

## BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY DONOVAN SHERMAN, WITH SANNA FOGT

### ¡Presente! The Politics of Presence

By Diana Taylor. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020; pp. xii + 329, 75 illustrations. \$104.95 cloth, \$28.95 paper, \$28.95 e-book.

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In June 2019, at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics' Encuentro in Mexico City, Diana Taylor announced in her address that she was stepping down as director of the institute. After a well-deserved standing ovation thanking her for her unstoppable work as an advocate for performance in the Americas, the feeling of gratitude for her life's work was palpable. Taylor has devoted her academic career to highlighting the importance and making visible the work of those on the margins. Her most recent book, *¡Presente! The Politics of Presence*, brings an awareness of her personal search for ways to create other spaces for belonging as an academic and an activist. As she explains, the purpose of the book is to trace "my meandering journey through the Americas, around, back, and back again as I've engaged in an unsettled and undisciplined approach to scholarship that prioritizes relational and embodied forms of knowledge production and transmission" (xi). In addition, she outlines the importance of these forms of artistic and cultural production as she presents an invitation to think critically and engage beyond the established Eurocentric norms that have colonized academia. Taylor has paved the way for this intervention since her renowned *The Archive and the Repertoire*, and this latest book is a culmination of her journey as an academic constantly trying to find other ways of understanding the significance of embodied knowledge as it's expressed in art and in cultural phenomena.

In this useful and illuminating study, Taylor prioritizes embodied knowledge production that is able to move our own scholarship beyond the restrictions of the colonizing epistemologies that characterize performance studies. Thus there is a continuation from her previous works of finding ways for "other" knowledges to be more than epistemological spaces to be raided and appropriated, but rather substantive epistemes in their own right. Taylor encourages us to "talk and walk with others" (xi) in our search for knowledge so that we can attempt to answer the central question of her book: In this conflicting world that continues to thrive

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*Note:* As of volume 61, the List of Books Received has been posted exclusively online. For book review guidelines, an up-to-date list of books available for review, or to contact the Book Review Editor, please visit: [http://www.astr.org/?page=TS\\_Submission\\_Guide](http://www.astr.org/?page=TS_Submission_Guide)

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on dehumanizing politics, “What can we do when apparently nothing can be done, and doing nothing is not an option?” (2).

This book is divided into nine chapters, plus a prologue and an epilogue, that trace a theoretical and practical journey to reposition political activism in the Americas and reflect on the epistemic nuances of what it means to be present in a way that challenges coloniality. Each chapter allows for an understanding of the many ways of being *¡Presente!* and how these enactments of consciousness exist within their own logic of defiance. Taylor is able to consider a multiplicity of acts of presence that also trace her own journey as a scholar, teacher, and activist. She invites us to walk with her through her introspection and reflection on what all this can mean. Taylor offers broad overviews of how methods, practices, and forms of cultural performance have responded over time to larger historiographical movements and sensibilities. She begins the study with a chapter that brilliantly delves into the meaning of being *¡Presente!*, a beautiful and impactful search for its significance traced from personal introspection and theoretical approaches. Taylor continues in Chapter 2 by carefully considering mechanisms of refusal as acts of political defiance through her concept of “animatives,” a theoretical approach that consists of “embodied, communicative acts that refuse the performative utterance that tries to interpellate and frame them” (48).

Throughout the book, Taylor supports her arguments with the theories of Hannah Arendt, Rebecca Schneider, Achille Mbembe, and Louis Althusser, among others, but also with indigenous theorists like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Juan López Intzín. Across the chapters Taylor emphasizes the importance of “being there” (9), of accompanying others on all our journeys, while emphasizing the situatedness of knowledge that emanates from embodied performances, especially as they pertain to marginalized bodies that have been codified by race, gender, and sociohistorical practices. She bases the study on many different objects that range from historical protests and monuments to performance art pieces, photographs, songs, and political movements such as the Zapatistas, to whom she dedicates Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 she looks at the work of Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo as an example of how art can confront political violence. Chapter 5 focuses on what Taylor names “traumatic memes,” or instances of media frenzy around forced disappearances that circulate through the world to make violence and loss visible (127). The book is full of unexpected analyses that truly capture the intricacies of the issues discussed. For example, in Chapter 6 Taylor explores the complexities of queer identity through the “very queer dispute” that took place at the 2014 Hemispheric Encuentro in Montreal, with the purpose of questioning the ability of “communities of self-identified WE’s [a united, collectively identified “us”] to walk and talk together across divides” (153). This is a fascinating chapter that looks at the controversial work of Mexican artists Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe through their performance *Juana la larga* (Long Juana), a play about a hermaphrodite, Juana Aguilar, whose case was reported by Dr. Narciso Esparragosa in Guatemala in 1803. Taylor concentrates on the enormous debate it sparked throughout the conference, filled with accusations about how the performance appeared to be insensitive to trans identity. In the end, the chapter works with the rest of the book to consider the difficult practices of negotiation that we often ignore and fail to name and locate. Through the rest of the chapters,

Taylor is able to provide personal reflections on her own presence in these spaces and her interactions with those involved. Taylor reminds us why our work as scholars needs to exist on this basis of being *Presente!*, because “taking note, recording, witnessing, remembering, studying, and scholarly writing might at times also constitute acts undertaken in defiance of or solidarity with others” (46). Indeed, this book is a valuable meditation on what it means to practice the responsibility of writing through social relations, on creating new ways of doing and being in academia, performance, and life.

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## Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife

By Kareem Khubchandani. *Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020; pp. xxiv + 262. \$80 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$34.95 e-book.

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Over the past two decades, queer and trans studies' focus has increasingly been on the rise of neoliberal economies, nationalist regimes, racial capitalism, and how these structures are predicated on the exclusion of queerness; this scholarship is also enriched by work on queer survival tactics, resistance, and pleasures that thrive within heteronormative cultural spaces. Kareem Khubchandani's *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* is a compelling contribution to this latter body of work. Khubchandani's research follows gay South Asian men—from both the diaspora and urban India—as they navigate nightlife in the pursuit of romance, sex, pleasure, and belonging. Based on fieldwork conducted primarily in Chicago and Bangalore, the book explores how queer nightlife spaces are dense affective sites that offer opportunities for the performance of style, dance, and expressions deemed effeminate, uncool, or crass within the Westernized and neoliberal imaginaries of gay male worlds.

Khubchandani proposes “ishtyle,” or accented style, as an analytic to capture these performances. A South Asian colloquialism for “style,” ishtyle is sometimes aspirational style, sometimes friendly mockery of assumed pretensions. Ishtyle is exemplified in choreography, gestures, expressions, and the collective labor of participation in dance and spectatorship at the nightclub. For Khubchandani, ishtyle is “a useful rubric to consider performances of cultural difference across geopolitical scales while also demonstrating the historically politicized nature of Indian accents and habitus” (5). By narrating their interlocutors' ishtyle as political and liberatory acts of queerness and identity, Khubchandani foregrounds the terrain of nightlife over other political sites of study, like labor, migration, or the law. In particular, the book focuses on migrant, middle- or upper-middle-class professionals whose