Review Essay: Somatography
Debra Hawhee

James Fredal, Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens: Persuasive Artistry from Solon to Demosthenes (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), ix + 249 pp. $50.00.


Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), xii + 141 pp. $32.95.

Forgetting Speech

Frederick Douglass’s account of his first “invited” speech in “My Bondage and My Freedom” includes a snippet of rhetorical criticism, auto-criticism if you will. After writing about his being sought out by the abolitionist William C. Coffin at a summer 1841 anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Douglass recounts how he was “induced to speak out the feelings inspired by the occasion,” to offer “fresh recollection” of what he had endured as a slave. His account, remarkably, begins with what he can’t in fact recall: “My speech on this occasion is about the only one I ever made,” begins the auto-criticism, “of which I do not remember a single connected sentence.” He continues:

It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect, or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation and stammering. I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called. At any rate, this is about the only part of my performance that I now distinctly remember. But excited and convulsed as I was, the audience, though remarkably quiet before, became as much excited as myself.1

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What Douglass narrates here is a kind of overtaking—of body over speech, of body-speech over audience. Words were spoken, to be sure, and Douglass no doubt spoke them, but they recede into the background of the scene, giving way—at least in Douglass’s recollection—to energy, to “embarrassment,” to the physical transmission of excitement. The description, like the body that Douglass describes, moves from quivers to convulsions, from one person to the crowd, documenting a spike in energy, even in noise. By Douglass’s account, rhetoric is so much more than words: it is face, synapases, skin. It is energy, excitement, aura.

Attention to this “more-than-words” and its various material, pulsing moves has become the task of many scholars in the humanities. But how do we say much more than that? More, that is, than: “Look, Douglass’s body is talking! Bodies do matter. Just like Judith Butler told us.” End of story. Print. Submit.

Indeed, scholars’ contributions must stretch beyond merely noticing bodies. Finally, after a decade or more of noticing bodies, of reaping the benefits of earlier, extradisciplinary work on bodies, scholarship focusing on bodily rhetoric has begun to show just how instructive this focus can be. The four books I will consider turn from the questions “are bodies rhetorical?” and “can rhetoric be material?” (with an implied “if so, how?”) to questions such as “how might a sustained focus on bodies and materiality retrain our memories and produce new accounts of rhetoric?” With these questions, the stakes of bodily rhetorics get raised to the very processes of communication and meaning-making.

This essay discusses research by James Fredal, Anthony Corbeill, Paul Goring, and Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe; I offer these books less because they “represent” a particular moment in a subfield—although they might well do that—than for their historical, theoretical, and methodological range. These four books cohere around a category of bodily rhetorics, and yet each intervenes in discrete historical periods and places, moving, in turn, from ancient Greece and Rome (Fredal and Corbeill respectively) to eighteenth-century England (Goring) to twentieth-century United States (Houck and Kiewe). These books offer a number of distinct historiographic approaches to bodily rhetorics, even as each book sculpts its own conceptual argument. Taken separately, each book shows how a dual focus on bodies and rhetoric may bring into focus questions heretofore underexamined in a rhetorical context, including new questions about nature (Corbeill), about performance (Fredal), about politeness (Goring), and about disability and the American presidency (Houck and Kiewe).

Two of these books come from authors trained in classics (Corbeill) and literary studies (Goring), and I chose them because these authors make extensive use of rhetorical and oratorical sources in order to fill out their cultural accounts of bodies, behavior, and meaning-making. If Corbeill and Goring are any indication, rhetorical studies has indeed moved past the moment marked by the important early bibliography of Gail Corning and Randi Patterson.² That 1997 bibliography takes a uni-directional approach, exploring what body studies might offer rhetorical studies. In contrast, Corbeill and Goring help us see—sometimes through noticeable oversights and omissions—what rhetorical theories and primary sources can offer
studies of the body. What is more, the ringing methodological question of “in rhetoric, what do we study when we study bodies?” receives resounding and wide-ranging answers: we study wits, passion, artistry, and vitality; we examine stones, heat, chairs, and thumbs.

Materials and Methods

Explicitly historical, these four books document the challenges and rewards of excavating bodies from stony, dusty, inky sources. One of the most obvious challenges to writing about bodies from an historical perspective is that the bodies about which historians write are frequently no longer living, breathing, moving entities. Such bodies have been transmogrified into artifacts and data—textual reports, recorded descriptions, epistolary discussions, photographs, drawings, or artwork in other media. James Fredal and Anthony Corbeill, who are working on the oldest and deadest bodies of the bunch, treat this challenge explicitly and end up carving rather opposing views when it comes to language: Fredal attempts to bracket language altogether while Corbeill locates in bodily gesture a language all its own.

James Fredal’s *Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens: Persuasive Artistry from Solon to Demosthenes* seeks to reformulate ancient Greek rhetoric as a spectacular art, what he calls “rhetorical artistry” (7), and to do so, the book begins with a set of oppositions. On the first page Fredal takes the combined perspective of writing and theory—what he calls, parenthetically (Fredal has a rather distracting tendency to place important arguments in parentheses), “that other mountaintop locus from nowhere abstracted from the life of the city” (1–2) — and opposes that perspective to “the perspective offered by the city itself, its spaces, people, and practices and the values and beliefs that drove them” (2). Such a shift in perspective also requires a shift in what Fredal calls “orientation,” which, as any reader of Kenneth Burke knows, quickly becomes a method, even a methodology. Fredal explains:

> And it requires a material and spatial, visual and kinetic, gestural and chronemic orientation in order to discern ancient action buried beneath the tessellated labyrinth of literate treatise and theory, to resee the privileged practices and values of an ancient people from the often meager and dwindling traces that remain. (2)

Fredal goes on to write of writing itself as a “bias” (2), and to set aside texts in favor of column drums, paintings, and marble work. At stake, for Fredal, are “forms of knowledge . . . that reside in the body and in practice,” and such knowledge forms cannot be discerned from an exclusive study of texts (3). Fredal ultimately argues for what he terms an “archaeological rhetoric,” which I take as his methodology. The methodology attends to artifacts such as the boundary stones at the Pnyx, stones that demarcate and designate spaces for rhetorical action. Rhetorical action, Fredal argues, again in parentheses, is symbolic action (7). And yet if rhetorical action is symbolic action, can words be wholly bracketed? Should they?

I fear that Fredal overstates—or, better, mis-states—the case when in the Introduction he claims “that ancient Greek media for public symbolic (that is,
rhetorical) interaction were not so much verbal or textual as visual and performative” (7). Indeed, on my reading, Fredal’s book documents instead the difficulty of separating out spoken language from space, texts from physicality. If so, the four books considered here, together with work by scholars in visual rhetoric, would suggest that language itself—spoken and written—is also visual and performative. And an “archeological rhetoric,” a methodology that attends to spaces and places, to performance and bodies, shows just how expansive rhetorical knowledge was and is. Even so, while I don’t think it’s necessary or even desirable to forget speech, sometimes, as in Frederick Douglass’s case, we have no choice: it forgets us. Those are the moments we might attend to more specifically, and Fredal urges such attention.

Fredal’s book lays open the possibilities for what counts as rhetorical action. Perhaps the most compelling case in point is the chapter on the infamous herm-chopping incident, which Fredal interprets as an act of mass protest during the Adonis Festival of 416/15 BCE, and which resulted in the mutilation of the city’s herms, phallus-bearing statues scattered throughout Athens. This chapter is bold and imaginative, relying on the power of suggestion and scene-setting (as well as textual and historical accounts of the protestive act) to establish a strong case for material rhetoric as an alternative rhetoric, a forceful, collective, oppositional, even furtive rhetoric. This rhetoric is best characterized, following Fredal, as “persuasive artistry.” Fredal’s strong speculation that this act was committed by the women of Athens gives life to a feminist rhetoric well before the common era and stands against most rhetorical models—even feminist ones—that are based on single figures (Aspasia, Diotima, etc.). In this regard, Fredal joins the earlier efforts of Susan Jarratt to cull a feminist rhetoric from ancient practice, although curiously Jarratt, like a number of important scholars of ancient rhetoric, receives scant attention. She does not appear in the bibliography and joins a host of under- and unconsidered scholars in the field—scholars such as Jeffrey Walker, whose work on Homer is relevant to the second chapter’s arguments about rhetoric’s “beginnings” in action, and John Poulakos, whose arguments about ancient theatre seem more than relevant to many of the assumptions Fredal makes about action and performance. If rhetorical scholars are to expand their methodologies, the challenge still remains to keep the new work engaged with existing scholarship.

Anthony Corbeill’s *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome*, a book that examines Rome’s gesturing bodies and practices, stands as a useful corollary to Fredal’s intervention. On one hand, Corbeill, like Fredal, discovers that a focus on bodies makes room for more careful considerations of women’s action; on the other hand, Corbeill develops a stance on language that opposes Fredal’s. Corbeill’s chapter “Blood, Milk, and Tears: The Gestures of Mourning Women” examines Roman funerary rituals, cultural practices that reveal bodily orientations between live and dead bodies. It is a rich and powerful chapter that gathers a wealth of artifactual and textual evidence, evidence ranging from funerary reliefs to legal texts to an Etruscan hand mirror (102) to Pompeiian painting.

Corbeill’s book benefits from a tighter focus than Fredal’s, since Corbeill is studying one form of persuasive action: bodily gesture, movements of heads, faces,
limbs, and digits. His interest, though, like Fredal’s, is cultural, and his methodology keys nicely to the cultural work of gesture. As Corbeill puts it, “When our sources mention a gesture being performed, and its intention being understood by a viewer, we gain access to a shared area of knowledge, one based not on the expression of individual will but on cultural circumstances” (1). However, a crucial difference between Fredal and Corbeill would be Corbeill’s argument that bodies beget languages and that an ancient bodily language, like any other dead language, can be not only divined, it can even be tracked through time. Corbeill even argues, tantalizingly, that gesture language is more enduring and stable than verbal language.

In order to develop that argument, Corbeill combines the methods of anthropologists with those of philologists. Relying as much on readings of Bourdieu and Bateson as he does on Cicero and Quintilian, Corbeill culls what amounts to a philology of gesture. The gesturing bodies about which Corbeill writes are no less dead than the language he and his colleagues study and track. Taking seriously commonplace phrases such as “the body speaks” (2), Corbeill sets out, in his words, to consider the implications of this cliché of the speaking body by demonstrating how much of the gestural language displayed on the streets and in the houses of Rome can in fact be shown to belong to a self-consistent language, and to one no less complicated and subject to exploitation than the spoken language of Latin. (2)

As it turns out, according to Corbeill the language of gesture in the Roman world was as subtle and precise as the declension of Latin’s nouns and the conjugation of its verbs. What’s more, the political desire to control the “public body” is documented through careful, tacitly comparative, readings of Cicero and Quintilian’s meditations on gesture. Corbeill’s philology of gesture, however, spans other sources besides those near to the hearts of rhetorical scholars. Some are textual, including the more predictable poetic texts by the likes of Ovid and Pliny; others are religious, pharmaceutical, legal, and agricultural tracts that yield a robust account of what Corbeill terms “participatory gesture” — gesture through which humans develop a relation to other humans and especially to nonhumans. Religious ritual is therefore an important site for Corbeill, as is agricultural ritual.

One historiographic lesson that might be gleaned from Corbeill is this: when searching for what Corbeill calls “recoverable networks of knowledge” (12), particularly bodily knowledge, one must leave no text—written or sculpted—untouched. In addition to looking for proverbial needles in haystacks, one might, for example, pause to consider ancient accounts of hay bales formed in the shape of hands, or depictions of hands on coins (22); one must meditate on the specific reticence of Tiberius’s mouth or the bloodshot eyes of Claudius, as rendered in texts as well as busts (161–62), and be able to discuss how these features graft onto the “new world order” of Roman emperors and their reign of deception (166–67). Such an approach, of course, challenges scholars to engage the resources of multiple disciplines, to test the very limits of established expertise. In addition to classics and anthropology, for example, Corbeill is by default responsible for and to art history, history of medicine, and religious studies. Bodies, in short, move inquiries...
onto other plains, plains which we might not be comfortable or well-equipped to traverse.

And yet while Corbeill is of course qualified to write about antiquity/antiquities, he nevertheless introduces comparative moves, whereby Bourdieu's Kabyle women are considered alongside Roman matronae (70–71) and Todorov's account of Mexican versus Spanish linguistic practice sits beside Tacitean and non-Tacitean representations of Tiberius. The net effect is, at last, the blowing open of classics in order to think broadly—some might even say dangerously universally—about bodily gesture and its status as participatory language. The philologist is at home with the linguistic anthropologist, and the rhetorician might also elbow her way in. Corbeill's frequent return to oratorical texts as gesture manuals, while unsurprising to historians of ancient rhetoric, still raises the question of why Corbeill's favored passages differ so sharply from those favored in, say, Bizzell and Herzberg's Rhetorical Tradition. Why don't Quintilian's meditations on the index finger receive as much treatment in rhetorical studies as his account of the vir bonus? This question seems especially puzzling when one considers that the two—virtuous manhood and gesture—were bound together tightly for Quintilian, only to become slowly disentangled through centuries of privileging reasoned, moral, educational practices over bodily training. The point here is that rhetorical studies has long focused on rhetoric as a history of ideas rather than a history of bodies, when the two, as Corbeill resolutely holds, can't be so easily separated.

Perspective by Incongruity

Books on like topics in other disciplines are often consulted as source guides, or for added perspective on a particular subject such as bodies. A hidden value of consulting such books is that they can help us identify disciplinary values and methods even as they reveal rhetoric's disciplinary blind spots—messy, splotchy, grey areas that result in and from the specialization of reason, argument, and education. Paul Goring's book The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture, an examination of the discourse of politeness, can't help but consider the bodies marked as polite. As such, it functions as both source guide and as disciplinary gauge. Goring's book and its use of oratorical texts in the service of literary studies can therefore be as instructive as it is frustrating.

First, the frustrations. Perhaps because of his investment in the discourse of politeness, Goring wants to view bodies as almost exclusively symbolic. The resulting theoretical stance on bodies and language rubs against both Corbeill's and Fredal's perspectives. Goring's view of rhetorical delivery as "signs generated through the body" (34) approaches but doesn't exactly square with Corbeill's relatively stable language of the body, and the distinction between the two can be methodologically instructive. Whereas Goring handles bodies with the literary gloves of signs and symbols, thereby leaving bodies in the realm of strictly human interaction and almost wholly beholden to linguistic structure, Corbeill, following the Romans (who inform so much of eighteenth-century rhetorical practice), views bodies—and bodily
gesture—as enabling a much broader participation, which is to say as profoundly relational, and this relationality stretches beyond humans to the superhuman, the dead, nature, and the environment. Fredal would probably urge Goring to disentangle the language of codes and signs from bodies, somehow to hit the mute button historically and see what bodies do. Goring’s reliance on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s discussion of discursive space (66–67) restricts his intervention to the domain of discourse and social codes, and in the process reveals the usefulness of Fredal’s exclusion of discursive accounts if not altogether then at least temporarily.

Even more specifically, what gets ignored in Goring’s reliance on a bodily hermeneutic of code is the work of rupture that bodies can do. When, in a treatment of the fiery Orator Henley, Goring observes that “the body animated by passions performed a symbolic function,” he restricts bodies to—and places them in the service of—textual meaning. If, however, we follow Fredal’s advice and shed symbolic propensities, we might find so much more. Take, for example, an account of Orator Henley’s performance considered by Goring, wherein Henley, having entered the scene through a trap door “jumped to the desk,” and proceeded to, according to the observer, “beat into the audience with hands, arms, legs, and head, as if people’s understandings were to be courted and knocked down with blows, and gesture and grimace were to plead and atone for all other deficiencies” (68). Goring uses this passage to document the writer’s “predetermined expectations regarding pulpit decorum,” thereby finding a set of symbolic expectations violated. Such a reading, though, sucks the life out of the otherwise remarkable scene and misses the way Orator Henley moves the audience with his body.

To recognize the full significance of Orator Henley’s performance requires an interpretation that shifts from discourse and symbol-centered hermeneutics to one centered on kinetic force. Goring’s analysis effectively tames both the performance and the reception of the performance, settles them down, in order to squeeze them into his reading of politeness. Similarly, in earlier treatments of Michel Le Faucheur’s advice to an orator, wherein Le Faucheur suggests locking eyes with the auditors in such a way as to “set them a-blaze too upon the same Resentment and Passion” (48), Goring insists on the eye as an “emotive sign,” effectively ignoring the lively, catchy language of fire. In other words, eyes—and arguments—are made to flicker and burn; later passages, in which hearts are characterized as melting, are allowed to slip by. One passage about Methodism speaks of the “heat of imagination” (72), and while all the talk about heat doesn’t add up to much for Goring, a nonrational account of bodily rhetoric nevertheless flickers in his margins. What we have in the elocutionary movement is a powerful—and powerfully new—account of the body’s capacity to make sense in registers other than those typically favored by symbolic analysts in literature, rhetoric, and history: thought, reason, codes, signs, and symbols. Just as with Douglass’s speech, oratory presents bodies acting on bodies—visible, audible, state-changing actions that burn their way into audience’s passions. Through this experience words do, as Fredal suggests, begin to fall by the wayside.

Goring should not be taken as representative of a literary style of reading. Literary scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Rei Terada are in fact leading the way
studies of affect, which may be considered an offshoot of body studies and which seeks to set aside the rational language of symbolicity in favor of exploring alternative modes of interacting, of moving, and even of meaning. Despite the overly-contortive reading of politeness, Goring’s book is the result of painstaking research, and the sources gathered therein can be of immense value to rhetorical scholars.

Rhetorical Bodies, Bodily Rhetorics

So far I have considered the way these authors try to reconcile—or, in the case of Fredal, to radically separate—bodies and language in their treatments of archaic Greece, Rome, and eighteenth-century England. It seems there is no single answer to how to do this, although some sort of productive, if temporary, suspension of semantics is in order. Corbeill, interestingly, comes closest to this approach, even as Fredal might take it a bit too far. But the question still remains: what happens when bodies get reincorporated into a more traditionally defined text? And for all this talk about bodies and The Body, how might physical difference figure in to bodily rhetorics?

Immediately on the heels of the Douglass speech with which this essay opened, the famed abolitionist William Garrison took the stage, stepping into the aura of Douglass and incorporating that aura into his own speech. Douglass recalls the moment more modestly: “Mr. Garrison followed me, taking me as his text.” He continues, describing Garrison’s speech as no less than tornadic:

It was an effort of unequaled power, sweeping down, like a very tornado, every opposing barrier, whether of sentiment or opinion. For a moment, he possessed that almost fabulous inspiration, often referred to but seldom attained, in which a public meeting is transformed, as it were, into a singled individuality—the orator wielding a thousand heads and hearts at once, and by the simple majesty of his all controlling thought, converting his hearers into the express image of his own soul.

Here, Douglass offers a thoroughly affective account of rhetorical performance, what Fredal might call sheer artistry, a complete giving-over of Garrison to Douglass, of the audience to Garrison. And all of this happened through a combination of what Douglass calls “fabulous inspiration” achieved in part by “taking [Douglass] as his text.” Douglass himself—and, by extension, his excitable speech—might be read as the very rotation of Garrison’s earth-ripping effort. Douglass’s nervous vitality becomes both occasion and “text,” rhetorical force and primary source. And that combination is, by Douglass’s account, transformational.

Davis Houck and Amos Kiewe narrate a somewhat similar transformation, no less remarkable for its comparative protraction. Their account of a rhetoricized body resembles Douglass’s in that they follow the taking of a single body as a rhetorical text. This time the body is that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Houck and Kiewe trace how Roosevelt transforms his body, disabled by infantile paralysis, into a powerful rhetorical force and in the process alters the very structure of the presidency. To those of us who have worked with ancient sources, Houck and Kiewe seem to have a distinct advantage, a luxury, what with presidential archives and photographic
journalism. And yet for Houck and Kiewe, when researching such a carefully orchestrated campaign to at times disavow disability, the source material proved challenging. As they write in the Preface, “primary source material related directly to FDR and polio is just plain hard to find” (xxi).

The finished book, however, rewards their labors. Houck and Kiewe begin with the compelling story of the 1921 vacation on which FDR fell ill, a story they assembled by piecing together bits of Eleanor Roosevelt’s accounts and recollections in interviews and in hush-hush family letters, physicians’ letters, internal telegraphs, and public news stories. What results is a remarkable account of political/rhetorical strategy, a contribution not just to disability studies and presidential rhetoric but to public rhetoric studies as well. Their treatment of the genius stroke of FDR’s half-million-dollar life insurance policy, issued in 1930, shows how crucial that policy was on the path to the presidency, and stands on its own as a rhetorical commentary on insurance, a promise for future vitality, a stamp of presidential fitness (93 ff).

The photographs included in the book perhaps make the most efficient argument for the production of FDR as fit for the presidency. Whether the photos show FDR working in a chair, sitting with his legs folded on the beach, walking with barely-perceptible assistance, or leaning on a banister to pose with his mother, the images argue, however subtly, for the power of photography to refute the widespread rumors about FDR’s health. For the purposes of rhetorical scholarship, these photographs also showcase the links between visual rhetoric and bodily rhetoric, thereby offering a platform from which to consider what I have taken to calling rhetorical vision, which is to say the images, rhetorically produced, that utterances engrave into the minds, hearts, and imaginations of the audience. And it is FDR’s rhetorical vision and Houck and Kiewe’s account of it that are the most remarkable here. Much like the photographs, FDR’s speeches work visually to refute his condition. Houck and Kiewe cull FDR’s language of standing and walking and moving, through which Roosevelt effectively installs what Houck and Kiewe call “the vernacular . . . of a fit, active, vigorous, and healthy man” (115). Roosevelt’s presidential utterances reformulated ideas of his own body and of nation, as demonstrated in the chapter “A New Deal and a New Body.”

**Break Down**

Set next to the other three quite wide-ranging considerations of bodies in this selection of books, Houck and Kiewe’s stands apart for its focus on one person’s body, a body-in-public, a body-in-archive. As such, they fit in with a small handful of scholars working on what might be called “figural bodily studies,” which feature very particular bodily condition(s). My graduate seminar on “Rhetorics and Bodies” last fall considered a small collection of figural bodily studies, including Houck and Kiewe on FDR’s body, Janet Browne on Darwin’s body, Heather Merle Benbow on Kant’s body, and Kenneth Burke on his own body. Each piece meditated on bodily maladies—be they physical disabilities, digestive disorders (Darwin and Kant), or run-ins with the medical establishment (Burke). We couldn’t help but notice that
when a figure is of a privileged identity—a white, male, political leader or leading scientist or philosopher—the only time their bodies receive attention is when those bodies break down. The body of FDR perched on a wall or leaning on crutches might be usefully considered alongside that of the presumably able-bodied Frederick Douglass, who nevertheless recalls being able to “stand erect” only “with utmost difficulty.” Douglass’s strained standing no doubt contributed to the energy of his speech that day, much as Roosevelt’s physical difficulties may have resonated with a struggling nation. Both bodies relate to language in various ways: they utter, they stutter, they reveal and refute; they quiver and hold still, they incorporate trauma—historical, social, pathogenic, and physical.

Such attention to bodies in rhetorical studies helps redraw the bounds of rhetoric. Rhetoric, that is, exchanges impulses as much as words, energies and movements as much as arguments and metaphors. As Fredal demonstrates so well, rhetoric traffics in material, and as Corbeill shows in his elegant discussion of the “physicality of words” (15–20), even words themselves enfold material form and betray physical commitments. “Words,” Corbeill argues, “are verbal gestures in which physical action . . . has primacy” (17). Such an observation provides a useful way to think about words themselves as “carriers” of impulses, energies, and movements, and so written discourse need not be left out of bodily rhetorics. Language extends, reaches, relates. Such accounts, then, help to restore vitality to a field of study, urging it to loosen its grip on reason, to feel around for what else—and where else—rhetoric might be.

Notes
