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Race, The Floating Signifier *Featuring Stuart Hall*

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

CLIP: Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing"

SUT JHALLY: As the previous clip from Spike Lee's film, "Do the Right Thing" shows, racial slurs and insults trip easily from people's lips. More and more, it seems, the dividing lines within our society are being drawn along how we are physically different from one another. What W.E.B. Du Bois called the differences of color, hair, and bone; what everyone understands as visible racial differences. This program examines the inner workings of the system and tries to unlock the secret of how and why race matters so much to people. We are going to do this by talking and listening to a leading expert in the field. Stuart Hall is a professor of sociology in Britain and is a key figure in the development of what has come known as cultural studies. His many writings now enjoy an international and global audience. On the subject of race, culture, and society we could not be in better or more insightful hands. I should point out, that in what follows hoards of principal focus is not on the effects of racism. He takes those as his starting point. Now, as a result, some people have accused him of not paying enough attention to the practical outcomes and violence associated with racism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hall is passionately concerned with the psychological, cultural, and physical violence that racism inflicts, but he believes that's a better fight against it we have to first understand the logic of how it works. He wants to understand how racism is cultivated in our imaginations, of how it works in our heads, so that we can better combat it on the streets.

What racism, as a philosophy, contends is that there is a natural connection between the way people look, the differences of color, hair, and bone, and what they think and do. With how intelligent they are, with whether they are good athletes or not, good dancers or not, good workers, civilized or not. Racists believe that these characteristics are not a result of our environment, but of our biological genes. Blacks, for instance, are born not as intelligent as whites. Hall's basic argument is that all attempts to show this scientifically, that blacks are not as intelligent as whites, have failed. And yet, there is a persistent and widespread

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belief in the inferior mental capacities of black folk. To understand why this should be the case Hall argues that we have to pay attention, not the objective facts of the situation alone, but to the stories the culture spins for us about what the physical differences we are born with mean. This involves examining the discourses that surround race. Taking what he calls a “discursive position”. That is, analyzing the metaphors, the antidotes, the stories, the jokes that are told by culture about what physical racial differences mean. In fact, when we do this, we see that historically things like skin color have been given many different meanings over the years. There is nothing solid or permanent to the meaning of race. It changes all the time. It shifts and slides. That’s why the title of this program is Race: The Floating Signifier. What racial difference signifies is never static or the same. This sounds very theoretical and abstract but Hall’s motivation for insisting on this strategy are not at all academic. It is only once we understand how racism works that we can struggle against it and understanding it takes hard, analytical work.

The lecture that Hall delivered on this subject at Goldsmiths College in London, which we’ll see shortly, is a starting point for this work. But first we are going to see an interview I conducted with him where I asked him to talk a little bit about why classification, putting people into different groups, is so important to human beings and how race fits into that. I also asked him to address the political implications of his analysis.

STUART HALL: As you, you know, in human culture, I would say, the propensity to classify sub-groups of human types; to break up the diversity of human society into very distinct typings according to essentialized characteristics, whether physical characteristics or intellectual ones, or characteristics of the body and so on. This is a very profound kind of cultural impulse. In a way, it’s a very positive cultural impulse because we now understand the importance of all forms of classification to meaning. Until you classify things, in different ways, you can’t generate any meaning at all. So, it’s an absolutely fundamental aspect of human culture. What is, of course, important for us is when the systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power. That’s to say when the marking of difference and similarity across a human population becomes a reason why this group is to be treated in that way and get those advantages, and that group should be treated in another. It’s the coming together of difference, or categorization of our classification and power. The use of classification as a system of power, which is really what is very profound and one then sees that across a range of different characteristics. You see it in gender, the ascription of clear masculine and feminine identities and the assumption from that that you can predict whole ranges of behavior and aspirations and opportunities from this classification. Classification is a very generative thing once you are classified a whole range of other things fall into place as a result of it. But, another important point about classification is that it awakens, well let me put it another way, it is a

way of maintaining the order of any system, and what is most disturbing is that anything that breaks the classification. So, you know, its not just that you have blacks and whites, but of course one group of those people have a much more positive value than the other group. That's how power operates. But then, anything that attempts to ascribe to the black population, characteristics that used to be used for the white ones, generates enormous tension in the society. Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, describes this in terms of what she calls "matter out of place". She says every culture has a kind of order of classification built into it and this seems to stabilize the culture. You know exactly where you are, you know who are the inferiors and who the superiors are and how each has a rank, etc. What disturbs you is what she calls "matter out of place". What she means by that is you don't worry about dirt in the garden because it belongs in the garden but the moment you see dirt in the bedroom you have to do something about it because it doesn't symbolically belong there. And what you do with dirt in the bedroom is you cleanse it, you sweep it out, you restore the order, you police the boundaries, you know the hard and fixed boundaries between what belongs and what doesn't. Inside/outside. Cultured/uncivilized. Barbarous and cultivated, and so on.

And races, of course, one of the principle forms of human classification, which have all of these negative and positive attributes kind of built into it. So, in a way, they function as a common sense code in our society. So, in a way, you don't need to have a whole argument, you know, about "are blacks intelligent?" The moment you say that blacks, already the equivalences begin to trip off peoples mind. Blacks then, sound bodies, good at sports, good at dancing, very expressive, no intelligence, never had a thought in their heads, you know, tendency to barbarous behavior. All these things are clustered, simply in the classification system itself. What I'm interested in then is how these definitions of race come to operate, how they function. I'm interested partly of how they function, of course, in the systems of classification, which are used in order to divide populations into different ethnic or racial groups and to ascribe characteristics to these different groupings and to assume a kind of normal behavior or conduct about them. Because they are this kind of person, they can do that sort of thing, and we'll believe that sort of thing, and we'll suffer from that set of problems, etc. Everything is kind of inscribed in their species being, they're very being because of their race. So, I think that ones seeing there is a kind of essentializing of race and a whole range of, diverse range of characteristics ultimately fixed or held in place because people have been categorized in a certain way, racially.

These are very big cultural principals we're talking about and a whole lot in terms of power and exclusion results from having the system of classification. So, in the lecture I want to talk about how this, how race as a principal of classification operates to sort out the world into its superiors and inferiors along some line of

biological or genetic race and how as a consequence of that all the conduct of society towards black people is inflicted and shaped by that system of classification.

I end the lecture with the phrase, “politics without guarantees”, and what I mean by that is that in a funny way race itself, if you think that race is a fixed biological characteristic, and that a whole number of other things: cultural qualities, intellectual qualities, emotional and expressive qualities follow from the fact of being genetically one race or another, if that is your image of race. You will think, then, that the very fact of race can actually guarantee a whole range of things including, just to name two, whether the works of art produced by a person who biologically belongs to that race is good or not. So, you know, if they’re black it means that they’re also very expressive, it also means they’ll produce a certain kind of work of art and it’ll be good because it’s black. And similarly, a certain kind of politics that defends the race, tries to protect us against discrimination, etc. In which all black people will be figured as people who are holding the correct position and when you ask what positions do they hold what you will respond is not the normal political argument: “well they believe in the following things which I think are viable and progressive things for black people to vie for now in order to change their circumstances”. You will say well they’re like that, they think like that because that’s how black people think, its right that black people should --. So it’s right that these functions act as a kind of guarantee that the work of art will be good because it’s black and will be politically progressive because it’s black. Now, we actually know that the word does not come out like that. Some of the words are not good. Though black, made with the best of positive intentions to reverse negative stereotypes, to praise the diversity of black people, they just don’t work aesthetically. And similarly, we know black people have a range of different political positions: conservative, reactionary, progressive, and so on. And that these fall out in a way in which is not defined by their genetic or biological disposition. So, I’m trying to end the notion that our politics is to cure. We know it’s correct entering the very, very difficult debate. Are we correct? What is the right strategy now? What are the tactics we ought to adopt? Who can we be in alliances with? What is the strategic thing, in this moment, to go for? You know, the normal game of politics. It sort of in a way prevents us from having to play that difficult game because we have another guarantee. We know it is because we wrote it and I think in a way it leads to a kind of mechanistic anti-racist politics, not a thoughtful one, not a self critical one, not a reflexive one. So, by ending the guarantee, I don’t mean by that of course that it’s black people or black politics that’s involved. The reason why it matters is not because what’s in our genes it’s because of what is in our history. It’s because black people have been in a certain position in society, in history, over a long period of time that those are the conditions they’re in and that’s what they’re fighting against. And of course that matters, but then black, the term black, is referring to this long history of political and historical oppression. It’s not referring

to our genes. It's not referring to our biology. And in order to fight a politics, which is effective in ending the oppression of black people, you have to ask what is the right politics to do. You can't depend on the fact that it's blacks doing it; that this will guarantee in heaven that you're doing the right thing. So I want blacks to enter into what I think they've been reserved in doing, which is, you know the hard graft of having arguments with their own fellows, men and women who are black, about it. And that's a difficult thing because in a way you have to mobilize effectively, you can't depend on just the race to take you to your political objective. And it's not therefore that I have a counter-politic to the existing politics of racism to put into the space but its rather a sort of approach to the political which I always see as not a practice which has any guarantees built into it, its not, there is no law of history which tells you we will win, we may lose. Just as there is no law of history, which will human beings won't blow themselves to bits, they probably will. So one has to act in the notion that politics is always open. It's always the contingent of failure and you need to be right because there is no guarantee except good practice to make it right to mobilization, to having the right people on your side committed to the program. So I want people to take politics a bit more seriously and to take biology less seriously.

LECTURE AT GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE New Cross London

What More is There to Say About 'Race'?

STUART HALL: I want, at what you might think a rather late stage in the game, to return to the question of what we might mean by saying, what are the implications of saying as I've done in a rather provocative title to this lecture, that race is a discursive construct, that it is a sliding signifier. Statements of this kind of acquired a certain status in advanced critical circles these days, but it's very clear that critics and theorists don't always mean the same thing or draw the same inference from the statement when they make it. What's more, the idea that race might be described as a signifier is not one which in my experience has penetrated very deeply into or done very effectively the work of unhinging and dislodging what I would call common sense assumptions and every-day ways of talking about race and of making sense about race in our society today. And I'm really talking in part about that great untidy, dirty world in which race matters, outside of the Academy as well as what light we may throw on it from inside.

More seriously, the dislocating effects on the world, of political mobilization around issues of race and racism, the dislocating effects on the strategies of anti-racist politics and education of thinking of race as a signifier have not been adequately charted or assessed. Well, you may not be persuaded by the story yet but that's my excuse for returning at this late date to a topic about which I

know many people feel that after all, or that can usefully be said about race has already been said.

The ‘Formal’ Rejection of Biological Racism

STUART HALL: What do I mean by a floating signifier? Well to put it crudely, race is one of those major concepts, which organize the great classificatory systems of difference, which operate in human society. And to say that race is a discursive category recognizes that all attempts to ground this concept scientifically, to locate differences between the races, on what one might call scientific, biological, or genetic grounds, have been largely shown to be untenable. We must therefore, it is said, substitute a socio-historical or cultural definition of race, for the biological one. As the philosopher Anthony Appiah put it succinctly in his now renowned and elegantly argued contribution in a book, which I think many of you will know, it’s the critical inquiry book called *Race, Writing and Difference* edited by Henry Louis Gates. He argues that, “...it is time, as it were, that the biological concept of race was sunk without trace”. As we know, human genetic variability between different populations, normally assigned a racial category, is not significantly greater than it is within those populations. And what WEB Du Bois, who is a great African-American thinker and writer on these questions, a figure not necessarily known in the United Kingdom as well as he should be, who wrote a wonderfully moving text called *The Souls of Black Folk*. But what Du Bois argues in his essay called *The Conservation of Races*, what he called “...the differences of color, hair, and bone”. Though, as he observed, and I quote, “...clearly defined to the eye of the historian and the sociologist” – it’s a good thing, because there’s a lot of things sociologists don’t see, but he thought that racial difference was something they might just make out – “...that such things are on the whole, poorly correlated with genetic difference and on the other hand, impossible to correlate significantly with cultural, intellectual, or the cognitive characteristics of people. Quite apart from being a subject to extraordinary variation within any one family, let alone within any one so-called family of races.”

The Survival of Biological Thinking

STUART HALL: I want to note four things at once about this general position. First, it represents the by now common and conventional wisdom among leading scientists in the field. Second, that fact has never prevented intense scholarly activity being devoted by a minority of committed academics to attempting to prove a correlation between racially defined genetic characteristics and cultural performance. In other words, we are not dealing with a field, in which, as it were,

the scientifically and rationally established fact prevents scientists from continuing to try to prove the opposite.

Thirdly, I observe that though the radicalized implication of this continuing scientific work into for example, race and intelligence, are vociferously refused and condemned by large numbers of people, certainly by most liberal professionals and especially by Black groups of all kinds. In fact, a great deal of what is said by such groups, amongst themselves, is predicated precisely on some such assumption, i.e. that some social, political or cultural phenomenon, like the rightness of a political line or the merits of a literary and musical production or the correctness of an attitude or belief, can be traced to and explained by and especially fixed and guaranteed in its truth by the racial character of the person involved. I deduce from this intense scholarly activity that the awkward lesson that diametrically opposed political positions can often be derived from the same philosophical argument. And that though the genetic explanation of social and cultural behavior is often denounced as racist, the genetic, biological, and physiological definitions of race are alive and well in the common sense, discourse is of us all. The fact that the biological, physiological, or genetic definition, having been shown out the front door, tends to sidle around the veranda and climb back in through the window.

This is the paradoxical finding, which I want to explore and address in what follows. Why should this be so?

The Badge of Race

STUART HALL: In an article in *Crisis* of August 1911, we find DuBois moving decisively towards writing and I quote “of civilizations where we can now speak of races,” adding that “even the physical characteristics including skin color are to no small extent the direct result of a physical and social environment. In addition to being too indefinite and too elusive,” he says, “to serve the basis for any origin, classification, or division of human groups.” Now on the basis of this recognition in *Dusk of Dawn*, DuBois abandons the scientific definition of race in favor of the fact that he’s writing about Africans, that Africans and people of African descent have what he calls a common racial ancestry, because – its important to note this – “they have a common history, have suffered a common disaster, and have one long memory of disaster”. Because color, though of little meaning in itself, is really important, DuBois argues, “as a badge for the social heritage of slavery, the dissemination and the insult of that experience”.

A badge, a token, a sign, here indeed is the idea, hinted at in the title of my talk, that race is a signifier, and that racialized behavior and difference needs to be understood as a discursive, not necessarily as a genetic or biological fact.

Race as a Language, a 'Floating Signifier'

STUART HALL: I don't want to deviate here with a long theoretical disposition about the terms that I'm using, to bore you to tears, I simply want to remind you that the model being proposed here is closer to that of how a language works than of how our biology is or our physiologies work. That race is more like a language, than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted. You may think that's an absurd and ridiculous thing to say, you may even now be surreptitiously glancing around the room, just to make sure that you know your visual appearances are in full working order – I assure you they are, people do look rather peculiar, some of them are brown, some of them are quite black, some of you are pretty brown, some of you are really disgustingly pink in the current light. But, there's nothing wrong with your appearances, but I want to insist to you that nevertheless, the argument that I want to make to you is that *race works like a language*. And signifiers refer to they systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its *making meaning* practices. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection on contracting new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time.

The meaning of a signifier can never be finally or trans-historically fixed. That is, it is always, or there is always, a certain sliding of meaning, always a margin not yet encapsulated in language and meaning, always something about race left unsaid, always someone a constitutive outside, who's very existence the identity of race depends on, and which is absolutely destined to return from its expelled and objected position outside the signifying field to trouble the dreams of those who are comfortable inside.

But What About the Reality of Racial Discrimination and Violence?

STUART HALL:

I address this point directly because I believe this is exactly where the more skeptical amongst you may be beginning to think, "Alright, you might say perhaps race is not after all a matter of genetic factors, of biology, of physiological characteristics, of the morphology of the body, not a matter of color, hair, and bone, that chilling threesome that DuBois frequently quotes." But you may say,

“can you seriously be claiming that it is simply a signifier, an empty sign, that it is not fixed in its inner nature, that it cannot be secured in its meaning, that it floats in a sea of relational differences – is that the argument that you’re advancing?” And isn’t it not only wrong, but a trivial and I hear the word being rustled in the audience, an idealist approach to the brute facts of human history, which after all have disfigured the lives, and crippled and constrained the potentialities of literally millions of the world’s dispossessed? After all why don’t we use the evidence of our eyes? If race was such a complicated thing why would it be so manifestly obvious everywhere we look? I have to say it again because I can feel the sense of relief that after skirting around through these various structures we have come to know after all what we all know about race. It’s reality. You can see its effects, you can see it in the faces of the people around you, you can see people pulling the skirts aside as people from another racial group come into the room. You can see the operation of racial discrimination in institutions and so on. What is the need of this entire scholarly hullabaloo about race, when you can just turn to its reality?

What trail through history is more literally marked by blood and violence, by the genocide by the Middle Passage, the horrors of plantation servitude, and the hanging tree? A signifier, a discourse, yes, that is my argument.

Two Positions: The Realist & the Textual

STUART HALL: Since we are concerned here not with abstract theoretical critique but with an attempt to unlock the secrets of the functioning in modern history of racial systems of classification, let me turn to this question of how indeed one sees this functioning around the troubling question of the gross physical differences of color, bone, and hair, which constitute the material substratum, the absolute final common denominator of racial classifying systems. When all the other refinements have been wiped away, there seems to be a sort of irreducible, ineradicable minimum there, the differences, which are palpable among people, which we call race. Where on earth do they come from, if they are simply as I want to claim, discursive?

Broadly speaking, as I understand it there is really three options here. First, we can hold that the differences of a physiological kind or nature really do provide the basis for classifying human races into families, and once they can be proved to do so, they can adequately be represented in our systems of thought and language. That’s a kind of realist position, it really is there, and all we have to do is reflect what is out there in the world, adequately in the systems of language and knowledge, which we use to conduct investigations into its effects.

Well, a second possibility is to hold what is sometimes called the purely textual or linguistic position. Race here, is autonomous of any system reference, it can only be tested, not against the actual word of human diversity, but within the play of the text, within the play of the differences that we construct in our own language.

A Third Position: The Discursive

STUART HALL: But there is a third position, the third position is the one to which I subscribe, its often the third position I often subscribe to it as it turns out, (I don't know what you want to make of that but there it is). The third position is that there are probably differences of all sorts in the world, that difference is a kind of anomalous existence out there, a kind of random series of all sorts of things in what you call the world, there's no reason to deny this reality or this diversity. I think its sometimes, not always, what Foucault means when he talks about the extra discursive...I don't want to stir up the Foucaultians there...It's only when these differences have been organized within language, within discourse, within systems of meaning, that the differences can be said to acquire meaning and become a factor in human culture and regulate conduct, that is the nature of what I'm calling the discursive concept of race. Not that nothing exists of differences, but that what matters are the systems we use to make sense, to make human societies intelligible. The system we bring to those differences, how we organize those differences into systems of meaning, with which, as it were, we could find the world intelligible. And this has nothing to do with denying that, as I say, the audience test – if you looked around, you'd find we did after all look somewhat different from one another.

I think these are discursive systems because the interplay between the representation of racial difference, the writing of power, and the production of knowledge, is crucial to the way in which they are generated, and the way in which they function. And I use the word discursive here to mark the transition theoretically from the more formal understanding of difference to an understanding of how ideas and knowledge's of difference organize human practices between individuals.

Religion: A First Go at Radical Classification

STUART HALL: Racially classifying systems themselves have a history and their modern history seems to emerge where peoples of very different kinds first encounter and have to make sense of peoples of another culture who are significantly different from them, and that we can date when that historical encounter occurred (I don't want to talk about that at the moment).

When the Old World first encountered the New, peoples of the New World, they put to them a question; it's the famous question that Sepulveda put to Las Casas when the subject was debated within the Catholic Church of, "what is the nature of the peoples that we have found in the New World?" Now, they didn't say what I think the religious amongst you would like to hear them say, "well, these are, are they not, men like us, and our brothers? Are they not women like us, and our sisters?" No, they didn't say that, that took a very, very long time to come – about two or three hundred years before the Abolitionist movement thought of putting a question like that. No, what they said are, "Are these true men?" That is to say, do they belong even to the same species as we do, or are they born of another creation? And here for centuries it was not science, but religion, religion standing as the signifier of knowledge and truth. Where the human science is, and then science itself was later destined to stand, which would ground the truth of human difference and diversity in some fact which was controllable which could put them over there, and us over here; them in the boats and us on top of the civilization that we had conquered and so on.

Sleeping Easier: The Cultural Function of Knowledge

STUART HALL: It is that act of organizing people through their differences into different social groups, which is the act of social human classification, that is what is being sought – first in a religious discourse, then in an anthropological discourse, and finally in a scientific discourse – here, each of these knowledge's are functioning not as the provision of the truth, but as what makes men and women sleep well in their beds at night. They're kind of soothers – they're knowledge soothers, they're tucking in you know the soother in the mouth; first you pop in the religious one, and you hope to find that after all, when after all is said and done, god actually created two kinds of men, he had two goes at it – one weekend and then another weekend, and they were over there and we were over here and its only long afterwards that we happen to stumble across one another. But there's no thought that we both came from the same place. And that soother doesn't work, you take that out, you pop in another one: an anthropological would say, well they're sort of really like us, that's because we all really come from monkeys, but some of them are much closer to monkeys than we are and although that may not be an absolute difference, you know this is enough to find differences in university departments, publishing, etc. And then finally when that anthropology itself finally gives up, along comes, you know James Clifford, and he gives up this sort of knowledge of what anthropology can do, sort out the sheep from the goats. Then science comes along and says, "I can do it, and I can do it." Higher genetics, you can't see genetics, it's a wonderful, internal system, we have the clue to it, we can look at it in the laboratory – but human beings can't see, what they see are the *effects* of the genetic code operating. So it's a wonderfully secret code that only a small

number of people have at their disposal, which can do exactly what religion didn't manage to do, and anthropology didn't quite bring off. It can tell you why these people do not belong in the same camp, why they are very different from one another, why they really are a different species. And wouldn't it be good to know that instead of, you know trying to work out whether the ones that are your friends are so closer to you than the ones who are not, all that complicated map of alliances, etc, which constitute human relations – wouldn't it be good if you just had something simple to say, I'll just pop into the lab and I'll tell you whether they are or not. And that's what it'll do.

Fixing Difference: The Cultural Function of Science

STUART HALL: Science has a function, a cultural function in our society. Let me pause before I get carried away. I'm not suggesting that there's nothing to science; that's not my business today, and talking about the function which science performs within human cultural system, I'm talking about the *cultural* function of science, and I'm saying that the cultural function of science, in the languages and discourses of racism, have been to provide precisely that guarantee and certainty of absolute difference which no other systems of knowledge up until that point have been able to provide. And that is why the scientific trace remains such a remarkably powerful instrument in human thinking, not only in the Academy but everywhere in people's ordinary common sense discourse. For centuries, the struggle was to establish a binary distinction between two kinds of people. But once you get to the Enlightenment, which says or recognizes everybody is one species, then you have to begin to find a way which marks the difference *inside* the species; not two species, but how, why, one bit of the species is different – more barbarous, more backwards, more civilized – than another part. And you get into a different marking of difference, the difference that is marked *inside* the system. You know, I mean, listen to the way in which Edmund Burke once wrote to wrote to Robertson in 1877, "we need no longer go to history," he said, "to trace the knowledge of human nature in all its stages and periods. Why? Because now the great map of mankind is on a road all at once and there's no state or gradation of barbarism and no mode of refinement which we do not have at the same instant under our view." That is the panoptic glance of the Enlightenment – everything, all of human creation, is now, as it were, under the eye of science. And within that, can be marked, the differences that very much matter. And what are they? "The very different civility of Europe and of China. The barbarism of Tartary and of Arabia; and the savage state of North America and New Zealand."

The point I'm making is it is not science as such, but whatever is in the discourse of a culture, which grounds the truth about human diversity, which unlocks the secret of the relations between nature and culture. Which unties the puzzling fact

of human difference, which matters. And what matters is not that they contain the scientific truth about difference, but that they function foundationally in the discourse of racial difference. They fix and secure what else otherwise cannot be fixed or secured. They warrant and guarantee the truth of differences, which they discursively construct.

Nature = Culture

STUART HALL: The relationship here then, is that culture is made to follow on from nature, to lean on it for its justification exactly nature and culture here operate as metaphors for one another. They operate metonymically. It is the function of the discourse and the race as a signifier, to make these two systems – nature and culture – correspond with one another, in such a way that it is possible to read off the one against the other. So that once you know where the person fits in the classification of natural human races, you can infer from that what they're likely to think, what they're likely to feel, what they're likely to produce, the aesthetic quality of their productions, and so on. It is constituting a system of equivalencies between nature and culture, which is the function of race as a signifier.

The biological trace in my view as a discursive system is required so long as this essentializing, naturalizing function, this way of as it were, taking racial difference out of history, out of culture, and locating it as it were beyond the reach of change, so long as that function is part of what racial systems are about.

Seeing is Believing

STUART HALL: However this is not the only reason in my view why biological reasoning, wild functioning as it were, as if its largely untrue but still somehow hangs around in the conversation which we conduct around race. That's not the only reason why that is so. What DuBois started with was precisely the grosser physical differences of color, hair, and bone.

Which despite the fact of there remain anomalous fractural populations that they transcend scientific definition. They are, what finally, when we come down to it, providing the foundation for the languages of race that we speak everyday. The stubborn gross physical facts, of color, hair, or bone. Now, the central fact about these gross physical differences is not that they are based on genetic differences, but they are clearly visible to the eye. They are what palpably to the untutored, unscientific eye, which makes race thing, which we continue to talk about. They are in a sense beyond dispute. They are brute, physical biological

facts about human vision that appear in the field of vision. Where seeing is believing.

When Franz Fanon in 'Black skin White Masks', who has you know was transfixed by this inscription of racial difference on the surface of the black body itself. What he called the dark and unarguably evidence of his own blackness. "I am a slave," he said, "not of an idea that others have of me, but of my own appearance, I am fixed by it." For what indeed, of course, what can people be transfixed by others by that which is so powerfully and evidently concretely undeniable there. A racial difference which writes itself indelibly on the script of the body.

Genetics: Making Sense of Difference

STUART HALL: What gives rise to these evident and visible signs of racial difference? Fuzzy hair, big noses, thick lips, large behinds. And as the French writer, Michelle Curnow, once delicately put it, "penis's as big cathedrals." What gives rise to all that is of course the genetic code. I mean its not just that those things are there because nobody ever conducted the experiment and tried to actually sort out a part of a group of people who contain some these differences, you know, carefully and discreetly into two opposing groups. It just simply cannot be done. Just simply can't be done. You get some people of there and a few people over there, and then they are all those wishy-washy things in the middle that keeps slipping and sliding from inside to outside. It's just not quite possible to actually fix it. So, actually, though races are something that you can plainly see. What fixes it, is because we all know, we scientific folk, what is behind these is the genetic code, which regrettable you can't see. But which you can infer from the fact that some have large behinds and some people have fuzzy hair and some people have big noses and some people for all I know have penis's as big as a cathedral. But you can't set about organizing the population, you know if I say drop your pants and if I tell you whether you are this or that, because the thing is just to anomalous for that. But you can be sure, that genetically some code has actually given at the level of the surface of appearances these differences. And we poor mortals have to work with this confusing surface of appearances because we can't get access to the genetic code.

Reading the Body

STUART HALL: Well, this is quite true, but what I am afraid that your saying, what your telling me is that actually, these things, which you can see, are also signifiers! You are reading them as signs of a code of which you can't see. You assume that it is the genetic code creating these gross differences of color, hair,

and bone. And only because of that can you use that as a way of distinguishing between one group of people or another. If I were to say, 'It happened by chance', that is not the answer we are looking for we are looking for the fact that you can read the body as a text. It is a text. Now my friends you know, I know you will say. "If you hit me, cut me, I'll bleed. You run over me in the street, as is a frequent of a case in front of, you know, the new cross. You know, I will be flattened. It may be, but in so far as what we are talking about is the system of classifying difference. The body is a text. And we are all readers of it. And we go around, looking at this text, inspecting it like literary critics. Closer and closer for those very fine differences, such small these differences are, and then when that does work we start to run like a true structuralist, we start to run the combinations. Well if I perm, you know, not so big nose, with rather fuzzy hair, and a sort of largish behind and goodness knows what, I might sort of come out. We are readers of race, that what we are doing, we are readers of social difference. And the body hair, which you know is sighted as if, this is what terminates the argument. When you say race is a signifier. No it is not! See the folks out there they are different! You can tell they are different. Well, that very obviousness, the very obviousness of the visibility of race is what persuades me that it functions because it is signifying something; it is a text, which we can read.

Why We Have to Move Beyond 'Reality'

STUART HALL: Now this notion that even the genetic code then, is only imprinted on us as it were through the body rather than on the body. That you can't stop at the surface of the black body itself, as if that, well, I was going to say, as if that, brought the argument to a close. But that is exactly why the body is invoked in the discourse in that way. In the hope that it will bring the argument to a close, that if you invoke reality itself, if you say "the blackest person in the room step this way" Somehow pointing to him or her will destroy all my argument. Just look there. That is exactly what the function of invoking the body as if it is the ultimate transcendental signifier. As if this is the marker beyond which all arguments will stop, all language will cease, all discourse will fall away before this reality. I think we can't turn to the reality of race because the reality of race itself is what is standing in the way of our understanding, in a profound way. What the meaning is of saying that race is cultural system.

Analyzing the Stories of the Body

STUART HALL: You know, in Fanon's book *Black Skin White Masks* whereas I said he's entranced and he's obsessed by the trauma of his own appearance and what it means he is driven wild by the fact that he is caught, caught and locked in this body which the other the white other knows just by looking at him that the

other can see through him just by reading the text of the black body. He's obsessed by that fact. And yet, as I am sure you know, when it came to it, the power and importance of *Black Skin White Masks* is that Fanon understood that beneath what he called the bodily and corporeal schema is another schema. A schema composed of the stories and the anecdotes and the metaphors and the images, which is really, really he says, what constructs the relationship between the body and its social and cultural space. These stories, not the fact itself. The fact itself is just exactly that trap of the surface, which allows us to rest with what is obvious. It's so manifestly there. The trap in racism is precisely to allow what is manifestly there what offers it to us as a symptom of appearance to stand in the place of what is in fact one of the most profound and deeply complex of the cultural systems which allow us to make a distinction between inside and outside between us and them between who belongs and who doesn't belong. That apparently simple, obvious and banal fact requires the invocation of territories of knowledge in order to produce it as a simple, obvious, visible fact. In this way race is more like sexual difference, racial difference is more like sexual difference than it is like the other systems of difference precisely because anatomy, physiology appears to wind the question up and what we know about and have learned gradually about sexual difference that is to say the profundity of the depth that lies behind the making of that distinction is what we need now to begin to learn about the languages of race which we speak.

Why Does it Matter? Battling Racism

STUART HALL: Though race cannot perform the function it was asked to do by providing the truth and fixing that truth beyond the shy of a doubt. It is difficult to get rid of because it is so difficult in the languages of race to do without some kind of foundation or guarantee. And the point I am making there, about the necessity of a foundation or guarantee, is not a theoretical argument, or not a theoretical argument only, it is a political argument; because so much of the politics both of race and anti-race are founded on the notion that somehow, somewhere, by the biology or genetics or physiology or color or something other than human history and culture, will guarantee the truth and authenticity of the things we believe and want to do. It is the search for that guarantee, as much in the politics of anti-racism, as in the politics of racism, which makes us, which addicts us, to the preservation of a biological trait. It is hard to give up because in the end, we don't know what it is like to try to conduct a politics, especially a politics of anti-racism without a guarantee, we don't know what it is like to conduct the politics without a guarantee. We want somehow to be told something which tells us that the contingent open ended usually wrong politically choices we make, can in the end read off against some other more scientific theoretical template which if we only had hold of the beginning would have told us what was right and what was not. We need the guarantee, we need to have in the sleep of

reason, that which says, “Yes do it” because it not only feels like and looks like and is the right thing as far as your calculations can take it, but in the end it will be right, there is something which will make it right. That is because the people holding it, after all, these are the people you know, these are good people, how in the name of people come together around this common form of identification, how could they be wrong? But the truth is that like all ordinary human beings they could. We could all be wrong. And often are. Quite usually are in fact and in our politics almost always are you might say. The one thing we are not is guaranteed in the truth of what we do. Indeed, I believe that without that kind of guarantee we would need to begin again, begin again in another space, begin again from a different set of presuppositions to try to ask ourselves what might it be in human identification, in human practice, in the building of human alliances, which without the guarantee, without the certainty of religion or science or anthropology or genetics or biology or the appearance of your eyes, without any guarantees at all, might enable us to conduct an ethically responsible human discourse and practice about race in our society. What might it be like to conduct that, without having at our backs just a touch of a certainty that even if we look as if we were wrong if we only had access to the code something would have told us in the beginning what we should do.

And this is an uncomfortable truth. It’s an uncomfortable truth, of course, for those who would have liked to invoke the biological or genetic traits as a way of stopping the argument. But it is also a very difficult truth to come to terms with amongst those people who feel as it were the reality of race gives a kind of guarantee or under pinning to their political argument and their aesthetic judgments and their social and cultural beliefs. Once you enter the politics of the end of the biological definition of race you are plunged headlong into the only world we have. The maelstrom of a continuously contingent guaranteed political argument, debate, and practice. A critical politics against racism, which is always a policy of criticism.

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