



Keith Kahn-Harris
Patrick Campbell
Carla Neuss
Joseph R. D'Ambrosi
Reviewers

Reviews

Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal by Owen Coggins. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 224 pp. £73.44 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-350-02510-3.

As western societies lose touch with their religious heritage, its influence on popular culture often becomes confused and incoherent. In response, research on religion and popular music has sometimes fallen into over-interpretation; for example, seeing the rave or rock concert as a kind of church or ritual. Similarly, 'mysticism' is, at times, treated as a kind of shorthand for any kind of transcendent musical experience.

In his ground-breaking new book, Owen Coggins has found a way of analysing mysticism and the religious in a way that refuses easy banalities and looks directly at the ambiguities of the musical talk he studies. His subject is drone metal, a relatively recent offshoot of heavy metal, whose performers include acts such as Sunn0))), Om and Bong. He describes the genre as follows:

Drone metal music is characterized sonically by extremes of repetition, extension, lowness, slowness, amplification and distortion within but radically pushing the boundaries and conventions of the wider heavy metal tradition. (3)

As Coggins argues, whereas metal has traditionally foregrounded the distorted electric guitar, drone metal foregrounds the amplifier. Indeed, the Japanese band Boris once titled an album 'Amplifier Worship.' This is a genre that values heaviness in a literal, material sense, venerating vinyl and scorning the digital.

In his ethnographic work on the drone metal scene, Coggins found many examples of the experience this music provides being described as 'mystical'.

However, he takes issue with traditions in religious studies that essentialise mystical experience and treat it as somehow separate from discourse. Instead, he summarises his approach as follows:

Popular music mysticism can be heard in ongoing, creative chains of communication, interpretation and response to an existing tradition of intertextual practice and performance. Dissolving a traditional and unhelpful dichotomy in scholarly approaches to mysticism, musical sounds can be heard as simultaneously 'text' and 'experience'. (16)

Coggins's approach allows him not just to analyse drone metal talk as an integral part of the experience of drone metal music, but also to penetrate the often-contradictory nature of the discourse. While drone metal seems monumental and impenetrable, jokes, humour and memes simultaneously lighten its weight and engage with its substance and boundaries. While drone metal acts frequently invoke ancient mystical traditions, they do so playfully and with little regard to theological traditions. As Coggins reports with regard to one of the genre's canonical texts:

The interpretation and reception of Sleep's Jerusalem/Dopesmoker (1996, 2003) is serious and reverential, while simultaneously jocular, almost derisive. As one interviewee put it, 'it takes its not being serious very seriously'. The lyrical theme of a caravan of stoner priests in hybrid Star Wars/Old Testament landscapes and language is described as silly, though the same recording is described by the same listeners as the holy grail of drone metal and as a sacred text. (73)

Coggins identifies repeated 'struggles with language' in talk about drone metal. Invoking the extraordinary and the ineffable in experience is also a common feature of mystical discourse too. Drone metal is therefore mystical insofar as it shares a fascination with otherness, distant 'elsewheres' and altered states with other mystical traditions.

At the same time, the relationship between the mystical and drone metal is one that avoids the more dogmatic notions of the religious. Informed by Michel de Certeau's work on the communicative nature of mystical experience, Coggins develops the concept of 'listening as if' to understand the ways in which drone metal fans listen as if one were religious, as if the music was a mystic ritual, while still sustaining a 'conceptual ambiguity' that ensures 'escaping commitment to any dogma or institutions, or even to stable and definitive statements or propositions about the music.' (85)

It is this intriguing concept that makes *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* required reading for anyone interested not just in contemporary popular music, but also in contemporary mysticism and religiosity. On finishing this book I wondered if perhaps 'listening as if' is a practice shared more widely in more overtly religious fields. In the post-enlightenment west, might the search for mystical experience always be aware of its own constructedness? Might religious practice today always be practice experienced 'as if' it were religious? Or maybe it always has been? Coggins's findings on the ambiguities of the experience of drone metal raise productive questions about the uncertain, performative nature of religion as a whole.

—Keith Kahn-Harris
Leo Baeck College and Birkbeck College, London

Performance Studies and Negative Epistemology: Performance Apophatics by

Claire Maria Chambers. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 301 pp. £79.00

hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-137-52043-2

Intellectually stimulating and thoroughly engaging, Claire Maria Chambers's *Performance Studies and Negative Epistemology: Performance Apophatics*, is an ambitious interweaving of the two concepts in her title, generating an emerging methodological approach predicated on a practice of 'critical unknowing'. This 'telos', described as a *how*, a praxical process rather than a state to be achieved, is developed through close readings of theologians and critical thinkers ranging from Augustine of Hippo through to Jean-Luc Nancy; Hildegard von Bingen to Bruno Latour. Chambers fearlessly traces an interdisciplinary genealogy between the negative theology of Christian mysticism and poststructuralist theory, tackling spirituality, theatricality and performativity head-on. The framework generated by this far-reaching critical analysis is subsequently applied to an array of artistic, performance and spiritual phenomena, from intercultural Eastern and Western religious practices to modern African American drama and a South Korean theatrical adaptation of a Scottish play text.

Chambers's skill is making the complex accessible (to a graduate readership base); she playfully and energetically interweaves negative theology, phenomenology, Derridean deconstruction, feminist theory, existentialism, Actor Network Theory and performance studies in order to map out the entangled tradition of *apophaticism*: a shared conviction that the absolute, the Real, the big Other (be that the divine, the non-human, or the cultural/racial/gendered other) is ultimately unknowable, and can only be approached through negation. Chambers' argument is that it is exactly this lack of an absolute, over-arching onto-theological truth that allows for a relational being-with difference, an 'unselfing the self, unworlding the world' (259) that generates a 'critical unknowing' (Ibid), permitting greater unity and community.

The introduction offers an overview of Chambers's operation of performance apophatics, delineating its possible applications and limitations. This is unpacked in the critical interweaving that takes place in her second chapter, 'Performance Studies and Negative Epistemology', which traces a genealogical through-line of the operative application of apophatics from classical and medieval theology through to the phenomenal and post-structural limits of knowledge as mapped out by Butler, Phelan, Levinas and Derrida, amongst others. Chapters three through seven apply performance apophatics to a range of phenomena, from South Korean transcultural consumption and the work of James Baldwin to Orthodox Christian iconography and the living archive of pioneering female Anglican priest, Reverend Doctor Florence Li Tim-Oi.

The chapters on Tim-Oi's archive and the author's fashioning of Christian iconography at a San Francisco Episcopalian Chapel are particularly effective, due in part to Chambers's meticulous, auto-ethnographic accounts of both research projects. Her search for the ghostly traces of Tim-Oi through the detritus, ephemera, fading recollections and messianic reinterpretations of the latter's life in the burgeoning archive devoted to her is poignant and thought provoking. Chambers's in-depth analysis of the theological impetus behind the embodied labour of fashioning a Christian icon as an indexical medium for a spiritual encounter with the divine is highly articulate, and will be useful to scholars from a variety of different fields engaged with embodied praise practice forms.

The chapter on South Korean theatre AGA Company's 'transcultural consumption' (86) of Scottish playwright Douglas Maxwell's *Our Bad Magnet* is somewhat more problematic. Chambers suggests that the patriarchal notions of lineage and essentialised origins underpinning the work of early intercultural practitioners such as Grotowski, Barba, Schechner and Brook can be tempered by the 'queer stance' of transcultural consumption, which elides source and origin and thus allows for the apophatic — understood here as the unknown contours between the transcultural creative product, Chambers's reception of it, and its reception by a mainly female South Korean audience. However, Chambers does not rigorously question the underlying capitalist agenda underscoring the notion of 'consumption', nor is it clear how the patriarchal roots of apophaticism in negative (Christian) theology are any more benign than the cultural naivety underpinning HIT (Hegemonic Intercultural Theatre), or how apophatics can comfortably sit alongside a queer agenda given its Catholic theological heritage.

Similarly, Chambers's assertion that performance apophatics will not '[...] chase, capture or otherwise force the other into our own zones of comfortable contact and cultural interpretation' (221) is contradicted by her application of Kierkegaard and Heidegger (a Nazi party member) to her analysis of Baldwin's play texts and novels. What is missing in the chapter on Baldwin is a greater focus on Chambers's own personal engagement with Baldwin's texts as a white North American scholar living and working in Seoul. A more overtly ethnographic account here would not have been mere 'navel-gazing' (61), but rather would have served to add greater complexity to the relational ontology of being-with the other underpinning Chambers's re-inflection of negative epistemology. This complex being-with the other needs overt articulation in the context of the racial inequities that unfortunately continue to underscore any critical, deconstructive embrace between a white scholar and a Black artist.

Despite these issues, this is a rewarding, challenging book, written with intellectual integrity and sagacity. It will surely make an important contribution to the fields of performance studies, performance and philosophy and performance and religion, and should serve as a seminal work for anyone seeking to engage with performance from a critical post-theological perspective.

—Patrick Campbell
Manchester Metropolitan University

A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion by David Scott Kastan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 176 pp. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-199-57289-2.

David Scott Kastan's *A Will to Believe* presents a concise and incisive addition to recent scholarship on Shakespeare and religion. Based on a series of lectures given at Oxford University in 2008, this work offers an engaging overview of the reading of religion in Shakespeare's life and canon. Kastan's work relays the importance of religion within the social-historical context of Shakespeare's life and corpus while also arguing that the plays themselves are non-partisan on the question of Shakespeare's

Protestant or Catholic allegiances; ultimately, Kastan argument asserts the Bard “recognized and responded to the various ways in which religion charged the world in which he lived” (3).

Over its five chapters, *A Will to Believe* presents a summary of the scholarly discourse surrounding Shakespeare’s engagement with the religious tumult that characterized early modern England. Kastan argues against the notion that Shakespeare or his work was detached from the divisive religious concerns that characterized sixteenth-century England. Rather, he suggests that religion played a role in Shakespeare’s work that is more nuanced than simply reading his plays for signs personal religious belief; instead, the canon attests to “the experience of belief...rather than the truth of what was believed” (7).

The second chapter presents a thorough reading of the sparse archival evidence surrounding Shakespeare’s personal religious belief, ultimately asserting that such evidence is inconclusive regarding Shakespeare’s inner religious convictions. In analyzing such documents as Shakespeare’s will or his father’s hidden pamphlet affirming Catholicism, Kastan posits that, “Shakespeare’s faith does not clearly emerge from the desultory narrative of his familial and personal history” (30). By the close of this chapter, Kastan shifts the question of religion and Shakespeare away from postulations about Shakespeare’s own convictions and towards a dialectic of belief as manifested in his literary texts themselves.

Chapters 3 through 5 provide close readings of various religious elements within Shakespeare’s dramatic canon. Chapter 3 reads the Italian plays and history plays as consistently set in locales or eras where Protestantism was absent. In the Italian plays, Kastan argues that “Shakespeare stages Catholicism without any of the hostility with which English Protestant polemic characteristically treated it” (53), suggesting neutrality rather than politicization as characterizing the representations of the Roman faith. On the other hand, the history plays like engage with Catholicism as a potential political threat to early English autonomy but refuse to offer a proto-Protestant retort from its English protagonists. Kastan concludes that this ambivalence reflects within contemporary English culture “a continuity of amicable, unsystematic religious thought in which communal harmony regularly trumped doctrinal purity” (76), despite the political turmoil surrounding religion.

Chapter 4 specifically investigates the cosmopolitan Venetian setting of both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* as early portrayals of a religiously pluralistic society. In the religiously minoritarian figures of Othello the Moor and Shylock the Jew, Kastan sees the conflation of their religious otherness with their racial marginalization: “Shakespeare fails to imagine worlds in which even three-dimensional Jews and Moors can avoid the bitter discovery of how provisional and vulnerable their existence is” (110). The concluding chapter, “Forgetting Hamlet” argues for the Bard’s hallmark tragedy as the most theologically engaged of his canon. Reading the inciting incident of the Ghost’s appearance in Hamlet as reflective of the Catholic and Protestant division over questions of the soul, purgatory and salvation itself, this chapter features Kastan’s most detailed exegesis of any of the plays discussed. While he disagrees with Stephen Greenblatt’s reading of Hamlet as a Protestant tragic hero haunted by a paternal, Catholic ghost, Kastan does suggest that Hamlet’s innervation points to “an epistemological crisis at the heart of the play and arguably in Protestantism itself” (135) concerning theological knowledge and certainty. This reading of *Hamlet* once again

asserts Kastan's thesis: the religious ambivalence of the play reflects the theological ambiguity of contemporary English consciousness itself.

On the whole, Kastan's light argumentative touch and deft prose offer a subtle but acute contribution to the field of Shakespeare studies. *A Will to Believe* may be most effective at problematizing other critical readings of Shakespeare and religion (particularly those that make claims about Shakespeare's personal convictions) rather than proffering a compelling alternative reading. In interpreting Shakespeare's canon as deeply reflective of the religious ambiguity of his time, this book offers readers a greater understanding of and the means to culturally critique of his literary legacy.

—Carla Neuss

University of California, Los Angeles

Dance, Consumerism and Spirituality by C.S. Walter. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 189 pp. £59.99 hardback (£55.00 paperback, £43.49 ebook). ISBN: 978-1-137-46352-4.

As the canon of dance scholarship develops, so too does scholarship that investigates the intersections of dance and spirituality. For example, in the edited collection, *Somatics and Spiritualities: Contemporary Sacred Narratives*,¹ prominent dance theorists and practitioners attempt to understand the role spirituality plays within somatic movement studies and dance pedagogy and practice. A unifying theme present throughout these works is that dance is *inherently* a spiritual practice, or at least one that serves as a vehicle through which a mystical experience might occur. It is in this vein that dance practitioner and scholar C.S. Walter presents her book, *Dance, Consumerism, and Spirituality*.

Walter relies on theoretical, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic research to argue that humankind—a species that buys, uses, gives, and disposes goods, services, and ideas for both nourishment and enjoyment—makes use of dance in multiple capacities. As spectators, people spend money to attend the concerts of popular dance companies. Within ritual practices such as weddings, people participate in dance, manifesting joy on the dance floor. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Walter suggests that the consumption of dance is often connected to consumption of goods, albeit discretely; dance is included in product advertisements and within popular media, such as television shows and motion pictures. It is specifically within this capacity of consumerism that Walter builds her primary argument: that the inclusion of dance within these forums serves as an almost subliminal mode of inviting the consumer into mystical awareness. Walter situates her book “at the crossroads between dancing in cultural consumption and dancing for overt religious and spiritual purposes. I seek to show that people dance or love dance for the satisfaction of the desire for a mystical experience” (4).

Walter develops her argument through six chapters. In the introduction, she explains that her assertions stem from her own practical experience with dance, as well as the experiences of others. From these interactions, she writes, “I have learned that a

¹ Amanda Williamson, Glenna Batson, Sarah Whatley, and Rebecca Weber, eds, *Somatics and Spiritualities: Contemporary Sacred Narratives* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014).

spiritual connection is developed, maintained, or addressed through dance that is not based on any rational, enlightened, textual, or linguistic analysis” (3). Dance, Walter suggests, is an expressive form manifested through a vehicle shared by all of humanity: the physical body. She situates dance practice as a commodity in many cultures throughout history, often relied upon for mystical aims. To connect the physical to the mystical, then, Walter employs her own theoretical framework—what she classifies as *womanist transmodern*—to “explain how dance is used over time as a way to express *mystical experiences* and emotions” (7). Although Walter explains thoroughly what this theory does for her argument, its components (womanist and transmodern) are not clearly defined, nor do they aptly draw from other theoretical sources. Nevertheless, it is through this lens that she develops subsequent chapters.

Walter slowly unravels her use of terms and theory in chapters one through four. In chapter one, she situates the spiritual motivations for dance consumption and argues that “seeing, experiencing, and feeling dance, and doing so among other people, fulfills needs for shared and individual experiences” (85). Chapter two looks at black social dance, or “black folks’ dance that has not transferred onto the concert stage,” borrowing from dance and theatre scholar Thomas DeFranz’s definition (40). Here Walter vaguely argues that a womanist transmodern lens eases the tension that surrounds how different cultures and histories might lead to mystical movements through dance. In chapters three and four, Walter provides a brief overview of how people tend to value aesthetics, especially as they relate to spiritual experiences, and how people apply this value to cultural dance experiences. These chapters, too, are rather vague and sweeping.

Only in the penultimate chapter does Walter apply these previous ideas to dance as they are contextualized by consumerism and spirituality. Walter relies on ethnographic data where undefined participants of different ages, genders, and ethnicities rate their feelings, responses, and experiences after watching ads through a computer-based interface from major companies like Kia and Apple. This chapter ultimately does what Walter’s introduction states the book would do: explore how dance within consumerism leads to mystical occurrences. Walter ends the book with a call for a more intentional look at ourselves, our need for consumption, and for spiritual connection using dance as a vehicle.

Throughout this book, Walter employs conversational language. She often refers to personal anecdotes from her own journey as a dancer and dance scholar. Although Walter’s explanations and uses of theory and terms may at times seem clinical or underdeveloped, for the most part, this book’s main ideas are accessible and might be useful in the undergraduate classroom. *Dance, Consumerism, and Spirituality* is an interesting look at how the mystical connects to the human body and how people’s need to consume brings these elements together. Although this book certainly has its weaknesses, overall it is an ambitious marriage of dance studies, religious studies, anthropology, and performance.

—Joseph R. D’Ambrosi
Indiana University