



# **Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance)**

*Harvey Young*

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"Young's linkage between critical race theory, historical inquiry, and performance studies is a necessary intersection. Innovative, creative, and provocative."

---Davarian Baldwin, Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of American Studies, Trinity College

In 1901, George Ward, a lynching victim, was attacked, murdered, and dismembered by a mob of white men, women, and children. As his lifeless body burned in a fire, enterprising white youth cut off his toes and, later, his fingers and sold them as souvenirs. In *Embodying Black Experience*, Harvey Young masterfully blends biography, archival history, performance theory, and phenomenology to relay the experiences of black men and women who, like Ward, were profoundly affected by the spectacular intrusion of racial violence within their lives. Looking back over the past two hundred years---from the exhibition of boxer Tom Molineaux and Saartjie Baartman (the "Hottentot Venus") in 1810 to twenty-first century experiences of racial profiling and incarceration---Young chronicles a set of black experiences, or what he calls, "phenomenal blackness," that developed not only from the experience of abuse but also from a variety of performances of resistance that were devised to respond to the highly predictable and anticipated arrival of racial violence within a person's lifetime.

*Embodying Black Experience* pinpoints selected artistic and athletic performances---photography, boxing, theater/performance art, and museum display---as portals through which to gain access to the lived experiences of a variety of individuals. The photographs of Joseph Zealy, Richard Roberts, and Walker Evans; the boxing performances of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali; the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley, and Dael Orlandersmith; and the tragic performances of Bootjack McDaniels and James Cameron offer insight into the lives of black folk across two centuries and the ways that black artists, performers, and athletes challenged the racist (and racializing) assumptions of the societies in which they lived.

Blending humanistic and social science perspectives, *Embodying Black Experience* explains the ways in which societal ideas of "the black body," an imagined myth of blackness, get projected across the bodies of actual black folk and, in turn, render them targets of abuse. However, the emphasis on the performances of select artists and athletes also spotlights moments of resistance and, indeed, strength within these most harrowing settings.

Harvey Young is Associate Professor of Theatre, Performance Studies, and Radio/Television/Film at Northwestern University.

A volume in the series Theater: Theory/Text/Performance

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