

Strange familiarity

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TITLE: Strange familiarity

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests that we can think about the autobiographical techniques of Stuart Hall's *Familiar Stranger* as an experiment in history writing. The article uses *Familiar Stranger* as a lens through which to consider some of Hall's key ideas, particularly around the nature of historical conjunctures. It suggests how historians might use this approach to think, in particular, about the connection between historical processes and 'inner life'.

KEYWORDS

Stuart Hall; Postcolonial theory; diaspora; race; history; autobiography

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When *Familiar Stranger* was published early last year, a friend on social media, some years older than me, posted a photograph of its cover and fondly remembered reading Hall while studying sociology at Bradford University in the 1990s—‘a total academic hero of mine’. Another, replying, remembered Bill Schwarz, her tutor at the University of East London and ‘a good guy’. Hall was always cautious to describe himself as an academic—‘that is how I earned my living, not a vocation’, he writes in *Familiar Stranger* (2017, 13). But what these posts spoke to were Hall and Schwarz as teachers. Teaching was key to Hall’s identity. He first taught in a formal sense as an eighteen-year-old in Jamaica, working with ‘bright as buttons’ (133) rural children as he awaited the start of his Rhodes scholarship and his move to England. Next, in the late 1950s, he was in a south London comprehensive, a post that taught him a lot about the passions and politics of locality, youth culture, and race in his adopted city (Hall and Back 2009, 671–673). His move to the University of Birmingham in the 1960s secured his living as an academic, but it was in teacherly mode that many would have first encountered Hall, in his countless television performances, often late at night, for educational broadcasts—eight hundred hours of which John Akomfrah would later sift through to give us the Hall we see in the *Stuart Hall Project* (2013).

Teaching, as David Scott has underlined in his epistolary memorial to Hall, was key to Hall’s style of thinking, to his ‘voice’. ‘[W]hat is undeniably distinctive about your intellectual style’, Scott writes to Hall, is ‘the practice of making yourself tangibly—embodiedly, attentively—present in any particular situation in which you’re involved’ (2017, 23). This is the strange familiarity of Hall’s voice that is evident in so much of his writing and that once heard it is impossible to read without hearing. It was a voice that Hall worked for. Feeling at home in language was important to his work, but it was nothing inevitable. If his familiarity—the familiar stranger—has become something, well, familiar, it was the result of a struggle. On leaving Oxford he fought to lose ‘the Oxford cadences which had crept

uninvited into my speech’, and to learn ‘to speak more conversationally’ (Hall 2017, 209).

These were political and intellectual decisions. His ‘habitation of voice’ (Scott 2017, 30) was central to Hall’s sense of how intellectual exchange should work. It insisted on the need for familiarity, generosity, receptivity. It revealed Hall’s project, and his understanding of the dynamics of history, culture, and politics, as always necessarily, to borrow the name of Akomfrah’s (2012) other brilliant film on Hall, an *unfinished conversation*.

Conversational, dialogic, unfinished by Hall himself, *Familiar Stranger* is exemplary of Hall’s way of working, and his familiar mode of address. The book began life as a long conversation between Hall and Schwarz, his former student and friend. It reaches us in its final form shaped by Schwarz into something closer to a memoir, though one that bears traces of its dialogic origins. This is a form of autobiographical writing, but as *ego-histoire* it is an experiment in what autobiographical writing can do, and what it is for. Familiarity is key not only to the book’s form but, through its form, to its argument about how we might write lives to write history, and how we might understand history’s dynamics. Hall’s student Paul Gilroy, ambivalent about the value of autobiographies, recently complained that that these were ‘the last place you can really find anything interesting about anybody’ (Fisher and Garcia 2014, 223). Hall was not convinced there is anything interesting to tell—‘I have never thought that the detail of my life, of the kind which fills memoirs, was of much intrinsic interest or significance’ (2017, 10). The basis for this book is different, motivated not by an intrinsic interest in Hall’s life, but by the thought that he has lived ‘in interesting times’, and that recounting a life lived ‘from the margins’ might reveal these times in a new light (10). There is also, though, something in autobiographical writing that is peculiarly suited to Hall’s interests, even if the idea of writing ‘an autobiography’ is something he balked at, and even if, as in each iteration of that loose and fluid genre of autobiography, inasmuch as this is an autobiography it is one necessarily forced into new shapes to communicate what Hall and

Schwarz wanted. As an experiment in autobiographical writing, *Familiar Stranger* makes the gambit that if familiarity must be at the heart of understanding a life, so also it must be at the heart of understanding history.

Hall's writings, speeches and interviews became increasingly autobiographical in his later life, particularly as his writing became more explicitly concerned with questions of identity and race. This turn to autobiography served a purpose. The epochal changes within which Hall (1988) situated Thatcherism signaled, more starkly than ever, the fallacy of those guarantees about the subjects or sites of history that had comforted much socialist thinking. In this realisation, as Scott (2017, 89) has it, Hall recognised that with the socialist project 'unhinged from its untenable foundationalist moorings', identity became 'disembedded from naturalized invisibility or normalized essence', and became a key site at which historical contingency needed to be thought. His attention, famously, was on the conjunctural. Hall's concept of conjuncture refers to 'the coming together of often distinct though related contradictions, moving according to different tempos, but condensed in the same historical moment' (1988, 41). The making of a 'new terrain on which a different politics must form up' (1988, 163), it describes recompositions of social and political institutions, relations of state and society, modes of production and consumption, cultural tendencies, but also, at a more intimate level, reconfigurations of our selves. Not only are historical conjunctures lived out in subjective life, but—and this is the understanding at the heart of *Familiar Stranger*—those private historical times of inner life come forth in conjunctural moments to reshape history in often unexpected but never wholly indeterminate ways.

We all have pasts that do not pass, and circle back upon us—this is the major insight of psychoanalysis. These pasts are deeply personal, lodged in our individual psyches. Such is the expected terrain of memoirs. Hall's concern, though, is to how those not-yet-pasts that are more social, epochal, with longer histories, also hit us in deeply personal, intimate ways.

When Hall (2017, 95) is concerned ‘less immediately about my life and more about how a life should be narrated’, it is because ‘recounting the story of someone born out of place, displaced from the dominant currents of history’ can reveal these strange movements of history—‘history from its “bad” side’, as he puts it at one point (61), borrowing from Brecht. ‘Inner life’ makes repeated appearances in this book. In each case, Hall’s ambition is to show in what ways the social-discursive and the psychic combined. If, to borrow one of Hall’s favourite Marx (1963, 15) lines, we make our history not as we please, ‘but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’, in the case of colonial Jamaica these transmissions happened in ways that made them lived with a strange intensity in ‘inner life’. Sixty-six pages into *Familiar Stranger* we are back in the 1550s, reliving the genocide and enslavement that inaugurated the modern Caribbean. Such detours are common in Caribbean literature, which endlessly returns to slavery and colonialism as the brutal and slippery historical inheritances that bequeathed the region’s intricate and unstable colour-class societies. But, as this literature also underlines, slavery and the fully racialised culture it bequeathed was at once everywhere present and everywhere disavowed, and as such was carried less obviously in public culture than in the vagaries of inner life: ‘Much of the disavowal I experienced when young represented the endeavour to live with—or rather, not to live with—this traumatic breach in our nation’s past’ (Hall 2017, 70).

Hall spends some time recounting the Caribbean labour rebellions of the 1930s. These, he proposes, marked a key conjuncture in Caribbean decolonisation, and in his own historical formation. In the Jamaican insurrections of 1938 a blackness that had previously remained unspeakable, disavowed, ‘came to function as a resource for the future’ (Hall 2017, 47). Hall’s own laying claim to blackness came much later, and *Familiar Stranger* is in part his attempt to lay claim to that legacy of 1938, and to name himself as formed in that political generation. Reading his own political formation like this, Hall shows us history as the long

pasts which we carry within us, as much as those pasts which acts upon us from without. When these deep histories of race and its disavowal met their moments of confrontation, in the rise of Garveyism, in 1938, the effect, however distant from the day-to-day life of the Hall household, was strangely familiar. And it was strangely familiar precisely because of the intimacy with which race was lived, as everywhere present and unspeakable. ‘These seemingly distant events’, he writes of the 1938 upheavals, ‘weren’t so distant after all. In displaced form, they entered our household, and entered too my inner life’ (46). When Hall consciously turned to blackness, many years later, he was working through this displaced family history of 1938 that he had carried within for decades.

Race, Hall famously argued (1978), is the great disavowed of modern British history. Its disavowal allowed for the peculiar claims to innocence on matters of race and immigration in postwar British politics. But disavowed, as Hall insists, does not mean disappeared. For all its assumed marginality, race tripped easily off the tongue in the England to which Hall moved. ‘Think’, as Rushdie (1991, 130) wrote, ‘about the ease with which the English language allows the terms of racial abuse to be coined’. There might be no other language ‘with so wide-ranging a vocabulary of racist denigration’. Here is history’s uncanny imprint, which Hall’s historical mindset offers us the possibility of working through. Moving between Jamaica and Britain attuned Hall to this way of thinking. When we look to the works that first made him famous—his recognitions of the peculiar significance of youth cultures (Hall and Jefferson 1976), his incisive critiques of British political culture and its self-policed limits (1988), his insistence on the displacements of British politics, at the moment of its greatest postwar transformation, onto the folk devil of the black mugger in the decaying inner city (Hall et al. 1978)—we can see in this memoir how, as he makes the case, the Caribbean ‘provided me with the means to think about the properties of history in general’ (2017, 92), allowing him to think how history moved on its ‘bad’ side. This way of thinking can indeed

be liberating for historians, particularly for those working on the connections between Britain and the Caribbean. For historians, it has been theorized and carried forward perhaps most fully in Schwarz's own work of the last two decades (1996; 2002; 2003; 2011), often in explicit dialogue with Hall.

Conjunctural work is uncanny work, in which strangeness and familiarity switch places; or, the strange appears to us as strangely familiar. Conjunctions are moments in which new things are made possible out of old materials. As Hall found, they can set the histories from within and the histories from without into new relations with each other. Conjunctural history, in this respect, *is* history from the margins, including the margin of self and society. It is the strange familiarity of conjunctural thinking that Hall can make us most aware of: the way that currents of history work in subterranean ways, and appear in unexpected places. This requires us to interrogate how we write history, and it shows us Hall's own voice, which he has worked at in ways that attempt always to open, to listen, to leave unfinished, as a key formal counterpart to his conceptual or intellectual approach. Strange familiarity, in other words, might describe not just Hall's manner, but his way of thinking, and the way he invites us to think about how history works.

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