



# Presence, 2019–2022

Introduction

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In the Fall of 2019, the three of us—Kimberly, Elise, and Tavia—decided to gather our *TDR* Consortium issue and the next year’s meetings of Yale’s Performance Studies Working Group (PSWG) around the theme of “presence.” It seemed like a capacious enough topic, one that held within it historical debates about the nature of live performance, as well as high currency in the fast-paced world of digital communication, virtual representation, and the popularity of embodied mindfulness/somatic therapy research. We had no idea, of course, how much more current the topic would soon become.

The initial idea had been to tie together our interests in a way that might engage an interdisciplinary community on themes that felt, at that time, urgent in performance studies. Elise was thinking about humans interacting with technology as a means of representing, resisting, and healing from the power imbalances of surveillance and war; Kimberly was researching the political power of massed physical co-presence; and Tavia was thinking about how immersion in digital mediation—what we now call the metaverse—was shifting the ontology of liveness. The conversation about liveness (which is always “alive” in our field, if not “undead”) seemed to take on new urgency whenever the news reported the latest advances in digital technology, told us about ongoing mass political rallies to make America “Great” that were powered by viral disinformation, or streamed the latest evidence of the relentless targeting of Black bodies in public spaces. The issue seemed clear.

That was 2019.

When the pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, our first reaction was a nervous laugh that our issue had just become more relevant.

There was no predicting then that as it finally goes to press in August 2022, we would be in year three of wearing masks and watching Covid-19 rates in our communities climb...again. No predicting that in-person contact would include asking people in hazmat suits to hand us cotton swabs to swish five times in each of our nostrils. And no predicting that meetings and classes and conferences and plays and birthday parties would, for over two years, be held “live” in a new way: simultaneous, but physically distant; connected, but not co-present. Foundational aspects of communication, like eye contact and vibrating vocal cords, became mediated experiences, channeled through pixels, blue light, and invisible series of 1s and 0s moving from our mouths and bodies up to towers, to satellites, and back down again. The need to be present with one another in educational, theatrical, political, and personal contexts was palpable, even if it meant doing so in little boxes on screens, assembling face-to-interface.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Todo lo que está a mi lado, written and directed by Fernando Rubio. Seoul Plaza, South Korea, July 2015. See “Presently in Beds: Re/mediating the Sensible in Argentine Postdictatorship Performance” by Nahuel Telleria. (Photo by Asia Culture Center; courtesy of Fernando Rubio)*

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The first Zoom performance at the Yale School of Drama was an actors' project, *Swimmers*, directed by Jackson Gay. It had been rehearsed and ready to open in the spring of 2020. The production "pivoted," as we now say, to an online platform. Kimberly confesses that her interest in watching a theatre production on Zoom was low; Tavia confesses that his interest was high. But for both, it seemed this wouldn't be a long-term thing, anyway, so Kimberly amped up her interest for this one-off, since her advisee, Lily Haje, dramaturged it.

She logged in. And she watched, with more interest than she could possibly have imagined, the whole thing.

It was fascinating to observe the stage actors translating stage work to their laptop cameras so quickly. To note the clever hand-offs of objects from one actor's home playing area to another. To watch the absurdly interesting inter-segments, rapidly improvised by the team. To grok that we were watching this live, that these humans were acting across the ether, and that a "glitch" was something powerful we would all, soon, be thinking about.

Tavia missed that production, but he did tune in to view one of the more ersatz performances on Zoom that year, a livestream of Richard O'Brien's cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, organized as a fundraiser for the Wisconsin Democratic Party. With original cast members from the 1975 film version reprising their roles, and newer actors stepping in to fill out the ensemble, the goofiness of midnight screenings was recreated in front of thousands of computer screens. When Tim Curry, playing the nefarious Dr. Frank-N-Furter, flubbed a line, other boxes on the Zoom screen chimed in to support him. The call-and-response of the live participatory performances in the cinema was remediated in this new, as yet unfamiliar format. No one knew what was going on, which was in a way a perfect shambles of a tribute to the original's delirious chaos. While neither actors nor audience were physically co-present, we came together through a shared love of the ribaldry and irreverence that interacting with this transgressive tale has brought generations of freaks, geeks, and weirdos: many of whom came of age dressing up as Riff Raff, Columbia, and Brad and Janet, yelling obscenities and throwing rice at the screen in provincial megaplexes.

Later that year, Elise teamed up with her colleague Nathan Roberts to teach a course at Yale College called "Alone Together: Live Performance in the Time of Covid-19." Birthed by equal parts desperation and curiosity, the course sought to explore the effects of the pandemic on live theatre-making and viewing, situating the pandemic challenges as an inflection point that at once challenged theatre-makers to create new modalities for storytelling, while at the same time making visible (and more mainstream) certain strategies of intermedia performance that had been in the making for over a century. Bringing in as many examples of new live theatre work, as well as making some of their own, they searched for what is new and topical about Covid-era performance, even while considering it as a (natural?) extension of decades-long experiments in digital media performance, brought to new levels of visibility and centrality. The syllabus shifted constantly, as the class hungrily connected with creators of works that premiered in 2020 and early 2021, all which had pivoted from brick-and-mortar plans or had been uniquely prepared for virtual performance platforms. There were intensely personal stories that made drama of the isolation so many contended with, such as the New Ohio Theatre's delightfully fanciful *Journey Around My Bedroom*; WalkUpArts' interactive and inventive take on a "closet drama," *Baby Jessica's Well-Made Play*; and Jonathan Tolins's award-winning one-man show *Buyer & Cellar*, remounted by Broadway.com and Rattlestick Theater to fundraise for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS's Covid-19 Emergency Assistance Fund and one of the first Zoom theatre pieces to be billed as "a play that will make you want to watch theatre online." There were cutting political pieces that sparred with the personalities and falsehoods dominating our virtual political landscapes—the Neo-Futurists' gorgeous historical tour, *45 Plays for America's First Ladies*; Sarah Gancher's brilliant *Russian Troll Farm*, produced by The Civilians, TheaterWorks Hartford, and TheatreSquared; and the deservedly infamous, Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Circle Jerk*, created by Fake Friends (covered in this issue).

But 2020 was not merely, or even primarily, a year in which the nature of digitally mediated performance mutated. It was a year in which the largest global uprisings against anti-Black

racism in modern history took place, as the “racial pandemic” of police violence — as the National Council of Black Lawyers named it — proved simply intolerable. Black Lives Matter, a movement that had been growing since the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman for the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin, went global after the murder of another unarmed Black person, George Floyd, was captured live on bystander cell phone cameras in June 2020. Suddenly, stay-at-home orders proved unenforceable as millions moved into the streets to protest, to grieve, and also to connect and invent new ways of being together in an environment in which the most dangerous preexisting condition was living in a Black body.

The massed presence of physically co-present people became, in 2020, as important as it has ever been in the United States. From years of stadium rallies for Trump, to protestors risking pandemic conditions to rally for BLM, to the Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021, massed virtual viewers tuned in by the billions to watch massed physical actors. Who was present for which performances? When did it suffice to be present as spectator on a digital device, and when did people throw their physical bodies into streets, into air possibly full of viruses, into proximity of other living, fleshly, breathing bodies? Where and when did people decide physical presence had to supersede virtual, and when did virtual presence itself save physical and emotional lives? Where technology and business media waxed rhapsodic about the metaverse, the reality of bodies on the line told a different story.

The concept and experience of “presence,” along with its concave siblings absence, disappearance, and erasure, have been foregrounded for nearly all of us in the past two+ years. There were some awkward, deflating, and lonely aspects to making and viewing performances on Zoom, times when the distinction between “live” and “co-present” often felt separated by an uncanny valley of global pandemic proportions. There were times when distance and virtuality had to be broken so that bodies could assemble IRL (in real life) and be present together in shared space, whether in mourning, in protest, or in celebration. And there were also breathtaking innovations and new forms of intimacy, interactivity, and virtuosity created under these restrictions.

In *The Order of Things* ([1966] 1973), the philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the concept of an “epistemic” shift to map the discontinuities between one historical period and its successor, suggesting that rather than there always being a continuous development in scientific knowledge, there were as often abrupt breaks in discourse. These breaks often resulted in terms that were the same (or similar) bearing radically differing meanings from one period to the next: as if the answer had remained the same, but the question had changed. Such, this issue posits, is the case with “presence,” a term whose self-evidence is currently subject to an epistemic shift, the scale and consequence of which we are still figuring out.

It is difficult to see the term “presence” now without seeing its refractions across the uprisings, changes, and challenges of the racial and viral pandemics — and the political divides undergirding both — that palpably affect our daily lives. Presence has come to stand for both immediacy (of connection, communication, representation) and hypermediacy, often at the very same time. The essays we have collected here examine “presence” within these contexts and, in many cases, move far beyond them, fulfilling, too, the promise we originally saw in the topic of “presence” as a transhistorical, widely applicable concept through which to analyze a range of performances.

## The Issue

We begin with an essay by Tavia Nyong’o, “Unburdening Liveness,” that revisits the “burden of liveness” debate prompted by José Esteban Muñoz, taking up questions of where these questions stand 20 years later, in the era of artificial intelligence. Nyong’o explores contemporary BIPOC and feminist artists who employ technology to query presence, bringing together our themes on the presence of the Black body and the presence of digitally mediated bodies.

Abimbola Adelakun’s “The Healing of Maseko” ventures into a globally (even spiritually) interconnected metaverse, as she describes how enforced restriction of movement and social distancing

regulations during the pandemic pushed a Nigerian-based church with global membership, the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), to innovate new dimensions of liveness—without co-presence. Examining how the church purportedly transcended time-space limits in miracle performances during their “Distance Is Not a Barrier” digital sessions, she critically explores the dynamism of presence in religious contexts. Through the concept of “the theatre of the spiritual,” Adelakun argues the necessity of critiquing the interface of what is live and a-live—that is, the perceivable human versus perceptible supernatural agents and nonhuman forces.

Following this, we get a peek into another Covid-era wonder, the aforementioned online performance of *Circle Jerk*. Part interview, part conceptual musing, part history lesson, dramaturg and company member Ariel Sibert in “Vanity Monitor” guides the reader through the minds, influences, and processes of Fake Friends as they adapted their play *Circle Jerk*—originally planned as a co-present, brick-and-mortar production—to a Zoom extravaganza. Their dizzying array of camera angles, stage sets, social media platforms, pop culture references, and quick changes was brought into intoxicating virtual presence with the vigor, wit, and intelligence of a 21st-century Charles Ludlam (times ten, on speed). The show, which had a hybrid (simultaneously co-present and virtual) run Off-Broadway in June 2022, is here revealed as high-level multimedia creativity, grounded in the substance of the satirical play script, comparable to that of the Wooster Group’s embrace of televisions and microphones many decades ago.

Joseph Roach’s essay “Presence and the Stuff That Isn’t There” came to us first as a talk in our Fall 2020 Performance Studies Working Group. With one eye on the present Zoom era and another on the 18th century, Roach asks: “How can someone learn how to be there when clearly they are not?” The response he provides derives from empiricist natural philosophers and their concept of “phlogiston.” Roach ties this unseen but observable substance, this invisible matter existing amongst the visible, to timeless questions of relationships between matter and energy, matter and mind. In all cases, absence is the *sine qua non* of presence; no presence—in performance, of bodies—could be known without that which isn’t there.

In Daniel Ruppel’s “Global Imaginaries and Elephantine Artifice: Re-Presenting Race and Time in André Valladier’s *Labyrinthe Royal de L’Hercule Gaulois triomphant*,” we zoom in on presence, image by distanced image. We begin in a rare book reading room, enter a tome heavy with text and print, and delve deeply into centuries-old cross-hatching that depicts the eyes, hands, and bodies of absent beings. Ruppel examines a lavishly illustrated account of a royal *entrée* that didn’t exactly happen, signaling through the pages where two elephants, two imaginary Moors, and a king *ought to* have been present in person but were in fact present only in the illustrations. Are they any less present for that, he asks? Or do these beings make themselves even more present through their vivid images, Valladier’s wordy annotations, and the reader’s ability to focus on details that would be lost if viewed from the town square? The present but imaginary elephants, Moors, and king tell us about the values and proposed values of the time, about land and race and rule, about how making presence felt doesn’t require supplying living bodies as much as it does engaging lively imaginations.

In Kara Reilly’s “A Medium to History: Notes on the Phenomenology of Dyschronia in the Lyric Theatre,” presence disrupts linear time to manifest dead subjects of history in a chilling now. Proposing dyschronia—the simultaneous experience of different times—as a tool for a performance historian, Reilly courageously shares her own harrowing experience of dyschronia in researching the Lyric Theatre in London. A place that has been home to a famous anatomist, his operating theatre, countless dissections of dead (and possibly murdered) pregnant women, and the ongoing entertainment show featuring Michael Jackson’s hits, *Thriller Live*, time in the Lyric is “out of joint.” Reilly proposes that on its site “the past is both behind and in front of us; time moves in an endless loop, a mobius strip that folds back into itself.” Presence *remains* in the Lyric, and Reilly offers her experience of bipolar psychosis, prompted by deeply layered historical research, as an ontological shift in how we interact with—and possibly give voice to—the lost persons of history.

Our next essay, “Metered Togetherness: Affective Drifts and Temporal Proximities,” by Anna Jayne Kimmel, Diana Damian Martin, and Asher Warren, looks, re-looks, and looks again at the stranded *Ever Given* cargo vessel in the Suez canal. The essay proposes a theory of “metered” co-presence that seeks to register the ontoepistemic shift that has occurred within the logistics industry. As a supply-chain crisis morphed into the still widening global shortages in basic goods caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the authors invite us to reflect on capitalism’s repetition compulsion. Through close examination of simultaneous presence, both physical and digital, of bodies that are both present and invoked in their absence, in circulation both oceanic and networked, the theory of metered togetherness the authors propose develops the paradoxical idea of *stasis* as a sine qua non for movement, continuing the issue’s trope of absence as necessary for presence.

Regan Lynch’s “Back for Good: Heterotopic Memory in Melbourne’s Queer Nightlives” provides us with a detailed investigation of the ways the pandemic has affected queer communities in Australia: the ways that the absence of group, intimate, physical co-presence has disrupted the “messy immediacy of queer party-performance.” Positing that the time of queer nightlife is, again, “out of joint,” Lynch’s ethnographic dive into the scene investigates cultural memory, fantasy, and community through sex, dance, poppers, and the need for a connective presence in a traumatized community. As the LGBTQ+ community faces continued ostracism, persecution, criminalization, and violence globally, Lynch considers the consequences of shuttering the safe spaces of a community—which for the LGBTQ+ community are so often performance spaces.

Our final essay by Nahuel Telleria, “Presently in Beds,” brings us back to a consideration of “presence” in the theatre as affected by pandemic quarantines and, even more specifically, by the cultural tensions that have long attended Argentinian performance art works. Telleria begins with a close reading of his two experiences as a participant-viewer of Fernando Rubio’s *Todo lo que está a mi lado* (Everything by My Side; 2012)—the first when the piece was on tour, in person and outdoors on Pier 45 in New York City; the second in 2020 when the performance was reconceived for and broadcast via Zoom. In both cases, a bed (or virtually conjoined beds) functioned as the central space of representation and reception. Telleria examines his experiences via a comparison of the English terms “presence” and “liveness,” so familiar to performance studies scholars, and the Spanish *presencialidad* or being “in-person,” which became the counterpart of “liveness” in Argentina as theatres closed and performances moved online in 2020. The essay gracefully takes on the multilayered meanings of presence and names the historical ghosts that attend the loss of being “in-person” in an Argentinian context, noting that “absence” onstage (or screen) still carries with it innate references to the mass disappearances of civilians and dissidents during the state-perpetrated violence of 1976–83. Telleria uses beds as frame and throughline, bringing into conversation performance art pieces by Moria Casán, Batato Barea, and Fernando Rubio as he considers, broadly, what legacies of absence mean for/to the ontology of presence itself.

During the academic year 2020/21, dozens of presenters, attendees, and students of the Performance Studies Working Group were instrumental in fleshing out this topic with us. The PSWG has hosted performance studies scholars and artists in weekly meetings at Yale since 2003. In recent years, as part of our Performance Studies Initiative at Yale, we have gathered presenters, as well as a credit-bearing course, around a yearly theme—including algorithmic performance, presence, and environments in/of crisis. In this new chapter, PSWG has become an even more vital, collaborative space for fostering cross-disciplinary conversations on pressing current topics and for developing this work for *TDR* Consortium issues. We write this by way of acknowledgement of the extraordinary collaborative relationships that have developed within extremely unforgiving pandemic conditions. With this second Consortium issue from New Haven, the Yale *TDR* Consortium editors wish to further a common intellectual enterprise whose urgency has only grown as the social fabric around us has frayed.

## Reference

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