

# IDENTITY AND CULTURE

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OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

# I

## SUBJECTIVITY AND IDENTITY

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' lays claim.

(Hall 1990: 222)

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.

(Haraway 1991b: 193)

### 'Hey, you there!'

In his classic and influential essay, 'On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, Notes Towards an Investigation,' French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser theorizes the process of identification through which individuals become 'knowing subjects' (Althusser 1971). A 'knowing subject' is an individual conceived of as a sovereign, rational and unified consciousness, in control of language and meaning. It is the 'I' that thinks and speaks and is the apparent author of meaning. This is the theory of the subject that is usually assumed in commonsense discourses. Althusser describes an everyday situation in which an individual is walking down the street and hears a police officer or other voice call out 'Hey, you there!' Almost always, Althusser suggests,

the hailed individual will turn around. In the process s/he becomes a subject. Althusser comments on the reasons for this, suggesting that it occurs:

Because he [or she] has recognised the hail was really addressed to him [or her], and that 'it was really him [or her] who was hailed' (not someone else!). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their 'woman or' man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognises that it is really him [or her] who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences.'

(Althusser 1971: 163)

Faced by this 'strange phenomenon', Althusser theorizes the process of hailing, that is, the process of the constitution of the individual as subject within language and ideology, as fundamental to human societies. In Althusser's theorization, the process of recognition by the individual of herself or himself as the one addressed by the call to recognition *interpellates* the individual as a subject within ideology. The individual is hailed, and responds with an identification through which s/he is a subject in a double sense. S/he becomes both the agent of the ideology in question and subjected to it. This process of identification, Althusser argues, inserts individuals into ideologies and ideological practices that, when they work well, are lived as if they were obvious and natural. In Althusser's theorization, a range of what he terms 'Ideological State Apparatuses' such as religion, education, the family, the law, politics, culture and the media produce the ideologies within which we assume identities and become subjects.

Identities may be socially, culturally and institutionally assigned, as in the case, for instance, of gender or citizenship, where state institutions, civil society and social and cultural practices produce the discourses within which gendered subjectivity and citizens are constituted. Often they solicit active identification on the part of the subject so defined. For example, forms of dress and many children's games are marketed as gender specific and encourage normative gender identification and behaviour. In the case of citizenship, an elaborate bureaucracy monitors and allocates the markers of citizenship, for example, birth certificates, passports and electoral registers. National anthems, sung at official state occasions and at cultural and sports events, seek to recruit subjects, drawing on emotional as well as rational forms of identification in order to interpellate individuals as citizens of a particular nation. In the cases of both gender and national identity, a wide range of social practices come into play in recruiting subjects to identify with the identities on offer. The meaning of a particular social practice, for example, the singing of a national anthem, is, however, never fixed. It will change according to the context in which it is used.

Forms of identity are often internalized by the individual who takes them on. This process can be theorized in terms of what Judith Butler has called 'performativity'. This refers to the repeated assumption of identities in the course of daily life. Butler,

who concentrates on the example of gender, argues that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990: 24-5). Thus, for example, feminine identity, manifest in dress, ways of walking and behaving, does not give rise to this femininity but is the product of it. It is acquired by performing discourses of femininity that constitute the individual as a feminine subject. Whereas common sense suggests that femininity and masculinity are natural, in this mode of theorization they are culturally acquired through repetition. In Butler's language, this 'performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act", but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (1993: 2). As individuals inserted within specific discourses, we repeatedly perform modes of subjectivity and identity until these are experienced as if they were second nature. Where they are successfully internalized, they become part of lived subjectivity. Where this does not occur, they may become the basis for dis-identification or counter-identifications which involve a rejection of hegemonic identity norms.

Other identities rely explicitly on active processes of identification, for example membership of a club or religion, and may involve a conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent. An example of this would be gay and lesbian firms of identity that mobilize common signs and symbols to signify difference from a heterosexual norm. Identity is made visible and intelligible to others through cultural signs, symbols and practices. This can be seen most obviously in the case of gender identity, where cultural codes of the body, dress and behaviour signify gender. Discourses of gender help shape the materiality of both female and male bodies, through, for example, differential gender roles, physical education and work. Yet these same codes can also be used to subvert hegemonic meanings, as in the case of Queer appropriations of the signifiers of heterosexuality. The visual dimensions of identities are often pronounced, as, for example, in the case of sub-cultural groups such as the wide range of Western youth cultures from teddy boys through punks to Goths, seen in the West since the 1950s. Religious identities, too, are often marked by dress and hairstyle as in the case of Christian or Buddhist nuns, monks and priests, Muslims, Sikhs and Rastafarians.

In Althusserian theory, as in the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the subject on which it draws, identification is central to the mechanisms through which individuals become knowing subjects. Yet the wide range of identities available in a society and the modes of subjectivity that go with them are not open to all people at all times. They are often restricted to specific groups, usually on the basis of discourses of class, gender and race, that are exclusive to and policed by the groups in question. Non-recognition and non-identification leaves the individual in an abject state of non-subjectivity and lack of agency. At best the individual concerned must fall back on subject positions other than the ones to which s/he is denied access. Toni Morrison, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, for example, vividly describes a scene in which the poor, Black child,

Pecola, goes to buy sweets from the local store and comes up against a racism that denies her access even to the position of a shared humanity:

She pulls off her shoe and takes out three pennies. The gray head of Mr Yacobowski looms up over the counter. He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Blue eyes. Blear-dropped. Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly towards fall, he looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary.

Morrison 1981: 47.

Mutual recognition between self and other has been a feature of theories of subjectivity. In 1807, Hegel argued in the *Phenomenology of Mind* that the Other is essential to the realization of self-consciousness (Hegel 1971: 153–78). This idea fed directly into twentieth-century phenomenological and existentialist approaches to the individual, identity and subjectivity, which also inform commonsense assumptions about the self.

In commonsense discourse, people tend to assume that they are 'knowing subjects', that is sovereign individuals, whose lives are governed by free will, reason, knowledge, experience and, to a lesser degree, emotion. They are subjects who, in Althusser's terms, work by themselves. As sovereign, knowing subjects, they use language to express meaning. They acquire the knowledge that they convey in language from their socialization, education and experience of life. The assumptions that they hold about themselves as fully conscious, knowing, intentional subjects derive from Enlightenment ideas of rationality, combined with aspects of a humanism that privilege the individual, consciousness, language and lived experience over theories which ground the essence of the human in biology and natural science or in social structures such as class. In humanist thought the subject and subjectivity are assumed to be unified and rational and the subject is governed by reason and free will, which give it agency.

Humanism is a powerful discourse which, when linked to discourses of human rights and equality, can serve as a positive basis for a tolerant and caring society. It is a discourse based on an assumed sameness in which all human beings share a common humanity, with specific needs and rights. The United Nations, for example, aspires to the humanist goal of universal human rights for all. States that seek to resist this discourse tend to deny the universality of the rights in question and argue that they are culturally specific. Yet, when it comes to understanding how subjectivity and identity work in societies fractured by power relations of class, gender, sexual, racial and ethnic privilege and disadvantage, the theoretical basis on which humanism grounds

its aspirations requires problematization. There is more to the constitution of subjectivities and identities than humanism is readily able to theorize. In drawing on other theories we necessarily both think and act as knowing subjects, and, at the same time, need to stand back from this position in order to question our assumptions and to analyse how subjectivities and identities are socially constituted in ways that serve particular interests, even while they may appear or be lived as obvious and natural.

### Subjectivity and the subject

Subjectivity and the subject are crucial terms in social and cultural theory. Cultural studies, film and media studies and literary studies all draw on a range of competing theories of subjectivity and identity, variously derived from humanism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and feminism. Various political, philosophical and cultural movements have challenged Enlightenment and humanist ideas of subjectivity. If the seventeenth century in the West is often seen as the age of reason and the scientific revolution, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romanticism, reinstated the centrality of emotion and sensibility. In a radically different vein, Marxism, which developed from the 1840s onwards, constituted one of the most important challenges to the sovereign rational subject and towards the end of the nineteenth century Freud developed his influential critique of the rational subject. His psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious have remained profoundly influential up to the present day. How, then, might these and more recent poststructuralist theories of the subject, language, meaning and power help us understand subjectivity and identity?

Different theoretical approaches to subjectivity and identity will produce different types of analysis and forms of knowledge. This raises the question of how to choose between theoretical approaches. Traditionally, proponents of particular theories have appealed to science and truth to justify the validity of the theory in question. For example, Marxists have often claimed the scientific status of historical materialism and Freud attempted to clothe psychoanalysis in the language of science. More recently, postmodern theory, particularly the work of Jean-François Lyotard, has questioned the truth status of universalizing theories that claim to explain societies and the process of history. Lyotard (1984) calls such theories 'metanarratives' and suggests that they are never universal but merely one among many competing narratives. In the light of such critiques, theory effectively becomes a tool kit that offers different ways of analysing and theorizing social and cultural phenomena and practices. According to this logic, the theory that one chooses will be that which has the most explanatory power in relation to the questions that one wishes to understand. Important, too, in choosing theories are the social and political implications of the type of knowledge produced. For example, I would argue that it is necessary to have a theory of the unconscious in order to understand the irrational dimensions of racism, sexism and homophobia. The most developed theory of the unconscious is Freudian, yet this might not be the most

productive approach to understanding irrational hatred of others, given its reliance on the fear of castration and on the Oedipal complex as they relate to the acquisition of subjectivity. While psychoanalysis's positing of a split subject based on lack and of the unconscious raises questions that are arguably central to understanding subjectivity and identity, Freudian psychoanalysis itself remains a theory that explains these things in terms of universal drives and illicit repressed sexual desires. Maybe we need a more historically and culturally specific theory of the unconscious that does not ground human behaviour solely in Freudian drives.

The questions with which this book is primarily concerned are how different forms of cultural narrative and cultural practice: historical, political, fictional and visual work to constitute subjectivity and identity for the individuals who engage with them. It is further concerned with how cultural practices can offer new forms of identity and agency and serve as ways of subverting and negotiating dominant forms of identity. In analysing how cultural narratives work, the book is primarily concerned with the social power relations that structure the subject positions and forms of identity in play. While these include class, gender and sexuality, the book's major focus is on the mobilization of forms of ethnic identity in societies still governed by racism. I want to return now to some of the theoretical approaches to subjectivity and identity that may prove useful in this project.

### Class, ideology, identity

Class remains a key ingredient of subjectivity and identity. If people often do not positively acknowledge the social class to which social theories assign them, they certainly know the classes with which they do not identify. Whereas in the twentieth century the Labour Movement in the UK and other industrial societies appealed to 'class' as if it were something obvious, identifiable and the source of positive forms of identity, in contemporary society such appeals have become less convincing. In cultural analysis in recent years, class has become the poor relation of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. This is not unrelated to broader social changes that range from the demise and discrediting of socialism in Eastern Europe to the decline of explicitly class-based politics. In Britain, for example, recent decades have seen a fading of traditional forms of class identity and the rise in a range of discourses and social practices of the idea of a 'classless' society. This has become central to conservative political rhetoric, popular culture, the leisure industries and the expansion of consumerism. Few people in Britain today identify with traditional versions of class politics, though these still have a home in more left-wing trade unions and in far-left political organizations.

Despite the demise of class as a clearly articulated form of identity, it still has important theoretical purchase as a way of conceptualizing social relations that can lead to an understanding of inequalities within society. One of the questions that we

need to ask of particular forms of identity is how they relate to the reproduction of economic and social inequalities. Class signifies differences that imply inequalities that can be variously understood as necessary and inevitable or social and undesirable; either way class remains a highly politicized concept. Moreover, class as a form of identity is still significant in many social contexts; it shapes, for example, the meanings given to particular ways of speaking and dressing, to exclusive forms of education, cultural pursuit, and the membership of particular organizations and clubs. It also affects the ways in which individuals interact with one another.

Ideas about class are an important aspect of common sense as well as social and political theory. Commonsense assumptions tend to identify class with particular ways of living to which individuals are born or naturally suited. For example, popular notions of organic working-class life, in which ordinary people are the salt of the earth, remain popular in British television soap operas and cinema and are arguably as strong as commonsense assumptions about the natural 'class' of the aristocracy. Commonsense notions of class tend to focus on its cultural dimensions, for example, whether people speak with class-specific regional accents or use received pronunciation, or what they do in their leisure time, rather than emphasizing the ways in which class is firmly grounded in economic and educational relations of difference and inequality. It is Marxist theories of class that have defined class in more radical ways and produced critiques of the relation between social class, identity and power.

In the Marxist tradition, the individual is the product of class relations, and subjectivity and identity are governed by ideology. For Marxism, subjectivity is always class subjectivity. According to the classical Marxist tradition, economic relations shape both society and the individuals within it. Class is first and foremost an economic category that characterizes the relation of specific groups within society to the mode of production.<sup>1</sup> Yet class position is also a crucial determinant in the formation of subjectivity and identity. According to Marx, in modern capitalist states the relations between capital and labour appear in the form of contracts between apparently free individual subjects – workers and employers. These relations of production are secured by ideology, which is embedded in social and cultural practices. In Marxist theory, ideology shapes subjectivity. As Marx and Engels put it in their early formulation in the *German Ideology*: 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' (1970: 47). The forms which ideology takes vary in different Marxist texts, ranging from Engels' notion of ideology as false consciousness to the Althusserian notion of ideology as the subject's lived relation to his or her real conditions of existence (Althusser 1971: 152–4). It is this latter formulation that has been most influential in media, cultural and literary studies and which, as suggested above, offers one useful model for theorizing identity.

Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity is concerned both with the mechanism of interpellation and with the role of identity and subjectivity in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. According to Althusser, ideological state apparatuses play a central role in the reproduction of individuals as class subjects. Each

apparatus contributes to the reproduction of capitalist relations in its own specific way, creating subjects through the process of interpellation: 'The political apparatus by subjecting individuals to the political state ideology, the "indirect" (parliamentary) or "direct" (plebiscitary or fascist: "democratic", ideology. The communications apparatus by cramming every "citizen" with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism etc.' (Althusser 1971: 146). Individual subjects internalize particular meanings and values and take up the identity offered to them by the institution in question, for example, that of worker, mother or citizen of a particular state.

### Language and the split subject

Crucial to theorizing subjectivity and identity is the question of language. In the Althusserian model of the interpellation of individuals as subjects within particular ideologies, it is the linguistic category of the speaking subject 'I', who identifies with and speaks and acts according to the ideology in question.<sup>2</sup> For Althusser, who draws on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, this subject is split. The subject who says 'I think' is not the same as the subject whose existence is assumed in the act of thought. Thus, in this model, the subject can no longer be seen as unified and the source of knowledge and truth, since the very structure of language points to the implausibility of such models of subjectivity. Identity categories can be understood as attempts to mask this gap between the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken. It is a gap that individuals, constantly attempt to cover over and for Lacan, it marks the subject's inability to control meaning and the symbolic order.

In his critique of the unified, intentional, knowing subject, Lacan takes as his starting point Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* – 'I think therefore I am'. He rewrites Descartes' proposition as 'where I think "I think, therefore I am" that is where I am not' (Lacan 1977: 195). Privileging one particular emphasis in Freud's work, which can be found in texts such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1976) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1975), Lacan develops Freud's theory of the acquisition of gendered subjectivity into a general theory of society and culture. Lacan argues that the symbolic order of language, law and meaning is founded on the unconscious, which is itself structured like a language. Subjectivity is an effect of language, governed by lack. The intentional subject (which is equivalent to the ego) is a subject based on identifications created via a structure of misrecognition, laid down in the mirror stage of psychosexual development.

It is useful to understand the mechanisms in play in the mirror phase, since this has become an influential part of recent theories of identity. Its importance lies in the way it theorizes the subject as split and governed by a lack that is produced by the non-unified, non-sovereign status of the subject as an effect of language. It points to lack of control over meaning in the symbolic order and the non-sovereign status of the

subject.<sup>3</sup> In Lacanian theory, the infant repeatedly identifies with a mirror image and, in the process, misrecognizes itself as whole, unified and autonomous. Lacan suggests that prior to the mirror phase, infants do not have any sense of distinct identity. The pre-Oedipal stage of development is governed by the experience of the body in fragments, lacking a definite sense of unified, embodied self, separate from the world around it. This state is compounded by the lack of control over the satisfaction of needs and desire that will become the motivating force behind language. Governed by a fragmented sense of self and unable to distinguish itself as a separate entity, the infant overcomes its fragmentation by identifying with the visual image of an 'other', an external mirror image.

According to Lacan, this process of misrecognition becomes the basis for all future identifications by the subject of itself as autonomous and sovereign, once it has entered the symbolic order of language. Apparently unified, subjectivity is thus divided and based on misrecognition. It is the subject's lack of fullness, lack of self-presence and inability to control meaning that motivates language. The process of assuming subjectivity within language invests the individual with a temporary sense of control and of sovereignty which evokes identity according to what Derrida has called a 'metaphysics of presence' in which s/he becomes the source of the meaning s/he speaks and language appears to be the expression of meaning fixed by the speaking subject (see Derrida 1976: 49).

Yet, in Lacanian, Derridean and other poststructuralist theories, the speaker is never the author of the language within which s/he takes up a position. Language pre-exists and produces subjectivity, identity and meaning. For example, language in the form of competing discourses offers the individual meanings and forms of subjectivity that they can assume and live as if they were true. In the process they become subjects. Yet access to the forms of subjectivity and identity constituted for the individual within different discourses is structured through power relations of inclusion and exclusion, often based on visual signifiers of difference that acquire particular meanings in racist, heterosexist and patriarchal societies.

### The importance of the visual

'But you do not have the look.'

This was the comment, probably non-committal in its intention but potentially disheartening in its effect, which I repeatedly received in response to what may loosely be called an 'identity claim' that I made, and through which I first started to develop an interest in the alienating relation between how I perceive myself and my visible image: I did not always look what I was, or more precisely, what I tried to claim I was. Sometimes the identity for which I did not have the look was not the one that I wanted to claim anyway, in which case it did not greatly concern me.

I remember the pride and satisfaction that I felt when, at the age of eleven, I transferred from Southeast Asia to a school in Japan and some of the new classmates immediately picked up on my appearance, which they saw as 'darker', 'non-Japanese' and 'native'. Since I did not necessarily want to be a Japanese after having spent most of my childhood in Southeast Asia, I was glad to know that I apparently did not look like one, at least to some of my friends, no matter what it said on my passport. My appearance, in a sense, seemed to truthfully convey what I thought was important about myself at that time. At other times, however, it was precisely what I considered to constitute a large part of who I was that seemed to fail to show.

(Shimizu 2003: 1)

It is not only the speaking subject that is disunited in poststructuralist approaches to subjectivity and identity. There is also often a radical difference between how individuals see themselves and how others define them. At issue here are often discourses of the body and what it means. The body is central to identity – both chosen identities and those imposed by institutions. Competing regimes of meaning seek to define bodies according to gender, sexuality, skin colour, phenotype, norms of beauty and ugliness, age and physical ability. In the above quotation the child in question has spent eleven years as a Japanese girl in Southeast Asia where attitudes to Japan are often negative. She has learned that to be Japanese is problematic outside Japan in areas previously colonized by the Japanese army and state. Inside Japan her body fails to match up to hegemonic norms of Japaneseness and she is relieved to find herself 'othered'. Later in life, when she comes to realize that she is sexually attracted to other women, yet appears to most people to be classically feminine and heterosexual, she feels that a large part of who she is fails to show.

The meanings discursively attributed to bodies are never static but rather a constant site of struggle in which meanings can change. For example, one of the more successful dimensions of Western feminist political struggle over the last thirty-five years has been the recognition and legitimization of a range of different ways of being a woman, and indeed a man. This is, in part, an offshoot of the widespread acceptance that femininity is neither natural nor one thing, and that many media images of femininity are neither possible nor desirable. Yet the diversification of acceptable modes of femininity combined with the seductive, postmodern fascination with difference as style and lifestyle, has often served to detract attention from the ongoing inequalities in women's position in society. Similarly the postmodern commodification of racial and ethnic otherness often hides the persistence of racism as a negative and discriminatory force in Western societies.

In racist and sexist societies, most women, and women and men of Colour cannot help but know that they are embodied subjects. Hegemonic discourses of gender and race constantly reassert the centrality of the body but in different ways. Thus, if white women in Britain, whatever their class and background, can participate to some

extent – real or imagined – in the postmodern culture of difference and choice, this is much less the case where women who are not white are concerned. Everyday racism insists on attributing fixed sets of meanings to non-white bodies. They are defined as ‘other’ to a white norm on the basis of how they look. As Richard Dyer has argued in his book *White* (Dyer 1997), predominantly white Western societies privilege white bodies as an unmarked norm against which difference is measured and defined. Whiteness is seldom recognized as an explicit identity by those who live it, except in relation to those it excludes. It is assumed to be natural and the norm. This practice of assuming the universality of whiteness as a marker of the quintessentially human has deep roots in the development of Western culture since the Renaissance. One of its outcomes has been white supremacy: the belief in the natural superiority of white people.

Power limits the possibilities of identity. The meaning of the visual is not at the disposal of individuals but is overdetermined by the history of representation. The rise of modern conceptions of race and racism, which still inform aspects of twenty-first-century life, coincided with the beginnings of modernity and colonial expansion. In Volume One of his study of sexuality, Foucault (1981) attempted to map what he called the ‘incitement to discourse’ in relation to sexuality, that is the ways in which the modern discursive field of sexuality was created by the constitution of sexuality within discourses as wide-ranging as medicine, psychiatry and demography. In a similar vein, African-American philosopher and cultural critic, Cornel West, has attempted to outline the ‘incitement to discourse’ in relation to race. He argues that three factors, in particular, came together in the early modern period to make white supremacy an inevitable outcome of the incitement to discourse that produced modern ideas of race. They were, he argues, inherent in: ‘the very structure of modern discourse at its inception [and] produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity, as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of white supremacy’ (West 1982: 47). West acknowledges that many other factors also gave rise to or helped sustain discourses of race, for example, the demands of the mode of production (capitalist and colonialist expansion), the political interests of colonial powers and of the slave owning classes, and the psychological needs of the dominant white racial group. However, he is interested in what he sees as a neglected area: the endemic racist structure of modern discourses which he sees as the product of a creative fusion at the beginnings of modernity of three things: scientific investigation, Cartesian epistemology and classical ideals of beauty. He argues that they work to circumscribe the ways in which it was possible to conceive of and live discourses of race:

To put it crudely, my argument is that the authority of science, undergirded by a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors and Cartesian notions, promotes and encourages the activities of observing, comparing, measuring, and ordering the physical characteristics of human bodies.

(West 1982: 48)

This project of the natural sciences with its objective of classifying the natural world, was extended to human beings and gave rise to a 'racial science' that incorporated within it classical aesthetic and cultural norms that implied white supremacy:

The creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian epistemology, and classical ideals produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which, though efficacious in the quest for truth and knowledge, prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality in beauty, culture and intellectual capacity. In fact to 'think' such an idea was to be deemed irrational, barbaric or mad.

West 1982: 48.

The important point here is that the discursive field of racial theory did not allow for forms of subjectivity and identity based on the equality of the races that it constituted. These could only emerge from the contradictions between racialized thinking and other discourses that emphasized a common humanity such as those of human rights and religion. Yet, in the hands of white people, these, too, were often rendered compatible with hierarchical racialized thinking, giving rise to attempts to ground racial science in the Bible, and to segregated religious institutions. The supposedly objective, descriptive classifications produced within eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses of race consistently included judgements about intelligence, level of cultural development, beauty, sexuality and morality (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 261-314). These judgements became firmly linked to racial categorization. Nineteenth-century racial theories ranging from Gobineau in Europe to Morton and Nott in the United States, shared a hierarchization of the races in which the white, Caucasian body was placed at the top of the scale (for more on racial science see Stanton 1960, Harris 1968, Gould 1981 and Young 1994). It was said by whites to signify the most beautiful and desirable body and the most advanced and intelligent mind.

While racial science has long since been discredited, many of its assumptions and the stereotypes to which it gave rise, have entered mainstream culture and become part of a collective 'common sense'. The meanings and status often attributed to non-white and non-Western bodies and the modes of subjectivity and identity that they constitute can be traced both in discourses of racialized difference and in the visual iconography of the West. If we look, for example, at the legacies of classical racism and Orientalism in a postmodern Western world we find ongoing stereotypes of difference, particularly in popular culture. Pop music videos, in particular, recycle images of Black people as hypersexual, physically strong, athletic and rhythmic. The popular press repeatedly depicts Muslims and Islamic societies as extreme, fundamentalist, often violent and more primitive than their Christian and secular counterparts (see Said 1981 and Runnymede Trust 1997).

Racialized identities are more often imposed through the assertion of hierarchized oppositions than freely embraced. The liberal humanist identity of being a unique individual insists on the unimportance of constructions of race or gender to who one

is. In practice liberal humanist subjectivity often corresponds to white subjectivity. Whiteness is rarely acknowledged as a racialized subject position, yet this freedom from the burden of race is a luxury most often denied to people who are not classified as white. While mainstream discourses fail to acknowledge whiteness as a privileged identity and subject position, the white supremacist far right affirms and celebrates a racialized white identity which relies on the explicit denigration of those who are not white (see Daniels 1997 and Chapter 5 of this book).

Racialized forms of subjectivity and identity, constructed within Western societies, produce resistances. This is an issue taken up in different ways in the following chapters. Often, oppressed groups seek to reclaim some form of positive identity out of racialized discourse, creating what Foucault has called 'reverse discourses' (Foucault 1981: 101, see below). For example, in her novel about slavery, *Beloved*, Toni Morrison depicts an ex-slave woman preaching a new religion of self-love that focuses on the Black body that was so abused and denigrated by slavery:

'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh: flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes, they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it.'

(Morrison 1988: 88)

In a similar vein, the Black Power Movement in the West in the late 1960s and 1970s attempted to counteract racist definitions of Black people with its affirmative, campaigning slogan 'Black is beautiful' and its move away from Eurocentric norms of beauty.

### Subjectivity, discourse and power

How we see bodies is an effect of the discursive field within which we are located. For the Japanese children invoked in the quotation from Akiko Shimizu above, particular hegemonic norms, produced within the discursive field that constitutes Japaneseness, insist that they deny this identity to the new child recently returned from Southeast Asia. Particular regimes of power inform the discursive fields that define and shape both the materiality and meaning of bodies. Discursive fields are themselves made up of competing discourses that produce different subject positions and forms of identity. In this poststructuralist theoretical approach to subjectivity and identity, language *constitutes* rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of experience and identity. This approach opens up subjectivities and identities to processes of cultural struggle

and resistance. Subjectivity – consisting of an individual's conscious and unconscious sense of self, emotions and desires – is also constituted in language, and rational consciousness is only one dimension of subjectivity. It is in the process of using language – whether as thought or speech – that we take up positions as speaking and thinking subjects and the identities that go with them.

This book is concerned with how cultural texts and practices ranging from literature and history to film and television, constitute modes of subjectivity and identity in multi-ethnic, postcolonial societies. While these societies may officially subscribe to discourses of tolerance and, in some cases, even the celebration of cultural diversity, they remain fractured by racism and ethnocentrism. Discourses of identity and difference take many competing and often contradictory forms. Following Foucault, the various chapters of this book see discourses of identity as part of specific discursive fields that are structured in relation to a range of cultural and other institutions. They constitute our subjectivity for us through material practices that shape bodies as much as minds and involve relations of power. Some discourses, and the subject positions and modes of subjectivity and identity that they constitute, have more power than others. For example, as suggested above, with the racist othering of non-white bodies in Western societies, only the white body enjoys an apparently neutral position as universal. Black and Asian bodies, are burdened with a long history of negative, orientalist or primitivist representations and an individual finds herself or himself defined not just as a man or woman but as a specific racially coded man or woman. Primitivist discourses define the other in binary opposition to rational Western 'man', celebrating those features that the other is said to have to a much larger degree than his/her Western counterpart, for example spirituality, emotionality, closeness to nature, sensuality and sexuality. In primitivist narratives these features are often said to belong to an earlier stage of 'Western man's' development (for primitivism see Hiller 1991, for orientalism see Said 1978). In Foucault's work discourses produce subjects within relations of power that potentially or actually involve resistance. For example, Foucault give the instance of the homosexual in the nineteenth century who, he argues, is discursively produced as a subject and an identity within discourses as diverse as psychiatry, jurisprudence and literature, whereas previously homosexuality had only been a mode of sexual behaviour:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphroditism' made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.

(Foucault 1981: 101)

His example well illustrates how power is both repressive and enabling. For Foucault, power is a relationship that implies resistance. It is not something held by a particular group, but rather, it is a relationship that inheres in all discourses – economic, media, familial and so on – that serves particular interests. It is dispersed across a range of social institutions and practices and functions through the discursive constitution of embodied subjects within discourses. The subject positions and modes of embodied subjectivity constituted for the individual within particular discourses allow for different degrees and types of identity and agency both compliant and resistant. As will be seen from many examples in this book, the discursive fields, which produce meanings and subjectivities, are not homogenous. They include discourses and discursive practices which may be contradictory and conflicting and which create the space for new forms of knowledge and practice. While there is no place beyond discourses and the power relations that govern them, resistance and change are possible from within.

### Subjectivity and identity: the local and the global

How then can we usefully conceptualize the relation between subjectivity and identity? Identity is perhaps best understood as a limited and temporary fixing for the individual of a particular mode of subjectivity as apparently what one *is*. One of the key ideological roles of identity is to curtail the plural possibilities of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field and to give individuals a singular sense of who they are and where they belong. This process involves recruiting subjects to the specific meanings and values constituted within a particular discourse and encouraging identification. A wide range of social practices, for example, education, the media, sport and state rituals, offer subject positions that encourage identification. While it is possible to be a subject without identification, identity presupposes some degree of self-recognition on the part of the subject, often defined in relation to what one believes one is not. For example, from our earliest years we learn who we are and what this should mean. We learn that we are female or male, even though we may not identify with or conform to 'socially appropriate' forms of female or male behaviour.

Like the structure of meaning in language, identity is relational. It is defined in a relation of difference to what it is not. Thus, for example, most cultures create polarized binary oppositions between what they define as masculine and feminine. All identities have their 'others' from which they mark their difference. This assertion of difference is often at the expense of similarities, for example, in the British context, Scottishness and Welshness are often defined in opposition to Englishness and the differences in play are not always apparent to those not directly involved. Similarly, an outsider to the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir might wonder at the level of passion that fuels the conflict, given the many similarities and fundamental shared problems faced by the inhabitants of the two countries. In this case, as in many others, the legacies of colonialism have created questions of ownership and control of

territory that lie at the heart of the dispute and are fuelled by political interests that mobilize religious differences (see Chapter 8).

National identity, too, is defined in an exclusive relationship of difference from others that is most often tied to place or lack of it, as for example, in the demands of the Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Turkey for their own state. It is also linked to language, history and culture. Often these different factors are seen as inextricably linked, as for example in the case of the indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand and North America. Discourses of national identity most often appeal to ideas of a shared culture, history and place. A common language is often assumed to signify a common culture and identity, though the need actively to construct this has long been recognized by cultural critics and politicians. In Britain, Matthew Arnold, writing in the 1860s, looked to literature, and poetry in particular, for the means to instil a common culture and shared national values that would cut across class divisions in the face of increasing social unrest and the rise of trade unionism and other forms of working-class radicalism (see Arnold 1869). Some 131 years later, the Parekh Report on the *Future of Multi-ethnic Britain* (Parekh 2000), which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, would urge the importance of rethinking British history, Britishness and the national heritage to the process of creating a tolerant and vibrant multi-cultural society.

As noted above, states mobilize flags, anthems, monuments and rituals to promote narratives of identity and belonging. Other agencies and institutions, from tourist boards to industry and commerce, market national costumes, crafts and customs, cuisines and landscapes in their constructions of what makes a nation different and, in this case, worth visiting. Often these images have little to do with life as it is lived. Identity in all its forms, even national identity, is never singular but is plural, fractured and reconfigured by gender, ethnic and class relations. Constructions of identity are always historically specific, for example, the much maligned attempt by New Labour in Britain to rebrand the country as 'Cool Britannia'. As will be seen from examples in Chapters 2 to 5, more often, attempts to construct identity appeal to history for their legitimation, often creating both hegemonic discourses of history and invented traditions (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

In recent years there has been much debate about the implications of globalization for identity. The term globalization is widely applied to many different aspects of contemporary life, ranging from the spread of multi-national corporations to the international appropriation of popular cultural forms and practices and the worldwide web. Writers on globalization point to the ways in which the structures and integrity of nation states are being challenged by economic and cultural developments, as well as postcolonial diasporas and the migration of peoples, particularly from the 'South' to the 'North'. The effects of globalization on identity have been varied and are always contextual and shaped by the particular social relations of the society and social group in question. The worldwide spread of commodities such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's burgers has led to theories of the 'McDonaldization' of the world (see Ritzer 2000). Here community and place are apparently rendered less important

in the formation of identity, as people strive for Western and mostly US influenced life-styles. The meaning and significance of such symbols of Western capitalism and Western values in non-Western countries will vary according to location and specific context. Some critics have pointed to the ways in which the spread of American capitalism, media and the values they incorporate has spurred the development of oppositional and resistant forms of national and religious identity. The post 11 September increase in Islamophobia and US policies in the Middle East have further strengthened this process.

In the second half of the twentieth century, inward migration changed the face of most West European societies. If throughout the colonial period, white Europeans settled outside of Europe, encountering others on their own terrain, the twentieth century saw large-scale non-European settlement in former colonial powers. One of the concerns of this book is how migration affects identity, both that of states and of individuals and groups within these states.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that identity is central to the desire to be a 'knowing subject', in control of meaning. I look at the ways in which, in defining their own sense of identity, individuals tend also to fix the identity of others working within long-established binary modes of thinking. I ask how we might begin the process of dislodging these binaries. Is such a process not crucial to the development of plural societies that are accepting of difference, and that even celebrate it? What forms do and might cultural political struggle over identity take? Can we move beyond identities? How important is having a voice, representation and respect? Do people need to belong to a recognized group or community? How, in the cultural arena, might we challenge hegemonic constructions (white, male and middle-class) of histories and traditions? It is to these questions that I now turn in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

### Further reading

- Althusser, L. (1971) On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, Notes Towards an Investigation, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 121–73. London: New Left Books.
- Donald, J. and Rattansi, A. (eds.) (1992) *'Race', Culture and Difference*. London: Sage in association with the Open University.
- Dyer, R. (1997) *White*. London: Routledge.
- Rutherford, J. (ed.) (1990) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Woodward, K. (ed.) (1997) *Identity vs Difference*. London: Sage in association with the Open University.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

(hooks 1989: 211)

The importance of 'talking back' for marginalized and colonized groups has been a central theme of this book. It enables people who find themselves subject to racist, sexist, colonial and homophobic power relations to resist negative definitions of what and who they are, to rewrite their history, to explore existing identities and to create new ones. Identity is important to occupying the position of 'knowing subject' and it is as knowing subjects that we speak and act most effectively in the world. Foremost among the claims of the knowing subject is the belief that we know who we are and are in control of meaning. Of course, this knowledge and control is a partial fiction, but it is a fiction by which we live and which has real effects in the world.

Yet identities are not just enabling, in defining their own sense of identity, individuals and groups tend to fix the identity of others, often working within long-established binary modes of thinking that help sustain inequalities, exclusions and oppression. This is why it is important to see identities as both changing and changeable cultural constructs. Cultural narratives, historical and fictional, such as those discussed in this book, are sites where cultural political struggles over identity take place. They are also sites from which we learn about others.

For those who inhabit privileged, seemingly obvious identities, and witness the role that identities play in oppressive social practices and even wars, the question arises as to whether we can move beyond identities. This question is important, but it is

articulated from that privileged space, usually of whiteness, in which people are able to see themselves as simply 'human'. To move beyond identities as divisive, we would need to move beyond material power relations that privilege some groups over others. For those who find themselves excluded from the space of the simply 'human', and are defined as 'other' in discourses of race, gender, sexuality or ethnicity, it is clear that having a voice, representation and respect are crucial. More often than not, this comes from a sense of belonging to a recognized group or community.

In his essay on new Caribbean cinema, Stuart Hall argues that recent diasporic Black cultural production is:

Putting the issue of cultural identity in question. Who is this emergent, new subject of the cinema? From where does he/she speak? Practices of representation always implicate the position from which we speak or write – the position of *enunciation*. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say, 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place.

(Hall 1990: 51)

As we saw from the quotation at the beginning of Chapter 1, Stuart Hall argues that identity is neither as transparent nor as unproblematic as we tend to think. He argues that rather than assuming that identity is already an accomplished fact, we might usefully see it as a 'production'. Identity from this perspective is never complete, it is always in process, and constituted within representation. From this poststructuralist perspective, identity becomes an effect of culture.

In these final reflections, I want briefly to consider what conclusions might be drawn about the three major concerns of this book. The first of these was how we might usefully theorize the relationship between subjectivity, identity and agency and understand their constitution in and through cultural texts and practices. The idea that cultural practices, such as those discussed in earlier chapters, produce identities through the process of representation, rather than reflect already existing identities is central to the arguments of this book. Because cultural identity is neither one thing nor static, it is a key focus of cultural political struggle: it is constantly produced and reproduced in practices of everyday life, in education, the media, the museum and heritage sectors, the arts, history and literature. It is textually constructed in the narratives of these discourses and institutions and performed by individuals who assume the modes of subjectivity and identity that the discourses offer them. In the process, the individual, interpellated as a particular subject, works by herself or himself as if she or he were a sovereign, knowing subject.

For Stuart Hall cultural identity is:

A matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time,

history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.

(Hall 1990: 52)

A second concern of this book has been the importance of history to identity. As we saw in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, history matters and it is a site of cultural political struggle for both the hegemonic and the marginalized. In this struggle, issues such as having a voice that is recognized and heard, are clearly crucial to the formation of positive forms of identity. Narratives of the past that depict a collective experience for marginalized groups have important social, ideological and political roles. They can begin to inform and transform the relations of dominant groups to these narratives and to the histories they inscribe. As was suggested in Chapters 2 and 3, having a history within which one can position oneself positively is crucial to identity. This holds true both at the level of personal history and of the larger stories of the communities and nation with which a person identifies. The level of hostility from the conservative press to the suggestion that Britain needs to produce a more inclusive history and more plural conceptions of Britishness, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, illustrates the perceived importance of history to identity. Chapter 4, which focused on Black British writing, suggested ways in which hegemonic constructions of British identity and their grounding in particular narratives of history are being challenged. This writing attempts to reposition Black Britons in relation to hegemonic white-centred narratives of Britishness and provide the basis for positive Black British identities.

Like most societies, Britain has never had a singular and homogenous culture or national identity. It has always had different white ethnic groups with their own senses of history and identity. It has always had strong regionalisms and different forms of class and gender identity. It has had non-white citizens for centuries. Yet the last fifty years have seen a massive expansion in cultural diversity in Britain, as a wide variety of migrants have settled in the UK, diversity that is often strongly grounded in religious differences. The British South Asian writing, films and television discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 point to the ways in which the second and third generation children of migrants to the UK are creating new modes of subjectivity and new hybrid identities. These are emerging both from conflicts and contradictions between 'traditional' cultural values and life-styles and those of mainstream British society, and as a response to forms of racism and ethnocentrism on the part of white Britain. The establishing of minority cultural and religious institutions has led to an increase in forms of cultural racism, in the face of which it becomes difficult to develop a positive sense of belonging. As we