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Tangled Legacies

The *autos* of biography

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What is the measure of an illustrious life, what is its legacy? Does a biography begin at the point of birth and conclude with one's death, or does it take on a life of its own? Consider an example that has enjoyed recent salience: the year 2002 marked the birth centennial of the celebrated African-American poet Langston Hughes, who died in 1967. On this commemorative occasion, evaluations of his life and his legacy – some recycled, some fresh – were advanced, debates about his relevance 'outside the race' for literary modernism revisited. Some thirty-five years after his demise, both the man's life and his *oeuvre* remain amenable to constant interpretation and assessment—an openness underscoring the remarkable iterability that is a characteristic of chronicles of famous lives.

In this article, I offer elaborations on – and tease out the connections between – a series of insights that already inform contemporary understanding of the genre of history-writing we call *biography*. I may as well disclose my 'punchline' at the very outset: every biography contains the trace of an autobiography. To put it another way, to the extent that the subject of a biography constitutes a sign of its author's predilections, interests and even desires, the biography always, already signals an autobiographical impulse. Here, I will draw on two biographical texts that self-reflexively foreground this *intersubjective* tendency through a wilful slippage: the subject of biography is displaced on to, even makes way for, the *autos* or self of autobiography. The texts in question are two documentary films by the black British film-maker Isaac Julien: *Looking for Langston* (1988) and *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1996).

The first film, shot in brilliant black and white reminiscent of *noir* style, is ostensibly about Langston Hughes (1902–1967) – an elusive character, known both for his good looks and his remoteness; however, it turns into a poetic meditation on 1920s Harlem and an excavation and celebration of gay subcultures in African-American urban life. Beginning at a wake, the film launches us into a shimmering dreamscape of jazz bars and speakeasies, meadows and gardens, city streets and cultural soirées. The second work explores the life and legacy of the Martinique-born theorist and prophet of decolonization, Frantz Fanon (1925–1961); it too extends in unexpected directions, following trajectories set by contemporary feminist and queer theorists. Both films derive their intensity and expressive strength from a host

of formal strategies that include fluid camera movement and editing, vivid tableau compositions and stylized performances, reminding us of the experimental, lyrical films of Jean Cocteau; it is precisely the same features that rule out easy description or summation.

Much has been written about these two films, with some of the most articulate exegesis coming from the film-maker and his associates (Fusco 1990; Julien and Mercer 2000; Julien and Nash 2000). I am going to focus only on those features that press upon the very idea of biography, complicating and extending it. In the course of such reformulation, the related categories of the bio-pic, documentary, author, subjectivity, agency and, finally, historiography also exceed their standard definitions. Through an investigation of the form of historiography that is focused most intensely on individual personalities, I want to bring out the dialogic connection between the *personal* and *social* dimensions of the production of history.

The bio-pic as a postmodern genre

Of late, the bio-pic has been enjoying a remarkable resurgence, with the release of high-profile films such as *Erin Brokovich* (2000) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001). Not that it was ever a genre relegated to the peripheries of cinema: one need only remember the critical and commercial success of *Gandhi* (1982) and *Amadeus* (1984), and the discursive enigma called *X* (1992). What interests me about the more recent films is that they are about living figures: thus they lead to a collapse of the distance afforded by the death of the protagonist, a distance that was once seen to ensure both reverence and objectivity. Suddenly 'game theory' is an integral part of popular parlance, and the internet chat rooms are rife with gossip about the private life of its progenitor, Nobel laureate John Nash; a feisty paralegal becomes a ubiquitous celebrity, appearing in award shows and public announcement spots on television.

This attrition of reverential distance is in keeping with the simultaneously heightened voyeurism and exhibitionism that mark our present conjuncture: on the one hand, we cannot get enough of the intimate details of others' lives; on the other hand, we are willing and able to display ourselves, to bare the most private aspects of our existence.¹ What Jean Baudrillard (1983) calls the postmodern obscenity of 'the all too visible' – the confessional mode of television talk shows, the immense popularity of 'reality shows' and the sustained presence of print biographies on various best-seller lists – may be seen as a democratization of sorts, a levelling of the historical field. Powerful agents of history, the standard subjects of biography, are presented in terms not only of their Olympian achievements but also their vulnerabilities. The

seemingly insignificant multitudes wrest a sense, however fragile, of agency and empowerment through their representation in the media, through bearing witness to their own struggles and concerns. Of course, charges of manipulation and exploitation associated with various fora in the popular media rule out any unproblematic celebration of such media democratization; one need only think back to the controversies surrounding the highly orchestrated element of ‘surprise’ on various talk shows helmed by, among others, Jenny Jones (a straight man murdered a gay man, citing his ‘public humiliation’ following the latter’s confession of his feelings for the former on the show) and Jerry Springer (a programme marked by bitter showdowns and frequent fisticuffs). In fact, I hope to demonstrate that the two Julien films advance a rather different, transformative notion of articulating the legacies of exemplary historical figures and the popular in order to envision a more utopian future.

Nevertheless, both popular media’s ‘lowbrow’ engagement with the past and Julien’s decidedly ‘art house’ sensibilities and strategies share a common terrain: that of postmodern historiography. In this epistemological terrain the criterion of objectivity, once a staple requirement of all serious pursuit of knowledge, is transformed so radically that it is rendered unrecognizable. The subjective, the ideological, the expressive now appear at the core of the so-called objective: desire becomes the motor of knowledge production, not just in the sense of ‘the desire to know’ but also in the sense of ‘the desire to desire’. Historiographic narration is identified precisely as that – yet another kind of narration with its own protagonists, motivations, emplotment and rhetorical conventions.²

George Custen (1992) has analysed the bio-pic as a narrative form and has identified its generic codes and conventions. I am more interested in the ways in which exemplary lives are turned into the substance of popular desires and fantasies. In other words, what is the legacy of a biographical subject, and how is it deployed to make sense of the past from the vantage point of the present, perhaps with an eye to the future? How do these figures become both our heroes and parts of our daily lives through a complex web of idealization and identification? In particular, how does the interested *autos* or self come to infiltrate, or get imbricated with, the remote subject of biography?

A new paradigm of biography

In thinking through the vexed question of the fascist appropriation of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida refuses to either accept that the ‘Nazi orchestration of the Nietzschean reference’ was the only possible interpretation of the philosopher’s work, or claim that ‘Nietzsche never wanted that or thought

that, he would have vomited it up, or he didn't intend it in that manner, he didn't hear it with that ear' (Derrida 1985: 28). At stake here is our understanding of Nietzsche's legacy – a complex issue, since it is the name and the work associated with the name that outlives the living, and therefore remains available to appropriation by others even beyond death, irrespective of the person's intent.

Nietzsche died as always *before* his name and therefore it is not a question of knowing what he would have thought, wanted, or done. . . . [T]he effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its 'truth,' to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or even its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory.

(28–9)

What is the relationship between the empirical fact of an individual life, and the work produced during that life, between the 'body' and the 'corpus'? There is no privileged approach, no predetermined strategy of reading that can ensure a 'proper' interpretation of the corpus isolated from the life-world, since there is no immanent meaning to begin with. Nor is it enough to dwell on the life alone, on 'empirical-genetic readings' external to the written work. The borderline between the two bodies – the body of the historical agent and the corpus of work – is a potent field of meaning waiting to be mined. In other words, the life and the work of the subject must be put into dialogue by all future interpreters. The notion of 'Nietzsche's legacy' takes concrete form only when a reader keenly listens and responds to his words that are addressed to all future, potential readers – that is, when someone bears witness to his work. It is as if the reader has to countersign the Nietzschean text, just as one validates a cheque or document.³ Thus Nietzsche's legacy comes to bear his signature only in the future, only through his reader's interpretive efforts. Hence the legacy of Nietzsche remains open and available for continuous interpretation and appropriation.

If we are to jettison standard notions of immanent textual meaning, the proper name and the signature, what do we have left of the biographical form? If the legacy of an exceptional historical figure is to be determined by all posterity, by 'the ear of the other', what relationship can we sustain between the biological and the biographical? Derrida writes:

We no longer consider the biography of a 'philosopher' as a corpus of empirical accidents that leaves both a name and a signature outside a system which would itself be offered up to an immanent philosophical reading. . . . [B]iographical novels or psychobiographies claim that, by following empirical procedures of the psychologistic – at times even psychoanalytic – historicist, or sociologistic type, one can give an account of the genesis of the philosophical system. We say no to this because a new problematic of the biographical in general and of the

biography of philosophers in particular must mobilize other resources, including, at the very least, a new analysis of the proper name and the signature.

(1985: 5)

Such an analysis of the proper name and the signature explodes, as we have seen above, the mythic autonomy of the exemplary subject of history. This subject – usually embodied in the figure of the author, the artist, the scientist, the leader or the philosopher – is no longer romanticized as an autonomous genius working in isolation: indeed, such romanticization erases the specific social forces and structures that are the conditions of possibility of any agency.

A ‘new problematic of the biographical’ must dismantle the myth of autonomy and unified consciousness, and attempt to explain the exceptional nature of the biographical subject as the overdetermined outcome of contingent, determinate factors. Such a new problematic also has to acknowledge the biographical process itself as part of a politics of the proper name. As Michel Foucault would perhaps put it, in invoking the name of its privileged protagonist, the biographical constitutes an exercise of power: it *authorizes* – assigns a certain value to – his or her work. Moreover, inasmuch as the biographer attempts to produce an *interested* reading of the life and corpus of the protagonist, to delineate his or her legacy, every biography is an instance of both *witnessing* and *appropriation*. This tactical dimension, which standard ‘psychobiographies’ elide either unconsciously or wilfully, must be disclosed within, and even made central to, a reformulated problematic of the biographical. As I hope to demonstrate below, eschewing well-rounded characterization and interiority, Isaac Julien’s bio-pics perform just such an operation: in these highly reflexive works, ‘Hughes’ and ‘Fanon’ emerge as open signs.

‘Documentary is/not a name’

Bio-pics engage in creative acts of narration: they are at liberty to select and embellish in the service of enigma, drama and fantasy, and hence remain open to charges of distortion of history. Documentaries, in contrast, belong to what Bill Nichols (1991) called ‘discourses of sobriety’, alongside of academic disciplines such as economics, sociology, biology. While bio-pics traffic in desire, it is epistophilia – the pleasure of knowing – that drives documentaries. In standard estimations of documentary, the domain of desire is occluded: the farthest that a documentary can go is to interrogate its own modalities and conditions of production. Nichols (1991: 56–75) seems to privilege this reflexive mode as the most sophisticated approach; but it still does not admit,

let alone address, the ambiguous and frequently subterranean role of desire in documentary film-making practices, and cannot take into account epistemological uncertainties stemming from unstable selfhood. This paradigm presupposes a stable subject of documentary enunciation, one who always speaks authoritatively from a position of certitude. When the work is open-ended, as in certain films of Frederic Wiseman (for example, *Model* (1980)), the level of ambiguity is produced by the film-maker in a manageable way. In other words, all reflexive gesture is subsumed under the sign of a film-maker – identifiable by his or her name – who is always in control of the production of meaning. By closing off considerations of those volatile factors that course through the system and threaten to destabilize it, the myth of a totalizing voice is sustained.

Through his innovative approach, Isaac Julien challenges this model of the documentary and foregrounds its constitutive aporia: the lack of an adequately theorized historical subject of enunciation, who might occupy shifting epistemological positions. His work is close in spirit to the various autobiographical documentaries produced by feminist film-makers and video



Figure 1 Isaac Julien as Langston Hughes (Source and copyright: Isaac Julien (1988), *Looking for Langston*).

artists of the past two decades.⁴ His investment in a tenuous documentary voice, born of his understanding of the problems of representing complex historical experience, is borne out by his careful dispersal of the biographical protagonist: subjectivity remains a shifting chimera. As a mark of this radical erasure, Julien appears briefly once in each film: as a dead man in *Looking for Langston*, and as a white man's other, in the background and out of focus, in *Frantz Fanon*. He is the corpse at Hughes' wake; he is, like Fanon, the white man's threatening other.

Julien seizes upon a material limitation – in this case the paucity of real-life footage (he ran into problems with the Hughes estate due to reasons elaborated below; as for Fanon, the only extant film footage was found at the Paris archive of the L'Institut National de Audiovisuel or INA) – and uses it strategically, prizing apart the indexical link between the photograph and its referent.⁵ *Looking for Langston* unhinges itself from the poet, the ostensible subject of biography, and focuses instead on a group of gay black men – particularly on two characters referred to as Alex and Beauty. In *Frantz Fanon*, the revolutionary thinker is portrayed by the well-known black British actor Colin Simon: his iconic presence introduces a dissociation, undermining reductive notions of realist representation. Indeed, one could say that Simon does not represent Fanon so much as he *presents* him, his experiences and ideas. The very names *Hughes* and *Fanon* are disengaged from the corresponding biological entities, complicating the biographical problematic. The treasured biographical and documentary values of authenticity and immediacy, typically invoked to lay claim to an authoritative place of knowledge and enunciation, stand discounted. Following Trinh Min-ha (1990), who once famously proclaimed, 'Documentary is/not a name', one is tempted to declare: 'Biography is/not a name.'

Why, then, Langston Hughes, why Fanon? By focusing on these two iconic figures, Julien draws on two salient conjunctures within what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls a black modernity: the Harlem Renaissance and the African struggle for liberation. While both are towering personalities within the African diaspora, for many, including Julien, they remain ambiguous figures of idealization and identification. Their lives, their works, their names – in short, their legacies – are fraught with controversies. Hughes remained publicly silent about his homosexuality in deference to the demands of his race/community; Fanon, while insisting on the dis-alienation of the black man through political liberation and the disavowal of his 'mask of whiteness', and denouncing the woman of colour for her alleged attraction for the white man, defended his marriage to a white woman in the name of love. Time and again, desire asserts its centrality in the corpus of each man's work: as when Fanon identifies a fearful desire for the other at the heart of racism; as when Hughes writes 'I toss/Without rest in the darkness,/Weary as the tired night,/My soul/

Empty as the silence,/Empty with a vague,/Aching emptiness,/Desiring,/Needing someone,/Something.' (Hughes 1999: 41). It is desire that seeps outside and across categories, desire that rules out straightforward delineation of their legacies.

While Julien problematizes his protagonists' legacies, it is a mark of his reverence and understanding that nearly every frame in both films shimmers with desire. This vivid quality, achieved through a careful and seductive orchestration of formal elements, places the two films firmly in the realm of the subjective: an innovative poetics of documentary pushes the texts beyond the limiting horizon of 'discourses of sobriety' on to a remarkable expressivity.⁶ And Julien's fractious identification with these forbears, his own ambivalent desires and anxieties allow only a faltering voice, a voice that speaks from a rather provisional knowledge position.

A voice of one's own

It is, nevertheless, a voice that helps articulate a long repressed subjectivity – that of the black gay man. To be black is already to occupy the position of the other in a world that privileges whiteness and frames all difference as lack; to be black and gay is to be an outsider in one's own community, to occupy a position of radical alterity and silence, akin to what Barbara Johnson (1987) designated as 'the lower case "x" of radical negation'. In the African-American community, homosexuality is considered to be a 'sin against the race', an attitude that is evident in W. E. B. Du Bois' reaction to a 1920s novel that describes gay and lesbian bars in Harlem: 'Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath. . . . McKay has set out to cater for [the] prurient demand on the part of white folks.'⁷ The black liberation movement of the 1960s endorsed primarily a macho, often militant, black subjectivity that excluded gays and lesbians. Mercer and Julien (2000: 60) point to this history of intra-racial discrimination:

Figures such as Eldridge Cleaver promoted a heterosexist version of black militancy which not only authorized sexism – Stokely Carmichael said the only position of black women in the movement was 'prone' – but a hidden agenda of homophobia, something which came out in Cleaver's remorseless attack on James Baldwin.

Here one could dwell on the long, protracted history of the emasculation of black men, from the days of slavery and lynching to mass-scale internment in the contemporary era, and also the continuing white – and black –

investment in the myth of black male sexual prowess, as factors that help us understand homophobia in the black community; nevertheless, that specific history still remains embedded within a more general tendency on the part of heteropatriarchal communities to characterize homosexual desire as disease, as contagion from outside – as in Du Bois’ ‘prurient demands on the part of white folks’.⁸

Isaac Julien’s project is one of moving beyond the dismissals and disavowals to claim a space from which a silenced black gay voice can speak. As a film-maker, he wants to piece together such a subcultural identity by bringing it into representation; as a black gay man, he wants to recuperate for himself and his kind a sense of history, a sense of belonging to a community. These two biographical projects are clearly driven by an auto-biographical impulse: the urgency of becoming, of positive self-fashioning, in the process of exploring exemplary lives. The halting irruption of the *autos*, the self, in the two biographies is signalled by the film-maker’s body: Julien as the *dead* poet at the wake for Langston Hughes; Julien as the *blurry* racial other of the white man and putatively standing in for all coloured men, including Fanon.

In a sense, Julien countersigns the legacies of the poet and the prophet of revolution with his own body; however, in both instances it is a body put under erasure (lifeless or out of focus) to mark his ambivalent relationship – of simultaneous identification and alienation – with the celebrated legacies. In *Looking for Langston*, Julien brings out the homoerotic dimension of the poet’s life, and uses the occasion to signify the subterranean cultural and social communities of black homosexual men. His agenda brought him into headlong conflict with the Hughes estate, which levelled charges of copyright infringement and forced him to delete the poet’s work from the soundtrack: he was able to retain only a brief archival footage of Hughes reciting his poetry.

Frantz Fanon is critical of its revered protagonist’s attitude towards women and homosexuals. Through evocative music and images (for example, a haunting shot, repeated several times, in which the photograph of the face of a woman is projected on to the veil of another woman; a tableau in which a photograph of Algerian women is made to ‘come alive’), readings of excerpts from Fanon’s essay ‘Algeria unveiled’, and comments by cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Francoise Vergese, the film takes on Fanon’s decidedly masculinist conception of the struggle for liberation, challenges the marginalization of women that marks his thought, and implicates his legacy in the continuation – perhaps intensification – of oppressive heteropatriarchal norms and structures in postcolonial Algeria.

Equally trenchant is the film’s criticism of Fanon’s disavowal of homosexuality. His conception of total independence for the North African male



Figure 2 Palimpsestic sign: veiled Algerian woman (Source and copyright: Isaac Julien (1996), *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*).

became practically a fetish: any form of desire that was a potential source of weakness or a threat to this project of liberation was complete anathema. The homosocial world of freedom fighters was predicated on intense camaraderie and loyalty, and on a single-mindedness of purpose: the only admissible desire was a yearning for liberty. Fanon could not accommodate in this paradigm any erotic longing between the soldiers of the FLN, for it would detract from the heroic task at hand.⁹

Julien mocks Fanon's summary dismissal of the possibility of homoerotic desire by having Colin Simon as Fanon declare to the camera 'I had no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique', even as two black men kiss passionately in the background. At one point, the two men stop kissing and look at Simon-as-Fanon, who looks back at them. Such a relay of looks and exchanged glances, which emerges as something of an auteurial signature, is Julien's mode of loaded signification: it brings out the play of desire – avowed or denied – in the field of vision. In this instance, Simon-as-Fanon continues to ascribe the absence of homosexuality in the Antilles to the absence of the Oedipal complex. He then admits that there are

those men who cross-dress (an admission accompanied by the photograph of a 'godmother'), but insists that 'they have normal sex lives'.

Culling an archive of images and ideas, pointing to the silences and contradictions, Julien produces a history of black gay desire and identity. His subjectivity – understood as part of a collectivity – begins to materialize haltingly as a racialized, sexualized other: yet there is an overall sense that this traumatized *autos* can be transformed into a pole of idealization and positive identification. The question is, how does Julien pull this off?

Archive, desire, cultural memory

His very liminality presents Julien with an opportunity: he brings to light the unavoidable seepage between the poles of the binaries (white/black, straight/gay, healthy/pathological, masculine/effete, heroic/scandalous) that produce his 'radical negation'. This seepage is refigured formally – through stunning tableau compositions, neo-*noir* lighting, music, poetry, testimonials, expressive visual inserts, sensual camera movements and even special effects – as desire that oozes through the frames, and engulfs spectators in a seductive spell. Unleashing the power of his own yearnings, Julien dismantles and reworks limiting structures, vivifies an archive of marginalized lives and silenced voices, and produces a novel form of (auto)biography.

Both films are intricately textured, capturing something of the palimpsest that is cultural memory. *Looking for Langston* eschews the authoritative talking heads of standard documentary form: voice-overs are dissociated from the images, complicating signification and producing paradigmatic density. We are presented with a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that underscore the intersubjective dimension of a collective legacy: the voice of Toni Morrison, reading at James Baldwin's funeral service in 1987, heard in the opening scene of Hughes' wake; Essex Hemphill reading extensively from his explicitly homoerotic poetry, his articulate desire a telling counterpoint to Hughes' silence; excerpts from Oscar Micheaux films (*Ten Minutes to Live*, *Go Down Death*, *The Killer*); footage of Bessie Smith sitting at a bar singing 'St Louis Blues'; black and gay British singer Blackberri; contemporary *house* music, conjuring up the erotic charge of the dance floor. The two characters Alex and Beauty can be traced back to a prose-poem by Bruce Nugent, one of the doyens of the Harlem Renaissance, entitled 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade'.¹⁰ Signalling Julien's ambivalent identifications across race lines, the film incorporates the white singer Jimmy Somerville as an angelic presence, and Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs of black men, often in the nude. Documentary realism is jettisoned altogether to make way for a lyricism that endows the film with its rhetorical charge; thus space and time configurations

confound our expectations as the camera moves languidly between three levels of what looks like a single set – a nightclub, a funeral parlour and a heavenly bevy of angelic boys – and escorts us through an otherworldly pastoral landscape that may as well be in the mind of one of the characters.

The talking heads of *Frantz Fanon* do not produce any illusion of certitude either; rather, they bear witness to the uneven, even contentious corpus of thought that Fanon left behind. Stuart Hall and Francoise Vergese, the two main interlocutors, are framed in ways that call into question the positions from which they speak: Hall, a distinguished academic theorist, is surrounded by still photographic images used throughout the film as artifice – either as intercuts to heighten emotional expressivity, or as back projections to produce the impression of deep focus interiors; Vergese, whose exegesis draws heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, stands in front of a mirror – the site of misrecognition that is constitutive of such a theory of subject formation.¹¹ In the course of their reminiscences, various relatives and friends falter or express conflicting views: while reading from Fanon's last letter, received after his death, his brother chokes up; looking at his childhood photograph, Fanon's son informs us of his father's ambivalence about his light complexion; one associate dismisses another's anecdote about Fanon literally unchaining patients in the Algerian psychiatric ward, asserting that Fanon's originality is not contingent on such mythification.

Given that the film bearing the name of the poet Langston Hughes is more lyrical, and the film about the theorist-revolutionary Fanon is more overtly rhetorical, one is tempted to argue that Isaac Julien adapts the formal style of each biographical work to the life and work of its historical protagonist. However, a close scrutiny of the two texts reveals that such a link between the biological and the biographical is unwarrantedly reductive. While the earlier film – subtitled 'A Meditation on Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance' – is definitely a lyrical contemplation on black gay desire, it advances a clear understanding of the poet as an overdetermined site of literary production. Even as the stylized aesthetics of the film intimates the romance of poetry, the romantic idea of a genius producing masterpieces in heroic isolation is debunked and demystified: the figure of the poet emerges as a productive node at the intersection of specific historical forces. Placing the individual figure in relation to community, Hughes' association with the Harlem Renaissance is subjected to critical scrutiny. The film challenges the canonical history of the cultural movement, which celebrates the contributions of many gay artists without acknowledging their sexuality: 'Not to discuss the moral significance of Countee Cullen, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, choosing in the main others of their kind to love, is to emasculate and embalm their society as a whole.' While recognizing the significant contributions made by the Harlem Renaissance to the development of a black

aesthetic, the film reveals the movement's middle-class aspirations and its mainly white patronage: a white intelligentsia expected the movement to produce work that would speak from some essentialist black position, and to forge an oppositional forum that would invigorate the cultural scene of the 1920s.

The substance of Frantz Fanon's writing requires exegesis: his work addresses the loaded issues of subject formation through racial encounters, physical and psychic violence, the moral incommensurability of psychiatric practice and the alienation produced by colonialism, and nationalism in the postcolonies. As Stuart Hall (1996) has pointed out, Fanon's work may be thought of as a series of extended and unfinished dialogues: with Freud on psychiatry and psychoanalysis; with Sartre and 'the ghost of Hegel' on the master-slave dialectic; and with negritude, that essentialist lynchpin of African liberation movements and identities. Interestingly, Julien chooses to explicate Fanon's major theoretical contributions through dramatized sequences, depending on commentators to provide elaborations and critique; meanwhile, biographical details are presented mainly through the



Figure 3 Fanon in the psychiatric ward (Source and copyright: Isaac Julien (1996), *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*).

recollections of people who knew Fanon. In other words, the *biological entity* is subjected to the vicissitudes of recollection, while the *intellectual output* is turned into drama: documentary expectations are turned on their head, establishing the interpenetration of life and work, fact and fiction.

The gaze, returned

Both films employ *tableaux vivante* extensively: as if Julien wants to underscore his agenda of bringing to life an archive of words and images, lives and voices, memories and impulses. Each tableau presents a carefully orchestrated group in specific locations: a nightclub, a wake, a psychiatric ward. The illusion of deep-focus photography is created by means of chiaroscuro lighting in the earlier film, and by back projecting still photographs of interiors in the later work. While the people remain nearly static as the camera pans around them or tracks along the formation, the more prominent figures (Alex, Beauty and the white man in *Looking for Langston*, Fanon and a couple of his patients in *Frantz Fanon*) turn ever so slightly, so as to gaze at the moving camera directly all the time. Through such stylized presentation of the act of looking, the films foreground the centrality of the gaze in the production of subject–object relations within modernity’s scopic regimes. Who gets to look at whom is a loaded question, since it is implicated in historical processes of objectification, control and colonial self-aggrandizement. In the two cinematic biographies, the ethic-political dimension of looking is examined with the explicit aim of fostering a transformative gaze – a gaze that is returned by the other.

Looking for Langston is ‘looking’ in at least three distinct senses. The film wants to uncover the renounced sexuality of a poet who once lamented: ‘There are words like *Liberty*/That almost make me cry./If you had known what I know/You would know why’ (Hughes 1999: 117). It is also looking for a disavowed black gay identity, and wants to wrest for it a ‘liberty’ that it has been denied twice – first by a white society as its racial other, and then by a heterosexual community as its sexual other. Finally, it is *looking on behalf of* Langston: as a fully realized desiring subject, who can freely express and follow his longing, and return the desiring gaze of others.

The film seeks to achieve this last objective through a careful organization of looks. The black men in the gay club look at each other with yearning, and acknowledge their mutual acts of looking and longing. When Alex looks at Beauty who looks back at him, Alex bears witness to Beauty’s desire for another man; he also recognizes in Beauty someone who bears witness to his own longing for another man. Here the economy of looks and glances creates the condition of possibility for the emergence of subjects who desire, and who

see their desire reciprocated by their objects of desire. By returning the gaze, the two black men overcome the proscription imposed by their race and articulate an explicitly gay desire.

But the film does not stop there: it allows the black man to return the yearning gaze of the white man, thereby breaking out of the place of the other, the perpetual object of desire. Julien underscores the transformative power of such relay of looks by incorporating Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, criticized widely for their fetishistic investment in black male bodies and their implied fascination with the racial other who 'fucks like a jungle'. Julien stresses the possibility of transcending the fixed meaning of stereotypes through 'reading against the grain' and finding pleasure in identification with these representations.¹² Here, a kind of recuperation is staged on behalf of black men who self-consciously inhabit their signification as the sexualized racial other, thereby acquiring an ambivalent agency. In short, through a complex play of/on 'looking', *Looking for Langston* attempts to reconstitute to black gay men a selfhood they have been denied historically.

I want to dwell upon two more textual illustrations, this time from *Frantz Fanon*, of Julien's exploration of the link between subjectivity and the act of looking. In one, Julien follows Fanon closely; in the other, he reads Fanon against the grain. The first example involves the powerful sequence which stages Fanon's encounter with metropolitan racism, and explores the debilitating psychic consequences. It begins with Simon-as-Fanon declaring with great certitude: 'There is no color prejudice here.' Then one day, a woman patient refuses to be touched by this colored man. A sombre Fanon sits at a desk and says:

'I came into this world imbued with a need to find meaning in things. My spirit was filled with the desire to get to the very source of the world. [Cut to a brief close up of a pair of hands caressing a red flower, as if to invoke a prelapsarian organic connection to one's world, a sensuous and disalienated life.] Instead of which I found myself to be an object . . . [a pregnant pause, during which Fanon looks to his right, and the camera follows his gaze to settle on a set of kitschy Negro figurines, like a head with a fez cap and "melon lips"] among other objects.'

A couple of minutes later, we are presented with a significant turning point in Fanon's life: seeing him, a white child clutches her mother's hand, exclaiming 'Look mama, a Negro.' The child's trepidation and the mother's startled glance interpellates Fanon to the position of a threatening other. As the child's voice reverberates on the soundtrack, Fanon's image splinters into several; images of a white man, an Arab man and a coloured woman are intercut rapidly with Fanon's; this eddying 'collision montage' ends in an extreme close-up of Fanon's face. As the camera moves in even closer to frame

Fanon's eyes and nose, Stuart Hall explains on the soundtrack: 'He sees himself being seen by the French child and its mother and this look from the place of the other completely destroys him.' This encounter shatters Fanon's subjectivity as he realizes that the only sense of selfhood he has is an imitation of the colonizer – an alienated, depersonalized self. It is a moment of profound displacement, for it not only forces him to acknowledge the 'colour prejudice' but also brings him to the shocking recognition that all along he has been donning a white mask over his black skin – disavowing his coloured self to embrace a whiteness that only negates his very existence.

My second textual illustration from *Frantz Fanon* finds Julien critically evaluating the long-term implications for women of the theorist's overtly masculinist notion of the Algerian revolution. Women occupied a peripheral – even problematic – position in Fanon's homosocial scheme of things: in fact he rationalized patriarchal conservatism, and supported the deportation of women from Maquis to Tunisia when they were alleged to cause problems for the Algerian Liberation Army. Julien implicates such marginalization in the subsequent oppression of women in postcolonial Algeria. In particular, he challenges Fanon's take on the veil and demonstrates how this cultural sign need not always be associated with subjugation or objectification. Extending the category of the documentary, Julien uses footage from Gillo Pontecarvo's celebrated film *Battle of Algiers* (1965) to underscore this possibility of fluid, transformative signification. The sequence in question depicts Algerian women smuggling firearms under their veils across a colonial checkpoint: the French soldiers assume that these 'traditional' women are too passive to pose any threat, and let them pass without a thorough search. Here a certain kind of colonial gaze, predicated on the equation of the veil with tradition and passivity, is turned around by the women in the service of the revolution: they know they can depend on the operation of European stereotypes regarding veiled women. The colonial gaze, which produces *them* as passive objects of an oppressive tradition, is returned by the women as *they* reduce the soldiers to trusting dupes, the objects of *their* derision.

The future of a dream deferred

Julien and Nash (2000: 106) characterize the kind of film-making practice inherent in the Fanon piece as *doing theory on film*:

[T]he act of visualization can be seen as a form of theoretical production, one which makes the body in particular a privileged site of imagistic power and mediation. That is to say, it is not a question of simply finding a way to represent Fanon in film, but to use film to engage with Fanon's ideas and perhaps in some way transform them.

Not mere representation with its attendant values of authenticity, objectivity and adequacy, but also engagement with and transformation of the historical life and the corpus of thought: surely we are in the realm of a new problematic of the biographical.

To do justice to the films, however, we must recognize that Julien is no mere theorist, for the images and words assembled here are simply captivating. He provides us with a new sense of what is an exemplary life and how we narrativize it: while a biography has to tell us something about someone's life, Julien does it as few have, combining his critical interrogations with a deep understanding and artistic panache.

Passionate engagement with and interested transformation of an always-iterable past: this is doing history from the present with an eye to the future. This is why house music reverberates anachronistically in what is initially presented as 1967, the year in which Hughes passes away. Or is it the late 1980s, the historical conjuncture in which *Looking for Langston* gets made, a moment when the spectre of AIDS hangs over the gay community? What sense do we make of the angelic boys hovering in a dreamy atopia that is spatially contiguous with the nightclub and the funeral parlour, or of Julien appearing in the casket at Hughes' wake? If such wilful confusions are to be



Figure 4 How to have desire in an epidemic (Source and copyright: Isaac Julien (1988), *Looking for Langston*).

read as political gestures in a time of crisis, how do we make ethical sense of Julien's penchant for aestheticization? His appropriation of a 'faggy' sensibility (leather and lame costumes, disco ball, swishy gestures) and its transformation into high aesthetics must be understood as another instance of 'returning the gaze', of recuperating cultural agency: as if Julien wants to demonstrate defiantly how to have beauty – and gay desire – in the middle of an epidemic.¹³

Eschewing all hang-ups about being 'true' to a legacy and all pretence of scholarly distance, and transforming the melancholic charge of post-AIDS gay life into creative urgency, Julien produces two riveting biographies: *this* is *his* legacy. His own self stages irruptions, visually and paradigmatically, in the hermeneutic unfolding of these palimpsestic texts. In the process of these entanglements – the ambivalent identifications, revisions, interactions, transformations – repressed desires get unleashed, silenced tongues are untied: other selves are revealed, perhaps even invented, through these biographical acts.¹⁴

Given the particular context of the contemporary black British cultural formation, and the multiple voices and agencies imbricated in the making of these two films, the proper name 'Isaac Julien' emerges as a complex sign irradiating a series of other names – Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, Mark Nash, Maureen Blackwood, Homi Bhabha, Sankofa and Black Audio Collective, to cite only a few – names that are associated with British cultural studies and experimental black British art of the past two decades. The two texts and their auteur cannot – will not – contain the intersubjective dimension, which spills out: spatially, by implicating us in the exchange of looks, and temporally, by forcing us to listen keenly, to ponder anew on consecrated legacies. As if Julien engages his audience in a contract of countersigning, which is an extension of the temporal contract he himself entered with his visionary protagonists – a poet who spoke of 'a dream deferred', a prophet who exulted 'a coming revolution'.

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Notes

- 1 As an anonymous referee points out, the afternoon talk shows showcase mainly ordinary people, while the evening shows are devoted to the lives of celebrities: thus prime-time television focuses on 'prime' lives of the rich and famous, while

the afternoon hours help the rest of us to temporarily transcend our mundane lives and achieve what Andy Warhol called 'fifteen minutes of fame'.

- 2 See Hayden White (1978), Vivian Sobchak (1996).
- 3 Christie McDonald provides this analogy in her preface to Derrida (1985: ix).
- 4 Here I have in mind artists such as Michelle Citron, Vanalyne Green, Lynn Hershman and Tracy Moffatt.
- 5 As Roland Barthes (1982) once noted, the photograph always points indexically to that which was once before the camera: 'the referent adheres' to the photograph.
- 6 My understanding of the documentary is greatly influenced by the work of Michael Renov (1993).
- 7 Quoted in Julien (1992: 259).
- 8 See the excellent studies by Eng (2001) and Shah (2001) on the intersection of race and homosexuality.
- 9 For an interesting discussion of Fanon and homosexuality, see Goldie (1999).
- 10 Upon its publication, the poem caused a scandal: it was described as 'soft pornography' and 'effeminate tommyrot'. See Stokes (2002).
- 11 In a longer version of the film, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, who is largely responsible for the rekindling of academic interest in Fanon in the past two decades, roams through the streets of metropolitan Paris: a postcolonial *flâneur*?
- 12 See Mercer and Julien (1994).
- 13 Another intertextual echo: Douglas Crimp (1987) and Paula Treichler (1999).
- 14 In this context, mention must be made of the late Marlon Riggs' wonderful video work, *Tongues Untied* (1989), which shares many of the concerns evident in Julien's work.

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