**Q2 Synthesis Essay - Identity**

**Assigned Prompt**: 1: Is identity something people are born with or given, or is it something people create for themselves?

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Identity is an inextricable part of our life; it dictates everything from the choices we make for dinner, to those we make when faced with unimaginable crises. While identity is primarily created by the choices people make in terms of how they define themselves and what they choose to present to the world, identity is inevitably also shaped by the environment and culture people inherit.

In terms of identity, some of the most essential choices we make lie in how we use language to define ourselves. Words are some of the most powerful tools any human being is equipped with. They not only shape our daily interactions, but simultaneously shape our reality. By choosing to break free from cultural stereotypes, and by explicitly using terms that deviate from presumptuous societal stereotypes. Nancy Mairs, who deals with multiple sclerosis, chose to define herself with the word "cripple". She noticed that "People…wince at the word 'cripple,' as they do not at 'handicapped'" (Source B). Mairs purposefully chose to establish her identity, and to associate it with terms that society often shied away from, however accurate they were. Her culture, and the environment she grew up in was primarily that of Western culture, which prioritizes sensitivity and care over forthrightness and honesty, would have encouraged her to use other verbiage, be it "disabled", or "handicapped". Yet, the individuality and transparency Mairs chose shows that she did not want to be defined by sugar-coated, and simply inaccurate terms. By expressing so, Mairs was able to show that our identity is often created by how we view and establish ourselves, not how society or culture prompts us to do so. However, we must also consider the role that heritage and culture *does* play in our identity. Expression, as mentioned before, is key to establishing one's identity. Yet, not everyone has the tools to do so, which may be a disadvantage that is a result of one's culture. Amy Tan had felt that English was never her strong suit, and commented on how statistics showing that Asian-American students typically perform better on math/science than they do English make her "think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as 'broken'" (Source A). Tan further goes on to say how, as the careers people pursue in life

typically depend on their strengths, teachers may begin to steer Asian-American students away from English or language-related classes. In this case, one is almost handed their identity, their values. Without the ability to express themselves, people tend to undertake whatever stereotypes, prejudices, or identities are handed to them by others in society. By going on and depriving those who need it most of the ability to push back and carve out their own space in the world, the educational system simply perpetuates the use of outdated judgement and unjust assumptions both in the classroom, and beyond. Hence, culture does play some essential role in shaping identity: it dictates the environment and circumstances people are born into, which affect their schooling, and therefore their path and career in life. To say that identity is either given or born can be argued, but the plain truth is that both are inextricably linked. Overall, people can choose to create identity through expression, and defining themselves, but it is important to keep in mind that even this choice, and this ability in itself, is shaped by the situations we are given at birth.

In the same manner, identity is shaped by the choices people make in regard to how they present themselves to others in the world. With the advent of social media, the power to establish one's identity online has become more potent than ever. Youth can post what they want, without having an overbearing adult micromanaging their online activity. Thus, new technology also "allows us to…choose what to remember and what to contribute to our own mythos" (Source C). Mythos, as in the set of beliefs that act as our moral compass and guide us throughout our lives. When people select what to post, they are deciding how they want to present themselves, what values matter to them, and what is most important to them in life. This prompts deep thinking, and allows teenagers to begin deciding what they want their identity to be from a young age. However, once again, how we appear to the world around us is also influenced by our heritage, and prevailing stereotypes about certain cultures in the world. For example, Asian-Americans are often considered to be very intelligent, specifically in the fields of math and science. Despite scoring decently in English, Amy Tan expressed that "those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science…" (Source C). Although the fact that Tan scored highly on those subjects does matter, her home environment, such as her mother's English potentially limiting her abilities in that field, did affect this. As a result, the way Tan was perceived by others was also impacted, as people began categorizing her based on scores and stereotypes, rather than by her personal wants, likes, and dislikes. Her values, what mattered to her, were predetermined in the minds of others, resulting in constraint rather than

freedom of exploration. In this way, the situations which we are given at birth, or born into, influence how we are presented to the world. This lack of choice, and lack of freedom, is all too real, but does not permanently construct categories we must fit into. We still have some freedom to express ourselves, to improve upon ourselves, and to work, so that we can overcome the barriers that we were previously presented with. Hence, neither choice nor birth entirely determines our identity. Rather, an original, unique amalgamation of the both do. Overall, the choices people make in terms of how they present themselves serve as an important hallmark of creating identity, but the circumstances people inherit also play a role.

In conclusion, the role that identity plays is not set in stone. It is fluid, moldable, and inevitably shaped by both choices of expression, presentation, and understanding that the cultures, values, and situations we have inherited also greatly influence how our identities are established.