

THE X OF REPRESENTATION: REREADING STUART HALL

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Abstract: This essay is a study of the notion of representation – its relation to difference, politics, diaspora, otherness, truth, and doxa – within Stuart Hall’s work. The reevaluation of this concept in terms of dialectics and *différance*, or of blackness and innocence, is shown to be an abiding preoccupation of Hall’s work. In particular, because blackness (or its notion) is never innocent, this essay explores the consequences of a certain undecidability that attends any encounter between representation and difference. And it is this X – its shaping of black meaning and life – that alerts us to an unsettling tension in Hall’s work that no knowledge or encounter can fill and that leads to a purely negative reassessment of the racial imperatives of certain truths.

Keywords: blackness, Stuart Hall, representation, diaspora, innocence, autobiography, Michael X

It [the *constitutive* role of representation in social and political life] marks what I can only call ‘the end of innocence’, or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.

Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’¹

These are the thoughts that drove me to speak, in an unguarded moment, of the end of innocence of the black subject or the end of the innocent notion of an essential black subject.

Stuart Hall, ‘What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?’²

I would like to begin with a personal confession: the experience of reading these peculiar, uneasy formulations by Stuart Hall has always been disconcerting to me. The very discrepancy between innocence and its representation alerts the reader to an uncertainty as to what exactly has come to an end: innocence and/or its notion? Moreover, we are told that the very attempt to think the end of innocence was itself driven by a need to speak, in an unguarded moment, of an innocence ending, even though Hall was not himself sure of what this ending represented – whether it, like blackness, was no longer essentially innocent, or whether it was no longer possible to represent blackness as the innocent expression of its notion. The representation in whose name the end of innocence *has to be* stated, in brief, cannot possibly be derived from the notion that governs the unguarded confession. And the imperative

1. Stuart Hall, ‘New ethnicities’, in *Black film, British cinema*, pp27–31, London: ICA Documents 7, 1988. (Hereafter *New Ethnicities*).

2. Stuart Hall, ‘What is this “Black” in black popular culture?’ in *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent (ed). Seattle, WA: Bay, 1992, pp21–37. (Hereafter *What is this ‘Black?’*).

according to which that ending is known, and so expressed, conveys from the start a suspicion, a scare-quote uncertainty, that it might be impossible to ever know innocence without the delusion of its unveiling. There is no escape from this, for these comments also establish that there is no way to talk about blackness that is neutral or innocent, or not already laden with certain kinds of concepts, ideas, or images, that are coextensive with a *usage* that is racially imperative. It is therefore not altogether clear whether the end of an essential innocence itself denotes a struggle, not over representation but with the racial limits of the representable as such; or whether the question of ends raises a question about the limits and modalities of blackness itself (at least in Hall's theorising of it), a bewildering uncertainty that I shall take as the guiding thread for what follows: namely, what would it mean to bring blackness to an end, to tell its story differently, by bringing to an end the innocent forms of its formulation, and this ending being read, in turn, as an obscure, undecidable beginning? For there to be an end to black cultural innocence, must we not also first believe in a blackness that is neither conceivable nor representable until the moment of its unveiling, and according to a notion that, from the start, must presuppose a fall (*into* representation) as both the end position and the becoming theme of blackness?

The sense shared by Hall that what is at stake here is not identity but rather the ways in which it might be thought or represented seems to find confirmation in the word *innocence*, which suggests that any theory of blackness must begin by innocencing itself of any belief that it could ever essentially or finally know what blackness is. Are we thus to assume that the only possible way black theory can conceive of blackness is by innocencing itself in the grasp of that imperative? The question would then become: How can a theory of the end of an essential innocence be unaware that it is itself the very innocence from whom the theory must overcome? To follow on from such non-knowing is possible, it seems, only if we grasp the point that to pursue a knowledge of blackness is to discover an irreducible gap or absence, which no conscious or past notion could symbolise. For only then can we discover that there is no essential truth to find, and no essence prior to representation.

Blackness would then be inseparable from the effect of a certain non-knowing whose expression changes the very nature of what we think we know, or experience, as black. Indeed, this would suggest that the signifier *blackness* must remain necessarily innocent of the very notion of its innocence, for to know it is to discover a blackness that is undecidable, irretrievable. Blackness would therefore be defined neither by its objects nor by its representations, for these meanings convey no criterion of truth: what is deemed black is nothing more than an imperative concerning what counts as racially true. The innocent ending of any essentialist notion would then be decreed by the same kind of thinking as that represented by the essential ignorance of any theoretical mode of representation. To know the end of innocence is thus not to know it, or to know that one does not know it, for to become conscious of what one thinks

is innocence, or what once was innocent, is really a sense of being driven by what one does not yet know or is unaware of because what is unknowingly grasped is always unguardedly so. The end of innocence is, then, the story of a repetition that is itself the repetition of a story from which innocence can never be finally thought. The end of any black essential notion can never know, then, the innocence it conveys; it is ignorant of its own essence. And this end no longer repeats its beginning: what it repeats is nothing less than a previous story of trying – but failing – to think it. To have the last word on innocence or its essential instance – and, as we shall see, these phrases can never be innocent in any theory of blackness – is thus to name an unknown notion whose undecidability can only repeat itself unknowingly.

And the proof of this is in those traces or signs left by the split between thinking innocence and being innocent, between knowledge and being, the non-coincidence of which prevents blackness from ever coinciding with itself. And because it has no clear and distinct concept, blackness is a sign that has to be made meaningful so as to be grasped; it requires a certain language, discourse, speech, and a certain lexis: it is therefore always arbitrarily endowed with meanings that we assume innocently presuppose our significations of it, which are psychically constitutive and more imperative than our conscious awareness. Blackness is therefore a void, but we are not even aware of it, since it is the very thought that we can know it that prevents it from being absolutely known or understood; this is, one might say, its scandal and its politics, and it is this scandal and its politics that we propose to read as an X that can no more be represented than it can be essentially known in its effects or affects, and without which no ‘black’ text can be articulated. To make sense out of what I am here calling Hall’s intriguingly paradoxical, but also unsettling, remarks on blackness, I should like to begin with the notion of representation in his iconic 1980s texts to show why blackness must, in time, correspond with a particular, less innocent possibility. In this image of blackness, heir to a certain cultural studies approach, at once singular, contested, and abstract, a cultural politics is both affirmed and divested of any theoretical value that preserves it from contingency without thereby grounding it in identity or self-certitude. Hence it is as an image (of blackness as both absence and becoming, both *différance* and contradiction) that I seek to question, and so understand, in Hall’s approach to black cultural politics.

BLACKNESS IS NEVER INNOCENT UNTIL IT IS FALLEN

But let us return to my two epigraphs, whose differing implications we have also undertaken to examine. The fact that cultural studies has become widely institutionalised as a set of reading practices in which representation is no longer a question strikes me as a somewhat paradoxical situation, given Hall’s initial emphasis on the delusion that reading invariably engenders, and given his insistence on the inevitable misreading or ‘detour’ of theory in which

3. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies' in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in Cultural Studies*, David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (eds), London, Routledge, 1996, p269. (Hereafter *Theoretical legacies*).

4. For an elaboration of this trope, see my 'Waiting to Fall', where the logic at work here is traced back to black British cultural studies: David Marriott, 'Waiting to Fall', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 13, no.3, 2013, pp163–240.

reading, or its concept, must always err in its destination to truth, owing to the unfinished history of blackness as concept.³ Hall therefore hands down to us an alternative question: not what it means, theoretically, to separate blackness from its notion but, rather, whether there is any definition of blackness that is consistent with its being or that could give rise to the present or past meaning of what it was or could become without also revealing an unknowing unknown to itself. The reason for this, to say so once again, is that it is hard to discern any notion of blackness from the shadowy meanings that envelop it – a situation of obscurity that is not just one of depth or illumination. By this I mean that there is nothing concealed here or hidden. Rather, blackness is the abyssal work of any concept or structure that would seek to perform or render it as knowledge. To speak in more personal terms – and autobiography will return as a question throughout – for some twenty years now my researches have been concerned with the history of black thought, without my being altogether convinced that history or thought could ever grasp this thing called blackness. I should like to say that this situation is one not of ambivalence but of the impure relation of blackness to thought, which involves the way in which blackness is conceived and through which it is often represented, which is at once a metaphoric form and politico-ontological concept. This notion is that of a void that arises in the midst of being and that reveals something fallen or waiting to fall.⁴ Not only is blackness considered fallen, but even the concept of its existence has no meaning prior to this fall, since it posits a fallenness that, even before it happens, has always already fallen and so knows itself to be an event that never as such happens but is always awaited. This is the case (*casus*) of blackness – meaning its fall or *lapsus* – whose occurrence has been historically determined as a void haunting spirit, concept, or representation, and that has come to signify its own absence, or absence itself. No salvation is expected for this fallenness, no redemption for its advent, no recognition for its nothingness. I do not believe, as a matter of fact, that any historical work on the notion of blackness can proceed without considering this image (or the ideas by which we recognise the metaphor), nor do I believe that the representational image of blackness, heir of a certain metaphysics, at once generic and formal, ideological, and abstract, can be divested of its notion, which preserves it from history without deflecting it toward meaning. Hence, in order to deal with this historical notion of representation, that blackness must, in time, correspond with a fall that occurs even before its advent – a fall that, as we know, has always been vertiginously marked by an X, in the sense of an abyssal structure – it is this image that I seek to question or, more specifically, cast doubt on: the notion of a fallenness *always awaited*, which was more an image of desire than it ever was a political or historical truth.

Simplifying greatly, it seems to me that the politics and concept of modern blackness begins with this X, the understanding of which defines the postwar epoch. One can see this analysis in such classic texts as Frantz Fanon's *Wretched*

of the Earth (1961), or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), or the early theoretical writings of Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka.⁵ In all these texts, it is the act of conversion – of what is deemed irreparably fallen – that seems to occupy the center stage, with blackness acting as the conversive reading of conversion that in some way disrupts the innocence or knowledge thereby lost or gained. Here, the very fact that we are dealing with an ‘end of an essential innocence’ (in the way that Stuart Hall used the term in the 1980s and early 1990s) that could be historically represented or, if you prefer, analytically disentangled, provides the basis of the present study (*New Ethnicities*, p28). When the end of that essential innocence (or its politics) also comes to define a renaissance of black critical thought from the 1950s on, the resulting question of what it means to read blackness as an innocence that is paradoxically always already fallen (its innocence following on from its fall), or as an X that endlessly presents itself as a sign that can never as such be innocently thought *as* signification, then blackness must be considered as part of the differential weave that Hall, in a quasi-Derridean manner, says necessarily constitutes and suspends any idiom of black identity.⁶ In the resulting debate over the meaning of blackness, including Hall’s own, this X therefore does not refer to an immanence posed before representation, which is then seen to coincide with a prior historical moment or advent. The X denotes a peculiar *Bildung* of the modern black subject, which, conjuncturally, sees the emergence of a writing and thinking of diaspora that is itself structured by its own deferment. Modern black diasporic experience, it turns out, must not only act out the loss of any origin; it must also refuse the consolation, in Hall’s and Fanon’s reading, of any question of a black arrival or destination in any concept whatsoever whether that of *Volk*, *Geist*, *Ethnos*, or nation. Or as Hall succinctly puts it: to find oneself always already read in those terms is to know that the very attempt to go back, to deny the loss conferred by black identity, is to risk a form of ‘psychic death’.⁷ Hall’s texts not only present the black diasporic subject as a new political subject – the key example here being that of black Caribbean British identity – but they also present black diaspora as the never finished project of modernity. Indeed, any attempt to think modernity must do justice to the question being asked, which is, what would it mean to bring to an end the notion of an essential black subject? It can hardly be an accident that the debate proliferates around the story of a lost innocence – of a being always already lost or fallen. Somewhere in each of these classic texts, blackness emerges as an allegory of a void that cannot be avoided or fulfilled. For in spite of the absence of any stable referent, the modern appearance of blackness presents nothing more than the injurious effects of such allegory. In addition, that void between citizen and immigrant, nationhood and globality, and race and ethnicity points to the making of a new politics and a new kind of black sensibility. It is as though any attempt to make blackness *innocently* black (i.e., free from racial injury) automatically injures it by bringing it to an end in racist allegory – which is, as we shall see,

5. Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, Ballantine, 1964. Franz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Weidenfeld, 1962; Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, New York, Dell, 1968; Leroi Jones, *Dutchman*, London, Faber and Faber, 1965.

6. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Kobena Mercer (ed), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, p132. (Hereafter *Fateful Triangle*).

7. Stuart Hall, ‘At home and not at home’. Interview by Les Back in *Stuart Hall and ‘race’*, Claire Alexander (ed), London, Routledge, 2011, p494 (Hereafter *At Home*).

just what the X has always already been signifying.

That said, this is not how Hall characterises black identity. For Hall, the master trope of blackness is not so much that of an X that has no content, or whose meaning is necessarily lacking, but that of a conjunctural moment whose meaning or *articulation* (a key term) is always concretely emergent.⁸ As a reader, he suggests, the point is not to begin with what Marx, in *Grundrisse*, derisively calls ‘abstraction’, for one must go beyond the ‘confusing fabric’ that ‘the real’ apparently presents, by adding more and more levels of determination until one can grasp what Hall following Marx calls ‘the concrete in thought’, a moment wherein one sees how different moments come together, and ‘how different tendencies fuse and form [into] a kind of configuration’ (*At Home*, p486). A concrete analysis is one in which abstraction is inevitable precisely because in modernity abstraction is constitutive of any act of reading difference, however determined, for one always appears as black, as a worker, as a man or woman, and so on. But the political point is to grasp these appearances not only as abstract relations of representation but as positions of enunciation within the politics of representation itself. Immediately following this distinction, Hall invokes black identity as an example of such a politics, which he variously elaborates as provisional, heterogeneous, deferred, and, to an extent, always on the border of fulfillment and dissolution. Hall invokes blackness as a signifier (in my terms an X) that has not only changed its name and even its content over time – from, say, colored to negro, negro to black – these changes in reference, usage, and rhetoric also express a profound shift in the way black cultural politics is now represented, which, for Hall, connotes a positive difference (and presumably because each epochal shift is thereby also less innocent). The end of the innocent black subject that Hall, writing in 1988, first identified as the sign of a new black political maturity, and then, later on, in 1992, would invoke, directly, as an ‘unguarded moment’⁹ in his own approach to the theorising of blackness, that is, less as a moment of rhetorical innocence and more as a moment of parapraxis, already performs what I consider the crux of the problem: namely, what would it mean to ever imagine blackness as rhetorically innocent, without thereby associating it with a non-innocent ignorance that must be overcome if it is not to be already lost or fallen? If blackness cannot be thought or practiced without recourse to the end of its innocence, then any attempt to capture this shift as one between, say, identity and difference (and it is difference that is here equated with a new cultural politics) will find that innocence and knowledge are not at all easy to separate. For if the aspiration of blackness is not just to announce or signal itself as a politics but to claim itself as a new knowledge (at the level of ethos and pathos but also language), then nothing is more ideological than the claim to be speaking from a place more knowing, and so less innocent, or from a position more or less black. We assume that a theory, or its politics, can be justified only by its consequences, but Hall’s unguarded reading of

8. ‘Articulation contains the danger of a high formalism. But it also has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices (articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment) can nevertheless be thought *together*’, see Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural studies: two paradigms’, *Media, Culture and Society*, no. 2, 1980, pp57–72, p69.

9. Stuart Hall, ‘What is this “Black” in black popular culture?’, p32.

his own theoretical autobiography would seem to suggest the impossibility of any innocent notion coming into being without also being essentially known as such and so, to some degree, being always already ruined. There may be something to be gained, therefore, by asking what kind of notion this is that produces and determines itself as already ruined, whether or not it is read theoretically, historically, or autobiographically. To tease out the implications of this paradoxical situation, let us now consider the two main terms of this opposition: that of innocence and that of its conversion, which is where the figure of the X first emerges.

THE END OF INNOCENT ENDINGS

The question of how to present the end of black innocence without doing so too knowingly or not knowingly enough is one that constantly recurs, as my second epigraph suggests, in Hall's sense of being assailed by notions defined solely by their inadequacy: that is, by concepts deemed to be no longer adequate. But one can see also this underlying tension in Fanon's wish to determine the difference between mimicry and invention, say, or in Malcolm X's wish to distinguish between a conversion that remains culturally and psychologically servile and an act that gives birth to a new mastery or analysis of both self and representation. The first act of our own narrative, then, will consist of an analysis of these various transformative effects in the meaning of innocence and conversion.

Although the act of conversion can occur in many ways, it always begins with the self's undoing. Is this why Hall refers to the end of innocence as an obliquity at once of historical and ideological significance? As if the notion itself were a slip, and so less an inquiry into the conditions under which such an essential thought is possible than the contingent expression of a historical imperative? At the same time, is not this very image of rhetorical unpreparedness that of a parapraxis (a mistake whose effect is never simply innocent or repressed), since it is not possible to know whether innocence has come to an end without the loss of its own manifest or latent notion? It seems to me that what the slip shows is not knowledge but rather how easy it is to let innocence slip or fall – and precisely because of the seemingly inevitable slipping of blackness from innocence into politics, from literal truth into substitutive figure, a slip that remains the fundamental sign of its unreadable difference. Hall's admission thus demystifies why the desire to see innocence end had at the same time to knowingly innocent itself of any complicity with a supposed theoretical innocence. From what has been shown, it is perhaps clear now why innocence is a notion so synonymous with Hall that it now serves as an introduction to his work on why ideology as such is never innocent, and why he also had to turn his back on the Marxian concept of the 'last instance' as never innocent enough, a refusal that has identifiably become one with the significance of Hall's cultural theory, which is why we should perhaps never

read this innocence too innocently. And also why we should never read the signifier *black* separately from the libidinal and political economies which constitute and convert it. Indeed, the above remark is revealing in that Hall seems to be feeling guilty not because of innocence's loss but because of his own knowledge of it, which is never innocent of the desire to be innocent, which is at once why innocence can never know itself without betraying the fact of its impurity. In this abyssal mirroring, blackness can only be possessed of its notion once it no longer possesses itself as historically knowing. This is why the political revelation of its ending fulfills the realisation that all black identity is a void for which no literal term can be substituted. It is the politics of this X, the structure of its writing and its affective uncertainty – that is my focus throughout this study.

Rather than pursue this point, however, which I am claiming is a fundamental principle in any representation of blackness, I want to resume the argument about what is necessarily absent, and what is insufficiently present in blackness as presence, and why this uncertainty is always the ending and beginning of its politics as such. Of course, if it is possible to read blackness conjuncturally – that is to say, as a Gramscian war of position rather than that of maneuver – then what permits us to choose 'cultural strategies that can make a difference', to transform difference from yet more of the same, also makes it necessary to acknowledge that 'there is no going back to an innocent view of what it [blackness] consists of'? (*What is this 'Black'?* p24, 25) When we read blackness innocently, in other words, we can see in it only what we have already learned to see as its essential identity, but to read it knowingly (guardedly?), a reading that is here suggested at the outset, is to see how blackness always differs from itself. And this difference can only be known non-innocently. Hall consistently contrasts this politics of innocence with what he calls the necessarily contradictory and contested aspects of modern racist culture that emerge, not out of the language of class, gender, or ethnicity but out of a changing historical dialectic between expropriation and resistance and what follows from the various nuances of their encounter. I should say that, on the basis of this argument, the signifier *black* is always historically overdetermined by 'antagonisms [that] refuse to be neatly aligned' or coalesce into any settled form or organisation – whence certain dislocative relations between antagonism and identity (p31). What, then, is black cultural politics? It is neither inherently conservative nor progressive, neither essential nor singular in its divisions, regionalities, and antagonisms, but always fragmented, negotiated, and discursively contested. This is why Hall, referring to his earlier notion of the end of the innocence of the black subject, counterposes a reading literally unguarded to the realisation that in the notion of an essential blackness he already 'knew' from the beginning the deterministic or reductive limits of its reading – be it Marxist, psychoanalytic, existential, or ethnocentric.

One might, for example, speak here of a conversion as the moment

of being named or spoken by something whose meaning is 'other, absent, unspoken' but nonetheless devastating because it issues as a claim that, *nachträglich*, will always come to be fulfilled in fantasy, but a claim that dovetails with the belief that it can never be fulfilled by any structure of equivalence, be it social, racial, or economic. Fanon's "Tiens, un nègre!" would be an obvious example of such conversion. Analogously, the ways in which people live their imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence (Louis Althusser) or acquire consciousness of their position (Antonio Gramsci) seem to be not really translatable (or one's racial difference cannot be posed in this way). For if there is no single reference that defines 'this term 'black' within a particular semantic field or ideological formation', then it means that what is vital about the 'constative resonance' of blackness issues not from its ostensible meaning but from the syntax that orders it or the figures that obscure it. Or, conversely, its destination is a matter less of historical objectivity than of how its meaning and desire are determined by language rather than by the social forces of production.¹⁰ Indeed, the politico-ontological form of this X seems to stall or suspend the notion of the political itself as metaphysically understood, for example, as the loss or gain of sovereignty. The black critic's task consists, then, in comprehending the continued, constantly changing ideological life of its designation. Indeed, it is not the ostensible meaning that must be recognised, but how it realises the absent, unspoken ideological term that surreptitiously defines it by naming it. Where this void manifests itself, blackness is *constituted* (p153). Contrary, therefore, to the claims of a certain Marxism, 'the word [*black*] itself has no specific class connotation', Hall argues, for blackness 'exists ideologically only in relation to the contestation around those chains of meaning and the social forces involved in that contestation' (p153). The life of the concept attained in these struggles is thus the result of a 'constant unending process in the representation and its significance', Hall concludes (p154). Representation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between black expressive culture and its politics. It cannot reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself, but it can designate it by realising it in social or ideological form. As for the posited notion of a field of meaning, it is marked by a distinct correlation of forces, or representations in which the subject enacts its own strangely already defined relation, so that it becomes what it was always (intersected, crossed by) destined to express. As certain meanings wither away, what endures gives rise to new struggles and meanings.

From this it follows that meaning and position may be regarded as conflicting tendencies. Ideology critique is not meant to reconcile the two. For what is meant by ideology but that its sense is not easily so rendered? Only if there is no equivalence between the signifier and its positioning does some ultimate, decisive element remain beyond all communication – inscribed yet neither concealed nor clearly distinguishable. In all ideological discourse there remains, then, an addition to what can be conveyed, something that cannot

10. Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A theoretical history*, Jennifer Daryl Stack and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, pp150-151. (Hereafter *Cultural Studies 1983*).

be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it neither symbolises nor is symbolised, but its traces are always incommensurable, unsettling. Though concealed and enigmatic, this something actively penetrates or inhabits representation, which it weights with nonmeaning. Meaning ceases to be the arbiter here, because of the way in which sense (or the political work of representation) is touched by unknowing. I have said that this excess (this X) is what, in racist ideology, pertains to an absence that can neither be nor conceived without blackness, and vice versa, a blackness that can neither be nor conceived without that of a void that falls without end. That is to say, to seek to know this X, to embrace it, is confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.

It is my contention that blackness and any narrative of its conversion cannot be presented without the allegorical, albeit meaningless, figure of this X. To illustrate why this is so, let me now turn to the story of Michael de Freitas, otherwise known as Michael Abdul Malik or Michael X – a man whom Hall knew, who was seen during the 1960s as a radical black leader in England, and who was hanged in Trinidad in 1975 after being found guilty of the murder of one of his ‘followers’. This story is not simply one of innocence and fall, knowledge and conversion, but also one of diaspora and law, power and coercion. I speak to the latter in the next section, where I also turn to the question of writing, but here I want to focus on the question of what it could possibly mean to read Michael X’s blackness innocently. By this I mean not only his innocence before law but also an identity innocent of any stable notion of a self, an emptiness subsequently read as a sign of black naïveté vis-à-vis revolutionary politics.

In the following scene de Freitas recounts how he became Michael X while accompanying Malcolm X on a visit to the Midlands in February 1965:

He [Malcolm X] got on the phone straight away to Birmingham and told the student organisation to book two rooms at his hotel. ‘I’ll be coming up with my brother – Brother Michael’, he said.

The Islam student body probably interpreted what he said literally. They booked me in at the Grand Hotel as Michael X – and that was how Michael X came into being. I was not a ‘Black Muslim’. The X was a mistake. When I eventually did become a Moslem, I chose a different name, but the mistake went on.¹¹

11. John L. Williams, *Michael X: A life in black and white*, London, Century, 2008, p131. (Hereafter *Michael X*).

The X seems to denote a symbol here, not belief; image but not conversion. This is a conversion that raises the first of many questions of when conversion actually occurs – in its experiencing, in its metaphoric narration, or in its literal, verbatim reporting? But there are two odd things about the anecdote: the mistake (which indicates a difference within the colonial histories of blackness) consists of a naming embarrassingly mistranslated, then hijacked

by a media that feels compelled to develop a picture (of a fearful British black nationalism), the better to control its representative meaning. Here referential mistake not only becomes autobiographical metaphor: the X comes to be read allegorically as a new figure of truth that is nonetheless a lie, and even when truthfully asserting that the X is a lie, or a mistake that goes on, none of us can escape the deception. Accordingly, in the substitution of X for de Freitas, the X traces a circuit that leads to the exposure of a shared dispossession: what is symbolically black is always the lack that possesses it, or what amounts to the same thing, to be named as such is to pass from meaning to contingency, signification to error. It is as impossible to dissociate metaphoric substitution from substitutive error as it is aberration from political message, for whether the X is a mere signifier, or simply a written sign, without it no black autobiographical or radical self can come into being, for what it signifies referentially is also what it elides, and what it weights with being has no persistence other than the erroneous implication of a linguistic predicament.¹² Accordingly, this rhetorical displacement is expressive not of a representational or referential meaning but of a deadly illicit conversion and theft. For these reasons it is simply not possible to correct the mistake that led to the confusion in the first place. The possibility of escaping from figure (doxa) into truth (episteme) by becoming aware of the rhetoricity of black power as it appears, for example, in black autobiography, always results in more complex patterns of error. We must here recall that any naive belief in the proper meaning of the X as metaphor (or metalepsis), however differently understood, is not the issue here; if blackness is aberrant, it is precisely because there is no way to dissociate the referential foundation of blackness from the pure signifying function of the X as error (a point that de Freitas understands, and already represents above). In which case, the X not only represents a missed encounter between image and belief, black British radicalism and US political culture; it also becomes a signifier in whose conversion it is hard to tell, for example, truth telling from narcissism, literal interpretation from symbolic pretense, media image from political reality. Therefore this is not a classic conversion narrative entailing a 'before' and 'after' but an allegory of a purely contingent prefiguration, in which one's political destiny as black – and the context here is its writing – can be substituted, overturned, suspended, and reversed by a mere mistaken stroke of a pen.

It is perhaps not unsurprising, then, that in the above passage from *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X* (ghostwritten by John Stephenson, a white civil servant and erstwhile pornographer), to read any story of black converted identity literally is to read it mistakenly. For what is being substituted is precisely what cannot be represented; what comes into being is a mistranslation that deforms any attempt to correct or educate it. After all, the X is a mistake that went on. Yet in all of the many writings on Michael X, the prevailing motif is that of an unknowing falsehood, or pretense, and of a selfhood knowingly rhetorically performed rather than actually believed

12. The term *linguistic predicament* is borrowed from Paul de Man's iconic sentence 'Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament': see Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as de-facement'. *MLN* 94, no. 5, 1979, pp919-30, p930. (Hereafter *Autobiography as de-facement*).

or felt. In all of these texts, X – as both sign and politics – is thus presented as the scene of a false address in which Michael X, who meanwhile is the first to call attention to the X as arbitrary signifier, is repeatedly invoked as a hustler of whom it could be said that, ‘on a personal level, [he] did not seem to care about race’ but just happened to find ‘himself in a society in which race was much cared about’, and who, accordingly, took up black politics as yet another scam or racket (*Michael X*, p3). What kinds of assumptions about race and culture are being given voice here? From what knowledge is a lack of care about blackness being read and judged? Do these readings fail to read the politics and meaning of the X because they fail to recognise that blackness is never simply a choice to be converted? Or do these readings succeed precisely because they already know that a failure to become an X should never be mistaken for a failure to become black, despite the widely held belief that blackness can never produce itself without becoming an X?

In this sense, de Freitas’s conversion to an X is typically read as little more than a rhetorical opportunism, with the X itself taken as the sign of an endlessly performed arbitrariness, with its identity little more than a check in a hotel registry. It is as if the X were useful or effective only as a symbol to be communicated, part of a calculated technique of evasion, even manipulation, and, to that extent, nothing but a rhetorical performance of conversion or, at least, a performance that due to the materiality of the letter has a significance that is merely mechanical. The above scene is thus deemed little more than the simple story of a failed conversion, with black radical belief always recognised as the blind unknowing repetition of that failure. But the passage from that literally checked letter to the controversy of the later life is presumably also proof that there were some, at any rate, who read into the letter something more than mere rhetorical duplicity. These were people such as Muhammad Ali, Dick Gregory, John Lennon, Kate Millett, et alia, who petitioned on Michael X’s behalf, in the belief that he was innocent of the charges against him because he was never an innocent, by which they meant naively black, even if they also tended to represent this innocence as crucial to their own seduction by him. That is, they saw something substantive and believable in the X, in its efficacy, and something that complicated the opposition between falsehood and truth. An X not indexed to both the truth and the untruth of race (its reality *and* its fantasy) would then be a blackness that does not try to persuade whiteness of the sincerity of its truth, because its truth is already dangerously, uncompromisingly black. *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X* would thus be a form of confession, as it is often taken to be, that knows itself to be an exercise in hubris and self-flattery, not because of deceit or tragedy but because there is no post-racial self to be discovered that could present itself as true. If autobiographical sincerity or truth amounts to a racist doxa, or opinion, particularly in the interpretation of black texts, then the general claim to know what it means to ever be sincerely or correctly black has less to do with veracity and more to do with the suspicion that black being and

identity always might be the appearance of something illusory, or something that is never what it appears to be – for what it appears to be is a deception that can never recognise itself as such. This opinion is repeatedly reproduced in accounts of Michael X. And this is why blackness is always interpreted as irresponsibly seductive: it appears to bear all the traces of the desires that seek to possess it without, however, being accountable. That said, in the autobiography itself, we come across repeated scenes where knowledge and seduction are interrupted by a discernably racial animus, scenes that involve the racist limits of doxa and truth, scenes in which Michael's unguarded way of saying things results in his failure to tell audiences what they want to hear and so brings more trouble than they are worth. If there is a certain essential ignorance in speaking to whites beyond which blacks should not go, then speaking as black is perhaps always to know the consequences of such fearless telling. Speaking the truth to whites, which is after all the blackest rhetorical move of all, means that any discourse that declares itself radically black must always be untimely, unknowing. And even if these 'mistakes' evolve from our deepest feelings, they can always be interpreted as an innocent failure to be politically knowing, and the speaker thus insufficiently adept in the demagogic uses of rhetoric, for when one is too sincere in one's blackness to not want to feign or conceal it, one learns that insincerity is the very thing that is often used to flatter white listeners or readers. In that case, black political autobiography equates to a writing in which the X is read as a form of masquerade that can never know itself, a masquerade that makes readers who would present it to themselves as a sincere assumption the dupes of racist culture. It is no wonder, therefore, that various readers who do not understand this should slam the book shut in antipathy, but does this antipathy not repeat the mistake of a literally anti-black reading?

Before tackling the analysis of these readings, let us return to the question of autobiography. The patterns of error presented by the X are not the same as those presented by black autobiography, even though both are read as if referentiality itself is already formed by error. The explicit linkage of X with error thus extends to the writing of black autobiography: as meaning, the X suffers from the same metaphoric illusion as that of the improperly converted self; that is, its falsehood cannot be corrected by greater knowledge, since the act of conversion is itself, by its very manifestation, an empty, parasitical falsification. The pattern of this falsification is the same as that of the essential innocence in 'New Ethnicities': it empties itself, impoverishes itself, at the precise moment it seeks to convert letter into truth, or lays claim to an original essence the better to conceal the differences that permit the very articulation of blackness at the outset. But the essential point in all this is that Michael X does not suppress these aberrant meanings, nor does he deny the contingency of his being named X, which means that the latter can no longer be determined as a historical or an intentional symbol. By presenting himself as the accidental object and not the subject of conversion, Michael X seems

to put quotation marks around his identity and his ability to tell his own story (which, just to remind you, was ghostwritten). There is no attempt here to make us believe in the reality of conversion beyond that of its mistakenness. Even when he decides to later name himself – as black, as Moslem – he is unable to successfully separate this conversion from the mistaken effect of a letter. Thus it is all the more surprising to find that this mistake is the point where what is literal gives way to a whole anti-black pseudology in which the ‘proper’ and the ‘literal’ come to be seen as the most radical forms of untruth and deception. In this sense, these substitutive reversals are themselves errors, since they are unable to escape from the rhetorical deceit they denounce. This point, however unsurprising, is of no small importance, as we shall see. For it concerns not only how black political conversion is read but also how truth and untruth, or sincerity and deception (i.e., the innocence that is always on the way to being corrupted), become ipso facto a way of judging black rhetoric, or black politics, as a deception and misrepresentation of the political as such. What is being narrated thus in *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X* – as self-expression, as conversion – gives rise to the possibility of the X as both truth and falsity. And whereas it is generally supposed that the function of the X is to strip off the form of a servile or deceitful identity to give us the true positive statement of a regained authenticity, here the use of the X does the very opposite: it withholds the truth of a true nomination, giving us only its form or simulacrum and therefore an avowal that is not easy to tell apart from self-deceit. Accordingly, what is confused in this representation is nothing less than the ability to know the difference between the performative dimension of the X and its truthful enunciation. The fact that the letter’s message is never revealed, or that it cannot stand for either blackness or identity, which will serve as the basis for Michael X’s own reading of race as a mistake that goes on, is thus negatively made explicit by the functioning of the *from* in the title of the autobiography. Indeed, Michael X’s various changes of identity as he seeks to write himself – like Malcolm did before him – from hustler to leader, Caribbean ‘red’ to English black, will also suggest that the X has no rightful designation, as we see it move from the suppression of what is literally written to that of self-expression; and from the repressive reading of what will come to be literally written off as a pseudology to that of radical black freedom. These rhetorical reversals, by the endless repetition of the same figure of deception, will keep the X suspended between truth and the death of truth in black autobiographical writing. More, as the question of deciding between innocence versus deception begins to invade the literary text, we will also see how critical narrative and its rhetorical modes render undecidable the difference between radicalisation and manipulation.

Hall’s representation of Michael X, as told to his 2011 interviewer Les Back, is interesting in this regard for the way it reproduces these oppositions: ‘This is why I think Michael X [whom Hall met before and during the 1950s Notting Hill race riots] is a tragedy, because he had exactly the same formation as Malcolm X,

who was from the same hustling background; and Malcolm became something and Michael lost his way' (*At Home*, p503). Since many commentators, in their critique of Michael X, also choose to make a comparison between Malcolm and Michael, we can combine all of them in Hall's pointed recollection of a young man who, despite wanting to be involved, and to change what was going on to black people in Britain, lost his way, as can be seen in the 1968 autobiography, in terms of what the X presents and what it does not, politically, culturally, and psychologically. And, of course, what is deeply implicit in all these accounts, as we shall see, is the need to separate the desire for meaningful change from the phantasmatic demand for it. Alternatively, if the desire to be black is given to me from without, then what could it possibly mean for me to perform it, or be equal to it, as the innermost core of my being? And, even more oddly, if the letter always might accidentally arrive in this way as error, then is not the letter already a diaspora in a literal sense, in the leading away or astray from what can only be expressed, or addressed, as a form of autobiography? As if a letter could itself produce a politics, and a blackness, in the sheer absence of any self or subject? Would this not be a politics that thereby disallows any distinction of politics as a structure of intention, or of dissimulation, or of radical conversion? And one in which truth becomes inextricably bound up with undecidability?

Thus it is neither a tragedy of the individual subject nor the inescapable possibility of erring or dissimulation, but the position of an undecidable X that decides the place of blackness with respect to the political. That said, I am not sure that *position* (a word repeatedly used by Hall to think representation) is the right word here: my hesitation or, to a clearer extent, my refusal has to do with how the X continues to be conceived as a positional relationship, that is, a principle of articulation that reduces history to a logic (of determination). For reasons that will become clear, such logic limits contingency to a position that is merely ephemeral or already determined by the 'real' meaning it conveys. Because the X functions not as a ground or dialectic but as that which produces unavoidable mistakes or errors or lapses, Hall can only retrospectively read the story as one of lost possibility (and note here the odd use of the present tense: Michael X *is* a tragedy), for he already knows the outcome of the story he wants to tell, of the death by hanging of a wannabe black leader, rather than the iconic, symbolic outcome of Malcolm's life and death – namely, a life-death whose symbolic value remains constitutive of what blackness might have become, a converted selfhood defined by its decisive orientation rather than by the errancy of its reading, which can never be distinguished from mere contingency and error. After all, it was only three weeks after the trip to England that Malcolm himself was killed – with the X, impersonally, taking its revenge.

This is why the X acts like a signifier to the extent to which its meaning always might lead astray those who desire that its meaning be revealed, and who thereby remain blind to the ways that any X might always be the double or counterfeit of such desire: on us as readers of the two fates and the two

X's falls the realisation that the relation of rhetoric to politics might always result in a radical or fatal mistake, or a murderous degree of violence, despite or because of what is sincerely meant or enacted. The X written down thus becomes for readers of *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X* an allegory of a fall that always just might be the true semblance of black politics (which as such always might be already lost or fallen).

The various readings of the autobiography do not dispute the validity of this allegory on its own terms but question its implicit presuppositions and its philosophy of blackness. But in Michael X's own account what cannot be avoided is (1) that all forms of political involvement are nothing but mistakes, for what is represented begins by being mistranslated, and (2) this is precisely why the world and its media must always generate a narrative about untruth, distortion, and concealment and, specifically, paint the experience of radical black conversion as necessarily a pseudo-achievement rather than a rivalrous truth impossible to determine or racially know.

1. *X is the mistake that goes on.* While asserting that X has no meaning, Michael X, according to several commentators, made this lack into the meaning of a perverse association between black politics and white seduction. The true meaning of the X is thus a perverse, murderous simulation that must be uncovered. Black power is, as it were, just another name for a desire to usurp the place of correct white patriarchal power, which then, by definition, gets imagined to be the avowal of a truth that is repressed as such by black aspiration. But the argument does not stop there. They go on to assert that what Michael X means by 'mistake' is the performative mistakenness of black power itself: black political desire is thus designated as either prepolitical or inauthentically so because it confuses the desire to be recognised with mere rhetoric rather than the resolute communication of a substantive truth. Michael X, however, never uses the word *truth* in the text of the autobiography, but the words *technique* and *effective communication*. That what defines the political for him is rhetoric is indisputable, but these commentators, by filling in what the text of the X leaves blank, seem unable or unwilling to accept this definition of politics as no more than a doxa whose racist meaning is always contested. The notion of black political leadership that emerges out of the encounter with Malcolm X, therefore, does not seem to equate being with truth, for truth is potentially always corrupted by its fall into the meaningless materiality of an X, and the subject is simply the one who always might fall prey to the fetishism of the letter's interpretation.
2. *The literal can always be mistaken.* If, as I have suggested, the X is the mistaking of the wish to have a meaning that can never be literally known and read, then reading itself becomes an allegory of an all-

too-ready attempt to see something appear when what determines it is not what is mistakenly seen but the inability to tell apart what appears from what does not or fails to. The objection to Michael X is therefore double: On the one hand, he is chastised for not being what he seems. On the other hand, according to V. S. Naipaul and others, at the very moment that the X appears, it is we and not he who have to believe in the reality of the conversion, though we ourselves know this lie to be the truth of antiblackness. The X is thus read as a racist allegory of a signifier in which, we are told, blackness, in the diaspora, is always the masquerade of its own *Aufhebung*, and one that remains blind to the disseminating power of its own untruth in the modern doxa of black power, thereby revealing the deepest truth and untruth of its politics. This seems to substitute an ontological for a rhetorical suspicion. To read blackness as though it can exist only as a pseudology and to reduce the complex textual representation of diaspora to a single meaning (of falsehood) might confirm the antiblackness of most of these critics. Therefore it is all the more noticeable that their own reading of Michael X repeats the dissimulations of which they are accusing him: they dismiss Michael X's own suspicion of the literal as a disguise, merely veiling, for a time, a lack of a genuine political message. And so Naipaul writes: 'Everything else was borrowed, every attitude, every statement: from the adoption of the X and the conversion to Islam, down to the criticism of white liberals...and the black bourgeois... He was the total 1960s negro, in a London setting; and his very absence of originality, his plasticity, his ability to give people the kind of negro they wanted, made him acceptable to journalists'.¹³ The rivalry over who possesses the truth of conversion, or who has the retrospective authority to narrate and write it, thus spirals forward in an indeterminable pattern of desire and duplicity. So if it becomes impossible to determine the meaning of X (or even whether there was a Michael X, who is described as a man 'without a personality' and as 'only a haphazard succession of roles') (p25), then it is also impossible to know why this business of getting even with the false, with the unoriginal, is so murderously taken up with people getting the kind of negro *they* wanted, a want taken as the very proof of a black duplicity. As I said, the attempt to deconstruct the symbolic authority of the X by showing that its conversion is an act can only act out this act by failing to convert figure (doxa) into truth (episteme), to which the attempt owes its very status as a referential act. Naipaul's repetition of the very gestures that he is criticising does not in itself invalidate his criticism of their effects, but it does problematise his statements condemning their implication. Blackness as untruth is always the semblance of truth, bewitching what we see and what we do not see, even with seemingly good intention. So also is the task of its

13. V.I. Naipaul, *Return of Eva Peron*, London, Penguin, 1981, p23. (Hereafter *Return of Eva Peron*).

14. Strangely enough, the very phrase linking black writing to a public relations exercise as well as lie also recurs in 'New Ethnicities', where the question of innocence is brought up once again in relation to a new 'politics of criticism'. Hall quotes the following sentences from Hanif Kureishi that, whether knowingly or not, curiously echoes Naipaul: 'The writer as public relations officer, as hired liar. If there is to be a serious attempt to understand Britain today, with its mix of races and colours, its hysteria and despair, then, writing about it has to be complex. It can't apologise or idealise. It can't sentimentalise and it can't represent only one group as having a monopoly on virtue' (*New Ethnicities*, p30). After informing us that such criticism is necessary if 'black culture is to grow up, to leave the age of critical innocence', Hall seems to take Kureishi at his word. Whether the source of these expressions is Naipaul, or whether it results from a new form of black criticism, both stand as condemnations of the essential ignorance of black writing. Symptomatically speaking, this unknown or repressed quotation may thus fulfill the end of critical innocence, but it can do so only by innocently repeating the *content* of a political *positioning*

reading falsified, since it loses its way in what it racially comprehends and what it fails to.

READING LITERALLY

We have just seen how, in the effort to read blackness innocently, that is to say, essentially, critics can only repeat, on a certain level, the notion of an essential non-innocent ignorance, the unveiling of which somehow involves the making meaningful of that which has no meaning, which then becomes a new pseudology. In fact, the act of reading the X as a cover-up is already prescribed by the unwillingness to see blackness as anything more than the unwitting repetition of a false conversion. What is written down in the X is a fantasy-as-signature, which curiously resembles the initial mistranslation of Michael de Freitas as a black Moslem brother to Malcolm, a resemblance on which we are told he is knowingly playing. And the various texts in which this X is transcribed describe the structure of a reading that can only repeat the literal mistake that led it to be misread in the first place. Let us examine this odd collusion more clearly. Consider the following two quotations from Naipaul and Malcolm X:

An autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies: it reveals the writer totally. And Malik's primitive novel is like a pattern book, a guide to later events. Malik had no skills as a novelist, not even an elementary gift of language. . . . But when he transferred his fantasy to real life, he went to work like the kind of novelist he would have liked to be.

This was a literary murder, if ever there was one. Writing led both men there: for both of them, uneducated but clever, hustlers with the black cause always to hand, operating always among the converted or half-converted, writing had for too long been a public relations exercise, a form of applauded lie, fantasy (*Return of Eva Peron*, pp63,88,73).¹⁴

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realised so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying. In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks. I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting. I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words, immensely proud to realise that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't

remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that 'aardvark' springs to my mind.¹⁵

that is decidedly antiracist.

15. Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, Ballantine, 1964, p175.

Here we see two differing accounts of writing in prison, of being imprisoned by not being able to write, and two accounts of learning and conversion. Naipaul's comments, taken from the 1974 essay 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad', obsessively condemns what he sees as the misalignment between truth and autobiography. The autobiographical 'I' refers not to some neutral, referential figure but to an identity produced, and so is more akin to a fiction than any veridical reality; but fiction here is also understood, in its own turn, as more referentially truthful than autobiography because it 'reveals the writer totally'.¹⁶ Autobiography itself, then, can be read as fiction, and fiction as autobiography; a chiasmus that ends up revealing the impossibility of reading their difference without arbitrary appeal to skills or effective rhetorical strategies. It is this *imposed* distinction that allows Naipaul to say that the writing of *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X*, in its clichéd unoriginality, reduces fact to fiction, autobiography to black power rhetoric. Then, like the stern judge he is, he says that such writing can find expression only in a falsely populist rhetoric that confuses the appeal of demagoguery with that of justice, just cause for applauded lie. This takes us back to the necessity of passing sentence on those who fail to see the difference between pretense and reality, or cliché and authenticity. Black power, like rhetoric, must thus be condemned as a public relations exercise that excludes true inventiveness and originality. And it is because Michael X fails as a writer that his black power fantasy ends in a literal murder. Writing (if we no longer identify it with style or with literature) is itself murderous of literality. In making the writerly fatally manifest, fiction (unlike the duplicities of autobiography) reveals the last instance of a text when it is isolated from rhetoric, for *it hides nothing*: its function is to reveal rather than to distort. However paradoxical it might seem, only in fiction does death acquire a literal, immediate presence, for only fiction can reveal the real death that ends the figural delusion that separates true conversion from its simulation, since fiction constitutes the putting to death of the falsely autobiographical self. It is, in fact, the veracity of fiction that separates it from rhetoric, reveals the force of fantasy, the weight of an irreversible event. Fiction thus conceived has nothing to do with lying (representation) but is the total revelation of a truth beyond referent or justice. What makes a fiction a fiction may well be, in de Man's words, a metaphor 'metonymised beyond the point of catachresis'¹⁷ – that is to say, beyond injury or error – but what makes fiction into a capital sentence (this cannot be repeated too often) is the moment when its conversion into justice fails to cohere, or when the half-converted, like the half-black, does not suffice to make its lies innocent of errors and so causes fatal harm both to literature and to those who read it. Only by killing, in brief, could Michael become the kind of novelist he wanted to be – a point that makes murder in

16. These inversions remind me of de Man's point that 'autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause' (*Autobiography as defacement*, p930).

17. Paul de Man, *Allegories of reading: figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, p292. (Hereafter *Allegories of reading*).

fact inseparable from, and fundamental to, the law separating good from bad writing, black power from truth telling, the good demos from the bad colonial polis, the well-executed from the fatally hanged. In the case of *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X*, fantasy becomes murderous only because its lies are not understood for what they are, and because the chain of political desires and substitutions is essentially a relation of deformations at once caught up and enmeshed in referential blunders in which the literal has no meaning. If only we had understood that the X was a meaningless linguistic mistake, people would have understood that Michael X was the innocently knowing writer-manipulator that he always was. Accordingly, fiction is not itself to blame for this distortion, but its falsely referential reading as truthful autobiography.

What this argument exemplarily distorts is the relation between autobiography and the meaning of being put to death, in all of its contingency. What this emphasis on the fiction of fiction obscures is the desire to perfectly render truth as a belief rather than as a mere figure, but this belief in truth can only betray the pleasure in having fiction stage its own figural execution of a black (text) and, in the process, enjoy its own textual cruelty. Moreover, this cruelty is not converted (into literature): the cruelty remains here; fiction needs it, if only to shelter its own murderous anti-black signification behind its metaphoric substitution of a literary murder for a real execution. But what cannot be reprieved is the performance of capital punishment as the just reward for a radical black fictionality that remains unaware of itself, an accusation that itself remains entirely literary, rhetorical, and deceptive insofar as it cannot grasp its own foundation in racist error. The threat of murder (to those wholly in the service of black power) is thus literally a rhetorical effect that makes it impossible to tell apart fiction from the figure of murderous fantasy. Moreover, this error is Naipaul's: it is he who seems to equate freedom from referential truth with an inability to tell apart the act of murder from the writing down of it. If autobiography deceives, why is fiction any the less deceitful because it asserts its own non-deceitful rhetoric? And if 'Malik had no skills as a novelist', why is this seen as a writing condemned by its rhetoric rather than one saved by its absence? Yet if writing is conceived as a *techne* or skill, why is its exercise any the less artificial (or rhetorical) than that of law or politics?¹⁸ Does this not make rhetoric the actual truth of politics, and murderous fantasy just another act in the game of conversion, whereby the actual truth of black power becomes (or has already become) an undecidable reinscription of the subject?

The novel in question, left unfinished at the time of Michael X's death, is thus read allegorically as the key to the events that follow, as if the life as politically lived can be believed only as fiction, or the way that one writes is of the same order as that of law, in whose referential system life can express itself only as the repetition of a disavowal that can neither be avoided nor known, and so always might be condemned, however skillful the subject. This, then, would be a 'before' that always comes 'after' and in a way that binds the

18. In this regard Naipaul's review of the case oddly echoes that of the appeal judges who sought to uphold the literal meaning of the law when condemning Michael X to death. No thought is given to whether the charges, the trial, and the sentence are just, and no attempt is made to question whether a blameless man has been allowed to hang. 'It beggars belief', writes John Williams, that 'neither Naipaul nor any of the other observers seems to have seriously considered the fact that much of the evidence against Michael was literally incredible' (*Michael X*, p246).

literary to the failed conversion it narrates. 'Writing [literally] led both men there', we are told; rather, the rhetoric of black political life can only repeat the false ideological tropes at its origin, which it can only naively perform but never know until it comes to an end in death. And so Michael X's attempt to tell his story can only repeat the story of its rhetorical failure, or how he has been duped by a certain black power rhetoric. The proof of this is in the sentences he writes and the words by which true opinions are murdered by the vagaries of popular tropes, self-knowledge by rhetorical manipulation. It also follows that any attempt to make autobiography into political ideal because one believes in the innocence of such narration will also prove to be a reading of the popularly duped and thereby seduced. But in the case of someone who is ignorant or who does not know the 'elementary' aspects of writing, and who therefore cannot tell a lie from literal truth, or truth from a lie applauded, why is such self-expression seen as pretentious or imaginary, especially when there is no way of distinguishing the literary from the referential, no matter how fatal the failure and no matter that any presumed innocence may inevitably turn out to be truly murderous? What justifies this belief is the implicit analogy between writing and law, and the writing and the passing of sentences. Naipaul provides no definitions of writing, but the implications cannot be missed: words in black power autobiography are never innocent, because they inflict the injury by which the literal succumbs to a form of blindness or error. Whereas autobiography fails because it cannot recognise the rightful priority of skill over innocence, white over black, fiction over fact, black power narratives fatally confuse their resemblance to doxa with the fantasy of their difference. It thus becomes impossible to know fact from fiction, what is sincerely black from racist fantasy, and so on. The failure of Michael X's conversion is not, then, a failure to align truth with politics but a failure to know how black political truth produces itself as autobiographical rhetoric. Accordingly, Naipaul condemns not only Michael X as a writer but also those who 'substitute doctrine for knowledge, and irritation for concern ... all those people who in the end do no more than celebrate their own security' (*Return of Eva Peron*, p74).

This type of disgust may be considered moral, but I think that what is on display is an obligatory series of rhetorical codes that desire us to make a choice between two kinds of black writing.

The first, the *falsely imprisoned* (which is still with us, at least insofar as race is presumed to be the primary referent of black writing), is that black autobiography itself corresponds to *lie* and *distortion*: it derives, we know, from the moral and politico-philosophical belief that blackness is never innocent, which relies on an opposition between real life and fantasy: on real life (or the belief that to be black is to be cast out, or alienated from one's human essence) depends the notion of fantasy, or the belief that to encounter blackness, whose meaning is in its difference, is to encounter the force of a certain *conatus*, that is to say, an encounter wherein the X is

19. *Conatus* or striving is a term taken from Spinoza's *Ethics*. For a commentary, see Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the politics of renaturalization*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

20. The literature here is vast. For Hall's own discussion of race in science, see *Fateful Triangle* also, James Hunt, 'On the negro's place in nature', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 2, 1864, pp.xv-lvi; Troy Duster, 'A post-genomic surprise: the molecular reinscription of race in science, law, and medicine', *British Journal of Sociology*, 66, no. 1, 2015, pp1-27; Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal invention: how science, politics and big business re-create race in the twenty-first century*, New York, The New Press, 2011.

21. As a sign of this irony, I do no more than note here that Michael X was the first man to be charged and imprisoned for violating the 1965 Race Relations Act, which was designed to counter racial discrimination. For an account, see Williams, *Michael X*.

the sign of an infatuated, 'half-made' particularity.¹⁹ For to encounter this figure of black power is to be met by signs and gestures whose meaning bears on the relation of lie to that of conversion (or the belief that the X is the point or occasion whereby both reality and fantasy converge in a false image of authenticity). The relation of reality and fantasy is paradoxical: from the autobiography justifying blackness-as-conversion to the novelistic text presenting the seductive power of blackness, applause and flattery are blackness's truth and rhetoric.²⁰ Here the historical reality of antiracism becomes, by way of interpretative metaphor, the literal representation of black power as necessarily false, which then, historically, becomes the figurative truth of black inferiority. The historical irony is that it is the historical truth of anti-black racism that is disavowed, or its interpretive veracity is now hidden by politically correct rhetoric. Naipaul accordingly bewails what he proclaims to be an absurd truth, and what he says is contrary to reason: that it is racist to deny the truth of racism. Only racism, it seems, can speak the actual truth of race by negating the falsities of rhetoric. Yet that initial figure – that blackness is always rhetorically fallen – is already at play in the claim that only fiction can represent the truth of black literality. So it remains undecidable whether the X is therefore always a figure of rhetorical corruption or the historical sign of a corrupting figure whose truth must be represented the better to realise its reality; or again, to tell a racist truth – that blackness is a figure of absence – is to know truth as the absence of figure, and at the same time to show how rhetoric always blackens historical knowledge. The effect of all this is to make innocence and knowledge undecidably the experience of an encounter with a non-innocent ignorance that, rhetorically, cannot speak or recognise harsh truths because it persists as a figural cover-up. This would suggest that racist discourse can establish a *proper* relation between fiction (truth) and fantasy (rhetoric) only by making anti-antiblackness the sign of an authentic, political rhetoric. (Antiracism consists, after all, of an aspiration that cannot free itself from racist rhetoric, since it most typically seeks not only to announce or signal itself as pro-black but as anti-white, solely to expel or exclude the latter – just listen to Michael X).²¹ Hence, to clearly and distinctly perceive blackness, one must make its rhetoric subservient (so that there can no longer be an absence of truth) to the real, historical reality of racist fiction. It is this argument that sets in opposition, down through the centuries, the reality of blackness as an absence in which truth becomes mere persuasion, degraded, or mimicked, and so unknowing. This vision also persists, unwittingly (or perhaps innocently), in black political discourse wherein racial truth, instead of being recognised as lie and fantasy, is associated with deliverance and redemption. Despite the rhetorical inversion, blackness is still inevitably represented as a literal truth that can never know itself as innocent, and whose potentiality is hidden by various codes and signifiers, or by the fictionality and falsities of anti-black racism. The asymmetrical relationship

suggests to me that the belief in race as the absence of figure is itself a figure for the most racist of tropes. I will come back to this point in due course.

The second, much more recent idea of black writing, which comes directly out of the counterculture wars, is that of *writing as liberation*. The new cultural politics of blackness (code: black nationalism) is thus seen by Naipaul (and others) as an abstract claim to representation and to identity. But for a clearer understanding of this claim, we must note that its politics, for better or worse, also represents a refusal of the various ways in which blackness has been thought, and consequently read, as revolutionary. And although Naipaul does not focus on the rhetorical forms of this refusal, I want to suggest that this refusal has everything to do with the still-unresolved relation between truth and rhetoric in his account. If we define ideology as an enunciative position, and race as its meaning, what emerges in Naipaul's reading is a certain tension that relates to how blackness must be read ideologically – that is to say, rhetorically – as a falsely 'imposed' (a dismissive word for how ideas interpose themselves and so necessarily distort and falsify the clear and distinct outlines of phenomena) doxa. Let us pause for a moment on this question of reading. At issue is the fundamental undecidability of blackness as both *parousia* and *eschaton*, or advent and telos. The historical reality of racism led Naipaul to question the idea that ideology is ever finally determining of blackness. Such theoretical certainty, which consists for the most part in the belief that thought must begin by acknowledging doxa as determining of the events through which it is understood, not only introduces the idea of a cause that is curiously always absent from what succeeds it, yet is determining of its effects, but also loses sight of the ways in which ideologies are also representations, which, as such, do not merely reflect a more original transmission but also show various degrees of autonomy. If the meaning of the political can be falsely imposed, this is because its ideology is already presumed to be referentially stable, whereas fiction supposedly is not. But what gives the game away is the very opposition between fiction and rhetoric, which tries to correct racial lie for mistaken truth, an opposition that can only repeat the error that this distinction is designed to correct, namely, that any substitution of knowledge for ideological error is itself already a sign of ideological certitude.

Clearly, what is at stake here has something to do with the status of literal conversion. The passage from Malcolm X teaches nothing more clearly than that the act of conversion can never be divided between knowledge and naïveté, autobiography and cognition. While there is something innocent in the desire simply to write down words without knowing their meanings, being able to scribe and then being able to read aloud what has been inscribed is clearly a moment of radical transformation. 'I'd written words that I never knew were in the world', Malcolm tells us. The writing down of words consists, then, of a continuous labor that is itself the production, *in potentia*, of an irreducible – or non-totalisable – transformation. That is to say, writing (as we understand it here) has nothing to do with style or literature, and

its inscription has no other existence than its eventfulness; more precisely, what is elaborated in the very movement of inscription is a world that has no existence, or alibi, outside of or prior to its being written. Because inscription precedes any concept of the words as meant, it is not possible, first, to know the thoughts that attach themselves belatedly to the words as recollected. This is a *writing*, in brief, that unsettles all the distinctions between truth and sincerity, ideology and politics, and autobiography and fiction that Naipaul is trying to make. Yet what is it in Malcolm's narrative, in fact, that sounds so revelatory, and whose discovery lies neither in a naive faith nor in an amazed awareness but in the slow, demanding act by which he, as a copyist, fills in page after page as he mentally translates his own inadequacies into thoughtful potentiality? Represented as an absence, a blank, and a profusion of punctuation marks, the X of black power is both expressed and presented through this impossibility of knowing the words that one needs to learn. Thus what is being inscribed here is not true discourse, nor the fantasy that writing is an exercise of power, but that of a *tabula rasa* – a blank on which nothing is written but the pure potentiality of writing itself. No wonder that such a writing should so readily begin with the lexical form of words and find there the expression of both what one is deprived of and what one might become, since deprivation and potentiality are, consequently, both implicated in the new sense of a world accessible in the turning back on itself of an unknowing that has no predicate or signification as such. And what is then uttered or named is a nothing writing itself as the sheer inexpressible potentiality of language. This is a writing whose initial relationship (or lack of a relationship) to cognition recalls the mistaken writing down of an X in a Birmingham hotel. In terms of autobiography, then, the X is not the effect of a desire, or the telling trope of a *prosopopoeia*, but a reinscription that is nothing but the very movement of its being written and, as such, evokes neither a literal nor figural awareness. This passage, I think, supports my reading of the X as a signifier that can be neither posited nor negated as either deception or manipulation, and in whose emancipation from context and law Malcolm proved himself the ultimate reader and messenger.

It is the point at which he consents to his ignorance that Malcolm is able to dialectically possess the knowledge of what he does not know. But this does not mean that ignorance has been dispelled, for what is striking about the passage is the way in which the actual world of the prison gives way to the potential world of the X, as each letter in the tablet signifies nothing but the necessity to keep on reading and writing, and this is why, according to Malcolm, the arbitrariness of a word like *aardvark* is proof of both the power of memory and the endless potential for self-delusion. To read this passage as naive literalism, as Naipaul suggests we should, would therefore be to read naively, ignorant of the moment when, with the appearance of the X, black writing becomes the expression of what might be possible in the writing down of a world.

We have thus come to a paradoxical set of conclusions about the ‘innocent’ nature of black power discourse. It is only when it frees itself of any ideological certitude that black writing becomes literature, suggests Naipaul, but this move rapidly turns into a desire to defend the power of the written word from the seductive power of politics. And the proof of this is the non-innocent ignorance of *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X*, which, in its display of doxa or received opinion, is thus read as mere seduction rather than self-knowledge or genuine conversion. In this sense, paradoxically, Naipaul’s challenge to black writers of diaspora is how to learn to write ignorantly, or how to suspend the knowledge of what it means to be black. For only then can the writer possess the knowledge that rhetoric or politics gets in the way of. But can what is at stake here really be reduced to that of when innocence is known as such?

It is a question that returns us to Hall and the pursuit of a black diasporic politics. Let us approach the problem from another angle, that of Marxism or, more specifically, the trope of the last instance. While head of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, Hall wrote a series of texts on the question of economic determinism in Marx. The question of the ‘last instance’, for Hall, is one that reduces the concrete to thought by making the economy the necessary cause – or even the precondition – of sociopolitical events. In Hall’s opinion, such certitude fails to grasp how the concrete and thought have become so inseparably interwoven that to try and separate them, conceptually in terms of before and after, is to confuse the contingency of what happens, and what changes over time, with the ‘absolute predictability’ of an ‘already witnessed truth’.²² Accordingly, such a theory cannot grasp the wholly necessary but also difficult truth that contingencies are never merely empty, secondary, or derivative effects; and why, doubtless for the same reason, the singular effects of what we do show up the limits of thought’s ability to determine itself as knowledge, for the mind reveals nothing but the fact that it has no absolute dominion over reality. This is why, in a 2012 interview with Zoe Williams, Hall asks: ‘When is the last instance? If you’re analysing the present conjuncture, you can’t begin and end at the economy. It is necessary, but insufficient’.²³ In brief, at issue is the paradox of what is both necessary and insufficient when the last instance remains, as it were, literally absent from the immanent form of its meaning, and what is *really* first can only later be grasped *after* its fall into representation, and where what is considered a cause is actually the effect of an effect, and what is considered an effect can present itself only as the cause of a cause that has no guarantee or alibi other than that of error or deception. In Hall’s work, the contingent – politics – appears here as already determined, when it is in fact blackness that remains irreconcilable as both promise and error. Just as Althusser (whose 1962 essay ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ is pivotal here) concludes that ‘neither at the first instant nor the last, the solitary hour of the ‘last instant’ never comes’, Hall also says, ‘I got involved in cultural studies because I didn’t think life was purely economically determined’.²⁴ Which will also lead him to say, ‘We have

22. Stuart Hall, ‘The problem of ideology – marxism without guarantees’. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2, 1986. (Hereafter *Problem of ideology*).

23. Williams, Zoe. ‘The Saturday interview: Stuart Hall’, *Guardian*, February 11, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/feb/11/saturday-interview-stuart-hall>

24. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Ben Brewster (trans), London, Verso, 1969, p113, translation modified. For a lucid commentary, see Warren Montag, ‘To shatter all the classical theories of causality: immanent and absent causes in Althusser and Lacan (1963–1965)’ in *The concept in crisis: reading Capital today*, Nick Nesbitt (ed), Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, pp166–89.

25. Stuart Hall, *Problem of ideology*, p43. In his reading of this and other sentences, David Scott reduces such indeterminacy to a thinking about time or, more accurately, about the need to think the “contingency” of the present’. But this is a view that seems to elide the question of the relation between political economy and its theoretical representation in Hall’s account. There is also the more difficult question of the relation between contingency and representation, or whether the former is ever strictly representable, which I shall address throughout this essay. David Scott, ‘Stuart Hall’s ethics’, *Small Axe* 9, no. 1, 2005, p5.

26. Jacques Derrida, ‘Sending: on representation’, Peter Caws and Mary Ann Caws (trans), *Social Research* 49, no. 2, 1982, pp295–326, p324.

27. Stuart Hall, ‘Marx’s notes on method: a reading of the “1857 Introduction”’, *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2, 2003, pp113–49, p126. (Hereafter *Notes on method*).

28. Another elaboration of this circular logic may be discerned in Hall’s famous reference to the ‘necessary detour’ through theory. We know that

to acknowledge the real indeterminacy of the political’.²⁵ In describing such indeterminacy, which is not just a question of method or understanding, Hall again speaks of the singular nature of an X in whose meaning, whatever its attribution or its effects, one is never able to draw a reliable or predictable dividing line between the necessary and the insufficient. Yet without this X – whose possibility, once it gets misinterpreted as already determined, can generate only further errors or fictions – it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities – necessary or sufficient – will be the right one.

I should note, in passing, that the phrase *I didn’t think life was purely economically determined* enables the economic to be determining without filling in what exactly it determines. Similarly, the question of *when* is the last instance, experienced here as something awaited and infinitely suspended, is probably not the same issue as to whether, in its utterance, the last instance is always represented by what it presupposes, by way of return, or whether such rhetoric invariably produces what in the first instance it is supposed to represent but only via the detour of representation. Whatever the necessity of this question of the relationship between contingency and representation, or of an origin that, in Jacques Derrida’s words, is not ‘yet innocent of representation’, in Hall’s reading of Marxist method the problem faced is invariably one of whether the last instance reveals a structure that is always determining, or one that must necessarily remain ignorant of such presupposition precisely to grasp the knowledge of its historical concept.²⁶ This, at any rate, seems to be the focus of Hall’s important 1974 essay ‘Marx’s Notes on Method: A ‘Reading’ of the ‘1857 Introduction’, in which it becomes evident that there is no clear separation between method and its own constraining presupposition, as can be seen in the following passage:

Each element appears as both *determining* and *determined*. What breaks this seamless circle of determinations? It can only be deciphered by reading back from the apparent identity of the categories to *their differentiated presuppositions* (determinate conditions).²⁷

From this random and somewhat difficult passage, I should merely like to draw the following hypothesis: that even if there is a differentiated unity in what Hall here calls Marx’s first-last instance, this unity appears to derive its rhetorical force from the ways in which it grasps itself historically, and how it divides yet preserves itself over time; in both cases, what governs the interrelation is the relation that is, in the last instance, presupposed; and what connects thought to its historical object is the conviction that any Marxist reading essentially begins by doubling back on itself to recognise itself in its own differentiation. When Hall says that in such unity there is a ‘difference which does not disappear, which cannot be abolished by a simple movement of mind or a formal twist of the dialectic’, he still implies that to know difference is to know the essential economic characteristics of its reappearance that are

thus grounded in the rhetorical expression of such unity (p127). The fidelity of thought to knowledge is thus always undercut by this presupposition, which Hall singles out as the ‘methodological and theoretical key’ to Marx’s method (p127). Since this unity is not merely a dialectic among others, and since it is singled out, in its ‘concrete specificity’, as the point where thought meets its end in reality, it might seem that this unity always might stand in for the real as its literal embodiment rather than be conjured into being as the figure of some ‘essential dialectical law’ (p128). But it is still difficult to avoid the question of what is being presupposed and what is being derived from such presupposition (and consequently embodies the outcome desired), especially when the unity that dictates the law of its own interpretation, and that can do no more than reaffirm the method by which it is deciphered, is what also ‘assigns rank and influence’ to the levels of determination elaborated in its issuing forth.²⁸ What breaks the cycle of determination would thereby be a certain view of differentiation as itself inherently determining. In Hall’s view of differentiated unity, then, the sole measure by which difference can be understood is via the grouping that will have always preserved it, and first of all as a representational difference, which does no more than double and articulate the history that precedes it. My question, then, is as follows: regardless of the various terms used – *articulation*, *ensemble*, *unity in difference*, et cetera – what cannot fail to be presupposed is the whole schema by which Marxist method makes difference into something knowable that can then be figuratively be put to work *as* difference; a knowledge that, from a historical point of view, difference must always be ignorant of if it is to realise its dialectical concept, and just because what must be presupposed is a naïve form of representation that, subsequently, always knows itself to be determined from the very beginning. What, then, can be said about the relation between ‘the real indeterminacy of the political’ and its conversion to (the politics of) representation?

This is not the same problem, however, as what it would mean to think blackness politically, indeterminately, and in a way that has no alibi *as* politics. To return to the question of fall to which I alluded at the beginning: because blackness comes already constituted as sign, signifier, metaphor, et cetera, its meaning as a signifier is always fallen into a tropological darkness that literally obscures, as it were, any claim to represent it as absolute and self-validating. If before the fall there was unity without difference, after the fall the thing that falls is blackness, for it has no reachable unity of which its difference can be asserted. Its lack has no corresponding coherence in history, time, or language. Thus by definition it is always first and last. It is *first*, in brief, because like the strange fruit it is, its flesh ripens onto the expiration of its contents, and whose skin envelops nothing more than an absence blossoming. But it is also *last*, because its fall is never able to reach representation, for like the hung, irresolved thing it is, it is held up by the rope of nonexistence and thereupon hangs suspended before the law of its being.

theory is necessary to offset the dangers of a ‘simple-minded anti-theoretical populism’, for if there is one thing that theory is not, it is the naïve belief that it already knows what it does not know. Additionally, for Hall, ‘theory is always a detour on the way to something more important’. But how can one know of this importance without its importance being already naively presupposed by theory? In other words, one generation’s sense of urgency is another’s idea of utter boredom, and one seemingly innocent of the fact that what is urgent can never be thought urgently without the various detours of theory. Or, better put, the urgency of urgency cannot even be thought without the detour of the detour that just is the delay or suspense of theory. Similarly, how does one educate ignorance without the presupposition that it will come to know what it already—innocently, and more importantly—knows it lacks? See Stuart Hall, *Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies*, p269 and Stuart Hall, ‘Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities’ in *Culture, globalisation, and the world system: Contemporary conditions for the representation of identity*, Anthony D. King (ed) Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p42.

In this sense, then, the figure of the last instance can never be the final, literal truth of blackness or its politics, even though the two in fact are profoundly connected. Hall has described his position as one of realism because, although he finds the rhetoric of the last instance to amount to an eschatology, or a kind of fictional trope, political economy does figure in his representation of the class politics of blackness. He refers to certain '*tendential alignments*' between class, thought, and identity, albeit ones that should never be read as ever purely determining that we are obliged to read as already there at the outset (*Problem of Ideology*, p77). From this it follows that the relation between antagonism and ideology, however heavily dependent on finance or the economy, has to be more nuanced in its grasp of black political history and identity.

It is a move that has not gone unchallenged, with some critics returning to the issue as evidence of Hall's own theoretical 'innocence', however sophisticated it is, vis-à-vis capital. Alex Callinicos, in a 2014 essay, goes so far as to say, 'It is striking how innocent Hall's writings are of political economy', a lack that reveals Hall's 'theoretical original sin'.²⁹ The innocence to which Callinicos refers is that of a failure to consider the relation between race and political economy, the untheorised nature of which constitutes an absence fatal for any Marxist theory. This innocence is never innocent: it plays out the drama of something essentially missing from Hall's thought, an absence that can only be read symptomatically as an internal rupture between race and capital. Just as the attempt to know blackness itself functions as a sign of something finally missing, the fact that such desire reveals an absented cause adds a further insoluble twist to the problem of the last instance. Since, as Callinicos points out, no Marxist theory can take place without the concepts or discourse of political economy, no theory of blackness can ever claim to know itself as Marxist without political economy being finally determining of its differential becoming.³⁰ Clearly, after such knowledge one can never be black in the same way again. To reach such knowledge, Hall must thus know the consequences of a cause that has no equivalence in its effects, precisely because such knowledge is always the effect of an innocence that can never know itself as such. Put slightly differently, black cultural theory is unknowingly innocent only because it can never read the effectivity of innocence; and because it fails to recognise this innocence of innocence, it is always open to sinful temptation. If the last instance is not there at the beginning, Hall's writings are equally innocent and equally sinning. But why is innocence yet again the ground on which this battle is fought? Does the remark not also imply that blackness and the writing of the last instance are in a relation that can never be entirely innocent, precisely because naïveté and final truth are always mysteriously intertwined? Does it not also mean (both at the level of theory and at the level of politics) that to theorise blackness as undetermined is to theorise it naively, because one does not realise that, from the very beginning, it is already expressed and represented by a truth that supplements

29. Alex Callinicos, 'Stuart Hall in perspective', *International Socialism*, no. 142, 2014, p4. <http://isj.org.uk/stuart-hall-in-perspective/>

30. The idea that blackness could represent something unprecedented or inordinately sinful for Marxist theory is also implicit to Callinicos's allegory, but this insight is not developed, in part because of his failure to ask the simple, but decidedly difficult, question: What is it that makes blackness black?

it and that is decidedly neither immanent nor present? It is as if the language of political economy existed before the fall of blackness, and it therefore can represent this fall as forever grasped by the perfectly referential language of Marxist theory, whose material truth envelops its content like Eve emerging from Adam's exposed rib. The greater the innocence, it seems, the purer the transgression.

This opinion seems no less reductive to me than the belief that Marxist theory is driven solely by a concern with reality rather than by the desire to secure the status of its own discourse as truth. Hall addresses this problem to the extent to which he says that the question of representation is always bound up with desire (perhaps not so much simply as disavowal, but more like how antagonisms come to be invested). Reading Hall's influential essays now is to come across a concern not with what subjects take to be real, and against which they supposedly measure themselves, but with blackness as a task or labor that has to be accomplished within each and every conjuncture, and wherein the right *to* difference is recognised insofar as it cannot be essentially grasped as an unequivocal assertion but emerges out of the dialectical battle between thought and difference in the capitalist system. In this sense, any thought of the conjuncture must proceed without political resolution, for theory, rather like a naive tourist, cannot enter into the void without literally filling it with various representations. In this regard, any theory of the conjuncture must be innocent of any attempt to make it inherently determining. And it is out of this suspension of knowledge that any cultural politics springs as the necessary by-product of an ignorance that begins by announcing what it does not know. But even this attempt is haunted by radical impossibility, and for two reasons. Hall outlines his project as a Marxism without guarantees, as a careful teasing out of warring positions within representation itself. If anything, this is a reading that refuses all thought of totalisation to analyse the specificity of difference within each conjuncture. But the study of difference is still imagined as that of a positional truth that is then reread as the story of how political practices are articulated conjuncturally. For example, Hall distinguishes black cultural identity from what he classifies as its critical politics as follows: we must, he says, plunge 'headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism' (*New Ethnicities*, p28). Moreover, we must do so knowingly, that is to say, innocently, for there is no standard for establishing or evaluating what the outcome of such a debate will be.

From these opening remarks it follows that if blackness is to be thought, then we must distinguish it from the idea that (a) it occupies the rhetorical truth of its politics or (b) its politics can be truthfully defined only against rhetoric (which is marked by endless plunges and irreducible contingencies). The point is not so much to tell a black truth but to develop a criticism that has no guarantees as truth. The situation suggests that blackness can become black only by being implicated in the maelstrom or void that just is its difference

from politics. However, if criticism is always the exercise of a politics, at least insofar as criticism has a politics, why is the political given precedence here? Does that not make the political appear as the discourse that always speaks the truth of blackness? To go beyond this impasse, Hall was compelled to contest such notions. But did he resolve them? To answer this question, we must return to the question of representation, as Hall himself went on to do throughout his late work. And here we will see why innocence – which Hall will later refer to as his own unguarded moment – increasingly becomes the whole problem, at least insofar as it has a relation to criticism, the void, and the blackness of politics. Indeed – to speak plainly – we have already shown why innocence cannot be understood as simply naïve or secretly knowing. Let us briefly summarise why. First, innocence is not immanence but its retrospective illusion. Hence it makes no sense to see blackness as enslaved to its own potentiality, which it then confuses with actuality. Second, it is said that Hall was insufficiently Marxist in his grasp of alienation, but to me this amounts to a premature reading. One is not exploited insofar as one is represented, but how one represents oneself is the sign of one's relation to capital. For some, this is a mere sociology of investments, but, as we have just said, this loses sight of the dialectical battle in which blackness arises as a social value in the midst of society; or the protracted and complicated ways in which its desire misrecognises and valorises itself as black, precisely because its place in the structure cannot be fixed or determined as a politics. This battle is very dialectical and infinitely nuanced; it presupposes as a condition the imposition of a certain white valorisation that Hall has well described in *Policing the Crisis* – in a word, racism is not merely a social fact, involving a substantialist theory of value, or even of class conflict, but a relation to representation (that is not at all symbolic, or synecdochal); or, if we prefer, it is through conflict that difference emerges as a passionate desire for affirmation and/or subjection. Third, difference is valorised and determined to the extent that it is also the very movement of political praxis, whence the ways in which certain differences are judged more productive than representative in their character. This explains why the relation of blackness to representation is grounded in the work of a ceaseless phantasmagoria, while abolishing any possibility that it may have in the political organisation of identity. Consequently, difference explains why blackness is valued and why it cannot be affirmed as the source and origin of value, for it is merely a material means through which difference acquires value as capital. Blackness cannot be reconciled with capital, for it is its relation to capital that basically forces it, as it were, to acknowledge its subordination that must first be produced as a racial representation to be dispossessed and/or exploited. If blackness does not have this evaluated power, then it cannot be recognised as difference, and for that reason it must be captured if the differentiation anterior to its production is to be maximised as an embodied-capital relation. If the slave does not work, his or her evaluation as slavish cannot be turned

to appreciation in the hierarchical chains of difference.

Hence Hall does not oppose truth to deception; rather, one of his major insights – which for me is why his work has been so influential – is that all racist discourse is naive but never innocent: naive in the wish to separate racial truths from structures of antagonism, and non-innocent in the way that struggles over the meaning of blackness are also always multi-accented struggles over representation. This, then, is why blackness is read as a void waiting to fall into being, and why absence is its *veritas*, the truth of its literal, historical being. Blackness, historically speaking, has never been the direct echo of the ideological claims that would seek to either condemn or redeem it as something real in an act of understanding. If blackness is no more than its representational history, that is because, as figure, it is always disfigured by the rhetorical attempt to present its history as if it were an ontology to be unveiled. Racist discourse, in brief, is always an allegory of reading.

Let us continue by pursuing further the idea that Hall's work proceeds from these two opposed terms – *innocence* and *conversion* – less to explain them than to complicate them.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CONVERSION

The knowledge of radical innocence also performs the harshest mutilations.

Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*

In Hall's essays on diaspora and identity there is always an observable point where autobiography intrudes on the theoretical narrative. One of the more poignant examples is his reflection on the psychic cost of coming to England as a postwar immigrant: 'Diaspora is a loss. It's not forever, it doesn't mean that you can't do something about it, or that other places can't fill the gap, the void, but the void is always the regretful moment that wasn't realised' (*At Home*, p494). 'So being displaced, or out of place', he continues, 'is a characteristic experience of mine' (p497). There is thus a connection between void and diaspora, and this figure of out-of-placeness, of being always apart, of a gap that can never be filled – this relation is by no means a direct one. The personal is present everywhere, in every concept and representation, but it is always displaced and dislocated, even in relation to the theory or subject of blackness and its representation. Referring to 'black culture and the ordinary life of black people', Hall says, 'I couldn't get to it'; 'I could sort of imagine it and relate to it by empathy, but I couldn't *be* of it' (p497). The lineaments of race and belonging can be recognised, even felt or imagined, but they can never act as a point of origin, and for the good reason that diaspora is the point where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of loss, whose regretful inaccessibility is a clue to its function in black autobiography.

There is a sense that any attempt at consolation for such loss would be

an example of a false way of being, and a false way of knowing or desire. But even here, might Hall's denial of the very category of identity, far from being a denial of blackness, actually be his attempt to grasp its inherent ambiguity? For when blackness makes you not know yourself, he implies, what is unknown is still withheld. To illustrate this, let me give another example – that is to say, another autobiographical anecdote – that has become something of a leitmotif of Hall's diasporic writing, and that once again reveals the relation between being out-of-place and blackness:

It is a story frequently retold in my family – with great humor all round, though I never saw the joke, part of our family lore – that when my mother first brought me home from the hospital at my birth, my sister looked into my crib and said, 'Where did you get this Coolie baby from? . . . This was my sister's way of remarking that, as often happens in the best of mixed families, I had come out a good deal darker skinned than was average in my family. I hardly know any more whether this really happened or was a manufactured story by my family or even perhaps whether I made it up and have now forgotten when and why. But I felt, then and now, summoned to my 'place' by it (*Cultural Studies* 1983, p149).

The term *Coolie baby* haunts both mind and memory, but it recurs almost unconsciously, as if it were a slip, an innocently malicious gift from the family that leaves readable traces, that makes explicit the disjunction between one's desires and one's naming, for to receive such a gift is to be disinherited. To assume the language of blackness, Hall implies, is to discover a kind of shibboleth, or pharmakon in which the poison given is the effect of a harmless remedy, wherein innocent arrival becomes the point of a knowing condemnation. The danger is not only one of arrival as loss, however. It is also the knowledge that, for all his racial innocence, Hall is no longer, and can never again be, black (and so defined by its awareness), but is always the darker, the 'Other one' (p149). The return home thus turns out to be a worse deprivation, a loss of innocence and any sense of belonging. To that extent the language of diaspora is a figure (or metaphor) for how blackness acts as a caul that is more like a poisoned robe, that shelters insofar as it wounds, and that protects by making visible – and so knowable – the poisoning veil of one's illegitimacy. So when the sister uses a metaphorical term to state a literal meaning (you are not like us), it is to assert, with some violence, the radically foreclosed nature of an out-of-placeness that can never be traced back to an origin or cause. This is why blackness has no literal referent and is purely arbitrary. Its only referent is that of a void withheld, denied, in whose working what is manufactured is confused with essence. Moreover, the implications of that confusion convey a wrong that cannot be named, or whose determination is lacking; the origin of blackness in error thus does not simply reverse the opposition between fiction and reality by substituting

figural metaphor for genealogical aberration – far from it; it exposes how fictions determine the world and its reality, and how difficult it is not to confuse identity with ideological aberration. There is no blackness, except for the absence or void that can neither be assumed nor denied, and that upsets the literal sense of every autobiographical text. As such, the difference between being welcomed and being cast out also reveals the links between what is knowable and what, by implication, can never be innocently known as such. For there is no way to make the void known without loss, and no way of revealing innocence without the figural darkness of this X, in whose ideological mystification what appears to be referentially black is forced to darken its own languageless innocence. The effect of being mercilessly denounced by being named is in fact perfectly consistent with the metaphor of diaspora: the always too dark baby, like the postwar Caribbean immigrant, occupies the hearth as an outsider, and he or she is the point where inclusion is realised only by the violent exclusion of the receiver, who is seen as nothing less than an error of being as such. To be so designated is to be translated by being mistranslated, wherein one's autobiography becomes a mistake that goes on; but it is also to come across a judgment and a narration – that is to say, a story frequently told – that makes the referential impossible to tell apart from the fictional, or fantasy from forgetfulness. The story frequently told, in other words, is that of an uncertainty whose precarity is perpetually reenacted. For if race confers some kind of irrefutable, irresistible knowledge in being claimed by it, the price of that reclamation is often exacting and cannot be easily borne. To ask who is ever truly, literally black is thus to see racial difference as something fabulated, not given; a discourse learned, not a destiny achieved. 'Black is important historically', Hall suggests, 'because it was the bit that was never named, never spoken. . . . So all of us in different ways learn to be black' (*At Home*, p496). But the decision to name that nameless X, and the strange, regretful logic by which one is summoned into place by it, is never one's own but a sign of how one is rendered readable by being obliterated, and first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible effect of being summoned. For what kind of knowledge is this in which the assumption of a culture collapses any distinction between literality and figure, harmless joke and poisoned inheritance?

There seems, therefore, to be a contradiction between this theory of blackness as an unnameable, unspeakable summoning and self-knowledge as an achieved identity. Hall would seem to equate diasporic writing with infinite openness, while his family would insist that black identity can be situated only in the strictures and sacrifices of a decision that he could not choose not to make. But in a way, these positions are both shaped by a summoning that also expiates and doubtless also mistranslates, for to acknowledge the darker one is to acknowledge the foreignness, not of black life, but of its irredeemable imperfection. At the same time, one is necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of a merciless fate. In other words, like Oedipus, the black,

too, is the cause and realisation of an offense that he has no knowledge of. No matter what he does, he can neither escape it nor fulfill it, for this X, however it is suffered or tarried with, exists at the heart of the subject, and it will haunt him his whole life: 'I felt, then and now, summoned to my 'place' by it'. To the extent that the X can never be named or spoken of (and so is not a metaphor or a prosopopoeia), its strangeness cannot, as such, be represented but remains uncertain as to its knowledge and manufacture.

And what, then, of representation? Representation remains for Hall, it seems, a key term that was thematised from the earliest forays into cultural studies to the later essays exploring black art and visual culture. In any case, Hall proposes a reading of representation as part of how subjects are positioned, and the term is invoked, as if in passing, immediately after a discussion of blackness and ethnicity. 'Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time' (*New Ethnicities*, p29). Representation is the medium or means by which these historical codes enter into space and time, giving representation the role of an arbiter by which these codes themselves become historical, but also – and this is difficult – these codes cannot be historically meaningful without being represented, that is to say, enunciated, which gives representation an eminent position in the making known of a new kind of blackness that would thereby be not a position among others but the contestation, or disarticulation, that just is its meaning as a politics. And just as this politics is determining, when attributed to a representation that is no longer innocent, blackness appears here as an articulation that has no fixed or definitive code but appears only through its fixity or slippery disarticulation, or as an excess that might just appear as a practice of resistance to or contestation of the codes or meanings of racist speech. What interests me here is what allows blackness to be both what transgresses and what conforms (as happens in history) to the codes of its representation.

For example, whatever the facts of the matter, Hall has always been insistent that difference *like* representation (and we shall come back to this simile) is always slippery: 'Difference, like representation, is also a slippery, and therefore, contested concept'.³¹ From what has been said above we know that difference is related to the struggle to present a black authorial subject. But we also know why the resistance and ambivalence involved in being black explicitly relate to the writing of autobiography. Indeed, the connection between autobiography and the death of an essential subject has been our focus throughout. We have seen why the black autobiographical subject is dismissed as a false, incomplete conversion, and with an almost murderous cruelty. But we have also seen how the unwitting murder of truth by rhetoric, as it were, was celebrated as an end of innocence, and simply because, as we have said, it was simultaneously able to bring about a new critical black politics. In short, we have seen why rhetorical innocence is intimately embedded within

31. The notion of slipperiness implicitly raises the question of what it would mean to grasp or take hold of blackness, as thing, sign, or concept? And so determine the question of its orientation, of the place it occupies in history or ideology as that which the conjuncture demands it accomplish? I cannot further explain this here, but this taking hold is not just a theoretical question, given that it is the figure of the *hold* that summons blackness into being, and wherein its destiny is to be distributed among so many cramped, conjoined spaces, a taking hold that will also reveal to it the social death in which it is always already held, and that lies latent, awaiting only the crossing over into the glinting folds by which the white world will enslave it. This hold would then also be what always takes hold, and in its taking hold plunges blackness into the emptiness of its nonbeing. For a differing elaboration of this trope, see Christina Sharpe, *In the wake: On blackness and being*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

the question of black autobiography. The notion that blackness can somehow be read as autobiography is certainly related to its slipperiness. 'I couldn't get to it', writes Hall; 'I could sort of imagine it and relate to it by empathy but I couldn't *be* of it'. But what is it that makes blackness so slippery? Is it slippery because it is black, or black because it is slippery? Or, put slightly differently, is blackness slippery because we endeavor to seek after and desire it because we know it is ungraspable (an obliquity that, paradoxically, we desire to grasp), and so contrary to our ability to conceive of it? Let it be supposed that the thing that causes blackness's slippery effect must differ from its slipperiness, both as to its difference and its representation, for the thing that blackness is (its meaninglessness) is also the cause of both its slipperiness and its articulation. For if representation is said to be inherently slippery, then it must remain so even in its definition. Therefore, what is contested, insofar as it is conceived to be slippery, differs from both its representation and its slipperiness, and thereby cannot simply be represented as Hall seems to propose. How does one take hold of this slipperiness without making difference and its representation decidable and so meaningful? In this sense, paradoxically enough, it could be said that Hall's attempt to grasp the 'difference' inherent in representation cannot itself take hold of difference without contradicting and/or suspending it, and must needs let go of the undecidable difference we must analyse here. This much is evident from above. But what arises from this trope is decidedly more complicated. Hall elaborates the problem as follows:

Difference, like representation, is also a slippery, and therefore, contested concept. There is the 'difference' which makes a radical and unbridgeable separation: and there is a 'difference' which is positional, conditional and conjunctural, closer to Derrida's notion of *différance*, though if we are concerned to maintain a politics it cannot be defined exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier (*New Ethnicities*, p29).

Between simile and metaphor, the distance at first appears so wide as to be unbridgeable. Yet the two figures manage to exist side by side without one being reducible to the other. But what is it that allows one to pass from one to the other? Is not the figure of politics what allows this focus on each separately? Or is politics precisely the literalisation of the gap between them that allows difference and its representation to coincide in a new historical meaning? Considered as trope, difference is unbridgeable, but when considered as a politics, it overcomes racist separation. The same thing that makes difference positional is the same thing that makes *différance* the very essence of politics. This is because politics brings to an end, or allows us to get hold of, the endless slipperiness of the signifier. In this way, then, representation suddenly becomes a question of deciding between two differences, the unbridgeable and the conditional; and between two rhetorical figures, that of simile and metaphor, with politics the attempt to

draw a line between them. By using a simile to propose two metaphorical differences, Hall's purpose is to characterise a notion of politics that cannot be situated between, but only within, difference. There is politics only to the extent that it has the power to determine the referential moment of a difference that it maintains through sublation, and, by the same reasoning, conceives of as a literal as against a figurative difference. But if politics arises from figure, to the extent to which difference emerges from the very act of signification, it is impossible to say whether politics is literal or figural: from the moment there is politics, a metaphorical difference is implied, and whenever there is metaphor, a literal interpretation of the distance between differences is slippery (or figural) from the start. Hall thus situates his plea for *différance* firmly in a double bind: the realisation that difference is no more than simile straightway becomes linked to two antithetical and exclusive metaphorical modes that can only be thought as unbridgeable analogies. It is also suggested that the juxtaposition of these seemingly unrelated ideas can be sutured by politics: in order for *différance* to be maintained it cannot be thought as irreducibly different, for the endless slipperiness (of figure) must be checked by politics. The latter is the province of the decision to limit what it referentially knows, the former that of an endless slipperiness within the tropological or the referential. And once again politics takes on a constituent role that has consequences for the signification of difference, which henceforth appears both *like* a rhetoric and a statement of fact. The analogy being proposed here, however – and it is here that we must modify our understanding of the relation between difference and representation – is itself a slippery example of trope sliding under meaning, and what slips away is not what is representable, but a signifier that has no content. Or, to explain it more clearly: *différance* is not something that is separately added to meaning; or something that is engendered in the space between identities, which then has to be bridged; it is what makes all such totalising separations impossible. And it is this very designation of an irreversible, undecidable limit that constitutes the X of politics, and which the infinite play of signifiers and of difference comes to represent, through endless contestation. A critical black politics, in other words, is what is added to the scenes of differential struggle in order to mark the lack of a signifier that could close the set. The endless slide of signifiers would thereby be brought to a halt if politics were a closed set rather than that which acknowledges the impossibility of closure. With this emphasis, one would naturally expect Hall to go on to extol *différance* as the X of black politics, but no; instead he argues that if politics is to be maintained it cannot be thought exclusively in terms of an infinite sliding of the signifier. Why then does he choose to present blackness as a difference which brings to an end the *différance* of difference (which must occur if there is to be a politics)? Perhaps *différance* is too innocent or too knowing a notion? Or perhaps it is precisely too slippery a notion that can never be sutured to

the political as such – that is, in its wake comes too unconstrained a fall, or a plunge down slippery slopes too precipitate?

And just as this slipperiness must complicate the opposition between *différance* and politics, in the same way *différance* must necessarily exceed any political appeal to represent it as a politics, for *différance* just is this slippery work that cannot be brought back to the thought of politics, or even the wish to position difference as a conjuncture formed out of the traces it leaves in signification: the X of *différance* is formed, then, when blackness always falls short of its claim to be a politics, and therefore it cannot be represented as such, whence its deferral and complication of any mimetic logic of politics.

Although *différance* apparently represents for Hall the future of black critical politics, his treatment of it does seem to illustrate yet another unguarded moment that must be corrected. I suggest that the root of this misreading is not difference but the need to maintain its converted identity as a politics, which unsettles all the distinctions that Hall is trying to make. My understanding of this is as follows. In the first place, one cannot help but be struck by the appearance of Derrida in Hall's texts, and their successive references to conversion as a weave of differences, which is itself densely woven out of different terms. Furthermore, there exists in Hall's reading of representation, at moments of its own autobiographical conjuncture, what we might call not a representation of blackness but two tropological modes that can no longer be seen as the work of representation or that can be thought of as a praxis that therefore falls short of politics as Hall defines it (as a play of identity and difference). This already departs from what he describes in *The Fateful Triangle* as 'the interplay between difference and *différance* – that is to say, the contradiction *inside* the very signification of difference rather than, as was the case previously, the fixed us-and-them polarisation that opposed 'their difference' (which meant nationalism) to 'our identity' (which meant modernity) – is how the politics of cultural identity is now playing itself out on the global stage' (*Fateful Triangle*, p134).

Immediately preceding this quotation, Hall quotes the following passage from Derrida's 'Difference' essay:

[Différance means] the movement according to which language, any code or system of referral in general, is constituted historically as a weave of differences. It is because of difference that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be articulated by the mark of the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past . . . not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the difference of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (p134).

In the previous reading of the story of the darker baby, the question was not, What would it mean for racial identity to keep within itself the mark of a traumatic past, as a way of representing this out-of-placeness in the literal mark (X) of the future?; but rather, What is at stake in the uncertainty of never knowing when one's difference might appear as memory, fantasy, judgment, or self-knowledge? Yet Hall seems to be presenting *différance* less as an elusive X than as an example of the efficacy of political judgment. And the very certainty with which he does so invokes *différance*, not, as Derrida has it, as a trace-structure that is the quasi-transcendental condition of representation *per se* but as the moment wherein politics and signification meet in any system of representation.

Consequently, *différance* can be thought only as a contradiction waiting to be comprehended as part of its representational logic, a logic that sees the political as the limit of difference, rather than see the former as the trace that precedes the very distinction between politics and representation. So, too, the implicit belief and idea that *différance* can be expressed as a politics only if it becomes the object or thought of a new conjuncture. Does this not make the political function a kind of last instance? This insistence on contradiction already extends the Derridean text, as does the frank reference to the political as the end of *différance*, as if the one logically followed the other, or as if *différance* were something like a code for making politics representable as such, or the mode through which each and every difference can be thought, and so on, *ad infinitum*, as a looser, more permeable, and more porous weave of positionalities; rather than as an elusive mode of thought in which positions can repeat one another only in a nonbinary, undecidable logic (p172). Therefore the struggle over black British identity, insofar as it consists of different positions, is in fact the cause of a new differential conjuncture in politics. My hypothesis is that this positioning of blackness, on the border of politics and history (and thereby also, as we shall see, on the border of both difference and its theory), is what makes it so elusive, or slippery, for Hall to deal with directly without reproducing the binary terms in which *différance* is thus transformed into a politics of representation either open or closed, bounded or liberated, or suddenly experienced as the collapse of an essential innocence that we are told can only be innocently comprehended, but presumably only insofar as the binary thinking of politics and *différance* allows us to comprehend the heterogeneous and discontinuous meaning of the blurred, interwoven, and contested ways in which it is said to be innocently different. Far from bringing about a different idea of black cultural politics, such knowledge prevents it, in fact, for what we see is a blackness forever caught in the fall of its representation. Indeed, before coming back to blackness as such, Hall finds himself glossing Derrida, Gramsci, Paul Gilroy, *et alia*, in ways that necessarily complicate the supposedly clear relation between difference and the politics of its representation. For the present, I cannot give a clearer explanation of this impasse.

Hence it follows that as long as difference is always bound to representation so as to form a weave of codes and meanings that are intermingled, mixed, creolised, it can be represented – that is, thought – as contradiction. We can say that these weaves or multiplicities are the histories through which blackness has been disseminated, however discontinuous these weaves may themselves be.

This, then, turns out to be the focus of Hall's overall approach to black cultural politics, as can be seen when he characterises it in 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (1990) as an implicative relationship between representation and enunciation, a relation 'never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation'.³² He further illustrates this idea as follows: 'Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of *enunciation*' (p222). Identity, so to speak, never finally corresponds, or is never identical, to one's enunciative position but emerges from within it, and, insofar as we are able to articulate it, this identity will not be of the same order as that by which we are affected, to the degree that being affected requires us to act. Whosoever seeks to practice identity in an absolute or definite sense will come up against the knowledge that he or she acts only insofar as we are constituted out of our incessant differences, which cannot be explained fully. Difference is what we think through and necessarily work through, precisely because what we are is not infinite, or immutable, or absolutely determined. And it is this insistence on our finite difference that represents, says Hall, the true politics of cultural identity, although we practice it with the most intense passion and ignorance.

Moreover, we ourselves can never undertake such politics at the level of thought, for in our life, in the representation of our life, in what life affords us to desire and to know as experience, what we enjoy is often a fiction or phantasm. Should anyone want an example of a clearer understanding of the matter, I can think of none that would explain the point better than that of the unconscious. Hall never really rigorously explores this aspect, but let us admit that there can be something within us that can neither be nor be conceived along the order of a *self*-representation, but in respect to which our order and existence, say, betray a nonrelation to blackness, or that denies blackness in respect of a desire for a whiter being; or ends up as a more split enunciative position that necessarily employs negrophobia as a lexis of redoubt and self-doubt, by which one suddenly experiences one's difference as a desuetude, or as something tainted, lost, beyond civility and language. And when thereafter one comes to see that one is black, one can live one's difference only as something known but also as something barely known, or understood, and that must be excluded insofar as it produces contempt and disturbance in equal measure. And since this self-division is never clearly understood, it follows that it cannot be simply elaborated as a representative mirror, as we have just seen Hall mention as a process within representation. For the fact is that blackness always names an affect rather than a knowledge

32. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford (ed), pp222–37. London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. (Hereafter *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*).

or method, and so is analogous to a secret both known and buried within, for in culture the aspiration to be possessed of it, to be possessed by a meaning that is itself not always intelligible, which in turn is regarded as a desire to discover something real or transparent in oneself, often results in the feeling of an incommensurable opacity. Indeed, any black person can experience this when realising the truth of what it means to be irredeemably black, that is to say, that moment when the hateful essence of a culture becomes evident in one's being, and one knows that nothing is more black than the claim to be simply speaking or writing, or imagining the truth of one's human essence from a position that is nonblack; for to rest here, it is evident that one's self-certainty, at least insofar as one is aware of having to make a decision, has become a kind of hallucinated syllogism wherein all evidence of one's blackness is subject to doubt, and where hearing oneself speak as black is nothing but the sign of a deluded mind. From this we may conclude that being black is never simply a representational claim, even at the level of politics and truth, but also an identification shaped by hatred and envy, which as such is never simply inner or political. The one thing we know for sure about black autobiography is that the 'I' always comes from somewhere else and is always figured by an out-of-placeness. For the X represents an error – an aberration – that cannot be named, and whose meaning is lacking, and so cannot be substituted for difference or dialectics – a point that Hall insists on. But as we have also demonstrated, in attempting to name the difference that blackness is, he often reduces it to identity.

From this it follows that representation is an ambiguous place from which to understand enunciation because of its link to an identity always positioned, but a position that often ends up as the irreconcilable positioning of identification and desire that belongs to *both* but is defined by *neither*. For, as may be gathered from what has just been said, there must first of all exist in us a self to be so positioned, and, together with the notion of ambivalence that assumes that there would likewise always be a split between difference and desire, between the desire to be different and the drive to be the same, this is likewise why Hall characterises the failure to resolve this split as 'unsettling' to any notion of identity. This failure herein consists of the attempt to capture an experience of difference without attending to, or reflecting on, how difference appears in the real, or how it is both transgressed and preserved by an ambivalence impossible to identify with or to expel, which then becomes the sign of an 'instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution'(p228). But it is this unsettlement, as we have said, that cannot then be a political resolution of how one represents oneself, whether tactical, strategic, deluded, or otherwise.

This is not all. As we have seen, in his iconic 1988 essay, 'New Ethnicities', Hall presents a 'significant shift' from 'a struggle over relations of representation to a politics of representation itself': 'a significant shift that has been going on (and is still going on)'(*New Ethnicities*, p27). This shift

is one newly marked by black cultural practices that had heretofore been excluded from 'the dominant regimes of representation', or were placed and positioned as such, and that are now undergoing a new form of contestation: in Hall's view the signifier *black* emerges out of this struggle 'to come into representation', or the struggle to gain 'access to the rights of representation' by blacks themselves (p27). In describing how these new relations thus changed the political meaning of the word *black*, Hall clearly enough suggests that black politics can be fully articulated only out of such conjunctural moments, a conviction wholly based on the idea that blackness, in its achievements and promises, is not the transformation of a given essence into a more palatable version, whose representation is no longer negative or marginal, but a new way of being black that changes its narrative identity within the wider culture – in short, and since this word is singled out, in their assertion of a *right* to representation, black artists and cultural producers have changed the relationship between ideology and conjuncture (or, more generally, we can say that out of contradiction emerges a new signifier of difference) (p27). In becoming black, as it were, including the end of a certain essential subject, whose innocence presumably was never innocent or essential, I never simply replace or substitute a preceding phrase, but I '*displace*, reorganise and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another' (and Hall seems to recognise this as a form of questioning that offers itself as beyond that of innocence, and even beyond the question of meaning, margin, centre, or authenticity) (p27).

This gesture on Hall's part – to describe the significance of new shifts within difference and thereby, in short, subsuming ambivalence for identity – is opposed to any reductionist or formalist or masculinist account of black solidarity. Hall counters the 'evasive silence' of black separatist logic with the sense that people come together out of the in-between experiences of their differences rather than out of their shared samenesses (p29). This very singular interweaving-by-phrasing I shall call (following Hall) 'articulation'. As previously mentioned, articulation is not a relation to representation but a politics of representation: in question, then, is not truth, falsity, or a distortion that cannot be named as such, but the effort, that is to say, the struggle to make meaning out of the present moment; it is a struggle to redefine the limits and modalities of blackness not as a struggle to capture reality or go beyond it, but a struggle over how a certain notion of blackness has been articulated historically, or conjuncturally, and via codes and attributes that are not closed, linear, or totalising but that are constitutive of new positionalities. Beyond the closed signifieds of what blackness is, Hall's proposal is that during the 1980s (I shall come back to the question of time and difference in due course) a new shift in cultural politics has led to a new critical politics whose opening or path is neither simply *in* representation nor *outside* it: such is the meaning of the word *interweave*, referring to a coming together that differentiates itself as sign, concept, or doxa, and that issues forth on the basis of not being

33. So blackness is always historically interwoven; it is the braid of several codes: a pre-ontological code (racial essence), a dialectical code (the law of contradiction that defines the relation between innocence and knowledge), a symbolic code (the politics and relations of representation), and a hermeneutic code (the *différent* that never appears as past or present in or as representation but as the weave of traces that makes identity as such infinitely deferred). From what follows beyond the figure of innocence or knowledge: the weave of these codes denotes how differences can appear at any given moment, but they cannot be made sense of or determined without this figure of a dense or blurred imbrication: the density of the weave suggests that difference can in a sense be put to work as the sign of both its annulment and its overlaid accumulation of meanings.

34. Bhabha makes a related point that 'there is, however, a recognisable difference between *position in war of position* and *positionality* as deployed in the vocabulary of the politics of representation' see Homi K. Bhabha, 'The beginning of their real enunciation: Stuart Hall and the work of culture'. *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1, 2015, pp1–30, p25.

itself, and that opens up the thought and language of the category 'black', and, perhaps, is also the sign of a 'weakening or fading away' of everything that formerly stood as the post-imperial positioning of black subjects in Britain or, more generally, the world.³³ Articulation is then this awareness of something that gathers itself only in dividing itself, but only as the new phrasing of difference emerges, a difference that begins by always doubling back on what precedes it – that is to say, that divides it – from the very start, as both an essential possibility and as a representation. But if blackness *never is the last instance* of representation (for it is always the trace of *différences* that it can never stand in for or exhaust), it cannot also be said that this structure befalls an essential innocence. For if representation is the explicit designation of politics through the transformation of code to structure, and from trope to event, at what moment is it ever clearly definable as innocent? Such a notion implies that the relation to innocence is both what defines politics as a new expressive relation and what leads to a new positionality. Innocence would thus be the moment through which politics represents and repeats itself as politics. And politics then has to be necessarily innocent of politics to determine itself as difference. The shift *from* innocence to difference thus literally becomes the politics of politics.

These curious positions within the theory of position (which become no less curious when Hall refers to racism as an impassable symbolic boundary) will help formulate the question that I have wanted to pursue throughout. To put it bluntly, I want to say that Hall's appeal to the political meaning of blackness brings him to announce blackness's end as a positionality, an ending that, by contrast, whatever its importance for Hall's thinking, or at least his complex engagement with Marxism, opens some difficult issues for the articulation of position-as-event.³⁴ And even though he wants to avoid the binary form of thought that he associates with liberal capitalism, he also ends up in spite of himself in the uncomfortable position of someone trying to think blackness politically without reducing it to a structure of antagonism – or oppositional movement – but who can only repeat a series of oppositions between innocence and difference, essence and structure, contingency and guarantee, ambivalence and racism, and so forth. Yet this, clearly, turns out to be the point: blackness is and is not innocent because it is not always possible to separate what is thinkable from what is representable, what is desirable from what is unguardedly revealed by one's otherness. The problem is all the more acute in that politics is meant to provide the frame for thinking the end of innocence, and thus, Hall affirms, it can only ever be a non-knowing measure for thinking through the emergence of representation, which always might be innocently confused with the closed representations of race. Under the pressure of this uncertainty, the ambivalence (enigmatically always both innocent and non-knowing) of racism, of defining-denying blackness as absence, thus returns with a vengeance in the political articulation of those who would be black beyond the access or right to its cultural-political

representation. My broader suggestion is that no such (innocent) weave could be articulated, and no contestation constituted; blackness is the very sign of erasure – the X – but is never persistent or present in its representations (or: its politics is always lost to the hegemony of its representable ending, which it necessarily – unwittingly, innocently – repeats).

This is almost as far as Hall goes with representation in his work. We might summarise it by saying that there is a kind of general tendency to situate blackness in the context of a praxis, the better to understand it as work or task of representation, and just because blackness is deemed a dense interrelation of dereliction and power that therefore obliges thought to have recourse to its difference. For it is in its difference that blackness is opposed to enunciation in a more restricted sense, in that its position is not exactly that of a pure or singular difference, even though it is its difference that underpins its fatefulness as politics. It follows that blackness must be deduced from how its difference interrelates with multiple positionings, for everything that exists as identity will also be woven from the same interrelation, at each moment of its manifestation. Finally, the question can be raised as to whether this idea of difference-as-conversion is a purely formal one. If blackness is both less than and more than its representations *ad infinitum* (inasmuch as it reveals, as we have said, its incompleteness), why posit the political as its defining truth or validity?

We therefore need to ask why Hall, to perceive or understand blackness (or represent it politically) in ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ and other essays, has to locate it inside a continuous struggle to have access to representation, whereas in Hall’s reading of Derrida, say, or of Fanon, it could be argued that it is the peculiarity of blackness to never appear as such (even though it occurs as an event in art and thought), for its being slips out of representation. For what would it mean to affirm a void, or to know that it is a void that one is doubting or affirming, when it is what one does not know that is being denied or opposed? Would one even be aware of this fact, and by reason of having to be ignorant of this nothing, when the capacity to say that I exist is also declaring, in the end, that I have perchance to savor this nothingness – this X – by which I am presented, and always as completely lacking? An X that is unknowable as it is unavoidable? If all this sounds a tad skeptical, it is because I have my doubts that Hall’s deductions from psychoanalysis can be finally reconciled with the Marxist standard of knowledge through which he thinks the emergence of blackness as a political truth. And it is Fanon whom I need to turn to now to understand why this is the case.

DIASPORA AND REPRESENTATION

These uneasy formulations seem at least to be aligned with Hall’s many fascinating attempts (especially in other recently posthumously published works from the late 1980s to the early 1990s: *Cultural Studies 1983* and *The*

Fateful Triangle, the latter drawn from lectures given in 1993) to isolate and define the value of conjuncture, and of articulation, for understanding the cultural work of blackness as a kind of letter that remains too full of meaning to fulfill a political prescription appropriate to its signification, without thereby reducing it to an already read meaning by which it can be theoretically composed and understood. But what is densely interwoven cannot be easily disentangled: Hall is keenly aware that his appeal to the term *weave* engages a whole problematic of debate not only with the history of black cultural politics but more especially with the most radical ways of thinking blackness such as Fanon's, and he returns many times to Fanon's work, complimenting his theories of ambivalence and identification, but to an extent failing to clarify the terms of the debate as to why representation for Fanon remains a minor and inexact term – a question to which I now turn.

Up to this point, we have, very briefly, touched on what is meant as a certain naïveté of position that is now considered to be at an end, a declaration of what will turn out to be a future chapter in black cultural politics as laid down in 'New Ethnicities' and other texts. It seems that we are now ahead of that naive position, insofar as the attempt to develop blackness as an utterance or speech of identity has had to give way to a more opaque, slippery, oblique representation. Moreover, we have learned that it is naive to assume that the subject is ever in control of its representation, or that there is ever a straight path from desire to knowledge; that is, there is no fixed rule for establishing fidelity as praxis. Finally, we now know that speaking black is not the same thing as being black. Yet Hall also qualifies this naïveté: black naïveté must be understood to some extent as the naïveté of its politics, because politics, as practice, can never be identical to the presuppositions of its own historical contexts – whether imagined as a pathway from the false, or the fictitious, to that of truth or knowledge, or, as is more often the case, the method by which one's acts become equivalent to one's desires, it is never easy to distinguish between the act that is supposed to lay bare the limits of the untrue and the fictitious from that of politics. In such situations, for contradiction to exist it is necessary to imagine politics as the end of contradiction, an end that is unknown to us while we assume its existence. Hence if there is naïveté, such naïveté cannot engage in any politics without the idea that politics cannot be a matter of truth unless it also brings about the end of politics in some closed system of knowledge and truth.

From this it is evident, as I have said, why Hall proceeds not from knowledge or truth but from difference and contestation of which we are here speaking. Accordingly, there will always be a remainder – an opacity – that can never be represented as simply historical or as a meaningful political practice despite the belief that error can be recovered as if there were some hermeneutic pattern making error comprehensible as such. This hermeneutic model of politics is still too realist despite Hall's contrary protestation that the real of politics is always an event that is never simply in

or outside difference as represented. It is therefore worth going back to the essay on cultural identity and its focus on diaspora to see how this naïveté of representation is developed and posited; namely, there Hall asserts the possibility of a *différance* constitutive of any historicity of understanding and in a way not accessible to subjects in representation. It could be said, in that sense, that Hall was attempting to work out the residual problems in the relation between history, politics, and representation, say, or culture, difference, and hegemony, culminating in the development of a politico-philosophical positioning of blackness in his own discourse, whereas in this essay and the later work he is more aware of the difficulty of the relationship between such weaves and their discursive form. Where in 'New Ethnicities' he refers to Gramsci's contribution, here he refers very much to his own reading of Derrida and Fanon: historicising blackness as *différance* is to know, first, a fictitiousness that remains immutable, or an imaginary that could be said to always haunt the real; second, by seeing blackness (as Fanon, to a large extent, views it) as a path between nothingness and the historicity of a movement that occurs neither within nor outside representation, the conclusion has to be that racism is both a system of representation and the capacity to form fictions that appear as the limit of the real.

Here Hall also makes a claim that something genuinely new is emerging, and, indeed, the stress on a naïveté surpassed by art, by critical reflection, will be the characteristic of what defines black British cultural theory, and it can be claimed to be new in its history. Now although this critical outlook owes a lot to Fanonism to a large extent, Hall's emphasis on the overcoming of a certain nonawareness or naïveté by means of critical negation, by means of critical reflection implying that the endless slipperiness of any position can be sutured by militant consciousness, allows for the establishment of a new critical discourse that claims to overcome or renew a problematic supposedly derived from Fanon. This pattern is very traditionally that of critique, in the sense that the new phrasing of difference is always shown as a kind of warring overcoming of a certain naïveté of position and the rise of a black consciousness to a new level of self-awareness. It is traditionally militant, which does not mean that it was Hall's last word on the subject, but it is not Fanonian, for reasons that I will now examine.

But first this view of black cultural identity must be engaged with. Cultural identity is, as we have already explained, 'not an essence but a *positioning*', a positioning that 'has no absolute guarantee', ground, or origin (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, p226). That is how cultural politics is here defined, as a positioning that is experienced as an imposed 'regime of representation [that is also] a regime of power' (in the posthumous work, *The Fateful Triangle*, the couplet power-knowledge becomes power-knowledge-difference) (p225). 'That is the lesson – the somber majesty – of Fanon's insight into the colonising experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*', on the basis of which Hall concludes that black cultural identity in the Caribbean is always an experience of rupture

and dislocation, which takes precedence over the prepolitical imagining of the recovery of any 'essentialised past' (ppp225-226). Whereas this insight engages with the deferred relation between the past and the present, if we compare the critical, dialectical, nonessentialist concept of positioning that Hall here advances, with Fanon's comments on history and identity toward the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon would appear to share Hall's emphasis on 'the experience of a profound discontinuity', at least insofar as the relation of the black diaspora to that of 'Africa' (as a black imaginary) is always a relation of aporia (p227). Fanon would appear to be as militantly, prophetically anti any reliance on the precolonial past, especially as it appears to be a relapse into the naïveté denounced by Hall; indeed, Fanon has been criticised for this focus, which is explicitly and even combatively defined in opposition to any idea of the past as a consolation for the ruptures of the present. But the emphasis is less on black naïveté than on political guilt, namely, that blackness is the work of a consent that constrains its notion of freedom, which it cannot think or fathom, for it is compelled by the idea that to be black is to be indebted irreparably, ad infinitum.³⁵ 'I am guilty', writes Fanon. 'I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p139).

We need therefore to be mindful of this difference to clearly and distinctly perceive what is at stake here. The first impression you receive of Fanon's text is that of an anti-historicist argumentation, which is somewhat remote from the critical cultural politics that, in Hall (and others), is held up as the continuity of similarity and difference, or how culture positions us 'as *both* the same *and* different' (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, p227). Indeed, as you read the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, you will be struck by the insistence that blackness has more to do with guilt and indebtedness, and impropriety and diremption, and is never straightforwardly a question of representation. All references to the past in the text put this much in evidence. The desire for the retrieval of a precolonial identity is associated not with politics but with its very opposite, namely, disavowal.³⁶

There are many echoes of this attitude in Hall, but for Hall difference is always specific and critical, which means that the 'instability, the permanent unsettlement' of identity is always specific to the societies in which differences are formed along a sliding scale. Hall's retrieval of Derrida's quasi concept of *différance*, as we have already seen, is always to buttress the point that meaning is never finished or completed, for 'without relations of difference no representation could occur', and no representation can be constituted without the risk of being deferred, staggered, serialized (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, p229). The same is true of references to Fanon, who is invoked for his insights into blackness-as-rupture, *différance*, and incompleteness. But Fanon also examines the ways in which difference is always a fantasy in the colony in which the proper or the genuine is always already rendered inaccessible (as in essence masked), for it is this mask that becomes the true form of cultural sincerity in the colony, the essential point being that difference is the way that racial

35. The figure of guilt and indebtedness is worked out by Fanon with respect to colonial domination that is also interpreted as a perverse form of hegemony. See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and for a commentary, see my *Whither Fanon?*, chap. 5. (Hereafter *Black Skin, White Masks*).

36. If I am right to suggest that guilt – rather than innocence – is central to Fanon's analyses of blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, in this early work the emphasis is not so much on the politics of representation as on what is missing from representation, an absence (at least as Fanon conceives it) that is culturally effective and thereby unconsciously felt insofar as it cannot be grounded in truth or representation. Without attempting here to reconstruct Fanon's rather intricate account of blackness as an abyssal (a notion that I argue cannot be thought dialectically), this point is given a detailed thematisation in my *Whither Fanon?*

antagonism is masked – just as here, too, the fantasy of a whiteness masked compels the colonised to confuse blackness with something extraneous, or fictitious and false in its very nature, and consequently compound the two by making disavowal the essence of black political identity. For the black is he who cannot with impunity admit his difference to himself; his blackness as such cannot be affirmed or denied without guilt being enacted for being irredeemably white.

It is not just the form in which *différance* is present in Hall, which is grasped as merely a figure for what ‘continues to unfold...beyond the arbitrary closure which makes it, at any moment, possible’,(p230) whereas for Fanon black identity comes under the purview not of a politics but of the capacity to be doubled by a merely imitative semblance that continues to plague identity because it is never entirely in representation, and thus it shows up as never quite symptomatically positioned because of the ineffable categorical way in which identity is oriented toward a plenitude that is deferred, and a fantasy that compels assent by confusing hegemony with domination.

Here, for example, a little later on in ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, is Hall describing what ‘Africa’ represents in the Caribbean: its presence is everywhere, as can be seen in names and words, but these are words ‘disconnected from their taxonomies’; Africa is ‘the signified which could not be represented directly’ but whose spiritual-musical-rhythmic traces remain hidden, unspoken, but nonetheless real; and what constitutes this discourse are secret codes that assume the task, not of representing, but of being representatives, or delegates, of this agonistic remnant (p230). He is saying not that Africa is an empty signifier, or a subject without a predicate, but that it is an idea that can only be given assent according to the secret forms or codes that follow from it. Hall could not be more categorical. The fact that Caribbean cultural politics gathers these different attributes suggests to me that ‘Africa’ has no signified that could be represented in however secret or occult a way, since Fanon had already explained how the idea of Africa in the Caribbean was inseparable from, indeed fundamental to, the future imagining of a black polis, as its point of origin and return, a foundation stone never simply found but always spied through thickets of deception. That is to say, Africa can always be recognised because the concept it represents has been too long deferred, or covered over – a concept on whose rediscovery democratic black political life depends, precisely because of its imaginary differentiation. But what Hall does is read these textual gaps into a name and a rhetoric. ‘Africa’ becomes in an oblique way the ineffable meaning of the black diasporic text, and the text’s ineffability is what allows it to become a relation of equivalence for diverse signifieds.³⁷ In doing so, however, Hall makes the idea of rupture into that of a fetish, a hermeneutic cover-up that difference itself can never solve. If one thinks of black modernity as it is described by Hall as a loss of origin, as a loss of a certain kind of sacral-historical experience, and its replacement by a

37. The notion of equivalence opens the question of Hall’s own approach as contrasted with that of Ernesto Laclau, whose work on ‘equivalence’ and ‘signification’ can be discerned here. For an overview, see Jorge Larrain, Jorge, Stuart Hall and the marxist concept of ideology’ in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), London, Routledge, 1996.

secular historicism that has lost contact with Africa, then one can say that representation may well be a way of reestablishing what has been forgotten, but only insofar as what it 'knows' to be lost can never be expressed. For Fanon, on the other hand, such rememory is itself a sign of political indebtedness rather than authentic awareness. Given the importance of this notion in Hall, one measures the stakes of this loss of innocence as a question of how difference is lived. Hall, who reads this question with a great deal of subtlety, is aware of the complications in trying to think black cultural history as necessarily predetermined, as if slavery, for example, is ever simply an event that befalls blackness, as though there were indeed an African moment of innocence that was subsequently perverted or corrupted by Europe, which leads him to write, 'We can't literally go home again', but we can go home symbolically, via what Hall rather strikingly calls 'symbolic journeys [that] are necessary for us all' (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, p232). Routes rather than roots is the form taken by these journeys, where the point is not so much arrival as the coming back through a circular circumvention (or rather by a detour of memory, desire, imagination) – these journeys are neither a going forward nor a going back but a repetition that has a peculiar symbolic power whose cause is hidden, and by way of an image of Africa that opens time itself to another kind of emergence, namely, the still-unresolved relation between a memory that is irresolute and an identity that desires resolution.

The reference here is not to an authentic history of remembrance, to a recovery that then becomes a highly seductive concept of blackness, but to how difference is positioned or rather is linked, both in its conditions and in its effects, to different forms of articulation (of hope, resistance, redemption, and loss). Hall then asks the most naive, the most innocent, of questions: How do we place, rather than be forever placed by, our shared cultural history? And here a new enigma appears, which is impossible, in any immediate sense, to resolve (p238). It seems that, in the case of the black diaspora, there is no true or pristine position from which to take a position, to interpret or discuss the 'many, continuous displacements' of slavery, colonisation, and conquest (p234) – no going back without displacement, but no means of traveling without endless deferral of any true position of power, discourse, and belonging.

'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' is a testimony to a black cultural politics that 'can neither be fulfilled nor requited', and that entails a fundamental undecidability of relation – to the past, yes, but also to the politics of relation that accords difference a crucial place – as a figure for cultural translation explicitly described by Hall, which he selects as a figure for political cultural life more generally, which necessarily involves both possibility and failure, struggle and hope.

The question then becomes why this way of thinking about cultural identity, as a way of rethinking our relation to the past, is for Hall exemplary.

The question also becomes how diasporic art differs from an essentialist art, and here Hall is categorical in asserting that diaspora art is radically unlike, differs essentially from the subject positioning of essentialist art. This is what he calls the 'vocation' of diaspora art, which allows 'us to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves', and to address new points of identification and positionality (p237). This does not mean therefore, a new content in old forms but a new relationship to desire and meaning. Even if this relation is, in Hall's text, one of representation, of a meaning contested within and not outside representation, it is not a relation of mimicry and imitation but one of instability, or undecidability in general. The cultural politics of identity performed by Hall, and by Fanon before him – by means of which there is neither return nor origin, neither logos nor doxa, but an instability in each and every positioning – is the cultural work of blackness in the modern world.

Finally, the war of position is that of theory itself, to the extent that theory may also be understood as a relation to the differential relation of truth and history. In the same way, the relationship between knowledge and naïveté, the relation between difference and power that is at the center of Hall's entire thought and that consistently involved him in interrogating the imaginary limits of his own discourse as a work and cultural practice – that relation should not be taken as a privileged or conclusive relation to the real, or what it refers to, but also not as a merely derivative or secondary relation to the real against which it must secure or measure itself, or decide its truthfulness or error. Both Hall and Fanon see theory not as something beyond illusion, nor as something merely reducible to identity, but as something always already contested, or as something that reveals itself through disarticulation. But whereas Hall reads this from the perspective of a conjuncture and (again differently from Fanon) as a relation of representation, for Fanon black cultural theory is always endangered by the question of what blackness is, which it must ceaselessly confront not as a relation to some lost origin, or meaning imposed, but as the afterlife of a suffering that is no longer taking place because it is happening everywhere, and for which no historical or political concept is adequate, for whoever has the courage to address it will find that it is untranslatable: an aporia that is in a certain sense abyssal.

How are we to understand this discrepancy between Hall and Fanon, between innocence and guilty indebtedness? When Hall cites Fanon, who is so often mentioned in this text, it is to underscore the slipperiness of any black discourse that is founded on some nativism or ethnocentrism and that unilaterally proclaims itself the jurisdiction of what blackness has meant historically, culturally, and politically. But even though Hall invokes blackness as a weave of differences – by which is meant an experience of *différance* distinct from completion or truth telling – blackness is always addressed as a problem of conversion, whereas for Fanon blackness is never converted without already being crossed out, written over, purloined, erased by its

relation to that which it must never coincide with: the relation to identity that is never simply a relation but a destitution covered over, or always already masked, by racism. These two views are not complementary, and they may in fact be mutually exclusive, insofar as representation is for Fanon always a question of the symbolic-imaginary work by which racial meanings bind, overlay, or lay claim to difference. Hall tells us that even if representation, in a certain sense, is a relation of disjuncture and separation, this is historically because from the moment a new representation of blackness appears, its political-historical meaning also undergoes transformation.

An example is again the meaning of 'Africa' in a black diasporic context, in which the relationship between names and common words comes together in a new signification, but in each moment meaning is not straightforwardly present. 'Africa' as such cannot ever be rendered as a veil concealing or symbolising some ultimate essence because it is what escapes the very possibility of any unequivocal meaning. In this disjunction between grammar and meaning, Hall avers that there are secret codes in which the ostensible meaning of a sentence is underlain by a slippage or echo in which meaning evanesces or disappears, and by means of which the route to truth is lost in surprisingly dense weaves. But this is precisely the difficulty and challenge of any positioning of identity. But whenever Fanon uses the trope of the *tabula rasa* to convey a substitution that is absolute and irreversible, the relationship between representation and meaning is no longer metaphoric, or symbolic, involving the overlay of codes or taxonomies, but a radical displacement that is forever displaced vis-à-vis any trace of the original, or any possibility of secret access to a lost original. This reading of *tabula rasa* as the place where trope and what it represents no longer correspond is what Fanon defines as the modern political work of an X for which there is not yet a language, because blackness is beyond the grasp of the concept of ontology, and indeed of representation. The black letter X not only subverts the very terms of its rhetorical status, but its positioning cannot be thought of as a moment of literality or error. What we have instead are the traces of its shattering, in whose fragments we merely experience the *aporia* of our faithfulness and fidelity, which are faithful to the extent to which we have yet to grasp it at the level of being and of thought. This is a movement of *différance*, an endless process of commencement if you wish, but one always displaced in relation to identity. Moreover, it is this errancy of position, this meeting point of nothingness and infinity that is blackness's afterlife, that Fanon calls the abyssal: as a kind of determining non-cause that necessarily reveals itself as blank, absent. It is, as it were, the unfinished conversation between Fanon and Hall that is as necessary now as it has always been for the understanding of blackness, which is expressed as neither the end nor the beginning of what is here called the politics or meaning of its history.

Since what is here proposed is the political and the historical as an irreducible relation of *différance*, we can see why Fanon and Hall urge us

to replace the historical by the affective, by feelings wholly based on the conviction that identity is no more than a structure of feeling that transforms any given text into an aporetic version. For here we see that the political aspect of affect is the result of a racist notion of identity, so that the political and the racial are not opposed, but part of the narrative meaning of any identity. To the extent that such a narrative, such a history, is unfinished, not a concept but a rhetoric, it has no room for any historical notion of blackness, which is always dialectical, that is to say, an allegorical notion. This takes us essentially back to Hall's notion of the interweave, in which all lines and points are equivalent, a figure that he explicitly associates with phrases that are not successive but concurrent. We have seen how, for Hall himself, the interweave is such a phrase, which actually brings him much closer to Fanon's notion of *tabula rasa* than to that of a positioning seen as inherent to any narrative sequence or story, since it makes manifest not a content or a signified but another phrase, another signifier, which is never a last instance (for each moment is articulated around codes that it cannot exhaust) but opens onto a difference that is always possible but unknown even in its innocence.

CODA

The foregoing raises, as I see it, a question of non-arrival – not what is deferred but whether it is possible to know when one has or has not arrived. Every idiom of arrival – that of truth, knowledge, conversion, justice, diaspora, the last word or instance – is by its structure, by its desire, prevented from ever securely knowing itself, since there is always the possibility of an error that will never be read as such, yet that will come to be what enables the very expression of completion. If there is no theory, or politics, entirely free of this X, except the rhetorical, what would it mean to knowingly speak, or write, from the assertive mode of its denial? Yet if politics is this knowledge *and* its denial, why is the obligation always one of being forced to choose between suspending, abolishing, or expelling this X or incorporating it as something other? In any case, what appears as the X is in a way the materialisation of a mistake – and in particular a form of writing – that can prove literally fatal and especially when the condemned subject is black.

Michael X spent approximately three years on death row before he was executed on May 16, 1975. One of the 'obscene rituals' of death row in Trinidad involved the weekly reading of death warrants on Thursday afternoons, when a prisoner was told that he would be put to death the following Tuesday morning.³⁸ Geoffrey Robertson, who clearly regards the death penalty as 'cruel and unusual punishment', describes the arrival of the prison governor with the death warrant as follows: 'He would stride up and down with his folded parchment, sometimes taking a small sadistic pleasure in stopping in front of one man whom he would torture for a moment merely by clearing his throat, and then moving across to the cage of the actual

38. Geoffrey Robertson, *The justice game: tales from the bar*. London, Chatto and Windus, 1998.

victim, where he unraveled his scroll' (p76). All the terms that are at stake here – indeterminacy and legislation, misreading and murder, innocence and cruelty, a writing (of law) that itself does violence to those before whom it is performed, and a reading both deadly and undecidable precisely because it falsely (i.e., arbitrarily) withholds the meaning of a letter – these terms are ones for which we have tried to provide a reading as the effects of a mistake that can never be innocently determined or foreknown. Yet, as a result of this ignorance – its politics or ideology – my commentary has also had to walk the thin green line between obligation and resistance, precisely because of the moment of which we cannot ever speak or write: a moment of suspense when the letter unraveling the undecidable difference between cruelty and law, fear and cognition, sees knowledge converted – via a slow, interruptive movement – into an innocence that can never avoid choosing itself except as fatally undone. This, then, would be a blackness whose execution literally repeats the end of any essential notion, without for all that transforming its imprisoned meaning into a last redemptive moment.

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Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 2018 Annual Comparative Literature Association Conference and the 2018 'Entangled Encounters' seminar at Northwestern University. My thanks to Rei Terada, Mlondolozzi Zondi, and Mishana Garschi and to both audiences for their comments and questions.