

Book Review

Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times
 Edited by Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich
 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

JENN STEPHENSON

This collection of essays—*Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times*—edited by Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich is a compelling and energising read. The twenty-two essays gathered here, from an international cohort of scholars, speak with urgency and passion to a troubling political climate. Documenting the performative responses of women globally to the rise of neoliberalism, these writers engage the intersection of feminist artistic praxis with affective outcomes to demonstrate how these works reveal and resist this ideology and its products. Neoliberalism, which casts people as cogs in an economic machine, encourages entrepreneurship, competition, and do-it-yourself individualism through government policies of free trade, reduced regulation, and stripped social safety networks. This “Third Way” governance creates precarity of labour, precarity of health, and a sense of dispossession as interdependent communal relations are undervalued and so eroded.

For a number of the essay writers, the focus is on gendered offshoot effects of neoliberalism, especially restoration of patriarchy and anti-female conservative values that have arisen seemingly antithetically from increased accessibility of women into the labour force and into leadership roles previously restricted. The increased mobility and access under neoliberalism creates a gendered paradox. As the editors point out, the “intrepid entrepreneur” is a trope of masculinity and yet “postfeminism is a happy creature of neoliberalism. . . . The autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-inventing subject of postfeminism” (3). And yet, as this volume shows over and over, the patriarchal power of capitalist free markets frequently implies negative effects for women. The essays in this volume do not shy away from this tension. The performances discussed are not themselves free of this imbrication. They are caught in these pervasive structures and so the performance work “may be part of that social stitching or unravelling – often it is both” (2).

The volume is organised in five sections. The first section “Affect, Performance, and the Neoliberal State” features instances of how individuals are regulated and contained by the legal systems and bureaucratic structures that shape lived patterns of what a citizen may or may not be or do under the law. This section looks at how neoliberal systems control participation in the public sphere, who is seen or not seen by the state and under what circumstances, and offers examples of resistance (sometimes loud, sometimes silent) to those explicit and implicit strictures. The essays of the second section examine performance as protest and other artist actions that bring visibility to what has been hidden and seek justice for state-sanctioned violence against women. Anger wielded as public protest is powerful and affecting. One of the strengths of this collection is that it does not acquiesce to a single view of what feminist performance might do or be. Two particular analyses and interpretations of performances of rage exemplify this critical sophistication. Candice Amich smartly and with great nuance unpacks the limits of testimony that has been subsumed by state processes linking truth commissions to the workings of neoliberal smoothing and forgetting. In contrast to the containment of words, Amich highlights the visceral, “unforgettable” and “excruciating” body art performances of Regina José Galindo to reify the outrages of genocide in Guatemala’s civil war. Tiina Rosenberg also engages with performances of rage in her critique of feminist “sextremist” activism by the group Femen in Sweden and France known for bare-breasted protests against patriarchy. Rosenberg argues that while perhaps laudable in their ambition, an underdeveloped understanding of how their protests play out intersectionally relegates performances by this group to reinscribing intolerance and racism in the interests of secularism.

Part three “Global Spectacles” turns to the circulation of affect in mass market, popular creations, including the international 1990s phenomenon of the Irish step dance show *Riverdance*, the revival of neoburlesque performance, the bodies of Bollywood dancers, and performance art star Marina Abramović. A common thread in this section is how large-scale commercial production can render affect complicit with neoliberal profits. In the case of Abramović, Marla Carlson argues that “by closing down the affective potential of her early work, [she has become particularly] suited to neoliberal times” (7). In the case of *Riverdance*, Aoife Monks persuasively links the Taylorist virtuosity of rigid line dancing to a nostalgia for Irish emigration to the new world factories of nineteenth-century New York in the context of the neoliberal Celtic Tiger era. The next section “Resistance and Theatre Politics” presents several examples of plays and performances that are explicitly in opposition to neoliberal ideology, telling stories of people who have been dispossessed. A highlight is Charlotte Canning’s historical account of *Can You Hear Their Voices?* — a play staged in 1931. Canning views the play through its mix of proto-feminism and agitprop to address familiar struggles and attitudes under an incipient neoliberal ethos, an analysis which is persuasive and intellectually exciting. The final section “Affect and Site-Specific Performance” connects affect to the embodied experience of the performance site and immersed audience congregation.

It is regrettably not possible here to discuss, even briefly, all the excellent essays presented. However, to give a sense of the richness of the material and the range of topics and viewpoints contained in the volume, I offer here a survey of the five essays comprising the

first section. In the lead-off essay, Sue-Ellen Case begins with newly married gay couples celebrating their joyful day, kissing in the civic offices or posing for photos in front of the courthouse. In the intersection of love and the law, she asks, “what exactly is the object of your desire, your joy?” (17). Case navigates the conflicted implications of gay marriage with subtlety and care, locating this inclusivity in liberal ideology, but also remarking that formerly outlawed queer bodies and associated relationships of love and sex are now subsumed under state control. This article captures a sticky ambivalence to the pernicious embrace of neoliberalism and sets a sophisticated and nuanced tone of argumentation for the rest of volume. Next, Denise Varney examines the power of affect through a close reading of the infamous 2012 “Misogyny Speech” delivered by Julia Gillard, then Prime Minister of Australia. Outlining how structural features of liberal democracy permitted and even facilitated a gender-based campaign to undermine Gillard’s leadership, Varney shows how Gillard’s anger channelled through perlocutionary speech became a powerful rupture (however brief) of resistance to the biopolitics of the system. Through the dual examples of denied speech at a protest event and in the resistant performance of Frances Djulibing as Gloucester of an adaptation of *King Lear*, Sandra D’Urso illuminates the situation of jurisprudential death—being unauthorised and unacknowledged under the law. She argues that the effects of neoliberal thinking on land rights and human rights in Australia renders Indigenous peoples legally invisible and mute under a “state of exception” – a state of precarity that renders them vulnerable to harassment, arrest, and for many, death in custody. Shifting from legal precarity to economic precarity, Nobuko Anan unveils the situation of young people in contemporary Japan relegated to irregular low wage jobs, who dub themselves as NEETs – Not in Education, Employment, or Training. In this context, she focuses on Yanagi Miwa’s *Elevator Girls*. This work depicts young women as *hikikomori*, expressing a kind of passive female solidarity caught in the ambivalence between a desire for belonging and comfort in each other’s company and for leaving or opting out of this world in which they are disposable and unloved. Anan, like many authors in this collection, acknowledges that this might not lead to immediate action but is still important as testimony to a feminist consciousness that leverages affect as a statement of resistance. In the next chapter, Christina Svens introduces the reader to Kurdish-Swedish actress Nisti Stêrk and her exposure of raw prejudices about migrants and citizenship in Sweden by directly challenging audiences in her autobiographical plays.

Given the volume of material included here, the essays are necessarily short; however, I consider this to be strength of the collection. The best essays here are muscular in the way they compose the arguments briskly and elegant in their concise execution. Even some of the essays which are weaker in their analysis are still immensely valuable in their descriptions as they introduce the reader to work and also to political and cultural contexts that may be outside their usual realm of familiar experience. There is significant value in the kaleidoscopic view of this collection. Through these offerings, I met many, many bold and engaging artists whose work was new to me. Simply expanding the knowledge repertoires of readers is valuable and impactful. Next, as a collage, the broad variety of feminism performance praxis was evident, encompassing adaptation of traditional texts and forms, autobiographical performance, art as explicit political protest, political protest as performance, works that bear witness to what has been or what is, and works that imagine

alternate ways of being. The volume also presents a range of views on the results of these documented performances. Just as often as the contributors position works as resistant and oppositional to the forces of neoliberal ideology, they situate other works as colluding and perpetuating neoliberal values – some intentionally, happy in their entrepreneurial privilege and success, and some incidentally, embedded in a potent system beyond their necessarily limited influence. Ultimately the diversity of international contributors and the works they discuss establish cross-cultural affinities and resonances, forging a network of resistance.

In tension with its diversity of material and global reach, the chapters are intensely local, tracing the particular historically contextual roots of how neoliberal practices manifest in various sites and cultures. These sites ranged from the New York City real estate markets of the 1980s to the urban-rural touring corridor of Swaang dance troupes in Northern India post-1991 to inner city neighbourhoods in north Dublin, to contemporary Seoul, to the Palacio de Tribunales de Santiago in post-dictatorship Chile. The editors describe their approach in the introduction as “delivering to readers the performance news about neoliberalism’s erratic spread” (2). Certainly, I did feel like I was reading the news. Each essay is a dispatch from elsewhere. On the whole, the authors do a superlative job of providing the local, historical background needed in terms of mapping the political evolutions, the revamped social constructions, and explaining with precision how via these upheavals neoliberalism manifests in each specific locale and culture.

In conclusion, I concur with the editors’ own declaration that “our book demonstrates that the nexus of feminist performance and affect constitutes a powerful, activist engagement with contemporary life, and presents some of the most courageous acts of opposition to the depredations of existence in neoliberal times.” (5) Not only are these acts contained within the art works featured in the various essays, the volume itself is a collective gesture of resistance.

JENN STEPHENSON is Professor in the Dan School of Drama and Music at Queen’s University, Canada. Her book, *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real*, is forthcoming from University of Toronto Press. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Canadian Theatre Review*.

© 2018 Jenn Stephenson



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).