

Handbook Sketching Out Vibrant Debates on Queer and Trans Feminisms in Performance

Rosenberg, Tiina, Sandra D'Urso & Anna Renée Winget, eds. 2021. *The Palgrave Handbook of Queer and Trans Feminisms in Contemporary Performance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. (541 pages)

THE PALGRAVE HANDBOOK of *Queer and Trans Feminisms in Contemporary Performance* presents a rich mapping of key developments in twenty-first century queer and trans feminist performance. Edited by theatre and performance scholars Sandra D'Urso, Tiina Rosenberg, and Anna Renée Winget, the handbook comprises twenty-eight chapters that accentuate how gender and sexuality are engaged with from intersectional and decolonial perspectives by a new generation of artists, playwrights, scholars, and activists.

Several chapters discuss performances enacted in response to uncertain times marked by military conflicts, climate crisis, growing fascist and extreme right movements, misogyny, and anti-LGBTQI+ legislations. These performances are examples of the forceful ongoing fight against discrimination and violence. Some chapters describe implicit confrontations enacted at for example theatre and performance venues in Asia, Africa, and Europe in response to regime violence. Others con-

template explicit protests waged by political and social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName.

The main contribution of the book is that it provides an eclectic as well as pedagogical mapping of contemporary approaches to queer and trans feminist performance. Framed by the editors' introduction, the chapters include essays, artist statements, interviews, and conversations that approach performance from a broad range of different political, cultural, and geographical contexts. In line with its eclectic structure, the book closes with a conclusion formulated as a dialogue between the editors, social activist and writer Emi Koyama, and scholar Eric A. Stanley. A central theme throughout the anthology is, according to the editors, the question of how queer and trans feminist theories can enhance our understanding of developments in feminist performance today. Based on this question, the editors have divided the contributions into four main sections.

Several of the chapters in the first section, "Subversive Performance: Breaking Through Codes of (Un)Intelligibility", make use of theories of the performative in order to enhance aspects of how performances may have subversive effects in specific circumstances. With Canada as context, Jan-Therese Mendes argues that everyday acts related to black women's conversion to Islam hold the potential of destabilizing normative principles and racial logics tied to notions of national belonging. With a similar theoretical framework, Claire Pamment's essay underlines how Asifa Lahore's British-Asian Muslim drag performances expose how the promise of safety embedded in the increasing public visibility offered to trans people can become a trap (Gosset et al. 2017) wherein trans persons are limited by the threats that accompany exposure as well as by the boundaries of "positive" representation. Another interesting recurring theme in many of the essays in this section is how the meaning of concepts such as queer, trans, feminisms, and performance changes in different geopolitical and social contexts. In their respective contributions, Sandra D'Urso and Stefania Lodi Rizzini address this topic in relation to difficulties and power asymmetries embedded in the act of translating queer theory and feminism.

Playwright Leelee Jackson's forceful letter to predominantly white institutions of theatre arts opens the second section "Whose Queer Currency? Ex/Changing CIS White Fragility". Titled "You Can't Hold My Baby", Jackson's letter crucially articulates the anger, sadness, and fear evoked by the professional dependency of artists of colour on white institutions. Jackson accentuates the impossibility of attempting to produce artistic work within institutional structures organized according to a coded language wherein the understanding of craft is rooted and established in whiteness. Many of the chapters that follow in similar ways make use of queer decolonial and intersectional theoretical frameworks in order to problematize how whiteness operates. Particular attention is directed toward how whiteness functions as an organizing principle in various forms of financial and cultural support systems as well as a currency in several queer and trans feminist movements. Delving into questions of homonormativity (Duggan 2004), Zane McNeill and Kyra Smith discuss how the Black Pride 4's intervention at Stonewall Columbus Pride in 2017, where members blocked the celebratory parade and insisted on seven minutes of silence in memory of black people murdered by the police in recent years, was a political action that can be understood in terms of a performance. McNeill and Smith argue that the Black Pride 4, by using their black trans bodies as a means to disrupt the movement of white gay bodies in celebration, exposed an invisible system of violence wherein white gays are supported at the cost of BQT-POC queers. Another example is the essay by Beck Tadman, wherein Tadman explores her own emotional experiences as a cis-white audience member at Travis Alabanza's performance *Left Outside Alone*. Tadman elaborates on how Alabanza's work performs an opposite gaze (hooks 2003) that challenges its white audiences by making them become aware of their own "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2011).

The third section, "Queer Crossings and Transformations", presents a number of chapters wherein theories of the body are employed to enhance various aspects of performances. Calling attention to the possibilities of understanding Chicana/o murals as pieces of evidence of performance, Amarilis Pérez Vera argues that such a framework recog-

nizes a correlation between Chicana/o artists' emphasis on the creative process over the concept of the artwork and Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's theory (1999) of the new *mestiza*. Tatiana Klepikova's essay makes use of theories of cyberfeminism and post-humanism (Haraway 2004) in order to explain how the Maailmanloppu theatre – an independent theatre based in Saint Petersburg – experiments with long-standing Russian traditions of reverence for the literary text in order to contest simplistic binary codes often applied to gender and sexuality in Russia. A compelling essay by Sandra Chatterjee, Cynthia Ling Lee, and Shyamala Moorty departs from their joint artistic process in order to elaborate on the ambivalent sense of desire and cultural/political disappointment that present-day queer subjects may experience when studying queer-ish artists of the past.

In the introductory chapter, the editors clarify how the notion of healing was not part of their call for contributions to the book. Rather, it emerged as a central theme in many of the contributions, prompting the editors to include a fourth section in the anthology, "Healing and Revolution: Activism as/in Healing". Most essays in this vital section treat healing as a possible productive effect of performance for performers and artists as well as their audiences. Sydney Flynn Rogers, a.k.a. Miss Barbie-Q, suggests their art functions as a means of healing and protest. The conversation between D'Lo and Anna Renée Winget puts emphasis on how art and performance can create spaces in queer and trans communities wherein an affirmation of struggles may open up possibilities of healing. Other contributions problematize the association between healing and able-bodiedness or "wholeness" (Kafer 2019). Krizia Puig, for example, elaborates on how they, in their performance art, suggest the possibility to "heal otherwise" by inhabiting, rather than overcoming, ambiguous states of vulnerability.

The four thematically arranged sections of the book all provide their own intriguing answers to the central question of how queer and trans feminist theories can enhance our understanding of developments in feminist performance today. However, during my reading yet another theme emerged, the addressal of which, I argue, would have benefitted

the book. It concerns the way in which theory does not solely enhance our understanding of performance, but at times also impedes or even blocks it.

In her essay, Sue-Ellen Case contemplates her self-identification as a butch woman. Due to its implications of a stable sort of masculinity, Case argues, the identification as butch woman is “both pathologized and celebrated as perversion; as generational and conservative (thus nostalgic and historical); too stable, and too exclusionary, marked with unexamined privilege and retaining binary gender in a time of revolutionary movements away from its force” (28). From this perspective, theories of the performative basis of gender identification, rather than enhancing performance, sometimes also lock the meanings of certain gender identifications into frameworks wherein they become deemed incomprehensive, politically backwards, or even pathologized. Another example is Joel W. Abdelmoez’s essay, that interestingly presents debates on the translation and determination of terminology within queer and trans movements in the Arabic-speaking world, including the dominance of Western discourse in issues concerning non-normative sexual and gender identifications. Correspondingly, Jaye Austin Williams’s brilliant essay on the work of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks offers a decolonial perspective on the limits of language and theory. In the essay, Williams suggests that the language (including theories) of political emancipation is founded on the notion of a coherent “civilized” subject/human that has gained its meaning through a history marked by colonialism and slavery. Williams pays attention to how Parks’ work meditates upon a paradox regarding attempts to narrate “black liberation” through a language wherein the conception of the liberated subject is founded on a positioning of “blackness as quintessential captive locus” (139).

Throughout its chapters, the book compellingly chronicles – and offers inspiring analyses of – current contestations of and elaborations on the definitions and enactments of queer, trans, feminism, and performance. The editors’ curation places emphasis on the breadth of and dissimilarities in present-day trans and queer feminisms in performance. In

addition to being of great value to the field of theatre and performance studies, the anthology also forms a platform for novel conversations by bringing together diverse, at times conflicting, voices.

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