

Performance Matters

Introduction

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(Re)sounding Bodies East and West: Embodied Engagements with Japanese Traditions

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Introduction

Gretchen Jude and Lynette Hunter

Based on approaches developed by the research group (Re)sounding Bodies East and West at the University of California, Davis, this journal issue brings together a variety of contributions to transcultural and intermodal ways of knowing by scholar-practitioners, primarily located in the United States, who actively engage with Japanese performance. The book explores performance practice beyond the common categories of period, genre, tradition, or lineage. In the research group, we found productive cross-pollinations for examining a broad swath of Japanese aesthetic culture—from theatre, music, and dance (both traditional and modern) to film, electronic music, and anime—through approaches that open up the body as a site of profound importance for enacting transcultural understanding. These approaches engage critical perspectives informed by embodiment, affect, and performance theories and through ethnographic, anthropological, and historical methodologies.

In collecting the work of practitioners as well as scholars, this issue addresses the need in performance studies to include more diverse voices. The collection illustrates how transcultural creative practices lead to changes that are particular to each performer's practice and therefore to the audience's practices experiencing the work performed. At the same time, the articles point to the complexities generated by a somatic focus on transcultural exchange, complexities that often lie outside existing critical vocabularies. Whether grappling with how to engage with traditional work in new contexts or with how contemporary work reverberates with, rubs against, and expands traditional aesthetic categories, the critics and artmakers in this collection trace the profound shifts in “Western” performance practices, which occur when engagement with works from “the East” breaks down previous distinctions and generates new priorities and frameworks for understanding.

Studies in culture and society have now firmly demonstrated that knowledge is not fixed but rather context specific; understanding emerges as a person experiences historically contingent phenomena. More recent studies in artmaking—including both physical artifacts and ephemeral, time-based performance work, with the latter as the focus of this issue—demonstrate that ways of knowing also emerge from peoples' experiences of creative, collaborative, and relational activities. With the arts becoming more accessible over the course of the twentieth century, creative endeavours have become valued for providing strategies that offer different approaches to ways of living. Accordingly, the emerging field of practice as research (PAR) reflects and responds to the need for new vocabularies with which to describe the particular processes of artmaking and their modes for engaging diverse audiences. In our increasingly globalized, hypermediated world, artmakers face transcultural issues head-on. Alongside many artistic strategies for transcultural contact, PAR¹ has consistently generated vocabularies for communication that focus on embodied affect.² The writers

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in this collection exemplify some of this range of discursive style, from formal academic register to exploratory and experimental writing, such as autoethnography (Hernández), interviews (Halebsky; Bolles et al.), pedagogical reflection (drum), and performance scores (Fraleigh; Maeshiba). The range of this writing attempts to involve the body in processes that remain unique to practice as research and somatic studies of performativity.

In many ways, the writers here have been inspired by the concept of transcorporeal vibrational practice, a term coined by transcultural singer and musicologist Nina Eidsheim (2015), which foregrounds the understanding of bodies in particular contexts, rather than a singular, abstracted “universal body” (3). Transcorporeal vibrational practice, as such, highlights interactive and shared activities as processes that continue to develop in flux, always open to change. Accordingly, this issue aims to treat performances in ways that recognize and encourage the uniqueness of each instantiation and the particularity of each person’s experience of it, while also “tak[ing] into account its nonfixity and recogniz[ing] that it always comes into being through unfolding and dynamic material sets of relations” (Eidsheim 2015, 10). The performative processes of embodiment, while historically contingent, also vibrate alongside cultures in unexpected ways, resonating across a myriad of differences. The somatically sensitive approaches provided by PAR foreground how people’s bodies can move and sound together. Furthermore, through the vocabularies developed in this issue, transcultural communication can be accessed in new and different ways. A felt sense of resonance is not about unidirectional stimulus and reaction but about moving together in ways that sometimes seem to defy linear logic altogether.

Engaging with embodied transcultural experience in artmaking and in audiencing, you find yourself forever changed by the journey, in whatever medium it occurred. Since you find yourself a different person returning from the journey, the experience opens you to different ways of knowing the world. The articles in this issue examine what happens in transit. How can artistic engagement with a “foreign” practice be something other than an imitation—or an appropriation? The articles here apply Eidsheim’s concept beyond the practice of music and propose that we explore what a transcultural transcorporeal vibrational practice might be across a range of performance modalities. Even at the level of vibration, the embodied communication of what people do with voice, motion, gesture, and relational interaction is not only generated by culture but also generates the particular feelings of situated affect from which culture emerges. This issue tells the stories of embodied resonance at a finer resolution of somatic detail than conventional ethnography or cultural criticism by focusing on particular instances of artistic engagement with a form, artist, or performance piece.

Transcultural performance requires a deep level of responsibility and reciprocity, dedicated engagement over time, and a personal investment that is open to recognizing misunderstanding, to being changed, and to finding oneself “other.” The artists and scholars collected together here all attend to performative particularities with respect, connecting conceptual and intellectual understanding with embodied and experiential reflection. The articles push beyond the boundaries of academic discipline and codified performance genres in ways that reflect on Japanese notions of body-mind such as *kokoro* and music-dance-theatre, as a literal reading of the word *kabuki* suggests. At the same time, they also engage with the intermedia impulse of transnational postwar experimental groups, which brought together artists and musicians from Europe and the Americas with Japan and Korea—if not for the first time, then in uniquely transformative ways.

For all its broad range, this journal issue circles around and back to particular themes: physicality in the training of non-Japanese students of *noh*, *kyōgen*, and *butōh* (Halebsky; Hernández; Fraleigh); the

influence of postwar playwrights Terayama Shūji and Ōta Shōgo (Maeshiba; Ridgely; Lichtenfels); performative writing (Maeshiba; Fraleigh; Bolles et al.); the role of experimentalism (Bolles et al.; Jude; Ridgely); and the voice beyond signification (Hernández; Jude). It is also concerned with what might broadly be called STEM topics, including biology, ecology, topology, and media technology (Jude; drum; Ridgely) as well as collaboration and transmission (Halebsky; drum; Bolles et al.; Lichtenfels). Perhaps inevitably, Japanese aesthetic terms such as *kata* (form), *ma* (interval), and *jo-ha-kyū* (introduction, break, conclusion) recirculate through the writers' thinking. At the same time, newer terms from Japanese—the long-popular *anime* (animation) and the less-familiar *onkyō* (sound)—emerge just as English terminology is expanded in creative ways.

The issue begins with articles by Judith Halebsky and Sondra Fraleigh explicating how traditional and modern Japanese bodily practices of *noh* and *butoh* enter into contact zones of non-Japanese cultures. In her article, “Yuriko Doi’s Teaching and Transmission of *Noh* and *Kyōgen* in San Francisco,” Halebsky traces the history of Doi’s foundational work with her San Francisco-based troupe Theatre of Yugen. Halebsky examines both cross-Pacific transmission (how to make ancient Japanese forms emotionally accessible and aesthetically intelligible to contemporary American audiences) and artistic transmission (how to train actors to move through radically different physicality), while giving an overview of the ancient roots of *noh* and *kyōgen*. Halebsky explores Doi’s concept of “extra-creation,” which draws from the traditional training and welds it to the training of Western practitioners so that it acquires the personal insight of “being real.” Rather than a fusion to an idea of exact tradition, Doi suggests “pollination.” Instead of borrowing Japanese techniques, a transcultural performer will experience a collision of somatic trainings that leads to a “digestion” of those techniques and releases an energy of dynamic performance. Halebsky’s essay, based on personal interviews, also provides an invaluable document of a Japanese *noh* practitioner’s lifetime of work in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Fraleigh’s writing, similarly rooted in years of collaboration and study with her materials, provides both scholarly analysis and performance scores for experiential knowledge. In “Performing Everyday Things: Ecosomatic Threads of *Butoh*, Phenomenology, and Zen,” she presents a fruitful dialogue between Japanese Zen (primarily Dōgen) and German phenomenology (primarily Husserl), as she aims toward deeper understanding of the time she spent moving with the influential *butoh* artist Ohno Kazuo and his son, Yoshito. She suggests that the body in *butoh* converges with its environment through an inner somatic resonance. Transformation becomes not only the enacted moment but also the transition in between the somatic self and that moment that “actively constitutes a world.” Fraleigh includes exercises for readers to try out their own first-hand phenomenological understanding of *butoh* in the form of poetic instructional scores. This grounding in the experiential body sets the tone for the writers of the subsequent three articles, who reflect upon their own creative work, engaging with ways that cultural and geographical location change the materiality of their instruments.

The next three articles explore zones of contact that include performance in both traditional and modern forms of dance, theatre, and music. These authors, Naoko Maeshiba, Álvaro Iván Hernández, and core members of Thingamajigs Performance Group (TPG), focus on the workings of embodied practices. They use personal, somatic responses to their transcultural experiences in PAR—not in any abstract sense, but in the most concrete and particular forms. Of necessity, these scholar-practitioners write beyond the expository essay form, hailing the poetic functions of language to invent not only new vocabularies—such as Maeshiba’s “thinking with the body,” and

Hernández’s “in-provisation” and “no-character”—but also new grammars such as those exemplified in the dialectical explorations by Northern California-based TPG.

In “Anatomy of Conflict,” Maeshiba considers the conflicts, confusions, and resolutions of her Japanese/Western body. A highly experienced performer and teacher of movement, she opens out the connections between her personal somatic growth and her approaches to performance. She includes physical training exercises for actors, detailing with deep somatic fluency the effects of her own transcultural experiences growing up in Japan and working as an artist in the United States. The article reflects on the different senses both of an individualistic and more fluid selfhood that have emerged in her professional work, and how that expansion of “thinking with the body” has helped her move forward. Reflections on her work with playwright Ōta Shōgo show her keen sensitivity to how culture infuses the body and how emplacement is an ongoing interaction that entails exchange and generation and flow of energies that are difficult to articulate, particularly in a second language.

Colombian theatre artmaker Álvaro Iván Hernández, in “On the Path of No-Character: Zeami’s Traces Walked Back and Forward,” connects his experiences studying noh in Japan with embodied practices of walking and chanting. In this way, he weaves together stories of the Indigenous people of southern Colombia with modern Peruvian poetry into a solo piece developed in Bogotá and performed worldwide. Hernández echoes Fraleigh’s description of the butoh body converging with the environment, recounting the way that a performer, instead of pursuing a unified character, learns to become multiple, dissolved, and dilated. He proposes the term *in-provisation* to articulate the coming together and apart in performance, not of Western concepts of “character,” but indeed, of “no-character.” Key to Hernández’s retelling is the insight that before he went to Japan and was trained in noh, his dramaturgy was already seeking no-character, and that noh offered a way of articulating this performativity. Dealing with the monstrous legacies of (post)colonialism, Hernández’s grounding in the aesthetic writings of Zeami breaks a pathway for moving past pain and uncertainty through creative persistence.

Dylan Bolles, Keith Evans, Suki O’Kane, and Edward Schocker, who are all members of the experimental Thingamajigs Performance Group (TPG), perform/reconstruct a far-ranging “discussion” of their collective musical composition entitled]MA[. Placing linguistic play in the foreground, they define the concept through their performance/composition, “]MA[—The Space between the Interval.” The freewheeling quality of this conversation is founded on the conversants’ deep expertise in and dedication to Japanese and Korean traditional musics and experimentalism. In this article, *gagaku* meets Frank Zappa, John Cage meets *Speed Racer*, and *hichiriki*³ meets microphone in a squeal of feedback amid an ocean of silence. At the centre of this verbal whirlwind is the quiet breath of *ma*, the Japanese aesthetic (re)claimed and reinterpreted by postwar composers on both sides of the Pacific, with attention to what TPG discuss as the embodied resonance of “tuning” and “para-tuning.” The article itself becomes a kind of meditative score for a performance enacted by the reader in the space of their own mind.

The second half of the collection returns to a more scholarly tone, with articles by Gretchen Jude and duskin drum both exploring the relationality of transcultural flows through digital media and examining methodologies of what the intercultural can offer—not only embodied responses on a sensory or affective level for the individual experiencing transcultural art-making but also into the weeds of what happens when people exchange cultural practices. Jude’s notion of “plasmatic voice” continues TPG’s engagement with transcultural experimental music to face some of the issues that occur when different cultures exchange embodied practices. Jude’s article, “Ami Yoshida, Onkyō,

and the Persistently ‘Japanese’ Body: Making (Electro)voice Sound,” takes a 180-degree turn in its approach to Japanese experimentalism and its critical resonances outside the archipelago. Jude focuses on an underexamined member of the twenty-first-century Japanese *onkyō* group that eschewed what they viewed as stereotypically “Japanese” aesthetics, in order to get at the problem of an identity and a body that struggles to shed the marks of gender, nationality, and race. Jude understands Yoshida as using technological re-embodiment to dis/re-assemble identity as performed rather than fixed—a transcultural strategy simultaneously both Western and Japanese. Triangulation of the voice as it vibrates and flows through audio networks—along with a Japanese female vocalist’s location and relation to the complex of recording media, viewers’ bodies, and cultural discourse structures—indicates a way to begin to understand how profoundly communications technology affects voice.

In “Surprising Pedagogy through Japanese Anime,” duskin drum picks up the topics of media, technology, and gender and examines them in the radically different context of his experiences using anime to teach environmental studies to university students in Russia and California. Facing head-on the question of what happens to Japanese cultural practices/artifacts once they leave Japan, drum embraces the possibilities of unavoidable misinterpretation and misunderstanding as productive of a “mess” from which students can learn. drum also engages with post-human ecological implications of multiple popular anime films and series. Since there are always places/concepts/feelings/affective domains that are not and cannot be known by another culture, drum recounts his development of respectful yet brave strategies that recognize the impact of working with multiple Others beyond the goal of “resolving issues.” Instead, he finds potential for performative possibilities mixed into the problems—and recalls Halebsky’s opening call for Doi’s pollination rather than fusion.

With the work of Steven Ridgely and Peter Lichtenfels, the issue comes full circle, once again examining intercultural performing arts practices, but with a reversal of positionality. Here the Western scholar and director observe what Japanese theatre practitioners (namely Terayama in Europe and Ōta in the Americas) do when they import non-Japanese forms into Japanese repertoire—and what then flows back to “the West.” Like Jude and drum, Ridgely attempts to understand humanistic performances with STEM fields, specifically engaging with Terayama Shūji’s 1970s avant-garde theatre and film through the study of topology. In “Everting the Theatrical Sphere Like Terayama,” Ridgely posits the mathematical transformation called “eversion” as frame for Terayama’s multiple radical reversals, moving toward residual effects, a process that holds the potential for radically other performance to alter the experience of time and space. For Ridgely, Terayama’s performances of bodily intervention everted the form of theatre, and Terayama’s elicitation of frustration and other affective states generated a “transformation of theatricalized space.” Ridgely continues exploring themes of STEM fields in performance, examining how Terayama Shūji’s interest in mathematical models of eversion, or turning the inside out, influenced his work in avant-garde theatre and film, particularly as presented in 1970s Amsterdam. Hailing Massumi’s notion of affective intensity, Ridgely observes that Terayama’s positioning of the audience went beyond the mere notion of “revolution” into something more complex and evocative, in which the highly scripted expectation of normative everyday life comes into question. Bodily and spatial interventions bring together viewers and performers, with the purpose of transforming social life through the affects, the everting, of the particular feelings generated by the experience of the artwork.

Peter Lichtenfels similarly focuses on the body as the site of energetic and affective potential, as he discusses the challenges of staging the works of Ōta Shōgo outside Japan, with non-Japanese actors

and audiences using both verbal scripts and video records as playtexts. “Directing Ōta Shōgo’s *Elements: From Form to Body*” traces multiple transcultural and cross-genre resonances—Daoism, noh, Zen—all with embodiment at the centre. Lichtenfels’s practice-based study exhibits how attention to the actor’s body can honour the spirit of a culturally different text while also honouring the performers’ present reality—with both grounded in the goal of energizing the relationship between performers and audience as they realize a shared, valued performativity. Lichtenfels’s reflections on directing productions of Ōta’s plays illustrate deeply collaborative, complexly transcultural processes that attend to the dissonant and its emergence into the fundamentally embodied nature of performance. Tracing the repetition of physical forms, vocal resonance, and bodily rhythms necessary to achieve energetic forms for Ōta’s work, Lichtenfels unlocks the malleability of time as both a personal and a collective experience. In common with other contributors to this collection, his article describes working within a Japanese context as diffusing the edges of the body, “as if the body was becoming part of a mixture with other people and things in the theatre.” He calls this a “virtuosity of sameness” and contrasts it with the virtuosity of difference so prevalent in Western theatre.

This final article exemplifies all the writers’ commitment to a deep respect and dedicated engagement upon which transcultural performance must be based, and which they hope to bring about. In all their diversity, the writers gathered together in this issue share first-hand knowledge of what is at stake in working as artmakers with audiences across what might feel like unbridgeable gaps in culture, language, and tradition. At the core of the endeavour is the shared human experience of being in a body, of our species’ common sensorial and affective possibilities. Even with vastly different and sometimes even incompatible interpretative tools, performance can bring us together, resounding across oceans and bodies, performing into existence a resonance, even as a sensed and felt dissonance. Each work in this issue offers a different way of approaching the potential of transcorporeal vibrational practice: complex resonances which can shake us apart unless we learn how to (re)sound together.

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Notes

1. Practice as research (PAR) was developed in several places (Riley and Hunter 2009; Nelson 2013) and has expanded over the past thirty years into many forms including practice-based research (Hansen and Barton 2009), action research (Yasuda 2009) and performance as research (Arlander, Dreyer-Lude, and Spatz 2019).
2. See the foundational article on the need for different styles of essay writing in performance studies by Della Pollock (1998) and chapter 3 on “documentation” in Lynette Hunter (2019).
3. An ancient double-reed wind instrument.

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