Living in the body of the world - it's all the rage these days. It's the title of Eve Ensler's latest book, but it's also the metaphorical framework for the Palgrave Macmillan anthology *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater*, edited by Florian Nikolas Becker, Paola S. Hernández, and Brenda Werth. The pieces use this lens to explore intersecting issues in activist performance – embodiment, bodies of work, state bodies. We look at bodies on stage, and the haunting presence of the bodies of those dead, disappeared. The authors take us through Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Mozambique, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, the United States, Uruguay, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The various essays offer stunning reporting on human rights theater productions that might otherwise go uncovered. However, with the exception of a few wide-ranging pieces, the collection looks past the major zeitgeist of creative industry: consumption, not just imagination and production.

The anthology’s editorial choice to leave out the “wrap-around” elements of activist art such as who sees it, who funds it, and what it does for human rights, the anthology doesn’t engage the other half of the equation: the bodies next to ours. We may live in our bodies as individuals, but we create and consume theater in groups. There is a rich capacity in that “negative space”, that space of silence and potential that sits just outside the reach of the volume, unaddressed.

Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater begins on an interesting note, with a nod to the iconic Diana Taylor statement that "embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing.” And while Anne Lambright’s *Dead Body Politics: Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani at Peru’s Truth Commission*, Joi Barrios’ *Theaters of Vigil and Vigilance: A Playwright’s Notes on Theater and Human Rights in the Philippines*, Jesse and Lindsey Montoro’s *Place and Misplaced Rights in Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, and Kerry Dominitz with her essay on Broadway Without Borders, Eve Ensler, Lynn Nottage...
and the Campaign to End Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ana Elena Puga’s piece *Migrant Melodrama, Human Rights, and Elvira Arellano.*

Bystrom’s piece explores how publicizing traumatic fistula in today’s DRC is comparable to the publicity of the chopped off hands wrought by Leopold’s troops in the late 19th century. Hers is a riveting, urgent and highly useful analysis of activist communications tropes. She notes how images of suffering and poverty porn "produce revulsion and pity and generate humanitarian funds", but root their effect in the Western viewer’s sense of pity for the “powerless”. She leaves us with a challenging ending question of “how to stage structural and meaningful connections in the theater and in the halls of Congress.”

Puga’s *Migrant Melodrama, Human Rights, and Elvira Arellano* is also incredible, and explores the sensationalization of suffering, focusing on DREAMer and Latino activist imaginaries. Audiences are moved — shocked — with large protests and many stories of many bodies and minds trapped in superhuman heartache. But she boldly calls out the double-edged sword of pushing sacrifice as a rewardable virtue, and also of relying on physical performance itself for visual relevancy. She also (rightfully) notes that “…Mass media today, with its large audiences and relatively easy access, is more influential than theater in shaping the zeitgeist of social performers and their audiences.”

**Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater** could benefit from more brave pieces such as these. If a greater number of pieces explored issues beyond production — moving from individual "being" into the social — this would be an even more stunning collection. And that’s because consumption often dictates which theater pieces get made and ultimately get seen. Groups such as the National Endowment for the Arts and Theater Communications Group are scrambling to address audience decline, and often choose which new critical imaginaries to mount based on potential viewership, not dramaturgy. Failing to place theater with or next to other actors in civic space isolates theater as an impassioned soliloquy instead of an enriching addition to the larger continuum.

Eve Ensler’s *Living in the Body of the World* is ultimately about how illness forced her to transcend her own individual body and gave her new respect for the vulnerability of other personal, gendered, national, and natural bodies around her. What activist theater does for human rights is just as important as how we imagine theater in human rights; what’s more, it takes us outside of our individual imaginations, individual productions, and individual bodies to enter into relationship with the larger activist exercise and as citizen-contributors to the social sector. We need to conceive of the field of activist theater as an literal body, and value not just the politics of being but of engaging – both on stage and in the world.

**Emily Goulding** is a writer, educator, and activist. She recently received a Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation fellowship to work with the São Paulo, Brazil Office of Harvard University’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, and prior to that was the Development Director for GALA Hispanic Theatre in Washington, DC. Her essays on art and activism have been published through the Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy and Theater Communications Group, and she has spoken civicly engaging mixed-race youth on ABC News with Dianne Sawyer and FOX News. She holds a bachelors degree in Modern Literature from UC Santa Cruz and a masters degree in Journalism from Georgetown University.