

The avantgarde is avantgarde again, it seems. The last decade has witnessed journal articles, conferences, books, and academic courses in numbers unmatched since the 1960s, when avantgarde studies first emerged as a field. Why such growth? Why such interest? While those aren’t questions to be answered here, meaningful, if not paradigm-shifting efforts to shape this new wave can be found in two books from the University of Michigan Press’s Theater: Theory/Text/Performance series: James Harding’s Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde and Kimberly Jannarone’s Artaud and His Doubles.

These texts are emblematic of an emerging scholarly framework, what I would call “Critical Vanguard Studies.” Harding and Jannarone limit their thinking neither to the Marxist and poststructuralist models nor the untheoretical, descriptive narratives that dominate the field. Though not dismissive of such approaches, they consider the relationship among aesthetics, power, ideology, institutions, and the power of critical-creative expression from a more diverse range of critical perspectives and with a keen eye toward the ideologies of history writing.

But what makes these two books emblematic of this trend is that they study the studying itself, to paraphrase Jannarone (27). Paul Mann’s The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde (1991) hit shelves over 20 years ago, but few have absorbed his lesson that, if we are to make comprehensive sense of the avantgarde, then we must address both the vanguards and the discourses surrounding them. In this spirit, readers will find in Harding and Jannarone’s books thoroughgoing assessments of both subject matter and discourse. They address, respectively, the gender bias of avantgarde studies and the weirdly hagiographical, ahistorical way that scholars and artists have treated Artaud. More importantly, both writers extend their critiques to how scholars have written the history of the avantgarde and how they have conceptualized and historicized avantgarde performance.

Harding’s Cutting Performances examines five American artists: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Gertrude Stein, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Valerie Solanas. Great choices, not only because these are remarkable figures in and of themselves, but also because their diverse critical-creative praxes enable Harding to describe a theory of the avantgarde that, while embedded in the rich tradition of feminist performance theory, is path-breaking. Harding writes, “I am less interested in feminist theory more generally than I am in experimental feminist artists whose feminism is manifested in the particulars of their performative praxis and whose praxis has the potential to change the course of current theories of the avant-garde” (7).
This is where collage comes into play. Because he wishes not just to argue for “a more prominent position for women experimental artists within the existing, accepted histories of American avant-garde performance” (70), he frames the varied collage techniques and epistemologies of these artists as a “recurrent metacritical strategy of feminist expression” that can be effectively deployed within avantgarde historiography itself—within, if you will, the “studying.” This method’s fullest exposition is in the chapter on Stein. Harding reads The Mother of Us All as a paradigmatic “staging of a crisis in representation that, seen through a variety of paratactical juxtapositions, illuminates the inability of the written word to provide a reliable sense of objective referentiality” (71). Ultimately, he argues for a critical strategy that, “drawing upon the radical juxtapositions of collage, accommodates a diversity of seemingly irreconcilable aesthetic tendencies while simultaneously calling attention to the constructed nature of the history” we tell about the avantgarde (73). Harding properly situates gender and sexuality as central to avantgarde theory—and provides a robust model for considering other biases that have shaped the avantgarde and its discourses.

Which leads me to a couple of criticisms. The first concerns the term “American.” Four of the five artists he discusses are white Europeans, and though Ono’s work raises questions about US imperialism and racism, it does so quite indirectly. The inclusion of, say, the Cuban-American Coco Fusco or the Mexican Jesusa Rodríguez might have introduced a more hemispheric concept of America and other kinds of “irreconcilable aesthetic tendencies.” Second, the chapter on Ono’s Cut Piece fails to mention the performance of the same by model Carol Mann at the 29 April 1967 14 Hour Technicolour Dream Extravaganza, held at London’s Alexandra Palace, a performance overseen by Ono’s then-husband Tony Cox. More shagadelic orgy than feminist statement, Mann’s performance, photographs of which were used by Ono as promotional material, shows how patriarchal politics can be sustained even within putatively feminist artworks.

Kimberly Jannarone’s Artaud and His Doubles is no less ambitious in its efforts to shatter conventions and highlight shortfalls in avantgarde discourse. As she describes it, her project began “from accepted familiar premises […] Artaud as prophet, madman, genius was the thing to study; his significance lay in his status as an inspirational figure manifesting a largely ahistorical impulse; his denunciation of civilization’s discontents implied a progressive critique” (ix). However, these premises do not hold up to the facts. Digging into the archives, Jannarone discovered that Artaud was a respected and accomplished theatre director. Thus, Susan Sontag’s notion that “both in his work and his life, Artaud failed” (8) is nonsense, and the idea that “what he bequeathed was not achieved works of art but a singular presence, a poetics, an aesthetics of thought, a theology of culture, and a phenomenology of suffering” (8) is far less tenable. Further, Artaud’s repeated calls for mass violence, terror, rape, and murder start to sound all too familiar once we remember that, when he first sounded those calls in the 1920s and ’30s, he was in plentiful company.

Jannarone focuses on Artaud’s war with European Enlightenment, his persistent invocations of plague and the irrational, his attack on the individualizing tendencies of bourgeois theatre, his efforts to transform the audience into an organic, terrorized mass, and his desire to raise the role of the director to a position of absolute, charismatic authority. She nests all of these securely in the “intellectual history and […] cultural climate of Western Europe in the interwar era, the historical development of modern theatre audiences and the director, and crowd theory” (22). The Artaud who emerges is not the suffering saint of radical performance and the postmodern Left, but a profoundly troubling historical figure, one of the many who advocated irrationalism, vitalism, mysticism, authoritarian people’s theatres, and
charismatic mass leadership. Ultimately, Jannarone argues convincingly that, if not a fascist, Artaud was at least a "reactionary nihilist" (199).

The implications of this argument are far-reaching and are going to raise a lot of hackles. As Jannarone points out, Artaud’s work “has been shadowed by a peculiarly persistent set of doubles […] : those of 1960s radicals in the United States, England, and France” (2). For the Living Theatre, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Charles Marowitz, the Wooster Group, Richard Schechner, and others, Artaud represents a set of methods and an attitude that transcends history. For Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault, Artaud is “poetry, person, and confinement,” the martyr for a “theoretical discourse on the poetics of madness and resistance perhaps unparalleled by that on any other single modern figure” (16–17). If the Artaud we thought we knew is not the real Artaud, then shouldn’t we take another look at all of those who used Artaud in the name of a progressive critique that Artaud himself despised?

Jannarone does not pursue this question, perhaps recognizing that she is already in enough hot water as it is. Frankly, the question is more complicated than it might at first appear, particularly regarding theatre artists. The Living Theatre, for example, used “cruelty” sometimes in a representational fashion to highlight the cruelty of US society (i.e., The Connection [1959] and The Brig [1963]); other times, “cruelty” was imbricated with complex alienation devices that complicate any simple designation as “Artaudian” (i.e., Frankenstein [1968] and Paradise Now [1968]). As concerns the theorists, I think the evidence will add to an already tangled set of questions. Poststructuralism has struck many as being far from progressive. Jürgen Habermas considered Foucault a neoconservative, and others have raised concerns about poststructuralism’s troubling intellectual and historical proximity to fascism, citing Paul de Man’s wartime journalism and Derrida’s unnerving critique of Heidegger’s Nazism. This is volatile material, for sure. I hope Jannarone’s book will be read seriously and its implications traced with care and thoughtfulness.

Based on the evidence of these two books, these are exciting times to study the avantgarde. The texts are rigorously written, equipped with comprehensive scholarly apparatuses, and accessibly phrased. They are a bellwether of a paradigm shift that promises to better understand the complex, shifting, and situational relationship among art, activism, and scholarship. In sum, they are among the most significant books written about the avantgarde in the last three decades.

Mike Sell is Professor of English and faculty member in the Graduate Program in Literature and Criticism at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War (Seagull Books, 2011) and Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism (University of Michigan Press, 2005), and editor of Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Ed Bullins: Twelve Plays and Selected Writings (University of Michigan Press, 2006). msell@iup.edu

NAME Readymade. Edited by Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Moderna galerija, 2008; 205 pp.; illustrations. €25.00 paper.

In 2007, Slovenian artists Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi, and Žiga Kariž had their names officially changed to that of Slovenia’s then prime minister, Janez Janša. That act, they maintain, had personal motives and no links with art; however, it marked the beginning of a long-term
project that has occupied the three artists’ public activities and private lives alike. In the 2010 election, Janša was voted out and while Kariž reverted to his original name, Hrvatin and Grassi chose to continue living and working under the name of Janez Janša.

In 2008, Zdenka Badovinac curated the NAME Readymade exhibition at the Forum Stadtspark gallery in Graz, Austria, which featured the artists’ valid personal identification papers with their new name(s). The exhibition was accompanied by an eponymous publication, richly illustrated with photographs, scans of the identification cards, and press clippings. It included texts written by Blaž Lukan, Amelia Jones, Zdenka Badovinac, Miško Šuvaković, Catherine M. Sousloff, Tadej Kovačič, Aldo Milohnić, Antonio Caronia, Lev Kreft, and Jela Krecič.

The book’s topics included Janez Janša as an artistic project, the exhibition, the works by the three artists, the act of renaming, and the general problematics of the name. It thereby remains somewhat unclear what the central problematic is, which leaves ample space for different readings.

One of the book’s main foci is the name itself; therefore it includes analyses of the artists’ name(s) from anthropologic, linguistic, philosophical, artistic-historical, feminist, and legal perspectives. Several authors specifically address this act of renaming through the relations between the public and the private. At this point we should be reminded of the difference between “doing” and “showing doing”—Richard Schechner’s ground for the concept of performance—which distinguishes performance from everyday behavior. However, Janez Janša revisits this issue and problematizes the borders between reality and fiction, positing the act of performing as a sort of a permanent reality show (152). Still, many authors agree that the artists’ self-renaming is an artistic project/performance. Lukan argues that this concerns a bid on the part of three public figures (the artists) to take Janša’s name into the public sphere. Besides, their choice of Janša’s name—if we bear in mind their previous art practices, oriented towards experimental work advocating leftist political positions—contains a critical dimension with regards to Slovenia’s right-wing government. Krečič additionally explains how this act becomes a performance, pronouncing it a media phenomenon. For her, the media are the public sphere in which performance emerges, because they become its accomplices the moment they start reporting about the work of these artists, who must be referred to by their new name(s).

Another important topic is “overidentification,” recognized as the basis of the project. Jones introduces Žižek’s interpretation of overidentification as practiced by the Slovenian music group Laibach, which uncovers otherwise invisible social problems (47). Lukan points out that in the discrepancy between these artists’ earlier practices and this work of taking on a new name, overidentification diminishes our fascination with the prime minister. Furthermore, he stresses that the three artists assumed the same name, whereby they produced a “series.” That raises the wider issue of identity and multiplication, and in their attempts to think through this work in concrete social contexts, many of the authors take us back to Prime Minister Janša’s statement—which the artists themselves refer to as well: “The more we are, the faster we will reach the goal!” Milohnić addresses the linguistic structure of this statement and the generation of the “we” from the hierarchic relation of the “I + the other(s).” It follows that the artists’ self-renaming series is a literal, absurd, and thus subversive response to the prime minister’s interpellation (127).

The question of this project’s efficacy is the most complex topic of all, because the project implies social engagement but does not realize it through criticism or direct subversion.

In the art world, Janez Janša reverses the 20th-century avantgardist tradition whereby life is introduced into art (readymade). According to Kreft, Janez Janša exceeds Duchamp’s Fountain, because it turns the artists’ names, their personal identification papers, and artistic activities at
once into an artwork and a real thing; they become artworks yet remain part of the material lives of the artists.

The problem becomes more serious when we move to the social context. The authors stress the project’s “subversive affirmation” as its basic tactic. Krečič points out that as a media phenomenon, Janez Janša causes confusion and comic situations, whereas Lukan and Jones specify that this succeeds in reducing the name of power down to an empty signifier—as in these media headlines: “Janša Dances in Berlin,” or “Is Janez Janša an Idiot?” Badovinac explains that its target is Slovenian xenophobia. She emphasizes that out of the three artists, only one is an ethnic Slovene born in Slovenia, and that nonethnic Slovenes are few and far between in Slovenia’s public scene. An additional argument is that the prime minister, too, changed his name from the ordinary (and Russian) Ivan to the typically Slovene Janez, which he uses in public. Finally, the responses to the question of what this act does—or does show—bring us to the next challenge: how and what exactly does that showing do? Should one expect more of art than (the efficacy) of showing? The book offers no precise answers; rather, it leaves the reader to reflect on these questions.

It was precisely around the project’s social efficacy that a heated debate arose in Slovenia. The book mentions objections that Janez Janša is a politically conformist project and a failed provocation—that is, that it does nothing. In my opinion, it is unfortunate that the book does not offer more space to such objections, because the project is multilayered and open enough to be able to withstand critical commentary without being refuted. As it stands, the book should be understood not as a polemical-analytical platform on the project, but as an integral part of it, a discursive frame for the primary artistic act. On the other hand, it becomes an exciting read on contemporary art, accessible and interesting even beyond the Janez Janša project.

—Ana Vujanović

Ana Vujanović is a freelance worker in contemporary performing arts and culture, and holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from University of Arts in Belgrade. She is a member of the editorial collective of TkH (Walking Theory) Belgrade, and editor of TkH journal for performing arts theory. She is the author of Destroying Performance Signifiers (SKC, 2004), Doxicid (IKZS, 2006), and, with Aleksandra Jovičević, An Introduction to Performance Studies (Fabrika knjiga, 2007). sarapana@yahoo.com


Heike Roms begins her essay in this volume, “The Practice Turn: Performance and the British Academy,” with the following sentence: “It is spring of 2007 and although this chapter has not yet been written, I already know it will be published too late” (51). Her self-reflexive statement refers to the fact that the article will not count towards her battery of work for the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise in 2008, which determines funding for British universities based on faculty “output.” Yet this lateness also references the delay between the volume’s conception in 2005 and 2006—in the midst of the debate about whether or not performance studies is imperialist (see McKenzie 2006; Reinelt 2007; Schechner et al. 2007)—and 2010, when the volume was published. Contesting Performance has been served rather than slighted by this delay because its critique of neoliberal institutional culture is more crucial and more legible now than it would have been a few years ago.
Originally conceived as a series of reports from the field about global sites of research in the face of performance studies gone global, the volume is broken into three parts: “Institutionalizing Performance Studies,” “Contesting the Academic Discipline through Performance,” and “The Power of Performance Practice.” The first set of essays includes Diana Taylor’s retrospection about the creation of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, Gay Macauley’s essay about the genesis of performance studies in Australia, Roms’s analysis of the emergence of practice as research within the British academy, Shannon Jackson’s brief history of “oral interpretation” in the US, and Uchino Tadachi and Takahashi Yuichiro’s survey of performance culture in Japan, which includes a section on the influential work of Sato Ayako. Ayako’s mode of performance studies is one that foments performative competence in a globalized economy, mimicking the market modalities that the anthology itself decries. Although diverse in subject matter, these essays share a genealogical approach to their sites of research, which are often their academic or geographical home bases. Many of the authors also offer trenchant critiques of “bottom line” thinking within their home institutions.

The essays in the second section of the book tease out many of the tensions between local and global frames of contesting performance while promoting the contributions of nonacademic institutions to the development of performance studies. Theorizing Australian performance as relational (and regionally imbricated) rather than as antipodal to US and European practices, Edward Scheer and Peter Eckersall’s essay rethinks Australian performance outside of traditional postcolonial paradigms; Bojana Kunst reveals the role of performance theory as a “material practice” in Slovenia’s art scene as it has been documented and developed in Maska, a 100 issue old publication (130); Ray Langenbach and Paul Rae survey how Singapore has been “performatively produced,” (137) while arguing against Singaporean exceptionalism; Sibylle Peters’s chapter on the setbacks faced by performance research (and performance as research) in the German academy points toward innovations in dance studies, practice, and participatory research; and Lada Čaletić Feldman and Marin Blažević’s essay reveals that interest in performance studies in Croatia came from scholars in folklore studies, underscoring the diversity of disciplinary investments in the academic field. Each of these essays takes on national as well as local interests, proposing ways for nonacademic and nontraditional institutions to open up some of their more rigid operational structures and disciplinary boundaries.

The last section of the book is composed of essays about particular performances rather than institutions. Khalid Amine’s essay on Al-Halqa traces the complex legacy of performance in Morocco, complicating notions of hybridity; Sal Murgiyanto looks at particular collaborations between Indonesian choreographers trained in classical and modern modes, authorizing collaboration as a contestatory mode; Sharon Aronson-Lehavi and Freddie Rokem’s essay on the role of theatre in articulating the performativity of the Hebrew language in Israeli theatre as a form of secular identity production includes a section on how bilingual Arabic-Hebrew productions in Israel acknowledge the multilingual and multicultural makeup of its society; Loren Kruger argues against theatrical exceptionalism—the assumption that theatre can best contest hegemonic power and global conditions of inequity—looking instead to the possibilities of mass media performance in South Africa. This section, which concentrates on performances in which artists challenge institutional structures, is the one that includes only non-Anglophone, non-European nations as subjects, bringing us back to the comments in the introduction’s commentary on the difference between the geography of knowledge production and the geography of cultural production (1). Although the diversity of researchers’ geographical origins is commendable, the absence of essays from this volume about institutionalization outside the Anglophone is a problem to be remedied in future scholarship by these scholars and others.
Books

That aside, Contesting Performance succeeds in investigating the “ways that performance researchers around the globe are grappling with problems of globalization, US hegemony, and the institutionalization of performance studies as a discipline” (11). Part of this work lies in recognizing that performance studies, however anticapitalist its adherents may be, “can become suitable and commodifiable fodder for capitalist development” (7) as the Japanese case suggests. Refreshingly, the essays in this volume, even when making the case for the power of performance, realize this, especially in regard to the possibilities of performance as research, which as Peters and Roms point out, is a new academic commodity in addition to offering a corrective to the outmoded theory/practice divide. If the tone of many of the essays is strident rather than self-reflexive, it is for good reason. Arts and humanities departments are in a state of fiscal emergency, fighting for survival in the midst of university downsizing in many parts of the world. Because they articulate the particular struggles of academicians and practitioners of performance studies, the essays in Contesting Performance will be an important contribution to the field.

— Patricia Ybarra

References


Patricia Ybarra is Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. She is the author of Performing Conquest (University of Michigan Press, 2009). She has published articles and reviews in Theatre Journal, Radical History Review, Aztlán, Latin American Theatre Review, and the Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. patricia_ybarra@brown.edu


Erin Mee’s book offers an illuminating account of the “theatre of roots,” an appellation coined by Suresh Awasthi, former General Secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and former Chair of the National School of Drama, two influential cultural/educational institutions of postindependence India. According to Awasthi, “The return to and discovery of tradition is inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This is part of the whole process of decolonization of lifestyle, social institutions, creative forms, and cultural modes” (1989:48). Awasthi’s performative and institutional interventions bring together diverse performance practices under a single rubric, that of the theatre of roots.

Theatre of Roots argues that the eponymous movement “decolonizes” the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual aesthetics, viewing practices, and dramaturgical models of realistic performance ushered into India in the wake of British imperial rule. Mee argues that colonial influence transformed three important dimensions of theatre in India: it reconfigured the performer-audience relationship, commercialized theatre, and reimagined the very
nature of theatre by valorizing literary text over performance. Mee somewhat emphatically declares the centrality of the theatre of roots in the practice of modern Indian theatre by claiming that no one who has worked in Indian theatre from the 1960s on has been left untouched by its influence.

Mee’s multi-sited enquiry combines close readings of plays, rehearsals, and live and video productions with analyses of the debates and discussions of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Mee’s decision to focus on a handful of key productions allows her to offer complex, in-depth analyses of the various layers—aesthetic, formal, generic, cultural, and social—that impact and shape these productions. In this way, Mee portrays some of the tension between the institutional and cultural discourses on the one hand, and the actual practice of the theatre of roots, on the other. As both a proficient director and scholar, Mee is able to consider this body of work from a variety of creative and critical perspectives, enriching her agile analyses.

Mee introduces her topic by setting up the discursive and historical framework of modern Indian theatre, which allows the reader to situate theatre of roots within a wider context of colonial history, institutional state practices, and modern aesthetics. The introduction and the first chapter skillfully demonstrate the genealogies of the theatre of roots by tracing institutional and creative cultural practices through deft readings of key texts on Indian theatre history. Through detailed case studies of three exemplars of the roots movement—KN Panikkar, Girish Karnad, and Ratan Thiyam—Mee demonstrates that the theatre of roots is unique because it combines “structural elements, actor training methods, performer-spectator relationships and stylistic devices from specific traditional Indian performance practices with Western theatrical conventions to create modern plays for urban audiences” (26).

Mee’s second chapter turns to the work of eminent theatre director KN Panikkar. Here, she discusses key concepts in Indian aesthetic theory—such as rasa, bhava, and abhinaya—through a probing analysis of Panikkar’s 1987 production of Bhasa’s Sanskrit play, Urubhangam. Her discussion also ably takes us through a variety of dramatic forms in Kerala, which include kuti-yattam, kathakali, kalarippayattu, and rbeyyam, among others. Mee sketches out a brief but perceptive discussion on the ways in which the idea of the “self” in India is tied to action rather than essence. She brings not only her research and intellectual questions to bear on her discussion of Panikkar’s productions, but also her alert directorial eye, which makes this chapter particularly rich. In her third chapter, Mee moves from a focus on rehearsal and production practices to the “modern play” most exemplary of the roots movement: Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana (1971). Through a close reading of the hybridity at work in the formal, thematic, philosophical, spectatorial, and pragmatic issues that the play raises, Mee argues that this hybridity reflects postcolonial urban anxieties about reconciling two conflictual models of cultural traditions.

In her chapter on Sangeet Natak Akademi, Mee examines the period between 1956 and 1989 to discuss the ways in which the institutionalization of the roots movement transformed it into a “style.” The top-down agendas of the Sangeet Natak Akademi attempted to formalize, institutionalize, and prescribe creative theatre activities. Next, Mee discusses the theatre of Ratan Thiyam, situating his work within the larger political economy of Manipur. She discusses Thiyam’s incorporation of indigenous Manipuri artistic practices into his theatre, looking specifically at his most celebrated productions, Chakrvyuba (1984) and Uttar Priyadarshi (1996). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of some of the more politically engaged theatre in the region, including work by the writers Premchand and Heisnam Kanhaiyalal, and by the Sana Leipak Nachom Artistes Group. Her final chapter roughly sketches out some of the “legacies” of the roots movement. Here she includes the work of a handful of women directors; briefly notes artistic criticism of the roots movement; considers the ways in which recent theatre takes up “global issues”; and concludes by touching upon the work of Maya Rao and Arjun Raina, both solo performers who experiment with kathakali to offer critiques of gender, colonialism, and globalization.
The term, “theatre of roots,” designates a wide array of experimental theatre practices under an umbrella category. This study could have unpacked in greater detail some of the political, social, and conceptual implications of this designation. How, for instance, does the nativism at work in the nomenclature offer what Kwame Anthony Appiah has termed a “reverse discourse” (1992:59), and play into — rather than against — a colonial topology? The conceptual elasticity of what constitutes the theatre of roots draws under its rubric a wide range of heterogeneous artists making this classification imprecise and unhelpful. In addition, what are the political implications of choosing classical rather than folk traditions as one’s roots? Can one challenge the sedentarism at work in “roots” discourses by considering the routes that motivate a Delhi-based Kashmiri performer, such as Arjun Raina, to experiment with kathakali, a dance-drama from Kerala? How does the turn to “indigenous” resources as the source of authenticity within the theatre of roots differ from the relational and socialist aspirations of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), indicated through their use of folk forms? Rather than treat the theatre of roots as a self-evident, foundational category, a sharper critique of “roots” discourses would have further enhanced this insightful and important study.

— Jisha Menon

References


Jisha Menon is Assistant Professor in the Department of Drama at Stanford University.

jmenon@stanford.edu


Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness.

By Nicole R. Fleetwood. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010; 296 pages; illustrations. $75.00 cloth, $25.00 paper, e-book available.

“Blackness troubles vision in Western discourse” (6). So begins, and ultimately concludes, Nicole Fleetwood’s compelling and ruggedly interdisciplinary new study, Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness. Drawing on the protocols of visual and performance studies as well as critical race theory, Fleetwood considers the ways in which blackness is enacted “as a problem, as perplexing, as troubling to the dominant visual field” (7). The emphasis here is on production rather than product, that is, how artists across media — from documentary photography to theatre, from performance art to hip-hop videos and print advertising — visualize the black body in ways that not only reveal the conditions of normative scopic regimes, but also the spectatorial labor of how we see, and therefore assign meaning to, blackness. Understanding the visual sphere itself as a “performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act” but a “doing” (7), Fleetwood develops a new critical vocabulary to conceptualize the relation between racial subjectivity and the “constructed nature of visuality” (20). The development of three analytical concepts in particular — namely, non-iconicity, excess flesh, and the visible seam — constitutes the project’s most original offering and promises to make Troubling Vision a vital, lasting contribution to the field.
Fleetwood defines non-iconicity as an interventionist strategy that destabilizes the icon’s signification of teleological, and thus occlusive, grand narratives of civic, social, and political progress. She writes, “Non-iconicity is an aesthetic and theoretical position that lessens the weight placed on the black visual to do so much. It is a movement away from the singularity and significance placed on instantiations of blackness to resolve that which cannot be resolved” (9). This position, therefore, complements and frequently challenges prevailing meanings that inhere within iconic signs, symbols, and images of “the black subject whose struggles for equality represent the possibilities of American democracy” (33). Fleetwood’s case study, here, is the photography of Charles “Tenie” Harris. His practice of non-iconicity complicates the iconic images of the civil rights movement, such as the well-known, yet staged, photograph of Rosa Parks sitting in front a white man on a bus. Fleetwood shows how his practice was one of photography as performance, that it was “not so much about the image photographed but the act of photographing subjects in his local environment” (49). Harris’s work — nearly 80,000 negatives of scenes he shot from the 1930s through the 1970s for the black newspaper, Pittsburgh Courier, and in his own studio practice—documents the quotidian heterogeneity of black life, telling a more grounded story of black struggle than that which the dominant visual archive of the civil rights movement signifies. Thus the negatives—a great number of which Harris left unlabeled, thereby doubly affirming their non-iconicity—unsettle “blackness as a singular totalizing narrative but [entertain] the notion of play, incompleteness, and resistance to the archive as [a] primary source for tapping into the historical evidence of black everyday experience” (60).

Like photographic non-iconicity, black feminist performances and performatives of “excess flesh” subvert racial and gender codes that configure normative visual production. Fleetwood writes that excess flesh is “an enactment of the gaze that does not necessarily attempt to heal or redress the naked, exploited, denigrated black female body tethered to the black imago but understands the function of this figuration in dominant visual culture. This productive look lays bare the symbols and meanings of this weighted figure” (111). She most fully theorizes this concept in her analysis of the portraiture of visual artists Renee Cox, Tracey Rose, and Ayanah Moor, as well as the music and videos of hip-hop artist Lil’ Kim. In their work, these cultural producers decidedly call attention to the visual configurations that have worked to negate and devalue black female subjectivity. In addition to its pedagogical function, excess flesh, “while not necessarily resistant, can be productive in conceiving of an identificatory possibility” for black women (122). The refusal to classify excess flesh and other enactments of black cultural production as always already oppositional endows Troubling Vision with an analytical generosity that allows Fleetwood to appreciate fully the complexity of her case studies. In this regard, the book serves as a model for those working on questions of (racial) performativity, as it re-calls attention to the essential neutrality of cultural performance.

If enactments of excess flesh “work through the spectacular, [then] the visible seam works through the subtility of a stitch that sutures but leaves visible the wound that it mends” (9). Employing Kaja Silverman’s psychoanalytic theorization of suture and the masculinist gaze in cinema, Fleetwood conceptualizes the visible seam as a “digital suture,” or the “employment of technical and aesthetic practices of disruption and assemblage” (181) that exposes how “technology narratives are based on notions of Western progress that produce black female bodies and non-Western subjects as folkloric and pretechnological” (30). She most thoroughly examines the form and function of the visible seam in her discussion of the work of media artist Fatimah Tuggar, whose pieces “challenge notions of opposition between [the West and Africa] and instead emphasize the mutually dependent relationship between these regions and respective tropes” (197–98). For instance, in her digital photomontage, The Lady and the Maid (2000), Tuggar interpolates an image of a black woman in West African garb into one of a 1950s American home within which a white woman is doing chores. As Fleetwood notes, it is impossible to tell who is the lady and who is the maid; to that end, the montage raises questions of (racialized) labor, gender normativity, and transnational relationality. Here, the visible seam “stitches black African female bodies into visual and technological narratives of US progress and
gendered emancipation” (204). Indeed, the works of artists like Tuggar enact counternarratives that not only challenge traditional accounts of Western development but also expose the visual codes and scopic regimes that underwrote those very accountings.

As troubling enactments, non-iconicity, excess flesh, and the visible seam constitute effective strategies with which to lay bare, and often disrupt, dominant racial logics of/in the visual sphere. Fleetwood’s remarkable study alerts us to how these strategies radically reorient “the psychic and affective domains of seeing and doing black” (15), thus revealing new terrain on which to construct political, social, and cultural theories of visual blackness. To be sure, Troubling Vision should quickly become standard reading for those looking for new insight—and new methods—in black visual and performance studies.

—Douglas A. Jones, Jr.

Douglas A. Jones, Jr., is Cotsen Fellow in the Princeton Society of Fellows. At Princeton, he also holds appointments in the English Department and the Center for African American Studies. His monograph, The Captive Stage: Black Exception, Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North, is forthcoming from University of Michigan Press. daj@princeton.edu

New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology


For decades it was common in the West to dismiss North Korea as a Soviet satellite. Then Bruce Cumings’s Origins of the Korean War (1981) introduced a more sympathetic view of the country that remains the reigning orthodoxy in cultural studies. Its influence is apparent throughout Illusive Utopia, Suk-Young Kim’s informative book on the performing arts in North Korea. In it we find the familiar tendency to play up the Confucian character of North Korea’s personality cult, the better to present it as being—for all its lamentable excesses—an inheritor of the peninsula’s indigenous traditions. Just as predictably, Kim reduces the influence of Japanese colonial fascism on post-1945 North Korea to a few isolated elements. This approach was easier to excuse in the 1980s, when Pyongyang, mindful of the need for Soviet aid, was still hiding its race theory behind so-called Juche Thought, a jumble of humanist truisms that has never exerted any influence on policy-making. But in plain sight since the mid-1990s has been a race-obsessed “military-first” regime, the current leader of which, though not yet 30, cuts just as maternal a figure as his father did. He too is apostrophized by the strikingly androgynous title of “Parent,” and celebrated primarily for his motherly solicitude. Suk-Young Kim may take the presence of a writing brush in the North Korean party logo as proof of the regime’s pro-intellectualism (170), but in fact it continues to glorify spontaneity and violence. A state less like a Confucian patriarchy, and more similar to the “national defense” state of fascist Japan, is difficult to imagine.

Kim also errs in calling North Korea a communist country (15, 20, 22–23). After fading steadily from propaganda since the 1970s, the word communism was finally removed in 2009 from the national constitution, and replaced there by an ideology of “military-first socialism,”
according to which society is led by the million-man army and not the proletariat. The new leader Kim Jong-un, for his part, has removed the portraits of Marx and Lenin that used to grace Pyongyang’s main square. Meanwhile, propaganda continues to vilify Americans as an inherently depraved people while vaunting the moral superiority of the “pure-blooded” Korean nation; to preserve racial purity, pregnant returnees from China are forced to undergo abortions. In short, the regime squats on the extreme right of the ideological spectrum. Recognizing this would have opened up fruitful lines of inquiry into colonial fascist culture and made Illusive Utopia even more useful.

I say “even more useful” because despite the fallacies from which the book proceeds, it is still an important contribution to English-language research on North Korea’s official culture. North Korean studies has been waiting for decades for a researcher like Suk-Young Kim, who has the complete bilinguality needed both to process an enormous amount of primary material and analyze it for Western readers in lucid English. Literally dozens of plays, films, and performances are discussed in Illusive Utopia, with copious, well-translated excerpts from songs and screenplays. This is the best-illustrated book on North Korea I have ever seen, with color plates and photographs of a uniformly high quality. Kim’s emphasis is on the theatrical and cinematic works that the North Koreans themselves consider especially canonical, such as Sea of Blood. Unfortunately for readers of TDR, who are perhaps most curious about North Korean live performance, the difficulty in gaining routine access to the country forces the author to concentrate more on film. The two are, however, remarkably similar in style. The staginess of Joseon Film Studio actors is such that students at my South Korean university cannot watch a North Korean movie without bursting into laughter every few minutes. This pronounced artificiality is one of the few aspects of the official culture that Kim does not mind tracing back to colonial Japanese influence (48–49).

Illusive Utopia also contains insightful discussion of North Korea’s revolutionary operas (many of which are available on video), and the way in which nature images — forests, mountains, flowers — are repeatedly deployed in them to represent Kim Il-sung as a veritable lord of the universe. Here, for example, is Kim’s translation of an excerpt from the opera True Daughter of the Party (1971), in which liberated South Korean villagers praise General Kim Il-sung in song:

The sunbeams of the benevolent General shine and shine.
Everyone sings of happiness and joy.
There is new life blooming in our southern land,
Which used to be immersed in darkness.
The People’s Army sent by the General
Brought happiness to every single family. (152)

Potential readers of Illusive Utopia should be aware that the above is representative of the intellectual quality of most of the works that Kim discusses. Almost all performing arts in North Korea serve the personality cult of the Kim Il-sung family line, and thus have a thematic uniformity that quickly becomes wearying even to read about. This is not Suk-Young Kim’s fault, and I am glad she refrains from the jokes about the Dear Leader that some scholars who write about North Korea use in an attempt to liven up things. But does she need to discuss so many works so extensively? A comprehensive analysis of one canonical play, one canonical film, and so on, would perhaps have been preferable, if only to avoid having to wade through bunches of thematically grouped excerpts from too many performances and films. The Flower Girl, North Korea’s most important play and film, is discussed sporadically throughout the book, although Kim would be the ideal person to tackle the story head-on. Illusive Utopia also suffers from the author’s reluctance to explain things straightforwardly, which is surely what is most needed in a pioneering English-language work. Instead she keeps interrupting herself to thrust another famous thinker between reader and subject. Surely we can all understand the regime’s constant recourse to anti-Americanism without reading a paragraph about how (according to Yuri
Lotman) “Every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space” (175). Ethno-nationalism is not nearly as complex as Kim seems intent on making it.

The result is an over-freighted read. It even includes extensive discussions of fashion and tourism in North Korea, under the principle that the entire country is in effect a stage. Suk-Young Kim’s ambition is laudable, but her book would have benefited from being either less detailed or narrower in scope. Unfortunately, reducing one’s research findings to the essentials is now generally frowned upon. To “essentialize” is to be thought incapable of making fine intellectual distinctions. We must instead unload all our knowledge in tomes that only fellow scholars will have the time and inclination to plow through. But as tensions rise between Washington and Pyongyang, and the average American’s curiosity about North Korea rises accordingly, I can’t help wishing there was more “essentializing” in the relevant scholarship. Illusive Utopia is certainly a well-researched, well-written book, but its main use will be as a reference work, a bibliographical launching pad for students who want to delve more deeply into one of its many subjects of discussion.

— B.R. Myers

References

B.R. Myers has written on North Korea’s official culture for the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Atlantic, for which he is a Contributing Editor. He is the author of Han Sorya and North Korean Literature (Cornell East Asia Series, 1994) and The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters (Melville House Publishing, 2010). brmyers3000@gmail.com


More Books


In this book Elizabeth Rivlin explores the changing relationship between servants and masters across various English plays, novels, and didactic treatise on service from the late 16th to the early 17th centuries. Rivlin argues that service is a representational practice in which acting for one’s master is correlated to acting as one’s master. It is in the imitation of the master by the servant, and vice-versa, that the concept of aesthetic service emerges. The performative mimesis of service from the plays of William Shakespeare to the prose of Thomas Deloney is considered within a broader historical context during which England transitioned from a neofeudal state to a burgeoning capitalist society. Rivlin traces all of the effects that this had on concepts of servitude and the service economy. The first chapter of the book focuses on the way servant characters’ use of role-play and imitation in Shakespeare’s The Comedy of Errors (1591–94) and The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1592–93) challenges traditional restrictions of status and agency. Chapter two traces the emerging self-awareness of prose fiction through the authorial voice of a page in Thomas Nashe’s The Unfortunate Traveller (1593–94). The next chapter bridges prose and drama by considering Thomas Dekker’s play The Shoemaker’s Holiday (1599) along with its
source material, Thomas Deloney’s novel *The Gentle Craft* (1597–98), and focuses on the way theater is conceived as a form of service. Chapter four is devoted to the work of Ben Jonson, including *The Alchemist* (1610–11), *Timber: or, Discoveries* (1649), and various poems, all of which articulate an evolving relationship between service and authorial subjectivity. The final chapter returns to Shakespeare by looking at *The Winter’s Tale* (1610–11) and *The Tempest* (1610–11), both of which, Rivlin argues, model their tragicomic aspects on the iterative and transformative power of service. The book is a rich addition to English literature, theatre, and cultural history of the period, and provides a historical perspective on the changing role of status, labor, and identity in the face of capitalist expansion in the early 17th century.


Graham Ley and Sarah Dadswell’s edited volume provides the first comprehensive documented history of South Asian theatrical activity in Britain from the 1970s onward. The book focuses on well-known companies based in Britain as well as smaller short-lived groups that incorporated diasporic communities from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, among others. The book is organized chronologically in 14 sections. The first section of the book provides a broad historical introduction to the theatrical work of British groups working in South Asian languages. Sections two to six highlight the emergence and prominence of the Tāra Arts collective (1977–1985), along with other London-based groups in the 1980s, such as the Hounslow Arts Cooperative, Actors Unlimited, the British Asian Theatre Company, and the Asian Cooperative Theatre. The subsequent sections explore the emergence of two women-led groups at the beginning of the 1990s, Tamasha (1989–1997) and the Kali Theatre Company. These are accompanied by other contemporary initiatives such as Man Mela (1989–2001) and the Watermans Arts Center. The sections also discuss the community-based groups Peshkar and the Asian Theatre School; the latter emphasizes professional development and increased participation within the theatrical sector. The final chapters are devoted to recent companies such as the Reduced Indian Film Company (RIFCO) and Rasa Theatre. Each section draws from primary documents, interviews, and plays to provide a comprehensive and multilayered documentary history. The book is accompanied by a DVD with illustrative images as well as audio and audio-visual recordings of many of these collectives’ works. The book will be of particular importance to those interested in South Asian theatre from a global perspective, as well as scholars engaged in contemporary British drama and theatre history.

**Mirrors and Scrims: The Life and Afterlife of Ballet.** By Marcia B. Siegel. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010; 416 pp.; illustrations. $85.00 cloth, $27.95 paper, e-book available.

Dance scholar Marcia B. Siegel’s latest book covers over two and a half decades of ballet criticism. It gathers more than 100 of Siegel’s reviews and short essays on the work and legacy of George Balanchine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Peter Martins, and William Forsythe, among many others. Spanning her work as a dance critic for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Boston Phoenix*, the reviews have been organized thematically into seven sections: “Legends,” “Movable Classics,” “Postlude and Prelude,” “Balanchine Diaspora,” “Ballet in Transit,” “On With the Show,” and “Riffs and Translations.” One of Siegel’s main concerns in collecting and arranging these critical works is the paradox of the past in ballet as a claim to authenticity that repeatedly escapes fixed meaning. In this way the book presents not only a broad survey of critical work on ballet
over a number of years but also a reflection on the relationship between dance criticism and history. Discussing work spanning from Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes to Savion Glover to the Mark Morris Dance Group, *Mirrors and Scrims* provides a rich critical history of ballet by a well-known scholar who has kept her finger on the pulse of classical dance over several decades.

**Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance.** Edited by Judith Brin Ingber. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2011; 504 pp.; illustrations. $34.95 cloth.

This generously illustrated volume collects 19 essays exploring the evolution of Jewish dance across two thousand years of diasporic history. The 18 contributors to the volume include dance scholars as well as choreographers reflecting on their own creative work. The essays are divided into seven chapters, the first of which focuses on five Jewish dance artists of the 20th century: Sara Levi-Tanai, Felix Fibich, Leonid Jacobson, Yardena Cohen, and Sophie Maslow. The next two chapters focus on the evolution of Jewish folk dance in Israel among Kurdish and Ethiopian communities, and also discusses dance within the context of wedding ceremonies. Chapter four explores Jewish dance in various sites and epochs, from Renaissance Italy to Nazi Germany, while chapter five is devoted to ultra-Orthodox dance. The last two chapters focus on the globalization of Israeli folk dance as well as on the role of Jewish culture in contemporary American and Israeli dance theater. The book contains many images and original documents published for the first time. *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* will be of great interest to scholars of Jewish dance and cultural history as well as the history of performance in Israel.

—Sebastián Calderón Bentin sscb@stanford.edu