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Texture as Substance: Reading Homi K. Bhabha Re-membering Frantz Fanon

HENRY SCHWARZ

[I]t is these signs and symptoms of the colonial condition that drive Fanon from one conceptual scheme to another, while the colonial relation takes shape in the gaps between them, articulated in the engagements of his style.

(Bhabha, "Remembering" 114)

[T]he idea of Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the "Otherness" of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. (116)

Isaac Julien

ACCORDING TO ISAAC JULIEN, THE DIRECTOR OF *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASK*, A FILM IMAGINING THE LIFE OF FRANTZ FANON, HOMI BHABHA

is presented in a nonspeaking role as a colored, racialized "colonial subject" to lend "texture" to the cinematography (Interview). Unlike the eloquent postcolonial critics Stuart Hall and Françoise Vergès, who are interviewed extensively in the film, the mute Bhabha is a cipher, a visual trace of difference in the philosophical, cinematic, and audio montage that composes Julien's meditation on decolonization (Frantz Fanon [Director's cut]). In many ways, Julien's Fanon seems indebted to Bhabha's strong reading, against the grain of Fanon's oeuvre, in "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," a foreword Bhabha wrote for a new British edition of Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks, published in 1986. Julien's Fanon is an interstitial figure, stitched together through multiple viewpoints and physically composed of cinematic elements juxtaposed in striking contrast to one another. He emerges from scraps of discourse cast off and reassembled, much as Bhabha's Fanon is captured in Fanon's ungrammatical utterance that betrays by ellipsis the nature of identity, which is that identity is "not": "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man" (113). The revelation that the nature of identity is spatially split and temporally deferred—the definition of Derridean différance—is most truly represented in the colonial situation, where white mythologies of wholeness and authenticity are actualized as

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performances of power. When these mythologies are accompanied by paranoid fantasies of blackness that reveal the contradictory duplicity of white representations of the other—the simian Negro, the inscrutable Chinaman—this racial discrimination and its neurotic imagery reveal the nature of the white self and its pretense of universality: that the human is not whole and that the Enlightenment dream of self-presence is an illusion thrown up by the anxious exercise of mastery over those lesser humans, the Negroes.

Searching for Bhabha, I circle back—in perhaps a symptomatic gesture—to what must have been a director's cut of the film I viewed in Philadelphia, in 1995 or 1996. It was at the screening that Julien told me, in answer to the question, "What is Homi Bhabha doing in your film?," that he had included Bhabha as a colored, racialized colonial subject (Interview). Yet in the official version of the film, released in 1995, there is no sight of Bhabha (Julien, Frantz Fanon [BBC]). Not no sign there are plenty of those-but no visual appearance of the striking-looking man, with his owly glasses and, at the time, bearded mien, staring fixedly into the camera and simultaneously recognizing and differing from—or perhaps defying—what the director called the "texture" of the colonial subject. I recall Bhabha's absence vividly, for at that time his book The Location of Culture was newly published, so Bhabha was on my mind. Not yet tenured and an avowed postcolonialist much ahead of the curve, I had just started teaching at Georgetown University. My colleagues were baffled by my insistence that English literature was an invention of British imperialism first elaborated in Calcutta, and they were bemused by my efforts to teach postcolonialism and postmodernism to undergraduates. Additionally, they were hostile to theory, and the embodiment of this anathema to them was the inscrutable Bhabha, who was Indian in blood and color but English in intellect, morals, and opinions. If that were

not enough, the Anglo Bhabha was also more Parisian in outlook than any of the senior teachers of literary criticism, and this double threat of being both Indian and French, black and British, sent a shiver through those frisky but interminable department meetings on curriculum at the height of the culture wars. Bhabha was a friendly figure for me, although he also represented danger at the office, and his presence in the director's cut authorized to a certain extent his edgy reading of Fanon, which I find echoed and endorsed in Julien's equally experimental film. Bhabha receives a consulting credit at the film's end, as does the cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy, but oddly Hall and Vergès are not acknowledged.

Bhabha's absence from the official version, then, is a strong absence, in the way we used to talk about strong readings. It is an absence marked by an intention, presumably of the director, to cut him out after a benchmark had been established. Perhaps I was one of the few to see the earlier version that included the visual marker of Bhabha, yet for me, at that time, Julien's film was not so much a documentary biography of Fanon as it was a Bhabhalian meditation on the poststructuralist, postcolonialist Fanon that Bhabha had reconstructed—against the grain, as he repeatedly admits—to serve the cause of a camp different from the one to which Fanon was originally admitted.

As a prophet of Third World decolonization, Fanon is an icon of the "Bandung Era," as Neil Larsen has termed it (32). In "Remembering Fanon," Bhabha re-members Fanon for the racially charged context of 1980s black Britain, colored by the neoliberal crackdown of Margaret Thatcher, who was prime minister from 1979 to 1990, and the riots in Brixton (1981), Handsworth (1985), and elsewhere during this tense time. Two important publications, Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order, by Stuart Hall and others (1978), and The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain (1982), by

the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, set the stage for a powerfully revisioned Fanon. In Bhabha's hands, Fanon's main concerns shift from colonial violence and the creation of national culture, never mind revolutionary socialism, to a Lacanian psychoanalysis of metropolitan racism equally concerned with the anxiety of the white colonizer as with the resistance of the black colonized. Moreover, Bhabha purges Fanon of Marxist ideology and adherence to Hegelian dialectics, leaving Fanon with a curious stance for a Third World revolutionary.

For Hall and Vergès, Fanon emerges as a complex but comprehensible character with an excellent French education, aspiring to serve his motherland during World War II, wishing to serve his universal fellow man through study of medicine and psychiatry, and steeped in the Hegelian Marxism that gave way to existentialism in the Cold War period. In both versions of the film, they discuss this intellectual climate and the faithfulness with which Fanon rendered the dialectic in his two most important books. Fanon ultimately describes a failed dialectic of recognition in the colony, a dialectic in which the colonized people's metropolitan racism and internalized inferiority prohibit a full appreciation of the other's identity.

I am not sure this account of failed recognition due to colonial racism would disqualify Fanon's endorsement of dialectical method; rather Fanon sees racism dialectically as Europe's failure to fulfill the liberatory potential of identity. Yet Bhabha's resolute "hermeneutics of suspicion" is fully on display in the film, and Fanon becomes in his hands an anti-Hegelian who died before he could have read Jacques Derrida, much less Francis Fukuyama. While Hall and Vergès make the theme of failure in Fanon's work clear, Julien's film amplifies it and provides audiovisual correlates. Below, I read two scenes attentively to highlight the Bhabhalian interpellations the director makes. I then turn to Bhabha's language and how Julien's film enhances our ability to comprehend it.

Critical Commentary

In Julien's film, Hall glosses Fanon's moment of clarity, described poignantly at the end of "The Fact of Blackness," the fifth chapter of Black Skin, White Masks, when the young writer's world was suddenly turned upside down in his encounter with French racism:

You have to think in terms of a West Indian intellectual formed very much in relation to France, with a French education, coming to Paris expecting to be accepted, who comes sharply up against metropolitan racism. And this is not just in how people treat him, but is actually in how they look at him. He sees himself being seen by a French child and his mother. And this look from the place of the other completely destroys him, because what it destroys is this false, what Fanon would call "depersonalized self," the colonial self which has been built up in imitation of the colonizer over many years. It fractures. I think what he's saying is that this is the only selfimage this young man has. So when the look shatters this self, there's nothing. He feels himself actually exploded from outside of himself. There is no autonomous self which is together that can confront this really.

(Frantz Fanon [BBC] 00:12:56-13:54)

The film continues with a quotation from "The Fact of Blackness," voiced by the actor playing Fanon, Colin Salmon, and then turns remarkable. The actor—shirtless, facing the camera but slightly askance from the viewer, framed in an institutional setting with vaguely Persian arches—concludes, "[A]nd there is a white song, a white song. All around me a whiteness that burns." As he says these words, the screen fades to an almost unbearable incandescent whiteness, while a weird, operatic white voice rises in volume to create a filmic "white song... that burns" (00:14:00–30). The blinding white dissolves, then cuts abruptly to

a reverse tracking shot of a white brain coral. This cinematic moment constitutes a synesthetic correlate to Bhabha's prose that is more textural than conceptual, in the same way that a filmic montage spliced from discrete snips of footage and combined with sound, voice-over, speed variation, motion, and other compositional elements creates an ensemble presentation rather than a linear narrative of thought or action. Robert Stam aptly describes Julien's work as "an audio-visual-textual dance of positionalities" and the director's relation to "high modernist" experimental filmmaking as "blasphemous," using a Bhabhalian word. He notes that Julien's films "avoid a dead-end anhedonia of a certain avant-garde." They "are intensely pleasurable; rather than merely including music, they are music. The films 'do' theory but in sensuous form."

After glossing Fanon's moment of clarity, Hall continues: "It's not black skin, white skin. So it's not just about racism. It's black skin, white mask. It's about the black man who has grown up wearing a white mask for himself" (Julien, Frantz Fanon [BBC] 00:14:52-15:03). The white coral reappears, now with two black hands caressing it, as if soothing the tired brain of a burning white thought process that has grown too hot for comfort (00:15:12-25). Julien then creates a depersonalized silhouette of the actor in shadow, haloed by white light. When we next see and hear Vergès, in profile, she is not speaking, and her voice-over describes a situation, acted on camera, in which an encounter with a white man is replaced by an encounter with a black man, who remains unfocused. She explains, "For Fanon, what he says is that the mirror, what in fact you see in the mirror, for a white person, the white discovers himself in the mirror. But then, at a moment of hallucination, the white man enters a moment of loss of reality, and what he sees is the other who threatens him" (00:15:25-50). In a dramatic cut, framed by music, that features Vergès making a full-frontal turn to the cam-

era and that shows her back reflected in a mirror, she declares, "He sees a black man." The film then turns to a trope: it shows a menacing black youth carrying a copy of Peau noire, masques blancs, the original French version of Black Skin, White Masks. In the midst of Vergès's commentary, we witness a tableau vivant of three women garbed in hijabs who turn solemnly toward the camera against a backdrop of an enormous gathering of people, presumably in Algeria on the eve of independence. Julien introduces a hint of color to the black-and-white scene. Hall says, "The racism appears in the field of vision" (00:15:50-56). Is the subtle color wash used over the blackand-white image a visual correlate of race? Stam comments, "[T]he film threads together a theorized orchestration of looks" that finally acts as antiracist resistance: "Here, racist discourse is ventriloquized in a kind of discursive masquerade." And, finally, the body of the colonized serves as a kind of ground zero for any possible misinterpretation of words. Stam remarks about Fanon, "The corporeal genesis of the interrogation itself implies a transcendence of the mind/body binarism."

Bhabha

In Bhabha's strong rereading of Fanon, the mute violence of the "racial epidermal schema" is a neurosis, a "constellation of delirium" that replicates in postcolonial London the colonial condition twenty-five years after Fanon wrote about Algeria (116). In Julien's film, Hall speaks movingly of creating a progressive black British political identity as an émigré from his Commonwealth origin in Jamaica, using a universal language of Marxism and worker solidarity (with appropriate French modification). Bhabha just as passionately denounces the "troubled conscience" of "ethnocentric little Englandism" he finds in the English Left, which makes empty gestures of solidarity toward the politics of race and sexuality (112). Fanon's contribution,

like Julien's, is to understand the disturbing presence of the racial other, "the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his actions at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being" and "turns on the idea of Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the 'otherness' of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (116). This "tethered shadow" is sufficient for the colonized to undermine colonial authority, re-membering this ghostly shadow in a corporeal politics of difference and disavowal as the bodily skin that disturbs the dialectic of racial misrecognition. In the director's cut of Julien's film, Bhabha serves as a visual icon of this disturbance, the presence of the colonial subject in the heart of the metropole, lending Julien's Fanon a further uncanny, haunting texture, a colored surface that voices without words, just as racial prejudice speaks through the skin without verbally articulating its negative message.

As mentioned, however, Bhabha is missing from the film that Julien released for the BBC. Whereas Bhabha was physically present in the director's cut but rendered mute and used visually to provide color--color that he was called on not to articulate but rather to embody-in the official version, this great writer and speaker ends up on the cuttingroom floor, his textured color now rendered too difficult, too troubled, or superfluous for the effect desired by the BBC. Nonetheless, this corporeal absence is articulation in Bhabha's schema. The ghost of Bhabha past significantly animates the official version of Julien's film. One would not wish to lean too heavily on the metaphor, yet Bhabha's absent presence in Julien's film, a film that seems to interpret Fanon directly through the Bhabha scenario, is a fitting vehicle for the message of absence that surrounds the myth of the Western subject, and by extension its creation of colonial others. Bhabha's absence, that is, leaves a trace, a shadow that flickers throughout Julien's

film, leaving flashes of insight and glimmers of incomprehension that mirror the deconstructionist and psychoanalytic theoretical paradigms used so centrally by Bhabha. By being absent from the visual mise-en-scène, Bhabha's presence pervades a world structured by absence as its organizing principle.

We must assume that Bhabha was intentionally cut from Julien's film; this cutting cannot be an acte manqué, or parapraxis, yet it is an excellent figure for a central (or oblique?) insight of Bhabha's that Bhabha would articulate nearly ten years later in his essay on Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, near the end of The Location of Culture. Dilating upon Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," Bhabha insists that the physical and social act of immigrant transition is at least if not more so an act of translation. For Benjamin, the crucial piece of translation was that which did not come across in the transfer between languages. Present in this resistance, according to Bhabha, was a "strange stillness that defines the present in which the very writing of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible" (Location 224).

In other words, the crucial piece of translation that does not get carried across the movement between languages is the presence of the original, yet in this absence we can sense the vanished present of what was, which we experience as writing, or the prelinguistic écriture that precedes signification as its condition of possibility. I believe this idea is what Bhabha's evocative language suggests in this passage, in which migrancy does not bring the culture of one place to that of another but rather creates something different from both in the in-betweenness connecting the two. I read this as the space of strong différance, the white space between letters that makes them intelligible, or the graphematic structure out of which language emerges for Ferdinand de Saussure. In this sense, to the degree that différance exists, it might be as much spatial or visual as audible or cognitive,

a translation Bhabha grasps in the migrant as a truly liminal figure: "the image of the new is iconic rather than enunciatory . . . " (227). Does he mean "the new is iconic" or "the image is iconic" (emphasis mine)? This curious phrase, redundant and ambiguous, demands close reading. An icon physically resembles what it stands for. The "image of the new" presumably refers to the physical appearance of the newly arrived metropolitan migrant. Of course the "image . . . is iconic"; how could it not be? Thus the migrant is precisely the "image of the new," the picture of itself, now newly "iconic," representative, in the new space of postcolonial black Britain. "The picture of itself" is exactly what it is and crucially different, the thing itself and its copy, "that problem of representation native to representation itself" (227). Must we pressure the word "native" here?

In either case, in his attempt to articulate différance for this new historical figure of the colonial returned to the metropole, Bhabha perhaps searches to name what Fanon called "national culture," famously described as the fluxive, emergent state of revolutionary consciousness, "the zone of occult instability where the people dwell" (qtd. in Location 227). I believe Bhabha wishes to appropriate Fanon's Algerian revolutionary national culture of 1960 for London's migrant culture of the 1980s. Rather than Fanon's "zone of occult instability," Bhabha finds the absence, reiterability, and différance where, in Saussure's schema, writing overdetermines speech as its precondition. How the overdetermination of writing enables revolutionary action remains somewhat undertheorized, even as the liberatory promise of deconstruction today seems somewhat overstated.

Ten years after his essay on Fanon, in one of the newer sections of *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha found Fanon's "zone of occult instability" in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, in the dream city of Ellowen Deeowen (London), where the translation of Saladin

Chamcha from fictional character to satanic he-goat seems like a revolutionary moment. Well and good; many situations are revolutionary if handled properly.

Stam offers a sober gloss, admirable for its clarity, on Fanon's stages of consciousness in national culture:

For Fanon the revolution mobilizes popular identification. . . . National revolution promotes in the colonized a massive transfer of allegiance away from the metropole as introjected ideal ego. Even Fanon's celebrated "three phases" turn on the issue of identification. In the first phase (colonized assimilation), the colonized identify with the paternalistic colonizing power; in the second phase (nativist authenticity), they identify with an idealized myth of origin as a kind of Ur-Mother or Ur-Father; and in the third phase (revolutionary syncretism), they identify with a collective future shaped by popular desire.

In The Location of Culture, Bhabha continues his Derridean rumination on revolution in another time and place, shorn of lawyers, guns, and money. I take the following as Bhabha's selective revision of Fanon's concept: "I am more engaged with the 'foreign' element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the 'unstable element of linkage,' the indeterminate element of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which 'newness comes into the world' (227).

What then are we to make of Fanon's conclusion to his celebrated passage on "occult instability," in which Fanon poetically exults, "[I]t is there that our souls are crystallized and that our perceptions and our lives are transfused with light" (227)?

In short, I find Julien's film to successfully embody the "folds and wrinkles" Bhabha seeks and in this sense to be an even more accurate conveyor of signification than Bhaba's prose. Perhaps by leaving Bhabha out,

Julien better let him in, a "strange stillness" left on the cutting-room floor.

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