theories and methodologies

Framed in Black

KEITH P. FELDMAN

I'VE HAD NINA SIMONE'S "SINNERMAN" ON REPEAT FOR MONTHS. THE PROPULSIVE FORCE OF SIMONE'S 1965 LIVE VERSION OF THIS GOSPEL song drives its ten-minute ferocity straight into the contemporary American zeitgeist. As she tells her audience in the lead-up to a lesser-known performance of the song, recorded in 1961, Simone learned "Sinnerman" when she was a "little bitty girl in revival meetings. It happened when my mother and lots more like her tried to save souls." The song's judgment-day tale of redemption's refusal is told doubly, both by the sinner—"I cried rock / don't you see I need you, rock"—and by those from whom the sinner begs, if not forgiveness, then simply some measure of mercy from the divine justice to come: "Oh sinnerman, where you gonna run to?" The break in the middle of the 1965 recording strips the song down to Simone's handclaps on the second and fourth beats. All that remains is the tenuous intensity of the time neither of redemption nor of damnation but merely of "accompaniment" in the in-between (Tomlinson and Lipsitz). Called forth from that time, in all of Simone's live recordings, and missing from those of Les Baxter or the Weavers just a few years earlier, comes the insurgent cry for "Power!" over and over, to the point of near exhaustion.

Nina Simone's "Sinnerman," I submit, instructively refuses both salvation and damnation. In between the two, the song enunciates power as an iterated capacity (Gilmore), a cry that in 1965 had white supremacy on the run, black freedom on the rise, and no one getting off easy. The song's cry emerges from holding together what we might think of as the elongated and enduring "time of slavery" between what Saidiya Hartman calls "the 'no longer' and the 'not yet'" (770). In this sense, the cry's possibility materializes out of a double refusal—neither save nor damn—that frames what we might call, following Fred Moten's keystone formulation of a black radical aesthetic, the break.

To hear Simone's song in this way invites us to engage *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha's canonical work of postcolonial

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s Little did I know that in foreshortening my sense of the text I had missed how analytics crucial to my work—blackness, relationality, and incommensurability, among them—were thematized across Bhabha's project. Elsewhere I survey how relational approaches to blackness taken up in ethnic studies and comparative literature proffer revelatory scaffolds for thinking the incommensurable and the interconnected ("On Relationality"). Here I inquire into the salience of black thought for Bhabha's formulation of a postcolonial modernity. In so doing, I hear the double refusal and empowering accompaniment of "Sinnerman" as inviting a nonredemptive rereading of these formulations of blackness that frame *The Location of Culture*.

Bhabha urges us in the book's opening pages to "look for the join" (25). In a modest, genealogical sense, the join is where we situate the text in the flows that constitute the formation of our thought, where it connects to relevant modalities of scholarly intellection. More substantively, the join, as Bhabha recalls from Toni Morrison's neo–slave narrative *Beloved*, is the portal through which the ghost of slavery becomes enfleshed—the apparitions of middle passage, fugitive infanticide, and transhistorical trauma apprehended therein. The join is a gateway through which slavery's death worlds come to haunt the present's differential dispensation of social life and human value and the disruptions of national belonging, progress narratives, and liberal conceptions of freedom such hauntings never cease to enact. *The Location of Culture*'s opening gambit demands that we engage Bhabha's elaboration of postcolonial theorizing through its formulation of slavery's enduring afterlives.

From a site permanently haunted by, and hence connected to, the world-ordering episteme Bhabha frequently refers to as "slavery and colonialism" and the historical subjects he calls "the subaltern and ex-slaves," Bhabha renders the join as elucidating a "desire for

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social solidarity" (27). Such a desire surely persists in the present, as do the numerous configurations of sublimity. In recent decades, however, scholars have troubled the text's underelaborated equations of these conjunctive formulations, the assumptive singularity of the episteme it purports to name, and the subject it calls forth. For Malini Johar Schueller, the text's instrumentalization and enfolding of African American cultural expression into a theory of postcoloniality does as much to obscure as it does to illuminate the incommensurability of and the material interconnections between slavery and colonialism (33–52). While slavery and colonialism are distinct formations, as Kenneth Mostern argues, Bhabha's conjunction is better understood as the "*post*slavery and *post*-colonial experience[s] of the educated middle classes," which "are in many ways quite the same" (72). Wary of erasing distinctions between highly differentiated social structures and historical processes, critical ethnic studies scholars draw on a range of materialist traditions to complexify, compare, and interrelate these (and other) epochal forms of domination and the agencies that operate through them. One notable example close to the heart of *The Location of Culture*'s intellectual milieu, yet obscured by its argument, is Stuart Hall's substantive 1980 intervention, which theorizes the racial capitalist state as a "complex structure," wherein differentiated capitalist modes of production are historically articulated across global cartographies of empire, slavery, and colonialism ("Race" 38). The contingent conjuncture of these modes is understood analytically as a complex unity structured by differentiated forms of exploitation, dispossession, domination, and incorporation. Extending from this line of thought is Hall's later antifoundationalist theory of diaspora—one more forthrightly engaged in *The Location of Culture*—which fashions an interconnected practice of unity in difference capable of opposing purist forms of settler nationalism, naming instead the many trajectories that animate through their difference transnational practices of cultural identity ("Cultural Identity").

The nonreductionist emphasis of Hall's Marxian cultural theory denaturalizes the forms that organize our social worlds by rendering provisional the material forces that bring such worlds into being. At the same time, leveraging the "minus in the origin" (Bhabha, *Location* 222), whose traces are left behind by signification's absenting of that which is not said, points to the "play" inherent in a social structure's signifying regime, as Derrida long ago argued ("Structure"). This leveraging destabilizes a social structure's frame of reference by surfacing into thought its necessary supplement—that which has been silenced, obscured, refused, and absented. This supplement ostensibly provides the warrant to recover history, give voice, generate visibility, proffer affirmation, and claim presence. But, as Bhabha argues (in accord with Hall), plenitudes such as these, when we situate them historically, often smuggle in identitarian investments in subjective regulation, nationally constituted gender and sexual normativities, and colonial desires for recognition. They carry the violence of their rendering, the fleshy scars and scrapes of a world wrought from raciality writ large and from racial capitalism specifically. Reversal of an order without its displacement cannot "provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions [the reversal] criticizes" (Derrida, "Signature" 21).

We find in *The Location of Culture* the coupling of reversal and displacement in the deconstructive impulse of Bhabha's notion of cultural difference, a concept that, in part, seeks to rub liberal multiculturalism the wrong way. If liberal multiculturalism syphons difference into the regulative containers of capital accumulation, nationalist assimilation, or parochial identitarianism (Melamed 26–39), the analytic of cultural

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difference registers minoritarian knowledges that are "adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical" (Bhabha, *Location* 234). Such knowledges carry "political and discursive strategies where adding to does not add up" (232–33). This is cultural difference's defense against the incorporative modalities of liberal multiculturalism.

Bhabha likewise fashions the concept of cultural difference through his sustained engagement with Frantz Fanon's much-debated essay "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks* first translated into English as "The Fact of Blackness."[1] The concluding chapter of *The Location of Culture* begins with a searing line from Fanon's essay—"'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'"—and takes this moment in Fanon's thought as the chapter's point of departure:

> Whenever these words are said in anger or in hate, whether of the Jew in that *estaminet* in Antwerp, or of the Palestinian on the West Bank, or the Zairian student eking out a wretched existence selling fake fetishes on the Left Bank; whether they are said of the body of woman or the man of color; whether they are quasi-officially spoken in South Africa or officially prohibited in London or New York, but inscribed nevertheless in the severe staging of the statistics of educational performance and crime, visa violations, immigration irregularities; whenever "Dirty nigger!" or, "Look, a Negro!" is not said at all, but you can see it in a gaze, or hear it in the solecism of a still silence; whenever and wherever I am when I hear a racist, or catch his look, I am reminded of Fanon's evocatory essay. . . . (338–39)

Bhabha poetically unfurls Fanon's iconic moment of racial-colonial interpellation across what he calls "a number of culturally contradictory and discursively estranged locations" (340). In doing so, he formulates not so much the mutability of a particular phenomenon called "the historicity of the black man" as the general "temporality of modernity" within which "the figure of the 'human' comes to be authorized." This distension of time lays the groundwork for Bhabha's argument that Fanon yields generalizable insights into the lived experience of "the marginalized, the displaced, the diasporic" (339). This paratactic triad echoes in an order of abstraction the world-belting litany quoted above. It also repeats the opening gesture of the chapter in *The Location of Culture* titled "DissemiNation," which performatively enunciates the "gatherings of exiles and emigrés and refugees" and crescendos to Bhabha's evocative citation of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry: "where should the birds fly after the last sky" (199, 200). A similar formulation jump-starts the chapter "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern." Here Bhabha claims that it is "[f]rom those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (246); likewise, the "transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation—makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification" (247). The paratactically unraveled skein of loss and dispersal marks the domain from which to glimpse what Bhabha names "postcolonial modernity." Yet such unraveling risks concept collapse, evaporating into the poetics of cultural difference the incommensurable and interrelated historical forces that have not only produced these variegated forms of loss but also given rise to distinct antiracist, anticolonial, and anticapitalist movements and the modalities of thinking, knowing, and relating such movements have sustained (Ahmad; Hardt and Negri).

Perhaps Bhabha's poetic litany evidences one aspect of Said's "traveling theory" ("Traveling Theory"), where between the then and there of Fanon's insurgent theorization and the here and now of our contemporary scholarly elaboration are mediating forces of

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incorporation and domestication that require their own critical account. At the same time, the deterritorialization that Bhabha's litany pursues runs counter to the ways Fanon's essay has been mobilized in recent years. This demonstrates another dimension of traveling theory: in theory's transit across what Said later calls "locales, sites, situations for theory," we can grasp its "fiery core" reigniting ("Traveling Theory Reconsidered" 452). For instance, the theory of sociogeny Fanon's essay elaborates intervenes in the science of racialized embodiment and thingification (Browne); in the ordering of coloniality's social formation as foundationally imbued with gendered and sexualized modes of antiblackness and their associated neuroses (Weheliye); and in shaping the visualizing assemblage of the United States homeland-security state (Feldman, "Empire's Verticality").

At the same time, Bhabha turns to Fanon's argument to reverse and displace the authority of a form of colonial visuality predicated on the interpellation of the *damnés* in white supremacy's scopic regime.[2] This turn initiates what Bhabha calls "a relation that is differential and strategic rather than originary, ambivalent rather than accumulative, doubling rather than dialectical" (*Location* 79). Recasting differentiation, doubling, and ambivalence out of Fanon's Manichaeanism invites us to look for the play in the joints that provide structures like colonialism and settler colonialism, if not their historical materiality, then at least their mutability and movement. *Coloniality* names a structured modality of power forged in the crucible of European conquest that persistently exceeds the spatiotemporal scene of formalized colonial administration. It enables a critique of the forms of sovereignty and self-determination encoded in the modern nation-state; of the nation-state's operative categories of sovereignty, law, citizenship, labor, and belonging; and of the practices of signification that fill such categories with texture and meaning (Quijano). Coloniality's forms materialize in the "patternings, shapes, and arrangements" (Levine 13) of race (Maldonado-Torres) and gender (Lugones), two interlocking engines whose catalytic converter is the definition and hierarchization of the *anthropos* (Wynter). Similarly, insights into the formal arrangements of settler states warrant a foundational structural analysis. Following Patrick Wolfe, for instance, settlerism can be understood as predicated on a foundational logic wherein "invasion is a structure not an event" (388). The perpetual insertion of a break into the relation between peoples and their lands converts indigenous peoples' modalities of sovereignty, relationality, and life worlds into forms of racial difference that lubricate the embodied, epistemic, and historical transfer of people and the enclosure of their lands. Systematic settler colonization thus facilitates capital accumulation, a permanent feature of capitalism's generation of surplus value (Goldstein).

The question that arises here is not about whether Bhabha's act of poststructuralist distension is empirically, analytically, or ethically right or wrong, or for that matter whether subsequent readers of Fanon are right or wrong in their refashioning of specific kinds of structural accounts. What's notable, rather, is the persistent generativity of Fanon's conceptualization of blackness and relationality as it moves into and out of particular moments of cultural theory, touching down mercurially in *The Location of Culture* and then returning radically reconfigured in recent scholarship.

If Fanon's scene of racial-colonial interpellation is one way in which blackness frames *The Location of Culture*, the crosscutting of the temporal and the historical is another. Bhabha names this crosscutting the "time-lag." The time-lag is the persistent disruption of liberal modernity's assumptive telos by postcoloniality, a permanent pathogen that refuses the rationalizing enclosures of a progressive historicity. It holds open the

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time of the breach that marks the permanent cut of diaspora in order to "keep . . . alive the making of the past" (364). Bhabha turns to Fanon's formulation of "blackness as belatedness" as one way to understand the time-lag (Bhabha, *Location* 340). But just as important are the content and context of black cultural production in the United States, even if the stakes of that specificity are obscured by the arc of Bhabha's argument. The book opens with a reading of the site-specific installation *Sites of Genealogy*, by the black artist Renée Green, and soon after turns to *Beloved*'s apparition of chattel slavery in the United States as unhomely inhabitation. *Beloved*'s ghost returns in the concluding paragraphs of Bhabha's book, here through the eyes of Ella—who organizes the novel's black Cincinnati community in the collective exorcism of slave memory. Bhabha also turns to the black arts poet Sonia Sanchez, whose writing shifts subtly between "what might have been" and "what could have been," a distinction on which Bhabha seizes in the book's final pages to mark the time-lag between the "conditions of an obscene past" and the "conditionality of a new birth" (363). Black cultural production emerges in these key examples as expressions of cultural difference to give texture and substance to postcolonial modernity's historicity.

It should come as no surprise, then, that *The Location of Culture*'s last citation is from W. E. B. Du Bois. Commentary from Bhabha's interlocutors regarding Du Bois's place in the text is seemingly as rare as commentary on Fanon's centrality is common. What ought we to make of it? Bhabha cites the words of the towering black scholar-activist from the culmination of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of swift and slow in human doing, and the limits of human perfectibility, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science" (qtd. in Bhabha, *Location* 366). At the turn of the last century, as Aldon Morris explains, Du Bois was already in the midst of organizing an approach to sociology whose guiding principles challenged the governing episteme of the time by foregrounding the then radical hypothesis that sociological and economic factors, not a purported black genetic or cultural inferiority, explained racial inequality in the United States (58). Du Bois conducted methodologically heterodox community studies to explore such factors, and they informed his rearticulation of race toward more egalitarian ends. The honing of double consciousness that Du Bois placed at the heart of these principles (and that Bhabha likewise indexes), comes to enunciate a profound sociological imagination, one that, as Avery Gordon notes, "approaches our gravest social problems from the 'second sight' of 'being' the problem itself and thereby confounding, in that very moment, the boundary between subject and object" (211). By troubling the white-supremacist foundations of the racial episteme in the United States, Du Bois announces what Nahum Chandler calls a form of "mutuality in difference" whose relationality "mak[es] tremble . . . the logic of being" (8, 9). In "The Sorrow Songs," the chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* on which Bhabha draws, Du Bois explains the "haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (154–55). They are, he suggests, the quintessential American form of song, an expression of "despair," "hope," and "faith in the ultimate justice of things"—a gift "to this nation in blood-brotherhood" (162).

For Bhabha the rhythm and silences of these songs break into the present, conjuring a nonprogressivist futurity by "making alive the past." Such a conjuring was, for Du Bois at the turn of the last century, predicated on a radical claim to black inclusion in an American "kingdom of culture," an adjunct to the sociological project of understanding black life in all its heterogeneity, in the hopes that scientific knowledge could disrupt white supremacy's dehumanizing field of vision. Yet in the

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first decades of that century, Du Bois's knowledge projects would begin to shift along with the shifting modalities of racial and imperial violence in the United States. By World War I, Du Bois foregrounded the interconnections among industrial capitalism, American militarism, and white supremacy in the crucible of the St. Louis race riots (*Darkwater*). By the interwar period, Du Bois was not only, in *Dark Princess* (1929), crafting the romance of an Afro-Asian internationalism in novel form (a project Bhabha explores in "The Black Savant and the Dark Princess"); he was also writing a groundbreaking historical-materialist account of the role that black people played during the Civil War and Reconstruction whose searing vision of abolition democracy accorded a degree of agency to the enslaved that far exceeded what liberal political reason otherwise made available (*Black Reconstruction*).

The historicity of blackness Du Bois fashions in these later works plainly surpasses the narrative protocols of national emancipation and legal incorporation in the United States. The abstract forms of equality enacted through the United States government could not redress racialized degradation—the patternings of capture, confinement, and commodification that were the plantation economy's violent invention. Indeed, the other side of law's failure at dispensing freedom is its ongoing capacity to legitimate state violence in race's transit across time and space (Reddy). In a more limited sense, Du Bois's engagement with and enactment of the black radical tradition also exceeds *The Location of Culture*'s conceptualization of postcolonial modernity. Du Bois's later, materialist accounts of racial capitalism's global and local dynamism as a "complexly articulated structure" run against the grain of his earlier formulation of racial slavery in *The Souls of Black Folk* as primarily an apparition haunting both American "blood-brotherhood" and, it stands to reason, the postcolonial analytic of the time-lag that Bhabha generates from it.

That critical aspects of Du Bois's thought are incommensurate with Bhabha's formulation of postcolonial modernity does not warrant shelving either *The Souls of Black Folk* or *The Location of Culture*. The presence of this early slice of Du Bois's vast oeuvre in one of postcolonial studies' programmatic texts signals the persistence of black thought in unlikely scholarly formations. That its presence could be obscured by our disciplinary predilections indexes our bracketing of what's meant to be thought in a field and what unwittingly falls outside its frame. If Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" has taught me anything, it is the ongoing need to listen for the ways black thought "transform[s] our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical" (Bhabha, *Location* 367).

Notes

1. Marriott provides an incisive commentary on the debate over Fanon's essay.

2. The original, French title of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* is *Les damnés de la terre*.

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