Incommensurate Bodies: Appropriation of Trauma and Subversion of Rhetorical Stigma in Wangeci Mutu’s “Uterine Pathologies” Series

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Embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it. This realization, with all its exfoliating implications, is so broad in its effects and so deep in its consequences that it is transforming the liberal subject, regarded as the model of the human since the Enlightenment, into the posthuman. (Hayles xiv)

N. Katherine Hayles

Introduction

The collaged and decorated images, from Kenyan-American artist Wangeci Mutu’s “Uterine Pathologies” series, are all constructed atop archaic textbook images of female genitalia variously afflicted with fibroids, lesions, tumors, and more. In composing these unexpected arrangements, Mutu has drawn collage materials from fashion magazines, pornography and books on nature and wildlife, embellishing with paint, ink, packing tape, fur and glitter. The faces thus exude a tension between the whole and the fragmented, the seductive and the grotesque. Seeming at times bionic, animalistic, or even mutant, they nonetheless distinctly evoke black female faces, and dynamically expressive ones at that. These images thus
arrive into our realm of perception densely layered with signification, in terms of their material and discursive components as well as the affective impression that each conveys.

This paper explores Mutu’s “Uterine Pathologies” series as an entry into a conversation about the ontology of contemporary subjectivity, especially with respect to real and imagined, visible and invisible traumas attributed to globalization and networked technologies. The epigraph that I have selected from N. Katherine Hayles, concerning her concept of embodiment, serves to guide my inquiry into a body-centric phenomenology of the globally and technically networked and interactive contemporary subject.

Incommensurate Bodies and Problems of Context

The traumatic impact of postmodernism on the ontology of the politically consequential subject marks the beginning of this conversation. As Andreas Huyssen puts it in *After the Great Divide*, postmodernism departs from the “perpetual cycle of boom and bust, exhaustion and renewal, which has characterized the trajectory of modernist culture.” Postmodernism “rather represents a new type of crisis of that modernist culture itself” (217). In particular, I seek to engage the quandary of the postmodern subject that Frederic Jameson sets forth in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, keeping in mind attributes that he distinguishes as significant to the postmodern cultural moment. These attributes are: (1) the incursion of capitalism and the forces of commodification into all of “culture,” including private and psychic spheres; and (2) the technologically facilitated, space-time compression, which irrevocably changes modernist attitudes toward history and geography. Per Jameson, these changes yield an externalization, flattening and fragmentation of modes of apprehension and expression for the thus-implicated subject. Thus, according to Jameson, postmodernity engenders a “sheer” externalization of everything, leading to an inside-out culture where a subject no longer has the space to exercise rational political agency. An increasingly spatial and visual, rather than temporal, cultural orientation leads to the postmodern subject’s engulfment in an overwhelming, spatial present, not unlike the overstimulated schizophrenic patient, for whom experience boils down to “the gloss and smoothness of material things” (Jameson 27).
Going further, Jameson writes, “there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject” (39). While to Jameson, the mutation of the subject is as of yet inaccessible, his writing implies a pending necessity of a certain mutation in the human subject, in order to bring it up to speed with the material conditions of postmodernity in a politically viable way. The trauma that is at work in Jameson’s postmodern subject, then, is one of incommensurability: the body (or at least modes of understanding the body, cognition, and phenomenology) is incommensurate with the material and rhetorical conditions of its cultural context. This quandary naturally would lead to a theory of loss of affect, political agency, and general postmodern malaise and paranoia with respect to the political efficacy of the postmodern subject/ivity.

Radical Contextualization: Interpenetrations of Trauma

The challenge assumed by this paper, then, is: How to conceptualize such a mutation that engenders viability? To answer this question, I return to Hayles. Beyond asserting the material importance of the body coterminous with its dermatological periphery, Hayles posits a dynamic and interactive relationship between embodiment and the ontology of human cognition: “Subjectivity is,” she writes, “distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it” (291). Hayles outlines a radically contextualized perception of selfhood and subjectivity, where body parts and objects in the environment interact with the mind in the process of cognition, arriving at a theory of distributed cognition and distributed subjectivity as her vision for what she calls the posthuman subject.

Alluding to the technologically facilitated, space-time compression, Mutu herself says, “we live in a moment of collage, of splicing, of entering one another’s space, of coexistence, and of forced coexistence” (Tate). With respect to collapsing of public and private spheres, and flattening of perspectives and aesthetics in contemporary (“postmodern”) culture, it is fascinating to note Mutu’s recombinant use of body parts of different scales in this series, beginning with the striking superimposition of a face on an image of the uterus. This practice is especially present in the “Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus,” where a leg becomes the nose of the face, and “Indurated Ulcers of the Cervix,” where one finds a torso, a smaller mouth-and-chin section
of a face, and even smaller pair of legs all as a part of the face. Even if a leg comes to make a nose, or a nipple makes a chin (as in “Histiology of Different Classes of Uterine Tumors”), the end result still gives off the impression of the figure of a female face. In addition, in the instances where there is a speculum present, it also becomes incorporated into the face. I see in this process a convergence with Hayles’ theory of distributed cognition and subjectivity: The whole in interactive parts is what makes the being, particularly when the pieces are so disjoint and disparate. As such, I would venture to say that, rather than collage, holistic figural representation of an embodied subject ultimately functions as Mutu’s primary medium.

How does the idea of radical contextualization and distributed cognition play out with respect to trauma in these images? As implied in the preceding discussion of superimposition in the pieces, the notion of distributed cognition and radical contextualization implies a disregard for dermatologic confines and also of scale and visual commensurability within an alleged subjective agent (such as one of these images or the series as a whole). The superimposition of the female face on the diseased female reproductive organs in fact quite literally performs the traumatic label of the hysterical woman (from the Ancient Greek word for uterus), with complicated repercussions. Further, by making uterine pathologies the material and conceptual base of her works, Mutu plays with and challenges the question of visible marginalization, since uterine pathologies are normally externally invisible. This series literally forces this frequently unnoticed pathology into the externally visible field. The uterus is of course also arguably the defining organ of femininity, but it is invisible in day-to-day life, in stark contrast to the perpetually visible body part of the face, which is also arguably the most defining body part in terms of thinking about the subject. This challenges the viewer to consider the largely invisible socially inflicted traumas on the visibly marginalized African American woman. Aspects of the stereotypical impositions on darker-skinned women include hypersexuality, making this particular series by Mutu all the more apt with respect to engaging the rhetorical traumas that the dark-skinned woman might have to endure more than her fair-skinned counterparts. By creating her works on top of these texts that distinctly pathologize the uterus, central to femininity, and imply a hierarchical and standardized approach to medicine and women, with the male hand wielding a speculum in several of the images, Mutu exercises a certain power over the traumatic and pathologizing agents. The
consequent anthropomorphizing of the pathologized uterus through these pieces contributes to an ambivalence of power and affect: The faces appear monstrous and not a little terrifying; at the same time, the sick uteruses are empowered by this anthropomorphism, given mouths, eyes, agency, erotic appeal. The reclaiming of agency is particularly poignant in the images that contain a speculum and a man’s hand wielding the speculum.

As I mention in my introduction, there is an important affective aspect to these images, as expressive faces, which contributes to the overall political implications of the works. “Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix” and “Tumors of the Uterus” are both interesting in this respect, and with respect to the agency of speech and self-expression, with both of these faces sticking out their tongues. The sticking-out tongue here both recalls the patient “opening wide” for the doctor to get a good look at her sore throat, for example, and defiance, aggression, and eroticism.

In a 2006 interview, Mutu explains her figures as performing embodied narratives in their eclectic constitutions: “All of their history is written upon their bodies and in their hair. It’s very clear where they’ve been. Some of them are missing parts, or have gained a new a part, be it an animal part or a machine part, as they’ve gone along” (Tate). As Mutu’s quote indicates, her aesthetic is one of visibly translated and recorded trauma, where the trauma is sensually and opportunistically appropriated into these works of art. My argument is that there is an interpenetration of trauma that then occurs with these monstrous but erotically compelling images, as they incorporate and exhibit allegedly traumatic agents and literally put them on display in an empowered way—this results in a subversive redirection of traumatic agency and power structures of oppression via embodied performativity.

Concluding Thoughts, Further Questions

Perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of Mutu’s “Uterine Pathologies” images is that their very performative appropriation of things that are viewed as deficiencies, shameful, or incommensurate, is an act that challenges the very foundation of rhetorical stigma. The deep and alluring ambivalence of these monstrous faces/articulate uteruses calls into question the foundations of value, and the consumption and production of the political subject. I would argue that works such as these allow us to approach notions of the ontologically bereft and politically impotent postmodern subject in a different
light. Further, these works call into question the rhetorically impermeable contrivances of wholism and autonomy that continue to be perpetuated in contemporary culture, and to perhaps consider these ideas themselves as traumatic.

There is much more that this discussion could accommodate and explore, both with respect to the particular works that I analyse and with respect to the greater driving questions of trauma and radically contextualized subjectivity. Among these would be a greater exploration of the inter-implications and of visible-versus-invisible disabilities and rhetorical stigmas, including issues in mental health. Additionally, there is an undercurrent of the rhetorical connection between the woman as an allegory and an agent for cultural trauma, including the crisis of subjective and cultural ontology that is triggered by mechanical labor, communication technologies, and physical travel that have led to globalizing cultures. The female face, uterus, and body, and each aspect’s peculiar and changing role within economic structures of production and consumption, arrive here as a question that is important to explore in an attempt to arrive at a greater understanding between subjectivity, gender, and stigma.

NOTES

1. All images referred to in this discussion can be found at The Saatchi Gallery’s website on Wangechi Mutu’s page: [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu.htm). The pieces that I consider in this discussion, and which were included in unpublished versions, include: “Histiology of Different Classes of Uterine Tumors” (2004), “Tumors of the Uterus” (2005), “Indurated Ulcers of the Cervix” (2005), “Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus” (2005) and “Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix” (2005). [back]

2. While the interview from which this quote is drawn was in reference to the figures of another series of Mutu’s, the sentiment of her practice still applies to the “Uterine Pathologies” series. [back]
WORKS CITED


