

## Theatre Research in Canada Recherches théâtrales au Canada

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ALVAREZ, NATALIE, CLAUDETTE LAUZON, and KEREN  
ZAIONTZ, EDS., *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times:  
Performance Actions in the Americas*. Cham, Switzerland:  
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Katherine Zien

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draws attention in the brief “Coda” to *Sound*. Even given the dearth of published materials on non-Western sound in theatre and performance studies and cognate disciplinary pathways, as well as the situated strategy of authorship practised by both herself and Solga, it should have been possible to decentre whiteness to a greater extent. In both books, it also would have been useful to offer firmer framings and definitions of words like theatre and theatrical, especially when not all of the practices discussed would be readily recognised as either by many readers. Related, I was not always convinced by Solga’s characterizations of performance studies as discipline and methodological frame, although this never undermined the analysis itself or insights offered.

To read *Space* and *Sound* while sheltering in place and with no access to the types of performance experiences at their heart (with the significant exception, of course, of audio walks) was both provocative and challenging. Solga’s description of attending Shakespeare’s Globe in London underlined just what I had taken for granted and was missing terribly—that is, “the unmistakable physical proximity—the shared, embodied investment in the performance—of one another” (52). Later, she refers to Una Chaudhuri’s concept of “geopathic dramaturgy” through which modern realistic theatre can be understood as “a disease of place and space” whereby the concept of “home” is staged as a collision of the incompatible desires for a stable identity and deterritorialized self. That thinking about performance and its theorization is able to resonate so powerfully—especially in a historical moment in which theatre cultures, ecologies, and assumptions of its constituent elements (such as shared presence and perspective) are shaken—demonstrates why this new series is so valuable.

### Contributor

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## ALVAREZ, NATALIE, CLAUDETTE LAUZON, and KEREN ZAIONTZ, EDS.

*Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas.*

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019, 343 pp.

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“Sustainable tools and time-sensitive tactics that defy the habitual *and* enact more democratic futures are needed to aid communities caught in the throes of political violence, manufactured

austerity, and environmental disasters” (10). Writing against the backdrop of raging wildfires, the coronavirus pandemic, and a newly empowered movement against anti-Black racism and police brutality, I could not find this book, and its goals, timelier. Alvarez, Lauzon, and Zaiontz’s edited collection comprises of thirteen chapters that are an eclectic combination of interviews with artists and activists, scholarly essays, and glimpses into artistic projects that embody the principles set out in the volume at large.

Time is central to each chapter: the contributors recount acts of activism that emerge both in moments of uprising and long after the masses have dispersed and the “now what?” feeling set in (252). What happens beyond the strike or march, when we cannot sustain regular gatherings in the streets, when our need for income or childcare forces us back to work or home? What does it mean to play the “long game” when we are daily caught up in exhausting efforts to keep up with the fast-moving devastation of the Trump administration (41–42)? And when decades of globalization and neoliberal privatization have eroded institutions of democracy and social support beyond repair? This volume is centrally concerned with both “event-based” taking to the streets and the longer-term infrastructure and planning that make this possible (104). Temporality resides in the shift from live events to digital records, from radical acts of the 1960s and prior to our nostalgia for these modes of protest. Also crucial is the faith in futurity that structures “performative conduct” and scripts “bad acting,” histrionic performances of dissent (41–42). Scholars and students of performance and politics will enjoy this book. Anyone interested by “theatre for living”—performance practices that can structure lives on the front lines by transferring skills and knowledge through embodied means—will appreciate its many vignettes of art-ivism sustained even in contexts of extreme precarity.

The contributors “investigat[e] work in the Americas that meets the shifting demands for activism through the creation of art activist tools, sustainable spaces, and adaptable tactics that exceed the space-time of the action itself” (3). In doing so, they raise important questions about performance, repetition, and duration/durability and inject fresh insights through the perspectives of artists and activists who push back against the western, white, normative biases of performance scholarship. For example, New York-based Mierle Laderman Ukeles (discussed by Jimena Ortuzar) has spent years embedded in cycles of sanitation, maintenance, reuse, and transportation, creating symbioses with these systems rather than momentous but singular and finite interventions. This is duration as resistance—slow, incremental, and unspectacular. Tensions emerge between performance as a neutral technology, transferable across the political left and right—and as a haunted medium laden with valences of its previous uses and iterations. In addition present are tensions between the idea of repetition so fundamental to performance studies, and Occupy Wall Street co-leader Micah White’s directive to “never protest the same way twice” (32): “a ceaselessly adaptive approach to direct action that emphasizes the redistribution of capital and, by extension, the social order” (9).

The volume utilizes performance theory and practice to re-envision our understanding of what politics is and can be. Jennifer Spiegel’s essay on the creative legacies of the 2012 Quebec student protests, for example, chronicles the choreography and dramaturgy of protest, from the rectilinear marches of trade unions to the “bloc” and now “swarm” (100). Changing forms of protest are accompanied by digital technologies of capture, archiving, and transmission, which bring diverse communities into dialogue. In several cases, performance “tools” (like the

flashmob, die-in, performative conduct script, and even “pimp my carroça” events) share some formal components with neoliberal franchising and marketing. I wonder what the ramifications are of conduits that resemble neoliberal flows. Do these techniques reproduce neoliberalism, or must we mimic neoliberalism to combat it?

I also wonder what happens when we take seriously Micah White’s advice to travel beyond bodies in the streets, into legislatures, and into courtrooms. Several former leaders of student movements in Quebec and Chile have entered formal party politics. As several chapters attest, the fecund aspirations of the streets do not always thrive in the greenhouse (or city hall, white cube, proscenium stage). Many entries are in conversation with Shannon Jackson’s dissection of social practice and institutional politics, *Social Works*, and the authors are justifiably ambivalent about institutionality. What is sustainability in a post-institutional or anti-institutional framework? And if we take an anti-institutional approach, are we playing into the hands of neoliberalism? Several authors ask these questions, and perhaps the clearest responses come from artists: both Cuban conceptual artist Wilfredo Prieto and Colombian theatre director and activist Patricia Ariza discuss the differences between making art in institutional contexts and on the streets, and their answers demonstrate fluid, hybrid approaches to institutions.

I appreciate the volume’s multifaceted definitions of precariousness, precarity, and sustainability. Sustainability inhabits a spectrum, “from the durational to the environmental” (16). The term can refer to the climate—as in Jessica Jacobson-Konefall’s chapter on the decimation of Cree lands by Canadian hydroelectricity—and to economic forces, health, and wellbeing. I find fruitful Alvarez and Zaiontz’s “performative conduct” as a mode of performing dissent that “offers ways of sustaining the individual labor of collective resistance” (64). Sustainability is also negative: the endurance of coloniality across the Americas (227). Martha Herrera-Lasso and Kimberly Skye Richards expertly outline how coloniality operates, through the case study of an international art biennial in Cartagena, Colombia. Yet the authors also demonstrate how artists in positions of precariousness “overcome precarity” and put their bodies on the line, to represent those who are most vulnerable (15; see also 232–34).

Within all of this richness, I see a couple areas that could be improved. One suggestion is to provide ligament tissue between the chapters, to engage the contributors in a sustained dialogue. The volume’s collage of case studies is welcome, and the contributions’ varied forms present an enlivened way to think about these movements, but implicit links among the chapters could be made explicit. An organizing framework of thematic clusters could be fruitful. Some of the many themes that emerge, which could be clustered or condensed into a glossary, include: the festival as a tool of (un)sustainability; wearable and functional art; environmental works (like the use of recycled materials); the interlinking of public and private domains as necessary for a sustainable activist art practice; transferability; duration; tactical texts and scripted manuals for action; comedy, bad acting, and the art of complaint; digital dissemination and collective open-source editing. But wouldn’t it be helpful to have the authors and editors come together to perform a meta-analysis, thinking aggregately across these concepts? Alternately, having the authors cross-reference each other would be a boon. Another under-addressed tool is the historicized bibliography, and our learning from the lessons, successes, and failures of radical scholars and practitioners of the Americas like Enrique Dussel and Paulo Freire. While more could be done to link current movements to past precedents, several of the essays (notably, Alvarez and Zaiontz; Melo; Herrera-Lasso and Richards) create genealogies

and sift through past knowledge, while recognizing the differences of the present. And artists with longstanding practices, like Prieto, Ariza, and Cheryl L'Hirondelle (Cree/Métis), link past to present through the wisdom that Micah White sees in Elders.

Connecting the chapters would help strengthen the geographic imperative. The introduction details activism and protest in the hemispheric Americas and asserts a hemispheric focus to subvert national boundary-making and account for the transnational movements of people, goods, and ideas. This hemispheric framework subsequently fades from view. Notwithstanding a rich array of case studies from Cuba, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, the United States and US–Mexico borderlands, and Indigenous communities that span borders, at times the connections among these sites remain unaddressed. What can we learn through study of the Western hemisphere, in an age of global flows? One takeaway is the breakdown of Global North/ South dichotomies (232), in favour of a more nuanced, striated imbrication of precariousness and precarity. There are many ways to think about the Americas—not only as nations bound together by coloniality, but also riven by tensions among local, national, and international influences, and where performances, at different scales, can evidence these tensions. If, as Richards and Herrera-Lasso note, “precariousness is not a recent phenomenon [...] but is [...] in many places in the Americas, the continuation of colonial practices in new formations of civic and national engineering” (241), then the volume situates Latin America as knowledge-producer instead of mere recipient of western technologies and objects of value.

Overall, I appreciate deeply this informative and energized collection, which attends with renewed energy to the terms that define our field; provides fascinating encounters with artists like Cannupa Hanska Luger (Standing Rock, North Dakota) For Freedoms 2016—the first artist-run Super PAC in the US, and many others; and considers the affective and physical registers of the labour of protest and activism. As actors and dancers know, our embodied consciousnesses are crucial to sustaining our labour, and activists too must maintain and shore up embodied resources to continue doing the work. A major strength of the volume is its appreciation of bodies, persisting in time, as at the core of activist movements and communities. By including many artistic and scholarly voices, the editors show that more is possible: by breaking away from the vertiginous news cycle and entering into sustained movements for social change, we can renew our activist resources and collectivize in ways that matter. Natalie Alvarez, Keren Zaiontz, and Claudette Lauzon's collage of interviews, artistic projects, and scholarly essays offers a wealth of information—and hope—in examining how people in the Americas are resisting, contesting, anticipating, subverting, and circumnavigating neoliberalism, colonialism, and authoritarian power.

## Works Cited

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