

***Performance Studies in Canada*. Edited by Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 464 pp.**

Reviewed by Jennifer Chutter

When asked to review *Performance Studies in Canada*, my initial sarcastic thought was, “Oh great! Another book celebrating Canada published during its sesquicentennial.” However, upon reading the collection of essays, it seems that the aftermath of the Canada 150 celebrations is the perfect time to explore the performance of Canadian cultural identity, Indigenous-settler relations, and whose stories are told and how. In their introduction to the collection, Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer suggest that by viewing all behaviours as performance—be it dance, the presentation of self in a political context, or the naming of a place—performance studies can be used as a decolonizing tool to expose the settler practices that are embedded in everything we do. The essays in this collection avoid positioning “Canadian culture as superior to and fundamentally different from” the US; instead, the scholars focus on situating their work within the existing performance studies scholarship, while also introducing “alternative ways of reading culture as performance” (24). The inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, marginalized communities, and language politics displaces the more traditional Eurocentric approach to performance studies. The strength of this collection is how many of the essays reflect on Canada as a settler nation.

The collection is divided into four sections. In “Part One: Performing Geographies,” the four essays explore how place shapes performance and performance shapes place. In “Calgary’s Cultural Topography: The Performance of a City,” Susan Bennett looks at the role of public buildings and plazas in downtown Calgary and how people move through and use space. Peter Dickinson also situates his autoethnography in an urban setting in his discussion of dance performances that take place outside in Vancouver. In their focus on how the built form allows for the creation of specific place-making practices, these two urban essays contrast with the other two essays, which illustrate how Indigenous peoples have been erased from the landscape through colonial practices. In “*Xeyxelómós* and Lady Franklin Rock: Place Naming, Performance Historiography, and Settler Methodologies,” Heather Davis-Fisch draws attention to the ways in which the colonial state preserves a certain collective and cultural memory that is then challenged by Indigenous performances of place. Julie Nagam, in “Travelling Soles: Tracing the Footprints of our Stolen Sisters,” outlines how performance can be used as a decolonizing tool. Through her examination of the travelling display of moccasin vamps, Nagam suggests that the display creates a “living archive” of Indigenous histories, as well as cultural resilience. She suggests that it is through the use of objects that colonial legacies can be confronted by, for example, physically representing the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, but also the act of cultural survival as represented through the beading work on the moccasins. The four essays illustrate both acts of creation and erasure as attached to specific geographic landscapes.

Moving beyond the vast geography of Canada, “Part Two: Spectacles of Nation,” brings together three essays that look at the performance of a national identity from economic, military and athletic perspectives, while at the same time challenging the myths upon which our national identity is based. While on the surface the marketing of American Girl in Canada can be viewed as the expansion of a neoliberal consumer culture, Schweitzer guides the reader further into the parallels between the cultural work of American Girl dolls and US imperialism and questions the performance of cultural

identity on children generally, but Canadian children specifically. She challenges the myth that Canadians are oppressed by US cultural and economic dominance and instead shows the similarities between nations through a reading of how children perform their acquisition of the American Girl doll in online videos. Natalie Alvarez explores the performance of Canada's peacekeeping cultural identity in her essay, "Presumptive Intimacies and the Politics of Touch: 'Strategic Culture' in Simulations of War." Alvarez's essay is based on her observation of military simulations that train Canadian soldiers to understand and interpret Afghani "cultural systems, traditions, and practices" in order to more effectively carry out their peacekeeping mission (172). Helene Vosters rounds out this section with her essay, "Sochi Olympics 2014, Canadian Truth and Reconciliation, and the Haunting Ghouls of Canadian Nationalism," looking at how Canada presents itself publicly on the world stage as a pristine nation unblemished by colonial practices, and how this contrasts with the reality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. Rather than viewing Canadian cultural identity as a static construct, these essays challenge the myths on which it is based in order to illustrate the cracks in the foundation.

The cracks in Canadian cultural identity become more exposed in "Part Three: Reframing Political Resistance." This section presents three essays that challenge the reader to view the performance of activism, political posturing, and artistic displays through the lens of what they are informing their audiences about the underlying oppressive structures of colonialism, contemporary political culture, and patriarchy and language politics. Dylan Robinson's "Enchantment's Irreconcilable Connection: Listening to Anger, Being Idle No More" illustrates the importance of Idle No More gatherings as displays of anger, as well as cultural survival. Robinson further develops the idea of the differences between settler understanding of Indigenous dance and song as an aesthetic performance, rather than as an act of resistance and a form of political activism. Laura Levin reflects on the role of performance in politics in her examination of Toronto's former mayor, Rob Ford. Levin suggests that rather than viewing Ford as an aberration in Canadian politics, he should be viewed alongside other US leaders who have mastered performance art in politics. Erin Hurley explores how theatre and dance in Quebec challenge views of performance studies in English Canada. Through her study of two multidisciplinary artists, Leslie Baker and Andréane Leclerc, Hurley shows how a performance studies methodology disrupts the tendency to view Canada as a unified nation.

As an emerging performance studies scholar, "Part Four: Practising Research" gave me the most food for thought as the four essays presented different approaches to practising, critiquing and engaging with performance theories from a distinctly Canadian perspective. MJ Thompson maps out the cultural importance of Québécois Louise Lecavalier's dance expression. By juxtaposing oral history and the physical buildings of Montreal, Thompson creates a biography of Lecavalier and her work. Naila Keleta-Mae also uses history and place to tell a story in her reflective piece "on love: Performance as Pedagogy." Keleta-Mae illustrates how she used performance as a way for her predominately non-Black students to explore the history of Black slavery in Canada. For her students, writing and performing a play together allowed them to confront unconscious stereotypes and "to grapple with the ethical and aesthetic questions raised when predominately white students, faculty, and staff perform and produce non-white work" (332). Brian Rusted explores the practice of embodied writing in his discussion of Don Wright's artistic practice and work through the creation of his own texts. In "Working Art—Working Knowledge: Doing the Visual and Making the Material Matter," Pam Hall explains how she makes everyday practice and knowledge accessible to a wider audience by archiving everyday practices, such as knitting and salting cod in rural Newfoundland. These four essays show the interdisciplinarity of performance studies as a research practice, as well as new ways to give voice to stories that are often untold.

While the collection of essays spans the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, there is a distinct lack of scholarship addressing performance in the Prairies and the North. As Pam Hall suggests, we need to recognize different “ways of knowing and doing and being in the world” (370). Greater inclusion of other rural forms of performance would help to round out this collection and make it a more inclusive representation of Canada. While MJ Thompson’s essay, “Two-way Street: The Icon in the City,” fits with the collection of research practices, it would be better juxtaposed with Peter Dickinson’s, “Choreographies of Place: Dancing the Vancouver Sublime from Dusk to Dawn.” Both essays discuss the role of place in producing a particular performance of dance in an urban environment. Reading these two pieces consecutively would help to highlight the regional and cultural differences between Montreal and Vancouver, but would also show the parallels in how the natural topography and built landscape play a role in the presentation of different forms of dance.

All of these essays highlight how performance studies can be used to challenge our existing ways of making meaning and understanding our world. Calling our attention to the embedded nature of the settler narrative within Canadian society is the first step in unravelling it. As Ric Knowles suggests in his “Afterword” to the collection, exploring the ideas of state through how they are performed allows us to unsettle their ideological ties. Through its diversity of ideas and approaches *Performance Studies in Canada* inspires scholars to keep asking challenging questions about the role of performance in Canada, whether it is used to critique the actions of our political leaders, to give voice to the marginalized, or to view performance as a decolonizing tool.