
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. xxv, 336, photographs, notes, references, index. US\$30.00 hardback; \$22.00 paperback.

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I FOCUS HERE on Desmond's contributions to performance studies rather than her position within Pacific Studies. I am not a Pacific Studies specialist, and I know that other reviewers for this journal will speak to the book's location within area studies. Instead, I write from my sensibilities as an ethnomusicologist and I address Desmond's contributions to performance studies. More broadly, I want to address how performance studies opens up understandings of ethnicity, racialization, and nationalism within the framework of spectacle.

I have heard informal reports that Desmond's comparison of Hawai'ian performance traditions to spectacles of animal performance has prompted uneasiness and even anger in certain circles of Pacific Island studies. Desmond's work addresses cultural representations, and her decision to put both kinds of "bodies on display" in the same book is strategic. It opens up important issues and questions, and prompts a kind of calculated discussion that offers useful handles to indigenous studies and Ethnic Studies. Her focus is squarely on issues of representation: Desmond does not align the "native" with the non-human but rather offers a critical analysis of the processes that make such elisions possible.

Staging Tourism offers the kind of reconsideration that productively shook up feminist studies when race, ethnicity, and class were theorized as interconstitutive with gender and sexuality. Studies of tourism have to some extent marked Pacific Studies as an area, as have considerations of how colonialism and Orientalism defined its place in the global imagination. Shifting the frame to the performing body is yet another way to open up the cultural politics of the Pacific. As an outsider to this particular area studies (I work in Asian American Studies and Southeast Asian Studies), I have long been struck by how the Pacific has been acknowledged and constructed as a heavily politicized zone in a way that other parts of the world have not been; for instance, it has taken Southeast Asian Studies much longer to begin interpolating critical models of colonial influence into its foundational ideas of modernity and history-making, even though most of that region was under colonial direction for anywhere between three and five hundred years. The ways that different spheres of area studies are defined and maintained must always be attended to—that is, a reflexive consideration of how particular area studies are imagined and prioritized must be part of the critical vigilance that we bring to any part of the globe. What is considered worth focusing on is part of the inheritance and politics of any area studies, as are critiques of work departing from it.

If the critical dynamics of Pacific Studies necessitates attention to indigenious rights, then it is equally important to consider the ways indigeneity is and is not a pure zone standing outside the complexities of history and culture. Certainly Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies have been reinvigorated by the difficult questions asked by (often indigenious) scholars of Pacific Island Studies. At the time of this writing, the Association for Asian American Studies is struggling with a proposal, put forward by both indigenious and Asian American scholars (including fellow reviewer Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman), to change its name to the Association for Asian and Pacific Island American Studies in an attempt to correct certain elisions and erasures that have marked the very construction of the Asian-in-America. This is part of the long-term, endless, and necessary effort to account for everyone in our midst, even if the effort is utopian. Accounting for multiple presences will transform the way we conceive of "ourselves," and certain shared processes may be made visible as we move toward new critical and political models for social justice.

If (the new?) Pacific Studies is thus marked by attention to power, authority, representation, and postcolonial response, then it is also necessary to attend to the ways that Western traditions of representation and constructed indigeneity have profoundly shaped some of the ways that "tradition" is maintained and rendered powerful in the Pacific. The 1980s and 1990s

were marked by a number of significant studies focused on the dynamics of Western exhibition practices, including museums, festivals, and historical reenactment (e.g., Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Price 1989; Handler and Gable 1997). This is the scholarly milieu Desmond is part of and responding to, and she is aware that this area was more deeply part of a critical effort to transform the hoary discipline of folklore from within by questioning the praxis of the "traditional" as an always already mediated product of control and redefinition. Folklore has gone from being a field stubbornly in search of a vanishing original to a discipline vibrant in its engagement with pressing questions of power, authority, and the control of history. Indeed, "folklore" has effectively been transformed into a matter of "folkloricization," which is understood to take place from the top down. All this has been in close conversation with the young discipline of performance studies, which emerged in the 1970s from the confluence of avant-garde efforts to redefine dramatic practice and work by anthropologists, notably Victor Turner, focused on cultural processes of performance and ritual as central to culture making in the most foundational sense. Some of these ideas came full circle. "The Couple in the Cage," a now (in)famous work by performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco (Fusco and Heredia 1993), featured the two confined in a cage, dressed in fantastically "indigenous" costuming, on display for hours and even days at a time; the work was staged in a number of public venues and was meant to force a critical engagement with the tourist gaze and its colonial ancestry. Other studies, including *Ota: The Pygmy in the Zoo* (Bradford and Blume 1992), *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo* (Harper 1986, 2000), and to some extent *Ishi in Two Worlds* (Kroeber 1961) have retraced troubled histories of ethnic others elided with animals, or presented as artifacts by exhibiting them in museums, or both. An upcoming conference titled *Performing Ethnicity* will offer a reevaluation of the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904.¹ The critical space between the tourist venue, the museum, and the zoo is historically small, and Desmond's work is intrinsically informed by such scholarship. She knows that heritage work and tourism are not unrelated. She proceeds with the understanding that any research along these lines is informed by an engagement with this relatively new scholarship.

The thread of inquiry connecting the different parts of this book is, in Desmond's own words, "radical bodily difference." She begins by arguing that "Many, many people are willing to pay a lot of money to see bodies which are different from their own, to purchase the right to look, and to believe that through that visual consumption they have come to know something that they didn't before" (xiii). Further, Desmond attends carefully and consistently to the economies driving desires to witness spectacles of bodily

difference; no mere study of entertainment for its own sake, the book asks pressing ethical questions about “our paradigms of social classification” (266) and their relationship to race, class, and gender, and more broadly to ideologies of multiculturalism and the politics of pleasure.

One of Desmond’s primary contributions is a sustained examination of the body—what it is, how it is constructed and reconstructed, how it signifies, how to address its specificity as well as its kinesthetic commonalities across time and space, and more. The usefulness of “the body” as a critical concept is part of the deepest work that *Staging Tourism* pulls off. What inroads does “the body” offer to an understanding of particular places, people, histories? Why deploy such a generalized idea of materiality in the service of ethnographic and historical particularity? The emergence of the body as a meaningful site is one of the most significant theoretical developments in the last twenty years across a wide range of disciplines. From philosophy, feminist theory, cultural studies, dance ethnography, to performance studies, “the body” has offered a means to join considerations of discursive and material realities—in short, to push at the dialogical relationship between the discursive and the material, but without ultimately concluding that discourse is all. Whenever “the body” is evoked, much is activated, including a serious consideration of bodily knowledge, bodily memory, economies of the laboring body, the body as a site of conjoined pleasure, danger, and commodification, etc. Desmond attends carefully throughout to what she calls “the seeming prediscursive qualities of physical presence” (252).

The hula dancer is in some ways all too easy a mark, and surely everyone knows that she is a construct (because *she* is inevitably gendered despite the strong historical presence of men in the hula tradition). Desmond addresses the re-racialization of the Polynesian hula girl into a hapa-haole that rendered the native controllable and familiar: she argues that the hula dancer stands in for a primitive, original, natural native, but that its nineteenth-century tropes have been reworked into a twentieth/twenty-first century emphasis on “culture” that simply complicates earlier biological models of authenticity without abandoning them. Desmond approaches this history of representation in several ways: as an archivist and historian, as a practitioner (formerly a professional modern dancer, she studied hula for a time in Hawai‘i),² and as an ethnographer. Her participant-observation work was not confined to dance but was deliberately focused on a range of tourist activities in Hawai‘i (tours, souvenir shopping, lei-making classes, tourist shows, lū‘aus, etc.).

This first half of the book is likely to attract the most attention from Pacific Studies scholars, and in some ways it revisits work found elsewhere. Nonetheless, Desmond’s discussion of how Hawai‘ians have been racialized as charmingly, harmlessly brown (not black, not white) is informed and pointed, and

she refers constantly to the tensions between the tourist view of Hawai'i and the complexities of Hawai'ian nationalism and the sovereignty movement. She attends to the relationship between the two as a continuum, not as separate spheres, and allows for the possibility of native Hawai'ians rewriting the tourist script from within. An entire chapter is devoted to an analysis of turn-of-the-century postcards of hula dancers and the ways that this tradition of visual culture segued into mainland hula performances in the early 1900s, often by non-Hawai'ians. Her account carefully attends to how minstrelsy, vaudeville, and Broadway informed the production and reception of these performances. Her conclusion, that the hula craze in Anglo-American mainland culture of the 1900-1920s drew together "racial, sexual, and national discourses" (77), is well-documented and strongly argued. Moving into more fraught territory, she turns to the expansion of the Hawai'ian tourist industry from 1930 on and focuses on the Anglicization of the hula girl and her reformulation into a slimmer, less-brown erotic object. Her chapter on beachboy surfers and their eroticized, safely racialized access to Anglo women tourists is short but offers a good counterbalance to the emphasis on the hula girl phenomenon, and it brings home Desmond's points about the power of representational play around ideas of Hawai'ian performance.

None of these matters are passé. In the summer of 2003, an excellent new documentary about the Hawai'ian hula in California was aired on public television,³ and a reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times* came up with astonishingly tired and naïve pronouncements, including the observation that the filmmakers should have featured less talking and more extended footage of the dances, or, as the reviewer put it, "more hip-moving, less hand-wringing" (Perry 2003). Indeed, the reviewer went so far as to describe hula as "that sexy, feminine, macho, ancient, modern, thoroughly captivating and expressive form of dance"—so the old tropes are alive and well.

One of Desmond's most challenging and trenchant conclusions is that the liberal conservationist impulse supposedly driving interest in animal spectacle is not innocent, and is in fact closer to the sexist and racist consumption of the hula girl than may at first be evident. She suggests that the manufacture of "the natural," whether indigenous peoples or animals, is always suspect—and that cultural tourism and animal/nature tourism are therefore linked (144). The hula girl and Shamu are each the outcome of a "culturalization of nature" that ultimately speaks volumes about the ideological values driving such markets. As Desmond puts it (250),

The celebration of the natural that Sea World sells is simultaneously a celebration of certain visions of the cultural and the fantasies that they encapsulate. This vision is ultimately a liberal one, which

through its emphasis on the heterosexual family, individuation, and unproblematic “harmony” and universalism, serves conservative political interests. It is consonant with the beliefs and desires of both the corporate backers of Sea World and the predominantly white middle-and upper-middle-class consumers who form its audience base.

If it seems a bit easy to reveal the hula girl as a problem, it is in the second half of the book that Desmond offers particularly original and pointed critique. Ethnographic thickness is nicely balanced against interpretation, and what’s more, Desmond never gives in to the simplest and most cynical analysis possible. She treats ecotourism and the pleasure of being “kissed” by Shamu the killer whale in the spectacularly artificial world of Sea World as two ends of a single continuum.

Desmond is a noted dance ethnologist and her skills in analyzing performance are constantly on display, though not always in expected ways. Her description of watching schools of fish circle in tight formation at the Monterey Bay Aquarium is a small tour-de-force: she notes that “fish do not make great trained performers” but that watching them move in the huge tank is both beautiful and the result of their confined artificial environment, resulting in “recoreographed behaviors” (184). This attention to movement and its cultural basis (even for fish, in this case) is emblematic of Desmond’s approach. An evening at Germaine’s Luau show outside Honolulu is an early high point of the book. The chapter on Shamu, titled “Performing Nature,” contains a detailed description and analysis of the Sea World show and its “heavily narrativized” (243) messages, always maintaining a seamless balance between vibrant depiction and critique of the show’s emphasis on an “Edenic” nature and anthropomorphized animals. Her point, that “the choreography constructs and presents this ideological process, staging bodily actions as symbolic practice” (242), is always glowing evident. Desmond’s attention to the behaviors more normally regarded as dance are woven into her broader consideration of performance. For example, white performer Gilda Gray’s “South Sea Dance,” published in a popular dance magazine in 1924, is described in detail, from the raffia skirt to the shimmy of the hips on an eight count, and Desmond shows how these features speak to the ideologies of race and gender that Gray was subject to—and busily constructing.

To summarize, *Staging Tourism* is an outstanding example of performance studies work. I have used it effectively to draw graduate students into some of the most pressing issues in the humanities, e.g., how racism and sexism are interconstitutive; the gaze as male, colonial, imperial, etc.; how to do gendered/racialized/classed analyses of performance and visual

culture, etc. *Staging Tourism* is solidly grounded in ethnographic research in multiple (and sometimes unexpected) sites, from the archives at the Bishop Museum, to hotel storerooms in Honolulu, to Sea World, the San Diego Zoo, and any number of tourist restaurants and nightclubs. The numerous photographs—51 total—add immeasurably to the book: the archival images of hula (including postcards covering almost a century) and Desmond's own photographs of tourists, tourist sites, and tourist consumption, are a treasure trove in their own right. The book's strongest points are its accessibility and the sophistication of its theoretical framework. "Description" is never distinct from critical analysis: the two are interwoven in compelling ways. Desmond's writing is always clear, frequently in the first person, and is often inspired. The book is beautifully, sensitively, and vividly written, with reflexive attention to how ethnography, consumption, and desire became inter-related during Desmond's fieldwork (146). Throughout, Desmond herself is a spirited, enthusiastic, and always thoughtful tourist in the best sense of the word. Yet she is fully in control of her argument and its implications, and she is at pains to ensure that she is not misunderstood. To this end, I quote her at length (xxiv):

In drawing comparisons between animal tourism and cultural tourism, I am not suggesting that viewing Hawaiian tourist performances is just like viewing animals in a zoo. I am not saying that complicated subjectivities are reducible to bodily evidence, although this is precisely what the epistemological structures of these industries imply. Nor am I saying that bodily differences are merely epistemological tropes to be overcome, that a jellyfish is really no different from a whale, that animals and humans are exactly the same. Nor am I saying that histories of genocide and animal annihilation are irrelevant predecessors to tourism, and we should just investigate the rhetorical structures of tourism that transpose such histories into nostalgia for a utopian past instead. My interest throughout is in understanding how bodily differences are marked, calibrated, measured, and mobilized politically to naturalize various social relations and how these operations are both constitutive of and constituted by certain kinds of tourism.

Finally, it is important to note that Desmond's bottom line is an effort to reimagine tourism. No mere critic, she proposes "a more embodied concept of tourism and of the tourist as consumer," with the idea that the "scholarly intervention" of her book, among others, might help to create new models for "social citizenship" (xxiv-xxv). In significant ways, this book is about

whiteness and the white American middle class. Not quite a study of tourists (indeed, Desmond offers little evidence of having solicited tourists' responses or opinions),⁴ it certainly opens up tourist culture and its colonial and imperialist ideologies. In her conclusions, Desmond begins to map out an "alternative vision" of tourism (260-66)—a tourism that would reveal history (rather than transcend it), that would redesign what is chosen for commodification, that would draw on the co-presence and "co-contemporaneity" (263) of the resident and the tourist, that would acknowledge the economics of the encounter. *Staging Tourism* demonstrates how performance studies, at its best, is not 'just' the study of performance but in fact gets at the big questions, including the possibility of different practices and different futures.

NOTES

1. *Performing Ethnicity, a conference marking the centennial of the St. Louis World's Exposition*, City College of the City University of New York, October 15-16, 2004.

2. Desmond is sometimes described as a dance ethnographer, which she certainly is, and her two edited collections (1997, 2001) have already made a significant impact on dance studies. Still, I see her critical orientation as more broadly situated in performance studies.

3. *American Aloha*, filmed and directed by Lisette Marie Flanary and Evann Siebens, broadcast on P.O.V. in August 2003.

4. Desmond herself notes that this entire area cries out for more research (258-59).

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