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Book Review



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About the Author

Sofía Fernández González is a doctoral student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Yale, where she researches the relationship between literature and dance, liminal spaces in literature, and Galician diaspora focusing on the exile to Latin America. She studied psychology and philosophy in Spain and Mexico, and received a Fulbright Scholarship to further her dance studies at the José Limón Dance Institute, in New York. She is partnering with The Segal Theater in the curation and translation of *New Galician Plays*. She has published the novel *Os Corpos Fráxiles* (Aira, 2024) and the poemary *Alalá* (Arteidolia Press, 2024).

Book Review

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Ryan, Courtney B. 2023. *Eco-performance, Art, and Spatial Justice in the US*. New York: Routledge.

Considering eco-performances as an interdisciplinary endeavor encompassing various mediums such as film, cultural actions, happening, or theater, Courtney B. Ryan's *Eco-Performance, Art, and Spatial Justice in the US* delves into the diverse ways in which these manifestations connect with both human and non-human nature. Ryan questions how artistic expressions defy conventional capitalist structures, emphasizing the transformative impact of micro-performances on the historical processes of spatial production. In her analysis, Ryan directs attention to the US context, focusing on groups subjected to the control and manipulation of the land by the middle- and upper-class, such as BIPOC and poor and underrepresented communities. She prompts readers to contemplate moments that disrupt the domestication and confinement of urban and suburban plant and aquatic life as acts of resistance. Also, her study explores the contributions of an extensive number of contemporary artists and creators, revealing their roles in challenging established norms and advocating for spatial justice throughout eco-performance.

Ryan starts out discerning the nuanced forms of interconnectedness between humans and non-human nature and how these are handled in everyday life. The author assumes how entrenched these two are and points out the disparity that exists between the Global South and Global North in terms of, among other issues, access to resources. Her focus is directed towards the adoption of the term "eco-performance," aligning with Lavery's perspective that posits performance not as a savior of the world, but as an artistic practice that "can make the world problematic, multiple and complex" (2016, 234). Ryan uses the example of the X

(formerly known as Twitter) user @LakeSuperior to illustrate how small manifestations, protest actions, or artworks can break in and disrupt the status quo. The author draws attention to the importance of spatializing her research since, as she argues, “there are no neutral spaces” (6). Ryan also explores how these urban micro-performances expose controlling attempts towards human and non-human nature’s existence by analyzing works that “expose underlying, historic processes of spatial production” (8), and how space plays a relevant role in capitalism.

The first chapter “In a Plant Time and Place: Plant Art in the City,” Ryan looks at the evolving perspective on plants across Western humanities and sciences. The chapter begins by addressing the historical “othering” of plants made by Western societies, encouraging readers to consider plants not just as passive entities but as dynamic beings with their own agency. The book *The Hidden Life of the Trees* (2015), the Tik Tok trend “Plant Tok,” and various short videos exploring plant behavior serve Ryan as examples that spotlight the often-overlooked vitality of the botanical world. Despite the growing awareness of plant sentience, their marginalization persists, especially in urban design and architecture. The familiarity of plants paradoxically aligns with their enigmatic nature, emphasizing humanity’s struggle to recognize commonalities with the vegetal realm. In this first chapter, Ryan centers on works of plant-artists Vaughn Bell and Megan Moe Beitkis, which contribute essential examples illustrating the intersection of art and botany.

Bell’s series *Portable Environments* (2003), and in particular *Portable Lawn* (2003), serves as a poignant critique of turf grass homogenization and challenges societal norms. By presenting alternative ecologies through mobile plants in shopping carts, Bell envisions a more egalitarian relationship between humans and vegetal life, exploring the urban uncanny, and questioning the binaries of nature and culture. The author later examines Bell’s performance, *Gammet for Flora Fauna Relationship* (2006). She emphasizes the intricate connections between humans and plants in the realm of contemporary art. Ryan also argues that through Bell’s pieces, plants are re-given their right to have their own form of communication and therefore, to be considered beings instead of objects. Beitkis, on the other hand, responds parodically to Marina Abramovic’s iconic performance *The Artist is Present* (2010) with *The Plant Is Present* (2011), bringing individual plant qualities to the forefront. Ryan directs attention to how Beitkis awards rights not only to humans for her pieces but also to plants. By highlighting the biological characteristics of plants through

unorthodox play, Beitkis aims to redefine the way society perceives and engages with the botanical world.

In the first chapter, “Plant Time and Place: Plant Art in the City,” Ryan successfully introduces readers to an exploration of plant-human relationships from this irreverent artist, blending insights from art, science, and philosophy. Ryan does not analyze the work of two women accidentally, but rather she argues that the long-story of subjugation of women is shared with the long-story of subjugation of plants. Ryan’s chapter also gives the reader hints on how this subjugation is also not only pierced by gender, but also by race and class.

The second chapter, “I Speak to Him of Seeds: Centering Black Experiences of Green Spaces,” confronts the intertwined issues of anti-Blackness, environmental injustice, and their impact on public spaces and individual lives. The narrative emphasizes how these issues, both stemming from attempts to limit Black mobility and access to public spaces, ultimately result in premature deaths. The focal point of this chapter revolves around how Black artists, particularly Naime Green and Marc Bamuthi Joseph, navigate their intricate relationships with the environment, specifically urban vegetation. In an attempt to do so, Ryan analyzes Green’s photographic series, *Jewels from the Hinterland* (2013–) and Marc Bamuthi Joseph’s multimedia performance piece, *red, black & GREEN: a blues (rbGb)* (2012–2013), and how both works delve into the injustice and land deprivation of BIPOC lives, as well as how the pieces had emerged as a claim for fairness.

Ryan argues that Green’s photographic series, *Jewels from the Hinterland* (2013–), becomes a powerful response to the historical neglect of Black experiences in outdoor spaces by white environmentalists. The author argues that Green’s work challenges the marginalization of Black urbanites and vegetal life, revealing the nuanced and multidimensional experiences of Black individuals with plants. The ongoing series, comprising 80 portraits of BIPOC individuals in city parks, serves as a crucial counter-narrative that centers Black experiences in outdoor environments. Further analysis is provided through the examination of Marc Bamuthi Joseph’s multimedia performance piece, *red, black & GREEN: a blues (rbGb)* (2012–2013). This performance vividly portrays the intricate connections between social, spatial, and environmental injustices. While initially aiming to “green” the ghetto, the evolving narrative questions the appropriateness of this goal over time. The interactive nature of the performance invites the audience to actively participate, fostering a deeper engagement with the issues at hand.

“I Speak to Him of Seeds: Centering Black Experiences of Green Spaces” concludes by underscoring the concept of environmental racism in conjunction with environmental in/justice, highlighting the explicit racism that motivates much of the environmental injustice in the United States. The environmental justice movement, as presented in this chapter, takes a holistic approach, defining the environment not as pristine and remote “nature” but as the physical spaces where people live, work, learn, eat, and ultimately, exist.

The third chapter, “Plant Some Shit: Guerrilla Gardening as Tactical performance,” investigates into the realm of guerrilla gardening, using TikTok sensation @sfinbloom and the San Francisco Bloom group as a lens to examine the performative aspects of this grassroots movement. A blend of rebellion and creativity emerges as guerrilla gardeners employ theatricality and playfulness, including unconventional tactics like dispersing wildflower seeds with shakers and water guns while skateboarding through the city. Ryan navigates the cultural, racial, and class dimensions of guerrilla gardening, dissecting the performance elements that reflect diverse gardening identities but also problematizing the whiteness that the movement embodied in its beginnings. By framing guerrilla gardening as an embodied practice and performance, Ryan challenges the tendency to romanticize or abstract nature, as previously highlighted by Adams and Hardman (2018). Ryan underscores the nuanced tactics employed by guerrilla gardeners, pointing out the ever-changing nature of their performances based on unique identities and needs, and also by the dynamic quality of nature itself. Furthermore, the author contends that guerrilla gardening serves as both activism and performance.

“Plant Some Shit: Guerrilla Gardening as Tactical performance” explores the historical roots of guerrilla gardening, traced back to the Green Guerrillas in 1973, and the countercultural actions of groups like the Liz Christy Community Garden in NYC. Ryan explores how guerrilla gardening intersects with issues of race and whiteness, by questioning on the racial assumptions inherent in seemingly neutral spaces, and the resulting disparities in BIPOC neighborhoods with limited access to fresh products such as in Harlem and South Bronx in NYC. Issues of food justice inequalities are woven into the narrative and brought to the text by examining Ron Finley’s work. Finley denounces the racism inherent in the existing food apparatus in the US in a TED Talk, which Ryan uses to exemplify the challenges of the system and how the inequality attached to it manifests unevenly depending on which population. Ryan ultimately calls for a nuanced balance between improvisational, guerrilla tactics and long-term gardening performance, urging

readers to consider the broader ecological and environmental implications of guerrilla gardening practices.

The fourth and last chapter, “Touch the Water: Performing in Los Angeles River,” expands Ryan's narrative to encompass the river's evolving identity and the profound impact that concretization has had over it. The LA River, once a vibrant watercourse, gradually transformed into a concrete channel, erasing its status as a river in the collective memory of the inhabitants. Ryan, building upon the inquiries posed by T.S. McMillin, grapples with the complex question of what defines a river. As the author argues, the LA river emerges as both a “site-specific location and a non-place” (114), which is essentially contingent upon the observer's perspective. Ryan looks into the interplay of performance in a river that has undergone being “de-rivered and re-rivered” (114), scrutinizing its history and ecological representations through the lenses of Henri Lefebvre and Edward William Soja.

In “Touch the Water: Performing in Los Angeles River,” the author points out the dialectic between concreteness and abstraction, drawing from Lefevre's ideas to emphasize how spaces, like the LA River, can serve to challenge capitalist domination. Ryan, however, acknowledges the risk of understanding this center-peripheric relationship as a simplistic dualism in favor of a spatial perspective rooted in social justice. In this chapter, Ryan carefully examines cinematic and theatrical works such as *Chinatown* (1974) and *Touch the Water: A River Play* (2009). Ryan revolves around both pieces' shared emphasis on spatial histories and ongoing spatio-environmental injustices along the river. However, while “Chinatown” explores water corruption and personifies characters as embodiments of the river, “Touch the Water” unfolds as a theatrical commentary on spatial-environmental injustices, featuring living characters representing flora and fauna and placing the river “center stage” (127). The author argues that both artworks unravel the intricate web of perceived, conceived, and lived spatial representations and understandings of the LA River, thereby illuminating the multifaceted dimensions of its socio-environmental dynamics. Also, both pieces use the multiethnic population related to the river. Ryan also draws attention to the overlooked narratives of Indigenous people in California, illustrating how their marginalization contributes to the displacement of people from the river's narrative and raising awareness of solutions that sometimes ignore the people by giving emphasis to the environment.

Ryan's exploration of eco-performance delves into numerous instances where human and nature become entangled, not only the artwork impacting the audience but by the

impact the environment causes on the artist. The author prompts readers to reflect on what eco-performance means, as a timeless and contemporary method of artistic coexistence with and within nature. This analysis invites a reevaluation of the symbiotic relationship between art and land, emphasizing the potential for artistic expressions to shape our understanding and interactions with nature in both traditional and innovative ways. Ryan also raises the question on how humanity can have more/less rights to inhabit and benefit from the land and to have a reciprocal impact, and who are the subjects of this disparity. *Eco-Performance, Art, and Spatial Justice in the US* is a challenging, thought-provoking, and meaningful contribution to the ongoing research on environmental humanities and eco-art. Ryan encourages the readers to take a moment and reflect on everyone's presence within the environment by using eco-art and eco-performance as political mediums of being in the world.

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