"NEW ETHNICITIES" AND MEDIEVAL "RACE"

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Prior to his famous and consequential "Left birth" as a Marxist and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall nearly became a medievalist.[1] Upon winning a Rhodes scholarship, Hall left his homeland of Jamaica and spent six years at Oxford University, where he received training as a literary critic. The "Oxford course," as Hall has described it, was very "lodged in the past."[2] A full quarter of his coursework there consisted in literature from the middle ages, an intellectual focus made visceral due to what Hall describes in his recently published, posthumous autobiography as the overall "medieval seriousness, solidity and gloom" of Merton Hall: "I read Chaucer in the Old Library sitting beside books still chained to the wooden desks."[3] While Hall "hated" learning dead languages, he did "love" some of the medieval poetry he read, e.g., " Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Wanderer, The Seafarer."[4] Indeed, Hall was so interested in one medieval poem—William Langland's labor-text, *Piers Plowman*—that he "planned to do graduate work on" the poem, with the plan of applying "contemporary literary criticism" to those texts.[5]

The question of "what might have been" if the great thinker Hall had put Langland's poem into conversation with contemporary criticism and gone on to become a medievalist is, certainly, a tantalizing prospect for not only Langland scholars but also all medievalists. But, unfortunately for medieval studies, Hall was dissuaded from pursuing this line of study by his "ascetic South African language professor," who told him "in a pained tone that this was not the point of the exercise."[6]

In dissuading Hall from his proposed project, Hall's professor pointed to issues that are still hotly debated today by medievalists: the value of historical precision and the risk of anachronism. Thanks to the considerable historical alterity of the medieval period to the "contemporary," the application of present critical modes to the past fails to meet standards of academic rigor. As Hall would put it in an interview with Les Back, "I was interested in medieval literature, but I was interested in it in a critical way, not in a scholarly way."[7] Could this early academic lesson in temporal specificity help make Hall the strict historicist he came to be? In being scolded early on—in a "pained tone" no less—that the point of academic work is to respect history, did Hall become a scholar who famously stresses historical context?

It is with some irony, then, that I invoke Hall's own theories in my medieval project, a student-friendly introduction to "race" in medieval Europe. In a sense, by using contemporary race theory to unpack medieval culture, I am doing with the past what Hall wanted and yet could not do back in the 1950s at Oxford.
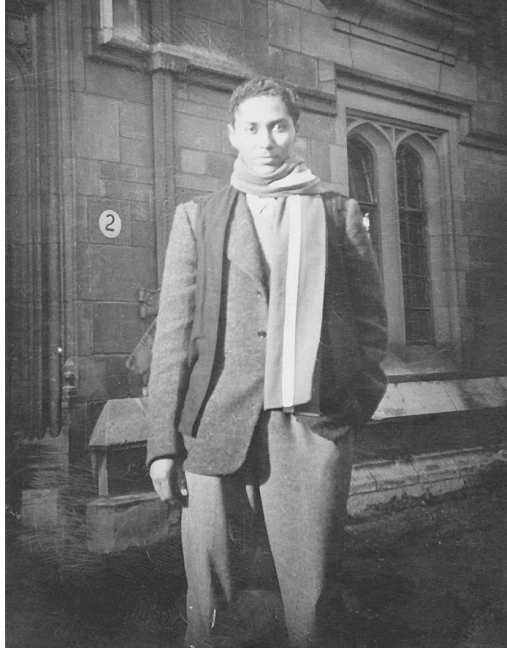

Figure 2: "Stuart Hall's First Encounter in London." Stuart Hall at Merton College, Oxford, 1951.

At the same time, I risk violating the stress on precise historical situatedness that Hall would come to embrace. In the case of "race" and ethnicity, Hall thus asserts, that the "question is not whether men-in-general make perceptual distinctions between groups with different racial or ethnic characteristics, but rather, *what are the specific conditions which make this form of distinction socially pertinent, historically active*" (my emphasis).[8] Is it viable to place Hall's theories—in this case his idea of "race" and new ethnicities—in dialogue with medieval representations of identity?

The essay by Hall in question—his influential piece on "New Ethnicities"—is geared to a precise historical moment: the shift in the 1980s, when Black British cultural producers turned from monolithic and positive representations of "the historicist ethos, Hall situates Black popular culture of eighties Britain in the

Figure 3: Merton College Library. Photographer: Tom Murphy VII. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

context of such phenomena as the hegemonic conception of "Englishness" under Thatcherism, the rising sensitivity to the Black diaspora and the earlier, essentialist model of Black identity promulgated by cultural producers.

The Black filmmakers and artists discussed by Hall are a far cry from the medieval cultural producers I analyze in my book. However, Hall's definition of "race" as an essentialist fantasy and his appropriation of the term "ethnicity" to indicate the constructed (and situated) nature of identity nevertheless appeal to me. For one thing, while Hall presents his argument as it pertains to a particular time and place, those arguments nevertheless have the potential to be pertinent to other moments and other places. The fact that medieval people did not self-consciously understand themselves to be thinking in terms of "race" or ethnicity does cancel out the possibility that their cultures and societies possessed racial and/or ethnic elements. One need not necessarily comprehend racist thinking or Hall's new ethnicity to exhibit stances that share some ground with either perspective. In fact, evidence suggests that the problem of racial fantasy extends back to the middle ages, in textual and visual depictions of identities that include but are not limited to white, Black, English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish, French, African, Mongol, Turkish, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim people. And, while medieval culture certainly did not overtly embrace ethnic difference along poststructuralist lines, it does at times hint at an interpretation of identity that somewhat complements Hall's new ethnicity; that is, certain texts intimate how identity is performative, constructed, and changeable. The crucial methodological move that Hall would urge, I would argue, is to identify, as much as possible, the spatio-temporal situatedness of both identities ("racial" and ethnic) during the medieval

period by seeking to identify the precise historical factors that led to particular representations of others.

Hall's theory also provides a helpful means of correcting two problems that appear in existing work by medievalists who discuss race and ethnicity: 1) they often fail to distinguish between the two terms, and 2) they at times support fantasies about essential identities. Hall provides a helpful means of avoiding both problems and *clearly* separating "race" from ethnicity. That clarity is symptomatic of Hall's overall means of disseminating his theories. With his "engaged scholarly practice that spurns high academic dogma," Hall models how to communicate difficult ideas in an accessible manner.[9] As Brett St. Louis puts it, Hall's work "initiates a dialogue with the reader through the text wherein the reader is questioned and encouraged, their ideas tested and extended."[10] Because my book is aimed primarily at non-specialists and students, Hall's work proves crucial due not only to its content but its style of delivery. In stark contrast to the "pained" and disciplinary voice of his off-putting language advisor at Oxford, Hall engages the reader as valued and capable interlocutor.

Notes

[1] Harry Stecopoulos, "Stuart Hall," *Dictionary of Literary Biography: European Cultural Theorists*, Ed. Paul Hansom, Vol. 242 (2001): 199-207: 201.

[2] Stuart Hall and Les Back. "Stuart Hall and Les Back In conversation AT HOME AND NOT AT HOME," Special Issue on Stuart Hall and 'Race,' Ed. Claire Alexander, *Cultural Studies* 23.4 (2009): 654-87: 665.

[3] Stuart Hall with Bill Schwartz. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 155.

[4] Hall and Back, "AT HOME AND NOT AT HOME," 665; Hall and Schwartz, "*Familiar Stranger*," 156.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Hall and Back, "AT HOME AND NOT AT HOME," 665.

[8] Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 305-344: 338.

[9] Stecopoulos, "Stuart Hall," 201.

[10] Brett St Louis, "On 'the necessity and the impossibility' of Identities." The politics and ethics of 'new ethnicities,'" *Cultural Studies*, 23.4 (2009): 559-582: 578.

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