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Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-war History

Stuart Hall

Correspondence: Smhall@dircon.co.uk

Editorial Introduction

In November 2004 Stuart Hall delivered the Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture to a packed audience at London's Conway Hall. The lecture was the culmination of a day devoted to 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain, Past and Present', organized by the Raphael Samuel History Centre at the University of East London, which had also featured multimedia presentations by three artists based at the University of East London – Roshini Kempadoo, Keith Piper and Faisal Abdu'allah – and a showing of Horace Ove's film, A Dream to Change the World. We here publish an edited transcript of Stuart Hall's lecture, accompanied by reproductions of some of the major artworks to which he refers. The 'Black Diaspora Artists' event was co-sponsored by the Institute of International Visual Arts, which has recently published an important collection of essays, Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain, reviewed below by Sandy Nairne, director of the National Portrait Gallery and a participant in the 2001 conference on which the volume is based.

The article offers a conjunctural analysis of three 'moments' in the post-war black visual arts in the UK. The main contrast identified is between the 'problem space' of the artists—the last 'colonials'—who came to London after World War Two to join the modern avant-garde and who were anti-colonial, cosmopolitan and modernist in outlook, and that of the second generation—the first 'post-colonials'—who were born in Britain, pioneered the Black Art Movement and the creative explosion of the 1980s, and who were anti-racist, culturally relativist and identity-driven. In the work of the former, abstraction predominated; the work of the latter was politically polemical and collage-based, subsequently embracing the figural and the more subjective strategy of 'putting the self in the frame'. This generational shift is mapped here in relation to wider socio-political and

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cultural developments, including the growth of indigenous racism, the new social movements, especially anti-racist, feminist and identity politics, and the theoretical ‘revolutions’ associated with them. The contemporary moment—less politicized, and artistically neo-conceptual, multi-media and installation-based—is discussed more briefly.

I am delighted to take up the invitation from the University of East London's Raphael Samuel History Centre to give the 2004 Memorial Lecture for my friend Raphael Samuel. I first met Raphael at Oxford in 1952 and our paths – personal, intellectual, political – closely intersected thereafter until his untimely death in 1996. In the deep-freeze days of the Cold War, we were beleaguered members of different fractions of the Oxford student left: he, already a gifted historian and leading light of the small but influential Communist Party group; me a member of a more dispersed, independent and diasporic left. With others, we founded *Universities and Left Review* in 1956, in the aftermath of the invasions of Suez and Hungary, and then *New Left Review* – projects which would never have happened without Raphael's unquenchable political energy, which brooked no empirical obstacle. Not being a historian, I was not directly involved in the founding of *History Workshop Journal*, but remained engaged with its wider project – including the recovery of neglected, hidden and subaltern histories. I have thought of this lecture as a contribution, perhaps from an unexpected direction, to that initial inspiration.

The lecture also aspires to add another kind of chapter to those collected and edited posthumously by Alison Light, Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones in *Island Stories* (Verso, 1998), the second volume of Raphael's richly-textured and ever-evolving work, *Theatres Of Memory*, which focused on what he called ‘the wildly different versions of the national past on offer at any point in time’, depending on the optic adopted. In part, that project disturbed the master-narrative of ‘the nation’ by seeing it from the perspective of its four constituent parts. Mine tries to de-centre this re-writing still further by adopting a diasporic perspective.

In doing so, I borrow the spirit of Raphael's method. As Alison Light observed in her Biographical Note to *Island Stories*, ‘the incompleteness of some of the essays ... is as much a measure of Raphael Samuel's constant, even obsessive, revising and recreating of every project he was involved in ...’: his work – I know, sometimes to my cost – was always in a state of fissiparously disseminating before completion into multiple further projects. Further, apart from a short chapter, left in provisional draft form, entitled ‘Empire Stories: the Imperial and The Domestic’, and the plan of a final but unwritten chapter on ‘post-colonial history’, Raphael did not really address the impact of the post-war, post-colonial, diaspora cultures on the national culture or the subversive effect of racial difference on the ‘un-writing’ of ‘our island story’. And since our friendship was marked by intense argument and discussion, I should add that Raphael and I did not really agree about this matter and, alas, it remained unresolved at his death. So this is also a continuation of the debate by other means.

I want to identify and roughly characterize three contrasting ‘moments’ in the history of the black diaspora visual arts in post-war Britain.¹ The aim is not only to continue the

project of inserting this ‘constitutive outside’ into the centre of ‘our island story’, but – in choosing the visual arts as my point of departure – to do so from an unexpected angle. But first, some words of warning. ‘Black’ is used here with a deliberate imprecision deriving from the ’70s, when the term encompassed all the minority migrant communities without the careful discrimination of ethnic, racial, regional, national and religious distinctions which has since emerged. It is used here not as the sign of an ineradicable genetic imprint but as a signifier of difference: a difference which, being historical, is therefore always changing, always located, always articulated with other signifying elements: but which, nevertheless, continues – persistently – to register its disturbing effects.

As to ‘the arts’: being neither an artist, art critic nor art historian, I cannot discuss individual works of art or artists in the aesthetic and critical depth they deserve. My focus here is on historical moments and their periodization. I discuss ‘the work’ as part of a cultural/political formation, a constitutive element in a field of ideas, practices, social movements and political events – though I do also want to insist that it offers a privileged vantage point on to that world.

The approach, then, is ‘historical’. Or, since I have already confessed to not being a historian, I had better settle for ‘genealogical’. I want to begin to construct an outline ‘genealogy’ of the post-war Black British diaspora arts. This means marking their distinct ‘moments’; noting certain striking convergences between very different kinds of work; but, more significantly, identifying the breaks and ruptures between moments as they unravel and disseminate, their elements evolving in radically different directions. I am concerned with shifts in thematic concerns, in ‘ways of seeing’, in what we might call the construction of different ‘fields of vision’ and what they tell us, symptomatically, about changes in what Raymond Williams (in *The Long Revolution*, 1961) called ‘structures of feeling’. I try to think of such moments as *conjunctures*. Thinking conjuncturally involves ‘clustering’ or assembling elements into a formation. However, there is no simple unity, no single ‘movement’ here, evolving teleologically, to which, say, all the artists of any moment can be said to belong. I try to assemble these three ‘moments’ in their fused but contradictory dispersion. As I will try to show, the late 1980s, a moment of explosive creativity in the black arts, is characterized by deep fissures which in turn set in train new trajectories that diverge rather than ‘adding up’. That is why the 1980s remain so contested, a focus of unfulfilled desire. They can be ‘mapped’ only as the ‘condensation’ of a series of overlapping, interlocking but non-corresponding ‘histories’.

Does this undermine the genealogical enterprise? Not necessarily. It depends on how a ‘moment’ is defined. Neither decade, accident of shared date of birth or location will do. Artists of the same generation do different kinds of work. They go on working, across different moments, often in radically different ways from how they began. Or they continue to follow a trajectory long after its ‘moment’ has passed. They appear here, not in their radically-creative individuality, but as the ‘bearers’ – ‘subjects’, in a displaced Foucauldian sense – of their artistic practices. By ‘moment’ then, I mean the coming together or convergence of certain elements to constitute, for a time, a distinct discursive formation, a ‘conjuncture’, in a Gramscian sense. This is always ‘a fusion of

contradictory forces’; or as Althusser once put it, a ‘condensation of dissimilar currents, the ruptural fusion of an accumulation of contradictions’ whose ‘unity’ is necessarily over-determined.²

* * *

David Scott, in his challenging new book, *Conscripts of Modernity*, calls such a moment a *problem space*.

[A] problem space is first of all a conjunctural space, a historically constituted discursive space. This discursive conjuncture is defined by a complex of questions and answers – or better, a complex of statements, propositions, resolutions and arguments offered in answer to largely implicit questions or problems. Or ... these statements ... are moves in a field or space of arguments and to understand them requires reconstructing that space of problems that elicited them.³

Evoking a ‘problem space’, then, is to think of a conjuncture epistemologically. It is as if every historical moment poses a set of cognitive, political – and I would add, artistic – questions which together create a ‘horizon’ of possible futures within which we ‘think the present’, and to which our practices constitute a reply; a moment defined as much by the questions posed as by the ‘answers’ we seem constrained or ‘conscripted’ to give. When the historical conjuncture changes – as it did significantly between the 1960s and the 1980s and again, between the 1990s and the present – the problem space, and thus the practices, also change since, as David Scott puts it, what was a ‘horizon of the future’ for *them* has become *our* ‘futures past’ – a horizon which we can ‘no longer imagine, seek after, inhabit’, or indeed create in, *see or represent* in the same way.

* * *

We can usefully divide the post-war Black British diaspora artists into three distinct ‘waves’. The first generation was born in the 1920s and 1930s in the far-flung corners of the British Empire. They came to Britain, as the last ‘colonials’, in the 1950s and 1960s, immediately after the Second World War, on the eve of decolonization – following, in the Caribbean case, the political upheavals of the 1930s, or in India and Africa the rise of the independence movements – to fulfil their ambitions to become practising artists. The pioneer figure, Ronald Moody, a major sculptor of the black body, whose work sadly awaits a retrospective, was born in Jamaica around 1900 and lived and worked in London and Paris before the war. He returned to London in 1941. Between the mid 1940s and the mid '60s, F. N. Souza, Avinash Chandra, Frank Bowling, Aubrey Williams, Donald Locke, Ahmed Parvez, Anwar Schemza, Balraj Khanna, Iqbal Geoffrey, Ivan Peiris, Uzo Egonu, Li Yuan Chia, David Medalla, among others, arrived in Britain. Rasheed Araeen – painter, and sculptor, born in Karachi – came to London in the 1960s. He became a major cultural animator, curator of the famous *The Other Story* Hayward exhibition, founder-editor of *Third Text* and tireless champion of what he described as ‘the unique story ... of those men and women who defied their "otherness" and entered the modern space that was forbidden to them, not only to declare their historic claim on it but also to challenge the framework which defined and protected its boundaries’. He and Avtarjeet Dhanjal, the modern sculptor from India who arrived in 1974 via East Africa, are

manifestly transitional figures who span the two moments. Whereas the leading early figures of the second ‘wave’ – people like Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Mona Hatoum, Maud Sulter, Gavin Jantjes and others – were not born until the 1950s or 1960s and did not exhibit work until two decades later.

One immediate contrast between these two ‘waves’ lies in their attitude to Modernism. Broadly speaking, the artists of the first wave came to London in a spirit not altogether different from that in which Picasso and others went to Paris: to fulfil their artistic ambitions and to participate in the heady atmosphere of the most advanced centres of artistic innovation at that time. As colonials, they had been – and are still thought of as – marginalized from such developments. In fact, they came to Britain feeling that they naturally belonged to the modern movement and, in a way, it belonged to them. The promise of decolonization fired their ambition, their sense of themselves as already ‘modern persons’. It liberated them from any lingering sense of inferiority. Their aim was to engage the modern world as equals on its own terrain. In that sense, they shared, and were clearly part of, the rising optimism of the first ‘Windrush’ generation of West Indian migrants, who came in the 1950s and 1960s in search of a better life, and whose jaunty self-confidence is so palpable in the images of their arrival produced at the time.⁴

They – we – came, of course, *because* of the colonial connection, following linkages forged by imperialism. An ambiguous journey, since they/we knew ‘Britain’ intimately but from afar, as both ‘the mother country’ and ‘the mother of all their troubles’. They came to see for themselves, to look it in the eye – and, if possible, to conquer it.

Artists were not alone in this. In the 1950s and 1960s London became the Mecca for a group of Caribbean writers and intellectuals who felt that they had to migrate to fulfil their ambitions. George Lamming has written poignantly in *The Pleasures Of Exile* (1960) about how a whole generation of West Indian writers – Lamming himself, Edgar Mittelholzer, Vic Reid, Roger Mais, Sam Selvon, John Hearne, Jan Carew, V. S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Neville Dawes – all ‘felt the need to get out’.⁵ As Lamming says, referring to their colonial education, ‘How in the name of Heavens could a colonial native taught by an English native within a strict curriculum diligently guarded over by yet another English native ... ever get out from under the ancient mausoleum of this historic achievement?’⁶ The West Indian novel is the product of this migratory movement because, as Lamming observed, ‘in this sense, most West Indians of my generation were born in England’.⁷ The intellectual and artistic ferment created in these years of exile is finely documented in Ann Walmsly’s history of *The Caribbean Artists Movement* (1992), to which they all belonged.

The distinctiveness of the relationship of this anti-colonial mentality to Modernism is a difficult ‘horizon of the future’ for younger contemporaries to imagine or inhabit. As a result of what Edward Said has called the ‘dynamic of dependency’ in colonial societies, the writers and artists were already knowledgeable about new developments in western writing and painting long before they set out. However, ‘modern art’ was seen by them as an international creed, fully consistent with anti-colonialism which was regarded as

intrinsic to a modern consciousness. These writers and artists were, of course, deeply critical of the colonial imposition of western models. Nevertheless, as Rasheed Araeen has argued, they saw an engagement with modern art as ‘the only way of dealing with the aspirations of our time’. They seemed to agree even with so ‘English’ a figure as Herbert Read, a leading Modernist apostle, that modern art was an attempt ‘to create forms more appropriate to the sense and sensibility of the new age’. They were, in that sense, ‘moderns’ in spirit, if not specifically ‘Modernists’: internalizing the spirit of restless innovation, the impulse to ‘make it new’, which defined the modern attitude. Frank Bowling, who left London for the United States in 1966, and who has had an unswerving loyalty to abstraction throughout his later career, said ‘I believe the Black soul, if there is such a thing, belongs in Modernism’.⁸ They regarded the artistic vocation as a universal calling. They claimed art in the name of humanity in general. They were universalist and cosmopolitan in outlook.

There are many parallels elsewhere with this complex attitude from below to the idea of ‘the modern’. There were, of course, the vigorous indigenous modern art movements of India, Africa and Latin America – like the astonishingly bold and formally revolutionary space opened up by Brazilian artists such as Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark – since largely written out of the history of Modernism with a capital ‘M’. Between the Wars, the Harlem Renaissance had aspired to combine the formal mastery of European modernism with what Houston Baker calls ‘the deformation of mastery’ through which the black vernacular found expression.⁹ There was that vibrant, heady, syncretic, urban culture which surfaced in the 1950s in the mixed-race areas of some South African cities, the matrix from which the anti-apartheid struggle emerged: including that astonishing company of black journalists and photographers, such as Peter Magubane, Bob Gosani and Alf Kumalo, grouped around the magazine *Drum*. There is the explosive, syncopated world of West African urban music. More personally, I remember the young black intellectuals I knew in Kingston in the late 1940s, before I too set off in pursuit of ‘the pleasures of exile’, who were dreaming of freedom to the haunting but forbiddingly complex and uncompromisingly ‘modern’ tonalities of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk.

Of course many artists from the colonial world shared the anti-colonial objective to destroy the feudal structures they inhabited or the foreign institutions imposed by colonialism. There was also a powerful ‘nativist’ current in anti-colonial nationalism – where opposition to colonialism was grounded in the traditional cultures which colonialism had almost destroyed, and in hope that the culture of the new nations would emerge from some redemptive revival of these older values. Anwar Jalal Shemza, one of those migrating artists who came to Modernism steeped in the formal traditions of Islamic art, never resolved the contradictory pulls between these currents. And indeed, as we know from the wonderfully rich chapter on ‘Resistance And Opposition’ in Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), these tensions between the ‘nativist’ and the modernizing impulses in anti-colonial nationalism have never been resolved. They haunt us still today.

However, as far as we can judge, the dream of the ‘first wave’ was not to restore the past so much as to look forward, expecting independence to issue in a new era of progress and freedom which would be the basis for a new, post-colonial culture as well as enhancing the individual's capacity for creative innovation. Certainly, they continued to paint and create with varying degrees of reference to the sights and sounds, cultures and traditions, histories and memories of their places of origin. However, increasingly, they seemed to *see* these things within a modern vision-field, via the modern consciousness of a certain ‘de-territorialization’ of colour and form.

Aubrey Williams's career is exemplary here. His early figurative and naturalistic painting, the astonishing birds and other natural forms of his Guyanese and Latin-American ‘continental’ work (including *Kaituk* (1970), a painting of the Kaieteur waterfalls in Guyanas which is a landscape literally in the process of becoming an abstract) was followed by an explosive move into abstraction, in his Arawak and Carib compositions and his Olmec and Mayan-inspired canvases, and on to the swirling colours and shapes of his ‘cosmologies’ and his struggle to find visual co-relatives for the symphonies and quartets of the Russian composer Shostakovich. As the critic Guy Brett observed of Williams,

He arrived in London as a young artist with a unique combination of experiences: an agronomist's knowledge of the fauna and flora of his country, political experience of a moment of profound historical change, a deep curiosity about the pre-Columbian culture of Central and South America, and memories – human, affective ones – of a people for whom ‘life’ and ‘art’ were interconnected. With these memories, he began working in the ‘mainstream of modern art’ influenced by Pollock, Kline and especially Gorky, as well as Rivera, Orozco, Tamayo and Matta (the North and South American vanguards had a connection, especially in the thirties and forties, which they have never had before or since).¹⁰

* * *

What happened to this ‘structure of feeling’? The disintegration of this ‘moment’ is a complicated affair – over-determined from several directions. There was the actual experience of the first ‘wave’, which turned out to be a patchy and dispiriting affair. For a time they were central to the *avant-garde* of the day, attracting critical acclaim, operating at what Guy Brett calls ‘the heady interface between artistic innovation and trans-nationalism’.¹¹ But some found the doors of recognition barred and became progressively disenchanted. A few retreated into self-imposed internal exile. At one point, Ahmed Parvez tore up his canvases and left England for good. Anwar Shemza experienced an artistic trauma and totally changed direction. Frank Bowling emigrated to the United States. Rasheed Araeen describes in a recent essay the onset of a ‘personal crisis’ in the early 1970s when he lost ‘all hope of becoming a successful artist’ as a consequence of ‘institutional indifference’.¹²

Another factor was the shift in attitudes towards Modernism itself, which ceased to be an all-encompassing name for – became just one more phase in – the long, unwinding story of contemporary art. Some questioned Modernism's ambivalent celebration of 'primitivism' – which seemed to have opened up the non-western world to western art, rejuvenating the latter's jaded spirits whilst appropriating the former as an exoticized 'support' to the West's inventiveness. There was a loss of confidence in its universalist and cosmopolitan claims – the result of a devastating critique which has proved historically decisive. There emerged the new critiques of 'cultural imperialism', growing out of a fuller understanding of the *cultural* dimensions of imperial power – of Eurocentrism and Orientalism – arising from a growing awareness of how the universalistic promise of the Enlightenment had been appropriated in a particularistic manner by the West.

More significantly, the whole fulcrum of the political world had shifted fundamentally. To speak metaphorically, between the work of Souza or Aubrey Williams and that of Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and the Pan-Afrikan Connection falls the shadow of *race*: the Notting Hill Race riots of 1958 followed by the murder of Kelso Cochrane; the Smethwick election; the visits to Britain of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; the formation of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD); the passing of the Immigration Acts, with their 'second-class' and 'patrial' categories; the appearance of Stokeley Carmichael at the Dialectics of Liberation Conference in 1968; the sound of Bob Marley and the sight of locksmen on the streets; the new sport of 'Paki-bashing'; the campaign against the 'sus' laws, and Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Horace Ove's photographic work, recently revived in an important retrospective, is a dynamic visual testimony to this moment. The result was a full-blown anti-racist politics, a powerful grassroots and community mobilization against racism and racial disadvantage and a fully-formed black consciousness, fed by Civil Rights, anti-apartheid and other global struggles. By the mid 1970s race had finally 'come home' to Britain. It had been fully indigenized.

This is the world into which the second 'wave' emerged. In the place of anti-colonialism, *race* had become the determining category. This changed conjuncture reshaped the experience, the political outlook and the visual imaginary of the first black generation to be born *in* the diaspora. There was nothing in the experience of the first 'wave' – who had certainly experienced racial discrimination – to match the speed and depth of this racializing process. The anger it provoked exploded across Britain's black communities. It literally scars, fractures, invades, scribbles and squiggles, graffiti-like, across – batters the surfaces of – works like Eddie Chambers's *Destruction of the NF* (1979–80) and *I Was Taught To Believe* (1982–3), Keith Piper's *Reactionary Suicide: Black Boys Keep Swinging (Another Nigger Died Today)* (1982) and *Arm in Arm They Enter The Gallery (This Nigger Is Sure As Hell Stretching My Liberalistic Tendencies)* (1982/3) or Donald Rodney's *The Lexicon Of Liberation* (1984).

This new 'horizon' produced a polemical and politicized art: a highly graphic, iconographic art of line and montage, cut-out and collage, image and slogan; the 'message' often appearing too pressing, too immediate, too literal, to brook formal delay

and, instead, breaking insistently into 'writing'. The black body – stretched, threatened, distorted, degraded, imprisoned, beaten, and resisting – became an iconic recurring motif. Keith Piper's and Donald Rodney's work of this period is exemplary – a magisterial rebuttal of the cliché that art and politics cannot creatively coexist. It was of a piece with Eddie Chambers's statement in *Black Art An' Done* (1981) that Black Art 'is a tool to assist us in our struggle for liberation both at home and abroad'.¹³

The moment of the late 1970s/early 1980s was however divided at its heart. Right alongside this politicized work, we can identify a second set of impulses, less overtly political, though no less 'engaged' with wider issues: concerned with exploring the experience of, and resistance to, racism, but in a more subjective idiom. At first these tendencies overlapped. A critical factor here was the Civil Rights struggle. It was here that Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Marlene Smith and others picked up the idea of a Black Arts movement grounded in an anti-racist politics, an Afro-centred black identity and a 'Black Aesthetic'. But more significant perhaps in the long run was the path that the Civil Rights movement took, from the integrated 'black-and-white-unite-and-fight' desegregation struggles of the mid 1960s to the Black Power, black consciousness, 'black-is-beautiful' phase, with its greater focus on 'race' as a positive, but exclusive, identity category, and its more separatist, cultural-nationalist, Afro-centric and essentialist emphases. Exhibitions like the *Black Art An' Done* show, organized by Chambers and Piper, at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the *Five Black Women* show organized by Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Sonia Boyce, Houria Niati and Veronica Ryan at the Africa Centre, translated those vibrations on to the British scene – though the decision of five black women to exhibit separately may have been a harbinger of trouble to come. These and similar initiatives opened the floodgates to a veritable deluge of independent shows and exhibitions in photography and the visual arts, the prelude to that extraordinary explosion of creative production which staked out the terrain of the autonomous 'Black Arts' movement of the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴

Here I can only track one theme from the array of questions which this creative upsurge posed. The experience of racialized exclusion bore down in a particular way, subjectively as well as politically, on this second generation. Separated from their homes of origin, marginalized from society's mainstream, excluded and stereotyped, discriminated against in the public sphere, pushed around by the police, abused in the streets, and profoundly alienated from recognition or acceptance by British society at large, they were haunted by questions of identity and belonging. 'Who are we?' 'Where do we come from?' 'Where do we really belong?'

Of course, the identity question had already surfaced in the 1970s, and was regarded at the time as not alternative but integral to the politics of black resistance. It first emerged as a symbolic restoration of the African connection, so long disavowed in the Caribbean itself, which took the form of the rediscovery of an African identity *through* its diasporic translation and dissemination; that 'Africa' which is 'alive and well in the diaspora': as much a 'country of the mind', an imagined community, as a real, historical space that lives 'Africa' through its New World displacements. This 'Africa' begins to be spoken at this time by young Black British people – in part through the languages and iconography

of Rastafarianism and ‘dreadlocks’ – and is evident everywhere in street life, in the styling of dress and body, in music and black popular culture. In the visual arts it is, perhaps, most splendidly celebrated in the photographic work of Armet Francis, Vanley Burke and Franklyn Rodgers, though later it is given an erotic re-reading by Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Robert Taylor. A new Pan-African diasporic imaginary surfaces for a time, redeeming through image and sound the breaches and terrors of a broken history.

This is the performative identity we find in the rhythms of Bob Marley and ‘roots’ reggae – a syncretic, contemporary music masquerading as a traditional music of memory, transmitting ‘ancient’ pulses by the most ‘modern’ of technologies, and ‘speaking’ as much of Kingston and London as of Guinea or Angola: grounded in the double inscriptions of a richly metaphorical syntax which condensed into one narrative or visual trope such dissimilar currents as the ‘loss’ of Africa, the terrors of the Middle Passage, the trauma of enslavement and indenture, the humiliations of colonialism, the displacements of migration, the search for identity, the ‘suffering’ still in place (despite independence) in Kingston's Trench Town *and* the new kinds of ‘suffering’ emerging in the ‘Babylons’ of Handsworth, Brixton, Bradford, Toxteth and Moss Side.

In this moment, long before the quarrels between the different tendencies of the second conjuncture surface (which registered as differences in art practice), identity in a broader sense acquired a political meaning and political struggle acquired a cultural dimension. Identity-politics has since, perhaps deservedly, acquired a bad name. However I want to argue that in this moment the emergence of the identity question constituted a compelling and productive ‘horizon’ for artists: not so much the celebration of an essential identity fixed in time and ‘true’ to its origins, but rather – as the Rastafarian case, despite appearances, actually demonstrates – what we would now call ‘the production of a new, black subject’. And since that is a conception of identity and subjectivity which can only be constituted within, rather than outside, representation, the ‘answers’ in practice which music and the visual arts provided were absolutely critical. As I said at the time,

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. Like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, would secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.¹⁵

Such issues connected directly with the shifts in artistic practice between the 1960s and the 1980s – from the binary of ‘pure abstraction’ versus ‘documentary realism’ to the more mixed or hybrid mode – in photography – of the constructed image and – in the visual arts more broadly – the ‘return to the figural’, best located in the foregrounding of the black body as the key racial signifier. This is specially striking in photography, which for a time dispensed with the documentary mode altogether and turned to the consciously-staged image – the photograph aspiring to the condition of the work of art.¹⁶ We find this preoccupation with body and self in artists and photographers as diverse as Sonia Boyce,

Keith Piper, Mona Hatoum, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Joy Gregory, Maxine Walker, Ingrid Pollard, Sunil Gupta, Franklyn Rogers, Clement Cooper, Dave Lewis, David A. Bailey, Ajamu, Roshini Kempadoo, Chila Burman and many others. This deliberate 'staging' of the black body is the only motif I have time to consider in any depth.

It includes the preoccupation with portraiture and, particularly, self-portraiture; with 'putting the self' 'in the frame'; with relocating the stereotyped, abject, black body of racialized discourse 'in the field of vision'. 'Black self-portraiture', I have argued, 'broke its links with the western humanist celebration of self and became more positional – the staking of a claim, a wager. The black self-image was in a double sense, an exposure, a "coming out". The self is caught in its very emergence.'¹⁷ These selves are contextualized but, as it were, on the inside. The experience of historical rupture and break, of loss and resistance, of migration and upheaval, of the struggle to live within multiple locations and to sustain multiple versions of the self, multiple strategies of resistance, 'are allowed to invade and disrupt the mythical inner wholeness of the self-image'.¹⁸

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.

With this putting of the black body into question we come face to face, not with some essential 'truth' about blackness, but with what elsewhere I called 'the end of the essential black subject'¹⁹ – triggering a kaleidoscopic proliferation of meanings around blackness, and bringing to light the hidden connections between the racialized, the gendered and the sexualized body – a space of condensation which for so long had been the privileged operational zone of racial discourse. I argued in *Different* (2001) that

This body is at one and the same time the 'container' of identity and subjectivity, the over-determined point where differences collide, what Fanon called 'the epidermal schema' or surface on which racism etches its indelible mark, and a ground of resistance from which alternative counter-narratives can be produced. On the site of the body, racial discourse had long undertaken the work of systematically reducing history to biology, culture to nature.²⁰

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: witness the way it has transmogrified, apparently seamlessly, from a reduced, abject stereotype into the well-honed, 'designer' bodies found everywhere in the contemporary iconographies of sport,

fashion, the music business, street 'chic' and advertising. It was therefore necessary not just to vary the stereotype but to deconstruct it from within: entering the terrain of a dangerous, unguaranteed 'politics of representation' which, in Rotimi Fani-Kayode's work, for example, involved undoing from inside the very fetishism which had been deployed to try to fix it irreversibly.

If we ask what were the wider conjunctural elements which fused together sufficiently to make this 'turn' possible, one can only indicatively map a number of different histories. There is the fragmentation of the landscapes of social class and the consequent collapse of 'class' as the master analytic category, into which all other contradictions could be subsumed. This led to the rise of the so-called 'new social movements', each with its own authentic constituency, in whose name political claims were to be made, producing a further fragmentation of the political field.

There was the rise of gender and sexual politics, loosened from the grip of economic determinism by the same process that made 'race' more visible. Feminine, personal, familial and domestic themes, hitherto excluded from the political field, were exposed to view. Black women did not slot easily into a feminism led largely by white women. However, without this conjuncture of feminism and black politics, the work of people like Sonia Boyce, Claudette Holmes, Lubaina Himid, Maud Sulter, Mona Hatoum, Sutapa Biswas and many others, would never have taken the form it did. Equally significant was the impact of feminism and sexual politics in opening up the question of masculinity, the homo-erotic gaze and gay desire. The early work by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Sunil Gupta, Ajamu, and – in film – Isaac Julien and others, broke the tabooed silence around black male desire and exposed how, through an aggressive black masculinity, some black men continue to live out and reproduce, in inverted form, their own historic subordination and infantilization.

Thirdly, Thatcherism and free-market neo-liberalism were the forces which successfully hegemonized the crisis in the post-war settlement. The destruction of the social fabric, the assault on the welfare state and punishment of the poor and disadvantaged at home, unbent the springs of action, including anti-racist politics. The race uprisings of 1980, 1981 and 1985 – undoubtedly a response to the brutal impact of Thatcherism – were in fact the last of their kind for fifteen years, until the riots in northern industrial towns in 2001, with their very different motivation. Of course, racism and racial violence persisted, right alongside multiculturalism. But black and Asian people were also not immune to the seductions of 'the enterprise culture'.²¹

Finally there was the theoretical deluge which swept across the 1970s and 1980s, and is sometimes wrongly held responsible for the loss of political momentum. In this category we must include new theories of language and discourse; the post-Bakhtinian attention to the polysemic nature of language and the post-structuralist themes of 'the slippage of the signifier', constituting the struggle over meaning and the relations of representation as key sites of political struggle; psychoanalytic and other theories of 'subjectivity'; theorizations of 'difference'; the rise of post-colonial theory and the 'philosophy of the Other'. In this space of renewed theoretical debate, there emerged what have come to be

called the ‘posts’ – post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-feminism, post-marxism and so on: ‘post’ signalling, not the passing of chronological time, but the waning of old paradigms – passage without supersession, dialogic movement without dialectical overcoming.

The ‘moment’ of the late 1970s/early 1980s, then, is really two moments condensed into one. It was followed by a sustained wave of new work in the early 1990s which I cannot here discuss at length. I have had my say about much of it in photography in *Different* (2001). It was a period of novelty, of innovation, of cutting-edge achievement. But the 1990s seem to me to have operated on a ‘problem space’ largely defined by the 1980s. If there is a third moment proper – or, perhaps, a fourth? – then it is the one emerging now, before our eyes, and it is too soon to attempt to configure it. What we can say is that ‘black’ by itself – in the age of refugees, asylum seekers and global dispersal – will no longer do. It has become part of the disseminating axes of difference which provide intersecting lines of identification, exclusion and contestation, and which have – as usual – also proved to be both sharply divisive and artistically highly productive. In culture, the polarizing tendencies – present everywhere in that highly contradictory formation called ‘globalization’ – between the pull towards fundamentalism, ethnic and religious particularism on the one hand and a homogenizing, evangelizing assimilationism on the other – have left the ground in between more embattled. On the other hand, the black diaspora arts stand in a more engaged position in relation to contemporary art practice, in part because the art world itself has been obliged to become more ‘global’ – though some parts of the globe remain, in this respect, noticeably more ‘global’ than others. The thematics of what Zeigam Azizov calls ‘the migration paradigm’ – boundaries and border crossings, liminal and disrupted places, voyaging and displacement, fault-lines and states of emergency – are surfacing and intruding ‘within the work’ everywhere, as the costs of living in one deeply uneven, interdependent but dangerous and unequal world make themselves felt. Difference refuses to disappear. In terms of artistic practice, we are now unequivocally in the domain of the installation, multi-imaging, the digital arts and, above all, neo-conceptualism; though fortunately the concepts which the diaspora arts deploy are actually *about* something – they have a content – and are not floating about in a passionless, self-referential void, entertaining only themselves.

* * *

I end with two, somewhat, disconnected, reflections. First, I have been trying, as it were, to contribute to the ‘writing’ of the post-war history of the black diaspora through the optic of its visual arts. In doing so, I have been insisting that it should be properly ‘historical’ – that is, with proper attention to chains of causation and conditions of existence, to questions of periodization and conjuncture – not just celebratory of a general and undifferentiated ‘black presence’. I have been concerned to give it specificity; but also to read it *both* in its connection with, and its difference from, other histories. In doing so I have tried to follow Edward Said’s injunction to ‘think contrapuntally’, to treat ‘different experiences ... as making up a set of ... intertwined and overlapping histories’,²² to ‘think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal

coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others.’²³

The second reflection concerns the difficulty of trying – as I have – to make connections between works of art and wider social histories without collapsing the former or displacing the latter. Despite the sophistication of our scholarly and critical apparatus, we are still not very far advanced – especially when the language concerned is the visual – in finding ways of thinking about the relationship between the work and the world. We make the connection too brutal and abrupt, destroying that necessary displacement in which *the work* of making art takes place; or we protect the work from what Edward Said calls its necessary ‘worldliness’: projecting it into either a pure political space where conviction – political will – is all, or an inviolate aesthetic space, where only critics, curators, dealers and connoisseurs are permitted to play.

The problem is similar to the relationship between the dream and its materials in waking life. We know there *is* a connection there. But we also know that the two ‘continents’ cannot be lined up and their correspondences read off directly against one another. Between the work and the world, as between psychic and social, the bar of the historical unconscious, as it were, has fallen. The effect of the unseen ‘work’ – that which takes place out of consciousness, in the relationship between creative practice and deep currents of change – is thereafter always a delicate matter of *re-presentation* and *translation*, with all the lapses, elisions, incompleteness of meaning and incommensurability of political goals these terms imply. What Freud called ‘the dream-work’ – in his lexicon, the tropes of displacement, substitution and condensation – is what enables the materials of the one to be ‘re-worked’ or translated into the forms of the other, and for the latter to be enabled to ‘say more’ or ‘go beyond’ the willed consciousness of the individual artist. For those who work in the displaced zone of ‘the cultural’, the world has somehow to become a text, an image, before it can be ‘read’.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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Stuart Hall was born in Jamaica and has lived in the UK since 1951. He was Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies, Birmingham and is now Emeritus Professor at the Open University and Chair of the Boards of the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) and Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers. His most recent relevant publication is *Different: Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity*, with Mark Sealy, Phaidon Press, 2001.

1 An earlier version of this argument is to be found in my essay, ‘Assembling the 80s – The Deluge and After’, in *Shades of Black*, ed. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce, Durham NC, 2005.

2 Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Over-determination', *For Marx*, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 99.

3 The quotation is from the Stuart Hall/David Scott interview, published in *Bomb* 90, winter 2004/5. The concept of 'problem space' is more fully developed in David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Durham NC and London, 2004.

4 See Stuart Hall, 'Re-construction Work', *Ten/8*, 1984.

5 George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, Michael Joseph, London, 1960, p. 41.

6 Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile*, p. 27.

7 Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile*, p. 214.

8 Frank Bowling, 'Frank Bowling and Bill Thompson: a Conversation Between Two Painters', *Art International*, 1976, quoted in Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story*, London, 1989.

9 Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Chicago and London, 1987, p. xvi.

10 Guy Brett, 'A Tragic Excitement', in *Aubrey Williams*, Institute of International Visual Arts and the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1998, p. 25.

11 On critical writing addressed to this interface in the visual arts, see Guy Brett, *Carnival of Perception: Selected Writings on Art*, Institute of International Visual Arts, London 2004.

12 Rasheed Araeen, 'Rethinking History and Some Other Things', *Third Text* 54, spring 2001, p. 95.

13 Eddie Chambers, artist's statement in the *Back Art An 'Done* catalogue, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, June 1981.

14 See *Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s*, ed. David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, *Ten/8* 2: 3, 1992.

15 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London, p. 225.

16 This shift is discussed in Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy, *Different: Contemporary Photography and Black Identity*, London, 2001.

17 Stuart Hall, 'Black Narcissus', in the catalogue for Autograph's *Autoportrait* exhibition, p. 3.

18 Hall, 'Black Narcissus'.

19 Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, Routledge, 1996, p. 443.

20 Stuart Hall, in Hall and Sealy, *Different*, p. 38.

21 See Stuart Hall, 'Aspiration and Attitude: Reflections on Black Britain in the 90's', in the *Frontlines/Backyards* issue, *New Formations* 37, spring 1998.

22 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1994, p. 19.

23 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 36.