
The Bodies That Were Not Ours and Other Writings assembles 24 writings penned by New York based interdisciplinary artist and writer Coco Fusco since 1995. Critical essays and artist monographs as well as interviews between Fusco and other artists (including Isaac Julien and Tracey Moffat) chronicle Fusco's characteristically candid commentary as an art and cultural critic. Including two performance scripts, a 24-page colour “photo album” (created with Nao Bustamante), other performances and videos from the 1990s, The Bodies picks up from her previous anthology, English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas (1995). As an ensemble, The Bodies highlights the function of different media and written genres when it comes to engaging critical questions on racialization, gender, and globalization. Her interviews, for instance, allow her to heighten tensions and contradictions in the politics of racialized identity; the critical essays enable pointed critique and extended analyses; the performances experiment with alternative representations. Complex, nuanced, and polemical, this anthology reveals Fusco’s significant position at the forefront, and frequently in the crossfire, of ongoing debates in cultural race politics, transnationalism, media, and artistic production.

As evidenced by the book and its title, at the heart of Fusco’s performances and critical writing is an exploration of the everyday, invasive forces of globalization. Her opening essay, “The Bodies That Were Not Ours” (1996) provides a substantial context for the rest of the book, addressing contemporary artistic and media work engaging with the Black body, a representation she suggests is “one of the most visible, lasting effects of an historical black experience in the diaspora” (p. xx). As demonstrated by her epigraph quoting literary theorist Françoise Vergès—“A group can express what is still lacking or still to come only through a redistribution of its past”—Fusco's historical arc is expansive in its consideration of the resonances within contemporary art and media. For Fusco, histories of colonialism, slavery, and the mutation of their residues in the present profoundly inform contemporary vectors of power and culture, and she is attentive to those erasures, slippages, and displacements that have repeatedly undermined a more rigorous historical memory and continuity. What has made Fusco’s critical and creative work so valuable are its polemics, and its pointed qualities can be immediately gleaned from her preface as well as throughout the book.

Accenting her examination of the contradictory race politics of the international art world, an underlying thematic is her desire to unpack the complicated backlash against identity politics that commenced in the late 1980s. Fusco sees the backlash as partly facilitated by claims to a “post-human era” within cultural theory and its displacement of the “integrity of the human organism as the basis of identity” (p. xvi). She underlines how the disappearance of the body within post-human discourses displaced critiques of race and difference that were dismissed as essentialist and reductive, out of step and out of touch. Yet statistical demographics cited class and racial segregation, simultaneously claiming an international and American “digital divide” that implicitly celebrated the virtues of cyberculture and the need for democratic access to the virtual realm. Like scholars Lisa Nakamura (Cybertypes, 2002) and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, as well as others, critiques of the “digital divide” were quick to emerge, and Fusco articulately summarizes its logic:

The digital divide is not just about access to computers and phone lines—it is about how subaltern bodies are positioned vis-à-vis technology. Colonialism abjected the subaltern body through militarism, forced labor, and scientific objectification—new technologies elaborate and diversify these strategies of domination. The fact that few people in developing countries can access the internet and thus imagine their own transcendence of the uneven modernities in which they live does not wipe out that overarching reality. (p. xvi)
In “At Your Service: Latin Women in the Global Network,” Fusco further explores the conjuncture of the post-human effacement of the body with the backlash against identity politics, citing cultural theorist Chela Sandoval’s and Angela Davis’ (Methodology of the Oppressed, 2000) notion of “oppositional consciousness within cyberrcultural discourse, one that reads the teleology of techno-liberation not as natural law but as the ideology of the virtual class” (p. 90). When her comments are considered in relation to Fusco’s collaborative on-line performance Dolores 10-10 with Ricardo Dominguez (of Electronic Disturbance Theatre [EDT] and formerly of Critical Art Ensemble), one clearly discerns the complex challenges Fusco negotiates as both cultural theorist and artist, incorporating her analyses as points of departure for her creative performances. Fusco engages the political economy of digital culture, insisting in “At Your Service” that it is essential to recall by whom our computers are made, where and at what human costs; Dolores 10-10 was a live-streamed docudrama that simulated the surveillance of a Mexican woman worker’s rights violations in a Tijuana maquiladora based on a true incident in 1997. Her earlier performance collaboration with Nao Bustamante, Stuff, and her “research” essay, “Hustling for Dollars: Jineteras in Cuba (1996),” further demonstrate her multidisciplinary engagement with the transcultural effects of the global information network on women’s lives. This very network is also the circuit for alternative forms of net activism, such as EDT’s support of the Mexican Zapatistas with FloodNet actions, as described in “Art in Mexico after NAFTA.”

The brilliance of Fusco’s writing is its often surprising and unpredictable turns, particularly in her interviews, where she ably facilitates debate on the thorny terrain of race politics. In “The Man and the Myth,” she interviews Roger Guenveur Smith, probing his one-man show as former Black Panther Huey P. Newton. The interview’s abrasive moments are familiar and insightful as Guenveur Smith becomes increasingly irritated by Fusco’s attempts to locate his play within broader historical and cultural representations of the Black male body. “Look, Coco,” Smith responds, “the play is about Huey, it’s not about the black man. It’s not about black masculinity” (p. 31). Fusco’s point: “It’s always going to be viewed in light of that larger issue because Huey Newton’s not just anyone.” In “Bad grrl Bravado,” Fusco’s “frustration” with Australian artist Tracey Moffat’s “unusually cagey” responses to her tracing of historical signification in her work leads her to delve more deeply into her own expectations of Moffat’s self-understanding: “Her resistance made me think—until I realized that she was leaving gaps not so much to pass herself off as an aesthete but to encourage a metaphorical reading of her work by an audience that still treated artists of color as unimaginative reporters of abject social realities” (p. 129).

“Captain Shit and Other Allegories of Black Stardom,” on the notoreity of British artist Chris Ofili (recipient of Britain’s coveted Turner Prize, and renowned as the artist who “paints” with elephant dung) further explores the critical, curatorial, and market conditions that repeatedly situate artists of colour in such volatile and ambivalent racialized positions.

There is much more in The Bodies that makes Fusco’s book a complex testament to contemporary global politics, cultural theory, and artistic practice. Rounding out The Bodies are essays by former Third Text editor Jean Fisher, who looks at Fusco’s critical contributions, and Caroline Vercoe, who examines the trajectory of Fusco’s performance work since the late 1980s. Fusco’s anthology is a refreshing reminder of the historical continuities that must be unfailingly traced, however skilfully its elisions are repeated.

References

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