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Review of Performing Conquest: Five Centuries of Theater, History, and Identity in Tlaxcala, Mexico, by Patricia A. Ybarra

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theatre in Sri Lanka—reflexively question their interventions in a global conflict context. In another exemplary essay, Caoimhe McAviney offers an astonishingly honest take on the difficulties of her classroom work and the inventive solutions derived *with* students operating in the fertile fields (rather than “at risk” edges) of the margins.

In the main, the case studies are richly illuminating. Yet, while I recognize that economies of publishing and participatory ethics might limit photographic reproductions, I yearned for more than verbal illustrations of the projects cited. The only two images in the anthology appear on its front cover, disconnected from any particular case study. Featuring actively engaged (and unnamed) young people of color, with a lone Anglo-appearing woman standing at the edges of the book’s frame, they are perhaps unconsciously telling about the historical conditions and questions underpinning applied theatre practices. Scanning an image of uniformed schoolchildren, I wondered again who applies theatre for and with whom? To what ends?

In its essays and curation *The Applied Theatre Reader* eloquently animates such questions, provoking those in the field to remain Wise Fools and provocateurs, upending assumptions, highlighting contradictions, and working to produce new ways of being and knowing together.

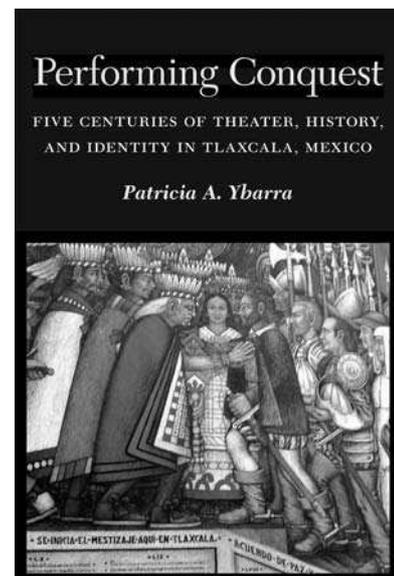
—Sonja Arsham Kufinec

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Performing Conquest: Five Centuries of Theater, History, and Identity in Tlaxcala, Mexico. By Patricia A. Ybarra. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009; 288 pp.; illustrations. \$65.00 cloth.

With *Performing Conquest*, Patricia Ybarra’s commanding research demonstrates “performance is an epistemology of conquest” (60) and hence a historiographical practice that is negotiated by colonizers and ‘colonized’ alike. The figure of the *complicitous exemplar* is at the heart of Ybarra’s analysis of Tlaxcala, Mexico, whose tactics appear to gesture the role of indigenous sovereign and accomplice with the same stroke. Ybarra studies performances that frame and deploy Tlaxcalan historiography, probing their efficacy in the context of Mexican national narratives about colonization and independence, and into the contemporary era. Like Ybarra, Mexican scholars such as Jaime Cuadrillo are interested in the pertinence and persistence of the “cultural identity which we shall call *Tlaxcaltequidad*” (Cuadrillo 2004:25). Ybarra’s research illuminates *Tlaxcaltequidad* as an “exemplary site of preservation of indigenous culture” (121), whose logics (and prophecies) have been flexible enough to facilitate multiple pedagogies of foreign occupation.



As the title suggests, Ybarra culls from a variety of sources, including “‘texts’ that perform despite themselves” (25) (newspaper articles, civic records, and the testimonial witness of personal memory) as well as 16th-century missionary chronicles and conversion festivals; 18th-century plays; 19th-century paintings and dramas; 20th-century political events, public performances, campaigns, murals, and novels. Ybarra includes in her survey attention to the legacies of Mexican and US national scholarship about Tlaxcala; including the late Desiderio Hernández Xochitiotzin (official historian of Tlaxcala City), to whom Ybarra dedicates the book. As Ybarra moves across time and place in pursuit of her analysis, a strategic reading calls for attention to detail as well as a broader overview of the theoretical discourses that the work obtains. For readers who are new to Mexican history, the book demands quick adjustment to an indigenously named (or translated) Mexico and its disputed histories. For the experts, *Performing Conquest* demonstrates complex engagement with Tlaxcalan cultural identity and its living archives, as well as strategies for theorizing performance historiography.

Ybarra’s introduction observes a highly choreographed 1997 state visit to Tlaxcala by Bill and Hillary Clinton, in which Tlaxcala City’s public ceremony frames the Presidential pair as performing “conquest in the present” (2). Ybarra recounts the event in order to demonstrate “how Tlaxcalans, and those who staged them, performed conquest while playing by the rules” (3). In chapter 1, Ybarra sorts through the ways that key 16th-century writings by Franciscan missionary Toribio de Benavente (better known as Motolinía, 1482–1568) used and narrated festival performances to establish Tlaxcala as a well-ordered colonial city. (Cuadrillo [2004] notes that Hernán Cortés compared Tlaxcala to the well-governed city of Venice.) Ybarra keenly points out that Motolinía produces rather than records missionary success, an important point of departure for any examination of Mexican performance and/as historiography (54). Refreshingly, she also inscribes herself within the repetitions of narrative pattern, noting, “as critical as I had been of [Motolinía’s] observant awe in print, I embodied it the moment I stepped into Tlaxcala City” (35).

Chapter 2 traces reformulations of Tlaxcalan identity (“Postcolonial Mexico Emplots the Tlaxcaltecan Hero”). In a Mexico where indigenous identity is converted into nationalist promise (Vasconcelos 1997) it is no surprise that “playing indian” still invokes the ethos of good Mexican citizenship. Indigenous Tlaxcalan figureheads deliver on this cosmic promise in a variety of ways: if Xicoténcal the elder was the first Tlaxcalan to be baptized, and maneuvered the allegiance with Cortés, Xicoténcal the younger is sometimes the preferred Tlaxcala representative, given his later resistance against Cortés (69). Yet Ybarra notes that in the *maquila* context (year 2000), “Xicoténcal [the younger] is being emulated in everyday acts against forces more clever in their duplicity than a nineteenth century [emplotment of] Cortés” (103). Throughout the book, Ybarra’s accounts challenge typical appeals to “Grand Narrative” versions of social change that can make Latin American Studies so frequently synonymous with the study of revolutionary activity (Saldaña-Portillo 2003). Notwithstanding that enduring desire for a rubric in which “participants and audiences either ‘resist’ or ‘comply’ with the message,” Ybarra avers, “the interaction between local and national representational practices [are] more nuanced than I or my interlocutors imagin[e]” (135).

In chapter 3, “Producing Mestizaje and Its Discontents,” Ybarra reads Tlaxcalan playwright Miguel N. Lira, whose work hovers between Mexico City and Tlaxcala; or better said, between the narrative demands of *patria grande* (nation) and *patria chica* (local belonging). Arguing that “*patria chica* is a relationship between locations rather than a locatable place” (128), Ybarra cites as evidence *mestizaje* projects such as Lira’s early-20th-century theatrical dramas. For Lira, art is a tool for cultural preservation, and as expected, the dramas evoke pressing ethnographic questions. Under the direction of Manuel Gamio, the 1917 foundation of the Bureau of Anthropology encouraged the preservation of indigenous cultures, to the extent that locals were encouraged to “indianize” themselves: “designed to sell the country to investors and tourists while also fomenting Mexican nationalism, the resonances of this project still exist today” (108).

Festivalizations of culture continue to define the increasingly touristic economies of everyday life in Mexican *pueblos*, particularly those deemed by the state as valuable heritage sites.

Chapter 4, “Entries and Exits into Neoliberal Mexico,” moves to the 1981 stagings of the *salida*, a historical reenactment that “celebrated the 1591 colonization of Northern New Spain by Tlaxcaltecan Christianized Indians” (134). Model converts, Tlaxcaltecs performed missionary work, and the *salida* ritually commemorates this history. Ybarra argues that between 1981 and 1999, the *salida* “restaged Tlaxcala for urban renewal purposes” while also shifting from a popular mode of production towards a privatized commercial and professional performance event, which Ybarra reads for neoliberal symptoms (160). In turn chapter 5 (“Performing the Exceptional Historian in Saltillo, Mexico”) queries the role of the historian in the context of Saltillo, a state to the north of Tlaxcala, examining scholarship, speeches, cultural festivals, and plays. In this chapter, and throughout *Performing Conquest*, Ybarra demonstrates a keen understanding of the preeminently political ruses of so many thickly devised historiographic practices surrounding the study of “performance” and “conquest.” In this, Ybarra observes Hayden White’s familiar assertion that the writing of history is an ideologically charged narrative art ([1987] 1990:24). Scholarly investigation of the past pressures its objects of study to conform to those archives that, for whatever reason, are deemed useful for the present. Ranajit Guha takes it a step further: “Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion” (1994:37). Ybarra suggests a version of this praxis: the *complicitous exemplar*.

In the conclusion, Ybarra finally reckons with the contemporary moment: “What is the status of performing conquest in Mexico?” (199). If the crisis of Mexico’s pasts can be narrated by Tlaxcala’s exemplar, Mexico’s future appears written by the rule of another “state of exception” (Agamben 1998) where Tlaxcala is again called upon to negotiate the rule of absolute power.¹ Citing an educational flier featuring an image of the warrior Xicoténcatl — “Don’t be marginalized in the global market!” (197) — Ybarra suggests that *Tlaxcaltequidad* is asked to forge a strategy through Mexican neoliberal governmentality. Between the pressures of the global economy, severe income inequities, and a “drug war” that, according to the conservative estimates of the US press has killed over 18,000 people since 2006 (Englewood 2010), the lessons of *Tlaxcaltequidad* require careful rethinking. As publics continue to question what such figurations imply for the future history of the Americas, for Mexico, and for Tlaxcala, Ybarra concludes that in Tlaxcala, “We learn that we must be wary of overemphasizing [...] resistance [...] if it is only in the service of our own nostalgia for the holy or the radical. We learn that we need to eliminate the binary between authentic political commitment and performance” (203).

—Lara D. Nielsen

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1. For Néstor García Canclini, “What’s happening in Tijuana is in some way what is happening throughout Mexico: incredibly violent killings, dismembered bodies, corruption at all levels of the police and the State. The conflicts between mafias, the decapitated cadavers, the police and political complicity are reproduced in regions far from the border: Acapulco, Michoacán, Mexico City” (in Montezemolo 2009:745).

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More Books

I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom. By Danielle Goldman. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010; 186 pp; illustrations. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper, e-book available.

Freedom not as an endpoint, but as a practice grounded in constraint is the central concept of Danielle Goldman's *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. Goldman problematizes the relationship between improvisation and freedom by honing in on the historical, artistic, and material conditions of particular case studies of dance improvisation in the United States in the latter part of the 20th century, from mambo dancing to multimedia performance. She insists on the role of "tight places" or forms of constraint as constitutive of dance improvisation and the politics of freedom. The book is divided into four chapters, which cover mambo dancing at New York's Palladium Ballroom in the mid-1950s; collaborations between dancers and jazz musicians such as Judith Dunn, Bill Dixon, and Dianne McIntyre in the late 1960s and early 1970s; a comparison between contact improvisation and forms of civil rights nonviolent protest; and improvisation in the work of Bill T. Jones in the late 1990s.