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The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation
Edited by Alan Read. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London,
Bay Press, Seattle, 1996

(Contributors to the book: Homi K Bhabha, Bell Hooks, Stuart Hall, Lola Young, Kobena Mercer, Françoise Vergès, Renée Green, Isaac Julien, Raoul Peck, Marc Latamie, Lyle Ashton Harris, Ntozake Shange, Mark Nash, Martine Attille, and Steve McQueen.)

Book Review by Julian J. Samuel – ‘Ignoring the role of violence in Fanon: playing with the bones of an exhumed hero’

Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique in 1925, studied psychiatry in France, went to Algeria to head a hospital at Blida where he joined the struggle for Algerian liberation. He wrote about colonialism and the struggle against it from a point of view that tried to understand violence and its role in de-colonialization. Fanon died in 1961 at the age of 36. Many Third World political and intellectual leaders have studied *The Wretched of the Earth*, which has been translated into many languages including Urdu, (now a native language of England); and, into Farsi, by Dr. Ali Shari'ati, a major influence on the Iranian revolution of 1979.

"To wreck the colonial world is henceforth a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitute the colonized people." (The Wretched of the Earth, Grove Press Edition, 1963 pp.40-41)

"...colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence."
(The Wretched of the Earth, p. 61)

Algeria's resistance to external and internal imperialism persists decade after decade. When did it all start? Did it start with the surrender of Abd-el-Kadar in 1847? Or with French orchestrated massacre at Setif in 1945, when according to President Bourguiba of Tunisia, upwards of 45,000 people were killed? Or does it start with the war of liberation itself (1954-62), in which one million Algerians were killed, and an additional 3000 politically related deaths ensued in metropolitan France?

Fanon's acts are inseparable from the Algerian war against the French. So, does a possible '90s interpretation of Fanon's thinking start with Alan Read's book? No. Why? Because most of its contributors put profound emphasis on dull '80s style sexual politics seen through Fanon's thrilling and naïve 'Black Skin White Masks,' (1952).

The professors and artists in this book are benightedly disconnected from the many guerrilla movements transpiring throughout the world. Read's contributors do not discuss the tactical violence that the Front de Libération Nationale (F.L.N.) offered French civility. Alan Read keeps the issue of armed struggle out of a study of Fanon. It is impossible to discuss Fanon without discussing the many violence-laden Algerias today, and to read Fanon in terms of the mere sexual-political trend is futile.

The Fact of Blackness records a dialogue that took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London via an exhibition: 'Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire,' -- preceded by a conference: "Working with Fanon: Contemporary Politics and Cultural Reflection' (1995). The conference was sponsored by Toshiba.

Read's effort consists of the work of university professors, some visual artists and filmmakers who have made career improvements by injecting their work with the glorious auras of political activism via a "re-thinking" of the earlier Fanon. When reading the book I wonder whether these anti-colonialists are doing nothing but maintaining the status quo. Do they offer anything on the many imperialist machines ravaging the Third World? No. Do they show any interest in front-line struggles within the West (IRA), or, for example, in Latin America (MRTA)? No, not at all. Instead, I hear them whispering: I am stuck in a dreamy utopian class-struggle oriented Marxism without the requisite gay and lesbian 'activism'. They just offer uglily written "Theory."

A short note on the current state of cultural studies is appropriate. The emptying of the activist politics from Fanon's works means, of course, that there will be plenty of "committed" yet sloppy thinking. Much of cultural studies is complacent, and careless, these days. Read's work reminds me of the recent Sokal affair. A physics professor at NYU submitted a bogus cultural studies style essay to *Social Text*, a leading journal in that field. Sokal was trying to prove that cultural studies professors have not any rigour.

Andrew Ross and the editors of the journal rushed to publish the essay: they were now going to have a physicist "doing" cultural studies in their pages. This would make them look cutting-edge. As soon as his paper was published, Professor Sokal publicly exposed the whole set-up. [For an exhilarating discussion of the inherent and utter falsity of cultural studies postmodernists, please see Paul Boghossian's comment in the 13 December, 1996 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*].

Read's collection is a clear example of hazy and complacent "Theory" that so resembles the Sokal set-up. Stuart Hall, the king of cultural studies in the United Kingdom, who does not make the same Rolls-Royce-level salary as his anti-colonialist counter parts in America, writes so "Theoretically" that the word, incomprehension, does not describe the

experience of "Reading" him. With clockwork regularity he gives nods of approval to the beacons of Eurocivility: Hegel, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and the requisite others are noted, and foot-noted, incessantly. I presume, he thinks that these European intellectuals are crucial to political action. Hall's introductory essay gives the impression of someone who is willing to use philosophical references to impress the naive. Action is what counts. Otherwise, why study Fanon? Why not just study Baudrillard and fall fast asleep? With unbridled erudition Hall informs us:

"Let us put it simplistically ...For, if this text is 'where Lacan makes his interruption into colonial discourse theory', as Gates asserts, it is also where Fanon 'reads' Lacan in the light of his own preoccupations. In the long footnote on the 'mirror phase', it is Fanon's appropriation of Lacan which strikes us most vividly. First, the 'Other' in this transaction is raced: ('...the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely'). It is difficult not to agree that he writes here as if 'the real Other' is indeed 'a fixed phenomenological point'." pp. 26

Fortunately, this swishy stylistic complexity is far outdone by Homi Bhabha, who sometimes does do good work, I think. However, in Read's book, Bhabha constructs sentences that are so magnificent that one has to appreciate them as ink marks on the page, as a kind of finger painting in minutiae. Listen to this unadulterated Gayatri-Chakravorty-Spivakese:

"Fanonian 'continuance' is the temporality of the practice of action: its performativity or agency is constituted by its emphasis on the singularity of the 'local': an iterative structuring of the historical event and political pedagogy and an ethical sense constructed from truths that are partial, limited, unstable. Fanon's dialectic of the everyday is, most significantly, the emergency of a new historical and theoretical temporality generated by the process of revolutionary transience and transformation." pp. 190

Bhabha implies that complex-sounding prose is needed to interpret and understand Fanon. Clarity, brevity, and historical analysis are not needed

This book is born of a massive pre-Oedipal-post-Foucaultian-pre-Hegelian-Electra-inferiority-complex in the contributor's attempts to out do the colonial masters at the game of words, and not at the game of gaining political ground. Western "radicals," argues Michael Neumann in 'What's Left: Radical Politics and the Radical Psyche,' (1988) are addicted to "Theory" and not to political success. To actually engage in projects that make political gains is a fate worse than death.

Read's contributors offer attacks on Fanon's correctable homophobia, misogyny, and sexism. Moreover, these charges are made without fair reference to historical context, and are amplified to drown out Fanon's understanding of violence. Violence is the only thing the masters listen to. Nothing else. But political violence may not be a good

companion to cultural and sexual politics; indeed, it may be bad to support it when trying to become a tenured high priest of cultural studies.

Here is the thinking of the completely delirious American bell hooks -- another super-salaried anti-colonialist:

"In love. I was thinking a lot about the place of empathy in any kind of ethic of care and the notion that part of how one embraces that larger you - that you that Fanon uses - is through the capacity to embrace the other in some way. What does it mean if Fanon is unable to embrace the black female -- what part of himself remains unembraced? How does the possibility of love or an ethic of care chart the path to this humanism that he poses as redemptive?" pp. 106

Are these consequential and serious psychological insights? Is there anything at all to be gained from "thinking" about bell hook's words? No. (This passage reminds me of the smell of an epoch when people used to smear on patchouli oil). Need one really embrace questions of academic freedom of speech and tenure? These passages offer sufficient proof that activists who have anything contestory to say are not permitted anywhere near the university or art institutions. Tenure protects complacent luminaries.

Read's book is a quintessential dead end. There is no human liberation here. It begins where Fanon began, not where Fanon left off. It is boring to see sloppy professors and artists toying with Fanon's bones in the old-fashioned world of sexual politics, and in the wordy flatulence of "Theory" devoted to more "Theory" and to more "Theory".

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