

***Staged News: The Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers in New York.* Jordana Cox. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023; Pp. 168.**

Jordana Cox's 2023 *Staged News: The Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers in New York* is a striking reminder that the practice of adapting the news for popular expression has deep roots that have historically influenced the fields of both journalism and theatre. *Staged News* bridges the constructive processes of both arenas, revealing how journalists deem which subjects are newsworthy and how artists interpret and communicate "the news" to an audience. As Cox explores the continued legacy of the living newspapers that the Federal Theatre Project constructed between 1935 and 1939, she creates an expansive resource for historians, artists, and journalists.

In an important deviation from existing approaches to the study of the New York Living Newspaper (NYLN) that focus on the political message or artistic value of living newspapers, Cox sees the NYLN as a "news-making" body that was able to identify and publicize urgent social issues. The designations "news-making" and "news-makers" in reference to the NYLN reflects the group's hybrid combination of professional journalists and theater-makers as it worked under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project. Cox argues throughout the book that the NYLN "cultivated *journalistic imagination*," a term she defines as "a capacity to perceive, reflect on, and revise the processes through which people and issues are deemed *newsworthy*" (2-3, emphasis original). Cox extends the influence of living newspapers to the history of journalism, a historiographical challenge to a field that has traditionally ignored the NYLN. Cox makes the case that the NYLN had a substantive effect on journalistic imagination; moreover she asserts that the study of the NYLN offers a chance to "consider how text, image, time, and space work together to create conditions for witness" (26). Living newspapers, in Cox's study, are an important site for understanding how journalists create and perform the news.

This insightful volume traces the evolution of the NYLN's approach, providing an organizational history that analyzes the NYLN in her first chapter, followed by three internal chapters, each of which investigates an NYLN production, presented in chronological order. While the NYLN produced six living newspaper projects in its four years of operation, Cox explores four (*Ethiopia* (1936), *The Events of 1935* (1936), *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), and *Liberty Deferred* (1938) in detail. All her case studies illustrate the NYLN's philosophical development in its newsmaking processes. She argues that *Ethiopia*, which the NYLN developed first, and *Liberty Deferred*, which came last, hold particular importance in highlighting the NYLN's approach to racial representation. Her selection fills a gap in scholarship around the NYLN's first and last productions, yet it also seems a bit subjective. Neither *Ethiopia* nor *Liberty Deferred* received public performances during the operation of the Federal Theatre Project; at 168 pages, Cox's history might have benefitted from the presence of two additional case studies of works that engaged audiences.

In the first chapter, Cox dives into organizational logistics and describes how networks, labor

practices, economic precarity, and political expedience shaped the NYLN. Having established the logistical circumstances in which Living Newspapers were produced, Chapter Two investigates what publics the NYLN was attempting to reach and why. Cox considers these social questions primarily by analyzing *The Events of 1935* (also referred to as *Highlights of 1935* or *1935*), the NYLN's third project and one in which the NYLN developed stage techniques—such as courtroom performances as an embodiment of nationhood and citizenship—that the company would use consistently thereafter. Chapter Three turns its focus to *One-Third of a Nation*, the most widely popular of the NYLN's projects. Rather than examine that show's political message about the shortage of affordable housing, Cox asserts that *One-Third* expanded journalistic imagination by highlighting the co-constructive relationship between mass media and the greater public of US audiences. In Chapter Four, Cox's examination of *Liberty Deferred*, an unproduced anti-lynching living newspaper written by Abram Hill and John D. Silvera, serves as a meta-commentary on the flawed approach of the NYLN towards anti-Black racism in the 1930s US. Despite the white hegemony present at the NYLN, Cox demonstrates that *Liberty Deferred* broadened the perspective of the NYLN and, crucially, was evidence of how news is simultaneously constructed and consumed in the context of identity, specifically racial identity. In a relatively short conclusion, Cox connects the legacy of the NYLN to two projects outside the Federal Theatre Project: *One-Third of a Mitten* (1939) and the Royal Court Theatre's series of living newspapers produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cox argues that these two projects, inspired by the NYLN, utilize journalistic imagination in a similar way to create news even as they were freed from “current events and journalistic norms” (139).

Staged News is consistently well-researched, drawing on photographs and archival sources in order to immerse readers in the theatrical situation of Living Newspapers and in the visual and aural experiences of the NYLN's audience members and artists. Cox's detailed analysis of the Living Newspaper projects provides a fresh resource for cultural critics, universities and theatremakers interested in re-staging these plays. *Staged News* also forges an important link between the histories of journalism and theatre. With this volume, Cox points to embodiment as a central constructive force that influences what and who journalists consider to be news and newsworthy, both at the NYLN and in the present. Ultimately, Cox argues that making and receiving news is a process of “embodying information, of taking in and responding to information at the moment it arrives in the body” (25). Significantly, the NYLN's process of embodiment drew attention to some important social and political issues, like affordable housing, while also engaging in racial exclusion in its failure to produce *Liberty Deferred*. Cox's focus on the crucial power of public embodiment in shaping journalistic imagination is one of the book's great strengths.

Staged News holds particular relevance for scholars of journalism, communication and political science interested in the methodologies of communication, performance and entertainment related to the production and consumption of news. Cox argues that journalistic history is a

relatively young field of study, and this book weaves living newspapers into the fabric of the history of journalism, as opposed to the histories of labor or theatre that focus on living newspapers as a cultural program subsidized by the government.

At a point when the development of new media in photojournalism and radio broadcasting caused journalists and their readers to rearticulate what the news was and how it was consumed, Cox convincingly argues that theatre offered a “glimmer of possibility” about how theater and the newspaper might “supplement and transform each other” (4). The relevance of that work from the 1930s is even greater today, Cox argues, and her book provides a significant resource in understanding how embodying the news, particularly in nonliteral ways, may again redefine what is ultimately newsworthy.

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