

# **The Art of Reading: Postcolonial Bodies and Strategic Illegibility**

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Analytic reading of two “works” —a description of her clothing by Gayatri Spivak, and Lorraine O’Grady’s *Flowers of Evil and Good*. Unpublished paper read to a symposium at Louisiana State University, March 2000.

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to explicate a practice of reading (loosely defined to include a practice of viewing) that would yield a non-essentialist interpretation of postcolonial subjectivities. The practice (as opposed to the concept) of reading appears to me to be one of the only methods of approaching certain objects. The objects with which I am generally concerned, and which will serve as points of analysis in this paper, are elaborately constructed, complexly arranged visual images that border on artifice. They are artifice to the extent that they are artificially contrived, manipulated, deliberate expressions that announce themselves as having a complicated relationship with the real. I would argue, however, that these objects are less artifice than artifacts in the sense that they are theoretical signposts of meaning. They are the products of self-conscious creative and intellectual production. In a sense, I am attempting simply to figure out how to read art, not in a disinterested Kantian mode, but from a deeply politically interested position. The works that serve as my analytic objects here are concerned with race and gender as devalued bodily markings. These markings are not abstract symbols, but politically charged codes. The objects, then, do not permit the reader or viewer an objective distance or a disinterested perspective. In fact, through a juxtaposition of these and other visual codes, organized or explicated in such a way as to deny a linear or coherent narrative of the postcolonial

subject, these objects, by appealing to the visual sense, disrupt the ostensibly natural practice of reading. These visual scenes are jarring and unsettling for this reason. I am privileging the visual scene in these objects because the visual here actively denies a linear narrative organization of information.

## **Terms**

I would like to take a moment to define certain terms as this project is as much about the potential fluidity of signs as it is about the myriad meanings conveyed by those signs.

This paper will offer the notion of seeing as a form of reading. Such a project inspires the question, *Why*, when discussing a politics of reading, focus on the *purely* visual? I take as my objects of study two works (one theoretical, the other artistic [that distinction, in itself, is problematic, but bear with me]) in which vision is foregrounded. In these works the reader is compelled to consider that which can be seen prior to that which can be logically inferred, deduced, or extrapolated. The structure of logic in these works is deferred. The narrative structure is collapsed and the reader is left to consider the terms (images or words) being presented. It is my intention to argue that the strategic foregrounding of the visual is able to deny linear narrative organization and thereby open up a space for an irreducible subjectivity.

The word *postcolonial* in the title of this paper reflects another element in the project of reading. The bodies at issue here (that is, both the bodies in the works to be analyzed and the bodies who produced the works) can be described as postcolonial because they have worked to escape the colonizing practices of hegemonic reading. Although these bodies are racially and sexually marked, they refuse to be read as receptacles of prescribed meanings of essential identities. These bodies have become complicated, de-colonized, fragmented. It is therefore not simply coincidental that the producers of the works I will discuss are both women of color.

Having thus explained what I take to be the two fundamental positions to consider in the art of reading, I would now like to present my readings of two works—one, a selection of theoretical writing, the other, a piece of visual art.

In the *Culture* chapter of Gayatri Spivak's most recent book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak offers the reader her body as a text for an analysis of labor and transnational movements of capital. Near the end of the "Culture" chapter, amidst a more conventionally academic discussion of the garment industry, labor, and global markets, Spivak describes the clothing on her body at a specific moment in time and space. She uses "the example [of] Gayatri Spivak on a winter's day at an opening in New York's New Museum" to "place the export-based garment industry in transnationality," and to "explain that transnationality [does] not primarily mean people moving from place to place." (414) She describes the "cheap" and "unattractive" top that was mass-produced in Bangladesh by an English-based, international clothing company, and contrasts it with the "exquisite" sari made by a weaver's collective in Bangladesh. Spivak goes on to describe the teamwork, tradition, and craftsmanship involved in the collective, and explains how private subsidizing is needed to maintain the collective in the face of the colonization of the international garment industry. She then states, "Thus I was standing in the museum wearing the contradiction of transnationalization upon my body, an exhibit, though no one knew it." (414, my emphasis)

What I am interested in here is less the issue of transnationalization per se, than the author's offering of her body as an exhibit that is both seen and not seen. There are at least two layers to this notion of "seeing and not seeing": first, there is the idea that the visual field yields a phenomenological complexity that the act of writing cannot; then there is the issue that what we, the readers, are presented with is not really Spivak's body, but Spivak's text. Our reading is thus doubly frustrated. Were we present in the museum with Spivak at this moment, we would have her body and the contradictions written on it immediately available to us, but we would not know how to read it, nor to read it at all. "*an exhibit, though no one knew it.*"

We are therefore reliant upon Spivak's writing and, moreover, her instructions on how to read her body for information about transnationality. But the text that guides the eye operates like a frame, hedging the view and, by extension, the available interpretations. "*an exhibit* ." I choose the word "hedging" deliberately here because I do not think that the frame that Spivak has used is absolutely limiting. There is a great deal that is outside of the frame to which Spivak alludes (the Bangladeshi collective, the international clothing company). The object, then, of the reader's gaze is not a simple, contained body, but a highly complex one, adorned with multiple layers of meanings or terms whose absolute meanings, in the spirit of Derridian deconstruction, are endlessly deferred. As a result, the project of reading Spivak's body/text simply (that is, as simplistic) is equivalent to not seeing it at all.

"I don't know whether to read it or to look at it," or words something to their effect, were spoken by a visitor to the studio of the artist Lorraine O'Grady. The object with which the visitor was having so much trouble are a series of diptychs that present three overlapping layers of portraits, paintings, and text. The layers consist of Picasso's painting "Les desmoiselles d'Avignon," a portrait of Charles Baudelaire and his black mistress of 20 years, Jeanne Duval, and text from either Baudelaire's poetry or of the artist's invention (meant to represent the language of Duval). *Flip through slides* [In the gallery press release, the work is succinctly described thus: "In these diptychs, a photograph of Baudelaire is juxtaposed with a Baudelaire drawing of Duval. Each is layered with crops from Picasso's 'Les desmoiselles d'Avignon,' as well as with text constituting an imaginary dialogue."]<sup>1</sup>

The layers form a palimpsest with each image struggling with another to articulate meanings, to tell the story of modernist aestheticism, of interracial love, of the experience of gender and racial hierarchies. The stories intersect, overlap, and occlude. A painted face hovers ghostlike over Baudelaire's shoulder. The familiar words of his poetry disappear into shadows, are cut off by Picasso's hard angles. In other images, Baudelaire's pen and

ink sketch of his "mistress" is deepened by the shading in the painting overlay.

The (dis)organization of the terms in this work (the Picasso painting, Baudelaire, Duval, the written text) effectively obscures any easily available meaning. The terms themselves are immediately available. One might begin to read this work thus: "Baudelaire is the father of modernist aesthetics. Picasso is the great modernist painter. Blackness and womanhood are repressed subjectivities." Of course, the terms are not innocent; they are iconographic. But any attempt to reduce the work to a singular meaning remains frustrated. If a value judgment is being made here, for example, on the status of modernity or Picasso, then it is quite convoluted.

I am intrigued by the related tropes of "the exhibit" for Spivak and "the visual art object" for O'Grady as texts that are set-off, framed, removed from the continuum of "the real" as exemplars. What is significant about the moment described by Spivak, and what led me to read this section more closely, is her privileging of the exhibit as a useful method of practicing deconstructive self-reflection. Indeed, it seems that the museum is the only space in which such a reflection could occur. Spivak becomes an exhibit in the space of the museum. The museum here operates as a deferring mechanism. It signifies a space in which the complicating effects of temporal and spatial contexts may be momentarily bracketed. In the museum, Spivak sees her body not as she really is, but as she wants to; in this case, for the purpose of furthering a critique of capitalist transnationalism. I do not wish to challenge the purity of that desire to see one's self (or one's object of study) as one wants to. I suspect it is, in fact, deeply problematic to suggest that any space might provide a venue for pure analysis. Nevertheless I believe it is still the visual that holds the possibility of exposing those desires. The experience of viewing O'Grady's work (and O'Grady's experience in composing the work) foregrounds desire. Out of the consternation of not knowing whether to look or to read emerges the desire to "just look," to "just read," to "read or look in the proper order," or in a "useful order." For me, I am capable only of reducing my encounter with this work to a desire to know; a

desire that is quickly followed by an art lover's impulse to "do right" by the work.

I want to offer the project of reading the visual as a potential, not an absolute, denaturalizing of the concept of reading as knowledge production. In ideal circumstances, the visual is non-narrative. Its offering of objects and icons to the visual sense is unbiased in that it does not indicate a beginning point or a priority. Visual reading, then, is a project of narrating the reader's desire through the excavation of an elected intellectual agenda. In this scenario the focus of the reading process could then be transferred from the objective (the intellectual agenda) to the subjective (the narrative of the reader's desire). The knowledge produced would inevitably form a dialect of sorts, between the goal of the critical analytic work and the agency of the reader (now author).

As Donna Haraway remarks in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), "Vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions." (187) [This is from chapter nine, titled "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."] Haraway goes on to make a case for "situated knowledges" which "insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere." Haraway is fundamentally concerned with the embodied position of the reader. While I am interested in the impact of the visual and the agency of the reader, my project diverges from Haraway's in that my focus is on the reader's active agency as it is articulated through the reader's desire. My investment in visuality therefore is less about structure (the self as constituted by a position) than it is about mobilized passions (the self as constituted through desire). Thinking about self-reflexive reading as an intentional foregrounding of desire problematizes the conflicts that arise in conceiving of reader-subjects as inhabiting multiple and often conflicting subject positions.

Visual reading as I have envisioned it is a sort of autoethnographic performance. In attending to the visual, in working through one's relationship to a visual object, one

produces a unique textual interpretation, a spectacle of analytic encounter. Spivak's writing and reading of her own body is an example of that type of spectacle. Although the immediacy of her body is displaced for us (the readers of her text) we nevertheless have another object available to our gaze: the spectacle of her self-reading. Visuality in this project of reading is thus mirrored and repeated. What begins with a look, ends with a look. The possibility of new, unique readings therefore remains open, and the final word, the ultimate judgment, is endlessly (and I think happily) deferred.

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<sup>1</sup> For those of you who don't know, Picasso's painting "Les desmoiselles d'Avignon" (1907) traditionally represents a very important moment in the history of Western art. As art historian Hal Foster notes, the painting marks a bridge between modernist and premodernist painting, a primal scene of modern primitivism. The painting presents an encounter in which are inscribed two scenes: the depicted one of the brothel and the projected one of the heralded 1907 visit of Picasso to the collection of tribal artifacts [most notably African masks] in the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadero." (Art in Modern Culture, 199)