Inside Out

A Diasporic Narrative

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Stuart Hall's writing began to take a biographical turn. For readers such as myself, then a mature undergraduate pursuing an American Studies degree in New Zealand, this was somewhat of a revelation. The surprise was not so much Hall's shift from the somewhat dry prose of structural Marxism to the rather more vital style of a postcolonially inflected post-structuralism, but the fact of Hall's Caribbean background when I, along with no doubt many other geographically distant readers, had assumed him to be ex-working class, British and white. Some seven years later, while wrestling with a PhD on the history of cultural studies at the University of Melbourne, I found myself writing an essay for *Arena* using the question of Hall's diasporic identity to explore 'the relations between knowledge production and cultural identity/location'.[1]

Here, my aim was quite specific. I wanted to challenge conventional narratives of British cultural studies that located its development firmly on British soil and grounded in Anglo-British working-class culture. Using Hall's own reflexive narrativisation of his intellectual biography as one profoundly framed by *dis*-placement, the essay sought to reframe and recontexualise the concerns of the British New Left within the broader setting of a transnational politics of cultural identity, using Hall's biography as a way of complicating a conventional class-based account of the formation of British cultural studies. Reading the essay some eighteen years later, however, I'm struck by the continued broad relevance of Hall's at once individual and yet collectivised diasporic 'condition' for reflecting critically on the shifting 'place' of cultural studies and of critical academic positionality more generally in the current day. Here I'm thinking not so much in terms of the usual association between diaspora and identity but instead—viewing diaspora as a *metaphorical* rather than an *actual* condition to paraphrase Said's concept of exile and its relation to intellectual practice—as a trope for capturing relationships to intellectual institutions and power.[2] While the story of British cultural studies is often characterised as one that historically emerged out of concerns with marginality and the subaltern, I want to complicate this narrative and the position of the cultural studies practitioner more broadly through a re-reading of key moments in Hall's intellectual biography, a biography closely linked to the development of British cultural studies. My focus in this brief essay emphasises the cultural and institutional tensions and contradictions that have marked Hall's life and career as a middle-class, university educated, black British intellectual—foregrounding in particular the transitions from Jamaica to Oxford and then to Birmingham in the mid 1960s.

In the essay 'Minimal Selves', and in two key interviews in the 1990s, one with Kuan-Hsing Chen and the other with Naoki Sakai, Hall recounted his experiences as a Jamaican who migrated to Britain in the fifties, emphasising an upbringing shaped by colonial and class tensions.[3] Hall's father worked for the United Fruit Company and was promoted to a managerial position previously held only by white employees. Growing up 'in a lower-middle-class family that was trying to be a middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family', Hall recalls distancing himself from his parents' aspirations, identifying instead with the anti-

imperialist goals of the then fledgling Jamaican independence movement.[4] At the same time, however, he was excelling in a traditional English-oriented education system where he notes that he 'was very much formed like a member of the colonial intelligentsia', gaining a scholarship to Oxford University where he moved as a young man in 1951.[5]

Hall's time at Oxford was, rather like his upbringing, shaped by complex and contradictory elements and allegiances. While commentary on his time at Oxford has tended to focus primarily on his involvement in socialist politics, Hall has offered a rather different take on his first three years at Oxford as one of total saturation in postcolonial politics, living as he did in a milieu dominated by 'first generation, black, anti-colonial or post-colonial intelligentsia'.[6] His early engagement with British leftism was thus not surprisingly marked by an ambivalent relationship with the more traditional institutions of British socialism. Staying at Oxford courtesy of a second scholarship, Hall met various key thinkers (such as the philosopher Charles Taylor) who, while interested in Marxism, remained distanced from the Communist and Labour parties. These 'displaced' figures formed an 'independent' Socialist Society, a group that, Hall notes, was largely made up of 'foreigners or internal immigrants: [while] a lot of the British people were provincial, working-class, or Scottish, or Irish, or Jewish'.[7] This sense of displacement for Hall was further heightened by an Oxfordian culture of deadening conservatism and 'willed triviality'. As Hall comments: 'Outsiders like myself found it particularly hard to adjust to being catapulted into the centre of the process by which the English class system reproduced itself, educationally and culturally.'[8] It was outsider figures like Hall (along with various British born 'scholarship boys') who not surprisingly rebelled against the dominant intellectual and political concerns of the day, preempting a subsequent shift by the New Left towards a politics built along new social movement lines.

In 1964, after teaching at the University of London, Hall and Richard Hoggart set up the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. If Oxford University was an unusual site for the development of the New Left, then the English Department at the University of Birmingham—steeped as it was in an implicitly Arnoldian ethos—was an even more surprising location for the emergence of culture studies. As Hall has documented, the English Department,

having appointed Hoggart to a professorship, was rather dismayed when he announced his intentions to continue the work he had started in *The Uses of Literacy* on the impact of mass culture on working-class experience.[9] The department refused to fund any such research, forcing Hoggart to use his own money to employ a research fellow to set up and maintain the CCCS. This was Stuart Hall. Thus while the centre was located within a university department, from the outset it had a rather marginal status that in many ways allowed the CCCS to develop a more radical intellectual agenda than was possible in the more academically entrenched disciplines of history, English and sociology.

Hall was the director of the CCCS from 1968 to 1979. While the CCCS might have been relatively marginal in the 1960s, the 1970s saw the institutionalisation in the United Kingdom of a broader critical left culture, shored up by the formation of a number of other university-based departments and research units with New Left orientations, as well as the emergence of a series of journals (*Screen*, *Radical Philosophy* and *Feminist Review*) and publishing houses (Pluto Press, Harvester) with critical leftist leanings.[10] At the same time, British intellectual life in the 1970s was increasingly affected by the democratisation and rapid expansion of higher education. The student population in Britain not only doubled in the period between 1960 and 1967–68, it became more diverse, with an increasing number of female students and of black British-born students.

This was a complex and challenging time for the centre and for Hall. While the decade marked a turn to European theory with a dramatic reorientation away from a primary focus on the meanings of 'lived experience' to a concern with the relations between everyday culture and broader structures of power, ironically the CCCS itself was undergoing a number of institutional and intellectual power struggles, in which Hall was at times paradoxically placed in the position of hegemon.[11] In Colin Sparks's narrative of this period, the CCCS, under Hall's direction, was dominated by a Marxist focus on ideology to the exclusion of other approaches. Hall himself, critically reflecting on this time, describes the emergence in the 1970s of feminist and race-based approaches to theory as 'interruptions in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies'.[12] Hall has confessed that while he was aware of the growing importance of feminism and attempted to attract some feminist scholars to the CCCS, when feminism did finally 'interrupt' the status quo at the centre it met

with significant institutional resistance.[13] Furthermore, in relation to the foregrounding of race as a central social category that needed to be theorised, Hall notes: 'Actually getting cultural studies to put on its own agenda the critical questions of race ... the critical questions of cultural politics ... was itself a profound theoretical struggle.'[14]

As a key institutional player negotiating multiple intersecting 'positionalities'—as a non-white academic but also a (perceived) patriarch and intellectual power broker—Hall's own relationship to these 'interruptions' was profoundly ambivalent and ambiguous. Arguably, it was just such complexity of experience that cultural studies sought to grapple with intellectually in the 1970s. Read in this light, the centre's shift from an Althusserian to a Gramscian-inflected Marxism marked an attempt to come to terms with the contradictory, socially constructed subject. That is, at a time when class began to be challenged as *the* marker of subalternity by feminist and race-based accounts of social inequality, Hall's Gramscian turn can be seen as enabling rather than foreclosing a turn within British cultural studies towards foregrounding the politics of cultural identity.

This is not to deny that the arrival of feminism and, in particular, the publication in 1978 of *Women Take Issue* represented a major challenge to the institutional and intellectual politics of the male-dominated CCCS.[15] As Hall himself admitted, one of the reasons he finally left the CCCS for the Open University in 1979, along with a number of other factors, was the difficulty of being pro-feminism at the same time as being positioned 'as the senior patriarchal figure' at the centre.[16] Nevertheless, as Anne Balsamo has argued, the revisionist version of Marxist cultural studies put forward in *Women Take Issue* crucially contributed 'to the development of an understanding of the *articulation* of sex, gender, and class in the organisation of social relations'.[17]

In this brief account of Hall's early biography I've challenged the story of cultural studies as emerging out of a particular place of class-based marginality. The tropes of diaspora and displacement mobilised here function not as simple markers of outsider or subaltern status but rather suggest negotiated and multiplied identities and locations. The key 'energizing impulse of British cultural studies', I would argue, was (and continues to be) drawn from a tension of being caught both *within* and *between* locations and moments.[18] Hall's legacy—crucial for navigating

the late liberal, managerialism of present day academia—is one of a humanistic engagement with and reflexivity toward conjunctural relations of power, identity, cultural location and institutionality.

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1 Tania Lewis, 'Stuart Hall: Biography of a Diasporic Intellectual', *Arena*, no. 9, 1997, p. 157.

2 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 39.

3 Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (eds), *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*, Edward Arnold, London, 1993, pp.134–8; Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 484–503; Stuart Hall and Naoki Sakai, 'A Tokyo Dialogue on Marxism, Identity Formation and Cultural Studies' in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 360–78.

4 Hall, 'Minimal Selves', p. 135.

5 Chen, p. 487.

6 For instance, see the discussion of Hall's involvement in the early New Left at Oxford in Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1997; Chen, p. 492.

7 Chen, p. 492.

8 Stuart Hall, 'The "First" New Left: Life and Times', in Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group (ed.), *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 19.

9 Stuart Hall, 'The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities', *October*, vol. 53, 1990, pp. 11–23.

10 Ioan Davies, 'Cultural Theory in Britain: Narrative and Episteme', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 10, 1993, pp. 115–54.

11 Bill Schwartz, 'Where Is Cultural Studies?', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1994, pp. 377–93.

12 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 282.

13 Chen, p. 492; Hall, 'Theoretical Legacies', p. 281.

14 Hall, 'Theoretical Legacies', p. 283.

15 See Charlotte Brunsdon's discussion of the impact of feminism on the CCCS in 'A Thief in the Night: Stories of Feminism in the 1970s at CCCS', in Morley and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, pp. 276–86.

16 Chen, p. 500.

17 Anne Balsamo, 'Feminism and Cultural Studies', *The Journal of the Midwest MLA*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1991, p. 53.

18 Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, 'On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: "British" Cultural Studies in an "International" Frame', in Morley and Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall*, p. 376.

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