Journal of Postcolonial Writing

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjpw20

Return to innocence? Diaspora screen media and "New Ethnicities" in the moment of diversity

Anamik Saha

To cite this article: Anamik Saha (2024) Return to innocence? Diaspora screen media and "New Ethnicities" in the moment of diversity, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 60:2, 135-149, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2024.2312360

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2312360

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 07 Feb 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 977

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rjpw20

JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL WRITING
2024, VOL. 60, NO. 2, 135–149
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2312360

Return to innocence? Diaspora screen media and “New Ethnicities” in the moment of diversity

Anamik Saha

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT
This article revaluates Stuart Hall’s influential essay “New Ethnicities” for the study of diaspora screen media. In “New Ethnicities”, published in 1988, Hall famously declares that we have reached the “end of innocence”, having identified a shift in how race was then being articulated in the work of a new generation of British-born black and Asian film-makers. However, while Hall was excited by the promise of these new ethnicities, this article argues that there has been a shift back to the previous state of innocence, a consequence of racial neo-liberalism and the emergence of “diversity” discourse. The remainder of the article examines the implications of this reversal for research on the representation of race. While Hall’s optimism may have been premature, the article argues that “New Ethnicities” nonetheless contains a mode of critical enquiry that is crucial to our understanding of contemporary diaspora screen media in this moment of diversity.

KEYWORDS
Stuart Hall; new ethnicities; politics of representation; diversity; diaspora; media

Introduction: “New Ethnicities” in the current conjuncture

In this article I revisit Stuart Hall’s (1988) foundational paper “New Ethnicities” in relation to the present moment of “diversity”, to consider what it means for the study of contemporary diaspora screen media. Hall’s relatively short essay, published in 1988, gained significant recognition for how it captured a shift that Hall had identified in the representation of black and Asian people in British media, and, crucially, what this in turn revealed about the politics of multiculturalism and (English) nationalism in that moment. “New Ethnicities” referred to the new generation of British-born black and Asian film-makers who were producing new articulations of race, gender, class, and sexuality – and, in turn, British national identity – through their artistic and cultural practices. The moment of “New Ethnicities” was a time of optimism for Hall, marking the “end of innocence, the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (1988, 28).

In his essay, Hall established the “politics of representation” as a key concept in sociology, media, and cultural studies taught curricula as well as research (1988, 27). It spawned a new approach within the broad study of race and racism, which employs

CONTACT Anamik Saha a.saha@leeds.ac.uk School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

textual analysis derived from literary studies to interpret and deconstruct the representation of race in popular culture. Hall's theories of cultural identity, diaspora, and hybridity became the frame through which these texts were analysed. While concepts such as hybridity have fallen out of fashion in recent times, textual studies of representation and the politics of diaspora as inspired by "New Ethnicities" remains one of the dominant methodological approaches in critical race and media research. With the essay's focus on film and cinema, the influence of "New Ethnicities" is most felt among those studying diaspora screen media, whether directly or indirectly.

While this article will further reiterate the importance of "New Ethnicities", its actual purpose is to argue that new ethnicities as both an artistic and intellectual project – that had created such optimism for Hall at the end of the 20th century – has stalled. I argue that the promise of "New Ethnicities" has not been realized and that we have seen a regression to what Hall in the original essay calls the "struggle over the relations of representation". I will argue that racial neo-liberalism and the turn to diversity have impeded the politics of representation, and, in turn, any study of race and media that employs a purely textual mode.

The article will be structured as follows. Firstly, it will revisit "New Ethnicities" and its central argument regarding the potential of the politics of representation. Secondly, it focuses on two relatively neglected aspects within "New Ethnicities": Hall's arguments on the "relations of representation" (1988, 27), the moment that preceded "New Ethnicities"; and his advocation of a new "critical politics, politics of criticism" (28). In the third part of the article I argue that the ascendency of the "diversity" paradigm in media industries, alongside the emergence of platform capitalism, has seen a regression to the pre-new ethnicities mode of representation. Fourthly, I will think through the implications of this regression in terms of what it means for the study of diaspora screen media. To conclude, the article argues that any textual analyses of diaspora screen media will be severely limited unless they take seriously this conjunctural moment of diversity.

Revisiting "New Ethnicities"

"New Ethnicities" was the name of the paper Stuart Hall gave at the "Black Film British Cinema" conference at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1987. In this paper, Hall reflects upon the explosion of new black and Asian-made British cinema – films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears 1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Frears 1987), both written by author Hanif Kureshi and directed by Stephen Frears; *Handsworth Songs* directed by John Akomfrah (1986) and produced by Lina Gopaul; and the *Passion of Remembrance*, directed by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien (1986). These films, Hall noted, were not just articulating new racial identities, new ways of being black or Asian that transcended the stereotypes that characterized the representation of these groups in British media, but new classed, gendered, and sexual identities too. They represented new ethnicities. The argument around "New Ethnicities" is well known and has generated much commentary (for a recent reappraisal, see Brar and Sharma [2019]), but for the purpose of this article I summarize it again now.

"New Ethnicities" marked a new mode of enquiry for Hall. It was written at a time when he was developing a new career as patron of the black visual arts in the UK. While Hall's initial writing on race and media is shaped by post-Marxist critical theorists such as

Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, "New Ethnicities" demonstrates the increasing influence of post-structuralism upon his work. The essay is a further development of Hall's theory of media representation that he had explored throughout the 1980s in his writing and teaching at the Open University (see Hall 1997b). According to this argument, representations are the building blocks of culture, which in turn is how we give meaning to the world. It is never the case that representation is simply a mirror of society, nor is it a distortion of a fixed reality. Representation matters in the sense that the sounds, words, and images used to depict particular groups in media, even in entertainment, are crucial to how we understand difference in society. Representation is shaped by ideology, the ideas of the dominant class – or what Hall prefers to call "the dominant culture" (1981, 228) – but is also contested within culture through cultural practices such as film-making and the creative arts. Moreover, these creative practices play an important constitutive role in political mobilization and activism. As Hall states: "the questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – (play) a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life" (1988, 27).

This last point is the basis for Hall's (1988) argument in "New Ethnicities". In this paper he describes a shift that had taken place in the mode of representation, from a "relations of representation" approach to the "politics of representation" (27); in a later essay (Hall 1997a) he describes this as a shift in terms of identity politics. In his encounter with the new black and Asian cinema referred to above, Hall finds an articulation of an "extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities' (1988, 28). These representations conceived by black and Asian film-makers and screen-writers cannot be grounded in a set of fixed racial categories. Instead, we are presented with intersectional representations of blackness that display the full diversity of the black experience.

For Hall (1988), the moment of "New Ethnicities" marks "the end of innocence" (28). Hall is referring to the end of the "innocent notion of an essential Black subject" (28), that all black people share the same fixed essence – a rejection of the spurious biological or culturalist basis for race. It also refers to the end of an innocent take on representational politics and the notion that the only way to challenge the negative representation of black and Asian people is to counter them with positive images. Moreover, the end of innocence speaks of how we no longer have to like something just because it features a black or Asian character or is made by someone of colour. Writing in the late 1980s, Hall felt that our encounter with race on screen was becoming much more complex and varied.

New Ethnicities as a mode of cultural representation transcends naive conceptions of identity and race in a way that liberates the black artist. As Julien and Nash (1996) put it, the end of the innocent essential black subject meant "the freeing up of positions from which black artists and film makers can speak" (484). For Hall, this is a much more radical form of cultural politics, precisely because it comes, to use a famous phrase of his, "without guarantees" (1986, 28). It explodes black identity rather than reifies it. Moreover, it does so through an articulation of race with class, sexuality, and gender – a shift from a previous form of black radical politics that, as Hall argues, "has frequently been stabilized around particular conceptions of black masculinity" (1988, 29). The articulation of race with sexuality is particularly generative for Hall. As he states, while

categories of gender and sexuality in an earlier phase of representation would remain fixed and secure in depictions of racial identities, the new politics of representation calls this into question, "crossing the questions of racism irrevocably with questions of sexuality" (29). Indeed, Hall's reference to "the end of innocence" is possibly euphemistic, describing a new stage of development that includes a sexual awakening.

The main purpose of Hall's formulation of new ethnicities was to show how screen media made by this new generation of black British and British Asian film-makers was contesting ideological conceptions of ethnicity. De-essentializing "Black" is a crucial cultural political intervention, not just for the fact that black and brown subjects have more freedom in telling the stories they want to tell, but in a way that deconstructs the inherent whiteness of British/English national identity (see also Hall 1997a). Hall refuses to reject ethnicity in its entirety since "the term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" (1988, 29). Thus, while at one end of the spectrum is an essentialist, "blood and soil" conception of ethnicity that undergirds white nationalism, at the opposite end is a radically anti-essentialist version of ethnicity, as articulated by "New Ethnicities", that opens rather than closes.

This returns to Hall's theory of the politics of representation as an alternative to the mimetic theory of representation (i.e., that they are simple visual depictions of an external reality). As he says, "how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role" (Hall 1988, 27). Building on his 1981 essay, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'", Hall argues there is more at stake in the sphere of popular culture than just pleasure and entertainment. The potential of the cultural practices of the "New Ethnicities" moment is in how it "engages rather than suppresses difference […] which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities" (Hall 1988, 28). Thus, representation is political in that it is automatically embroiled in a struggle over hegemony; as he continues,

> we are beginning to think about how to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity, to set against the embattled, hegemonic conception of "Englishness" which, under Thatcherism, stabilizes so much of the dominant political and cultural discourses, and which, because it is hegemonic, does not represent itself as an ethnicity at all. (29)

To conclude this opening section, I want to stress how the influence of "New Ethnicities" across the humanities and social sciences is a tribute to Hall's conjunctural analysis, and how the interpretation of film as an articulation of new ethnicities speaks to the broader social formation, including the dominant culture's mobilization of an English nationalism against which it is positioned. Hall's argument also opened a new mode of critical enquiry that shaped both sociological (Alexander 2000; Back 1996) and cultural studies of race (Brar and Sharma 2019; Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996) for its sophisticated account of the centrality of culture in explaining the dynamics of race and ethnicity. As stated earlier, however, Hall's proclamation of the end of innocence has not been fully realized and, in fact, has been followed by a troubling reverse trend. Moreover, this has implications for new ethnicities as an intellectual project and leads me to question the

textual approach to race and representation that still dominates so much research into race and media/popular culture. To open this discussion, in the following section I draw attention to two somewhat neglected elements of Hall's argument in "New Ethnicities": the initial phase referred to as "relations of representation"; and the "the politics of criticism". These, I argue, have not been resolved as much as Hall had anticipated or hoped for.

Reconceptualizing "New Ethnicities"

The first aspect of "New Ethnicities" that I want to focus on here relates to the time of "innocence" that Hall felt had been left behind. After all, the emphasis in "New Ethnicities" is on the shift that Hall identified in the mode of representation in the creative practices of black and Asian people. The new moment of the politics of representation, as mobilized by the new generation of Black British and British Asian artists whose articulation of new ethnicities is a source of Hall's optimism, feels significant in marking a break (though, as he stresses, not a total cleavage) from a more innocent time in the sphere of culture characterized by a struggle over the relations of representation.

In this earlier phase, it was not just that black and Asian people were invisible or absent, but that their representation was reductive, overly simplified, and stereotypical. As Hall describes it:

> In these spaces blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation. The struggle to come into representation was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject. There was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the black experience but with its simplification and its stereotypical character. (1988, 27)

The act of countering the highly negativized representation of racialized groups was what Hall describes as the phase of trying to affect change in the relations of representation. Hall identifies two strategies in this mode. Firstly, it demands access to the means of cultural production or what he calls "access to the rights of representation" (Hall 1988, 27). In other words, it involves a struggle over inclusion in the cultural industries that have historically been monopolized by members of the dominant culture. The second strategy happens at the level of representation, fixing negative images of black and Asian people with the opposite, what he calls the "counter-position of a 'Positive' black imagery" (27). Once access to the means of cultural production had been secured, the next phase of the struggle was reversing negative imagery of minoritized groups. The struggle over the relations of representation, then, entailed a politics around access, visibility, and creating more positive images of black life.

While Hall is not necessarily critical of the political impetus of this earlier phase around the relations of representation, he does critique the terms through which it was being conducted; namely, how it was based on a simplistic and naive understanding of how representation works. As Hall explains, the problem with this approach is that replacing "negative" with "positive" is equally reductive and does not attend to the complexity of representational politics. He saw transgressive potential in the aesthetic

practices of the new generation of black and Asian film-makers and screenwriters, precisely because of their rejection of these binary terms of positive/negative, authentic/stereotypical. Instead, they were working with a new language of racial politics that emphasizes ambiguity, ambivalence, and (sexual) transgression (see Mercer 1994). This leads on to the second aspect of "New Ethnicities" that is very relevant to our understanding of the new challenges within the current conjuncture: the issue of how to critique and evaluate this new representational mode.

For Hall, the new phase characterized by the politics of representation necessitated a new language of cultural criticism to make sense of the articulations of race, gender, class, and sexuality as embodied in new ethnicities. While Hall's quote about the end of innocence is perhaps the most famous, the following passage, in my view, captures the essence of new ethnicities, while introducing the issue of the politics of criticism:

> Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily right on by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. (Hall 1988, 28)

Here, Hall is suggesting that the new politics of representation escapes the ways in which we have historically evaluated representation, and the reductive terms of positive/negative, truthful/biased, stereotypical/authentic. Instead, representation is always contingent; quite simply, what might feel radical in one moment might appear stereotypical in another physical or temporal context. The question is, how to define – or rather, "who gets to define" – what the terms positive/negative, truthful/biased, stereotypical/authentic even mean? What is a "positive" depiction of race? What is "authentic" black or Asian experience? The power of the new practitioners of new ethnicities is not just in how they complicate these terms in their work, but how they revel in the complexity. For this reason, Hall in "New Ethnicities" lauds Hanif Kureshi's script for *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears 1985), for how it paints a complex picture of black/Asian identity, one that is neither noble savage or violent avenger, not reliant on a stable version of sexuality, nor "right on". Hall's point again here is how the new politics of representation demands a new mode of evaluation, judgement, and critique that can do justice to this complexity.

Moreover, Hall urges us to rethink the terms of traditional cultural criticism, which are often based on Eurocentric/modernist notions of quality. This last point is the subject of a famous exchange between Hall and the author Salman Rushdie (and, later on, activist Darcus Howe) in the letter pages of *The Guardian*, where Hall rejects Rushdie's critical review of Black Audio Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, "as if it were just like any other film the Guardian might review" (Julien and Nash 1996, 484). As Brar and Sharma put it, Hall

> was not looking to make aesthetic judgements on the transcendental value of artworks, because such a move would indicate a level of critical failure. Instead, he was interested in how the works within Black Arts operated as an ensemble of elements in the construction and challenging of a wider social fabric. (2019, 94)

Hall, then, prefers to critique the new black cultural aesthetics in terms of the role they play in a war of position, on how they reinforce or challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture, often in highly complex and ambivalent ways that prevent an easy,

straightforward reading. Indeed, Hall emphasizes the challenge of such critical work as one that we absolutely must rise to. As he says, "the difficulty of conceptualizing such a politics (and the temptation to slip into a sort of endlessly sliding discursive liberal-pluralism) does not absolve us of the task of developing such a politics" (1988, 28). Such is the difficulty in conceptualizing "a critical politics, a politics of criticism" that is worthy of the new ethnicities movement, that Hall admits that he failed to do in his own attempt to counter Salman Rushdie's criticism of *Handsworth Songs* in his letter to *The Guardian*.

It is my contention that we still have not yet managed to effectively articulate a new politics of criticism. But using "New Ethnicities" as the basis, we can at least identify three guiding principles towards this goal. Firstly, we need to guard against the temptation to like a film just because it is made by someone black or Asian. Secondly, we need to evaluate the cultural text in question in relation to its conditions of production, to see "signs of innovation, and the constraints, under which these filmmakers were operating" (Hall 1988, 29). Thirdly, we need an "alternative mode of address" (30) that goes beyond the usual forms of aesthetic evaluation that has historically privileged a particular cultural canon. As Hall says, we need a politics of criticism,

> which locates itself inside a continuous struggle and politics around black representation, but which then is able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representation, above all, the regimes of representation. (30)

To reiterate, despite the emphasis on the need for a new form of cultural criticism in new ethnicities, to what extent have we been able to conceive of such a new critique? Similarly, despite Hall's optimism concerning the shift from a struggle over the relations of representation to a new mode concerning the politics of representation, to what extent has such a shift really been fully realized? I argue that thinking through these issues will shed new light on the cultural politics of contemporary diaspora screen media.

Diaspora screen media in the time of diversity and platform capitalism

"New Ethnicities" remains a landmark essay, especially for scholars who study diaspora screen media. It transformed the understanding of representational politics and reaffirmed how popular culture functions as a critical site for the operation of power where a struggle over hegemony is waged. Hall stressed that artists and cultural practitioners from the margins play a key role in helping to create and consolidate "subaltern formations and emergent tendencies" (2000, 215) that can counter and resist the hegemonizing forces of global capitalism. But in "New Ethnicities", might Hall have been a little premature in his declaration of the end of innocence?

It is my contention that the promise of "New Ethnicities" has been undermined in the era of racial neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is a political philosophy that in the UK emerged in the Thatcher era (Hall was one of the earliest critics to identify "Thatcherism" as a radical new political project). It is characterized by deregulation, the rolling back of the welfare state, the privatization of key services and public utilities, and the opening of all sectors of society to marketization. This includes the cultural industries, which have, since the 1984 Telecommunications Act, seen increasing marketization and commercialism, where deregulation has intensified media concentration,

arguably leading to less diversity in output, as well as ownership (Hesmondhalgh 2018). "Racial" neo-liberalism draws attention to the racializing dynamics of neo-liberalism, including the depoliticization of race (Kapoor 2013), the individualization of racism – that is, racism is a problem of individual racists rather than a structural problem (Goldberg 2009) – and in turn the ascendency of post-racial discourse, that declares that state racism is no longer a problem. Under racial neo-liberalism, racial identities are more likely to be associated with a lifestyle, a brand identity, or market niche, rather than a subject position within a system of dominance. On this point, Herman Gray (2013) provocatively points to the emergence of the neo-liberal racial subject as

> a self-crafting entrepreneurial subject whose racial difference is the source of brand value celebrated and marketed as *diversity*; a subject whose very visibility and recognition at the level of representation affirms a freedom realized by applying a market calculus to social relations. (771; my emphasis)

Here I want to punctuate Gray's reference to diversity, which is one aspect of racial neo-liberalism that has set back the "New Ethnicities" arguments.

Diversity is the dominant paradigm in which racial inequalities in the creative and cultural industries are today understood and addressed. While the term "diversity" has always been present in one shape or another in UK cultural policy, the modern, more formalized conception of diversity stems from the New Labour moment, where a commitment to both social justice and the market become aligned (Nwonka 2015). As Gray's remark above implies, diversity has become more the cultural expression of neo-liberalism. It has become decoupled from a language of social justice or multi-culturalism and is nowadays defined in terms of performance metrics (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019). Moreover, with the rise of new streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime that have taken television production into an even more global scale, diversity in a production becomes an asset that can help reach new, international audiences. As such, diversity is increasingly the logic through which representations of race in the cultural industries are now made. It is a discourse that sets the terms of how corporate cultural industries attempt to include (and capitalize upon) diaspora screen media.

What has diversity meant for new ethnicities? To answer this question, we should note that that diversity has been critiqued by critical race scholars for several reasons, not least being the lack of impact that diversity initiatives have had upon the constitution of the cultural workforce in the UK that remains overwhelmingly white. Two relevant arguments are that firstly, diversity has turned racial identities into a commodity; racial subjects accrue value but only if their performance of their racial identities is acquiescent with the white dominant culture. Secondly, diversity does not lead to actual structural change; rather, it allows the dominant culture to maintain its status and cultural authority (see Saha 2018).

Returning to Hall's "New Ethnicities" essay, diversity uncannily replicates what Hall (1988) describes as the "relations of representation phase", especially his references to "access to the rights of representation" and the "counter-position of a 'Positive' black imagery" (27). Diversity discourse as operationalized in cultural policy places a heavy emphasis on issues of access, including training initiatives, mentorships, and work placements. Such initiatives are often problematically based on a "deficit model" that

blames the lack of diversity on the marginalized subject who is seen as lacking the required abilities to work in the cultural industries (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019). Regarding Hall's point about visibility and representation, that we seemingly have been unable to shake off the logic that countering "negative" depictions of race means replacing them with "positive" ones: on the big-budget streaming shows at least, it seems that black people can do no wrong! Under diversity we have seen an explosion of difference, but rather than leading to a radical destabilization of racial tropes – and the complex and at times transgressive articulations of race, gender, class and sexuality that Hall describes in "New Ethnicities" – we get post-racial, or even "raceless", depictions of people of colour, what Kirsten Warner (2017) calls "plastic representation" (n.p.).

Under diversity, visibility becomes the end goal. Moreover, race becomes an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage. As stated in "New Ethnicities", Hall makes a claim for an anti-essentialist version of ethnicity, but crucially in a way that prevents the subject being "contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or filmmakers" (1988, 29). But under the rubric of diversity, this containment has been reactivated as artists and film-makers find that leaning into their racial identities creates new professional opportunities. Under the logics of racial neo-liberalism, racial difference produces brand value and a way for creators to differentiate themselves in an overcrowded market. This has been shaped by social media. Consider how in contemporary times creative managers base so much of the commissioning process on a creator's online profile. In this context using one's race-as-brand can help build followers, or at least develop a distinct niche (Sobande, Hesmondhalgh, and Saha 2023). The very emergence of social media, let alone its profound impact on culture-making, was something that Stuart Hall could never have envisaged when he originally delivered his paper in 1987.

To think through the impact of platform capitalism upon new ethnicities, I want to return to Hall's argument on the need for a new politics of criticism to critique and judge the new black cultural aesthetic and the ways this project has been severely undermined within racial neoliberalism. I draw here from Gavan Titley's (2019) important argument on the "debatability of racism" (2). Titley refers to the tendency of discourse around race as it unfolds on social media, to become invariably reduced to an argument over whether something/someone is racist or not. Social media comment threads are full of such heated discussion where racism is debated. This has led to the somewhat perverse assertion that to bring up the issue of race is to be racist oneself. The key point for Titley is that the debatability of racism has been "structured into the economic and operation of contemporary 'news-as-comment' culture" (48), enabled by the very infrastructure and workings of social media in the context of platform capitalism (McMillan Cottom 2020). With data taking on commodity form, social media platforms are essentially in the business of producing user engagement, which they can in turn monetize. The more we engage and produce content on these platforms, the more data we create about ourselves, which in turn allows big tech companies to build user profiles to be sold to advertisers.

It is against this backdrop that "a critical politics, a politics of criticism" – which Hall understood as central to the politics of representation – has been transformed by social media platforms. In this moment of diversity, when issues of visibility and accuracy become matters of social justice for a form of "popular anti-racism and feminism" (Littler 2017, 148), discussion of the politics of racial representation has become of huge

monetary importance to social media companies. Discourse around race in popular culture – over the presence or absence of people of colour in a film or programme, or the authenticity of their depiction – is the source of a seemingly endless amount of commentary and counter-commentary. This is facilitated by the very architecture of new media that encourages and rewards user engagement (such as the design of the "like button"). As stated earlier, for Hall, the emergence of "New Ethnicities" and the end of a notion of the essential black subject results in daunting yet potentially radical possibilities, entailing being "plunged into a maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate" (1988, 28). But in the time of platform capitalism, the maelstrom that Hall refers to is now more likely to appear as a churn of content on social media which in turn is monetized and turned into profit for the major tech companies. Under racial neo-liberalism the politics of criticism/critical politics has become commodified.

A conjunctural approach to diaspora screen media

The reason for this revaluation of "New Ethnicities" is to argue that we have returned to the age of innocence – a struggle over the relations of representation – that Hall, in that essay, had felt we were leaving behind. But it is worth noting that Hall was careful about what he defined as a "shift" in new ethnicities. He was clear from the outset that it did not mean that one mode of representation had displaced the other totally. Rather they are "two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave" (Hall 1988, 27). The shift he speaks of refers to a reconfiguration and reorganization in the mode of representation. As he states:

> There is no sense in which a new phase in black cultural politics could replace the earlier one. Nevertheless it is true that as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree displace, reorganize and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another. (27)

So rather than say we have gone back in time to the phase of representational politics that preceded the new ethnicities moment, it is more accurate to say that the discourse around the relations of representation, which never totally disappeared, has remerged as the dominant mode through the manifestations of diversity discourse, and the techno-infrastructure of platform capitalism.

It should be added that the cultural politics that Hall found in the moment of "New Ethnicities" is still alive and present in popular culture. I am referring to cultural productions that include articulations of race that transcend, complicate, and make messy, and even transgress those simplified, historically embedded constructions of race. I do not mean that these articulations better represent racialized communities, as though there is a fixed reality that can be mirrored authentically in media. Rather I am thinking of representations that "make race" (Saha 2021, 13) in a way that destabilizes the very ontology, or foundational idea of race. In recent times, television comedy drama has provided some of the best examples of this mode, including *Atlanta* (2016–22), *Awkwafina is Nora from Queens* (2020–23), *Reservation Dogs* (2021–23), *Ramy* (2019–2022), and *Juice* (2023). At times, these interventions – especially in corporate contexts – have

been enabled by the logic of diversity. Despite the critique presented above, diversity also needs to be understood as the reaction of the dominant culture that feels its authority under threat (Saha and van Lente 2022). Therefore, diversity contains a disruptive quality. As Hall (1981) states, in a war of position, the dominant culture must concede some ground in order to maintain its authority, and this creates an opportunity for black, brown and Asian cultural producers to mount meaningful cultural political interventions.

Thus, "New Ethnicities" helps us make sense of the current context with regard to diaspora screen media. While I argue that the promise of new ethnicities has been pulled back by racial neo-liberalism, the current landscape for diasporic subjects making media can be characterized as a tension between a cultural political strategy that is focused on fixing the relations of representation, and one that looks to explode it, or at least complicate it. There is a further discussion to be had about how to enable the politics of representation in the present. But to end this article I want to focus on what this discussion means for scholarship on diaspora screen media.

As stated in the opening of the article, "New Ethnicities" ushered in a mode of cultural and media studies that centred on the cultural commodities of popular culture, treating them as texts to be interpreted and analysed for meaning. The textual methods employed were derived from literary studies and influenced by post-structuralism's mode of deconstruction. This remains one of the most common approaches in the broad study of race, culture and media, especially in relation to diaspora media culture. But as Titley considers it, if we recognize that the politics of representation in popular discourse has become a form of media content itself, what implications does this have for the role of academic textual studies? Are there similar dangers of co-option with such an approach? Titley considers criticisms of the textual focus on representation: that it is an "exhausted enterprise" (2019, 39) that, despite its constructivist roots, cannot help but slip into a "media must represent truth mode", and also still relies upon simplistic notions of the "stereotype", whereby the focus on "good" or "bad" depictions of race "confronts racist discourse on that discourse's favoured ground" (41). In light of this critique of purely textual/deconstructive methods, I propose four principles for the study of diaspora screen media, based on this critical re-evaluation of "New Ethnicities".

First, any discussion of contemporary diaspora screen media needs to take seriously the conjuncture; that is, the forces that come together at a specific moment and the shaping of their social configuration. Studying culture offers a route to grasping a given conjunctural moment. This is the very essence of the cultural studies project that Hall advocated, where the particular emphasis on diaspora is not to fetishize hybridity or difference, but to provide a lens through which to explore the conjuncture, especially when, as Hall puts it, the "capacity to live with difference" (1993, 361) remains a key question of the 21st century. Any analysis of diaspora screen culture needs to bear this in mind. Otherwise, it is in danger of producing a thin analysis that adds little else to the discourse on representation that unfolds online and becomes fodder for social media platforms. Instead, the study of diaspora screen media can and should draw our attention to the operation of hegemony in society, especially at times of crisis, where Hall once again shows us, race becomes the mode through which the crisis is experienced:

> Race is the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved – "send it away". (1978, 31–32)

Secondly, the basis of the study of diaspora screen media must give a better sense of how discourse fixes race and makes a social construct tangible and real. There needs to be an understanding of how discourse takes different forms in different temporal and physical contexts, though it is embedded in history. This includes a recognition that different regions have their own histories of race, that might stem from the modern conception of race that was formed in the Enlightenment but has been indigenized in different settings (Goldberg 2009). In other words, the study of diaspora screen media needs to be historical and contextualized.

Thirdly, and building on the point on conjuncture, the study of diaspora screen media should not be focused on the text alone. Instead, greater attention should be paid to production and circulation, including social uses of media as well as their technologies. In "New Ethnicities", Hall asks us to consider the "signs of innovation, and the constraints, under which these filmmakers were operating" (1988, 30), in order to better grasp the politics of representation. Interestingly the organization and dynamics of cultural production inside formal cultural industries where the new ethnicities were operating is not of subsequent interest to Hall. But as a potential framework there exists a relatively new body of production-orientated studies that takes as its subject the focus of the industrial contexts through and within which culture is made. Critical race scholars working in production studies have placed a particular emphasis on how the material contexts of the cultural industries shapes the symbolic nature of the cultural commodity. As a result, this has produced some of the most exciting research on diasporic media culture: examples include Clive Nwonka's (2022) work on the black neo-liberal aesthetic in contemporary British film, Al Martin's (2021) work on televisual depictions of black gayness, and Kirsten Warner's (2015) work on the politics of colourblind casting.

Fourthly, there needs to be a refocus on the task of developing a critical politics, a politics of criticism. The study of diaspora screen media should invest in conjuring a new critical language through which to approach the black cultural aesthetic. The challenge is in developing a new way of talking about and critiquing the politics of representation that transcends the type of reductive relational approach to representation as enabled by social media. It also needs to refuse classist and Eurocentric notions of "quality" that undergird classical approaches in the humanities, but also processes of commissioning, acquisition and patronage in the core cultural industries. I will go as far as saying that developing a radical new critical language can transform the structures of the cultural industries, where traditional discourses of "quality" are used to police entry and decide who and who is not allowed to make culture.

Conclusion: Changing the relations of representation

"New Ethnicities" is rightly recognized as one of the foundational texts in the study of diaspora screen media. It drew attention to the complexity of representational politics, its radically contingent nature, but also the possibilities of cultural production for marginalized groups. Yet, while "New Ethnicities" has produced an important framework in

which to explore the politics of diaspora in popular culture and black and brown aesthetic practice, there has been less attention paid to further unravelling into the present the shift in representational politics that was the very plot line of new ethnicities. As I have explained in this article, in this conjunctural moment, the promise of "New Ethnicities" appears to have been lost. This raises the question of production: what new (radical) forms of policy and activism are needed to change institutional arrangements and the cultures of production that can facilitate, and allow to flourish, the creative and aesthetic practices of marginalized communities?

Building on this point, the secondary purpose of this article has been to think through the implications of this new moment of diversity for the study of diaspora screen media. I argue that research that takes a purely textual form – that is, that fails to address the political economic as well sociocultural context of the given moment that the text is made and/or read – will be of limited value. After all the significance of "New Ethnicities" and Hall's work on popular culture in general is that his reading of texts is always understood in relation to the conjuncture. This should serve as the model for any study of diaspora screen media. Moreover, in this article I have suggested that we have still been unable to set the terms of a "critical politics/politics of criticism" that Hall in the essay admits he himself fails to do. Production studies of race offer one potential route, not least in being able to concretely identify "signs of innovation, and the constraints" (Hall 1988, 29) under which black, brown, and Asian cultural producers are operating inside the cultural industries. "New Ethnicities" remains a generative model for studying the cultural politics of diaspora screen media, but we need to be careful to not ignore the elements that makes it so valuable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Anamik Saha is a professor in race and media in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Race and the Cultural Industries* (2018) and *Race, Culture and Media* (2021), and the co-author with Sandra van Lente of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded industry report *Rethinking "Diversity" in Publishing* (2020). He is an editor of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

ORCID

Anamik Saha http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7704-2493

References

Akomfrah, John, dir. 1986. "Handsworth Songs." Black Audio Film Collective, 61 minutes.
Alexander, Claire E. 2000. *The Asian Gang: Ethnicity, Identity, Masculinity*. Oxford: Berg.
Atlanta. 2016–22. Directed by Hiro Murai (26 Episodes, 2016–22), Donald Glover (9 Episodes, 2016-22), Amy Seimetz (2 Episodes, 2018), Janicza Bravo (1 Episode, 2016) Ibra Ake (1 Episode, 2022), Angela Barnes (1 Episode, 2022), Adamma Ebo (1 Episode, 2022), Featuring Donald

Glover, Brian Tyree Henry, LaKeith Stanfield and Zazie Beetz. Aired September 6, 2016–November 10, 2022, on FX.

Awkwafina is Nora from Queens. 2020–23. Directed by Laura Murphy (5 Episodes, 2021–2023), Jordan Kim (4 Episodes, 2021–23), Lucia Aniello (3 Episodes, 2020), Bill Benz (3 Episodes, 2021–2023), Steven K. Tsuchida (2 Episodes, 2020–21), Jamie Babbit (2 Episodes, 2020), Anu Valia (2 Episodes, 2020), Andrew Mccarthy (2 Episodes, 2021), Daniel Kwan (1 Episode, 2020) Natasha Lyonne (1 Episode, 2020), Daniel Scheinert (1 Episode, 2020), B.D. Wong (1 Episode, 2021), Awkwafina (1 Episode, 2023), Featuring Awkwafina, Lori Tan Chinn, B.D. Wong, Bowen Yang, and Jennifer Esposito. Aired January 20, 2020–June 7, 2023, on Comedy Central.

Back, Les. 1996. *New Ethnicities and Urban Cultures: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Blackwood, Maureen, and Isaac Julien, dir. 1986. *Passion of Remembrance*. Sankofa Film & Video, 80 minutes.

Brar, Dhanveer Singh, and Ashwani Sharma. 2019. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Studies? The Transition from Black British Cultural Studies to Black Critical Thought in U.K. Arts and Higher Education." *New Formations* 99: 88–109. https://doi.org/10.3898/NewF:99.05.2019.

Frears, Stephen, dir. 1985. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Working Title Films/Channel 4 Films, 97 minutes.

Frears, Stephen, dir. 1987. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. FilmFour. International/Working Title Films, 101 minutes.

Goldberg, David Theo. 2009. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gray, Herman. 2013. "Subject(ed) to Recognition." *American Quarterly* 65 (4): 771–798. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0058.

Hall, Stuart. 1978. "Racism and Reaction." In *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain*, 23–35. London: CRE.

Hall, Stuart. 1986. "The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantees." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (2): 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/019685998601000203.

Hall, Stuart. 1993. "Culture, Community, Nation." *Cultural Studies* 7 (3): 349–363. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389300490251.

Hall, Stuart. 1997b. "The Work of Representation." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 2nd ed., 13–74. London: Sage.

Hall, Stuart. 2000. "Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question." In *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, "Transruptions"*, edited by Barnor Hesse, 209–241. London: Zed Books.

Hall, Stuart. 1997a. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anthony D. King, 41–68. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hall, Stuart. 1988. "New Ethnicities." In *Black Film British Cinema*, edited by Kobena Mercer, 27–31. London: Institute of Contemporary Art.

Hall, Stuart. 1981. "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'." In *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by Raphael Samuel, 227–239. History Workshop Series. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hesmondhalgh, David. 2018. *The Cultural Industries*. 4th ed. London: Sage Publications.

Juice. 2023. Directed by Rosco Five, Featuring Mawaan Rizwan, Russell Tovey, Nabhaan Rizwan, Shahnaz Rizwan and Jeff Mirza. Aired September 18–October 2, on BBC Three.

Julien, Isaac, and Mark Nash. 1996. "Dialogues with Stuart Hall." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, 479–485. London: Routledge.

Kapoor, Nisha. 2013. "The Advancement of Racial Neoliberalism in Britain." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (6): 1028–1046. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.629002.

Littler, Jo. 2017. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. London: Routledge.

Martin, Alfred, Jr. 2021. *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. 2020. "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6 (4): 441–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649220949473.

Mercer, Kobena. 1994. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Newsinger, Jack, and Doris Ruth Eikhof. 2019. "Explicit and Implicit Diversity Policy in the UK Film and Television Industries." *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 17 (1): 47–69. https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2020.0507.

Nwonka, Clive James. 2015. "Diversity Pie: Rethinking Social Exclusion and Diversity Policy in the British Film Industry." *Journal of Media Practice* 16 (1): 73–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2015.1015802.

Nwonka, Clive James. 2022. "The Black Neoliberal Aesthetic." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25 (3): 843–862. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420973204.

Ramy. 2019–2022. Directed by Ramy Youssef (12 Episodes, 2019–22), Cherien Dabis (6 Episodes, 2019-2020), Christopher Storer (6 Episodes, 2019–20), Harry Bradbeer (1 Episode, 2019), Jehane Noujaim (1 Episode, 2019), Desiree Akhavan (1 Episode, 2020), Hiam Abbass. 2022. (1 Episode, 2022), Annemarie Jacir (1 Episode, 2022), Ari Katcher (1 Episode, 2022), Featuring, Ramy Youssef, Mohammed Amer, Hiam Abbass, Dave Merheje, Amr Waked and May Calamawy. Aired April 19, 2019–September 30, 2022, on Hulu.

Reservation Dogs. 2021–23. Directed by Sterlin Harjo (9 Episodes, 2021–23), Blackhorse Lowe (6 Episodes, 2021–23), Tazbah Chavez (5 Episodes, 2021–23), Danis Goulet (3 Episodes, 2022–23), Sydney Freeland (2 Episodes, 2021), Erica Tremblay (2 Episodes, 2022–23) Devery Jacobs (1 Episode, 2023), Featuring Devery Jacobs, D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai, Lane Factor, Paulina Alexis. Aired August 9, 2021–September 27, 2023, on FX on Hulu.

Saha, Anamik. 2018. *Race and the Cultural Industries*. Cambridge: Polity.

Saha, Anamik. 2021. *Race, Culture and Media*. London: Sage.

Saha, Anamik, and Sandra van Lente. 2022. "Diversity, Media and Racial Capitalism: A Case Study on Publishing." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45 (16): 216–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2032250.

Sharma, Sanjay, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, eds. 1996. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*. London: Zed Books.

Sobande, Francesca, David Hesmondhalgh, and Anamik Saha. 2023. "Black, Brown and Asian Cultural Workers, Creativity and Activism: The Ambivalence of Digital Self-Branding Practices." *The Sociological Review* 71 (6): 1448–1466. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231163952.

Titley, Gavan. 2019. *Racism and Media*. London: Sage.

Warner, Kristen J. 2015. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. New York: Routledge.

Warner, Kristen J. 2017. "In the Time of Plastic Representation." *Film Quarterly* 71 (2): 32–37. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2017.71.2.32.