David Scott, *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*.

Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 185 pp. (Cloth US\$29.95)

David Scott's latest book is an exemplary and novel exercise in style, form, and content that seeks, simultaneously, to grasp the inner meanings of Stuart Hall's eclectic and lengthy *oeuvre*, locate it within the universe of contemporary social and political theory, and celebrate the life and work of a close interlocutor and friend. Any one of these objectives would be difficult to execute successfully in such a short monograph, yet Scott is able to largely pull off an accurate and compelling engagement without, for the most part, reverting to long-winded adumbration or maudlin sentimentality. This he accomplishes by avoiding any pretense of a sequential history, but rather, using an effective epistolary style, asking the seemingly straightforward question, "What do friends owe each other intellectually?" With this as a launching pad, via a series of letters to his friend, he explores Hall's style, captured in his captivating rhetoric and sonorous vocalization, but which was, inevitably, the alter ego of his even more finely tuned listening ear. Both well-honed dimensions of what he later elaborates as his "receptive generosity" provide the foundation for a deeper exploration of two central dimensions of Hall's work—his lifelong concern with contingency and, closely allied to it, his multiple interventions around the question of identity.

Contingency, Scott proposes, is not merely one among a list of abstract theoretical notions that Hall elaborated; rather, it was close to the heart of his entire methodology and motivation for engaging in theory. If there was any recurring critique, whether earlier from E.P. Thompson and Terry Eagleton, or more recently Chris Rojek and Charles Mills, it is that Hall's style is too eclectic, too subject to improvisation and change, to be considered serious, consistent philosophy; as in Eagleton's (in)famous broadside: "If he theorizes himself, he gives off the air of doing so on the hoof, en route from one meeting to another, a prodigious improviser who can effortlessly churn out a sort of intellectual equivalent of rap" (Eagleton in Scott, p. 27). Putting aside for the moment the deeply troubling ethnic and racial implications of this comment, Scott suggests that this and similarly related interventions, miss entirely the thrust of Hall's classic conjunctural work, as captured in essays such as "The Meaning of New Times," "Policing the Crisis," and others. Hall was never primarily concerned with philosophy in the classical sense of getting at the essence of things, but quite distinctly, he focused on how to grasp, adapt, and modify existing theory in order to employ it to the purposes of understanding peculiar shifts in social relations (new conjunctures) as well, critically, as finding novel ways to act

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

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within the newly identified moment, to initiate social and political change. In this, Scott asserts, Hall was never primarily an academic scholar, but a talented thinker and activist who found himself located within the academy. Stated more profoundly, the focus on contingency reflected a deeper-seated intellectual humility, aimed at avoiding frozen ideological dogma and returning always, for explanations, to the concrete—the language, gestures, and predilections of the people and their culture in the conjunctural moment, in order to think clearly about possible pathways for change.

In his many commentaries on identity, but captured particularly in essays such as “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?,” “Old and New Identities,” and especially, as Scott proposes, “Minimal Selves,” Hall threads a distinct if often booby-trapped course, between essentialist thinkers and activists, particularly of the 1960s and 1970s who sought solace in a safe and absolute identity and trends in postmodernist theory that imagine identities as composed entirely of contingent, sliding signifiers. In one of the most compelling sections of the book, Scott suggests how Hall, through a series of very personal interrogations of his own historical trajectory, proposes that identities themselves are contingent, and while subject to the constraining outer barriers of a particular conjunctural moment, provide, if not the safety of a permanent resting place, at least a temporary solace for the accumulation of forces for further social battles. It is this facility of appreciating the importance of the uncertain, the temporary, and the contingent and at the same time grasping that identities ultimately are important that is central to Hall’s thinking. It is his appreciation that shifting identities are nonetheless the glue that allows for moments of common perception and the possibility of building real-life social and political coalitions that differentiates him from a certain kind of disarming postmodernism and a diametrically opposite though equally barren, variety of identity modalities, whether based on race, class, nationality, or gender.

In closing, I mention my major quarrel with this otherwise intriguing book. Scott identifies early in the volume a distinction between his work and that of his friend in which he distinguishes between a sense of *openness* to be found in Hall’s oeuvre and a sense of *finitude* in his. Here, at last, I felt, was a clearly identified difference that, in its elaboration, would lead to a clarification of Hall’s often deployed Gramscian self-descriptor of his work (“pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”), but which also might allow further insight into Scott’s own thinking. In his recent work, particularly his previous two books, *Conscripts of Modernity* and *Omens of Adversity*, Scott has developed his own somewhat enigmatic notion of “the Tragic” as an alternative to social progressivism, as a lens through which to view contemporary history. Indeed, in a long engagement with Romand Coles’s work, which he compares favorably with

Hall's and from which he borrows Coles's notion of "receptive generosity" as an appropriate analogue for Hall's approach, he returns to the notion of the tragic, asserting that Coles "connects this idea of receptive generosity to a tragic sensibility, or a tragic disposition, in thinking about liberalism and democracy, an orientation toward moral-political reflection that honors the role of chance and paradox and contingency" (p. 117).

What Scott seems to be suggesting here, in giving high visibility to "receptive generosity" and linking it, as Coles does, to "tragic sensibility," is to wed these two together and even more interestingly, to connect them back to Hall, as in this comment: "At any rate, as I read it, your famous 'Without Guarantees' is a formulation meant precisely to let open a tragic vulnerability, a tragic exposure, to what can't be known entirely in advance ... Contingency and the tragic are not enemies; they are the next of kin" (p. 129). It is not so much that I disagree with this, as that it seems one-sided, and here, I think, is the rub: if contingency opens the door to the possibility of failure, it also hovers over another portal that might in the opportune moment, learning from the tragedies of the past, beat a pathway to meaningful and substantial change. A "sensitivity to tragedy" then, from such a perspective, must be differentiated from a "tragic sensibility" and this I think is *the* point of distinction between the two, with Hall leaving far more open space for optimism, hope, and the struggle for a better world.

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