

Book Review

> **Jenni Lauwrens**

University of Pretoria. Pretoria. South Africa.

jenni.lauwrens@up.ac.za (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0336-7356>)

African somaesthetics: cultures, feminisms, politics

Edited by Botha, Catherine F. 2020.
Brill, Leiden, ISBN 978-90-04-44296-2

Introduction

The American pragmatist, Richard Shusterman, has given shape to a field of study known as somaesthetics. In his formulation of this field, Shusterman (1999:302) recommends that, in philosophical discourse and in relation to aesthetic experience, close attention should be paid to 'bodily states and experiences'. His concern is especially to place the thinking body and its capacity of knowing at the centre of academic attention and to develop awareness of how the living body is experienced, used, and cultivated in particular situations. *African somaesthetics: cultures, feminisms, politics* (2020) takes up Shusterman's proposal by applying the discourse of somaesthetics to issues of race and gender in the contemporary African context. The chapters in this volume, therefore, focus on interrogating the body in African cultures in the context of colonisation, decolonisation, and globalisation. In her introductory chapter, editor Catherine F. Botha briefly explains that the contributors take Shusterman's conception of somaesthetics as a provocation that arouses and stimulates thinking around the importance of attending to the lived body in understanding human existence. Thus, each chapter offers a unique and refreshing view on the significance of the bodily dimension of aesthetic expression and experience in general. An interesting array of topics are covered in the volume, including albinism, film, philosophy, cultural activism, and various forms of dance including ballet, contemporary dance, and break dancing.

Published by



The volume broadly deals with three themes, namely African cultures, African feminisms, and African politics. The 11 chapters are further organised into four parts, namely,

Book review

“Untouchable bodies”, “Black bodies”, “Dancing bodies” and “Changing bodies”. Part 1 opens with ‘The untouchable body’, in which Gerard M. Samuel analyses his own (male, brown, “untouchable”, dancing) body as a culturally inscribed text that is invisibly, but certainly viscerally, tattooed by his lived experience of apartheid in South Africa. Currently a dance academic, choreographer, and artist-educator based in the global South, Samuel weaves his own personal experiences as a young Indian boy who was, and presumably still is, devoted to ballet into a sensitively written challenge to the patriarchy and misogyny that still defines the discipline. Traversing the blurred lines between visual arts and dance-theatre, the author offers a somaesthetic response to a performance artwork by Gavin Krastin, in order to explore how spectators might identify with the bodies they watch in dance-theatre performances.

In ‘The other as unbeautiful: analytic somaesthetics, disgust and the albinotic body in African traditions’, Elvis Imafidon analyses the perception of the albinotic body in African cultures through the lens of somaesthetics. Imafidon (2020:28) shows that in African societies, albinotic bodies arouse disgust in those described as ‘melanin-privileged Africans’. The author (2020:27) argues that systemic ignorance and previously condoned bodily norms have led to deeply entrenched perceptions of the albinotic body as not only ‘abnormal’, but also ‘repugnant’ and therefore unbeautiful. Imafidon (2020:26) argues that in African indigenous thought, persons with albinism (PWAs) are seen to be ‘lacking essential qualities for being human’. So too, many PWAs assimilate and accept the cultural explanation of their being. In this chapter, the author challenges such normative perceptions of PWAs in African communities by suggesting that ‘enlightened lenses’ are needed to prevent discrimination against PWAs, and to ensure their wellbeing (Imafidon 2020:25).

Part 2: “Black bodies” opens with a chapter titled ‘Black bodies, “Black Panther”’. In this chapter, Paul C. Taylor, Sarah Di Maggion, Holly Longair and Takunda Matose (2020:40) unpack the ways in which the Hollywood blockbuster *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) offers a racial-kinesthetic reading of the film according to which *Black Panther* does not merely depict counter-hegemonic notions of Blackness but, more interestingly for a somatic aesthetic analysis, it is preoccupied with capturing ‘the lived, kinetic experience of these bodies’. Without denying that the film invents Black identities in problematic ways, the authors argue that the film is an exercise in somaesthetics in that it is a study of lived experience. This means, according to the authors (2020:57), that *Black Panther* makes a positive contribution to the Black aesthetic tradition and as such is an ‘interesting and ambitious project in critical race aesthetics’.

Chapter 4 deals with the construction of race and identity in South Africa’s so-called rainbow nation. In ‘Re-imagining race through *Daai za Lady & Butoh*’, jacki job argues

that rhetoric surrounding the rainbow nation serves to veil the harmful racial politics of apartheid policy which classified and categorised people in South Africa in terms of the colour of their skin, hair texture and facial features. Job believes that these atrocities should not be forgotten, and neither should individual experience be subsumed into a homogenous community. The author examines these issues by focusing on two dance works, *Daai za Lady* (2017) and *And Then...* (2019) which both employ the Japanese contemporary dance form, Butoh. In both performances, aesthetic expression is used to imagine alternative ways of being that move beyond social, political and religious agendas. In this way, both performances embody difference and thus contribute to current discourses of transformation.

The third chapter in Part 2 is titled 'Necro-being and the black body: an interview with Leonard Harris'. The chapter is a transcription of an interview between the editor, Catherine F. Botha and Leonard Harris, who is the author of *Philosophy of struggle: the Leonard Harris reader* (2020). In the interview, Botha (2020:79,81) draws out what Harris means by 'necro-being' as an 'actuarial account of racism' as understood through Harris's 'insurrectionist ethics'. In Harris's formulation, racism in its worst form amounts to necro-being which means not existing at all; it is a state of non-being. Necro-being is more than being invisible – not visible; it is a state of not existing at all. Harris's actuarial account is an attempt to describe and depict the somatic reality of racism. He believes that it is necessary to eradicate all memory of necro-being by race and is hopeful that reconciliation can bring about cooperation between different communities, go beyond hate, and repair past damages.

Rainy Demerson's chapter 'Sensing the stage: decolonial readings of African contemporary dance' opens Part 3: "Dancing bodies". The author argues that dance is uniquely capable of contributing to an African somaesthetics through highlighting its decolonial potential. Demerson (2020:96) maintains that 'African epistemologies support the manifestation of self through performance'. In Africa, argues Demerson (2020:98-99, emphasis in original), 'histories, philosophies, and religions...are *danced*' while in western cultures 'dancing bodies' are associated with 'vulgarity'. The performance, *Phuma-Langa* (which means sunrise), choreographed by Mamela Nyamza, is analysed as a demonstration of Walter Dignolo's notion of *decolonial aesthesis*. In multisensorial ways, this dance performance provokes and confronts; it challenges western aesthetics, the construction of dance as a western theatrical genre, and notions of cultural identity. By way of this example, the author (2020:108) argues that African dance artists and choreographers 'hold...revolutionary decolonizing potential'.

Chapter 7, by Devon Bailey, is titled 'Self-knowledge through dance: considering the female break dancer in South Africa'. Bailey investigates the challenges that female

break dancers encounter in South Africa, specifically as a result of the inferior status relegated to them by colonialism, apartheid and patriarchal values. The author (2020:120) argues that the break dance style celebrates authenticity and difference and allows the dancer to explore the self as a 'mind-body'. Through the repetitive rehearsal of moves and sets, a habitual somaesthetic awareness is cultivated as the dancer develops a profound sense of her body's capabilities and limitations. For these reasons, break dance enables self-discovery and can lead to a deep sense of self-knowledge. Equally, break dance is a tool for the expression of and resistance to stereotypical treatment and behaviour.

Chapter 8 by Lliane Loots is titled 'Learning to speak in my mother tongue: ruminating on contemporary decolonizing dance practices for myself and my African continent'. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach, the author reflects on her artistic process as a dance maker, dance educator, academic, and choreographer who is committed to decolonising how dance is taught, researched and practiced in Higher Education in South Africa. Loots documents her own contribution to curriculum change within the university context as well as her work outside the institution with the Flatfoot Dance Company where she trains black dancers. As part of the programmes Loots runs at Flatfoot, she addresses localised issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and rigid social and gender role expectations. Abandoning 'good technique (a strangely Westernised/universalized idea that all contemporary dance begins with)' entirely, Loots (2020:154) utilises dance to explore issues of race, gender and health.

Part 4: "Changing bodies" opens with Sara Matchett's 'Walking and stumbling: the aesthetic as agitator for activism'. Matchett (2020:165) examines The Mothertongue Project (a women's arts collective based in South Africa) as an example of 'embodied activism'. Two performances by The Mothertongue Project – *Walk* and *#StumblingBlocks* – demonstrate how performance can address issues of rape and sexualised violence against women. Matchett (2020:167) argues that, owing to their embodied nature, these performances are effective in 'alleviating gender imbalances and the high levels of violence against women historically prevalent in South African society...'. They 'function...as the instigator [or agitator] for activism' through inciting conversations and discussions and thereby 'viscerally provoke', interrogate and 'inspire...people into action' (Matchett 2020:166,169).

Monika Lillieke's chapter 'Skinstory – Migratory experiences and the transformational power of performative means of expression' explores and reflects on the author's experience of migration from Namibia (formerly South West Africa) to Germany (then, the Federal Republic of Germany), Hawaii and Europe. Mostly auto-biographical, this chapter expands on the author's experiences of being an outsider and her struggle

to find a sense of belonging through performance. Although Hawaiian hula continues to be incorrectly classified as dance, this traditional form of theatre combines the art of chanted poetry and stylised gestures with body motions and percussion. Through the 'somaesthetic power of embodiment through hula', Lilleike (2020:198) describes how she was able to reconnect with Africa, Europe and Hawaii through hula.

The final chapter in the volume is Matthias Pauwels' 'Disinfect this! Scato-aesthetic indictments of South Africa's cultural, social, and spatial divisions'. The author examines selected activist practices of cultural contestation by the Tokolos Stencil Collective, an anonymous activist group that operates mainly in Cape Town. Owing to their use of obscene language and imagery as well as human excreta, Pauwels (2020:207) refers to the strategies deployed by this group at the art exhibition Plakkers and the cultural event Open City as 'scato-aesthetic activism'. The author (2020:218) offers an engaging and thought-provoking analysis of Tokolos's extreme guerrilla strategies that challenge the 'exclusionary soma-politics of both art institutions and public spaces in South Africa'. The author's (2020:208) nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of Tokolos's 'philistine' activism ensures that the volume ends on a high note.

Across its 11 chapters, the authors use somaesthetics as a philosophical tool to understand how the body is used as a medium of expression, protest, and provocation in various aesthetic practices. They place the body of the performer at the centre of their investigations in order to negotiate and navigate issues of race, gender and identity politics in the African context. The point of departure for many of the contributions is that African people have historically – perhaps uniquely – used the body not (only) as a form of individual self-expression, but as 'an act of subject formation' (Demerson 2020:96). The reader cannot miss the overall recognition in each chapter that 'the embodied self [is] a site of meaning-making' (Loots 2020:143). The contribution of this volume to discourse on, and in, the arts is evident in the willingness of the editor and each contributing author to regard the body as a site of 'authentic study' and as an important component in understanding the arts (Loots 2020:143). This book is a welcome introduction to what will hopefully become a fruitful and productive field of enquiry into the arts in (South) Africa.

REFERENCES

Botha, CF. 2020. *African somaesthetics. Cultures, feminisms, politics*. Leiden: Brill.

Coogler, R. 2018. *Black Panther*. [Film]. Marvel Studios.

Harris, L. 2020. *A philosophy of struggle. The Leonard Harris reader*. London: Bloomsbury.

Shusterman, R. 1999. Somaesthetics: a disciplinary proposal. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57(3):299-313.