Migration, Modernity and English Writing:
Reflections on Migrant Identity and Canon Formation

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[The ideas in this lecture were first canvassed in a keynote address to a conference on postcolonial literature at Humboldt University in Berlin, which took place shortly before I joined the staff at Tate Britain (2005). Subsequently a form of the lecture was delivered to a conference on canon formation at Dundee University, by which time it had developed a new focus around the junction of 'black' visual arts, identity, citizenship and multiculturalism sparked off by a series of discussions with my Tate colleague Dr. Victoria Walsh. These conversations were joined at other moments by various critics, notably the Indian (and Danish) critic Tabish Khair, and were part of the buildup to the research programme which became Tate Encounters. The essay features various elements of our dialogues, which had a decisive influence in shaping some of our ideas about how to approach the role of such notions as diaspora, ethnicity and culture, when we began exploring the relationship of national institutions with 'new' and minority audiences.]

My name is Mike Phillips and I'm a novelist among other things.

You may not know that I am a United Kingdom citizen, and you may not know that I do not think of myself as a Caribbean writer, or an African writer, or an African American writer, or a diasporic writer, or even as a writer with an ambiguous stance somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. No such luck. I think of myself as an English writer, and all of this seems simple enough, except that I also think of myself (and I often describe myself) as a black British writer.

In this last persona, however, I am perpetually and consistently confronted by a specific difficulty, which is to do with a perceived disjunction between who I am and my identity as a writer. I want to point to the nature of the difficulty by quoting you an email I received recently from a woman, who described herself as being of Jamaican/Scottish parentage, and who was writing a PhD, which she described as: largely devoted to a discussion of issues for mixed race people in this country not least the historic invisibility, and the pressure to identify as a single, specific race that tends to come from people outside of the experience of being racially mixed. She went on to say "The self-identification is important here, as mixed race people so often have their identities decided for them by others, and are so rarely allowed to self-identify without a fight.[1] This put me in mind of several similar discussions I have had in the past with my eldest son, whose other parent is white, and it also put me in mind of the fact that I shared the same sense that my identity as a writer was perpetually under attack.

When I published my first novel in the second half of the 1980s the concept of a black British writer was not on the radar of most critics.[2] By and large it was a term they would have applied as a racial or ethnic categorisation rather than a cultural one. In any case 'Black British' was a contentious and highly contested ascription, until about halfway through the 90s, for reasons I'll describe later. But over the last ten years, as the label took on new meanings, it started to become a useful way of commanding attention in the cultural marketplace. Of course, a great deal of work

which carried that label came out of the old postcolonial syllabus and was neatly repackaged as 'black British'.

That was one strand which was harmless enough, except that it meant critics couldn't understand or explore the context in which the work they were studying was created. On the other side of the coin, some critics hurried to locate an identity within the African American experience and to describe the black British as a sort of subset of black America. At the same time, it became apparent that, to an alarming extent, the imagination of academic and other critics seemed to confine black British work to critiques which privileged notions of the outsider, the alien, the exile, and described its struggles to define an emerging identity almost exclusively in terms of a network of assumptions about cultural 'resistance'.

On top of all this, our work is labelled as 'black British', not because of its content, or style, or mood or tone or because it has a British landscape or says anything about Britain, but because the author has a dark skin and conveniently happened to spend some time in this country. What's important about this is that these are elements which establish a trope that ignores the actual experience and the dynamic developments which brought the term black British into view and made it an essential and useful statement of identity. When you come to consider the process of canon formation the results are more or less self-evident.

For example, take a recent and highly praised book describing the work of black and Asian writers about London, Sukhdev Sandhu's London Calling.[3] The book begins with the writing of former African slaves in the eighteenth century and moves through the next two centuries to the present day. Its dominant imagery renders blacks and Asians as outsiders – travellers, exiles, migrants – and, after analysing the work of the mid-century Caribbean writers, the author simply recycles these postcolonial familiar themes. As a result, the book ignores the period which followed Caribbean migration in the middle of the 20th century. This was a time when the establishment of a black strand in the British population and the ensuing conflicts became a central issue of political and social life in Britain, triggering a number of important changes - in the constitution, in the institutions of central and local government, in the arrangements for urban planning, housing, policing, and a great more besides. These were changes which the post-migrant generations of black writers often found themselves tracking, not as spectators, but as conscious agents in the restructuring of the city's self-image.

Arguably, therefore, the most important black writing to take London as its focus over the last two decades has been about a network of slippery transitions between public and private concerns - identity, community, citizenship and nationality. But *London Calling's* insistence on rendering black writers as migrants and exiles means that the latter half of the book ignores the elements which govern this transformation. One consequence is that Sandhu's reading can't make the appropriate distinctions between the social experiences of black and Asian writers, or assess the influence of class and ethnic status, or discuss different responses to the environment of different decades. He compares, for instance, Caryl Phillips's characters' arrival in London during the 1950s, with the excitement of Hanif Kureishi's suburban heroes' journey to the metropolis in the 1960s, but he can only describe the differences in the most banal terms - Phillips, he says, is 'gloomy' and 'is it the case that dire social circumstances need always be written up gloomily?' while Kureishi is cheerful. [4]

Another consequence of this approach is that writers who describe London from inside a complex interaction with its structures and changes are ignored by Sandhu's account or shoehorned into his version of the migrant saga. This leaves out any

detailed consideration of Andrea Levy, Ferdinand Dennis, or myself.[5] Typically, Sandhu bookmarks me as a novelist 'of distinction', quotes liberally from my non-fiction work about migration, but ignores the fiction set in London. Novels set in the world of local and central government or London's art galleries clearly don't fit the preconceptions of the book. Similarly, there is no consideration of the writers who experience London as part of family life or childhood. No Courttia Newland, or the rash of Brixton boys like Alex Wheatle, Anton Marks et al. No mention either of the black writers who create characters from inside the enclaves of English professional life, like Mike Gayle's (un)black London teacher, or Nicola Willams's black and female South London barrister.[6]

Descriptions of this kind place black and Asian writers in an ahistorical arena, where their most important common feature is the colour of their skins. The critic Tabish Khair argues that one effect of this view has been to foster the emergence of a swathe of contemporary writing which 'seeks to cast the reader in a passive and celebratory role'.[7] Khair has labelled this trend 'the death of the reader', and he illustrates it by reference to 'slippages' in some recent iconic 'multi-cultural' texts. Beginning with Zadie Smith's White Teeth, he writes:

> If one reads it from outside the celebratory space of multicultural Britain, one notices intriguing gaps and silences. The one that I still remember relates to Samad Miah Iqbal who claims to be and is portrayed by the text as the great-grandson of Mangal Pande, the Indian sepoy who fired the first shot of the 1857 revolt. Samad is a fireband – if not fundamentalist – Muslim much of the time and the sceptical reader in me could not reconcile this fact with the name of his historically authentic great-grandfather. For Mangal Pande is not just a Hindu name, it is a twice-born, pure-as-snow Brahmin one. It is difficult to imagine the descendants of the Mangal Pandes of India converting to Islam, let alone a firebrand version of it, and that too after the snuffing of the last symbols of Muslim glory in 1857.
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> Of course this is not life; this is a novel. But if this is a novel, there ought to be a story around this spectacular conversion. The story is never narrated, or not visibly enough…
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> A similar problem confronts the sceptical reader in another celebrated novel, Yann Martel's Life of Pi, which – in spite of its solid adherence to certain textual and mainstream definitions of religions (particularly 'Hinduism') – is rather shaky in the field of names. Take, for instance, this extract: " He was a Sufi, a Muslim mystic…His name was Satish Kumar. These are common names in Tamil Nadu…" It could be that, in the years I have been way from India, Tamil Nadu (in South India) has been invaded and colonised by people from North India so that North and West Indian names like Satish Kumar have become common there. I am willing to allow for that possibility. But I still find it difficult to imagine a pious Muslim, even a Sufi, with a Hindu name – for Satish and Kumar are both Hindu names. One wonders what such omissions signify? [8]

What these omissions signify, according to Khair, is the absence of 'textual traces … that enable the reader to fill the gaps, smoothen the rough patches, justify the "errors", "authenticise" the fiction.' In other words, to open a space for the reader to interpret, accomplish, and be active. Khair goes on, however, to note that:

> But if this space is foreclosed – not just in the text, which leaves unexplained and uncontextualised gaps, but also in criticism, which refuses to note these gaps – if this space of active reading is foreclosed, then all one can have is a

kind of celebratory echoing of dominant whims. The author might or might not be dead, but the reader is surely expected not to think much for herself – not to read in other words. [9]

Khair concludes the argument by quoting an anecdote from his own recent experience:

> I had just finished reading *Brick Lane* while waiting for the airport authorities to let me know whether I could board a plane to Heathrow in order to catch a connecting flight from there. In the past this would not have been a problem. But, unknown to me, the rules had been changed in London a few days back and now some passport holders were required to have a valid visa even to catch a connecting flight from the same airport in England. While I waited, I read the last pages of *Brick Lane*, where the main protagonist approaches a skating rink wearing a sari. But you cannot skate wearing a sari, her friend says. 'This is England,' the protagonist replies, 'You can do whatever you like.'Perhaps. Perhaps. I know that I laughed hysterically for about three minutes when I was informed that, in spite of many visits to England, in spite of a letter of invitation and valid tickets to my destination, I would not be allowed to board my plane. I wished I could be a protagonist in Ali's novel. My history, regardless of Barthes, did not set me free either as a reader or a person. I was bound to notice names, for my name is always noticeable. I was liable to be kept from boarding the double-decker of even multicultural Britain. I could not do what I liked. I could not even do what I had paid for. [10]

While reading Khair's essay my own list of slippages began to assemble itself, notably an extravagantly inaccurate reference to the Notting Hill riots in Diran Adebayo's novel *Some Kind of Black*.[11]   This eschewed the social, political or economic context, and served up the events as an otherwise inexplicable eruption of racial hostility - a violent clash between ethnic cultures. As a result, one of the novel's central metaphors (the riots) manoeuvres its characters neatly into an internal parallel with the now established multi-culturalist narrative, where migrants move, 'from a tranquil, though limited 'traditional' (ordered) space through a journey of much conflict and upheaval to the safe domain of a more complete and fulfilling Western multiculturalism.' There are a number of indications that the process of canon formation which is now in train has become one of the boundaries outlining this ahistorical multicultural space, where migrants are confined within an circular (and endless) rigmarole of celebration.

In the circumstances there is temptation for someone in my position to engage in what Gayatri Spivak calls 'retrospective hallucination'.[12] She argues that the ruling elites in the Third World, along with professionals and intellectuals who have their origins in Africa and Asia, reconstruct their own history or, to put it another way, re-invent their roots, which they claim spring from a historical world of uninterrupted ethnicity and nationhood, that existed before the takeover of imperialist and colonial culture. This re-invention becomes a rhetorical trope, which locates such people in a traditional stereotype where cultures are fixed and separated in history, partly because this particular view of culture has been, in our time, the official gateway to the transnational academic and business world in Europe and the USA. I think of the Trinidadian novelist V.S.Naipaul, who resurrected his role in an Indian caste system which his family had abandoned when they went to the Caribbean, and who, consistent to the end, has recently been supporting the attempts of Hindu nationalists to link themselves with a pure pre-Muslim Hindu culture.[13]

But the history of postcolonial and migrant intellectual effort is layered with this kind of affirmation, and the rhetoric, during the last couple of decades, has also begun to conflate a reconstructed nationhood with the historical roots of migrant identity. Franz Fanon, Aimie Cesaire, the poets of Negritude, all wrote within a specific historical context and they are part of our history, but partly as a result of this history, the spokesmen and women of migration now tend to trace migrant identity to a pre-colonial and autonomous ethnicity, an autonomous nationhood, an ancient paradise, from which the migrants have been, somehow, exiled - and of course, migrant academics, writers and artists, for understandable reasons, have not been slow to identify themselves with this over-arching popular narrative. [14]

We are also forced, I would say, into this position by a framework of popular racism which calls on us to trace the history of cultures through a kind of arena of separate development, as if cultures existed in a series of boxes, distinct from each other, and distinct from the world in which they exist. The result of this tradition of retrospection is that, for the migrants, their assertion of dignity, self respect or even humanity is supposed to be a constant recall of an imagined cultural tradition, an instant recollection of exclusive cultural roots, as if there was no other way of convincing society about their worth.

But as a black writer with a migrant background, now a citizen of a European country, Britain, I have to be conscious that my actual experience offers a continual challenge to this rhetoric of retrospection. For instance, English is my native language. Like most Caribbeans and many Africans I grew up speaking both standard English and a dialect of standard English. In the retrospective tradition it has become fashionable to interrogate our Atlantic dialects for African survivals, but it is equally possible and rather more obvious to trace the dominant influence of Elizabethan English, the language of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, along with a number of archaic regional dialects, notably from the seafaring southwestern coast of England. The point, however, is that, as a reader and writer, my experience of language located me in a tradition where such figures as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens figured largely, and drawing upon the richness and complexity of my own language involved my entering and exploring a culture which had evolved at some distance from the circumstances in which I had grown up.

According to the arguments of postcolonial retrospection this is transgressive behaviour, a rejection of the task of reconstructing one or the other nativist tradition. But as every genuine artist knows, creativity is a matter of grappling with the landscape in which you find yourself; and it seemed to me when I began to write fiction, as it does now, that resurrecting an imagined utopia in order to describe my identity would be a sterile approach, an intellectual cul-de-sac, whose likely consequence might have been to shut me off from my environment rather than liberating me for constructive engagement with my fellows.

The study of migration has also been dominated by certain major lines of sociological enquiry, which place the phenomenon of migration – the act of people moving across borders to settle in different places – in the context of social conflict and political anxiety; nd it seems to me that this sociological thematisation has had the effect of persistently distorting both our understanding of cultures and of the cultural consequences of migration. In Britain we've become very good at this. We know for instance, that migrants and the children of migrants have been excluded from certain occupations; that our system of public education has allowed a shameful proportion of migrants and of migrant children to emerge without useful qualifications. We know that recruitment of migrants and their children into the police force, the Civil Service

and so on has been blocked by discrimination. We know also many of the mechanisms, which control this situation.

The real problem, however, is to find solutions - and after two decades of revelation, discussion, and retraining, there is now a growing realisation that, if there is any answer to the problems we face, it lies in an understanding and a remodelling of the political and social culture we inhabit. This is a difficult matter. Britain began to tackle the issue earlier than its Continental neighbours, partly because our colonialist history created conditions in which migration became a central political issue during the mid-twentieth century, and partly because our cities and a number of our institutions had already begun to be reshaped by the fact of migration. This also led to an early realisation that a purely sociological approach to these issues was not entirely useful.

It became apparent, therefore, that culture was the only medium which could provide a framework for the solutions which had to be sought. The product of this understanding was, in Britain, the concept of multi-culturalism. I've already hinted at some of the difficulties, but I want here to discuss the term within specific historical circumstances and to outline specific consequences which flow from its use, because, although multi-culturalism was a term already in use in various settings, in Britain it achieved popular status as a response to specific conditions. It is crucial to note that the term entered our popular vocabulary during a specific period (in the second half of the decade of the 1990s) and within a specific context. When we – we, that is to say my brother Trevor and myself - began working on a TV programme and a book about the Windrush at the end of 1996, it seemed to us that 'multi-cultural' was a term which was making claims about British society which were more or less false. So we used the title, 'The Irresistible Rise of Multi-racial Britain'.[15]

But in between the conception and the actual anniversary of the Windrush landing a number of things happened. First, there was the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent McPherson enquiry which characterised a number of British institutions and authorities as 'institutionally racist'. This was a drama which played itself out in front of the TV cameras and in the daily headlines of tabloid newspapers. Secondly, Labour won the General Election and ushered in the first age of New Labour. Thirdly, there was a campaign for the mayor's office in London which was won by Ken Livingston, the man who had originally set out to create a species of electoral rainbow coalitions to support the GLC.

In hindsight the political and social anxiety of the Stephen Lawrence affair, the re-branding instincts of New Labour and the political opportunism of the mayoral campaign were all gathered up and reflected in the long aftermath of Windrush; and it was also obvious that we needed a new brand name to describe what was happening to the British population, especially in our major cities. Up to that point, 'multi-racial' had been a more or less acceptable code word for the changing population in our cities, and the eclipse of the term is instructive. Multi-racialism was rather too closely associated with Afro-Caribbeans, and a number of ethnic groups were uncomfortable with the term. In any case, multi-racialism served as a persistent reminder of conflict and oppression, the sort of thing the politicians in particular wanted us to forget. For example, our Minister of Culture, Chris Smith was deeply committed to a cultural diversity, which would feature the inclusion of homosexuals, language groups and so on. So multi-culturalism emerged from this background as an emblem of a diversity which had an official imprimatur, or to put it another way, had become part of an official strategy for containing the implications of a social and political crisis.

But multi-culturalism offered different meanings to different people. It was more or less devoid of challenging content, since the phrase merely referred to the existence of different cultures in the same place, while at the same time it was, for a number of people, symbolic of elements they hoped to embrace – equality, tolerance and so on. Ironically, even the right wing and racist parties, deadly opponents of multi-racialism or what they might have described as race-mixing, recognised the advantages of a multi-cultural arrangement in which each 'culture' could maintain its exclusivity behind various social barriers.

The problem has been that, on the one hand, multi-culturalism uttered a rhetoric about the co-existence of cultures from all over the world, and we demonstrated that by supporting Hindu religious festivals and the Notting Hill Carnival among other things. We had a high visibility of black and Asian people especially in popular entertainment and music. Overall, politicians and public figures paid an obligatory respect to the idea that there were several different cultures in Britain which enjoyed equal status.

The reality of life in the multi-cultural state was, however, very different. Multi-culturalism had its shareholders, of course. The rubric had made life easier for a number of institutions and authorities, who were able to retreat or delay such issues as equal opportunity recruitment by putting in place a multi-cultural policy which devoted relatively insignificant funding to supporting religious festivals and oral reminiscing. Multi-national corporations and local enterprises also benefited hugely from the commodification of identity which was implicit in the operation of multi-cultural. On the other side of the equation were a relatively small number of artists, entertainers, entrepreneurs and administrators, from the ethnic minorities, whose task it was to execute the strategy. These duly entered the lists of the great and the good and were duly rewarded with various honours and decorations.

At the same time we had a developing tradition of discrimination and marginalisation towards those people who came from the cultures we were celebrating. The idea of cultural diversity also started to become a useful tool for maintaining the barriers originally put in place by racial discrimination. To put it crudely the argument said: 'you have a culture which we will support and praise, but that implies that we don't have to make room in our culture for you.' So multi-culturalism, instead of being a process which made connections between social, political and economic conditions, became a sort of bridge which allowed various people to step lightly from one phase of history to another imaginary phase without having to dabble in these dangerous waters of cultural conflict.

Now you can see the potential in this for a kind of benign cultural apartheid, which is precisely why the organising principle of my own writing is concerned with trying to understand how migration fits into a framework of theoretical argument about the development of art and letters in the English language, rather than trying to recover notions of ethnic or cultural purity. The exploitative potential of the multi-cultural concept is precisely to do with its reading of cultures as autonomous and isolated from each other in history, but it is true that migration and its cultural effects can be read in entirely different ways; and it's also true that the trends associated with migration have begun to set in motion decisive changes in the way that we understand cultures, their relationship and their interaction.

The first thing is to identify what we're talking about. Migration is not, of course, a twentieth-century phenomenon. People were moving across borders before there were borders. The populations of every continent owe their origins to various kinds of migration, and they haven't stopped moving since. So, I'm not going to argue the

virtues of migration, if only because the thing was self evident, (even before we ever heard of famous migrants like Arnold Schwarzenegger, arguably Austria's most successful migrant). Migration, on the other hand, has nearly always been associated with a species of dramatic intervention in the social, cultural and political forms of one location or the other.

We habitually speak of these movements of peoples in terms of conquest or invasion - imperialist ideology fostered the idea that when two cultures met the superior culture inevitably destroyed or drove out its inferior. So, we also talked about civilisation as a matter of ownership in which the conquerors imposed their culture or took over the cultures they found. Imperialist Europe and its emigrants even believed that they introduced the idea of culture to territories in which such notions didn't exist. I think here about Joseph Conrad, and his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, a title which became part of the English language in describing Africa, and in a sense we see these notions persisting in the attitudes that Edward Said, the Palestinian academic described as 'Orientalism'.[16] So, the themes which run through the development of the nation state were concerned, not only with who belonged to the nation and why, but also with where the boundaries lay between inclusion and exclusion.

But while there is no doubt that the ideology of race and nation which policed these boundaries pervades the practice of European artists and writers in the modern period, there were also other interesting ways of talking about nationhood, rooted in other kinds of reality, and it can be argued that artists and writers have also persistently chosen other paths through which they have opened up an avenue of escape from the straitjacket of nation and nationality, and from the limitations of race and ethnicity. This is a practice which challenges the notion that, in the world of ideas, migration represents a sudden and alien incursion into the ecology of the arts in Europe. Instead, the effects of migration are part of how modernity and modernisation have shaped our world, and, in particular shaped the world of the arts and culture.

So in this process I can't talk about migration as if it were merely an aspect of race and racism – not because those things don't deserve a focus, but because the issues of migration go well beyond anxieties about the colour of people's skins; and I can't talk about migration without discussing modernity because modernity offers us new insights into migration. For instance, there is a moment in Europe, the start of the Enlightenment and the extraordinary movements of the eighteenth century where the nation state emerges to dominate the rhetoric of identity, and to define the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. One product of Enlightenment thinking, which went along with the development of the nation state, was a secularisation which encouraged Europeans to question the religious rubric in which the soul and its relationship with the City of God was the index of the individual. The result of this questioning was a state of mind in which the self could be identified with idea of nation. You can collect a bundle of characteristics, assemble them into a single personality and offer this individual up as a synonym for the nation. The nation itself could be thought of, or described, as an individual – so the French Marianne, the American Uncle Sam, the English John Bull and so on - were all products of this junction between individuals and the symbolism of the nation.

But as we pass through the nineteenth century, our ideas about what constituted the individual self change radically. In Freud, we see the argument that we aren't born as ourselves, we acquire a self which is already stressed and divided by internal conflict, fractured into ego, superego and unconscious, and we hold these things together by entering into a symbolic order of language and culture.[17] So we arrive at

the end point of the European Enlightenment, already in a condition of serious doubt about the status of the individual self, and this is a climax which brings on industrialism, control of information and centralisation of its distribution, capitalism, and military power. Hand in hand with this is modernism: aesthetic self-consciousness; interest in language; rejection of realism in favour of 'the real'; abandonment of linearity in favour of montage and simultaneity; Romanticism or emphasis on the value of aesthetic experience; depth and universal mytho-poetic meaning; privileging fragmentation; and the valuing of avant garde culture. Modernist poets like T. S. Eliot provide us with illuminating descriptions of these states of mind. At the beginning of 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock' you can read this divided consciousness, this new awareness of a divided and fragmented identity:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.[18]

In true modernist style, poets like Eliot reflected on the unreliability of words themselves, how they crack and break down into imprecision, and how they serve as a metaphor for the way that identity in modern times could never hold a single irreducible form. As W.B.Yeats, Eliot's contemporary, wrote, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' [19] Joyce goes further in highlighting the nature of language as a reflection of fragmented identity: parodies of advertising, journalism, literature, science, colloquial speech and classical analogies all get tossed in to focus on the tools we use to construct meaning. What emerges in *Finnegans Wake* is what he calls 'the waters of babalog,' in which meaning breaks down and flows into the shape of the narrative – the waters recreating and creating new meanings, contradictory statements.[20]

This brings us back to our particular tranche of modernity, the migration which has been going on while all this history has been in process. In the eighteenth century the Enlightenment had already brought the concepts associated with non-Christian, non-representational, pre-industrial art into the Western canon. The Cubists and their cohorts, after all, imported ideas about 'the Primitive' to justify their disdain for neoclassical and realist modes, and so on. What's new, then? As we know the transcultural has been walking among us for a very long time. What is important, however, is the notion that the migrations which alter cultural perspectives in the twentieth century do not emerge from isolated moments of inspiration or compulsion. Instead, they are the resolution of processes which were set in motion during preceding centuries by the operations of the most powerful nation states. After all, what did the empires of the nineteenth century give their subjects? Well they gave them modernity in the shape of speed, industrialisation, the irresistible export of capital, instantaneous communication, centralised authority, universal surveillance, and a culture of quasi-liberal despotism.

As such, one difficulty for the imperial mission was reconciling the political liberalism of the Enlightenment with its most important achievement, the nation state, within the framework of a rapidly expanding transnational capitalism. The logic of the nation was to impose cultural barriers between itself and the others which existed in the outer darkness. At the same time, the corporate needs of trade and military dominance drove its members outwards to engage with those others, but rationality

itself created social and cultural stresses which could only be resolved by a political rhetoric which justified despotism of one kind or the other. Modernity provided an arena in which all these different elements operated. So now, as a result of the movements of the last three centuries or so, we have in the twentieth century a globalised space in which the movements of migrants into regions like Europe provoke a ferment of debate about cultural ownership, about identity and about the nature of the self.

In effect, migration in the twentieth century has had an extraordinary impact which forced the realisation that we lived in the middle of peculiar break with the past. That we were moving towards a new aesthetic where the boundaries between art and culture were to be blurred, where culture and commerce couldn't easily be distinguished one from the other, where art and everyday life could be the same, and where the constant flow of signs and images turned in a perpetual conversation about meaning. Ironically, the practice of a modernist aesthetic co-existed comfortably with a traditional view about the ownership of cultures. Joyce himself, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has Stephen Daedalus say, (after a conversation with an Englishman), 'the language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine….His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words." [21] What stands out here is the sheer oddity of the sentiment, coming from one of the premier exponents of the English language, someone who shaped the way we speak and understand its idioms, and this apparent contradiction is a demonstration of the way that the traditional view of culture could survive hand in hand with modernist practice.

This brings me back to the meaning of black British identity and its potential in the process of canon formation. Artists are called upon to occupy a particular role in the business of arranging and fixing identity, because the pursuit of any kind of artistic endeavour is a public statement. Art and artists emerge from history, and at the same time recreate a history of their own activities. So in talking about the relationship between black British artists, black British identity, and some of the dilemmas I've been discussing, I need to discuss what it means to be black British, because, although we use the label continuously nowadays, it is largely the practice of artists which has called this label into being, and what they've done goes beyond a cosmetic multiculturalism and begins the reconfiguration of identity. In fact, we needed this term to describe a particular shift in awareness, which was not only to do with ourselves, but also to do with what was happening inside the United Kingdom.

We know a great deal about the constitutional and legal framework within which British citizenship has evolved over the last fifty years. This was a political struggle, which went on over the space of fifty years and which opened up new categories of British identity, and made a new statement about citizenship in Britain. It is also clear that the process is not at an end. It has made possible a constitutional statement about our citizenship which does not depend on ethnicity or racial origins. But, at the same time, this political formula does not account for the way that individuals perceive themselves. My passport tells me where I can go, for instance, and even what I am able to do in certain cases. It does not tell me who I am. This 'who I am', however, goes to the heart of a fundamental issue: the problem of how our notions of self are constructed.

Many postcolonial writers tended to suggest that an individual's identity was an autonomous entity - an a priori characteristic of skin colour or geographical location, something to do with the individual's relationship to a particular ethnic group or a particular place, a particular piece of territory. They were, accordingly, concerned with mapping the outlines of an authentic self which sprang out of a specific historical

continuity, and whose health could be determined by the extent to which it resisted the invasion of alien elements and cultural dominance. It is this background which makes the phrase 'black British' a necessary, and a challenging one, because, in the circumstances, it constituted a new argument about identity, which altered certain boundaries and created new possibilities.

For instance, the conventional way of talking about migration in Britain almost always focuses on the 'moment of arrival' because there is always a demand that ethnic minorities should be framed within this 'moment of arrival' – a moment which appears to value and privilege the arrival but which also, much more powerfully, is an argument that defines cultures as separate and alien to each other and extends that definition into the past. But this moment of arrival is an imaginary moment, because there were lots of black people in Britain before then. We have begun to discover that the history of the black British community truly begins, not with the moment of arrival, but with a routine daily negotiation about crossing boundaries and barriers, about expanding limits. At the heart of this routine negotiation is a reshaping of the self, and in the process what emerges is a divided, fragmentary, contradictory consciousness, which we are obliged to take for granted.

Now I would argue that any individual consciousness is determined or over-determined by compulsory relationships and external processes. No one is a simple and autonomous unit. This is the point at which we all emerged from the long transformation of the post-Enlightenment world. In the case of the black British, we were obliged to be conscious (aware) of the sense in which our selves were characterised by compulsory relationships with the people and the environment we found in the United Kingdom. This environment was composed of any number of different things; it was comprised of a bundle of economic and social features, forming a horizontal market place of cultures, coercive pressures, and a set of narratives about identity, about what people were.

So our reshaping of identity was determined by a continuing negotiation about the nature of language, about the meanings of behaviour, about things that were said, about how to learn, what we learned and what we taught. It was determined also by the internal play between a specific and singular history, which is the history of our own families, the history of the group to which that family belonged, and the historical circumstances which dominate the lived experience of a person or persons in this arena. For instance, we associate the coming into being of the whole concept of black Britishness a number of historical crises which are very important in the life of our communities. For example, the Notting Hill riots, the struggle against 'sus', the New Cross fire, the death of Stephen Lawrence and so on. These historical circumstances frame the way we see ourselves and the way that vision of ourselves develops.

All these elements and more go to make up the identity of any individual. What makes the narrative British is that these things took place within specific geographical and cultural limits and are determined by the conditions and processes operating within the limits of these particular boundaries. So, the development of the concept black British is complex, it takes place over time, and it exists in a creative tension with a modernist conception of self-hood and a particular concept of individuality – and it takes this reconstituted individual out of the private realm into the public arena – a shift which immediately creates an argument about the recasting of national identity.

But black artists in Britain work within the framework of race thinking. Audiences and people in general look at our work with the question in mind, 'What is he saying about

us? Does he like us? Is he attacking us? Is he condemning us?', rather than asking: 'What is he saying?' If I say that we live in a framework where racial divisions determine our view of almost everything I'm not making an accusation, merely stating a class of fact which accounts for many things. It accounts, for instance, for the fact that the inventiveness and creativity of black British artists have traditionally been submerged in a narrative about race, so that the productions of Caribbean, or African American, or Asian, or African artists are somehow perceived as offering the same view of the world as that of a black British artist. This is a consequence of a framework of ideas dominated by race - dominated also by generations of 'retrospective hallucination', as Spivak puts it.[22]

Most black British artists, however, come from a peasant or semi-rural, working class background which on the ground never completely shared in the nationalist post-colonial reconstruction of Third World history. The reality in which their work is grounded happens to be this routine renegotiation of identity in their new homes, where the historic formation of diasporic blackness, as well as universalist notions about an 'uncorrupted' identity, or about unbroken connections with black roots, have no actual connection with their day-to-day experience. On the contrary, the authentic identity of many migrant communities begins with the tension of operating several different selves at the same time. You'll see this most clearly if you live through, with some of the new East European migrants, the process of operating a new language, new religious ideas and new manners. The consequence of this tension is that, as migrant artists, the choices we make are often transgressive or at least unrecognisable within a context which demands from us an unambiguous black outline, 'black' that is, in terms of rigidly stereotyped conception of culture.

Typically, until very recently, the general context in which black British writers work has tended to regard us as another group of blacks who simply happened to be where we were, only notable for the colour of our skins; and the demand from us was to reproduce the 'drama of race.' In the present day, it is possible to see an equivalent being created, where the drama which is demanded from East Europeans is the drama of difference – a drama rooted in the distinction between rich and poor. I'm suggesting here, that, typically, as artists, our major struggle is not so much with dramatic manifestations of racism, although we struggle with those too, but is fundamentally concerned with the routine daily endeavour of representing who we think we are within our specific circumstances, with unlocking and exploring the specific history from which we emerge, and with finding outlets for that enterprise. By contrast, in the past, black artists in the United Kingdom were, traditionally, more rigidly confined behind the barriers of ethnicity, where we were required to sketch out a picture of an alien identity. On the other hand, the necessity of breaking out of these limits, in order to talk about the changes which were occurring in our own lives and about our relationship with our new environment, is precisely what gives the work of black British artists its radical tenor, and the potential for radicalising our nation's view of culture and what it means.

Again, I want to distinguish this enterprise from the post-colonial process in which artists are concerned with a very different view of identity. Instead of reclaiming and reconstituting historical identities, our history has delivered us into a process of reshaping, becoming a different kind of individual self; and this is a process which takes place in a sustained dialogue or conversation with all the elements which go to make up this new self. This signals the emergence of a new consciousness, springing from the time and place which contains it, and linked to various other narratives about migration, about urban experience, about tensions between nationality and citizenship. So, what you are reading when you read my books, for instance, is a part of the mechanism by which the concept of the black British came

into being, a reconfiguration of self-hood, which is a necessary pre-condition of the transcultural process.

On the other side of the equation all this has had a specific and interesting effect on the culture and identity of the United Kingdom. We, the British, recognised this fact in what I describe as the cosmetic rhetoric of British multiculturalism, but this is precisely why the term and the concept has had to be challenged. The rhetoric of inclusion conceals the fierceness and intensity of the struggle we are presently waging over cultural territory and over the identity of the state. At this moment in Britain, we face a long constitutional argument associated with Celtic nationalism. The establishment of regional governments in Scotland and Wales are only the beginning of a debate about the retention or dissolution of the British union, and in the last few years another argument has emerged – what does it mean to be English? That is, someone who, whether or not they were born there, lives in and identifies with the country, England, as opposed to any other constituent country of the British Union.

If we use that definition, a substantial part of the English population now has fairly recent origins in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. This fact is rapidly rendering archaic the old view of Englishness as an ethnic club, and we now begin to recognise that we are in the middle of a cultural struggle to reinterpret exactly what Englishness and Britishness mean, to re-interpret who has the right to say who we are, and towards what we should be sympathetic. This struggle is partly the result of a sort of sympathetic vibration provoked by the significance of the changes going on in the body of migrants. Black British and Asian writing is within the epicentre of this vibration and central to the recognition that a new debate has begun to organise categories of identity, opening up a new landscape.

Within this landscape, we begin to go beyond the pre-existing, the a priori definition of our nationhood which I heard my fellow citizens outline as I grew up. They used to say: 'We know what we are, because that is what we are. And if you have to talk about it, you are not one of us.' British writing of every kind now has begun, with a certain tentativeness, to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by this new debate where people are not saying, 'We know what we are.' Instead they're saying, 'We don't know what we are and we have to decide. I speak now about the writers of migration, rather than about migrant writers, because in this new atmosphere, it becomes the task of writers from any and every part of the population to understand and explore new meanings.

At the same time, there are major features which the black British experience and its literature makes explicit: the phenomenon of migration, movement and mobility, the renegotiation of selfhood, the historicising of new identities and the reconstitution of a dominant culture to reflect again new identities which are often in conflict. All these things together can flow, separate, join up in the same space, and co-exist. And not only co-exist, but actually offer the possibility of recreating a single culture with very different facets.[23]

So the meanings associated with this experience, seem to me to offer a defining vision around which a canon may be assembled, given that these are meanings which offer the potential of releasing both writers and critics from ethnicity and skin colour. The extent to which the British academy can meet this challenge will itself define whether it possesses the ability to resist the commodification of the cultural markets, whether it has the capacity to engage creatively with its own history,and whether it can locate a viable pathway out of the multiculturalist prison.

1 Email correspondence with Angeline Morrison

2 Mike Phillips, Blood Rights London, 1989

3 Sukdhev Sandhu, London Calling: descriptions of the English metropolis by African, Caribbean and South Asian Writers, 1772 - 1998, Oxford, 1998.

4 For example, Caryl Phillips, The Final Passage, London, 1984 and Hanif Kureishi, The Budda of Surburbia, London, 1990 and My beautiful Laundrette, London, 1984.

5. Among Andrea Levy's writings are: Every Light in the House Burnin , London, 1994)and Fruit of the Lemon , London, 1999. Among Ferdinand Dennis works are The Sleepless Summer, London, 1989 and Duppy Conqueror, London, 1998.

6 Works from these authors for further reading might include: Courttia Newland, The Scholar: A West Side Story , London, 1998; Alex Wheatle, Brixton Rock, London, 1999 and East of Acre Lane, London, 2002; Anton Marks, Bushman, London, 2004; Mike Gayle, My Legendary Girlfriend, London, 1998 and Turning Thirty, London, 2000; and Nicola Williams Without Prejudice, London, 1998.

7 Tabish Khair, 'The Death of the Reader'. "Laeserens foedsel -- og doed", Copenhagen, 25.11.2004 Extracts quoted from the manuscript version in English.

8. Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Ibid

11 Diran Adebayo, Some Kind of Black , London, 1996

12 Gayatri Spivak, 'Who Claims Alterity?,' in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariana, eds, Remaking History Seattle, 1989, pp.269-92; p.275.

13 For a discussion of V.S.Naipaul, see Bruce King, V.S.Naipaul

14 See Bruce King, The Internationalization of English Literature, The Oxford English Literary History, Vol 13, 1948-2000. pp125-140.

15 15   Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, Windrush: the irrestistible rise of multi-racial Britain (London: HarperCollins, 1998

16 Joseph Conrad, The Heart of Darkness (London: Dent and Sons Ltd., 1902). Edward Said, Orientalism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

17 17   Henk de Berg, Freud's theory and its uses in literary and cultural studies: an introduction (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003

18 T.S.Eliot, 'The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock,' in Collected Poems 1909 – 1962 (London: Faber, 1974), p.13.

19 W.B.Yeats, 'The Second Coming' in Selected Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.99.

20 James Joyce, Finnegan's Wake (London: Faber, 1939), p.103

21 James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (St Albans: Triad Books, 1977), p.172.

22 Spivak, op.cit., p.275

23 See, for example, the recent BBC TV series, Who Do We Think We Are, in which British celebrities trace their origins to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe.