

CfP: Material Selves: Gender, Health and Performance

28 February 2022

15th-16th June 2022. Hosted by the Centre for Health Humanities and Institute for Advanced Studies, UCL, University of London. Deadline for proposals: 31st March 2022



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At the heart of performance is a conception of life as materially embodied and enacted - a conception that it shares with both the health humanities and feminist approaches to selfhood. Introducing performance as a third term in this discussion, this Symposium seeks to insert embodied modes of knowledge production offered by theatre and performance into theoretical understandings of gender and health. It asks:

- How does attention to physical space, matter, rhythm and temporality in performance contribute to our understanding of gender and health?
- How have the legacies of feminist and queer performance generated new understanding of health and the body?
- How do feminist performance practices overlap with crip/disabled performances?

Keynotes: [Anna Harpin](#) (University of Warwick) and [Katharine Low](#) (Central School of Speech and Drama)

Conference organisers: [Leah Sidi](#) (UCL) and [Verónica Rodríguez](#) (Buckinghamshire New University)

Please email enquiries and proposals to: genderhealthperformance@gmail.com

Call for Papers

At the heart of performance is a conception of life as materially embodied and enacted - a conception that it shares with both the health humanities and feminist approaches to selfhood. Feminist and gender studies have provided new understandings of the body as ongoing material and relational projects. As Sherri L Foster and Jana Funke suggest in their special issue on 'Feminism and Medical Humanities', the shared methodological and disciplinary legacies between medical humanities and feminism remain partly unexplored, despite the need for further inclusion of the biomedical sciences in 'the feminist research agenda' (Oudshorn 1994: 2). Nevertheless 'feminist approaches [...] have helped to develop alternative understandings of health, illness, and the body, and to identify intersections between the humanities and biomedicine' (Foster and Funke 2018, 2).

Whilst highly productive for feminism, a historical emphasis on discursive productions of the body risks 'cast[ing] the body as passive' (Alaimo 2010, 3). As Celia Roberts eloquently puts it 'what of less visible, microscopic body elements such as chromosomes, and indeed hormones? Are they culturally constructed?' (2007, 7). Stacey Alaimo encourages us to think of the 'material self' constituted trans-corporeally, considering the ethical potentials which emerge 'from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature' (2010, 2). These ethical potentials include an expanded understanding of health as environmentally and culturally constructed, moving beyond the binaries of health/sickness and body/environment. In contrast, Joanna Hevda's Sick Woman Theory reorients the locus of feminist political action around the experiences of vulnerable, sick and disabled people. It is based on resistance carried in the body, 'an insistence that most modes of political protest are internalized, lived, embodied, suffering, and no doubt invisible.' (2020, 9) Thinking beyond the medical encounter, a feminist health humanities would 'call attention to bodies' as 'fleshed, pulsating, volatile' (Tuana 1997, 54), and cast light on the 'unpredictable and always interconnected actions of environmental systems, toxic substances, and biological bodies' (Alaimo 2010, 3).

Introducing performance as a third term in this discussion, this Symposium seeks to insert embodied modes of knowledge production offered by theatre and performance into theoretical understandings of gender and health. As Clod Ensemble's artistic director Suzy Willson states: 'like performance, medicine has a lot to do with looking and sickness being looked at' (2014, 31). At the same time, a singular emphasis on the gaze in both medicine and theatre disavows the shared material, sensory (beyond sight) and spatial dynamics of performance and embodiment. Performance, and especially feminist, queer and disabled performance, has offered critiques of health and medicine in a number of ways which go beyond 'science-engaged performance' (Bouchard and Mermikides 2016, 7): from understanding the medical encounter as inherently performative (the theatricality of the operating theatre) (Case 2014); to research into gendered performances of care (Stuart Fisher and Thompson 2020); to the potentials of explicit body performance to communicate experiences of disability and illness (O'Brien 2014).

Reflecting on these contributions, this Symposium asks: How does attention to physical space, matter, rhythm and temporality in performance contribute to our understanding of gender and health? How have the legacies of feminist and queer performance generated new understanding of health and the body? How do feminist performance practices overlap with crip performances? And if becoming ill and/or 'becoming disabled is "only a matter of time"' (Kafer 2013, 26), why have these issues have not yet received much attention in theatre and performance studies?

Proposals might relate to the following prompts:

- The body as gendered, racialised and sexed by/in performance and in medicine.
- Performance within the medical/therapeutic encounter, including applied performance practices, gender and health.
- Health communication or misinformation as online performance.
- Women's health and performance, including queering gynaecological health.
- Non-binary and trans health in/and performance.
- Ecofeminist approaches to health and the body in theatre and performance.
- Bodily fluids, flesh, tissue, menstruation in performance.
- Creating welcoming and accessible performance (work)spaces for sick, differently abled and differently gendered people.
- Performing gender and care, and/or the role of gender in performance of aging.
- Performing feminist health activism.
- Performing at the intersection of gender and fatness, thinness, wellness and body positivity.
- Performing gender and illness.
- Feminist and/or queer feminist models of illness and disability.

- Performance of small life: microbiota, hormones, neurotransmitters etc.
- Environments of health: dramaturgies, scenographies, soundscapes.
- Gender in d/Deaf, disabled and 'crip' performance.
- Performing patienthood and medical roles in 21st century economies.

Bibliography

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- Stuart Fisher, A. and J. Thompson eds. (2020). *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

We are happy to host 15-20 minute papers, provocations and creative contributions. Please send an abstract (300 words max) and bio (150 words max) to genderhealthperformance@gmail.com by **31st March**, and state if you would like to present in person or online.

To make this event as accessible as possible, the conference will be a hybrid in-person and online event. It will take place in a wheelchair accessible venue, with BSL interpretation and regular breaks. The online stream will have live captioning.

If you would like to chair a panel, please state so in your proposal.

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