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Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics (Cultural Studies Of The Americas)



Synopsis

There is more to identity than identifying with one's culture or standing solidly against it. José Esteban Muñoz looks at how those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate majority culture—not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. Muñoz calls this process "disidentification," and through a study of its workings, he develops a new perspective on minority performance, survival, and activism. Disidentifications is also something of a performance in its own right, an attempt to fashion a queer world by working on, with, and against dominant ideology. By examining the process of identification in the work of filmmakers, performance artists, ethnographers, Cuban choteo, forms of gay male mass culture (such as pornography), museums, art photography, camp and drag, and television, Muñoz persistently points to the intersecting and short-circuiting of identities and desires that result from misalignments with the cultural and ideological mainstream in contemporary urban America. Muñoz calls attention to the world-making properties found in performances by queers of color—in Carmelita Tropicana's "Camp/Choteo" style politics, Marga Gomez's performances of queer childhood, Vaginal Creme Davis's "Terrorist Drag," Isaac Julien's critical melancholia, Jean-Michel Basquiat's disidentification with Andy Warhol and pop art, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's performances of "disidentity," and the political performance of Pedro Zamora, a person with AIDS, within the otherwise artificial environment of the MTV serial *The Real World*.

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Customer Reviews

In eight essays (six of them previously published), Muñoz, an assistant professor of performance studies at NYU, explores the political and social impact of black, Latino and Asian performance artists on mainstream culture. Drawing on a wide range of examples from Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting and his relationship with Andy Warhol to filmmaker Isaac Julian's response to Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of African-American men, to the camp performance work of Cuban artists Ela Troyano and Carmelita Tropicana Muñoz outlines a process he calls "disidentification," in which an artist works inside the dominant culture while at the same time critiquing it. His insights into the complex ways that race, sexual difference, ethnicity, class and "professionalization" influence each artist's work can be startling, as when he compares mainstream drag films like *To Wong Foo... to the work of transgressive drag performers like Vaginal Creme Davis, or when he reveals how Superman comics can be understood as a response to anti-Semitism. However, when he explores the work of the late Pedro Zamora (of MTV's The Real World) and claims that the Cubano star with AIDS "used MTV more than it used him," or when he discusses Magic Johnson's AIDS education work yet overlooks the gender politics of his message, his analysis can come off as naive. While these essays are consistently enlightening and provocative, their dependence on academic rhetoric makes them resistant to casual reading. (June) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.*

Nowhere does the ambivalence of the minority culture toward the mainstream show itself more strongly than in the arts. In this densely academic work, Muñoz (performance studies, NYU's Tisch Sch. of the Arts) posits this ambivalence as an essential tool of performance artists in their reaction to and relation to a mainstream culture that often rejects them. Through a process that Muñoz terms "disidentification," artists, especially those within sexual and racial minorities, hold a distorted mirror to that culture through such techniques as camp and drag, lampoon, social satire, and outrageousness. By turning the dominant culture on its head, these performers call the emperor on his new clothes, revealing a white heterosexist society intolerant if not downright violent toward dissenting voices. A challenging, sometimes revolutionary work that should be added to serious performing arts and larger gay studies collections. A Jeff Ingram, Newport P.L., OR Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Whether you're a gender studies student or just interested in learning more about queer theory, I really recommend *Disidentifications*. To get the most out of Muñoz' text, I suggest reading about

Julie Kristeva's concepts of abjection. This will help you better understand the concept of disidentification, which can be initially very confusing and elusive within the beginning pages of the book. If you're stuck looking for a clear definition in the book's introduction, don't feel frustrated! Keep reading, as I think Munoz deliberately avoids laying out his concept in broad daylight. The book is a welcomed relief from dense and confusing theory alla Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault and Gayle Rubin. Munoz writes clearly and not in the confusing manner that some academics use. This doesn't mean his ideas are simple - they are anything but! Sometimes it's easy to be frustrated with queer theory texts because they don't always provide solutions for the problems they talk about. However, this book has lots of potential for real-life application in the queer community. Most optimistically, disidentification can save lives and be an agent of cultural change. Speaking from an American perspective, our culture is becoming more accepting, but there are some places or environments that are still very hostile towards queer bodies and people. Drawing from intersectionality, cross-identification and abjection, Munoz outlines disidentifications as a political and survival especially useful for queers of color, or queers with multiple minoritized identities (i.e. poor and trans and gay). Finally, people dissatisfied with the mainstream LGBTQ movement and its assimilation-like tactics may also find this book useful and/or relevant. Give the book a chance, and even if you think Munoz writes some of the introduction with questionable intentions, you will find something useful or at the very least interesting within *Disidentifications*. Like other reviewers, I think *Disidentifications* will eventually become a cornerstone of queer theory canon. Read this!

The idea I have taken from this book that I still use is the way we can misread people (and other things) purposefully: how Bette David can be treated by Black women *as* a Black woman. I don't think Muñoz's developments hold together but there's plenty of interesting stuff to make this worthwhile.

Thank You.

This is a crucial book. It was written by a gay Cuban man who teaches in New York City though he grew up on the suburban lawns that grow on the drained swamp lands of South Florida. The book is all about how artists of color build subjectivities from the suffocating madness of neo-coloniality. We pick up the pieces of a system opposed to us, and we restage it, we push it into having new meanings, and in so doing we disarm, just a little bit, the weight of the world upon us. Muñoz's

writings have always been full of beautiful stories. Vaginal Creme Davis, the half-African-American-half-Mexican drag performer who fronts a punk band where she pretends to be a white supremacist militia member because she thinks their look is "really hot". Or Muñoz himself, signing along as a teenager to the racist lyrics of an old X song because he needed their implicit critique of the suffocating conformity of Hialeah's cultural and sexual conservatism. What Muñoz elegantly lays out for us is a strategy for intervening in the public sphere that resists both the deadly paralysis of identification (assimilation with the status quo), or an imagined counter-identification which inevitably only succeeds in reifying the very bifurcating dialectic it seeks to overthrow. What interests Muñoz is what he calls "disidentification", a third way which I can best describe as such: Caliban's strategy of learning the master's language so he may curse him with it, but staged for the Millennium, so that we learn to curse (or desire) with irreverence, humor, rhythm, and while wearing stilettos. Practice theory without this book at your own peril. It is certain to become a seminal influence.

One of the most bizarre and distasteful texts I have ever read.

For those of us who have been starving since finishing Mercer's 'Welcome to the Jungle' or Fusco's 'English Is Broken Here', this is an excellent book to add to your reading list. Through complex theory and deep analysis, Munoz effectively articulates what many of us know but have difficulty proving to others: lesbian and gay artists of color are producing some of the nation's and the world's most revolutionary and counterhegemonic work. I am especially impressed that he examines work by Black, Latino, and Asian gays. This is a much-needed book for anyone who would like to see people of color come together in coalition. You will be impressed with Munoz's creation. This is not Hemphill's 'Brother to Brother' or Moraga's 'This Bridge Called My Back.' Some readers will be put off by the semiotic language Munoz uses. However, for those who can get through it, you will enjoy this book.

Jose Munoz has written a book which breaks new ground in queer studies. His analysis of queer, colored cultural productions is incisive and unapologetic. A much needed addition to a field which pays lip service but has yet to alter its strong hold on whiteness.

The critique of John Champagne's *Ethics of Marginality* in the introduction of this book is just plain shoddy and careerist. Munoz states that Champagne accuses Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* of

vilifying white people; in fact, Champagne's critique says the film vilifies gay, white, s/m culture. Munoz accuses Champagne of ignorance of Essex Hemphill's poetry--poetry Champagne himself discusses in the very same chapter in which he analyzes *Tongues Untied*. Apparently, Munoz is so interested in making a name for himself that he doesn't bother to read carefully the sources he cites. Perhaps Champagne's critique of the figure of the privileged marginal just hits too close to home for NYU's Munoz.

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