their roles as writers in relationship to the society they are experiencing. They should be encouraged to feel a sense of power and engagement as public writers--or writers with a public. (NKA)

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A Different Mirror: The Position of Immigrant Writers In British Society

Paper Presented at CCCC, Phoenix, 1997

Novelist Caryl Phillips, born in St. Kitts, but reared in the English industrial city of Leeds, says that the master narrative of the Twentieth Century is diaspora and displacement. Uprootings and new beginnings are, in Phillips words, "the dominant anxiety of our age" (Phillips).

As movement and immigration alter the nature of so many of the world's societies, the people involved in these movements are faced with continual questions of and challenges to identity. How do they respond to the tensions of identity created by living in a new culture and society? When are you no longer part of your place of origin, yet not at home in your new surroundings? And how is this complicated when you are trying to negotiate these relationships in a country that is overtly and continuously hostile to your presence?

In teaching international students in Britain and students in the U.S. in multicultural and multiclass classrooms I have found a common resistance to the consideration of how culture and society shape identity. Even international students from collectivist cultures, who see their identities as inextricable from their communities in their countries of origin, resist the idea that the new society in which they find themselves is busy defining them, regardless of their actions or responses. If they do accept this possibility, they remain frustrated and discouraged about how to respond to the process. One approach I have found that addresses this problem is to use this frustration in a productive manner. I encourage them to write in a way that engages the societal expectations and identities of the culture surrounding them.

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Over the past half century, the face and culture of Britain has change with the influences of immigrants or the second generation children of immigrants. These dynamic and often contentious changes are reflected in the novels of such writers as Caryl Phillips, Hanif Kureishi, Sunetra Gupta, Jan Lo Shinebourne, and many others. Overall, British society has remained hostile to this immigration. While the central mythology of the U.S. is that we are an immigrant-receiving nation that should treat all people equally (and though it is often a myth, it still offers a moral position about immigration that can create a power argument about civil rights and identity), Britain is a post-colonizing nation that is fundamentally hostile to the idea of immigration. The message to immigrants is "You don't belong here. You will never be British. Go back to where you came from."

Paradoxically, however, much of the most vibrant, influential, and popular writing in Britain during the past fifteen years has come from novelists who have immigrated to Britain or are the second generation of immigrants, including the authors noted above and other writers such as Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro.

I wanted to interview these writers to see how the tensions of identity construction and reconstruction compelled them to write, influenced the content and nature of their writing, and, most important, how their *engagement* with society in writing and in the goals for their writing motivated their work and their considerations of identity. For these novelists, the motivation for writing was never as simple as "doing it for myself."

Although I interviewed a dozen novelists for my book project, today I want to focus on the experiences of four of these writers and their private and public considerations of identity.

- Hanif Kureishi, born in London of an Indian father and English mother, is the author of *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*, but may be best known for his films "My Beautiful Launderette" and "London Kills Me".
- Caryl Phillips, who was born in St. Kitts and came with his family to Leeds at the age of twelve weeks, is the author of the novels *Cambridge*, *The Final Passage*, *A*

State of Independence, *Higher Ground*, and *Crossing the River*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

- Jan Lo Shinebourne was born in Guyana, though her grandparents were from India and China, and came to Britain for university in the 1970s. She is the author of *Timepiece* and *The Last English Plantation*.
- And Sunetra Gupta was born in India, lived in Africa until she was ten and then in India again. She moved to Britain to do her graduate work and now, along with being a novelist is a physician who studies infectious diseases at Oxford. She is the author of *Memories of Rain*, *The Glassblower's Breath*, and *Moonlight into Marzipan*.

For all of these novelists, the question of identity provokes a different response. Yet all of the responses, as Hanif Kureishi says, illustrate how, "Your identity has to be a mesh between how you see yourself and how others see you" (Kureishi).

For Kureishi, this societal conception of identity was one that was overtly in opposition to his personal view of who he was:

> If you see yourself as a South London boy who likes football and others see you as a 'Paki' and ask you where you came from all the time, there's a heavy disjunction there that can cause terrible splits in your sense of identity. But I think writing was a way of figuring all that out. So, as it happened I was writing it (Kureishi).

Yet Kureishi has not only maintained his identity as British -- and, as he says, more specifically a Londoner -- he has made that search for identity a central idea in his novels and films. He effectively compares his work to the Nineteenth Century novels of Dickens and Gogol of young people making their way in the city and society. Through the eyes of his characters, who are immigrants or their children, he engages in a critique of British society and culture, often in an ironic or comic form. Writing, then, became for him not only a means by which he could try to understand these conflicts of identity construction, along with a method of escaping the structural constraints of racial and class discrimination, it became a way of publicly engaging British society on the question of

identity. As Kureishi says, his project is to merge the personal with the social because his childhood was shaped by such forces.

Caryl Phillips' view of identity and writing is similar to Kureishi's in that he sees it as a public consideration because that is inescapable in a society that has continually denied his right to be a part of it:

> My position is "I am a British writer" because that means you have to deal with your definition of what constitutes Britain. If I actually said, "Well, I'm a Caribbean writer, or a black writer. I'm a writer of the African diaspora" it lets people off the hook, because they don't want to then reconsider, to reconfigure, Britain in their minds...It's politically important to maintain that (Phillips).

One question I asked all of the writers I interviewed was how, in the light of ethnic conflicts from Rwanda to Bosnia to Los Angeles, can we maintain distinctive cultural identities in peaceful, pluralistic society, and, more to the point, what role does the writer have in this process? Phillips sees this political situation as one that defines the writer's role in society:

> I think writers have a terrific responsibility to jerk people's head's around, hold them squarely, clump up their hair, bunch it up in the fist and make them look in the mirror. To say, "Listen. What are you doing? Don't try to elevate yourself by identifying the `other', because you are the `other' as well. And you will be the `other' when you cross this boundary. This boundary just may be between Yorkshire and Lancashire, or it may be between gender, between being male and female, between being black or white, between being British or French, between being young or old. But you are the `other' to somebody. So look, just look at yourself." I think the writer has a responsibility to constantly remind people that the exclusive boxes within which one scurries in a cowardly haste are the beginnings of conflict which usually end in Dachau and Belsen. So I think there is a responsibility for the writer to remind people, in whatever stories and narratives

> we're dealing with, of the consequences of not thinking generously, of not behaving generously. And the historical consequences I'm afraid are almost unbearable (Phillips).

And Phillips' novels are rooted in a past of slave trade and racism in Britain and her colonies. From the stories of English on their way to colonial West Indian plantations or West Indians on their way to England in the Twentieth Century.

The sense of identity is the most political for Jan Lo Shinebourne. She is emphatic in her insistence that her identity is not British, preferring instead to think of herself as "Caribbean in the world." For Shinebourne, the political and cultural nature of how identity is constructed is too often obscured by the language of psychology.

> I remember as a child feeling very confused and torn between my own feelings of security my childhood gave me and the negative value colonial values placed on those same things. It does not really capture this situation to say you feel torn between two cultures. This is a psychological interpretation that leaves out the important political parts of the whole story. I felt torn between what made me secure and a dominant system that asked me to reject it. I saw this problem as needing political interpretation and solution -- a gargantuan task. In terms of writing, the only thing that gave me a language to describe what was happening was a political language and so my writing apprenticeship included initiation into an ideology of decolonisation, and you can see the effect of this in my first two novels (Shinebourne).

For Shinbourne, writing is not primarily a vehicle for exploring personal questions of identity, but is one element of her public and political commitment and this is reflected in the overt political discussions in her novels and her criticism. "Writing has been a part of other efforts," she says, "especially participating in friendships, community activism, being involved politically in fighting against colonialism and racism" (Shinebourne).

From Kureishi to Phillips to Shinebourne, the question of writing as a means of publicly and politically engaging the majority culture becomes increasingly central to the motivation and goals of their work. Sunetra Gupta resists such overt political implications in discussing her work. She considers herself a "Bengali writing in English in Britain." her ability to define herself in this way stems from her sense of living in Oxford or, before that, in London, but not in *England*. She sees herself in an international, cosmopolitan community that transcends such borders, "The truth is, I don't live in England. I've chosen to create a space that is not in England. You have to create for yourself a space that is neither here nor there, yet rooted in a cultural identity" (Gupta).

And yet, though she is uncomfortable at defining a political project in her writing, she sees her work as a serving a transformative public role as well that is influenced by her experience as an immigrant in Britain:

> There is a tension between that kind of space and what is often created or presented in the name of multiculturalism which is kind of an area where you just are drawing together bits and pieces and little snatches of ethnic color and trying to create this colorful, but somewhat weightless, space. I find that can be unhelpful (Gupta).

For Gupta too, the writer does have a public responsibility in creating this authentic, cross-cultural space. Gupta sees the role of the writer as one in which the writer, "hands people the tools for creating a society perhaps more fundamentally accommodating of new cultures rather than just a loose net that gathers all into it and eventually becomes just a formless mass of nothing" (Gupta).

Because of how British society defines these writers -- and defines them in ways that very often is exclusionary and alienating -- their writing is, by necessity, engaged with public and political conceptions of identity.

What, then, do I take from this as a writing teacher? Or why is this a 4C's paper?

When we have international or multicultural classrooms we have to be continually aware of how identity is form and constructed by society and how dislocating and distressing this can be. this kind of conflict and how it influences discourse has been explored by writers such as Helen Fox and in work about contact zones. When we ask them to write, we have to consider how those conflicts are constraining; but also how they might be creative. The creativity can come from engagement with the societal conception of identity. Even if students begin to gain an awareness of how the culture in which they are living is defining them, they often feel they have no way of engaging that culture and its expectations. They feel they lack the permission, the language, the authority, to respond to the majority culture.

If there are ways, however, in which we can offer them example, models, texts, and forms through which they can respond it can be a positive and powerful experience. Although I like to provide my students with these interviews and with the novels of these writers, I don't think it matters whether the students are writing fiction, essays, research papers or what. What I think is essential is that they get a sense of the *public* mission in the work of these writers. I want them to see how these writers respond to the public construction of identity and to see how varied that response can be. Is this a project driven by social critique, political action, or a philosophical creation of a more accommodating society. Whatever the mission and form, it is *public writing*.

Different students have different issues. Cultural differences and classroom requirements will necessitate different kinds of writing with different focuses. Yet what I want them to consider is their role as a writer in relationship to the society they are experiencing. I don't deny them internal exploration; but I encourage them to feel a sense of power and engagement as public writers -- or writers with a public.

Sometimes there are concrete ways of doing this. Where I taught in Britain we published a small literary magazine that we distributed in town as well as at the college. Even if this is not possible, however, I find it useful to ask them who they would like to be

able to read this work besides me. Clearly, they know they are writing for me in order to pass a course. But I like to ask them, if they could, who would they like to have pick up this paper and hear their side of the story.

This idea, of who might read this work, was in the minds of many of the novelists I interviewed. If you asked them point blank about audience, they would answer that they are happy with anyone who would buy their book -- as are we all. If, however, I said, "OK, but all things being equal, who would you like to have buy it?" I got responses like this one from Caryl Phillips:

> I would like the upper-middle class in England, the ruling classes if you like, to read them. I am an optimist, generally. It may be foolish optimism, but I like the idea of them being able to sit in some judgment on themselves. I don't want them to feel guilty. But I want them to realize that the Britain that they unquestionably want to revive, want to breathe life into, is a Britain that, actually, doesn't exist; that maybe never existed except in mythology. In a sense, if somebody told me that John Major was reading a book of mine, I would be very happy about that. I would think that the fact that he had the book, to me would be a cross-over triumph. The fact that he may or may not get anything out of the book is neither here nor there. Though I would hope that he might.
>
> So I do have a particular desire to change people's perception of Britain, to change British people's perception of themselves. And to make them understand that, when they look at me, they are seeing themselves. In the late 20th Century they are seeing an English of themselves. They are seeing the British nation. They are seeing Britain.
>
> There are some people who are much less likely to have the generosity of spirit to take that on board. And I think those people -- the kind of high Tories, the upper-middle classes -- those are the people, it gives me some pleasure if I think that

they're reading it...I would like the enemy to be secretly reading it with their flashlights under the covers at night.

When I ask student to make a list of who they would like to know would read their work -- under the covers or not -- they find it fun and empowering. This move from that list to writing with such a public project in mind helps them to further understand both how the majority culture constructs their identity, because they begin to be more conscious of how this public audience would consider the work of someone they are reluctant to consider part of their cultural mix, and to gain a sense that there *is* something that they could say in return -- and something that demands that the public listen.

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