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Editor

# Editorial

## After the Heroic Human

We turn to spirituality in times of uncertainty. In particular, at moments of social anxiety, we find ourselves beholden to deep longing to a (performed) figure of the patriarchal hero that, as scholars of performance and religion, we are well-placed to unpick. As I write this in sunny Manchester, the news is full of two stories: the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus to ever-expanding corners of the world, and the collapsing down of the field of candidates for the US presidency to three white men in their 70s. In both cases, the popular press tends to frame the issue as one of leadership. The virus is invisible and dangerous, and like many forces in our lives, seems likely to affect us in ways we can neither predict or control. This terrifies many of us, and while we try to follow sober and reasoned scientific advice (wash your hands!), there does seem to be a public longing for a 'great leader' to solve the problem with their superhuman, even spiritual, strength. And when looking for those who can perform this role, we do find ourselves falling into traditional patterns of what such leaders must look like: white, male, middle class, and so on. This is not so much the fascination of 'abnormally interesting' people that Joseph Roach (2007) describes as it is a performative embodiment of certain social values, what Jeffrey Alexander (2011, 108) calls 'a symbol of the civil sphere, but also of at least some of those other, extra-civil spheres that generate non-democratic, often primordial values that real existing civil spheres are compelled also to represent.' Such a performative embodiment is what Brecht famously depicts in the training of Arturo Ui at the (shaky) hands of the old actor.

It seems clear that, if we are to learn to think in the systematic, ecological way that the contemporary world demands, we may need to critically examine our attraction to the performance of heroism. In this issue, we have a pair of articles and a discussion

forum that question that model or offer a different, less patriarchal, one in its place. These discussions question the relationship that individual humans can have to the natural world, to one another as individuals, and towards the societies in which we live.

In the first article, Florence Fitzgerald-Allsopp proposes a very different model of empowerment than that of the (male) human hero. In order to move beyond a patriarchal and anthropocentric logic based on the elevation of some (human males, especially white ones) over others (including other animals), Fitzgerald-Allsopp turns to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming-animal,' as well as the notion of 'becoming-with' from ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway. This is intersectionality at its most useful; the article details the ways in which human dominance over animals (as well as other fellow creatures) has served as a pattern for male dominance over women, and vice versa. She looks to the work of the artists Lucy Gunning, Ana Medieta, and Maja Smrekar for models of, as she puts it, "undergo[ing] a transformation in which they discover, or return to, a 'third home' that exists beyond the realm of dualisms in the porous threshold between human and animal." Though Fitzgerald-Allsopp does not develop this comparison explicitly, this ambiguity offers up a way of being in the world which offers a form of empowerment within the world for its many inhabitants that contrasts sharply with the isolated individualism of our model of heroism.

The second article, by Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon, analyses Katori Hall's play *The Mountaintop*, in the context of the Christian formations within the African-American theatrical tradition. *The Mountaintop* centres on the figure of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, one of the few universally-regarded heroes in twentieth-century American political life. The play, however, focuses on the limitations of the heroism of that character. Williams-Witherspoon traces what she calls the 'trope of Christianity' in the African-American theatre, and how it is used by Hall to show King as a fallible, flawed, but hopeful human being, especially on the day before his death. This contrast between the measuring of a human life, necessarily imperfectly lived, and the salvific figure that King has become, is the central tension of Hall's play, and Williams-Witherspoon elucidates this through her analysis of the piece's place within its theatrical and religious tradition.

Our forum this month considers the question of healing and reconciliation in performance and religion. It brings together artists and scholars from the UK, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand who study and make work grounded in communities, prisons, queer performance spaces, and contemporary ritual life. Many artists working in applied theatre and in more 'fine art' performance have a clear desire to use their performative work as a means to redress social ills. This, often, is the root of artistic interest in ritual. But by what authority, and through what means, can they do so? Especially when working with incarcerated, queer, indigenous, or otherwise marginalised communities, what role can the artist take up that is ethical, appropriate and effective? While none of the participants in this discussion think of the artist as a day-saving hero, they vary considerably in how they negotiate their roles as experts, facilitators, artists and witnesses.

Allow me to end my first editor's note with a few words about this journal itself. *Performance, Religion and Spirituality* has been a collective effort from the beginning: the four members of the editorial team work together closely, even from across the world, and we rely on the contributions of our editorial board, our publishers at the

University of Toledo Press, our peer reviewers, our contributors and our readers to make the journal a success. I do, however, want to take a moment to mark a transition. When we founded the journal, it was always planned that the editorial roles would rotate between the four of us every two years or so. We have now had the first of these rotations, and I have stepped into the post of editor previously occupied by Claire Maria Chambers. The work that Claire has done in putting together the first issues has been extraordinary. Her sharp critical mind, vast knowledge of the field, and generosity of spirit are precisely the combination one looks for in an academic colleague, and they have set the journal off on a strong path for the future. Claire, we are grateful for your work, and we look forward to working with you in the coming years.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy the issue.

### **Works Cited**

- Alexander, Jeffrey. 2011. *Performance and Power*. Cambridge: Polity.  
Roach, Joseph. 2007. *It*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.