Citation:
Doharty, N (2018) 'Is it because I'm Black?': Personal reflections on Stuart Hall's memoir Familiar Stranger, A Life Between Two Islands. Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 25 (1). pp. 14-21. ISSN 1070-289X DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1412154

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:
https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/4522/

Document Version:
Article (Accepted Version)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power on 26 Mar 2018, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1412154

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please contact us and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

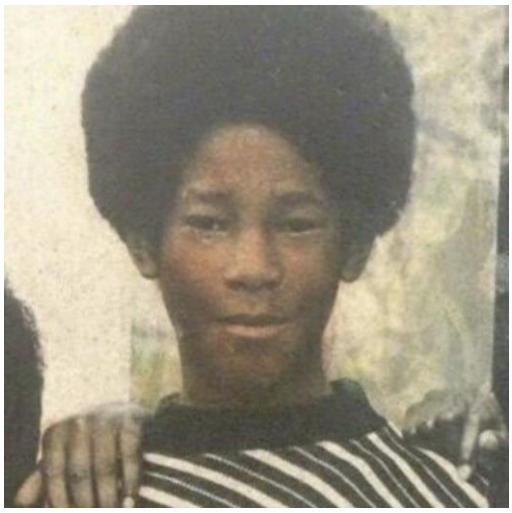
‘Is it because I’m Black?’: Personal reflections on Stuart Hall’s memoir *Familiar Stranger, A Life Between Two Islands*

Stuart Hall’s memoir reveals the roots of his intellectual identity through a personal exploration of the inseparable connections between his life and his ideas. Hall inserts his own biography into the history of Jamaica pre- independence from British colonial rule to shed light upon their unequal but inter-dependent connections and entanglements. In so doing, Hall’s personal form of the memoir intertwined with links to the broader historical context shows that Jamaica and Britain shared more to inform, shape and *displace* particular identities because of the complexities of race/colour and class. Therefore in both places, Hall felt a curious sense of déjà vu - a familiar stranger. Hall argues his struggles with identity in Britain were also the result of her inability to come to terms with colonialism and decolonisation, choosing rather to deny a history to the colonised and failing to look at her own disorder and displacements.

This article adopts a similar two-fold approach to Hall’s memoir by discussing my personal biography as a racialised Black woman culturally displaced in the national context and, making links to the broader social/historical approach to the teaching of History in English schools. Identit*ies*, and the recognition of the problematic nature of an essential Black subject has been fundamental to making sense of my own biography, but also my research on Black students’ experiences of studying Black History in English secondary schools.

The personal

Hall's memoir sheds light upon colourism within his family. Colourism in the Caribbean provides different degrees of acceptable Blackness; that is, lighter brown skin and 'good' (read: not coarse) hair being closer to Eurocentric standards of beauty than darker-skinned, kinky/curlier haired counterparts. This by-product of colonialism in the Caribbean is also an underlying feature in my family. My mother is Caribbean (Jamaican) and Asian (Chinese), but of her siblings, she has the least East Asian features and has her mother's dark brown skin. I have my father's lighter brown skin and I remember my mother remarked this was one of my 'good features' as well as *her* long hair! Her father never spoke of his upbringing and after leaving Jamaica, only went back once or twice. Five Jamaican and Chinese children were brought from Jamaica to their new lives in a predominantly working-class, Caribbean area of Bristol, England and you can see from my uncle's afro, he was gearing up for the dancehalls!



Part of the 'black' diasporic experience – settled communities of Caribbean peoples 'maintaining connections with the place and cultures of their ancestry in a new 'home' not fully theirs' – involves the use of language (Hall, 2017). The siblings were

schooled in England but used creole, or patois at home. Standard English, for them, was like a straitjacket they wore before leaving the house. To this day, they have not stopped 'creolizing their thinking' (Hall, 2017) and often, refuse to be suffocated by an insistence on using Standard English in White spaces any longer – "cyahh badda" (can't be bothered) – so, speak using creole *first*. Encountering predominantly White schools and a Eurocentric curriculum, which like Hall's experience, made no reference or connections to other colonial countries across the empire was unsettling. It did however, give them unique insight into how Britain framed their arrival and denied them a history so they – and other children of the empire – appeared to be "born out of place, displaced from the dominant currents of history" (Hall, 2017:95).

I was born in England and like Hall, always felt and continue to feel my outsiderness. Hall attributes this failure to 'fit' into the narrative of Britishness as a consequence of Black people being "written out of history – forgotten, disavowed, misrecognized" (Hall, 2017:12). Thus, my personal biography, my family history and indeed Hall's biography shares an important feature: displacement. Hall writes of feeling culturally displaced moving from Jamaica to England, without fully belonging to either place. For second generation immigrants such as myself, this cultural displacement manifests not as the result of physical migration; rather it is through institutional memories, media and policy erasure or silencing, strengthened by official knowledge filtered down through the curriculum, *and* having no tangible reference point of what *real* 'back home' life is like because I was not born or raised there either!

In England, I am reminded of my outsider position with the question – from Black and White people no less – “where are you *really* from?” I have started to return the question, “where do you think?” which is followed by an inquisitve dissection of my hair, eyes, skin colour and clothes. I have never heard “Britain” as a response. Hall argues that this ideologically loaded question is symptomatic of imperial amnesia – being dispossessed and disinherited from a past – and alerts those on the periphery of Britain’s colonial memories to “the strange imperatives by which the full force of the history of colonialism keeps slipping out of the collective memory of the metropole” (2017:12) affecting also, the approach to teaching History. Consequently, Caribbean peoples are inserted into History backwards and upside down, abetting an acute social forgetfulness (ibid, p.93).

The melancholic look back at Britain’s role in empire-building and the lack of acknowledgement about its global impact on communities of colour, perpetuates for Hall, a Britain in the present that developed aracially and ahistorically. In effect, this reduced the global diverse complexities of colonialism to a simplistic narrative of the ‘rise and rise of the West’ so that Britain’s involvement in empire-building was

because of a natural, God-given superiority over the colonised (Hall, 2017). This political approach to referencing empire seems to occur as "a matter of faith and providence rather than a historical outcome. It was as if Britain had an empire, as Sir John Seeley famously had it, in 'a fit of absentmindedness'" (Hall, 2017:119). It was only during the readings for my doctoral thesis that I discovered these processes of collective memory and collective *forgetting* are intentional (Feagin, 2010). In the former, political power holders (principally Whites) "have the greatest control over society-wide institutional memories, including those recorded by the media and in most history books, organizational histories, laws, textbooks, films, and public monuments" (ibid, p.17). In the latter, forgetting depends on how the "overt choices of the powerful…seek to suppress or weaken collective memories of societal oppression, and to construct positive and fictional memories" (ibid, p.17). One way collective memory and collective forgetting helps perpetuate a singular, unproblematic White British (read: English) identity and a singular Black immigrant identity is through official knowledge taught in schools, more commonly known as the National Curriculum which is where I turn next.

The professional

Hall argues that identity is a

> constantly shifting process of *positioning*. We tend to think of identity as taking us back to our roots, the part of us which remains essentially the same across time. In fact identity is always a never-completed *process* of becoming – a process of shifting *identifications*, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being (2017:16, italics in original).

Thus, it is more accurate to use the plural identit*ies* rather than assume an essential Black identity is not laden with reconstructions, transformations, plurality and antagonisms (Hall, 2017). In fact, to be of the African diaspora is to encounter fractured and changeable cultural identities, which challenges the notion of an "essential black subject" (ibid, p.144). The multiplicity of identities has been crucial to my work as a critical race scholar exploring African and Caribbean students' experiences of studying Black History in English secondary schools.

Black History in the National Curriculum at Key Stage 3 has suffered from crippling homogeneity designed to represent the histories of all African, Caribbean and South Asian peoples (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Doharty, 2017). 'Black History' as singular, encourages what Hall has remarked, a "racialized manner of looking . . . all [peoples] uniformly designated as 'black'. . . itself a misrecognition of Caribbean realities" (2017:175). Where Black History appears at Key Stage 3, it often falls into two camps: in opposition to Whiteness or celebratory and congratulatory (Doharty, 2015). From a critical race perspective, the official school curriculum is a "culturally specific artefact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (Ladson-Billings, 2009:29). This means that Black History is assimilated into the wider Whiteness-as-normal curriculum not to challenge the racial status quo, but as a form of 'mastery' over its scope and direction (Swartz, 1992). Consequently, Stone argued Black History is a 'misguided liberal strategy' designed to compensate the Black for not being White (1981).

In Critical Race Theory (CRT) literature, the study of Blackness must centre upon the

image of Black people and their *cultures* in wider society as in countries saturated by racism, Blackness is central in defining relationally what Whiteness is not (Espinoza and Harris, 2000; Rich, 1986). Therefore, Black History at Key Stage 3 continues to draw upon a deficit notion of Black people because Black Africans and those of African descent represent the lowest form of non-White (Espinoza and Harris, 2000). Hall suggests the colonial view of the 'subjugated colonials' through representations in textbooks serves to also "other us [black people] to ourselves…we – all of us – are still its inheritors, still living in its terrifying aftermath" (Hall, 2017:21). This could explain why many African and Caribbean students want to see the end to what they experience to be a repetitive and racist view of Black people during 'Black History' and, an absorption of Black histories into the mainstream curriculum (Traille, 2006).

Then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove's assumption that the Key Stage 3 history revisions in September 2013 would provide an accurate depiction of "our island story" is laden with White privilege and as Hall argues that within this "racial logic, the non-White migrants, out of place in the metropole, could only ever maintain a precarious hold on identity" (2017:181). Hall argues that not only do Black people face being racially marked as different, but culturally 'othered' too because the 'entrenched and defensive understanding of Englishness' depends upon binary positions, "We are this because *they* are not" (Hall, 2017:197). Consequently, Black people, including other communities of colour 'read' as Black, continue to face being positioned as an encroaching foreign presence in Britain. Thus, communities of colour appear in the history curriculum, as part of World rather than British history (Alexander, Chatterji and Weekes-Bernard, 2012).

The findings of my doctoral research revealed that Black History plays an important 'stabilising role' within the established Whiteness-as-usual British history curriculum (Bell, 1992). Specifically, having a unit demarcated as 'Black' rather than integrated as part of wider British history, provided an inferior counterweight to White British history's superior status. Having a stabilising role was also functional: Black History at both schools bore the burden of encouraging anti-racism (making non-Black students appreciate Black humanity) and fostering social cohesion, seemingly through empathy (through imitation slave plantation performances at one school). In so doing, Black History was removed from being taught because of its historical significance and instead, elements of it were engaged with only where it actively "did something" such as reaffirming everything that Whiteness is not: primitive, barbaric and cultural (Doharty, 2017:384). The consequence for Black students was put succinctly by David, a Black African boy in Year 8 at one of the research schools:

> "Because every time I learn my own unit, it feel like I belong in Africa, not in here [in England]" (Doharty, 2017:277).

Conclusion

Hall makes it clear throughout the memoir that his life and his ideas are inseparable and, reveals his own struggles with identity – both as a conceptual and historical issue – because of the complexities of colour/race, class and empire in Jamaica and Britain. By interwining his personal biography with the historical, he explores the entanglements and dissonances between the colony and the metropole to demonstrate that no country is without a history of disorder and displacements. This article has sought to draw upon Hall's personal and intellectual reflections on identities and combine this with how these reflections have shaped my personal and professional thinking about Blackness. Hall reminds us of the problematic nature of essentialism

and how this impacts upon the daily realities of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ peoples: serving to culturally displace the former and privilege the latter. My doctoral and now postdoctoral work uses Hall’s arguments for a more nuanced understanding of identities, to continue showing the permanence of racisms inherent within a history curriculum structured upon White supremacy. Thus all attempts to misrepresent and silence the multiplicities of African diasporic experiences through homogeneity – a singular, Black History unit set apart from the British history curriculum - will continue to alienate and silence ‘Black’ communities.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Claire Alexander (University of Manchester) for the opportunity to contribute to this symposium and for her insightful comments on an earlier draft.

Reference List

Alexander, C., Chatterji, J., and Weekes-Bernard, D. (2012) Making British Histories: Diversity and the National Curriculum. London: The Runnymede Trust

Alexander, C., and Weekes-Bernard, D., (2017), History lessons: inequality, diversity and the national curriculum, Race Ethnicity and Education, 20:4, pp.478-494

Bell, D., (1992), Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The permanence of racism, Basic Books: New York

Doharty, N., (2015), ‘Hard Time Pressure inna Babylon’: Why Black History in Schools is Failing to Meet the Needs of BME Students, at Key Stage 3. The Runnymede School Report: Race, Education and Inequality in Contemporary Britain, edited by Claire Alexander, Debbie-Weekes-Bernard and Jason Arday. The Runnymede Trust: London

Doharty, N., (2017), Black History Month and Black History With Key Stage 3 Students in English Secondary Schools: A Critical Race Theory Approach, PhD Thesis, Keele University: Staffordshire

Espinoza, L., and Harris, A. P., (2000), Embracing the Tar-Baby: LatCrit Theory and the Sticky Mess of Race, In: R. Delgado, and J. Stefancic, (Eds.), Critical race theory: The cutting edge, (2nd ed.), (pp.440-447), Temple University Press: Philadelphia, PA

Feagin, J. R., (2010), The White Racial Frame: Centuries of racial framing and counterframing, Routledge: London

Hall, S., (2017), Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands, Allen Lane: UK

Ladson-Billings, G., (2009), Just what is Critical Race Theory and what's it doing in a nice field like Education? In: E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, and G. Ladson-Billings, Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education, (ed) Routledge: Oxon, pp.17-36

Phillips, M. N., (1989), She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Break, Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut

Rich, P. B., (1986), Race and Empire in British Politics, Comparative ethnic and race relations series, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations - University of Warwick, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

Samory-I, (2017), Is it because I'm Black? In: Black Gold, Rorystonelove/Black Dub: Jamaica, Track 12

Stone, M., (1981), The Education of the Black Child: The myth of multiracial education, Fontana Paperbacks: London

Swartz, E., (1992), Emancipatory narratives: Rewriting the master script in the school curriculum, Journal of Negro Education, 61:3, pp.341-355

Traille, K., (2006), School history and perspectives on the past: A study of students of African-Caribbean descent and their mothers, PhD thesis, The Institute of Education: University of London