

# Stuart Hall's Ethics

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*For Stuart*

Increasingly, I think one of the main functions of concepts [like identity] is that they give us a good night's rest. Because what they tell us is that there is a kind of stable, only very slowly changing ground inside the hectic upsets, discontinuities and ruptures of history. Around us history is constantly breaking in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same.

—Stuart Hall

Here is the worry that animates much of Stuart Hall's work; one might call it his worry about "the solace of closure" (that phrase is his too).<sup>1</sup> It is a worry, I think, that shapes to a very considerable degree his intellectual *voice*—his style of thinking, his ethos of critical engagement. And *these* are what interest me. Stuart, I want to suggest, has cultivated an ethical voice responsive to the violations that grow out of complacent satisfactions, secure doctrines, congealed orders, sedimented identities. In this sense I read Stuart's practice *less* for its *cultural* criticism than for the guidance it gives in speaking *ethics* to politics. I read Stuart as a normative critic of normativity inasmuch as his style and his ethos urge us to *take* positions—not merely to disavow them. Stuart's

1. The epigraph is taken from Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), 43. On the "solace of closure," see, for example, Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 137.

ethics, I am going to argue more specifically, are *dialogical* ethics. By this I mean that his ethics are not rule-following ethics of the rationalist or Kantian sort in which what counts is mastery of the moral law as the guarantee of sovereign identity. Rather Stuart's ethics are *founded in* and *shaped by* responsiveness to alterity, to the opacities of otherness, and to the unavoidable risks and ineluctable uncertainties haunting any dialogical encounter, and any hope of belonging-in-difference.

We live in Dark Times. They are not times that favor forbearance, they do not shelter generosity, they do not encourage receptivity. They are, rather, obdurate times, cynically triumphalist and ruthlessly xenophobic times that seem to require a new routine of silencing and assimilation, a new regime of prostration, submission, and humiliation. Who, looking forward from a generation ago, in the middle of another imperial moment, could have imagined they would be living in a world that looks like this one? But Dark Times, as Hannah Arendt memorably said, need people who can give us illumination—and calls them forth into the public realm.<sup>2</sup> These are not people who speak to us with feckless sentimentality, who are interested in saving our souls. They are people whose vocation of dissent enables us to glimpse some possibility in ourselves and in others hitherto obscured by the priority we give to the solace of a good night's rest. This is what, to me anyway, Stuart's voice is, in all the recursive iterations in which I have had the good fortune to hear it: illumination for Dark Times.

For the sake of keeping me focused and tidy in what follows, the reflections I offer are organized around three distinct but I think inseparable dimensions of what I take to be Stuart's way of practicing the intellectual life. To begin with, I take up the question of the sense or senses in which Stuart Hall is, preeminently, a theorist of the *present* and of the present's contingency. I will emphasize that for Stuart respecting contingency is less an orientation toward Truth per se, than responsiveness to an ethics of action. Next, I take up Stuart's relation to the question of discipline and theory, and inquire some way into what I take to be his particular *evasion* of the voice and ambition of Philosophy. I argue that this has implications for an ethics of knowing, broadly speaking, and for the way

2. I am thinking, of course, of the framing of Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968). She writes of her sketches, "That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given to them on earth—this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn" (ix). Arendt herself was such an illumination in Dark Times.

Stuart thinks the question of the African diaspora, more specifically. Finally, I end by considering the ethics of receptive generosity I find at work in Stuart's conceptualization of identity. Stuart's fundamentally *ethical* stance as an engaged intellectual, I will suggest, is illuminated in his solicitous affirmation of a mode of giving that is simultaneously a mode of receiving.

This is the scope of my preoccupations here. It will be obvious, I hope, that I am not aiming at comprehensiveness. There is plenty of what Stuart Hall is and has been about that I am not going to be concerned with. This is because my overwhelming interest is in the ethical style of his vocation as a critic, the ethos of dialogical responsiveness he brings to bear on his practice of the intellectual life. It might be as well too to underline that my whole effort here is not a "critical" one in any of the standard senses of that word inherited from Kant, Hegel, and Marx. I do not entirely repudiate that inheritance, but it has no real claim on the relation to Stuart's work—Stuart's voice—that I am seeking to construct. Therefore, I am not proposing—even supposing I were able—to interrogate his work in order to discern its yield or its limits. I am not interested in *overcoming* Stuart Hall, in getting *beyond* him. I have what I can only call an *internalist* concern to enact my own dialogical encounter with a receptive voice I have been striving to hear; to learn *from within* the idiom of Stuart's way of taking his bearings in the world he seeks to question.

## THE CONTINGENCY OF THE PRESENT

I have often thought—and have doubtless said as much before—that Stuart is less the author of books than the author of *interventions*. Interventions are his modus operandi, his MO. Needless to say, there are a large number of books that bear his name—as author or coauthor, editor or coeditor. And these books constitute an indispensable inventory of—and a remarkable testament to—the work of his singular life. But, significantly, there is no Big Book in which you can read, once and for all, the final expression of his thought, in which you can look for, and be reassured by, Stuart Hall's Theory of Everything. This is why the essay-form—rather than the monograph—has been Stuart's métier. Indeed such books as there are—seminal ones such as the early *Popular Arts*, or later ones such as *Policing the Crisis* or *The Hard Road to Renewal* or *New Times*, or more recent ones such as *Different* and the growing number of catalogue introductions—are, I would say, more in the way of provisional working notes in which a distinctive *present*, or better, the *distinctiveness* of a particular present, is made visible, is produced *theoretically* in thought. They are, in short, *strategic* interventions.

More than any other contemporary intellectual I can think of, Stuart Hall embodies a keen alertness to the present in which he finds himself. One has the sense of him always thinking on his feet, thinking from where he is, thinking out loud, making it up (as he's often said of the Birmingham cultural studies days) as he goes along. Consequently, and much to the annoyance of the intellectual "gatekeepers," you won't find him just where you left him moments ago, thinking the same thoughts in exactly the same way.<sup>3</sup> Thinking, for Stuart, is a way of *moving on*; it is a way of attending to those moments when an idea, a position, an identity, begins to merely repeat itself, to harden into dogma, because this is a sign of the need to think again and to think *otherwise* than before. As was true of Michel Foucault, thinking for Stuart is a way of *changing* himself, a way of preventing himself from always being the same. It has always seemed to me one of his defining virtues, this way of honoring the provisional in himself; it is an aspect of his *style*, and one consummate way he has of embodying an engaged responsiveness to the ineluctable contingency of the present.

Perhaps the most memorable site on which to see the vocabulary of this responsiveness to contingency begin to produce theoretical effects is the famous "without guarantees" essay rereading Marx's conception of ideology. First published in 1983 as part of a volume commemorating the centenary of Marx's death, the essay constituted a strategic intervention not only into the particular moment of cultural-politics in Britain (the early Thatcher years) but also into the theoretical predicament of Marxism. (It should be remembered that this essay appeared before and not after Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a book with which he would in significant ways disagree.)<sup>4</sup> In any case, "The Problem of Ideology" is an essay of enormous importance for understanding Stuart's trajectory, because as *post-Marxist* as he would later become (in his own distinctively careful use of that term), he would always remain within "shouting distance" of the Marxism it helped so profoundly to revise. As its many readers know well, this essay operates at several levels simultaneously; but the level that interests me here—perhaps the broadest of its levels—is the one concerning the way we think about the question of "determinations." Stuart's central preoccupation here was to rescue a conception of "determinacy" from the "final closure" of the infamous

3. Needless to say the allusion here is to Terry Eagleton's "The Hippest," *London Review of Books*, 7 March 1996, but also to his memoir, *The Gatekeeper* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002). This desire to discipline Stuart's imagination and streamline his politics is echoed in Chris Rojek's *Stuart Hall* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

4. Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," in *Marx: A Hundred Years On*, ed. Betty Matthews (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 57–85. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* was published by Verso in 1985.

“determination in the last instance” and *thereby* to open a working space for *contingency*. This Althusserian idea of the “last instance,” he said, was “the last repository of the lost dream or illusion of theoretical *certainty*.” The structure of social practices, Stuart argued in the final summarizing moments of the essay, is “neither free-floating nor immaterial. But neither is it a transitive structure, in which its intelligibility lies exclusively in the one-way transmission of effects from the base upwards.” The “terrain” of the present, therefore, cannot be defined by “forces we can predict with the certainty of natural science, but by the existing balance of forces, the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture.”<sup>5</sup> In short, it has in part to be defined *contingently*.

To honor the “contingency” of the present, then, as Stuart has urged, is to be prepared to give up a certain *metaphysical* conception of history, namely the idea of history-as-teleology: a progressively unfolding succession, driven by an in-built law or logic of temporality, and carrying humanity forward from a determinate past in the direction of a specifiable future. On this view, the present can hardly have any theoretical significance, being merely a pre-determined *stage* on a journey whose script is already concluded. To give up this metaphysical notion of history and embrace the idea and vocabulary of contingency is to see the structural, institutional, and discursive shape of the present as non-necessary, as rather the conjunctural *effect* of a multiplicity of articulations and determinations that cannot all be known in advance. It is to see that the present does not rest on a fixed and enduring foundation, the identification or uncovering of which will provide the assurance that our moral and political actions are the best or right or certifiable ones. And if the present is not shaped by a pre-determined past, neither of course is it governed by a pre-ordained future, by an a priori horizon waiting for us, however far that future and however long it might take to get there.

To understand the present contingently, in other words, always requires grasping it in its conjunctural specificity, in terms of the new problem-space of questions it poses, and the possibilities it both lays open and shuts down. For, as I have suggested elsewhere, one way of describing the spacing of temporal discontinuity, the historical punctuation that constitutes a conjuncture, is as the reorganization of an existing cognitive-political problem-space, the reorganization of an existing configuration of “questions and answers.” The conjuncture of any given present, I take it then, is the outcome of an historical *interruption* and conceptual *reconfiguration* in which one field of argument is displaced by another. As I read Stuart’s uses of it, therefore, to grasp a particular

5. Hall, “The Problem of Ideology,” 83–84.

conjuncture it is not enough to seek to inquire whether a new answer (a new proposition) can be arrived at; one must also seek to understand whether in fact a new *question* has been contingently posed by the present. Read this way, a conjuncture is not merely a cognitive category in a social-historical reconstruction but a *moral-political* category in a strategic intervention. For what is important in the theorization of any conjuncture of the present is not only whether it is possible to identify the question to which the proposition addresses itself as an answer but whether that question continues morally and politically to be one worth having an answer to.

The *point* of “contingency,” it should be easy to see then, is not strictly speaking an *epistemological* one. At least in Stuart’s uses of it, “contingency” is not meant to be elevated into a new metaphysical first principle, an antiessentialist theory of essential meanings. Consequently, it is never the *absence* of essence *as such* that matters to him, but the implications of this refutation of foundations and teleology for how one thinks about moral judgement and political action. In this, Stuart separates himself from a wide swathe of contemporary antiessentialism in which the critique of foundations only serves to *reinscribe* a surreptitious metaphysics. The idea of the contingency of determinations is important, rather, because it helps to unsettle—indeed subvert—a naturalized idea of politics as the mastering and instrumentalist practice of securing and guaranteeing a preconceived community of the Good and the True. To hold open a space for contingency, to read the present conjuncturally, is to see in this conventional idea of politics the ideal of an *antipolitics*, in other words a politics conceived to *preempt* and *foreclose* the possibility of an ethics of politics as such. The point of contingency is that it promotes a conception of politics understood as *strategic*, as always *earned* rather than derived, as always a matter of ideological *struggle*, as an ongoing “war of position.”

It is important to bear in mind that the argument here is *not* that politics is therefore *groundless*, that politics can be conceived without *any* premises. To turn down this road is, again, to convert politics into epistemology, into a game of Truth. If there are no Final Grounds for politics there has always to be *enough* grounds to give *traction* to a position, to give *force* to claim, to give *point* and *uptake* to an argument. However, such grounds have always to be treated *lightly*, as *provisional* rather than fixed or ontological. They are, in Judith Butler’s paradoxical phrase, “contingent foundations.”<sup>6</sup> “Let me put it this way,” Stuart remarks, deploying a handy pedagogical instance, “you have to be

6. Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–21. Many thanks to Ritty Lukose for pointing me to this reference.

sure about a position in order to teach a class, but you have to be open-ended enough to know that you are going to change your mind by the time you teach it next week. As a strategy, that means holding enough ground to be able to think a position but always putting it in a way which has a horizon toward open-ended theorization.”<sup>7</sup>

It should also be underlined that the idea of contingency does not license an ethical-political subject of *sovereign* agency. The idea that the present is contingently (over)determined does not imply that it is simply constructed or invented by the sheer will of rational action, and therefore can be reconstructed or reinvented by a fresh application of radical agency. Liberal as well as postmodern subjects often perceive themselves as agents of pure choice, *ironizing* agents who can stand back from themselves, so to speak, and revise and modify their ends *at will*. For Stuart, by contrast, part of the point of contingency is *precisely* that we are not simply the sovereign authors of our selves and our worlds, that we are partly constituted by energies—desires, injuries, dispositions, pasts—flowing beneath the threshold of rational self-consciousness. These are contingencies that William Connolly felicitously calls “entrenched” or “branded” contingencies; contingencies that are not given, he says, to easy modification or revision.<sup>8</sup> Such ineluctable contingencies make us alert—or *ought* to make us alert—to the hubris of reason, to the limits of sovereign agency, to the *tragic* senses in which our best, our most enlightened, intentions are often subject to reversal, are often vulnerable to catastrophe. To act in the world, in other words, is to *expose* ourselves to contingencies over which we may have no absolute control and to face the prospect of alternatives between which it may be impossible to choose *well*.

To speak in the vocabulary of the contingency of the present, then, is to affirm an *ethics* of action. It is to give priority to the ethical-political project of making provisional claims and negotiating settlements (constantly reopened and reimagined and reworked) over the epistemological aim of converging on a final Truth. It is to make oneself receptive to the given—and not always (indeed, not ever) transparent—circumstances in which one is obliged to act, receptive to the dialogical encounters of agonistic argument in which some positions are staked out and other positions undermined or subverted, and receptive, moreover, to the risk of failure to which any intervention (by dint of being “without guarantees”) is necessarily always exposed.

7. Hall, “On Postmodernism,” 150.

8. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 176.

## THE EVASION OF PHILOSOPHY

SMALL  
AXE

I am urging that Stuart Hall is preeminently an ethical theorist of the present and its ineluctable contingency. His practice consists, above all, in making criticism produce a labor of work—strategic, provisional, positional work. What matters to him is how to *intervene* in an existing predicament to expand or revise (or *both* together) the cognitive terrain on which an ethics of action can be conducted. In view of this it can hardly be surprising that Stuart has exemplified—and pedagogically encouraged—a willfully exploratory and experimental relation to the academic disciplines and the authoritative knowledges and methodological ambitions that constitute them. “The idea of a discipline,” Richard Rorty quotes Jonathan Culler as saying, “is the idea of an investigation in which writing might be brought to an end.”<sup>9</sup> This is clearly because of the way a discipline works to secure its claims by imposing what Stuart has referred to as “paradigm closure,” or what Thomas Kuhn might have called paradigm *normalization*—namely, the methodological stabilization of the parameters of an investigation such that its resources are employed not to question the paradigm itself and the assumptions of which it is composed but to converge on that final chapter that will bring the script to its long-awaited conclusion.

It is well-enough known, of course, that the incitement to cultural studies as an institutional programme in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s was antidisciplinary; it arose in part, that is to say, out of a strong doubt about the ability (let alone the *will*) of the existing academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to comprehend and grapple with the transformed social and cultural conditions of postwar Britain. As Stuart tells it, in a now familiar vocabulary, cultural studies emerged as a “conjunctural practice.”<sup>10</sup> Inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s idea of the intellectual life and seeded by the seminal texts of the first New Left, it assembled itself under Stuart’s leadership as a contingent “field of work” by occasionally raiding and appropriating whatever resources it needed from existing “disciplinary terrains.”<sup>11</sup> For Stuart and the early “apprentices” at Birmingham, then, disciplines held *no priority* over problems and no necessary privilege

9. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 133, footnote 31.

Quoted from Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 90.

10. Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 11.

11. Among the most important of these were Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963). For a fascinating account of the significance of the first New Left to his thinking, see Stuart Hall, “The ‘First’ New Left: Life and Times,” in *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On*, ed. the Oxford University Socialist Group (London: Verso, 1989).

in their access to them. Whatever it has now become on either side of the North Atlantic (and elsewhere south as well), cultural studies was initiated less as a new discipline than as a new constellation of strategies for unsettling, displacing, and sidestepping the hegemonic claims of the existing disciplines, and for opening up cognitive room for a new ethics of knowing.

To my mind, this is the sense in which Stuart has consistently *evaded* philosophy, that is to say, philosophy in its institutional, programmatic and disciplinary form. The allusion here to Cornel West's important book of some years ago—*The American Evasion of Philosophy*—is deliberate.<sup>12</sup> Stuart does not necessarily share West's specific genealogy of the sources of U.S. pragmatism, but there are points of contact, for example in the mutual admiration for W. E. B. Du Bois's prophetic criticism and in the *decentering* and *revisionary* role they both assign to Gramsci and Foucault. More importantly, though, there is a good deal in the *spirit* of the book's suspicion of philosophy's foundational voice they share, in particular the book's concern to *disable* philosophy's authoritative claim to epistemological privilege and disciplinary priority, and to reconceive it as kind of "cultural criticism."

I read Stuart's critical practice as exemplifying a similar doubt about (capital P) Philosophy. This is obviously not to say that Stuart Hall is antiphilosophical in the sense that he has sought—or seeks—to avoid *theory*. It is to say that in Stuart's uses of it, theory is a mode of *phronesis*, of practical (and therefore ethical) reasoning. "I am not interested in Theory," he's said, with his usual accent on the contingent *process* of thinking, "I am interested in going on theorizing." Not theory, then, as a stable compendium of invariant First Principles, but the "open horizon" of a theoretical practice *moving*, as he says, "within the magnetic field of some basic concepts, but constantly being applied afresh to what is genuinely original and novel in new forms of cultural practice."<sup>13</sup> Instructively, for example, what worries Stuart about the later work of people like Ernesto Laclau is that precisely *because* they are so preoccupied with philosophical consistency, with getting theory *right*, they end up in their own kind of reductionism.<sup>14</sup> This is because for them theory is not—as it is for Stuart—a *detour*, en route somewhere else, but something more like an end itself, a terminus.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the figure of

12. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

13. Hall, "On Postmodernism," 138.

14. David Scott, "Politics, Contingency, Strategy: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Small Axe*, no. 1 (March 1997): 157. For Stuart's doubts about *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, see Hall, "On Postmodernism," 145–47.

15. Hall, "Old and New Identities."

theory that emerges in his critical practice is closer to the one offered by Gilles Deleuze and Foucault in a now famous exchange in which they suggested that a theory is best understood as a dialogical ensemble of relays negotiating blockages and obstacles in an effort to prize open ethical-political space. Or as Deleuze put it, in a phrase I believe Stuart would endorse, “theory is exactly like a box of tools.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the old “cases and circumstances” casuists who never believed in an invariant code of general principles, Stuart has evaded the *tyranny* of First Philosophy and the metaphysical underpinnings regarding origins that are typically mobilized to secure it.<sup>17</sup> One discursive domain in which this particular theoretical strategy has been put to impressively effective use, it seems to me, is that of discussions about the African diaspora. Stuart’s thinking here has had an *untimely timeliness* about it because it has served to question many of the seemingly settled assumptions that drive and indeed *over-drive* the contemporary theorization of black identity, in particular the striving to anchor diasporic African identities in an anthropologically and philosophically grounded theory of authentic presence.

Take, for example, his memorable and (as he himself has described it) “notorious” essay entitled “New Ethnicities,” published in 1988. In this essay, Stuart offered an explicitly provisional reading of a shift in the problem-space of black cultural politics in Britain. He put to work a practice of *redescription* aimed at discerning the distinctiveness of the new questions that were coming to animate black Britain. On this reading, the older historical moment (centered in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s) was characterized by the question of how to gain access to the discourses, disciplines, apparatuses, technologies, institutions, and so on that produce and circulate authoritative representations of blacks, the black condition, and black knowledges, subjectivities, and experiences. In Stuart’s account, this moment was being displaced by another one characterized by a struggle over the very conceptual and ideological terms and terrain of these discourses, disciplines, apparatuses, technologies, institutions, and so on themselves. In this emerging problem-space, new questions became visible, questions that turned *less* on how to come *into* representation than on the knowledge/power regimes such representations depended on. What *concept* of blackness is at stake in any enunciative practice? What is this concept being employed to *do* in the arguments and practices

16. Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205–17.

17. On casuistry, see, for example, Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

in which it is deployed? What *effects* of subjectification does it aim to produce? What modes of identity does it endorse and what modes of difference does it seek to *exclude*? The new conjuncture constituted a shift, as Stuart put it, from “a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself.” Or put slightly differently, it defined a shift from a moment in which the identification and representation of racial presence served to guarantee authenticity and moral approval to one in which “blackness” now constitutes an unstable and pluralizing field of knowledge and identity in which contestation for hegemony is constant. In Stuart’s unforgettable phrase, the shift marked “the end of innocence, the end of the essential black subject.”<sup>18</sup>

Everything about this essay is inimitably and invaluablely Stuart Hall: the tentative, exploratory, and at the same time bold and innovative formulation; the textured, recursive voice you hear thinking out loud in the immediacy of a conjuncture; the self-consciousness of intervening and trying to gain uptake for a new position; and the openness to the risks and dangers that potentially await his move in the ongoing argument about the African diaspora. But what I want us to notice for my purposes here is the way this practice of theorizing *evades* philosophy, evades, say, the besetting conundrums of the “Afro-Caribbean philosophy” recently being urged.<sup>19</sup> For notice that Stuart has no recourse to the structure of an argument in which the supposed essential meaning of African discourse and identity is established as an originary baseline against which the authenticity of *all* black critical practice can be measured and judged. For Stuart, there are simply no such guarantees. In this argument, needless to say, “Africa” is not denied (as some might be tempted to assert) but neither is it treated like an ethnographic *essence* defined by authentic meanings such as “religion” or “spirituality” or certain modes of being. “Dreaming in Afro,” Stuart suggests in his remarks on Chris Ofili’s aesthetic figurations, does not require an Africa “recollected in nostalgia,” but the landscape of an “Africa” variously reimagined from elsewhere, “not remembered but dreamt in its translated ‘Afro’ idiom.”<sup>20</sup> For Stuart, in other words, “Africa,” is conceived as a

18. Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in “Black Film, British Cinema,” ed. Kobena Mercer, *ICA Documents* 7 (1988): 27–31.

19. See, for example, Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Whereas I am sympathetic to the worry that animates this book, I disagree with its epistemological assumption that an archaeology of black memory and of black moral and political hopes needs to be grounded in a “philosophical” or “anthropological” theory of origins. In my view, sentences such as “the vision that informs traditional African philosophy, that generates its fundamental questions is a religious one” (23) are rife with deadend essentialisms.

20. Stuart Hall, “Chris Ofili in Paradise: Dreaming in Afro,” in *Within Reach*, ed. Chris Ofili, volume 1, *50th Venice Biennale Catalogue* (London: Victoria Miro Gallery, 2003).

historically constructed *semiotic field*, the proper name of a vastly complicated terrain of contested significations, knowledges, discourses, images, dreams, as well as differently positioned and unequally empowered techniques of embodied self-fashioning, an understanding of which requires a *conjunctural* reading not the ontological ambition of a First Philosophy.

Stuart's whole way of carrying on the practice of theorizing—of taking the provisional detour of theory—is to evade this project and the consolations of closure as well as the vindications of cultural presence it commends to us. For what the ambition of First Philosophy encourages, after all, is the idea that if you go on anthropologizing long enough you will eventually discover the originary language, the background concepts, that will secure forever the privilege of a *single* way of being black and a *single* idiom for speaking in the name of a black subjectivity—it encourages, in short, the conceit of an investigation in which *writing* the African diaspora might be brought to an end.

## AN ETHICS OF GENEROSITY

I have been drawing a picture of Stuart's style of intellectual practice by attending to his particular responsiveness to the present's ineluctable contingency (his ethics of action), and by sketching something of the way he evades the ambitions of a certain disciplinary convention (his ethics of knowing). I now want to turn to the kinds of ethics of identity I think his theorizing commends.

In a recent book, Romand Coles explores with considerable subtlety the idea of a refigured ethics of *caritas*, of giving, of generosity.<sup>21</sup> Coles is interested in reconstructing the old (and of course partly Christian) concept of generosity and making it a central virtue of a *dialogical* ethics. What he wants to commend is, as he calls it, a *receptive* generosity, that is to say, a mode of practicing generosity that is as responsive to *receiving* as it is to giving, as responsive to *listening* as it is to speaking.

The worry that Coles is expressing in his book is a worry about a prevalent manner of practicing generosity in which the self is confident, in advance of any encounter with difference, of the beneficial singularity of the gifts—whether of God or Freedom or Democracy—it bears to others. By Coles's lights, this is a *monological*—as opposed to a *dialogical*—ethics of generosity, because it supposes a subject of *impervious* and *self-sufficient*

21. Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

identity. Of course, the varieties of the modern Kantian subject of sovereign autonomy are the paradigmatic instances of this subject of *one-dimensional* and *uni-directional* generosity. They seek to construct an enlightened and beneficent self, to be sure, one that scrupulously avoids selfishness and cultivates respect for others. But whether understood in terms of Rawls's "veil of ignorance" or Habermas's intersubjective domain of communicative reason, they remain "unreceptive givers" because their appreciation of difference depends in effect on its erosion, its assimilation, its overcoming, on the basis of a regulative ideal of unifying consensus. Against these tendencies in contemporary ethical-political theorizing, Coles offers the following caution and commendation:

Insofar as generosity does not understand itself to be deeply rooted in a receptive encounter with others, it will proliferate blindness, theft, and imperialism despite its best efforts; it will ensure an oblivion that continually suppresses the question concerning how intelligent giving might happen, given the myriad specificities of the moment that calls for the gift. The most difficult and often the highest aspect of giving is receiving the other in agonistic dialogical engagements. Such engagement is not reducible to an a priori injunction to "let be." Rather, it is an effort to erode a priori closures so that the play of mutual transfigurations which are a condition of possibility for sense, intelligence, and well-being might thrive.<sup>22</sup>

I want to suggest, in what follows, that Stuart renders this "play of mutual transfigurations" of identity and difference, the irreducible *trace* (as he would say) of the one in the other, in ways that comport well with this idea—and ideal—of a dialogical ethics of generosity. Because, as I have been urging throughout, what distinguishes Stuart's theorizing of identity is not merely its epistemological skepticism but its openness to the constitutive paradox of receptive giving integral to a pursuit of a politics of belonging-in-difference.

In a number of extremely fertile essays since the late 1980s (one of which I have already touched on), Stuart has sought to intervene in the new and proliferating discussions in which an ethics of identity is at stake as *a question* concerning politics.<sup>23</sup> Stuart's concern, as I have already suggested, has been to draw us away from our consoling attachment to the idea of identity as imagined and lived as a continuous and developmental unfolding of the self. Centered, integrated, bounded by a clear sense of inside and outside, surfaces and depths, this self is perceived as the sovereign author of social, cultural,

22. *Ibid.*, 3.

23. See, for example, Hall, "New Ethnicities"; "Minimal Selves" in "Identity: The Real Me," *ICA Documents* 6 (1988): 44–46; "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* 36 (1989): 68–81; and "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996).

and political practice. Of course, in the oppositional cultural-politics advanced through these secure identities, generosity toward difference is by no means always absent; these are not—or not necessarily—self-righteously ungenerous selves. However, these selves, merely reversing the logic of totalization as they do, have often been more concerned to turn historical injuries into the ground of a new politics of stigmatization and exclusion, and consequently have had little room for receptivity to the edges of otherness.

This is a picture of the self and identity that I think Stuart finds insupportable. Against the old view of identity as self-presence, he urges that we think in terms of an open-ended process of *identification*. In this sense of it, identity is not a fixed and permanent entity existing continuously through time but an always unfinished *suturing* together of fragments. Identity is never a neat and singular whole, but always plural, always fluid, more *both/and* than either/or, and therefore there is no authentic core, no stable point of origin that will guarantee the rightness or wrongness of any decision. Of course as you would expect with Stuart (and in contrast with the endlessly floating signifiers of the postmodernists) this process always takes place in relations of power, in relation to institutions, apparatuses, and disciplines that position the self in *structured* ways, in relations of inclusion/exclusion. But above all, Stuart argues, identities are constructed *through* difference. “This entails,” as he puts it, “the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its identity—can be constructed.”<sup>24</sup>

As I read Stuart, then, if identity is always-already (in William Connolly’s apt phrase) identity\difference, the ethics we need is an ethics generously receptive to the trace—even the photographic *negative* of the trace—of the self in the other and the other in the self. Since each is indispensable to the constitution of identity, we need an ethics that affirms *not* a harmonious mutuality, *not* an assimilative intersubjectivity, but an agonistic regard for—a respectful contentiousness toward—identity\difference. If we cannot live without identity perhaps we can live (in a phrase that Stuart has made his own) with identity “under erasure,” and therefore without the autobiography of a sealed-up identity that shelters the pose of self-congratulation and drives the conceits of exclusive entitlements. Perhaps what we can cultivate is a restless receptivity to otherness *within* identity, a generative will to disturb, disrupt, unlearn our easy complacency with the identities we always-already inhabit, and the pressures to stabilize and congeal identity in dogmatism.

24. Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity?’”, 4–5, italics in original.

In contrast to the meager charity of many contemporary moral theorists, therefore, we find in Stuart Hall the elements of an ethics of the self and other attuned precisely to the *edges*, the *margins*, where “identity” ceases to hold with certainty and where ambiguity, otherness, finitude, the outside, begin to decenter and undermine its fables of stable self-presence. Stuart proposes that we take seriously that there is something altogether reductive and *therefore* morally impoverished about the picture of human selves and human interaction that emerges from the one-sided Enlightenment admiration for a sovereign, autonomous self legislating the single good for us all. We stand a chance of flourishing better, he suggests, the more open we can *make* ourselves to our own vulnerability—our own fragile, exposed, receptivity—to difference. This is not multicultural sentimentality. A real ethical labor is required. For Stuart knows that such receptivity entails an ongoing and dissonant practice of working on the self that, as Connolly puts it, resists two foreclosing pressures at once: the normalizing pressure to repress and subjugate otherness, including that contingently disruptive otherness within the self, *and* the vindicationist pressure to transform historical infringements and marginalized dispositions into the ground of a poetics of revenge and a political reversal of subjugations.<sup>25</sup>

I have been talking about Stuart Hall as a moral theorist, as a theorist of the ethics of identity\difference. I have been urging that we attend to the ethical implications of his cultural criticism; or, if you like, that we read his cultural criticism as the *idiom* of his ethics.

In speaking in this way about Stuart’s intellectual practice it is hard not to call to mind his late friend and interlocutor, Edward Said, and the ethics of outrage their voices share. There is of course the Gramscian provenance of their intellectual commitments, but there is more than this to the restless disquiet that defines them. They both speak to us—Stuart Hall and Edward Said—as intellectuals “out of place,” intellectuals whose public and *worldly* relation to the world as lived-in, as thought-about, is never *not* oblique, never altogether *at home*, never completely centered in a theory, in a discipline, in an institution, in a nation, in a permanent enclosure of harmonious reconciliations and imagined satisfactions. In his Reith Lectures, remember, Said eloquently defended the humanist promise of the intellectual as a vocation of dissent: “At bottom,” he said, “the intellectual . . . is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy

25. Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 159.

formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do.”<sup>26</sup> It is arguable, perhaps, that there are moments when Stuart would likely not agree with the detail of every sentiment Said expressed about the distinguishing virtues of the intellectual life, but in the ample *spirit* of its demand for a revised and insurgent humanism, for a “constant state of alertness” and a perpetual unwillingness to be steered along by “half-truths or received ideas,” it is exactly Stuart in every line.

In the dark and inhospitable times in which we live, in which it is hard to see just how to act responsibly against the moral-political disasters by which we seem overtaken in the post-cold war and post-9/11 world, we naturally look for guidance and illumination from those whose words and deeds in the public realm have always urged us to think against our complacency, against the limits of our normalized satisfactions. Of course the ethics of generosity that I read Stuart as embracing and commending are no general panacea, no final security against the evils that threaten us on every side. For *nothing* is. *That’s* his point. But if, for better or worse, there is no way back to the old familiar logic of absolutes and certainties and guarantees that once assured us of a good night’s rest, there may be no better option for us (hard though it may be) than to set aside our conceits of identity, open ourselves a little more to contingency, and risk the agonistic striving required to belong-in-difference.

Such, anyway, at least as I have come to see it, is Stuart’s challenge to us.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay was first read as a plenary lecture at the conference “Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall,” held at the Centre for Caribbean Thought, University of the West Indies, Mona, 17–19 June 2004. I am, needless to say, grateful to the organizers of this occasion for inviting me to present it. I have altered it only very slightly and added footnotes.

26. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 23. See also, more recently, Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), in which he again defends a robust—yet generous and self-reflexively critical—humanism.

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