
Freak Performances by Analola Santana is a major contribution to the burgeoning body of work currently being produced at the intersecting fields of Latin American, theatre, and performance studies. This book offers a theoretically sophisticated and eminently readable analysis of how the “freak” comes to embody a broad range of deviant and nonnormative positions: the queer, the colonial, the abject, the criminal, the neoliberal. Santana maps how notions of difference undergo change in the Americas from the colonial model of “monsters” to the neoliberal language of “freaks”: “the grotesque, the deformed, the disabled, the visually/morally/socially excluded, the prostitute, the beggar, the terrorist” (3) and so on. The list expands to include Trump’s “rapists” and “criminals.” Santana begins by tracing a “genealogy of corporeal difference,” and takes us through an analysis of performance work throughout the Americas clustered around themes such as “the pathology of difference,” “the savage exotic,” and the “perversion of citizenship.” In each of the cases, the playwrights and performance collectives she examines mobilize the “freak” to question these perverse categories and the politics that they enable. Santana examines how Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, Peru’s major theatre and performance collective, presents the history of the country and its national figures as a freak show. Other performances reflect the ways in which medical terminologies and systems isolate and label the so-called nonnormative as a form of dangerous deviance. Colonial paradigms separate the grotesque “them” from the civilized “us.” The freak continues to serve an enormous social function, and is mobilized towards all sorts of projects of social control.

The plays and performance pieces that Santana examines in this volume are among the most important in Latin America today. Some of the groups, playwrights, and performers are very well known, even iconic (Regina José Galindo, Teatro Malayerba, Yuyachkani). Others less so. This study will contribute to updating everyone’s ideas of what’s going on in this dynamic field.

Freak Performances also makes a sophisticated and important contribution to the scholarly debates around colonialism, coloniality, and neoliberalism through the prism of aesthetics, performance, embodiment, abjection, race, gender, sexuality, and abilisms. Santana stages conversations among theorists from what we now call the “global” north and south to expand the range of understandings of how these political and economic processes have affected the Americas. For reasons that are hard to understand, theories of colonialism continue to focus on countries colonized by the British and French colonial powers. But Latin America has brilliant theorists of coloniality such as Enrique Dussel, Eduardo Galeano, Aníbal Quijano, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Walter Mignolo, among others that, in this study, make their voices heard. Santana’s theoretical range is remarkable. The brilliance and dexterity with which she brings existing debates into conversation with her own very fine readings make this book a major critical intervention.
One of the many things I admire about the project is that Santana groups the theatre and performance pieces in chapters that allow her to develop the theoretical arguments in a grounded and compelling manner. Instead of organizing the materials according to specific works or countries, she focuses on urgent questions posed by the “freak” in terms of pathology, medicalization, gender, and citizenship (for example) that will surely interest readers across disciplinary fields. One challenge that Latin Americanists (and other scholars from understudied fields) confront is that we need to provide a great deal of context so that readers can follow the argument. But the methodology that Santana uses allows her to set up the context as a theoretical set of questions that the works themselves illuminate. It is within this analytical framework that the power of the freak—as both the mechanism and critique of exclusion—gains its explanatory power. She never reduces the works to “examples” of the theory she imposes but, on the contrary, argues compellingly for new theoretical directions opened up by the works themselves.

Another of the book’s strengths comes from the fact that Santana is a dramaturg as well as a theorist. Her perspective thus accounts for the practical, communicative, and aesthetic components of theatre and performance as well as the textual and symbolic components we can glean from the scripts.

It is exciting to see the excellent new work now being published in Latin American theatre performance, and _Freak Performances_ stands out for its breadth, its unusual archive, and the theoretical depth of the analysis.

— Diana Taylor

_Diana Taylor is University Professor and Professor of Performance Studies and Spanish at NYU. She is the award-winning author of multiple books, among them: Disappearing Acts (1997), The Archive and the Repertoire (2003), and Performance (2016), all from Duke University Press. Her forthcoming book, ¡Presente! The Politics of Presence, is also with Duke University Press. Taylor is Director of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, which she helped found in 1998. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2018. diana.taylor@nyu.edu_

_Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production._

In the current convoluted context of US identitarian politics, scholarly approaches that articulate discourses for collective survival are not only relevant, but also urgent. In Leticia Alvarado’s _Abject Performances_, this urgency converges with an active critical analysis of cultural products that refuse identitarian coherence, focusing specifically on the uncertainty of Latinidad. This choice seems at first counterintuitive, considering that hate speech and anti-immigration rhetoric have found institutional power at the White House. The safe response to a seemingly unstoppable MAGA violence upholds aesthetics and politics of respectability in the hopes of not being cast off—in this case, deported. Alvarado makes a case for a different strategy of survival for the Latinx community, and for marginalized communities at large: to embrace abjection as a way of exposing the fissures of a country that rejects whatever it cannot understand or control. She finds world-making potential in the artists examined in this book, understanding their disdain for normative inclusion as an aesthetic strategy that transforms their own abjection “into a destabilizing force” (11). From here, Alvarado brings together artistic, academic, and activist
ways of being and doing in this world, opening spaces to imagine brighter futures.

Alvarado’s project dialogues with contemporary theorists examining the political role that identitarian markers play in the functioning of the social fabric. Along these lines, the book intervenes in larger cultural studies conversations, drawing upon notions of abjection understood as foundational to exclusionary systems (Kristeva 1982; Butler 1993). The abject is that which must be despised in order for the “proper subject” to function, unveiling the fissures of political systems that base their myth of democratic grandeur precisely on rejection and marginalization.

In this same line of theoretical inquiry, Alvarado associates the paradoxical existence of what is at once pleasurable and repulsive within the philosophical concept of the sublime proposed by Immanuel Kant. Alvarado locates this “emotive site that frustrates reason” (15), this shapeless object, this incomprehensible wonder, within Latinx, queer, racialized, and sexualized bodies. She finds political potentialities of Kant’s sublime in the inexplicable fascination that abject performances can evoke, and the yet-to-be-known ways of thinking and feeling that can emerge from such performances. Employing negative affects of uncertainty and unbelonging, Latinx artists’ aesthetic strategies generate resilient “structures of feelings,” understood by Raymond Williams as emerging affective links of solidarity and mutual recognition forged in given socio-historical moments. Alvarado connects artistic and creative processes with alternative ways of feeling together, and with the growth of dissident affects for communal survival.

Abject Performances not only expands the scholarship on abjection; it also offers a dialogue with radical destabilizing forces in academia (Alarcón 1989; Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 2002; Sandoval 2000). The work of intersectional feminism by women of color is central to the book’s project, placing in dialogue academic and activist proposals in the fields of queer, ethnic, and race studies, as well as Latino studies, American studies, performance studies, and visual culture. The amalgamation of apparently disparate perspectives becomes a strategy that underlies the incisive analyses in the book. In this sense, the legacy of the late José Esteban Muñoz permeates the project not only through the critical analysis of Latinx political possibilities, but also through the performative gesture that stages these very possibilities. Alvarado brings together scholarship that could be read as antithetical to her project, selecting what is meaningful and intertwining dissimilar perspectives. This hybridity renders a dynamic thinking, intensely traversed by affective links to Muñoz’s understanding of minoritarian aesthetics as modes of community formation and social critique. Both Alvarado’s and Muñoz’s work are attempts “at weaving together a provisional whole that is indeed not a whole but rather an enabling sense of wholeness that allows a certain level of social recognition, [...] a reparative performance” (Muñoz 2006:683). In the wake of anti-Latinx and anti-immigration rights, reparative scholarship can also carry political potentialities for social transformation.

Along these lines, the arrangement of the chapters stages a path that travels from performance art as an epistemic site to popular culture as a space of contestation, and from collective defiance of heteronormative nationalistic discourses to the individual apostasy of heteronormative racist missions. Chapter 1 analyzes the work of Cuban American visual and performance artist Ana Mendieta. Focusing on the early stages of her work, Alvarado discusses how Mendieta arrived to a form of identification permeated by racial awareness, negotiating her Latinidad in relationship not to Chicanidad but to blackness. Locating Mendieta in the genealogy of feminist women of color and queer of color critique, Alvarado rethinks her work as a site for “intellectual and political coalitions” (54). Chapter 2 focuses on Chicano group Asco, who consistently evaded attempts to define and contain their work within coherent identifications.
Asco’s performances challenged Chicano heteronormative nationalism, revealing the fissures in nationalist discourses that reject the power of hybridity. Asco performed an alternative vision of national belonging through “uncivic” participation, conjuring “affective communities through an ambivalent embrace of a decidedly queer abject aesthetic” (59). Chapter 3 contrasts the work of Chicana performance artist Nao Bustamante and the primetime TV dramedy *Ugly Betty*. Whereas the TV show stages mimetic minority beauty by giving an ultimate makeover to the “ugly” titular character, Bustamante embraces abjection and refuses any efforts to define her work and herself. This political strategy of identitarian refusal performs “queer tactics that highlight the uncontainable excesses that seep through the mechanisms for beautifying the Latina body, as well as the rigid categorization of proper normative minority identity, through an embrace of abject failure” (91). Finally, chapter 4 taps into a personal narrative: Alvarado’s own renunciation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although this church sees migration as a divine event, and provides structures for Latinx communities, at the root of its missionary discourse there is the promise of “turning white.” Alvarado uses performative testimonies both as a way to expose the racism inherent in this discourse, and as a personal insertion in her aesthetic and political project: “I became an apostate, an abject subject who has willfully turned away from the church [...] in critique of structured injustice and desirous of imagining a more just beyond” (159).

Alvarado concludes with a teaser-analysis of the ongoing work of Xandra Ibarra (La Chica Boom) and her queer antinormative affectivity as a new possibility for abjection, envisioning “communal articulations that might uncover unknown routes to world making, routes not yet here and of the beyond” (165). Against the myth of wholeness and completion, Alvarado offers a final Muñozian gesture: circling back to the urgency of imagining futurity, *Abject Performances* rehearses a path towards a more sensual world not-yet-here.

— Leticia Robles-Moreno

References


Leticia Robles-Moreno is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies in the Department of Theatre & Dance at Muhlenberg College. Her research is focused on collective creation processes in contemporary performance and politics in the Americas. She studies how theatre, art, and activism can build networked practices as relational strategies of resistance and survival. leticiarobles@muhlenberg.edu

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As populist movements—on both the left and the right—continue their rise to power in nations throughout the Americas and across the globe, Angela Marino’s *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela* is an especially timely and evocative work. Marino argues that “populism is a performed act” (166), defining populism as “a unifying strategy of collective identification carried out through the everyday and the spectacular embodied act” (10). The volume offers a significant addition to both performance and populism scholarship through its analysis of an array of examples of cultural production, ranging from festive dance performances to political ad campaigns. Marino’s incisive research illustrates that popular politics can emerge from popular culture and working-class communities, revealing how performances—such as religious festivals, theatre and film, and political propaganda—can create and sustain alternative networks of power, agency, and governance.

In *Populism and Performance*, Marino argues for the importance of “systems of production” that support cultural performances and the popular politics they embody (28). Instead of looking solely at performance spectacles, her emphasis on the production process of populist performances offers a counterpoint to the widely accepted idea that fiesta performances only offer a temporary reversal of power relations and political order (68–69), demonstrating instead that these performances have the potential to create “an alternative political order” (22) through “a fiesta politics, where embodiment, spatiality, and the senses are at the center of this paradigm of reversal” (42). Marino’s research also contributes to populism scholarship through its focus on embodied acts, rather than spoken rhetoric and written texts. Marino argues that “we can delve more deeply into the dynamics of populism by taking into account the ways that performance transmits its own logic and shapes its own political outcomes” (10).

The layout of the chapters follows an arc that moves from examples of “street and staged performances” to populist rhetorical performances in political ad campaigns, posters, and other visual media. Throughout this analytical arc Marino develops three main arguments: (1) “populism is a performed practice” (10); (2) performance was a significant mechanism in the mediation of populist ideologies, grassroots activism, and the construction of a new political identity; and (3) the ubiquity of performance in the Bolivarian Revolution, which builds on a “history of reproduction through performances and embodiments,” requires analysis through a performance studies methodology that foregrounds the “embodied, spatial, and temporal” (10–11).

Using the cultural icon of the *diablo* as the central thematic figure throughout, Marino examines an array of source materials over the four chapters. The first chapter is the longest and most central to her argument. It establishes the historical foundations of the diablo figure through an examination of the religiously inspired devil dances that are staged in Ocumare and other towns near the Caribbean coast of Venezuela. The devil dances were first performed as part of Catholic Corpus Christi rituals meant to purge the community of evil embodied by the devil performers. These spectacles of good versus evil were “a tool of religious conversion initially intended to reproduce the colonial logic of the church and the institution of slavery” (38). Over the centuries, however, the message of the dances was subverted by generations of indigenous and African-descended working-class communities, what Marino calls *el pueblo*, “the people.” Communal networks evolved out of local organizations (*cayapa*) that sponsored dance troupes as well as other community projects. Marino elucidates the work of these *cultors,*
or “cultural producers”; she argues that the webs of communal labor and reciprocity created by the cultors is central to the production of popular politics through fiesta performances in which “people rehearse populist logics” (31). Utilizing vivid description of her own ethnographic research, Marino describes the systems of production needed to sustain the dances and celebrations, which she argues create grassroots agency in the community. Sixteen illustrations lend visual support throughout the text. The majority of these are photographs taken by the author during her fieldwork and complement the written ethnographic accounts. In chapter 2, Marino continues her examination of el pueblo through an analysis of the work of Venezuelan dramatist Román Chalbaud. She illustrates how theatre and film staged the populist logics of the working class in urban barrios before the Bolivarian Revolution.

The second half of the book focuses on “performances of the state.” Chapter 3 shifts to an examination of political strategies used to counter the 2004 recall campaign against the presidency of Hugo Chávez, exploring the mechanisms used by Chávez supporters in remaking the story of “Florentino and the Devil.” In that campaign Chávez was cast as the humble peasant who defeats the devil, offering new ideals of participatory democracy in the country. The final chapter is an insightful investigation of three “turns” of Simón Bolívar’s white horse. The first turn is the Chávez administration’s decision to change the direction and appearance of the image of the horse on the official Venezuelan coat of arms. By changing the horse so it was actively galloping toward the left, symbolizing the historic legacy of Bolívar’s revolution, Chávez intended to create a visual metaphor for the vigorous efforts of the new revolution to liberate the popular classes. The second turn focuses on a public mural that represents Bolívar and his horse surrounded by indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan people. The third turn takes us back to the coastal town of Ocumare to examine an educational project that integrated both Bolívar and Chávez into the political struggles of Afro-Venezuelans in the area. Marino suggests that the three turns of Bolívar’s horse created populist reinterpretations of national history.

Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela is a substantial contribution to the study of the movements and mechanisms that have supported the spread of populism in the contemporary world. Marino’s book offers an excellent template for the use of performance studies methodologies in the analysis of populism in order to understand the connections between performance and popular politics, a task that has become increasingly urgent as cultural performances are continuously utilized by populist movements to gain support for political policies, ranging from the progressive to the authoritarian.

—Joshua L. Truett

Joshua L. Truett, a Fulbright–García Robles Researcher/Artist 2018–2019 (Mexico), is a PhD Candidate in Theatre with a specialization in Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University. His dissertation, “Velás, Muxes, and the Performance of Zapotec Style: Indigenous Festival and the Making of Dissident Counterpublics,” investigates the vela festivals hosted by communities of muxes, a third-gender identity in the Zapotec culture of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico. jltruett@gmail.com

Choreographing the Airport stages an ethnography of movement. Centered on the international airport as a hub for the experience and constitution of global cosmopolitan culture, this book draws together and interweaves insights and perspectives from mobility and cultural studies, cultural theory, and dance to outline an original and thought-provoking kinesthetic model for reading the affective impact of in-between space. The book opens anecdotally, with a prologue in which the author details the motion sickness she experienced as a child in transit between the US and Australia. The vertigo is not only to do with movement, but with the creation of a dizzying series of selves and senses of self, all being spun out of motion and relocation. The physical, material situation—Australia itself—becomes an in-between space, as though the contradictions and tensions of an identity forged in transit spaces cannot be contained in a solid and stable place; as though the materiality of place is itself brought into question by the ways in which we move through it, reconfiguring both it and ourselves as we do so.

The most significant theoretical connection is perhaps of the kinesthetics of airport space and the question of embodied experience, understood through the practice and articulation of dance. Analysis is interwoven with the author’s field notes—short accounts of experiences any international traveler will recognize—and works through a series of well-argued and persuasive chapters to examine the ways in which spatial organization and practice meet transiting bodies and situated selves.

The chapters are oriented around this theme and work to develop it. The first establishes the central methodologies of the book, offering a fluid and agile analysis of contemporary cosmopolitanism, and bringing it into dialogue with concepts of choreography and dance. A key point of departure is Marc Augé’s “twenty-year-old binary” (7) of places and non-places, drawn from his 1995 Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. Justine Shih Pearson makes clear that this binary must be revisited, extended, and examined, to reveal a much more nuanced and complex set of negotiations being staged in transit spaces. Not least, this strategy encompasses the possibility that the “space-between” is not a line between this or that, but a constant zone of indeterminacy, in which all the provisionalities of modern political selfhood can find resonance, become visible, and make themselves available for scrutiny. The book extends this reading through engagement with the work of Edward Soja and Homi Bhabha, as they articulate the concept and potentiality of “thir dspace,” before engaging with the experience of embodied transit, in which the body performs and absorbs the dislocations that the airport produces. These displacements and disassociations, whether experienced as the deficiencies of temporal and spatial awareness in jetlag or in the strange interiority of decontextualized luxury shopping malls, produce, for Shih Pearson, an odd sense of security. The implication is that the multiple in-betweennesses of our own everyday subjective experience cannot help but find resonance in the kinesthetic spatiality of transit.

Chapter 4, “Performing Self at the Border,” focuses on the consequences of all this, as the body itself is produced as a transitional object: context-dependent, subject to investigation, and ontologically determined by instabilities of place. Finally, the book returns explicitly to the political, re-imagined at the scale of the body: how we move, who is permitted to move, the performances that are demanded and elicited in the face of barriers, boundaries, customs, and passport control. Shih Pearson neatly reconnects the transit spaces of the international
cosmopolitan traveler with the resurgent “national” apparatuses of security theatre at the border, and makes the astute observation that so often these reemphasized “national” boundaries are being staffed and policed by first-, second-, and third-generation migrants.

This is an articulate, readable, rigorous, and friendly book, offering innovative perspectives on what it means to be held in transition. It finds the work of movement in what is often an experience of stasis—sitting on chairs, waiting in lines, standing in queues—and insists upon the importance of embodied experience to our understanding of the kinesthetics of international travel. As one would expect from the Palgrave Pivot series, which aims to make timely and significant interventions into current global debates, the book is well served by detailed notes and references located at the end of each chapter, and a helpful and thorough index. Succinct and clear abstracts for each section of the argument and a short list of keywords are to be found at the top of each of the chapters. This book will be of interest to students and scholars from multiple disciplinary homes: performance and dance studies, ethnography, sociology, and spatial and mobility studies. All will profit from spending some time here on their way to their respective somewhere else. As they journey, they will be accompanied by the author, in the field notes she has scattered throughout the book, standing nearby with a too-large bag, or a wrong-colored passport, or somebody else’s magazine. These objects, identities, and bodies may obstruct the promised smoothness of transit, but, in the final analysis, they remind us that, as we are in transition, so we are always in relation: to location, to place, to others and, ultimately, to ourselves.

—Sophie Nield

Sophie Nield teaches theatre and film in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. She writes on questions of space, theatricality, and representation in political life and the law, and on the performance of “borders” of various kinds. Recent work has focused on the figure of the refugee, the theatricality of protest, and the political viability of the riot. sophie.nield@rhul.ac.uk

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Joshua Chambers-Letson’s After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life rests on a somewhat painful contradiction. Although the book ostensibly delves into the modes of life and aesthetics that sustain the queers of color in the subtitle, there is a deep sense of loss that permeates the text. The preface is an apostrophe addressed to José Esteban Muñoz, Chambers-Letson’s mentor and close friend, who passed away in 2013. Chambers-Letson recalls the immediate shock and aftermath of Muñoz’s passing, in particular arriving to the apartment that had been the site of so many gatherings and parties and which would now soon be vacated. These recollections are accompanied by the devastating understanding that the future which Muñoz had written so hopefully about was now marked by an absence that left us with the uncertainty of how exactly to imagine a future the late theorist had been so essential in helping us imagine. The “after” of the title is the after that Chambers-Letson and countless others would now be wondering about in the wake of this absence. Indeed, what could come after such an earth-shattering loss? As the subtitle suggests, however, the goal of this book is to somehow try and find an after—not just any after, but one invested with finding the aesthetic spaces
where queer of color life may still thrive, in spite of the knowledge of just how precarious this promise of life is for queers of color.

*After the Party* is filled with figures, some unabashedly queer, some who move through the world queerly, whose works provide us with a blueprint of how to continue living in the time of grief. Nina Simone, Danh Võ, Félix González-Torres, Eiko, and Tseng Kwong Chi are the protagonists, with other figures appearing throughout the book. Chambers-Letson approaches them with a sense of loving familiarity that deftly moves across each of their oeuvres. He makes clear in the introduction that he chose these artists in part because they were central to helping him make sense of the world anew in the aftermath of loss, something that is reflected here as an offering that he passes on to the reader.

*After the Party* draws from performance studies not only in its critical genealogies and objects of study, but also in its awareness of the audience, in this case the reader. Chambers-Letson refers to the reader in the second person throughout the book, which gives the writing a sense of informal intimacy that reminds us of the body (I am holding this book) and as an invitation to engage (I am listening, viewing, witnessing with).

Each of the chapters is organized around a central concern drawn from the intersection of performance studies and Marxism. The first chapter, on Nina Simone, investigates how the great artist understood her relationship to performance in terms of labor. Chambers-Letson structures the chapter in the form of a mixtape that deploys the sonic and visual archive of Simone’s performance of freedom, placing this oeuvre in larger Black feminist genealogies of struggles for freedom, a concept that the author rigorously interrogates while keeping hope that something like it is still possible. The following chapter, primarily focused on the work of the Vietnamese-born Dutch artist Danh Võ, takes up the concept of reproduction. Reproduction appears here both as the female labor of procreation and as a central notion across histories of performance studies. Chambers-Letson provides an elegiac reading of how the work of mothers is intimately tied not only to the function of capital accumulation but also as an element embedded in our encounter and transmission of the aesthetic. As Chambers-Letson writes, “Marx appropriated metaphors of biological reproduction to illustrate the process of capital’s reproduction” (92). The chapter takes this as a potential site to argue that performance’s relationship to reproduction might also help us think about the mother; this, the author argues, is “an approach that restores, recognizes, and centers reproductive labor to the theory of capital’s reproduction accounts for women’s creative and agential power within the production process” (93).

The book next reads the work of the Cuban-born artist Félix González-Torres as a mournful attachment to the project of communism. Chambers-Letson is intimately aware of González-Torres’s difficult relationship to the very idea of communism, as a diasporic subject displaced by the politics of the Cold War. He focuses instead on “the Marxist valences of his thought and the sense of communist sociality performed in/through the work. The praxis, tactics and strategies” (129) that were inevitably present in his work. Chambers-Letson maintains that González-Torres’s oeuvre, so much of it dedicated to reckoning with loss in the midst of the AIDS crisis, invites a communal sociality for its audiences. The following chapter on the work of the Japanese performance artist Eiko and her collaborations with Koma takes up the possible intersections between fugitivity and choreography. In this chapter, the one most closely engaged with an artist clearly working within the idiom of performance, the author provides
a convincing analysis of the kinds of claims toward freedom that the live body brings to the museum space, and the communal avenues it opens up for its spectators. The party comes to an end in the final chapter devoted to the Chinese-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi, whose photographs captured the twilight of New York’s queer art scene throughout the 1980s. Chambers-Letson argues that Kwong Chi’s insistence on including himself as a subject in his photographs is a performative action that calls for “the promise of a revolutionary alliance of people of color sharing the struggle for emancipation” (222).

My brief explanations of each chapter are woefully incomplete. This is because there is a certain unwieldiness to the book. Given the author’s clear love of his objects he attempts to capture each in detail, moving across multiple aesthetic and intellectual genealogical strands, a move that feels at times overwhelming as each chapter dwells and wanders into multiple asides. However, because of this After the Party feels animated by a sense of discovery as each return to the text yields new insights and directions, making the experience of reading this book feel productive, even when following threads that felt wayward upon first encounter.

Across the book however, one weakness emerges. Although the text is principally concerned with what Marxism and its conceptual tools can offer the always uncertain future for queers of color, any work that places Karl Marx at the center cannot help but find itself on shaky ground. Although Chambers-Letson affirms from the outset that this book draws from a rich tradition of Black Marxist thought, something he does to great effect, any time Marxism enters the arena it can’t help but come loaded with a host of critical genealogies that ultimately the book cannot entirely engage. Although I find myself aligned with any project that attempts to wrestle Marxist thought away from its overdetermined uses in the (white) US and European academy, After the Party inevitably overlooks the productive ways in which Marxist thought has been deployed outside of these geographic sites. Thus, the multiple ways in which subjects located in the Global South have used Marxism for the project of liberation goes mostly unexplored. I also wish that Chambers-Letson would have spent more time grappling with the fraught divisions between Marx and queer of color critique in the US-American academy, a difficult project that requires closer analysis. Indeed, even when Chambers-Letson is at his most convincing about the promise and uses that Marx and communism might still have for queer of color futurity, a lingering tension in regards to these multiple genealogies remains unresolved in the book. But perhaps After the Party can also be read as an invitation for unwieldy queer minoritarian subjects who have been in large part ignored by Marxist thought to claim their importance in this tradition. In that sense, After the Party can encourage other queer scholars of color to throw our own party in the playground of Marxist orthodoxy.

At its best, After the Party provides an essential critical survey of the version of performance studies that Muñoz was so central to enabling. In that way, as much as After the Party is a work of mourning, it is also a work of deep intellectual gratitude to someone who made queers of color indispensable to the field. Indeed, Chambers-Letson’s loving and rigorous engagement with his objects is not only a tribute to Muñoz, but a hopeful reminder of how minoritarian subjects encounter the aesthetic as a life-sustaining practice. In the end, After the Party reminds us that even as the loss seems unbearable and the odds insurmountable, we may yet find the hope for more life — to endure yet another day — in the gestures of beauty and survival that queers of color and other minoritarian subjects enact among and for each other.

—Iván A. Ramos

Iván A. Ramos is Assistant Professor of LGBTQ studies in the Department of Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland. His book project, “Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States,” examines how Mexican and US Latino/a artists and publics utilized sound to articulate negation in the wake of NAFTA. iramos@umd.edu


Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance by Amber Jamilla Musser and Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life by Tavia Nyong’o chart new circuits through the intersection of black studies, queer studies, and performance studies. Published as part of the Sexual Cultures series of NYU Press upon its 20th anniversary, Musser’s and Nyong’o’s works address at least the last two decades—if not a century—of critical inquiry on blackness, brownness, queerness, and humanism. Considering the structural antagonisms and representational imperatives of US (and hemispheric) regimes of race, gender, and capital, Musser and Nyong’o theorize performance practices that lead out from these epochal binds. Musser takes a route through the sensual and spatial; Nyong’o traces virtual flights across multiple temporalities. Fueled by their deep engagements in an intergenerational and interdisciplinary body of scholarship, Musser and Nyong’o mark new time and space for studying queer, black, and brown performance.

Musser’s Sensual Excess explores black and brown femme performances, discerning the pleasures and self-making possibilities that arise in and through violent structures. Working from Hortense Spillers’s paradigm of the pornotrope as the symbolic apparatus of black female abjection, Musser invites us to consider the fleshy pleasures and counter-epistemologies that such “violence produces and [yet] cannot incorporate” (9). Theorizing brown jouissance as that unincorporated, erotic, and opaque excess, Musser brings the critical insight of Audre Lorde and Édouard Glissant to bear on the Oedipal economy of psychoanalysis. Moving away from the episteme of sexuality and phallocentrism, Musser considers the sensual erotics that inhere in the breach of the familial and the ecstasy that arises, not in subjectivity, but in relation. Musser acts as a sensorial guide through black and brown femininity’s queer disruptions of domination, detecting brown jouissance across the surfaces and textures of her assembled archive.

The introduction stages a first encounter with brown jouissance in the collapsed-yet-inhabited space of “ecstatic openness and insatiability” (5) between Lyle Ashton Harris and Billie Holiday in Harris’s photograph, “Billie 21” (2002). Brown jouissance is as labile as it is alluring in this first reading, and the following chapters both cohere and disperse its meaning further. Chapter 1 locates brown jouissance in the labial and permeable selfhoods of Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party (1979) and Kara Walker’s A Subtlety (2014). Identifying the scale and irrepressible funk of A Subtlety’s infamous sugar vulva as a site of epistemic intervention, Musser then advances her discussion of labial possibilities in chapter 2, where she reads the rhinestoned opacity and excess surface of Mickalene Thomas’s Origin of the Universe 1 (2012) as a site of radical narcissism and poetic relationality.

Chapter 3 moves from visual constructions of the flesh to the fleshy, filmed performances of Xandra Ibarra and Amber Hawk Swanson’s Untitled Fucking (2013) and Cheryl Dunye’s Mommy Is Coming (2012). Reading scenes of topping, bottoming, and deep listening between Latinx, black, white, masculine, and feminine performers, Musser shows how pleasure, care, and agency “can be grasped in all sorts of positions” (85). In chapter 4, Musser discerns another register of care in the practices of “mothering” (114) and “kinship” (118) forged by Carrie Mae Weems.

Claiming “the commodity’s scream [as] the space of brown jouissance” (165), chapter 6 closes Sensual Excess by reading the campy, spectral “femme aggression” (144) of the film series Crush (2010–2012), directed by Maureen Catbagan and performed by Molly Caldwell. In her discussion of racial surrogacy between Filipino Catbagan and white Caldwell, Musser stretches brown jouissance to its conceptual limit, asking us to feel brownness within white embodiment. In coming to this edge, however, Musser locates a horizon of critical possibility. Considering the invisibilized, black and brown “conditions of possibility” (166) that hold the universe—and whiteness—together, Musser arrives at her full exploration of mothering and queer femininity, forming the grounds of an expansive “elsewhere” (172) where the book’s coda dwells. If Musser asks a great deal of her reader to get to this elsewhere, she also supplies ample critical guides, not least her concept of “empathetic reading” (14) and her extensive store of theoretical frameworks and genealogies. Like Musser, Nyong’o invites his reader into an unknown, preparing the way with inventive methodological guidance.

Though Afro-Fabulations is a study in the “dark powers of the false” (19), an afro-fabulist is “nothing like a liar” (5), according to Nyong’o. An afro-fabulist might be drag performer Crystal LaBeija throwing shade, comedian Melvin Van Peebles as Brer Soul, or artist Regina José Galindo assuming the form of a blackened stone. Nyong’o names these performers as each enacting resistance to colonized, accumulative, and reproductive time. Examining these artists among many other late 20th- and 21st-century producers of performance art, dance, cinema, literature, and cyborgism who disrupt “the relation between story and plot” (3), and confound the space between true and false, Nyong’o diagrams the “angular sociality” (22) and queerness in—and of—blackness. Defying “all liberal universalisms and scientific positivities” (26), Nyong’o nevertheless establishes a rigorous theoretical framework to orient us to these anachronistic, unruly, yet never untrue performances of black being. Theorizing afro-fabulation in close conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s black feminist method of “critical fabulation,” Nyong’o also draws from Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Bertolt Brecht, and Donna Haraway to underwrite the term’s many modulations.

Picking up threads on “critical shade” (27) that begin to unspool in the introduction, chapter 1 examines how Trajal Harrell reads—in a “black queer vernacular sense” (30)—the racial and historiographical politics of postmodern dance and black queer voguing in Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church, Size Small (2017). Chapter 2 sharpens the concept of critical shade against the cinematic notion of a “crushed black,” using both to theorize Shirley Clarke’s Portrait of Jason (1967) as a film that crushes but fails to capture its subject. In chapter 3, Nyong’o draws on LaMonda Horton-Stallings’s and C. Riley Snorton’s respective work on “funky erotixxx” (83) and black trans genealogies to convene the unlikely, though generative, meeting of ribald comedian Van Peebles as Brer Soul (1969) and conceptual artist Adrian Piper as the Mythic Being (1973–1975). Shifting from the funk of 1970s personae to the abrasive palimpsests of slavery and colonization, chapter 4 reads Kara Walker’s A Subtlety (2014)
and Galindo’s *Piedra* (2013) for the hemispheric histories of violence that they revive, aggravate, and foul. Narrating Galindo’s incitement of audience intervention, Nyong’o articulates—with graceful reflexivity—how afro-fabulations assert themselves in the time, space, and feeling of the real. Considering myths and fictions of the real in chapters 5 and 6, Nyong’o uncovers the covert colonial sovereignty of the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and excavates Samuel Delaney’s speculative novel, *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), as an unrecognized predecessor to queer theory.

The closing chapters of *Afro-Fabulations* bring Nyong’o’s study of time further into axial relation with fiction. Chapter 7 considers the possibility of *habeas flecta*—or fictions of ethnicity—in conversation with Alexander Weheliye’s concept of *habeas viscus* and Kara Keeling’s cinematic “black femme function” (172), and within a longer theoretical genealogy leading back to Spillers’s porntrope. Chapter 8 empathizes with the depressed affects of Bina48, a black female cyborg whose conscription into a technocratic future illuminates the enforced, perpetual not-yet-humanism of blackness. Afro-fabulation describes a vast and diverse set of practices across these eight chapters (and in the book’s concluding discussion of the art practices of Geo Wyeth). As such, afro-fabulation’s capacious reach might “deny it the status of a concept” (200), as Nyong’o acknowledges. Yet, lacking this status—and the imperative to explain—the term is free to do something more attuned to the black queer tactics with which Nyong’o’s work is concerned. Afro-fabulation “open[s] up” a “blank space in discourse” (200) for meaning to fill, unsettle, and take flight from. In this open and untimely “crypt” (200), Nyong’o locates dazzling, phantasmal, and urgent work at the interstices of reality and possibility.

Deeply engaged in their critical surround—and with one another’s work—Musser and Nyong’o suggest what a black queer politics of relation, if not a poetics, can look like in scholarship’s form. Though they fix their attention differently—Musser on touch, texture, and care, and Nyong’o on shade, fictiveness, and time—the two scholars share a studious attunement to the fields in which they think and write. While issuing a roll call of scholars cited by Musser and Nyong’o would be excessive here, the authors make it an appealing task, a pleasure matched fully by the thrill of pursuing the heady, original paths they invite us to follow.

—Camille S. Owens

Reference

Camille S. Owens is a PhD Candidate in African American Studies and American Studies at Yale University. Her dissertation, “Blacness and the Human Child: Race, Prodigy, and the Logic of American Childhood,” traces a genealogy of 19th- and 20th-century black prodigy performances to explore intersections of race and child development as measures of the Human. camille.owens@yale.edu

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More Books


In Nine Plays of Early America, 1765–1818, Sarah E. Chinn and Richard S. Pressman revitalize the stagnated perspective on American pre-antebellum theatre. Intended as a critical text to teaching early US history, this anthology surveys the dramatic field to include both well-known and unpublished plays in the years surrounding the American Revolution and War of 1812. Chinn’s meticulously researched introduction details the history of US-American theatre, in particular its many parallels to political debates of early American society. Pressman modernizes the grammar of the texts for ease of the 21st-century reader, yet remains faithful to the original vernacular. The carefully selected plays, two of which are authored by female playwrights, collectively stage themes central to US society and politics, including US masculinity and the rising voice of the working class, as negotiated both onstage by actors and in the theatre by the attending public. Consequently, Chinn and Pressman challenge the tendency of literary studies to privilege the US-American novel, and finally pay tribute to the significance of theatre in the early republic.


This feminist anthology presents 22 brilliantly diverse essays interlocked by their critique of the neoliberal patriarchy that (in)visibly structures today’s global society. In the introduction, Elin Diamond, Denise Varney, and Candice Amich humbly justify that “the scholarship printed here helps sustain and publicize” the labor of feminist performance artists, but the collective text goes beyond this modest claim to effectively insist that resistance to the neoliberal marketplace is made available through the affectation of the feminist-activist, as evidenced by a broad spectrum of performance. To make this ambitious argument, the book is organized into five chapters, allowing the sections to (re)configure — through at times conflicting but always simultaneous modes — the relationships between performance, feminism, affect, and neoliberalism. The breadth of the essays challenges the reader to coalesce the various case studies; while the examples are united by the four main themes of the book, they remain intentionally more different than akin, ranging from localized to cross-cultural, individual to collective, recorded to performative. Ultimately, this potent collection allows precarious plurality and nonconformity to become its greatest asset as it surveys the complex network of feminist activism across the globe. Building upon traditions of affect theory and second-wave feminism, this book radically advances performance scholarship as it tackles the implications of our neoliberal times.


Performing Process, composed of 13 essays in four parts, attends to the understudied element of process and practice as/against performance. This discourse on choreographic culture investigates the sharing of process versus the practice of performing, a 21st-century phenomenon attributed to technological advancements and dance’s heightened relationship to the academy. The text attempts a global overview, including case studies from Europe, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia, yet the biographies of the contributing authors reveal a geocultural divide in artist-
scholar debates: all contributing university-affiliated scholars are European or Australian, while only the practicing artists extend beyond. However, the text’s mixed use of “documentation” reanimates the performance studies debate of the archive. Stephanie Jordan and Anna Pakes specifically question implications of the archive, and “Part Two: Methods and Formats” intentionally vexes the distinction between product and process (akin to the constantly negotiated division between the archive and the repertoire). Yet, this critical intervention remains a subtext to the larger discourse on the politics and economies of sharing behind-the-scenes processes. Consequently, the authors collectively probe the ontology of (dance) performance and the subsequent divide between the valorization of aesthetics and knowledge. Ultimately, Performing Process highlights the system of exchange—against today’s product-driven, patent-based economies—to advance the field of practice as research.

**Performing Trauma in Central Africa: Shadows of Empire.** By Laura Edmondson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018; 348 pp.; illustrations. $90.00 cloth, $42.00 paper, e-book available.

*Performing Trauma in Central Africa: Shadows of Empire* by Laura Edmondson offers a necessary critique of performance artists’ commodification of mass trauma in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. Staged through the theoretical framework of empire, Edmondson guides the reader through the performance-based commodification of the conflicts of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, the Rwandan genocide, and the continued violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Edmondson recognizes the dangers of employing the analytics of empire, yet pursues its application to argue that “sovereignty and humanitarianism intersect in an empire of trauma” not separate from the neoliberal marketplace. Although she touches on incendiary subjects such as victimhood and genocide, she risks obscuring her argument in a guise of neutrality, offset by her deeply personal ethnographic research conducted in Uganda and Rwanda in the late 2000s. Although her introduction references Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and others, she contains her theoretical intervention to the final chapter. Consequently, her text is less a performance studies intervention and more a historical and political case of (and often against) performance’s entanglement with affect economies. In spite of Edmondson’s self-policing ethics at play in the global discussion of trauma and the non-speakability of violence, Africanists remain footnoted and pushed to the afterword. If voices such as Achille Mbembe’s were given preference throughout, how would this change our understanding of these narratives of violence? How could this allow us to finally dismantle empire, and circumvent patterns of oppression even in Western scholarship? Ultimately, Edmondson’s publication provokes a crucial debate on the humanitarian efforts of performance, particularly in geographic regions of trauma.

**Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze.** By Shane Vogel. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018; 272 pp. $90.00 cloth, $30.00 paper, e-book available.

“The calypso craze begins with a disavowal,” provokes Shane Vogel in the opening line of *Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze*. In this powerful new book, Vogel contends that calypso’s embrace of the inauthentic and subsequent consumption as middlebrow, racial kitsch allowed for black resistance to imperial ways of knowing. To accomplish this intentionally paradoxical argument, each chapter addresses an understudied form of calypso performance: nightclub acts and sound recordings, film, television, musical theatre, and dance. While Vogel’s attention spans from the 1890s to the 1960s, his primary emphasis resides in craze of the 1950s. Vogel’s nuanced play upon Langston Hughes’s configuration of “swiped calypsos” allows him to skillfully desegregate media studies and performance studies through black fad performance and
challenge ontological claims of difference between these fields through his proposal for liveness as sensation, shifting focus from the visual “presence or absence of the performer to the sensory attunement of the spectator/listener in the club” (18). At times uncritical of the risks assumed by local communities when diasporic culture is (re-)appropriated as caricature, even (or especially) when that appropriation is self-inflicted, Vogel successfully re-reads calypso as a defiant form within commodity-driven culture. His framing of stolen time accentuates the reciprocal directionality between African American and Afro-Caribbean mass-cultural consumption and calls attention to this recursive transmission of calypso from its roots in Caribbean folk music to its appropriation into Jim Crow-era performance in post-WWII United States, and its ultimate re-appropriation as time stolen back.


Sarah Townsend’s first full-length monograph is an impressive foray into the avantgarde production between 1917–1934, defined as a period of transition and change, of uneven and unfinished development for the capitalist, bourgeois state. She convincingly argues that while Brazil and Mexico operated at the semi-periphery of the global economy of power during the interwar years, the theatrical avantgarde was central to national aesthetic and sociopolitical formation. By dividing the book into two sections—Mexico and then Brazil—Townsend maintains their distinct histories in an asymmetrical mirroring, not collapsed under a common Iberian/Latin American identity. She sources across genres and textual form—from radio and puppetry to operatic ethnography—to rupture preconceptions surrounding the avantgarde. In this fissure, the precarious essence of unfinished art transfigures the vexed relationship between autonomy and institution. Building upon Leon Trotsky’s work on futurism and Walter Benjamin’s commentary on the baroque, this book is not so much an exposé back in time, but an effort against time. Townsend bravely preferences the materiality of theatre to work against the ephemeral, embodied temporality that is often privileged within performance studies. While she focuses on Mexico and Brazil, her research has broader implications as it complicates our presumptions of the European avantgarde, institutionalization, and revolution. Impeccably researched in the archive, she compels history out of the past and into the future-present as she illuminates the entangled themes of avantgarde theatre.

—Anna Jayne Kimmel

Anna Jayne Kimmel is a PhD student in Performance Studies at Stanford University. She holds an AB in French and Italian from Princeton University, where she also pursued certificates from the Program in African Studies and the Program in Dance. Her current work engages Francophone and Arab-African dance as a tool for investigating immigrant social and affective infrastructure, cultural memory, and movement practice. ajkimmel@stanford.edu

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