

**FROM DIALECTIC TO DIFFÉRANCE:
RETHINKING CREOLISATION IN THE LATER WORK OF STUART HALL**

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Stuart Hall's richly allusive but elliptical and often elusive essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" represents something of an epistemic shift where recent attempts to conceptualise Caribbean culture are concerned.¹ My argument is, to be precise, that where the dominant approach to such matters has been informed by a dialectical problematic, Hall's draws by contrast on Saussurean and post-Saussurean notions of 'difference'.² This is a departure with important implications for our understanding of many of the most cherished hypostases of Caribbean culture.³ In what follows, my mission is two-fold. Firstly, I will try to clarify Hall's claims by explicating some of the finer points of his argument, the significance of which may not be immediately obvious to those not up to date with those strands of so-called Continental philosophy, often labelled 'Post-Structuralist,' with which Hall engages quite extensively. Secondly, I will attempt to intervene at various points in his argument in an effort to take up Hall's challenge to rethink some of the orthodoxies which have seemingly cemented themselves in the study of Caribbean culture.

¹I use the terms 'episteme,' 'problematic' and 'paradigm' synonymously. The first is Michel Foucault's term for the "epistemological foundation" (de Certeau 173) which makes possible the cast of thought peculiar to an epoch and a place:

Between the many institutions, experiences, and doctrines of an age, he [Foucault] detects a coherence which, though not explicit, is nonetheless the condition and organising principle of a culture. (172)

This coherence, however, is a "ground that escapes the notice of the very people whose ideas and exchanges it provides the foundation for" (172). Though 'problematic' is a term first popularised by Claude Lévi-Strauss (see my discussion later in this essay), it is most often associated with Louis Althusser who argues that any body of knowledge can only "pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its *problematic*, which constitutes its absolute and definite conditions of possibility" (my emphasis; Reading Capital 24). Such a conceptual framework accordingly allows some objects to be known whereas others that fall outside its scope remain unknown precisely because "they are not objects of this theory, because they are forbidden by it" (26). Both 'episteme' and 'problematic' have much in common with Thomas Kuhn's conception of the role played by 'paradigms' in the historical development of the natural sciences.

²See Raymond Williams' important distinction between the 'residual,' the 'dominant' (and 'hegemonic'), and the 'emergent' elements (especially the 'structures of feeling') of a culture.

³In this paper, I draw on UNESCO's definition of culture as the "set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group," encompassing "in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."

Hall's starting-point in this essay is the "film and other forms of visual representation of the (Afro-)Caribbean (and Asian) 'blacks' of the diasporas of the West" (392) and, in particular, the "new cinema of the Caribbean" (392). He argues that all these "cultural practices and forms of representation" (392) have the "black subject at their centre" (392) and, as such, serve to put the "issue of cultural identity in question" (392). Identity, he points out, is widely assumed to be a "transparent and unproblematic" (392) given, something fixed and beyond dispute that is merely mirrored by literature, film and other cultural practices. Hall states his intention, however, to "open a dialogue, an investigation, on the subject of cultural identity and representation" (392) in order to problematise the "very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim" (392). The two main questions which Hall consequently seeks to address in this essay are, firstly, "[w]ho is this emergent, new subject of the cinema?" (392) and secondly, somewhat more enigmatically, "[f]rom where does he / she speak?" (392).

An important answer to the first question is offered by thinkers like Léopold Sédar Senghor. This perspective, which I will call the 'residual idealist' model, continues to greatly influence those 'structures of feeling' which inform many expressions of popular culture especially. 'Blackness' takes the form, in this schema, of a transhistorical and transcultural essence which, though repressed or at least overlaid by the ravages of colonialism, slavery, racism, etc., nevertheless persists, waiting to be rediscovered in its pristine form by both Africans per se and those whom Brathwaite terms 'ex-Africans' (i.e., members of the diaspora). Hall argues that Caribbean cultural identity often continues to be understood from this point of view, that is,

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. . . . This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence of 'Caribbeanness', of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express. . . . (393)

Africa is the "name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked" (394). The "rediscovery of this identity" (393), he contends, is most often the "object of 'passionate research'" (393).

There are some aspects to this view which are worth underlining. First, the relationship of this superficial Caribbean self to the true Africa self is conceptualised in both temporal and spatial terms. Diasporic identity, as Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin point out,

has been constructed traditionally in two ways. It has been figured on the one hand as the product of a common *genealogical* origin and, on the other, as produced by a common *geographical* origin. (my emphasis; 305)

(Afro-)Caribbean identity, in other words, is secured not in the here and now but primarily in relation to another place and time. However, this identity is predicated, as the very term 'identity' implies, on the equation of phenomena that are in and of themselves discrete by positing both a sameness that blurs the boundary between there and here and a continuity that fuses the past, the present and the future into something of an 'eternal now.' It is from this point of view that the (Afro-)Caribbean person of today is not thought to be different in any essential way from his or her African forbears of the distant past. Second, this relationship is most often conceptualised in expressivist terms: an inner African essence is thought to *express* itself through an outer Caribbean manifestation

much like light is thought to emanate outwards from the inside of a lamp or breath is exhaled from within the body.⁴ One very popular trope used to this end conceives of (Afro-)Caribbean identity as something akin to a 'plant' emerging from and grounded in an original black or African identity comparable in turn to a 'root' which must at all costs be acknowledged as the true source of the plant's existence and vitality above ground.⁵ Third, this relationship is often figured via a number of overlapping tropes that pit reality against appearance, authenticity against inauthenticity, core against veneer, inner against outer, centre against periphery, and so on. These all, notwithstanding subtle differences, circle around a distinction between an inner truth that waits to be (re)discovered and an external falsity that desperately needs to be discarded. (Afro-)Caribbean identity is accordingly often constructed as involved in something akin to an Oedipal romance, its true core repressed beneath the false trappings of colonialism until, in the grand moment of anagnorisis central to decolonisation, its presence is revealed and, in the post-colonial dénouement that follows, ultimately embraced. Fourth, the African element thought to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, to express itself in all that an (Afro-)Caribbean person says and does, and to constitute the very truth of his or her being is most often viewed as self-identical in nature, that is, as something unchanging, unique, distinct from all other such elements, and impervious to external influence. Possession of it indisputably distinguishes those who belong to this category from all those who, less fortunately, do not. Nigel Bolland argues that this 'self versus other,' 'us versus them' kind of thinking is responsible for a "dualistic" (64) or "dichotomous" (64) model of Caribbean cultural identity that results in the view (with which Bolland associates Brathwaite especially) that creole Caribbean society is at best merely a "blending" (64) or "aggregate" (64) of in and of themselves inherently distinct racial sub-groups.

As a philosophical materialist, however, Hall is suspicious of the idealism which undergirds this account of identity. For Hall, like Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon or a whole host of other Caribbean thinkers, for example, 'blackness' is not an essence which transcends time and place but a construction shared by persons who, by virtue of the accident of possessing a particular skin colour, are the product of certain social and historical circumstances largely of suffering and deprivation.⁶ He questions, firstly, whether (Afro-)Caribbean identity is an essentially static and unchanging phenomenon anchored in and, thus, forever tied to some originary moment. He doubts whether it is possible to ever succeed in merely "*unearthing* that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid" (my emphasis; 393). This is because there is no original, pre-colonial black or African essence that persists serenely unaffected by the vagaries of time and waits

⁴See M. H. Abrams for an indispensable account of the 'expressive turn' in cultural theory which took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The links between the expressivist model of culture and the expressivist philosophy of language which came to prominence around the same time (and which is perhaps most famously articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt) are equally unmistakable.

⁵For a discussion of the Romantic 'roots' of this model of identity (and of the crucial role played by Herder in this regard) as well as its remarkable persistence in our thinking even today here in the Caribbean, see my "'Roots': a Genealogy of the 'Barbadian Personality.'"

⁶See, for example, Césaire's "What is Negritude to Me?" which was evidently written to distance his own materialist model of negritude from Senghor's essentialist version.

merely to be rediscovered in its pristine form:

whether it is . . . an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is . . . open to doubt. The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive and unchanging past. (399)

Africa "must at last be reckoned with by Caribbean people" (399), Hall agrees, "but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered" (399) in the form it once possessed.

The reason for this is that identity is not a transhistorical given, in Hall's view, not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. (395)

It is, rather, a

matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (394)

In other words, our identity in the present is necessarily a function of the *history* which inevitably interposes itself between what our ancestors may once have been and the persons we have and will become. This is not to say that we inherit nothing from our ancestors. Hall's point is simply that our identity, while inevitably continuous in some respects at least with that of our predecessors, is necessarily also discontinuous in others due to unavoidably altered circumstances. Indeed, he argues that if black Caribbean persons have anything in common, it is less some putative origin in a place and time far away than certain social and historical circumstances in the 'New World' that in fact functioned to sever most links to that past: the "uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world" (396), he writes, "'unified' these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past" (396). Paradoxically, therefore, "what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity" (395).

Hall argues, secondly, that there is no single, self-identical core to (Afro-)Caribbean cultural identity. The proof of this is that, notwithstanding the many similarities which bind (Afro-)Caribbean persons both to each other and to those who remain on the African continent, there is also immense and unquestionable diversity due to those altered circumstances alluded to earlier. Hall lists some instances of this diversity: the linguistic barriers which segregate the Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanic territories; the socio-cultural differences which persist even between those islands, like Barbados and St. Lucia, which share a common official language; the political distinctions between, for example, the Anglophone and Francophone territories as a result of which the islands of the region do not all stand in quite the same relationship of 'otherness' to the metropolitan centres; and, last but not least, the heterogeneity of the "slaves" (395) themselves, our ancestors, who hailed "from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods"

(395). In short, Hall's point is that (Afro-)Caribbean culture is a complex admixture of similarities *and* differences, informed, like any other culture perhaps, by both centripetal and centrifugal forces, that is, by a tendency towards unification on the basis of certain shared characteristics counterbalanced by a propensity for fragmentation due to the unavoidable differences which separate us. Hence, Hall's argument that it is as vital to acknowledge the "critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (394), as it is to recognise what we may have in common.

For both these reasons, Hall suggests that we should think of (Afro-)Caribbean cultural identity as "framed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture" (395).⁷ The major question accordingly confronting theorists of (Afro-)Caribbean culture is precisely how to grasp what he characterises, not insignificantly, as this paradoxical "play of 'difference' within identity" (396) and of discontinuity within continuity. To put this another way, if (Afro-)Caribbean "identity does not proceed, in a straight unbroken line, from some fixed origin" (395) and if there is no single, unique, self-identical core to (Afro-)Caribbean cultural identity, then exactly "how are we to understand its formation?" (395).

The dominant "vision" (Bolland 64) of "creole identity" (64) and of the "nation as a creole community" (64) has, in recent times at least, arguably taken a "synthetic" (64) or "dialectical" (65) form. By contrast to the dualist model, Bolland argues, the dialectical model underscores the "interrelated and mutually constituted nature of 'individual,' 'society,' and 'culture,' and of human agency and social structure" (65).⁸ The various elements which comprise Caribbean culture and society, are seen as the "differentiated parts of a whole, constituting a unity of opposites" (71), "parts of a system that have no independent existence, but are defined in their relation with each other" (71), and are necessarily understood, moreover, in relation to the "historical process of domination / subordination in the wider society" (64) which functions, he argues, as the "chief source of social change" (65). The dialectical model in this way takes account of both the similarities and the differences, the continuities and the discontinuities in the Caribbean situation.

The dialectic is a concept synonymous, of course, in modern times with the idealist philosopher Hegel who bequeathed it in turn to materialist schools of thought such as Marxism with which many Post-colonial and Caribbean theorists have engaged.⁹ James, for example, one of the leading voices of Pan-Africanism, not only contributed in a major way to the synthesis of Hegelianism and Marxism which came to dominate Marxist theory in the West during the first half of the twentieth century at least, but also viewed Hegelian Marxism as an indispensable tool for grasping the historical predicament of the negro in

⁷Hall employs a Bakhtinian concept to describe the relationship between these two axes as "*dialogic*" (my emphasis; 395) but fails to expand upon this insight.

⁸Bolland revisits this discussion in his essay in this issue of Shibboleths.

⁹Georg Lukács, perhaps the best known Hegelian Marxist, summarises Marx's indebtedness to Hegel this way: the "category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science" (27).

the Caribbean and the African diaphora more generally.¹⁰ Fanon is another such thinker, of course, who has sought to grasp Caribbean society and culture through the prism permitted by a dialectical framework of thinking. Though space does not permit me to enter into a detailed discussion here of either of these thinkers, there are several aspects to a dialectical conception of Caribbean cultural identity with which Hall will take issue and which are thus worth underscoring. First, the expressivist model of society, to be precise, the notion that each epoch is largely expressive of one of its component-elements to the exclusion of the others (a particular aspect of Spirit, such as an excessive emphasis on rationality, in Hegel's schema; a particular class in Marx's; a particular race in the Caribbean context; and so on) which accordingly defines and constitutes the truth of that particular social and historical conjuncture.¹¹ Second, the dialectical model of history, that is, the view that historical change is produced primarily through the confrontation of this component-element with its antithesis (an emphasis on emotion, for example; another class; or another race), producing thereby a synthesis that combines the best elements and discards the worst of both poles. This functions in turn as a thesis which, in conflict with its own antithesis, spawns a new synthesis, and so on. In this schema, the appearance of difference and discontinuity merely masks the underlying truth of similarity and continuity: plus ça change, as the French say, plus c'est la même chose. Third, the view that each socio-historical context forms a totality or unity of opposites in which all differences are ultimately transcended or cancelled out.

However, Hall shares with Althusser, one of his earliest and most important mentors, Jacques Derrida and other Francophone theorists a deep distrust of the idealism which secretes itself in such appropriations of Hegel, even when undertaken to materialist ends.¹² Contemporary French philosophy in general, Derrida points out, is plagued for this reason by "a sort of active and organized allergy, we could even say an organizing aversion, towards the Hegelian dialectic" (qtd. in Malabou, xxvi). Hall turns instead to Saussurean and post-Saussurean models of difference for a way of circumventing the pitfalls inherent in Hegelianism and neo-Hegelianism. This is a change of direction signalled by Hall's very diction, not least his use of terms like 'difference,' "play of 'difference'" (396) and "differance" (397), the latter two gesturing unmistakably to the work of Derrida in particular.

Ferdinand de Saussure is best known today as the founder of semiotics, the academic field

¹⁰For the former emphasis, see James' Notes on Dialectics and for the latter, for example, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro."

¹¹What Frederic Jameson terms the 'expressive totality' involves the isolation and the privileging of one of the elements within that totality . . . such that the element in question becomes a mastercode or 'inner essence' capable of explicating the other elements or features of the whole in question. (27-8)

¹²For Althusser's critique of the residual idealism which, he argued, mars the work of the younger Marx and, by extension, the Hegelian Marxism predicated thereon, see his For Marx. Hall's indebtedness, especially during his influential sojourn at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, to Althusser's so-called 'Structuralist Marxism' is unmistakable in essays such as "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" but markedly absent from "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

devoted to the study of the production and interpretation of meaning.¹³ A linguist by profession, his work had two emphases that departed radically from the norms that prevailed in nineteenth century philology: firstly, his focus on 'langue' (the theoretical principles informing all language-use), as opposed to 'parole' (discourse or actual language-use), and, secondly, on the 'synchronic' (the view that signs derive their meaning from the relationship which they share with other signs at any given moment of time), rather than the 'diachronic' (the view that signs derive their meaning principally from the history of their actual use). Though he was not ignorant of the fact that language is necessarily put to use by people in particular social and historical contexts and that, for this reason, meanings inevitably change over time, his emphasis was on what makes meaning possible at all regardless of time and place.

In his seminal *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure devoted little attention to the correspondence theory of meaning (according to which a sign 'means' what it does by reflecting or referring or corresponding to some aspect of the external world). His main target was, rather, the expressivist model of signification that had risen to dominance by the early nineteenth century and which was associated with the work of linguists like Humboldt. According to this view, a sign signifies by virtue of *expressing* pre-linguistic ideas already present in the mind of the speaker / writer. Rejecting the notion that "ready-made ideas exist before words" (646), Saussure argued that our ideas (to wit, the conception of particular objects as distinguished from other objects) are inextricable from the phonic systems (organised, to be precise, around differences between sounds) into which humans are inserted as they grow up and learn to speak. (Many humans, of course, later learn to write but speech is primary, Saussure argued, its acquisition synonymous with the growth of human consciousness.)

Briefly, for Saussure and important heirs such as Roman Jakobson, our cognitive development proceeds in tandem with the acquisition of language. As we learn to differentiate between particular sounds (e.g. **c**-a-t as opposed to **b**-a-t), so too do particular ideas corresponding to those sounds individuate in our minds (in this case, our understanding of the difference between a cat and a bat). For Saussureans, it is sound (or, more precisely, phonic differences) which is primary and from which ideas (or, more precisely, conceptual differences) are derived. With this in mind, Saussure posited that each sign is in fact divisible into a 'signifier' (a particular sound) and a 'signified' (importantly, an idea about reality rather than some aspect of reality itself). Although an intimate bond joins the signifier to the signified as a result of which the idea in question cannot be thought without reference to a specific sound, and vice versa, particular signifiers and signifieds are actually attached to each other in an only *arbitrary* way, that is, purely through convention rather than necessity. The question consequently arises: what exactly determines the attachment of a particular signifier to a particular signified? Saussure's answer: at any given moment, each sign forms part of a synchronous system predicated on difference. To put it simply, the combination of sound c-a-t is attached to the idea 'cat' because other combinations of sound (e.g. d-o-g or b-o-o-k) are attached to our conceptions of other objects out there. For Saussure, in short, at any given moment in the historical development of a given sign-system such as the English language, the meaning of each sign is determined by its difference from all the other signs.

It is important to note that Saussure does not envisage some dialectical resolution

¹³My focus here is not on the semiotics of C. S. Peirce, the American Pragmatist.

whereby an antithetical relationship between signs is transcended in Hegelian fashion by a synthetic third term. Rather, for Saussure, meaning is entirely a function of the gap which never ceases to separate one sign from another. That is, signs mean what they do simply because they are different from other signs. To put all this another way, meaning does not inhere *positively* in the sign but is derived *negatively* from its relations with the other signs. Saussure puts it this way in a famous passage: just as phonemes (signifiers) are not "characterised by their own positive quality but simply by the fact that they are distinct" (652), so concepts (signifieds) are

purely differential and *defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.* (my emphases; 651)

The most important consequence of this is that in "language there are only differences without positive terms" (653), language having neither "ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (653).

In arguing that the meaning of each sign is a function of its *implicit* difference from all the other signs which comprise the synchronic sign-system in question, Saussure's focus was on what he termed the 'associative' (or 'paradigmatic') axis of an utterance. However, he pointed out that the meaning of a sign is also determined by its *explicit* location within the linear, diachronic sequence of signs which constitute a given utterance and in which each sign normally acquires its "value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it" (654). This chain of signs, which comprises what Saussure terms the 'syntagmatic' axis of an utterance, is governed, at the level of the sentence, by rules of syntax that dictate both the choice of particular signs and the precise order in which signs must be placed in relation to each other. As sentences in turn form paragraphs which in turn comprise, depending on the genre of the utterance in question, arguments and / or narratives, determinate rules of logic and / or emplotment evidently come into play.

For Saussure, in short, meaning is not something which exists prior to but is, rather, entirely derived from the workings of language. The meaning of an utterance is, to be precise, a function of the inter-relationship of both the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. The proof of this is that if for some reason (such as brain-damage on the part of the speaker / writer) either axis is impaired, Jakobson argued, the resulting meaning is thereby compromised. A completely meaningful utterance, rather, consists in a COMBINATION of constituent parts (sentences, words, phonemes, etc.) SELECTED from the repository of all constituent parts (the code). The constituents of a context are in a state of CONTIGUITY, while in a substitution set signs are lined by various degrees of SIMILARITY which fluctuate between the equivalence of synonyms and the common core of antonyms. (75)

Jakobson accordingly identifies the paradigmatic axis (the vector of similarity and substitution) with the function of metaphor and the syntagmatic axis (the vector of combination and "contexture" [74]) with that of metonymy.¹⁴

¹⁴The relationship between signs along the paradigmatic axis is metaphorical because one sign may be replaced by other equivalent signs in the utterance in question. The relationship along the syntagmatic axis is metonymical because, in the Francophone tradition, the substitution of the sign 'hand' for 'sailor' (as in the expression 'all hands on deck') is viewed not as a relationship of part for whole (or synecdoche) but of contiguity

Though its origins lie in linguistics, the focus of semiotics has not been limited to questions of language per se. It has been used, rather, to explore the meaning of a wide range of phenomena accordingly conceptualised as 'signs.' Lévi-Strauss, for example, utilised Saussure's theory of signification to mount an important critique of the expressivist paradigm of culture as well as the comparative and historicist emphases of nineteenth century anthropology which it subtended. Arguing that culture is a form of communication and that its structure is analogous, as such, to a language, he contended that the nucleus of any culture consists in the 'kinship system,' to be precise, the set of relations binding mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, cousins, etc. as well as the rules of sexual conduct predicated thereon, into which humans are inserted at birth and from which their identity is derived prior to any subsequent social relationships.¹⁵ He contended that this system of relationships forms an underlying 'deep structure,' analogous to that of the sign-system, to which all cultures are ultimately reducible (this would function something like a cultural 'langue') at the same time, however, that each culture is necessarily idiosyncratic to some degree at least in how this common structure has historically been adapted to local circumstances (thereby forming a unique cultural 'parole,' as it were). From this point of view, the 'meaning' of a culture is produced not solely along its 'paradigmatic axis' (arising from the synchronic system of similarities and differences linking the basic elements of any culture) but also along its 'syntagmatic axis' (derived from the diachronic order in which certain of these elements have historically been combined to particular effect). Lévi-Strauss argued that the "purpose of myth" (229) and the related practices which constitute a culture's syntagmatic axis is to "provide a logical model capable of overcoming" (229) any "contradiction" (229) or "problem" (216) that may be perceived to arise in the deep structure of culture along the paradigmatic axis (which he accordingly labels the 'problematic').

It is from a semiotic perspective similar to this, I would suggest, that Hall seeks to conceptualise Caribbean culture. For Hall, there exists no single, unchanging 'presence' at the core of Caribbean culture that exists prior to and is simply and unproblematically expressed in the various practices in which Caribbean people engage. He proposes, rather, that we should think of Caribbean culture as something akin to an utterance that is both to some degree unavoidably informed by the structural principles governing culture-in-general and at the same time a unique permutation of those rules. Its 'meaning' is, as such, located at the intersection of its paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. To be precise, Caribbean cultural identity is a function in part of the synchronic system of metaphoric similarities and differences (the basic components of which Hall considers to be the various races / cultures worldwide, rather than the elements of the kinship system per se). It is also partly a function of the particular diachronic order of metonymic contiguity in which some of these races (not least the African and the European) have historically been chained to each other in the region.

Hall terms, not insignificantly, each of these elements a 'présence,' a term evidently indebted at least in part to the title of one of the earliest and most distinguished journals

(the hand is thought to be joined to the rest of the sailor).

¹⁵Lévi-Strauss argued that the prohibition of sexual relationships between relatives (endogamy) is designed not to forbid incest per se but to ensure social cohesion through exogamy: males forge alliances with other males by exchanging females between themselves.

of the African diaspora, *Présence Africaine*. He proposes that it is possible to “rethink the positioning and repositioning of Caribbean cultural identities [note the plurality of this term here] in relation to at least three ‘présences’: “*Présence Africaine, Présence Européenne, and Présence Américaine*” (398). By far the most important ‘présence’ is evidently the African ‘presence.’ Employing a Freudian / Lacanian trope, he contends that Africa is the “site of the *repressed*” (my emphasis; 398): it is the “*signified* which could not be represented directly in slavery” (my emphasis; 398) but which “remained and remains the unspoken unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture” (398).¹⁶

The ‘Présence Européenne,’ by contrast, is an ineluctable but troubling one for most Caribbean persons, especially those of African descent, to confront: “[f]or many of us” (399), Hall avers, “this is a matter not of too little but of too much” (399). The reason for this is that the coloniser had the power “in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense” (394) not only to construct us “as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West” (394) but, far more harmfully, “to make us see and experience *ourselves* as ‘Other’” (394). The crucial question which consequently arises in this regard is, can we ever “recognise its irreversible influence, whilst resisting its imperialising eye?” (400).¹⁷

‘Présence Américaine’ is Hall’s term for the New World, the “juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet” (400). Employing a psychoanalytic framework once more, he describes the New World as the “*primal scene*” (my emphasis; 401) where the “fateful / fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West” (401). In so doing, the Caribbean is implicitly compared to the male infant who witnesses the act of intercourse between his parents and, after concluding that the mother’s ‘wound’ is evidence of her ‘castration,’ henceforth represses his desire for the mother (Africa) and instead identifies with the father (Europe). Interestingly, notwithstanding his own allusion at the very beginning of the essay to “Afro-Caribbean (and Asian) ‘blacks’ of the diasporas of the West” (392), Hall fails to make any mention of that very ‘Présence Indienne’ (or even Chinoise) which is unmistakable in countries like Trinidad and Guyana especially where immigrants from Asia have left an indelible mark.

Equally importantly, however, ‘présence’ (as well as, even more famously, the ‘metaphysics of presence’) is a term synonymous in recent times with Derrida. Influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger, Derrida uses ‘présence’ sometimes to denote ‘Being’ in general, that is, those fundamental properties, shared by all particular ‘beings’ if they may be said to ‘be,’ which it is the task of metaphysics to grasp, and sometimes to denote those properties specific to particular beings which differentiate them from others. The term ‘présence’ also gestures, significantly, towards the assumption, prevalent since Immanuel Kant at least in the Phenomenological tradition especially, that there is both a spatial and temporal dimension to how the mind works and, thus, the precise way in which the essence of things is intuited. Phenomena are thought to *present* themselves to human consciousness in two senses: as existing in the *here* (constituting, consequently, an *object*

¹⁶Jacques Lacan is famous, of course, for re-reading Freud’s model of the psyche in the light of Saussure’s model of signification. However, Hall’s engagement here with Lacanian thought is beyond the scope of the present essay.

¹⁷Hall evidently alludes here to the nexus of power and knowledge most famously explored in the work of Michel Foucault and, by extension, Edward Said, but which is also beyond the scope of this essay.

that occupies a particular physical *space*) and / or the *now* (functioning, thus, as an *event* in a temporal *series*). Language has long been thought of as a verbal substitute for the presence of the 'things-in-themselves' in this way, Derrida argues: the sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, 'thing' here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. ("Différance" 9)

Derrida argues that "all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidos, arche, telos, energieia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" ("Structure, Sign and Play" 279-280).

Derrida generally concurs with Saussure's contention that difference *without positive presence* is the basic principle by which all signification occurs. However, he argues that signs are linked not by 'différence' per se but by what he terms 'différance,' evidently a homonym of the former. (Two synonyms for *différance* are 'play of difference' and 'signifying play.')

Différance evidently gestures to Saussure's 'différence' which is obviously linked to the French verb 'différer' (to differ) which, Derrida points out, is derived from the Latin verb 'differre.' To differ is commonly taken to mean "to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc." ("Différance" 8). "[W]hether it is a question of dissimilar otherness or of allergic and polemical otherness, an interval, a distance, *spacing* must be produced between the elements" (8). It is this sense of 'différence' which underpins Saussure's theory of the sign: because he conceives of the sign-system as existing at a particular moment in time artificially isolated from the historical development of a particular language, his notion of difference is predicated on a largely *spatial* trope. In other words, along the paradigmatic axis of an utterance, the sign forms part of a *synchronic* system conceptualised solely in spatial, rather than temporal, terms as a result of which each sign means what it does by virtue of the fact that it occupies a clearly differentiated 'space' from its companions in that system.

However, Derrida argues that there is also a temporal dimension to the Latin verb 'differre' which is glimpsed less in the French verb 'différer' than 'déferer' (to defer). *Différance*, from this perspective, accordingly also implies something which Saussure only hints at: the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a relay, a reserve, a representation – concepts that I would summarise in a word . . . : *temporization*. (8)

This temporal factor is evident in the diachronic order which constitutes not only the syntagmatic axis of an utterance (for the simple reason that the linear sequence of signs perforce cannot reach the auditor or reader all at once but only consecutively, as Saussure himself points out) but also, by extension, the historical development of the sign-system and in the course of which the meaning of particular signs change. Each sign, thus, does not only occupy a particular 'place' in a *synchronic system* but functions also as an 'event' in a *diachronic series*.

Moreover, zeroing in specifically on Saussure's claim that language is a "system of *interdependent* terms in which *the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others*" (my emphasis; Saussure 650), Derrida argues that the crucial insight

which Saussure made possible (though without necessarily realising its full significance himself) is the fact that, given its dependency on other signs in order to generate meaning, the sign does not exist in a relationship of 'pure' difference (or independence or distinction) from other signs. Rather, signs are at best only *relatively autonomous* of each other. To put this a slightly different way, the meaning of a sign is not a function of its sheer *distinction* from but, rather, its inevitable dependence on or relatedness to other signs for the simple reason that, in order to signify at all, signs must ceaselessly gesture towards other signs, whether this be implicitly along the paradigmatic axis or explicitly along the syntagmatic. Meaning can thus never be fully present in a given sign because it cannot be purely differentiated from other signs for the simple reason that each sign necessarily bears within itself the implicit *trace* of all the other excluded signs. The seeming self-sufficiency of the sign in Saussure's schema gives way to the inevitability of what Derrida terms 'supplementarity.' Différance, Hall argues, captures "this sense of difference which is not pure 'otherness'" (397).

Accordingly, along the paradigmatic axis of an utterance, the sign is not a self-contained unit and thus does not occupy its own distinct, independent space precisely because the meaning of each sign is 'displaced' in the direction of other signs on which it depends in order to signify at all. Along the syntagmatic axis and, by extension, in the course of the historical development of a particular sign-system, the meaning of each sign is necessarily 'referred' in the direction of the signs that come before it and 'deferred' in the direction of those which come after it: "each so-called 'present' element" (13), Derrida contends, "is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" (13), hence, Derrida's talk of the "traces of retentions and protentions" (13) found in any sign. The cumulative result of both displacement and deferral is that the meaning of the sign, the

signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. (8)

There is for this reason, Derrida argues, "no presence before and outside semiological difference" (12).

There is a number of radical implications to Derrida's conception of the process of 'différance' to which signification is necessarily subject, with important consequences, in turn, for Hall's efforts to grasp the 'play of difference within identity' that comprises Caribbean culture. First, by making the sign gesture to a myriad other signs, *différance* generates a multiplicity of "associations" (Roland Barthes 168) which provoke, in turn, an "explosion, a dissemination" (168) of possible meanings. The surplus of signification, Hall writes, "challenges the fixed binaries which stabilise meaning and representation and show how meaning is never fixed or completed, but keeps on moving on to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings" (397). From this point of view, precisely because the 'meaning' of each 'présence' is continuously 'displaced' and continually 'deferred' in the direction of multiple other 'présences' both within and without the region, both backwards and forwards in time, oscillating now in one direction, now in another, what it means to be a 'Caribbean' person is consequently a potentially illimitable and undefinable affair. This underscores the sheer difficulty, if not impossibility, of putting one's finger on the 'true' nature of Caribbean cultural identity, that is, of reducing the Caribbean in some indisputable way to a single, definitive essence. This is not to say that Caribbean people

have no identity, merely that in the absence of some putative 'positive presence' thought to express itself in all manifestations of Caribbeanness, Caribbean identity can, like any other, only be defined negatively, that is, in relation to a myriad others. It is, as such, a flexible phenomenon, suspended in that interstitial, limbo-like area on the boundaries between several different 'présences' and accordingly potentially orientable in multiple directions. The term 'présence' is evidently a concept which Hall uses *sous rature* or under erasure, as Derrideans say.

Second, because *différance* causes the clear-cut boundaries assumed (in the Saussurean schema) to distinguish one sign from another to become blurred, those hierarchical binary opposites (good versus evil, and so on) to which thought is prone, according to the Structuralists, are said, in Derridean parlance, to 'deconstruct' themselves. From this perspective, because the various 'présences' which comprise Caribbean culture can never be purely differentiated from each other, it follows that what Hall calls those "fixed binaries" (397) such as European versus African, white versus black, and so on which have historically figured so prominently, and tragically, in the consciousness of Caribbean people are in fact undermined by their interdependence and interplay to the point where they become unstuck and fall apart. It is in this light that one should view Hall's argument that the intricacies of the "cultural 'play'" (396) which comprise Caribbean culture could not be represented . . . as a simple binary opposition – 'past / present', 'them / us'. Its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation. At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited. (396)

Hence, too, his celebration of that "special and peculiar *supplement* which the black and mulatto skin adds to the 'refinement' and sophistication" (my emphasis; 397) of European culture. The result of cultural *différance* is that there remains, in lieu of that monolithic singularity so beloved by purists of all descriptions, only what might be described as cultural 'miscegenation' and intermixture.

Third, Derrida's concept of *différance* restores a temporal dimension to signification that is largely understated in the Saussurean account. A sign, Derrida argues, is defined not only by synchronic displacement but also by diachronic deferral, that is, by its relationship to those signs which precede and follow it not only in a particular utterance but also, by extension, in the actual history of a given language. This allows Hall in turn to supplement Lévi-Strauss' largely ahistorical model of culture with an emphasis on the diachronic that avoids the essentialism and rigid predictability inherent in the neo-Hegelian model of history. From Hall's perspective, Caribbean history does not constitute some journey ultimately towards self-realisation on the part of a single putative 'presence' through its encounters with otherness. In our ends we do not find our beginnings. Rather, the history of the region is a contingent, haphazard affair, the Caribbean present inevitably retaining traces of those cultures which preceded it even as it also anticipates future, unforeseeable developments that may mark a decisive rupture with that past. There are, in this way, both retentions and protentions, both continuity and discontinuity in Caribbean culture.

The surplus of signification generated by cultural *différance* evidently makes for a troubling undecidability, forcing Hall himself to ask: "Where, then, does identity come in to this infinite postponement of meaning?" (397). In other words, if the meaning of the various 'présences' constitutive of Caribbean culture oscillates now in one direction, now in another, now backwards, now forwards in time, is Caribbean identity forever doomed to indeterminacy? Hall's response is the simple reminder that, notwithstanding the

inevitability of *différance*, the allocation of “meaning, in any specific instance, depends upon the contingent and arbitrary stop” (397). Hall has in mind here Derrida’s view in “Signature Event Context” that meaningful communication is possible only because all users of language, both those who speak or write and those who listen or read, avoid ambiguity by truncating in Procrustean fashion the potentially endless dissemination of meaning. To be precise, a fixed meaning is most often attributed to particular signs through what Jakobson calls ‘contexture,’ that is, by its explicit location relative to other specific signs in a given syntagm (metonymic contiguity thereby reins in, as it were, metaphoric polysemy), and imposed on entire utterances by situating the acts of speaking or writing in question within specific socio-historical contexts. The meaning of a simple question such as ‘is there a text in this class?’ varies, as Stanley Fish points out, depending on the precise context attributed to it.

Hall’s point is that the play of identity which occurs, due to cultural *différance*, along the *paradigmatic* axis joining *all* cultures at all times to each other (this would constitute a common cultural langue) is necessarily arrested in very particular ways along the *syntagmatic* axis of the paroles peculiar to *specific* places and times, forming in each case a particular, albeit always provisional, sense of cultural identity. To put all this another way, if it is along the paradigmatic axis that the *problem* of Caribbean identity is posed (Are we European? Are we African? Are we Indian? Are we only one of these? All these things? A bit of each? None of the above?, and so on, the very form which such questions take being dictated by the racialised nature of the *problematic* which currently holds sway in discussions of Caribbean identity), it is along the syntagmatic axis that this problem is in turn ‘solved’ (even if only provisionally), that is, in the particular forms which our beliefs take, in the patterns of our behaviour, our acts of speaking and writing, our myths, and so on, including, perhaps most importantly, the artistic, dramatic, literary, cinematic, and other works which we produce.

This is why, having addressed at some length in this way the identity of the black subject, Hall is compelled ultimately to return to the second, somewhat unclear question posed at the very beginning of his essay: from where does s/he speak? He is at pains to emphasise, in this regard, that identity is not an “already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent” (392). Cinema or literature or any other cultural practice is not a “second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists” (402). He urges us, rather, to envision a “quite different practice” (393) when it comes to cultural identity, one based not on the “rediscovery but the *production* of identity” (393), a production, however, “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (392). In other words, identity is not a given which precedes its depiction but something defined only in the process of being signified, something produced only in the very act of speaking or writing or film-making, etc. (Hall uses the generic term “*enunciation*” [392] to cover all these possibilities).

The presence of the tell-tale term ‘enunciation’ here signals Hall’s indebtedness to the crucial effort undertaken by another of Saussure’s important heirs, Émile Benveniste, to rethink the traditional assumption that language is merely a vehicle by which a self that exists *prior* to the act of speaking or writing or film-making, or what not, is expressed. Benveniste claims, by contrast, that our identity does not precede but is entirely a *function* of any such enunciation. Subjectivity, that is, the “capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject’” (224) (not the “feeling which everyone has of being himself . . . but . . . the psychic unity which transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles” [224]),

is a purely linguistic fact, to be precise, the “emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language” (224). His point is that the sign ‘I,’ for example, is necessarily comprised of a signifier (‘I’) that is perforce joined with a signified (‘me’, that is, a concept of myself rather than the real ‘me’ per se who is speaking or writing). These combine to signify (in the sense of ‘offer an interpretation of,’ rather than simply label, refer or correspond to) the referent (the utterer, the real ‘me’ which speaks and writes). Such a coupling comes about only on the basis of the fact that within the larger sign-system, the sign ‘I’ is differentiated from other signs, one of the most important of which is, in this instance, ‘you.’ As a result, the signified ‘me’ is derived from the differentiation of ‘me’ from ‘you’ and not from any ‘positive presence’ per se which exists prior to the enunciation in question. It is langue, then, which may be said to assign the speaker or writer a *subject-position* by loaning him / her the “linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity” (Benveniste 227) for use in “discrete instances” (227) of discourse (parole). These linguistic forms, it should be noted, include not only the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘You’ but also other “indicators of *deixis*, the demonstratives [such as this, here and now], adverbs, and adjectives, which organise the spatial and temporal relationships around the ‘subject’ taken as referent” (226) by their occurrence in the syntagm of the utterance. The result of all this is, Hall points out, that what

recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say ‘in our own name’, of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. (392)

In other words, the subject spoken or written about (what Benveniste terms ‘le sujet de l’énoncé’) may very well coincide with the speaking or writing subject (‘le sujet de l’énonciation’), that is, the actual person speaking or writing, but there is no guarantee that this is in fact the case.

The point of Hall’s allusion to Benveniste is simply that Caribbean identity does not pre-exist but is, rather, entirely a function of the various cultural practices in which we engage. A Caribbean identity is crafted in particular each time we produce an artistic, dramatic, literary, filmic or other kind of discourse. Through a combination of factors – the particular socio-historical context which we attribute to the utterance in question, the metonymic contiguity specific to each such syntagm (the choice of certain deictic indicators, demonstratives, adverbs, adjectives, and so on, its sentential and, by extension, its broader narrative structure) – the potential for seemingly limitless metaphorical dissemination is thereby halted, even if only temporarily. Identities, Hall argues, far from being “grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, . . . waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity” (394), are in fact the “names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and *position ourselves within*, the *narratives* of the past” (my emphasis; 394). Hence, his argument not for an “identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past” (393). Hence, too, his call for novel forms of cultural representation “able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover [fresh] places from which to speak” (402). Where an earlier generation, for example, may have sought at all costs to align the sign ‘Caribbean’ (or ‘Barbados’ or ‘Jamaica,’ etc.) with all things ‘European,’ he argues, the time is now ripe to do the same with regard to ‘Africa’ and thereby spin new tales that fashion alternative, non-Eurocentric visions of ourselves. It is in this light that we should view his praise for the cultural changes which occurred in Jamaica during the late 1960’s and 1970’s. These constituted, he argues, nothing less than an “indigenous cultural revolution” (398) through which an “Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available” (398) to Jamaicans for the

first time. He contends that the “post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae” (398) made possible new “metaphors” (398) (perhaps Hall should have used the term ‘metonym’ here?), fresh “figures or signifiers of a new construction of ‘Jamaican-ness’” (398) which “signified a ‘new’ Africa of the New World, grounded in an ‘old’ Africa: . . . this Africa, as we might say, . . . as a spiritual, cultural and political metaphor” (398) (metonym?). This, he emphasises, is the “Africa we must return to – but by ‘another route’: what Africa has *become* in the New World, what we have made of ‘Africa’: ‘Africa’ – as we retell it through politics, memory and desire” (399).

Alluding to Benedict Anderson’s view that communities are “distinguished, not by their falsity / genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (402), Hall is at pains to stress the importance of the aesthetic dimension in the recuperation of an African basis for Caribbean cultural identity in this way. Any such undertaking, he contends, is necessarily an “act of *imaginative* rediscovery” (my emphasis; 393) that involves “imposing an *imaginary* coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas” (my emphasis; 394) and leads to the restoration of an only “*imaginary* fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past” (my emphasis; 394). Africa, he stresses, “has acquired an *imaginative* or *figurative* value that we can name and feel’. Our belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls an ‘*imaginary* community’” (my emphasis; 399). Hall evidently also has Lacan’s notion of the ‘mirror stage’ in mind when he describes this reconstructed ‘Africa’ as the indispensable element in the “Caribbean *imaginary*” (my emphasis; 399): the displacement and deferral which have marred the region have given rise to a “certain imaginary plentitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (402), a desire which can never actually be fulfilled except through fictive substitutions.

As Hall points out, thinking of our identities as something provisionally assumed (and discarded) as the need arises does not contradict the view that identity is always potentially infinite. It “only threatens to do so” (397), he argues,

if we mistake this ‘cut’ of identity – this *positioning*, which makes meaning possible – as a natural and permanent, rather than an arbitrary and contingent ending. . . . Meaning continues to unfold . . . beyond the arbitrary closure which makes it, at any moment, possible. It is always either over- or under-determined, either an excess or a supplement. There is always ‘something left over.’ (397).

His point is that all attempts (including his own) to prescribe what it means to be a Caribbean person are, in the final analysis, Procrustean acts designed to arbitrarily arrest the boundlessness of signifying play and to thereby proscribe other interpretations, other possible ways of envisioning the self. The danger lies in forgetting that the Caribbean, like any cultural identity, can be configured and reconfigured in potentially countless ways.

All in all, Hall offers us a strikingly “different way of thinking about cultural identity” (402) in the Caribbean, one that borders almost on apostasy vis-à-vis some of the most cherished assumptions which we currently entertain on this score. He advocates a model of identity “defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” (402), an unavoidable “*hybridity*” (402) that allows us to avoid those “imperialising” (401) and “hegemonising” (401) forms of “‘ethnicity’” (401), inherited ironically from the coloniser, which continue to inform so much of our thinking.

Hall uses the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict to make a thinly veiled warning in this regard. A similar essentialism, he argues, underpins the view of some that identity is secured solely "in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea" (401). In other words, the common origin which provides the sense of belonging that glues a community together in such a schema necessarily functions also, tragically, to exclude and ultimately even destroy others. The beauty of *différance*, Hall suggests, may consist in the way it allows us to envision alternative conceptions of ourselves that circumvent the dangers which inhere in the dualism of self versus other.

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