

**“A Multi-modal and Durational Praxis of Decolonization”: *Performance Studies in Canada***

Jen Harvie

Book review of Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer, eds, *Performance Studies in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), published in *Canadian Theatre Review* 176 (2018): 115-17.

**Abstract**

This review of *Performance Studies in Canada* edited by Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer argues that its most important contributions are the arguments it makes for paying attention to Indigeneity and to decolonizing practices, and the many, varied decolonizing practices it demonstrates. The review also admires the collection’s commitments to exploring diverse ways of knowing, from the sensory through embodiment and textuality. Finally, the review appreciates the book’s consistent and rigorous attention to grounding research and arguments in detailed local specificity. All three of these emphases--on Indigeneity, diverse ways of knowing, and local knowledges--demonstrate the collection’s through-running commitment to respect and preserve differences while facilitating communication across them.

**Keywords:** performance studies; Canada; decolonizing; Indigeneity; more-than-human; localism; diversity; difference; communication

**Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer, editors. *Performance Studies in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017**

This is an important and impressive book. Most significantly, it's important for its rigorous, repeated, caring, and insistent attention to Indigenous practices, cultures, histories, artists, protests, feelings, and peoples. This attention is important in itself; that is, it is important not simply in service to performance studies.

Secondarily, this attention to Indigenous experiences is also important to performance studies. It acknowledges how urgent it is to decolonize existing practices of knowing and representing the world, including practices of performance studies. Furthermore, it demonstrates and teaches approaches that do the work of decolonizing.

### **Context and content**

First, a bit of context about performance studies in Canada. In the winter 2012 edition of *Canadian Theatre Review*, volume 149, the Views and Reviews section was dedicated to performance studies in Canada, documenting a panel on the topic convened by Laura Levin and Lisa Wolford Wylam at the 2010 Performance Studies international conference in Toronto. *CTR's* Views and Reviews editor Natalie Alvarez argued, "performance studies has had little uptake and support by both universities and funding bodies in Canada" (Alvarez 73). Levin observed a corollary "failure of the international performance studies field to engage with Canadian work" (Levin 74) and noted that "very few performance studies anthologies feature topics related to

Canadian culture, and the work of performance studies scholars in Canada is almost never acknowledged in international mappings of the field” (Levin 75).

Since Levin wrote that in 2012, a lot has changed, not least due to her own substantial leadership, as well as the efforts of many of the contributors to both that section of *CTR* 149 and this edited collection. In their introduction to *Performance Studies in Canada*, co-editors Levin and Marlis Schweitzer list numerous examples of the proliferation of performance studies in Canada, especially as represented at research events such as the 2014 Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics at Concordia University, and in dedicated sections of both *CTR* and *Theatre Research in Canada* (Levin and Schweitzer, 11-12). But likely the most persuasive evidence that performance studies is thriving in Canada--and making a huge contribution from Canada--is the mass of work and commitment represented in this volume, the first of its kind.

*Performance Studies in Canada* weighs in at almost 450 pages, with work by fifteen contributors in fourteen essays plus an introduction and an afterword, integrating over fifty black and white images plus a helpful index and a voluminous bibliography. It is impressive. Its four main sections address “Performative Geographies,” “Spectacles of Nation,” “Reframing Political Resistance,” and “Practising Research.” Its coverage is vast, in terms of not only the topics it addresses but also the places, voices, arts practices, subjectivities, histories, and critical approaches it engages with. The focus of chapters ranges across, in order: urban change in Calgary; imperialist place naming on the Fraser River; dance and the sublime outdoors in Vancouver; artistic responses across the Prairies to violence against Indigenous women; children and consumerism in American Girl boutiques

within Indigo Books & Music stores; the performativity of combat training in southern Alberta; mythologies of “Canada-the-good nationalism” at Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Sochi Olympics (Vosters 203); affective political forces of Idle No More protests in BC malls; Toronto’s former mayor Rob Ford as performance artist; feminist materialisms in Montreal women’s performance work; experimental biography of Montreal dancer Louise Lecavalier; autoethnographic reflection in Waterloo, Ontario on performance about Black people’s experiences in Nigger Rock, Quebec; the performativity of visual art in St. John’s, Newfoundland; and local knowledges from across rural Newfoundland and their representation. Critical approaches tend to favour new materialism and autoethnography but also include cultural materialism, experimental biography, impressively nuanced historiographic work, theories of performativity and touch, and practice-based research. As the nearly fifty-page bibliography suggests, the range of citations is vast, but some key thinkers (alongside the book’s own contributors) include J.L. Austin, Jane Bennett, Tim Ingold, Jon McKenzie, Naxaxalhts’i (Albert “Sonny” McHalsie), Pierre Nora, Rebecca Schneider, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Diana Taylor, and Maurya Wickstrom.

The collection’s range is deliberately wide, recognizing differences and their importance, partly to “facilitate meaningful dialogue and alliances across disciplinary, cultural, and professional communities” (Levin and Schweitzer 24). The variety also permits a great range of critical issues to be addressed, and to simmer across the collection in dialogue and with polyphony. (The contributors and editors have done a strong job drawing connections across the book.) The issues the book engages with are its greatest strength.

## **Decolonizing**

Most important of these issues is the urgency of decolonizing. The book deliberately “foreground[s] Indigenous perspectives,” seeking “to displace the dominance of Euro-American paradigms in a global performance studies” (Levin and Schweitzer 25) and effectively “shaping” the field (Knowles 388). Indigeneity bookends, centres, and grounds the collection. The second main chapter, by Heather Davis-Fisch, narrates the colonial history of settlers’ renaming of sites along the Fraser River and engages extensively with Indigenous expertise and historiographic practices, such as recognizing the significances of landscapes, more-than-human forms, myths, place memories, and non-linear time. Davis-Fisch attempts an important self-reflexive, positional “settler methodology” that acknowledges her own background and the persistent risks of “settler creep,” “moments when [her] writing naturalizes [her] own interpretive practice as a settler” (70). In his “Afterword”, Ric Knowles argues that the collection “performs a beginning in which performance studies in Canada, riven and led by the efforts of Indigenous scholars, artists, activists, and their allies[,] not only problematizes borders and subverts disciplinary authorities and atomizations, but begins to forge a genuinely unsettling, decolonizing body of work” (388).

Between these bookends, there are also powerful contributions by the likes of Helene Vosters and Julie Nagam. Vosters describes herself as a “Prairie girl” (184) and “a white non-Aboriginal Canadian” (202). She explores the state violence Canada has perpetrated on Indigenous populations and how it has “snowblinded” white settlers through dominant narratives of Canada’s “benevolent multicultural

nationalism” (184). She reads this “snowblinding” in Olympic hype and the “reconciliatory technology of apology” (195) of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). But she also finds the violence properly represented in Jeff Barnaby’s 2013 film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, set on “the fictional Red Crow Mi’gMaq reserve of the 1970s” (196). Furthermore, she finds hope in the “multiple legal, creative, and activist processes [the TRC] has engendered, which situate redress not as a grand finale but as a multi-modal and durational praxis of decolonization” (195). Nagam’s chapter tells the story of artist and community responses to the “[o]ne thousand one hundred and eighty-one open cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada” in *Walking with Our Sisters*, “a community art exhibition and commemorative installation led by Métis artist Christi Belcourt” and composed of 1,760 moccasin “vamps’: the tops of moccasins, which have yet to be sewn into footwear” (116; italics original).

At the heart of the collection--literally and figuratively--is the essay by Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson. Robinson warns against performance studies’ enduring appropriative “colonial enterprise [...] to understand, and perhaps in the process normalize, Indigenous cultural practice as ‘performance first’” by making performance “the *primary* point of analysis” (211-12; italics original). For Robinson, Indigenous cultural traditions’ “primary point” is the work they “do’ as politics, acts of history, and law-making” (212; italics original). He examines Idle No More activism “not for what it demonstrates about performance or aesthetics, but to better understand strategies that may in some small way help Indigenous artists, activists, and academics resist the destruction of Indigenous lands” (213). Seeking Indigenous “protest’s affirmative politics through self-address”--rather than address to settlers--

he argues for the affective force of “affirmative anger, of playful rage, and of enchanted resentment” as means of resisting colonial oppression (231). Through Robinson’s leadership, the collection not only demonstrates the importance of decolonizing, but also warns against the risks of instrumentalizing both Indigeneity and, implicitly, decolonizing practices themselves.

### **Diversity and localism**

Some of the ways the collection treads this line to practise decolonization but to resist appropriation is through the strategies already cited above. More broadly, in a second great strength of the collection, it deliberately engages with, and attempts to respect, many, many ways of knowing. Essays engage with not only text, but also senses, sites, narratives, bodies, and matter, “refus[ing] to privilege any one form of knowing” in ways that compel consideration of “the enmeshment of lived experience within larger ecologies and networks,” including the hemispheric, the global, and the local (Levin and Schweitzer 35). This is another great strength of the collection: essays engage repeatedly with the specificities of the local, be it the “local knowledge” of rural Newfoundland knitters and fishers in Pam Hall’s beautiful chapter; of girls negotiating consumer markets in Toronto’s Yorkdale mall or online in Schweitzer’s essay; or of audiences, performers, and producers at Montreal’s Edgy Women and Wildside Festivals in Erin Hurley’s chapter. All three of *Performance Studies in Canada*’s admirable emphases--on Indigeneity, diverse ways of knowing, and local knowledges--demonstrate the collection’s through-running commitment to respect and preserve differences while facilitating communication across them.

## ***Performance Studies in Canada, Volume II***

A future, imagined, second volume on *Performance Studies in Canada* might engage more with health, disability, sexuality, age, the great range of ethnic lived experiences that exist across Canada, live art, and environmentalism (though Hall's essay here is very good on this). But I hope that any future engagement with performance studies in Canada--and beyond--will be marked by the crucial decolonizing work this volume does with important self-reflection but also a sense of durational commitment and an urgent resolve.

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