



HAL
open science

Staging American Bodies – Introduction

Nathalie Massip

► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Massip. Staging American Bodies – Introduction. *Miranda: Revue pluridisciplinaire sur le monde anglophone. Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world*, 2017. halshs-02455242

HAL Id: halshs-02455242

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02455242>

Submitted on 25 Jan 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

15 | 2017

Lolita at 60 / Staging American Bodies

Staging American Bodies – Introduction

Nathalie Massip



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/10472>

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Nathalie Massip, « Staging American Bodies – Introduction », *Miranda* [Online], 15 | 2017, Online since 18 September 2017, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/10472>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Staging American Bodies – Introduction

Nathalie Massip

- 1 On Monday, August 14, 2017, protesters toppled the statue of a Confederate soldier in Durham, North Carolina. Dedicated to the “memory of the boys who wore grey,” the statue had been erected in 1924 and, like many others of its kind, stood outside a government building. The event came in the aftermath of the violent clash between white nationalists and counterprotesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, two days before. The “Unite the Right” march had been organized to protest a plan to remove a statue of General Robert E. Lee, a hero of the Confederacy, from Emancipation Park in Charlottesville. While the removal of Confederate statues had already stirred controversy before the Virginia deathly event, notably in New Orleans, it was given new and accelerated impetus throughout the nation in the days and weeks that followed.
- 2 A majority of removals were sanctioned and organized by state and local authorities. Yet, in some cases, crowds literally took the matter into their own hands. Such was the case in Durham: “With a strap tied around the neck of the statue, protesters spat, kicked and gestured at the mangled figure after its base was ripped from the granite block.” (Horton) Considering that the event described is the tearing down of a statue, the violence and symbolism of the act, evoking mob rule and lynching, may be surprising. Yet, as “dead people cast in bronze or carved in stone, [statues] symbolize a specific famous person while in a sense also *being* the body of that person.” (Verdery 5; italics in the text) Therefore, removing a statue has a double effect: not only does it mark a physical erasure from the public landscape, akin to an amputation, but it also desacralizes the person it stands for:

As it is deprived of its timelessness and sacred quality, the ‘sacred’ of the universe in which it had meaning becomes more ‘profane.’ The person it symbolized dissolves into an ordinary, time-bound person. (Verdery 5)
- 3 As the statue falls down, the body loses its godlike characteristic and becomes a mere mortal.

- 4 The dismantling of Confederate monuments also corresponds to an erasure of visible signs embodying the legacy of the racist Jim Crow era. The majority of these monuments were erected between the 1890s and the 1920s, that is to say when segregation was institutionalized and the Jim Crow system ruled African Americans' lives, sometimes in a most violent way. While the myth of the "Lost Cause" was taking hold in the Southern psyche, monuments were being erected to celebrate, if not glorify, the soldiers, generals, and political leaders who had lost the war, yet had fought for what was considered as a noble cause. Just as Thomas Dixon's 1905 *The Clansman* and D. W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation* depicted Klansmen as vigilante heroes, Confederate statues carved and/or cast the triumph of white supremacy in stone and/or in bronze: "Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. [...] [They] make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life." (Danto 153) As for the location of these monuments, on public places and outside government buildings, not only does it legitimize this institutional racism, but it also serves as a painful reminder "of who has the power to choose how history is remembered in public places." (Foner)
- 5 In the case of the Durham statue, the staging of the removal was all the more striking and powerful as it was a public event. Taking place in broad daylight, it was filmed and broadcast on social media in the minutes that followed the episode. Were it not for the catharsis of collective anger that one may witness on videos of the incident, it would be possible to see the fall of this bronze body as a street performance, a clownish figure standing tall on a pedestal one second, then crumpled ridiculously on the ground the next. If "[the] body is both an internal, subjective environment and simultaneously is an object for others to observe and evaluate" (Johnston xv), then its staging reveals as much about one's identity as about others' expectations and conceptions of what this identity ought to be.
- 6 The essays collected here explore the various ways in which American bodies have been staged and represented throughout history and through various media: photography, paintings, drama, literature, movies, scientific reports, poetry, memorials... Just as the Confederate statues are legacies of a racist, cruel past, as well as sites of present brutal clashes, violence permeates the essays in this issue, be it physical (the violence enacted on bodies), pictorial (the depictions of impaired, maimed, assaulted, or wounded bodies), or psychological.
- 7 The issue opens with Wendy Harding's essay on spectacle lynchings of the early 20th century. Harding demonstrates how lynchings, as staged and public displays of violence, were meant to confirm and reinforce racial divisions. Exhibiting lynched bodies not only served as a message to the black community but, also, asserted white power and domination. The troubling images that remain of these public, theatricalized, executions, whether pictorial or textual, extend their effect over space but, also, crucially, over time, thus perpetuating racial violence and affecting modern audiences. Harding's analysis of various works by African American writers, from Richard Wright to Ta-Nehisi Coates by way of Toni Morrison, shows the difficulty of tackling both the violent acts and their representations while, at the same time, breaking the cycle of white supremacy and black victimhood, in order to ponder the meaning of violence and, ultimately, empower blacks.
- 8 The violence of these "ritualized lynchings" and of their representation echoes Thibaud Danel's depiction of war as an "embodying event." Using the example of the Korean War, Danel shows that bodies of war and bodies of memory are inextricably linked, as the representation and staging of the former influence the way the war is remembered.

Referring to a variety of representations of bodies of war, including posters, movies, and memorials, Danel demonstrates how the staging of bodies tells us more about the political dimension of memorialization and commemoration than about the war itself.

- 9 Similarly, H el ene Gaillard reveals that the depictions, both textual and pictorial, of bodies by poet Walt Whitman and painter Thomas Eakins, and the reactions they triggered, are meaningful testimonies of Victorian society’s prudish attitudes toward corporeality and corporeal matters. Analyzing the artists’ aesthetics against the 19th-century backdrop of medical and technological progress, Gaillard draws parallels between Whitman’s and Eakins’ representations of bodies, especially the way they brought together the spirit and the soul. In so doing, the artists elevated the status of the body to that of agent of democracy and equality.
- 10 Deviant bodies are the topic of Sarah Dyne’s article, which reassesses Lillian Hellman’s 1934 play, revised many times for film and stage, *The Children’s Hour*. Using Foucault’s theory of discipline and docile bodies as well as a recent trend in queer theory, which deals with the notion of time (“chrononormativity”), Dyne explores both the way Hellman exploits and articulates temporal and spatial elements, and the connections between space, time, and sexuality at work in *The Children’s Hour*. In so doing, Dyne shows how Hellman delves into and represents issues of power, female intimacy and sexuality, and morality prevalent in late 19th- and early 20th-century American society.
- 11 The same social anxieties surrounding turn-of-the-century American women inform Lauren MacIvor Thompson’s essay. Analyzing a New York medical doctor’s notebooks, written between 1885 and 1902, Thompson pinpoints the connections between eugenics, the development of the specialties of obstetrics and gynecology, and the professionalization of American medicine. Physicians’ fascination with and study of female bodies, which led to the birth and development of the OB-GYN disciplines, elevated the practice of medicine into a profession. As the latter became more and more standardized and the expertise and authority of practitioners grew, medical discourse gained in legitimacy. So did its impact on women’s subordination; immigrant and working-class women, more particularly, attracted a lot of attention, as their sexuality was seen as a threat to the integrity of American society, therefore spurring the development of eugenics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Birth of a Nation (The), dir. D. W. Griffith, Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915.

Danto, Arthur C. *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*. Amsterdam: G + B Arts, 1998.

Dixon, Thomas F. *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*. 1905. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970.

Foner, Eric. “Confederate Statues and ‘Our’ History.” *The New York Times*. Aug. 20, 2017. Sept. 8, 2017.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/opinion/confederate-statues-american-history.html?mcubz=0>>

Horton, Alex, “Protesters in North Carolina Topple Confederate Statue Following Charlottesville Violence,” *The Washington Post*. Aug. 14, 2017. Sept. 8, 2017.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/08/14/protesters-in-north-carolina-topple-confederate-statue-following-charlottesville-violence/?utm_term=.7dbe288e916e>

Johnston, Jessica R. *The American Body in Context: An Anthology*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001.

Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

AUTHOR

NATHALIE MASSIP

Maître de conférences

Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, membre de l'Université Côte d'Azur (UCA)

nmassip@unice.fr