

Freak Performances: Dissidence in Latin American Theater

By Analola Santana. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018; pp. x + 256, 22 illustrations. \$75 cloth, \$29.95 paper, \$29.95 e-book.

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In *Freak Performances: Dissidence in Latin American Theater*, Analola Santana provides powerful evidence of the ways in which the rhetorical representation of the freak in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latin American theatre generates dissidence, protest, and ultimately “contests the Anglo-European hegemonic and imperialist gaze” (2). From the outset, she identifies the legacy of colonialism as crucial to understanding contemporary racist and hegemonic constructions of Latin American identity, connecting historical practices to present-day neoliberalism and paranoid nationalism. In constructing these genealogies, Santana very effectively shows not only how perspectives of the Other have changed over time but also, significantly, how the hegemonic gaze has shifted to redefine what constitutes the human. Although this book centers on Latin America, what comes across is the author’s deep commitment to revealing the complexity of human experience in its diverse forms.

One of the book’s unique contributions is Santana’s perspective as a dramaturg. She gives thorough attention to the historical, social, and political context of the performances, and she combines close readings of texts with detailed descriptions of stagings. Every page reveals intimate familiarity with Latin American theatre through vivid testimony of performances, personal interviews with artists, and accounts of the cities and cultural contexts in which the performances are staged. This deep knowledge allows her to curate an archive of dissident performances that we as readers likely would never have encountered were it not for this book. The book’s grouping of plays seems unlikely at first glance but offers a “new frame for the study of Latin American identity construction” (19) when situated within Santana’s rich theoretical framework, joining together critical approaches to disability, gender, race, colonialism, the abject, and the concept of “enfreakment” (72).

Freak Performances is structured cohesively into an Introduction, four chapters, and a Conclusion, with illustrations throughout. Each chapter presents three performances as case studies, which “traverse four main instances of freak identity as categories of marginality: the historical construction of the freak, the medical classification of abnormality, the associations brought on by gender and class, and the removal of citizenship through violence” (19). Chapter 1 offers a critical historical overview of the rhetorical use of the monster and the freak, and the transformation of the monster, once considered wondrous, into something intolerable. Santana introduces three performances from Mexico, Peru, and Argentina that explore corporeal otherness and how it is socially constructed, exhibited, and reappropriated as political dissidence. Particularly compelling is her analysis of *De monstruos y prodigios: La historia de los castrati* [Of monsters and prodigies: The history of the castrati

(2000)], by Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes, the Mexico City-based theatre company for which Santana has worked as professional dramaturg since 2010. Santana discusses shifts in the historical valuation of the figure of the castrato and demonstrates how the play makes audiences acknowledge (and consume) the resignification of the monster as savage and cannibal in the context of the New World.

In Chapter 2, Santana focuses on the nineteenth-century transformation of divine monster into scientific specimen by presenting analyses of three plays that deal with “the discourses of science and medicine as a hegemonic political gaze that categorizes certain modes of behavior and corporality as dangerous difference” (75). What resonates with particular power here is her discussion of *Vacío* [Emptiness (2000)], a play about how scientific discourse pathologizes female sexuality and maternity, created and performed by the Costa Rican theatre company Abya Yala. As Santana explains, when director Roxana Ávila and dramaturg Anabelle Contreras were conducting extensive archival research at the San José Asylum in preparation for creating the play, they found letters from women in the asylum that had never reached their addressees. Transcripts of these letters were passed around to audience members during the play, creating an affectively powerful form of testimony to the experiences of these silenced women.

Santana further explores the enfreakment of womanhood in Chapter 3, which focuses on the intersection of gender and class in the context of twenty-first-century neoliberalism. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s theory of gaga feminism and Judith Butler’s notion of a grievable life, Santana traces “an analytical pathway that leads from the heteronormative freak show of ‘perfect’ femininity and masculinity to the enfreakment of the working-class woman for the purposes of exploiting her body and labor” (133). Santana’s firsthand account and analysis of Regina José Galindo’s controversial performance piece *Piedra* [Stone (2013)] is particularly nuanced: she both identifies the ways in which Galindo uses her body effectively as a social and political tool, and signals the problematic aspects of a performance that not only replicates scenarios of violence against women but also receives validation from the audience.

In Chapter 4, Santana examines theatre and performance under dictatorship with a fresh analytical lens, acknowledging the critical significance of memory discourse but focusing on state methods for excluding as noncitizens anyone who does not fit into an “imperialist imaginary of normalcy” (5). The result is mass violence: “Freakness, then, becomes something more than stigma, as it leads to the removal of the individual from society and leaves a lasting impact on future generations” (170). The theatrical examples in this chapter are especially interesting as they fall outside the usual canon of plays about dictatorship in South America. In her analysis of *Gemelos* (1999), Santana describes how the Chilean troupe Teatrocinema uses puppetry and caricature to create the effect of exaggerated difference, a metaphor for how authoritarian regimes “enfreak” (179) and ultimately annihilate their nonconforming citizens.

In her conclusion, Santana revisits Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco’s groundbreaking performance piece *The Couple in the Cage* (1992), a foundational work in thinking about race, colonialism, and enfreakment and thus a particularly fitting way to conclude this stunning book. *Freak Performances* is an essential

contribution to the field of Latin American theatre and performance studies. It is a meticulously researched, engaging, and highly original piece of scholarship that reflects the expertise of an author who is intimately engaged as a practitioner and scholar of theatre.

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After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life

By Joshua Chambers-Letson. *Sexual Cultures*. New York: New York University Press, 2018; pp. xxii + 299, 44 illustrations. \$89 cloth, \$30 paper, \$30 e-book.

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With a keen aesthetic sensibility, Joshua Chambers-Letson crafts a declaration for queer of color survival through minoritarian performance in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. Beginning and ending as a conversation with the late critical theorist José Esteban Muñoz, Chambers-Letson highlights his dear friend and mentor's influence in his investigation of themes of life, death, livability, and survival. Particularly useful is his engagement with Muñoz's definition of minoritarian as a way to describe "a communism of incommensurability" composed of the "often fractious and incommensurable, but no-less necessary, alliances forged between people of color (and especially women, queers, and trans people of color)" (15). These alliances, these instances of coming together, help to anchor theoretically Chambers-Letson's outlining of what he terms "after the party" (8).

The unimaginably difficult loss of Muñoz was, for Chambers-Letson, an ending that marked the beginning of an ongoing performance, the process of living after Muñoz's death. The after-party referenced in the title, and gestured toward throughout the text, names the coming together in difference of people—especially minoritarian subjects dealing with loss, grief, the precarity of trans and queer of color lives, and state violence—while also trying to imagine ways to make this life more livable or, to quote Chambers-Letson, to imagine "More Life." Specifically, as a manifesto rooted in Chambers-Letson's rigorous scholarship, this book examines the work of minoritarian subjects "who mobilize performance in both the realm of the aesthetic and the everyday to sustain the fugitive flight and revolutionary fight to produce freedom and More Life in the face of subordination, exploitation, annihilation, and negation" (5).

Examining the conditions of possibility available to queer people of color by thinking through the life-giving and life-affirming possibilities opened up by gathering together in difference as "a way of staying alive and of keeping each other alive" (xi), this text is located at the intersection of queer of color critique, black studies, women of color feminism, and Marxism. Using performance studies as a