

Writing to the 'big names' in Geography

An in-class writing task where students write a letter to the writer of a text they have been studying.

(Content starts with large picture on next page.)

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Dear Doreen...

An intensive writing exercise

Write a letter to one of the following cultural theorists/geographers offering a positive appraisal and commentary on their work. You should discuss what you like about their work and tell them about the ways in which their ideas and writing have inspired you.

You have **twenty minutes** to do this. You can refer to past lecture notes or ask Alastair Owens questions if you wish. Letters will be collected in at the end.

Professor Benedict Anderson

Professor Edward Said

Professor James Clifford

Professor Paul Gilroy

Professor Doreen Massey

Professor Peter Jackson

The aim of the exercise is for you and I to assess your understanding of some of the material that we have dealt with in the course so far. Writing under pressure encourages us both to focus and reflect – two important learning skills.

Dear Edward,

I am writing to tell you that, as a geography student, I have been very impressed and inspired by your work on Orientalism.

I have found it interesting that although Orientalism was published back in the 70s and was describing the imaginative geographies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, it is still relevant today. Indeed, you need look no further than a travel brochure.

I was especially interested in the way the British and French, like Lord Cromer and Gustave Flaubert, used Orientalism as a way of characterising the West's superiority and not just the perceived inferiority of the East. I was also fascinated by the way this legitimated and sustained the relationship between the East and West, ~~show~~ how the ~~xxx~~ Western world dominated the Eastern through Imperialism.

I agree that much of this was because of blatant racism on the part of the West.

As you focused mainly on literary material, you have inspired me to look at artwork of the period. There is much evidence to suggest that Orientalism is prevalent here too. As Orientalism is, in a way, a type of propaganda this is unsurprising. Many paint ~~a~~ pictures of exotic, sexual and often barbaric scenes, and others seem to warn of the effect of this culture on Western ladies. Perhaps this is something you might like to pursue?

Joe Bloggs

Dear Benedict (Anderson),

At night Ben how things?
Imagined any communities recently? What ever
your on I want some!?!?!#? I've done some
things in my time and tried some stuff but the
biggest thing I ever imagined was a big green
fire breathing elephant! hmmm... absinthe!

But seriously, your concept of imagined communities
really explains nationalism. I mean why should I
care about what happens to someone in
Inverness? But I do. I've never met that person,
lets call him Bob, but because he's from Inverness
- and as a result Britain (Surt!) - I care about him.
That's an imagined connection. So I really
agree with your concept. I see it as a
binding force that keeps our nation together.

You say we, as a nation, share so many
things, from news coverage to sporting events.
Sharing these things you say gives us a collective
national identity, but I do think you gloss over
the social class divides a bit. There is
~~definitely~~ definitely a social class, conscience
as well.

Your work has really made me think about
how I feel about my nation, especially in
light of the American experiences recently. I mean
there is a massive country full of diverse and contradictory
people and ideas but on Sept 11 they all
came together in a time of need. ~~What~~ Would
bits do the same? Probably, but with a healthy dose
of scepticism, what do you think? Anyway, I think
it's about time you write a new book.
10... Richard (Gorm)

Dear Benedict Anderson,

I like your theory on how nations are imagined communities as it has helped me grasp this difficult subject. I think it is one that people do see themselves as belonging to certain cultures and that basically they do have to imagine this (but maybe they don't realize they are doing so) because they can't meet all their fellow people. Your ideas and writing have inspired me to think about how nationalism isn't natural but is created - by govts, by media and has mentioned above by peoples minds (a three way process). I also like the way in which you have shown how nationalism may have evolved from the demise of religion and feudal society. This meant that people shifted allegiances away from God and one leader or the person above them and began to think of the country as a collective. I also think you were right to highlight the importance of the media in this respect because people can relate to the same stories at the same time and begin to work towards a 'horizontal' public belonging. However for me your ideas about the media also got me thinking about its importance in creating nationalism today. For instance people will see other countries on TV & other peoples and so by creating a sense of the other this forges nationalism also. So the media can be important in this respect. On similar lines to you it is interesting ^{to think} about that today in the time of the Afghanistan war people in America & Britain receive very similar news and so a bond is forged but what about those in Britain who are receiving Al Jazeera and does this affect their commitment to the 'community' of Britain and would we all have a different perspective of ourselves as a nation if we all received & understood Al Jazeera.

I like your ideas that people have to believe that the nation exists ('imagine') for it to exist.

I think this is interesting when looking at such things as Welsh and Scottish nationalisms because the only reason Britain as a nation exists is because the Welsh and Scots believe ('imagine') both. They may feel pulled stronger towards one or the other but they still have dual allegiances in most cases.

It is also a credit to you I think that people have begun to look beyond these ideas. Admitting yes communities have to be imagined but this act can be helped along by institutions and ceremonies. This has also helped me begin to think about how nationalism may be good for capitalism (keep working for your country & will do little to disrupt order) and how for instance in the miners strikes or truck drivers & the fuel strike - both accused of betraying their nation.

Your work has also helped me consider what about nations that don't have the backing of a state and the conflict of cultures.