



Pressure Points

An Introduction

Leon J. Hilton and Jasmine Johnson

We began conceptualizing this *TDR* Consortium section in late 2019 through the central frame of “pressure points.” We were interested in the ways performance can be constituted through ongoing constraint, duress, and harm—these impositions existing in relation to will, forfeit, relief, and pleasure. Our original ambition was not to simply point to the fact that pressure exists (pervasive as it is, after all), but to invite contributions that would expand our grammar around the mattering of pressure in theatre and performance-making.

Pressure points are prescient, sensitive, and muscular. They are areas that are ripe for study precisely because they have endured repetitious activity. “Pressure” can also signal a temporal shift. A finger’s weight on a sensitive spot speaks to past strain. An awareness of sensation indexes previous stimuli. The work of pressure, in other words, is about identifying a location that requires attention—despite its potential overuse—and attends to a call for different modes of assembly and performance. The writing gathered together for this Brown *TDR* Consortium section asks after performances and performative instantiations that respond to the urgencies of “pressure” and its effects.

What isn’t under pressure, we necessarily ask? For historically minoritarian groups, pressure is a constitutive feature of everyday living; although pressure is not the subject of minoritarian performance, it certainly can and often does impact its aesthetics. Our ambition is to show the work of performance when wrung by financial constraint, racial subordination, and (as each of the three authors attend to through their own geographical/temporal coordinates) misogyny and sexism. Does performance bear or buckle under the brunt of history? Perhaps more importantly than its potential capacity to *endure*, the authors ask how performance might yield other modes of identification and (queer) presence.

It so happened that our discussion about pressure points as a rubric for performance studies unfolded against the backdrop and amidst the chaos of the global Covid-19 pandemic as well as the explosion of activism, protest, and reflection catalyzed by a renewed national attention to antiblack violence and policing in the summer of 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The introductory reflections we offer here—appraising some of the meanings, uses, and possibilities for performance studies opened up by the concept of *pressure* and the figuration of *pressure points* in the work of our contributors—are followed by excerpts from a conversation that the two of us had in 2020 about what pressure is and how pressure illuminated our own investments as performance studies researchers and teachers working in the midst of what felt (and feels) like the ever more pressurizing, crisis-laden present.

Figure 1. (facing page) Close-up from .bury.me.fiercely. by Julie Tolentino and Stosh Fila, 2019. On Tolentino’s work see “Permanent Gestures: Primitive Whiteness in the (Queer) Tattoo Shop” by Meredith Lee in this issue. (Photo by M. Baranova; image courtesy of Julie Tolentino)

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The figuration of *pressure* indexes a curious slippage: one that marks the body's encounter with the world—and the other bodies that populate it—as being imbued with the capacity to both *receive* pressure and *transmit* it. In fact, this multivalence is of ancient provenance: the word *pressure* (from the Old French by way of the Latin *pressura*) carries within it an obsolete sense of constraint, tribulation, torture, and physical suffering.¹ Pressure shares a root with words like “oppression.” In burrowing down into these etymological roots of the word we find not only the body as a site of pressure but also the origins of the book (the printing *press*) to say nothing of the extraction of liquid for nourishment and consumption (from, say, olives and lemons). And then there are the sorts of pressures and pressure points that are produced by the frictions that are constitutive of social relationality as such. Shifting the focus onto these often overlooked or forgotten meanings of pressure might prompt us to hear new resonances in well-worn axioms—as in, for example, Michel Foucault's insistence that “power is not exercised simply as an obligation or prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’” but rather “invests them, is transmitted by them and through them,” and “exerts *pressure* upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grasp it has on them” ([1975] 1995:25–27; emphasis added). More recent critical antecedents for thinking about what we are tempted to call the social life of pressure might be found in the way that Lauren Berlant seeks to understand how the willful agency and intentionality attributed to the liberal humanist subject can be exhausted or transformed beyond recognition by “the *pressures* of coordinating one's pacing with the pace of the working day, including times of preparation and recovery from it” (2007:779). The essays that follow lay bare the inheritance of pressure for particular performance communities and bring questions around strain to the surface.

In foregrounding something as ubiquitous as pressure, we are reminded by Stuart Hall of the utility in asking new questions about long-established dynamics. With regard to black popular culture, Hall writes that moments of critical reflection “are always conjunctural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments [...] they are never the same moment” (1993:104). In the spirit of Hall, the contributing authors don't simply point to the fact that pressure exists or use pressure's everywhere-ness to dismiss its specific, conjectural presences. Rather, they offer rich engagements on the shape of its mattering in North American and Korean performance contexts. Refusing to “name call it ‘the same’” they offer new avenues to explore the vexed nature of pressure: the ways in which it conscripts and the ways individuals and groups insist on their own queer/femme prerogatives despite pressure's bullying (Hall 1993:107). Across the essays, pressure is an aperture: a way to explore a push/pull; a collapse or moment of resistance; a folding in or a breaking out. Each essay deals with the complex processes of being made and making one's self.

Pressure points conjures up certain traditions of body-based knowledge and practices of care that precede—and exceed—the rational epistemologies of modern Western science and medicine. Massage, Roling, and Reiki, for example, all apply considered touch in the service of wellness and remedy, physical or otherwise. Healing techniques with roots in ancient Chinese medicine—including acupuncture, for example—map the body as a kind of topography that is traversed by channels connecting seemingly disparate anatomical meridians. Meredith Lee's article for this issue, “Permanent Gestures: Primitive Whiteness in the (Queer) Tattoo Shop,” offers a different way to consider the relationship between touch, intimacy, and the epidermal. Lee keeps us viscerally close to the body and its secret histories, unearthing the queer and racialized pasts of tattoo culture in the archives of sexology, race science, and colonial criminology. “Permanent Gestures” connects what Lee names as “skin and ink, body and race to analyze how sex is a strange matter that mediates these practices of corporeal inscription” (33). Indeed, race, Lee suggests, “is the blueprint that underpins the ostensibly radical and transgressive dimensions of tattooing in the first instance” (45). Attuning us to the libidinal economies and “criminal intimacies” historically

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. 2007. Oxford University Press. s.v. “pressure.”

inseparable from the practice of, and desire for, a permanent impress of ink on the skin, Lee dwells with the uncomfortable, undeniable proximities of tattooing culture to white supremacy. Yet she also insists on the importance of tattoo culture as a site of expression that has been historically important to wayward and errant lives lived on the extreme edges of social marginalization.

Ra Malika Imhotep's essay "being-in-blackfeminineflesh: Towards an Embodied Veneration of BeTTY BuTT's Inexhaustible Pleasures" offers a richly instructive model for black performance ethnography in the digital era. Imhotep maps out what might be considered the *pressurized* relationship between black femininity and the performance of labor that becomes visible in the vernacular aesthetics of the "twerk video": short digital recordings created and circulated online by young black women dancing the eponymous move. Twerking, with its distinctively sped-up rhythmic gyrations, originated in the bounce and hip hop music scenes of New Orleans, Atlanta, and other parts of southern United States in the early 1990s. Focusing on the twerk YouTube videos of BeTTY BuTT, Imhotep argues that twerk video performances offer what she calls "a sensuous engagement with being-in-blackfeminineflesh" (16) that flagrantly refuses the moral strictures that have stigmatized, and indeed pathologized, black sexuality—a legacy of the "pornotroping" of enslaved flesh (see Spillers 2003; and Wehiliye 2014). "In the vernacular cinema of the twerk video," Imhotep writes, "what [Hortense] Spillers describes as the 'irresistible and destructive sensuality' of the pornotrope is mobilized by a global cohort of Black women and GNC Black femmes connected by a thread of Black popular culture highly influenced by Black sexual cultures and economies of the US South" (25). BeTTY BuTT "effectively brings the viewer into a digitized hall of mirrors as she doubles and re-doubles her flesh through a series of repetitive gestures" and "displays a series of alterations meant to transform the dancing body into a sight of self-pleasure" (19).

In her essay "Queer Archives, Performance, and Historiography in South Korea: siren eun young jung's *Yeosung Gukgeuk Project*," Yeong Ran Kim also zeroes in on a set of aesthetic and performative objects that seem to put pressure on sedimented ideologies of gendered propriety and sexual "identity"—albeit in a radically different cultural context. Kim considers contemporary South Korean artist siren eun young jung's fascination with the history of yeosung gukgeuk, a nearly forgotten theatrical genre performed exclusively by enormously popular all-female performance groups in the 1940s before fading into obscurity. In recent works of video, multimedia, and performance, siren has excavated the stylized gestures and performance techniques developed by the yeosung gukgeuk artists who performed male roles in the form's heyday, conjuring a version of the past as a theatrical world of queer fantasy, desire, and play. Reading siren's efforts to reanimate a long neglected, critically denigrated tradition of male impersonation as an example of temporal drag (Freeman 2010), Kim suggests that the renewed interest in yeosung gukgeuk in contemporary queer South Korean culture "exposes the pressure points and tensions within contemporary South Korean queer identity politics vis-à-vis the past" (48).

The three contributions that follow approach pressure from distinctive vantage points, taking up *pressure points* as a concept, embodied reality, metaphor, or problematic for performance studies in ways that are richly suggestive and frequently surprising. Taken together, they prompt us to ask how pressure serves as a site for theoretical reflection on the workings of performance. These essays invite reflection upon the work of, and demand for, pressure's alleviation while urging us to consider how being worn out might not always mean being worn down.

Pressure Points: A Dialogue

We had this exchange in 2020 as we began to think about *pressure points* as a way of focusing a conversation in *TDR* on the current moment.

JASMINE JOHNSON: Early in our thinking about pressure, we conceived of the term as marking spaces of sensitivity, but then also as places that mark repeated activity—those that are sensitive because they have been trafficked. This has me thinking in a US context, about the uprising during the summer of 2020. One of the things that I've been writing about is: Why do black people dance

when the world is on fire? Part of how I was thinking about that was in terms of the ways that ciphers—solos, music circles—cropped up at protests for black lives and in defense of black lives. Blackness that always finds a way to confer presence, even while inside catastrophe.

There's a different kind of alchemy going on that is not about black dance as a kind of evidence of transcendence, but something that is a practice and process of *working through*. So it makes sense that in this context when folks are gathering in intentional ways, protests become sites where people think about the beauty and the limits of assembly in incredible ways.

So, what does that have to do with pressure for me? There's something about the repetition of being forced, at this point, to bear witness to extralegal antiblack violence—and by forced I mean that in this historical moment we're inundated with it, whether or not we choose to opt in. In the repetition of having to bear witness to these scenes of brutality, there's a way this kind of historical depth of sadness around these scenes becomes a site of pressure. That well of frustration can also be the resource of action—of having to take to the streets, of having to be with others.

The mass gathering expresses the many pressure points: exhaustion, being overworked, constantly being pressed. There's something about the simultaneity of multiple pressure points being about continued exhaustion and also being an avenue toward muscle building. To be able not only to endure and “take it” but also to alchemize that energy in a different way.

LEON HILTON: If pressure presumes a certain capacity to be borne, to bear it, and suggests that there is *something*—an expectation, a historical burden, a material object—pressing down upon us that produces the pressure, it also suggests the necessity of something else that's pressing back in resistance. I was thinking about how interesting it is that we formulated this theme of pressure at a certain moment that preceded both the Covid-19 pandemic and a renewed attention to antiblack violence prompted by high-profile killings committed by police officers. Much of the language we generated about pressure was thinking about it as this concretely embodied phenomenon that everyone has an experience of, but the ways in which pressurization can both come from without and also, as we're seeing with this disease, from within the body itself. How is pressurized breath produced by the body's own immune system overreacting to infection? In respiratory infections like Covid-19 there is this molecular process that happens, where the body's immune system essentially turns against itself and makes it difficult to breathe from “within.” What is the relationship between these different ways that pressure can constrict the breath—and limit the capacity of the lungs, the larynx, the other components of the body's breathing apparatus—that is necessary for the persistence of life? I'm wondering if this might be another way of understanding a connection between an upsurge and mobilization around black life and the onset of a pandemic that is also killing black, brown, and indigenous communities at hugely disproportionate rates relative to whites.

JOHNSON: It's no surprise that when I hear you talk about breath, Ashon Crawley's work comes to mind: this idea that black folks find ways to come to gather, to exercise and activate collective breath...and that it's all happening after a day's exhausting work [see Crawley 2016]. There's already this intensity of pressure in terms of labor being extracted from your body, of course. And then after that there is a different kind of possibility of breathing together that is not overdetermined or scheduled by these structures that are designed with an arithmetic to stretch the body/breath. Within the context of that cruel elemental component of slavery to pressurize the enslaved is when so many black performance innovations cropped up.

Black US American performance is not a romance made possible by having all the time, all the space, and all the breath. It comes from a historical context of being so robbed of total control over one's own breath and one's own body. What can emerge through deep intimacy and relation with exhaustion, with mourning, and anxiety?

HILTON: Hamja Ahsan, a writer and artist based in London, has been developing a project that he calls *Shy Radicals* (2017). It is a project that has been imagining a kind of underground, global movement of Shy Radicals, taking off from the idea of a global network of dozens of local

terrorist cells, but instead consisting of isolated pockets of shy or what he calls introvert resistance movements. It has been striking to think about forms of introversion or interiority that perhaps have not been as attended to within the worlds of culture, art, and performance that are dominated by what Ahsan might call “extrovert supremacy.” *Shy Radicals* in part grew out of Ahsan’s experience defending his brother who spent years in detention, often in solitary confinement. One of the things that he gave his brother while he was in prison was a pamphlet about how to survive solitary confinement first assembled by a Quaker activist for the American Friends Service Committee in the 1970s. This guidebook circulates surreptitiously among prisoners throughout the world, through various underground networks. It contains instructions for how to mentally survive extended periods of isolation: the pamphlets function as a sort of performance text that, when followed, helps to undermine the official structure of the carceral institution’s power.

I interviewed Ahsan toward the beginning of the pandemic, when he was Zooming from Europe in the midst of its first lockdown. He said that he was going back to those pamphlets and looking for the things that people have done when they have to be alone with themselves. It seems like there’s a kind of relationship to pressure when Ahsan asks, in effect, about the inner resources that might become available when you can’t be with the people or the community that otherwise sustains you. Maybe this leads to another question: Is there such a thing as good pressure? Is there generative, productive, valuable, important, beautiful, meaningful, or transformative pressure?

JOHNSON: Yes. A slight detour that isn’t one: I have been getting my certificate to teach barre. And those movement exercises are seemingly so low impact when you look at them from a distance. When you’re executing them, strength comes from how small you can make a movement and for how long you can endure that clipped range. Perhaps it looks low stakes to anyone who is just watching, but when you’re inside of it, that kind of micro gesture—combined with the intensity of repetition—literally pressurizes your body to produce a physical quaking of the body. You conjure the pressure and it manifests as tremor. And what’s on the other side is this newfound, hard-won strength. Muscle, maybe. But it’s an intensity that only becomes possible through that pressure of repetition. This is obviously a very literal example, but it has been a way that my body has managed quarantine. I wonder if this is precisely what draws me to it: this sense of possibility; the gifts of pressure to be able to ultimately fortify us.

HILTON: I really love that description of the practice as being a way of fortifying the self through the pressure of small movements and long durations, because one of the reasons I’ve been interested in thinking about pressure is that it invites us to focus on the very small margin where conscious intentionality meets its embodied limit. Where do we meet our bodies? Or where, even, does body meet itself? I think that’s why pressure is interesting to think with in performance studies, with its longstanding obsession with places of liminality. But it’s really about getting us right to that narrow border where the will meets something that’s bigger than our ability to maintain control. Bodily practices that are designed to get us up to that brink can, I think, teach us a lot. There’s a lot to be learned right at that point.

JOHNSON: Yes, that threshold.

HILTON: Threshold would be the word...

JOHNSON: The threshold becomes an occasion for some other potential and collective action. How can the body get to that threshold without breaking? And then: what can be made possible for the communal by arriving at and meeting it?

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