

BOOK REVIEWS

About Face

Performing Race in Fashion and Theater

by Dorinne Kondo

NEW YORK, NY, ROUTLEDGE PRESS, 1997
260 PAGES + REFERENCES + INDEX

Dorinne Kondo, Professor of Anthropology and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, has published a collection of eight provocative essays about race, ethnicity, and gender issues. Although I was initially put off by the feminist-political agenda that Ms. Kondo espouses, there is enough rational and interesting academic research here to recommend it for a class in either ethnic studies, Asian cultural studies, or even fashion, at the undergraduate level. These essays give the reader insight into an Asian American woman's perception of commonly held Asian stereotypes that can be illuminating to the student of Asian culture.

In Part One, "Orientalisms," Ms. Kondo urges us to believe that Asia is portrayed in Western culture, especially in theater and fashion, not as it is, but as a projection of Western fantasies. To communicate this message in the first essay, "M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender and a Critique of Existentialist Identity," she describes the plot of the Puccini opera, *Madame Butterfly*, and then discusses David Henry Hwang's amazing variation on that story, *M. Butterfly*. Parallel to her analysis of the play, she often rails at both Asia and the West for capitalistic, superficial portrayals of culture. She objects to the simplistic view that the West holds of the Orient as personifying woman (and the reverse), as she states, that "matters are more complicated, that 'woman' is a collection of cultural stereotypes connected at best to a complex, shifting reality" (41). This is a scholarly and fascinating analysis of the expectations we have of men and women and foreign culture, and well worth a discussion about stereotypes and themes of Asian and gender identity. She states, "In sum, *M. Butterfly* enacts what I take to be a number of profoundly important theoretical moves for those engaged in cultural politics" (47).

Discussion of these theories continues in the next essay in Part One, "Orientalizing: Fashioning Japan," which describes the entrance of Japanese fashion designers into the world of haute couture. The author describes the basic assumptions underlying Western fashion (specifically the size and shape of European women), contrasts it with Eastern fashion, and goes on to describe, in detail, garments created by Japanese fashion designers Miyake, Kawakubo, and Yamamoto. The definition of Asian racial and cultural stereotypes by the Western fashion media is something of a

conundrum for Ms. Kondo. "Inevitably, the work of Japanese designers articulates a problematic of 'Japan' and 'Western' identities" (56). While she wants Asian identity to be respected for its traditions and uniqueness, she is defensive about labeling, as when European fashion writers laud a "Japanese designer" as opposed to just a "haute couture designer." Again, her ideas are worth discussing and critiquing in a class, from the perspective of studying a particular culture, examining the methods of observing style, or criticizing media-created stereotypes. The polarization of East and West provides plenty of food for thought.

Part Two, "Consuming Gender, Race and Nation," again uses the fashion world as its subject. It examines "commodity capitalism and mass culture" in a subculture which is outrageously superficial, and describes the body as that which is "the most available surface for inscribing resistance." Two essays, one about fashion's avant-garde, and the other about men's fashion, pay strong attention to details—both of theory and of the fashions themselves—and again provide ample material for discussion and contention.

Part Three, "Strategies of Intervention," examines the need for and ways in which Asian Americans (although Ms. Kondo is Japanese American, she seems to lump all Asian Americans together) might cope with living in a hegemonic culture which is not their own. The diasporic imperative is to ask . . . "to what races and genders shall the future belong?" (176). An interesting answer proposed is transnationalism, by which biracial or binational peoples of the world can find a new cultural identity. This new identity can be, and is, described here again through performance, and in the last group of essays, Ms. Kondo examines the work of David Henry Hwang and other Asian American playwrights as cultural leaders who have both revealed and created an identity and a home for the Asian American.

This book as text for an undergraduate—probably upper division—class could serve as a point of departure for discussion, critique, and/or argument. It is sure to elicit differing opinions about its strongly stated ideas, and Ms. Kondo's style of writing and vocabulary will provide food for thought. Many of her turns of phrase provoked me to ponder meaning: hierarchized binaries, contestatory fashion, the vestimentary system, commodity fetishism, racially marked capitalist nation-state, essence fabrication, and coalitional identity, to name a few. While I often felt myself arguing with notions in this text, I felt it was material worthy of argument. ■

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