Signs and Wonders

Fetishism and Hybridity in Homi Bhabha’s
*The Location of Culture*

Shai Ginsburg

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Two key locations of pleasure and desire lie at the center of Homi Bhabha’s discussion of colonial discourse: the *fetish* and *hybridity.* Bhabha sets hybridity as a site of interruption of the fetishistic logic and fixation that structure European colonial discourse. Yet the two terms frame not only his manifest engagement with the colonial encounter, but also his endeavor to recontextualize the colonial book in general and reading in particular in contemporary (post)colonial studies. Still, relatively little attention has been paid to the way he positions the fetish and hybridity in relation to book and reading. The following is an attempt to chart the deployment of these four terms—fetish, hybridity, book, and reading—in Bhabha’s essays. I shall suggest that as he celebrates colonial desire and pleasure through hybridity, he quite explicitly dismisses reading, and as he shies away from reading the colonial book, he fetishizes that book. His essays thus reproduce the same logic he decries.
In a sympathetic exposition of Bhabha’s work, Robert Young points at Bhabha’s continuous changes of his theoretical conceptualizations of colonial discourse. Mindful of a potential paradox, Young tries to save Bhabha from its consequences. He suggests that it serves as a considered strategy whereby Bhabha rejects consistent metalanguage, refusing to let his terms reify into static concepts, thus eluding the problem . . . that the analysis ends up by repeating the same structures of power and knowledge in relation to its material as the colonial representation itself. If Bhabha exploits the structures of disavowal that he finds, it is first and foremost to undermine this possibility and to prevent the reification of mastery. (1990, 146)

In what follows I shall argue the exact opposite. Notwithstanding Bhabha’s manifest reluctance to privilege any one theoretical model in his analysis of colonial discourse, his own discourse ends up reiterating structures of power/knowledge of colonial representations. His failure is not the failure of avoiding “false” structures of power/knowledge—I do not believe this is possible—but the failure to examine the way a theoretical discourse is perforce implicated in its object. Bhabha’s discourse is reified precisely around the terms through which he exposes the reification and fixation of colonial discourse, namely, fetish and hybridity. Ultimately, the reduplication of reification and fixation in Bhabha’s discourse produces a new fetish, that of theory.

**The Fetish**

Bhabha discusses the fetish in the context of his criticism of Edward Said’s *Orientalism.* Following Foucault, Said points at the modes in which discourses of knowledge, aesthetic discourses in particular, serve political formations of power in general and, more specifically, the colonial-imperial project in Europe and the United States. Bhabha similarly underscores the ways coloniser logic binds together the knowledge of non-European territories and the colonization of these territories. He nevertheless identifies
an ambivalence between two discursive modes that haunts Said’s analysis—between Orientalism as “a topic of learning, discovery, practice,” and Orientalism as a “site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions and requirements” (Bhabha 1994, 71). Bhabha maintains that the introduction of binaries into Said’s argument is meant to resolve that ambivalence. The setting of these two modes in opposition to each other allows Said to correlate them within a “congruent system of representation” (71) formed by a single, unidirectional intention (72).

Yet such a coherent system, Bhabha continues, fails on two counts: first, Said evaluates Orientalism in terms of commensuration between representation and “real conditions.” Although he does not simplistically consider the occidental representation of the Orient to be a misrepresentation of an Oriental essence, he still dismisses it as a deformation; this blinds him to the political effects of Orientalism as an instrument of colonial authority—effects produced, Bhabha astutely notes, by the articulation of the historical alongside fantasy. Second, more significant for our purposes, the closure and coherence of Said’s system of representation neutralize the disturbing effects that the unconscious and its fantasies have on the colonial system, undermining “the return of the oppressed” as Bhabha names it. As it assumes a clear-cut distribution of power between the powerful—colonialists—and the powerless—the colonized—such a system does not merely fail to account for the terrifying images of the colonized that return to haunt the colonial project. It also fixes the colonized as a passive object of colonial discourse, unable to produce local resistance to colonialism, and completely dependent on those located at the centers of colonial power for the development of such a resistance.

Last, Said’s discussion raises an additional query—on an institutional level—that haunts his critical effort and at which Bhabha only hints: if the colonial discourse merely reflects a reductive power/knowledge formation, why should Said continue to accord it such a central place in his academic occupation? Indeed, Said’s persistent engagement with the European and American literary canon seems quite baffling in light of his criticism of its place within the imperial-colonial system.

To overcome the limitations of Said’s model, Bhabha turns to the psychoanalytic model of the fetish. Following Freud and Lacan, Bhabha sees the
fetish as a site of ambivalence and contradictions, in which real knowledge intersects with fantasy, mastery with anxiety. As Freud writes in his essay on fetishism, the male child who has perceived

that a woman does not possess a penis . . . has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. . . . Yes, in his mind the woman has got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed as its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. (1953–1974, 153–54)

Usurping the attention previously accorded to the woman’s sexual organ, the fetish replaces the phallus, but also signifies its absence, marking the denial of the difference between man and woman and the fantasy of identity, but marking at the same time the acknowledgement of difference and the status of fantasy.

Through the logic of the fetish, Bhabha seeks to expose the ambivalences and discontinuities of colonial discourse, the locations in which control over the discourse slips away from the colonizer, opening up gaps and fissures in which resistance to colonial power can be produced. The “strategic function” of colonial discourse, Bhabha maintains, “is the creation of a space for a ‘subject people’ through the production of knowledge in terms of which surveillance is exercised” (1994, 70). “Colonial discourse,” he continues, “produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (70–71). In its anxious desire to fix the colonized under its surveillance, under its gaze, this discourse “moves between the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal, by affixing the unfamiliar to something established, in a form that is repetitious and vacillates between delight and fear” (73). As a fetishistic discourse of knowledge, colonial discourse vacillates between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the visible and the obscure, the knowable and the unknowable. It simultaneously acknowledges and denies the failure to fix the colonized as a stable object of knowledge of European colonial categories; it likewise acknowledges and denies that the encounter between the colonized and these categories undermines their
claim for universality. The very obsession of the colonial power/knowledge structure with originary, fixed, unchanging identities of colonizers as well as the colonized, its manifest desire to fix the opposition between them, opens up colonial discourse to contradictions and ambivalence, to the presence of the different that characterizes the colonial encounter.

The fetish allows Bhabha not only to criticize and refuse the oppressive application of knowledge to the colonized and to expose, like Said, the reductive homogeneity colonial discourse projects on its Other, but also to present the colonizer as subject to the same discursive forces that unsettle the colonized. Equally important, the fetish also salvages colonial discourse for Bhabha, for it allows him a continued engagement with the European-American colonial canon in order to expose the limits, conflicts, and contradictions at its foundation, and use these to undermine colonial authority. Bhabha thus activates the double cognizance of the fetish against fetishistic fixation, to liberate the colonial subject from the mastery of the skin/culture signifier (1994, 75), or as he writes elsewhere in his book, to promote “cultural difference and incommensurability,” as well as “possibilities for other ‘times’ of cultural meaning . . . and other narrative spaces” (177–78).

Nevertheless, although Bhabha’s use of the logic of the fetish undermines the homogeneity that colonial discourse forces on non-European territories, his own discourse cannot avoid a fetishistic logic and fixation. Moreover, Bhabha’s reproduction of the logic of the fetish hinges on his refusal to read, as a reading of “Signs Taken for Wonders” will demonstrate.

The primal scenes

“Signs Taken for Wonders” revolves around one primal scene (Ur-Szene)—of the repeated revelation of the book “in-between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly space of the earth” (Bhabha 1994, 107):

There’s a scene in the cultural writing of English colonialism which repeats so insistently after the early nineteenth century—and through that repetition, so triumphantly inaugurates a literature of empire—that I am bound to repeat it once more. It is the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless
wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book. The discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority. It is, as well, a process of displacement that, paradoxically, makes the presence of the book wondrous to the extent to which it is repeated, translated, misread, displaced. (102)

In this scene, repeated and rearticulated time and time again, the colonial-imperial endeavor, the English missionary project, and English literature intersect. The scene embodies the encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans through the surprising discovery of the English book in a non-European space. Bhabha goes on to provide three instances of this “sudden, fortuitous discovery”: of the Bible, on the first week of May 1817, in a grove of trees just outside Delhi; of An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship “by a man Tower, Towson—some such name” that Marlow discovers in Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness (1995, 65); and the discovery of Conrad’s novel itself and, in it, of Tower’s or Towson’s book, by V. S. Naipaul in his essay “Conrad’s Darkness” (Naipaul 1981, 223). “Written as they are in the name of the father and the author,” Bhabha writes,

these texts of the civilizing mission immediately suggest the triumph of the colonialist moment in early English Evangelism and modern English literature. The discovery of the book installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art, creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative. But the institution of the Word in the wilds is also an Enstellung, a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition—the dazzling light of literature sheds only areas of darkness. (Bhabha 1994, 105)

Through a process of “displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition,” the discovery of the book in the wilderness becomes a moment of transfiguration of “word” to “Word,” of “word” to the logos in which the divine, the political, and the aesthetic are bound together. Yet within this transfiguration, books as texts are lost. For what is strikingly absent from Bhabha’s engagement with these texts is reading. Books are written and discovered, and they suggest, install, institute, represent, create, and finally shed areas of darkness, but they are never read.
True, Bhabha’s text is marked by the formal signs of “reading”—that is, by references, citations and quotations; still, as we shall see below, Bhabha explicitly turns away from the hermeneutic practice that he associates with reading and engages in a different practice that illuminates, so he claims, crucial aspects of colonial discourse. Reintroducing reading into Bhabha’s colonial primal scene illuminates what is lost in the move away from reading.

In Bhabha’s first instance, Anund Messeh, one of the earliest Indian catechists, encounters the Bible within a group of five hundred people seated in a grove just outside Delhi. As Messeh approaches the group, the men, women, and children are “employed . . . in reading and conversation” (102), but these activities are immediately interrupted. In the excited interchange between Anund Messeh and the leader of the group, the book is opened up only to allow Messeh to identify it as “the Gospel of our Lord, translated into the Hindoostanee Tongue” (103); yet it is never read. Messeh recites passages from the book, but he does it by heart, not by actually reading these passages.

Bhabha elides the references to reading that do appear in the original account from the passages he quotes and glosses over the place of reading in the colonial-Christian mission only when he returns to analyze the scene, toward the end of the essay. “What is the value of English in the offering of the Hindi Bible?” he asks; “it is the decision to produce simple, abridged tracts of the plainest narrative that may inculcate the habit of ‘private, solitary reading’ as a missionary wrote in 1816, so that the natives may resist the Brahmin’s ‘monopoly of knowledge’ and lessen their dependence on their own religious and cultural traditions” (1994, 118). It is telling, once again, that Bhabha turns to the words of a missionary to characterize reading, fully locating it within the discourse of the colonizer, as a marker of the attempt to undermine local social structures to facilitate their incorporation into the colonial order.

Yet, as a close reading of the other two instances of the colonial primal scene shows, reading also unsettles the colonial order itself and points at its limits. Here are the passages from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, which describe Marlow’s encounter with the book:

The matter looked dreary reading enough, with illustrative diagrams and repellent tables of figures, and the copy was sixty years old. . . . Within, Towson or Towser was inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships’ chains
and tackle, and other such matters. Not a very enthralling book; but at first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. . . . Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes penciled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn’t believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it—and making notes—in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery.

I had been dimly aware for some time of a worrying noise, and when I lifted my eyes I saw the wood-pile was gone, and the manager, aided by all the pilgrims, was shouting at me from the river-side. I slipped the book into my pocket. I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship.

I started the lame engine ahead. “It must be this miserable trader—this intruder,” exclaimed the manager, looking back malevolently at the place we had left. “He must be English,” I said. (1995, 65–66)

I have italicized the sentences Bhabha omits and would like to concentrate on them (quite appropriately, I reproduce here the same kind of practice identified in what follows by omitting a few lines of Conrad’s novel). The scene ends with the forced interruption of reading as the material conditions of the colonial expedition come between Marlow and his book. Yet the book, “inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships’ chains and tackle,” also reflects the very same material conditions, even if in a refracted way. The sentences Bhabha omits draw our attention not to the act of reading but, on the contrary, to its failure and, with it, to the limits of the European civilizing project. What raises Marlow’s curiosity is not the “illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures,” which he can read, despite their dreariness, but rather something else, other indecipherable signs that he mistakenly reads as a cipher, and that finally lead him to misconstrue the identity of the owner of the book as English rather than Russian.

The irony here is double and does not frame only Marlow but also Conrad himself. Conrad, to reiterate known facts, was born in 1857 in Russian Poland;
his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a Polish patriot who belonged to the circles that would ultimately organize the anti-Russian insurrection in 1863. Korzeniowski himself had already been arrested in 1861 and sentenced to exile, first in the northern part of the Russian empire and then in the Ukraine. With his mother, the young Conrad followed his father to his places of exile, where he was introduced to Polish literature, but more importantly from our perspective, to French and English literature. Conrad, then, inscribes Russian imperialism within Europe on the margins of the English text that he produces, and by this suggests that the ostensible Englishness of both *Heart of Darkness* and himself as its author should be read from its margins, shaped not exclusively by the idea of Englishness, as Bhabha would have it, but rather by the friction between divergent European imperialisms.

Bhabha, however, like Marlow himself at this point in the narrative, fails to note the Russian irony of the text. “Marlow’s ruminative closing statement, ‘he must be English,’” Bhabha asserts, “acknowledges at the heart of darkness . . . the particular debt that both Marlow and Conrad owe to the ideals of English ‘liberty’ and its liberal-conservative culture” (Bhabha 1994, 106). The book in this scene marks, however, not the presence of the English Word, as Bhabha would have it, but rather a friction between reading and misreading, between reality and its refracted reflection in the text, between English and Russian language and imperialism. To conceive the book as constituted by such frictions is to question precisely whether it is the locus of the Word; for to allow the book qua Word to be “repeated, dislocated, distorted, displaced” as Bhabha would have it, it has to be conceived as fixed and fixated. In other words, his insistence on locating the Word within the English book suggests that he does not fortuitously discover the book qua Word “in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean” alongside other colonial subjects, nor does he merely repeat once more the colonial primal scene as he claims. Rather, he produces the Word as a sign of his own writing by suppressing the frictions constitutive of the writing of others.

The last scene Bhabha explores evokes similar themes. “Reading” in V. S. Naipaul’s essay is located in between two moments of “writing”: of Naipaul himself and of his father. Here are a few sentences from the opening passages of the essay:
Conrad . . . was, I suppose, the first modern writer I was introduced to. It was through my father. My father was a self-taught man, picking his way through a cultural confusion of which he was perhaps hardly aware and which I have only recently begun to understand; and he wished himself to be a writer. He read less for pleasure than for clues, hints and encouragement . . . Conrad the stylist, but more than that, Conrad the late starter, holding out hope to those who didn’t seem to be starting at all. (1981, 223)

Naipaul’s father turns to reading for encouragement and a sense of security. Yet, as the reader soon finds out, reading fails to supply him with such a refuge; Bhabha chooses to quote from among the passages that testify to this:

To be colonial was to know a kind of security, it was to inhabit a fixed world. And I suppose that in my fantasy I had seen myself coming to England as to some purely literary region, where, untrammeled by the accidents of history or background, I could make a romantic career for myself as a writer. But in the new world I felt that ground move below me . . . Conrad . . . had been everywhere before me. (1994, 233)

Naipaul finds reading to be a source of anxiety and a disturbing experience. Not only does it perturb the sense of security provided by the colonial framework, nor does it merely expose his desire for “a purely literary region . . . untrammeled by the accidents of history or background” for what it is—a fantasy. It also undoes the illusion that one can write without reading first, for “Conrad . . . had been everywhere before.” Still, the reading of Conrad’s different texts, which constitute the core of Naipaul’s essay, is completely elided in Bhabha’s analysis. According to Bhabha, Naipaul’s discovery of Conrad is not the discovery of the unsettling effect produced by the reading of Conrad but, rather, the discovery of Conrad himself as a fixed model and set historical object.

Bhabha’s dismissal of reading marks not only the dismissal of the potentially subversive energies of reading but also the perpetuation of Naipaul’s fantasy of a pure literary region, free of the accidents of history and personal background. Whereas Naipaul, following his reading of Conrad,
discovers that he has to relinquish this fantasy, Bhabha fails to note that
the same fantasy haunts both his primal scene and his critical endeavor
as a whole. He thus insists: “the Bible translated into Hindi, propagated by
Dutch or native catechists is still the English book; a Polish émigré, deeply
influenced by Gustave Flaubert, writing about Africa, produces an English
classic” (Bhabha 1994, 108). Bhabha’s primal scene, however, depends not
so much on the “authoritative acknowledgement” of the English identity
of the Bible translated into Hindi, of the Christian polish émigré and of
the Indian-Hindi immigrant from Trinidad—an acknowledgment that is
inherent, Bhabha suggests, in the colonial scene. Rather, eliding the fact
that the English Bible—Bhabha’s privileged example of the English book—is
itself a translation, the primal scene depends on the identity Bhabha himself
establishes among the Bible, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, and Naipaul’s The
Return of Eva Peron, as well as between Conrad’s An Inquiry into some Points
of Seamanship and the Christian Missionary Society’s Missionary Register
from which the account of the encounter outside of Delhi is taken. Bhabha’s
failure to engage with the texts that announce his primal scene as texts,
that is, his refusal to read them, consigns them to a place outside history
and geography and strips them from whatever unsettling effect they may
produce. In the end, even as the alignment of these texts illustrates that
reading is implicated by the logic of the fetish, it also betrays a recurrent
repression of ambiguity and difference and an obsession with identity and
fixation that reproduces colonial fetishist logic.

Hybridity

Bhabha’s dismissal of reading is not only implicit in his treatment of the
primal scene; it is explicitly pronounced. He proclaims a turn from “the vicis-
situdes of interpretation in the mimetic act of reading to the question of the
effects of power, the inscription of strategies of individuation and domina-
tion in those ‘dividing practices’ which construct the colonial space” (1994,
108). He furthers envisions the move from the “vicissitudes of interpretation”
to the “question of the effects of power” as a move from the Derrida of “The
Double Session” to the Foucault of Power/Knowledge.
Bhabha’s turn to Derrida’s project is marked by a manifest ambivalence. To challenge the authority of truth in the metaphysical tradition of the West, Derrida seeks to unsettle the reference to presence, upon which that tradition depends. He does so, primarily, by exploring the indeterminacy of writing: “whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke,” he writes in a passage that Bhabha quotes,

[t]his double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its play as one of its functions or parts. This displacement does not take place, has not taken place once, as an event. It does not occupy a simple place. It does not take place in writing. This dis-location (is what) writes/is written. (Derrida 1981, 193; in Bhabha 1994, 108)

Noting that the colonial text as the site of articulation of colonial authority should be probed for the same ambivalence and indeterminacy of authority produced by writing as a double inscription, Bhabha nevertheless contends that Derrida fails to engage the question of authority and domination. Such a contention, however, appears quite baffling in the context of this quote, which seems to address explicitly the question of authority. In fact, Bhabha’s dismissal of Derrida’s exploration of writing and authority even as he refers to it seems to betray anxiety vis-à-vis the framing of the question of authority within the undecidability of writing.

Bhabha’s suggestion that a departure from Derrida “is also a return to those moments in his essay when he acknowledges the problematic of ‘presence’ as a certain quality of discursive transparency which he describes as ‘the production of mere reality-effect’” or “the effect of content” (Bhabha 1994, 108–109) points to the bone of contention. “The Double Session” centers on Malarmé’s Mimique and Malarmé’s exploration of the mime and the nature of the mimicry that, for Derrida, “has never been a question of anything other than reading and writing” (Derrida 1981, 223). “We are faced,” he writes,

with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There’s no simple reference. It is in this that the mime’s
operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass. . . . This speculum reflects no reality; it produces mere “reality effects.” (206)

As an imitation with no imitated, a signifier with no signified, a reference with no referent, mimicry unsettles—so Derrida argues—the difference between desire and satisfaction, between distance and non-distance, between difference and nondifference (Derrida 1981, 209). Mimicry illustrates nothing but itself: it illustrates, in other words, the suspension of difference of the dream (210).

Notwithstanding Bhabha’s indebtedness to Derrida’s notion of mimicry in his formulation of hybridity, he rejects Derrida’s reading altogether. Committed to the articulation of the historical alongside fantasy, he rejects, in fact, Derrida’s deconstruction in “The Double Session” and elsewhere, for such deconstruction renders it impossible to mark differences between authority and its subject, between colonizer and colonized. Ironically, as shall become clear, this is exactly the difference obliterated in Bhabha’s move away from reading.

Bhabha acknowledges Derrida’s contention that the text as a “system of reference” simply reduplicates and repeats itself ad infinitum, and he therefore shifts to engage with the colonial text as a “system of address” (Bhabha 1994, 109). Such a system produces an “effect of finalisation, relative to an objective,” as Foucault would have it (Foucault 1980, 204; in Bhabha 1994, 109). To argue for an effect of finalization is to argue against Derrida that writing can be (and, in fact, should be) circumscribed and its supposed “interiority” inscribed against its supposed “exteriority.” It is further to argue that the text yields differences, more specifically, power differences. As Foucault insists, “power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations . . . one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis” (Foucault 1980, 198–99). Under Foucault’s aegis, Bhabha is able to fixate writing and its effects, to probe its function within colonial strategies, to probe the modes in which it effects colonial power hierarchies by asserting colonial authority alongside colonial subjects.
By positioning the text as a “system of address,” Bhabha interrogates the modes through which a text produces an illusion of presence by determining the positions of the addressee and the addressee and regulating the power relations between them. Following Foucault, Bhabha describes this system of address as a structure of gaze. Its effectiveness, he further suggests, depends upon its discursive transparency, that is, upon the institution of distinctions and differences through a division, distribution, and classification of “spaces, positions, knowledges in relation to each other relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order” (Bhabha 1994, 109). The resulting régime of truth—to borrow Foucault’s phrase—produces the effect of the presence of truth as a sign of authority, sets the addresser as the holder of truth/authority, and subjects the addressee to the discourse of the addresser. Still, transparency cannot but work through a “double vision”: truth emerges as truth only after the division between the true and the false is recognized. Likewise, authority can be acknowledged only after its “rules of recognition” are perceived (110). This double vision inscribes a space in which the reiteration of the colonial régime of truth does not reassert the truth of the latter but, rather, introduces an ambivalence that escapes—as Derrida maintains—“the presence or authority of truth.”

As European fetishism penetrates non-European territories, it produces hybridity. Whereas colonial fetishism figures authority through fantasies of originary, fixed identities, hybridity leads to the revaluation of these fetishist patterns of identification through unauthorized, repeated performances of colonial representations by the colonized. Hybridity, Bhabha maintains, does not mediate or resolve the friction between different terms of identity or cultures. On the contrary, it reproduces colonial representations of differences and discriminations—between European and non-European culture, between the metropolis and its colonies, between colonizer and colonized, between self and other—differences that lie at the core of the attempt to establish fixed and stable colonial identities. The repetition of this “discriminatory identity effect” (Bhabha 1994, 112) produces excess that unsettles colonial authority; it undermines the certainty, immediacy, and uniqueness upon which that authority relies and exposes its ambivalence, indeterminacy, and uncertainty. Displacing, distorting, dislocating, and repeating the colonial
“distribution and arrangement of spaces, positions, knowledges,” the hybrid reveals the colonial space as one of unchecked procreation that reverses colonial disavowals and muddies colonial transparency. Indeed, it inverts the colonial gaze: whereas the gaze of colonial authority is directed from the knowing colonizer to the colonized subject, through hybridity the gaze of the colonized is directed back at the colonizer and on the discursive devices of colonial authority, forcing a “revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity” (112).

In hybridity, Bhabha seeks to address the question of intervention that has been haunting other critics. Resistance to the colonial power structures is now located within the ambivalence of colonial authority itself as a systemic effect of the colonial régime of truth. Accordingly, Bhabha no longer has to endeavor to excavate whatever traces there are of patterns of agency and political intention, explicit refutations of colonial contentions, and willful production of an alternative discourse as a marker of resistance. Rather, he shows resistance to be inherent in the colonial encounter—everywhere, at all times.7

For our purposes, it is important to note that Bhabha clearly distinguishes here between fetishism and hybridity. The mark of difference is the temporality of the two. Fetishist fixation takes place “prior to the perception of difference” (1994, 115, italics in the original). Hybridity, on the other hand, takes place after colonial intervention, that is, after an authoritative system of distinctions and differences has been installed in the non-European territory. Thus, whereas the fetish avoids the question of whether it resembles the symbol of authority it substitutes, hybridity necessarily is implicated in that very question. In this distinction, however, Bhabha seems to reintroduce history into his argument, for if the fetish marks a refusal of difference—as Bhabha would somewhat contradictorily have it—and with it, of history, hybridity is a historical product of European colonialism.

Nevertheless, Bhabha simultaneously undoes the historicity of hybridity, for as he examines the appearance of the English book as a symbol of colonial authority and its hybrid effect, another primal scene is inadvertently revealed, this time not of the colonial encounter but, rather, of the encounter with theory. Indeed, there is a scene in the cultural writing of European
and American academia that repeats so insistently after the early twentieth century—and through that repetition, so triumphantly inaugurates a literature of theory—that Bhabha finds himself compelled to repeat it once more. However, although this scene constitutes and structures Bhabha’s argument, it remains—unlike the other primal scene—unacknowledged. Bhabha’s discovery of the English book reduplicates the discovery of another book, a book that is not an English one, a book that is not exactly a book. It is a French book published by two students, Charles Bally and Albert Séchéhaye under the name of their Swiss professor: Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*, first published in 1916, three years after Saussure’s death.

Bhabha’s repeated assertion that hybridity marks the “displacement from symbol to sign” (1994, 114) indicates that what underlies hybridity is, in effect, Saussure’s linguistics. It is this structural displacement of the symbol—and not some historical occurrence—that creates the “crisis for the concept of authority . . . the revaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial difference” (114). The estrangement of the colonial book and its emergence as “the sign of . . . difference” (113) thus reveal a more profound crisis than that of English national authority in English colonies. It is a crisis of language itself, produced by the revelation of the interruption of the symbolic unity of the sign, of the split between signifier and signified, and of the sliding of the signified “beneath” the signifier. In other words, it is the crisis of the discovery of post-Saussurian theory in the colonial context.

As one examines the place of this second primal scene within “Signs Taken for Wonders,” two points emerge. First, Bhabha fails to decipher the “specific and determinate system of address” (1994, 109) of this scene and, more particularly, the question of authorship/authority and its effect on academic power so peculiarly manifest in Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*. Second, this second scene reverses the shift from symbol to sign that Bhabha identifies in colonial hybridity. For as one continues to read, one discovers that Bhabha moves—within the span of one paragraph—from asserting that hybridity “profoundly unsettles the demand that figures at the center of the originary myth of colonialist power” (115) to an elision of difference within the fantasy of identity that, in effect, rearticulates a formation
that seems all but too familiar—that of the colonial disavowal. Bhabha thus writes:

Consider, for example: Locke's notion of the wasteland of Carolina—"Th is in the beginning all the world was America"; Montesquieu's emblem of the wasteful and disorderly life and labour in despotic societies—"When the savages of Louisiana are desirous of a fruit, they cut the tree to the root, and gather the fruit"; Grant's belief in the impossibility of law and history in Muslim and Hindu India—"where treasons and revolutions are continual; by which the insolent and abject frequently change places"; or the contemporary Zionist myth of the neglect of Palestine—"of a whole territory," Said writes, "essentially unused, unappreciated, misunderstood . . . to be made useful, appreciated, understandable." (115–16)

Captured within his primal scene, Bhabha reproduces Naipaul's fantasy once more. He conflates the wasteland of Carolina, Louisiana, Muslim and Hindu India, and Palestine, as well as Locke, Montesquieu, Grant, and Said, all differences—textual, historical, social—erased. Said's presence in this list is particularly striking. For one thing, Zionism speaks out of Said's mouth, as if it lacks spokespeople of its own and is in need of the mediation of its Other to articulate its myths of Palestine. More serious, though is the fact that Said becomes but one item in a list of colonial authorities that includes Locke, Montesquieu, and Grant, his discourse aligned with their colonial discourse.

The elision of all differences in this passage does not mark a move back from Foucault to Derrida, from the question of power and domination to the suspension of differences within the "system of reference." On the contrary, it points to the spuriousness of Bhabha's reference to Derrida in the first place. For whereas Derrida perceives writing (and reading) as an unceasing vacillation between differences and their undoing that remains forever unsettled, Bhabha here arrests and fixes colonial writing as an ongoing repetition of the same. Indeed, even as these passages point at the radical differences that colonial discourse strives to conceal, they also recant the very same differences. Rather than the challenge to authority that hybridity promises,
these passages reproduce the colonial disavowal of cultural/historical difference, of colonial fetishism. The “displacement from symbol to sign” dissipates within a fixation on identity that arrests the vacillation of writing and insists on its riveted and certain referent; a fixation that perceives writing, in other words, symbolically. That fixation thus disavows difference in the production of a discourse that, although critical of the failures of colonial discourse, still reproduces the fantasy of a homogenous, unifying, universalist symbol—of theory.  

Rhetoric

Bhabha’s rhetoric has attracted much attention and, more than that, consternation. The dismay his rhetoric provokes has not been limited to humorous occasions of the likes of the 1998 “Bad Writing Contest” sponsored by the journal Philosophy and Literature, in which he won second place. Arif Dirlik, for instance, accuses Bhabha of, among other things, the “substitution of post-structuralist linguistic manipulation for historical and social explanation” and names him a “master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation” (Dirlik 1994, 333; see also Callinicos 1995). Such criticism, however, misses the point, for it fails to account for the place language occupies in the formation of the scene of theory in Bhabha’s work.

Bhabha’s rhetoric should be interrogated within its double signification as Language/Law. For if, as Dirlik contends, Bhabha is truly responsible for the dissemination of a certain postcolonial vocabulary and rhetoric or, in other words, for the establishment of a particular common or customary language of postcolonial theory, then that language should be interrogated in between its mark as Language and as Law. Bhabha himself notes the intertwining of Language and Law in his analysis of the colonial scene; the colonial civilizing project, he asserts, speaks “with a peculiarly English authority derived from the customary practice on which both English common law and the English national language rely for their effectivity and appeal” (1994, 106; italicized in the original). For elucidation of the tie of language and law in customary practice, he refers his reader to John Barrell’s English Literature in History 1730–1780: An Equal, Wide Survey.
Examining the history of the notion of a common language in eighteenth-century England, Barrell shows how discussions of language and grammar were translated into political terms that served the attempts to establish a linguistic community as a political one. More than that, he points at the power formation that such discussions supported. Customary language, he insists, was not a democratic language; rather, it privileged certain social classes:

the customs of the language . . . when defined, often turned out to be the recent creation of a minority of speakers only. It was necessary, then, first to persuade the vulgar that these were, in legal terms, “general,” not “particular” customs, which were binding on everyone, everywhere; and second, to oblige the vulgar to do, in obedience to what is thus represented to them as customary law, what the polite did by “custom” defined for them not so much as law but as habit. (Barrell 1983, 136)

The notion of “custom” bridges and conceals the breach and tension between the polite and the vulgar, between language and law. Constituted to mark a transition from the private to the public, from habit to law, the custom as law sets and determines a formation of appropriate behavior for the vulgar. In Bhabha’s words, it sets a system of address that determines the upper classes as the addressers of language—and, hence, as the source of authority—and the lower classes as the addressees of that language.

The force of the customary and of habit forms an underplayed aspect of “Signs Taken for Wonders” and lies at the center of both the colonial primal scene and the primal scene of theory: “There’s a scene . . . which repeats so insistently . . . that I am bound to repeat it once more” (Bhabha 1994, 102; my italics). Bhabha puts into relief this compulsive repetition—the uncanny return of the repressed/oppressed—and celebrates it at the center of hybridity as the disruption of colonial transparency and, with it, of colonial authority. Simultaneously, the very same repetition also marks the return of custom, of habit, and the establishment of common language/law as an authoritative system of address, that is, as Language/Law. Bhabha indeed notes the ambivalence of repetition in the colonial scene, even if he privileges
the subversive effects of repetition over the modes in which it perpetuates authority. He fails, however, to acknowledge that his compulsive repetition of the other primal scene—that of theory—implicates his own language/law in the very same “ambivalence of splitting, denial, repetition” (114) that structure the colonial scene.

The uninterrupted repetition of the other primary scene thus figures that scene as an originary myth and establishes, in turn, an authoritative system of address. Although the latter seems to reverse the colonial system of address, its devices and effects are similar. As already noted, Bhabha explores the colonial system of address as built upon discursive transparency. By contrast, the other system of address is characterized by its rhetorical obfuscation and impenetrability. Indeed, Bhabha turns the opacity of poststructuralist rhetoric against the seemingly transparent moves of colonial authority to unsettle the latter. Still, the repetition of the other scene does not merely neutrally refer to the authoritative power of that other scene. Rather, notwithstanding the evasiveness of Bhabha’s rhetoric, it sets his own text, his own book as a seeming symbol of that authority, as the voice of its command.

**NOTE**

I would like to thank Aamir Mufti, Ruth Ginsburg, Gil Hochberg, David E. Johnson, and the participants of the colloquia of the Department of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Department of Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University, and the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Haifa University for their insightful comments. Special thanks are due to Doron Narkiss, who also edited this paper, for his insightful observations about the course of my argument.

1. Bhabha discusses the two terms repeatedly in the essays collected in his 1994 *The Location of Culture*. These essays were initially published in different venues in the decade or so that preceded the publication of the volume.
2. My line of inquiry thus differs from the approach taken by Arif Dirlik, for instance, who seeks to explore "the relationship of the idea of postcolonialism to its context in contemporary capitalism" (1994, 331); as well as from the approach taken by such critics as Benita Parry, who gauge Bhabha’s discourse in terms of its apathy toward material
resistance to colonialism (1998; 1994, 8); see also the responses to Parry’s criticism by Chambers (1995), Kraniauskas (2000, 240–42). Both Dirlik and Parry have little to say on the way theory figures Bhabha’s argument.


4. See also Church Missionary Society (1818, 18).

5. See also Church Missionary Society (1818, 18).

6. For the history of the term “hybridity” and its circulation in critical discourse, see Young (1995). For a favorable discussion of Bhabha’s definitions and uses of the term, see Fludernik (1998a, 1998b). Although Fludernik notes that “Bhabha’s actual use of the term hybrid(ity) is curiously static” (1998a, 23), she misses its implications for Bhabha’s theory in general. For a more critical discussion of the term, see Parry (1987, 41–43).

7. This point, in particular, raises concern among a number of critics who comment upon the ways in which Bhabha’s emphasis on hybridity obscures what is at stake in the very visceral struggle between colonizer and colonized and tends to reproduce the colonial disempowerment of the colonized. See, for instance, JanMohamed (1985, 60), Lazarus (1993, 86–87), Loomba (1991, 170–71), Wagenbauer (2000, 114–15).

8. Suvir Kaul similarly argues: “even as Bhabha argues for the hybridity of effects and objectives, for the enunciation and construction of the political, for the iterations, the translations and the negotiations of cognition and recognition, he grounds his case in the universal, generalizable, necessary structure of the moment of enunciation, of the act of écriture. He is quite aware that he does so, and he offers partial explanation (partial in that it explains the polemical need for such a ground, but not why the truisms of structuralist semiotics or grammatology should provide an immediately acceptable, or even preferable, foundation)” (1992, 223).


REFERENCES


Signs and Wonders is a 2000 psychological thriller directed by Jonathan Nossiter and co-written with British poet James Lasdun (also co-writer of Sunday) was inspired by the Polish surrealist novel, Kosmos of Witold Gombrowicz. It stars Stellan Skarsgård, Charlotte Rampling and Deborah Kara Unger. Produced by MK2 in Paris, with Nick Wechsler and Jed Alpert in the United States, it was one of the first larger budget films (reportedly $5,000,000) to use digital cameras for eventual blowup to 35 MM Signs and wonders. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto My Father." John 14:12. The draught of fish. John 21:5-12. © 1976, 1977, 1998 by Diane S. Dew Order the complete 6-volume, 850-pg. spiral-bound set of studies, 100 topics. I. A miracle is the occurrence of any event apparently contradictory to and unexplainable by the laws of science, and usually attributed to God. A. The Meaning of Signs and Wonders: Signs and wonders are special miracles that signify that something miraculous is going on. They are always intended on making people wonder about important things instead of remaining numb to them. In the Bible, signs and wonders include: 1. Miraculous Healing, raising the dead, giving sight. 2. Speaking in tongues. 3. Prophesying - telling the future. 4. Withholding rain for 3 1/2 years (Elijah) in judgment. 5. The sun darkened, and moon turned into blood (Act 2:19,20). Signs and wonders refers to experiences that are perceived to be miraculous as being normative in the modern Christian experience, and is a phrase associated with groups that are a part of modern charismatic movements and Pentecostalism. This phrase is seen multiple times throughout the Christian Bible to describe the activities of the early church, and is historically recorded as continuing, at least in practice, since the time of Christ.