

SLEEK

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Coco Fusco Retells the first German Genocide in Berlin Performance

In 'Words May Not Be Found' the artist performs the
Namibian testimony relating to the Herero genocide



Coco Fusco, Words May Not Be Found, 2017, Performance at SOPHIENSÆLE (2017), co-produced with KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Diethild Meier

Germany's forgotten colonialism

The difficulty in articulating traumatic knowledge means that dark episodes in history often fall by the wayside, and so Germany's period of colonization in Namibia is one that is often befallen. Though there have been recent political events such as the repatriation of the Namibian skulls found in German museum basements, open apologies by relatives of colonizers to the Herero people, and the suing of Deutsche Bank for financing the genocide that all simultaneously attempt to dredge up the past, the aporia persists. Coco Fusco, contemporary artist and writer, has recently challenged the persistent silence surrounding the period of Namibian colonialism with her work *Words May Not Be Found* performed at Sophiensaele in Berlin as part of KW's performance series. *Words May Not Be Found*, takes its name after the abridged series *Words Cannot be found* of testimonies put together by Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald in 2003 about the Namibian period of colonization. The performance particularly details the bloody genocide that followed after the Herero people's revolt against the Germans in 1903 that subsequently caused the Germans to respond with a massacre of between 24,000 and 100,000 Herero and 10,000 Nama people. The book gathers testimonies taken from the British after the First World War of 50 voluntary testimonies from victims as well as accounts from officials. The testimonies gathered, that Fusco then restages in Berlin in 2017, attest to atrocity, massacre, but also the violence and regimented thinking of an imperialist capitalist system.

The Herero and Nama peoples

The performance is extremely difficult to digest, in part because of the events being spoken really happened. Staged austere in a black box theatre with a cohort of performers, *Words May not Be Found* is comprised of an ensemble of different participants that read from the selected fragments of testimonies. Mimicking an official meeting or summons, the performance takes the structure of a report and the audience stands in as the belated witnesses to a history that seems crossed between Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.



Coco Fusco, *Words May Not Be Found*, 2017. Courtesy the author

The speeches vary from bureaucratic jargon vacant of any humanizing language to intense testimonies of infanticide: one particularly gut-retching episode is of an African baby being thrown into the air like a football between soldiers while screaming before being violently tossed onto the blade of a knife attached to the barrel of a machine gun. Through juxtaposition, the historic episodes conjure up images of the cannibalistic white settler and the attacked native. But the performance does not just detail bodily violence, but also explains the violence of credit and how the different tribes were robbed blind and tricked into a predatory lending system, which left them both physically and economically vulnerable. When the Herero or Nama people reported to the authorities about the lies the Germans had told them, that they would receive credit in exchange for cattle—which they never received – the German authorities responded “A German never lies.”

Depicting violence without exoticizing

Words May Not Be Found explicitly focuses on the violence and pain of the black body, yet does not succumb to overtly exoticized spectacles that would allow the contemporary audience to view the events as sensational. In weeks where there has been persistent backlash against the spectacle of black suffering and the subsequent insistence of the destruction of such images because they remain consumable commodities for a majorly white audience, the ephemeral nature of Fusco’s performance resists typical codings. This is precisely because of the fact that the performance is devoid of any aesthetic experience other than the darkness of the theatre that the viewers must enter into for the two and a half hours of readings. It is perhaps the resistance against clean images or even enjoyable experiences that makes Fusco’s performance particularly poignant and affective for the very fact that it pushes us to speak and communicate when we have so long failed to bring articulation to the void of feelings. Like her very subtle changes of the title of the manuscript to Words May not be Found, words may be found, but only when we have the strength and discipline to respond.

Coco Fusco's "Words May Not Be Found" took place on 11 March 2017 as a collaboration between KW Institute for Contemporary Art and SOPHIENSÆLE, Berlin