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***Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures / Producing Culture* by Carrie Noland**

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Caoimhe Mader McGuinness

Carrie Noland's ambitious project is, in her own words, 'to construct a theory of how a biologically and/or culturally informed use of the body affords a type of awareness that is agentic in a sense that it plays a role in what a subject does and feels' (p.16). Challenging both purely experiential and phenomenological analyses of agency as well as strict (post)structuralist approaches to the question of subjectivity, she chooses to focus on the role of kinaesthesia as a vector for both acquiring cultural norms and subverting them. Noland's understanding of kinaesthesia here is not concerned with the possible effect of performance or dramatic writing on potential spectator's bodies, as, for example, Stanton B. Garner's work is. What she understands as kinaesthesia is the sensation of the body being aware of itself, particularly in performing certain gestures. In her exploration, Noland does not choose to focus on performance representations per se, but rather on the acquisition of culture, particularly the kinaesthetic experience of writing, which is one of this text's most compelling focal points.

Noland's argument is based on an extremely comprehensive overview of mainly French theories regarding cultural and gestural constructions of the body. She is very careful in providing critical analyses of both early sociologist Marcel Mauss and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This permits her to challenge structuralist assertions that humans remain imprisoned in an indelible culturally imposed *habitus* while also refusing to rely on a purely vitalistic agenda. This dual approach is particularly evident in her examination of displays of affect, which she argues are at least partly transmitted socially, linguistically, and intergenerationally. The juxtaposition of both approaches is key to understanding Noland's overarching argument for stressing the role of kinaesthesia in gestural formation, as she asserts: 'And here is where the dialectic peculiar to the gesture must be located: the gesture shapes a body that can perform--reform--the gesture in turn.' (p. 213).

This proposal is also what makes her focus on inscriptive practices compelling. Her

concern lies not with performative writing or *écriture féminine*, if these are understood as practices that challenge linearity or play with grammatical rules and offer a multi-vocal space of reading. Rather, Noland chooses to focus on various possibilities of bodily engagement in the act of reading and writing itself. She illustrates this through paleoethnographer André Leroi-Gourhan's assertions on the role of technical interaction in the kinaesthetic development of human gestural culture. Noland argues: 'Existence is ensured by the possibility of programming (or putting in reserve), that is by the possibility of displacing the gestures of contact from human technological hands.' (p. 116). To illustrate—and further—Leroi-Gourhan's assertions that these technological interactions are both axiomatic in corporeal and gestural composition, and also, through repetitive activity, modifiable through time, Noland provides convincing examples from the fields of digital poetry as well as the work of post-war poet turned painter Henri Michaux. These examples help to manifest how artistic practice can, through a focus on the kinaesthetic experience of either reading, writing, or viewing, challenge acquired gestural practices and materialise a shift in gestural habit. Noland's thorough investigation of Michaux's work as a lifelong practice in 'documenting, encyclopaedically, the greatest number of mark making movements he could execute without exceeding the bounds of an implicit, sign defining grid' (p.155) is a considered and convincing description of ways in which comprehensively and kinaesthetically focusing on inscriptive techniques provides a space for modifying the artist's habitual wrist movements. Instead of pursuing a 'universal language' that, somehow, would be pre-culturally accessible to all humanity, she makes the point that corporeal subversion can happen only through a sharpened awareness of and a conscious engagement with socially integrated cultural norms.

Carrie Noland's book provides a thorough examination of a wide range of theories in order to make her argument, and she provides a careful and engaging navigation of both phenomenological and linguistic approaches regarding cultural bodily constructions. If she remains critical of purely post-structuralist approaches, she also recognises their role in providing complex additions to phenomenological analyses of the body, stressing the important role of language as a crucial yet incomplete framework for subjectivity.

Many times whilst reading her book I found myself reflecting on my own postures and sensations, the way a keyboard feels and makes my fingers move. Indeed, Noland's most interesting and surprising contribution is her work on inscribing and writing as embodied and kinaesthetic practices. When analysing both digital poetry and Michaux's work, she makes a great case for considering how a seemingly systematic and disembodied practice like writing can formally shift through a writer's or reader's conscious

connection to their actual bodily practice as they produce and encounter written textual material.

Yet this is also where her writing disappoints slightly. If she, rightly for her argument, distances herself from Phelan's theorising of performance as 'salient, productive and introceptively available, rather than, abject, negative and out of reach' (p.17), she does not, for all her insistence on the formal subversion a kinaesthetic awareness of writing can provide, participate in such a modification herself. She refers to her training as a dancer as a tool for perceiving the gestures of others, but does not appear to bring her own body into the text at all, which seems like a missed opportunity to formally further her argument. If she does not claim to be attempting an exercise in a performative writing of sorts, she may have benefited from attempting, like Phelan has, to bring the body forth in her own writing. Finally, Noland's project is so vast that this book sometimes appeared overwhelmingly dense to me, or, in the case of her critique of Butler's writings on gender via Frantz Fanon's work (surprisingly situated in the last chapter), left me wanting for more. Nevertheless, Noland's extremely rich and original contribution provides a useful addition to performance studies' work on kinaesthesia, which usually focuses on performance training or spectatorial reception rather than the unexpected territory of writing itself as an embodied practice.