ICS Lecture Series 2010: On the Surface/Under the Skin

Bowling Green State University. Institute for the Study of Culture & Society

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W.E.B. DuBois famously declared that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line. But what about in the 21st century? How have racial identity and identification changed with the increasing attention to non-black minority identities, some written on the surface of the body and others hidden within that body; some elegantly expressed through bodily performance and others painfully thwarted by the body itself? What roles do race, affect, and performance play in the construction of modern identity, for those who are “Brown” or “Queer,” “White Trash” or “Trans,” or any number of things in combination? More broadly, how has the very notion of identity changed since the turn of the last century?

The 2010 ICS Lecture Series focuses on the dialogue between surfaces and depths, visual signs and internal affects, theatricality and the everyday. Our speakers investigate the circuits that shape modern identity, those that are visible as well as those that lie hidden from view. In so doing, they urge us to look backwards at the past and forwards to the future. This year’s series, “On the Surface/Under the Skin,” provocatively historicizes our ways of seeing, powerfully imagines new ways of being, and refreshingly considers the role of feeling in identity formation.

Wednesday, March 17 at 7pm
in Room 206 (Theatre) BTSU

José Esteban Muñoz

“Becoming Otherwise: Mario Montez, Sonia Sotomayor, and the Affective Life of Brownness"

Professor Muñoz’s talk is based on his latest work, Feeling Brown: Ethnicity, Affect and Performance, forthcoming from Duke University Press. In the early twentieth century, modern building surfaces offered the architectural analogue for questions about the body—that is, about primitivism and modernity, mystery and transparency, solidarity and movement. In this lecture, Muñoz will discuss the surprising conversation between the art of Josephine Baker, the internationally famous African American performer, and the philosophy of Adolf Loos, one of the forefathers of modern architecture. Cheng tracks the intimate relationship at the turn of the century between the theatricalization of black skin in Baker’s provocative strip teases and the production of the smooth, “naked” modern surface in modernist architecture. By seeing blackness as akin to cladding on a building, a constant negotiation between corporeality and sign, this study reflects on how the discourse of racialized bodies inflects how we understand surfaces today, which is to say how we read at all in the modern era.

José Esteban Muñoz is chair and associate professor of Performance Studies at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. He is an internationally recognized scholar in the fields of performance studies, visual culture, Latino studies, queer theory, cultural studies, and critical theory. Muñoz is the author of Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), a foundational text in queer-of-color critique, and Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (NYU Press, 2009). His third monograph, Feeling Brown: Ethnicity, Affect and Performance, is forthcoming.

Wednesday, March 24 at 7pm
in Room 206 (Theatre) BTSU

Anne Anlin Cheng


Professor Cheng’s talk is based on her latest work, Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface, forthcoming from Oxford University Press. Anne Anlin Cheng is chair and professor of English, as well as a faculty member at the Center for African American Studies, at Princeton University. She specializes in race and gender studies, psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory, cultural studies, film studies, and poetry and poetics, with a special focus on Asian American and African American literatures. She is the author of The Melancholy of Race: Assimilation, Psychoanalysis, and Hidden Grief (Oxford University Press, 2003), which explores the notion of racial grief at the intersection of culture, history, and law. Her latest work, Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface, is forthcoming.