

# NTQ Book Reviews

edited by Rachel Clements

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Wei Feng

## **Intercultural Aesthetics in Traditional Chinese Theatre From 1978 to the Present**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 277 p. £59.99.  
ISBN 978-3-030-40634-9.

Based on extensive research into the intercultural adaptations of western plays in traditional Chinese theatre (called *xiqu* in Chinese), Feng's book offers an insightful analysis of the transformations in *xiqu* since China's reform and opening-up in 1978, as well as a valuable dialogue with and critique of the existing discourse of intercultural theatre studies that has been dominated by the West. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, Young's theory of cultural appropriation, and Nellhaus's concept of agents, Feng carries out a detailed, thorough and provocative examination of some influential *xiqu* adaptations of Shakespeare, Beckett, and Brecht in mainland China and Taiwan over the last four decades.

Feng explores four major types of *xiqu* adaptations of western plays, which are representative of Chinese intercultural theatre in general. First, the overt Sinicization of foreign plays by reducing source text and catering to the aesthetic traditions in the target culture. Second, the fusion of *xiqu* with source text and foreign performance cultures, featuring creative innovation in the process of border-crossing and theatrical hybridity. Third, the pursuit of avant-gardism both in form and theme by reforming *xiqu* under western stimulation. Fourth, the one-sided westernization of *xiqu*, which results in 'the loss of *jingju*'s subjectivity' and turns out to be 'unlike *xiqu*'. Each of the four chapters deals with one major aspect of theatre, respectively: playwriting, performance, scenography, and audience.

In this book, the transformation of *xiqu* is situated not just in the context of East meeting West, but also in relation to the development of *huaju* (spoken drama) in China, which has a history of a little over one hundred years. The two are intertwined: complementary to each other as well as mutually enriching. They are also in conflict as the aesthetics of *xiqu* is 'at odds with the principles derived from realistic theatre'. Consequently, the *xiqu* adaptations of western plays, which are in general under the influence of *huaju*, are challenged by the horizon of expectations of the audience, most of whom have had very limited experience of watching *xiqu* performances and become less

familiar with the performing conventions of traditional Chinese theatre.

In his analysis of individual performance events, Feng takes into consideration various human agents, including directors, playwrights, actors, and audience, but neglects other equally important players such as international theatre festivals, cultural policy, sponsorship, and public diplomacy. His study of the actor-network around the *Shakespearean Handan Dream* in 2016 is exemplary, but it is not adequately applied in his analysis of the other performances.

This book convincingly demonstrates that the Chinese intercultural *xiqu* is diversified and dynamic. The views and arguments provided by Wei Feng on interculturalism in traditional Chinese theatre are valuable and worthy of being reflected upon, not least because this book contributes to a shift in the related theoretical discourse from western dominance to a plurality of different voices in international academia.

CHENGZHOU HE

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Catherine M. Cole

## **Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice: Dance and Live Art in South Africa and Beyond**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.

286 p. \$85.00.

ISBN: 978-0-472-07458-7.

Catherine Cole's monograph presents a timely and urgent discussion of live art, dance, and performance in South Africa. She situates her study in the historical context of post-apartheid South Africa, but several key examples and case studies move beyond the country's geographical location to flag their wider relevance and global reach. Cole's main argument focuses on the 'corporeal epistememes' of colonial violence and trauma.

Theoretically, her position appears much indebted to African American scholarship and theorization around racial and social injustices in the aftermath of slavery in the American South. The term 'afterlives', for example, is duly credited to Saidiya V. Hartman's critical work and features insightfully alongside repeated references to Alexander Weheliye's concept of 'hieroglyphics of the flesh'. In Chapter 1, Cole begins her inquiry by looking back to the anti-apartheid era through a close reading of Athol Fugard's *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* (1974). This reading

of one of Fugard's somewhat lesser-known plays is interesting because the play premiered in Johannesburg and toured to London with an all-white cast to engage interracial audiences in both locations at the height of the anti-apartheid struggles fighting censorship and racism.

Against this historical backdrop, Cole's analysis of white South African contemporary theatre-makers becomes more critical as she moves into the 1990s and the present in the following chapters of the book. The work of Robyn Orlin and Brett Bailey often raised controversy as it engaged mixed casts from a privileged white director position. Cole's reading of their work asserts that their aesthetic strategies fall somewhat short of the dismantling potential she sees in the work by South African artists of colour in the way their aesthetics are juxtaposed and compared in Chapters 2 and 3, 'sharing the stage' under persistently unequal terms. Dance takes a prominent position in Cole's analysis across Chapters 2, 3, and 4, especially in works by Jay Pather, Mamela Nyamza, and Sello Pesa, as well as those by Gregory Maqoma and Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, drawing on Brenda Dixon Gottschild's work amongst several other dance scholars.

Cole's book is at its strongest in those instances where she draws parallels with issues of systemic racism, human rights, and colonial violence in the USA and elsewhere. By critically engaging with African American scholarship, Cole adds valuable commentary to existing critical paradigms such as 'interculturalism' or 'interweaving' to challenge facile notions of reconciliation that often operate to protect white privilege in these debates. As such, *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice* presents a much-needed critical reckoning with the unreconciled histories of colonial and racial trauma very much alive in today's multiple political crises, and will be of relevance to performance scholars, students, cultural theorists, and artists alike.

SABINE SÖRGENL

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Dominic Johnson

**Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s**

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

232 p. £17.99.

ISBN: 978-1-5261-3551-3.

This is a beautiful book that asks important questions about performance art, questions worth considering, worth pondering from different angles. These are articulated by an author who is taking the responsibility to make an intervention into a field of study that he has carefully attended to and helped to shape over the last decade. Calling the book 'beautiful' may seem odd, considering that the

practices discussed in it vigorously reject 'beauty' as an element of aesthetics. As Johnson reminds us, building on Danto's concept of 'kallophobia', these practices can be considered distinct examples of an 'anti-aesthetics sensibility', an attitude inherited from (and that radicalizes) early-twentieth-century and avant-garde approaches to art-making, and crucial to the elaboration of new aesthetic strategies. The book meticulously explores what the deliberate blurring of the limit between art and life entails for both life and art: what is at stake politically and poetically in flirting with that limit, whose existence according to the author is vital for any act of transgression. The performance of extremity, then, is a lens to write a 'counterhistory' that considers actions not overcoming but 'staging or dramatizing' the sensuous or violent challenge to that limit.

And yet there is an undeniable beauty in Johnson's prose, in the elegant language chosen for the impressive descriptions of the performances, something one would hope to see more often in performance scholarship. There is a beauty, as well, in the research journey the book documents: in Johnson's affectionate encounters with the diverse traces of events that happened in the 1970s, and with those surviving artists whose work is chosen as the five main case studies – Kerry Trengove, Ulay, Genesis P-Orridge, Anne Bean, the Kipper Kids – alongside others that the book briefly touches upon, but who are still crucial to locate the theoretical hypothesis of 'the performance of extremity' in a broader social, political, and artistic landscape. In diverse ways, Johnson concludes, all these artists express 'recklessness' as a vital category to consider in an expanded understanding of the politics of art.

The way this claim is supported throughout the book is persuasive, but it triggers questions about the politics of scholarship, which Johnson also reflects upon. He does so in the introduction, for instance, acknowledging that in the book he failed to 'decolonize and internationalize the history of performance art in the 1970s', not least because some archives are precluded to him because he is not fluent in languages other than English. While welcoming this caveat, we are left wondering what it would mean for the author to push that limit and broaden the scope of this meticulous research not only beyond his chosen case studies, but also beyond the imperatives at stake in the work he discusses. Even staying within the remit of the book, some questions remain surprisingly unattended: what was Ulay's relation with the Turkish family at the receiving end of his legendary *Berlin Action*, stealing and relocating a painting from the Neue Nationalgalerie? What do we know about the body of the woman of colour whose corpse John Duncan acquired in Tijuana for his performance *Blind Date*? Whose bodies have the privilege to be reckless, and whose actions can afford to be 'unlimited'?

GIULIA PALLADINI