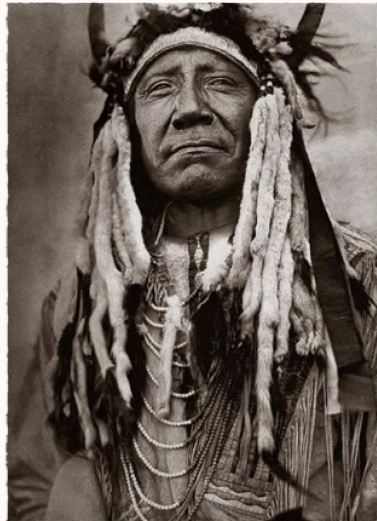


MA Photography

Coexistent Perspectives (ADCD7001)

5. Research two contemporary artworks that address the concepts of identity and memory. Employ critical analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives to compare and contrast them.



NOBLE SAVAGE

Photograph by E.S. Curtis



SAVAGE NOBLE

Photograph by A.P. Matteson

Submission Date: 06/05/2022

Word Count: 4399

How does cultural identity and one's heritage perpetuate the concept of the Other?

Introduction

Using examples by Welsh artist Iwan Bala and Indian photographer Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, this essay will explore how cultural identity is created, perceived and portrayed through artworks. Cultural identity shapes a person and influences how they are seen by other people. This is often through stereotyping which forces categorisation and creates a sense of 'Otherness' for those in the minority. In this essay, I will start by looking at what cultural identity is and what constitutes Other, using the theories of Stuart Hall and others to put this into context. Hall outlines four types of 'difference' within identity. This essay will focus on the cultural explanation of difference, which is what creates separate cultural identities. Groups are defined by their shared memory and experience and become Other to those that differ.

A sense of Otherness can be felt by people within the same culture if they cannot relate to certain aspects. Identity is often a social construction partially made through a stereotypical cultural identity that is attributed to them. However, this essay considers what happens when a person is different to those with whom they would share an identity? In the case of Iwan Bala, this is how as a Welsh man he differs to other white British people, and with Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, as examined in her work *An Indian from India*, how she is different to the other type of Indian, i.e. Native Americans.

Looking at Bala's series *Gwalia (reinvented)* and Matthew's *An Indian from India*, I will discuss how their cultural difference and 'otherness' has influenced and affected their work. Both Bala and Matthew are seen as Other, despite one artist being a white man and the other an Indian woman. This essay will explore the cultural identities of both artists, how they interlink, and the ways that their respective heritages have impacted their identity and sense of 'otherness'.

Wales and India are both colonised nations so I will be looking at the impact this has had on the cultural identities of Bala and Matthew and how the perceptions of each differ in their post-colonial societies. I will explore how Matthew and Bala's differing cultural identities and heritage have forced them into positions of Other and how they represent this through their work. Wales is seen as Other, particularly within Britain, and India is seen as Other in the West. This causes a conflict in identity formation as the emphasis is on how these cultures are seen by other groups of people rather than the primary focus being on how they see themselves.

Theoretical perspectives

Cultural identity is the understanding of how a person's culture and participation in particular groups build and define their identity. Identity formation is partially constructed through the perception of others. According to the Marxist theory of interpellation, a person 'recognises' themselves in certain identities (Woodward, 2004). This can be a conscious recognition such as admiring an actor and wanting to dress similarly or it could be unconscious, seeing an advert selling a product to meet a particular lifestyle. 'Symbols' of certain cultures can be adopted in order to create identities through clothing or hairstyles, however there are many parts of identity that are not chosen (Woodward, 2004). Class, ethnicity, location, and gender form our cultural identity and are all major parts that a person does not, initially, have a choice in. Common experiences and "shared cultural codes" create a 'oneness' within social groupings bringing people together (Hall, 2011a, p.222). These factors play a role in cultural identity formation and can limit the shared culture experienced, for example being brought up in an area with a particular accent, or language, then moving to an area where people speak differently creates a barrier in communication. This creates a sense of 'Otherness' for a person even if they are part of a culture as they cannot relate to certain aspects. If "identity is based on being the same as some people and different from others" (Woodward, 2004, p.34) what is the outcome when a person is different to those that they are the same as? Whilst identity is largely formed from heritage, past experiences and upbringing, a person's identity isn't fixed. It is transient, evolving and adapting to the situations and experiences that happen in life. Stuart Hall argues, "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories...they undergo constant transformation" (Hall, 2011a, p.225). Identity is as much about the person one will become, as it is who they have been. "Cultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall, 2011a, p.225). Identity is transformative, a continuous process generated by the memories of who we have been, our historical past and the future selves we can become.

The concept of the Other can be examined from several different angles. Hall describes four explanations of 'difference'; "linguistic, the social, the cultural and the psychic levels" and argues that the ambivalence of difference means they can be positive or negative (Hall, 2013, p.228). Cultural 'difference' is what creates separate cultural identities. Groups are defined by their shared memory and experience and become Other to those that differ. Hall defines the cultural explanation as "culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture" (Hall,

2013, p.226). This can be as simple as differentiating a fruit from a vegetable, but also the more complex 'differences' between races such as black and white and the assumptions that are put in place through these.

Writing of the negative side of this classification structure, Mary Douglas argues that things (or people) being in the 'wrong' categories, or not fitting into any given category, "disturbs cultural order" (Hall, 2013, p.226) by not belonging to society's ideals, such as mixed-race people. This is where types and stereotypes are used. Types are important for how people view the world, things are categorised so we can easily make sense of them. Stereotypes grasp a few characteristics, "reduce the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them...Stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'" (Hall, 2013, p.247). Stereotypes are used to perpetuate the idea of Other. They oversimplify a person, a race, a country to keep it within its category. It fixes boundaries and reinforces difference "Stereotyping is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order" (Hall, 2013, p.248). They keep people in their place by making known what is (or isn't) expected of them. Further to this, stereotyping tends to occur where there are power imbalances, Foucault calls this 'power/knowledge' (Hall, 2013). Knowledge creates power and in turn gives the ability for the knowledge to be construed in the way that those with the power/knowledge wishes. Perhaps the biggest example of this being colonialism.

Colonizers stereotyped Indigenous people and established their 'superiority', as described by McEvilley, there is "the assumption that Western modes of representation...were superior – more objective or true to nature than those of non-Western cultures" (McEvilley, 1992, p.101). This exacerbated the idea that those who were different, 'other', were 'less than' and thus could be subjected to unrealistic descriptions and expectations, such as simultaneously being civilised and primitive. Marginalised groups are often scrutinized by the polarized extremes of "good/bad, civilized/primitive...repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic" – these are "tropes of representation" (Hall, 2013, p.219). This encourages the West to think of other countries in specific ways. They are not neutral opinions that are held but instead view Other in simplistic terms, unable to see the grey areas or nuance. Stuart Hall summarising philosopher Jacques Derrida's ideas states "there are very few neutral binary oppositions...there is always a relation of power between the poles of binary opposition" (Hall, 2013, p.225). There is always a 'better' of the two opposing sides, and it's the person, or group of people, with power that either adopt or assign these labels. Richard Dyer states that in a culture that assigns the highest value to those that are most visible, "social groups must be visibly recognisable and representable, since this is a major currency of communication and

power" (Dyer, 2006, p.44). This further pushes the agenda of the West as it forces Other's into categories where they can be stereotyped, keeps Other as Other and creates boundaries that are difficult, or impossible, to break out of.

Iwan Bala - Gwalia (reinvented)



Fig. 1 *Gwalia (reinvented) (variations on a theme)*
no. 1



Fig. 2 *Gwalia (reinvented) (variations on a theme)* no.4

Iwan Bala is a contemporary Welsh artist, working primarily in the forms of painting, drawing and collage – ‘mark-making’. Born Richard Iwan Ellis Roberts, he defines his own identity as an artist from Bala. His work concentrates on Welsh culture and identity, using certain artistic mediums to accentuate his point of historical imprints; writing of his mark-making techniques in *Offerings and Reinventions*, Bala said “charcoal, chalks and pastels...like human life itself, they always leave a stain, a trace, a residue, a memory” (Bala, 2000, p.65). His use of mediums directly reflects his understanding of memory, identity and heritage, and the impact cultural identity has on his practice. The themes of Wales’ past and how Welsh people are represented (as a female in traditional costume) are common within his work.

Iwan Bala’s artworks *Gwalia (reinvented)* (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) are a mixed media series of several pieces with each showing an abstract ‘Welsh woman’, they are each “variations on a theme” with some more distorted than others (Bala, 2000, p.106). The works depict a woman with a twin-face

Janus head with a large dress and a hat that is part of the national costume of Wales. The colour palette of each image is limited, with blue, black, red and yellow being the predominant colours. The woman is a representation of Wales, a reinvention of the traditional 'Welsh lady' to give her a new role of 'mother-goddess' rather than a symbol of unthreatening domesticity (Bala, 2000, p.72). The bowl features in images no.1 and no.2 of the series symbolising domesticity; Bala has depicted a chronological reinvention where the dutiful woman evolves into a more ethereal and abstract being. The stick figures in the dress could be interpreted as children, another symbol of where a woman would traditionally be.

The twin-faced figure, or Janus head, appears numerous times through Bala's work. In Roman mythology, Janus is the god of beginnings, doorways, and endings (Britannica, 2019). "The Janus figure is significant in that it symbolises a position where both past and future are being scrutinised to provide relevance to present" (Bala, 2000, p.73). This is representative of cultural identity whereby memories of the past (individually as well as communally) inform the present and the future. Bala continues: "This is not simply an attempt to recreate a historic or mythic past, but also to capture the past's continuing psychological importance for the present" (Bala, 2000, p.73). Bala wants to create art that represents the state of mind, the feeling of what it is to be Welsh, rather than an interpretation of its history. Using the Janus head in *Gwalia (reinvented)* on a female figure, Bala is suggesting that Wales itself, is the 'mother' of new beginnings. The woman, the country, is giving birth to a new land, the culture is being re-born after being colonised by England.

As Roland Barthes suggests in *Mythologies*, "myth is a type of speech...[it] is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes, 1993, p.109). Barthes writes that images have underlying messages – their myths, and that myth is a type of communication, and therefore everything can be a myth. Captions can give an alternative or extended meaning to what is being represented. Certain images can have a denotation vs. connotation conflict where the image 'says' one thing but a caption or context says another, with the thematic meaning behind the picture becoming interpreted by its label, or myth. In the example of *Gwalia (reinvented)*, without the title of the image, or the Welsh writing within it, the viewer could easily miss the association with Wales altogether if they aren't familiar with Bala's work. Barthes suggests that captions provide meaning to what is being represented (Barthes, 1993). The phrase "a fu ddoe a fydd o hyd" is written on Fig. 2 and translates to "which was yesterday and still will be" (Morris, 2022). Furthering the message of the series that is emphasised by the Janus head, Bala is referring to the 'yesterday' of Wales and how its heritage and history cannot be easily erased, it will continue, evolve and be reinvented.

The incorporation of the Welsh language is a critical part of the heritage underlying the formation of Welsh identity. Bala uses Welsh words within his titles and artworks providing privilege to Welsh-speakers, giving them the full context whilst concealing it from non-Welsh speakers. *Gwalia (reinvented)* has a partly Welsh title and features Welsh words within some of the images. This makes a statement regarding the views on Welsh identity by emphasising the importance of the Welsh language and upon learning the meaning of *Gwalia*, the Welsh culture. *Gwalia* is an archaic name for Wales. By using this old version of the country's name, Bala is playing up to the stereotype of Wales being underdeveloped and 'behind' compared to its English neighbour and stating that he is reinventing the country with his reimagined look of the woman in Welsh costume.

There is an inherent link between culture and identity, with a person's culture and upbringing influencing who they become. Raymond Williams on BBC Radio 4 in 1975 spoke of Wales being a post-colonial nation suggesting that Wales struggles to come to terms with the colonial 'baggage' it holds which is "preventing the Welsh from engaging fully in the present and looking forward to the future" (Bohata, 2004, p.14). This echoes what Bala has described when writing of Wales as a post-colonial country; "the problem Wales has with issues of colonialism, nationhood, identity and status [is] everything is half-done, half-undone, mainly by us" (Bala, 2003, p.175). Bala uses the concept of custodial aesthetics within his work to describe the memory of a community rather than that of an individual; a cultural memory is created by a community and its fragility must be protected to have an influence on future cultural identity formation (Bala, 1999, p.12). There is a lot that has been left unfinished in Welsh society, culture and politics which means the country isn't yet post-colonial, it's stuck somewhere in between being fully Welsh and fully English which reinforces the idea of Wales as Other to England.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew - *An Indian from India*



Fig. 3 *An Indian from India – Flags*

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is a photographer who was born in England, grew up in India and now lives in America, teaching at the University of Rhode Island. Her project *An Indian from India* stemmed from a fascination with the photographs of Native American people by Edward Curtis and his peers in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. The name of the project came from needing to explain her heritage was not Native American, aka 'American Indian'. "When I say I am Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India" (Matthew, 2002, p.67). Annu Matthew, similarly to Iwan Bala, has lived in different continents, but as an Indian woman moving to India from Britain and then on to the US, her adoption of other cultures is more in line with assimilation rather than appropriation.

In *An Indian from India* Matthew recreates Native American images with herself, superimposing self-portraits onto the original backgrounds to make the photographs look as similar as possible. She draws on the similarities between the way white people photographed the indigenous people of America and "the colonial gaze of the Nineteenth century British photographers working in India" (Matthew, 2022). This is a clear comparison of the way the white person views minorities. The colonizers chose to photograph people that they saw as Other and pushed the idea of them being different by putting

them on the other side of the lens to be examined. This is reflected in the difference in composition between Bala's piece *Gwalia (reinvented)* and *An Indian from India*. Bala has chosen his composition and presented a woman as a stereotypical symbol of domesticity, whereas Matthew has adopted the composition of someone else's choosing. This difference mirrors the societal roles that are common in the West; the white man being free to make their own decisions whilst a woman of colour has decisions put upon them. Bala is a white man, arguably the most privileged type of person to exist in society and thus holds the most amount of power. He entrenches his work with additional meanings, showing that knowledge is the power to the full comprehension of it and unless the context of the image is known, the meaning is quite different (Hall, 2013).

Displayed in pairs with off white borders surrounding them and small captions underneath, the presentation of Matthew's photographs is reminiscent of old family photo albums. The sepia tone adds to the nostalgic association. Whilst replicating the style of the original images, when sepia toning was popular and essential for preserving photographs, Matthew could be using the look to evoke the memory of colonisation, bringing it to the forefront. Both Bala and Matthew's works have limited colours, but in the same way as the composition of the images, Bala has chosen the colour palette of his piece, whereas Matthew was forced to adopt the tones that were chosen by the coloniser. Colonialism creates an inferiority complex, a self-alienation; "one learns to evaluate oneself according to the values of the colonizer" (Bohata, 2004, p.22). This forces groups of people with certain cultural identities to view themselves as Other. In contrast to the Welsh, Indians still have Otherness pushed upon them. The obvious difference being Indians are not white, nor are they from the West, as the Welsh are. This distinction in Otherness means that although both Bala and Matthew's feelings of being Other are valid, the experience of an Indian woman in the West is vastly different to that of a white man in the West. Referring to the Welsh as an Other does not mean it is the same as the Otherness experienced by Native Americans or Indians.



Fig. 4 *An Indian from India – Noble Savage*

In the captions of the images, Matthew duplicates the caption given by the original photographer and adjusts the details to describe her image, such as ‘American Indian’ to ‘Indian American’ and ‘wearing flag’ to ‘wearing flag as a sari’ (see Fig. 3), exploring the way she is perceived in comparison to ‘the other Indian’ using language as well as visuals. She also switches the controversial title of ‘Noble Savage’ used to describe the Native American to ‘Savage Noble’ to describe herself (see Fig. 4). The concept of a noble savage is a literary trope used to depict a character that is an “idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization” (Britannica, 2019). Used in the context of the image of a Native American wearing a headdress, it could be viewed as a photograph of a Native American, a ‘savage’, who is well-regarded and a higher member of the community, as indicated by the headdress and the word noble. By reversing this phrase to caption herself, Matthew is saying that she is the opposite. This could also be referring to the way she is wearing the sari in the image. Matthew could be commenting on the fact that she does not uphold this ‘traditional’ way of dressing in her own life and thus is a ‘savage’ when compared with the more conservative parts of her Indian heritage. Matthew pokes fun at Indian culture in a similar way to Bala with Welsh history. Both artists are signifying “the imagined nature of our identity as much as the partly imagined costume” (Bala, 2000, p.74). They are saying that it hasn’t been their own people and cultures that have decided what represents them, but others outside of it

that have pushed stereotypes onto them and thus their own cultural identity has been reinforced by an outside perspective. As with the Welsh learning their own cultural identity and heritage through the English language, it's a narrative that's been assembled by those with power/knowledge for the Other.

Edward Curtis often changed what the Native Americans were wearing for the images he created, wanting them to seem more 'exotic'. He created the photographs knowing white people were the audience, curating a look that would appeal to them more. People prefer photographs to reality; they are easier to digest as they only exist within the frame of the image (Sontag, 1979). Matthew decided to do the same for her images, exaggerating and creating fictional costumes of Indian women, to emphasise how little (white) people know of other cultures, as the majority in the Western world would not notice the errors. She explains "The clothes are also 'made up', similar to Edward Curtis' contrived posing and dressing up of some of his native American subjects. The final paired images challenge the viewers' assumptions of then and now, us and them, exotic and local" (Matthew, 2002, p.68). Bala also does this in his piece *Gwalia (reinvented)*. He uses a female to depict Wales and repeatedly uses the Welsh woman in 'traditional' costume to emphasise that it is a made-up version of what Welsh people look like, a stereotype. Both artists are mocking the stereotypes that Western culture has imposed on others. Reinforcing this point, Thomas McEvilley wrote "Western culture...was to be the universal Self: non-Western was to be entirely Other" (McEvilley, 1992, p.10). Knowledge of the East, and in this case also Native American's, is based on imagined constructs and the ways that white people want to see and portray non-Eurocentric cultures rather than facts (Said, 2003). European colonisers pushed the narrative that best suited them. As described by Stuart Hall, the colonial experience "had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'" (Hall, 2011a, p.225) in addition to translating natives into a 'devalued other' (Fanon, 2008). Colonialism creates its own versions of indigenous people and pushes stereotypes to the point where the subjects of the stereotypes inhabit the traits further. This creates issues with forming cultural identity as it can be difficult to determine where the 'true' culture ends and the stereotype begins.

The power dynamic of each photograph in the pairs is very different. Colonialism has affected the culture of both 'Indians', however it is only in the images of the Native Americans that the power is reflected; the oppressor is photographing the oppressed, reinforcing where the power lies. The photographer always has more power than the subject; they choose what to photograph and how, making the stylistic choices that they want rather than the person they are photographing. In

Matthew's images, she is photographing herself, scrutinising her own poses and features rather than another's.

I'm talking about the imbalance of power between the subject and photographer... That's one reason why I turned the camera on myself. Since the portrait is of me, I am in control of how I am being represented. It was a way to hold hands with Native Americans and reverse that gaze" (Matthew, 2002).

She is mirroring the Native Americans to reflect the image back to the viewer (the West), to reclaim the power and point out what has been done in the original images. Matthew is mocking the view of Native Americans that was held by white people, showing the inaccuracies and stereotyping that was (and largely still is) in place; "in each instance the power of colonial representation is mocked by the copy with a difference" (Bhattacharya, 2005). She is pointing out that she is different to those that she is supposedly 'the same as', and the individuality of the cultural identity of the different 'Indians'. Bala's work conveys a similar message, that the Welsh, and he, are different to their English neighbours even though they look 'the same'.

Conclusion

This essay has considered the impact that colonialism has had on differing cultures and the implications that living in a post-colonial country has on cultural identity. Using the theories of Stuart Hall, Thomas McEvilley and Kirsti Bohata to reinforce how colonialism drives the narrative of natives as Other. This exemplifies the imbalance of power between those that are Other and those that decide Other.

As shown in the examples of Iwan Bala and Annu Matthew, artworks are used to express cultural identity and emphasise the sense of Otherness that is felt by being part of certain cultural identities. The techniques that each artist has used in the examined artworks to portray this are easily recognised by the use of stereotypes. Both Matthew and Bala have used a whole series of images to convey their message, indicating that they feel it needs reiterating to be understood. Both Bala and Matthew were born into cultures that are viewed as Other.

Bala's Welsh heritage has created his cultural identity and forced him into the position of Other to England. He feeds this into his artwork using the stereotypical Welsh lady to symbolise Welsh culture and comment on the reductive perception that stereotypes offer. Matthew creates similar symbolism within her work, pairing herself and her Indian heritage alongside another frequently stereotyped cultural identity; Native Americans. The use of language is as important as the images for both artists in furthering their message, as discussed in relation to Roland Barthes Mythologies.

Otherness is perpetuated by cultural identity through stereotyping. Cultural identity has a clear impact on the creation of stereotypes. Stereotypes are based on simplified differences between groups of people and form ideas of Otherness. Cultural identity can be and often is presupposed through a person's clothing and the identifying markers they wear. Can culture really be understood through the way a person looks and does this form their cultural identity? Or is this a reflection instead of societal stereotypes rather than the personal attributes a person holds which connects them within their culture?

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Bala, I. (1999) *Gwalia (reinvented) (variations on a theme) no.1* [Mixed Medium]. *Offerings and Reinventions*. Bridgend: Seren Poetry Press Ltd pp. 1, illus.

Figure 2: Bala, I. (1999) *Gwalia (reinvented) (variations on a theme) no.4* [Mixed Medium]. *Offerings and Reinventions*. Bridgend: Seren Poetry Press Ltd pp. 106, illus.

Figure. 3: Matthew, A. (2014) *An Indian from India* [Photograph]. Available at: <https://www.annumatthew.com/gallery/an-indian-from-india/#17> (Accessed: 29 April 2022).

Figure 4: Matthew, A. (2014) *An Indian from India – Noble Savage* [Photograph]. Available at: <https://www.annumatthew.com/gallery/an-indian-from-india/#18> (Accessed: 29 April 2022).