

“*The Wiz Live!* and Body Rhetoric: The Complexity of Increasing Diversity in a Whitewashed Entertainment Industry”

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*Rhetorical scholars are continuing to turn their attention to the body as a means of argument production. This essay examines body rhetoric as an avenue of protest for marginalized groups, with specific regard to the African-American community. In the midst of controversy around racial diversity in the entertainment industry, NBC’s live telecast production of *The Wiz Live!* proved to be wildly successful. With over 11.5 million viewers tuning in for the original airing, *The Wiz Live!* demonstrated that body rhetoric can express duality in purpose. This essay suggests that the telecast not only acted as a protest against diversity fiascos like #oscarssowhite, but that it also focused on celebrating a historically unrepresented and marginalized culture.*

Introduction

One of the biggest problems plaguing the entertainment industry as a whole is the issue of racial diversity and the notable absence and minimization of people of color. Between the implementation of racial quotas and the disregard of actors of color during award season, the entertainment industry is struggling with how to solve this problem. But that doesn’t mean that people of color are entirely absent from entertainment. NBC’s recent reworking of *The Wiz*, a black retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, demonstrates a conscious effort, problematic or not, to tell multiracial narratives. While symbolic action takes many forms, the use of the body as rhetorical protest, as demonstrated by the live staging of *The Wiz*, has the potential to disrupt societal norms and the institutions that enforce them. A fundamental understanding of how the rhetorical body affects the way we shape public policy in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, etc. is useful in examining how various marginalized groups can create potent and dialogue-prompting arguments using the limited resources available to them. While the body is typically thought of as upholding or reinforcing hegemonic societal values, the body is a powerful tool that holds the potential to change those values, as is seen in various scholarly studies of body rhetoric.

Based on E. L. Baum’s novel *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Wiz* retells the story in an urban setting that celebrates African American culture by including songs, dances, and a dialect characteristic of the otherwise marginalized black community. The original 1975 Broadway production of *The Wiz* received mixed reviews from Broadway critics, but ultimately became large enough of a success to pave the way for other African American shows like *Dreamgirls*, *The Color Purple*, and *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill*. The revival of an old but important theatrical dialogue has forced the issue of diversity and representation back into the spotlight. With the recent Oscars controversy (#oscarssowhite), in which the Academy Awards has received criticism for its lack of non-Caucasian nominees as well as the rehashed question as to the necessity of all-black television channels and awards shows, it seems as though Broadway is one of the few, if not the only, media that is proactively trying to change the otherwise white landscape. While the broadcast is not technically Broadway, it’s a new emerging medium that has grown in popularity in the last year. Live televised broadcasts of Broadway shows like *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*, *Grease*, and *The Wiz Live!* are becoming increasingly popular as the ratings continue to rise. They are a hybrid of both television and theater as stage productions are adapting to soundstages, but they are not quite the same as movie musical translations because the conventions vary from stage to film and technically, a telecast is still live staged performance.

By using an all-black cast and rewriting familiar dialogue and music to better represent that specific minority group, *The Wiz Live!* creates a new experience for its audience: what it means to be black and to celebrate African American culture outside of the confines of the political and racial tensions of the United States. By interjecting black culture into a land (Oz) removed from our current reality, the text operates as an opportunity to demonstrate the richness of African American culture. For the audience, it’s a chance to undergo a black cultural experience without the negative connotations, stereotypes, or familiar storylines that include black characters. In doing this, it seems as though the purpose of telecast is multifaceted; yes, it is a cultural celebration. But it’s also

the chance to tell a story of black people that is lacking prejudice and discrimination. By creating this alternate black narrative for audience members, *The Wiz Live!* pushes further onto the rhetorical persuasive continuum (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 2012) into altering the audience's (most likely that of the resistive audience) perception of what it means to be black.

Racial performance as a means of protest can also act as a celebration of non-hegemonic culture. Its duality of purpose is strengthened as *The Wiz Live!* challenges the institution of a whitewashed entertainment industry, but sings the praises of a marginalized and underrepresented population by adopting and transforming a traditionally white narrative.

This study aims to examine *The Wiz Live!* as a form of racial and performance body rhetoric, which in turn acts as symbolic action to protest the overwhelmingly white nature of the entertainment industry. After introducing the live telecast as a modern and poignant adaptation of the 1975 Broadway production and subsequent 1978 film, I will perform a close reading of the bodies present in *The Wiz Live!* to determine how the use of rhetorical techniques like prosopopoeia and musical elements that uphold black tradition challenge the hegemony of an otherwise white institution. Performance as protest also has the potential to act as a celebration of non-hegemonic culture, as is exemplified by NBC's *The Wiz Live!* Its duality of purpose is formidable as it simultaneously challenges the entertainment industry, but also sings the praises of a historically unrepresented and marginalized culture.

Background

Based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel *The Wizard of Oz* and the 1939 film of the same name, *The Wiz* acts as a retelling of the classic narrative but instead features an all-black cast. The original Broadway staging of *The Wiz* in 1975 and the film in 1978 received critical acclaim, but NBC aired a live telecast production in December 2015. *The Wiz Live!* followed other live musical telecasts such as *The Sound of Music Live!* and *Peter Pan Live!*, but surprisingly outperformed all previous NBC telecasts in ratings, with approximately 11.5 million viewers tuning in for the original airing (Malone, 2015). Amidst conversations about racial diversity in the entertainment industry, this telecasted revival of the 1975 musical acts as mixed media – Broadway musicals meet live television programming, and in doing so, contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the diversification of American pop culture.

Between the implementation of racial quotas and the disregard of actors of color during award season, the entertainment industry is struggling with how to solve this problem. But that doesn't mean that people of color are entirely absent from entertainment. NBC's recent reworking of *The Wiz*, a black retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, demonstrates a conscious effort, problematic or not, to tell multiracial narratives. When *The Wiz Live!* aired on December 3, 2015, it acted as a blending of media, as the live broadcast works as a black narrative in both television and musical theatre. *The Wiz Live!* performed very well, with over 11.5 million people tuning in to the original airing (Malone, 2015). However, the situation and reaction to the live broadcast speaks to the larger issue of racial tension not only in entertainment, but on a larger scale in the United States. If all-black shows like *The Wiz Live!* are still lauded for making progress, then we still have a long way to go to make meaningful progress. The telecast begs the question, "Is it good to have different stylistic and cultural approaches to storytelling when it comes to familiar American texts?" In telling classic American narratives from a racial vantage point, texts like *The Wiz Live!* challenge not only the hegemony of the source material, but also of the larger institution of entertainment as a whole and the injection of race into an otherwise white story is a form of embodied protest, known in the literature as body rhetoric, to forcibly claim visibility and recognition.

Body Rhetoric and Recognition: How to Challenge Hegemony

Palczewski et al. (2012) define body rhetoric as "rhetoric that foregrounds the body as part of the symbolic action" (p. 66). When rhetoric scholars look at the use of the body as a rhetorical tool, it is not treated as some biological or medical form but rather a socially constructed entity, unto which meaning is placed or assigned. All social institutions, including religion, gender, sexuality, age, and more, can be challenged using the body as symbolic action and groups who do not or cannot conform to the ideals of these regimented social institutions often use their bodies as a means of protest or argumentation. For some, especially the oppressed, body rhetoric is useful because it is the only available proof for an argument (Palczewski et al., 2012). Marginalized groups who often do

not have access to resources they need to make their case or further their cause will use their bodies as symbolic action to both solicit attention to an issue and construct an argument. Enactment is when the body of a person (female body for women, black body for African American, etc.) acts as the proof or reasoning in the argument that person is trying to convey. Bodies can act as part of the argument, or be the entire argument, depending on how it is used. Traditionally, the body was used as a means of capturing attention, but scholars like DeLuca (1999) and Selzer and Crowley (1999) argue that it can act alone as the central argument. By using the body as proof for the argument, as reasoning for the argument, or as the argument itself, body rhetoric demonstrates the power of mere existence and why that can be vital in creating dialogues and change.

While speeches and texts are the typical staples of rhetorical criticism, Selzer and Crowley (1999) explain why the body is worthy of analysis. They state that the body acts as a material dimension of rhetoric, and that material rhetorics “delineate ethics for a culture confronting material crises in public policy: the politics of race and ethnicity; the issues related to ‘family values’ that revolve around sexual and gender identities, [...]” (p. 10-11). Just as texts and speeches have the power to provoke discussion, move toward progress, and incite action, the body can also; it is simply in another, less verbally or literarily explicit form. Therefore the body has the power to prompt discussion about social progress and ultimately affect attitudes surrounding the aforementioned issues, but the key to creating these dialogues is establishing a presence that is strong and formidable enough to get the attention of the social institutions which the body is challenging.

Michel Foucault (1977) explains that the body is so much more than our physical vessels, but that they also hold the potential for power and domination. His argument is similar to Kenneth Burke’s (1969), who maintains that humans exist in nature but more importantly, we exist in a symbolic world. Bodily motion is natural and impersonal, action (and consequently symbolic action) is deliberate and personal. By analyzing how the body is used as a tool of empowerment, we can understand the scope of its effects on public policy. While the body is typically used as a means of reinforcing the preexisting dominant ideology, it holds the potential to challenge hegemony under certain circumstances. Examining both Foucault and feminist critical theory, Sawicki (1991) explains how the female body is used as a tool to fortify hegemonic values: “the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body [are used] to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed” (p. 49). Feminist scholars then argue that the feminine body can challenge those norms of subjugation with embodied presence that doesn’t uphold patriarchal values. The same can be done in other areas of systematic oppression like race, sexuality, gender identity, etc.

Bodies act as symbolic action when their presence is notable, especially when that presence violates social norms put forth by dominant ideologies. Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner (1991) explain the body’s presence in terms of a symbol of the processes that uphold an institution’s ideals. To achieve successful symbolic action, members of minority groups can place themselves in spaces that are not meant for them. “These groups are in hostile territory with little control. What they do have some control over, however, is the presentation of their bodies in the image events that attract media attention. Their bodies then, become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself” (DeLuca, 1999, p. 10). As a supplemental critical perspective, recognition also comes into play in the discussion of representation and basic human rights. Hesford (2011) describes recognition as “the incorporation of the subject into the regime of rights” (p. 284). Within the context of body rhetoric, an unwelcomed body, the person(s) fighting for acknowledgement, has not been granted the same rights as others in social institutions. “The sociopolitical process of recognition that [personhood] relies on often reiterates social hierarchies, especially when privileged groups and powerful nations are configured as the distributors of rights for those unable to claim them.” (Hesford, 2011, p. 284). Therein lies the difficulty for marginalized populations to achieve actual recognition. The route to recognition, Hesford argues, is through the very channels that support hegemonic oppression. Similarly, Doxtader (2012) explains that while recognition should inspire truth and some sort of reconciliation process within the institution, the human rights institutions fall short of doing so. It is not immediately clear how best to go about creating equality and make reparations for previous trespasses, but DeLuca (1999) and Selzer and Crowley (1999) argue that the entrance of obtrusive bodies in hegemonic spaces is one potential place to start.

DeLuca explains that the body can in fact be its own argument, and that the presence of otherwise unwelcomed bodies is a powerful form of symbolic action. For DeLuca (1999) in his study of several activist groups, the body is used for creating image events, meant for media dissemination, and in doing so, the body

becomes a “pivotal resources for the crucial practice of public argumentation” (p. 10). Again, if a person or group has established an embodied presence that is an anomaly in societal values and is strong enough to constitute an argument, scholars like DeLuca and Selzer argue that the body is a powerful form of symbolic action. However, it is not simply enough to be present to disrupt social institutions, as Butterworth (2008) argues in his criticism of body rhetoric.

Butterworth’s (2008) work in body rhetoric suggests that presence isn’t always enough to successfully disrupt and/or change institutions. As demonstrated in his case study of Katie Hnida and her feminine presence in the hypermasculine space of college football, it is difficult to change large institutions with mere presence. Butterworth (2008) maintains, “embodied arguments do not always or necessarily lead to progressive outcomes” (p. 261). These arguments can push for change but are also limited in effectiveness. As previously mentioned, an embodied argument has to be noticeable enough to prompt a dialogue about the contrasting values of the social institutions and the body that confronts it, and then that created discussion must continue until change and/or progress is made. The rhetorical limits of the body are great, but not impossible to overcome. As is the case of Katie Hnida, perhaps one body is not enough to upheave the way we think about things like gender but maybe repeated presence or the embodied presence of large groups would be more effective in overcoming the rhetorical limits of perpetuating an argument that relies on the body.

Racial Body Rhetoric and Performance

Much of the work in body rhetoric has examined the politics of gender because some of its origins stem from feminist critical studies, but the critical perspective also relates to the politics of race. Considering that the presence of conventionally unwelcomed bodies in spaces that reinforce hegemonic values is a demonstration of symbolic action, racial body rhetoric is explained as the strategic presence of a body or bodies belonging to a minority ethnic group. This concept is simple enough; minority groups have conducted protests for centuries. The sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement and the 1970 student walkouts of the Chicano Movement are just two examples of when racial and ethnic groups used their physical presence to make a case for equality. The scope of my research examines black symbolic action, specifically looking at celebrations of blackness as a form of protest.

Reinforcing the racial hegemony of Western culture, black bodies are traditionally shown in positions of powerlessness, submission, criminality, or aggression (Doreski, 1998). That script is flipped in black narratives, in which these static portrayals are dismissed and both black culture and black bodies are given dynamic and empowering characteristics. “The epistemological moment of race manifests itself in and through performance in that performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity – a knowing made manifest by a ‘doing’” (Johnson, 2005, p. 606). People who belong to different racial groups, specifically the African American group Johnson refers to, make use of performance as a tool to evoke social consciousness. In literary texts, blackness is created only through a complicated process of signification (Gates, 1988), but in performance, protests, or other image events, the black body is one that is explicitly present and potentially implicitly powerful. Early examples of this come from the Harlem Renaissance, during which the African-American community reevaluated what it meant to be black, how that fit or did not fit within Western culture, and how best to celebrate blackness (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). But there is much contention, even to this day, as to what constitutes the parameters surrounding African American culture. It is almost impossible to pinpoint what signifies African-American embodiment, but it is almost immediately evident once present.

African-American body rhetoric, like other body rhetoric, takes many forms because all that is needed for body rhetoric is presence, embodiment and enactment (Palczewski et al., 2012). Scholars have applied body rhetoric as the critical perspective to a number of situations, ranging from the activism of different social movements to the politics of sports, but one potentially powerful form of body rhetoric can be found in performance. While rhetorical criticism of the body only spans a few decades, booming after 1999, performance stretches the basic ideals of the rhetorical body. In most studies the body is viewed as simply being, and while that is a powerful tool capable of constituting an argument by itself, the bodily functions that accompany presence can also contribute to the argument, one which Elam (2001) argues has always been linked to issues of race. “[T]he discourse on race, the definitions and meanings of blackness, have been intricately linked to issues of theater and performance. Definitions of race, like the processes of theater, fundamentally depend on the relationship between the unseen and seen,” (Elam, 2001, p. 4). The sounds emitted from the body and the movement enacted by the body construct the notable

presence of an obtrusive body; it is the embodiment of what should or should not be in a space. Sound as musicality and dialogue and movement as dance directly apply to performance, which in turn is applicable to the rhetoric of race. The sounds of black voices in both song and spoken word, as well as dancing movement, act as extensions of the black body, which can occupy spaces that are traditionally white.

“Considered within a frame that includes an immobile [white] audience, the prevalent underlying action of movement in hip hop dances, is ‘j’acuse,” spoken by young people of color to those in power who would ignore them. [...] The body in these forms dances about unequal power relations, self-awareness, and kinetic fun” (Lepecki, 2004, p. 79).

Here we see that black body movement and dance can not only pay homage to African tradition, but also act as symbolic action to protest the unjust. The black voice functions in a similar way. While the expectations set forth concerning the black voice expect that it is a robust, rhythmic, and melodic one, the black voice can be easily distinguished from others when it is not expected. This makes it a particularly powerful tool in achieving presence because it is distinct and notable. It is entirely possible that the spoken or sung words do not matter as much as the actual sound that the body emits in constructing the argument because by using sound as an extension of embodiment and presence, the black voice can call attention to both the black body and the argument conveyed. Performance rhetoric and racial rhetoric often combine in circumstances under which hegemony creates a strong barrier to entry, but artistic performances that celebrate race are a powerful tool to break into what is typically thought of as the white space known as the entertainment industry.

How *The Wiz Live!* Achieves Recognition Through Body Rhetoric

The Wiz Live! becomes an example of body rhetoric when it employs prosopopoeia. It takes previously established characters from a well-known narrative, *The Wizard of Oz*, and slightly transforms them into a characterization more representative of the African American community. Traditional characters like the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion are subtly changed in their dialect, musical sound, bodily movement, and physical appearance to assume Afrocentric qualities. The parallels between the original *The Wizard of Oz* novel and film and *The Wiz Live!* facilitate an examination of how prosopopoeia, voice, and choreography function within the telecast to achieve its purpose of creating a virtual experience of celebrating blackness and acting as an avenue to celebrate diversity in the entertainment industry.

One of the most interesting aspects of *The Wiz Live!* is its absence of mention of race. Perhaps this is because the narrative occurs in a land in which race relations are not necessarily prevalent. The land of Oz acts as a removed landscape in which the characters are able to express and celebrate African American culture. This is a noted change from the 1978 film of the same name, in which Diana Ross plays Dorothy as a 24-year-old schoolteacher living in Harlem. The political and racial tensions of the film are set up in early scenes, but also carry over into the land of Oz, unlike what the telecast does. The film’s Oz is an urban jungle, a post-apocalyptic New York City and Dorothy’s journey through a junkyard filled with garbage, a subway station bumping with drugs, and an evil witch’s sweatshop parallels the dangers of the city in the 1970s. *The Wiz Live!* makes perhaps an intentional decision not to do this. Dorothy’s few moments outside of Oz take place in a nondescript farm in Kansas. Furthermore, *The Wiz Live!* attempts to remove as many racial connotations as possible, even changing the Wicked Witch’s flying monkeys to what the director referred to as “winged warriors” (Gallagher, 2015). These choices to attempt to remove most, if not all, of the racial tensions and connotations from *The Wiz Live!* signal to the audience that the show is not about drudging up the hardships of the African American community, but rather celebrating its culture in the most positive light.

One of the many ways *The Wiz Live!* celebrates race without explicitly pointing it out is by mirroring the plot points of the *The Wizard of Oz* novel and the scenes of the following film. Because race is not explicitly acknowledged in the dialogue, but instead alluded to in dialectic choices and musical lyrics, it is best to compare the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* with *The Wiz Live!* The movie’s plot more closely aligns with the live telecast than the original novel in format. It is difficult to demonstrate the distinct changes between the two narratives because only so much of it is linguistic. The rest lies in sound, voice, and bodily movement. By comparing the film and the telecast, it’s easiest to see how the portrayals of familiar characters like Dorothy and the Scarecrow are adapted

using prosopopoeia. As a rhetorical device, prosopopoeia can occur when another's character is assumed, and within the context of this project, black characters assume traditional character roles with whom the audience is already familiar, and then attribute racially diverse characteristics to their portrayals. This is abundantly clear throughout the entirety of *The Wiz Live!*, but it is considerably elucidated in scenes and musical numbers that coordinate with scenes from *The Wizard of Oz* film. One such scene is the Scarecrow's introduction. Acting as a pivotal plot point, this scene introduces a central character other than the protagonist, Dorothy. In the 1939 film, the scene reads as follows:

[Dorothy looking at the Scarecrow as he nods his head]

Dorothy: Are you doing that on purpose, or can't you make up your mind?

Scarecrow: That's the trouble. I can't make up my mind. I haven't got a brain, only straw.

Dorothy: How can you talk if you haven't got a...brain?

Scarecrow: I don't know. But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they?

Dorothy: Yes, I guess you're right (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939).

In this original scene, it's established that the Scarecrow is without a brain, but he also jokes that the lack of a brain doesn't prevent mindless chatter. Below is the transcribed dialogue from *The Wiz Live!*, during the same plot point. Note how although the topic of conversation is identical, linguistic differences establish a new tone:

Dorothy: A talkin' scarecrow.

Scarecrow: Where?

Dorothy: You! And if you're a scarecrow, how come they crows ain't scared?

Scarecrow: Well that's a bevy of excellent questions which would be a pleasure to answer, if only I had a brain.

Dorothy: How can you talk without a brain?

Scarecrow: Well I'm not sure but since I've been up here, there's been a whole lot brainless people talkin' and it ain't stopped them. So how 'bout it, you're gonna help a brother out with some cash or what? (Zadan, Meron, Leon, & Diamond, 2015).

The dropping of consonants, especially from verbs in the gerund tense is one of the noticeable differences stemming from the African American English vernacular, but the use of the word "ain't" in place of "aren't" and "hasn't" is also characteristic of the specific dialect chosen for *The Wiz*. When Scarecrow refers to himself as a "brother," he's appealing to a sense of comradery with the audience that is unique to African American culture. And while African American English vernacular is often criticized and condescended upon for violating Standard English grammar rules, it's important to note that the use of words like "ain't" is a cultural choice. The dialogue is still complex and rich, using words like "bevy" to push back against connotation that the dialect is less intelligent or less valid than standardized English.

This linguistic pattern continues beyond the dialogue of the telecast into the musical numbers. Perhaps the most well-known song from *The Wiz*, "Ease On Down the Road" reiterates the sentiment of *The Wizard of Oz*'s "We're Off to See the Wizard," but replaces the lyrics with ones that more closely follow the African American English vernacular. Both songs are reprised several times throughout their respective texts and are fairly repetitive, but the differences are most notable in the verses:

We're off to see the wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz

We hear he is a whiz of a wiz, if ever a wiz there was

If ever, oh ever a wiz there was, the Wizard of Oz is one because

Because, because, because, because, because

Because of the wonderful things he does

We're off to see the wizard, the Wonderful Wizard of Oz (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939).

In the overarching narrative, Dorothy and her companions sing this on their way to the Emerald City as a mantra of sorts to keep them on their journeys, both the literal one to see the Wizard/Wiz and their journey toward self-fulfillment. In the original text, the lyrics not only move the plot but propel the characters continuously forward. Note how the same is done in *The Wiz*'s "Ease On Down the Road:"

*Come on, ease on down, ease on down, down the road.
Pick your left foot up
When your right foot's down
Come on legs keep movin'
Don't you lose no ground
You just keep on keepin'
On the road that you choose
Don't you give up walkin'
'Cause you gave up shoes,
Ease on down, ease on down the road (Zadan et al., 2015).*

Similar to the aforementioned scenes, the consonants are noticeably dropped from gerunds and the word "because" is shortened to "cause." And while this style is not exclusive to African American vernacular, the dialectic changes are most noticeable in the pronunciation, specifically that of the vowels. Furthermore, the addition of "you" and the substitution of "no" for "any" in "Don't you lose no ground" are characteristic of African American vernacular. While "We're Off to See the Wizard" serves the purpose of moving the plot and pushing the characters, "Ease On Down the Road" does this to an even further extent because the lyrics maintain the sentiment throughout the verses, but the ways in which that sentiment is expressed is elaborated upon, whereas the film's song more heavily relies on alliteration and repetition of words such as "because" to carry the tune. It is in this way that by making linguistic differences and writing new lyrics for the same scenes that it can be argued that *The Wiz Live!* enriches the original text by adding cultural flair. These subtle linguistic differences, it can be argued, is an extension of body rhetoric in that it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly constitutes as African American vernacular and sound. It is rather something that is heard in the black voice, which is more easily observed audibly, but these small linguistic hints in the script and libretto suggest that the dialogue and music is exclusively meant for African American voices. Only so much of what constitutes black performance can be put into words because so much of it is experienced – you know it when you hear it and see it, just as you hear the black voice and witness black bodily movement.

Similar to black vocal intonation, *The Wiz Live!* evokes body rhetoric and recognition by using a blend of traditional African dances and more modern hip hop styles in its choreography. Styles noted in the telecast included everything from traditional tribal dances to the latest trendy moves. In an interview, choreographer Fatima Robinson, who is also responsible for choreographing numbers for black artists like Michael Jackson and Aaliyah, explained the choices in dance, "We are touching on every street dance that's out there. We're hitting the Quan and we're hitting the Nae Nae. I love the new world of discovering dance, where you can go to YouTube and find the latest dance step" (Smith-Sloman, 2015, para. 7). The blend of dance styles is notably black, as the modern dance trends originated within the African American community, but this intentional directorial decision is one made to increase both recognition in the overwhelmingly white entertainment industry and identification in the black community, which is evident in its social mediated reactions.

It is this sort of cultural celebration that makes the text so much more easily identifiable for a black audience. As previously mentioned, *The Wiz Live!* employs prosopopoeia to appeal to its target audience consisting of African Americans. Using the film as a jumping point, on which beloved characters can be differently portrayed, *The Wiz Live!* allows black actors to assume roles with which all of its audiences are already familiar. The contents of each character, their personality and their core identities are unchanged, but instead altered to reflect another culture. *The Wizard of Oz* is recognizable narrative in American pop culture, but what *The Wiz Live!* does is transform that narrative ever so slightly with linguistic changes to represent another American culture, one that might not have previously identified with the narrative for lack of visibility. Prosopopoeia works in the libretto to increase this identification with the audience, especially with the black target audience, because the characters look and sound like they do, despite the relatively unchanged plot and consistent characters. This approach, the use of

prosopopoeia, is unique in a current entertainment industry that does not prioritize telling non-white stories. The fact that *The Wiz Live!* is based on a traditionally white story and it changes the script to make it a non-white narrative makes this telecast compelling and attractive for its target audience.

Body Rhetoric at Work in Two Planes

The Wiz Live! practices body rhetoric on two separate levels: within its own narrative, and against the whitewashed landscape of today's entertainment industry. Historically and currently the entertainment industry has struggled with diversity. While characters of color are routinely portrayed by white actors and representations of racial groups are damagingly stereotypical, there are limited spaces for racial minorities like the African American community. Almost in the vein of Plessy v. Ferguson's "separate but equal," we have separate entertainment spaces for black people like BET and the barrier to entry into white entertainment spaces like primetime television or Broadway are arguably heightened due to the existence of reserved black spaces. The 1978 *Wiz* film acted within the confines of these relegated spaces, but the 2015 live telecast breaks through the barrier, true to the style of body rhetoric. When it premiered on NBC in December 2015, *The Wiz Live!* received over two and a half hours of screen time on a typically white primetime network. Unsurprisingly, the target audience responded very positively to the telecast and the intentional changes, both from the 1939 source film *The Wizard of Oz* and previous *Wiz* adaptations. The black audience took to Twitter to live-tweet their reactions to the live broadcast. Thousands of tweets like, "This is so black. I'm in love #TheWiz," (Watson, 2015, para. 24) echo the general sentiment that, for once, black people are shown in a positive light. Despite musical producers' previous arguments that diversity doesn't sell, the telecast stood as evidence that multiracial narratives are profitable in the entertainment industry. "Audience reception to #TheWizLive was yet another reminder that Black culture has mainstream appeal beyond common stereotypes and even campy musicals oozing with innocence, love, laughter and modern-themed wit are more than worthy of great investment—and will sell," (Ellis, 2016, para. 19). It is important to remember what *The Wiz* has represented for the black community in the last four decades. From its original Broadway production in 1975 and the Diana Ross film in 1978, *The Wiz* has been a classic black narrative beloved by the community it represents. Moreover, it is a family friendly narrative, meaning that it can be shared and act as a source of black pride between generations. For those who grew up in primarily black schools, *The Wiz* was one of only a few options for community theater, and perhaps this is one of the reasons it resonates so profoundly within the black community: it is one of the only available opportunities for participation in a theatrical space that has been traditionally off-limits due to lack of non-white roles. All adaptations and productions of *The Wiz* act as an invitation to both celebrate black identity and participate in theater.

Moreover, it is evident that the telecast reached its target audience and achieved its rhetorical purpose within that specific demographic: to honor African American culture by increasing black visibility in both television and musical theatre. "We're in another watershed in which there are dozens of black people, who also feel free, creating television and appearing on it. That's the version of *The Wiz* that NBC aired [in December 2015] — a balmy celebration of what should be the natural order of things: black America, unoppressed" (Morris, 2015, para. 17). Ultimately *The Wiz Live!* could not fix or change the entertainment industry, but it put black people front and center onstage and prompted a discussion about what should come next. The blending of two media, theatre and television, as well as receiving attention on a primarily white network is only the first rung on which *The Wiz Live!* successfully uses body rhetoric to argue for more opportunities to tell black stories that are lacking prejudice and discrimination; the second level is how the narrative operates itself.

In my textual analysis, I noted that one thing *The Wiz* does is honor black tradition, but that it does so by intentionally removing African-American culture from the confines of racial and political tensions in the United States. This contradicts the basic idea of body rhetoric as symbolic action because typically it is thought of as being obtrusive; a body's presence in an otherwise unwelcoming space makes an argument. However, the transformative power of translating an otherwise white narrative into a disparate ethnic performance is noteworthy and possibly expands our understanding of entering spaces. The absence and/or removal of white bodies means that *The Wiz Live!* not only enters that space, but it reshapes it into something that better fits the needs of an otherwise marginalized group of people. Furthermore, the lack of white bodies does not mean that there is a lack of white presence. The narrative itself is a white space because both the novel and 1939 film featured primarily white writers and producers, white actors, and a white audience. But the conversion of a white Wizard of Oz to a black Wiz

removes much, but not all, of the white presence and exponentially increases embodied black presence. In doing so, *The Wiz Live!* establishes itself as a black celebration, but it doubles as an embodied protest.

Conclusion

Akin to the challenges Butterworth (2008) describes in his examination of body rhetoric, it takes more than one successful body or body of work to completely challenge and overthrow a hegemonic institution. However, *The Wiz Live!* is rhetorically successful in its employment of body rhetoric for several reasons, the first of which proving that diversity and racial narratives are profitable. Between 11.5 million viewers tuning in for the live telecast, critical acclaim from theater and television critics, and thousands of positive online responses from the very community it sought to represent, *The Wiz Live!* proves that it is not risky to celebrate marginalized culture and that it is in fact welcomed. It may not be welcomed by the entertainment industry who routinely ignores the value of racial narratives, but it is instead welcomed by the millions of viewers, who in a form of their own symbolic action, choose to consume racial narratives as a way of signifying to the media that this is the type of narrative they want to see. It is clear in both the rating and the outpour of support on social media that the black community wants to see narratives that reflect what it means to be black, and not just in relegated media spaces like BET. The telecast acts as an exception into what has traditionally been a white space (that being NBC and primetime television) with extremely high barriers to entry. Does the one telecast of *The Wiz Live!* change the entire landscape of entertainment? No, that would be nearly impossible to achieve with one instance of black presence and embodiment. What it does, however, is set precedence for what successful racial media integration can look like, and it proves to media conglomerates who control programming that there needs to be a shift in entertainment that reflects what American looks like today.

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