

MINIMAL SELVES

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A few adjectival thoughts only ...

Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a *migrant*, on the *difference* from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things about this discussion is to find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience! This is 'coming home' with a vengeance! Most of it I much enjoy — welcome to migranthood. It also makes me understand something about identity which has been puzzling me in the last three years.

I've been puzzled by the fact that young black people in London today are marginalized, fragmented, unenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they too, in spite of everything, are centered, in place: without much material support, it's true, but nevertheless, they occupy a new kind of space at the centre. And I've wondered again and again: what is it about that long discovery-rediscovery of identity among blacks in this migrant situation, which allows them to lay a kind of claim to certain parts of the earth which aren't theirs, with quite that certainty? I do feel a sense of — dare I say — envy surrounding them. Envy is a very funny thing for the British to feel at this moment in time — to want to be black! Yet I feel some of you surreptitiously moving towards that marginal identity. I welcome you to that, too.

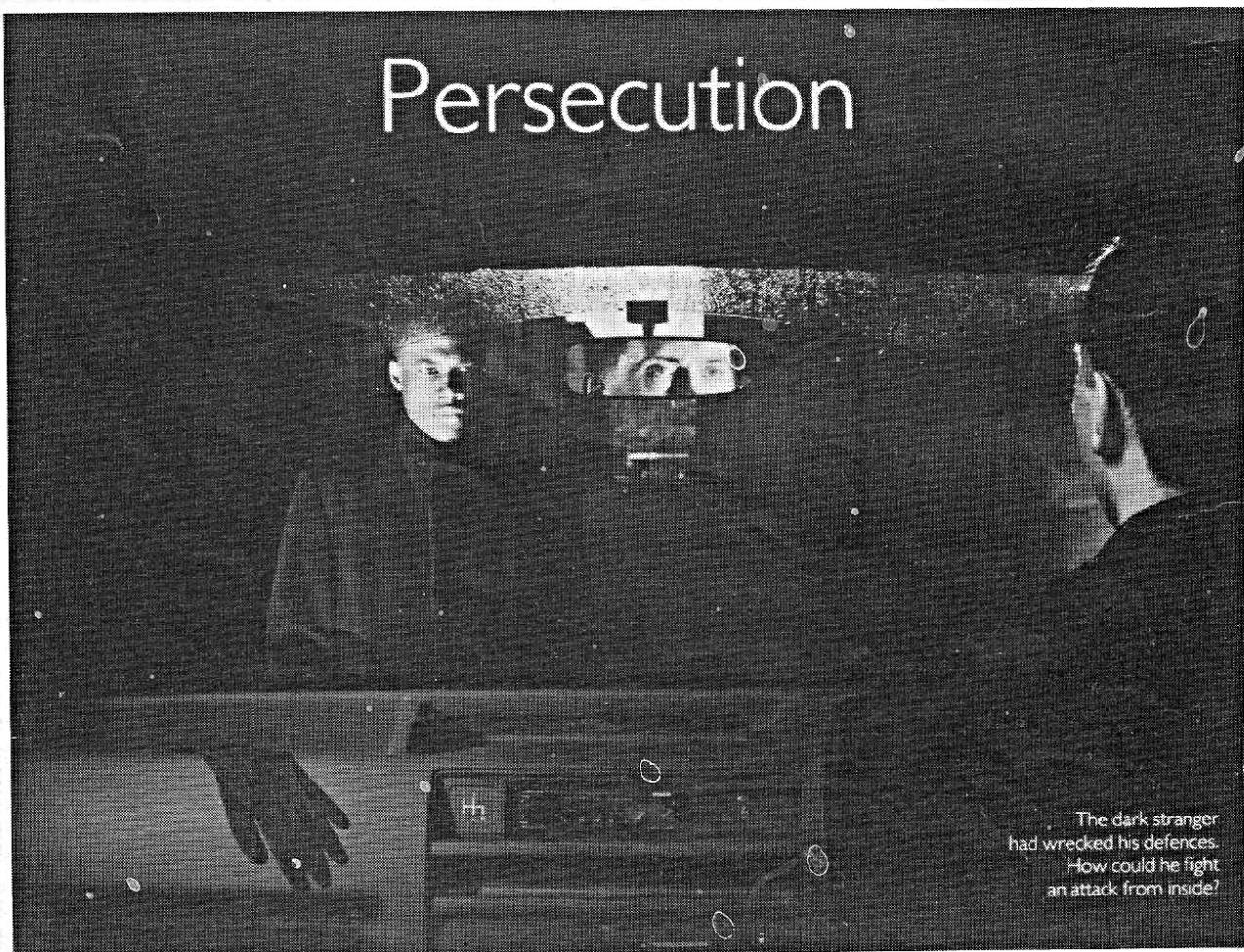
Now the question is: is this centering of marginality really the representative postmodern experience? I was given the title 'the minimal self'. I know the discourses which have theoretically produced that concept of 'minimal self'. But my experience now is that what the discourse of the postmodern has produced is not something new but a kind of recognition

of where identity always was at. It is in that sense that I want to redefine the general feeling which more and more people seem to have about themselves — that they are all, in some way, *recently migrated*, if I can coin that phrase.

The classic questions which every migrant faces are twofold: 'Why are you here?' and 'When are you going back home?' No migrant ever knows the answer to the second question until asked. Only then does she or he know that really, in the deep sense, she/he's never going back. Migration is a one way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to. There never was. But 'why are you here?' is also a really interesting question, which I've never been able to find a proper answer to either. I know the reasons one is supposed to give: 'for education', 'for the childrens' sake', 'for a better life, more opportunities', 'to enlarge the mind', etc. The truth is, I am here because it's where my family is not. I really came here to get away from my mother. Isn't that the universal story of life? One is where one is to try and get away from somewhere else. That was the story which I could never tell anybody about myself. So I had to find other stories, other fictions, which were more authentic or, at any rate, more acceptable, in place of the Big Story of the endless evasion of patriarchal family life. Who I am — the 'real' me — was formed in relation to a whole set of other narratives. I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning, long before I understood any of this theoretically. Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. And since he/she is positioned in relation to cultured narratives which have been profoundly expropriated the colonized subject is always 'somewhere else': doubly marginalized, displaced always *other* than where he or she is, or is able to speak from.

It wasn't a joke when I said that I migrated in order to get away from my family. I did. The problem, one discovers, is that since one's family is always already 'in here', there is no way in which you can actually leave them. Of course, sooner or later, they recede in memory, or even in life. But these are

Persecution



arbitrary closure?

not the 'burials' that really matter. I wish they were still around, so that I didn't have to carry them around, locked up somewhere in my head, from which there is no migration. So from the first, in relation to them, and then to all the other symbolic 'others', I certainly was always aware of the self as only constituted in that kind of absent-present contestation with something else, with some other 'real me', which is and isn't there.

If you live, as I've lived, in Jamaica, in a lower-middle class family that was trying to be a middle class Jamaican family trying to be an upper-middle class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family ... I mean the notion of displacement as a place of 'identity' is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. Living with, living through difference. I remember the occasion when I returned to Jamaica on a visit sometime in the early 1960s, after the first wave of migration to England, my mother said to me: 'Hope they don't think you are one of those immigrants over there!' And of course, at that point I knew for the first time I was an immigrant. Suddenly in relation to that narrative of migration, one version of the 'real me' came into view. I said: 'Of course, I'm an immigrant. What yo you think I am?' And she said in that classic Jamaican middle class way, 'Well, I hope the people over there will shove all the immigrants off the long end of a short pier.' (They've been shoving ever since).

The trouble is that the instant one learns to be 'an immigrant', one recognizes one can't be an immigrant any longer: it isn't a tenable place to be. I, then, went through the long, important, political education of discovering that I am 'black'. Constituting oneself as 'black' is another recognition of self through difference: certain clear polarities and extremities against which one tries to define oneself. We constantly underestimate the importance, to certain crucial political things that have happened in the world, of this ability of people to constitute themselves, psychically, in the black identity. It has long been thought that this is really a simple process: a recognition — a resolution of irresolutions, a coming to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one. The 'real me' at last!

The fact is 'black' has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as 'black'. Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s. So the notion that identity is a simple — if I can use the metaphor — black or white question, has never been the experience of black people, at least in the diaspora. These are 'imaginary communities' — and not a bit the less real because they are also symbolic. Where else could the dialogue of identity between subjectivity and culture take place?

Despite its fragmentations and displacements, then, 'the self' does relate to a real set of histories. But what are the 'real histories' to which so many at this conference have 'owned up'? How new is this new condition? It does seem that more and more people now recognize themselves in the narratives of displacement. But the narratives of displacement have certain conditions of existence, real histories in the contemporary world, which are not only or exclusively psychical, not simply 'journeys of the mind'. What is that special moment? Is it simply the recognition of a general condition of fragmentation at the end of the 20th century?

It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of 'closures' which are required to create communities of identification — nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities etc. — are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political action, whether movements, or parties, or classes, those too, are temporary, partial, arbitrary. I believe it is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all identity is constructed across difference and begins to live

with the politics of difference. But doesn't the acceptance of the fictional or narrative status of identity in relation to the world also require as a necessity, its opposite — the moment of arbitrary closure? Is it possible for there to be action or identity in the world without arbitrary closure — what one might call the necessity to meaning of the end of the sentence? Potentially, discourse is endless: the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything at all in particular, you do have to stop talking. Of course, every full stop is provisional. The next sentence will take nearly all of it back. So what is this 'ending'? It's a kind of stake, a kind of wager. It says. 'I need to say something, something ... just now.' It is not forever, not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am. At a certain point, in a certain discourse we call these unfinished closures, 'the self', 'society', 'politics', etc. Full stop. OK. There really (as they say) is no full stop of that kind. Politics, without the arbitrary interposition of power in language, the cut of ideology, the positioning, the crossing of lines, the rupture, is impossible. I don't understand political action without that moment. I don't see where it comes from. I don't see how it is possible. All the social movements which have tried to transform society and have required the constitution of new subjectivities, have had to accept the necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity, of the arbitrary closure which is not the end, but which makes both politics and identity possible.

Now I perfectly recognize that this recognition of difference, of the impossibility of 'identity' in its fully unified meaning, does, of course, transform our sense of what politics is about. It transforms the nature of political commitment. Hundred-and-one percent commitment is no longer possible. But the politics of infinitely advancing while looking over the shoulder is a very dangerous exercise. You tend to fall into a hole. Is it possible, acknowledging the discourse of self-reflexivity, to constitute a *politics* in the recognition of the necessarily fictional nature of the modern self, and the necessary arbitrariness of the closure around the imaginary communities in relation to which we are constantly in the process of becoming 'selves'?

Looking at new conceptions of identity requires us also to look at re-definitions of the forms of politics which follow from that: the politics of difference, the politics of self-reflexivity, a politics that is open to contingency but still able to act. The politics of infinite dispersal is the politics of no action at all; and one can get into that from the best of all possible motives (ie: from the highest of all possible intellectual abstractions). So one has to reckon with the consequences of where that absolutist discourse of postmodernism is pushing one. Now, it seems to me that it is possible to think about the nature of new political identities, which isn't founded on the notion of some absolute, integral self and which clearly can't arise from some fully closed narrative of the self. A politics which accepts the 'no necessary or essential correspondence' of anything with anything, and there has to be a *politics of articulation* — politics as a hegemonic project.

I also believe that out there other identities *do* matter. They're not the same as my inner space, but I'm in some relationship, some dialogue, with them. They are points of resistance to the solipsism of much postmodernist discourse. I have to deal with them, somehow. And all of that constitutes, yes, a politics, in the general sense, a politics of constituting 'unities'-in-difference. I think that is a new conception of politics, rooted in a new conception of the self, of identity. But I do think, theoretically and intellectually, it requires us to begin, not only to speak the language of dispersal, but also the language of, as it were, contingent closures of articulation.

You see, I don't think it's true that we've been driven back to a definition of identity as the 'minimal self'. Yes, it's true that the 'grand narratives' which constituted the language of the self as an integral entity don't hold. But actually, you know, it isn't just the 'minimal selves' stalking out there with absolutely no relation to one another. Let's think about the

question of nation and nationalism. One is aware of the degree to which nationalism was/is constituted as one of those major poles or terrains of articulation of the self. I think it is very important the way in which some people now (and I think particularly of the colonized subject) begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity.

Now one knows these are dangerously overlapping terrains. All the same they are not identical. Ethnicity *can* be a constitutive element in the most visciously regressive kind of nationalism or national identity. But in our times, as an imaginary community, it is also beginning to carry some other meanings, and to define a new space for identity. It insists on difference — on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists on specificity, on conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion.

I don't want to present this new ethnicity as a powerless, perfect universe. Like all terrains of identification, it has dimensions of power in it. But it isn't quite so framed by those extremities of power and aggression, violence and mobilization, as the older forms of nationalism. The slow contradictory movement from 'nationalism' to 'ethnicity' as a source of identities is part of a new politics. It is also part of the 'decline of the west' — that immense process of historical relativization which is just beginning to make the British, at least, feel just marginally 'marginal'.

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