Diasporic walking sticks

Yasmin Gunaratnam [1] 17 February 2014

In the cultural realm, we rarely talk about failing bodies, dialysis and dependency. Stuart Hall is one of those who did. Following him, what might it take to create new cultural resources from which to bring post-colonial debility and its histories into the cultural imagination?

From the recent obituaries and tributes paid to Stuart Hall [2], a story is emerging of both an extraordinary intellectual and an utterly contemporary British predicament: that of Generation Exodus, our cohort of post-war migrants who came to the UK in the 1950s and 60s and who are now ageing and dying [3].

Both stories - about the man and a trajectory of post-colonialism - are about Hallian ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’, full of spatial but also temporal metaphors. “These routes hold us in place, but what they don’t do is hold us in the same place” Hall [4] has written, “We need to try to make sense of the connections with where we think we were then as compared to where we are now.”

For too long race and cultural politics have been dominated by attention to the young, the able-bodied, the lippy. “Where we are now” is at a time of having to face and make way for the impact of disability, illness, ageing and care on cultural and post-colonial critique.

As John Berger and Jean Mohr pointed out in The Seventh Man [5] - an arresting photographic essay of European migrant labour in the 1970s - the incapacitated and dying migrant is a murky presence within capitalism’s unconscious. Parodying the mounting tension between the global demand for healthy aspirational migrant workers and the responsibility for their long term well-being and care, Berger wrote “So far as the economy of the metropolitan country is concerned, migrant workers are immortal: immortal because continually interchangeable. They are not born: they are not brought up and they do not age: they do not tire: they do not die.”

This economic denial of bodily vulnerability does not only apply to impoverished migrants; it is a more generalised cultural aporia, a part of what Hall might have seen, via psychoanalysis, as a normalising ‘symbolic economy’. In the cultural realm, apart from romanticised narratives of the super-crip – disabled people defined by their disability and for ‘overcoming’ it - we rarely talk about or show failing bodies, walking sticks, dialysis and dependency. Stuart Hall is one of those people who did.

In an interview [6] with Zoe Williams in 2012, Hall spoke of his dispondency that we were not out in the streets fighting for the NHS as the ‘one of the most humanitarian acts that has ever been undertaken in peace time’. He was morally outraged that anyone should profit from ill health. But typically of Hall, he did not hide behind rhetoric and offered his own experiences as someone diagnosed with renal failure, intimate with the NHS after being on dialysis for 7 years. "It gives you a different conception of yourself, a different conception of yourself in relation to others. Your wife becomes your carer. For God's sake!"

On no other subject have we remained quite so politically and culturally mute, so inarticulate, so tongue tied. And in yet the worlds of disease and dying, huge disparities of class and other inequalities continue to unfold. A 2007 report [7], by Lord Darsi into health care in London, used a striking analogy to convey a message about mortality, class and gender: if you travel east, seven stops on the Jubilee line from Westminster to Canning Town, the average life expectancy for men drops a year for each stop, from 77.7 years to 70.7 years.
Meanwhile, on the other side of our sick beds, there is the ‘perverse subsidy’ of migrant labour from resource poor nations that underpins our health and social care systems. And in the shared spaces of our multicultural institutions, black and ethnically minoritised people can face racialised rancour and niggardliness from fellow patients. There are also other points of profound, if fleeting, convivial connection between dying people of different colours, ethnicities and faith.

Traditionally our silence on matters of disability and dying in the west are not new and touch upon longstanding cultural anxieties. We also like to remember our intellectuals in their prime, celebral and disembodied; somehow transcending fraility. It is as if this selective commemoration and amnesia will extend like an existential forcefield to protect us too, like those proverbial monkeys with hands clasped tight over eyes, ears and mouth.

But if we are to learn from Hall’s attentiveness to ‘routes’ and if we worry away at the layers of ‘displacement’ that he saw as so critical to diasporic experience, it is time to take post-colonial critique and activism to the concerns of the care home, the hospice, the diasporic deathbed.

It is in these liminal places that I have seen some of the theoretical ideas that Hall drew upon, such as Derridian notions of deferral, take on flesh as diasporic journeys meet up with phenomenological migrations set in train by disease and disability. For example, in the biochemical grasp of dementia or ‘terminal restlessness’ – a condition that can cause irascibility and hallucinations for those close to death – identities are indeed manifold, deferred and unsettled; signifiers and signified slide and representation comes up against “the broken teeth of language” to use the words of the poet Janet Frame.

It is undeniable that those of us who were a part of post-war migration, either directly or indirectly, are now facing a significant historical moment or ‘conjuncture’. Again Hall’s ways of understanding diasporic experiences are invaluable. For instance, if as Hall argued, Caribbean identity only came into being in the 1970s as a result of new cultural endeavours, “the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae” then we must wonder about what it might take to create new cultural resources from which we can begin to acknowledge, explore and bring post-colonial debility and its histories into the cultural imagination.

A starting point might be that when we remember Stuart Hall, we remember him throughout his life – young and dashing in jeans with a Che Guevara beard; in a suit and tie at the podium; with his walking sticks.

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