

Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich, eds. *Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times*, London: Palgrave, 2017, xviii + 315 pp., £67.99 (hardback), £67.99 (paperback), £53.99 (PDF ebook).

Reviewed by Jen Harvie, Email: j.harvie@qmul.ac.uk for *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 8:2 (2020): 332-335. Published online 12 November 2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2020-00>; <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/jcde/8/2/article-p332.xml>

This book tells two very important, highly detailed, consistently contextualized, deeply layered, and complex narratives. The first – rigorous and scathing – exposes the enormous, penetrating and globally widespread violence perpetrated by neoliberalism. The second – inspiring and hopeful – shows the wide-ranging feminist performance responses to that violence. One of the focuses on the book's content is affective strategies for responding to neoliberalism's punishing consequences. The third great contribution the book makes, alongside its two powerful narratives, is *its own* affective force, as it accumulates story after story of neoliberalism's violence and of feminist artists' acts of resistance. Painstakingly, rigorously, the book exposes the gross inequalities and violences of neoliberalism and simultaneously testifies to feminists' extraordinary acts of resistance.

Arising from the Feminist Research Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the collection is fulsome and impressively international. An introduction is followed by five sections, each consisting of four or five chapters. Organizing the material cannot have been easy, with so many areas of overlap across these consistent stories of neoliberalism's violence and feminist performance's resistance. The sections the editors Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich have chosen are broadly formal: the role of the state; activist responses to extreme violence, particularly in Latin America and India; the role of spectacle; theatre's resistance; and site-specific performance. This structuring importantly does not group by geography; it prevents ghettoizing nations and regions, and also highlights how globally pervasive neoliberalism's devastating consequences are (though the

book appropriately acknowledges that extreme physical violence is a far greater risk in some locations than others).

Essays address neoliberalism and performance in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Europe, Guatemala, India, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Sweden, and the USA. They examine performance in a wide range of sites, including “ritual spaces, conventional theatres, department store elevators, corporate property, village squares, public sidewalks, parliament chambers, YouTube videos, and massive political spectacles” (2). They examine a great range of performance events and practices, from ceremonies and speech-making to body art, live art, cabaret, neo-burlesque, photography, activism, various forms of dance, practice-based research, and theatre. They discuss the work of dozens of artists and companies, including activist organization Femen, Indigenous actor Frances Djulibing, Mexico-based queer artists Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, Brazilian body artist Berna Reale, African-American visual artist Kara Walker, Indian theatre-maker and activist Maya Rao, and Japanese playwrights Ito Tari and Yamashiro Chikako.

The collection paints a stark picture of neoliberalism, its global reach, and its profound consequences, especially for women. Many of these consequences are predictably economic, marked by the “upward distribution of wealth and power” (Duggan 181) brought about by policies that “privilege big businesses and corporations at the expense of workers and the majority of the population” (285). Repeatedly, essay authors describe nations where neoliberalism’s market deregulations have ushered in eras of ever-greater employment precarity. Nobuko Anan reports that in Japan, by 2015, 40 per cent of workers were “irregular workers,” earning less than half of regular workers’ wages and with “no health insurance, pensions, or other benefits” (53). Jung-Soon Shim shows that in Korea in March 2010, irregular workers made up 49.8 per cent of the working population (219). Ana Bernstein reports that in Brazil, in 2014, “women earn[ed] 30 per cent less than men” (288). Amich records that in Guatemala, over 80 per cent of workers in *maquiladoras* – duty-free manufacturing plants – are young women paid half the

wage men are paid (98). These economic oppressions inevitably have other consequences, destabilizing housing, care, mental health, and much more.

The book details how the repercussions of neoliberalism go far beyond economic insecurity and include women's (and others') dispossession and being rendered invisible, irrelevant, non-existent, neutralized, "inadmissible to the public sphere" (40), and "abandoned, excluded, ignored" (284). Authors detail ways that neoliberalism legitimates linguistic oppression, racism, misogyny, and curtailments of legal and human rights. They show that, in nations that have come through dictatorships and forms of armed conflict into supposed democracies ruled by neoliberalism, there has been "continuity, rather than a radical break" (91) in violence against women; armed violence has become "decentralized and dispersed violence" (101).

Two of the most disturbing linked conclusions the book cumulatively illustrates relate to this idea of dispersal. First, neoliberalism's violence operates through means often not explicit and direct, but implicit, dispersed, and difficult to isolate and attack. As one of its most influential theorists Wendy Brown has observed in the subtitle to her 2015 book *Undoing the Demos*, neoliberalism is effecting a "stealth revolution". In vocabulary pioneered by Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith in their eponymous edited collection, neoliberalism operates through "*dictablanda*", soft oppressions not outright dictatorship. Second, as Michel Foucault argued long ago, neoliberalism's means of dispersal are often internalized, made part of the biopolitical sphere, so that many of us are complicit with it, even when we don't want to be. Christina Svens emphasizes (after Brown) how neoliberalism "extends its metrics to all dimensions of people's lives [...]. It pushes individuals to think and act as if they are market entities themselves, even in contexts where revenue is not relevant" (66). Its emphasis on individual liberty cultivates competition and self-interest, not solidarity.

A deeply insidious aspect of this internalization for feminists is feminism's own complicity with neoliberalism. Several authors note how putatively feminist

performances lose their feminist solidarity when they fail to focus on intersectional oppressions of not only gender but also race and especially class (see, for example, Bishnupraya Dutt on the stage play *Nirbhaya*, Tiina Rosenberg on activists Femem, and Marla Carlson on Marina Abramović's later work). Authors note how women "winners" in the economic market of neoliberalism – for example, highly paid actresses in Bollywood and Korean Western-style musicals, and management-class women in Ireland – mask the fact that many more female workers experience increasing precarity (see chapters by Vibha Sharma, Shim and Shonagh Hill, respectively). Profoundly insidiously, as Svens notes, "[n]eoliberal rationality erodes both the foundations of democracy and the political imagination, so that it appears increasingly impossible to envision a society that exceeds the prevailing circumstances" (67).

Fortunately, this collection insists that feminist performance makers use a broad, powerful, and inspiring range of strategies to envision alternatives to the prevailing circumstances, and to contest and challenge neoliberalism and its violent consequences. These strategies are many and include: embodiment, as a materialization of neoliberalism's impacts and efforts to make people invisible, and as an alternative act of making visible; as well as making women heard, activist speech-making, and "shared laughter" (82). Many authors highlight strategies of collectivizing, for example, acting on behalf of those less fortunate, acting in solidarity, and using participation as a means of imagining collectivism in the face of rampant competition. Diana Taylor observes that some feminist theatre-makers foreground simulation to draw attention to the political simulations that foster neoliberalism. Many makers celebrate witnessing; others trouble it, showing the inadequacies of state systems of "truth and reconciliation" which have been inadequate (see Amich on Guatemala), and recognizing, after Peggy Phelan, that "[i]f representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture" (Phelan10). Against the insidiousness of neoliberalism, the collection emphasizes the political force of affects – shared feelings that are often indescribable. Many of these affects are what might conventionally be seen as "positive" – senses of solidarity and comfort. But the

majority are affective disruptions that disturb spectators, offer what María José Contreras Lorenzeni calls “micro-resistance” (241), and highlight the uneven, polarized and polarizing economic and social effects of neoliberalism for women.

The book could have an even wider geographical scope. It could draw on scholarship from theatre and performance more and from other disciplines less. It could gather some of its analysis more succinctly, especially of affect and its impacts. But those can be the tasks of future books. This book gathers powerful scholarship by a global roster of writers, also including Antje Budde, Sue-Ellen Case, Charlotte Canning, Sandra D’Urso, Sarah French, Rebecca Jennison, Aoife Monks, and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri. It details and analyses an extraordinary array of performance and art practices. It tells a resounding horror story about the global reach of neoliberalism, the disparity it brings, and the precarity it multiplies, especially for women. But alongside, throughout, and in the face of that story it delivers the powerful, inspiring affect of feminist resilience and resistance.

Works Cited

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