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Rehearsing Revolution

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Books

DAPHNIE SICRE

REHEARSING REVOLUTION

Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism

by Patricia A. Ybarra

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018

Current policies at the us/Mexico border are a clear escalation of the trickle-down effects of neoliberalism in the Americas over the past fifty years. The 2018 zero-tolerance policy directive, from the administration of Donald Trump to us immigration agencies, to separate families after they enter the United States to seek asylum and the administration's subsequent use of the reunification of these children with their families as a political *peón*¹ to pass legislation to fund a wall, are the results of a violent economy that prioritizes capitalism over humanity. Patricia Ybarra's new book, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism*, comes to us at a poignant moment, when questions abound about the representation of Latinx bodies in the media and the state of relations between communities and ethnic groups. Ybarra's study advances that examination by looking at recent Latinx theater in a broad political context—especially in the supercharged politics of immigration and related violence.

Ybarra specifically chooses to focus on theater, not only because of the intimacy of practice but because theater cannot depict violence in the same way as other media, such as film. She eloquently reminds us that theater cannot provide the audience with thousands of dead bodies in one image and that live staging requires a different artistic mindset. In the medium of theater we find a very specific form of performance that cannot be imitated elsewhere, creating a platform for discussion that focuses on how the violence of neoliberalism can be staged.

Ybarra defines neoliberalism as “a political and economic philosophy whose proponents espoused free markets and privatization of state enterprises as the mode by which prosperity and democracy are best reached” (x). She frames the book around

specific policies, including the consequences of NAFTA, border relations, immigration, industrialization under the border, and the economic history that has led to turbulent and violent events throughout Latin American history. While investigating us Latinx playwrights who have written about these issues, she questions the theatrical practices and staging strategies of their work, noting the courage required not only to call out the violence that has emerged as a consequence of neoliberalism in the Americas but also to capture the lived experiences of Latinx people contending with these policies on stage.

Ybarra offers a great resource for dramaturgs and directors looking to stage these plays. Because she considers wider forms of cultural production as well as performance texts, this book differs from most studies of Latinx theater in that it focuses on the geopolitical rather than on ethnic identity or difference. It studies the ways playwrights have voiced their concerns at neoliberalism's failures, especially for Latinx communities. Ybarra simultaneously questions what it means to investigate geopolitical violence through theater and examines the traces such theater leaves on our conscious and subconscious minds after it has been performed.



Rubén Amavizca-Murúa's *Women of Juarez*, The Studio Theater, Cerritos College, Norwalk, CA, 2016. Photo: Renee Bloch

How do you stage neoliberalism, and in so doing, how do you give form to the violence, destruction, and neglect caused by imperialism and capitalism? Can one simultaneously stage critiques of economic and physical violence that have become norms for many communities, both north and south of the border? What strategies allow us to see on stage the complex dimensions of transnational business and consumerism that have become part of people's daily lives in the Americas? How do such concerns pertain to the dramatic text, when so much of it is influenced by metaphor, magical realism, and

theatricality? Ybarra successfully explores these concerns while also recognizing Latinx playwrights for the innovative theatrical modes they have devised. As she states, these are not works that make us “ambivalent about indifference” (xi); these are plays that hit us at our core and ask us to truly take a stand against neoliberalism’s established geopolitical norms in the Americas.

The book is separated into six parts: an introduction, four chapters illustrating a neoliberal theme, and a conclusion. The introduction focuses on defining neoliberalism and looks at how theater, especially Latinx work, deconstructs it, showing why these works are crucial in today’s political climate and how these playwrights contribute to a larger canon.

The first chapter, “‘Never Any Other Time but This Time No World but This World,’ or Staging Indigeneity in Neoliberal Times,” looks at how Latinx playwrights in the United States have considered economic relationships such as the NAFTA agreement, privatization of the formerly public sector, and communities such as indigenous cultures under siege from neoliberal policies. Revisiting plays from 1970 to the present, Ybarra reveals how theater has handled violence induced by capitalism and inflicted on indigenous peoples. Ybarra analyzes shifts in representational practices, from Cherríe Moraga’s infamous works to Luiz Valdez’s plays to the work of Michael John Garcés. She informs us that these plays stage the mobilization of indigenous movements, exemplifying how communities can fight for social change. She also critiques cultural nationalism in light of the idea of the Cosmic Race.² Ybarra finds a balance between critique and praise by reviewing pros and the cons of staging cultural nationalism under a geopolitical world driven by neoliberalism. By the end of the chapter, she proposes that we rethink dramaturgy and calls for an end to practices of stereotyping indigenous peoples on stage.

The next chapter, “Havana Is (Not) Waiting: Staging the Impasse in Cuban American Drama about Cuba’s Special Period,” makes a juxtaposition to traditional Latinx Cuban work and the claim that Cuban theater lives in nostalgia.³ She is able to question nostalgia, as seen through the lenses of Marxism and capitalism, by making us rethink how we look at Cuban works. She tears down and reintroduces themes of exile and migrant experiences. Her critique offers a new perspective on Cuban work that focuses on migrants and living in exile. By focusing on

Caridad Svich’s
*Iphigenia Crash Land
Falls on the Neon Shell
That Was Once Her
Heart (a rave fable)*,
7 Stages, Atlanta,
2004. Photo: Yvonne
Boyd. Courtesy of
the Cuban Theater
Digital Archive





plays written after the 1994 Balseiro Crisis and playwrights experiencing a life of exile in Miami and New York, Ybarra highlights the effects of neoliberalism after the fall of the Cuban Revolution and compares it with the experiences of migrants from Central America who now live in the United States. Both share commonalities that many us Cubans and Chicanos might not see right away, but the works of Eduardo Machado, Caridad Svich, Nilo Cruz, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, and María Irene Fornés share clear parallels.

Ybarra's third chapter, appropriately titled "Neoliberalism Is a Serial Killer," turns to femicide, with vivid examples from Latinx plays demonstrating how serial violence can be staged. Ybarra proves how the killing of women in the border regions directly relates to neoliberal violence and politics. With an emphasis on plays that present the killings since 1993 in Ciudad Juarez, Ybarra illustrates how Latinx theater can contemplate violence on a large scale. At the same time, she is able to discuss the consequences of years of economic repression on our borders. All these works are violent: all depict death, and not just one death, but the death of hundreds of real women. Ybarra wants

Stephanie Cleghorn
Jasso as El Azul
in Matthew Paul
Olmos's *so go the
ghosts of mexico, part
two*, Undermain
Theatre, Dallas,
2017. Photo:
Katherine Owens

to see more documentary plays like *Mujeres de Arena* by Humberto López, which not only shares these stories but illuminates for audiences how us-Mexico border communities are dealing with and reacting to femicide. Ybarra acknowledges the importance of creative dramaturgy, in championing plays that investigate truth and are based on reality. She analyzes the ways Latinx playwrights defy conventions of theatrical realism to evoke this massive violence. Many of these crimes remain unsolved, and the pattern of violence in the border regions shows few signs of slowing down any time soon. The chapter also includes a consideration of Coco Fusco's *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* and Caridad Svich's *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart (A Rave Fable)*.

In her final chapter, "Swallowing the '80s (W)hole: Millennial Drama of the Narcoguerra," Ybarra questions how narco-trafficking and narco-guerra were staged during former Mexican president Felipe Calderón's rule. In the history of physical and economic violence wrapped around a drug war between the United States, Mexico, and other countries, neoliberalism surfaces again in a complex web of economic relationships. But Calderón is not the only one to blame; various American presidents have also backed this war in their policies. Circling back to NAFTA's influence since 1989, the United States and Mexico have wrapped themselves up in a vicious cycle of violence and economic upheaval. Ybarra explores several works depicting this economic violence and drug war, showing the choices made by their creators in order to dramatize multiple killings, beheadings, and violent kidnappings, both as narco-dramas and as everyday occurrences. These works depart from realism, shifting the paradigm of the reality of economic violence to one of economic opportunity while focusing on the importance of masculinity in the patriarchy. This leads to representations of excruciating violence as forms of entrepreneurship, and kingpins as male heroes. At least through theatricality, narco-terrorism can be critiqued. Among the dramas Ybarra tracks are Octavio Solís's *Santos y Santos* and *Dreamlandia*; Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar*; Victor Cazares's *Religiones Gringas* and *Ramses contra los Monstros*; and Matthew Paul Olmos's *so go the ghosts of mexico part 1*. Seen together, they chart an evolution of neoliberal geopolitics that transcends borders, recreating visions of transnationalism on stage. She notes that because of their shifts in strategies of representation, *Religiones Gringas* and *so go the ghosts of mexico part 1* provide new ways of thinking about neoliberalism in the Americas, calling for an ultimate end to narco-masculinity and narco-realism through the feminine compassion Olmos depicts in his play.

Ybarra's book ends with a call to advocate for theater and artistic strategies that will help us reconsider neoliberalism and the effects it has on all Latinx communities. If we want to recognize where we stand today, we must learn the importance of this history and its implications for others. She writes that before we can move forward, "it is clear that an understanding of the recent past in the Americas is crucial to thinking our

way out of our current situation.” (199). Her book enables just such an understanding and more. For Ybarra, it is not enough to understand why neoliberalism exists; we must also find safe spaces to critique it through Latinx theater.

As I read *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism*, I could not help but think of Augusto Boal’s claim that “the theater itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution.”⁴ Ybarra’s book calls for Latinx artists to help us navigate away from transactional neoliberal politics, arguing that Latinx plays can provide spaces to fight the neoliberal status quo. *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* is a beautiful example of how we can start to reevaluate a culture of destruction and devastation, and how theater can become our space to rehearse for tomorrow’s revolution.

NOTES

1. *Peón* is the Spanish word for *pawn*.
2. Here Ybarra refers to the 1925 essay “La raza cósmica” (“The Cosmic Race”) by José Vasconcelos.
3. Luis A. Ramos-García, *The State of Latino Theater in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
4. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 141.