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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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DIONA ESPINOSA\*

## **Acting the Private, Intimate, and Public Body of Cuba. Review of Bretton White's *Staging Discomfort: Performance and Queerness in Contemporary Cuba*<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract

This study offers an alternative viewpoint for understanding contemporary Cuba after the 2000s from a performance studies perspective. *Staging Discomfort: Performance and Queerness in Contemporary Cuba* by Bretton White discusses how performing queerness in contemporary Cuban theater can also promote a counternarrative that criticizes the state's failing rhetoric about socialism and revolution in Cuba. She concentrates on queer bodies to examine key concepts like race, sex, marginalization, citizenship, and the state. The book considers five plays by Cuban playwrights that have been judged subversive, or have been censored or met with minimal official recognition from state cultural institutions. From the title one can already appreciate the questioning of the official Cuban cultural archive and political agenda. This selection brings to light an absent and urgent topic in current Cuban performance studies. In addition, it evokes a practice of resistance through artistic expression, as theater-makers and even audiences refuse to be silenced, reprimanded, or forgotten from their right to live in an inclusive and democratic country.

KEYWORDS: performance; queerness; theatre; Cuban theater; identity; counternarrative

How are theatrical spaces created in Cuba considering limitations of expression? How do queer themes connect the bodies of actors and spectators? These are the main questions that *Staging Discomfort: Performance and Queerness in Contemporary Cuba* by Bretton White intends to answer. The book focuses on the bodies of actors and spectators and their proximity, which creates an intimate relationship vital to the theatrical representation – in this case, the contemporary Cuban stage. This title presents under the queerness discourse key terms like fluidity, subjectivity, intimacy, citizenship, state, censorship, racism, and sexism to propose an understanding of how the intervention of queer performances constitutes a critique of the state's failing socialism in Cuba.

<sup>1</sup> Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2020, ISBN 9781683401544, pp. 258

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Queerness is a wide topic of analysis in Cuba, but White concentrates on examining queer bodies and their new affective modes. The author finds in the Cuban stage the capacity of queerness to imagine new subjectivities that reshape different forms of citizen participation. She remarks that the main purpose is rethinking “the capabilities of queer sexual intimacies that are produced by sex, the possibility of sex, or the proximity to sex (or its suggestion) in spite of and because of their tension with the state’s ideologies” (3).

Thus, the study is interested in the discomfort produced by intimacy and sexualized bodies not only in relation to artistic expression, but also to political activism in Cuba. Queerness is understood in this context taking into consideration gay bodies and at the same time other alternative identities that rise in the face of the established system of power.

Homosexuality on the island and, more broadly, queerness, has been a topic with a particular space within the Cuban project. The Revolution imposed rigid conceptions about sexuality; indeed, the norm established was white masculine heteronormativity. The government instituted in 1959 imposed strict standards in the construction of a new masculinity and declared homosexuals to be depraved, perfidious, questionable, and unconvincing to the new moral socialist order. Homosexuality was even proclaimed as a foreign and imperialist import, that needed to be eradicated under the ideological, moral, and political program. According to a speech pronounced by Fidel Castro in 1963, homosexuals represented a threat exhibiting their depraved and even “elvispreslian” behaviors. Castro affirmed that:

Muchos de esos pepillos vagos, hijos de burgueses, andan por ahí con unos pantaloncitos demasiado estrechos; algunos de ellos con una guitarrita en actitudes “elvispreslianas”, y que han llevado su libertinaje a extremos de querer ir a algunos sitios de concurrencia pública a organizar sus shows feminoides por la libre . . . Que no confundan la serenidad de la Revolución y la ecuanimidad de la Revolución con debilidades de la Revolución. Porque nuestra sociedad no puede darles cabida a esas degeneraciones. La sociedad socialista no puede permitir ese tipo de degeneraciones. ¿Jovencitos aspirantes a eso? ¡No! “Árbol que creció torcido”... ya el remedio no es tan fácil . . .

[Many of those lazy *pepillos*, children of bourgeois parents, walk around with shorts that are too tight; some of them with a little guitar in “elvispreslian” attitudes, and who have taken their debauchery to the extreme of wanting to go to some places of public concurrence to organize their feminoid shows on their own . . . Do not confuse the serenity of the Revolution and the equanimity of the Revolution with weaknesses of the Revolution. Because our society cannot accommodate these degenerations. Socialist society cannot allow that kind of degeneration. Aspiring youngsters? Nope! “Tree that grew crooked”... the remedy is not so easy . . . (translation mine)]

The image of the Cuban Revolution was conceived and promoted mainly by

young white leaders like Fidel and Raúl Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos, Ernesto Che Guevara, among others. The idea of the ‘macho’ who descended from the mountains of Sierra Maestra in Santiago de Cuba and became a victorious hero of the people created a mystical conception of a new man (*hombre nuevo*). These loyal, honorable, and courageous men were the ones able to fight, defend and reproduce the utopian prospect of the socialist project and the vision of the country and its population.

Consequently, the representations of queerness have been molded, coded, and articulated in a kind of soft visibility considering the pressure and control of power. The introduction of this book contextualizes the Cuban post-revolution stage and the role of the theater in times of crisis with performances that confront Cuba’s cultural system. In this first movement, *Staging Discomfort* underlines the challenge of queer representations, their visibility, and engagement via performance. Hence, the topic of queerness on the Cuban stage is also an examination of how bodies, and specifically queer bodies, possess a potentially political and subversive capital in modern Cuba. Queer bodies operate as alternative identities as against the official discourse, alternatives also to the established system of power.

Then, White reflects on what Judith Butler considers a certain kind of ‘appearance’ bound with her conception of gender as performative. If gender is “prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or other” (2009, 2), the reproduction of gender will be a negotiation with power, and therefore within the Cuban theatrical context will be a persistent and insistent counternarrative. White argues, using Butler’s terms, that she focuses on embodied presence:

her insistence on the plural repeatability of performance – as opposed to the unique, performed act – is related to how I envision the proliferation of intimacies. The spreading of discourse, performance, and intimacies undermines singularities and similarities by dispersing the sites where they take place . . . In my consideration of affect, I argue that discomfort, shame, frustration, longing, and failure can constitute affective bridges between bodies and can mobilize criticism. (18)

In particular, the book assesses five Cuban plays produced after 1959 that highlight the challenge of questioning the Cuban revolutionary model of masculine heteronormativity. The selection includes contemporary works from different theatrical directors, most of them located in Havana (*Las relaciones de Clara* directed by Carlos Díaz, Teatro El Público company; *Baños públicos, S.A* text by Esther Suarez Durán; *Pájaros de la playa*, directed by Nelda Castillo, El Ciervo Encantado company; *Chamaco* by Abel González Melo, directed by Carlos Celdrán, Argos Teatro company; *Perros que jamás ladraron* by Rogelio Orizondo, Teatro El Público company) which suggests that the most challenging, controversial, ‘visible’ and/ or knowable work occurs in the capital of the country. Chapters examine each of the plays critically, putting the original theatrical arguments and plots in dialogue with recent theoretical frameworks such as psychoanaly-

sis, behavioral theory, theater studies, and queer theory.

Chapter 1 “Instigating Intimacies: *Las relaciones de Clara* and Uncomfortable Closeness” analyzes a play directed by the Cuban director Carlos Díaz from Teatro El Público, an adaptation of the original German text by Dea Loher. The space of a colonial home is the context for *Las relaciones de Clara* (2007) and there appears an intimacy between actors and audience which generates an unpleasant, but warm shared space.

It is the concept of intimacy that has an important role in this analysis. Actors and spectators make a kind of involved association that recognizes during the performance the chance for an alternative Cuba. However, this nearness on both parts at the same time produces a liberty with discomfort, an awkward proximity that understands the necessity of the prostitution of bodies as the source of income. The idea of familiarity in the audience with the situations that Clara experiences, and the discomfort likewise, is what the author claims as queer sexual intimacies.

According to the queer theorist Leo Bersani and the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in *Intimacies* (2008), there are limitations in the imagination of intimacy, the limit for example of psychological curiosity. These constraints create tension in the dynamic between the audience and performers, depending on whether one accepts the status of witness and accomplice in the intimacy of Clara and the possibility of sex. According to Bersani there is a

move from a hermeneutics of desire to the pleasure of bodies. Correlatively, there is a profound shift in registers of intimacy: from our heterosexual culture’s reserving the highest relational value for the couple to a communal model of impersonal. (2008, 42)

In other words, White argues that in the case of Cuba and, particularly this work by the director Carlos Díaz, the intimacies create

dynamic spaces that upset the state’s organized, harmonious view of its populace . . . by participating in the work, if only through sheer proximity to it as an audience member, Cuban spectators become complicit actors in intimacies that directly disrupt the unified image that the state holds for itself and its citizens. (29)

In this chapter, the author proposes the possibility of analyzing and adapting a foreign text which has been reinterpreted for presenting Cuban-ness. It is not new for Carlos Díaz to make versions of foreign dramatists and destabilize traditional roles with queer performances, however the political, provocative, and avant-garde dimension of *Las relaciones de Clara* is striking because of the unique and paradoxical way in which it critiques the status quo.

On the other hand, the author presents Chapter 2 “Sharing Shame: Reimagining Entrepreneurship in *Baños públicos, S.A.*”, an analysis of a text by Esther Suárez Durán. The piece *Baños públicos, S.A* is a representation of clandestine



sexual behaviors in the intimate space of a bathroom. Equally, it represents the connection between dignity and shame, a dialogue for “unhinging from homonormative behaviors and encouraging queer freedoms” (73) through the prism of the queer discourse about national identity.

White asserts in this essay that *Baños públicos, S.A.* plays with an intimate space like a bathroom that has become common use in a kind of queer experience. Identity and embarrassment are at the same level of the experience, because

what is specifically mentioned in *Baños* is the bathroom space as a place for evacuation, and Él’s [one of the characters] imagined glorification of that space as a sort of tourist destination of bathrooms. She sees the need for more bathrooms in Cuba, and for Él and Ella’s [one of the characters] need for capital. Furthermore, during the Special Period, the state’s change to allow certain kinds of private businesses (and to ignore others) signals a fortuitous historical moment of capitalist permissiveness from which Él can benefit financially. (77)

In the words of Eve Sedgwick, the stage promotes the spectacle of narcissism; there performers can speak, dramatizing the “hyperbole of its original cast” (Sedgwick 2003, 38). In *Baños públicos, S.A.* there is the force of queer pride, and dignity like “different interlinings of the same glove” (77). The theatrical performance also has a transformational shame because

[it] interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though importantly it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and – performativity. (ibid.)

Instead of restricting actions, shame triggers the expression of identity, thus,

shame, then, instead of being an affect that limits the body, like guilt, creates an aura of movement and performance held internally that is not easily touched by the state’s power machinations . . . This is shame’s connection with performance – its moment of transformation – that can create movement out from underneath guilt’s weighty bodily connection. (76)

Chapter 3 “Frustrating Futurity: Beauty and Pain in *Pájaros de la playa*” explores representations of queer bodies dying of AIDS, their pains, and beauty. The examined play is a theatrical adaptation by the group El Ciervo Encantado based on the Cuban author Severo Sarduy’s homonymous novel. White explains that the conception of Cuban identity and gay subjectivity destabilize “the unilateral, future-focused, and fantastical power structure organized by the state” (2020, 107) where the performance is decidedly non-textual. *Pájaros de la playa* is an opportunity to experience the discomfort and frustration of a painful situation like a disease, but at the same time pushes a feeling of desire for a new concep-

tion of knowing and living in the body.

This essay also moves towards the archive and the repertoire, in the terms of Diana Taylor, proposing that text and performance break down the hegemonic binary of writing and performance, which is also a suggestion that crosses the entire book. The traditional and controlled content and practices of archival knowledge is eroded by queerness. Performances, as Taylor asserts in her text *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2015), are acts for transferring social knowledge, memory, and identity. Therefore, its presence in the repertoire and archive becomes an act of power. However, what we have with *Pájaros de la playa* is the expression of a counter-hegemonic discourse as the original text belongs to an author censored and prohibited in Cuba.

For its part, Chapter 4, “Vexing Visibilities: Space and Queerness in *Chamaco*”, based on the analysis of a text by Abel González Melo, argues that “an aesthetics of cruising could provide a visual and bodily tool for problematizing the state’s aging heteronormative and antagonistic project, through circularities and darkness that work against linearities and knowing” (147). *Chamaco* is a play where the space has an important role; it is indeed this instance that brings the idea of the queer. In the most hidden and obscure corner of the architecture in a colonial building of old Havana occurs an explosion of intimacy, sex, and body expression. For the author of *Staging Discomfort*, spaces, the absence of the stage of the actual architecture, and the substitution for black areas make it possible to reconsider what can be done or found in our imagination,

making the invisible visible, but the visibility takes place not on stage so much as in our imaginations. The (lasting) relationality of the play is an architectural structure and the actions that take place there that is constructed piece by piece in the audience members’ minds. (142)

Lastly, Chapter 5 “Fronting Failure: Testing Continuity in *Perros que jamás ladraron*”, examines a play by Rogelio Orizondo which “tackles failure thematically in its representation of bodies and identities that do not conform to the revolutionary ideal of its national citizenry” (174). The play presents seven monologues contextualized in Cuba after the Special Period. *Perros que jamás ladraron* has a special emphasis on racial identity along with gender and sex. The monologues highlight the exploration of the grotesque in contrast with the model of national identity and put into question the historical ideal of Cuban citizens and revolutionaries. White states that:

layering of bodies and practices that do not work, both thematically and structurally, might signify the possibilities of failure as a theatrical strategy, if audience members can stay with the disruptive and discontinuous experience of seeing the piece because failure points away from but does not prescribe. Failure’s lack of direction, then, suggests new ways to imagine Cuban identity, as well as new ways to stage it. (174)

Overall, *Staging Discomfort* presents smart and elegant arguments about a theater dependent on state funding for its survival, giving sustenance to performing and queer bodies – artists who, however, criticize the pressures of censorship and are imprisoned or blacklisted when they rise against the official apparatus. As White argues:

these pressures on queer identity and on performing bodies make it difficult to imagine something so organized as a movement taking place on Cuban stages, especially considering the dependence that practicing performers have on the state to be recognized as official artists. Without that recognition, performing artists risk access to the material support that they need. (215)

This volume bridges a scholarly gap providing an analysis of queerness and contemporary Cuba that opens avenues for further and deeper critical academic thinking. The author takes as a corpus of analysis plays with a counternarrative by Cubans and for Cubans, for which original texts or performances in one or another case have been considered subversive, blacklisted, censored (mostly by the state), or with very low official recognition. However, *Staging Discomfort* offers a kind of unity in the constant call for reflection on art's subversive capacity and potential threat not only to the state but also to the normative understanding of national identity. On the other hand, the definition of queer has indeed adopted a non-normative identity, its non-homogeneous, but rather fluid nature underlining "how theater can reach, touch, and spread feelings" and "how queer intimacies can be elusive and omnipresent, but that they might be experienced but not articulated in the bodies of spectators" (24).

Furthermore, White's proposal is also an encouraging attempt to approach some strategies, subjectivities, and negotiations from a queer theorization and performance perspective, that stress relations with the Cuban State. This selection of plays brings to attention not only the absence of queerness in most of the revolutionary period, but also the contemporary characterizations of people who resist in many ways and forms of expression and are censured, marginalized, or forgotten from the public and governmental agenda.

What Bretton White took as a corpus of study related to theater and performance studies goes beyond that field, and *Staging Discomfort* could be an alternative text to understand many contemporary and critical themes in Cuba after the 2000s. However, a lot has changed on the island since the publication of this book in May 2020. On one hand, same-sex marriage was just approved with more than 66 percent by a referendum in September 2022. Nevertheless, the totalitarian regime still condemns performances, independent initiatives, and unofficial artistic productions, making it clear that queerness, and Cuba in general, is far from experiencing freedom of cultural expression. Censorship is nowadays harsher than ever before; the island is immersed in one of the darkest periods, which represents the context for works such as those presented by White. Further, in the current Cuban scenario, *Staging Discomfort: Performance and Queerness in Contemporary Cuba* investigates the queer archive, revolution-

ary rhetoric, and what frustrations, failures, and even hopes are recorded for staging future Cuba.

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