

Life In Berlin: Coco Fusco Re-Opens German Colonial Archives

By LILY KELTING • MAR 15, 2017



Coco Fusco, "Words May Not Be Found" 2017, Performance at Sophiensaele (2017), co-produced with KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

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There have been many blue books produced by the British Parliament since the 15th century. But one in particular is The Blue Book. It's a 212-page document from 1918. It's actually titled *Report On the Natives of South-West Africa And Their Treatment By Germany*. It's a collection of 47 sworn testimonies and other reports, assembled to prove that Germany should cede control of its colonies to British South Africa.

"Namibian activists know about it, but that's about it."

Cuban-American writer and artist Coco Fusco has been working on themes of gender, race, and power for decades. She was commissioned to present a performance on language at Sophiensaele as part of Kunst Werke's Weekends Series. In a piece titled *Words May Not Be Found*, Fusco and seven others read aloud from the Blue Book, giving voice to native testimonies about the experience of living under German colonial rule.

"I had been very interested in the history of the Herero and Nama rebellion and the German southwest military campaign to quench the rebellion that



Cuban-American writer and artist Coco Fusco performs "Words May Not Be Found" at Sophiensaele.

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culminated in the killing of 80,000 Hereros, and the stories that emerged from that conflict," Fusco says. "And that's a very unusual kind of historical document; usually the story of colonialism is told by the colonizer."

The testimonies from the Blue Book read in "Words May Not Be Found" contain graphic accounts of violence the Nama and Herero suffered, leading to their rebellion in present-day Namibia. The German officials' banal and officious responses are hard to listen to.

"Very interestingly, eight years after the report was published, the British government agreed to destroy it," says Fusco.

Apparently by 1926, it was more important for European colonizers to present a unified front than to single out the Germans for the Herero genocide. And so the report more or less disappeared.

"This is a chapter of German history that is not taught in school. These are aspects of German history that are not given enough attention, that are not collectively known, and I am more interested in a symbolic sense of putting the story back in the collective consciousness," Fusco explains. Even though the KW performance is reading, not acting, I had to ask: Does it become emotional to sit with these traumatic chapters of history?

"I don't see anybody in America crying about slavery. In my experience, there's more avoidance than grief. It's hard stuff."