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# PERFORMANCES THAT CHANGE THE AMERICAS

Edited by  
Stuart A. Day



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# Performances that Change the Americas

This collection of essays explores activist performances, all connected to theater or performance training, that have changed the Americas—from the Southern Cone to Canada. Through the study of specific examples from numerous countries, the authors of this volume demonstrate a crucial, shared outlook: they affirm that ordinary people change the direction of history through performance. This project offers concrete, compelling cases that emulate the modus operandi of people like historian Howard Zinn. In the same spirit, the chapters treat marginal groups whose stories underscore the potentially unstoppable and transformative power of united, embodied voices. This book will be of great interest to students and scholars of theatre, performance, art, and politics.

**Stuart A. Day** is Professor of Spanish at the University of Kansas. A graduate of Northern Arizona University, The University of Arizona, and Cornell University, Day's recent books include *Outside Theater: Alliances That Shape Mexico* and *Modern Mexican Culture*.

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# **Performances that Change the Americas**

**Edited by Stuart A. Day**

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**To the performers who change the Americas**



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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvi
1 Introduction: case studies in activist performance STUART A. DAY	1
2 Playing Creole: circus dramas, the theater marketplace, and urban society in Argentina and Uruguay WILLIAM ACREE	20
3 <i>BASTA</i> : reactivating bodies and the dramaturgy of femicides in Argentina PAOLA HERNÁNDEZ	38
4 Carnival in hell: kinetic dissidence and the new queer carnavalesque in contemporary Brazil PABLO ASSUMPÇÃO BARROS COSTA	59
5 Absent bodies and melted weapons: art and social change in contemporary Colombia GASTÓN ALZATE AND PAOLA MARÍN	79
6 Queering Abiyala: personal and political cartographies of the Indigenous Americas TIFFANY D. CREEGAN MILLER	99
7 Music, poetry, and <i>Créolité</i> in the songs of Carole Demesmin, Singer, Troubadour, and Activist CÉCILE ACCILIEU	116

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
8	An island in crisis: theater groups and social change in Puerto Rico in the new millennium PRISCILLA MELÉNDEZ	131
9	Performing the revolution: Castro's Cuba MARTA M. CAMINERO-SANTANGELO	154
10	The queer/ <i>muxe</i> performance of disappearance: Lukas Avendaño's butterfly utopia ANTONIO PRIETO STAMBAUGH	175
11	"Why are the Canadian authorities afraid of this play?": <i>Eight Men Speak</i> and Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada ALAN FILEWOD	202
	<i>Index</i>	221

# Figures

2.1	With the goal of creating the society clear in mind, members of the Sociedad Criolla pose along the <i>paseo criollo</i> for a picture in May 1894	21
2.2	Cover of the eighth edition of Gerardo Grasso's <i>Pericón</i> . Grasso's rendition of the music for the dance performed around the region was just one of many composers' attempts to vie for the claim (and accompanying profits) to have written <i>the</i> definitive score for the <i>baile nacional</i>	29
2.3	Looking the part, a member of the Sociedad Criolla poses for a photograph in his gaucho attire	33
2.4	Another member of the Sociedad Criolla poses for a photograph in his gaucho attire	34
2.5	Members of the Sociedad Criolla prepare for a <i>pericón</i> in 1919	35
3.1	Performance of <i>BASTA</i> outside ICBC, Florida Street and Diagonal Norte, Buenos Aires, December 2018	45
3.2	Performance of <i>BASTA</i> during the women's march 8M, ICBC, Buenos Aires, March 8, 2019	46
3.3	Performance of <i>BASTA</i> , National Congress, Buenos Aires, March 6, 2020	47
3.4	Public call for <i>BASTA</i> , March 2020, Buenos Aires. Image courtesy of Expresión MoLE	48
3.5	Digital pamphlet during COVID times, June 2020. Image courtesy of Expresión MoLE	53
4.1	"Maricotinha." 2018, Camila de Almeida	63
4.2	"Inferno Walk." 2018, Camila de Almeida. People dance and parade through the streets at night	69
5.1	Voces de Resistencia documentary director talking to some of the Pogue Singers at one of their houses	80
5.2	The Pogue Singers performing in traditional Afro-Colombian attire in Bellavista (the site of the massacre)	82

5.3	Two members of the Pogue singers in Afro-Colombian traditional attire, smiling at the camera. (ICESI)	85
5.4	Entrance of the main corridor of the “Fragmentos” installation. Bogotá, 2017	91
5.5	Detail of the floor of the installation <i>Fragmentos</i>	94
9.1	This image is one of the stock movie stills from <i>Holiday in Mexico</i> , similar to the one used in the Univision article	156
9.2	A dove lands on Castro’s shoulder during his first speech in Havana, to thousands of Cubans	160
9.3	“Fidel Castro Entertains in Harlem” during his visit to the United States for the United Nations General Assembly; Castro integrated his experience in Harlem into his speech to the UN as part of a general critique of US imperialism	162
9.4	Cuban-Americans protest the removal of Elián González by force from his Miami relatives and repatriation to Cuba, waving both Cuban and US flags	172
10.1	Lukas Avendaño in <i>Réquiem para un alcaraván</i> , Xalapa, Veracruz, México, 2012	177
10.2	<i>Buscando a Bruno</i> performed outside the Mexican Consulate of Barcelona, Spain in June of 2018. Lukas Avendaño holds hands with a local artist from the Xica Teatre group	179
10.3	Lukas Avendaño at the entrance to the Fiscalía General de la República (National Prosecutor’s Office) building in Mexico City, during the “Llamado a la autoridad” demonstration, May 2019	187
10.4	Performance of <i>¿Dónde está Bruno?</i> during the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ XI <i>Encuentro</i> at Mexico City’s National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), June 2019	189
10.5	Concluding moments of <i>¿Dónde está Bruno?</i> during the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ XI <i>Encuentro</i> at Mexico City’s National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), June 2019	190
11.1	The final tableau of <i>Eight Men Speak</i> , staged in 1933, shows the members of the Worker’s Court angrily pointing at the cowering figure of Capitalism as they announce him guilty of the attempted murder of Canadian Communist leader Tim Buck	209

# Contributors

**William Acree (PhD UNC Chapel Hill)** is Professor of Spanish in the Department of Romance Languages & Literatures at Washington University in St. Louis. His research and teaching center on the cultural history of the Río de la Plata, with particular attention to popular culture and everyday life. His recent book, *Staging Frontiers: The Making of Modern Popular Culture in Argentina and Uruguay* (University of New Mexico Press), traces the growth and impact of popular entertainment, most notably the Creole Circus phenomenon in the late 1800s, and its enduring imprint on cultural marketplaces. His first book, *Everyday Reading: Print Culture & Collective Identity in the Río de la Plata, 1780-1910* (2011; Argentine edition 2013), was awarded the Latin American Studies Association Southern Cone Section 2013 Humanities Book Award. He is the editor of *The Gaucho Juan Moreira* (2014), and co-editor of *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (2009), *Jacinto Ventura de Molina: los caminos de la escritura negra en el Río de la Plata* (2010), and *Empire's End: Transnational Connections in the Hispanic World* (2016). Acree taught at San Diego State University prior to joining Washington University.

**Cécile Accilien** is professor and chair in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia. Her area of studies are Francophone African and Caribbean Literatures and Cultures and Film & Media Studies. She is the author of *Rethinking Marriage in Francophone African and Caribbean Literatures* (Lexington Books, 2008). She has also co-edited and contributed to two collections of essays, *Revolutionary Freedoms: A History of Survival, Strength and Imagination in Haiti* (Caribbean Studies Press, 2006) and *Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the U.S. South* (University of Virginia Press, 2007); She has published articles in the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, *Women, Gender and Families of Color*, *Southern Quarterly* and *Diaspora in Caribbean Art*. She has an upcoming co-edited volume (with Valérie Orlando) *Teaching Haiti: Strategies for Creating New Narratives* (University Press of Florida, 2021). She currently serves as chair of the Editorial Board of *Women, Gender and Families of Color* and is on the advisory board of the Haitian Studies Association.

**Gastón A. Alzate** is Professor of Spanish (Latin American Theater and Literatures) at California State-Los Angeles. He has published on Latin American theater, popular culture, literature, film, and visual arts in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Spain, the UK, and France. Along with Paola Marín he is director of the journal *KARPA*, which is dedicated to theater and visual culture criticism. *KARPA* encompasses miscellaneous aspects of Latin American and Iberian cultures such as political cabaret, dance, performance art, theater, graffiti, photography, and film. In his native country he won the National Essay Prize (Colombian Ministry of Culture). He was also the first *Latin American Theatre Review Cátedra Woodyard* recipient (University of Kansas) and was an invited Resident Researcher for a year at the International Center for Interweaving Performance Cultures (Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany).

**Pablo Assumpção Barros Costa** is Associate Professor of Dance and Performance and Chair of the Graduate Program in Interdisciplinary Arts at Universidade Federal do Ceará, in Fortaleza, Brazil. His writing has appeared in various journals, collections, and catalogues published in Brazil, focusing primarily on the politics and aesthetics of embodiment in performance art and everyday life, as well as the cultural politics of queerness and belonging in Northeast Brazil. In 2017, he was a Global Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University.

**Marta Caminero-Santangelo** is Professor in the English Department and Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She was born to Cuban immigrant parents in Canada, grew up in a suburb of Pittsburgh, earned her BA in English from Yale University, and received a PhD in English from UC Irvine. Caminero-Santangelo taught in Chicago before coming to The University of Kansas as an Assistant Professor in 1997. Her academic research involves the question of how literature interacts with the “real world.” She has published three books: *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Cornell UP, 1998); *On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (UP Florida, 2007); and *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino Narrative and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper* (UP Florida, 2016).

**Tiffany D. Creegan Miller** is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Colby College, and she works on contemporary Central American cultural studies, focusing on Maya literatures, oral traditions, and performance art. Her research interests include Latin American Indigenous social movements, decolonial theory, gender inequalities, and digital humanities. Her published work addressing Maya poetries and Indigenous LatinX diasporic identities in the United States has appeared in journals such as *Hispanic Studies Review* and *Label Me Latinola*, as well as edited volumes. Miller’s first book, *The Maya Art of Speaking Writing: Remediating Indigenous Orality in the Digital Age* (University of Arizona Press, 2022),

draws from fieldwork in the Guatemalan Highlands (2010–2019). She has an advanced linguistic proficiency in Kaqchikel Maya and currently serves as an advisor and volunteer translator/interpreter to a Guatemala-based medical NGO, Wuqu' Kawoq: Maya Health Alliance.

**Stuart A. Day** is Professor of Spanish (BS in Spanish and Education, Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education; MA in Hispanic Literature, University of Arizona; PhD in Latin American Literature, Cornell University). His first book, *Staging Politics in Mexico: The Road to Neoliberalism*, was published by Bucknell University Press. Day has also published several play anthologies. He co-edited *El Teatro de Rascón Banda: voces en el umbral* (Escenología) with Jacqueline E. Bixler; and *Mexican Public Intellectuals* (Palgrave 2014) with Debra A. Castillo. Recent books include *Outside Theater: Alliances That Shape Mexico* (University of Arizona Press, 2017) and *Modern Mexican Culture* (University of Arizona Press, 2017). Current projects are a book on documents (passports, voter identification cards, etc.) and the completion of three plays. Day is Managing Editor of the *Latin American Theatre Review*.

**Until his retirement in 2018, Alan Filewod** was Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, where he specialized in Canadian drama and political theatre. His books include *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada* (1987), *Workers Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement Since 1970* (with David Watt, 2001), *Performing Canada: The Nation Enacted in the Imagined Theatre* (2002), *Theatre Histories: Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* (2008), *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (2011) and a critical edition of the banned communist play *Eight Men Speak* (2013). He is a former editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* and has served as president of the Canadian Association for Theatre Studies, and the Association for Canadian and Quebecois Literatures.

**Paola S. Hernández** is Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she specializes in contemporary Latin American theatre and performance as well as Latinx Studies. She has published numerous articles on Southern Cone theater, performance and memory politics, sites of memory, human rights, and documentary theater. She is the author of *Staging Lives in Latin America: Bodies-Objects-Archives* (Northwestern UP, 2021), where she examines the role of the “real” in theatre and visual arts with an emphasis on contemporary documentary theatre in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. She has also authored *El teatro de Argentina y Chile: Globalización, resistencia y desencanto* (Corregidor, 2009), and is co-editor as well as of *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First-Century Theater: Global Perspectives* (with Brenda Werth and Florian Becker, Palgrave, 2013) as well as (with Pamela Brownell) of *BiodramalProyecto Archivos: seis documentales*

*escénicos* by *Vivi Tellas* (Papeles Teatrales, Universidad de Córdoba, 2017). Hernández is currently Director of the Center for Visual Cultures.

**Paola Marín** is Professor of Arts and Letters at California State University, Los Angeles. She has published on Latin American and Spanish literature, theater, and visual arts in academic journals in the United States, Mexico, Colombia, and the United Kingdom. She is co-editor of the *Editorial Karpa* (Cal State LA). Her book on the theater of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz entitled *Teología and conciencia criolla* was published by the University and Minnesota and Ediciones Clásicas in 2006. She translated into Spanish *Terror and Performance* by Indian cultural critic and director Rustom Bharucha, which was published with an introduction by Leo Cabranes-Grant (KARPA, 2017). Along with Gastón Alzate she co-edited the two volumes entitled *Cartografías críticas*. These are the proceedings of the research seminar on art and politics coordinated by Professor Ileana Diéguez Caballero at the Autonomous University of Mexico City (KARPA, 2018).

**Priscilla Meléndez** is Professor of Hispanic Studies at Trinity College in Hartford. She is a specialist in Spanish American theater and narrative of the 20th and 21st centuries and her research has centered mainly on Mexican, Argentine, and Caribbean theater. Meléndez has written on the works of the Mexicans Emilio Carballido, Vicente Leñero, Sabina Berman, and Hugo Salcedo, of the Argentines Osvaldo Dragún, Griselda Gambaro, Eduardo Rovner, and Diana Raznovich, and of Caribbean playwrights Luis Rafael Sánchez, José Triana, Alberto Pedro Torrente, and Gerardo Fullea León. She is the author of three books: *La dramaturgia hispanoamericana contemporánea: Teatralidad y autoconciencia* (1990), *The Politics of Farce in Contemporary Spanish American Theater* (2006) and *Asaltos al escenario: Humor, género e historia en el teatro de Sabina Berman* (2021). Her essays have appeared in *Hispanic Review*, *Symposium*, *Latin American Theatre Review*, *Gestos*, *Modern Language Notes*, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* (Washington University), *Latin American Literary Review*, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, and *Modern Drama*, among others. She earned her BA in Hispanic Studies from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras and received her PhD in Contemporary Latin American Literature from Cornell University.

**Antonio Prieto Stambaugh** specializes in contemporary Latin American theatre and performance art, focusing particularly on artists that deal with issues of gender, class and ethnicity. He is Professor of theater and performance studies in the Theater Department of the Veracruzana University (Facultad de Teatro, Universidad Veracruzana, in Mexico), where he currently chairs the graduate program in Performing Arts (Maestría en Artes Escénicas). He holds an MA in Performance Studies from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and a PhD in Latin American Studies from the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of Mexico's National University (UNAM).

Antonio Prieto Stambaugh is co-author with Yolanda Muñoz González of the book *El teatro como vehículo de comunicación* (Editorial Trillas, 1992); editor of four books, the most recent of which is *Corporalidades escénicas: Representaciones del cuerpo en el teatro, la danza y el performance* (Universidad Veracruzana–Argus-a, 2016); and editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Investigación Teatral. Revista de artes escénicas y performatividad*. He is a member of Mexico's National System of Researchers (SNI).

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# 1 Introduction: case studies in activist performance

*Stuart A. Day*

*The University of Kansas*

If anyone questioned the efficacy of grassroots organizing in the twenty-first century, the US Tea Party's success, eventually leading to the single-term election of Donald Trump in fall 2016, provided a clear answer: door knocking, social media engagement, plus locally and nationally organized rallies worked. The election stunned activists across the political spectrum—and across the world. Average people (with significant help from the US Electoral College, Vladimir Putin, conservative billionaires, the National Rifle Association (NRA), white evangelical churches, et cetera) had found a *performer*, a billionaire evil genius at the podium, someone to help them push back against the relatively progressive Barack Obama era in order to preserve white supremacy. Many of us looked on in despair as the 2016 election results came in, jealous of conservative success, ready to flood progressive organizations with cash, and determined to take back the power of performance, following a long tradition of progressive predecessors.

This book is about activist performances that change the Americas, from the Southern Cone to Canada. Small or large, activist performances are carefully staged and often self-referential. They add art to activism and vice versa. They are protests with dramatic structure (sometimes subtle, sometimes not), they have “scripts” (again, sometimes subtle, sometimes not; they are rarely logocentric), and they often require the participation of the powers that be, generally because they force authorities to make a choice: attack, retreat, or, occasionally, acquiesce. In this sense, they compel those in power to play a role. In their own roles, activist performers demand justice in myriad ways; at times they are humorous in their endeavours, at times deadly serious—at times both. Our main objective in the pages that follow is to demonstrate that the link between theater/performance and politics is anything but ephemeral. It need not be an afterthought or a “could be” but is, rather, an effective means to transform society.

Through the study of specific examples from numerous countries, we demonstrate a crucial, shared outlook: we affirm that ordinary people change the direction of history through performance. Our book is not a catalogue of successful protests, which would of course be impossible to compile. Nor does it attempt to cover all modes of activism. What we do

offer are concrete, compelling cases in an attempt to emulate the modus operandi of people like historian Howard Zinn, a writer who expressed himself in many genres, including theater. Zinn wrote the seminal underdog tome *A People's History of the United States*, which, as the title suggests, narrates history in a way that makes visible those who would otherwise remain in the shadows. In the same spirit, our chapters treat marginal groups (albeit of dramatically varying privilege and power) whose stories underscore the potentially unstoppable and transformative power of united, embodied voices.

In *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, Andrew Boyd and Dave Oswald Mitchell remind readers that “fools, clowns and carnivals have always played a subversive role, while art, culture and creative protest tactics have for centuries served as fuel and foundation for successful social movements” (1). Boyd and Mitchell, seasoned activists, also write that they perceive the increased importance and influence of artistic activism: “This new wave of creative activism first drew mainstream attention in 1999 at the Battle in Seattle, but it didn’t start there. In the 1980s and ’90s, groups like ACT-UP, Women’s Action Coalition and the Lesbian Avengers inspired a new style of high-concept shock politics that both empowered participants and shook up public complacency. In 1994, the Zapatistas, often described as the first post-modern revolutionary movement, awakened the political imagination of activists round the world, replacing the dry manifesto and the sectarian vanguard with fable, poetry [and] theater” (2). Heightened activist activity and awareness of the importance of performance inspire us to look to new (to some of us) forms of protest and to earlier periods, particularly the 1960s and ’70s, to uncover and document the components of their success.

Our examples often provide counterweights (identified variously in the chapters that follow as counternarratives, counterstate, part of the countermachine—as opposed to the narco-machine—counterjudicial incursions, et cetera) to the equally performative practices of powerful conservative entities in business and government, which can be easily discerned at every point in history. In his *Atlantic* article “The Case for Reparations,” for instance, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes about deceptively simple, cruel performances that, taken together, had an enormous impact on the not-so-distant past and that continue to stymie the possibility of equality throughout the United States. In a section of the article on racist housing practices in and around Chicago, Coates underscores the performative side of redlining, the discriminatory denial of loans and other services, as well as other racist housing practices:

Speculators in North Lawndale, and at the edge of the black ghettos, knew there was money to be made off white panic. They resorted to “block-busting”—spooking whites into selling cheap before the neighborhood became black. They would hire a black woman to walk up and down the street with a stroller. Or they’d hire someone to call a number

in the neighborhood looking for “Johnny Mae.” Then they’d cajole whites into selling at low prices, informing them that the more blacks who moved in, the more the value of their homes would decline, so better to sell now.

The next step in this racist practice was always to sell to Black families, who were forced to pay exorbitant prices under unreasonable, and in many cases unsustainable, terms.

Richard Rothstein, in *The Color of Law*, writes that blockbusting and many other unethical practices might have been business run but that the US government legislated segregation—and is therefore constitutionally responsible for its effects. He tells of the time future Pulitzer Prize-winning professor Wallace Stegner was recruited to Stanford University. Even then, housing prices were steep in Palo Alto, California. Stegner joined a housing cooperative that planned to build hundreds of houses on a large plot of land next to the university; however, “banks would not finance construction costs nor issue mortgages to the co-op or to its members without government approval, and the FHA would not insure loans to a cooperative that included African American members” (11). In other words, and as seen above and in the following chapters, some change—good or bad—happens only through the power of law, which is why judicial reform is central to most activists’ playbooks. But perception is also critical, and sometime the performance *is* the change. Without being overly prescriptive, in the following pages of this introduction I offer numerous brief case studies that begin to delineate the types of performances highlighted throughout this book.

In the examples above, Coates and Rothstein write about the midcentury US Midwest and the Bay Area, respectively. Not long after, in the early to mid-sixties, a set of performances, what Neil R. McMillen calls “high moral drama played out in ... public spaces,” were taking place in the South. Unlike the performances of predatory housing described earlier, these acts were staged as part of a large movement to challenge the small- and large-scale injustice of segregation. McMillen’s use of theater metaphors to describe activist engagement goes beyond a reference to everyday performance (the familiar notion that “all the world’s a stage”). He describes civil rights strategies and the way “black activists and their few white allies broke the back of Jim Crow by compelling a reluctant federal government to enforce the Constitution.” McMillen documents multiple staged demonstrations, in what he terms “the movement’s street theater period,” that changed the way the world saw civil rights protest. In Mississippi these included the Freedom Elections of 1963: “Aaron Henry, a Clarksdale pharmacist and state NAACP leader, and his slate of ‘Freedom Candidates,’ didn’t really have a prayer. In a state where nearly all blacks were disfranchised, they were ‘elected’ in an unofficial straw ballot by some 80,000 citizens who could not

legally vote. They were victorious, however, in the theater of national opinion.”

McMillen also outlines one of the better-known examples of scripted activist performance, part of the movement in Birmingham, Alabama: “Project C—Project Confrontation—scripted by Southern Christian Leadership Conference strategists for King’s 1963 Birmingham Campaign was not an exercise in idealism. Project C, as its name implied, was calculated to provoke an excessive show of white force in Birmingham that would unsettle the national conscience and force federal intervention .... The plan required a high degree of unwitting cooperation by Birmingham Police Commissioner Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor and his heavy-handed cops. Connor did cooperate, playing the role of a hardhearted ‘heavy’ as though he had read the script.” The images that resulted from the Birmingham campaign are widely considered to be critical in creating the perception, especially in the North, that it was no longer possible to turn a blind eye when it came to civil rights. The children who participated in the marches and other expressions of mostly peaceful resistance were not actors per se, but they were trained and assigned roles in the series of protests that made up the Birmingham campaign. The resulting photos of people being attacked by water cannons and canines were too much—either politically or ethically—for national leaders, including President John F. Kennedy.

The theatrics of the movement were critical to the success of mid-sixties social change, as was the idea that well-designed actions will force political foes to play a required role, a type of coerced improvisation that limits the responses available and plays to a person’s tendencies. (Improvisation is an art form that is, ironically, known for a high level of structure.) McMillen is clear about the impact of performance: “The Birmingham Campaign alone did not produce the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But no one should doubt that the weight of King’s demonstrations, combined with the 1961 Freedom Rides, the 1962 University of Mississippi integration crisis, and the broader southern struggle for suffrage and desegregation pushed the politically cautious Kennedy administration to introduce the sweeping legislation that President Lyndon Johnson later signed into law in 1964.” This is the type of link we underscore in the chapters that follow to add to global writing on the power of activism and, to a certain extent, to realign our reading of history as influenced by explicit performances that encompass the performative machinations not only of conservative elites but also of performers who resist the status quo.

A different but equally complex context—the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship, or *proceso*, that left up to 30,000 murdered and disappeared at the hands of the Argentine government—offers another example that civic engagement can induce change. Diana Taylor, writing about the activist performances of the groups HIJOS and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, contends that “the short- and long-term effects of these performances are difficult to measure. Over four hundred torturers have been brought to trial and are now serving

life sentences. Did the activism by Mothers and HIJOS make that happen? It's hard to prove, although we would probably be correct in saying that justice would *not* have been done had the groups not persisted." Taylor explains further: "As the Mothers and HIJOS have made evident, the search for justice is a long, durational performance. Although the tactics and circumstances change over time, it's the endurance and perseverance that prove efficacious" (153). As the acronym in Spanish implies, HIJOS represents children of the victims of the war, many of whom were forcibly taken and given to the families of the military; while the Mothers (and Grandmothers) of the Plaza de Mayo have gained worldwide attention for the constant presence they and others have held in Buenos Aires in front of the Argentine presidential palace. The incremental pressure both sets of activists fomented has led—and continues to lead—to real change in Argentina.

Taylor is spot-on in her assertion that "the search for justice is a long, durational performance," though she would also certainly agree that some performances result in more immediate—or immediately promising—change. The striking impact of activist performances, as was the case in Birmingham, can lead to swift action (granted, swift action followed by painfully slow, uneven change), often from politicians who either find an excuse to act or act because they can no longer find an excuse to remain silent. No matter the way people go about activist performances, both slow and dramatic change often occurs because people put their bodies on the line at a given time in history. Woven throughout the chapters that follow are performances that changed society *in the moment*—their very existence ushered in a different reality.

A recent example from my own experience is a meditation, livestreamed from the University of Kansas, by professor and playwright Darren Canady after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The performance and its framing were remarkable: it began with a bold statement by the university's chancellor, followed by eight minutes and forty-six seconds of silence—the length of time a police officer knelt on Floyd's neck—accompanied by nighttime views of the campus's campanile, a World War II memorial and one of the university's most iconic landmarks. What followed were Canady's words, performed by the artist himself:

This will be a year of burning  
 The streets are sweating  
 We are a nation measured in masks and infections and march numbers  
 and solidarity posts and caught up in a crucible of rage and pain and  
 bewilderment  
 Pressure packing us in to a confrontation  
 A reckoning  
 A collision with flesh and blood and spirit  
 Spirits named George and Breonna and Tony and Ahmaud joining this  
 great hovering host of blackness

Beautiful, aggrieved, still vivid blackness  
A mighty throng of witnesses who have felt the terror and the breaking  
and the bringing to heel of American Black bodies  
Black bodies across genders and ages and sexualities and places and  
times  
They throng up there with Emmett and Mary and Sandra and Amadou  
and tonight we fall before them and we shout them out and feel them  
pulling their names out of our throats, pushing some to tears  
Wrapping others in a precise, focused, steadfast anger that plants itself  
in front of batons and shields and closed gates and indifference.

But here you are *black and brown* in the heartland  
You here on this hill  
This second Oread  
This rising place above a golden valley  
Your minds sharp with intellect and pierced with talent  
You have come here to the Jayhawks' Nest and followed trails made  
possible by the same strength that holds that throng of spirits aloft  
And you have waited to be heard to be seen to be called in to  
community to be made at home and be celebrated  
you are not crazy when you say you have been shunned  
you are not lying when you say this school must do more  
you are not imagining the attacks and your exhaustion  
Let that same crucible scorching the nation also bring its heat here and  
let us scoop something new out of its ashes a place that knows this land  
we learn on—this land that has seen genocide and war and wagon  
wheels and free soil that this school set upon it will not turn away from  
the 2020 burning the sweating the throng of black spirits—that  
somehow we will fashion a place worthy of you and every bit of  
liberated humanity that you possess (“Meditation 2020”)

Canady's performance does many things: it references the racial pandemic as well as the COVID pandemic; calls out to the past, specifically the history of Kansas and the land upon which the University of Kansas was built; links present-day murders to past murders; and challenges the people who make up the University of Kansas—located on its own Mount Oread, with the Jayhawk as its mascot—to do better. Remarkable performances like this sometimes lead to change and sometimes not. But it is critical to recognize that sometimes the performance *is* the change. While Kansas was established as a free state and the University of Kansas has its own history of political activism (e.g., Canady's mother, Linda Canady, was a civil rights activist at KU in the 1970s), this was a counterperformance that gained power through context. Despite the fact that in 2020 almost 70 percent of Douglas County, where the city of Lawrence and the University of Kansas are located, voted for President Joseph Biden, Kansas is a red state. Words like those Canady

spoke represent a contextual rupture, an authorized aberration that did what performances do best: it left a before-and-after mark on the university that—as surprising and absurd as this might seem—authorized an immediate cultural change. It was now acceptable to proclaim, from classrooms to deans' offices, that Black Lives Matter.

Canady's performance also complicates the link between performance training and political activism. That is, one of the central ideas in this book is to link theater and performance training to political activism. But what "training" led to the power of this performance? A degree from Juilliard? Yes. Religion? Yes. Family tradition? Yes. The experiences of a Black, gay man in the United States? Yes. Working as a creative writing professor? Yes. Canady told me that as much as through his life experiences and artistic training, his words were formed through conversations: "I knew students were in pain and were telling me that their pain was so often unacknowledged." Performative pedagogy—that is, activist performance—is always already beyond the bounds of an academic discipline, even performance studies. And teaching—arguably the main goal of activist performance—offers an effective/affective way to fight ignorance.

In *Impure Acts: The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies*, Henry A. Giroux writes: "That racism exists among literate people suggests that more is at work than their ignorance of its untenable and contradictory logic .... Not only do students need to understand the economic and political interests that shape and legitimate racist discourses, they must also address the strong emotional investments they may bring to such beliefs" (104). Giroux quotes Shoshana Felman, who invokes Jacques Lacan's notion that ignorance is a passion: "Ignorance is nothing other than a desire to ignore: its nature is less cognitive than performative." At its best, performance lowers resistance to knowledge. And maybe people were transfixed, transformed, and moved to act by Canady's incantations—I certainly was. Yet Canady's performance, as I mentioned above, *was* the change.

The link between staged productions in performance venues versus public, political performance is central to the work of Mexican artist Jesusa Rodríguez, who ran a political cabaret in Mexico City for many years. When Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, lost his first presidential bid in 2006, Rodríguez offered a critical example of the connection between the theater space and the public, political sphere: "I placed everything I could at the disposal of the resistance movement protesting electoral fraud after Felipe Calderón was named president, especially for the large demonstrations in the *zócalo* that reached two million people," she told me in an interview. "What I proposed to them was that I could oversee the scenic direction of the pavilion because, in general, the pavilion is seen as a political concern, but in the end it follows the same laws as any stage." She certainly had an impact in her cabaret, as I have argued more extensively elsewhere, but as part of the resistance she used the tools of the trade on another, bigger, stage. Rodríguez continues: "I would say that it's an

amazing change to go beyond the cabaret—political farce created in an enclosed stage. We can really say that our work passes from one plane to another, where theater has direct political consequences, something that, as much as one tries, is not going to happen in the enclosed space of the cabaret. It’s like talking about the map and talking about the land; we have now moved to the land.” Breaking down the invisible fourth wall that separates spectators from the stage was always one of Rodríguez’s specialties, but walking out the door and into the streets added a new dimension to her work. Rodríguez—now the first openly gay senator in Mexico and more powerful than ever—promises to continue to apply her expertise in performance art to the national stage. Indeed, in an interview shortly after her 2018 election victory, she affirmed that the Senate, like the political cabaret and the campaign rally, is a theater, a stage (“Jesusa Rodríguez se viste de senadora”).

Despite the move from small to large stage that Rodríguez and others have accomplished, and despite (or perhaps because of) the actor or performance training that many activists experience, calling an activist an actor is one of the most powerful accusations in the destructive political arsenal; to be called an activist-actor or crisis actor is, of course, meant as the ultimate insult. To label an activist a paid actor is to tag them as an outside agitator, someone not authentically committed to a cause or legitimately part of a specific community. It is a tried and true way to delegitimize protestors and to fire up a base that always already feels threatened. A high-profile reminder of the activists-are-paid-actors strategy presented itself in the US in 2018. The performances resulted from yet another school massacre, this time in Parkland, Florida. The combination of well-funded, already-extant nongovernmental organizations, high-profile donors, and—most importantly—activist students like Emma González galvanized people on the left, while on the right her ultrashort haircut and *latinidad* were a threat—and therefore a boon—for NRA fundraising. And, of course, conservatives went on the attack, calling the students “actors.”

This was nothing new, as many people will recall. Michael E. Miller reminds us, for example, that “sixty-one years before teens at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., would survive a mass shooting only to be labelled ‘crisis actors,’ the nine African American teens who braved racist crowds to enroll in Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas were also accused of being impostors.” Part of the resulting defense from the NAACP was that the students were *not actors* but “children of local residents, including veterans” (Miller). The need to provide evidence to contradict the claim that protestors are not legitimate but, rather, paid actors is often necessary, but doing so (1) sets up a detrimental need to take a conservative, more-patriotic-than-thou stance and (2) leads to the denial of fruitful links. Regarding this second point, Michael Shulman points out that “one of the less inspiring things about the movement led by student survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting has been the