

Halferty, J. Paul; Leeney, Cathy., editors. *Analysing Gender in Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

THE MANY ANGLES OF GENDER AND PERFORMANCE

Jéssica Soares Lopes¹*

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brasil

The relevance of the concept of gender performativity as popularized by Judith Butler and of the theoretical construct of intersectionality devised by Kymberlé Crenshaw in contemporary gender and performance studies is reinstated in the 2022 textbook *Analysing Gender in Performance*. Comprising case studies and interviews that open up multiple grounds through which to analyze representations of gender in performance and performances of gender, the book as a whole allows diverse perspectives on both performance and gender, which are approached as “mobile, morphing, and iterative phenomena” (5). The collection of essays and interviews on theatre and other media examines how “scholarly understandings of gender and performance” (1) have been reformulated and expressed over a period of fifty years, offering complex and multifaceted case studies and accounts from practitioners. Organized in three parts, the essays in parts I and III and artist interviews in part II cover the periods from the 1970s to the 2020s from the contemporary perspective of scholars, performers and theatre practitioners from the Global North. The book as a whole takes an “intersectional approach to gender, and its interdisciplinary understandings of performance” (1) are reflected in its organization.

Although limited in relation to the geographical and cultural locations, and therefore to the analytical reach of its contributors, each chapter offers a glance towards gender meanings specific to the Global North of the past fifty years from contemporary perspectives. The selected analyses point to possibilities of investigation of how critical theories engage with gender and interact with and within performance studies, offering an overview of explorations and evaluations of gender in performance/performances of gender, as well as analytical frames of reference for teachers, students, performers and audiences. Consisting of mainly

*Jéssica Soares Lopes is a PhD candidate in the English program at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, where they research Irish Drama. Their interests include Language Studies and Foreign Literatures, with focus on representations of bodies, gender, and sexualities. Member of Núcleo de Estudos Irlandeses (NEI/UFSC). Email: soareslopesjessica@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6759-3493>



new commissions, the contributions are also wide-ranging, a feature repeatedly promoted by the editors in the Introduction (1-5).

All of the essays in part I focus exclusively on theatrical performances. The essays indeed include a wide range of questions, opened by Finola Cronin's analysis of sexuality and gender in performance through bodily movement, repetition, dance and costume in "Pina Bausch's *Kontakthof*: Choreographies of Gender and Costume". In "Queer Becomings: The Ridiculous Theatrical Company's *Camille* and *Split Britches*/ *Bloodlips*' *Belle Reprieve*" Sean F. Edgecomb and Benjamin Gillespie weave a critique of realism and point to a foreshadowing of queer theory in the 1970s and 1990s. In "Théâtre du Soleil and Ariane Mnouchkine: Living and Performing Gender Politics" William McEvoy comments on the ongoing consideration of the company with materialist and feminist gender politics, especially in relation to egalitarian creative and labor conditions. Similarly, Jessica Silsby Brater analyses three productions in order to illustrate the collective ethos, queer and feminist concerns of American avant-garde company Mabou Mines in "Nora, Lucia, and Lear: Gender and Performance at Mabou Mines". Finally, "Freaks and Not Freaks: Theatre and the Making of Crip Identity" by Colette Conroy critiques the use of the trope of freak shows in disability theatre, while "*Fires in the Mirror*: Representations of Race, Gender and Class in Anna Deavere Smith's *Search for American Character*" by Valentina Rapetti offers an assessment of the ethics of representation of racialized bodies on stage and a critique of blind-casting and dramatic realism, focusing on the work of Anna Deavere Smith.

The chronological thread of case studies contained in part I is 'interrupted' by four interviews with artists and their own accounts of practices in part II, which are equally as diverse in both form and content as the case studies. In some instances the rationale behind interview questions and the transcription process are explicitly stated and linked to the intersections of race, class, gender, and nation in the performance context observed, such as in "Black Women Performers: 'I Don't Want to Do Anything Else'" by Naila Keleta-Mae. In "Embodied and En-sited Performance: Reflections on Gender in *Cooking Miss Julie*/*Miss Julie Cooks* and *March of Women*", what is made explicit by Kathleen Irwin and Anna Birch through collaborative reflection on the gendering of space is the general invisibility of the work of women. Finally, either in the form of a manifesto of bodily transformation and gender performance through self-portraiture in Nina Arsenault's "A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)" or trans visibility as opposed to visibility as explored in "Trans-body-text: Exploring Performance Disruptions, a Discussion with Lazlo Pearlman" by J. Paul Halferty, these artistic reflections gathered from diverse gender intersections on unique performative experiences bring to light the often invisible meaning making processes which allow for in-depth understandings of both gender and performance from the specific stance of each practitioner. The explicit exploration of performance disruptions from the perspective of trans visibility – not visibility, as expressed by Lazlo Pearlman – challenges mere "inclusion" of trans

bodies on stage and highlights the potential of disrupting cisgender parameters of visual consumption and experience of those bodies.

Differently from the exclusive focus on theatre in part I, the third portion of the book brings analyses focused on other media and performances such as music videos, live art, installation, as well as contemporary practices of casting and re-genderings. Some of the essays chronologically complement the investigation of practices in the 1970s to 1990s as described in part I with analyses from productions and media from the 2000 to the 2020s. Kim Solga's contribution titled "Gender and the Aesthetics of Occupation: Making Room for Women's Labor at the Theatre" assesses relations of space, labor and gender in modern theatre through the perspective of cultural geography in order to argue for the recognition and reorientation of gendered labor in theatrical space/place. Intersectionality is explicitly brought forth in "Loose Wrists: Camp and Intersectional Politics in the Works of Cazwell, Todrick Hall, and Big Freedia" by Thom Bryce McQuinn. The essay critically examines the subject positions of three gay artists' personas in terms of gender, race, class, and sexuality, as well as the political deployment of camp in their respective music videos.

The materialist concern of previous decades returns in discussions through new materialist and environmentalist thought around performance and gender. Such is the case of Lara Steven's examination of Ai Hasegawa's conceptual art installations touching on inter-species relations and technology through daring imagination on human/non-human connection through reproduction in "Performing Reproduction in an Age of Overproduction: Environmental Installations by Ai Hasegawa". Similarly, the more-than-human nature of gender is brought forth through a new materialist analysis of gender assemblages in live art drag form in Rachel Hann's "Gender-Assemblages: The Scenographics of Sin Wai Kin". Both performances focus on the body and its possibilities, largely through images: in the case of the former, the body artificially affords reproduction of non-humans, and in the case of the latter the artificiality of the gendered body is re-produced.

Recent concerns around gender and casting practices are tackled by R. Darren Gober when analyzing the titular play in the essay "*Love and Information* by Caryl Churchill, or Sexuality and Gender in Non-binary Times". In this analysis of productions of a play script in which gender is not predetermined, possibilities and realities of gender are explored. Similarly, Stephanie Tillotson examines the now familiar practices of regenderings of Shakespeare in "From Gimmick Casting to Standard Practice: Re-gendering Shakespeare in Performance", in which casting choices and the performance of gender, influenced by Butler's thinking, are analysed alongside audience reception of the production and re-production of gender in the 2012 all-female *Julius Caesar* directed by Phyllida Lloyd.

An exploration of the multiplicity of gender and sexuality expressions is laid out in Brian Singleton's "Riotous Assembly: Performing Gender and Social Justice in

thisispopbaby's *RIOT*". The essay focuses on the representation of masculinities as tropes of gender related to nationality, and argues that, through various artistic disciplines, the performances of *RIOT* "contested the politics of neoliberalism that contemporary Ireland had embraced, seeking instead to reinstate gender and sexuality markers of identities" (241) as a way to contest the state's/dominant public discourses around social justice issues in the context of the centenary commemoration of the Easter Rising in Ireland.

Finally, in "'Women's Business': Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* and the Reclamation of Black Australian History", Julie Shearer analyses how Leah Purcell's version of a short story by Henry Lawson utilizes contemporary performance aesthetics such as visceral violence and the representation of various bodily fluids in order to visually express Australian aboriginal trauma and the complexity of race relations in contemporary Australia through the perspective of a woman. The play mirrors similar contemporary issues with immigration to Australia, as exemplified by Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil's concern with migrants' stories in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, as discussed in chapter 4 of the book.

Taking into consideration the timespan of the selected case studies in part I, it is possible to observe specific preoccupations shaped, for example, by second-wave feminist "emphasis on egalitarian labor conditions" in the Paris of the seventies (57), the queer be/comings enacted before the term was incorporated in identity politics of the USA gay liberation movement from the seventies and eighties, as well as an overall presence of critique of realism and emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, and class in the productions analyzed. Strong points of connection between parts I and III are the continuous reassessment of gender, labor and its relation to space, especially in more recent years, and discussions on migration. In general, analyses on gender in part III are more focused on aesthetic and identity issues when compared to earlier concerns for material and ethical matters in theatre companies as discussed in relation to The Ridiculous Theatrical Company and Théâtre du Soleil in part I, for example. Analyses of space, gender, race and migration are also present in different essays, especially in postcolonial readings of such identity markers, as exemplified by both Julia Shearer's and Brian Singleton's contributions on the Australian and Irish contexts, respectively. As previously stated, analyses in part III include but are not limited to theatrical performance, which points to the diverse research possibilities in this field in contemporary times.

The book is organized in a manner that allows for multiple reading experiences and consulting paths. In a first table of contents, the essays are presented in chronological order regarding the year of performance(s) analyzed, whereas an alternative set of table of contents arrange the same chapters according to different investigative angles. On the one hand, because the book as a whole interrogates both gender in performance and techniques of performance analysis (which in turn can also reveal the workings of gender), its chronological organization allows for the observation

of possible historical trends and changes in the wide-ranging geographical contexts of the selected case studies. On the other hand, the alternative tables of contents can guide the reader in navigating chapters with a primary focus on either gender or specific approaches to performance analysis. Under the table 'Gender and Its Intersections' the chapters are organized according to their thematic intersections with gender: feminism, masculinities, disability, race and racialization, trans* and non-binary, class, nation, and queer. The chapters arranged under 'Performance Analysis and Research Methods' pertain to the following methodological or analytical categorizations: companies, performance event, archival research, scenography, bodies, and casting. The occasionally overlapping chapter titles organized under each table attest to their intersectional nature and interdisciplinary quality, while the tables offer the internal organization of the book, providing quick and accurate retrieval of information. *Analysing Gender in Performance* is therefore a practical tool for the perusal of a wide range of readers from different research fields according to their different needs. The reader is then given the opportunity to craft their own path and make particular connections between the essays, which point to different directions but intersect in potentially interesting ways.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Does not apply.

Submission date: 14/05/2025

Acceptance date: 14/08/2025

Section Editor: Magali Sperling Beck