

Exploring multicultural literature: the text, the classroom and the world outside

In this essay I want to do three things. First, to explore the notion of multicultural literature. What do we mean by the term? What is it? And where did it come from? Second, I want to look at the relationship between texts, teachers and school students. And third, I want to glance at the world beyond the classroom, and suggest ways in which the literature read and written in the classroom can contribute towards students' understanding of and engagement with the wider world. In today's parlance this last focus might count as something to do with citizenship.

So what is multicultural literature? It certainly didn't exist when I was at Oxford in the late 1970s and early 1980s – by which I mean that I spent seven years within the English Language and Literature faculty without ever being troubled by any awareness that there was such an animal as multicultural literature. In 1985, I started work as a schoolteacher, in a boys' comprehensive in Tower Hamlets. One of the first texts that I chose to read with my Year 8 group was *Young Warriors* (1967). The novel, by Jamaican author V. S. Reid, tells a coming-of-age story of five Maroon warriors who help their people to outwit and ambush the occupying Redcoat army. At this distance, I do not know why I chose it – whether it was to do with the boys' adventure story format of the novel, with its anti-imperialist narrative and positioning, whether it seemed to be accessible enough, to my highly inexpert eyes, for my students to be able to cope with it (whatever coping with it might mean). I asked my students to look at the front cover, to describe what they could see and then to predict as much as they could about the novel they were about to read. It's an interesting exercise, both as a way of activating students' prior knowledge and as an opportunity

to render explicit some aspects of the conditions of literary production. The content of the image – the foregrounding of the Maroon boys, the adoption of their perspective on the advancing Redcoats, the extent to which the image represents a particular moment in the novel – all provide useful ways in to the written text, productive foci for the students’ conversation. But there are also issues about the style of the illustration – the use of primary colours, the lack of individuation in the four Maroon figures in the foreground (and maybe even the problematic, racialised stereotype of the Maroons in the treetops). When students returned to the front cover after reading the novel, many felt that the illustration marked a dumbing down of the content, a means to market the text as “safe”, unthreatening, childish.

What immediately attracted the attention and interest of my first Year 8 group, however, was not the front cover but the back, and more particularly the photo of V. S. Reid in the centre of it. “Who is this?” they asked. I explained that this was the author. What was completely clear from my students’ responses was that, for them as for me, encountering black authors was something of a novelty. The class was almost entirely composed of students of Bangladeshi origin. There was an identification on their part with the author; but what was the basis of this identification? It was not a product of language or geography or religion or ethnicity, in any straightforward sense. It was not, in other words, an issue of any narrowly-defined identity politics. But the students’ obvious surprise – and pleasure – was related to their sense of themselves, like V.S. Reid, being defined as “other” by the dominant culture in which they lived. They understood, I would argue, that in a clear, political sense they were Black.

Is there, then, a very simple definition of multicultural literature? Is it just a way of referring to literature written by Black authors? What, though, of the subject-matter of such literature? Is it also an element in the multicultural identity of *Young Warriors* that it tells a story of Maroon people? And what of the presence of the white Redcoat soldiers in the narrative? Does the fact that the novel enacts a conflict between organised groups of runaway Maroons and the colonial power make it more multicultural? To put it another way, would it have been a less multicultural text if Tommy and the other warriors had restricted themselves to hunting coney?

Versions of multiculturalism had been given prominence in education even before my time at Oxford had begun. There is in the Bullock Report a recognition of the relevance of students' out-of-school identities and experiences to what happens in the classroom:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart (DES 1975: 286).

Such pluralist notions were always contested. Barely a year after the publication of the Bullock Report, the speech that James Callaghan, the then Prime Minister, made at Ruskin College, signalled an agenda for education that has continued to dominate the discourse of policy throughout the intervening three decades: the focus on basic skills, on standards and reductive versions of accountability has left little space for more nuanced considerations of curriculum and pedagogy. Shortly after I had started work in Tower Hamlets, the Bullock Report's commitment to more locally accountable, student- and community-centred approaches was effaced in official

discourse by an entirely different model of the relationship between students' lives and identities outside school, on the one hand, and, on the other, the school curriculum. When the consultation paper on the National Curriculum was published (1987), it used the language of progressivism, the language of difference, in a statement of entitlement that denied any curricular space for the exploration of difference, of subjectivity. This was, quite explicitly, to be a one-size-fits-all curriculum, one that ensured:

that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study (DES 1987: 4).

In this paradigm, the school curriculum, detailed in the programmes of study, derives its validity not from its responsiveness to local interests but from its universality. And, if the curriculum is to be “broadly the same”, little space is left for any serious attention to be paid to what Bullock termed “the language and culture of the home.” The key word here is “regardless”: local differences – of gender, history, culture – are to be disregarded. Equality of opportunity is to be delivered through access to a homogeneous, preformed entity, the already-specified curriculum. One might be permitted to wonder about the meaning of “relevant” in this context. Relevant to what, or to whom? What does such relevance look like? This formulation has, nonetheless, been massively influential. If one enters “curriculum” and “regardless” as link terms in an internet search engine such as Google, one finds hundreds of UK school websites, all of them proclaiming their commitment to providing a curriculum that is beneficial precisely because it is delivered “regardless” of the identities and specific characteristics of its students.

Perhaps part of the reason for this universalist curriculum promise/premise is that it distances schooling from the dangerously controversial territory of identity politics while simultaneously colonising the language of equality of opportunity. What could be more egalitarian than a commitment to a common curriculum? And what, at the same time, could be more comforting to those who fear social fragmentation and who regard the curriculum as a means of both asserting and re-establishing a single, national identity?

It is instructive to contrast this notion of universality with the other strand of official discourse on the relationship between students and the curriculum. If pre-existent, social aspects of the students are to be discounted, individual psychological traits are important determiners of appropriate curricula. Schools may even choose students on the basis of a perceived aptitude (for music, for languages, or whatever). And it has been a consistent feature of government thinking about the curriculum that the choices that students make about courses should be based on a sense of their individual strengths, interests and aptitudes. The foundation for the current mania for specialist schools is thus some rather fanciful notion that children, or their parents, should at the age of eleven opt for a school that specialises in languages (or media arts, or “business and enterprise”) because they have already discerned a particular aptitude for these pursuits.

The centralised model of the curriculum, promoted by the 1987 consultation document and by the earlier HMI *Curriculum Matters* publications (DES 1984), continues to underpin the most recent policy pronouncements around the theme of “personalisation”, to the extent that personalisation has been carefully defined as a set

of increasingly individualised interventions to ensure access to the same pre-specified curricular goals. Here is Ken Boston, the head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, speaking at the launch of the latest version of the National Curriculum:

We now know that to maximise the learning for each individual, we must first measure the level of progress that the student has reached (which is called 'assessment for learning'); we must then plan and deliver the learning necessary to enable the pupil to advance to the next level of progress (which is called 'personalised learning'). The development of such a customised or child-centred approach to teaching and learning is not some new-age obsession with making students feel good, or any rejection of the importance of formal teaching, or a drift from discipline-based curriculum: it is the internationally proven research-based strategy for improving learning and raising attainment at individual, school and national level (Boston 2007).

Implicit in the 1987 consultation document's notion of "access" is a particular pedagogy, one that was rendered more explicit in the increasingly frequent appearance of the phrase "pupils should be taught to ..." in subsequent versions of the National Curriculum (DES/Welsh Office 1990, DfEE/Welsh Office 1995, DfEE 1999).¹ The assumption is that what is learnt is equivalent to what is taught, that knowledge can be transmitted, and that, in effect, a curriculum can be delivered (like a sack of coal, or potatoes). Ken Boston's view of personalised learning emphasises important elements of continuity with what has gone before. Learning remains, in his presentation, linear, measurable and the property of the individual learner. His version of teaching might be more fine-grained than the versions on which earlier incarnations of the National Curriculum were premised; it is, nonetheless, a deeply technicist approach to pedagogy.

Moreover, when Boston is at pains to define what his (official) version of personalisation is *not*, it seems to me that all the strands that he caricatures and then rejects are aspects of practice that need to be taken seriously. I might not be committed to “new-age obsession with making students feel good,” but I worry about approaches to teaching and learning that fail to take sufficient account of the subjectivities of the learner, that fail, therefore, to conceptualise teaching and learning as relational, socioculturally situated practices. Likewise, though I am not sure exactly what Boston means by the “rejection of the importance of formal teaching,” I want to explore approaches to pedagogy that are more conscious of the agency of the learners. And if Boston wants to allay fears that what is on offer is a “drift from discipline-based curriculum,” I want to suggest that there is a pressing need to look closely (and critically) at the ways in which the current discipline-based curriculum is negotiated and instantiated in the urban classroom.

Part of what seems to me deeply problematic about curriculum policy post-Bullock is that it does not reflect my experience in the (multicultural, urban) classroom. What attracted me, more than twenty years ago, to Bullock’s advice that students should not be “expected to cast off the language and culture of the home” was that it gestured at a more inclusive, pluralist conception of schooling. In other words, my initial reaction was an ideological one, supportive of what appeared to me to be a move in the direction of a more socially just education system. What I did not appreciate then, I think, was the force of Bullock’s words in relation to pedagogy: students do not – *cannot* – simply cast off their out-of-school identities and histories as they enter the classroom. The question is, therefore, what opportunities there are for them to deploy these cultural resources in their learning within the classroom. The danger of that one

word, “regardless” is that it encourages an approach to curriculum and pedagogy that is inattentive of such cultural resources.

And yet, of course, even for those most vehemently committed to a notion of a curriculum that is “good’ because it pays no regard to the histories of the students to whom it is to be delivered, the plain fact of actually existing social diversity cannot be avoided completely. So, from the earliest incarnation of the National Curriculum there has been a small plot labelled “multiculturalism”. It appeared in the first version of the National Curriculum for English in the “Programmes of Study for reading”, in the instruction that at key stage 2:

The reading materials provided should include a range of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, as well as periodical suitable for children of this age. These should include works written in English from other cultures (DES/Welsh Office, 1990: 30).

In the National Curriculum Council’s “Non-statutory Guidance” that accompanied the publication of the first version of the National Curriculum, the section on literature contains this advice:

Texts should reflect the multicultural nature of society, including home-language and dual-language texts (NCC 1990: D2).

In the current version of the National Curriculum, there is the following statement of entitlement:

Texts from different cultures and traditions

- 3) Pupils should be taught:
 - a) to understand the values and assumptions in the texts
 - b) the significance of the subject matter and the language
 - c) the distinctive qualities of literature from different traditions

- d) how familiar themes are explored in different cultural contexts [for example, how childhood is portrayed, references to oral or folk traditions]
- e) to make connections and comparisons between texts from different cultures (DfEE 1999: 49).

It is worth comparing this with the preceding section:

English literary heritage

2) Pupils should be taught:

- a) how and why texts have been influential and significant [for example, the influence of Greek myths, the Authorised Version of the Bible, the Arthurian legends]
- b) the characteristics of texts that are considered to be of high quality
- c) the appeal and importance of these texts over time (*ibid.*).

When exploring texts “from different cultures and traditions”, the student is placed in the role of cultural anthropologist; when encountering the “English literary heritage”, it would seem that awe and wonder are more appropriate responses. The assumption is that the student will encounter difference in reading texts from different cultures, but will be inducted into her or his own “heritage” in worshipping at more canonical shrines.

This schematic distinction is tendentious, to say the least. The National Curriculum website from which I quoted earlier lists as “major writers from different cultures and traditions” Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams alongside Athol Fugard and Wole Soyinka, Hemingway and Steinbeck together with Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Meanwhile, the “major playwrights” named as part of the “English literary heritage” include Congreve, Goldsmith, O’Casey, Shaw, Sheridan and Oscar Wilde.

Among post-1914 writers of fiction, there is James Joyce; among the poets, Sylvia Plath. What I am not doing here is requesting a re-classification exercise, a literary equivalent of the bureaucratic madness of the apartheid regime in South Africa. What

I am suggesting is that such lists are inevitably arbitrary. A line is drawn between what is part of an “English” tradition and what belongs elsewhere.

When school students begin their GCSE courses, they find in their English *Anthology* a section headed “Different Cultures” (AQA 2002: 5-18).² In the earlier versions of the *Anthology*, this was entitled “Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions” (NEAB 1996: 17-28, NEAB/AQA 1998: 17-26). If one visits the examination board’s website, one can find a FAQ (frequently asked questions) page, which includes the following:

What is the difference between ‘different cultures’ and ‘other’ cultures?

None. "Different" is defined as being synonymous with "other". This change was introduced with the changed subject criteria in September 2001 (http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gcse/eng_a_faq.php#faq3, accessed 18 September 2007).

Despite the examination board’s assurance that the two terms are synonymous, the change might be regarded as progressive – a recognition, at any rate, that the ascription of otherness to certain cultures makes an assumption about the cultural positioning of the reader. The move is, nonetheless, a slight one: the *Anthology* continues to operationalise the National Curriculum’s distinction between the canonical and the multicultural, and all that unites the poems selected for inclusion in the “Different Cultures” section is difference. The *Anthology* encourages – demands – particular ways of reading the poems contained therein. They are stripped of history, of specificity. Does it matter that Tatamkhulu Afrika’s “Nothing’s Changed” (AQA 2002: 6) was written in the immediate aftermath of the end of apartheid in South Africa? Or that Achebe’s “Vultures” (AQA 2002: 10) moves from the lived

experience of the Nigerian Civil War to pose a more universal question about the ethical status of “kindred love”? Apparently not. “Vultures,” bizarrely, is accompanied by an illustration of vultures, as if, somehow, it should be read as a nature poem.

The problem of all anthologies is that they are someone else’s selection, and that, in consequence, the meaning of the anthologised text becomes determined by the anthologist’s criteria for inclusion. This tendency becomes much more acute when the reader’s response to the anthologised texts is to be assessed through an examination question. When the anthologist chooses thematically, or historically, or geographically (war poetry, Mersey poets, or whatever), there is some room for manoeuvre on the part of the reader, some space in which the complexity and the uncertainty of the relationship between the text and the world beyond the text might be negotiated. In this section of the *AQA Anthology*, though, cultural difference is the sole criterion, and in its wake are dragged some fairly disreputable assumptions about culture and identity. If these are poems from different cultures, then, presumably, there is a one-for-one correspondence between the poem and the culture which it represents – the culture that it is, so to speak, “from.” Culture thus becomes like a replica football kit, an instantly recognisable index of affiliation: the badge signals membership that is, simultaneously, inclusive and exclusive: one poem, one poet, one culture. Such a view of culture – stable, single and essentialist – would be questionable in any context. What makes it seem positively perverse is that many of the poems contained in the *Anthology* problematise precisely these assumptions, as they enact within themselves processes of cultural negotiation and contestation,

exploring shifts in identity and cultural positioning and relating these shifts both to global historical processes and to individual subjectivities.

What happens when these poems are read in the classroom is shaped by the immediate context of the *Anthology* and the overarching context of the GCSE examination. Sometimes, nevertheless, school students' (and even teachers') purposes are less narrowly instrumental than these contexts might suggest. I want to turn now to describe what happened when one of the *Anthology* poems, John Agard's "Half-Caste" (AQA 2002: 13) was read in an East London school, in April 2006.³ In analysing what was happening in the lesson, I want to indicate the importance of approaches to teaching and learning that are attentive to the cultures, histories and subjectivities of the learners. I also want to draw attention to the complexity of the processes involved in the reading of (multicultural) literature in the urban classroom.

It is a mixed ability Year 10 English class (fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds), halfway through their GCSE course. They have just started work on the "Different Cultures" section of the *Anthology*, and Agard's is the first poem that they will study. Before looking at the poem, however, their teacher, Pascal, asks them to devise an improvisation:

... it can be about anything you like, anything, but it must end with the two words, someone saying the two words, "Excuse me" and preferably a freeze frame, because I know how good some of you are at drama, you know how to use body language and gestures ... if you can end with "Excuse me" and a freeze frame, that's exactly what I want (transcript from videotaped lesson, 21 April 2006).⁴

After ten minutes of rehearsal, groups of students present their role plays to the class. Jamal's group creates a newsreader's desk, signifying a studio, at the front of the room, from where the anchorman introduces Patrick as the roving reporter, interviewing a football manager. Patrick's questions about the team's recent poor results is met by an angry, defensive and dismissive "Excuse me." Amina's group goes next. She and three other girls of Bangladeshi heritage organise themselves into two pairs who encounter each other in the undefined public space – a corridor, a street – that the classroom has become. Neither pair can give way, and the slight physical contact of their meeting is accompanied by this dialogue:

Sarah: What?

Amina: Why're you barging us for?

Sarah: You're the ones who's barging us

Amina: Excuse me, bitch

Amina's last word, delivered with particular emphasis, is lent even more power by the fact that it breaches the rules of the game that Pascal has established – the instruction that the role play should end with "Excuse me." Mutib's group has devised a scenario in which Salman has met a girl (Susan) whom he fancies. His attempts to chat her up are interrupted by the arrival of Mutib, who informs Salman that the girl is his sister. "Excuse me!" says Salman, with an exaggerated politeness that is belied by body language that indicates that no ground will be conceded.

After the presentations, the teacher encourages his students to think about the different ways of saying "Excuse me" that they have explored. Mutib comments:

it's like manners ...you say excuse me instead of swearing ... it's a way of showing that you're angry without swearing at him or shouting or saying anything that might upset him

Tariq reminds the class of Mutib's much earlier suggestion, that "Excuse me" could be "flirty," and Pascal asks Mutib to explain what he meant by this:

Mutib: say I was a girl, and a man come to me and put his hand like on my leg and that if, if he was ugly you'd say "excuse me," [raises pitch of voice, rising intonation, signalling rejection] like, but if he was good-looking you'd say "excuse me" [again raises pitch of voice, this time attempting to sound seductive, interested]

Salman: no you wouldn't, I wouldn't

Was Salman contesting Mutib's view of women, his assumption that a woman's response to physical harassment would vary according to her judgement of the man's appearance? Or was he contesting the generalisation, Mutib's confidence in speaking for all women? Or was he uncomfortable with Mutib's gender-switching performance? I don't know. What does emerge from these moments is a sense of how much the students already know about the layered nuances of language, how it is used to enforce and contest power relationships and how these exchanges are situated in a dense web of culturally-specific, multimodal meaning-making. As Volosinov argues:

Verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of this connection with a concrete situation. Verbal intercourse is inextricably interwoven with communication of other types, all stemming from the common ground of production communication. It goes without saying that word cannot be divorced from this eternally generative, unified process of communication. In its concrete connection with a situation, verbal communication is always accompanied by social acts of a nonverbal character ... and is often only an accessory to these acts Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication,

and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers (Volosinov 1973: 95).

The improvisations and the discussion arising out of them seemed ideal preparation for reading Agard's poem. The students, given time and space to investigate and imagine other scenarios in which "Excuse me" might carry a heavy semantic load – and the opportunity to draw on their knowledge of sites beyond the classroom – arrive at the poem already sensitised to the multiaccented, socially determined character of the sign.

When Pascal puts the poem up on the IWB (interactive whiteboard), there is an immediate, explosive response to the title, "Half-Caste":

Malcolm: that is so racist, that is so racist

Teacher: Malcolm, do you want to say a bit more

Malcolm: no I don't want to say a bit more, that is so disgusting, despicable

Mutib: you might as well call someone a Paki or something, it's the same thing

Malcolm: I don't care – I don't know what it means, anyway

It matters, in this exchange, that Malcolm is a mixed-race student and Mutib is of South Asian heritage: it matters, but what they say is not explained by such facts. There is, in their reaction, genuine outrage; equally, there is a *performance* of outrage. The outrage and the performance are both equally inseparable from the context of the classroom, from the fact that the offensive words have appeared on the IWB and hence are part of the formal script of the lesson: outrage enables the students to contest the power relations of the classroom, to stand in judgement on the text that they are supposed to be reading, rather than be judged by the accuracy, sensitivity or plausibility of their reading of it.

When the uproar subsides, Pascal perseveres with an exploration what the title might mean. It becomes apparent that there is not a consensual view on this:

Teacher: Malcolm, I would like you to say if you agree with what
Tariq says this means
Malcolm: what did he say?
Teacher: Tariq-
Tariq: when somebody, when you call someone a half caste it may be
a different religion, or they might be, they might have two
religions, two backgrounds
Gavin: you can't have two religions
Tariq: {you can
Salman: {course you can, your mum might be a Muslim and your dad
might be a Christian
Gavin: well you can't have two religions
Salman: yeah, I know, that's what I'm saying

In the current climate of licensed Islamophobia, it is not surprising that Tariq, a relatively recent arrival from Afghanistan, should foreground religious identity, or difference in religion, as the primary line of divide. He is quite clear, too, about the force of the term “half caste”: “when you call someone a half caste” directs attention to the context for the utterance, a context where the label is attached by another as a term of abuse. In the ensuing debate, countering Gavin’s insistence on an individual’s brand loyalty to a single religion, both Salman and Tariq show an awareness of religious affiliation as socio-cultural, historically produced and situated.

The matter, though, is far from settled, and it is Malcolm who re-opens the debate:

Malcolm: What’s the difference between mixed race and half caste? Is
mixed race just the colour of your skin?
Teacher: Does anyone want to answer that?
Tariq: mixed race is when you are from, when you have two
backgrounds, when your father, your dad is from one country
and your mum is from another, like me from London and --
Salman: no, it’s not, though, mixed race is two different, like your
mother being a different colour from your dad

Tariq: that's what I just said
Salman: no, you didn't, you said backgrounds, as in countries
Tariq: yeah, that's what I mean, backgrounds and-
Salman: {no

For Tariq, "race" only makes sense in terms of history, origins, background; for Salman, on the other hand, it is all a question of skin colour. Pascal lets the discussion run for a while. Gavin and Salman explore whether someone with one white and one Chinese parent should be categorised as mixed race. Gavin, who is white, thinks not, presumably because he associates the term only with the children of liaisons between white and black (African or African-Caribbean) people. Salman convinces him that the term is more elastic, but maintains a distinction between "race" and nationality ("you could be white Chinese though"). Pascal encourages the class to explore this further:

Teacher: is a race anything other than a colour? could you have two people of the same colour who were different races?
[murmurs – confusion – then]
Mutib: yeah – Indian and Pakistani
Teacher: OK, Mutib, tell me about that
Mutib: well, I don't know, that could be like half caste, or it could be like normal, because brown is brown
Teacher: OK, Ben and Sarah, we'll come to you in a moment, I want you to take Mutib's idea, if someone has an Indian mum and a Pakistani dad, are they mixed race?
[a mixture of yeahs and nos]

Mutib suggests that the answer to the question might be arrived at by consulting a dictionary, or by searching on the internet. (In effect, he is making an appeal to the higher linguistic authority that Volosinov argues does not exist: Mutib pins his hopes for a resolution of this difficulty, momentarily, on language as a stable, already-defined, system of signs. But the sign is being re-made in the course of this dialogue.) Salman, meanwhile, makes explicit the connection

between his sense of himself – the identity which he wishes to present – and his definition of mixed race:

Salman: I'm British but I'm black, I'm born in England, I've lived in England the rest of my life, and from my passport, I'm British – that's just like you could say a British man and a British woman, but er I'm still thingy, I'm still black and if I was to go fuck some white bird and have some mixed race kids, they're gonna be mixed race, innit

Mutib's response is both diplomatic and thought-provoking, as he insists on the contingency of all such labels:

Mutib: yeah. For a black person and a white person, that's mixed race, innit. But if there's an Indian man and a Pakistani woman, then for them that's mixed race.

Gavin: no, if they're the same colour, it's not mixed race
[there is a pause – a long one – silence: there's a lot of thinking going on]

Mutib: that's a hard one, man, innit

The conversation continues. Malcolm attempts to explore a hypothetical question that is, simultaneously, a way of teasing Salman about his insistence on his British identity:

Malcolm: Say if Salman, I dunno where he's from, Nigeria, wherever

Salman: no, no

Malcolm: Kenya

Salman: NO

Malcolm: Congo

Salman: NO!!

Malcolm: Angola

Salman: NO not Angola!

Teacher: Malcolm, why don't you ask him?

Salman: –Britain, man, England!

Malcolm: All right, England, then. Say if someone was born Nigeria, right, and like the bird was born Kenya, and they had sex, does the child, it wouldn't come out mixed race?

Rebecca talks about having an English mother and an Irish father, and Malcolm responds by making a distinction between culture and race: in his view, Rebecca's heritage is culturally mixed, but not racially. Martin, however, voices uncertainty about whether this is, in practice, an absolute distinction. Gavin shifts the terrain – while also returning the discussion to what is going on in Agard's poem – with an appeal to the common sense view of other people's perceptions:

Gavin: see when people look at you, they don't turn round and say you're mixed race, do they – they say you're white ... because people wouldn't walk down the street and say Martin was mixed race even though he might have, I don't know, a German dad or a Polish mum or something like that.

Gavin, who is white, is a powerful and often somewhat truculent presence at the back of the room. What he says here is, in some sense, nothing more or less than the truth, the truth of the categories that operate beyond the school gates, on the streets of East London. But these categories are neither neutral nor unproblematic, either in the world outside or in the classroom. The “people” to whom Gavin refers are, presumably, people like him: he shares their confidence in deploying the categories of race to determine others' identity. It is not coincidental that Gavin found it difficult to accept Salman's examples of different versions of “mixed race” such as Chinese/white: for Gavin, the superordinate categories are white and black. He has some distance to travel, I suspect, before he could acknowledge the justice of Agard's ridicule of such external, reductive ascription of identity. But at least, in this lesson, the students' dialogic enquiry into the category of “race” opens it up for further perusal.

In the course of the discussion, neither Gavin nor anyone else in the room has been expected to “cast off the language and culture of the home,” in the words of the Bullock report. It matters, too, that Pascal, their teacher, is Black, and that he is prepared to talk to the students about his parents’ background in Goa and his sense of his own cultural identity. He is a participant in the dialogue:

Teacher: So here’s a question. I’ve told you about my background yesterday, didn’t I. My family, parents would describe themselves as Goan .. but all I know is London, and England
Salman: so you class yourself as British
Teacher: so what if I were to go to Goa, and have a child with someone who had only known Goa, would the child be mixed race?
[several “no”s]
Teacher: ... but my culture would be entirely different because all I really know is London

The debate has continued to acknowledge, indeed to be structured around, the students’ sense of their historically situated identities. There is nothing cosy about this. Mutib’s insistence on the relevance of the divide between India and Pakistan to the subject under discussion involves him (and his peers) in strenuous intellectual work at the same time as demanding considerable resources of diplomacy: he manages to disagree with Gavin, to suggest that Gavin’s notion of what mixed race means is too narrow to be universally applicable, without causing offence. Equally, students are prepared to tease out the inconsistencies and silences in their peers’ presentation of self – as when Malcolm prods Salman to acknowledge his African heritage.

From one perspective, Salman’s insistence on defining himself as British – and not as African – can be seen as analogous to Tariq’s earlier presentation of himself as “from London” or to Amina’s feisty, assertive role-play persona (“Excuse me, bitch”). It is not possible simply to read off students’ classroom identities from data on their

histories, their heritage, their home identities. The selves that they perform in the classroom are inflections of those other, out-of-school identities, and, as such, they can legitimately be construed as indications of the students' agency and of the classroom's potential as a site within which different versions of the self can be fashioned and experimented with. Individual students' room for manoeuvre should not be exaggerated, though. There is powerful pressure on them to produce approved versions of their identities. Within the classroom, as in the outside world, the new arrival has a lowly status. There is a strong urge to belong. How could it be otherwise in a society where government and mainstream media habitually present both refugees and migrant workers as a problem, as drains on the nation's resources? And these, too, form the concrete situation within which the students' utterances must be construed: no wonder, then, that Salman insists on his Britishness and Tariq presents himself as a Londoner.⁵

And, in this situation, "making students feel good," as Ken Boston puts it, seems really rather important as an aspect of the teacher's role. Nor is it easy to see how Boston's adherence to "formal teaching" would have achieved what Pascal has managed to achieve here. There is much more to be done if all the students in the class are to understand what Martin is already reaching towards, in his suggestion, made after listening to Agard's performance, that Agard's "Excuse me" has an element of "retaliation – like he's taking the confusing points and using them against him." There is, equally, more work to be done if the students' everyday concepts of race, culture and ethnicity are to be brought into a dialectical relationship with more scientific understandings of these terms. (Whether all of this work would best be accomplished in the English classroom is not clear: both history and science

departments might have contributions to make. But perhaps I am dallying with the disciplinary boundaries that Ken Boston is so keen to maintain.) The claim that I am making, though, is for the importance of the work that was being done in Pascal's classroom in this lesson, work that enabled the students to begin to grasp Agard's poem while also grappling with questions of identity and difference that continue to exert a shaping influence on our society.

When I started teaching in London, a novel that was widely used as a class reader in London schools was Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985). Telling the story of Naledi and Tiro, a sister and brother who travel from their village to Johannesburg to find their mother, a maid for a white family, so that she can return to the village and save the life of her youngest child, the novel lays bare the grotesque, savage inequalities of the apartheid regime. And that, of course, was the point. English teachers chose to read it with their classes for reasons that lie beyond the approaches to "texts from different cultures and traditions" proposed by the National Curriculum. Educating London school students about apartheid South Africa was both a contribution to antiracist education and a natural extension of the ethical commitments that have historically shaped English teachers' conception of their subject and, in particular, of the role of literature.

These same ethical commitments have underpinned teachers' selection of class readers from Hans Peter Richter's *Friedrich* (1961/1971) to, more recently, John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006).⁶ Whatever other – aesthetic – criteria may have been in play, part of the justification for such choices was, without doubt, teachers' sense of the importance of teaching about the Holocaust. Now, some

English departments are beginning to explore Elizabeth Laird and Sonia Nimr's *A Little Piece of Ground* (2003). Set in the Occupied Territories, it tells the story of Karim, a Palestinian boy from a middle-class family in Ramallah, and his friendship with Hopper, a boy from the nearby refugee camp. Their shared passion for football takes them to the "little piece of ground" of the title, the stretch of wasteland where they play together until their games are interrupted by the arrival of an Israeli tank. The makeshift pitch thus functions as a synecdoche, standing for the state of Palestine itself, as the novel attempts to represent the impact of the occupation on the lives of ordinary Palestinians. Such multicultural texts demand a place within the English curriculum, not for the anthropological interests recommended by the National Curriculum but for reasons of solidarity. It is the rationale provided by Atticus Finch in that classic – if deeply problematic – piece of multicultural literature, *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he had completed his examination of the wistaria vein he strolled back to me.
"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view –"
"Sir?"
"—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee 1960: 36).

Solidarity, quite distinct from sympathy, is the recognition of common interest: "your struggle is our struggle." It is the movement from the binary opposition of "I"/"not I" to the collective point of view. And Atticus's prescription of empathy is, perhaps, the literary route whereby this broader perspective might be attained.

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¹ In the new version of the National Curriculum, there is a welcome return to the more open, and learner-focused, stem, "Pupils should be able to ...". See http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_12195.aspx, accessed 17 August 2007.

² I focus on the AQA examination board's GCSE English syllabus (specification A), which is followed by 60 per cent of UK candidates. See www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/397/JCQ%20GCSE%20Results.pdf, and www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat_nat.php (both accessed 24/9/07).

³ The research data on which I draw are derived from a longer-term research project, focusing on the ways that literature is read in English classrooms in an inner London secondary comprehensive school. Names of students, the teacher and the school have been pseudonymised.

⁴ Subsequent quotations are from the transcript of the same lesson, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ I write this the day after Gordon Brown's first speech as Prime Minister to the Labour Party Conference, a speech in which there were eighty references to Britain and Britishness – and a speech which contains the line, "I stand for a Britain where it is a mark of citizenship that you should learn our language and traditions" (http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown_speech, accessed 25 September 2007). The shift from first to second person and back again is as interesting as the assumptions about language and traditions.

⁶ See also Vivky Obied's (2007) account of the use of Brecht's magnificent sonnet, "Emigrant's lament," as part of an English department's contribution to Refugee Week in an East London school.