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## Glued to the Image: A Critical Phenomenology of Racialization through Works of Art

### ABSTRACT

I develop a phenomenological account of racialized encounters with works of art and film, wherein the racialized viewer feels cast as perpetually past, coming “too late” to intervene in the meaning of her own representation. This points to the distinctive role that the colonial past plays in mediating and constructing our self-images. I draw on my experience of three exhibitions that take Muslims and/or Arabs as their subject matter and that ostensibly try to interrupt or subvert racialization while reproducing some of its tropes. My examples are the Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (2015), the exposition *Welten der Muslime* at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (2011–2017), and a sculpture by Bob and Roberta Smith at the Leeds City Art Gallery, created in response to the imperial power painting, *General Gordon's Last Stand*, that is housed there. My interest is in how artworks contribute to the experience of being racialized in ways that not only amplify the circulation of images but also constitute difficult temporal relations to images. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, I argue that such racialized images are temporally gluey, or stuck, so that we are weighted and bogged down by them.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes several experiences of racialization that take place through works of art, popular media, and film.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he evokes the experience of having to encounter his racialized image every time he goes to the cinema: “I wait for myself [*je m'attends*],” he says (BSWM 136, 140, 119). This experience of overdetermined waiting reveals something of the temporality of racialized experience, of the ways in which racialization structures and skews lived time. At the same time, it raises the question of how artwork and film may contribute to racialization in ways that not only amplify the circulation of images, but that also constitute distinctive and difficult relations to images. Such racialized images are gluey or stuck, I would say, so that we are weighted or bogged down by them (Fanon says “engluer”) (BSWM 32, 35, 18; 224, 230, 205).<sup>2</sup> What takes place in this encounter with *my* racialized self in an artwork?

In this essay, I propose a critical phenomenological account of the racialized structuring of lived

experience that happens through works of art.<sup>3</sup> Rather than simply focusing, as has often been the case, on the objectifying aspects of racialized representation, I wish to examine these racially inflected encounters *temporally*. What is revealed, in addition to objectification, is a temporal projection or retrogression by which the racialized body (whether subject or viewer) is cast as perpetually past, coming “too late” to intervene in the meaning of its own representation. We are *glued* to, stuck in, our past. This points, I argue, to the distinctive role that the past can play—within different modes of cultural production—in mediating and constructing our self-images and self-understandings.

To develop this critical phenomenological account, I appeal to examples from art installations that ostensibly try to avoid or subvert racialization while reproducing some of its tropes. I discuss three examples: (1) the 2015 art exhibition on *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism* (Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant) at the Montreal Museum of

Fine Arts, (2) the exposition *Welten der Muslime* [Worlds of Muslims] at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (2011–2017), and (3) a sculpture by the contemporary British artist Bob and Roberta Smith (one person) at the Leeds City Art Gallery, created in response to the imperial power painting, *General Gordon's Last Stand*, that is housed there. All three exhibitions take Muslims and/or Arabs as their subject matter, whether partially or wholly, and derive from colonial contexts. And all three try—in contrasting ways and with varying success—to avoid dominant stereotypes. My phenomenological analysis is informed by my experience of and work on the racialization of Muslims and Arabs in contemporary Western contexts and by my responses in navigating the lived spaces of affect and sensation generated by these installations.<sup>4</sup>

#### I. RACIAL IMAGINARIES

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon shows how racialization not only structures the ways in which bodies are represented and perceived, but also configures our affective, perceptual, and cognitive maps, our imaginary and aesthetic life.<sup>5</sup> Racialization describes the ways in which colonialism and white supremacy divide bodies politically, economically, spatially, and socially in order to exploit and dominate them. Racialization comprises, then, the historical, social, economic, epistemological, and affective processes—the (de)structuring violence and colonizing formations—by which races are constructed, seen, and, when interiorized or “epidermalized,” lived. The power of Fanon’s account of racism is twofold, in my view, for he is interested both in the *naturalization* of race, its constitution in relation to perceived bodily markers that come to unconsciously stand in for race, and in its *rationalization*, the ways in which racism takes itself to originate as a mere reaction to the racialized other.<sup>6</sup>

What Fanon reveals is that constructions of race in the social imaginary have more to do with drawing lines of domination and privilege than with the concrete racialized and colonized lives who are its ostensible objects.<sup>7</sup> “Black,” “native,” and “Arab” are oppositionally (yet differentially) constructed as that *other*, which “white” identity disavows. In this projective *othering*, difference is no longer relational; difference becomes *Manichean*

and masked—wherein colonized subjects serve as negative mirrors for what “modern European” identity takes itself to be (BSWM 185, 191, 167). There is an ignorance to racism that is not merely accidental but that sustains its operations—a forgetting which actively hides racializing mechanisms and misconstrues its objects. Racism is ambivalent, structurally relying on an epistemology of ignorance (Mills 2007), or what I call *colonial disregard*.<sup>8</sup> As Fanon notes, “[t]he European knows and he does not know”—both at the same time (BSWM 192, 199, 175).

Thus, Fanon shows racialization to be both recalcitrant and mobile. Its recalcitrance relies on an ability to adapt to its social time and place, taking on the guise of prevailing norms (Fanon 2006, 40).<sup>9</sup> Yet racism also covers over this rephrasing; it represses the histories and operations of power, which constitute it, and instead scapegoats or blames its victims (BSWM 188, 194, 170). More precisely, what is disavowed in the process of racialization is not some ahistorical essence; rather, the very guilt and corrosive de-structuring, which colonization brings about, is blamed on its *colonized others*.<sup>10</sup> Racialized bodies are, at once, the material and affective labor, the disposable and consumed lives that colonization exploits—the “fertilizer” that nourishes colonialism, says Fanon—and they are the scapegoats upon which the *need* for colonization and its constitutive violence are projected (BSWM 209, 216, 190).

To understand the role played by modes of cultural production, it is important to note that a racial imaginary is not innate. While Fanon describes it as a kind of “collective unconscious,” he argues, against Jung, that “[it] is cultural, which means acquired” (BSWM 182, 188, 165). This imaginary persists as unreflected habit or acquisition, or, as Fanon notes, *as cultural imposition* (185, 191, 167). This imaginary constellation, this cultural view of the world, is acquired through childhood education, scholarly manuals, language, media, comic books, stories, films, and images (BSWM 25, 28, 11; 143–144, 146, 124–125; 150, 152, 131).<sup>11</sup> As a result, particular ways of imagining, thinking, and seeing become normative. It is for this reason that Fanon calls the racial imaginary “white.” This is not to imply that it is restricted to phenotypically white subjects, but rather that it upholds a social mapping of ways of being where habitually “white” forms of seeing and being are privileged (and internalized as normatively

desirable for all subjects). Significantly, this account allows for racial imaginaries to be both historically dynamic and multiple, to differ for different racial societies as well as within each society. What is defining of a racial imaginary is *how* it draws borders that attempt to stabilize social categories of othering and manage racial formations; even as those borders shift, in policing who is included or excluded, the othering mechanism remains in force. Racial imaginaries are not coherent wholes; there is splitting and fragmentation with differential temporalities at play (BSWM 108, 110, 90).

The circulation of racializing images, in artistic and cinematic production, plays a constitutive role in the social imaginary. Depending on the context, this circulation may have the effect of conscious foregrounding, making the racialized body the focal point of fear, pity, surveillance, or violent sexualization. At other times, however, the circulation of images relegates racialized bodies to background or decor, making racism appear mundane in its indifference—a constitutive yet unthematized atmosphere of our lives. While this foreground–background play may be one way in which racism dissimulates and rephrases itself, my interest is in the temporal experience that *racialized subjects* undergo in relation to cinematic images, artworks, or artifacts. In this regard, it is not so much the foregrounding or backgrounding of racial stereotypes that is at stake, nor the composition of images, but the ways in which racism already saturates the temporal horizons of images, even when it is not ostensibly present. Fanon’s “black bellhop” haunts the films he attends, is waited for, watched out for, dreaded; the same can be said of submissive Muslim women in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibition described below. In other words, a racial imaginary already structures the encounter with the canvas or screen in a given society and epoch; but since this imaginary is acquired and temporally dynamic, the artistic and cinematic repetition and circulation of racialized stereotypes both borrow from this imaginary and intensify its affective power and embodied effects, amplifying rather than interrupting its hold. Next, I analyze this logic of amplified, aesthetic racialization, drawing on Fanon’s account of cinematic experience. In the last three sections of the essay, I examine three exhibitions that repeat or attempt to interrupt this logic. Using these exhibitions, I ask whether and how artistic pro-

duction can be configured to open routes not only to social critique but to other ways of affectively relating to the images of racialized groups.

## II. WAITING FOR MY RACIALIZED IMAGE

There are three places in *Black Skin, White Masks* where Fanon reflects on how images can racialize.<sup>12</sup> Most famously, at the end of the chapter entitled “The lived experience of the Black [*L’expérience vécue du Noir*],” he says:

I cannot go to a film without seeing myself [*me rencontrer*]. I wait for myself [*je m’attends*]. In the interval [*l’entracte*], just before the film starts, I wait for myself. Those in front of me look at me, spy on me, wait for me. A black bellhop [*un nègre-groom*] is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim. (BSWM 136, 140, 119, translation revised)

The experience of waiting that Fanon describes is both reflexive and intersubjective; not only does he wait for himself, but that interval is filled by the stereotyped expectations of others in the theater who watch him. This intersubjective dimension of the aesthetic experience—which mediates the meaning and reception of films, artworks, and cultural productions—makes a difference, to which I return below. For now, I note that *waiting* is loaded with several senses: watching and surveillance, a sense of expectation filled with foreboding since what is expected is predetermined in advance, and a passivity before the image (of the bellhop) that evokes a feeling of coming “too late,” of powerlessness to change its received meaning. Here, waiting loses its sense of indeterminacy, its opening onto an unpredictable future. While Fanon defines himself, earlier in the same chapter, as “one who waits; I investigate my surroundings. . . . I become sensitive [*sensitif*],” it is precisely this sensitivity and receptivity to context that means that the racialized subject is affectively overloaded and “tetanized” under the weight and circulation of racialized images (BSWM 117, 120, 99; 110, 113, 92).<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic experience of racialization is, at this level, one of weariness and pessimism.<sup>14</sup>

Yet there is a second level to the experience. What is made visible, what becomes conscious, in the encounter with the screen is the temporal fragmentation of self that racialization involves.

I have argued elsewhere that this racial fragmentation is experienced as lateness and delay. But Fanon's account conveys something more, for this delay occurs even with respect to an image that has *not yet appeared*. It shows that neither prevision nor preparation and effort can ensure timeliness or coequality; the racialized subject cannot intervene in the sense of what appears.<sup>15</sup> This is a delay that cannot be caught up. It means that the racialized viewer is *always already late*—not only phenomenologically but ontologically and structurally, Fanon would say.

It is important that this feeling of lateness not merely be understood in terms of the preexistence of the world that is supposed to characterize the phenomenological experience of an “intersubjective world.”<sup>16</sup> The feeling of coming to a world that was *always already there*, that contains meanings sedimented through other lives, would give the sense of that world as “real.” Yet this intersubjective world would not be perceived as a completed or closed reality; indeed, sedimented meanings are there to be taken up, made sense of, and transformed into new meaning. This is not the overdetermined world of the racialized image that Fanon describes. To understand the overdetermination that belongs to and is produced by the racial imaginary, we must examine the other two discussions of film in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Earlier in the book, in the context of a discussion of language, Fanon notes that, when contemporary American films are dubbed in French, black actors are often made to speak in stereotypically constructed dialect, infantilized and simplified; they are made to speak “*petit-nègre*” (BSWM 31, 34–35, 17).<sup>17</sup> In a context where he has shown that speaking “correct” French is associated with authority and with becoming “almost white [*quasi-blanc*],” this dubbing not only racializes the actors but spreads an audible racism throughout the cinema (BSWM 19, 21, 7). Specifically, this forced synchronization of optical and sound images creates a kind of glue, says Fanon, “tying [the racialized subject] to his image, snaring him [*l'engluer*], imprisoning him as the eternal victim of [an] essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible” (BSWM 32, 34, 18).

Thus, racialization in the cinema involves a double movement: a temporal fragmentation of agency (or body schema), where the pieces have been glued back together into a racialized self (what Fanon calls the “racial-epidermal schema”).

This racialized self is put together by others, whence the significance both of the intersubjective context that makes possible the film and of the other audience members in the spectator space (BSWM 107, 109, 89). In a long footnote later in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recommends an experimental observation: attend two screenings of the same film (Fanon proposes a Tarzan film or a documentary on Africa), first in the Antilles and then in France. In the Antilles, the black audience member identifies with Tarzan against the “savages,” but in France the white audience “automatically place him among the savages on the screen.” Whereas the first context triggers exaggerated laughter, “betray[ing] a hint of recognition,” in the second context he is “literally petrified,” says Fanon (BSWM 150, 152–153, 131).

What is this glue? Saying that the glue is aesthetic racism gives only part of the answer, for *colonial glueing*—“*engluer*”—is also temporal. The cinematic image in Fanon's account—the forced optical-sound dubbing of “*petit-nègre*” that becomes part of the new racialized self—synchronizes that self not with the present but with a constructed, colonized, and already sticky past. Rather than coexistence in the present, we find ourselves fastened to the past in a backward projection, rendering us perpetually late. Elsewhere in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon calls this construction of the past a *historico-racial schema*. Its elements, he says, “had been provided for me . . . by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (BSWM 109, 111, 91). This schema incorporates the cultural imaginary described above, but it highlights how racialized subjects are stuck and positioned *differentially* within that imaginary: while white subjects can appropriate the expanse of “civilizational” history, racialized subjects are limited to those historical or fictional elements that make up a stereotyped past.<sup>18</sup> Thus, says Fanon, “my eardrums were bursting with cannibalism, mental retardation, fetishism, racial taints, slave-traders, and, above all, above all, ‘*Y a bon banania*’” (BSWM 110, 112, 92).<sup>19</sup> While Fanon emphasizes the historicity of this schema, as the glue that constitutes the racialized self, it is affectively lived, interiorized, and epidermalized (BSWM 109, 112, 92). We thus slip into a naturalization of the stereotyped past, and of racialized images, to the body (in a “racial-epidermal schema”).



FIGURE 1. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant (1845–1902). *The Favorite of the Emir*, c. 1879, Oil on Canvas, 142.2 × 221 cm. Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art. Courtesy of the United States Naval Academy Museum. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### III. GLUED TO A COLONIAL PAST

In the dubbed film that Fanon recalls, the dubbing not only makes racism audible but repeats and amplifies it. Images glue together and constitute a racialized self, while supplementing the circulation of stereotypes in the cultural imaginary. Here, the historico-racial schema is both enacted and amplified. In the 2015 exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Benjamin-Constant: Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism*, the stickiness of artworks becomes palpable (Figure 1).<sup>20</sup> Ostensibly, the aim of this exhibition was to collect in one place, while producing a double reading of, the works of the relatively minor orientalist painter, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant. While the first reading locates the painter “in his time,” within a tradition of orientalist painting in the late nineteenth century and highlights his technical expertise as a colorist, his travels, and his awards, the second reading inserts a critical awareness of the ways in which Orientalism stereotypes its subjects. This mixture of readings can be found in almost all

of the texts of the exhibition but results in an ambiguity that hides critical import. Juxtaposed with the overwhelming size, the number, the vibrant colors, and the representational seduction of the paintings (Figure 1), the ambiguity of the texts collapses into mere admiration (witnessed in the exclamations of the viewers). Violent but asexual men, quiescent and sexually available women, languid, unthinking, and indolent, are made visible in colors and on a scale designed to overpower and convince the viewer. Here, stereotypes come to life, and while the text may tell us that Benjamin-Constant would not have had access to a *harem* and, hence, could only imagine it (with the exception of one doubtful boast on his part), the paintings make this fiction appear real and leave the viewer with a univocal and eroticized image of Arab women.<sup>21</sup>

Intentionally decorative (with the aim of selling to a Western public), this exhibition constructs the “Orient” as decor for Western sensibilities and suspends it in an eternal past. Arabs and Muslims, but especially Muslim women, are the contextless



FIGURE 2. Detail from the frame. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant. *The Favorite of the Emir*, c. 1879, Oil on Canvas, 142.2 × 221 cm. Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art. Photograph by Alia Al-Saji. The inscription reads in Arabic: “There is no victor but Allah.” [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

objects for a phallogocentric Western gaze. Significantly, Benjamin-Constant has “his own time [*en son temps*],” a time which is historicized, narrated, and contextualized, while the subjects of his paintings remain without narrative and often without name (for example, Figure 1). More generally, the “Orient” seems stuck in a time before time, a past that lacks progression or covalency with the West. The real subject of the exhibition is an orientalist and racializing way of seeing. This is not only embodied by the paintings but carried through in all the background pieces of the exhibition: from the generic “oriental” music floating through the rooms to the literal frames that Benjamin-Constant chose for his works. Making the name of God in Arabic a frame for several of his paintings (Figure 2) might be a mundane decorative detail for the Western viewer, but it is one that can only alienate any of the large Arabo-Muslim population of Montreal who venture into the museum. From the sexually overdetermined, reclining *odalisque* in *The Favorite of the Emir* (Figure 1) to the fictionalized biblical figure of *Judith* to paintings of the marketplace and of impassive Arab men, such inscriptions frame a variety of paintings throughout the exhibition (Figure 2).<sup>22</sup> Rather than taking them as the starting point for critique, the exhibition treated them as decor, amplifying their alienating affect.

I return to the acquiescent smile of the attendant of *The Favorite of the Emir* (Figure 1) below. But I pause here to question the antiblackness that frames the image. The black musician under the lifted curtain (whose sexuality appears neutralized through slavery) and the spying guard behind the column are assigned to background and made fungible (Figure 1). To track the differential opacity and translucency with which figures are rendered allows us to see the racialized and gendered colorism that Benjamin-Constant’s painting generates. But, like images of the *harem*, we must remind ourselves that Benjamin-Constant’s scenes were staged in his Paris studio with European models. Benjamin-Constant’s racialized colorism makes visible the gaze of the French colonial society to which he belonged through the medium of imagined “hidden” spaces in the colonies. This is not to deny slavery and concubinage in Muslim societies, nor that multiple modalities of antiblackness operate in Arab cultures. As Saidiya Hartman has shown, Islam itself became a pretext for expanding the slaving frontier in Africa in the nineteenth century, raiding “infidels” and weaker states (Hartman 2007, 183). Yet, like his *harem*, we should treat with suspicion the representational realism of Benjamin-Constant’s *The Favorite of the Emir* (Figure 1)—the lifted curtain unveiling the truth not only of Arab women but also of oppressive social relations within colonized society. Indeed, the “barbarity” of slavery and gender oppression in North Africa both served as retrospective reasons for colonization, under the guise of liberation.<sup>23</sup> This is what Fanon calls “the racial redistribution of guilt”—indexing how colonization divided racialized subjects against each other and used them in colonial repression and occupation (BSWM 101, 103, 83).

If we question the translucent skin of the female figures in *The Favorite of the Emir* (Figure 1)—the attendant whose “not-quite-white” paleness is contrasted to the shimmering “whiteness” of the *odalisque* (differentiated by hair color and hierarchal position)—colonization as racialized gendering comes into view. Benjamin-Constant portrayed North African men in generally darker hues than women (with the exception of servants).<sup>24</sup> As “hidden” beauty made into voyeuristic spectacle for European enjoyment (through the proxy of European models), North African women needed to be whitened. The desirability of whiteness and the frame of

antiblackness structure the image and produce racializing (hetero)sexual desires for European viewers. And this constructs, as its obverse, another desire—that of smiling, sexually acquiescent (and substitutable) Arab women—and prescribes for them an aspirational need to whiten.

In the last room of the exhibition, photographic works by three contemporary female artists of Moroccan origin were curated in guise of a response to Benjamin-Constant.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes critical, sometimes mimicking, but always self-conscious, these pieces belied the logic whereby Arabo-Muslim women are unreflecting and animal-like creatures of enjoyment, of bare life. The success of these pieces in responding to Benjamin-Constant was, however, doubtful in the context of the Montreal exhibition. Not only were they limited in the space they occupied—collected in the last room as if the critical gesture were an afterthought—but Benjamin-Constant's works also overpowered them in both size and number.

To illustrate: the piece by Yasmina Bouziane that was included in the exhibition—a self-portrait photograph *Untitled No. 6, alias "The Signature"* (c. 1993; Figure 3)—offered, in my view, the most effective resistance to Benjamin-Constant. Bouziane photographs only herself, refusing to make use of other women's bodies; in an interview, she explains that she limits herself to "self-portraits" so as to avoid subjugating others into becoming objects of her gaze (Behiery 2014, 250–251). More so, Bouziane shows herself as the artist behind the camera, as both eye and hand, actively turning the camera onto the viewer. The photographic apparatus as orientalist tool—used to produce colonial postcards portraying veiled Arab women exposed (postcards sent home by French troops)—is retooled. Its power as prosthetic technology of vision is not only exposed but critically reworked. What her photograph presents is a bodily assemblage where camera combines with veiled body, with hands, eyes, and cloth, to create different possibilities of seeing Arab women—and of seeing *as* an Arab woman—that fit uneasily with colonial constructions of the orient as past, such as Benjamin-Constant's. Rather than seamless composition, emphasizing realism and beauty, Bouziane makes artifice and bricolage visible within her photograph—creating leeway for reconfiguration. Lighting source, reflective screen, Moroccan carpets, and the tarpaulin suspended behind her, showing traces of paint and

dirt from past work, foreground the improvisational agency of the artist.

Bouziane's photograph (Figure 3) offered me an interruption in the flow of the *Orientalism* exhibition, an affectively rich interval in which I might hesitate and come unstuck from the colonial past. Indeed, as prosthetic to carry back with me, it promised a resistant means of revising the images I had just walked through and felt swallowed up by. Yet, the hesitation it provided was drowned out by the sheer size and multiplication of Benjamin-Constant's paintings, but also by the time to which it was subsumed.<sup>26</sup> The rhythm of the exhibition, while not homogeneous, was dictated by Benjamin-Constant's paintings: the linear chronology of his life, family, travels, studio. It would be a different exhibition that found its heartbeat in Bouziane's photograph.<sup>27</sup> As it was curated and circumscribed, in the last room, its interruptive beat could not ripple through the rest of the exhibition.

To the exclusion of Bouziane's, the contemporary pieces curated for the exhibition were limited in their focus to the harem and odalisque—as if these were the only parts of Benjamin-Constant's oeuvre in need of correction. The repetitiveness of this focus paradoxically amplified the sticking power of Benjamin-Constant's paintings, even when the aim was critique. To illustrate: Lalla Essaydi's *Harem, No. 2* positions her subject as an odalisque whose body is textually and visually over-inscribed, but who nevertheless returns the gaze. Yet, in the context of the exhibition, this direct gaze recalls that of the attendant of *The Favorite of the Emir* (figure on the right in Figure 1), housed in the same room, and sucks us back into the exoticizing and racializing milieu of that imposing painting, a milieu which Essaydi sought to criticize. Rather than empowering Arab women as subjects able to return the gaze, the reverse effect is produced by Essaydi's beautiful photograph: the power and stickiness of Benjamin-Constant's painting overwhelms her photograph and overdetermines how it is seen.<sup>28</sup> The unsmiling and defiant look of Essaydi's subject—a subtle play on the orientalist odalisque—finds itself reframed and overwritten by the smiling openness and malleability of the figure in Benjamin-Constant's painting. More pessimistically, this shows the failure of our, Arab women's, oppositional looks in responding to orientalizing contexts—the co-option and



FIGURE 3. Yasmina G. Bouziane (b. 1968). *Untitled No. 6, alias "The Signature"* from the series c. 1993 "Inhabited by Imaginings We Did Not Choose." Chromogenic print, 1/10, 40.8 × 27.9 cm. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase, Peter Dey Fund. Photo: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



sexualization of the very look that looks back, indeed, of any response on our part.<sup>29</sup> It shows how orientalist representations were not simply about objectification of female bodies but had already been able to exploit the ambivalence of the direct gaze to inscribe Arab women with a *subjectivity* in need of rescuing and, hence, that called for colonization—a subjectivity that was, at once, acquiescent, even complaisant.

And therein lies what is troubling about these sticky, orientalist images. For the bodies they represent are not merely sexual objects for a Western phallogentric and colonial fantasy, to be unveiled and possessed; they are subjects that do not, cannot, protest and, hence, have “an aura of rape” about them (Fanon 1965, 45; Fanon 2001, 27).<sup>30</sup> Disturbingly, Fanon uses this expression to describe French attempts to unveil Algerian women in his essay, “Algeria Unveiled” (1965, chap. 1): linking the colonization, material, and moral exploitation, of Algeria to the ways in which Algerian women were represented as prey for the colonizer. Could this explain the sensation of “occupied breathing” and of enclosure, the tightening of the circles of racialization through sexualization, as I walked through this exhibition (Fanon 1965, 65; 2001, 49)? The nausea of being bogged down in a viscous colonial duration and being glued to an image? With sticky images such as these, that linger in the imagination and mediate how we see—how one sees oneself—the image seems to become agential in its own right, co-opting even critical reproductions.

#### IV. INTERRUPTING RACIALIZING IMAGES

This raises the question of what could be an effective response to racializing and orientalist ways of seeing. How could such an interruption be performed? The exhibition *Welten der Muslime* (2011–2017) at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin attempted to enact such an interruption to Islamophobic stereotypes.<sup>31</sup> Arguably incomparable, both in its mission and in its collections, the Ethnologisches Museum has as its self-conscious focus offering a corrective to the colonizing ways of seeing perpetuated in its past. Two aspects of the exhibition *Muslims' Worlds* (in the plural) are worth noting. First, due to the nature of the collections available to it, the use of artifacts. Writing instruments, window covers, doors, amulets,

prayer beads, and multiple forms of dress are used to invoke the agency and lives of diverse Muslims (within the geographical limits of the collections of the Museum and the colonial pasts from which they derive). Muslims are not directly defined (very few photographs are used), but indirectly invoked by the tools they use, tools which beckon to the visitor's body to be used and worn. Second, there is an insistence on the complexity and multiplicity of Muslims' *worlds*, with an explicit openness to the possible interpretations and meanings that Muslims may give to their practices, cultures, and lives. This is recalled in almost every context where dominant racializing perceptions might intervene. It can be seen most clearly in the careful treatment of Muslims' dress, in particular of the *hijab*; here, one witnesses an attempt to stave off dominant preconceptions and correct them wherever they might arise.

While the exhibition had its limitations and incoherencies, its effect on this Muslim viewer was a feeling of leeway, of breathing and moving room, the space to hesitate, think, and insert one's own meaning. Unexpectedly, one feels able to relax that guarded attitude of waiting that characterizes one's relation to modes of cultural production. Not only did the exhibition refrain from offering a univocal sense to its subject matter (Islam, the *hijab*, public-private space), but it also sought to destabilize the dominant, orientalist readings and homogeneous stereotypes. While the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibition conveyed one way of seeing, a seeing that took place according to a largely unquestioned colonial past, *Welten der Muslime* opened up the past to interpretation and reconfiguration, to being lived and enacted differently in the present.

This brings me to my final example from the Leeds City Art Gallery. This gallery, which I visited in 2015, has historically housed a number of orientalist paintings from the nineteenth century, paintings designed to reinforce and propagate the image of the imperial power of Britain among its subjects. A public institution with an educational function, it continues to be free and open to the public to wander in and take in, or be taken in by, its imperial power paintings. In 2010, the gallery commissioned a response to one of these paintings: *General Gordon's Last Stand* (1893), by George William Joy (Figure 4), depicting the supposed heroism of Gordon, who died in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1885 after a siege of



FIGURE 4. George William Joy (1844–1925). *General Gordon's Last Stand*, c. 1893. Oil on Canvas, 23.6 × 17.5 cm. Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery). UK/Bridgeman Images. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

almost a year by the forces of the Muslim leader, al-Mahdi. In the painting (Figure 4), one can see Gordon, intrepid and unafraid, standing upright and almost alone, his gun relaxed by his side, in front of an overwhelming force of Muslim men with spears and swords, “hordes of Islam,” as

the newspapers of the time exclaimed (quoted in Behrman 1971, 50). In the painting, it is these men who appear awestruck, even frightened, while Gordon bravely faces his imminent martyrdom. Such hagiography of Gordon was popular at the time and served the purposes of empire.



the structure, counterclockwise, in order to read the text that spirals down. The effect is dizzying, decentering the sensory-motor schema of the viewer and recentering an open-ended question: not history as such but the suffering past–present, the destructuring and aphasic wounds of colonial durations. The text on the sculpture reads:

This is General Gordon. On the radio this morning was the news that the trial had collapsed of two men who were accused of being part of a mob that killed six military policemen in Iraq in 2003. The men were surrounded in a building. They were underequipped and given an impossible task. I am on a train to Leeds to look at the painting by William Joy of General Gordon at Khartoum. It is an Imperial Power painting it was painted to point out to Gladstone that he had failed General Gordon. Gordon had been surrounded and killed. Joy painted it when Gladstone's Home Rule Bill was being debated, the point was being made that Gladstone was a traitor to the Empire, he had let Gordon die. Now he was giving Ireland to the Irish. Gordon's death lead [sic] 15 years later to the massacre of Omdurman when Kitchener retook Khartoum killing 10,000 men with British losses of 42. After Leeds I travelled to York to see my mother who has problems with her memory. I told her of my ambition to make a sculpture of General Gordon. She said I have forgotten was there a past? [Figure 5]

Reading the text in linear fashion elides the ways in which the dizzying journey around the artwork undoes sensory-motor habits and creates possibilities for seeing and feeling differently. For this circular movement makes the viewer *take time*, opening up a temporal interval in which the colonial past comes flooding back into the present, not merely as narrative but as affect. This past is felt not as a bygone event but as a present and troubling past—a past that remains an open wound in the present, despite attempts to cover it over or rewrite it. As I walked around this artwork, the hitherto invisible and sticky past was reconfigured with new temporal links, spacing it out and loosening its hold; hesitation was introduced into the past and its enduring colonial formations. Breathing time was created, a time not of rest but of troubling affect and dizzying sensation, without tetanization. The affective pang—of sadness, anger, and despair—comes at the end, with the question: “I have forgotten was there a past?” A question without hope, an impossible question that holds in tension, at once, the pres-

ence of the past and its continual reconfiguration, its spiralling without progress. This tension, an interval that cannot be filled, makes me feel the indeterminacy of the past, giving me, as a racialized Iraqi viewer, time to breathe.

#### V. CONCLUSION

I feel hesitation ripple through the room. As spectators become participants in the sculpture, they move around it, taking the place and orientation of the Muslim soldiers relative to Gordon for whom the sculpture speaks, albeit differently. Performing a function of public art, the sculpture disassembles and re-members the sticky past that made Gordon (and Kitchener) heroes—just as it recuperates and reconfigures discarded pasts of the colonized. Placed prominently in the Victorian gallery, so as to face *General Gordon's Last Stand*, to which it responds, the intersubjective space of the gallery is already configured in ways receptive to contagion from the sculpture; its critical regard may sometimes travel to other imperial power paintings in the room. Charting affective histories and geographies, folded pasts, the sculpture touches the wounds of a colonial duration that is neither linear nor progressive (see BSWM 181, 187, 164).<sup>32</sup> This past snowballs, festers, and gets stuck, making a corrosive difference in the present; it bogs us down, as racialized subjects, and submerges us.

Image and sculpture can operate as intervals—corporeal and imaginary prosthetics—that mediate our relation to this difficult and sticky past. They can reproduce and amplify the glue of colonial duration, pushing us under; or they can buoy us up, offering leeway and air. I have shown how the Orientalism exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts was a stuck perception, fixated on repeating a romanticized past of indolent North African men and acquiescent Arab women. Benjamin-Constant's paintings constructed for Muslim and Arab viewers a stifling and non-relational world—one that reflected French racism in its colorism and racialization of gender.

In contrast, Yasmina Bouziane's photograph and Bob and Roberta Smith's sculpture offer me perceptual and imaginary prosthetics, sensitive, hesitating, opening intervals in which I can live. They are modes of bricolage that unfold and re-fold the past, allowing it to touch in new ways,

making possible different relationalities. Stuck in the past, as racialized subjects, we need to retool and reconfigure it, to use our bodies to interrupt its colonization. Rather than borrow our tone and affective texture from Orientalism—in its “beautiful” and seductive, violent and romantic images—we might dismember that past and “rememory” it differently (Morrison 2004, 116).<sup>33</sup> An assemblage without seamlessly fitting parts, an improvised bricolage, structures its past with relays and intervals, making room for hesitation and reconfiguration and for breath. Such an assemblage holds within its joints the leeway to interrupt the mechanism of the aesthetic apparatus, to hesitate and use it differently.

I note, in conclusion, that the interval of hesitation created is not immediately, nor necessarily, liberatory. Moving around Smith’s sculpture, I am still caught in the interval, still waiting for the next time the image of an oppressed Muslim woman or a barbarous Muslim man will appear (and it will). But the sculpture makes that interval livable, breathable. By replacing the willful look at a painting with an unwinding and dizzying bodily movement that has duration, the sculpture makes me *take time to dwell*, to redress my disjointed body and mourn. This duration makes a difference, creates *affective leeway*, within the glue of colonial duration. It makes it possible to remain with hesitation, rather than be forced to move on.<sup>34</sup>

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1. Fanon 1952; Fanon 1967; Fanon 2008. Cited as BSWM with French pagination, followed by both English translations (1967 then 2008). I use and correct both translations, since each has its virtues and errors.

2. I derive the term “gluey” from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, specifically from the French verb “engluer” that he employs a number of times, but that is lost in both translations (BSWM 32, 35, 18; 224, 230, 205). While I do not have space to analyze their differences, I understand Fanon’s *engluer* to be different than Sara Ahmed’s sticky words and objects of emotion (2004, 11–14). Ahmed does not draw “stickiness” from Fanon, but Sartre (although she discusses Fanon in other connections; 2004, 90). For me, the *glueing* mechanism must be understood temporally and in aesthetic terms; images are sticky in ways that differ from discourse.

3. Paul C. Taylor argues compellingly for the role of a phenomenology of experience in aesthetics, and in Black aesthetics in particular (2016, 24–26).

4. While Arabs and Muslims are not equivalent identities, Arabs belong to the “Islamic world.” This means that anti-Arab racism overlaps considerably with anti-Muslim racism. I use the most relevant term based on the racial discourse at stake; often both are interchangeably at play.

5. Monique Roelofs draws on Fanon to argue for the role of the aesthetic in both racialization and anticolonial struggle (2014, 44–48). José Medina (2013) argues for the structuring role of the imaginary in ignorance and for its

potential for resistance. While both of their outlooks are more optimistic than mine, our projects intersect in seeing in the aesthetic, both oppressive and resistant, possibilities.

6. Perceptibility is constituted within a colonial horizon, wherein visible, audible, and other signs of “race” are overdetermined (phenotype, skin color, facial features, but also mannerism, accent, and cultural-religious dress and practice).

7. Robert Bernasconi describes race as a “border concept” (2012).

8. Medina argues that this is “active ignorance” (2013, 39, 57). Ann Stoler describes it in terms of “colonial aphasia” (2011).

9. See also Taylor (2016, 9–10).

10. Fanon calls this “the racial redistribution of guilt” (BSWM 101, 103, 83).

11. “[I]l y a une constellation de données, une série de propositions qui lentement, surnoisement, à la faveur des écrits, des journaux, de l’éducation, des livres scolaires, des affiches, du cinéma, de la radio, pénètrent un individu—en constituant la vision du monde de la collectivité à laquelle il appartient” (BSWM 150, 152, 131; see also BSWM 25, 28, 11; 143–144, 146, 124–125). For more on the concept of social imaginary, see Medina (2013, 68).

12. There are several film theorists who take up Fanon’s discussions of racialization through cinema, notably, David Marriott and Kara Keeling. Marriott’s account is explicitly psychoanalytic and opposes phenomenological readings of Fanon (choosing to ignore, it seems to me, the interconnections and tensions between phenomenology and psychoanalysis that might have appealed to Fanon). See Marriott (2013).

13. *Tetanization* is used by Fanon in medical and metaphorical senses, inseparably. If colonization is tetanus, then it is infection, which penetrates colonized bodies, and it leads to the spasming of their muscles in a useless repetition which externally looks like paralysis.

14. I, thus, disagree with Kara Keeling’s otherwise compelling construal of the interval of waiting, when she reads it as potentially liberatory. While there are instances of hesitation and waiting that are transformative in Fanon, the experience of waiting that he describes in the above quotation is decidedly pessimistic (Keeling 2003).

15. The racialized subject lacks “ontological resistance,” to use Fanon’s term (BSWM 108, 110, 90). This means that coequality needs, at minimum, simultaneous radical reconfiguration at the structural and ontological levels.

16. An intersubjective world of relationality and reciprocity would be inaccessible for subjects living under colonization, whatever their positionality; ours is a pathological world, for Fanon.

17. Commonly translated “pidgin,” *petit-nègre* was not just any pidgin, but the unconjugated simple French that French officers and administrators spoke to their colonial soldiers and subjects.

18. To make one speak *petit-nègre* is to say that: “He has no culture, no civilization, and no ‘long historical past’” (BSWM 31, 34, 17).

19. BSWM 110, 112, 92 (I have revised the translation using Macey 2012, 164). The French phrase “*Y a bon banania*,” which Fanon employs, is difficult to translate. It recalls to the French reader a well-known brand of cocoa drink mix that uses, in its advertising and on its tin, the caricature of a grinning black man (supposed to represent a Senegalese

tirailleur, a colonial infantry soldier). But it also replaces the “correct” French of “*c’est bon*” with “*y a bon*”—amplifying the racialization of the Senegalese soldier by making him speak *petit-nègre*,” glueing visible, audible, and linguistic dimensions.

20. “Merveilles et Mirages de l’Orientalism: De l’Espagne au Maroc, Benjamin-Constant en son temps.” Because of their stickiness, I reproduce only one of these paintings (Figure 1).

21. To the effect that he stumbled into a *harem* by mistake, having crossed the threshold of the wrong door. See Benjamin-Constant, *Interior of a Harem in Morocco*, 1878 (oil on canvas, 310 × 527 cm). Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/past/marvels-and-mirages-of-orientalism/#works>, figure 5/16.

22. Not always the same inscription, but always with the name of “Allah.” In Figure 2, it says “*Walla Ghaleb Illa Allah* [there is no victor but God].”

23. After the abolition of slavery in the metropolises of France and Britain.

24. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/past/marvels-and-mirages-of-orientalism/#works>, for instance, figures 3/16 and 4/16.

25. There were five pieces altogether. I reproduce Yasmina Bouziane’s (Figure 3).

26. Over 100 paintings by Benjamin-Constant were collected for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibition, many with sizes comparable to Figure 1, which is 142 × 221 cm. Bouziane’s single piece was 41 × 28 cm (Figure 3).

27. Bouziane has photographs of veiled women in different activities, including reading.

28. Essaydi recognizes how her images reproduce a “dangerous beauty” that she is attempting to reclaim from the Orientalists (Behiery 2014, 252). It may be that in a different context such reclamation could succeed, but in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibition the beauty of Essaydi’s photographs only confirmed the “hidden beauty” that Benjamin-Constant’s paintings claimed to unveil. See *Harem No. 2*: <http://lallaessaydi.com/8.html>.

29. While distinctive, Hartman’s analysis of the ambivalence of “seduction” under slavery is relevant here (1997, 103).

30. In French, “*un fumet [odour] de viol*,” a term borrowed from Sartre.

31. See Pfluger-Schindlbeck (2012). See also [http://ww2.smb.museum/weltendermuslime/index.php?page\\_id=2&lang=en](http://ww2.smb.museum/weltendermuslime/index.php?page_id=2&lang=en). Unfortunately, this exhibition is now closed, since the Ethnologisches Museum is moving to the Berliner Schloss, the reconstructed eighteenth-century imperial palace rebuilt in the middle of Berlin.

32. 2010 London, 2003 Iraq, 2010 Leeds, 1893 England, 1885 Khartoum, 1893 Ireland, 1898 Khartoum, 2010 York.

33. See Hartman on redress (1997, 72–77).

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