

Passionate Irreverence: The Cultural Politics of Identity (1993)

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Hardly a week has passed in the last two years without public attention being drawn to yet another battle over identity and culture. Behind each debate linger fears and hopes about the image this country projects to its people(s) and to the rest of the world. *Who are we?* asked *Time* magazine, as statistics point to the changing (i.e., increasingly nonwhite) ethnic makeup of American society. *Whose values?* asked *Newsweek*, as many reel and others applaud at the radical Right's neofascist, universalist rhetoric. These questions have spilled over into the world of art in several interrelated and volatile debates over censorship, cultural property, and cultural equity. *Whose museums and whose aesthetics?* asks a new generation of critics, curators, and artists. *Whose icons?* wonder multicultural theorists and activists, as familiar elements of foreign worlds are absorbed with increasing speed by American consumer culture. *Whose image?* argue the lawyers involved in the lawsuit against Jeff Koons who, in the eyes of the law, "appropriated" and, in doing so, capitalized on another artist's photograph by reinterpreting it as sculpture without acknowledging a "source."

Where are we? We are in America, five hundred years after the beginning of the conquest and colonization of the New World, five years after the beginning of the sweeping transformations in the socialist world, and eight years from the end of the millennium. The last great empires of this century—the United States and the Soviet Union—are on the decline as superpowers, their respective economies tip into tailspins, and their international work forces become migratory "social problems." With the unraveling of these systems, the concept and reality of the unified, homogeneous nation-state and national culture become highly contested terrains. To these political and ideological changes we must add the fact that advances in technology have disrupted geographical, political, and cultural boundaries forever.

The collectively experienced anxiety provoked by these transformations has generated a plethora of identity-related conflicts, from geopolitical boundary disputes and the resurgence of ethnic tensions

in Europe, to the concomitant racial unrest of North America. In Europe, these issues are being fought over principally in the geopolitical sphere; in the United States, we find ourselves in more of an ideological battle over symbolic representation. This does not mean, however, that the battles in America are any less political; on the contrary, culture in this country is a critical, if not the most crucial, area of political struggle over identity. While the tensions in the East and the West do differ, they are nonetheless driven by the same underlying contradictory forces: on the one hand, economic internationalization and the formation of "global culture" (symbolized by the European Economic Community and the North American Free Trade Agreement); and, on the other, political fragmentation based on regionalism, ethnic separatism, and extreme economic polarization. We struggle to preserve distinctions that, for some, can no longer be taken for granted, and, for others, appear for the first time to be within reach.

These conditions shape much of the art and the cultural debates of our historical moment. Physical and cultural dislocation characterizes the daily lives of many, if not most, of the people of the world. Those in a position of privilege live this condition by choice, conducting international business, using advanced technology, or playing virtual-reality games; others who are less privileged are compelled to live this sense of dislocation without respite as migrant workers, immigrants, exiles, refugees, and homeless people. Diasporic cultures rival those of the homelands in size and complexity. Exile communities often provide crucial economic support to imperiled "centers." Exile, and the split sense of self it entails, are paradigmatic experiences of identity for millions. Some nations exist without a place, while others exist only through authoritarian enforcement. The hegemony of national cultures is perpetually disrupted by "foreign" information, media, consumer items, and people. The once colonial condition of having to adjudicate between local and outside cultures and power structures has not been swept away by the postcolonial age; in fact, it bears resemblance to daily life in postindustrial societies, where advanced technologies facilitate continuous transmission of information and commodities to different ends of the globe. Nonetheless, for some, these transformations do not necessarily signal greater availability of resources—only more intrusions into their lands and their lives.

In such a state of things, the very notion of cultural purity can seem like something of a nostalgic fantasy, one that not even "non-Western" societies can provide proof of any longer. Yet these issues continue to trouble many and are central to cultural debates about the condition of subaltern peoples in the United States. Our con-

tinued engagement with questions of identity would indicate that not even a shifting of borders will bring us to relinquish them altogether. Unlike many other interpretations of postmodernity that have suggested that the accelerated flow of cultural property has nullified fixed identities and power relations between them, subaltern theory and cultural practice have maintained the need to account for distinctions between political power (i.e., the ability to make things happen and how those with political power see themselves) and symbolic exchange of cultural symbols. While other schools of thought associated with postmodernism have interpreted identity as pure process, and as infinitely transformable and essentially performative, subaltern discourses have looked upon these positions as volunteerist characterizations that do not account for controlling forces that affect identity, such as racism and the determining force of collective historical experience. Such elisions still appear too similar to the racial violence that has robbed many in this country of the right, first to be considered human beings, and then to have access to political power. At this historical moment, then, the post-modern fascination with the exchange of cultural property and with completely deracinated identity can seem for many people of color less like emancipation and more like intensified alienation. Instead, for many, the times demand what Gayatri Spivak has called "strategic essentialism," that is, a critical position that validates identity as politically necessary but not as ahistorical or unchangeable.

Cultural identity and values are politically and historically charged issues for peoples in this country whose access to exercising political power and controlling their symbolic representations has been limited within mainstream culture. While some might look upon the current wave of multiculturalism as inherently empowering and/or new, others look upon the present in relation to a long tradition of "celebrating" (or rather, objectifying) difference as light but exotic entertainment for the dominant culture. From the perspective of those who have been geographically, politically, culturally, and economically marginalized in and by the United States, these celebrations and the curiosity that drives them are not necessarily disinterested or inherently progressive phenomena. They are, instead, potentially double-edged swords, signaling both the exercising of control over cultural difference through the presentation of static models of diversity and the potential opportunity to transform the stereotypes that emerge with the imposition of control.

Those stereotypes that have grown ingrained over time cannot be easily dismissed and then simply cast off; they are both reminders of a painful legacy of bigotry and disempowerment that has fueled their systematic misrepresentation, *and* the starting point for under-

standing the racially inflected, voyeuristic impulses in Euro-American and other colonizing cultures. "Appropriation," a favorite buzzword of the 1980s art elite, isn't just about disinterested pastiche or tracing one's creative bloodlines to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol; it is also about reckoning with a history of colonialist power relations vis-à-vis non-Western cultures and peoples to contextualize certain forms of appropriation as symbolic violence. In other words, although appropriation may not connote power inequities when conceived within other strains of postmodern culture, its historical and political implications in relation to European colonialism and American expansionism cannot be ignored, because the erasure of authorship and the exchange of symbols and artifacts across cultural boundaries have never been apolitical or purely formalist gestures. That mainstream culture has periodically expressed desire for subaltern art has never obligated anyone to deal with subaltern peoples as human beings, compatriots, or artists. That is, perhaps, until now.

While the claims to absolute authority in issues of cultural identity and property are at times problematic (since no one, in the end, speaks for every member of a group), the ways that these dealings are represented in the mainstream media and even most of the art press are invariably tendentious. Little effort has been made to distinguish between dominant cultural attempts to curtail an artist's right to express his or her aesthetic sensibility and a subaltern critique of institutionalized racism and privilege; in fact, the blurring of these distinctions has fueled the debates over political correctness during recent years. Nonetheless, many if not most of the criticisms leveled at those who raise questions about cultural appropriation are hardly substantive; rather, masked by platitudes about quality and freedom, they are often expressions of displeasure that heretofore underheard sectors of society choose to have opinions about culture at all. As the left and right invoke "imagined communities" of "the audience" to justify their assuming the authority to speak, this "audience" is deemed either too sensitive and innocent or much too smart to mistake evil for good. Anyone who challenges an entrenched power structure's absolute "freedom" to make money or meaning in whatever way it finds desirable can be labeled anti-American, socially backward, and artistically ignorant. Any subaltern question or protest, even if its aim is not to curtail but to contextualize, can be perceived as threatening to the current cultural order of things.

For the privileged purveyors of culture in this country—be they artists, teachers, critics, collectors, benefactors or exhibitors—confronting the limitations of one's knowledge and relinquishing authority can be seen as a challenge or a crushing blow. This

prospect has generated another spate of defensive retaliation in the past two years, using very old tactics. In the summer of 1992, when hundreds of Chicana actresses in California protested the production of a film about Frida Kahlo because its producers refused to hire a Latina actress for the lead—claiming that “there weren’t any big names”—many mainstream reports presented the protesters as having interfered with basic artistic freedoms. The Chicana position was seen as subjective and partisan and as a personal attack against the director. Such an analysis could not take into consideration that decades of absence of a substantial role for a Latina actress in Hollywood might not be the result of pure coincidence but of an unwritten and unchallenged policy. Nor could it, for that matter, stress an awareness of the sense of disempowerment provoked by the knowledge that rampant commodification of one’s cultural heroes does not necessarily lead to gaining access to cultural resources for oneself or for one’s community. On the contrary, the mainstream appropriation of subaltern *cultures* in this country has historically served as a substitute for ceding to those peoples any real political or economic power.

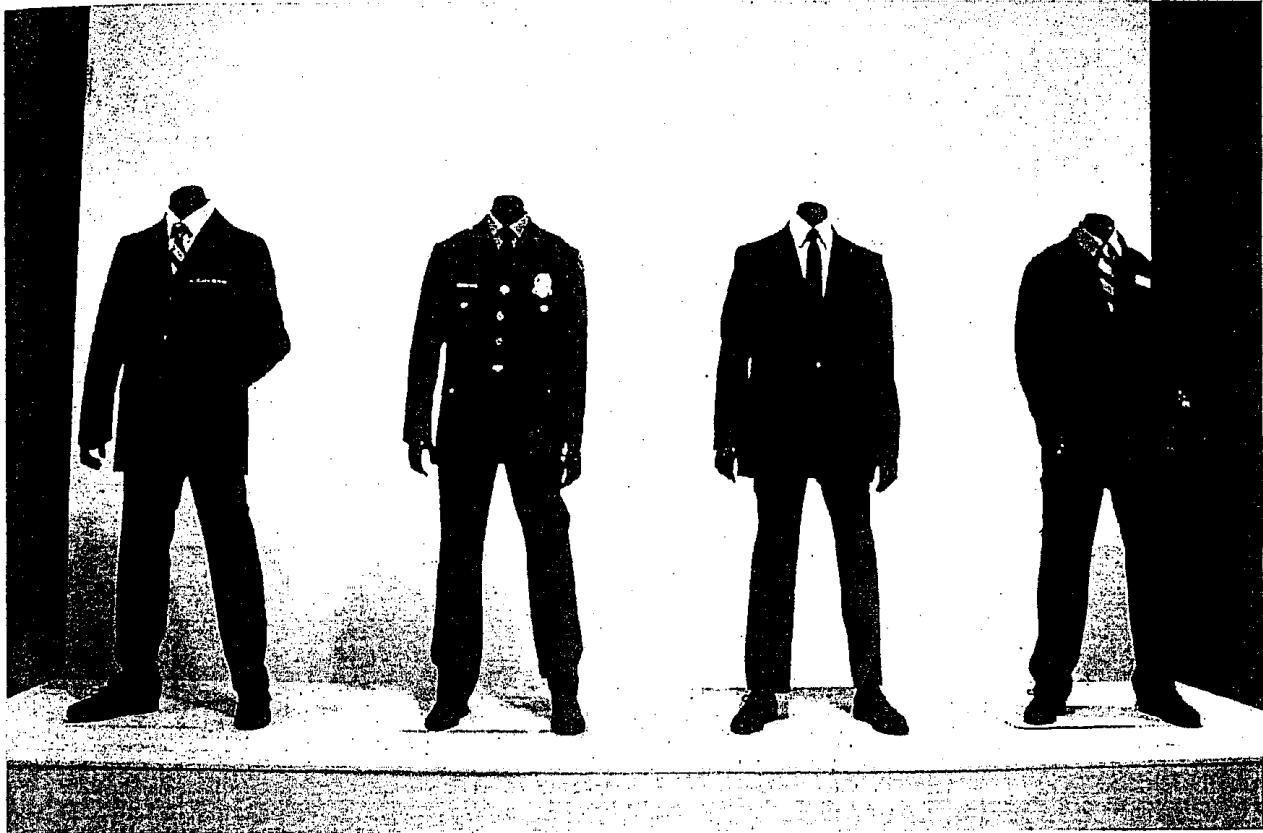
Had it been the 1960s, and had the protesters been male, they might have been lauded as the leaders of a new lobbying group in Hollywood and protagonists of a chapter on Chicano history. Instead, they have been largely represented outside the Chicano community as the latest in a line of politically correct feminists to appear on the horizon. The commercial impetus and concentration of wealth of the movie industry have made it perhaps the toughest cultural arena in which to fight, particularly for women artists of color, who have benefited the least from the latest round of investment in commercial films about African-Americans and Latinos. This is perhaps the saddest lesson about identity politics that we have learned in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and the backlash against the policies it inspired that the Reagan and Bush administrations have fueled: that superficial assimilation through consumerism and tokenism can be lauded as a sign of the mainstream’s acquiescence, while the fundamental changes needed to bring out a more profound form of equity are still thwarted at every turn.

On the other hand, the world of the visual arts at times evinces more conciliatory signals. For example, amid the countless Native-American art showcases opening throughout the Midwest in the fall of 1992 as liberal-minded counter-quincentennial gestures, a conflict erupted at a Minneapolis art museum over the proposed exhibition of Native-American pipes that are considered sacred by many indigenous peoples. It was only after lengthy discussion

among Native elders, artists, activists, and museum staff that the institution was convinced of its error, a position that might not have been taken had it not been for years of debates about the ownership of Native artifacts, and for the fact that around the same time the American-Indian Movement filed a suit against the Washington Redskins for the team's use of a racial slur as its name.

Another indicator of this changing tide is that recent complaints in New York City over representations of blacks and Latinos in public art by white artists have been met with unprecedented willingness to pay them heed. Such communally oriented and ethnically divided discussions of the role and quality of public art strike at the core of the radical individualism that characterizes the mainstream's notion of the artist in this society. These discussions also test the limits of power of dominant cultural institutions and curators, whose long-standing authority to act as arbiters of taste is now being continually questioned by "lay" critiques of their notions of aesthetic value and realism. I cannot say that I have always found these criticisms to be devoid of extra-artistic motives—some have been used as indirect attacks on politicians, for example. Furthermore, these criticisms would be more convincing if they were more systematic, more clearly directed at perceived misrepresentations in the commercial media, and not only the arts. Nonetheless, these protests offer a critical opportunity to reconsider relationships among culture, art-making, community, and public space. However they may be manipulated by the press, these encounters are multicultural identity politics made manifest in everyday life. They speak to the complexities of negotiating diverse views on culture and identity in our society. Together with public actions by such groups as the AIDS activists of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the feminists of WAC (Women's Action Coalition) and Guerrilla Girls, and the artists of color of PESTS, they constitute some of the most interactive public engagements with the media and the arts that have emerged in the past decade. Each, in its own way, seeks to redress inequities by taking its concerns to the street and other public spaces, merging activism with spectacle.

These conflicts over a person's right to define his or her culture and icons resonate with similar battles from the past, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they have become increasingly concentrated within the arts, the media, and education, and have taken on a particularly strident tone. They signal a growing awareness of symbolic representation as a key site of political struggle. These conflicts also herald important shifts in how we must understand postmodernism and "difference." By giving abstract concepts and formal operations more overt social content, these conflicts localize, politicize, and



historicize postmodern cultural debates that had been at one time excessively formalist and ethnocentric, even in the characterization of difference itself.

At the heart of these other postmodernisms lies an insistence that art and politics are never truly extricable. While a more formalist approach to appropriation and pastiche characterized much of the art and art criticism of the early 1980s, the subaltern cultural strategies that have gained attention more recently foreground the connection between the political and the symbolic. The surrounding debates also involve explicit critiques of liberal humanist claims that legal equality ends significant difference between peoples, and of the relativist postures of certain strains of poststructuralism and their accompanying volunteerist propositions for understanding identity. Scores of feminists and postcolonial theorists have rejected formulations of poststructuralism that declare the death of the subject, the end of meaning, the decline of the social, and the failure of political resistance; these proclamations, they argue, speak only to the realities of those few who once could claim absolute right, absolute truth, and absolute authority. They also turn a skeptical eye to popular interpretations of the poststructuralist stress on the performative dimension of identity that reduce subjectivity to pure and self-determined artifice. Despite cataclysmic changes in the ways that communities are defined and information circulates, only an infinitely small sector of society actually chooses freely where they are, who

Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991, installation. Photo courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures Gallery, New York. Art Matters grant recipient, 1990.

they are, and how they live. Even the limited ability one might acquire to alter aspects of one's identity cannot completely obfuscate the impact of outside social, political, and economic factors in the constitution of the self. To paraphrase the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, not all symbols and exchanges are interchangeable—there still are differences that make a difference. What emerges, however, is not a romantic form of essentialism, but a fluid notion of identity that is imbedded in, but not mechanistically determined by, history.

Within the realm of culture, then, two interrelated but seemingly contradictory struggles are in the foreground. One, waged in the realm of political representation, is an interracial, intercultural battle in the public sphere over appropriation, in which people of color are demanding the right to determine the meaning of their culture and delimit its identity—or, rather, to point to borders that still exist. This is a battle that seeks to resolve a legacy of inequity by addressing the power relations involved in symbolic representation. On the other hand, the artistic outpourings from these same communities in recent years have stressed hybridity as a cultural experience and as a formal strategy. Performance artist and musician Alvin Eng, for example, in his experimental video about being Asian, *Rock Me Gung Hey*, sets his story in rap idiom. Interestingly, rap music, which is often characterized as the expression of black male youth, is perhaps today's most resonant cross-cultural American language for defiant self-affirmation; its use has spread to Chicanos such as Keith Frost and the groups A Lighter Shade of Brown and Aztlan Nation, to Cuban-Americans such as Mellow Man Ace, and Nuyoricans such as Latin Empire—as well as dozens of young black women in the United States whose voices often counter the male-centeredness of the practice, and to other young people throughout the world.

Although some might cling to the idea that all artists are bound to a specific, group-oriented mandate, or a fixed notion of community, the most intriguing work takes these very assumptions apart and presents new possibilities for old terms. Adrian Piper's media installation *Cornered*, for example, is an indictment of American prejudice that demonstrates how the legal definition and social understanding of the term "black" are incompatible, compelling us to rethink our own understanding of our racial makeup. Rather than celebrating the survival of a "pure" tradition, James Luna's moving performance *The Shame Man* depicts some of the most saddening aspects of contemporary Native-American experience, inviting us to enter into a poignant and enriching process of redefining his culture.

Perhaps the best result of the cultural climate of the past decade has been the flourishing of a *variety* of artistic practices and perspectives, which testifies to the impossibility of reducing cultural identity to a simplistic paradigm. It appears that we have worked away from the once widely held belief that artists of color must all be engaged in what Stuart Hall has called the act of imaginative recovery of a singular, unifying past in order for their work to be valid. No longer bound to a sense of having to restrict one's focus, materials, or genre, many contemporary artists of color move back and forth between past and present, between history and fiction, between art and ritual, between high art and popular culture, and between Western and non-Western influence. In doing so, they participate in multiple communities. Artists such as Fred Wilson and R enee Green excavate the European and Euro-American colonial past, drawing our attention to often horrifying elements many ignore or take for granted, but also underscoring our attraction to and even fascination with the artifacts and documents themselves. Pep on Osorio's ornate and intricately redesigned domestic objects and theater sets blur commonly held distinctions between original and copy, and between reliquary and sculpture, forcing us to redefine Euro-American notions of taste and originality.

These artists reflect the hybrid experiences that shape so much of contemporary life. They emerge from the dynamics of moving between worlds, and feeling at home and not at home in more than one. They use different languages, and cross-aesthetic genres as they follow ideas through multiple media. They express the ambivalence produced by being out of sync with dominant media constructs and yet being fascinated with images and with the creative possibilities for their recontextualization. Similarly, they look at Western history and art history not to excise its racism but to excavate and play with symptomatic absences and stereotypes, creating a counterhistory by bouncing off negative images and teasing out hidden stories. Rather than reject dominant culture for its exclusionary tendencies and retreating, literally or figuratively, many artists of color who have matured in the last decade are forcefully engaged with it in ways that make it new. I am reminded here of the New York-based filmmaker Elia Suleiman's description of his own strategy of creating a new visual syntax out of bits of footage from television: "In a war in which you have no weapons, you must take those of your enemy and use them for something better—like throwing them back at him."

The strategy of taking elements of an established or imposed culture and throwing them back with a different set of meanings

is not only key to guerilla warfare; the tactics of reversal, recycling, and subversive montage are aesthetics that form the basis of many twentieth-century avant-gardes. Nonetheless, a more profound understanding of the influences affecting many artists of color demands that we also perceive their connections to the semiotics characteristic of the colonial condition. Syncretism, or the fusion of different forms of belief or practice, enabled disempowered groups to maintain their outlawed or marginalized traditions. It also paved the way for a host of cultural recycling methods that infuse old icons with new meanings. Symbolic action, in the form of spirituality and art, has for centuries been a critical arena for self-definition by politically disenfranchised peoples. One might recall the importance of African-American spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement, or the role of the *corridos* for Chicanos in the Southwest as conveyors of a history suppressed by the dominant Anglo society. Culture and communal self-expression are perhaps most important sites of resistance, the signs in everyday life of an ongoing political struggle. Yet, resistance within a colonial context is rarely direct, overt, or literal; rather, it articulates itself through semantic reversals, and through the process of infusing icons, objects, and symbols with different meanings. As literary theorist Henry Louis Gates has argued in his analyses of the African-American practice of signifying, it is in these dynamics that one finds echoes of the creative defense of the enslaved against his or her master. They are among the many ways oppressed peoples have developed to take their identity back.

However bittersweet, they are also, often, very humorous. Parody, satire, and carnivalesque unsettling of established orders continue to thrive as creative strategies for temporarily subverting authority. Not surprisingly, the sixteenth-century government of the Viceroyalty of Peru issued a law to outlaw comedy, out of fear of its potential political repercussions. Today, those who identify with the established order of things respond in a literal-minded manner to the playfulness and double entendres of subaltern creative expression by reading only at face value. They insist that art should not "offend," that sophisticated appreciation must be distanced and reverent, and that serious criticism be dispassionate and "objective." What these dismissive attitudes cannot understand is that the irreverence and exuberant energy of these aesthetic strategies is evidence of the survival of subaltern practices that have created the conditions for spiritual and cultural renewal, as well as critical reinterpretations of the world in which we live.

The identity battles of recent years are among the variety of ways that the peoples of this country are transforming our vision of



Coco Fusco, *La Chavela Realty Co.*, performance installation, 1991, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.

America and its cultures. What are surfacing in the process are the histories that have circulated until now in marginalized communities. In the debates and art emerging from the tumult of the present are reflections of the many legacies of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, among them, its limiting views of art and culture. Although American society has defined progress as a focus on the future, we must now return to the past in order to place ourselves in that history and understand how we got to where we are. As we try to grasp at crucial parallels and tease new stories out of them, new alternative chronicles surface; these are the latest examples of how collective memories, those storehouses of identity, once activated, become power sites of cultural resistance.