"The sacramental body became the focal point of different gazes that needed to see the same body" (202). This simple, yet profound statement is buried within the final chapter of Michal Kobialka’s book *This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*, published by The University of Michigan Press. In trying to determine how and where to start my review of such an ambitious and fascinating text on representational practices in the Middle Ages, I kept returning to the text’s focus on the heterogeneous gaze. As exemplified in the above quotation, the raised Eucharist, symbolic of the body of Christ, became the main attraction of the Medieval Mass. However, Kobialka’s purpose in this work is to also metaphorically address the conditions surrounding the reception of any body, be it physical, theatrical, spiritual or - as in the case of a review - textual. Thus, Kobialka’s realignment of representational practices in the early Middle Ages can apply to any act of reading, during any time period, “which transforms documents into monuments” (Foucault 7). This transformation is constructed by a heterogeneous gaze informed by scholarly dabblings, interests, and expertise, as well as academic needs and desires. The reviewer, then, participates in a heterogeneous, creative act that must morph into a homogeneous pronunciation of faith in the body (of research) before her, just as Kobialka’s Medieval Christian community was expected to pronounce, despite their disparate gazes, their unified belief in the body of Christ, His church, and its “physical and spiritual power relations” (147).

The backbone of Kobialka’s book is that representation in the early Middle Ages (CE 970-1215) was vastly different than our present, traditional understanding of the term as the “perspectival relationship between the subject and the object” (28). Kobialka claims representation in the Middle Ages to be “heterogeneous discursive practice... defined and redefined, disseminated and erased, and institutionalized and internalized within the dynamic field of the ever shifting relationships between theological, historical, metaphysical, social, political and cultural formations” (28). Representational practice, especially as they related to the body of Christ, was a heterogeneous, “dynamic field of enunciative possibilities” (28) attracting multiple gazes that
eventually transformed toward the materialization of a homogeneous and unified focal point in Christian mythology.

Kobialka’s text provides a post-modern challenge to the traditional, evolutionary scholarship on Medieval drama, theatre, performance and society. He argues for a shifting and fluctuating vision of the Medieval period that uses post-modern enquiries and explorations to see representation as a discursive practice between shifting power relationships laboring to “define a local reality and produce modes of thinking and expression that implement it” (28). In expansive chapters covering four epistemological fragments, Kobialka traces how and why representational practices in the Middle Ages can not be seen as stable, but as sites of transformation within a “dynamic space where words, concepts and objects can be situated but never classified” (29). But why would modern readers want to do this? What is the purpose in seeing a far-removed past as a transformative site of social, cultural, political, theological, and spiritual possibilities?

The simplest, yet most significant, reason is that in viewing the elaborate representational practices of a past time as non-neutral and non-evolutionary provides contemporary audiences with a window on current transformative sites where a body “could emerge and become a focal point of all the gazes that were brought into unity. . . .” (218). His argument evokes the question concerning what contemporary ‘Hosts’ are being ‘held up’ to public scrutiny as representational devices intended to stabilize current heterogeneous and disparate gazes.

Before going any further, attention needs to be drawn to Kobialka’s cautionary statements in the Introduction: statements that signify the originality of his thesis by stating what it is not. He clearly confesses that those looking for a text revealing the origins of drama and theatre will not find that. He also says the text will disappoint those thinking of drama and theatre in the restricted form of having to be comprised of dialogue, setting and impersonation. Rather, his interest is in representation as a pre-form or practice that anticipates the advent of Medieval drama and theatre as discussed by other scholars. The text’s emphasis on what Kobialka calls four fragments of a historical episteme seem far removed from a conventional understanding of drama and theatre. Building on Foucault’s notion of history as creative and constructive process, Kobialka says that the richer the text, the more “powerful are the forms of presentation that are invented to construct a text that produces the past” (21). The entire process is a “game” of decipherment where presence and absence (of material) depends entirely on what rules the game uses to “establish the identity of an object” (23). But we know that identity is neither stable nor is it divorced from the contextual environments surrounding it. Kobialka’s warning then, is merely a stating of the rules upon which his scholarly game is being played.

Despite this clear enunciation of the ‘game,’ This Is My Body is a complex, intriguing text interweaving historiographic evidence, and postmodern playfulness to its scholarly advantage. While I can not make assumptions regarding Kobialka’s assertion of the Medieval community’s complete and absolute transformation from heterogeneous to homogenous understanding, I found This Is My Body to resist, while simultaneously desiring, such a homogeneous reading. The dual existence of
receptive resistance and acquiescence not only marks the text’s indebtedness to post-modern theory, but reinforces the claim that “the study of medieval literature and culture has never been more alive or at a more interesting innovative stage” (2). *This Is My Body* exemplifies the post-modern awareness that “we can never speak of history without speaking about ourselves” (2). Such a self-reflective awareness links us to a past that is simultaneously separate from us since the attainment of the notion of origins is always already an impossibility with our desire for knowledge and understanding resting upon the desires of those who came before us in a similar search.

Interestingly enough, the text posits a straightforward, singular assertion concerning representation, but its theoretical framework invites its own heterogeneous, multiple readings of the material. Thus, when using the game rules of post-modern theory, content and form enter into a playful dance of signification and (con)fused identities. Not surprising, then, the body of Michal Kobialka’s text is itself in a state of flux between clarity and invisibility, between theoretical enquiry and historical detail.

The dichotomy between the knowable and the unknowable, the visible and the invisible, the speakable and the unspeakable, the present and the absent (in the text’s case, religious, ecclesiastical and theological issues) and the conditions determining these realms are issues that hover throughout Kobialka’s medieval focus. They also pertain to today. This critical contemporaneousness blended with the allure of Medieval history is why *This Is My Body*, awarded Outstanding Book in Theatre Practice and Pedagogy from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, is a fascinating read celebrating the transformative potentiality of all heterogeneous gazes. The text may engage the reader’s thoughts toward a singular understanding of its thesis, but the heterogeneous playfulness of postmodern enquiry destabilizes the textual body within the reader’s vision producing exciting possibilities of further study.

Of particular noteworthiness is the text’s link between ecclesiastical practices and the common person. While not necessarily a new connection, Kobialka’s semiotic interpretation discloses the manipulation of politically dangerous heterogeneous gazes into a homogeneous piousness based on Christian unity and obedience. He accomplishes this connection between the secular and the vernacular by extensively detailing the complex preparations undergone by the people “to be able to participate in the celebration of the unity of the Christian community” (182). Once again, the argument turns upon the idea of making the invisible - in this case private devotion - visible through financial contributions in the forms of tithes, and physical adherence to the Christian hierachal system that mirrored the feudal relationship structuring the participants’ lives. Thus, the complex concept of presence as it applied to the church and society can be seen as a “structure of the perceptual field that conditions the entire field and without which the field could not function” (194). Such social criticism provides the framework for an understanding of church ritual and the “desire to control the proliferation of private practices... by increasing the performance of meaning in order to establish the Church’s spiritual supremacy” (157). But this supremacy also had a political and economic relationship that functioned as a
stabilizing and regulatory force of everyday life.

To return to Kobialka’s beginning, the body of Christ, the body of the Church, the body of the dramatic performance and the body of the Christian community obtains a presence that is “anchored to the operations, which give it permanence, and to the functions, which establish its relationship to other objects” (19). The Medieval heterogeneous gaze is thereby controlled and unified by a focal point that raises all eyes to one version of heaven. But the contemporary, heterogeneous gaze sees the ‘host’ of Kobialka’s unified argument as enticement for further theoretical possibilities.

Kobialka displays his deep understanding of the Medieval Period and major scholarly work in the field. He does this as a prologue to his vibrant application of post-modern questions and concerns regarding Medieval representational practices. Here, he states that his focus is on the practices of representation as a “field of enunciative possibilities” (31) that are mutable rather than stagnant, multiple rather than singular, and incapable of simple classifications, such as drama or theatre. By taking this perspective, Kobialka broadens the definition of Medieval drama and theatre in particular, and the understanding of the Middle Ages in general, by providing a historiographic practice “linked to the unstable interpretation of Hoc est corpus meum [This is my body] (32). He summarizes the major research in the field of Medieval studies as evolutionary pedagogy and positions his argument as part of the theoretical continuum questioning the writing of history and the organization, arrangement and ‘visibility’ of what constitutes the past. He cites Foucault, de Certeau, Barthes, and uses Derridean phraseology to re-map the medieval landscape and ultimately conclude that ecclesiastical, theological, political, cultural and historical understanding of the times by the populous rested in the body (of Christ).

Kobialka’s fresh perspective is exquisite in detail and coloration. Chapter One focuses on the Regularis concordia providing a fascinating glance into the daily rituals and routines of monastic life. At times, it may seem like Kobialka delves too deeply and extensively in historical detail, thus forcing the theoretical argument to slip beneath the factual records. This happens again in Chapter Two, when he chronicles the Berenger-Lanfranc Eucharist controversy, and again in Chapter Four concerning the Fourth Lateran Council. The pull of history takes prominence as he details the destruction of documents, forced exiles, public denouncements, papal condemnations, mystical visions and miracles. While it is difficult to determine if the absence of such material would compromise Kobialka’s theoretical positioning, an integration of his post-modern perspective with the historical accounts would keep his theoretical perspective in full view. Yet, having said this, I realize that this longing for a fulfillment of my academic desires is precisely the text’s constructive intent and what kept my reading in an excited state of flux “modified by different modes of seeing” (217). So when Kobialka details the controversy over the Eucharist, the changes to the holding of relics, the regulation of mediation, and the articulation of mystical experience, to name a few examples, these discipline-based, ‘authentic’ moments provide the gaps and fissures necessary for the reader’s own interests and post-modern enquiries to seep through. Kobialka never quotes the semiotic maxim “everything is a
sign”, yet, he covers that territory in his discussion of the miniatures within the 
Benedictional of St. Aethelwold, and the presentation of the Jeu d’Adam outside the 
church wall, and signifies the fertile ground such examinations afford.

This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages by 
Michal Kobialka challenges our understanding of the past and how theoretical think-
ing is used to construct that past. His model of historical research contains multiple 
points of departure for further enquires into:

1) the relationship between power structures and the performative, popular 
and ritualistic acts that enhance or challenge those structures;

2) the present absence of the theatrical body as it vacillates between the real 
as defined by the truth of the body(actor) and the truth of the discourse (character);

3) the semiotic exploration of events and activities as non-neutral, non-
evolutionary steps that consciously maneuver toward the construction of homogeneous thinking, acting and doing;

4) the ever-present conflict between that which is invisible and visible, unseen and seen, unspeakable and speakable and the contextual conditions attributing to what is permitted, when and by whom.

This Is My Body: Representation Practices in the Early Middle Ages is not solely a text about Medieval Studies, or Medieval drama and theatre, or the Medieval Church. Rather, it is a template for re-examining and re-configuring historical moments and documents through the critical lens of contemporary theory in order to ‘see’ the past as present sites of transformation and possibility.

Works Cited

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