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Locating Caribbean Studies in unending conversation¹

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I come at Caribbean Studies from two relatively unusual but quite particular locations – as a UK-based human geographer, and as a Caribbean diaspora academic (I was born in the UK, and my parents are from Jamaica). Being a Caribbean diaspora academic is less unusual in the interdisciplinary field of Caribbean Studies than is being a UK-based human geographer in the Caribbean diaspora² However the combination of the two – being a Caribbean diaspora human geographer based in the UK but interested in the Caribbean as an area of study - is actually rather singular. In the following essay I want to work through how seeing Caribbean Studies from such a singular location leads me to ‘converse’ with a range of differently-located academics, in order to locate Caribbean Studies in very particular ways. I want to enlist in particular the help of Stuart Hall, a pioneer Caribbean diaspora academic, particularly his 1993 Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture, at the Centre for Caribbean Studies at Warwick, which was later published as ‘Negotiating Caribbean Identities’ in *New Left Review* (Hall 1995), in illustrating how those conversations can be made to matter to other geographers and to other Area Studies academics. In particular, Stuart Hall’s paper implies two relevant critiques of defining one’s own cultural and disciplinary identity through Caribbean Studies, and also points in the direction of a renewed Caribbean Studies, one that is born out of unending conversations in and with the region.

¹ I recognise that this phrase ‘the unending conversation’ is often associated with the literary critic Kenneth Burke. However, here, rather than understanding academic conversation as somewhat bleached of relations of power, I route much more closely through John Akomfrah’s “The Unfinished Conversation”, which was an art installation about the life and work of Stuart Hall.

² Elsewhere, I have joined my voice with the many who have noted that UK-based geography is a relatively white middle-class discipline, and that UK academia continues to largely exclude black academics, see (Noxolo 2009).

There are many noteworthy things about Stuart Hall's lecture, but the first that strikes me is that he does not constitute Caribbean Studies as an area to be studied, but instead focuses on Caribbean identity as constitutive of any study of the Caribbean – he begins: “The more we know and see of the struggles of the societies of the periphery to make something of the slender resources available to them, the more important we understand the questions and problems of cultural identity to be in that process.” (Hall 1995, p. 3). So the study of identity is not a marginal sub-field of a constituted field of Caribbean Studies that includes economics, politics etc. Rather, what he calls “cultural identity presenting itself always as a problem to Caribbean people” (Hall 1995, p. 3) saturates all the other questions of resource management, sharing and generation that are central to Caribbean societies.

This insight strikes me very directly as a Caribbean diaspora geography academic studying aspects of the Caribbean. This singular cultural identity presents itself to me always as a problem, not because of anything intrinsic or essential to my being, but because the Caribbean cultural frameworks that (along with my British education) construct me as part of a Caribbean diaspora are not always in evident dialogue with the cultural frameworks through which the Caribbean is studied by Caribbeanists, including geographers. In this sense, Paul Gilroy (Gilroy 1993, p. 1) famously said about being both black and European, to be a Caribbean diaspora geographer engaged with Caribbean Studies “requires some specific forms of double-consciousness”. In Stuart Hall's terms (see above), this paper tries to investigate the problem of this multiple doubleness.

Perhaps more than most other regions, the Caribbean evokes Arjun Appadurai's (2000, p. 8) statement that: “areas are not facts but artefacts of our interests and our

fantasies as well as of our needs to know, to remember, and to forget”. As Gayatri Spivak (2003., pp. 2-3 and 104) has noted, Area Studies is also an artefact that has been made and re-made several times based on reconfigurations of US geopolitical concerns, whether it be the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s or the security concerns of the 21st century. Similarly, Geography has had to own up, largely due to pressure from postcolonial theory (Blunt and McEwan 2002, Sidaway 2000), but also through anti-imperialist perspectives located at the University of the West Indies amongst others (Hudson 1972) to its imperialist roots – both Area Studies and Geography have frameworks of areal study that are formed in and through imperialist wills to power.

Alongside these geopolitical routings, and in an ongoing way, issues around educational funding have often determined the size and capacity of each discipline (Anon. 1973), whilst inter-disciplinary jostling, between and within both Geography and Area Studies, also play their part in moulding the routes of both disciplines as academic enterprises (Smith 2010, Duffield 2015). With an understanding of academic cultural identity as a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) that is formed out of changing material and pragmatic roots/routes, both Area Studies and Geography look, from my admittedly singular perspective, like post-imperial twins wearing largely identical technocratic spectacles.

To problematize disciplinary identity, to begin with a sense that the historical routes down which disciplinary frameworks go need to be moulded not just assumed, has the potential to produce a reflexive vulnerability that is potentially a rich source of dialogue in studying regions, which is a point I will come to later in this essay.

However, to approach a region with a desire to fix one’s own disciplinary identity viz a viz other disciplines, by means of claiming the superiority of the frameworks

through which we approach the world, is a post-imperial outworking of historical imperial roots.

In a section called ‘the cross-currents of diaspora’, Hall (1995, p. 6) says: *“It may be a surprise to some people in this room that there are several Caribbean islands, large ones, in which blacks are nowhere near a majority of the population.”* He then goes on to explain that in some islands the Indian diaspora are more numerous than the African diaspora, and that culturally in different islands different European countries (Britain, France, Spain) have made a deeper impression than any other.

Even though Hall cannot assume that a British audience’s knowledge of the Caribbean is necessarily very detailed (my own knowledge of the Caribbean came only in my post-compulsory education: apart from the omnipresent image of slaves packed tightly into slave ships, the region was largely absent from my British schooling) I do not think that Hall is striking up a conversation here with people who have no pre-existing interest in the Caribbean, particularly as the paper is given at the University of Warwick’s Centre for Caribbean Studies. Perhaps narcissistically, I see Hall as striking up a conversation with black diasporic academics like me, an emerging generation of scholars of Caribbean Studies who might look to the Caribbean as a kind of ancestral home, a location in which to invest a blackness that (certainly in the late twentieth century) was often abjected from the UK. As we were often violently reminded: ‘There ain’t no black in the Union Jack’ (Gilroy 1987). What Hall has to say to us, the Caribbean diaspora, is that the Caribbean not only *has* a diaspora, but that the Caribbean also *is* a diaspora: “The Caribbean is the first, the original and the purest diaspora” (Hall 1995, p. 6).

This is of course quite a contentious thing to say so boldly, although it is mitigated by the fact that Hall had previously located himself as the descendant of Portuguese Jews— he had not forgotten the prior claim of the Jewish diaspora on the concept of diaspora. The way that I read this insight into the multi-layered histories of diaspora is that Hall is shaking diasporic academics like myself free of the false securities of a static Area Studies view of Caribbean Studies. Although such a view might seem to supply a secure mooring onto which to fix our identities, there is a risk that in doing this the Caribbean is seen not so much from an areal view as from an aerial view: as a set of distant island pearls to be discovered and imagined in and from different locations according to the logics of those locations. We are discouraged from fixing the region for our own self-definition, staking a double claim to it, both as ancestral homeland and as area of expertise. If we were to do this (and the seductive security that such a move promises is actually quite hard to relinquish), we would only replicate and even aggravate the kind of colonising scholarship that Said (1995, p. 5) famously critiques in *Orientalism*: “the East as career”.

In the second half of this essay, I want to use Hall’s essay to think about what a less imperialist Caribbean Studies (or Area Studies or Geography more broadly) might look like. The watchword here is ‘conversational’: much of Stuart Hall’s most influential writing was published in volumes that were conversations or dialogues (see for example Hall 1996). The fundamental call for conversation is a call for the study of regions of the world not to seek to apply frameworks of understanding to the Caribbean in Orientalist careerist mode – whether these are theoretical frameworks generated elsewhere and applied to the region (Robinson 2003), or theoretical frameworks supposedly extracted from the region and re-routed elsewhere (such as creolization; see for example Stewart 2007). Instead there needs to be much more

of a dialogue or conversation with scholarship located within the region and emanating from its realities.

In relation to this need for conversation, Hall both sets up a series of conversations within his paper, then finishes with an example of intense scholarly conversation.

The conversations that he sets up each problematize and nuance conversation as a mechanism both for self-reflexive and for mutual understanding. In the first, he (Hall 1995, p 8) records two conversations with his parents, in the first of which they express their fears that he is becoming a migrant, which for the first time makes him recognise himself as such ("In that moment I migrated"), and in the second conversation his parents express their fears about black consciousness, which immediately makes Hall conscious of himself as "what in Britain we are starting to call black". Conversations can be zones of translation (Apter 2006), with unpredictable transformations of meaning. In other words, in the very same conversation through which one speaker might intend to clasp their interlocutor to them, the interlocutor may find a means to escape.

In the second nuance, Hall recalls a longer conversation with Aimé Césaire, in which he recognises that Césaire's identity is a selective conversation with France, in which: "The France with which Césaire identifies... is one France and not another, the France of the revolution... the France that mobilized and touched the imagination of slaves and others in Haiti before the revolution." (Hall 1995, p. 10). Conversations can be selective rather than totalising, enabling rejections as well as connections. In other words, where one side may feel they are setting the terms for engagement, the other may be subtly re-setting them, according to their own needs.

Finally, Hall recalls a conversation he had with a Rastafarian elder in Kingston, Jamaica, who gently resists Hall's (Hall 1995, p. 13) desire to "nail him" by exposing what might be considered mythological elements of Rastafarian historiography – when Hall insists that Haile Selassie cannot be the Son of God, because he is dead, the reply – "When last you hear the truth about the Son of God from the mass media?" - forces Hall to recognise that the language and imagery of Rastafarianism was really not about rediscovering history but about reclaiming it: "a whole people symbolically re-engaged with an experience which enabled them to find a language in which they could re-tell and appropriate their own histories." Conversations can spark unpredictable revelations in the self that can be as much about the fact and form of the encounter as about the content of the conversation. In other words, engaging in diverse conversations can be much more a means of changing the self, of re-shaping the conditions for future conversations, as it can be about attempting to change or re-shape one's interlocutor.

All of this implies that to call for Area Studies or Geography to become conversation is not simply to advocate listening to existing scholarship (though that would be a good start and I have advocated it elsewhere, see Noxolo and Featherstone 2014). Beyond this, it means that the recognition of global flows that have become standard in geographical theories of the production of space, and that Smith (2010) rightly indicates have huge implications for static notions of Area Studies, need to combine with the depth of engagement (of which immersion is only the smallest part) that Duffield (2015) rightly notes as so essential to a genuinely insightful Area Studies. More than the sum of both these parts, a conversational Caribbean Studies enables the rediscovery of the disremembered histories of global conversation (the

transformations, ruptures and sparks) that have been and are now the conditions of knowledge production.

Hall (1995, p. 14) finishes his paper with an elaborate illustration of this history of conversation, which I want to quote in full here:

“I want to end by quoting a passage from CLR James. It’s about a talk he had just heard by the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris. This is what James has to say:

‘I went the other day to the West Indian students’ hostel to hear Wilson Harris speak on the West Indian novel. Well, in the end, we decided we should print it. I was told I could write an introduction [a wonderfully CLR James phrase, that!]; Larry Constantine paid for it, and I have the proofs here. Harris is speaking about the West Indian novel, and I want to read one extract, because we can’t have a talk about Wilson Harris without your hearing something that Harris says for himself. Harris says, ‘The special point I want to make in regard to the West Indies is that the pursuit of a strange and subtle goal, melting-pot, call it what you like, is the mainstream, though the unacknowledged tradition, of the Americas. And the significance of this is akin to the European preoccupation with alchemy, with the growth of experimental science, the poetry of science, as well as the explosive nature which is informed by a solution of images, agnostic humility, and essential beauty rather than vested in a fixed assumption and classification of things’”.

This is a dense and rich passage, presenting quotes within quotes, conversations within conversations: Hall selecting the quote from James and interjecting to

comment on James' style; James selecting the quote from Harris and recalling how his conversation with Constantine led to the publication of Harris's talk; and ending with a quote from Wilson Harris that is about precisely this kind of mixing of voices, this unending conversation. Harris argues that this mixing of voices, this conversation within conversation, is 'the mainstream', the most fundamental ground, of tradition in the Americas. It seems clear to me then, from my singular perspective of UK-based Caribbean diaspora geographer with an interest in Caribbean Studies, that my singular perspective is a conversational multiplicity that can transform, rupture, spark cultural identities, and that is my starting point.

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