

Theatre and Cartographies of Power: Repositioning the Latina/o Americas.

Reseña/Review: Santana, Analola, and Jimmy A. Noriega, eds. *Theatre and Cartographies of Power: Repositioning the Latina/o Americas*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2018, 320 pp.

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Jimmy E. Noriega and Analola Santana's *Theatre and Cartographies of Power: Repositioning the Latina/o Americas* is a richly textured collection of essays that navigate the varied landscape of contemporary Latin American and Latinx theatre. Written by practitioners, scholars, and scholar-practitioners, the anthology is curated to map not only geographic sites, but also the landscape of theatrical imperatives brought about by disparate and overarching political tensions. Sites of tension are examined telescopically, zooming in to focus on distinct intracultural dynamics in the civil conflicts of Guatemala, Colombia,

and Peru, and widening to investigate broader sociopolitical dynamics between South, Central, and North America writ large.

The intention is to reposition the importance of this theatre and performance-making for an English-language readership. As Noriega and Santana remind us in their introduction, there is no good reason why the south pole should be viewed as ‘down;’ it is just an arbitrary point on an orb floating in the middle of a vast, nondirectional space. Yet on most maps the region is positioned beneath us, physically and metaphorically. When a project “goes south” it is failing. The anthology aims to reorient the cartography, to flip the poles. To this end the very first essay is accompanied by a series of photographs designed by and featuring performance artist Violeta Luna who has painted the silhouette of South America on her chest. The map is repositioned so that Central America tucks into her belt. As the essays throughout *Cartographies* attest, perspective and authority are everything.

As Noriega and Santana note in their introduction, “What is unique about this project is its effort to complicate and (re)envision the spaces and significances of Latin American and Latina/o performance practices from scholarly *and* artistic viewpoints” (1). In addition to the pieces written by US and Latin American scholars such as Beatriz Rizk, Jorge Huerta, and Diana Taylor, many of whom have paved the path of this field, a significant number are written by renowned Latinx and Latin American practitioners, including Argentine playwright Gustavo Ott, Anna Correa of Peru’s Yuyachkani, and Claudio Valdés Kuri of Mexico’s Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes. Nearly thirty authors in total share theoretical frameworks, describe their creative aims, processes, and problems, and illuminate a variety of performances and their receptions. The inclusion of artists also distinguishes the format of the collection; their voices are more personal and candid. For example, playwright Migdalia Cruz shares the challenge of trying to locate her homeland within her bicultural Puerto Rican/Nuyorican experience, and finds that her homeland

only exists when she writes it.

The expedition of the book is built upon the tradition and legacy of the paths laid out by George Woodyard and the Latin American Theatre Review, as well as those of Vicky Unruh, Rizk, Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday, Adam Versényi, Taylor, and Juan Villegas, who have mapped Latin American theatre and performance since the late twentieth century. All of these projects are critical tools for understanding the breadth and depth of Latin American and Latinx theatre, but a fair portion were written and published in Spanish, limiting readership in the US, particularly among students. *Cartographies of Power* is presented entirely in English.

Nearly all the essays include historical backgrounds which contextualize the work described, its purposes, and receptions, particularly for readers who may not be familiar with Latin American or even Latinx history. For example, the powerful but nonverbal performances by internationally renowned artist Regina José Galindo are illuminated by Taylor's encapsulation of the atrocious history of the Ríos Montt dictatorship in Guatemala.

Several of the essays illuminate the historical foundations of contemporary and sometimes harmful practices. Katherine Zien describes the political expediency of blackface performance in early 20th century Panama, while Gad Gutterman writes about the cultural ventriloquism employed by Spanish playwrights who authored plays celebrating Colombian history in the late 17th century. These practices entertained some audiences at the expense of others, and as such their popularity kept the practices alive, as well as the harmful re-inscription of false narratives.

While the essays can be read as stand-alone pieces, the book is well organized into five thematic sections. *Cartographies of Power* begins by first investigating several theoretical and historical frameworks, then shows how theatre and performance interrogate historic sociopolitical identifiers, describes contemporary expressions of performance, and then the current concerns of

its production and distribution. But these sections also have mutable borders; the essays resonate with each other. A few of the pieces are only a few pages long, just as long as each writer needs to tell their story. This creates an organic feel to the book's terrain; the journey through it is sometimes a quick sprint, sometimes a hike, and always revealing a different view. It is also noteworthy that the editors invited a variety of translators to make the works accessible. Their distinct interpretive voices reinforce the unique tones and textures of each essay.

I'd like to address one more strategy at work in this anthology. *Cartographies of Power's* focus on Latin American and Latinx politics, micro and macro, past and present, side by side, and all in English, inadvertently reveals the narrow-minded thinking of current US politics, particularly its immigration policies. The current administration foments xenophobia, an us-versus-them approach, promoting firm and impenetrable borders. *Cartographies of Power* acknowledges that a border is a construct, and that history, culture, and art transgress any imaginary wall between "America" and the rest of the Americas, especially where Latinx are concerned. The artists and art-making addressed in this book are not delineated by externally crafted political borders; they self-define as participants of and respondents to historical experiences. The *nepantla* spaces, as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa, of Nuyorican as well as Chicana identities, the transcultural experiences of expat theatre-makers and touring companies, and the location of communal mourning and protest following the slaughter of forty-three students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, are transformed by theatre makers into sites of geopolitical validity. Experiences are located in performances, and the repetition of themes such as displacement, war, exploitation, intolerance, colonialism, post-colonialism, and decolonialization contribute to the creation of our hemispheric theatrical landscape.

This does not mean that the Latin American or Latinx experiences are conflated and forced to stand in for one another. Several questions raised

by Noriega and Santana in the introduction provide a way to navigate one's reading: What maps are being drawn by the work? Who is drawing them? How are they redrawn from one essay to the next? How do these new maps challenge Eurocentric or Unitedstatesian cartographies?

Ultimately, and possibly more importantly than the comparison with dominant narrative, *Cartographies of Power* dismantles walls between Latin American Studies and Latinx Studies. While Noriega and Santana readily admit that it is reductive to use one term, the Americas, to capture the whole of the hemispheric experience, nevertheless they embrace the need for “fluidity and agency for those who wish to self-identify their identity within this complicated paradigm” (12). The pieces are distinct enough that an instructor can assign independent essays to illuminate any curriculum in Latin American or Latinx theatre. The book as a whole could certainly be assigned for a seminar. Fifteen black and white images and photographs provide visual support, and most of the essays include information about other artists or projects to inspire and launch further reading.

