Semiotic Review 7: Blank Faces | review published September 2019 |
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On Observing the Face

Abani, Chris. 2016. *The Face: Cartography of a Void*. Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books.

Aw, Tash. 2016. *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*. Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books.

Ozeki, Ruth. 2016. *The Face: A Time Code*. Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books.

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We spend most of our lives trying to read other people's faces. Even the most opaque face contains, we believe, the key to some kind of essential truth about a person—though we may have to wait hours, or years, to catch the one fleeting glance that hints at this truth. And herein lies the paradox: no matter how much we prize the revelatory power of faces, we are surprisingly bad at reading them. When it comes to reading faces, we are like wild boars hunting for truffles, stumbling around blindly through the dark, waiting to catch stray whiffs that bring us closer to that essence. That is why face-reading will always be a poetic endeavor, based on what facial expressions might suggest rather than a more literal de-coding.

When it comes to our own faces, we are equally blind, though in a different way. We are chuffed when someone seems to recognize our face—or something true in our face, like our identity or mood. Even if this recognition is completely inaccurate—if we are, like the author Tash Aw, mistaken for being a "local" in almost every country "east of India"—the act of recognition itself, though false, can create an intimate connection (Aw, 1). Other times, though, the misrecognition of our faces can feel like the opposite: like something essential in us has not been seen. And yet, though they are so intimately connected to us, our own faces remain blindspots to us. This is why there is something estranging about seeing your own face in the mirror—it looks so different from the way you had imagined it!

Restless Books' series "*The Face*," an exercise in self-observation, is a bold experiment in making this blindspot visible. In three short memoirs of their faces, well-known authors Ruth Ozeki ("A Time Code"), Tash Aw ("Strangers On a Pier") and Chris Abani ("Cartography of the Void") reflect on their faces and what it can tell us about who they are. What we learn is that there is something joltingly intimate about the face—especially when it is recognized, or thought to have been. In this review, I will interweave my own experiences of observing other people's faces—and their relationships to their own faces—in my ethnographic fieldwork on young Muslim women in India with the auto-reflections of these authors. What can these two different kinds of observation—auto- and ethnographic—tell us about the face and how we might "read" it?

1. Bride Filter

Aliya is showing me a photo of a sock puppet on her phone. It's about the size of an adult hand and sits, slightly hunched, on a glass display case of saris. Its round body is a patchwork of varying shades of sock-grey; its face flat and expressionless. Two brown buttons (eyes) hover over a crooked, black string (mouth). "Isn't it cute?" Aliya exclaims. She made it with her co-workers at the clothing shop where works in South Delhi. Aliya turns to her aunt, Saleema, who is chuckling at the sock puppet. "But, auntie," she says, "*yeh gunah hai*? Is it a sin?" Saleema responds, "Well, of course!" Aliya clicks her tongue in disappointment. In Sunni Islam, idolatry is forbidden. This is why Sunnis try not to keep pictures of living beings—defined as anything with a face—in their homes. Aliya explains to me that in making a sock puppet, she has attempted to create a new being, and has thus usurped Allah's role. "Because I can't breathe life it into it, can I? Only Allah can do that," she tells me.

This is not the first time Aliya has ventured into the morally ambiguous territory of creating, or tweaking, faces. Aliya is between 24 and 26—she belongs to a generation of working-class Indians who never had birth certificates. Sometimes, she will ask me to tell me how old she looks, based solely on her face. She works in an upmarket clothing store and spends much of her free time trying out different Snapchat filters on her face. Snapchat filters are location-based, which means the filters she has are India-specific. Almost all of the filters brighten your skin, make it radiate a soft glow, make your eyes sparkle, lengthen your eyelashes and dye your lips cherry red. Some filters give you cat ears, some a wreath of flowers, but Aliya's favorite filter is the bride filter. This filter makes your skin radiant and adorns your head, ears and nose with golden bridal jewelry, as well as a veil. I have to admit that I have also applied this filter to my face several times. Who doesn't want to look radiant?

Tash Aw, whose ancestors emigrated from China to Malaysia in the 1920s, has a very "malleable" face "whose features are neutral" and whose skin tone changes according to

the climate (Aw, 1). This is why, anywhere "east of India," people mistake him for a local. In the Nepali hills, he is Nepali; in Bangkok, Thai; in Hong Kong, Cantonese; in Tokyo, Japanese, etc. Aw says he enjoys being mistaken for a local, mostly because it makes the people who have recognized you (albeit mistakenly) happy. "They draw their index finger around their face: my face is their face," Aw writes (Aw, 4). "We want the stranger to be one of our own, someone we can understand," he concludes (Aw, 4). For Aw, then, the literal "reading" of his identity is less important than the intimate connection that is sparked through the act of recognition itself—even if it is false.

Chris Abani, whose father is Igbo and mother a white Englishwoman, is not as happy when his face is mis-read, or recognized as something it is not. In the West, he writes, people look at him skeptically when he tells them his mother was white, implying that he is too dark (Abani, 11). But, in Nigeria, he does not look African enough, and is often mistaken for being an Arab immigrant. He has also been mistaken for Dominican (in East LA), Cuban (Miami), Nubian (Egypt), Zulu (South Africa) and Pakistani (Qatar). Abani realizes that there is, paradoxically, great creativity in being able to assume so many identities, but also, at the same time, a kind of fixing of your identity: Abani can be either entirely Pakistani or Cuban, but not both. Abani remembers fondly what his grandfather once said to him:

> "You don't belong here or in the land of spirits. You are a bat, neither bird nor mammal." I loved that. That meant I could be anything (Abani, 16).

As Abani shows, the face can fix you in ways that feel imprisoning instead of freeing. And because the face is so intimate, having it be mistaken can be doubly jarring. Abani, who had a very fraught relationship with his father—indeed, much of the essay is about him—has his father's face. He is constantly being told by relatives that he looks uncannily like his father. "To wear the face of someone you can't help loving even as you can't help hating them, is to be caught in an infernal struggle for your own soul," writes Abani (Abani, 62). Though he spent many years priding himself on being different from his father, Abani is still referred to as *oyiri nnaya*, or, "the one who resembles his father"(Abani, 65). This mis-recognition can be almost physically painful. In this case, it is the literal recognition of Abani's physical face that obscures something more intangible—and essential—about Abani's identity. One day, Abani writes, his mother came "stumbling into the kitchen with a dazed look on her face. 'God, Christopher,' she said. 'You sound just like your father'"(Abani, 65). This recognition hits both—mother and son—like a blow to the face. Because even if we know that we are more than our faces, there is something very intimate about how they are seen by others. We see in them some truth that breaks through the masks we wear.

2. Silent Mode: On Blank Faces

In South Asian Islam—and there are similar practices in Hinduism—a woman's beauty is to be carefully guarded and doled out in small amounts. It is as if a woman's radiance—believed to be expressed through her face and hair—needs to be saved up for the one time when it can truly shine: the wedding day. Girls who wear make-up before marriage are often accused of jumping the gun—or spoiling the surprise. If people have already seen you in make-up, it is said, then the impact of wearing make-up on your wedding day will be lessened. Sahiba, a classmate of Aliya's, got married this spring at the age of 19. Normally a very talkative girl, Sahiba went quiet in the days leading up to the wedding; if she spoke at all, she spoke almost in a whisper. This, too, is a ritual—in the days before their wedding, South Asian Muslim girls are not supposed to leave the house or speak very much.

A few days before her wedding, I went to a gathering at Sahiba's house. Sahiba sat in a corner, silent and expressionless. I asked her great-aunt why Sahiba had gone so quiet. The great-aunt explained to me that soon-to-be-brides must be subdued in every way. "She's on silent mode," she cackled, pointing her smart phone towards Sahiba. On her wedding day, Sahiba was an explosion of color and glitter. Her wedding outfit was so heavy that she could barely walk; her gold jewelry weighed down her head. After the wedding, it is custom, in both Hindu and South Asian Muslim traditions, for the new bride to wear glittery new outfits and jewelry for several months. Thus, the afterglow of the radiance of the wedding persists long after the day itself. In this case, then, the face becomes the locus of something very intimate—a woman's essential "radiance." We can see this radiance as a kind of window into some truth—or a moment when the face becomes suddenly legible. In this case, much energy is invested in deliberately dimming this radiance—or making it illegible—until the moment of revelation.

What do we do when we are confronted by faces on "silent mode"—faces that seem unreadable to us? Tash Aw grapples with this conundrum in his essay, which, like Abani's, centers on his fraught relationship to his father. Aw laments that he really knows "very little" about his father—he knows the basic facts of his biography, but nothing about his "idiosyncrasies" and "quirks"(Aw, 25). To Aw, his father's face appears as a very rough sketch "that has been blurred by years of neglect," and whose details have been deliberately obscured. Aw refers to his father as a "Forgetter," one of those migrants who wish to "wipe the slate clean" of their past and only look forward (Aw, 27). But Aw wants to know his father's story, because he thinks it will give him clues to his own identity. He hopes that it will help him understand things like "why my face is becoming more angular as I grow older," and why there is a history of mental illness in his family (Aw, 33). But his father remains stone-faced, unresponsive to his questions. And that carefully edited blankness—Aw refers to it as "featureless" and "unblemished"—belies the shadows and

contours that give our face its unique shape (Aw, 32). In the end, Aw gives up on trying to understand his father, who will not reveal himself to his son. But Aw's quest for transparency seems unrealistic to me—for aren't the shadows in our faces created by silences? Even if we can't decode them literally, the shadows in other people's faces can still tell us a lot. They may not be able to transmit information, but they can give off a mood, a sense, a hint of what they might be hiding. They speak a different language—they may give us suggestions, gesture in certain directions, rather than a literal text. And sometimes, that is enough.

3. Ethnography of the Face

When I'm doing ethnographic fieldwork in India, I sometimes catch myself imagining that my face is completely neutral. Well, maybe not neutral, but what Chris Abani characterizes as a "comfortable face"(Abani, 81). Abani concludes his essay with an anecdote about a visit to the nail salon. His favorite Korean beautician tells him that he has "a comfortable face," the kind of face that makes her want to tell him everything. Abani likes this idea of a comfortable face, like a "well-worn armchair" that you collapse in after a rough day (Aw, 81). This is the face all ethnographers, I imagine, aspire to have. A face eternally receptive and open to everything. But again, this is not a realistic expectation.

Sometimes my interlocutor's reactions to my face jolt me out of this illusion of neutrality, reminding me that my face is constantly betraying things against my will. In India, the most common response to my face, after I have not seen someone for a while, is "Oh, you have become very weak! Your face looks, I don't know, thin. Weak. What's happened to you?" Sometimes, people will read secrets into my facial expression. "Oh, look! She is smiling, she is lying! I can see it in your face! You *do* wear short skirts in your country!" or "I knew something bad had happened to you, because I saw a shadow in your face." When I wear the smallest hint of make-up, people will say something about it, and any sort of blemish or people will be immediately remarked upon. As for my ethnicity, I have been mistaken for Kashmiri, Afghani, or sometimes, even Indian. Like Aw, I enjoy being mistaken for a local. What anthropologist wouldn't?

Ruth Ozeki's contribution deals most explicitly with the relationship between observation and the human face. Her essay is an experiment in observation: she looks at her face in the mirror for three hours. Ozeki is also a Zen priest, and so her aim, in this experiment, is inspired by the Buddhist tenet that "to study the self is to forget the self"(Ozeki, 134). She wants to answer the question that first drew her to Buddhism—what did your face look like before your parents were born (Ozeki, 31)?

After finishing the experiment, Ozeki has not been able to forget herself completely—but, interestingly, she is more attuned to the subjectivity of others. She finds herself staring at

the faces of strangers on the subway. And this is where she might teach us a valuable lesson about ethnographic observation in the face of apparent illegibility. Instead of thinking about the possible biographies of the other passengers, Ozeki thinks about what relationship they have to their own faces. She imagines that "they, too, have intimate, if unarticulated, relationships with their reflected faces that are as complex and fraught as mine"(Ozeki, 134). Just knowing that they, too, have an intimate relationship to the mirror is, for Ozeki, interesting enough to occupy her mind—even if she doesn't know the content of that relationship.

Both the authors in the Restless Books series as well as the vignettes from my fieldwork underline the fact that the face—whether we can "read" it or not—contains something very intimate. In the case of Sahiba, the young woman who was about to get married, this intimacy—in the form of radiance—was seen as something precious (and finite) and was carefully controlled, lest it be exhausted too soon. For Abani and Aw, the alternate recognition and mis-recognition of their faces struck very close to the bone. While Abani hated being told, over and over again, that he had his father's face, Aw relished being mis-recognized as a local in so many different countries. But what, then, is the best angle from which to observe the face? It seems that, as Ozeki found on the subway, when we observe the faces of others, our goal should not be total transparency, but rather a kind of leap of faith. We may have to acknowledge that there is an intimacy in the faces of others similar to the way we feel about our own faces, though we may not know exactly what it looks like.

And so, instead of trying to read people's faces like a book—as Aw seemed to want to do with his father—we might try instead, as Ozeki did, to marvel at them as enigmatic windows into other people's intimate subjectivities. And that is why seeing someone's face is always a little like seeing someone naked—even if they choose to reveal nothing. So, instead of a text waiting to be read, we might understand the face as always gesturing towards—but never truly revealing— something essential. What that essence might be is not as important. And perhaps we who read faces—either professionally or as lay-people—every once in a while, take a step back from our busy schedules of trying to read faces and simply gaze at their shadows and contours, admiring their shape without knowing it.

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