
In Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left, Malik Gaines argues that black performers across 1960s music, theatre, cinema, and experimental art harnessed the decade’s energies of “excess” to radically destabilize gendered, racialized, and capitalist systems of dominance. These acts of disruption were as revolutionary as they were provisional. The performances of sonic affect, antistate critique, queer sexual dissent, and gendered spectacle that Gaines traces did not programmatically reorder social relations; they instead left ambivalent and ephemeral imprints that Gaines limns with care. Constellating Nina Simone’s defiant performance personae, Ghanaian black feminist theatre by Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo, the cinematic collaborations of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Günther Kaufmann, and the queer communal life-world of the San Francisco Cockettes into a genealogy of possibility, Gaines contributes a rich archive and an original approach to black performance and its temporal, political, and representational dimensions.

Gaines’s emphasis on the critical possibilities of black queer and feminist performance resonates with paradigms of utopia, excess, and afro-alienation generated by scholars José Esteban Muñoz, Tavia Nyong’o, and Daphne Brooks, yet Gaines offers a unique location from which to theorize. While writing in conversation with this body of scholarship, he locates the outskirts of the Left as a particular site of black performative energy. For Gaines, the transgressive, radical, and “excessive sixties,” the transnational routes of African diaspora, and blackness as a historical and representational sign form the “three complicit registers” that together collage the subjects of his study. The US civil rights movement, the unfolding of West African independence, anticapitalist social movements of postwar Germany, and queer scenes of late-1960s California comprise the Left through which the subjects of Gaines’s study embody and animate heterogeneous forms of dissent. While Gaines risks reifying the Left as putatively straight, white, and male in relation to its queer, female, and black margins, he deftly troubles this relation by identifying the multidirectional circuits of power and multiple sites of articulation that comprised these networks of political affiliation; for Gaines, outskirts and margins do not wholly conflate.

Gaines reads archives of live performance footage, scripts and lyrics, cinema, interviews, and memoirs to excavate these circuits. In chapter 1, “Nina Simone’s Quadruple Consciousness,” Gaines multiplies Du Boisian double consciousness to explore Simone’s virtuosic deployment of genre, affect, and protest to marshal “multiple positionality [as] a source of provisional power.” Detailing how Simone drew jazz and blues traditions, Brechtian alienation effects, and Marxist analysis into her own affective alchemy, Gaines suggests that Simone produced a potent ambivalence that “staged agency where it [was] a structural impossibility.” In chapter 2, “Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, the State, and the Stage,” Gaines analyzes
the texts of Sutherland’s plays, *Edifa* (1962) and *Foriwa* (1962), and Aidoo’s *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964) as they challenged the Ghanaian state’s imperative to create a synthetic “African Personality” (55) by presenting tensions of gender and diasporic alienation as central to their dramatic dilemmas.

Chapter 3, “The Radical Ambivalence of Günther Kaufmann,” explores the eponymous black Bavarian actor’s role as a “radical agent” (111) in Fassbinder’s filmic oeuvre. Considering works such as *Gods of the Plague* (1969) and *Pioneers in Ingolstadt* (1970), Gaines argues that as an emblem of difference, a sexualized object, and an insurrectionist revolutionary, Kaufmann disrupted German national identity and sexual politics while withholding utopian alternatives. Kaufmann’s ambivalence—which Gaines locates somewhere between Fassbinder’s directorial control and the actor’s embodied agency—confounded rather than resolved Fassbinder’s filmic narratives. Confounding spectacularity forms the energetic locus of Gaines’s fourth chapter, “The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life,” which comprises the book’s most textured and vibrant reconstruction of queer sociality and performance. Excavating the spectacular life-world of the San Francisco Cockettes, and centering the performative repertoire of black queer Cockette performer, Sylvester, Gaines argues that the collective’s deployment of intertextual camp and their practice of liberation through “life as performance drag” (117) left a critical imprint at the intersection of black performative strategy and cultures of sexual dissent.

Gaines not only works across the “three complicit registers” that he names at the outset but across registers of performance studies scholarship and performance-practitioner expertise. As the book’s four chapters make manifest, Gaines demonstrates fluency speaking to black performance history, diasporic cultural studies, feminist film studies, and queer theory, while also deriving insight from his own longstanding relationship to performance as a member of the art collective My Barbarian. As Gaines writes, “While scholarship and practice are different, they have plenty to say to each other” (x). The book’s “Afterword” stages this generative conversation, transporting the reader to the 2015 Venice Biennale, where Gaines participated as an audience member and performer. Tying his personal knowledge of contemporary black performance to the history his work rigorously constructs, Gaines closes the monograph with provocations regarding the failures, excesses, and ongoing possibilities that black performance in the 1960s and present share.

*Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left* provides an impressive account of embodied tactics, affects, and experiments that launched provisional challenges to hegemonic systems of order and charted energetic paths for future radical acts to follow. Constructing a genealogy that defies generic, national, and gendered bounds, Gaines supplies black performance studies with an expansive and heterogeneous approach to the history of radicalism, to performance, and to blackness itself. One wonders how Gaines’s work might have further destabilized categories of difference had the author included nonblack people of color who performed radical acts across intersecting circuits of the global Left during the 1960s; yet, in the absence of engaging blackness and brownness together, Gaines nevertheless supplies rich theoretical ground from which such an investigation can emerge. Taking blackness as the central site of his analysis, Gaines thoroughly proves his contention that “blackness endures [...] as a deeply energetic position from which to communicate” (202).

—Camille S. Owens

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The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives. By Macarena Gómez-Barris.

In The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives, Macarena Gómez-Barris visits five resource-rich territories in South America traversed by colonialism and extractive capitalism to observe the social ecologies submerged within these geographies. She documents the petroleum industry in Eastern Ecuador; the spiritual tourism industry in the Sacred Valley of Peru; silver and tin mining in Potosí and La Paz, Bolivia; pine plantations in the Bio Bio region of Chile; and hydroelectricity projects in Cauca, Colombia. While these regions have been deemed “extractive zones” by agents of colonial capitalism who have, since the 1500s, mined the Américas to convert natural resources into commodities for capital accumulation, sacrificing biodiversity in the process, extractive capitalism has not been totalizing in its destructive effects. Wading through these worlds, Gómez-Barris uncovers local knowledges and “submerged perspectives” that challenge the monocultural view of developmentalism and colonial capitalism, and represent material alternatives to the exploitative relations and destructive path of extractive capitalism. She takes her cues from Indigenous guides, artists, activists, and cultural producers who train her to see the webs of interdependence between nature and culture in their natural ecologies, and she challenges us to find new ways of seeing, hearing, perceiving, and apprehending submerged perspectives that invert the colonial extractive view. While the natural ecologies that Gómez-Barris visits are in peril as a result of large-scale extractive projects, the Indigenous communities that reside within these spaces remain vital sources of knowledge because they have survived the colonial encounter. Gómez-Barris lifts and amplifies powerful genealogies of thought, praxis, and connection that have survived the violence of capitalist reduction and commodification of life. Doing so establishes the “extractive zone” as the terrain of potential for critiquing, resisting, and dismantling extractive capitalism and coloniality, and reorganizing social and ecological life based on Indigenous principles of coexistence with the nonhuman world.

As Indigenous-led obstructions to the expansion of extractive capitalism increasingly gain global attention, and the deleterious effects of the Anthropocene are more readily acknowledged, The Extractive Zone offers a timely study of the proliferation of extractive capitalism and coloniality within neoliberal multicultural states. Gómez-Barris shows how even as newly progressive states such as Ecuador and Bolivia incorporate environmental protections into constitutional change and legalize Native people’s rights, they often fall into a colonial logic that imagines resource extraction as the only means towards national development. By enabling extractive projects that violently reorganize territories and disrupt complex ecosystems, they prolong social and economic inequalities that delimit Indigenous sovereignty and perpetuate anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racisms; fail to address the needs and perspectives of female, gender-nonconforming, working-class, and queer populations; diminish the possibility of national autonomy from global markets; and curtail actual decolonization.

The Extractive Zone is the first book published in the Dissident Acts series coedited by Diana Taylor and Gómez-Barris, a series that focuses on embodied politics and decolonial practices in the Américas. Gómez-Barris’s engagement with the burgeoning literature on extractivism that has emerged in South America—much of which remains untranslated—buttresses the need for theory from sites in the Global South that are deemed marginal but are nevertheless central to the global economy. The Extractive Zone takes on the work of epistemic decolonization. It is the result of substantive situated fieldwork attentive to embodied knowledge and the geopolitics of
knowledge production. A submerged perspective requires one to occupy a position from below and reckon with the opacity of what lies beneath the surface, invisible to the vertical colonial gaze that facilitates and perpetuates accumulation by dispossession by rendering Native populations invisible. Gómez-Barris centers her own embodied experience as she moves slowly and carefully through extractive zones and perceives anew all that grows and emerges within these spaces. In chapter 3, Gómez-Barris shows how a “fish-eye” episteme that peers from below the surface counteracts the drone/surveillance logic that coincides with the commodification of water. This submerged perspective inverts the colonial extractive gaze approaching the river as a site of vibrant social and ecological sustenance rather than merely water to be harnessed for electricity.

Through engagement with Andean phenomenology and Indigenous anarcho-feminist critique, Gómez-Barris develops a “decolonial femme methodology” to lead us out of the “deadening impasse that is extractive capitalism” (xvi). She describes this method as the nexus where experience, perception, and decolonization meet—a mode of “porous and undisciplined analysis shaped by the perspectives and critical genealogies that emerge within these spaces,” not bound to the “disciplinary drive” to “master” images or the formations being studied, nor claiming to fully comprehend the myriad forms of life and potentiality encountered (xvi). She illustrates the necessity of fighting against patriarchal relations, coloniality, and extractive capitalism at once, and the radical potential of intellectual and cultural productions such as the Indigenous anarcho-feminisms of Mujeres Creando, whose anticolonial and anticapitalist philosophies, modes of critical living, and political enactments are rooted in antiracist and decolonial praxis, and who find routes of escape from the reinscription of Andean patriarchy and the erasure of embodied knowledge.

The Extractive Zone moves beyond the realm of critique to develop and point to queer and porous practices that move beyond colonial capitalism and its anthropogenic effects. As various critics have pointed out, the Anthropocene discourse leads to a universalizing idiom and perspective that shelters the main culprits of colonial capitalism and obscures the colonial matrix embedded within extractive capitalism. The submerged ontologies, movements, artworks, and modes of living within Indigenous territories that Gómez-Barris locates demonstrate material alternatives to coloniality and the reduction and extinction of life. They refute the doomsday scenarios currently rampant in political and artistic discourse and present viable strategies for decolonizing relations within the Anthropocene. Indigenous epistemes from within the extractive zones of Latin America (and the Global South) appear as critical sites for the production of knowledge. There may be no greater testament to the value and urgency of decolonial approaches to embodied vernacular knowledge today.

— Kimberly Richards

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Filmmaker, theorist, and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha’s most recent genre-defying book, Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared, is critical theory, creative offering, and philosophical reflection on the essential “dis-ease” (Trinh 1989) characterizing contemporary global victory-hungry regimes of militarism, and the possibilities of loving forms of dissent within. Following conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Congo, Iraq, Palestine, Rwanda, Tibet, Vietnam, and elsewhere, Trinh shows that on today’s “screen of events,” what is relevant is for war itself to remain in a state of ever- “pending ending” (47). As a radical retelling of the war story, Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared presents itself as a “resonance event” (4)— tracking the ways in which war wounds reverberate, resound, and tremble across time and geographies, materially affecting our quotidian rhythms (7). Trinh posits the figures of the walker and the writer as receptors of the pulsations of war events. Therefore, she urges bodily-kinesthetic attention to the “propulsive generosity” of the walker—a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, a climate justice activist, a water protector, a Movement for Black Lives protestor (118). Walking in answer to the “call of the Disappeared” opens up an alternate spatio-temporality for political action. Relatedly, Trinh suggests that when a writer moves through the world with her sensory apparatus reawakened, these same rhythms may disrupt mental categories and create new assemblages of words, unsettling the war propaganda machine’s attempts to evacuate meaning from language (63).

As in Trinh’s other works, her striking methodology expands the possibilities of what scholarship in the humanities may look like. Bringing together voices from critical and feminist theory, mainstream media, poetry, Zen Buddhist practice, mythology, oral tradition, and aphorisms, Lovecidal presents a form of multivocal decolonial praxis that readers familiar with her body of work will recognize. The book also features art photography by Jean Paul Bourdier. Multiple black-and-white images capture human bodies with, in, near, and against varied natural landscapes, playing with illusion and actuality, camouflage and mimicry, light and shadow, so as to perform Trinh’s conceptual offering of “inter-possibility,” a zone of “between states” in which liberatory praxis may be located, both aesthetically and politically (80).

Composed of 18 chapters or “creative fragments,” Lovecidal makes at least four critical moves. First, the reader encounters Trinh’s carefully researched critique of contemporary war forms, with a focus on the flawed logics of a US regime that will never accept “anything else than complete victory” (72). “Victory” is exposed as an enduring and infelicitous speech act in these pages, with each new US war raising the specter of Vietnam (35). In scene after scene of apparent military victory, Trinh indicates how each such proclamation is exceedingly short-lived, Afghanistan being a case in point where a “revived for replay” war continues (126). Further, to sustain the Manichean logics of the current US dispensation, the war mouthpiece redefines victory at each turn. Trinh notes that the line separating victory and loss is strategically blurred or rearranged, so that we witness war unfolding between “victor and victor” (91). An especially acute example of this was in the first Gulf War, when a moment of broadcast television showed both Saddam Hussein and George H.W. Bush claiming victory for their side at the time of the ceasefire. In fragments titled “Enhanced Security: He Won,” “Screen Replay,” and “Deep in the Red,” Trinh maps the landscape of affect (alongside material violence) that is activated by counterinsurgency, surveillance, and security measures, both domestically and abroad, in the name of victory over the enemy. Finally, if the staging of victory privileges spectacular visuality, Trinh draws our attention to the “nocturnal gestures” of war (31). For instance,
she describes how the US withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2010 was carried out under cover of darkness, such that the world could not discern the actual limited and messy nature of this much-blazoned departure.

A second section of the book sheds light on China’s own specific “dark night policy” of disappearing Tibetans (a policy that has intensified since the spring 2008 Tibetan protests). The parallels between US imperialism and Chinese oppression in Tibet are critically presented as two separate but related discourses of imperialism. Tibetan “black hand” detainees are kept in ad hoc and unofficial detention centers, “black houses” and “black jails” (163). Here Trinh names the tactics of the monastic dance teacher Gendun, Tibet’s singing nuns (the Drapchi 14), the singer and nightclub owner Drolmakyi, the documentary filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen, and numerous other dissidents of the nonviolent Tibetan resistance movement. In response to the Chinese state decree calling for a ban on images of the Dalai Lama, ordinary Tibetans turn to the plenitude of the void. An empty space on the wall, a gap in the altar, a blank sheet of paper, or a vacant chair stand in at once for the Chinese state censor and for the exiled spiritual leader (227). Trinh concludes this section with a reminder that the oppressor remains cognizant of the “equanimity of a void” (64) and the “multiform of the between” (261), themes that surface across her expansive oeuvre (Trinh 1991; 1999; 2005; 2011).

The titular neologism, “lovecidal,” is a rich conceptual and performative term, appearing fleetingly in various instances of the text, offering a third intervention. In the fragment “The Ultimate Protest,” the reader is led to consider the acts of self-immolation by Vietnamese monk Thích Quang Đức, the Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, and Tibetan Lamas as ones of love suicided. In Tibet, these extraordinary gestures of refusal say “no” to tyranny as much as to hollow liberal appeals for peace. Further, in their call for solidarity, freedom, and the recognition of Tibetan cultural identity, these radically nonconforming sacrifices are “life affirming” (250–51). Trinh writes that through their “one torch-body” the self-cremators desire for “thousands of candles to be lit without bodies being sacrificed” (250). Here, love as a force and an event enables new modes of thinking and action beyond the frames of a Foucauldian biopolitics, in which the State can “make live” or “let die” (Foucault [1997] 2003:241). That is, when love is pushed to suicide it shows itself to be “profoundly indifferent to the clash of binaries on which both the governing power and its resistance thrive” (79). Trinh infers that it is for this profoundly destabilizing nature of loving acts and affects that voices “from the seat of love” have been silenced, and corporate media’s “bleeding heart” is presented as a feminized and trivial organ (3). Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared thus proposes we revisit the terms of current debates on biopolitics and feminist praxis, and the work may be considered in generative conversation with Jasbir Puar’s The Right to Maim, which introduces “debility” as a third biopolitical concept (2017); Judith Butler’s theorizations of precarity and assembly as paired aspects of corporeality (2015); as well as bell hooks’s writings on love as a “practice of freedom” ([1994] 2006).

A final section of the book offers the twin rhythms of writing and walking as creative forces. Walking is presented as a simultaneous movement on an outward path and on an “inner road” (123). Sections such as “she, the wayfarer,” “twilight walk,” and “walk for rain” interweave through the book, such that the reader is invited to make her own route through the work. Ultimately, Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared offers tools and methods for multiple fields of praxis. This text is a formidable resource for scholars of performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, media studies, globalization studies, cultural studies, and peace and conflict studies, as well as for artists, writers, and activists, who seek an expansive, embodied critical language as they bear witness to our times.

—Karin Shankar

References


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*Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance.*

In the first chapter of *Singularities*, “Moving as some thing (or, some things want to run),” André Lepecki describes a scene that sent me pealing with laughter. Colombian visual and performance artist Maria José Arjona is warming up for her durational performance *Untitled* (2004) in the gallery specially made for her inside Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt. She is blowing bubbles of “liquid soap laced with vermillion pigment” (28), bubbles that begin to rise from the gallery and threaten the building’s protected spaces. Lepecki, who has yet to arrive at the space, receives a call from the technical director who shouts, “The bubbles are everywhere!” Arjona’s fugitive bubbles send the house technicians on a frenetic mission to capture them with butterfly nets, and Lepecki finds himself gingerly walking alongside Arjona, who has entered a trance-like state, attempting to ask if it is okay that this mayhem is taking place during her performance. There is so much rushing, dashing, blurtng, chasing, splatting, and breathing, so much activity erupting beyond the control of the artist, the curator, and the technicians, it’s like a scene from the Keystone Cops!

Taking us through the event with the patience, humility, and wit of a great storyteller, Lepecki accomplishes two tasks with this anecdote: 1) he demonstrates a thing as “less an object than a mode of actioning the absolutely unforeseen” (36), as that which wants to run despite human efforts to run things; and 2) he performs the figure of the “audience as witness” (175), an audience tasked with “the responsibility of caring for a performance’s afterlives, by giving testimony” (172). The anecdote does something else as well, something all of his performance descriptions do: it stimulates the reader’s nervous system, taking them on a kinesthetic-affective ride straight into the materiality of theory.

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**Singularities** is a sparkling work of dance theory that reads like an urgent and prescient call to action. It combines performance studies, dance studies, black studies, continental philosophy, and political theory to ask “what it means to be a dancer in today’s world” (2), a world governed by neoliberal rationality. The case studies—performances that “gather and take place under the name of dance” (5) by artists from Colombia, the US, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Brazil, Romania, Argentina, France, and Germany—“both express and critique the fundamental elements that define the (irrational) rationality sustaining our age of neoliberal, neocolonialist capitalism,” embracing “choreopolitical actions” (5).

Readers new to Lepecki will need to brush up on their Gilles Deleuze since Lepecki has so thoroughly digested his philosophy of immanence. And it doesn’t hurt to be at least somewhat versed in black studies, particularly Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s theorizing of the undercommons, which is indispensable to Lepecki’s reading of Marcelo Evelin’s and Mette Edvardsen’s dances in the dark, works that expose blackness as “an onto-political force of disruption” (59). But even without this background, any dancer, dance-maker, or dance lover will thrill to a book that claims dance as “one of the most relevant critical-aesthetic practices in live art today” (7).

The book is also a (tough) love letter to dance. Lepecki reimagines modernity’s figure of the silent, spotlighted dancer, the “angelologic” servant of the choreographic master, as self-reflexive and historically conscious, skilled and stumbling in the dark, resistant to the physics of flow, the laminar that imposes upon the transcendent principle of ideal order” (154). As a dancer still in love with the organizing principle of the “5-6-7-8!” I bristled at the thought that traditional technique classes are necessarily complicit in constructing an ideal community, “where individuals move about incessantly only to avoid each other and to make of this avoidance the glorious performance of their virtuosity” (155). Are performances of flow and virtuosity incapable of transforming “spaces of circulation into spaces of freedom” (18)? Does “a choreography freed from the limitations of what it means to make a dance” (64), even one that seeks to forge connections across time and space, and between performer and audience member, impose other kinds of limitations and hierarchies of what dances matter? Can the dance techniques of modernity function as a repetition that creates the skilled dancer capable of “the dark physics of the unpredictable” (155)?

Lepecki mobilizes the concept of the “singularity” to describe dances that move within and against “the (irrational) rationality sustaining our age of neoliberal, neocolonialist capitalism” (5). In the most general terms, Lepecki claims a dance as a singularity when “something happens” (22) in the work, when he detects an “actualization of a difference that matters difference in the world” (7). Lepecki’s typology of singularities includes thingly potential, nonhuman and human animal assemblages, the endurance of the encounter, darkness/blackness, and the body as living archive—all of which coexist in both theory and practice. A singularity is “an odd and wild bifurcation or swerve of a path” (148); “modes of collective individuation away from the monadic-juridical form of the person” (6); a “bearer of strangeness” (6); a “gathering of the disparate” (7); a “choreosomatics of resistance” (12); the “performance of nonperformance” (14). Lepecki is equally interested in a practice of choreography that requires “an altogether different relation to authorial intention and to the purpose of performing” (149), and a relationship between academic and artist that is not one of scholarly distance, but rather a nonhierarchical conversation. For example, Ralph Lemon’s words (quoted from films, published texts, and personal emails sent to Lepecki) play as much of a role in Lepecki’s analysis of *How can you stay in the house all day and not go anywhere*? (2010) as do those of Moten and Deleuze. Together, artists and theorists form “an expression of relations,” impersonal yet intimate (18).

In the last chapter, “Afterthought: Four notes on witnessing performance in the age of neoliberal dis-experience,” works of Mette Ingvartsen and Jérôme Bel appear as “moments when another kind of language reveals the enfleshed alliance between power and its non-verbal inflections of violence” (174). This other kind of language takes shape, resounds, and speaks back to the “forensic expert” (the neutral, objective, scientific, detached conveyor of information) and
the “accomplice” (the silent, complicit, modern subject), figures drawn from Eyal Weizman and Peter Sloterdijk, respectively. It is the language of the witness (the “fictive-affective,” “historical-political,” “performative-narrative-aesthetic” storyteller) who is “aware of the political-aesthetic power of sharing experience, and that the transmissibility of experience [...] is an imperative in our age when experience is diminished” (175).

Repetition in Lepecki’s account—whether in a Julie Tolentino reenactment, a limotrophic border crossing between human and nonhuman animals in the work of Antonia Baehr, a durational encounter between Ralph Lemon and Walter Carter, or in Marcela Levi and Lucia Russo’s telling “those stories human love makes” (94)—is not merely the enactment of difference over time, but is a mode of obstruction and survival. Repetition is about turning back and resisting the neoliberal command to move forward in forgetting. Embracing “the clunky movements of broken things” (89), the “cracked or torn plane of matter whose other name is history” (90), is about resisting micro- (and macro-) fascisms.

To give testimony (of the past, for the future), “[t]he task of the dancer is to open up the present so that these events gain flesh and muscle, tremors and spasms, gestures and actions, and indeed, words” (174). Singularities is itself full of flesh, muscle, tremors, spasms, gestures, actions, and, of course, words. And it appears that the task of the reviewer is not to review but to witness the event of reading, to tell a story “decisively, if not necessarily nimbly or with virtuosity, certainly neither in servility nor neutrally” (151). Citing Ralph Lemon’s embrace of our shared “universal doubt” (157), Lepecki calls for action in the time-space of not knowing. At many points in the book, I found myself thinking, “I don’t know what this is.” But I do know one thing about Singularities: it’s something, a hard (difficult, solid) thing. Singularities does not just flow: it works.1

—Sima Belmar

Reference


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In the penultimate scene of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, the Duke of Vienna gathers citizens to witness a carefully staged public display that he hopes will restore the authority of law while safeguarding his own reputation against accusations of tyranny. Jeffrey Alexander’s recent collection of essays on the cultural pragmatics of social performance echoes the Duke’s performative designs — though it plays down the hollowness of political contrivance that Shakespeare envisions. For better or for worse, Alexander exhorts us to note well this kind of political

1. “time does not just flow: it works” (Didi-Huberman 2002:320; translation Lepecki’s [157]).
staging if we are to properly understand what makes social movements succeed. Drawing upon the emotional intensity of Émile Durkheim’s concept of ritual and Richard Schechner’s broadening of ritual to include social performances more generally, Alexander describes what a successful social performance requires: namely, the fusion of actors, audience, and script.

With examples that sweep readers from the civil rights movement in the US during the 1950s–’60s under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to the pro-democracy uprising in Tahrir Square, Cairo, in 2011, to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US following a spate of police killings of unarmed black citizens in 2015–16, Alexander presses home his point: it isn’t organizational tactics or compelling ideas alone that make for successful social performances. Political and social leaders fare best when they construct narratives in conjunction with living symbols that inspire the popular imagination. Larger than life leaders need to speak and dress for their role—whether it is Mao trading in his scholars’ phrases and robes for more earthy substitutes or Black Lives Matter leader DeRay McKesson making the daily rounds on TV news shows sporting his trademark bright blue Patagonia vest. It’s the symbols and gestures together with the words and actions that arrest the collective imagination.

The theory of social performance that Alexander propounds squares well with what successful rhetors, including lawyers, have always understood. Persuasion in law and politics is a matter of stagecraft. The professional persuader, along with his or her clients (or constituents), always remains ripe for casting—along with everyone else in public assemblies where power moves belief into action. What characters are they playing? What story genre is being enacted? What central images will rivet the attention and distill the issues at stake? Perhaps it’ll be a matter of activating resentment toward endemic police racism, as Johnny Cochran angled for in his defense of OJ Simpson when Simpson stood charged with double homicide. “Only you police the police!” Cochran urged the jury (see Sherwin 2000:45–47)—as if to say, what is more important, solving a forensically flawed murder mystery, set up by racist cops, or sending the racists themselves an unmistakable message: that their corrupt practices will rebound against them? Cochran grasped what Alexander advises—you have to fuse actors, audience, and script in a grand shared action. If the jurors—or any social actor for that matter—can be made to believe the cause is right and the power to do great things is at hand, successful collective action remains possible.

Not surprisingly, Alexander’s brand of social performance theory takes issue with advocates of the postdramatic, such as Hans-Thies Lehmann. In a similar vein, Alexander argues that the notion of a “de-dramatized reality” bruited by theorists of the society of spectacle, such as Guy Debord, or the society of endless simulacra, such as Jean Baudrillard, needs to give way in the face of new forms of myth and social ritual. As Alexander puts it, “deflationary symbols can be dramatically re-inflated” (126). In this view, the vitality of performance studies is hardly a matter of “romantic sentimentality” (127). Of course, that is not to say that advocates of performance studies get off scot-free. Alexander takes aim at some performance studies scholars for their “moralistic” writing and “metaphorical concepts [...] more suggestive of poetics than social theory” (129). The latter caution, however, gives a reader pause. Having advocated in favor of motivating the collective imagination through new forms of shared emotional intensity, it is difficult to see why poetics remains the apparent bane of social theory. Is it not Denis Diderot whom Alexander sympathetically quotes as saying: “It is the conformity of action, diction, face, voice, movement, and gesture, to an ideal model imagined by the poet” (134)?

Perhaps it is less the metaphorical nature of performance studies’ concepts that is at issue than Alexander’s implicit preference for concepts over metaphors. Are we really back to the old
scientific/rational knowledge versus interpretive/poetic understanding binary (see von Wright 2004)? If Alexander wants to understand better what inspires social performance, as he claims, it’s not concepts he’s after. It’s the aura, the sense of presence and authenticity that remains central. But here the elephant in the room takes center stage. The decline of contemporary political reality into mass spectacle is hardly an illusion. Or if it is, it is a mass illusion—facilitated by a carefully orchestrated fusion of scripts, actors, and audience on digital social media platforms everywhere.

Alexander may be correct when he writes: “democratic movements to control power cannot afford to be postdramatic” (141). But democratic fascism is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Alexander advocates “the invigorating experience of myth” (141). But myth is not tantamount to justice. The most pressing question we face today might well be what cultural resources remain to help us tell when myth and justice jibe and when they differ. On the heels of that query comes another: Does it matter when the effervescence that empowers belief operates on the basis of Machiavellian spectacle (as Shakespeare has envisioned) instead of a more organically constituted (“authentic”) social drama? Could it be that justice, authenticity, and presence are somehow entangled? A theory of social performance that fails to address challenges such as these may find it hard to shake off the ancient stigma of sophistry.

— Richard K. Sherwin

References


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In March 1894 at London’s Avenue Theatre, two Irish playwrights altered the course of leftist theatre by staging a fairy play and a drawing-room comedy. Both failed—W.B. Yeats’s *The Land of Heart’s Desire* was misunderstood by audiences and critics, while John Todhunter’s *A Comedy of Sighs* proved career-ending—and their failure is precisely the point in Susan Cannon Harris’s new monograph. By broaching the then-volatile phenomenon of queer female desire, the plays precipitated a reactionary heterosexism in late-19th-century English drama and socialist politics that would persist for decades to come.
Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions explores a series of short-lived moments wherein Irish drama, progressive gender and sexual politics, and the international Left converged upon the European stage. Connected by a belief in the revolutionary potential of radical eros, this “web of influence and inspiration” sought to remap human society along utopian lines (1). Each of Harris’s five chapters dwells at the cusp of a turning point in this history, where hope and failure are suspended in dialectical tension. That dialectic serves as both the organizing principle and ethical imperative of the study. It is only by returning to the theatrical and historical archives of the late 19th and 20th centuries, Harris insists, that we can appreciate the vibrancy of what she terms “queer socialism” as well as the magnitude of its loss. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure and José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “queer futurity,” Harris’s book dwells on the luminous potentiality of these thwarted moments in order to combat the sense of inevitability etched into histories of socialism, queer politics, and the Irish dramatic revival. “If we lose our memory of [queer socialism’s] vision and of [its] obstacles,” she cautions, “then all we can do, when presented with post-revolutionary despair, is assume it was always like this” (133).

Harris focuses on Irish playwrights, but her approach is notably international. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the development of George Bernard Shaw’s socialist drama within the contexts of fin-de-siècle English theatre and the rise of Fabianism. Chapter 3 traces the syndicalist movement in Ireland, focusing on strike plays of the 1910s by St. John Ervine, A. Patrick Wilson, and Daniel Corkery, while chapters 4 and 5 move further afield, exploring J.M. Synge’s reappearance in the Spanish Civil War drama of Bertolt Brecht and Sean O’Casey’s flirtation with Soviet Communism during his experimental phase in the 1930s and ’40s. The epilogue turns to the postwar US Left, showing how the drama of O’Casey and Samuel Beckett helped shape Lorraine Hansberry’s staging of political self-reckoning in the post-McCarthy era. In its archival coverage alone — Harris consults unpublished plays, abandoned drafts, programs, press clippings, correspondence, journalism, and theatre records — the book adds considerably to our knowledge of this chapter in dramatic history.

The book’s methodology is equally noteworthy. By situating Irish dramatists within international socialism, Harris breathes new life into the often hermetic narrative of Irish modernism. She takes a deliberately decentered approach to Irish drama, positioning both familiar and long-forgotten playwrights within a political and artistic network held together not by W.B. Yeats or the Abbey Theatre but by a disparate cast including the English actress Florence Farr, socialist intellectuals William Morris and Edward Carpenter, Irish labor leader Jim Larkin, utopian reformer Ebenezer Howard, Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, and the ghost of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions affirms the national specificity of theatre all the while charting its global itineraries, and it will appeal to scholars in a variety of areas.

Harris also accounts for the range of socialist drama, including the workers’ theatres so often maligned by their contemporaries and in scholarship as amateurish or crudely propagandist. Though their constituencies were “cobbled together from labour unions, political parties, [and] national liberation movements,” Harris affords them an important place in the history of modern drama (6). For instance, the fourth chapter recounts how the exiled Brecht, having botched early collaborations with workers’ theatres, learned to adapt the methods of epic theatre to the more accessible conventions of realism. The book’s cross-sectional methodology succeeds in large part because of Harris’s considerable skepticism about the caprices of artistic taste. What looks simply like “bad” form turns out to be the purposeful rejection of inherited conventions like the well-made play. Meanwhile, critical praise also warrants scrutiny, as in the case of postwar American critics who championed O’Casey in spite of the Stalinist leanings that have earned him a rightful place, Harris quips, in “the Hall of Grievously Mistaken Modernists” (171).

One of the book’s distinctive virtues is its willingness to interrogate its own methodology. In her introduction, Harris contemplates a series of pointed rhetorical questions about the
value of the archival research she has conducted; in the epilogue she acknowledges the risks that remain; and throughout, she commits to “document[ing] carefully, and to renounc[ing] the arrogance of discovery” (240). By admitting what scholarship cannot achieve, Harris is able to dwell more convincingly on what it might nonetheless lead us to imagine. Reading Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions, one is also struck by the fairness with which the author treats her subjects. Although her imperative is to name the institutional forces and human agents responsible for queer socialism’s foreclosure, Harris manages to assign blame without judging motive. Early in the book, she reminds her readers that “Shaw had a vulnerable body just like ours,” and that vulnerability affected his “decisions about what not to say and how not to say it” (28). Fear, shame, grief, pride: these are human failings that Harris allows for without censure.

The study’s peripatetic investigations are held in check by fine organization. The chapters center on interlinked readings of plays, and here Harris’s formal dexterity and theatrical expertise shine. The scholarly apparatus is minimal (several sketches and photos, a works cited, and an excellent index) but effective. In all, it is a well-made book. The fourth chapter presents one puzzling departure from the otherwise consistent structure. Rather than focus on an Irish playwright, Harris examines Brecht’s 1937 adaptation of J.M. Synge’s 1904 play Riders to the Sea. The problem rests not in foregrounding a non-Irish playwright but in decontextualizing the source material. Although Harris claims that Brecht had little interest in the Irish Left, Synge did, and to omit the politics of Riders is to make the two plays’ synergy appear merely fortuitous. Nonetheless, it is a minor oversight in an otherwise impeccable study. Harris’s first monograph, Gender and Modern Irish Drama (2002), placed her at the vanguard of Irish studies. The new monograph is sure to extend her influence to scholarly revolutions still in the making.

— Sarah L. Townsend

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The introduction to Giulia Palladini’s provocatively titled monograph opens with scatter-shot bits of description that call forth a collection of (initially unnamed) 1960s-era performers, places, and venues. These arresting “snapshots” center on important theatre and performance makers such as Ellen Stewart, Andy Warhol, Jackie Curtis, Penny Arcade, Tom Eyen, Ruby Lynn Reyner, and others who become the subjects of Palladini’s critical investigations of performance-making, labor, and leisure in the 1960s. Her unusual study is based on a theoretical framework she conceives as and calls “fore-play.” Palladini defines this paradigm along parallel lines with the sexual practice as “a labor of pleasure on the part of performers and spectators, [...] not organized according to a climax”
She writes that there is an “extended interval of leisurely enjoyment,” that “playful activities” are engaged in and a “productive outcome” is avoided or postponed. Additionally, the subset of 1960s performances that Palladini bases her argument on are “not a form of preparation, nor a training toward a future craft” (4). In the four chapters and two “interludes” (shorter sections) that follow, Palladini interroagates each of the opening image-bits and works hard to connect them and support them via her theoretical construct, which she builds through lengthy formulations that meld Marxist theory (via Walter Benjamin and others) with queer theory. José Esteban Muñoz’s evocation of the utopian potential in pre-Stonewall gay culture and Elizabeth Freeman’s work on queer kinship and community are foundational to Palladini’s thinking.

My encounter with and experience of the book’s first pages reflect my takeaway from the book in its entirety—a sometimes startling and refreshing collage-work of detailed close readings and performance critiques, meshed with wide-ranging theoretical analyses that are occasionally interrupted by the author’s self-reflections. Several of the book’s 1960s-era subjects (she illuminates performer/playwright/director Jackie Curtis’s life and work in juxtaposition and in combination with director John Vaccaro’s Playhouse of the Ridiculous) are compellingly and comprehensively critiqued with the support of Palladini’s theoretical framework. Using the fore-play paradigm, Palladini also brings a fresh lens and energy to her analyses of two stars of the time period—the filmmaker and performer Jack Smith and the legendary artist Andy Warhol. Palladini reviews Warhol’s Screen Tests (1964–1966) as “a pure form of fore-play”: in her reading of “Marx’s scheme of the creation of value” these “auditions” are only “tests” of the performer’s ability to do the actual work on a role (166). In the case of Warhol’s evocative film portraits, the work ends with the scene of foreplay; there is no final production.

Palladini’s analyses of Ellen Stewart’s mission and practices work less well in support of her argument. Stewart’s steadfast commitment to specific artists and their training, her strategic and forward-thinking fundraising, her accumulation of real estate and East Village and international theatre empire-building are in contradiction with Palladini’s fore-play conception of her: Stewart did not see her participation in making theatre happen as “playful”; she was very interested in the success of the work at her theatres and actively sought critics’ attention to shows she produced; she financially supported training and workshops for performers in La MaMa companies (see Crespy 2003; Bottoms 2004; Rosenthal 2006; Harding and Rosenthal 2017; Rosenthal 2017). Stewart was the advocate for and home to US and international collectives’ and directors’ path-breaking workshops and training-based theatre work (Joseph Chaikin/The Open Theater, Andrei Serban/The Great Jones Company, and Tadeusz Kantor/Cricot 2, to name a few) whose methodologies and outcomes were in direct contrast to the “amateur”-centered work of Curtis and Vaccaro (who were also produced at La MaMa and serve productively in Palladini’s book as examples of fore-play in action). Because of the multitude and variety of productions at her theatre(s), and because of her success-oriented management and operations style, Stewart is not a useful case study to support Palladini’s argument for a fore-play performance mode.

Mirroring the scatter-shot feel of the opening, the structure of the book lacks cohesion. Palladini’s decision to pull discussions of 19th-century and early-20th-century popular cultural forms (vaudeville, magic lanterns) into her already broad-based exploration of 1960s performances and dense theoretical excursions takes away from, rather than supports, the strength of her argument. That said, what works very well is Palladini’s close attention to Stefan Brecht’s 1970s insider/outside accounts. Palladini makes good use of Brecht’s “participatory” critiques of Vaccaro’s Playhouse of the Ridiculous and of Smith’s midnight performances in constructing a theory of 1960s-era queer spectatorship. Palladini deploys the fore-play paradigm especially well in her incisive analysis of Warhol’s Screen Shot series, a film project “yet to come” (as Palladini describes it), which is the focus of her final chapter.

At the center of her book, Palladini includes 14 black-and-white production shots and publicity photographs that illustrate many of the cast of characters featured in The Scene of Foreplay. Those of Curtis are particularly moving and poignant: both of his self-
constructions—glamour-boy and glamour-girl—directly confront the camera; in his three faux wedding pictures he plays the beautiful bride. Curtis died of AIDS soon after the last bride shot. These striking visuals capture what the sharpest bits of Palladini’s descriptions and theoretical reflections of the 1960s do for readers: illuminate under-valued labor, re-view vibrant art-work, and productively unpack queer community connections. Indeed, the labor of love is often revealed in this book, a labor that is reflected in the author’s scholarly investment in her subjects.

— Cindy Rosenthal

References


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Megan Lewis’s Performing Whitely in the Postcolony: Afrikaners in South African Theatrical and Public Life is an urgent and overdue analysis of 20th- and 21st-century performances that are strategically tethered to ideologies of whiteness. Lewis examines South African performance tactics and media, staged performances, playwrights, and performance artists in order to mark and make visible how Afrikaner whiteness protects itself. Methodologically, her intent is to examine performances created by white artists in ways that do not patriotically defy nor glibly demonize them (5). Lewis interrogates how South African performances have reified and critiqued shifting manifestations of whiteness from the nation’s inception to the contemporary moment.
Lewis frames her scholarship around the term “whitely,” which serves to focus the reader’s attention on her subject’s “doing of actions” or the “performing of self” (10). She defines whiteness as a fictitious concept, but one that believes itself to be infallible. Whiteness demarcates boundaries and separates “those who benefit from its privilege and those who are excluded from it” (46–47). The starkest example of the performance of whiteness is found in the study’s use of the word “laager,” or circle of wagons. This represents the literal fortress early Dutch and French Huguenot settlers used to protect themselves from “wild animals, enemy forces, [and] black Africa” in order to establish insiders and outsiders (28). Metaphorically, it represents the invisible border of whiteness designed to keep out the unwanted, which is in fact vulnerable to being penetrated as both literal and ideological borders are both porous and not sealed. This “laager mentality” continues to shape Western media’s narratives of Afrikaners and serves as a unifying concept for understanding the white subjects of this study (3).

Lewis follows a lineage of intersectional feminist scholars who have attempted to unsettle universal narratives and assumptions of objectivity by making their own voices heard. She identifies her own position as a white, naturalized US citizen with an English father, Afrikaner mother, and with Afrikaner roots concealed by her Anglicized name (4). She foregrounds this “insider-outsider” construction as a strategy to unmask and understand the book’s subjects. For instance, in reaction to escalating crime, Bok van Blerk wrote the controversial war song “De La Rey” in 2006, a summoning of the 19th-century Boer war hero General Koos de la Rey. The song was seen by many as a call for “insider” Afrikaners to circle the wagons and perform their volk identity in order to find protection from the “outsider” black government (59). The Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, a monument that commemorates the Afrikaner nation, similarly presents the insider-outsider narrative with its construction comprising 64 wagons (43–44).

Broadly, the book examines how whiteness is constructed and protected, as well as how notions of traditional, binary, and the well-defined continue to be embraced, challenged, and interrogated through performance. Lewis tracks white anxiety from the white settlers who defined themselves in opposition to others, to contemporary artists working to queer and parody historical whiteness and the contemporary anxiety it produces. In chapter three, Lewis shows the ways in which the plays of Dean Opperman use “nostalgia, memory, and minority status” to garner sympathy for the Afrikaner position. In his work, Opperman investigates white anxiety, and asks his audiences to remember the world whiteness created, and to envision a future South Africa (68–69). In another case study, Lewis examines the work of Afrikaner cross-dressing satirist and performance artist Pieter-Dirk Uys, whose character Evita Bezuidenhout is strategically covered with diamonds—a jab at the mining industry that fueled the apartheid economy (103). Uys uses satire, alternative masculinity, and drag to trouble binaries and categorization and to resist whiteness and traditional gender constructions. One of the most provocative subjects Lewis examines is Anglo-Afrikaner Peter Van Heerden who comments on how whiteness and Afrikanerness are tangled by ritually sacrificing his own body (137). For instance, in his piece So is ‘n os gemaak (Thus Is an Ox Made) (2004), he sketches across his naked body words such as “volk” (people), “skyt” (shit), and “bitch.” While suspended upside down from an ox yoke, he violently moves his head through the earth underneath. He explains that his white masculinity must be ritually sacrificed in order to “enable the formulation of a new non-racialised practice” (137). By examining his own white body, he does not intend to recenter power to whiteness, but to ask South Africans to examine themselves and the culture they created in order to bring forth change.

Lewis is diligent to create a monograph for the transnational reader. As many will not be familiar with her subjects, she is careful to include a representative sample of images and more thoroughly explain Afrikaner-specific terminology and concepts in the endnotes. This book urges white practitioners and scholars to remain vigilant so as to prevent their privileged positions from recentering the focus onto their white bodies, thereby undermining their original
pursuit to disavow white privilege. In the wake of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, whiteness continues to protect and consolidate its power as right-wing nationalism becomes more visible across the globe. Lewis presents a study that can be used as a strategy for marking these developments in order to “resist, challenge, abject, queer, and refashion whiteness” (191). Although Lewis agrees that this study presents more questions than answers and expresses her doubts that irony alone is capable of helping whiteness escape its hegemonic past, this book is a welcome contribution to the growing body of transnational whiteness scholarship, which includes Mary Brewer’s *Staging Whiteness* (2005) and Wendy Sutherland’s *Staging Blackness and Performing Whiteness in Eighteenth Century German Drama* (2016). This scholarship works to reverse the gaze in order to discover the paradoxes, loss, and imagined suffering created as a result of an ideology of whiteness (61).

— Christopher Martin

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*Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution.* Edited by Mohammed Albakry and Rebekah Maggor. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2016; 346 pp. $45.00 paper.

In 2016, Routledge and Seagull Books each released titles addressing Egyptian theatre and drama in translation. *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre: Translation, Performance, Politics* gathers a formidable cast of scholars and practitioners working both on and in the Egyptian theatre and attempts to assemble them as a cohesive volume that addresses aspects of Egyptian theatrical translation from the 19th century up to the present day. *Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution* collates 10 original translations of contemporary Egyptian plays. The publication of both volumes is proof of the considerable development of Arabic theatre studies in English. This is important as scholars within this specialization often articulate anxiety about the invisibility of Arabic theatre in international theatre and performance scholarship. The two texts offer divergent experiences for the reader and different directions for the subfield of Arabic theatre studies.

Aaltonen and Ibrahim’s volume consists of 13 chapters divided into 4 sections. In addition to an introductory preface from the editors, each section contains two or three scholarly pieces and one practitioner’s “testimonial”—written by an Egyptian playwright-actor-director (Dalia Basiouny), translator (Mohamed Enani), theatre critic (Nehad Selaiha), or documentary
filmmaker (Mona Mikhail). The first three of these are of the strongest contributions in the volume and ensure a refreshing juxtaposition of practice and scholarship. The subsections each address currents the editors take up as four of the book’s central queries: intercultural rewriting, interlingual rewriting, intercontextual rewriting, and intermedial rewriting. These four queries intersect with several other themes the editors gesture towards in the introduction alongside translation, including: transformation, reconstruction, representation, performance, and crossing borders.

With a few exceptions, Aaltonen and Ibrahim’s volume shows a subfield in blithe intellectual isolation. The volume illustrates the drawback of approaches that privilege East-West or core-periphery encounters over interdisciplinary collaboration and debate. There are several ways the failure to engage recent critical scholarship on cultural production in the Arab world produces a questionable framework for the book. Most glaringly, several entries, including the editorial framework, proceed as if there has been no elaboration of orientalism or its effects since Edward Said’s 1978 landmark text. There is an uncritical recirculation of “the West” as if it were a sovereign entity in relation to which Egypt’s theatre should be understood. The phrase “the West” is used throughout with little elaboration and is meant to evoke both places and histories seemingly free of Arabic speakers, whose “encounter” with Egypt has been steady and materially constant since the 18th century. (This is so, despite Bassiouney’s entry, which clearly performs the opposite.)

The problematic weight and authority of “the West” reproduced in the volume is felt most obviously in the decision to frame “translation” as a process concerned with English primarily, French secondarily, and Arabic. Nine of the 13 entries deal with translations of Arabic content into English while 4 consider translations of English plays into Arabic. The volume ultimately risks reifying the precise lines of orientalist expectation it identifies and claims to work against, namely the production of knowledge that values Egypt and its theatre when it is assessed through “Western” eyes. Translation and adaptation are almost exclusively conceived of here as a process of accessing English speakers or of making English content accessible to Egyptian audiences—as opposed to a wide array of questions about representation, politics, and performance concerning divergent histories of dialect, vernacular, class, and power both within and outside of Egypt.

This framework is an unfortunate package for the several standout essays the volume includes. In addition to the testimonials to which I have already alluded, Wessam Elmeligi’s entry on the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion is an exemplary piece of scholarship that does succeed in being attentive to both local and intercultural aspects of theatrical translation. Elmeligi successfully brings to life the context that made Samir Khafagy’s 1961 Sayidati al-Gamila [My Beautiful Lady] a successful adaptation of Shaw’s play.

On the other hand, the editors of Seagull Books’ Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution succeed in illuminating particularities of the political events of recent years without belaboring a gulf between the US readers and audiences they claim to seek and their Egyptian source texts. The plays are deftly and elegantly rendered in English, producing texts that Anglophone university students will be able to read and embody with little difficulty. The volume is thus a valuable resource for students and teachers interested in introducing audiences to a range of performance histories and political questions.

While the subtitle of the volume reads “plays from the Egyptian revolution,” the collection does not consist exclusively of documentary pieces or of performances put on during the 25 January–11 February 2011 events. Rather, attentive to critiques of the fetishization of
Tahrir Square and the #Jan25 Revolution that have been elaborated in recent years by scholars and commentators of Arab media, geography, history, and anthropology, the volume includes performance texts that were written in the buildup to the initial 2011 protest occupation of Cairo’s central Tahrir Square (such as Hany Abdel Naser and Mohamed Abdel Mu’iz’s They Say Dancing Is a Sin, written in 2008) and many in the years after it. A number of plays include perspectives from outside, or the periphery of, the Egyptian capital or in imagined settings (Ibrahim El-Husseini’s Comedy of Sorrows is a powerful example of the former). In addition, while many of the characters in the plays are young protesters, there is also a clear attempt in the selections to represent the range of demographics that make up Egyptian society (a wonderful example is the play Taxi, based on the novel by Khalid Al Khamissi and translated by Al Khamissi with Jonathan Wright and Rewan El Ghaba). Violence, doubt, shame, and guilt emerge as centrally important, recurring themes in the volume, refreshingly rendered with texture and complexity. As the plays rehearse, stage, and explore social strife, economic hardship, conservative mores, peer pressure, and family life, they present both documentation of historical events and imaginative recreation for students and players about what political activity could look like.

Importantly, the value of Albakry and Maggor’s volume is not limited to students of theatre and drama. The collection also promises to be an excellent resource for students and teachers of the humanities writ large. It should be easy for readers to relate the situations to their own lives—indeed, a goal highlighted by the coeditors. The exploration of police violence against protesters from the perspective of an officer and his family in Ahmad Hassan Al-Banna’s In Search of Said Abu-Naga is only the most obvious of direct connections to the US in the age of #BlackLivesMatter. While it begs a more thorough addendum following the 2014 coup d’état led by former Chief of Military Intelligence Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, the late Nehad Selaiha’s invaluable article (first printed in TDR in 2013) “The Fire and the Frying Pan: Censorship and Performance in Egypt” provides a thorough contextualization as the collection’s conclusion. The play titles in Arabic would have been a welcome inclusion for students and researchers looking to follow up with the original texts. Still, Tahrir Tales promises an invaluable teaching and dramaturgical resource.

Interest in Arabic theatre is clearly increasing. Those successors of Aaltonen and Ibrahim’s volume who take up the mantle of elaborating questions of representation and translation of Egyptian and other Arabic theatre might benefit from incorporating critical scholarship on a range of cultural production in the Arab world. It is of course to be expected that most academic exchange about Arabic theatre is with other scholars of theatre. But it is also clear that future approaches will benefit from scholarship in related disciplines. For example, studies of Arabic theatre in translation might build on explorations of encounter and translation such as those offered by the Lebanese literary scholar Tarek El-Aris. New work would surely also benefit from considering elaborations of politics and the popular such as those put forth by Moroccan cultural studies scholar Tarik Sabry, US anthropologists Walter Armbrust and Ted Swedenburg, or Egyptian literary scholars Mounira Solimon and Walid Elhamamsy. Questions of political economy of art production in Egypt, such as those explored by US anthropologist Jessica Winegar, seem especially apropos, as are theorizations of hybridity, such as those taken up by the Lebanese media scholar Marwan Kraidy. Considering the reality of authoritarian censorship in today’s Egypt, connections to analysis of the politics and performativity of censorship and its evasion, specifically in histories of other Arabic theatre—such as has been taken up by US political scientist Lisa Wedeen—should be self-evident. These are only a few examples of critical literature in an interdisciplinary overlap from which Arabic theatre studies might benefit. Moreover, it is clear that whatever the framework future scholarship on translation and Egyptian theatre employs, it will have to include the nuanced interpretation of political change collected in Albakry and Maggor’s Tahrir Tales.

—Rayya El Zein
References


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Penny Farfan’s work reflects on the ways queerness and modernism intersected on social and cultural stages in the late-19th and early-20th century. Bringing together a selection of queer performances, artists, and authors, Farfan argues that citational slippages such as homosocial desire, uncanny doubles, and androgynous heterosexuality in the reiteration of sex/gender norms onstage played a major role in shaping and reflecting the spectrum of emerging modern sexual identities. She begins by examining the interplay of homosocial and homoerotic behavior in Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893), revealing the sexual double standards of the conventional society drama while opening up a space for queer dynamics and desires to arise amongst characters, actors, and spectators. In an exploration of Loie Fuller’s *Fire Dance* (1895) and *Salome* (1895), Farfan shows how the dancer/choreographer’s “uncanny” aura and the presence of queer “ghostly” figures from past roles in her work allowed the artist to embody uncertainty and indeterminacy. In chapter three, Farfan highlights how dissident male sexuality disrupted conventional expectations of heterosexual narrative resolution in Vaslav Nijinsky’s ballet *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912). The book culminates in a close reading of Noël Coward’s popular *Private Lives* (1930) in which Farfan stresses how the work subverted comic norms by depicting androgynous characters. In these different case studies, Farfan repeatedly asserts queer performances as powerfully subversive yet insufficiently recognized realities in modernist scholarship.


Focusing on public demonstrations primarily organized and attended by women in the early 21st century, Elizabeth Currans’s book asks how and why certain groups utilize protest as a way of participating in contemporary political and cultural dialogues. Through various women-led initiatives, Currans discusses issues of sexuality, war, and citizenship. The Minneapolis Take Back the Night march, the New York and East Bay dyke marches, and the online and on-the-ground phenomenon of SlutWalks, constitute the book’s first case studies. Designating sexuality as a key issue of feminist organizing and of intrafeminist disagreement, Currans looks at a
spectrum of queer expressions of pleasure and feminist responses to danger manifested in these public demonstrations. Presenting local histories, interviews, and observations that focus on participant and organizer experiences, Currans’s analytical snapshots describe protests as rare opportunities for public copresence. In two distinct post–9/11 antiwar protests, the silent vigils by the Women in Black and CODEPINK’s direct actions targeting politicians, she expands on privilege (race and class) within protest movements, underscoring how transgressing accepted norms can simultaneously reinforce others. Turning towards emotions, affect, and citizenship practices, the book concludes with a discussion of two marches on Washington to illustrate how a space chosen for its symbolic value can be transformed to meet a range of political ends.


In *Using the Sky*, choreographer Deborah Hay considers 15 years (2000–2015) of movement experimentation through a range of poetic, analytical, personal, and playful engagements with language and writing. Hay revisits a collection of journal entries, drawings, dancers’ notes, and other pieces of written text that describe her and her collaborators’ working process resulting in a book that is a dance score of its own. Attempting to translate the ineffable, Hay grasps at a feedback system that has been at the core of her teaching—a movement practice rich with experimentation, risk taking, and the belief that it is possible to achieve the impossible. In the foreword, Kristy Edmunds traces her own curatorial experience of the work, including Hay’s explorations with what she calls “dis-attachment,” an attempt at destabilizing the experiential structures that are powerfully in place and accessible to the bodies of proficient dancers. Chronicling the choreographic process of four unique dances—*A Lecture on the Performance of Beauty* (2003), *If I Sing to You* (2008), *No Time to Fly* (2010), and the solo *my choreographed body* (2014)—*Using the Sky* weaves together a series of questions, thoughts, and actions aimed at stepping, literally and figuratively, into the unknowable.


Seeing differently can create a paradigm shift within one’s own vision of the world. This is one of the central premises behind Jill Sigman’s artist book, *Ten Huts*, which explores how choreography and the visual arts are able to re-envision environments through a series of hand-built, site-specific dwellings made from repurposed materials. Intended to be impermanent installations, this nomadic series of huts meant for shelter, performance, cooking, permaculture, and various other activities are activated within the book by Sigman’s recollections of the interactions, objects, and events that shaped them. With nearly 500 full-color illustrations documenting her process of reconsidering waste between 2009 and 2015 in North American and Nordic locations, the book chronicles the many ways in which Sigman’s interventions highlight issues around waste, consumption, coexistence, and the environment. With the audience’s engagement in these ritualistic containers defining much of Sigman’s work, *Ten Huts* includes invitations to perform guided exercises based on the artist’s choreographic exploration. A foreword by Pamela Tatge and critical essays by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, André Lepecki, Matthew McLendon, Elise Springer, and Eva Yaa Asantewaa complete the book by critically situating the huts within the fields of dance, performance studies, anthropology, philosophy, art history, and queer theory.

This volume of essays edited by Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit highlights the central role women have played in the emergence and development of collective creation in European and North American contexts, as well as the importance of these practices in the evolution of modern theatre. Part of a larger series dedicated to collective creation and devising, the book traces the legacies of women theatre-makers and their contributions to the field. It explores themes of emergence and disappearance, attribution, historiography, branding, authority, relationality, economics, mentorship, diaspora, labor, and protest. Divided into three historical waves, each section of the book is marked by distinctive ideological and aesthetic characteristics, as well as diverging and converging gender narratives that originate from specific cultural contexts. Contributing author Jane Baldwin considers the foundational role played by actress, teacher, and writer Suzanne Bing in early-20th-century France; Elizabeth A. Osborne documents Hallie Flanagan and the Vassar Experimental Theatre Project’s collective ethos; David Calder explores the work of Ariane Mnouchkine and the double standard imposed on women directors; Michelle MacArthur traces the erasure of Canadian feminist theatre from historical records; and Nia O. Witherspoon expands on theatrical-jazz aesthetics and black feminist methodologies in contemporary theatre.


John H. Muse’s book explores the importance of theatrical brevity focusing on a period in modern Western cultural history, between 1880 and the early 21st century, in which both dramatic conventions and experiences of time became specifically visible and contested. In doing so, Muse illustrates how short theatrical works diverged from generic and cognitive conventions and as such, deserve specific consideration. By analyzing plays, both on the page and in performance, Muse approaches the temporal rhetoric of theatre through four related notions: theatre’s specialization of time, the heterogeneity of brief time, the riddle of eventfulness, and the pace of absorption. The chronological narrative introduces a reading of Belgian symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck’s short dramas as they relate to fait-divers; a look at Futurist synthetic theatre as both a rejection of modern theatre and a distillation of it; a consideration of Samuel Beckett’s short plays as deliberate attempts to reveal the instability of theatre, space, and time; and an analysis of the contemporary microthons by Caryl Churchill and Suzan-Lori Parks. The book scrutinizes microdramas and accounts for their brevity as a structural principle and a tool to investigate theatre and time itself.

— Didier Morelli

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