

Introduction: Embodied Arts

by Lezlie Cross and Ariel Nereson
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This American Society of Theatre and Drama special issue of JADT offers four essays that reconsider the contours of the study of U.S. American performance through centering embodiment as the site where aesthetic values are developed, mobilized, and contested. Though all of the arts are arguably embodied, this special issue, by isolating “The Embodied Arts,” features scholarship about forms that foreground the body as the primary meaning maker.

Our CFP was inspired by Nadine George-Graves’s proposal in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater* (2015) that performance research might productively adopt an overarching rubric of “performative embodiment” to explain performance phenomena.^[1] In coining this phrase, George-Graves sought to bridge what Kate Elswit calls “[t]he artificial divisions between the thing most often called ‘theatre’ and the thing most often called ‘dance’ in both academic and artistic spheres.”^[2] Drawing on current scholarly energies around this interdisciplinary (or in George-Graves’s essay, “intradisciplinary”) concern, one of our central questions was: What might emerge as a coherent area of scholarly inquiry were disciplinary divisions forsaken in favor of metrics of legibility that arise not from genre but from the materials of performance phenomena themselves? The four essays featured in this issue demonstrate the efficacy of performative embodiment as a new metric to understand a diversity of performance events.

The resultant collection of essays does much more than probe or surmount the generic academic divide between dance and theatre studies; it also offers a breadth of methodologies drawn from dance, theatre, and performance studies. The sites investigated by these four authors -- Broadway, vaudeville, pageantry, and music videos -- have historically incorporated both choreographed movement and mimetic action. As such, these sites are situated in the center of a proverbial venn diagram of performative embodiment.

In a welcome shift, the four essays that compose this special issue refocused our initial call away from academic genre toward a more expansive examination of bodies in motion. The essays share a scholarly commitment to elucidating the interrelationships between body-based performances and what Susan Leigh Foster has termed “bodily theotics,” or a given historical moment’s normative and resistant modes of embodiment.^[3] A focus on historically situated power dynamics emerges when these essays are examined collectively. Rather than evidencing an ideological project that equates identity politics with embodiment, this focus develops from a primary physics of choreography, wherein time and energy produce the power required to activate movement repertoires. All movement happens within sets of constraints; here, our authors consider U.S. American norms of bodily comportment as socio-cultural constraints that frame the choreographies their subjects generate and complicate. The essays therefore comment on the hierarchies of power embedded in embodied performances, opening up conversations about race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and size.

All four essays engage with popular representations that challenge traditional aesthetic values about bodies in motion. Each essay articulates and argues against an ideal U.S. American form: the trim, athletic, disciplined, white body. Through their discussions of thin and fat bodies, bodies that trouble ideas of femininity, oppositional aesthetics of white and indigenous bodies, and the legacy of black female embodiment, the authors show how performing artists describe, interpret, and subvert established norms of bodily comportment through their embodied performances. Additionally, the authors' serendipitous shared focus on forms of popular entertainment reveals a wide range of social and cultural implications of embodied performance. We interpret this emphasis on "popular" (though not always commercial) rather than "concert" performance as affirmation of the degree to which theories of embodiment structure the bodily lives of everyday people.

Ryan Donovan's investigation of Broadway casting practices in relation to body size and the widespread commodification of thinness opens our issue. "'Must Be Heavyset': Casting Women, Fat Stigma, and Broadway Bodies" contributes to a growing and compelling body of scholarship at the intersection of performance studies and fat studies, as well as the current and lively conversation on casting within performance studies. Utilizing an archive comprised of original interviews and voluminous press seen through theories of fat embodiment and performativity, Donovan carefully describes the process of workshopping and producing *Hairspray* for Broadway, a process wherein allegedly inclusive aims were hamstrung by commercial imperatives. Contextualizing *Hairspray* within historical and contemporary Broadway productions reveals an unsurprising yet critical emphasis on women's body size and a concomitant mandate of thinness in order for female romantic desires to be culturally legible and, importantly, profitable.

Donovan's attention to not only the representational dynamics of these productions but also their pragmatics, including the language of fat stars' contracts and the use of prosthetics, broadens his critique to include Broadway's means of production as well as its narrative content and form. Donovan concludes that "The lack of fat actors cast in leading roles belies Broadway's vision of itself as a fully inclusive institution, and the use of fat suits and contractual weight clauses has perpetuated fat stigma," and, moreover, "[B]y not casting fat women outside of prescribed roles, Broadway musicals enforce a system of gendered bodily norms that police how all women act, consume, and labor in the U.S."

In "Unruly Reproductions: The Embodied Art of Mimicry in Vaudeville," Jennifer Schmidt demonstrates how female comics on the vaudeville stage used their embodied caricatures to fight against the superficialities of feminized consumer culture found in the theatre and print media of the late nineteenth century in the U.S. Schmidt places the performances of female mimics Cissie Loftus, Elsie Janis, and Gertrude Hoffmann in a critical conversation with the embodiment of femininity emblemized by the Gibson Girl and the women of Florenz Zeigfield's *Follies*. For instance, Hoffmann's burlesque of the Gibson girl included an exaggerated "kangaroo walk" which satirized the embodied impact of that "ideal" on the female form. Through rich archival details of their physical performances, Schmidt argues that these mimics, through their mockery of both feminine and masculine figures, brought attention to the manufactured nature of womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century. The women additionally disrupted the audience's expectations of gender, by maintaining their "girlishness" even when creating caricatures of figures like President William McKinley. Schmidt demonstrates that, through these embodied forms of reproduction, Loftus, Janis, and Hoffmann created critical space which allowed them to comment on the representations of women in the celebrity culture of their time. Through a detailed examination of their repertoires, Schmidt's essay reveals the cultural and political potentials of embodied

performance, by showing how the moving body can be a tool for creating critical parodies of popular culture.

Shilarna Stokes's essay "Choreographies of the Great Departure: Building Civic Bodies in the 1914 *Masque of St. Louis*" reveals how Percy MacKaye's symbolist pageant reinforced the processes of civilizing, and thereby Americanizing, both participants and observers through mass embodied practices of dance, gesture, and pantomime. In MacKaye's view, the "emblematic design elements, allegorical plots, and figurative choreographies" he created in the masque were an essential element of what he called the "rituals of democracy." Stokes shows how the hundreds of thousands of everyday people involved in the creation of MacKaye's embodied performance, "were able to generate performative arguments about civic engagement, citizenship, and democracy" through their participation in the pageant. Through Stokes' close analysis of the *Masque*, including a wealth of new archival research, she demonstrates how the pageant shaped St. Louisans' conceptions of collectivity and directly influenced the newly expanded white population of the city.

In her reading of the *Masque*, Stokes identifies three distinct choreographic modes of embodiment. She analyzes the pageant's two modes of "playing Indian," one which she terms "the ritualized" and the second "the savage," arguing that these embodiments showed audience and performer alike "the difference between rational forms of collective self-organization and wild expressions of collective fervor." The contrast between the two modes of "playing Indian" pointed St. Louisans' toward acceptable forms of civic organization. The third mode she identifies, "playing pioneer," modeled an ideal citizen who conformed to the "political and economic vision of city officials." Through her detailed analysis, Stokes critically parses the fraught legacy of the *Masque*, revealing both MacKaye and the city officials' aims for the piece as well as the impact of the pageant on the city and its citizenry.

Finally, Dana Venerable's essay "Collective Choreography for Weathering Black Experience: Janelle Monáe & The Memphis 'Tightrope' Dance" considers contemporary popular performance as a site of critical intervention in the daily repertoires of constrained embodiment experienced by black U.S. Americans. Venerable provides a detailed close reading of the popular music artist Janelle Monáe's instruction of the "Tightrope," a dance to accompany Monáe's 2010 hit of the same name. Venerable locates Monáe in a genealogy of black female performance makers and theorists, emphasizing Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston, who share a project of performance as collective healing for marginalized black U.S. American communities. This genealogy is placed in conversation with contemporary theories of black experience developed by Arline Geronimus and Christina Sharpe that posit "weathering" as quotidian strategies for living in a climate of anti-blackness.

Venerable argues that the "Tightrope" "acknowledges in its name and choreography the physical risk of black embodiment in the U.S. and enacts strategies of emotional stability, physical balance, spontaneity, and support as navigational tactics." Her analysis is rooted in the moment of 2010 and she reads the "Tightrope" as responsive to both local dance scenes, particularly in Memphis, Tennessee, and national narratives of racialized embodiment activated by the Obama presidency. Venerable's essay offers alternative lineages of influence that cross "high" and "low" dance and posit that distinctions in cultural production are secondary to tracking the omnipresence of the hostile environment within which black U.S. Americans live and create.

These seemingly disparate essays, which interrogate entirely different landscapes and forms, create

generative conversations about performance when gathered under the rubric of embodiment. By foregrounding disciplinary concerns in our CFP, we unwittingly replicated the generic binary of dance and theatre. Donovan, Schmidt, Stokes, and Venerable instead highlight the work which already takes place at the boundaries of what performance is and can be. In this way, the “Embodied Arts” issue gathers scholarship evidencing Elswit’s observation that “Once presumptions about form are suspended, even temporarily, all sorts of histories in the borderlands begin to emerge, and with them larger ecosystems of practice.”^[4] By drawing on theoretical frames that consider embodiment as epistemological as well as historical, lived social choreographies, these authors raise the stakes of their respective analyses to include both representational and experiential dimensions of performative embodiment.

This special edition ultimately seeks to spur a conversation around the proposal that we might do more to probe the cultural relevance of performance in the Americas thinking through, but not within, genre distinctions and disciplinary divides. This conversation has benefitted enormously from the guidance of Dorothy Chansky, President of the American Theatre and Drama Society, from the mentorship of JADT editors Naomi Stubbs and James Wilson, and from the members of our Editorial Board, who tirelessly and generously devoted their time and energy to furthering this discussion. We hope readers will engage the scholarship within this issue as they continue to reimagine the histories and theories of American performance.

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and in JADT, amongst others.

[1] Nadine George-Graves, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2015: 5.

[2] Kate Elswit, *Theatre & Dance* (London: Palgrave), 2018: 2.

[3] Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 1995: 8.

[4] Elswit (2018), 28.



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