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Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays by Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M. Gutierrez, and Felicitas Nuñez
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Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays. By Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M. Gutierrez, and Felicitas Nuñez. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama. By Lisa M. Anderson. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

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An engaged and engaging collection, *Radical Acts* contains essays by academics, artists, and activists committed to feminist approaches to teaching and making theater. As coeditors Ann Elizabeth Armstrong and Kathleen Juhl acknowledge, it picks up where the germinal 1992 collection *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as If Gender and Race Matter*, edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, left off.¹ *Radical Acts* returns to and renews an engagement with the teaching of feminist theater practices, but with a broader concern: to illustrate and demonstrate the creative, social, and political potential of pedagogies rooted in activating feminist ideas or explorations, in classroom situations and in theater-and performance-making contexts. The editors have organized sixteen essays into a three-part structure: situating the feminist teacher-practitioner in classroom and theater contexts, feminist teaching strategies as “radical acts,” and community contexts of teaching and theater making. A rich and diverse range of contributions in all three parts “share a commitment to feminist theatre practices that embrace gender and justice, transgress boundaries, and create spaces of social possibility” (8).

A particular strength of the collection is the way in which the editors have encouraged all contributors to tell their stories of doing feminism in theater and teaching contexts in ways that are instructive and inspirational to others. Contributions to part 1, where the essayists tell their different autobiographical stories of feminist theater discovery, making, and/or education, set the tone and style of the collection overall. Here,

¹ Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, eds., *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as If Gender and Race Matter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

Cherríe Moraga's "An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Story Xicana" is a truly inspiring essay. It details the possibilities of theater as an embodied, resistant, and critical practice as Moraga recounts and reflects on a primary-school theater project on "Mechicano history and culture" (46). The contributions to part 2, "Activating Practice," come from a mix of artists and practitioner-scholars and offer a plethora of concrete examples, practical tools, for feminist intervention and empowerment, ranging from Amy Seham's account of feminist strategies for teaching improvisation to Stacy Wolf's explanation of a practical "gender continuum" (171) exercise for theater or nontheater students. The generosity of the feminist artist passing on a body of theater knowledge is exemplified in an in-depth interview with Deb Margolin. More generally in part 2, the contributions detailing the feminist practice by professional artists coming from outside the theater academy to work with students serve to critically reinvigorate those of us who may otherwise find the radical edge of our feminist teaching practices blunted by institutional regulations and routines.

The final section of this anthology offers accounts of how feminist theater pedagogies can negotiate and build communities through theater projects and practices in ways that aim to be mindful of differences, however difficult or painful to negotiate. Contributions include a talking essay that brings together a number of black women's voices to narrate the development of theater at Spelman, a historically black college for women in Atlanta; an account of the "*Actual Lives* Performance Project," concerned with radicalizing views on disabilities; and youth and college theater projects that practice social and political activism. Rebecca Schneider's "Playing It Street" further illustrates how classroom communities require a feminist pedagogy that not only serves at an ideas (theory) level but has application for lived (street) realities.

While *Radical Acts* is focused primarily on "North American experiences" (4), the editors signal that they "look forward to future collections that will fully realize the global potential for a feminist pedagogy of theatre" (10). It is to be hoped that studies of feminism, theater, and pedagogy from beyond the borders of the United States will be forthcoming. In the meantime, *Radical Acts*, as Joan Lipkin's preface to the collection suggests, "inspires hope" (4) for those of us whose teaching and theater lives join with the feminist endeavors represented in this collection.

By contrast, the collection *Footpaths and Bridges* implicitly argues a need to stay geographically focused given its presentation of a marginalized, hitherto unrecognized, body of work by Native American women playwrights. Editors Shirley A. Huston-Findley and Rebecca Howard introduce this collection by setting the context in which this first-time pub-

lication of the plays was made possible. They explain how the published work comes out of a much larger archive: the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA), inaugurated in 1996 at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The archive consists of both a physical archive housed at Miami University and an electronic directory at <http://www.staff.lib.muohio.edu/nawpa>. The online resource lists plays by Native American playwrights of both genders, and it allows searches by gender, offering a useful first port of call for primary research in this field. It also offers an excellent resource on the long-running Spiderwoman Theater Company (materials about the group are a mainstay of the physical archive), including visual materials documenting the group's history and performances. In *Footpaths and Bridges*, brief explanations and commentaries by the editors introduce the plays selected from the archive and outline thematic connections and formal characteristics. Self-effacing in approach in order not to detract from the voices of the playwrights or, as Huston-Findley explains, to respect the wishes and views of the playwrights not to have their work framed "from a Western or Aristotelian perspective" (vii), the editors are necessarily brief and give over the space of the publication to the plays themselves.

The collection contains ten works authored by Monique Mojica, Jules Arita Koostachin (writing with Jennifer Fell Hayes), Marcie Rendon, Marie Clements, Martha Kreipe de Montaña (with Jennifer Fell Hayes), Denise Mosley, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Vera Manuel, JudyLee Oliva, and Spiderwoman Theater. The anthology opens with *ETHNOSTRESS: Women's Voices in Native American Theatre*, a lecture/performance by Mojica that presents a number of issues and reflections related to the identity and cultural work of Native American theater women. In terms of her own work, Mojica speaks of her art as both a resistant and a healing practice in ways that echo several of the contributions to *Radical Acts*. At the same time, however, the cultural location of Mojica as a Native theater artist, along with all the creative Native women's voices who join with hers in *Footpaths and Bridges*, requires specific attention. Moreover, while Native women's theater offers a means of identifying or categorizing the work of the collection, Mojica signals that within that categorization there are many voices that are both distinct and related: "The experiences are many, the voices must be many. We are different and we are profoundly related, from our origin stories and the oral histories of the migrations of the people—we are relations" (12). In turn this demands a reader who listens carefully to the different voices in the collection. On the one hand, reading from a position of Western feminism and theater, there is some common ground to be found as the work variously gives voice to and

politicizes women's personal lives, friendships, and relationships—especially across generations. On the other hand, there is every need to contest a Western point of viewing in order, for instance, to embrace the idea of a coexistence of spirit and physical worlds, or to be receptive to questions of identity arising out of the tensions between ancestral heritages and contemporary living. In these and many other respects, as Howard argues, “we need to use a lens that redefines what is implied by ‘our culture,’ embracing the cultural richness of our society while still respecting the autonomy of the specific cultural influences that created the artist” (7).

As moved as I was by the individual plays in *Footpaths and Bridges*, which, regrettably, space does not permit me to detail individually, I had yet another emotionally charged experience in store as I turned to *Teatro Chicana*. This collection comes in two parts: a collective memoir of the Chicana women involved in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s and their making of a women's performance collective and *actos*/scripts by the company. Along with the scripts, the *recuerdos*/memoirs, of which there are seventeen in all, constitute what Yolanda Broyles-González describes in her foreword to the collection as “the single most powerful Chicana women's collective document from the era commonly known as *El Movimiento*” (ix).

Written in retrospect, the memoirs tell the individual women's stories of campaigning for civil rights, fighting for women's equality, and protesting against the Vietnam War. As university students in San Diego in the late sixties and early seventies, all the women detail how they were involved in resisting and breaking out of the traditional gender roles assigned to them. *Chicana Goes to College*, which acts out the scenario of a Mexican American girl leaving home to go to college and join the Chicano movement, was their first all-women performance, presented by the new generation of college daughters to an audience of their mothers, in order to promote cross-generational understanding of how the younger women were seeking to better their lives. In turn it became the impetus for the founding of the Chicana theater collective, dedicated over the years to performing pieces that tackled issues that touched their lives as women and/or related to their class-based struggles. In addition to *Chicana Goes to College*, the collection includes six scripts from the company capturing the life of the group and the years of activism, also lavishly illustrated with production photographs.

Moving between scripts and memoirs makes for compelling reading. The combination of the two provides an excellent means to understand the social, political, and theatrical contexts that informed the lives and creative labor of the Chicana theater women. (In retrospect, it left me

wondering whether a similar kind of contextualizing apparatus drawing on voices from the NAWPA might be considered in relation to any future publications connected to this archive.) Woven into the threads of the individual memoirs are painful stories of hardship and abuse. As contributor Laura E. Garcia recollects, “at least one-third of the *teatro* members had been physically and sexually abused by a family member, a neighbor, a friend” (35). Moreover, the women also had to fight the sexism of their Chicano brothers, as illustrated in their *Bronca* skit, a piece that protested against machismo and urged men and women to unite in the class struggle (191–92). Ultimately, through theater, these Chicanas describe how they found a means of healing and resisting, of forging strong friendships between women who came in and out of the group over the years, friendships that they sustained in their future lives. In the hands of these Chicana feminists, as the group’s cofounder Delia Ravelo explains, theater became the space “for our expression to better the world and a forum to make a difference” (12). In turn, *Teatro Chicana* arguably makes a feminist difference to its readers. It is a landmark publication: uncovering feminist and theater histories that in equal measure are informative and inspirational.

Feminist theater histories of a different kind are uncovered in Lisa M. Anderson’s *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*. Anderson’s monograph is dedicated to commentaries on contemporary work by black American women playwrights, noting at the outset as a justification for her project “that black feminist writing about black feminist theatre has been scarce” (1). *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* therefore begins to address this critical writing gap and offers a seven-chapter study that charts plays by a cross-generational selection of contemporary writers: Pearl Cleage, Breena Clarke, Glenda Dickerson, Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron, Shirlene Holmes, and Sharon Bridgforth. This selection of playwrights enables Anderson to consider “a range of writing styles, performance styles, and generational differences” (3).

For theater students new to this particular field of inquiry or for non-theater students with an interest in black feminist criticism and theory, some of the dramatic detail may prove a little hard to access. Chapter 2 on “Pearl Cleage’s Black Feminism,” for example, which opens with an analysis of *Flyin’ West*, dives into the play in ways that assume prior knowledge rather than offering a dramatic synopsis that helps to make sense of the interesting account of the black feminism that Anderson argues Cleage puts to work in the play. Equally, here and in other chapters, Anderson’s dramatic literature approach may frustrate some theater readers in its scant attention to theater contexts. On the other hand, and in other places, the

monograph offers a stimulating reading that weaves together black feminist theater and black women's histories. Analysis of Clarke and Dickerson's *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, for instance, looks at the play's critical work on the Aunt Jemima/mammy stereotype alongside social and cultural histories that gave rise to racist stereotyping. Anderson's analysis of plays by Corthron (whose work has begun to make an impression in the United Kingdom) is a valuable foundation for establishing critical interest in a writer from a younger generation. Similarly, Anderson's penultimate chapter on dramatizations of black lesbian identities usefully shifts the more established theoretical ground of butch and femme inquiry toward questions of black lesbian desire—taking a much firmer theatrical (rather than dramatic) platform for her model of inquiry as she does so.

Anderson's final chapter provides an overview of her study and attempts to draw together conclusions with regard to a black feminist aesthetic. By aesthetic, Anderson, as she repeatedly is at pains to point out, does not mean "the 'beauty' of a text" (16). Rather, what she has in mind is "the elements of the text or performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a 'community' (broadly construed). . . . If there is a *core*, a commonality among these very different women [playwrights]," she contends, "it is they all, in their own ways, construct and reconstruct history and identity" (115). Thereafter, Anderson lists ten points in the interest of elucidating what characterizes black women's contemporary drama and what issues it takes up. This listing I envisage as useful for classroom situations and discussions concerned with generating understandings of the critical work that the plays do, which, as Anderson argues, chime with the concerns and issues treated by black feminist theory.

All four of these publications, albeit in different ways and mapping different feminist theater terrains, share a commitment to accounting for the particular ways in which theater can be mobilized as a radical act in the interests of social change. Each uncovers an important body of work that enriches and is important to fields of feminist and theater inquiry. ■