

THE POLITICAL MOMENT AND THE NATURE OF NAMING

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Raimi Gbadamosi pays tribute to the late Stuart Hall in a reflection upon the role of the black artist.

In 2004, Stuart Hall had this to say in “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History”:

In the ritual exchange of stereotypes around the body between ‘race’, gender and sexuality, racism had deployed its most violent and destructive fantasies. This could not be undone by simply reversing the terms, whereby in a single move ‘black’ became ‘beautiful’ – a strategy of positive imagery which was briefly tried but proved inadequate. Instead of subverting a system of representation, reversal leaves it intact, only standing on its head! Indeed, as we know, nothing can protect the black body – a signifier caught in the endless play of power – against reappropriation [.]¹

I am going to focus on this essay as a pointer, as I am in a position to choose a text relevant to me then and now. In this essay, Hall analysed the waves of Black artistic production in Britain, and his discussion provided me with a way of understanding myself as an artist, and highlights the schisms apparent in visual culture that surround me in Johannesburg.

I am reminded here of the video for *You Got Me* by The Roots (featuring Erykah Badu); a tale of



Flickr: Professor Stuart Hall. Antonio Olmos, September 12, 2007

complicated love, visualised, that the song pushes through a narrative of work, trust, and desire. In the video, *Black Thought*, the rapper, walks around bodies collapsed and inert in the cityscape. He eventually lies down next to one of the bodies, and the world comes to life. Through it all, Erykah Badu reassures him, it is more than love; it is support, and faith, and the confidence that all will make sense at some point.

“Stuart Hall continues to be a conceptual lodestone for a number of generations of artists and thinkers.”

In “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain”, Hall historicizes an approach to modernism and beyond by Black artists, which led to a redefinition of art and artists in contemporary Britain and elsewhere. He tells of the generational shift from conformity born of faith in the Colonial system to anachronism that only the descendants of conformists are capable of. In this, Stuart Hall continues to be a conceptual lodestone for a number of generations of artists and thinkers.

Britain was fortunate; it had and has the likes of Stuart Hall, and CLR James, and Rasheed Araeen, and

“(Some had an Empire, some were the Empire).”

Lola Young, and Sarat Maharaj, and Paul Gilroy – the list could go on for quite a while-- and out of that came the possibility to address a complex and complicated system of cultural, economic, social, sexual, gendered and political exclusion that did not have to name race and class as a basis for maltreatment but could function on this basis nonetheless. And yet Black Britons cannot rest on their new found authority, for the system does not rest either.

‘The Empire strikes back’ is one of those phrases that still holds the opposition to a self-satisfied hegemony together. One thing learnt was that naming must never be given up, and while it is possible to celebrate Britain’s claim to an easy adoption of national and racial others (after it no longer has the capacity to exploit them and their resources), and the children of the ‘independence Age’ of the 1960s realised they had a valid claim to their home in the face of constant and continuing rejections by the mother country: One should never forget who the Empire really was and is.

(Some had an Empire, some were the Empire)

Writers like Buchi Emecheta, who chronicled the period when Stuart Hall arrived in the United Kingdom through writing her own novels, told the type of stories Britain would rather forget, and John La Rose gave the gift of books to sustain the cultural and critical needs of an articulate black population. I have to pause and address the question of ‘black’ as a collective definer, a political position reliant on difference, but not on skin colour, even as skin functions as the marker of the difference. As a Black British Artist, blackness defines the terms of engagement, and still does, especially when in Johannesburg I get straight-on stares suffused with racial hate in the vegetable shop, because I dared to ask

for passage past another shopper, and voices filled with welcome embrace me amidst discarded city-centre ruins. And for the doubters, context is everything, as Hall taught, it allows for meaning in the smallest things.

This was the black body, presented as a moving signifier – first, as an object of visibility which can at last be ‘seen’; then as a foreign body, trespassing into unexpected and tabooed locations; then as the site of an excavation. This is the body as a space or canvas, on which to conduct an exploration into the inner landscapes of black subjectivity; the body, also, as a point of convergence for the materialization of intersecting planes of difference – the gendered body, the sexual body, the body as subject, rather than simply the object of looking and desire.²

Even more complicated is the acceptance of artificial classifications beyond race. Hall provides tools for dealing with the imposed representations of what it is to be made subject, and his progression into the arts seems natural; it meant and means the role of artists too became significant in a struggle to be seen, to achieve a voice strong and loud enough to be heard and addressed, and to establish a viable collective identity. Where else does the fiction of lived existence loom larger, than in the art gallery?

Terms like Black and Ethnic Minorities, BEM for short, may have emerged as a stratifying strategy, and have seen success in polarising positions, individualising experience, and rendering the collective presence vulnerable to new definitions from the outside. But they too will fade away in the face of a conscious and informed self-appraisal.

I listened to Raheem DeVaughn sing *You*, and the question of representing a collective self loomed again. Hall is clear on this in his writing: the self is responsible, we have control over what is seen, and the Empire will strike back. I had to play Angie Stone’s *Brotha* to complete my picture, or would Erykah Badu’s *Otherside of the Game* been more suitable?

NOTES

- 1 Hall, Stuart. “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History”, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 61, Autumn 2006. p.20.
- 2 Hall, Stuart. “Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History”, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 61, Autumn 2006. p.20.

REFERENCES

- Badu, Erykah. *Otherside of the Game* on Baduizm, 1997.
DeVaughn, Raheem. *You* on [The Love Experience](#), 2005.
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Roots, The. *You Got Me* on [Things Fall Apart](#), 1999.
Stone, Angie. *Brotha* on [Mahogany Soul](#), 2001.