

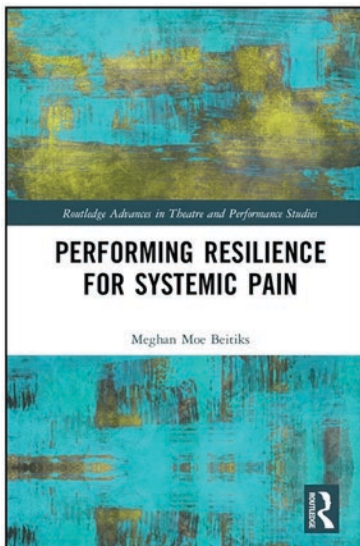
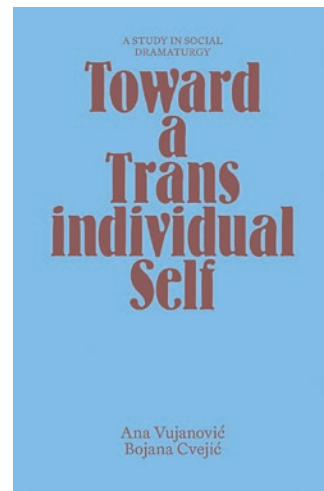
Concerning Books

Mobilizing and Sustaining Affect

Collective Awareness as Leverage for Social Change

Ana Pais

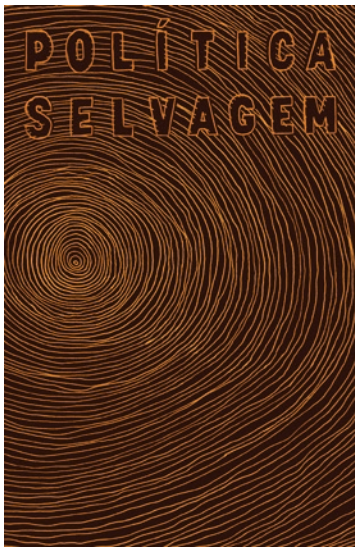
Toward a Transindividual Self: A Study in Social Dramaturgy. By Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić. Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Sarma, and Multimedijalni InSTITUTE, 2022; 338 pp.; €20.00, paper.



Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain. By Meghan Moe Beitiks. Routledge, 2022; 160 pp.; illustrations. \$157.84, cloth, \$52.95 paper, e-book available.

Performances do tempo espiralar. Poéticas do corpo-tela [Performances of Spiral Time: Poetics of the Body-Screen]. By Leda Maria Martins. Cobogó, 2021; 254 pp.; illustrations. R\$69.00, paper.





Política Selvagem [Wild Politics]. By Jean Tible. GLAC e n-1 edições, 2022; 320 pp.; R\$60, paper.

On 9 November 2022, Brazilian neuroscientist and science communicator Sidarta Ribeiro gave a talk at the Dance School of the Federal University of Bahia about his new book on the importance of dreams to enable the changes that need to happen for a more solidary world in resonance with the planet. Indebted to Indigenous cosmivision, wisdom, and practices, Ribeiro emphasizes the need of collective dreaming not only for health restoration but also for potentially connecting humans and nonhumans, diverse traditions, and modes of knowledge. The goal is to heighten social bonds in order to dream a better future for the planet.

The audience in the Teatro Experimental da Escola de Dança da UFBA was a particularly vibrant one. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had just been elected President of Brazil for the third time—two terms before Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and now a third ending his reign. The electoral victory against

Bolsonarism, which has undermined, persecuted, and censured the university and the arts during Bolsonaro's term, gave extra verve to the occasion. In the streets of Salvador da Bahia, one could almost touch the hope and love radiating from people's bodies, gestures, and voices. People owned their democratic victory and wore it like new Sunday clothes. Despite the nostalgic dimension to the mood (longing for Lula's victory is a present connected to a familiar past rather than an unknown future), it was a moving time to witness, where 72% of Bahia citizens voted for him. Surely, the mood must have been different in other states (Brasília, for instance) where tensions and protests rose. Ribeiro shared his thoughts on the elections with the audience: "We needed to activate the dream in order to elect Lula" (Ribeiro 2022).¹ Collective dreaming mobilizes affect and bodies to bring about change. Yet, for me the question remains: how can these forces be effectively sustained through time to build more equal and fair communities, to claim enduring equity and justice?

Processes of social transformation, political mobilization, and corresponding performances of identity are at the core of performance practice and performance theory's concerns. The books with which I dialog here emerged in a time of profound social vulnerability: in the wake of the pandemic, which has exacerbated existing social, gender, and racial inequalities; in a moment when Western democracies are witnessing ideal conditions for the rise of world conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine that precipitated an energy crisis in Europe and inflation throughout the globe; when xenophobic populism, as well as conservative and persecutory mentalities openly attack religious, racial, cultural, sexual, and gendered minorities; and in a moment of radical climate change challenges.

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1. All translations from Portuguese are my own.

There is a pressing need for strategies that support hopeful visions of the future and foster collective alliances and actions. Resistance is key to such an endeavour: how can we perform resistance collectively in times of pervasive neoliberal individualism? Taking action is key: in what ways can artistic practices and performance theory encourage, promote, and experiment with alternative conceptions for living together? Emotional health is key: how can individuals and communities heal trauma and foster solidarity and care for others and the planet as a whole?

Affect—by which I mean the affective experience including conscious and nonconscious processes of attachment to the world—tends to be acknowledged as a factor in initiating and fueling collective processes of change, but tends to be forgotten in relation to the sustenance of the actual changes resulting from those processes. Considered a fundamental activator of collective imagination and action for change, affect is, however, often left out when thinking of its sustainment. I suggest that resistance can be empowered by acceptance and receptivity, instead of opposition: strengthened by gentleness. As martial arts remind us, nonresistance can leverage the other's force in combat. Awareness of the influence of affect in private and public realms can be a relevant strategy to leverage and sustain collective processes of protest for long-term change.

Resisting

The crisis of the social in neoliberal capitalist Europe in the 21st century comes into focus in *Toward a Transindividual Self*, the most recent collaboration between Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić (dance and performance studies researchers, dramaturgs, and writers engaged in self-organized cultural and artistic projects for more than 20 years). As in their first coauthored book, the main concern regards the profound lack of collective actions and movements in the West that could challenge the dominant individualistic ideology today.

The main argument of the book is that sometimes, under certain conditions, one can perform a transindividual self: a self that is produced by a process of collective and individual co-individuation, which implicates the constitutive interdependence of the other and the social, and is thereby profoundly challenging to neoliberal individualism (11). Anchored in public protests (self-organized movements against austerity in Europe since 2011) and drawing on artistic projects, this argument, strongly rooted in philosophical and performative frameworks, opens alternative paths to imagining and performing diverse kinds of sociality and modes of action in public. That is, it posits transindividuality as a crucial human ontogenetic condition and a practice of individual and collective existence (262). For the authors, transindividuality is the “capacity of the ‘we’: what we have in common, and what we can be and can do together in social and political senses” (181). Drawing upon Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation as well as Étienne Balibar's notion of a transindividual community, the authors build a theory of transindividuality that considers the subject's social movements against austerity. Broadly speaking, these movements prefigure an alternative performance of the self—a transindividual self that constitutes both a singular and collective subjectivity, coextensively and interdependently. Performing is crucial to transindividuality because it develops “solidarity as a common notion, based on a social imagination, and the practice of a political vision in the public sphere” (222). Modeled after Victor Turner's social dramaturgy, in tandem with the proposed concept of transindividuality, self-organized practices provide evidence of a possible “transindividual political community,” a continuous and open-ended process of negotiation, resistance, and cooperation (227).

According to the authors, “affect is the driving motor of coming together,” as it plays a crucial role in organizing resistance, making alliances, and organizing a political community (223–24). Could affect also be the driving force behind sticking together? If affect is decisive for the mobilization of bodies in protest and resistance, it is equally important to support and sustain the union of the same political communities that emerge from protest and resistance. How can such movements endure and transform the continual forces of repression that bounce back on street protests?

Considering social movements and protests around the world from the Paris Commune to self-organized Indigenous rebellions, Brazilian political scientist Jean Tible diagnoses the current

moment as overlapping end-of-the-world scenarios and unachieved hopes—a dead end for imagining a mode of capitalism compatible with representative democracy, a state of well-being, and equal opportunities (42). In *Wild Politics*, Tible makes the radical claim that protests open a political plane of equality, which has been systematically repressed by the political order of the nation-state: the order of obedience (31). Political protest and self-organized movements against forms of oppression radically forge a path toward wild thought and creativity that comes with the “joy of enchantment, of being together, creating collectively, devoting vital energies” to the same common purpose, produced in encounters (24). In contrast with the focus on the production of subjectivities proposed by Vujanović and Cvejić’s model, Tible engages with historical facts and events from New Delhi to New York, Latin America, the Middle East, and Hong Kong in the mode of performative storytelling that inspires and expands the notion of (social) movements as modes of knowledge production and forms of new inquiry and transformation (58–59). Discussing democracy and the nation-state’s selectively repressive foundational principle, Tible claims that there is a transnational movement united by the common enemy of capitalism (166), and that social change also emerges from urban and natural landscapes such as cities, forests, and mountains. He draws our attention to Indigenous protests sustained by a cosmovision that accentuates the spiritual elements inherent in the political. For instance, he writes about ceremonial rituals that connect humans with the spirits of the forest, who are able to provide images and information on how to proceed with their protests (168–69). The spirits of the forest together with the *encantados* (enchanted)² provide knowledge and political imagination as well as affective support to inspire and mobilize the collectives to take action through the ritual enactment of forces, which in turn strengthen the community. Environment, collectivity, culture, and political action are vitally entangled in Indigenous culture.

Receiving/Asking Permission

In a recent panel about the role of Indigenous modes of knowledge in educational and artistic training in Brazil, at the 2023 Universidade Federal de Bahia (UFBA) conference, Cacique Ramon Tupinamba and Nádia Akauã Tupinamba asked permission of their ancestors—the Tupinamba, the first Indigenous people of Brazil with whom the Portuguese made contact—to speak before an audience of 200 professors and students. Being Portuguese myself, I could not help but feel the cultural awkwardness of being in the presence of the original Tupinambas that my ancestors (present as a hovering shadow) oppressed, enslaved, and persecuted. The presence of all these ancestors could be felt in my body as tension and embarrassment (their effect on me) but also as what I perceived as a tangible expansion of Cacique Ramon and Nádia Akauã’s bodies before the audience. It felt as if their bodies reverberated the strength of their ancestors like vibratory forces so dense that the audience could almost touch them. Their bodies seemed to occupy more space; they owned the land. I had witnessed similar formalities but usually coming from Western individuals, acknowledging the original people of the land on which they were living. Yet, in those instances their bodies did not seem to occupy more space in the room. I also realized I hardly ever consider my ancestors in my life; I rarely ask their permission to talk because, as a scholar in the academy, I feel entitled to express myself in public, to propose, to question, or to debate ideas. I wondered if the gentle ritual of asking permission to speak can teach us about building communities, about what we can do together and how we can sustain and endure processes of change. Similarly, to a transindividual performance of the self, asking permission produces a subject in relation to an inherent other (of whom permission is asked) who continually weaves an invisible, affective, cross-temporal, and cross-spatial—human and nonhuman—fabric that supports ideas, movements, and actions to come. Flexible though structured, this fabric offers support for community building through change.

Afro-Brazilian performance scholar Leda Maria Martins has carried out seminal research into the cross temporalities of religious rituals (namely, the syncretic tradition of Congadas in

2. *Encantados*, a Brazilian Portuguese word that translates a cosmogonic concept shared by various native cultures in Brazil to refer to the deceased, to the nonhuman or, more generally, to spiritual beings that offer protection and guidance.

Bantu culture) and Black Theatre. Awarded the prestigious Jabuti essay prize in 2022, the book *Performances of Spiral Time: Poetics of the Body-Screen* is a compilation of essays that bring together Martins's concepts of ancestry and spiral time, which are crucial to her work. Highly influential in the Brazilian academy for its theoretical contribution to the field, the book offers a detailed discussion of the groundbreaking decolonial concepts that Martins developed, such as *oralitura* (aurality), *corpo-tela* (body-screen), *ancestralidade* (ancestry), and *tempo espiralar* (spiral time). Together, the essays create a key conceptual framework in the field of performance studies drawing upon Afro-diasporic bodily practices, knowledge, and philosophical thought. I focus on the concepts of ancestry and spiral time, which are for me—as they are for Martins—inseparable; these notions of ancestry expand contemporary Western (white) understandings of being a collective or a nation with a shared memory.

Ancestry is a foundational concept in many cultures, including both Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous, that pervades daily life practices. According to Martins, these practices are anchored in a specific kind of perception and experience of temporality (23). Opposed to linear time, spiral time “can be ontologically experienced as movements of reversibility [...] simultaneity of presence, past, and future; as ontological and cosmological experiences anchored in a basic principle of bodily movement, not stillness, as in Aristotelian philosophy. In bent temporalities, time and memory are images that reflect each other” (23). In contrast to circular time, spiral time moves in a gradual and continuous way, expanding or constraining, upwards or downwards. One never goes back to the same point in time but to an expanded or contracted space/time fold that simultaneously embraces that which came before and will come after. This nuanced understanding offers a crucial perspective to enacting collective imagination and action for change, sustained by affective forces. Understanding community through the lens of spiral time allows us to think-feel the force both of the past and the future in the present, humans and nonhumans, matter, and spirit (humans and gods).

Spiral time is integral to ritual and social practices such as asking permission to talk. The kindness of such ceremonial gestures is significant. Asking permission is not merely the act of formality. Rather, it is a way of creating space for words to resound through time, acknowledging the past and the future; of appearing in public to others, not only as bodies present in the room but as making present other affective forces, including of those who came before. Asking permission gently positions the one who asks in a wider, meaningful context and invokes the presence of the ancestors in the present, remembering and performing affective attachments. Asking permission is a gentle way of leveraging the force of the opponent (for Sidarta Ribeiro, the academic institution of UFBA), of strengthening a political position with softness and candor (“just” asking permission). The colonial West does not know of such gentleness.

This discussion is timely in Brazil. While the postelection wave of euphoria is fading, love and hope (words used in Lula's campaign to fuel the dream) must materialize as political realities. Together with social imagination, love and hope can sustain communities to achieve the dignity of labor and equal opportunity, education and quality healthcare, and access to culture and the arts. The recently appointed president of the governmental foundation Funarte (responsible for national public policies on arts and culture), Maria Marighella, claimed in a public debate of the UFBA congress: “it is high time that the force of ideas and affects is materialized in actual politics for culture” (2023). This is the challenge, she added, that arts and cultural agents in Brazil need to face. For that, love and hope can be the “sticky” affects—to use Sara Ahmed's influential concept (Ahmed 2004)—that can hold the community together in the pursuit of a shared goal or when carrying out a common action. How can the arts, and performance in particular, create, enact and materialize ideas and affects to imagine and sustain a common future based on solidarity and care?

Philosopher, writer, and inspiring leader of the Indigenous movement in Brazil Ailton Krenak famously claims: “the future is ancestral” (Krenak 2022). There is no future without all that there has always been before us: rivers, mountains—the wild. Hence, the future is also our contemporaneity as it demands a careful attention to the affective ecologies of the present. Perhaps performance activates layers of interdependent and interactive living systems across times and spaces, striking invisible though strongly felt chords.

Artistic Creation as Supporting Networks

Like many performance artists, Meghan Moe Beitiks is invested in imagining and sustaining common futures through the collective enactment of affect, with a particular healing narrative. Her artist book *Performing Resilience for Systemic Pain* focuses on pain as an embodied experience that transcends the individual as pain is positioned within systemic structures of power. The volume follows the artistic process of her project *Systems of Pain/Networks of Resilience* (2015–2018): residencies (Nebraska, New York, and Santa Fe) in which Beitiks interviews locals with experiences in recovering from painful ordeals, culminating in the final exhibition of the project. “Things, people and places help us heal: we do not only heal ourselves” (24). This oft-repeated mantra shapes the book itself with soothing qualities—overflowing with care, vulnerability, and resilience. Connecting individual pain with collective pain and transforming it through artistic creation (whether directly involving the community or not) is one way the arts can contribute to sustaining affective networks, support resistance, and open spaces for raising awareness of the influence of affect in our lives. It’s a way of caring for the present and the future.

Highly aware of the cultural conditionings of both observation and feeling the world around us, Beitiks seeks to share the intentions of her artistic project: to demonstrate that “the forced distance of observation pulls the sighted viewer back into the reality of how they are looking at things, pulls them fully into the present” (18). Discerning affect, as Teresa Brennan would put it, and finding the right words to name bodily states and sensations is crucial to public health (Brennan 2004). That is also what Beitiks’s book aims to do by concentrating on three main operating concepts to work through and transcend the experience of pain: observation, description, and listening. These allow us to displace our common perception of the world, revealing the systemic influence of structures of power as well as raising awareness of our attachments to people, situations, values, etc. Hence, accepting pain, instead of fighting it, can strengthen resilience; discerning the damages of pain can leverage the fight. Artistic projects such as this connect singular experiences within a network of awareness, which is crucial to supporting collective subjectivities and actions, precisely because art has the potential to build narratives that help healing the pain. Such artistic activations can touch our hearts.

As mobilizing forces, love and hope can work to fuel political resistance and action so vigorously that they may quiet pain. This is a challenge for democracy, for the capacity of doing things together, for the capacity of imagining the ancestral future and maintaining the vibrancy of affective mobilization. Without artistic practices such as Beitiks’s, change has less of a chance to stick, despite its apparent visible impact on specific actions of protest. Pain needs to be cared for, individually and collectively, for as much as it can inflame political and artistic action it can also destroy bodies and hearts alike.

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