

Book Reviews

Gibb, Andrew. *Californios, Anglos and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West: How the First Generation of Mexican Americans Fashioned a New Nation*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2018. 268 pp.

Andrew Gibb's *Californios, Anglos and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West: How the First Generation of Mexican Americans Fashioned a New Nation* is a sound contribution to our understanding of the rich and complex history of Mexican Americans during the mid-nineteenth century. Under the umbrella of Performance Studies, Gibb examines intercultural relations in the years leading to the U.S. annexation of California and following the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Gibb challenges the Anglocentric notion of hegemonic cultural imposition and points instead to the interaction between elite groups as the basis of the socio-political structure of today's California. Through four chapters and an afterpiece supported with documentation, testimonials, and personal letters, this author discusses how Easterners who settled in coastal California towns not only adopted the fashion and gestures but also enacted the political and speech acts that the affluent Hispanic classes had performed for centuries under the Spanish Empire.

The introduction is divided into two sections. The first, "Dramaturgical Notes," sets a theoretical framework that traces original approaches to the study of the West prior to the inception of Performance Studies. The second, "Curtain Raiser," analyzes *El desfile histórico*, a Santa Barbara festival dedicated to the reenactment of a foundational moment, the intercultural marriage of Californiana Ana de la Guerra with Bostonian businessman Alfred Robinson in 1836. The *desfile* serves as a paradigm for intercultural relations even today, as descendants continue to enact their heritage as a performance of power, wealth, and status, for example, in elite Santa Barbara weddings.

In the ensuing chapters, Gibb documents performative interactions, including intercultural marriages, in which Californianas were used as trade icons in forging alliances with newly arrived, wealthy Anglo businessmen, thus providing the foundation for the political and economic oligarchies of coastal communities such as San Francisco, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey. Countering Anglocentric approaches, Gibb explores the Mexicanization of Easterners, as Anglo newcomers began to adopt and perform the fashions and customs of the Mexican elites, embodying the cultural characteristics of noble gentlefolk, including dancing, language skills, and negotiation skills. This refashioning of local customs marked the performance of distinctive attributes in public space from religious ceremonies such as baptisms and weddings to the negotiations of transfer of power examined in the first chapter entitled “The Angels.”

In “Collaborations,” the second chapter, Gibb shows how, even after the annexation, national celebrations such as the 4th of July shared importance with pre-Anglo public ceremonies such as Our Lady of Refuge, with which it coincided. The author concludes that these were not celebrations of national pride but rather regional and communal forms that reaffirmed the power of the oligarchic elites of both Californios and Anglos. Gibb’s theoretical model is relevant to the discussion of the intercultural relations between Anglos and Mexicans in the introduction and the first two chapters, but begins to fall short as an explanation for intercultural relations during the Bear Flag Republic and the Gold Rush examined in later chapters. A salient aspect of the final chapter, “Dress Rehearsal,” is the discussion of how, in order to retain land rights, the Californios ensured that the right of women to own land—as observed under Mexican Law—was respected. Although many Californio elites shared ethnic origins with Native Americans, mixed-race Mestizos and Afro-descendants, their affluent status and ability to negotiate and forge alliances with Anglos allowed them to preserve their class privilege and serve as patrons to the less fortunate. Nonetheless, Gibb shows how they themselves became disenfranchised under Anglo-American hegemony following statehood.

In *Californios, Anglos and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West*, Andrew Gibb provides his readers with a cultural reading of the bedrock that made California uniquely efficient in adopting and reaffirming values and customs enacted with the Spanish colonization of these territories.

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Suárez, Lucía, Amélia Conrado, and Yvonne Daniel, eds. *Dancing Bahia: Essays on Afro-Brazilian Dance, Education, Memory, and Race*. Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2018. 228 pp.

The scarceness of scholarly works in English about Brazilian cultural production is just one reason to celebrate the release of this edited volume on Afro-Brazilian dances. Bringing together Brazilian and North American based professors, dance performers, activists, and researchers, *Dancing Bahia: Essays on Afro-Brazilian Dance, Education, Memory, and Race* offers the English-speaking reader a fruitful avenue to understand the cultural significance and the political dimensions of African matrix dance as practiced and taught in contemporary Brazil.

The book is divided into four parts, each one focusing on slightly different aspects of the relationship between the cultural legacies of African matrix culture, the multi-layered Afro-Brazilian identity, and the role of dance—and its pedagogy—as a political gesture. The eight essays that constitute the book provide a multifaceted, first-hand account of inspiring initiatives aimed at preserving and honoring African heritage, promoting social inclusion, and combating stereotypes. Along the way, the authors wisely point out the various obstacles that prevent the practice and teaching of dance to fulfill its potential, including social prejudices, poor physical infrastructure, police repression, hyper-eroticization, urban violence, and commodification.

As the introduction underlines, African-descendants in Brazil “remain disproportionately poor and marginalized” (11) and “black stuff” (5)—despite being deeply-rooted in Brazilian society—continues to be regarded with contempt (if not with sheer hostility). That is why the initiatives discussed in the book go beyond the artistic field. By reenacting the traumatic history of the diaspora and exalting the Afro-descendant body, the cases examined represent very needed acts of political defiance, collective strength, and personal empowerment. Richly researched and theoretically sound, the articles in this volume provide a valuable historical background of the struggles of blacks in Brazil from colonial times to present days. The book also traces the recent history of dance institutions and organizations in Bahia and considers the implications of a 2003 federal law that mandates the inclusion of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum.

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective and sharing an informed and personal viewpoint, *Dancing Bahia* successfully reveals how the practice of dance in Northeast Brazil has been able to defy the status quo and promote

community bonding, self-confidence, cultural resistance, and social change. Because dance in black culture embodies spiritual and ethical values and arouses feelings of social connectedness, the authors suggest that Afro-Brazilian dance requires a pedagogical approach capable of offering a holistic corporeal education that can foster what Pilar Echeverry Zambrano calls “emancipating seeds for life” (91).

Just as importantly, the book showcases a wide variety of dance expressions, which convey a clear sense of the vitality of the African heritage in Brazil. Dealing with genres such as *maracatu*, *nego fugido*, *capoeira*, *marabaixo*, *samba de roda*, and *maculelê*, *Dancing Bahia* also broadens the vocabulary and the canon of dance studies and alerts unsuspecting readers to the vibrant dance scene that exists in Brazil well beyond Carnival.

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Hellier-Tinoco, Ruth. *Performing Palimpsest Bodies: Postmemory Theatre Experiments in Mexico*. Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 290 pp.

In *Performing Palimpsest Bodies: Postmemory Theatre Experiments in Mexico*, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco uses the idea of the palimpsest—a manuscript that was erased in order to create space for more writing—as a lens for analyzing contemporary Mexican performance. Performers’ bodies, like palimpsests, carry the traces of previous texts on them; they are layered with touches of history and memory that can sometimes be read simultaneously (though perhaps not always entirely). As Hellier-Tinoco states, “Through layering, accumulations and iterations, palimpsest bodies perform complex trans-temporal provocations and re-visions” (5). In this way, she suggests, the performers onstage reinterpret the bodies of history in an act of postmemory.

In order to demonstrate this, the book focuses on the Mexican theatre company La Máquina de Teatro, which was founded by Juliana Faesler and Clarissa Malheiros in 1996. To date, the company has staged over 30 productions that have toured throughout Mexico and across the globe. La Máquina de Teatro creates pieces that challenge the historical images and stereotypes that stem from Mexico’s past and reimagines them from feminist and queer perspectives. For this book, Hellier-Tinoco chose to focus on four of the group’s performance projects that are based on real and mythological

characters of Mexican history. *Mexican Trilogy* explores the figures of Nezahualcóyotl, Moctezuma II, and La Malinche. *Zapata, Death Without End* is a yearlong project that consisted of experiments and workshops among five different Mexican theatre collectives, all responding to the legacy of revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata. *War in Paradise* is a work-in-progress that stemmed from a three-week collaboration among twenty-five artists (it was based on a novel about Lucio Cabañas, the Mexican schoolteacher who became a revolutionary during the 1960s and 1970s). A solo piece performed by Malheiros, *Time of the Devil* explores Mexican iterations of the Devil. Each is a different type of theatre experiment and therefore gets its own chapter; each one includes a full summary and analysis of the performance/workshops as well as a number of photos and detailed descriptions of stage actions.

The author positions herself within the scope and analysis of the book as an artist and scholar who has worked in Britain, Mexico, and the US, acknowledging her own body “as a container and transmitter of memories and histories” (12). This aspect, however, could have been given more attention as a way of expanding the methodological practices that scholar-artists can use when writing about live performance, especially given the focus on “embodied archival-repertoires” throughout the chapters. In some ways, the book is unconventional in format and methodology, but it serves a greater purpose by archiving and presenting the work of La Máquina de Teatro to an English-speaking audience that otherwise might not have encountered the group or its pieces. With well over 300 color photographs (though some are repeated various times), this book presents the work of the Mexican theatre company in a way that is accessible to scholars, artists, and students.

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Marino, Angela. *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2018. 225 pp.

Angela Marino’s clearly written *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela* straddles political theory and performance studies to examine the complex relationship between populism and embodied actions in Venezuela. This intriguing study, which begins with the arrival of President Chávez to office in 1998, takes an interdisciplinary approach to “the political formations ... exercised by participants within and surrounding

these performances [...] as an organizational method of building popular power" (8). Highly relevant and ambitious, her original approach to the relationships between performance and politics serves as a correction to both the general misuse of the notion of populism to result from the recent rise in neoconservative nationalisms and the critical revision of populism in the face of Venezuela's unprecedented migration and humanitarian crisis.

Marino proposes that populism can catalyze and reorganize power, giving rise to alternative political approaches like the oxymoronic "critical populism" (9). If populism is a dimension of the political, she argues, "then we need to account for how people know and reproduce populism through performance" (10). However, if "performance was a constitutive, mediating factor in the emergence of populism in Venezuela" (169), Marino fails to trace the profound relationship between participatory democracy, performance, and the body that has been central to the reconfiguration of contemporary local politics. Although the book seeks to reject the Manichean opposition "good versus evil" characteristic of theories of populism, the author replaces it with multiple binary oppositions that oversimplify the case and leave her thesis resting on a caricaturized struggle between candid politics—that draws on uneven ethnographic research—and an imperialist and racist thirst. According to Marino, the Bolivarian Revolution is an unprecedented radical shift, but her analysis is based on a movement of individuals only vaguely connected to a collective (166). While she understands the resulting *fiesta politics* (174) as "a moving target that is constantly negotiated and rearticulated through the performance and its production" (31), the complex interplay between Venezuelan populism and performance requires a more careful study.

In five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, the book explores film, theater, and performance, as well as other intersectional bodily acts, and considers performance beyond its standard theorization as a cultural domain located outside of the law (168). Despite some misunderstandings and inaccuracies—for example, that Carlos Andrés Pérez's neoliberal reforms were announced "in a lavish banquet from the Teatro Teresa Carreño" (91)—Marino points out interesting connections. She fails, however, to explore the highly relevant Chávez-era transformation of the political regime from representative to participatory democracy. As Margarita López Maya has demonstrated, this regime's ideas were neither Marxist nor Chávez's own; rather, they were introduced in Venezuela through Catholic doctrine and reformulated by the political party Copei in the 1960's and 70's (López Maya 45). This understanding would change Marino's reading of Corpus

Christi devils, as well as her central argument. Also baffling is the failure to reference Rafael Sánchez's groundbreaking 2016 book, *Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism*, which questions the relationship between populism and embodied manifestations throughout the nation's history. Sánchez even depicts Venezuela as a theater in which audience members leave their seats to join the crowds outside while the nation's representatives try desperately to regain their attention through increasingly manic dancing onstage.

This welcome book considers a rarely analyzed topic in an understudied nation. Unfortunately, however, it fails to contribute in a rigorous way to an understanding of the extraordinary interplay between populism and performance in Venezuela.

Works Cited

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Gutiérrez Muiño, Ignacio. *Teatro: No pasar. Rendimiento crítico del teatro de Roberto Suárez en su contexto de producción*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2018. 199 pp.

Teatro: No pasar analyzes seven plays by Uruguayan director and playwright Roberto Suárez. The first chapter presents the structure of the book and introduces the reader to Suárez's *oeuvre*. The author offers a first hint of what *rendimiento crítico* entails by affirming that the relation between artists and audience is of crucial importance. The second chapter offers a close reading of Suárez's most recurrent dramaturgical strategies, following José Luis García Barrientos's methodology of *dramatología*. This chapter includes a detailed analysis of aspects such as staging, texts, characters, time, and space. These could be informative, but unfortunately they are buried in a dense, verbose structure. The author prioritizes scenes in which spectators are interpellated, yet fails to account for the spectators' responses. While there is

much talk about the “desdoblamiento de niveles dramáticos,” the dramatic level of the audience is mostly ignored.

In the third chapter, the play *Bienvenido a casa* is posed as a paradigmatic example of Gutiérrez’s analytical framework. For Gutiérrez, this play motivates and stimulates in the audience “una actitud alerta y autoconsciente que se asocia con la noción de rendimiento crítico” (191), in the sense that it combines a front-of-the-house play with a behind-the-scenes one, thereby allowing the dramaturg to present the audience with complex dramatic structures wherein they have to continually reexamine their roles.

The last chapter explains how *Bienvenido a casa* operates in the realm of *rendimiento crítico*, presenting the overworked condemnation of the referential pact as *totalizante* and alienating. Employing a conceptual frame based on a philosophy of language, Gutiérrez calls for a reflective, critical position that, while necessary, brings nothing new to the current state of either the theory or the history of theatre. The “political” is here “la visibilización y puesta en problema del estatuto de la representación y sus límites en el marco social y cultural actual” (152). The social and cultural realm fails to be explained, with the result that we learn very little about Uruguay’s or Montevideo’s political situation; the political remains constrained to a notion of the dramatic that does not exceed the referential. The poetic, imaginary, and lyric modes of criticism that close this chapter effectively illustrate Suárez’s dramatic strategies. One key aspect of the critical mode—the most advanced critical stage for Gutiérrez—consists of confusing the audience as to which level of representation the dramatic situation is operating in. The book ends by defining *rendimiento crítico* as a “perspectiva negativa o trascendental que, desde la ficción, abre (permite) la pregunta por las condiciones y posibilidades de la representación” (185).

Reading *Teatro: No pasar*, one cannot help but think about the bureaucratization of criticism and research. The book has the style, pace, verbosity, and appeal of a report on the development of a project. Its content is carefully developed to leave no term undefined, but it is not a very inviting read. Ultimately, the book speaks more about the conditions of this type of criticism than about Roberto Suárez’s work.

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Ward, Julie Ann. *A Shared Truth: The Theater of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. 162 pp.

In her book, Julie Ann Ward traces how twenty-first century Latin American theatre artists explore new ways in which to stage national histories through the use of archival documentation and personal histories. To do so, she uses the work of one particular company: Mexico's Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol (LTS). This collective has become one of the most recognized groups working with what artists and academics have named the Theatre of the Real, meaning a theatre that explores real issues stemming from real events through personal narratives that transform our understanding of public and private stories and question the liminal space between fact and fiction. *A Shared Truth: The Theater of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol* focuses on the important work of this Mexican collective precisely because the work of these artists "has emerged as an alternative source for reality in the face of unreliability and a lack of transparency from other sources traditionally associated with objective facts" (28).

In her critical introduction, Ward considers the role of documentary theatre in Mexican stage production and explains the evolution of this genre into theatre of the real. She also analyzes the particular aesthetics of LTS in regards to their use of the family story as a form of documenting the national. The rest of the book consists of four chapters that organize the work of this company in chronological order so as to delineate their evolution into theatre of the real. Though the book is very specific and detailed in its analysis, its aim is to broaden the understanding of the genre and the type of archival material analysis found in the plays. Chapter one focuses primarily on the play *Asalto al agua* as an example of a collective creation piece of documentary theatre that already begins to blend individual stories into national histories. Chapter two considers the addition of familial biographies as the lens through which to understand history. It analyzes the trilogy *La invención de nuestros padres*, which consists of the plays *El rumor del incendio*, *Montserrat*, and *Se rompen las olas*. In the third chapter, Ward focuses on two of the group's creations—the play *Derretiré con un cerillo la nieve de un volcán* and the cycle *La democracia en México*—to explain a shift in the company's aesthetics towards theatre as a tool for the investigation of Mexico's complicated political processes. This aesthetic turn nonetheless maintains a focus on family and individual histories. The final chapter looks at the more recent work of

the company and the ways in which its members have explored individual paths and innovative forms for producing performances.

Ward advances the concept of theatre of the real to explain how companies such as LTS weave the national with the personal and the familial to recompose the archive and question the concept of authenticity in history. An important contribution to the study of Latin American theatre, Ward introduces to a new audience the work of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, one of the most important contemporary theatre companies producing work at the present.

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