

# LAWEEKLY

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## Brown Like Who?

Coco Fusco extracts Latino identity from colonial history

BY MARÍA ELENA FERNÁNDEZ

**P**ERFORMANCE ARTIST AND CULTURAL critic Coco Fusco's *English Is Broken Here* feels like a travelogue propelled by a mind determined to excavate its most pressing preoccupations by traversing any terrain necessary. Through narrative, art criticism, theory, scripts and chronicles, Fusco visits *Cuba York*, Latin America, Chicano/landia, black London, the American heartland, Madrid and London. She probes the near boundlessness of Latino identities as she argues that, dressed as multiculturalism, the colonial mindset is alive and well in the art world.

U.S.-born to Cuban parents, *mulatta* and raised in New York, Fusco falls between the cracks of the dominant, generic brown notion of Latino — Chicano if you're on the West Coast and Puerto Rican if you're on the East. It's these multiple perspectives that give her the vision to connect African America to Latin American homelands to U.S. Caribbeños and the Chicano Southwest, to view them as streams of Latino identities that crisscross, although not without plenty of tension. She also represents a generation of fresh Cuban voices who have grown suspicious of their parents' divisive rhetoric, in which betrayal is determined by the side of the Caribbean waters you stand on. After wrestling across those political borders with her cultural origin, she finds that no place is beyond the reach of her investigation.

In the first section Fusco bravely takes on the politics of appropriation, arguably the most contentious debate in the art world for the past two decades. She makes an unwavering indictment of how multiculturalism has become an avenue for the cultural elite to control the symbolic representations of people of color (or, as she calls them, "subaltern" people) and how it has continued the legacy of colonialism. Her most shocking lesson comes from recounting her experiences traveling around the world performing *Undiscovered Amerindians* with collaborator Guillermo Gomez-Peña, for the quincentenary of the "discovery" of the Americas.

For their performance, Fusco and Gomez-Peña exhibited themselves in a locked cage, dressed as stereotypical "natives" doing "traditional" activities like sewing voodoo dolls, lifting weights and working on a laptop. Viewers could pay for various interactions with the "natives," such as having their pictures taken with them or watching the female native dance to rap music. The only form of communication between audience and performers was a posted explanation of the natives' place of origin and practices and a chronicle of live-native displays around the world.

Fusco and Gomez-Peña expected viewers to respond to all of this with confusion and reflection. Instead, at least half of their audience took such displays so for granted — the performance evidently invoked their colonial imaginations — that they assumed the performance was real, or knew it wasn't and played along anyway. In New York, a well-dressed man fed Fusco a banana, gladly paying the required \$10. In Madrid, a man confided to a security guard his sexual fantasies about Fusco; in London, skinheads attacked Gomez-Peña.



colonized's right to name things as their own." She observes how whites repeatedly refuse to face up to their complicity with appropriation, defending instead their freedom of creative expression and their right to consume or make money, always leaving out the historical analysis that is crucial to understanding power relations. She does note, however, that each instance of cultural exchange must be examined individually and that generalizations are to be avoided.

Yet it's precisely such specific examples that are missing from these essays. While Fusco's language is empowering on a conceptual level, her analyses of cultural politics on the battleground of everyday life are too few, and even those few are clouded by difficult language or underexplained.

Although Fusco never explicitly theorizes about Latino identity, by filling the second section with seven essays of art criticism on a wide spectrum of artists, she does demonstrate the interconnectedness among all aspects of Latino identities. Her essays cover the art of the late

*cubana* Ana Mendieta's haunting expressions of exile in her body art, U.S.-born black Puerto Rican Juan Sanchez's reflections on racism and domestic space, Mexico City photographer Volantia Andrade's images of urban mass culture, as well as the films of London's Sankofa and Black Audio indie film collectives. While mainstream art criticism has frequently diminished Latino artists by describing them as strictly "political" or "kitsch," Fusco locates each artist in his or her national, cultural and social context to explain each artist's form and use of symbols. This section is later complemented by transcribed conversations with Gomez-Peña about Chicano and Mexican identities, and by

## BOOKS

Fusco's autobiographical information early in the book. Her broad vision of Latino identities directly addresses Chicano culture and tensions with Mexican nationals. It also enriches the reader's understanding of identity through the parallel tensions, contradictions, pain and strength of each of the distinct Latino identities described in the book.

Considering the significance of *English Is Broken Here* in our current climate of ideological warfare, the flaws in Fusco's book — instances of obscure language and the need for more and better visuals to aid the reader in following Fusco's descriptions — seem trivial. Its incisive analysis should make the book an important document marking the raging debate of multiculturalism in these times. Coming from a subaltern point of view on a topic in which subaltern peoples are central subjects, Fusco's writing is a response both to the politics of domination in the art world and to this country's mounting anxiety over an eroding dominant white identity. Fusco reminds us of the importance of the politics of culture, its pain and power. She reminds us too that culture is also a site of political resistance, as important as the ballot box or the picket sign. And as her own artistic work shows, the struggle is in full swing. **A**

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