

in ekphrastic essay writing, focusing on performance and video art. Here, Sack explores the possibility of thinking of tears as akin to punctuation – a creative and critical way into meaning-making even in the face of the inscrutable.

While Sack clearly states that this book is not a history of tears, if there is an essay that comes close to writing this history, it is ‘Learning How to Cry (Again): Or, How Actors Keep Feeling the Past’. One might even say that tears are used here to write a short performance history of masculinity. The chapter moves between time frames and encompasses everything from the *Iliad* to Sam Taylor-Johnson’s (formerly known as Sam Taylor-Wood) *Crying Men* series (2002–4); from Diderot’s *The Paradox of the Actor* (written in 1773; published in 1830), to the author’s own experience of acting and (not) crying. Other stops along the way include important (and often disturbing) discussions of the uses and abuses of method acting – particularly Lee Strasberg’s advocating the use of one’s own experience to produce tears.

Having moved from the historical to the structural, and from sense memory to materiality, in ‘The Weeper’s Toolbox’ Sack turns attention to the prosthetic, prop and prompt to think about tools that ‘work at crying from the outside in’ (p. 94). This investigation moves deftly on to the last full chapter, ‘On Getting Water from a Stone’, which situates an insightful reading of *Pinocchio* between a discussion of crying statues of the Virgin Mary and crying robots in *Blade Runner* to ask questions about the humanity of tears, and how tears figure as a sign of nascent humanity.

This nascent humanity is taken up in ‘Teaching How to Cry’, an epilogue of sorts that provides an admirable ending to a study that, conceptually, knows it can never get a hold of tears. It takes the form of an autobiographical memory of Sack delivering a lecture he had given many times. This time, though, as he reads a fragment from Walter Benjamin, the academic cannot explain why his voice falters and his eyes water. I appreciate that the writer, while guessing at what could have happened, keeps open the mystery that he really does not know. Perhaps this is gendered – and Sack mentions as much – since I have had this experience too many times to name and have long since given up wearing the mask of the (white straight male) masterful lecturer expected of faculty in higher education. But as Sack’s smart and affecting essays make clear, tears make a spectacle of us all, turning each of us from automata into humans.

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***Theatre, Activism, Subjectivity: Searching for the Left in a Fragmented World.***

Edited by Bishnupriya Dutt and Silvija Jestrovic. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. Pp. xxiv + 296. £90 Hb; £30 Pb.

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In this volume, editors Bishnupriya Dutt and Silvija Jestrovic gather an urgent and diverse collection of essays that both interrogates and reimagines the sociocultural politics of the left. Emerging from the British Academy-funded project Cultures of the Left, the volume assembles an international and interdisciplinary group of artists, scholars and activists grappling with the reality of our fractured present. What remains of the left – and how a future left manifests itself.

Structured in three parts – ‘Activism’, ‘Theatre’ and ‘Subjectivity’ – the book draws its strength from dissonance. Rather than presenting a singular ideological line, it dwells in fragments, contradictions and contested inheritances. It does not search for unity but instead excavates the

fissures through which alternative solidarities might emerge. From neurodivergent modes of resistance and affective intimacies to street performances and constitutional dramaturgies, these essays collectively challenge what counts as political action and who gets to perform it.

Throughout, the book resonates with what José Esteban Muñoz described as the ‘forward-dawning futurity’ of queer utopia – a horizon of possibility glimpsed through shared risk, minor gestures and discontinuous time. This is not simply a text about theatre or activism; it is itself a speculative act of collective study, a rehearsal for how to imagine a new political future.

Several contributions exemplify this ethos of queer world making. Anika Marschall’s essay, grounded in the aesthetics of shyness and neurodivergence, unsettles the assumption that resistance must be loud, visible or heroic. In turning to the poetics of withdrawal, opacity and vulnerability, she offers a vision of activist practice, deeply attuned to difference, that also resonates with the disabled-bodies critique of ableist culture that perpetuates our political and social system. Similarly, Silvija Jestrović’s reflection on ‘revolutionary intimacies’ refuses the binary of public and private, showing how friendship, love and affective failure form the undercommons of political desire. These pieces, among others, challenge the left’s long-standing prioritization of mass mobilization by foregrounding the intimate as a legitimate and powerful site of resistance.

Subjectivity, as the third section of the book signals, is not peripheral to the volume’s argument – it is its critical fulcrum. Against the grain of universalist ideologies, the essays foreground situated, embodied and relational political identities. In her chapter on communist women’s cultural labour, Urmimala Sarkar Munsri shows how political agency is forged at the uneasy intersection of discipline, desire and memory. These subjective archives are not ancillary to political discourse – they are its condition.

In a similar gesture, Shirin Rai’s autobiographical meditation moves through family history, loss and uneven alliances, reminding us that leftist legacies are often carried through bodies, rituals and everyday acts of care. Here, the personal is not merely political – it is historiographical. It is through such feminist and queer reorientations that the book insists on alternative genealogies of resistance and collectivity.

Theatre, in this context, is not treated as a stable category but as a mutable and mobile force. The chapters consider performance not only on stages but in the streets, in hunger strikes, in courtroom testimonies and in the affective encounters of daily life. Adrian Kear’s essay draws from the work of Anna Deavere Smith to think through the dramaturgy of testimony and historical witnessing, while Bishnupriya Dutt’s chapter traces the radical feminist lineage of Indian street theatre. Across the volume, performance is understood as a porous and generative form: at once analytical and affective, archival and anticipatory.

Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, *Theatre, Activism, Subjectivity* composes a repertoire of responses to our political present. These responses do not consolidate into ideology, nor do they aspire to blueprint a coherent ‘left future’. Instead, they offer dispersed, relational and fragile strategies of survival and resistance – what decolonial and black feminist thinkers have called ‘fugitive practices’. The volume’s speculative reach, its openness to failure and contradiction, make it a crucial contribution to current debates on aesthetics, politics and the future of collective action.

Partha Chatterjee’s foreword provides a sobering counterpoint. He critiques the eclipse of class analysis in contemporary left discourse, while also recognizing that any revitalization must contend with the complexities of race, gender, caste and migratory subjectivities. This tension – between critique and reinvention, inheritance and transformation – is where the book does its most compelling work.

Ultimately, this volume is a rehearsal for alternative modes of sensing, thinking and relating. It calls on us to dwell in difference – not as an obstacle, but as an invitation to reimagine what solidarity can mean. In that sense, the book is both a refusal and a proposition: a refusal of closure, and a proposition for worlding.