**Different Times, Same Culture War: Performing Otherness and the War on Woke**

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The ‘war on woke’ is the latest iteration of a rightwing culture war that has raged for decades. Performance artists and other non-conforming identities find themselves being demonised by political gatekeepers to leverage control of expressions of cultural identity. Performance can provide a new horizon for resistance to assimilationist policies by locating otherness within a relational field not dependent on logocentric modes of expression to be meaningful.

Defining identity was framed as the crux of social and cultural transformation at the 1993 National Review of Live Art (NRLA), *State of the Art: A Conference on Live Art and Cultural Identity.* Watching recordings of the proceedings at the Live Art Archive in the summer of 2023 for my research into theatre and the free speech culture wars was an uncanny experience. I left the archive feeling as though I’d seen a performance of the contemporary culture war discourse projected from the past. The language may change but the arguments stay the same: Politically engaged performance artists and theatre-makers continue to find themselves being defined by the right without a language to leverage control of the discourse of otherness away from the gatekeepers who determine which identities are permitted to construct the culture and society they live within.

Performance artist Coco Fusco opened the NRLA conference with a talk on the politics of race and identity in the post-Cold War US context. In lieu of the existential threat posed by the Soviet Union to the liberal-capitalist order, Fusco argued that the right had swiftly invented domestic enemies to regulate, monitor, authenticate, commodify and control cultural difference. Conservatives were attacking performance artists ‘to destabilise sites of non-conformity and access to public debate on national culture.’[[1]](#footnote-1) This proved to be a prophetic statement when, just one year later, the Republican party used Ron Athey’s performance *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* to drastically reduce publicly funded artwork and launched a moral panic about the threat body art posed to the values of the American public. Fusco’s collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña also gave her firsthand experience of this cultural backlash when they presented their now iconic performance-installation *Two Amerindians Visit the West* in 1992-93. Performing an ‘authentic’ tribal identity using a positivist visual system of identification interpellated a Eurocentric paradigm of otherness for a white audience to encounter. Objections to the piece stemmed from the artists’ dissimulation of their real identities which some felt constituted a form of deceit. These cases showed that the freedom to artistically disrupt knowledge domains – whether those be orientalist hermeneutics of anthropology or, in Athey’s case, engrained homophobia and religiosity in American society – was not a given in the west. In the intervening years, the right has continued to fiercely police the borders of epistemological authority to prevent expressions of dissent and resistance from occurring within them.

In the contemporary British context, debates about which identities are permitted to challenge conservative-liberal hegemony have become a prominent feature of mainstream political discourse, particularly after Brexit, where ‘woke’ has become a common slur used by the reactionary right. Encompassing environmentalism, anti-racism, labour rights, decolonialization, LGBTQ+ rights, drag shows, campaigns against police brutality, feminism, and veganism (the list goes on), woke has gained a performative affectivity by interpellating a political other determined to control the normative majority by ‘altering the very building blocks of language and thought.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Like all moral panics, the war on woke seeks to ‘incit[e] in the population a mixture of moral disgust and anxiety about contagion.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Rhetorical displays of opposition to leftwing and progressive politics act as performative expressions of what Joanna Williams calls ‘the last vestiges of traditional values and an older social order’[[4]](#footnote-4) against a cultural contaminant gaining power from the margins. It is common for rightwing culture war figures to situate their critique of woke within the discourse of civilisational progress associated with the Enlightenment, a liberal telos characterised as scientific rationalism and expressed in the language of universalism and secularization.[[5]](#footnote-5) In a typical example of the genre, the former actor Laurence Fox delivered a monologue on the radical rightwing news channel GBNews denouncing what he sees as the anti-humanism and nihilism of woke society, which he darkly concluded was an all-out assault on British identity.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Although speaking in a different context, Coco Fusco’s comment that liberal ideals of universalism do not describe an objective reality but represent the views, aspirations, and interests of the most ‘empowered community’[[7]](#footnote-7) go some way to explaining why non-conformist cultural expressions are attacked with such vitriol from figures such as Fox and Williams. Performance can create new territories for radical articulations of identity to assert themselves in expressive forms that do not seek to be legitimised within the paradigm of liberalism and so risk disrupting this Eurocentric narrative of progress. Consequently, the right elevates logocentric forms of free speech which sustain this narrative –debates, interviews, panel discussions, lectures – to a higher level of epistemological authority than embodied knowledge to leverage control of political and cultural discourse from those who are excluded from these platforms. This became evident when the enslaver Edward Colston’s statue was toppled during the Black Lives Matter protest in Bristol in 2020, a performative disavowal of heritage sites that launder the history of slavery and white supremacy into a narrative of western benevolence. The backlash it provoked made visible what Stuart Hall calls the ‘regime of truth’[[8]](#footnote-8) that determines what forms of cultural expressions sustain Eurocentric discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality for the right to performatively defend through the systematic exclusion of non-conformist identities from public discourse. But the performativity of the war on woke has also interpellated the heuristic mechanics that underscore this regime’s hegemony. This presents an opportunity for performance artists and theatre-makers to develop performative modes of political engagement where ‘glitches, failures, subversions, improvisations, and breakages’[[9]](#footnote-9) of Eurocentric paradigms become possible.

*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (2022) by Javaad Alipoor is a good example of how intermediality can give a performative form to such a cultural disruption. The performance interrogates how western epistemes of race and history continue to shape western audiences’ understanding of the legacy of colonialism in the Global South. The dramaturgy emulated an Internet deep dive by interweaving a fictional true crime podcast series and a meta-theatrical meditation on subaltern knowledge. The podcast investigated the real-life murder of 1970s Iranian pop sensation Fereydoun Farrokhzad. The podcast was framed as a media format that, much like the nineteenth century novel, is inscribed with the assimilationist trope of liberalism in its reliance on translating otherness using cultural references immediately familiar to western ears. Describing Farrokhzad as the ‘Iranian Tom Jones’ immediately gave the audience a model to base their interpretation of his cultural significance on Iranian society upon. But modelling an understanding of his murder within a knowledge domain utterly disconnected from the reality of the political context Farrokhzad lived within brought the audience no closer to seeing the discursive territory his life as an artist and political exile originated from. The space between knowledge and understanding was called the ‘void’ in the performance, expressed by Iranian-Canadian singer King Raam as the space that exists between ‘the world you want to live in and the world you are forced to live in.’ Subaltern knowledge is generated from the politics that occurs beyond the gaze of the ‘panoptic, universalist eye’[[10]](#footnote-10) of Eurocentric conceptions of civilizational progress.

The refusal, or even impossibility, of King Raam articulating his experiences as a political exile living between West and East in a logocentric narrative was juxtaposed against the surety of the podcast host’s wild theories about Farrokhzad’s murder. Alipoor framed subaltern knowledge as a networked intelligence that cannot be instrumentalized into the assimilationist machine of capitalism. The intangibility of this knowledge forced the audience to work beyond cognitive interpretation to *see*, not *understand*, otherness in the performance. The attempt to bridge the void between Iranian and British cultures through a podcast in the narrative represents the assimilation of otherness into western discursive territory through logocentric cultural materials like podcasts. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* staged the process of interpretation, contemplation, and analysis that logocentric materials depend on to bring otherness within a knowledge domain western audiences can understand. For otherness to exist as a relational entity within performance outside of Eurocentric imaginaries of foreignness requires the image to precede the word, for it is in language that one ‘locate[s] oneself’ and ‘a symbolic “other”’[[11]](#footnote-11) is constituted as a space separate, and therefore inferior, from the dominant culture.

Outside of single performances, Jennifer Ponce de Leon’s conceptualisation of fourth world aesthetics[[12]](#footnote-12) provides a critical framework to move beyond the oppositional binaries that are characteristic of the identity politics of the culture wars, and indeed of Eurocentrism itself. Ponce de Leon’s theory of transcultural hybridity in performance draws on the anti-capitalist politics of the Mexican neo-Marxist Zapatistas. The 4th World War was coined by the Zapatistas to describe globalized capital and logics of the market coming to dominate all forms of human existence following the end of the Cold War. Neoliberalism represents, for them, the triumph of the free market over socialism and therefore extinguished the potential to create identities outside of capitalist hegemony. Fourth world aesthetics seeks to expand the concept of globalization beyond an economic context by imagining how systems of interconnectivity can upend, disrupt, dismantle, and reinvent the Eurocentric determinacy of race, nation, and ethnicity, all of which are mediated by capitalist systems of consumption, commodification and exchange. The hybrid forms of identity produced by the performative connections between the Global North and Global South shown in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* is one expression of fourth world aesthetics, and thus provides potential images of alternative forms of intercultural dialogue from the assimilationist principles of commodity exchange within neoliberal globalisation. Such a performance of otherness entails an unravelling of Eurocentric epistemes through the creation of hybrid, metamorphic, transcultural identities.

As Guillermo Gomez-Pena argued over thirty years ago, this quality of post/anti-capitalist hybridity also applies to those who, like King Raam, live between borders, as well as other ‘deterritorialized peoples’[[13]](#footnote-13) who exist in a constant state of kaleidoscopic identity reconfiguration as they navigate a world divided by ever harsher militarised borders. If the left has any hope of escaping the interminable culture wars of the past thirty years, it needs a new political horizon to work towards. Performing otherness means crossing the borders of the imagination that determine who is ‘us’ and who is the ‘other.’

1. ‘State of the Art: A Conference on Live Art and Cultural Identity’, 1993, NRLA/1993/AV/1A/2b, Theatre Collection: The Live Art Archives, University of Bristol, https://www.calmview.co.uk/bristoltheatrearchive/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=NRLA%2f1993%2fAV%2f1A%2f2b [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joanna Williams, *How Woke Won: The Elitist Movement that Threatens Democracy, Tolerance and Reason* (London: Spiked, 2022), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London: Penguin, 2021), 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Joanna Williams, How Woke Won: The Elitist Movement that Threatens Democracy, Tolerance and Reason (London: Spiked), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, (London: Harvard University Press), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. GBNews, “‘We Are Living in the Era of the Worship of Lies.’ Laurence Fox Gives his take on Woke Society,” YouTube video, 4:51, 26 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yVNvoCpaXQ> (accessed August 15, 2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘State of the Art: A Conference on Live Art and Cultural Identity’, 1993, NRLA/1993/AV/1A/2b, Theatre Collection: The Live Art Archives, University of Bristol, https://www.calmview.co.uk/bristoltheatrearchive/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=NRLA%2f1993%2fAV%2f1A%2f2b [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Milija Gluhovic et al., ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hall, ibid, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jennifer Ponce de León, *Another Aesthetics is Possible: Arts of Rebellion in the Fourth World War*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘The National Review of Live Art 1993 19-24 October at the ICA, London’, 1993, NRLA/1993/PA/1/1, Theatre Collection: The Live Art Archives, University of Bristol, https://www.calmview.co.uk/bristoltheatrearchive/calmview/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=NRLA%2f1993%2fPA%2f1%2f1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)