

and dying have become . . . unbearably overinflated in contemporary discursive registers of necropolitics and afro-pessimism” (202).

*Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* knits together dense theories and philosophical ideas to chart invigorating terrain in queer theory and critical race studies. The challenge engendered by the many threads that Nyong’o weaves together is necessary for greater awareness of the limited capacity of normative modes of representation to represent authentic black queer life.

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## The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances and Their Afterlives

By Selby Wynn Schwartz. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019; pp. xiv + 285, 22 illustrations. \$80 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$34.95 e-book.

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Perhaps the most erroneous assumption about the practice of drag is that it rests on the skin, that it reflects only from the surface of the body and stands for nothing more than a mixing of signifiers. This belief derives from an understanding of drag as static, as a choice selected from within a binary, a view that elides nuance, cancels out contradictions, and asks for practitioners (and spectators) of drag to consider it stable—or worse yet, constantly legible.

Selby Wynn Schwartz confronts and repudiates this idea. In her book *The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances and Their Afterlives*, she considers the roots of drag within the performer and brings her reader to question systems of notation present in drag work. Schwartz understands drag dance as a redoubling of the dimensions of drag performance: through layers of movement, signification, and study, these works find new methods of exploring gender as constantly in flux. This is an art form that can, as Schwartz puts it, “take gender from the surface of the body (what the body looks like) and embed it in the kinetic and kinesthetic experience of dance (what the body can do)” (3). Dance—an art form that requires a great tension among the roles of the artist, spectator, and critic—is uniquely positioned to bring forth an expression of gender inaccessible in other media.

Schwartz’s introduction to *The Bodies of Others* creates a theoretical framework that she then employs in her four subsequent case studies, and to marvelous effect. The author begins with an argument that drag is neither frivolous nor just an outward effect, two accusations it has often faced in both academic and general cultural assessments. Regarding the former (a perceived frivolity), this attitude is perhaps an effect of anti-queer bias, antifemale bias, or a general bias against the study of forms of movement—theatrical performance to some extent but dance more specifically. This, she argues, is crucially tied to the second accusation, that drag proves only an

outward effect. The frivolity of drag implicates a “prejudice against femininity as artifice” (8, emphasis added). When perceived as artifice, drag can be imagined as costume, an artificial look and not part of the intrinsic nature of a thing. Drag dancing, Schwartz argues, finds a way to examine one’s personhood and gender using an instrument—the only instrument—that does not just point toward, but that in fact *is*, the subject of examination.

Schwartz writes that drag dancing “entails a reconfiguration of what is held at the center of a body: what makes a body real, unified, identifiable, indexable, itself” (16). This is an argument for taking seriously the actions of a body (political actions and performative actions) as creators of theory. If we consider dance to be, as Schwartz convincingly argues, an act of thinking, then drag dancing cogently and vigorously demonstrates a method of reconsideration of the body and of restyling presentations of gender and sexuality. These performances provide us with the opportunity to see “bodies in the act of rethinking their boundaries” (16). In this understanding of drag, Schwartz disproves the pernicious assumption stated above, that drag rests on the skin. In this definition, drag comes from a place beyond that, from the muscle in motion, which is perhaps the essence of the body.

In the book’s first chapter—on Mark Morris’s 1989 choreography for Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*—Schwartz’s theory finds its praxis in a delicate deconstruction of the piece and its history, with attention paid to Morris’s dancers and to his own body. It is in the book’s second chapter, though, on Richard Move’s evocation of Martha Graham at the 1990s nightclub Mother in New York, that the book hits its aesthetic and theoretical stride. In a joyful study that reflects admiration and affection for her subject, Schwartz’s analysis of Move’s performance as Graham manages to illuminate both his practice and that of Graham herself. Move performed “with” Graham, not “as” her, Schwartz contends. In the study of these two figures, Schwartz as critic finds a perfect balance between these two artists. Chapter 3, on *butoh* artist Kazuo Ohno’s *La Argentina*, returns discussion to a consideration of a drag performance emanating from within the artist’s person. Ohno’s performance of a woman in this piece is not a “parody or facile simulacrum of gender,” Schwartz reminds us for, “as Deleuze notes, . . . ‘The simulacrum is the instance which involves a difference within itself,’” which Ohno’s practice brings to the fore (104). The book’s fourth chapter discusses Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, an all-male ballet company, and the final chapter is a brief, yet vivid, reflection on Monique Jenkinson’s performance *Faux Real* (2009).

*The Bodies of Others* provides a methodology and implementation strategy for an understanding of drag performance as a theorizing of and by the body. As Ohno says, “the body wears the universe, and at the same time the body—the dress of the soul—is also a costume” (119). As with any reflection on performative work, *The Bodies of Others* is at its most thrilling when identifying the methods through which performance—which is temporal, first and foremost—finds new ways of communicating between artist and spectator, or, as is often the case in dance works, when the artist is split and the two communicating are dancer and choreographer. Neither biography nor drag are about oneself, Schwartz argues. Rather, “[t]he most intimate acts of selfhood—grieving the dead, developing an identity, loving a family, acknowledging a shared history, desiring and being desired, belonging to a community—are things that we do in concert” (193). Another thing that we

do in concert: writing and remembering. In her book, Schwartz has continued this intimate act, and provided us all with a new way of thinking about gender in motion.

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## Off Sites: Contemporary Performance beyond Site-Specific

By Bertie Ferdman. *Theater in the Americas*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018; pp. xii + 212, 36 illustrations; \$38 paper, \$38 e-book.

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For decades now, we theatre people have been referring to performances staged outside of a conventional theatre venue as “site-specific.” As Bertie Ferdman argues cogently in her recent book, it’s time we stopped. In *Off Sites: Contemporary Performance beyond Site-Specific*, Ferdman offers a welcome critique of this over-used term, pointing out that the phrase “site-specific” fails to invoke any particular artistic approach. More disturbingly, its generalized application can obscure layered urban histories, the gravitational pull of international festivals and touring circuits, and the co-optive forces of immersive corporate entertainments. Over five chapters, Ferdman instead disentangles the disciplinary genealogies, performance histories, and institutional structures that have shaped our ideas about how and why theatre can be staged outside of conventional theatre stages. As an alternative, Ferdman proposes the evocative concept of “off-site”: a capacious term for understanding theatre in which the relationships between and among sites figure as a central element.

One of the book’s central interventions is to place the visual arts legacy of the term “site-specific” in conversation with multiple theatre histories of site-based work, particularly in its second chapter. (Chapter 1 functions as a theoretical and historical introduction.) The distinction between site specificity in visual arts and in theatre is hardly semantic; as Ferdman demonstrates, their different and contested histories have profound implications for the ways artists are funded, reviewed, and recognized by artistic institutions. Ferdman’s own experience serving on a New York Foundation for the Arts funding panel in 2007 provides compelling evidence here. Evaluating artists in the “cross-disciplinary” category—the sole funding category available to theatre artists who were not playwrights—Ferdman, the only panelist with a performing arts background, was surprised to learn that her fellow panelists held starkly different assumptions from hers about the value of theatre as an art form. “I was amazed to find that what I found virtuosic ‘as theatre’ (since that is what they were making), the other panelists did not find groundbreaking at all,” Ferdman writes. “No matter how innovative the use or combination of