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I AM WHAT I SPEAK:
MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY IN *LONDONSTANI*

1. Study background

At the beginning of the 21st century the definition of diasporic group identity is still an open question in Great Britain, especially if one considers the backlash against the project of a multicultural society that has occurred in the wake of the 9/11 catastrophe in 2001 and the 7/7 London bombings in 2005 (Modood: 2005). The implications of the 'war on terror' and the following 'clash of cultures' have posed further obstacles to the implementation of integration policies, while the promotion of a public debate about inclusive forms of civic nationalism (Goodhart: 2006) has been almost ousted from the political agenda, above all among younger generations, white, African or Asian[1].

Nonetheless, understanding identity-building processes in the face of individual and social needs remains a challenging question in contemporary societies, affected as they are by cultural, ideological, political and economic tensions between the speed of globalisation and a growing need to find refuge in a local dimension, often more imagined than real. How do individuals cope with negotiating difference in a changing world? How do they manage to solve, or at least to adapt to, its contradictions? What cultural stratagems and adaptive discourses emerge from this present global contingency? How are identities produced by linguistic and semiotic practices?

Quite understandably, these questions cannot be answered univocally. Within a general but inevitably vague assessment of multicultural dynamics, the answers vary according to the diasporic communities examined and the context within which they are positioned and evolve.

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[1] While both authors are responsible for the study background, the methodology section and the conclusions, Roberto Pedretti is the sole author of section 3 and Maria Cristina Paganoni of section 4.

In the light of the above research questions, this paper attempts to provide an example of contemporary identity negotiation by taking as a point of departure a recent successful novel, Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006)[2]. It is not uncommon for texts of fiction to provide invaluable insights into the struggle of individuals to maintain, reshape, assert and adapt their identity in changing socio-historical conditions. In this perspective, Malkani's acclaimed first novel constitutes an outstanding example of this kind of literature, which probes into the social mosaic and linguistic polyphony of multiculturalism with remarkable attention to reconfiguration processes and an attentive ear to emerging changes in language use.

Born in 1976 Malkani, who studied Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge, works as a journalist for *The Financial Times*. A handsome, well-educated British Asian man in his early thirties, he could hardly be considered a marginal self in the global city of London. The novel is spun out of Malkani's extensive undergraduate dissertation fieldwork in Hounslow, in the South-East of London, next to Heathrow airport, the 'Little India' where he grew up. A very inventive challenge to myths of migration and essentialist notions of identity, shown from the peculiar perspective of youth subcultures, *Londonstani* deals with the adventures or, rather, misdeeds, of a group of British Asian teenagers of a Sikh or Hindu background and well-off families living in Hounslow. The narrative is told by Jas, a nineteen-year-old tentative 'rudeboy' who is trying to make himself accepted by his more aggressive peers, Hardjit, Ravinder, Davinder and Amit. To this purpose Jas has borrowed their slang, rebellious lifestyle (including poor school performance and petty larceny) and extravagant consumption patterns and habits (designer clothes, luxury cars, exclusive clubs and gyms) with an uncompromising attitude typical of adolescence. In his case, however, the erasure of identity goes to unexpected lengths when the reader discovers, though only at the very end of the book, that Jas is in fact a white boy acting and speaking as a British Asian teenager.

Such a paradoxical twist of the plot moves the gist of a story from the phenomenology of multiculturalism in a global city (Block: 2006), as experienced by second-generation ethnic minorities, to new ways of perceiving and adjusting one's identity through sign systems (from language to fashion). The thematic shift invites a reading of the text within an ontological and thus provisional notion of

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[2] London, Fourth Estate, 2006. All quotations in this article are taken from the Harper Perennial edition, London, 2007.

identity in the age of globalisation (Colombo: 2006; Kim: 2006), taking into account not just the power dynamics of identity politics, but the inedited and fragmented performances of the self (Butler: 1990) carried out in multiple "local positionings, both ethnographic and interactional" (Bucholtz – Hall: 2005, 607).

2. Methodology

This paper moves from the theoretical framework of subcultural theory (Hebdige: 1987, 1988; Bennett: 1999; Muggleton: 2000; Bennett – Kahn-Harris: 2004), identity politics (Hall – Du Gay: 1996) and multiculturalism (Pilkington – Johnson: 2003; Modood: 2005, 2007). In tune with a cultural studies rubric, it sees in fiction a terrain for the elaboration of key social issues, which yields meaningful elements for a cultural analysis. In order to describe the construction processes of social identity in the urban British Asian diaspora, the two dimensions of culture and language have been taken into account to source from their mutual synergies. It is the belief of the authors of this work that both dimensions complement each other and that the understanding of their cross-fertilisation is central to the analysis of the discourses and practices of multiculturalism.

The British Asian youth subculture represented in *Londonstani* flaunts a notion of identity which is flexible to the point of paradox: a white British boy pretending to be of Asian descent. Such unexpected positioning of the self deconstructs the common notion of 'hyphenated identity', or dual ethnocultural identity, which would tend to naturalise difference as a permanent and unchangeable condition. Though it has been so far invoked to connote the cultural and linguistic difference of diasporic communities which belong, or claim to belong, to two different traditions or histories (Hobsbawm – Ranger: 1983), this notion appears insufficient to address the question of identity in contemporary urban diasporic communities. Rather, identity is more adequately theorised as a "porous" construction (Malkani: 2006a), influenced by a myriad of languages, styles, trends, images and cultural props that are increasingly global. In this context, macro dimensions such as class, race and gender, though still helpful, are inadequate to fully grasp the complexity and ambiguity of social and power relations. Arguably, new critical categories should be worked out and tested.

Rather than simply resorting to discrete identity categories, individuals shape themselves across a continuum of multiple dimensions, such as age, emotional identification with selected groups or

"tribes", sexual preferences, religious beliefs, fashions, styles, media images and icons, languages and vernaculars (Maffesoli: 1988). Through these processes, identity abandons any essentialist status to become a provisional experience, modified by time and space shifts. The metaphor of the revolving door aptly describes the process that people undergo while they produce, perform and then discard different identities, as if they were acting on a stage and had to choose what to wear and remove according to the needs dictated by contingency.

Individuals borrow the necessary materials to construct a temporary identity from several sources. The dynamics of fragmentation, hybridisation and adjustment are especially evident in diasporic communities – in particular, youth subcultures or simply youth groups gathering around restricted and/or practical interests – which are confronted with questions of self-representation, social positioning, integration, tradition, cultural heritage and cultural relocation.

The need to work out modalities to adapt to an environment simultaneously experienced as friendly and hostile, forces such individuals and groups to "cut'n'mix" the cultural fragments (Hebdige: 1987) of an alleged traditional identity with brand new elements in an effort to fill a social vacuum, a space in which open questions of power and self-assertion contribute to a state of uncertainty and unsolved tensions. The process of shaping alternative identities from a multiplicity of sources and raw materials frequently follows a so-called DIY (do-it-yourself) approach. According to the theoretical framework of subcultural theory as it has been developed since the 1970s, the DIY approach emphasises the effort to forge original strategies for self-help, self-representation and self-organisation that are then implemented with the aim to challenge and redefine mainstream culture and values. In this context, the use of creative raw materials to shape one's behaviour underlines the ability to elaborate original strategies to cope with a complex environment, trying to harmonise competing sets of values and cultural allegiances with viable meanings. In everyday life subjects explore new territories and dialogically interact with different subjectivities, thus working out a series of lifestyles that reflect their need to resist, adapt and develop.

As a quintessentially social construct and shared system of signs, language records and renovates the endless process of identity formation, at the individual and collective levels. It casts new discursive moulds to articulate the changing self in the mobile and porous space of contemporary society, where paradigms of stability, coherence and authority are constantly challenged by the emergence of new relation-

ships between the local and the global. The speaking self can be regarded as situated at the intersection of individual drives and social force fields, which contain and constrain its possibilities of self-fashioning (Colombo: 2006, 25). The "diversity of subject position" (Block: 2006, 63) is constantly negotiated through interaction with other social actors. Intrinsic to any human being in history, this condition becomes compelling in adolescence when the issue of identification is fundamental to find one's place in the broader society. It is this kind of identity formation process that is mapped in *Londonstani*, a novel which captures with intellectual sophistication and ethnographic matter-of-factness the contradictions of adolescents, recording through their language use both their potential for subversion and their fascination for mainstream consumer trends, in so far as they provide an ephemeral but shareable anchorage to identity.

On the side of language, the main theoretically-informed contribution to interpret these processes and practices has been offered by sociocultural linguistics (Ochs: 1993; Bucholtz – Hall: 2005; Block: 2006), with its encompassing assumption that identity is discursively produced in the intersubjective interaction with other social actors, endowing linguistic forms with social meaning. In other words, the kind of linguistic identity emerging from variation of phonological, morphosyntactic and discourse features has been related to the making of desi identity in urban youth subcultures.

A word of Sanskrit origin, present in several Indian languages like Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu, the term "desi" means "of the country". In recent years desi, both as an adjective and a noun, has become an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*[3] to refer to people of South Asian descent living in Great Britain and their customs. In British Asian slang, in particular, desi is now commonly used to describe a contemporary urban subculture whose participants are mainly second-generation youths from the subcontinent, as well as ethnically hybrid cultural trends in music, dance, food and fashion.

Additional critical remarks on the relationship between language and identity within ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom have been borrowed from multidisciplinary investigations into distinct cultural fields (Pilkington – Johnson: 2003; Robinson: 2005), one of them being desi music (Paganoni: 2006), which well exemplifies the heterogeneous style of young British Asians and the key role played

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[3] The entry "desi" and the other slang words discussed in this article were looked up in the *OED Online* (last accessed in Sep. 2008), at http://dictionary.oed.com.

by popular culture in shaping "the great British melting pot" (Malka-
ni: 2006b)[4].

3. The desi subculture in the United Kingdom

According to a poll commissioned by the BBC in 2007[5], over 30%
of young British Asians (i.e. aged 16-34) do not feel British, half of
them feel they are not treated as equals by white British people, and
three quarters consider themselves to have been deprived of their
own culture. These data would seem to suggest that approximately
70% of young British Asians do feel British but think, at the same
time, that their parents' or grandparents' culture is relevant to the
shaping of their own identity. In other words, most second- or third-
generation British Asians find themselves involved in a constant
struggle for identity, in a space that lies between the allegiance to an
often mythical and remote tradition and the need to conform to the
principles and norms of Western civilization.

Malkani offers an insightful viewpoint to understand how identity
is increasingly performed by young people – mostly of British-Asian
descent – set in an environment in which different tensions collide
and force individuals to an incessant quest for adaptive compromises,
within the family, at school, on the street, in the market of goods
and commodities. In fact, Malkani's novel 'celebrates' a youth sub-
culture in which questions of ethnicity, gender and class intermingle
and are confronted with an unresolved and chaotic multicultural
project.

A lively, vibrant and hybrid expression of the contemporary ur-
ban youth scene, which explains why desiness has become not only
possible but even desirable for a white individual, the desi subcul-

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[4]   The quotation is from Malkani's article "Sounds of Assimilation" (*The New York
Times*, 19.8.2006): "Too often the focus has been on rigid, traditional high culture – folk
dancing, religious headgear – instead of the more pliable, popular culture like the desi
beats and street styles of second- and third-generation immigrants. At the level of popu-
lar culture, the great British melting pot works incredibly well, allowing British South
Asian youth to coexist and integrate with mainstream Britain instead of living in a state
of victimhood or voluntary segregation".

[5]   "Many Asians 'Do Not Feel British'" (*BBC News*, 30.7.2007). According to a 2001
census, the largest ethnic minority group was made up of "South Asians of Indian, Pak-
istani, Bangladeshi or other Asian origin. [...] Indians from South Asia are roughly equal-
ly divided in numbers between Hindus and Sikhs, with only a small number of Muslims"
(Robinson: 2005, 182).

ture reflects the difficult negotiation between contrasting values such as tradition and modernity, loyalty and independence, conservatism and transgression. It appears to be mainly constituted by middle-class, second-generation males of South Asian origin. Indeed, instead of a one-dimensional portrayal of subculture as a form to express resistance and opposition, the novel *Londonstani* offers a complex understanding of contemporary subcultural strategies, underlying aspects of conformation to mainstream society and celebration and acceptance of models of affluence and consumerism together with the presence of elements of opposition and resistance. Moreover, in line with recent post-subcultural criticism, it emphasises the multifaceted fragmented nature of contemporary identity, how individuals fashion and perform their own identity in much more complex ways than normally expected, and how roles referring to ethnicity, gender and class are continually played and abandoned according to needs and situations (Muggleton: 2000; Bennett – Kahn-Harris: 2004).

This multifaceted identity reveals elements of instability and contradictions, particularly in relation to mainstream or parent culture, while sometimes exploiting elements of both for particular needs to realise a relentlessly changing subjectivity. Allegiances and loyalties are part of a process of doing and undoing according to contingency, even though this act of playing and performing does not resolve contradictions, but simply hides or postpones the moment of a real reckoning with them. This is clearly evident in relation to ethnic/religious belonging. These allegiances not only serve to confirm, in particular moments and specific spaces, an identity performed in terms of inclusion/exclusion along these boundaries, but they also reveal an unsolved tension with traditional narratives and histories often related to traumatic events (i.e. the Partition of India and its consequences, such as diaspora and religious conflicts) over which subjects cannot exert either control or power. In this context it seems useful to use the concept of "post-memory" as a specific experience "of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, [...] shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor create" (Hirsch: 1999, 8). These crystallised remembrances are not questioned in terms of their being a way to impose a certain version of history and articulate a tradition. Rather, these narratives of division and separation serve as pure instruments to play in terms of roles and contingencies. In this sense they are used, for example, to confirm and strengthen sexual domination, control and exclusion, to underline physical and body superiority, to tie and reinforce economic liaisons and interests inside and outside the group. Moreover, this relation with a rarely discussed past is complicated by the presence of

other sources simultaneously conveying and offering further elements with which to elaborate norms of behaviour claiming to refer to real space and time. From this point of view, Bollywood movie plots and characters, proposing a mythical dimension, are used as an unlimited source of inspiration, especially on issues of sexuality and gender. While tradition is invented, in an effort to reach unity and coherence, sources are assembled to re-create an imagined space and relations. Caught between modernity and tradition, identity shifts and organises its own representations through the production of a new lexicon and the assemblage of signs and symbols.

In the problematic framework of modernity, even the human body becomes a blank space on which it is possible to exercise the art of writing and producing meanings. The cult of body-care – sculpted muscles and limbs convey a message of health, toughness and affluence – and the veritable obsession with brands underline the acceptance of the hegemonic (capitalistic) set of values and the joyous celebration of consumer society in its privileged non-places (Augé: 1995). Immersed in the perpetual flow of goods and commodities, urban youth identity is affected by mainstream culture, often without investigating ideological questions of power and dominance. Besides, the enthusiastic adoption and exploitation of consumption patterns in terms of self-representation problematically co-exist with the contemporary presence of ethical beliefs, family norms and social constraints. All these factors concur to the confusing construction and support of an identity which is based on the needs of contingency.

Hybridisation is the norm in the production of urban youth languages and codes, a process showing a complexity beyond the duality based on bi-cultural or hyphenated identities. In these groups moving in-between marginality and inclusion, the beat of the town is translated into a language developing unpredictably through the mixing together of hip-hop lexicon, rap, slang, short text messaging, acronyms used instead of words, 'rudeboy' and Brasian (i.e. British Asian) English. Language serves to discriminate through processes of inclusion/exclusion:

> **Rudeboy rule #5:**
> Bout six months ago Hardjit taught me you couldn't learn to chat proply if you also din't know when to stop chattin. "U gots 2 know when 2 shut yo mouth," he'd said. It da same when u stickin yo tongue down a lady's throat, u can't jus go on an on an on, she'll get bored or fuckin choke, innit (*Londonstani*, 54).

Teenage slang hinders communication with mainstream society and culture, underlines diversity and constructs a new model of aggressive masculinity, as is evident in the following exhilarating dialogue between Hardjit, the gang leader, and Mr Ashwood, his schoolteacher, where the two characters confront each other on the correct way to pronounce Hardjit's name:

> "Well, Harjit, you can ask PC Boyling all about his gun when you speak to him in person".
> "R u def, man? I said da name's Hardjit. Hardjit, innit. Wid a d in it, innit".
> "I've never known it to be spelt that way before".
> "Well, now u do, a'ight".
> "No, actually I don't. Don't think you can terrorise me like you did all the other teachers here. Don't think you can pen me as one of those teachers who can't pronounce Asian names just because you've decided you prefer it spelt or pronounced a new way. I wasn't born yesterday".
> "Nah, man u ain't listenin, people really call me Hardjit now. Jus check wid ma crew" *(Londonstani, 117).*

Far from echoing the sinister sound of Orwellian Newspeak and its tragic consequences (Orwell 1949), this brand new urban vernacular reflects an enthusiastic and uncritical adherence to dominant models of consumption, quite evident in the neurotic allusions to goods, brands and celebrities endorsing luxury products.

Youth cultures primarily express their members' identity through styles. However, these styles wear blueprints of social class, gender, ethnicity, generational and geographical locations and reflect the complexity involved in identity formation. This process, made manifest through style, consists of identity opportunities that are both restricted and free floating, but also emphasise the importance of relating different identity constructions to each other. This means that multicultural or ethnic identities cannot be considered separately from other identity constructions, like class, gender or local identities.

4. The language of rudeboys

One of the reasons why the plot of *Londonstani* is startling is that the entire text masterfully hides from the very beginning what the amazed reader discovers only in the last few pages, namely that Jas, the main character, is not a British Asian. Instead, he turns out to be a white boy – Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden – whose rite of passage to adulthood involves the paradoxical performance of a different and

"peripheral" ethnic identity (Pilkington – Johnson: 2003), as it is now reinterpreted by desi youth subculture. The camouflage is made credible by the strategies of the narrating self with its flawless absorption of peer language:

> First we was rudeboys then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits. These days we try an' use our own word for homeboy an so we just call ourselves desis (*Londonstani*, 5).

The novel's idiolect – "homeboy desi talk" – is basically London street slang, enriched with "a hybrid of text messaging shorthand, MTV gangsta rap and subcontinental slang" (Harrison: 2006). For example, "fit" means "sexy" and "buff" "good-looking", "2" stands for "to", "bredren" for "brothers", "feds" for "policemen", "a" for "of". Though the text is interspersed with occasional Punjabi expressions, no real bilingualism among characters is observable, on the contrary the British Asian adults of the book speak – or try to speak – phoney English:

> After Aunty's gone, Hardjit's like, "Dude, why's yo mama always chattin like dem desis on da BBC? An wat'da fuck's Amit longin it out 4? Ain't got all day, u get me" (*Londonstani*, 180).

We also find neologisms, hilarious metaphors, formulaic expletives ("fuck"), trite taboo words ("dick") and racial labels, from the well-known "Paki" to "gora" (a Punjabi word) for "white". "Beemer" stands for a BMW car, a must-have status symbol, "bling-bling" is a slang term in hip-hop culture describing flashy and ostentatious jewellery. "Coconut" is a person who is brown outside, but white inside, in other words, an individual who denies his/her ethnicity, while Jas is a "cappuccino kid", white outside, but brown inside (Lall: 2006).

As typical of urban teenage slang, the boys' substandard variety of English is marked diastratically, i.e. according to class differences, a kind of language variation which associates them with working-class youth subcultures in spite of their middle-class background and love for luxury goods. Diatopic (or geographic) variation, on the other hand, occurs whenever their language imitates Black English or African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is also a working-class idiolect, diastratically connoted. This motley assemblage is facilitated by popular cultural trends, in this case exposure to Afro music genres, especially rap music. The most recognisable phonological variation of AAVE is the substitution of the voiced alveolar plosive [d] for the voiced fricative dental [∂] that we find, for example, in "dis", "de", "dem" instead of "this", "the", "they/them"

(Paganoni: 2006, 236-237). Other hybrid speech features of teenage slang include the zero copula ("I jus saying"), the quotative markers "go" and "be like" instead of "say", and fillers such as "yeh", "nah", "bruv", "dude", "man" and "mate".

> "Bruv?" I go to Hardjit. "Bruv, d'you know the original church got burnt down by two schoolboys?" (*Londonstani*, 79).

No matter how indecipherable the language of the novel may look at first sight, Malkani swears to its authenticity and claims to have reproduced it from a number of fieldwork interviews in Hounslow, making some kind of diachronic linguistic selection of those traits that have stood the test of time.

> What I didn't want to do was capture an exact picture of the way people talk by writing it just as I was hearing it. That would've been dumbassingly pointless because slang changes all the time and words and phrases would've been out of date by the time the book was published (if indeed it ever got published). So instead, I tried to create a timeless version of the slang so that more people could recognise and relate to it regardless of what year they finished school.
> Creating a kind of futureproof, timeless slang – instead of taking a snapshot at any particular moment in time – basically meant taking popular words from different years that have already stood the test of time and then stitching them together. So I took words from when I was at school in Hounslow in the late 1980s and early 1990s that people still use today. Then I took words that have stood the test of time from the interviews I did for my university dissertation in the mid-late 1990s (which luckily I'd captured on dictaphone cassette as well as notebooks). And then I combined all of that with words being used today that I think will probably survive. So from each stage of the research I was trying to bin words that might not survive (even if they were more interesting and trendy at the time) and replace them either with other, more enduring slang words or just plain English. The result, I hoped, would be a version of the slang that everyone would recognise but that nobody ever really used (at least in its entirety anyway) (Malkani, "About *Londonstani*").

The teacher Mr Ashwood, the girl Samira and the dangerous millionaire Sanjay speak 'properly'. Instead, nonstandard linguistic structures and forms index the rudeboy identity with varying degrees of intensity, from the more vulnerable Jas with his reversed assimilation strategies to the tough Hardjit and Davinder. This is to say that the boys' use of teenage slang performs two distinct pragmatic functions by means of different modes of intersubjective interaction. The first function is to erect an ethnic and generational boundary against outsiders, reinforcing cohesiveness and building a social identity within

the group. The second one is to make further distinctions between insiders within the same peer cohort. What happens is that, though they apparently sound identical, characters in fact follow slightly different sets of linguistic rules and speech patterns through which their different personalities come to light. By showing the extent to which each member of the youth group violates linguistic norms, the table below illustrates the stance the boys are adopting through discourse and, consequently, the kind of identity they are self-fashioning and performing. Quite expectedly, the greater the degree of morphosyntactic violation is, the tougher the self that adopts it becomes.

Word/Phrase *Standard English*	Jas	Rudeboys (Amit and Ravinder)	Hardcore rudeboys (Hardjit and Davinder)
about	bout	bout	bout
and	an	n (or An to start a sentence)	n (or An to start a sentence)
anything	anything	anyfink	anyfink
are	are	are	r
ask	ask	ask	aks
asking	askin	askin	aksin
be	be	b	b
being	being	being/bein	bein
come on	come on/c'mon	c'mon	c'mon
didn't	din't	din't	din't
doesn't	don't/doesn't	don't	don't
doing	doing	doing/doin	doin
enough (adequate)	enough	enuf	enuf
enough (lots/loads of/very/plenty)	nuff	nuff	nuff
except	except	except/cept	cept
for	for	for	4
four	four	four	four
fucked	fucked	fuck'd	fuck'd
going	going	going/goin	goin

instead	instead/stead	stead	stead
isn't	in't	ain't	ain't
just	just/jus	jus	jus
my	my	ma/my	ma/my
night	nite	nite	nite
nothign	nothin	nothin/nuffink	nothin/nuffink
of	a	a	a
other	other	other	otha
probably	probly	probly	probly
properly	proply	proply	proply
should	should	should	shud
something	something	sumfink	sumfink
see	see	see	c
that, the, this…	that, the, this…	dat, da, dis…	dat, da, dis…
to	to	to	2
tonight	tonite	tonite	tonite
was	was	was/wos	wos/was
what	what	wat	wat
with	with	wid	wid
you	you	you (or 'chyu)	u (or 'chyu)

Table 1 – Londonstani Style Guide
(adapted from http://www.gautammalkani.com)

A good synthesis of the boys' nonstandard use of English and of the main themes of the novel is offered by the consecutive display of the five sentences below, in flash colours and large font, on Malkani's official website, which work as a sort of sensational introduction to the text:

> "Call me a Paki again an I'ma mash you an yo family".
> "We din't fuckin come here innit. We was fuckin born here".
> "We treatin our bitches wid respect, innit".
> "It's my mum, a course. Da Beemer belongs to her, innit".
> "Gotta respect your elders, innit" (http//www.gautammalkani.com).

The tag question "innit", in particular, very frequently occurs in

the dialogues, covering a much wider range of situations than just "isn't it", of which it is presumably a contraction. A linguistic form typical of British urban youths, "innit" now functions as an invariant marker, tagged onto any preceding statement regardless of its verb form. It is highly addressee-oriented and interactive, its pragmatic function being that of indexing the speaker's affiliation to the rude-boy ethos.

In line with the "cut'n'mix" approach theorised by Hebdige (1987), Jas's style defies the naturalised association between linguistic forms and social categories, shedding light on new possibilities among identity formation, urban desi subculture and contemporary British society. First, according to "the ethnomethodological concept of 'doing' various kinds of identity" (Bucholtz – Hall: 2005, 588), we realise that Jas "does being" that particular type of Londoner who is a Londonstani (Block: 2006, ix). His boundary crossing is a cultural option that severs the naturalised link between ethnicity, a fixed identity and a given use of language. The processual character of identification by means of self-positioning through discourse is thus made manifest. The mantra for self-development has now become the dynamic "construct yourself" rather than the essentialist and patriarchal "know thyself" (Colombo: 2006, 23).

Second, Jas's attempt at ethnic crossing proves that desi identity has become an "ethnographically emergent cultural position" (Bucholtz – Hall: 2005, 585), an identity for which "speakers' language use does not conform with the social category to which they are normatively assigned", thus subverting "essentialist preconceptions of linguistic ownership" (*ibid.*, 588). As has been mentioned above, this emergent identity is produced on the culturally fragmented terrain of popular culture, for which being desi is 'cool', rather than within the more conservative boundaries of high culture, always at risk of reifying traditional values and manipulating them into fundamentalist ideologies.

Third, the language of the novel shows that desiness in the sense of doing "being a Londonstani" (tough, aggressive, disrespectful…) attracts urban young men for reasons that have more to do with the assertion of their masculinity than of their ethnicity. In other words, performing a tough ethnic identity, with all the self-segregating behaviour that it implies, becomes a way to assert the need for emancipation from domineering, emasculating mothers, Asian and non-Asian.

> At university, I had wanted to know why brown-skinned kids back home in the west London borough of Hounslow were suddenly choosing not to in-

tegrate with white-skinned kids. Why they were discarding the British Asian youth stereotype of disciplined, academically and grammatically conscientious citizens and instead asserting their ethnicity with an aggression usually associated with black-skinned kids. This was ironic given the prejudices Asian families have typically had against black communities and so, finally, I wanted to know why Asian kids were becoming alien to their own parents and adopting cultural identities that had as much to do with US hip-hop as they did with Bollywood. […] As a result, my work became an exploration of how the assertion of ethnic identities is sometimes better viewed as a proxy for the reassertion of masculinity (Malkani: 2006a).

This explains, among other things, the high frequency of homophobic terms, such as "ponce" (effeminate) or "batty"/ "batty boy" (homosexual), especially referred to assimilated "coconuts".

Oh, I see, Jas, Homophobia again. You boys think that by constantly insinuating that I'm gay that somehow makes you big men? (*Londonstani*, 129).

With their bolstering of straight machismo, these lexical items in fact indicate a reorientation in identity formation for young British Asians, which is also reflected in the organisation of the novel in three different parts, each corresponding to a different stage of ethnic identity. "Paki", a racial slur hinting at the submissive attitude of British Asian communities in the past, is followed by "Sher", or "tiger", for the phase of aggression and violence between gangs, while the third part "Desi" should open a new phase of awareness. Powerful language for empowered young men.

5. Conclusions

As *Londonstani* claims, cultural identity cannot be rigidly imprisoned within pre-constituted frames of interpretation. Rather, identity can be defined as a force-field where cultural fragments collide and generate unexpected temporary forms, as the product of a shifting discontinuity in which opaqueness and clearness alternate and overlap. In this context, hybridity plays a crucial role in promoting the unforeseen creation of multiple subjectivities – at times conformist, at times antagonistic and oppositional. These are spaces in which individuals organise meanings and adapt or react to social and historical contingencies.

One may consider Gautam Malkani's novel as the momentary point of arrival of a coherent and fruitful description and interpretation of the processes of hybridisation Great Britain has experienced

since the arrival of the first waves of migrants (Vivan: 2002). This process – defined by another Black British writer as the "great immigrant experiment" (Smith: 2000, 326) – has offered to younger generations alternatives and opportunities to shape identities to an unforeseen level of flexibility through the medium of popular culture. Disembedded from strong identity contexts whatever their cultural origins, what contemporary urban youths seem to share is their common status of active, if not greedy consumers of globalised goods. In this overview of contemporary urban scenes, identity is radically turned into a performance: here even one of the basic tenets of the traditional definition of identity – ethnicity – loses its constitutive character, enabling individuals "to hide in the light" (Hebdige: 1988), to recite whatever self they want to "do being".

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RECENSIONI
E
RECENSIONI SAGGIO

English lesson on MULTICULTURALISM. Use for debates, discussions, speaking, conversations, independent learning and more. Do you think the original culture of a society that has become multicultural like the change? (10). Is multiculturalism good for world peace and understanding? Do you think elementary school children in multicultural classes give a lot of thought to multiculturalism? (4). Would you prefer your country to be multicultural or of just one culture? (5). Is multiculturalism something that only white societies think about? (6). Can multiculturalism result in a country losing its identity? (7). Is multiculturalism really another form of racism? (8). But having read Mark's chapter, 'a Jigsaw state', I am left with the feeling that perhaps we need to start trying to answer the question after all. Whether or not Britain 'breaks up' in the political sense - and I am less convinced that it will 'inevitably' do so than Mark seems to be - it is clearly already breaking up in the cultural sense. If Englishness is a cultural identity we have to concede two things. One, that it cannot in itself be 'multicultural'. We might say that England is a multicultural country, or that Britain is a multicultural state, or that we would like them to be; but we cannot say that Englishness itself is multicultural, because a culture, by definition, cannot be. Secondly, English identity must be by its nature exclusive, simply because all identities are.