
Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

Theatre Research in Canada
Recherches théâtrales au Canada

Natalie Alvarez “Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance”

Tracy C. Davis

Volume 40, Number 1-2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068265ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068265ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto

ISSN

1196-1198 (print)

1913-9101 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Davis, T. (2019). Review of [Natalie Alvarez “Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance”]. *Theatre Research in Canada / Recherches théâtrales au Canada*, 40(1-2), 168–170. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068265ar>

ALVAREZ, NATALIE***Immersions in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance.***

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018, 214 pp.

TRACY C. DAVIS

This book documents cultural encounters facilitated in immersive role-play scenarios of military and counterinsurgency training, dark tourism, and pedagogy based on history, topography, and the politics of human rights violations. Among the four case studies, two concern training for North American combatants engaged in declared and covert wars in the Middle East; two feature Indigenous cultures claiming control over their narratives, designed to proactively alter a people's future; and whereas one relies on a built simulation three others utilize the natural landscape to shape encounters. Like studies by Scott Magelssen and Coco Fusco, among others, Natalie Alvarez's work is invested in formal characteristics of the cases, such as live immersive situations, for paradigm-building. Yet, more importantly, it is cultural ethnography that first destabilizes then reorients the ethnographer's understanding of kinds of knowledge and leads to sensitization to local cultures and ethical experiences of learning. It matters less whether the cases cohere in terms of formal elements of performance than that, through field work and ethnographic reflection, performance is indispensable in promoting personal encounters imbued with empathy. Over the course of many years, Alvarez's field work—at CFB Camp Wainwright's Afghan Village training site, the private company Aeneas Group International's course on Countering Insurgency in Complex Environments held in the Utah mountains, a nighttime walk led by Indigenous Hñahñu in Hildalgo northeast of Mexico City simulating perils encountered by border-crossing migrants, and a tour of Shoal Lake 40 Reserve conducted by a community leader and settler-ally through this Anishinaabe reserve in southeastern Manitoba—accumulates into a profound meditation on experiences of encounter.

In all but the Shoal Lake ethnography, Alvarez is a classic participant-observer. At CFB Camp Wainwright, playing a village woman amongst the real Afghan émigrés enhances her access to interlocutors on both sides of the war games. At close quarters, she could observe soldiers' behaviour with the Afghan villagers. Whereas the officers seek the right conditioning to switch onto auto-pilot in stressful situations overseas, the Afghan participants risk being retraumatized yet regard their endurance of both the stress and dull routine of war games as ultimately helping their compatriots at home, for Afghan lives depend on the military trainees' acumen. In three-block warfare scenarios, overcoming arrogance and vulnerability, the temptation to either react belligerently or “rush to the intimate” (62) reflects the fine balance of Warrior Science sought by this Canadian generation of peace-enforcers. Meanwhile, the Afghans improvise in response then rank the soldiers on cultural awareness, the use of interpreters, and postures.

Whereas at Camp Wainwright Alvarez could ask naïve questions as a player or researcher, at the counterinsurgency course in Utah she went under deep cover. For seven days, she forfeited contact with the outside world to join a role-playing cell of strangers dressed in Afghan men's overshirts, loose trousers, and chequered headscarves, her intent shielded from all but

the course instructors. Participants in earlier iterations of the training, high-ranking Canadians and Americans involved in counterintelligence operations, avow that this method of gaining insight through inhabiting another culture's mind-set (to the extent they could do so) made their efforts, whether militant or not, more effective in shrinking insurgents' recruitment bases. Their insider-outsider status, North Americans role-playing militant Muslims preparing to attack, then attacking, foreigners in Afghanistan, included field exercises of ambush, deception, and capture. Alvarez performed as a decoy and as the cell's strategic advisor, crafting media statements. (Better that she handle rhetoric, she stresses, than firearms.) The empathetic lesson is that insurgents have well-coordinated forces, more alike than unlike their Western opponents. As in theatrical spectating, the differences can be reconciled internally, yet Alvarez found among her cohort a marked lack of imagination in "colonizing the experience of the other" (97).

The voluntary tourist participants in the *caminata nocturnis* have gathered each Saturday night since 2009 to take part in a state-sponsored capacity-building enterprise run by the Hñahñu on designated lands. Whereas in the past, 90% of Hñahñu men have gone north as economic migrants, this profitable tourist enterprise that attracts well-to-do Mexico City residents out for an extreme physical adventure is making the need for members of this ethnic group to emigrate obsolete. Hñahñu volunteer to take part as part of community service commitments. Alvarez notes marked distinctions in the political engagements between the Hñahñu, who brief participants on their history and base the reenactments on collective experience, and the voluntary tourists, some of whom come (improbably) well-equipped for dodging border patrols in rough terrain for 5-7 hours. As an Indigenous enterprise, the *caminata nocturnis* interrupts the neoliberal positioning of economic migrants seeking opportunity within the constraints of modernity. This relies explicitly on a fictional border, unenforceable regulators, and first-person participation in the actions of flight, elusion, and detention. For the Hñahñu it is twice-behaved cultural heritage, but for most tourist-participants it is a dark, sweaty, late-night game.

It is especially poignant, therefore, that Alvarez concludes the book with an exegesis on "'learned ignorance' as a critical position" (170) as an end point for critical inquiry. At Shoal Lake, she sheds the guise of participant-observer and becomes a humbler student.

Since this book went to press, the Shoal Lake 40 Reserve has seen ground broken for a road linking their de facto island to its supply route. It is to be hoped that by the time this review goes to press the road is operational, and other long-deferred promises for investment have been honoured. But since 1914, when the Greater Winnipeg Water District was allowed to build a dyke to supply water to the city through a canal, the peninsula where the First Nation resided was turned into an island and waters around it became fouled from settlements on Falcon Lake. Fresh water had to be trucked in, though there was neither a properly graded road nor a bridge to accommodate the settlement year-round. Alvarez contraposes the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (opened in Winnipeg in 2014)—which takes an official position of silence on Indigenous rights and is resolutely tone deaf even to its own installation of Rebecca Belmore's (Anishinaabe) *Trace* (a three-storey structure that embeds volunteer bead-makers' handprints on 14,000 clumps of red earth, commenting through its form on the Hudson's Bay Company's germ warfare)—with the Shoal Lake people's propositional Canadian Museum of Human Rights Violations. Alvarez is conducted on a tour emphasizing the relationship of map to land and narration, presenting written archives, and commanding recitation of facts in situ. This invitation to witness, to listen to the band's

agonizing position and litany of fatalities, and to repeat rote facts does not immerse Alvarez in the experience of perilous sanitation and a century of disenfranchisement but positions her relative to this. This encounter, which she names “a necessary precondition of unlearning” (162), relies upon narrative yoked to sitedness and listening to others bear witness. Presence at this performance, the briefest of all Alvarez’s field studies, is without doubt the most transformative, leading her not to play at being another but reckoning with her actual situatedness as a descendent of settler-colonists.

BURELLE, JULIE

Encounters on Contested Lands. Indigenous Performances of Sovereignty and Nationhood in Québec.

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019, 232 pp.

MARTHA HERRERA-LASSO GONZÁLEZ

Encounters on Contested Lands joins an ongoing conversation around the challenges and possibilities of decolonization from the perspective of Performance Studies, and represents an important contribution to decolonial thought and practice across the Americas. Specifically, it broadens this conversation by offering a much-needed investigation, in English, of decolonization and performance read in relation to Québécois claims of sovereignty. The project reveals Quebec as a place of competing sovereignties, focusing on contemporary encounters between Indigenous peoples and what Burelle calls the *French Québécois de souche*—French-speaking white descendants of early French settlers, who were colonized by the British and later by Anglo Canadians. Burelle pushes against a long-time narrative of Quebec as a colonized minority, and makes visible the white possessive logic that connects English and French Canadian colonial projects, highlighting how Quebec’s history of suffering and practices of selective remembering have been used to assert a *Québécois de souche* nationalist project. Through her analysis of a range of cultural and political performances, Burelle exposes the discursive and performative strategies of dispossession of Indigenous peoples that have made this project possible, arguing throughout that Quebec’s imagined community is still unable “to accommodate (let alone comprehend) the concept of Indigenous sovereignty” (16). As a settler scholar, Burelle does not shy away from her positionality as *Québécoise de souche*, and offers a range of strategies for settler scholars to engage productively with their own accountability. Burelle’s introduction explicitly outlines her choices in nomenclature and citation, acknowledging the politics of naming and the importance of positioning theory in relation to the places and peoples discussed.

Encounters on Contested Lands deals primarily with performances in Quebec, a province coexists with the Abenaki, Anishinaabe, Attikamekw, Cree, Huron-Wendat, Innu, Inuit, Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Mohwak and Naskapi nations. In the case of the Marche Amun in chapter