

## Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance

*Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance*. Natalie Alvarez. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018; Pp. 214.

Reading Natalie Alvarez's *Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance* is a fantastic reminder of what theatre and performance studies have to offer during a cultural moment in which "reality" programming is often difficult to discern from other media and performance. Using the term "immersion" to capture a range of performances and situations, Alvarez takes readers to sites in North America and the UK through four chapters that examine a military camp, counterinsurgency training, an activist tour, and a museum. The analysis is run through with deep description and sometimes chilling impressions as Alvarez brings the reader into the immersions under investigation.

Present throughout the study are Alvarez's key inquiries: "how are immersions used as a means of deepening understanding across cultural difference?" and "whether the first-person experiential encounters afforded by the immersion could lead to meaningful cross-cultural encounters" (1). Through Alvarez's considered explorations, the book's case studies expand current discussions and arguments in the field beyond immersive theatre or gallery installations. Rather, Alvarez is most interested in examining "immersions that stage cultural encounters within the contexts of military training and tourism," and that "function as performative sites of negotiation between cultures" (2). Alvarez's emphasis on the relations and exchanges between people and cultures in sometimes extreme performances works very well in part because the book maintains a radically clear focus on immersion and simulation and, indeed, the ways that the researcher might be implicated in observing/participating in these situations.

Such issues are raised early in the book, as in the subsection entitled "Ethical Quandaries" in the introduction, which rehearses many of the important problems related to ethnographic and performance research. Taking immersive experiences as "overcoded in advance by [their] ideological and pedagogical imperatives," (13) Alvarez deftly negotiates the edges of simulations and their potential effects for future actions by participants. Alvarez thus makes clear the important connections between when and where immersions begin and end, stating: "What remains most urgent for my concerns here is the reproductive side of simulation—the narrative overlays on the event of the simulation that get replayed in order for it to become regularized and reproductive in the supposed postsimulation 'realities'" (15). The simulation (as well as the very knowledge that one is participating in a simulation) provides a way out that unsimulated events do not allow. Through this framing, which is present and considered throughout the study, Alvarez moves the work beyond formal analyses of immersive performances, hyperreality, liveness, and other such matters. That is, the immersions themselves, while central, are only one part of the larger cultural analysis that Alvarez unfolds and unpacks.

One of the real strengths of the book lies in Alvarez's ability to bridge larger political issues with the very personal and embodied experiences of the immersions under consideration. For instance, in the first chapter, which begins with wary hands on ready guns and ends with a handshake, Alvarez neatly works through the many affective and politically charged engagements at play in a simulated Afghan village used to train Canadian military forces. Alvarez describes her own shaking hands as she attempts to take notes amidst explosions, screaming, and gunfire and considers carefully the bodies of the performers in

relation to each other and the power of such performances both in the moment of enactment and in the memories and afterlives of the events.

The stakes are high in each of the examples, and those in chapter two and three are necessary reading for performance researchers looking to undertake such ethnographic and politically important work in the future. Alvarez's narrative and analysis of the process of taking part in counterinsurgency training in chapter two brings home the very realness of the immersions. Marking the trajectory from packing bags to training exercises, Alvarez makes a significant contribution to performance studies both in content and methodology. We need more performance theorists critiquing and studying how military and corporate programs deploy many similar tactics and practices found in what might be considered more artistic settings. That such work leads neatly into the following chapter on touristic, simulated border crossings is a testament to the focused throughline of the study. This is especially evident in how Alvarez sets out to examine "an embodied epistemology of otherness that leads precariously and almost inevitably toward a presumptive intimacy with an imagined 'other'" and, commenting on the subject of the third chapter, she notes that "there is, arguably, no other exercise that does so more dramatically than one that invites the tourist to play the role of a migrant attempting to cross the Mexico-US border in the dead of night" (106). The work of these two chapters anchor the book through Alvarez's commitment to participate in such immersions as well as through writing that easily interconnects field notes and theoretical analysis.

Chapter four and the conclusion offer mediations on the processes of simulation and the limits of performance. In the fourth chapter, Alvarez examines the Shoal Lake 40's Museum of Canadian Human Rights Violations as an "immersion that actively interrupts sympathy and empathy, [and] serves as a useful counterpoint to immersions that orient themselves toward embodied epistemologies of otherness" (164). Such reflections, along with the direct engagement with core considerations of performance studies in the conclusion, make clear that Alvarez has provided the field with an important document while furthering the methodologies of performance researchers.

As with many exciting books based in a set number of case studies, one may be left wanting more, and the book opens the door for further research. The book will certainly be of use in graduate and undergraduate classrooms, and those students would do well in taking up Alvarez's critical attention to culturally and politically significant immersions.

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