From ‘Our Island Story’ to ‘Citizens of Nowhere’: Culture, Identity and English Literature

Daniel Talbot

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

There is a growing consensus that the study of literature in English secondary schools is suffering a crisis: a fixation with knowledge and facts, a loss of creativity, and a denigration of students’ own experience, to name a few. This article argues that this is, in part, a result of the conception of culture embedded in the current National Curriculum; a conception in which the study of literature exists primarily to valorise and maintain a clearly definable national culture. In response to this, I suggest that recent thinking in the tradition of cultural cosmopolitanism can expose the inadequacies of this model and offer a set of conceptual resources for thinking about the role of identity and culture in relation to literary study in the secondary school. I also suggest that, as far back as the 1921 Newbolt report, fragments of this more capacious understanding of culture run through much of the most important thinking about the subject.

Introduction

This article was motivated by a series of political and professional events that provoked me to reflect on notions of culture and identity in the English Literature classroom. One was an announcement from the then education secretary, Gavin Williamson, that the government was to introduce the teaching of Latin in state-maintained schools as a way to tackle elitism (Bryant 2021). Another, as suggested by the title, was Theresa May’s claim that, ‘If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere’ (May 2016). Such a view suggests that affiliations of culture and identity that stretch beyond the strictly national ought to be delegitimised. Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton puts the philosophical meat on the nationalistic bones with his concept of Oikophobia, coined to describe those who favour a ‘repudiation of inheritance and home’ (Scruton 2004, 36). Under this view, culture can’t be plural, contested, and borderless. Instead, ‘to choose a culture or a set of values is precisely to have no culture and no values’ (Scruton 1993, 95). Scruton’s ideas concerning culture, nation and identity have been hugely influential on the intellectual foundations of modern conservatism. This cultural project, politically and educationally, looks to conceptualise individuals as born with an inherent fidelity to ‘their’ cultural origin. To believe instead, as this article
argues, that culture is something more contested, diffuse, and malleable is, for conservatives like Scruton and May, to be involved in some kind of category mistake. For them, culture is nation, and both are destiny.

A third and more recent event was the arrival of Afsar, a fifteen-year-old Pashtun boy, from Kabul to my year 10 classroom. For young people such as Afsar, the government have committed themselves to ensuring arrivals from Afghanistan have ‘certainty about their status and the right to work and contribute to society’. This ‘certainty’ takes the form of ‘indefinite right to remain’ (The Home Office 2021). If we take the above ideas about citizenship and culture seriously, it seems that Afsar can be certain about his status. Without British citizenship he is a ‘citizen of nowhere’. At the level of education, a National Curriculum constructed for the celebration of an insular ‘island story’ surely isn’t well suited to the increasing number of people in circumstances such as Afsar’s. A narrow model of nation-state citizenship does little justice to a world increasingly characterised by flows of migration and shared global challenges. Equally, Afsar’s arrival into a new social environment will bring with it resources, both linguistic and cultural, that ought to find expression in an English classroom. Instead, these potentially rich contributions are effaced in favour of a narrowly construed version of national belonging that amplifies difference and sharpens division (see Suissa 2021).

This article considers the extent to which the study of literature in diverse, cosmopolitan classrooms reveals that to be a ‘citizen of nowhere’, as a normative ideal, might in fact be no bad thing. In doing so, I wish to explore some of the ideological assumptions surrounding the conception of culture at the heart of current UK education policy, particularly as it relates to the study of literature in secondary schools. This is both because of my own experience as a teacher of English and co-head of a large English department and the ‘pre-eminent’ role English currently occupies in the National Curriculum (DfE 2014, 13).

The state we’re in: the study of literature in schools

English has often been a domain for discussions surrounding national identity, culture, and the curriculum (Perry 2019). Much has been written in recent years about educational reforms in Britain implemented initially by the Education Secretary Michael Gove and developed by subsequent Conservative governments (Okolosie 2013; Bleiman 2020). Grievances from educationalists include: the imposition of a nationalistic political project rooted in cultural conservatism (Yandell 2017), and the absence of creativity in favour of byrote didacticism (Smith 2019, 2020). Some critics have pointed to a moralising, even civilising, mission embedded within its self-declared purpose (Elliott 2014). At its outset, the curriculum announces that all state-maintained schools must promote the ‘spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society’ (DfE 2014, 4). When coupled with the pre-eminence of authors from a narrow ‘literary heritage’, this language evokes a quasi-Victorian fear of civilisational decline in the absence of moral and spiritual literary instruction.

Also controversial is the essential ‘knowledge and cultural capital’ explicitly prescribed by the current Ofsted framework (Ofsted 2019, 9). Here, there is a bizarre irony that a formerly recondite term of neo-Marxist sociological critique has become a central part of the assessment framework for schools. Lastly, a concern with the narrowing of the
scope of study to British authors at the age of 14 Key Stage 4, and its inevitable trickle down to the curriculum in younger year groups, has created a staid, anaemic experience of literature unfit for modern, multicultural societies in an increasingly interconnected world (Mansworth 2016; Yandell 2017).

What’s behind this regressive turn in education policy? Recent contributions to diagnosing the malaise in English have looked to theoretical ideas dominating current educational discourse. Critics point to the ‘knowledge turn’, ushered in by the popularising of work by, amongst others, American literary theorist E. D. Hirsch (Eaglestone 2020; Yandell 2017). Hirsch’s notion of cultural literacy provides succour to the conservative nationalistic educational project in so far as it posits the existence of a relatively stable and fixed culture that students ought to acculturate to. The mechanism for this acculturation is the learning of itemised chunks of ‘knowledge’. The result of this turn towards a state authorised conception of cultural knowledge has been a regurgitative pedagogical approach to literature in the classroom. According to Eaglestone (2020) the problem stems from a narrow understanding of what knowledge is in the current educational discourse. Invoking Aristotle’s tripartite account of knowledge, he argues that English is more akin to techne (craft or art) and phronesis (practical reason) rather than episteme (propositional knowledge) more characteristic of the sciences. The current paradigm in education is therefore built on a kind of scientism that valorises knowledge as fixed, bounded and empirically verifiable. Students are now being birthed, not into the critical and imaginative activity of analysing language and literature, but instead to a kind of byrote imitation of the ‘canon’ befitting the Arnoldian tone of the National Curriculum itself.

As a teacher of English in a large comprehensive London school, the above resonates strongly with my experience. Inner city classrooms are characterised by their cultural diversity. As such, to suffocate this valuable pedagogical pool of experience in favour of a fixed bank of knowledge, agonistically imposed on students, erases the possibilities that such diversity offers for the kinds of meaning-making characteristic of English classrooms. The implication of the jingoistic tone of the current policy environment is that there are authorised texts and interpretations that students ought to have transmitted to them. The notion that the meaning of a literary text can be preordained by policy making is not only pedagogically and hermeneutically suspect, it also naively misunderstands the ineradicably social basis of meaning making in English (See Yandell 2013).

The danger of a single story: cultural cosmopolitanism

The rhetoric of conservative educational discourse reflects the general rise of populist nationalism and the concomitant attempts to invoke a nativist, national identity. This identity acts as a salve for the failure of neoliberalism to distribute the rewards of economic growth to those at bottom of the socio-economic ladder (Mounk 2018). May’s words amplify this by endorsing a view of the citizen as forged and sculpted by an interiorly cohesive nation state. It is ‘our’ cultural narrative, on this view, that binds us together as a collective imbued with shared values, goals, and histories. Conservative thinking has often held, as an article of faith, the idea that the moral and spiritual health of a nation state depends on ‘authoritatively transmitted national culture which enshrines a set of common beliefs and values’ (Beck 1996). Gove used such language when
bemoaning students’ lack of the ‘cultural markers that glue society together’ (Gove 2009). On this view, the curriculum should effectively pay reverence to the ‘best that has been thought and said’ (DfE 2014; Arnold 1869/1993). No one sums up the Victorian spirit of civilising liberalism and high cultural elitism more than Matthew Arnold. By invoking him, the government clearly indicates the cultural guardianship model they wish to instantiate.

As a response to this view of citizenship and culture, insights from the resurgence of cosmopolitanism as a sociological and philosophical approach to identity are helpful. The term cosmopolitanism has its etymological roots in the ancient Greek Kosmopolités (citizen of the world) and refers to the school of thought instigated by Diogenes the Cynic in the 4th century BCE which was then fully developed by the Stoics. It has resurfaced at various times and in various forms since the time of Diogenes (Kleingeld and Brown 2019) and, more recently, a variety of thinkers have drawn on the history of the tradition to challenge static notions of culture (Appiah 2007; Beck 2006; Bhabha 2000; Held 2010). By adopting cosmopolitanism, proponents argue, we better reflect the hyper-diversity and cultural hybridity that characterises many modern nation states (Beck 2011).

Cosmopolitanism is now a multifarious field of studies (see Cicchelli and Mesure 2020); however, at its core is a desire to rethink the way in which the nation, citizen and global community are conceived. In Britain, there has been a notable retreat from any internationalist dimension to the curriculum. Encapsulated in Michael Gove’s intention that students learn ‘Our Island Story’ (Gove 2010), the current English curriculum prioritises texts written by ‘English’ authors. This conservative nationalism is met with forceful calls in return to diversify and decolonise the curriculum. This kind of polarisation can lead to the idea that there is a Manichaean choice between those that claim a national identity and those that desire to escape it because of its exclusionary criteria. As a response to these unsettled social issues, cosmopolitanism reaches back to antiquity to chart a lineage of thinking about citizenship, identity, culture, and political belonging that aims to capture the demands of both the local and the global.

Cosmopolitans recognise the richness and diversity of different cultural traditions and practices. What they deny is that an individual’s identity is reducible to a single culture (Scheffler 1999; Appiah 2007). I suggest there are at least two valuable critical insights this approach can make of the version of culture currently embedded in government policy. Firstly, cultural change and exchange is an inevitable fact of social reality given the world as it is. Secondly, cultural parochialism implies harm of its own that act as barriers to students accessing rich cultural experiences. Cultural cosmopolitans embrace the diversity that characterises all human life. Moreover, they recommend an enthusiastic interest and engagement with the world’s cultural achievements based on this difference (Appiah 2007). It is the conscious recognition of difference that distinguishes this view from previous universalist views that frame equality as uniformity. On the cosmopolitan view of culture, it is in encountering other ways of doing and being that we are likely to be enriched. One of the central pillars of this view is a deep scepticism of any claims to cultural homogeneity. The idea that cultures can be hived off into hermetically sealed units is an unhelpful myth dismissed by modern ethnographical work (see Phillips 2007).
Instead of thinking of cultures as sites of homogeneity ‘perpetuated and enforced by regulatory mechanisms’ (Appiah 2005, 152), the cosmopolitan ‘rejoices in mongrelisation’ (Appiah 2007, 112). All cultures are a tapestry of influences, mediated by different people over vast stretches of time. Trying to distil a cultural essence from this historical process is futile. For the cultural cosmopolitan, the anti-essentialist reality of culture is what generates its value in the first place. As Scheffler (1999) points out, cultures have a variety of external sources of origin but also continually undergo change from within. As Appiah put it, ‘cultural purity is an oxymoron’ (Appiah 2007, 113). Jeremy Waldron (1992) echoes this idea when arguing that there is no good empirical reason to think that one’s social identity can be mapped onto singular cultural communities. Such a mistake, argues Waldron, conflates the trivially true claim that all identities are formed within cultural contexts with the inaccurate claim that therefore all individuals gain their identities from one single culture (Waldron 1992). Instead, life options come to us ‘as items or fragments from a variety of cultural sources’ (Waldron 1992, 91).

The philosophical cosmopolitan view of culture is echoed by much research in the teaching of English. Mehrunissa Shah makes the point when discussing the teaching of canonical texts in multicultural classrooms. She describes how ‘rigid certitudes’ of ‘legitimate readings’ of texts are disrupted when teaching in culturally diverse classrooms (Shah 2013, 196). My own ten years of experience teaching in multicultural schools reinforces this view. It is in encounters with students like Afsar, and countless others, that the cosmopolitan potential of cultural artefacts becomes so clear. The current attempt by government policy to miniaturise both cultural identity and literary texts to an ‘island story’ is repudiated by the reality on the ground. Similarly, recognising the social identity of a student is often not a good barometer of other things about them, including their cultural identity and language usage. In my school, it is now entirely normal to hear students of all ethnicities use ‘wallahi’ and ‘haram’ in the school playground. This generalised use of nominally Islamic terms reflects the kind of cultural change that English teachers ought to use as fertile ground for discussion. Anne Phillips suggests we should delineate between talk of people as belonging to a culture and people as ‘cultural beings’ (Phillips 2007, 49). The latter realises that we are always mediating a social world in which culture is a significant part without enveloping people into totalising cultural prisons.

Parochial visions of culture therefore have a deleterious effect on both individuals and society. Instead, we should emphasise the more fluid basis of cultural identities that resist this impulse. Notions of culture and identity are inextricably bound up with the study of literature and so this point is crucial for teachers in the classroom. The problem with the essentialist view is that it conceives of cultural knowledge, ideas and artefacts as possessions to be hoarded rather than sites of contestation and navigation to be openly engaged with. In the case of the teaching of English, the cultural preservationist model can lead to a cultural triumphalism that alienates those whose identities are more plural, and therefore deemed anomalous. At the same time, it hubristically claims an insulated cultural autonomy that ignores the centuries of intermingling that most contemporary cultures are the result of. Nussbaum (1997) argues, that the unreflective reverence of an authorised version of culture strays quickly into either ‘normative Chauvinism’, in which the ‘evaluator judges that her own culture is best’ (131), or ‘normative Arcadianism’ in which the non-west is presented as ‘a green, non-competitive place of
spiritual, environmental, and erotic values, rich in poetry and music’ (Nussbaum 1997, 134). Ultimately, an essentialist and parochial view of culture leads to reductive and crass imaginings of the ‘other’ unmoored from the infinitely more nuanced reality.

In short, anti-cosmopolitan notions of culture risk creating a dangerous jingoism about the west and an exoticised view of minority cultures. The study of literature ought not serve the purpose of acculturation to a confectioned myth of a pristine cultural past. Such a view is anathema to the very project of education in the cosmopolitan tradition. Instead, the questioning and exploring of culture should be at the heart of the study of literature. The current National Curriculum in English suffers from the same internal problems as the ‘The Old Education’ of ancient Athens. Namely, that it sees the Socratic gadfly, intent on questioning supposed sources of cultural authority, as a dangerous aberration that ought to be silenced rather than the ideal students naturally strive towards. An unthinking loyalty to local allegiance is what Stoic cosmopolitanism specifically countenanced against (see Nussbaum 1997).

Cultural cosmopolitanism and English literature

How do cosmopolitan understandings of culture provide a framework for the study of literature in schools? One clear area of synergy between cultural cosmopolitanism and literary study is that both embrace a transcending of the hinterland of culture and identity. Salman Rushdie expresses this forcefully when responding to criticism of The Satanic Verses, a novel that, in his view, ‘celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs’ (as cited in Waldron 1992, 751). Similarly, Appiah points to the poet Basho, inventor of the Haiku, and remarks that he ‘took’ Buddhism from India and written script from China in forging the poetry crucial to the cultural self-understanding of modern-day Japan. Most culturally important figures and the best art are clearly often ‘flamboyantly international’ (Appiah 2007, 126). Shakespeare is no exception, both Othello and The Merchant of Venice are situated in Venice, famously the cosmopolitan centre of renaissance Europe. In both plays, imagined societies grapple with ethnic, religious, and racial difference. Whilst there is value in calls to avoid a mindless idolatry of the author, it nevertheless remains the case that there is an inescapably cosmopolitan side to the writer most emblematic of ‘the canon’. At the same time, it would be remiss not to recognise the fact that cultural exchange isn’t without potential harms. Much recent indigenous scholarship has pointed rightly to various forms of disrespect and exploitation that can come from an insensitive and obtuse approach to cultural exchange (King 2016). Nevertheless, just because a less rivalrous, more fluid version of cultural encounters may lead to abuses, it does not follow that we should retreat to anachronistic cultural cul-de-sacs. Such encounters are, of course, inevitable in multi-ethnic liberal democracies and therefore need to be confronted rather than imagined away.

There is, then, good reason to be suspicious of a National Curriculum that defines English Literature in terms of a fixed and immovable canon, detached from the diversity that characterises literature written in English today. One of the pre-eminent theorists of the English curriculum, Arthur Applebee, reflects, in his work, the cultural cosmopolitan concern with conversation across cultural boundaries. He suggests that part of literary
study is orientating oneself in ‘a domain for culturally significant conversations’ (Applebee 1994, 47). Such conversations have parameters and important figures but crucially they are revisable and contestable from within their own discourse. It is the sense of participation in an ongoing discussion that is missed from the culturally conservative educational model.

The notion that the study of literature ought to be conceived in terms of conversation beyond the immediate boundaries of one’s experience is not a new one. Literary works can often foster knowledge and understanding of the ethical, social, and cultural because of their narrative logic; a logic that escapes expression in propositional knowledge because of its first-person, experiential formal qualities. Such a view is more fully developed by Nussbaum’s concept of the ‘Narrative Imagination’ in which the study of literature fosters our ability to, ‘think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions, wishes and desires that someone so placed might have’ (Nussbaum 2010, 96). This is echoed in the work of Appiah who describes narrative as supplying the ‘moral epistemology that makes cosmopolitanism possible’ (Appiah 2005, 258).

This becomes important in the classroom. If English teachers are drafted into a mission of cultural protectionism, the classroom will be a radically different place to that with which many English teachers are familiar. The current offering for GCSE students involves a 19th Century novel, a Shakespeare play, a modern play/prose, and a collection of poetry. If these texts are to be ‘delivered’ as the building blocks of cultural capital or necessary components of cultural literacy, there will be little room for the cultural experiences students already have and can bring to bear on the reading of a text. Recently, in the teaching of The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Hyde, several of my students read Dr Jekyll’s inability to resist the temptations that the cloak of Hyde offers as portentously anticipating the dangers of anonymity in the online, social media space. Here, the text offered a heuristic through which to engage with the social world they currently inhabit rather than as an item of knowledge to be transfigured into cultural currency of some kind or another. By insisting on a singular English or British cultural identity, students could be derailed from the kind of creative readings of texts that can offer insight both for the understanding of the text itself but also as a lens through which to demystify their own cultural environments.

Similarly, consider students engaging with Romeo and Juliet, currently the second most popular Shakespeare GCSE set text. Whatever aspects of identity one wants to point to as typifying ‘Englishness’ today, it is unlikely they will be found here. In fact, what is striking about teaching a play such as this is the way in which the cultural experience of students will always impose themselves into the reading of the text. Discussions of Romeo’s initial pursuit of Juliet up to the famed ‘balcony scene’ are inextricably bound up with discussions around consent in ways specific to students’ lives and these are different in character to those I had at the beginning of my career. This is not surprising given the above discussion around the nature of cultural identity. It is also supported by research on the same text albeit in a quite different context. Yandell and Brady (2016), discussing the same play, show how the situatedness of students is crucial in enacting readings of the text. Given all of this, we might wonder whether we can we find, in the history of English as school subject, precedent for the more nuanced analysis of culture developed so far?
Back to the future: Newbolt and beyond

The Newbolt report was the first systematic attempt by the British Government to come to an understanding of the nature and purpose of English as a school subject (Goodwyn 2021). It also ushered in English as the ‘core’ subject it remains to this day. In drawing on the report, it is important not to imply that it disavows nationalism; the contrary is the case. Throughout, there is reference to uniting a ‘national culture’ by uniting ‘classes’ (BoE, 4). Terry Eagleton saw the report as a coded imposition of bourgeoisie values on the working class and, despite the rhetoric around ‘unity’, an attempt to reinforce the class distinctions already endemic to society (Eagleton 1983). However, I suggest that fragments of Newbolt recognisably challenge the cultural essentialism of the current educational policy climate. As Doecke suggests, readings of Newbolt that completely foreground the jingoistic overtones end up collapsing, ‘the rise of English together with British Imperialism’ and thereby ‘reflect a failure of historical imagination we should try to redress’ (Doecke 2017, 234).

One of the key ideas of this article is the rejection of an organicist view of culture. A key component to this is challenging the assumption that one’s own culture is unproblematically intelligible to its members and, by extension, that ‘other’ cultures are completely impenetrable. The diverse origins of most cultures is recognised at several points in the report including the below description of the provenance of English Literature:

There are mingled in it, as only in the greatest of rivers there could be mingled, the fertilising influences flowing down from many countries and from many ages of history. The flood of diverse human experience which it brings down to our own life and time is in no sense or degree foreign to us, but has become the native experience of men of our own race and culture. (BoE 1921, 13)

Here we see a resistance to the reduction of English Literature to any one definitive and authorised culture. Of course, the language of ‘our race and culture’ is inescapable but so too is the language of ‘fertilising influences’ and the ‘flood of diverse human experience’. There is therefore more emphasis on reducing the extent to which outside influences ought to be considered ‘foreign’. This is tonally very different from an ‘island story’ approach that relies, for its very coherence, on identifiable sites of separateness. The report continues this approach in its emphasis that English Literature act as a ‘channel by which to draw upon their experience with profit and delight, and a bond of sympathy between the members of a human society’ (BoE 1921, 15). The idea that a part of the purpose of literary study is to allow access to other ways of doing and being echoes both the arguments of Appiah and Nussbaum above about the ‘moral epistemology’ that the ‘Narrative Imagination’ can foster. The sense that literature can defamiliarize previously taken for granted cultural assumptions is an integral part of cultural cosmopolitan theory. Benhabib (2002), a prominent thinker in the cosmopolitan tradition, echoes this understanding of culture by pointing to the ‘narrativity’ involved in the development of a self. Whilst it is true that we are cultural beings, rather than simply submit to a cultural origin story, we in fact become ‘conversation partners’ in ‘webs of interlocution and narrative’ (15). In navigating the social world, ‘socialisation and acculturation do not determine an individual’s life story’ (Benhabib 2002). This cosmopolitan sense of culture
can also be seen in the Bullock report of 1975 which continues the idea that the cultural lives students themselves inhabit are of crucial ethical importance for English students and teachers:

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)

As in Newbolt there is an emphasis on the bridging of divides. Newbolt focused, depending on one’s reading, on the class divide and in Bullock we see an extension to the divides of ethnicity and race. These statements of a desire for togetherness are not, at least in spirit, equivalent to the acculturation advocated by Gove and May. Instead, there is the idea that the study of English ‘provides imaginative insight into what another person is feeling; it allows the contemplation of possible human experiences which the reader himself has not met’ (DES 1975, 125).

Another interesting preoccupation of the writers of the Newbolt report is to separate English from the influence of Classics. The report recognises that Classics is framed as synonymous with cultural and aesthetic quality as well as moral virtue. However, presciently, there is an awareness that this does not map on to the shifting identities we see today. As it makes clear, ‘culture and knowledge are no longer enshrined in the classical languages alone’ (BoE 1921, 37). This takes on particular salience considering the government intention that state schools are to teach Latin to keep up with the elite private schools mentioned at the outset of this essay. Here, we see the difference between classics as badge of cultural authority rather than as a contributor to a longer conversation about humanity (see Smith 2019). The Newbolt report was attuned to the fact that where large-scale cultural shifts are afoot, the cultural experiences of students ought to be considered. Today, the arguments for a more cosmopolitan conception of culture are as urgent as was the need to rethink the gilded status of Classics for the writers of Newbolt. Similarly, the report also recognised the importance of contemporary texts as a way of allowing students access to important cultural conversations. Students will recognise literature as the ‘most direct communication of experience’ if they understand how ‘the life of their own time has been interpreted by contemporary writers’ (BoE 1921, 186).

The report also argued it was more challenging to bridge the social class divide than it was in previous centuries. It suggests this is because there is ‘no source of unity’ in the ‘different types of school’ (BoE 1921, 6). The report situates this claim in the context of the desperate need for a National Curriculum to give a sense of purpose and normative direction to education; something that can unite across social divisions. Yet ironically the recent government reforms to GCSE English have opened a cavernous gap between the education in literature received by private schools and state school students. At present nearly half of independent school students are entered for International GCSEs (IGCSEs) (Fenton 2019). State schools are effectively not given this option as the IGCSE lost government accreditation in 2014. Much of the criticism of this constraining of state school choice has hinged on whether the IGCSE is an easier qualification, thereby further entrenching educational disparities between sectors. However, there is a second, less discussed, impact: the cosmopolitan nature of the IGCSE curriculum.
The Cambridge IGCSE in English Literature makes clear that they see English Literature as ‘the study of literature in English’ in contrast to the home board fixation with ‘British’ writers. The syllabus contains poetry from Maya Angelou and Kofi Awoonor, novels from Anita Desai and Alan Paton and plays from Lorraine Hansbury and Arthur Miller. These authors are not grouped under ‘other’ or ‘world’ categories. Rather, they casually populate the prose or poetry sections, nestled amongst Dickens, Keats and Shakespeare. Authors put in conversation with one another across time, place and ethnicity evokes the kind of cultural cosmopolitanism argued for in this paper and desired by many English teachers. If ‘cultural capital’ is an essential part of the National Curriculum’s purpose, we might be sceptical that the ‘English Literary heritage’ is in fact the lifeboat it is made out to be. Those likely to stalk the corridors of power, disproportionately taken from the independent sector, are in many cases being offered an English curriculum that resists the cultural hermeticism of the National Curriculum and, ironically, embraces a much more cosmopolitan vision of the subject.

Conclusion

I’ve argued that the reforms made to the National Curriculum in 2014 have instigated a crisis in the teaching of English and particularly in the study of literature. The narrowing of the GCSE curriculum to ‘British writers’ aims to construct a version of English that pre-dates even the Newbolt report. This is evidenced by the Arnoldian language of the document itself. The moral didacticism and sense of cultural fixity lends itself to the kind of mechanical pedagogy concerning critics and teachers alike. It is the conception of culture as inheritance to be handed down, rather than site of negotiation and challenge, that is at the root of many of the concerns in the classroom.

Using the conceptual framework of cultural cosmopolitanism, I’ve suggested that the study of literature should be understood as a conversation that extends beyond national boundaries. Furthermore, curricula ought to reflect the fact that culture escapes fixed essences. The concept of cultural ownership ought to be as foreign to us as it was to Diogenes when he first described himself as a citizen of the world. The fact that it escapes simplistic conceptions of ownership is what makes culture a dynamic resource for the kind of work English teachers do every day in multicultural classrooms. It is the job of educators to resist the clamour to purify and instead embrace the uncertainty, messiness and hybridity that characterises English classrooms.

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Notes on contributor

Daniel Talbot is a PhD candidate in Education and Social Justice at the University of Lancaster. He is interested in the relationship between knowledge, culture, and identity in relation to the curriculum. He is also the Co-Director of the English department at Thomas Tallis School in Greenwich, South-East London.
ORCID

Daniel Talbot http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1525-9819

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