

## Early Theatre

A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

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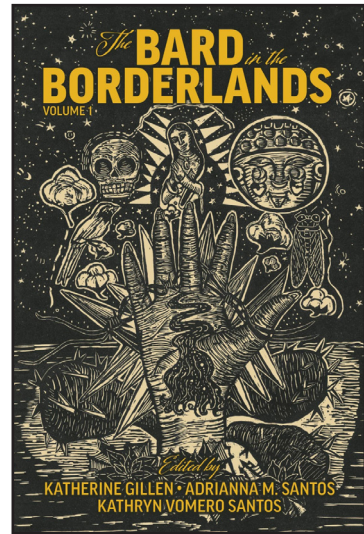
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*The Bard in the Borderlands: An Anthology of Shakespeare Appropriations en La Frontera*. Vol. 1. ACMRS Press. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. Pp 480. Paper \$19.95 USD. ISBN: 9780866988391. Hardback \$69.00 USD. ISBN 9780866988384. <https://doi.org/10.54027/wvkm8278>.

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*The Bard in the Borderlands*, an anthology of contemporary plays edited by Katherine Gillen, Adrianna M. Santos, and Kathryn Vomero Santos, provides a transdisciplinary approach to the curation, contextualization, and annotation of Shakespearean appropriations that reflect the lived experiences of those at the Borderlands. The anthology investigates the Borderlands as a geographical location, an ideological site, a physical space, a violent interaction, and a productive exchange. How might Shakespeare's literary works and cultural capital serve as a backdrop to 'critique the colonial legacies of the early modern period and tell stories from Borderlands perspectives in ways that disrupt dominant and often whitewashed narratives' (xvii)? The anthology confronts this question by challenging the social and literary structures that conceal the dominance of whiteness in cultural production and by helping readers navigate the artistic choices of six modern playwrights. Drawing from various disciplines — including Shakespeare criticism, contemporary popular culture, performance history, media studies, drama theory, and the local politics and regional concerns unique to the Borderlands — the open-access anthology is an exemplary model of public humanities that foregrounds marginalized voices and exhibits inclusive practices in academic scholarship and theatrical performance.



By providing historical context, playwright interviews, production details, and literary analyses, the introductions expose linguistic, political, and cultural

frameworks that scaffold each play. In order for a wider audience to comprehend the work of playwrights, the anthology calls attention to the regional concerns and everyday lives of those at La Frontera. Broad awareness of the U.S. immigration crisis, xenophobia, labour exploitation, family separation, the war on drugs, and systemic racism is not the same as witnessing their effects through artistic representation. The plays create visceral, impactful glimpses of life at the border. Irreverent appropriations of Shakespeare and diverse portrayals of Borderland subjectivities 'expand not just who could perform in the play but also which audiences might see themselves represented on stage' (2). Thus the 'bard' in the title is not an affirmation of Shakespeare's inherent value but rather an invitation to consider how contemporary practitioners and audience members might use canonical plays to express grievances, heal trauma, and enhance ties within their communities.

In various ways all six plays incorporate elements of Mexican folklore, Pueblo culture, pan-American history, local traditions, and Indigenous worldviews. In Edit Villarreal's *The Language of Flowers*, a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragedy of star-crossed lovers is a result of the colonial settler extraction of people and their land: 'The play's central conflict is between Mexican Americans who feel pressure to assimilate into white capitalist structures of power and those who embrace their Indigenous roots and imagine a future in which freedom is possible' (1). Shakespeare, precisely because he symbolizes cultural imperialism, is evoked only to be rendered to the background. In his stead, forgotten histories are enlivened, embodied, and performed for a new generation. Another *Romeo and Juliet* retelling, James Lujan's *Kino and Teresa*, foregrounds the 'devastating effects of Spanish colonial rule on the Indigenous Peoples of New Mexico' (134). Unexpectedly departing from the canonical narrative, Kino's mother emerges as a voice of activism. Her 'powerful resistance as a respected matriarchal figure reflects an egalitarian Indigenous worldview that counters the oppressive patriarchal dominance of both the Spanish crown and the Catholic church' (134–5). This character deviation, like many of the nuanced artistic choices presented, demonstrates one way in which alternative worldviews can herald social awareness and invite change.

The invitation to stretch our interpretive capacity beyond an anglocentric approach to literary studies continues throughout the anthology's amplification of non-English language and culture. Seres Jaime Magaña's *The Tragic Corrido of Romeo and Lupe* showcases local vernacular and folk traditions to subvert colonial settler violence. The regional feud of the Montagues and Capulets gets transplanted in the Borderlands, where exploitive capitalism, ecological toxicity, and

the trauma of immigration intersect. This bilingual, Mexican-American retelling of Shakespeare's play seeks to convey 'love, identity, and justice within the Rio Grande Valley, foregrounding colonialism, environmental destruction, and labor rights' (219). Dialogue often weaves between Spanish and English as a central component of characterization. For instance, in Tara Moses's *Hamlet, El Principe de Denmark* 'Hamlet's use of Spanish makes his dissembling madness even more subversive and threatening' (307). Polylingual choices are central to the artistic resistance conveyed in and through the plays, and 'Moses's *Hamlet* participates in the decolonial, educational, co-created work common in many Borderlands Shakespeare productions' (305).

The plays compel readers to ask which artistic choices depend upon and which depart from conventional forms and theatrical expectations. Borderlands theatre demonstrates resistance in the retelling. The last two plays exemplify Shakespearean narratives through Latinx perspectives by centering themes of resistance, identity, and the dismantling of stereotypes. Josh Inocencio's *Ofélio* is a one-act play that depicts a queer, Latino college student assaulted by his white, male instructor. The victim relives his trauma of the assault when faced with the coercive power of both the educational system and a medical institution. Inocencio 'brings Mexican frameworks to bear on Ophelia's story in order to recast queer sexuality in a positive light' (388). Furthermore, he represents survivorship beyond the aesthetics of white victimhood. Empathy for the marginalized Ofélio 'need not be sanitized, disembodied or white-washed in order to have value' (389). Olga Sanchez Saltveit's *O Romeo!* likewise 'uses Shakespeare's theatrical experiment to comment on connections between colonization and the politics of artistic representation and appropriation' (401). This play parodies the authorial process to show that the canon is an ideological formation, not an inherently superior literary body of work. Critiquing whiteness, assimilation, and classicism, Saltveit asks how the marginalized might co-opt established power for alternative ends.

By amplifying suppressed histories, foregrounding non-English languages and cultures, and promoting radical approaches to Shakespearean appropriation, the anthology inspires scholars, artists, audience members, and educators to scrutinize the interchange between early modern texts and our engagement with them. The plays exhibit the significance of community-centred storytelling by evoking yet decentralizing Shakespeare. Readers will benefit from the insightful literary analyses and ambitious cultural interventions offered by *The Bard in the Borderlands*. Effective ideas for teaching the plays intertwine with historical and literary contexts, inspiring students to be active rather than passive recipients of

scholarly interpretation. These previously unpublished plays, therefore, 'do not simply reproduce Shakespeare in new contexts but rather use his work in innovative ways to negotiate colonial power, to reframe Borderlands histories, and to envision socially just futures' (xvi). Creativity is not separate from critique but rather an extension of it, and this anthology is both an example of and a tool for comprehending and recreating socially responsive, transformative theatre today.