Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness

Nicole R. Fleetwood

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Troubling Vision addresses American culture's fixation on black visibility, exploring how blackness is persistently seen as a problem in public culture and even in black scholarship that challenges racist discourse. Through trenchant analysis, Nicole R. Fleetwood reorients the problem of black visibility by turning attention to what it means to see blackness and to the performative codes that reinforce, resignify, and disrupt its meaning. Working across visual theory and performance studies, Fleetwood asks, How is the black body visualized as both familiar and disruptive? How might we investigate the black body as a troubling presence to the scopic regimes that define it as such? How is value assessed based on visible blackness?

Fleetwood documents multiple forms of engagement with the visual, even as she meticulously underscores how the terms of engagement change in various performative contexts. Examining a range of practices from the documentary photography of Charles "Teenie" Harris to the "excess flesh" performances of black female artists and pop stars to the media art of Fatimah Tuggar to the iconicity of Michael Jackson, Fleetwood reveals and reconfigures the mechanics, codes, and metaphors of blackness in visual culture.

"*Troubling Vision* is a path-breaking book that examines the problem of seeing blackness—the simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility of African Americans—in US visual culture in the last half century. Weaving together critical modes and methodologies from performance studies, art history, critical race studies, visual culture analysis, and gender theory, Fleetwood expands Du Bois's idea of double vision into a broad questioning of whether 'representation itself will resolve the problem of the black body in the field of vision.' With skilled attention to historical contexts, documentary practices, and media forms, she takes up the works of a broad variety of cultural producers, from photographers and playwrights to musicians and visual artists and examines black spectatorship as well as black spectacle. In chapters on the trope of 'non-iconicity' in the photographs of Charles (Teenie) Harris, the 'visible seams' in the digital images of the artist Fatimah Tuggar, and a coda on the un-dead Michael Jackson, Fleetwood's close analyses soar. *Troubling Vision* is a beautifully written, original, and important addition to the field of American Studies."—Announcement of the American Studies Association for the 2012 Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize

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