Spaces within spaces: Teaching French culture from a British-Mauritian perspective and its relationship with GTA liminality and identity

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Abstract

Due to its varying nature, GTA positionality and teacher identity and how it is understood is a notoriously difficult subject. Though this can provide GTAs with unique experiences, it also means that we have to navigate these identity tensions on a daily basis, and navigate this liminality and the spaces it inhabits. Liminality, a term developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, can be defined as 'neither here nor there, betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial', and is a term that continues to be used in the field of anthropology and wider afield. The majority of literature has identified how this can be a problematic term, with GTAs being both part of and absent from the literature. This paper has no intention of disagreeing with that, but it does seek to offer a more positive outlook and personal reflection on the matter. In this paper, I will argue that we can use our own personal liminalities as an asset in navigating GTA liminality. In order to illustrate this, I will use my own identity as a British-born Mauritian and how it informs my teaching of French culture as an example. The paper will first engage with what we mean by (GTA) liminality, before moving onto how I perceive this in the light of my own liminalities. I will then reflect on how this was received at the Warwick PGT Conference 2025, how this has caused me to further reflect on my experiences, and how these personal reflections connect to broader reflections on GTA teaching practice and identity.

Keywords: GTA identity; liminality; personal reflection; cultural identity.

It should be said that any discussion of positionality and teacher identity – particularly when it comes to Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) – is a notoriously difficult subject. First, the form of teaching can take different forms. It could be contracted, or more akin to a zero-hours approach. Secondly, the level of training GTAs receive varies on both an institutional and departmental level. Yet thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – Hannah Rachael Slack and Madeleine Pownall (2023) highlight how we 'do not fit neatly into the category of either staff or student'. This inability to neatly categorise GTAs subsequently makes navigating discussions surrounding positionality and GTA teacher identity rather challenging. Consequently, individuals such as Naomi Winstone and Darren Moore (2017) have convincingly argued that we need to engage in 'identity work' throughout our studies. Of course, there are significant benefits to 'identity work', allowing GTAs and the wider academic community to address the idea of GTA liminality, which in itself can be a slightly problematic term. However, I believe that the flexibility of this term makes it worth considering, particular when it comes to reconciling our identities as GTAs with our other identities outside of the teaching space, which this paper will explore. I will further consider how we can we practically apply this notion of 'reconciled identities' to our professional contexts – in my case, I will explain how I teach French culture through another frame of cultural reference, and argue that our personal liminalities can help us to better negotiate our identities as GTAs. This paper will seek to address this by first unpacking ideas surrounding liminality and liminal identities, before introducing a little bit more about my own, separate identity, and then looking at how I used this to enrich my teaching experiences within the context of some of my seminars. It will finally think about the wider implications of this for the academic community by reflecting on my experiences presenting these ideas at the Warwick PGT Conference 2025.

Liminality, though originally coined by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, has come to be associated with British anthropologist Victor Turner (Wels et al, 2011). For Turner, the term can be used to describe a position which is 'neither here nor there'. Those engaging with liminality are, according to Turner, 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner, 2017, p. 95). Of course, there are issues in Turner's use of the term, particularly that he did not use it precisely. As Jasper Balduk (2008) has argued, this is problematic in the sense that 'anything goes'. Indeed, Balduk goes as far as to argue that using liminality outside of the field of anthropology is inappropriate, taking it away from its original meaning. However, I would argue that that it precisely because of the flexibility of the term that we should be using it – and indeed, it continues to be used in both the field of anthropology and more generically (Wels et al, 2011) to describe this notion of being 'in-between' spaces. It is because of the various factors at play in GTA identity outlined above that we would argue that not only is liminality an appropriate term, but it also why we need to engage in discussions surrounding GTA positionality and identity. Where do we fit? What are our identities? Are we comfortable having multiple identities in our roles as GTAs, or not? This paper does not claim to answer these questions, not does it argue that we can answer them – rather, this is an entirely subjective set of questions that should respect our individual spaces and experiences as GTAs.

There has been extensive research on GTAs' space within the wider academic community. (e.g. Muzaka 2009, Casey et al, 2022, Green, 2010, Nasser-

Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2020). Yet as Slack and Pownell (2023) have shown, the fact that GTAs cannot be neatly categorised means that they are paradoxically present in and absent from research simultaneously. This idea that GTAs exist between spaces is what I am primarily interested in here – and I want to argue that it can also apply on several other, more personal levels. For me, as a British-born Mauritian, this raises itself through questions of cultural identity. In my experience, I effectively walk the space between being British and being Mauritian. Of course, this particular identity also resonates with the field of postcolonial studies as well, particularly given the case studies of seminars I want to use, where I worked with students on a text that wrestles with questions of postcolonial identity. This is itself an incredibly rich field, and I cannot expand on it here due to spatial constraints (e.g. Fanon 2021, Said 1995, Chakravorty Spivak, 2010, Bhabha, 2004). However, what this shows is that when we talk about GTA identity and the concept of liminality, we are often talking about other identities and thus other spaces where liminality exists, and it is the interplay between these and their effect on the teaching experience for both teachers and students that I want to discuss.

It is in this spirit that I want to share a bit about my other liminal identity, of being both Mauritian and British and neither – all at the same time. Mauritius itself speaks to this idea of liminal identities due to its incredible diversity. Having been colonised by three countries before independence in 1968, it is multiethnic, with people of Indian, African, Chinese and European (mainly French) origins. It is also religiously diverse, with a Hindu majority and significant Christian and Muslim populations. Again, this paper cannot and will not claim to offer a singular view on Mauritian culture and identity – indeed, as an Indo-Mauritian from a Muslim background, my reference points are different to other Mauritians. Yet this diversity furthers my argument surrounding different liminalities at play in both the GTA context and a wider social context – it is extremely nuanced, subjective, and gives rise to some wonderfully unique experiences.

My reference points are also different because though I have made several trips and even worked in Mauritius, I am not necessarily a ‘true’ Mauritian. As a GTA, I walk the space between teacher and student – and in my personal life, I walk the space between Mauritius and Britain. I was born here in the United Kingdom, educated here, and based on exchanges with my colleagues from when I was working there, am from here and not there. I also walk a space, partly because of Mauritian culture’s close ties to South Asian (particularly Indian) culture, and partly because of the larger Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities in this country, where I belong to a wider South Asian identity as opposed to my Mauritian one. This is somewhat disarming due to the nation’s geographical position off the coast of Africa. Consequently, like most other GTAs, I have to navigate different spaces where liminality exists – and these are often spaces to which I may not necessarily belong by any formal means.

But this liminality is a part of me, and naturally feeds into my teaching. Just as lecturers transitioning from a school context are encouraged to hold on to their identity and credibility as schoolteachers, we as GTAs are encouraged to engage in identity work and employ a sort of identity malleability wherein we move between our positions as students and teachers. I would argue that there is also a need for us to consider other spaces where liminality exists in our teaching, whether that is based

on educational experience, cultural experience, and/or personal heritage to name but a few factors (Boyd and Harris, 2010). In my department of French Studies and the wider School of Modern Languages and Cultures, this is a huge part of what we do. We teach language, but we also teach that culture underpins language – you cannot really fully understand one without the other. For example, if first-year French essay classes look at cultural and economic tensions in the suburbs (*banlieues*) of Paris through newspaper and political reports, first-year culture classes unpack this further through film, literature, and other media. Of course, this requires a common frame of reference through which we can explain this. It could be a question of reframing sentences into other, simplified versions or using idioms, but there may be the need for cultural references too. For the most part, given that cultural models are taught in English and the general demographic of students, this is largely through a British and Anglophone context. I myself have made references to popular culture or to texts and films students have studied on A-Level French courses in order to draw parallels and further their understanding of the material at hand. However, what I want to focus on here is how we might do this using another cultural context – a Mauritian, somewhat South Asian one.

To this end, I will be using the example of my seminar teaching on a first-year French Studies module, the Story of Modern France. This is a two-term breadth module, explicitly designed to introduce students to the varieties of subjects that they can study at honours level: politics, literature, French Revolution, and postcolonial studies *inter alia*. It spans an extremely wide period, from the 11th century *Song of Roland* to a 2019 film discussing *banlieue* identities. Teaching therefore requires seminar tutors to be prepared to teach in a variety of different ways. To help with this, colleagues who deliver the lecture often design worksheets to help seminar tutors guide our teaching, but we do not necessarily adhere rigidly to these, speaking to our fellow seminar tutors and thinking about the best way to communicate key points about the material to our respective seminar groups. I had a group of nine students, five male, four female. Three students were from an ethnic minority, and two of those three were from a South Asian ethnic background – this is significant because the materials I used tapped into my experiences of South Asian identity. Of course, the small sample size of students limits the effectiveness of my observations, and in future, I would consider a small questionnaire to gain a more accurate insight into how my methods are received. However, I have still been able to draw some valuable reflections from my teaching practices.

For the most part, I largely relied on my liminal GTA status, and went between my role as student and teacher. I also benefited from the fact I had done this module myself as an undergraduate, and there were texts that remained the same, including the one I now want to discuss: Maryse Condé's *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer.* Condé was a celebrated French author from its overseas department and region of Guadeloupe, and *Le coeur* presents itself as the 'true' stories of her childhood, going from her birth up until her higher education in France. Like her other work, it largely deals with questions of postcolonial identity – at points, she engages explicitly with the work of philosopher Frantz Fanon (a pioneer of the field) and other postcolonial scholars. However, this particular text is more personal in its nature, presenting itself as a series of short vignettes tracking her personal experiences growing up as a middle-class black girl in Guadeloupe and its effect on her experience of race and gender, as well as her complex relationship with her mother. In other words, Condé

explores her own liminalities, and as such, I related to large portions of it, and used my own liminalities to teach the text.

One of the first things I did in the first of two seminars on the text was show a clip from the 1990s British sketch comedy show, *Goodness Gracious Me,* which I myself had seen extracts of growing up in a British-Mauritian household. The four ensemble cast members were British-Indians Meera Syal, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Kulvinder Ghir, and Nina Wadia, and the show explored the interweaving between traditional Indian culture and modern British life in a humorous way. Of course, some of the mannerisms and language are heavily exaggerated, and I made a point of saying this before showing this to students: that it was made in a different time, and for a different audience. The clip in question was about the Coopers (Kapoors) and the Robinsons (Rabindranaths) who claim to be entirely English with no Indian blood whatsoever, but often give themselves away by using each other's real names, mispronouncing words or making 'silly mistakes' such as serving guests some Pimm's with sliced courgettes in it. They refuse to acknowledge their real ethnic background under any circumstances, and become very upset whenever anyone refers to them as foreigners.

The reason why I did this was threefold. First, Condé's opening chapter is a portrait of her family, and they are very much presented in this same way, that they are more French than the mainland French people, rejecting their own Guadeloupean identity in favour of an idealised version of 'Frenchness'. Second, and more practically, students today tend to engage better with video materials than they do textual material, particularly when said video is also in English. Third, because of my own aforementioned references growing up in a British-Mauritian household. It occurred to me that I should use this as a cultural frame of reference with which I could unpack the text because of my own experiences of liminality.

We watched the clip, and I asked students to respond. There was a little discomfort from some students of a Caucasian background, perhaps given the dynamic, but this was quickly dispelled when I encouraged honest responses. Furthermore, overall engagement seemed to be higher because students felt like they were getting something different from the carefully outlined seminar sheet, but also because such a specific example was unanticipated, piquing curiosity. When we were later discussing the use of Guadeloupean Creole in the text, I used my own experiences with Mauritian Creole – when we use it, within which contexts, and so on. Consequently, this delved into a separate but not entirely unrelated discussion regarding Creole languages, and I responded to personal questions regarding how I use it to further students' understanding. Of course, I was careful to link it back to our discussion of Condé, but some of these more technical questions could be said to evidence some genuine curiosity and engagement from students with my own liminality in order to better understand liminality in the text.

In other words, by using my liminality as a British Mauritian, I furthered my ability to enrich students' understanding of a French language text. However, it also enriched my experiences as a teacher, in the sense that I felt that that space, though designed for students' understanding, allowed me to be seen as an individual and temporarily make the walking of these spaces where liminality exists a little easier. One of the South Asian students, who was one of the less vocal but still strong

members of the seminar, smiled as we watched it, and I could feel that there was a shared understanding. Their responses for the whole seminar were more frequent, and they shared deeper insight on the text, sometimes even relating it to their own experiences growing up. In that sense, it was nice for me – as an ethnic minority male in a discipline that is largely Caucasian female – to be able to let a student feel seen in some part, but also be seen myself and assume centre-field as opposed to a liminal position.

This was made even more apparent to me when I chose to present these observations at the Warwick Postgraduate Teacher Conference (WPTC) earlier this year. I had not really reflected on this concept of liminality before, taking it as a matter of fact, but thought it would be nice to share it with a group of my peers in order to show that there is a positive aspect to negotiating spaces where liminality exists. I was truly humbled by the response from others, some of whom attested to having similar experiences. I even received an email attesting to how it can be difficult to navigate the spaces of both GTA identity and cultural identity. In this sense, it is clear to me that we need to continue having these conversations. This in itself raises questions – where can we have spaces for this, and when? There are opportunities, such as the APP PGR programme or conferences such as the WPTC – but do we really enjoy these spaces within our own departments? Due to the fact that each individual has their own liminalities, it would be challenging – though not impossible – to organise talking spaces or forums within departments. There are some efforts to address questions of PGR liminality university-wide, such as the PGR Neurodiversity Network, which offers a community for PGRs who identity as neurodivergent. However, other than the aforementioned opportunities, I am not aware of a space that exists for GTAs specifically. In terms of strategy, it might therefore be worth raising this with departmental SSLC representatives, or for individuals to dialogue with other GTAs within their departments to get a sense of the liminalities that exist and how we might create networks to address this. In this sense, I hope this paper acts as a talking point that encourages GTAs to start having these conversations with each other, and try to foster spaces within our own departments that allow us to celebrate GTA liminality or address problematic aspects it may raise.

To conclude, liminality is a difficult aspect of GTA identity and positionality that requires constant work. However, as I have tried to explain here, because liminality naturally includes other spaces that are subjective to each individual, it is possible to use our other liminal identities – in my case, my British-Mauritian heritage – to help us navigate GTA identity and positionality. Furthermore, as shown by my experiences at the WPTC, these kinds of conversations are not only vital, but are also welcomed by other GTAs. Talking about how we navigate liminality and how we use it as a positive influence in our teaching is clearly needed within the GTA community. We need to keep a dialogue going on this subject, and look towards creating spaces that can be used to create a sense of community and to explore questions of liminality. Consequently, this paper has sought to contribute a more positive outlook on GTA identity, and how we should celebrate its diversity and engage in a dialogue that highlights this and contributes towards creating a community of support.

Ethical Claim

I declare that to my knowledge, the work here is all my own, except where I have stated otherwise, and that it is representative of my own reflections on my own experiences. Any references to other individuals are based on my own interpretations of comments made to/about me, and are not representative of the views of any other individuals mentioned in this paper.

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