

**Dia Da Costa**, *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger Called Theater*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-252-04060-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-252-08210-8 (paper)

### **Embracing “Cruel Pessimism” and Refusing Captivity**

I delved into Dia Da Costa’s latest book, *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger Called Theater*, while conducting interviews with Bird Song, a fashion social enterprise based in London (<http://birdsong.london/>). Savvy young feminist activists working in the violence against women sector originally formed this group as a way to address and contest gender-based violence. While working in this sector, they noticed that, as state actors cut back funding for feminist anti-violence work, an assemblage of philanthropic and public arts funders were promoting a proliferation of creative economy initiatives encouraging women to engage in arts-based activities including fashion start-ups.

Digging into these contradictions, the entrepreneurial Bird Song activists leverage social enterprise funding to engage in critical, anti-racist, and queer projects that support a wide range of feminist, trans, and queer clothing designers and activists, as well as activists and artists of colour. For example, the group’s website features feminist photographers’ photos of Black and Brown models as an explicit critique of the white supremacist male gaze in mainstream advertising. The group also use their website and pop-up fashion events to support the work of Palestinian clothing makers, as well as to discuss gentrification, precarious work, transphobia, self-care, sexual violence, and consent.

As I analyze Bird Song’s interventions through a lens informed by critical debates about neoliberal creative economy regimes, I ask: how do I make sense of such messy feminist and queer acts of entrepreneurialism and activism? Da Costa’s book appeared in

my life at just the right time to help me answer these questions. In *Politicizing Creative Economy*, Da Costa provides powerful analytic tools to interrogate the ways activists such as Bird Song work within and against the complicities and potentialities of neoliberal creative economy discourse and practice. Informed by Richa Nagar, Lauren Berlant, Saidiya Hartman, and Gayatri Spivak, among others, the book is a tribute to those who she describes as “creative warriors”—those who “nourish and refuse to let dominant forces capture the meaning of politics and creativity” (p.239), including the Idle No More and Black Lives Matter movements, Kashmir’s self-determination movement, and students’ movements.

In the book’s introduction, Da Costa states that her main aim is to contribute transnational feminist criticality to creative economy research, a body of work that, she argues, tends to overlook the “multiple meanings, diverse histories, and political significance of creativity as they emerge in different contexts” (p.15). Various urban researchers have interrogated how, since the early 2000s, the rise and spread of the creative economy discourse has intensified neoliberal values within the arts, community development, and planning (Florida 2002a, 2002b; Peck 2005). The key premise of this now globalised urban development script is that cash-strapped local governments in cities that have lost industrial and manufacturing employment should prioritise attracting and retaining the “creative class” (Evans 2009; Parker 2008, 2017; Peck 2005, 2011), a category constituted by university-educated professions in the IT, knowledge industry, and financial services sectors. In a feverish race to attract this “class”, municipal officials and city boosters have strived to reinvent cities and neighbourhoods with arts-led and “green” revitalisation connecting arts organisations, business improvement associations, non-governmental organizations, and philanthropic partners.

Feminist and queer scholars examining creativity discourse through a critical intersectional lens have advanced these debates by demonstrating how this regime

ultimately deepens raced, gendered, and classed inequalities, and naturalizes violent process of gentrification, an articulation of historic and ongoing settler colonial and white supremacist values (Catungal and Leslie 2009; McLean 2014, 2016). This research also illuminates the uneven politics of place-based urban creativity strategies that strive to make-over neighbourhoods into sites of consumption and play for middle class professionals and tourists.

However, for Da Costa, these lines of inquiry are limited because they rarely explore the ways marginal artists and activists involved in creative economy projects are often simultaneously surviving, critiquing, and reproducing what she powerfully describes as “economies of death, displacement, and divisiveness” (p.236). She also critiques researchers seeking out examples of artists’ complicity in neoliberal policies for reproducing privileged positionalities. Moreover, Da Costa contends that creative economy research tends to reproduce false binaries that separate the organizations and individuals ensnared in these policies and the activists resisting them. I have to admit, I reflected on how I have reproduced these tendencies in my earlier research on creative city policies in Toronto (McLean 2014) as I read her cogent commentary.

In response, Da Costa sets out to politicize creative economy research with her critical ethnographic accounts of two India-based activist performance groups: the Communist-affiliated Jana Natya Manch (Janam) and Budhan Theatre, a community-engaged group of the indigenous Chhara people. Organized into three main parts, the book documents and analyzes under-recognized spaces of creativity that continue to thrive and survive within a context of powerful creative economy enclosures.

For Da Costa, politicizing creative economy entails taking a transnational and provincializing view of everywhere policy makers implement neoliberal creativity strategies. Drawing from Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), this involves attending to the singularity of complex histories of power relations and the spatialized practices that

constitute “aesthetics”, “politics”, and “creativity” in particular sites, as well as how dominant policies intersect with heterogeneous histories of power. Provincializing creative economy also includes unsettling the epistemological hierarchies that scholars and policy makers reproduce when they approach creative economy discourse as a “travelling policy model moving from its origins in the ‘modern’ global North toward lesser articulations of arts and culture in the global South” (p.238). Furthermore, it involves fine-grained research of the “hemispheric and regional specificities, nationalist ideologies, sexual politics, and the profound ethnic supremacy” (p.15) that informs contemporary creativity regimes.

Reflecting on her ethnographic research with Janam and Budhan, Da Costa shows how both groups are complicit in creative economy policies and projects that entrench exclusionary dynamics. Meanwhile, she also demonstrates how these collectives mobilize creativity regimes to contest classed, raced, and gendered inequalities and caste hierarchies.

In her exploration of Janam, Da Costa discusses how the group espouses what she describes as a bracing, anti-capitalist “ideology for life” as they use a Brechtian theatrical form to promote socialist transformation and tell the stories of labour struggles in Delhi and Ahmadabad. Since the 1970s, the group has performed for women’s organisations and enormous trade union rallies, as well as staging a range of political plays about labour and precarious lives under capitalism. Meanwhile, she unpacks how Janam’s theatrical work also inadvertently legitimizes what she describes as the “seductive violence” (p.238) of creative economy discourse. For example, to access financial support, the theatre group collaborates in what Da Costa refers to as creative economy “memorializing and management” projects including industrial heritage walking tours and producing plays for Google’s Cultural Institute. Staged for middle class cultural consumers, such initiatives naturalize contemporary gentrification and displacement

because they are tethered to large-scale urban “revitalization” projects. Such schemes are depoliticising because they create space for politically conscious theatregoers to celebrate the good old days of labour struggle without acknowledging how seemingly progressive contemporary arts and planning initiatives promote displacement and dispossession. Furthermore, these projects receive the full support of the xenophobic and patriarchal Hindu Right.

Da Costa also unpacks and grapples with the contradictory feminist politics of Janam’s theatrical work. On the one hand, she critiques Janam for failing to grapple in their plays with intersectional feminist politics, domestic labour, surplus populations beyond the factory, and sex work as a site of political mobilization. On the other hand, in her detailed and moving analysis of the play *Aartanaad*, an exploration of violence against women, she examines the potential of street theatre to, drawing from Berlant (2011), challenge the “cruel optimism” of creative city projects that offer up clear, confident, and easy answers to ordinary violence. For Da Costa, the potential of creative economy projects lies in arts interventions that provide tentative answers and make space for the unanticipated.

Da Costa also politicizes the messy entanglements of market-oriented creativity in her detailed ethnographic account of Budhan. Grounded in the work of the precarious lives of the Chhara people, Budhan recounts the stories of a community brutally excluded by a constellation of caste histories, private property, laws and policies under colonial capitalism, including Hindu majoritarian politics. For decades, the Chhara people have survived on illegal livelihoods that include thievery and liquor production. Despite the long history of colonial and post-colonial rehabilitation projects to support the Chhara, Da Costa describes their everyday experience of citizenship as one of “betrayal, disappointment, death, and ongoing discrimination” (p.243).

However, Da Costa also charts how Budhan finds ways to leverage neoliberal creative economy projects to craft spaces of “praxis and pleasure, sensual epiphanies, and ordinary regard” (p.242). Drawing from Hartman (1997) who writes of momentary acts of agency where people robbed of basic humanity “steal away” (p.242) to create spaces of community and pleasure, Budhan mobilizes arts-based projects to promote survival, non-discriminatory education, respectable livelihoods, and citizenship beyond the vicious entanglements of BJP majoritarian politics. Such acts offer vital “lines of flight” from “stigmatized life, untimely death, and hollow citizenship” (p.242). Furthermore, Chhara caste-based histories prompt Budhan theatre practitioners to embrace the contradictions of neoliberal creativity in acts of what Da Costa describes as “cruel pessimism”: strategies that refuse the sentimental optimism of neo-colonial policies, as well as a fixation on the repeated failures of such schemes.

Da Costa’s timely, transnational feminist analysis resonates with a growing body research by of work by feminist, queer, and post-colonial thinkers critiquing this omnipresent neoliberal regime including Brenda Parker, JP Catungal, Debby Leslie, Natalie Oswin, Tiffany Muller Myrdahl, and Lily Kong. Parker (2017), for example, employs what she refers to as a “feminist political economy of place” approach to examine the gendered and intersectional power relations of creative economy policies and practices in Milwaukee. Her research demonstrates how neoliberal, white supremacist, heteronormative, and patriarchal creative city policies and structures foster uneven geographies and entrench despair, difference, and dispossession. But she also shows how the African American moms, activists, and planners push back at these policies and the masculinist urban experts promoting them. In a similar vein, Catungal and Leslie (2009) have engaged in detailed ethnographic analysis of the race dimensions of creative city models that promote the marketing and consumption of “ethnic” and “multicultural” identities in Toronto. Their research shows how such policies not only

naturalise gendered and raced precarious work, but are also imbricated in the heavy-handed securitization and policing of communities of colour and Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, Oswin's (2012) research on the Singaporean embrace of creative city policies reveals how these policies produce vastly unequal access to resources and mobility. While privileged, foreign members of the professional "creative class" reap the material and citizenship benefits of Singaporean state recognition, racialised and working class foreign workers toil away in devalued service economy jobs within a state of perpetual precarity.

All of these transnational feminist examples bring me back to my research with Bird Song in London. Entrepreneurial feminist activists started the fashion social enterprise in response to increasing cuts to funding for gender-based violence programs and proliferating entrepreneurial grants promoting creativity. Working within and against neoliberal policies fostering business skills and clothing design, the activists working with this group find ways to cross-subsidise grassroots projects that promote body positivity and self-care, as well as critique white supremacy, transphobia, and misogyny. Such acts open up creative spaces of "world-making" for queer, feminist, and POC artists across sites and scales. Meanwhile, critics looking for examples of easy-to-co-opt and post-political projects would probably dismiss such feminist and queer acts of re-working and resistance.

Importantly and excitingly, Da Costa unsettles these tiring binaries. Instead, she makes the case for the political potential of unanticipated spaces of criticality and possibility within creative economy policies and practices. Rather than separate arts organisations caught up in the feverish race to compete with creativity from activists contesting such stagings, she provides detailed ethnographic accounts of the everyday ways political theatre artists in India grapple with hegemonic regimes. Her vivid ethnographic insights show how, even though management discourse and

commodification and heritage policies instrumentalise and enclose radical arts practice, theatre artists keep finding ways to politicise their work. By exploring such acts of “ambivalence, serendipity, and unanticipated possibility” (p.242), Da Costa disrupts the “heel-digging purity” (p.246) of certain strands of urban research that can shut down potentialities.

Overall, as a researcher and artist committed to working with communities to chart possibilities within what feel like omnipresent neoliberal enclosures, *Politicizing Creative Economy* is a powerful feminist intervention. Da Costa advances this body of research by charting the everyday ways that activist-artists on the margins find ways to re-work and challenge the violent seduction of neoliberal creativity. Such practices point to generative lines of flight at a time when critical research can pave over possibilities.

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