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Performance, Identity and Immigration Law: A Theatre of Undocumentedness by Gad Guterman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. pp. 236. ISBN: 978-1137412485

Immigration issues carry multiple opportunities and problems that manifest differently for a number of groups, creating tension, inspiring passion, and thus rendering these issues politically difficult. As people move across borders into the United States, legal frameworks divide individuals into reductive categories of documented immigrants and undocumented non-citizens. In his first book, Gad Guterman, Head of the Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy Program at the Conservatory Theatre of Arts at Webster University, provides a detailed discursive analysis of theatrical works to illustrate how legal language defines the identity of those dealing with situations of undocumentedness. Guterman has spent nearly 20 years writing, directing and teaching theatre, focusing on relationships between theater and the law. The object of analysis in this book is a “theater of undocumentedness,” a theatre movement with many historical antecedents that has been circulating through small playhouses in border cities, Chicago and New York City since 2006. He addresses a number of the more well-known pieces by Josefina López, *Culture Clash*, Arthur Miller and Michael John Gárces, among others that he considers to fit into the theatre of undocumentedness.

In order to analyze these theatrical depictions of “border scenarios,” Guterman focuses on plays depicting the tenuous nature of immigrant status in the United States, both from an individual and collective perspective. While Guterman addresses plays that describe terrible instances of injustice, oppression, and violence towards those with undocumented status, he points out that most of the plays he reviews focus mainly on the powerful and hopeful stories of immigrants who “overcome” their illegal status in order to live as a “normal” juridical subjects in the U.S. legal system. For example, he relates the plot of *Real Women have Curves*, a 1987 play by Josefina López, about a group of women in a textile factory in East Los Angeles told by Ana, the teenaged protagonist. Ana is a documented citizen, but her family and the community she interacts with are not. The story, Guterman maintains, is intended to access notions of class and gendered wage labor, along with the way women must carefully craft their identities in order to evade the ever-watchful gaze of immigration police and those that might report them to the immigration police. At the same time, he claims that the plot breaks with reductive stereotypes associated with undocumented laborers by portraying nuanced characters in complex situations. Despite Ana’s struggles with a low-wage job, family, and body issues that are particularly harsh for women of color, her confidence and resolve are compelling. Guterman argues that one of the more memorable scenes takes place when Ana strips to her underwear in the sweltering

heat of the factory and convinces the other workers to do the same. Ana is also shown speaking out about the unjust economic realities she and her coworkers face that cause much of the conflict with the power structure that *Real Women* indirectly portrays. Guterman suggests that the normative ending—Ana’s acceptance of a scholarship to New York University and subsequent move away from her family and community to New York, living the American Dream, could be understood to undercut Ana’s revolutionary spirit and her dedication to being a strong member of her community. He argues that through Ana’s actions, the audiences become familiarized with new kind of American Dream that is borne by its relationship to specific circumstances of undocumentedness (p.61).

Instead of seeing this type of normative ending as major point of contention regarding the efficacy of theatre of undocumentedness, this and other theatre plots Guterman discusses allow him to emphasize that identity is performative—particularly so in the cases he outlines—as it encounters the legal frameworks of immigration and undocumentedness. His work with each play he analyzes is a nuanced triangulation among Linda Bosniak’s work on citizenship and alienage, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, and Judith Butler’s notion of *performative identity*. Throughout the book, he highlights a major point in Bosniak’s (2006) work on immigration law—immigration status works only through other forms of identification. Guterman quotes Bosniak (2006) in the first chapter, “It seems clear that there are certain characteristics that structurally shape the lives of most non-citizens...” (p. 14). He relates Bosniak’s statements to Foucault’s (1975) *Discipline and Punish* to discuss how lives and bodies are organized in relation to the law and other social disciplinary systems. Through each example he analyses, Guterman engages Judith Butler’s concept of *performativity*, in which gestures and everyday speech acts perform and construct identity, calling into question the idea that an identity is the interior quality of the individual that performs identity construction (1990). These performative actions of identity construction—gestures, speech acts, etc.—are situated within larger social contexts and frames of discursive power that generate cultural signification for bodies. This work explores how these manifest in labor, families, sexuality, and gender. Guterman expands on just this concept of performativity and how it is enacted through legal frameworks that exert power over how individuals express their own interiority through secondary performative actions, policing their speech, their bodies and the way they interact with the world. More importantly, he is interested in complicating this notion that identity is internally policed through performance by contending, much like Butler (1993), that that this policing can be reversed or contested through performativity itself. Guterman returns each time to theatre performances critiquing “immigrant subjectivities” (p. 15), created as a result of the power legal frameworks have over the lives of the undocumented. This can also happen in a more quotidian realm, as he describes in his last chapter.

This last chapter differs from the rest of the book in that it examines performative practices that occur outside of the theater. Guterman explains that the daily street performances of the life sized Disney characters and other characters— emblematic of a warm, fuzzy capitalism present in New York’s Times Square—are usually, if not always, undocumented individuals who work in obvious illegality feet away from the Disney stores and trinket shops where they could never be employed. Sometimes they act out in accordance to their status as “illegals” and are punished for it. Sometimes they act inappropriately to make the characters, the area, and perhaps even American capitalism appear undesirable to tourists. These practices are indicative of the performances that real people engage in every day to subvert the rule of law over their identities.

Guterman’s compelling examination of the discursive aspects relating to labor, family, sexuality, and gender identity in correlation to legal statuses present in the theater of undocumentedness illustrates the realities that exist between illegal and legal, citizen and non-citizen on the contemporary American stage. In creating a performative sphere of existence, these theatrical performances often succeed not just in calling attention to but also in subverting legal identities, opening categories of identification to encompass the variety of ways in which individuals exist in the world.

References

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Reviewer

Britt Paris is currently a PhD student in Information Studies at UCLA. Her research centers on application of critical theory to information organization, temporal aspects of networked communication technologies that affect value creation, and evolving information landscapes and their intersection with human subjectivity. She received her M.A. in Media Studies from The New School in 2013.