

INTRODUCTION

Here and Now

Performance in America argues for the significance of the performing arts in contemporary U.S. culture by challenging the conventional wisdom that performance is marginal to the national imaginary. The book takes seriously the role that the performing arts play in shaping American culture, especially around ideologies of race, citizenship, and national identity. Through a series of case studies drawn from contemporary culture, the book demonstrates the vitality of theatre, performance, and dance to local, regional, and national communities and poses the question: What might be gained by placing performance at the center of current national inquiries and debates?

In order to begin answering this question, the book proposes a way of thinking about performance as a practice that both shapes and informs a space that I call the “contemporary.” I here understand the contemporary as a critical temporality that engages the past without being held captive to it and that instantiates the present without defining a future. Performance proves an especially effective means to engage the contemporary in that artists and audiences are constituted and composed as a provisional collective in a particular temporal moment and in a specific localized space. They may or may not share the same history or future, but in the moment during which they compose a group, they enact and perform a temporary and conditional we. Performance’s liveness and impermanence allow for a process of exchange—between artists and audiences, between the past and the

present—where new social formations emerge. These new social formations constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being and belonging assumed both in the national culture and in the subcultural worlds that form a part of it. While *Performance in America* is especially drawn to understanding how performance critically reinvents what is meant by “America,” it is equally committed to understanding how the contemporary engages with the histories that precede and help produce it. The book understands the contemporary as that which both carries and reinvents particular moments and performances from the past.

The three keywords of my project—*performance*, *America*, and *contemporary*—converge in the book’s various case studies. While drawn from contemporary American performance, each case study holds a different set of relations to, and investments in, these three terms. Rather than attempt to unify these keywords in such a way as to prescribe the work that contemporary performance in America enacts, I wish to open up interpretive possibilities, rather than foreclose them. Although the book is organized under a central theme that showcases performance’s critical engagement with contemporary American culture, my consideration of the contemporary results in retrieving previous historical moments and performances that might seem anachronistic to the book’s mission: *Performance in America*’s archive is expansive without being exhaustive, and it includes unlikely sources and events.

The primary archive consists of work performed between 1994 and 2004, a ten-year period during which dramatic and unanticipated events unfolded throughout the nation and the world. From the profound results of innovative HIV/AIDS treatments introduced in the United States in the mid-1990s to the changing demographics of the American population at the end of the twentieth century, from the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to the ongoing effects of the second Iraqi war, performance engages the contemporary as a dialogue about the country, its people, and its history. In staging these conversations, performance creates its audiences as critical subjects of this now; the provisional gathering that characterizes performance opens up a space in the public sphere that might challenge or refute local or national sentiments prioritized by other media. This moment, although local and

temporal, should not be underestimated: not only does it rehearse new forms of sociality but those involved experience it in the process of the event itself.¹

Yet not all of the performances examined here engage the national culture with equal force or overtness. While this book mostly preoccupies itself with performances that address many of the pressing issues of our times, it also is interested in considering performances with less explicitly global implications. The focus in these moments rests on performances emerging out of particular communities or demographics and those exploring and mining questions of identity and affiliation. I am especially interested in the ways certain artists mark themselves as historical subjects whose genealogies might be found outside of traditional systems of identification and belonging. The performances I address here are located in critically undervalued genres such as cabaret, female impersonation, and Broadway entertainment. These performances also tell us much about contemporary American culture, even if their political themes appear less transparent than those more directly aligned with national political issues. As much as they engage contemporary matters, they also enable a reimagining of history and genealogy, both individual and communal, and demonstrate how performance functions as an archive itself. Throughout the book I thus explore the various connections that the contemporary makes with the past, not as a means to anchor the contemporary within an accepted tradition that needs to be either rescued or upheld, but as a means to trace the remains of history within our present moment so as to better understand that present. My project constitutes as much a historicization of the contemporary as a reflection on the relationship between the past and the present, thus exploring the dynamic relationship between performance, history, and contemporary U.S. culture.

Performance in America imagines performance as relevant and meaningful, and as fully capable of enacting cultural critique within multiple public spheres. It refutes the notion that the advocacy of performance is something merely romantic, as if a belief in the arts is a form of benign naivety, well intended but ultimately misinformed. In this sense, *Performance in America* can be understood as a polemical project. It argues for its subject matter so that others might be persuaded to

better understand the work of performance, what it does and what it achieves. The book remains unapologetic in its commitment to the arts. The work's thesis—that performance in America matters—is meant to be provocative.

Throughout *Performance in America* readers will be invited to sample different events that make the case for performance as a specific form of cultural critique and engagement. I draw my examples from the worlds of dance, theatre, and music, discussing work performed in local, regional, and national venues. The performing arts provide multiple entry points into many of the key questions and concerns that constitute and preoccupy the contemporary, questions about history and politics, citizenship and society, culture and nation. They often articulate positions that shift the current conversations already in place on these issues. The performing arts not only provide a critical space to rehearse key questions of our time; they also allow us to renegotiate the way these questions are conceived of in the first place. In this sense, the performing arts might be understood as embodied theories that help audiences restructure or, at the very least, reimagine their social selves.

Performance in America archives performances that embody what cultural theorist Raymond Williams describes as “new structures of feeling,” modes of experience that begin to shift individual and communal lives. Williams takes special interest in the ways that values are dynamically experienced and felt, that particular historical meanings and values emerge. Literature and the arts play an important role in this process. He writes:

The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming. . . . as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not as derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced.²

In several of his writings, it is worth remembering, Williams relied on the archive of theatre and drama to illuminate many of his most important ideas, and he devoted an entire book to the study of modern tragedy. *Performance in America* builds on Williams's work on performance, history, and politics, as well as their relation to cultural change. And it privileges performance as a charismatic cultural site that enables new forms of sociality and alternative models of being.

Performance, as Jill Dolan has argued, is uniquely positioned to do such work. "Live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world," she writes.³ Given its convictions about the power of theatre and performance, my work is interested in identifying performances that advocate for the theatre's capacity to shape daily life. I am drawn to texts that strive to make a difference, that promote a progressive point of view, and that engage in contemporary concerns. I am also committed to calling attention to performances that are innovative and creative, and that move their artistic medium forward. Politics and aesthetics are mutually interdependent, and my book aims to think through their relation.

The individual chapters offer case studies that provide specific readings of local performances in particular moments in time. Beyond calling attention to individual artists and productions, the chapters contextualize how performance participates in far-reaching conversations within contemporary U.S. culture and demonstrate how these performances can be understood historically. I begin with a chapter on dance and consider the choreography of two of the most interesting artists from the dance world: Bill T. Jones and Neil Greenberg. Jones and Greenberg have been creating dance since the 1980s, but I highlight the work they produced in the mid-1990s. The work of these artists, both HIV-positive, marks a shift in AIDS in light of the new drug treatments that became available in this period, while offering a radically different way of thinking about the crisis. This chapter, entitled "Not about AIDS," follows on my own earlier work, in part by insisting on AIDS as ongoing and unresolved, both in the United States and abroad. Despite the tendency to bracket AIDS from the political priorities of

queer communities in the 1990s, especially in light of an increasing interest in marriage and the military, both choreographers, burdened with AIDS materially and symbolically, pushed the discussion of living with HIV forward through their own creative corporal moves.

Chapter 2, “Visa Denied: Chay Yew’s Theatre of Immigration and the Performance of Asian American History,” shifts the focus to Los Angeles and the new wave of immigrants who have changed the racial and cultural demographic of Southern California in recent decades. I am interested in mapping what I call the “vernacular imaginary,” a mode of experience that departs from official narratives of citizenship in the United States and the nationalist myths they promote. These myths circulate globally and inspire many immigrants to abandon their homelands for what they imagine will be a better life in America. In this context, I look at *A Beautiful Country*, a collaborative production between the playwright Chay Yew and the community-based Cornerstone Theatre, that offered, according to the show’s promotional materials, “one hundred and fifty years of Asian American history through dance, drama, and drag.” The site-specific performance of *A Beautiful Country* in L.A.’s Chinatown district opens up new critical possibilities for thinking about migration and exile, citizenship and belonging, and the costs of each for those who traverse these borders and boundaries.

The next chapter, “Latino Genealogies: Broadway and Beyond—The Case of John Leguizamo,” moves from the vernacular worlds of the Asian diaspora in America and the localized production of a community arts project in a Chinatown school auditorium to the bright lights of the Great White Way and the premiere of *Freak*, John Leguizamo’s one-person show at the Cort Theatre on Broadway. I here wish to consider what Leguizamo’s hugely successful Broadway debut might tell us about contemporary Latino life in the United States. I discuss the material conditions that enabled Leguizamo—and, by extension, Latino audiences—to arrive on Broadway, and the cultural implications of such a move. I also offer a reading of *Freak* that attends to the models of kinship and genealogy that Leguizamo promotes in his show. *Freak* both pays tribute to a history of pan-Latino popular mainstream performance and traces a historical trajectory that offers new models for imagining Latino identity.

The chapters on AIDS and dance, Asian American theatre and immigration, and Latino performance and cultural history each showcase centrally the ways that performance intervenes in contemporary national concerns. As such, they highlight how particular communities find in performance a means to critically engage and reconstitute the experience of living in contemporary America. These chapters thus combine to form a cluster that illustrates the gains of imagining performance as central to the national culture. But they also begin to articulate the book's interest in the contemporary's relation to history. Each of the book's chapters will examine both of these themes—the political, the historical—and address the ways in which they are related. In the chapter on AIDS and dance, for example, I situate the discussion not only in the political context of the mid-1990s but also on the performers' relationship to their own bodies, themselves an archive of lived experience, social movement, and artistic expression. The chapters on Asian American theatre and Latino performance ruminate more broadly on questions of history and genealogy, even as they attend to the specifics of the contemporary culture in which they are now posed—I point out how contemporary performances provide an archive of previously forgotten or neglected histories. The two chapters document minoritarian relations to physical places and their symbolic capital—urban downtowns, theatre districts, commercial venues—as well as the high stakes involved in claiming rights to these locations in the contested public sphere. At the same time, all three chapters archive histories of resilience, many of which are found in the history of the performing arts.

This theme of performance as itself an embodied archive becomes more prominent in the following two chapters that foreground the ways in which questions of gender and sexuality contribute to the book's larger themes. These chapters expand the book's ongoing discussion of history and performance by focusing on work that provides a glimpse of previously contemporary performances in America as recorded in theatre history, Hollywood film, and popular music. As these chapters highlight, when the book takes an archival turn, the contemporary returns us in unpredictable ways to history. Admittedly, this makes for an unexpected move for a book on the contemporary, but it nonethe-

less proves a critical one if we wish to more fully understand how the contemporary is constituted in American culture. Chapters 4 and 5 also begin to answer the following question: Where in contemporary American culture are the arts acknowledged?

In Chapter 4, “Archival Drag; or, The Afterlife of Performance,” I consider the work of contemporary female impersonators who revive the legacy of performers from a different era and whose work within queer subcultures preserves the role of the arts. If the previous chapters moved backward in time from contemporary performances to the historical moments they recall, this chapter begins with a distant historical moment so as to move forward to the contemporary. I begin in the eighteenth century with the celebrated British tragedienne Sarah Siddons to trace the ways theatre, gender, and celebrity operated in eighteenth-century British culture, and how that cultural influence shaped the popular culture of Hollywood in the 1950s. From there I look at the influence of 1950s Hollywood film on gay popular performers of the 1980s, ending with a discussion of the legacy of this archival drag on contemporary female impersonators. I am interested in tracing a genealogy of performance that also serves as an archival system of popular performance. The chapter concludes with speculations on the potential loss of this archive, carried across the centuries through embodied performances.

“Cabaret as Cultural History: Popular Song and Public Performance in America,” the fifth chapter, focuses on cabaret performance and is similarly concerned with how contemporary performance functions as an archive of a historical past. Here, I make the case that cabaret performance provides one of the few venues in public culture where American cultural history is passed on and preserved. It is also a genre in which women and, in particular, older women, emerge as the main practitioners. Looking at the anecdotal narratives that many of these performers introduce between songs, I argue that this patten serves as a form of cultural memory, both personal and national, public and private. Rather than simply dismiss cabaret as an elite genre, I approach it through the lens of its archival function of preserving the songbooks of American popular composers and the personal and professional experience of the women who have sung them. In particular, I discuss three

women who arrived in New York in the 1940s and found themselves performing one-woman shows on the Broadway stage nearly sixty years later: Elaine Stritch, Bea Arthur, and Barbara Cook. But I also look at a later generation of women singers who perform in the celebrated cabaret venues of New York, including Mary Cleere Haran, Donna McKechnie, and Andrea Marcovicci. Taken together, the chapters on drag and cabaret suggest how contemporary American performance involves a serious interrogation of the past, and that the performances themselves involve a critical reassessment of American nostalgia. The legacies that these artists perform in their work rupture the primacy of patriotic history by summoning other sentiments, other trajectories, of popular culture.

My book concludes with a return to the discussion of performances embedded in overt political themes whose ongoing impact remains in effect. This final section unites the topics introduced throughout the book's other chapters while showcasing the important role the performing arts hold in the national culture. "Tragedy and the Performance Arts in the Wake of September 11, 2001," addresses the response of the performing arts to the terrorist attack of 9/11. The chapter departs from the earlier writing in the book in that it is composed in the first person and as an account of my own experiences of the events. I begin by discussing the idea of tragedy and how it structures contemporary life before considering how the performing arts, especially in New York City, became a central component to the national economic and symbolic recovery. I survey a wide range of performance events—Broadway musicals, fund-raisers for the families of fallen firefighters, and classical concerts—all in the wake of September 11. I conclude with a discussion of new work engaged with global geopolitical events including U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Iraq.

In the book's afterword, "The Time of Your Life," I take one final archival turn by discussing the 2002 revival of William Saroyan's 1939 play *The Time of Your Life* by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, perhaps the most esteemed theatre company in the United States. The production was restaged in 2004 in premier regional theatres in Seattle and San Francisco. I juxtapose the play's initial contemporary moment of the late 1930s and early 1940s—the Great Depression, the eve of World

War II—with the current contemporary to see what Saroyan’s work might offer us now. The book concludes in 2004, the year in which it was completed: the ten-year period between the 1994 dances of Bill T. Jones and Neil Greenberg in New York City and the 2004 performances of the Steppenwolf revival of Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life* in Seattle and San Francisco forms the book’s contemporary. The chapters appear chronologically, moving forward in time sequentially before arriving at the time of the now. The chapters can also be read as an archive of this period, one that includes the historical materials summoned to enrich the book’s concern with the contemporary. The same can be said for the book’s collection of images, many of which are also historical. I use images less as illustrations of the performances, although they help in that regard as well, and more to expand the book’s scope to include a visual component meant to complement the writing. The images help contextualize the contemporary in historical and visual terms. Performance’s impermanence is challenged by its ephemera, which paradoxically can be the evidence of its loss. These remains, however, document more than simply the constraints of writing performance history even in the contemporary period. The images and other ephemera included in the book provide yet another entry point into thinking about contemporary performance in America, its contribution to the national culture, and its engagement with the historical past.

ON THE CONTEMPORARY

The book’s claim for the vitality of the contemporary performing arts necessitates an interrogation of the concept of the contemporary and its relation to history. When is the contemporary? For whom does the term hold meaning? And what work does it do when it is employed? In thinking through these questions, we begin to challenge the amorphous quality of the term *contemporary*. Throughout the book, I call attention to the contemporary period’s virtually instantaneous movement from the present to the immediate past, a process that shapes the historical context of the period and underlines the philosophical challenges that come with thinking about history. “The question of ‘the contemporary’ is,” as Thomas Docherty has written, “almost by defi-

nition, a problem of representation.”⁴ He explains: “A presentation of the present must always involve a representing, which has the effect of marking the present moment with the passage of time.” But like most scholars drawn to the “question of the contemporary,” Docherty focuses on literature, philosophy, and theory. Interest in the contemporary rarely focuses on the performing arts, a regrettable omission given the temporal attributes of performance that lend themselves to discussions of representation and time. I argue that performance’s own nowness, which is to say its own ephemeral nature, provides an entrance into contemplating these questions around the contemporary and the interpretive and political issues attached to them. The act of writing itself delivers the contemporary into history. *Performance in America* is interested in addressing the temporality of performance, the historiography of theatre, and the practices of theatre criticism.

Scrutinizing the idea of the contemporary enriches the discussion of both recent and current American performances. Despite its ubiquitous usage, the term *contemporary* remains surprisingly undertheorized.⁵ This undertheorization allows for the term’s continued usage as a shorthand for something assumed but never explained. *Contemporary* is often used interchangeably with other literary or philosophical terms such as *postmodern* that set it up as a historical period, an aesthetic category, or both at once. My interest in the contemporary moves away from these discussions and focuses on the idea of the present as a time in which an audience imagines itself within a fluid and nearly suspended temporal condition, living in a moment not yet in the past and not yet in the future, yet a period we imagine as having some power to shape our relation to both history and futurity. My thinking here is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s ideas on historical materialism, where the relationship between history and the present moment is put under pressure, demystified, and fully explored. With Benjamin’s practice of historical materialism, the present becomes “the time of the now.” In this poetic phrase, introduced in his influential and much-quoted “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin sets out to conjure a process in which the historian breaks away from understanding history as a sequence of events and instead “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”⁶ History, therefore, does not make

for a story of progress, where each period sequentially improves on the previous historical period. Benjamin's the time of the now is set in an intimate yet unpredictable relation to the historical past. I argue that performance both embodies Benjamin's time of the now and exploits it to great effect.

The undertheorization of the term *contemporary* also allows it to circulate widely but amorphously. It enables the critical derision of the contemporary as something either ahistorical or unproven. Critical efforts to theorize the contemporary are often accused of being "presentist": a focus on the contemporary is presumed to come at the expense of history, as if the contemporary could only be understood as antagonistic to the past, or in a mutually exclusive relationship to it, two positions I contest throughout the book. The charge of presentism reprimands the critic for presumably holding little interest in or knowledge of history, as if the contemporary emerged outside of history or ideology; for understanding history in ways only valid and appropriate to the current period in which the interpretation is framed, as if the contemporary were incapable of historical nuance; and for overvaluing the contemporary with positivist notions of historical progress, as if the contemporary were the culmination of history. *Performance in America* refutes these charges, providing a model for how to think about contemporary productions in both historical and political terms.

In terms of performance, the anxiety around the focus on the contemporary period as a sign of presentist bias also shapes the cultural unease around new American theatre. Since contemporary performance has yet to stand the test of time, critics import previous cultural values to assess it. But contemporary performance becomes shortchanged in this process, as do contemporary audiences who bring other interests to their theatregoing practices. The contemporary exists as neither the future nor the past, although its links to each of these frames of time define it. It raises suspicions of its relevance since it cannot be mined nostalgically for past insight or tradition, and it cannot be forecast as necessarily significant for future generations.

Throughout this project I take on the allegation of presentism in two ways. First, I demonstrate how contemporary performance is itself already embedded in a historical archive of past performances that

help contextualize the work in history. In this way, the contemporary participates in an ongoing dialogue with previously contemporary works now relegated to literary history, the theatrical past, or cultural memory. Although the case studies I address are drawn from the period 1994–2004, they lead me to examine other historical periods and practices, including eighteenth-century British theatrical and visual culture, nineteenth-century American popular entertainments, the songbooks of the Great Depression in the earlier half of the twentieth century, and the 1950s and the golden age of Hollywood. Theatre and performance scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Joseph Roach, and Diana Taylor, among others, have made explicit the relationships between theatre and performance and history and memory. “Drama,” writes Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*, “more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory.”⁷ Carlson’s important project on theatre and memory focuses on the material aspects of theatre production—actors, scripts, buildings—and on how these elements become repositories of meaning for audiences over time. While Carlson’s ideas help dilute the binary between the contemporary and the past as specifically addressed in theatre, Roach and Taylor consider performance in the broadest sense to include a wide range of cultural practices outside of the traditional theatre, examining its relationship to cultural memory.

In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach demonstrates how performance and cultural memory are not simply linked but in fact form a genealogy indispensable to understanding the circum-Atlantic world. For Roach, “genealogies of performance also attend to ‘counter-memories,’ or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences.”⁸ Likewise, Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire* goes to great lengths to differentiate written and embodied histories, especially as they serve to commemorate a contested past, and demonstrates how performance functions as a “system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowl-

edge.”⁹ The efforts of Carlson, Roach, and Taylor to understand how performance functions in relation to history and memory shape my own project’s explorations of the relationship between the contemporary and the past.

While many works in contemporary theatre summon past performances in order to conjure the ghosts of previous cultural moments, other works invest little interest in anything but the present moment. My second argument against presentism offers a defense of cultural productions whose primary interests fall outside of traditional aesthetic models or social concepts of theatre. These works might intervene in an immediate social or historical problem, participate in a larger cultural inquiry where performance is one of many modes of address, or hold minimal regard for the business-as-usual standard practices of the theatre. Here, in these performances, the emphasis falls on audience relations and the politics of spectatorship.

One of the reasons that the contemporary remains undertheorized is because the term seems to fold into its own hermeneutics. In other words, the contemporary cannot be explained because it is still in process. Once it passes, it is no longer the contemporary moment, but the immediate past. *Performance in America* sets out to redress this concern by theorizing the contemporary in historical and political contexts and by divesting it of its attachment to teleological time, a project that feminist theorists have already successfully undertaken. According to Robyn Wiegman, teleological time “covets the ideas of origins and succession” and follows a model that builds on what Judith Roof has described as the “generational legacy” paradigm, in which the present remains continually indebted to the past.¹⁰ For Wiegman and Roof, the generational legacy model proves problematic given the reproductive logic it assumes. “Generation’s reproductive familial narrative assumes a linear, chronological time where the elements that come first appear to cause elements that come later,” Roof explains.¹¹ My book aligns itself with these scholars’ efforts to rethink the politics of time as a relation to the past that is not causal or direct, but unpredictable and nonlinear.

Following feminist models, my book likewise refutes the reproductive mandate of the generational paradigm that sees the contemporary as indebted to the past and bound to the future, a model of history

whose deference to heteronormative biases seems especially problematic. I find the power of the contemporary precisely in its nowness and argue that the significance of contemporary performance need not be based either in tradition or futurity, both biases that privilege heteronormative models of cultural reproduction. Such models value the contemporary only as the product of already legitimate cultural traditions or as the potential ideal for an imagined future. Neither of these positions prioritizes the contemporary's contribution to the time of the historical now. Rather than holding the contemporary to a standard that insists on its utility to future generations, cultural critics should consider how the contemporary speaks to its own historical moment. *Performance in America* challenges the presumption that the contemporary is obligated to recognize the past or gesture to the future. Here is where the book's indebtedness to queer theory is strongest. Queer theory has taught us to question the systems of normativity that govern daily life and culture.¹² Again, this does not mean to say that the contemporary or its study is ahistorical or outside of time. I am simply suggesting that the contemporary performing arts should not need to prove relevant to future generations in order to be valued today, nor should they be obliged to build on conventional models of tradition to be deemed significant. Rather, the contemporary should be evaluated primarily in terms of how it serves its immediate audience. Inspired by work in queer and feminist theory, *Performance in America* promotes different methods of reading the contemporary and writing theatre history.

I have organized the book around a set of related questions, each springing from my central thesis about the vitality of the performing arts to the national culture. These questions include: In what ways and at what moments does performance emerge as a progressive site of cultural production? What does performance achieve that differentiates it from other artistic practices or other forms of cultural engagement? Who invests in the performing arts and for what reasons? How do contemporary performing artists themselves understand their role in local and national cultures? How do contemporary performances engage with the historical past without replicating the norms and ideals of previous eras? What does performance tell us about American culture?

Along with its interrogation of the contemporary, *Performance in*

America demonstrates how new work in the performing arts will now and then return to past artistic practices and customs, though not in the teleological or positivist sense of exceeding, advancing, or improving on the past. Such a rehearsal of previous performances positions contemporary performance as a repository of American culture and theatre history. In this sense, contemporary performance can be understood as both an archive of past theatrical moments and an ongoing engagement with, and revival of, this history.

Much of the work I consider in *Performance in America* emerges out of minority and subcultural communities in the United States. These queer, racialized, and immigrant populations have alternative histories and often even oppositional relations to the sexual and racial normatives of conventional America, including its theatre. In *Performance in America* I am interested in publicizing the work of those artists whose commitment to the performing arts refutes the various antitheatrical discourses that permeate contemporary American culture. *Performance in America* also examines undertheorized and undervalued sites of performance including cabaret performance, the Broadway musical, and commercial theatre.

Antitheatricality in the contemporary period takes many forms, from outright efforts to stifle artistic practice to economic cuts to funding sources for the arts to efforts to censor works imagined as offensive to theatre audiences. But there also exist antitheatrical biases that trivialize the performing arts and their audiences as irrelevant or bourgeois. Such bias knows no political affiliation; it is as likely to be found among self-professed leftists as it is among conservatives. While social conservatives might prove more anxious about arts funding and are more likely to stifle alternative forms of artistic expression, progressives practice their own form of bias by devaluing and underestimating the work of the performing arts in general. Lack of engagement with the arts perhaps constitutes the Left's most subtle and prominent form of antitheatrical bias. *Performance in America* sets out to redress this problem by examining a wide range of performance practices, venues, and audiences. Despite the emphasis on community-based, alternative, and progressive performance, the book is also committed to examining mainstream theatre. Here I focus especially on traditional genres and

commercial venues, and the possibilities they offer to initiate critical conversations with innovative artistic forms and not-for-profit performance spaces. Thus the book refuses to place community-based performance and commercial theatre in an oppositional or antithetical relation. *Performance in America* attends to the various forms of cultural contestation available within a rich spectrum of the performing arts. For this reason the book, while primarily focused on theatre, also discusses music and dance.

Performance in America examines diverse theatrical performances and spectatorial communities shaped by race and ethnicity, class and region, and sexuality and citizenship. The book is situated at the crossroads of the new American studies—especially in terms of the rigorous reimagining of American identity and culture that have transformed the field—and the new theatre studies—where the reconceptualization of performance has inspired a new interest in the performing arts. The book does not position performance as either oppositional or acquiescent to mainstream American cultural practices. Rather, it sets out to understand how different communities might find in performance a way to embody and articulate new social formations within contemporary American culture. *Performance in America* promotes contemporary performance both as a critical engagement with the historical past and as a fresh interrogation of, or necessary separation from, the past through new articulations of culture and identity.

The next two sections of this chapter, “The Unacknowledged Drama of American Studies,” and “The Romance with the Indigenous,” will address the broader issues at stake in the fields of American studies and theatre and performance studies. I argue that the critical bibliographies of both these fields reveal particular assumptions about performance in America in need of challenging. *Performance in America* sets out to revive certain debates in both these fields, debates about performance and America that often occur simultaneously and generally without the other field’s direct acknowledgment. It also attempts to consider the kinds of artistic works valorized by scholars in these related fields. At first, I will look closely at some of the ways that American studies and performance studies have engaged each other, and at the limits of this engagement. At stake in this section is the tension between

the two fields; on the one hand, drama pervades the critical writings about American studies as a field, yet, on the other hand, theatre and performance studies continually laments performance as overlooked. Drama offers the dominant vocabulary for figurations of conflict, narrative, and progress in American studies, yet ironically, scholarly projects in theatre and performance studies continually highlight the relative absence of theatre and performance from critical studies of American culture.¹³

THE UNACKNOWLEDGED DRAMA OF AMERICAN STUDIES

In their introduction to *The Futures of American Studies*, a collection of essays published in 2002 that marks the intellectual and political shifts in the interdisciplinary field, the editors, Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, reconsider one of the field's central essays, Gene Wise's " 'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," first published in 1977. Wise's essay attempted to assess the formation of the field and forecast its future. The essay, as Pease and Wiegman claim, positioned itself "not simply as a history of the field, but as a founding gesture."¹⁴ Pease and Wiegman critique Wise's history of the field, especially his effort to integrate and unify American studies at a time when the field was just beginning to exceed the limited scope of its initial and dominant impulse. The field's prior interest in tracing identifiable and consistent characteristics of American culture had begun to wane in the wake of the radical political movements of the 1960s. A generation of new scholars now challenged the nationalist project of establishing an intelligible cultural, social, and intellectual history. New work on subcultures, race and ethnicity, gender, popular culture, and other emergent subjects of inquiry in the 1960s and 1970s started to make its mark on American studies, altering the way the field was composed and practiced. In his article, Wise mourns the loss of coherency in American studies and tries to steer the field toward a more homogenous movement based on his preferred genealogy and own disciplinary bias. And yet he felt that the earlier model of practicing and understanding American studies,

the “climate-of-opinion” history, was too deterministic and monolithic and that a new paradigm attending to the dynamic interplay between American culture and its study seemed in order. His critique runs as follows: “Conveniently, when handling ideas in historical context, scholars have employed a ‘climate-of-opinion’ mode of explanation. In this mode, ideas are handled as surface ‘reflections’ of underlying social forces. The social reality is seen as basic, and is thought to determine the ideas. Thus it is said that American scholarship of the 1950s was determined by consensual forces in the culture then, new left scholarship reflected the more radical climate of the 1960s, and so on.”¹⁵ Impatient with this model and concerned with the institutional genealogy of the field, Wise proposes a new paradigm drawn from the world of the theatre, which he understands as more involved in acts of exchange. “Where the climate-of-opinion metaphor is borrowed from observation of the weather, my working metaphor is drawn from the theatre,” he explains. “It views historical ideas not as ‘enveloped’ by their surrounding climates,” he continues, “but rather as a sequence of dramatic acts—acts which play on wider cultural scenes, or historical stages.”¹⁶ Wise’s interest in securing an identifiable history of the field—including its archives, methodologies, and meanings—and his efforts to coordinate these disparate facets of the discipline rightfully suggest to Pease and Wiegman an anxiety over the field’s future and Wise’s inability to harness its imploding subfields.

Pease and Wiegman critique Wise’s assessment of the field and unveil the senior scholar’s anxiety over its status. Not only are they reluctant to endorse Wise’s history of the field but they are also careful not to promote Wise’s own standing within the origins and intellectual history of American studies that he constructs. Rather than secure Wise’s position as a foundational figure for the field, Pease and Wiegman prefer to situate him historically within the institutional and political contexts of his writing. “We are less invested in writing continuity with his essay—and thereby founding this *Futures* [the title of their collection] as the fulfillment of that past—than in examining the various strategies of temporal management through which ‘Paradigm Dramas’ sought to negotiate the future.”¹⁷ Pease and Wiegman are especially critical of Wise’s attempts to foreclose the field’s future.

In their brilliant rebuttal to Wise's mission for the field, the two scholars carefully and persuasively critique Wise's essay point by point. Yet they leave one aspect of Wise's essay without mention and, in fact, it becomes the point of continuity that Pease and Wiegman had planned to avoid. This point has to do with the metaphor of drama. Drama enables Wise to restage the history of American studies as a sequence of interrelated and interdependent acts:

The drama metaphor suggests a dynamic image of ideas, in contrast to the passive "reflector" role they play in climate-of-opinion explanations. It also gives to ideas a *trans*-actional quality. This is so because an act in the theatre is always an interplay with the scene around it; an actor does not simply pass on his or her lines *to* an audience, but actor and audience (at least in a play which works) are in continual dialogue, messages traveling back and forth between one role and the other.¹⁸

Wise's use of drama here proves revealing. He begins by speaking in terms of dramaturgy, about what makes a good play, and in this sense his perspective is traditional if not conservative. He essentially describes what in theatre studies would be understood as a "well-made play," a nineteenth-century genre where a carefully executed plot—Wise's "sequence of dramatic acts"—figured most prominently and where these acts build on one another in a chronological manner. Wise then moves to discuss the play as it would be produced in the theatre. His interest in actors and audiences also proves traditional in that it presumes the actor inhabiting and communicating discernable "messages" to an audience—"at least in a play which works," he adds parenthetically yet assuredly. This explication of the drama metaphor stands as a type of dramatic criticism that is embedded in traditional theatrical conventions and the ideological underpinnings they convey.¹⁹ Wise introduces the drama metaphor in the opening pages of his essay in a discussion that while thoughtful, also remains brief. He soon abandons the drama metaphor, however, except to use it as a descriptive to name certain formative movements in American studies, or what he calls "representative acts," that follow sequentially and chronologically.

Pease and Wiegman find this sequential and chronological logic one of the essay's main problems in constructing a history of the field. And

yet, oddly, they too invoke the drama metaphor to challenge Wise's position. At no point do they challenge Wise on the use of the metaphor of drama; instead, they allow it to stand as such. In fact, they themselves employ it to make their critique:

But countering Wise's project at this late date is not finally the point. We are more interested in examining the implications of the unacknowledged drama we have begun to chart than in arguing with any of the essay's substantive claims. This drama involved Wise's anxieties over the recognition that the field would not reproduce any of the paradigms that he characterized as representative of the American Studies movement. The temporal crisis of his essay (and the problematic of time that his paradigmatic desire most powerfully demonstrates) provides a space for thinking about the anxiety over futurity that *America* as a nationalist icon and *American studies* as a field formation both evince.²⁰

Tellingly, Pease and Wiegman use the phrase "the unacknowledged drama" to describe Wise's anxieties about the future of American studies. They preserve the language of the metaphor even as they critique the paradigm it invokes. But unlike Wise, they offer no explanation for their use of it. Neither essay is concerned with drama in any way other than as a metaphor. In fact, both essays relegate their discussion of theatre and drama to a footnote. In Wise, the footnote announces, in perhaps his most prophetic claim, the possibilities of the metaphor for the field: "I believe drama metaphors offer enormous potential for future works in American Studies, and are especially useful in bridging the long-lamented gap between humanistic and social scientific approaches to culture."²¹ I find this claim particularly striking given the proliferation—and now near ubiquity—of the terms *performance* and *performativity* among the future generation of scholars Wise describes.

In a footnote to their introduction, Pease and Wiegman, too, contextualize Wise's term *paradigm dramas* within a critical genealogy based in anthropology and literary criticism. They write:

Wise used paradigm dramas to articulate the myth-symbol paradigm with the anthropologist Victor Turner's account of the social dramas through which cultures reflected on and thereafter trans-

formed themselves. Turner has modeled his explanation of “social dramas” after Northrop Frye’s description of literary mythology as educating the social imagination. Frye proposed that the literary understanding of drama might be extrapolated into an analytical category capable of representing as well as effecting social change. In placing Turner’s model into the service of defining the conflicts over the future of American studies, Wise reaffirmed the explanatory power of the myth-symbol paradigm to which Turner’s model was indebted—at the very moment that the paradigm had lost its epistemic authority throughout the academy.²²

Pease and Wiegman’s genealogy for Wise’s paradigm drama tells only a partial history of the influence of Turner’s ideas on the profession. While it might be true that the Frye/Turner model of social dramas “lost its epistemic authority” in some circles of the academy, Turner’s subsequent collaborations with the scholar and director Richard Schechner in the late 1970s and early 1980s helped usher into the academy the new and interdisciplinary field of performance studies.²³ These collaborations were based on the model of social dramas that Turner had proposed in his 1974 *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors*, but because Schechner and Turner were mostly concerned with non-Western cultures and events and with indigenous traditions and rituals, their reputation in American studies remains minor and their impact on that field as yet unrecognized.

Pease and Wiegman, like Wise before them, rely on the drama metaphor to punctuate their critique, but their interest in “examining the unacknowledged drama” never extends to drama itself. So what are we to make of these unacknowledged dramas in Wise and in Pease and Wiegman? Why the continuity of the drama metaphor in a field such as American studies? What does the drama metaphor offer the field?

It would be difficult to argue drama’s marginal significance to American studies given its prominence as metaphor in these state-of-the-field essays. Drama provides the underexamined current in these essays, and, as Wise predicted, it has proven incredibly fruitful as a metaphor in recent scholarship. Wise’s prescient sense that drama would prove a productive metaphor for future work in American studies materialized in the early-mid 1990s when *performance* became the critical term of

choice across the humanities. The word was generally used as a metaphor, as a means to differentiate and mark a contrast to anything essentialist or supposedly real. To complicate matters, the terms *performance*, *performativity*, and *performative* were invoked interchangeably without differentiating their subtle but useful distinctions and their specific intellectual traditions.²⁴ Moreover, the interest in performance did not necessarily inspire scholarship on theatre and performance itself.²⁵

So what work does this metaphor do? How might we begin to understand the deployment of the drama metaphor? Here I want to return to Turner whose interest in metaphor is worth revisiting. “There is nothing wrong with metaphors,” Turner explains, “provided that one is aware of the perils lurking behind their misuse.”²⁶ Turner is considering the implications of speaking about what he calls “the social world” in metaphors drawn from outside of the human experience, from plants and animals, for example. The problem, as he sees it, is that these metaphors “select, emphasize, suppress, and organize” according to the logic of the metaphor and not to that of the actual object of study. However, if the metaphor, “whose combination of familiar and unfamiliar features or unfamiliar combination of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives, one can be excited by them; the implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with their literal use enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way.”²⁷ Turner’s thoughts allow us to consider the drama metaphor in American studies as the catalyst to understand “the new subject matter” that is itself the field of American studies. It is American studies that needs to be placed relationally to something already presumed familiar; in this case, the familiar concept of drama. Drama occupies the position of the stable referent, the knowable term. Drama—and theatre and performance, used interchangeably by those working the metaphor—is therefore not just the steady metaphor that surfaces in moments of institutional or disciplinary chaos; it is the actual constant, that which is always already there. Drama is what is presumed to be known, so much so that it goes without saying. This, then, constitutes the unacknowledged drama of American studies.

Theatre and performance scholars, whose claims on the drama metaphor and the language of performance felt most earned, were quick

to note that the trend for performance metaphors, although borrowed from theatre and performance studies, meant little interest in their fields except for its language. In her own 2001 state-of-the-field project, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Jill Dolan, one of the leading scholars in theatre and performance studies, observes of this trend:

Theories of the performative—in feminism, gay and lesbian studies, performance studies, and cultural studies—creatively borrow from concepts in theatre studies to make their claim for the constructed nature of subjectivity, suggesting that social subjects perform themselves in negotiation with the delimiting cultural conventions of the geography in which they move. But as much as performativity seems to capture the academic imagination, and as much as performance captures the political field, theatrical performances, as located historical sites for interventionist work in social identity constructions, are rarely considered across the disciplines, methods, and politics that borrow its terms.²⁸

Dolan would like to see theatre studies “visited and acknowledged” instead of “raided and discarded.” Her concern that the insights and methods of theatre studies remain unacknowledged returns us to this problem of the ubiquity of performance in academic discourse even as it remains marginal, even seemingly irrelevant, to the larger intellectual communities interested in politics and social change. American studies, which Dolan does not include in her list of scholarly fields, is equally capable of this kind of raiding, as we have seen. But is American studies interested in drama in any other way than as a metaphor?

There is a near industry in theatre studies of work on American theatre and performance that bemoans drama’s irrelevance and marginality to the academy and the larger national culture. Nearly every study of American drama begins as an advocacy project, one where the case for the project itself needs to be justified. The self-consciousness of the scholarship on American theatre is surprising, although it has by now nearly become the defining characteristic of the subfield. The self-consciousness is unexpected given the high number of scholarly projects on American theatre, drama, and performance. Consider two

excellent books that range among the most interesting in American theatre published in the 1990s. In *The Other American Drama*, Marc Robinson's fascinating study of the American dramatic avant-garde, the author argues against the primacy of the historical genealogy of twentieth-century American drama that begins with Eugene O'Neill and works its way up to August Wilson. Robinson's alternative history challenges the plot-driven account of American drama and focuses instead on the formal innovations and influences of theatre artists such as Gertrude Stein, Tennessee Williams, and Marie Irene Fornes. Despite his enthusiasm for this work, he writes:

Yet, in American culture, drama has been set apart from the rest of the arts, banished to a dark corner, perhaps because it's too disruptive, too unwieldy, or just too slow to catch up with the advances of the other arts. Few serious students of music, literature, or painting take an interest in drama; few cultural forums find room for spirited debates about theatrical concerns. Part of the problem, of course, is temporality. Performances disappear; productions close after only a few people see them; only a fraction of dramatic literature is part of the living repertoire—even the best contemporary writers see just a few of their plays performed more than once.²⁹

Robinson's tentative explanations for why drama has been "banished to a dark corner" put the blame on drama itself ("too disruptive," "too unwieldy," "too slow"), but rather than abandon drama, Robinson sets out to recuperate it. "Theatre critics sometimes have a bathetic air, for they live in perpetual bereavement, watching the objects of their affection slip away into obscurity as the lights on stage go down," he writes. "Writing about plays, then," he concludes, "becomes genuinely restorative, in a double sense: invigorating, as exercise might be; but, more important, life restoring, setting the plays before all our minds once again and allowing a longer look."³⁰

If Robinson's project is a restorative one, other projects in American theatre are about reconfiguration. In the anthology *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*, the editors, Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, assemble over a dozen scholars of American theatre in an effort to showcase the diversity of critical work in the area and the

interdisciplinary potential of the study of American theatre and performance. In the anthology's introduction, Mason goes to great effort to place the project in the context of American literary studies and American studies more broadly conceived. His justification for expanding the study of American theatre seems compelling and persuasive:

Underlying our overt agenda has been an interest in situating the theatre as a product, an expression, and integral constituent of its culture. Performances and para-performances persist in venues scattered throughout society, and any of them can employ and interrogate the discourse that permeates and drives the whole. The stage is only an explicit site for performing national identity, one that serves to focus the issues, rhetoric, and images found in the more general forums; its creative freedom and opportunity to take risks encourage attempts to develop, explore, test, and dispute conceptions of national character. In the performative arena, in the interchanges among artists and spectators, we can enact narratives of nation, whether ostensibly actual or openly speculative.³¹

And yet, like Robinson, Mason also laments the status of American theatre and performance studies in the academy. He is particularly concerned with the intellectual history of the field, its lack of critical tradition, and its disregard in other related fields of study:

To so perceive the American theater is to remember a void in American theater studies. Those working in American literature can situate their work in long, rich debates over conceptualization and methodology, all in terms of the specifically American character of the experience. Yet there has been little attempt, if any, to theorize American theater or drama as such; there are no theatrical counterparts to such landmark literary studies as F. O. Matthiesson's *American Renaissance*, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land*, or Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation*. . . . Plays and their productions claim only a very little space in the discourse of American studies, no matter the decade or the methodology.³²

Robinson and Mason share a need to situate their work within a discourse of lack or neglect, or, as Mason puts it, a "void." This rhetorical

move, to call attention to the lack of attention paid to American theatre, has become the standard discursive strategy for nearly every project in the field regardless of its critical methodology or its particular case studies. From Robinson's traditional study of dramatic texts to Mason and Gainor's outreach to interdisciplinarity, scholars of American theatre remain self-conscious about the object of their study, as if the field itself were either at a crossroads or a crisis. In these scenarios, the field of American theatre and performance studies either needs to be revamped so that it gains currency in intellectual circles, or it will find itself on the verge of critical extinction, such that the study of American theatre and drama itself might become obsolete. These scholarly works, fairly well known in theatre and performance studies, remain unacknowledged by, if not completely unknown to, scholars in American studies.

The reasons for these disciplinary boundaries are complicated. As Susan Harris Smith explains in the introduction to her indispensable study *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, American drama has been neglected for no one particular reason, but for the convergence of a number of conditions. Her comments are worth quoting in full, and while they primarily concern the case against drama as a literary genre, they foreground the challenges drama faces at large:

American drama has been written almost out of the American literary canon because of enduring hostile evaluations and proscriptions that themselves need to be reassessed. I argue that for several reasons American drama has been shelved out of sight: in part because of a culturally dominant puritan distaste for and suspicion of the theatre; in part because of a persistent, unwavering allegiance to European models, slavish Anglophilia, and a predilection for heightened language cemented by New Critics; in part because of a fear of populist, leftist, and experimental art; in part because of a disdain of alternative, oppositional, and vulgar performances; in part because of narrow disciplinary divisions separating drama from theatre and performance; and in part because of the dominance of prose and poetry in the hierarchy of genre studies in university literature courses and reproduced in American criticism. As a consequence, American dramatic literature has no "place" in the culture either as

a “highbrow” literary genre or, surprisingly, as a “lowbrow” popular form of entertainment. As a sociocultural product, “literature” is not born, it is made by institutional processes, by disciplinary fiat, and by critical assertion. In the production of an American national literature, American drama has been a casualty of the wars of legitimation fought in the academy and has been so diminished that not even the revisionists have taken up the cause. Ultimately, however, I am interested not as much in arguing for American drama as literature as I am in examining the phenomenon of exclusion and in studying the tactics, discourse practices, and maneuvers employed to deal with American drama by those who were busy dominating and defining culture and legitimating their claim.³³

Smith’s comments above, while not directly engaged with the field of American studies, nonetheless begin to suggest the ways in which American studies participates in these practices of exclusion. While, on the one hand, the field has been drawn to using drama as a metaphor to understand its own disciplinary history, it has, on the other hand, been complicit in many of the exclusionary processes that Smith describes. Still, as Smith notes in her study, some essays on American theatre have appeared in *American Quarterly*, the official publication of the American Studies Association. In fact, an early chapter of Smith’s own book project was first published as the lead essay in a critical portfolio on American drama, which included three other theatre scholars, in the March 1989 issue of the journal.³⁴

But even in scholarship published in *American Quarterly*, work on theatre and performance remains self-conscious and defensive. In 1978, in somewhat of a prequel to Smith’s own project, C. W. E. Bigsby published an assessment of the field of American drama studies from 1945 to 1978. In his opening paragraph, Bigsby immediately pronounces the study of drama as worthy and important, while noting that it has been neglected. He is taken aback that American studies has not prioritized American theatre. “That it has failed to engage the attention it deserves, not only from dramatic critics but from those committed to analysis of the American temper is thus the more surprising,” he writes, “but of that neglect there can be no doubt.”³⁵

Nearly twenty-five years later, in the very pages of *American Quar-*

terly, the dance scholar Jane Desmond opens her review of two books on dance with virtually the same rhetorical move. American studies will be well served to pay attention to dance and performance studies, she argues, adding that American studies has been neglecting this work for too long. Theatre and drama here have been replaced by dance and performance, but the implications are essentially interchangeable: theatre, dance, and performance remain marginal to the field. Desmond writes, “As a scholarly community, American studies specialists have just recently begun to be more open to performance analyses.”³⁶ “What I think is less the case yet,” she then qualifies her claim, “is the *active* engagement of American studies scholars more broadly with the works of performance specialists: reading their works, assigning them in courses, citing them in articles, and engaging with them in print from the various locales we inhabit, whether it be literature, anthropology, history, or something more broadly connoted as cultural studies.”³⁷ Desmond’s advocacy for dance, and performance studies more generally, introduces a new factor missing in earlier accounts of performance’s marginality to the field: race. In order to make her case for dance, Desmond invokes the interests of the new American studies and offers a pragmatic solution: read, teach, and cite these books. The books she reviews—Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*, and Linda Tomko’s *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890–1920*—should be of interest to American studies scholars because “each engages specifically with issues at the heart of current American studies research: race and class formations.”³⁸ Within this logic, if earlier work on theatre, dance, and performance was marginal to the field, it might be because it failed to address race and class. But, as Desmond wants to argue, now that performance studies is addressing these two issues, there is no longer an excuse for its neglect.

And yet, as Desmond is surely aware, race and class issues have been central to theatre studies for some time. Scholars such as Jorge Huerta, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Harry Elam, James Moy, Margaret Wilkerson, and others were among the first to publish work on race and ethnicity beginning in the early 1980s. Class issues, especially as they converge with gender, race, and nation, have also been foregrounded in theatre and performance studies. Books on race and class have proven central

to the field of theatre and performance studies throughout the 1990s and, one could easily argue, have made the greatest impact on the field since the wave of feminist performance theory in the late 1980s. In this way, it is important to remember that theatre and performance studies do not remain exempt from the influences of the intellectual trends and innovations that inform the academy.

While I am sympathetic to Desmond's position, and while I, too, want American studies to engage more directly with the critical bibliographies, archives, and methodologies of performance studies, I cannot help but place her comments within the tradition of critical self-consciousness and anxiety I have been mapping above. *Performance in America* also, of course, locates itself in this same advocacy tradition. It, too, hopes to install theatre and performance more significantly in American studies. And while I am also interested in thinking through the antitheatrical sentiments that marginalize performance in American studies, my project also wants to trouble the way that performance is sometimes valorized within that field, broadly conceived to include ethnic studies, queer studies, and cultural studies. What are the kinds of performances that scholars in American studies and these related oppositional fields pursue and theorize? What are the implications of these choices and the omissions they foreclose? I am especially interested in exploring what I call the "romance with the indigenous," by which I mean the endorsement of community-based and often obscure cultural productions, venues, and genres that seem more rooted in the "authentic," and artists and icons who are linked to progressive social movements. The next section will unpack what I mean by these terms and will focus on the field of Chicano and Latino studies to make the point. I choose Chicano/Latino studies not to single out the field as somehow more drawn to this practice, but as representative of how this practice manifests in oppositional fields formed through identity politics and shaped by minoritarian and subcultural worlds.

THE ROMANCE WITH THE INDIGENOUS

In the fall of 1957, a relatively unknown performer in one of her first major Broadway shows broke out of gypsy anonymity to launch a career

that would establish her as one of the major performers in American theatre in the twentieth century.³⁹ Chita Rivera's performance of Anita in *West Side Story*, in the original Broadway production at the Winter Garden, ranks among the legendary moments in Broadway history (figure 1). *Dance Magazine* placed her on the cover of its November 1957 issue and wrote glowingly of her performance:

About the dancers, who also happen to be the singers and actors in *West Side Story*: They are, as dancers and sometimes as actors, superb. They can't sing Mr. Bernstein's complicated score, and it is his best thus far, but oh, can they dance! Each and every one of them has soloist possibilities in his own genre. Star of the piece is, indisputably, Chita Rivera. She is one of the few who can sing, can act, and, of course, dance magnificently. Here is a performer of enormous individuality with a dance approach quite uniquely her own. She has made the transition from chorus to star with seemingly no effort, shedding irritating mannerisms and replacing them with the superbly assured manner of, with luck, a future great lady of the American musical theatre.⁴⁰

Dance Magazine's prophetic claims for Rivera as a "future great lady of the American musical theatre" were echoed in various other production reviews of the period. Rivera was consistently singled out for her performance, particularly for her lead in the Shark girls' number, "America." *West Side Story* has been written into cultural history mainly for the brilliant contributions of its artistic creative team: Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim. We read little, however, about Rivera's performance except in the initial reviews, and, in fact, when discussions finally turn to the actors, it is now the Academy Award-winning performance of Rita Moreno, who starred as Anita in the film version of *West Side Story*, that is the one most often associated with the role.

Chita Rivera was born Dolores Conchita Figueroa del Rivero in Washington, DC, on January 23, 1933. She started training as a dancer at an early age. In her hometown, she studied ballet with Doris Jones, and when her family moved to New York City when she was eleven, she won a scholarship to the School of American Ballet, where she trained



1. Chita Rivera in *West Side Story* on the cover of the November 1957 issue of *Dance Magazine*. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

for three years. Before her breakout performance in *West Side Story*, Rivera had already appeared in a handful of musicals beginning with the 1952 national tour of the Ethel Merman vehicle *Call Me Madam* and including roles in *Can-Can* (1953) and *The Shoestring Revue* (1956). This makes for an impressive résumé for any aspiring actor, but for a young Latina working in the 1950s, Rivera's achievement was remarkable. Her roles after *West Side Story* established her stature as one of the few Broadway stars who has endured throughout the decades in shows such as *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960), *Chicago* (1975), *The Rink* (1984), and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993). The fall of 2002 marked her fiftieth year as a Broadway performer. Anyone who has seen her perform can attest to her boundless energy and charisma on stage, and there is no indication that she will stop performing anytime soon. In the past few years, she has appeared in the Broadway revival of *Nine* (2003), received a Kennedy Center Lifetime Honoree Award, and was cast as the lead in *The Visit* (2001), a new musical by John Kander and Fred Ebb. She is currently working with the playwright Terrence McNally on developing a one-woman show based on her life and career.

Strange then, given Rivera's talents and professional affiliations, that

so few scholars from any field—theatre and performance studies, feminist and women’s studies, and ethnic and American studies—have focused attention on her work. If not for the popular press and the drama critics who review for it, and the occasional memoir of one of Rivera’s collaborators or historical peers, there would be little engagement with her distinguished career in the theatre. Theatre studies seems ambivalent around the topic of stardom, as if generating intellectual energy about celebrities and the performers we admire undermines our scholarly project and reveals an uncritical embrace of fandom.⁴¹ The fear that our love of theatre will call into question our critical capacities follows from theatre studies’ efforts to credentialize itself against the charge of inconsequentiality. To indulge in our feelings of pleasure and, more to the point, to write about them, is viewed as unprofessional, a form of fandom that should be relegated to the publicists or left to our private theatre journals. Our knowledge of the history and performances of stars is information presumed to have no real cultural value, the frivolous theatre gossip of overly enthusiastic fans.

Like theatre studies, Latino studies has largely neglected to think seriously about Chita Rivera. In part, this has to do with the still heated controversy around *West Side Story* and its representation of Puerto Ricans. The resentments that continue to surround the musical’s casting of non-Latinos in Latino roles, its perpetuation of Latino stereotypes as criminal and primitive, and its endorsement of American identity over Island loyalty shape the scholarship produced by Latino critics.⁴² Understandably, *West Side Story*—as one of the handful of Latino representations on Broadway—ignites Latino ire. The dismissal of Broadway as a viable site for Latino scholarship results from the sense that Latinos will find little to applaud here. The late 1990s controversy over Paul Simon’s *The Capeman*, a musical much maligned for its book and its representational politics of Latinos—despite star performances by Marc Anthony, Ednita Nazario, and Ruben Blades—only solidified this position. Many Latinos were upset that of all the possible stories to tell of Puerto Rico, Simon chose the sensational story of Salvador Agron, the nineteen-year-old Latino who in 1959 stabbed two teenagers in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen. *The Capeman* confirmed for many that Broadway was not receptive to creating positive or uplift-

ing Latino representations and would only recycle Latino stereotypes as popular entertainment for commercial consumption. Latino scholars did little to alter this position. Except for Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez in his groundbreaking *José, Can You See? Latinos on and off Broadway*, scholars in Latino studies have not looked carefully at the industry of Broadway and what its history might contribute to our knowledge of Latino life.⁴³

Chicano and Latino theatre scholars take much more interest in identifying, documenting, and advocating for community-based productions, Latino self-representations, and Latino performers who work closely within indigenous traditions and forms than in thinking about the work of a Latina Broadway star affiliated with non-Latino productions. Chicano and Latino studies prioritize the indigenous over the commercial because of the former's seemingly more direct relationship to an authentic Latino community. I do not mean to undermine this project; my own scholarship has been in concert with it for many years.⁴⁴ Its necessity must remain a priority of the field for two reasons. First, Chicanos and Latinos continue to confront many of the same structures of bias and discrimination that led to the founding of Chicano and Latino theatres in the first place. For this reason alone, Chicano and Latino theatre remains in Jorge Huerta's apt phrase a "necessary theater."⁴⁵ Second, the current work of Chicano and Latino playwrights and performers deserves our interpretive efforts because much of it is intellectually and politically engaging and emotionally and spiritually moving. A new generation of playwrights and performers are positioning themselves outside of the conventional Latino themes and structures, and their work needs to be identified, documented, and analyzed.

That said, it seems to me that the suspicion of commercial theatre endemic to the fields of both performance studies and Latino studies should be rethought. Commercial theatre offers its own pleasures and possibilities, and appreciating them should not automatically brand one as naive or politically unaware. The disdain of the commercial theatre constitutes a strain of antitheatricality that is symptomatic of larger cultural anxieties about class, capital, pleasure, and the popular. The dismissal of certain kinds of theatre as not worthwhile subjects for the-

atre and performance studies—or for American studies, for that matter—constitutes a variant of the antitheatrical sentiment that permeates our culture. Broadway, in this scenario, is viewed as especially problematic; not only is it seen as irrelevant but it is also imagined as lacking in artistry and talent, its audiences lacking in taste. Unable to distinguish between art and entertainment, Broadway audiences are dismissed as indiscriminate and unenlightened.

This anti-Broadway bias makes for a form of antitheatricality sanctioned by theatre scholars who do little to defend Broadway's artistic and cultural work. But it is also a form of antipopulism that needs to be rethought by progressive cultural critics. Rather than acquiesce to the anticommercial sentiment and solely endorse the indigenous, theatre and performance scholars should rethink their criteria of what constitutes a valid object of scholarly inquiry. Yet cultural critics remain more likely to champion work either obscure or unknown outside the sub-cultural world from which it sprang.

This model of discovery and publicity is one of the standard moves in cultural studies that focus on the performing arts. My own scholarship also participates in this practice; throughout *Performance in America*, I am interested in publicizing work that emerges out of community-based and alternative venues. Many of the artists I discuss throughout the book lack a critical bibliography and find their first extended scholarly engagement in this book. Indeed, my own romance with the indigenous, and I offer this as a self-critique, preceded this project. Nearly all of my previous academic writings and projects have promoted artists emerging out of particular subcultural communities, or what I am calling here the “indigenous.” In my first book, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, I went to great effort to publicize the work of community-based artists whose primary interest in performance was activist based and political. I felt that many of these artists were offering the most important and effective artistic and activist responses to AIDS in their particular moment in AIDS history. Many of these artists hovered below the radar, unknown outside of the immediate communities in which they lived, worked, and sometimes died. I saw my book as an archival project that would provide an alternative history of the period between 1981 and 1996, the years that framed my

study and where AIDS fatalities among gay men in the United States reached their peak.

I still am drawn to alternative performance and community-based arts. I am not out to revise my assessment of its achievement, or to brand my own endorsement of these projects as naive. In fact, I continue to seek out artists, venues, and audiences that aspire to a shared political project, one that may or may not secure them popular success or media attention. And I continue to write for community-based publications about artists with HIV, Latino performance, and queer culture. However, I no longer assume, as I was inclined to do in the past, that this work is more politically efficacious than mainstream or commercial productions. Instead, I am interested in the different kinds of politics, including the politics of pleasure, that each specific practice brings forth. That said, we must continue to demarcate the social, cultural, and material differences dividing Broadway productions from alternative or community-based theatre. My aim is not to deny these differences, but rather to challenge the uncritical valorization of alternative performance and the nearly automatic dismissal of Broadway theatre.

I name this uncritical valorization of the indigenous a “romance” to call attention to the ways that cultural critics often mystify subcultural performance. The romance with the indigenous is a bias toward the grassroots and the community-based, seen as unmediated; it can be especially problematic when it is used against work or artists whose success and achievement fall elsewhere. The case of Chita Rivera proves this point, as do the careers of others who work in the commercial theatre. But it can be equally problematic when the indigenous becomes a fetish. The indigenous is too easily extracted from a subcultural or community-based context in order to stand in for something else. Often it is burdened with the interests of the scholar or critic who is presumed to be linked with the performance due to access or membership to the community it represents. Performances can be entrapped by these identitarian or minoritarian claims. I mean to use the word *indigenous* not in the literal sense, but to refer to what is thought to be natural. By indigenous, I mean the seemingly authentic. The indigenous is presumed to have remained uncontaminated by commercialism, commodity culture, or mainstream tastes. In this way, it can refer not

simply to racial or ethnic minorities, in particular Native Americans, the group that has the most immediate association with the term in the United States, but to sexual minorities and others whose relationship to the majoritarian public sphere is compromised due to their social identities or subcultural practices. But even here, disparities exist. Within queer cultures, for example, the indigenous would refer to those who reject heteronormative ideals, assimilationist goals, and commodity fetishism. In short, that would mean the sexual outlaws, radical activists, and social abjects, who are often one and the same. But the term can also then be used to differentiate among racial and ethnic minorities; the indigenous is not interchangeable with ethnic, as the case of Chita Rivera makes clear. No one would deny that Chita Rivera is Latina; however, the case for her being indigenous, at least in the way I have described it, would be less persuasive.

The romance with the indigenous presupposes access to authenticity and valorizes that which is most associated with realness. In this sense, it constitutes a type of pastoral trope. The search for the authentic marks both an escape from urbanity and a move toward the margins. For this reason, the indigenous can be located not just in the country, where it is traditionally found in conventional pastorals, but also in the ghetto, whether that ghetto is located in the Castro or in South Central. The indigenous is associated with the real, a presumption suggesting that there is much in the culture that is artificial, inauthentic, or unreal. Despite these claims to realness, others who find the work lacking in artistry or limited in scope regularly denigrate community-based performances. Let me use the example of queer performance to make this point.

Among the many dismissive responses to queer performance in the popular press and even among queer people, the accusation that queer artists are preaching to the converted is perhaps the most frequent.⁴⁶ Surprisingly, it is also the one charge that queer artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers have failed to provide with any forceful rebuttal or theorization. The ubiquity of the preaching-to-the-converted charge becomes evident with any perusal of theatre reviews or, in a more anecdotal vein, any eavesdropping on gay people's own assessment of queer theatre. Such foreclosing attitudes flow without reflec-

tion from a variety of critics and spectators alike. Mainstream theatre reviewers, for example, often dismiss queer artists who address queer issues for queer audiences as having a limited scope of address. Generally these critics see community-based work not as theatre but as propaganda; queer theatre, from this perspective, has little or no artistic value, and queer audiences have little or no critical acumen.

And yet queer spectators, too, participate in this kind of conjecture. Work that is explicitly directed toward a queer audience and performed in a community-based or queer-friendly venue remains underattended, undervalued, and mocked—by queers—for its alleged naivety or predictability. Such a contradiction—that, on the one hand, queer people harbor no critical distance from queer art, and that, on the other, queer audiences are themselves hypercritical of queer art—helps sustain the accusatory and shaming force of the preaching-to-the-converted judgment. In either case, the idea that an artist is preaching to the converted sets into motion a no-win discursive dynamic that implicates both the artist and the audience. The dismissive response assumes queer artists as didactic and queer audiences as static. Regardless of how the phrase is employed—whether it be to insist that queer artists are propagandists and queer audiences are infantile, or to insist queer artists are didactic and queer audiences bored with it all—queer performance that supposedly preaches to the converted is never understood as a valuable, indeed, vital, activity. Instead, the uncontested phrase shuts down discussions around the important cultural work that queer artists perform for their queer audiences. The result makes for yet another occasion of queer disempowerment, one that undermines the idea of building a community culture around an ongoing series of events and gatherings.

Queer artists and audiences are not the only people who must confront the idea that they are preaching to the converted. Most political artists from marginalized communities are vulnerable to this dismissal. The dialectical tension between the assumption that political artists are preaching a type of ideological redundancy to a group of sympathetic supporters and the possibility that community-based performers and audiences are participating in an active expression of what may constitute the community itself obscures the fact that these very marginalized communities are themselves subject to the continuous

rhetorical and material practices of a naturalized majoritarian norm. Hegemony's performance forces its subjects to a conversion into its alleged neutrality, its claims to the true and the real. Political performers expose these coercive attempts to maintain the hegemonic norms that govern and discipline our daily life. Community-based and community-identified artists and audiences offer each other necessary opportunities to rehearse the constitutive reiteration of our own identities in light of these facts, as well as a direct, proactive resistance to, and defiance of, hegemony's own unending production of what does and does not constitute, in Judith Butler's phrase, "bodies that matter."⁴⁷ Thus the preaching-to-the-converted charge conceals yet a second, related agenda: when conservative critics dismiss community-based art projects on the grounds that this art only constitutes propaganda, they also attempt to undermine the social movements that engender these art projects. Efforts to stifle the arts are, in essence, efforts to stifle the transformative cultural movements and social actions with which community-based arts see themselves in direct relationship. At the very least, these artists reclaim the once long-standing alliance between performers and spectators as members of community who, in the enactment of collective ritual, enable the power of individuals to gather and perform the necessary constitutive rehearsal of difference.

Here, then, I want to make claims for the possibilities of community-based work and show what is most productive about this romance with the indigenous I have been describing. Subcultural work is important for the reasons I have outlined above and because these performances provide a counterpublicity to mainstream and dominant medias. Cultural theorists from American studies, queer studies, and other politicized academic locations find in these performances alternative viewpoints and practices stifled or dismissed in the broader reaches of contemporary American culture. This scholarship has called attention to the vital role of the arts in progressive social movements, and as a result it has helped move these fields forward. Nonetheless, it needs to be stated that some critics remain skeptical of scholarship that aligns itself with community-based performances. In one of the most problematic scenarios in which community-based work and the scholars who support it are challenged, David Savran, a professor of theatre,

in an essay that itself stands as a rebuttal to recent trends in theatre and performance studies, writes accusingly of other scholars who “cruise East Village bars in search of performative identities” and who “hang out with Judith Butler.”⁴⁸ For Savran, much of this kind of scholarly work is barely scholarly at all, for it lacks historicity and rigor; but it also falls short on the political front, for it fails to attend to the real politics of social and material culture. This form of “academic leftism,” Savran claims, is largely ineffective and might be better understood as fashion. “While claiming to be radicals, many U.S. theorists instead end up advocating what [Aijaz] Ahmad styles, ‘a new mystique of leftist professionalism,’” he writes.⁴⁹ Now it is no longer simply the artists who are preaching to the converted, but the critic who values their work too.

I do not want to affiliate with Savran’s dismissal of the branches of theatre and performance studies that promote the subcultural or that emerge out of particular community and political struggles. Nor do I want to trivialize the work that happens in community-based venues, whether in East Village bars or elsewhere. My critique of the romance with the indigenous is not a complaint about the methodology or politics of other scholars in the field. Nor do I want to supplant or exchange a romance with the indigenous with a romance for the commercial, however seductive the allure of its spectacle. Romance can be a good thing; it stems from passion and commitment—much of the work that promotes the indigenous is exciting, smart, and timely. But these same attributes might also be found in scholarship on the commercial theatre. My aim is to encourage a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of performances and to encourage an awareness of the broader archives available to progressive cultural critics working in American studies. Such an understanding will enrich our sense of performance in America and help counter its marginalization in the national culture. I would like to end this discussion with a few brief examples of how this might occur.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s 2002 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, two brothers named Lincoln and Booth, abandoned in childhood by their parents, strive to come to terms with their relationship in a power struggle that ends in death. The play, which premiered at the Public Theater in New York under the direction of George C.



2. Promotional flyer for Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* on Broadway, 2002. Collection of the author

Wolfe in July of 2001, moved to Broadway in the spring of 2002 and has since toured the regional theatre circuit throughout the United States to much critical acclaim (figure 2). *Topdog/Underdog* is a two-person play; for the Public Theater run the cast consisted of Jeffrey Wright and Don Cheadle. Mos Def, the charismatic hip-hop artist, replaced Don Cheadle when the production transferred to Broadway. The play centers on the relationship between the brothers and their struggle to make a living (figure 3). One brother, Lincoln, has abandoned the lucrative but dangerous street performance of Three-Card-Monte, in which he was a resounding master, to work in an arcade where he dresses up as Abraham Lincoln so that others can reenact the president's assassination and shoot him. Booth, a brilliant thief, aspires to the older brother's former profession, and imagines the two of them working the Three-Card-Monte scam together as a team. Lincoln, however, resists and resents Booth's plan.



3. Mos Def as Booth and Jeffrey Wright as Lincoln in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, Ambassador Theatre, New York City, 2002. Photo by Michal Daniel.

It is easy to offer a racialized reading of the play centering on the fact that these are two brothers who traffic in petty crimes to counter the nihilism often surrounding contemporary urban life for many poor black men. The play's tragic outcome can also support such a reading, especially in a world such as ours where black-on-black crime remains a serious threat to the lives of young black men. Parks's work is often cited as a commentary on black America and race relations, and *Topdog/Underdog*, her most accessible play lends itself to such symbolic readings.⁵⁰ Parks, however, takes exception to these interpretations, as well as to facile correspondences between *Topdog/Underdog* and so-called reality. In an interview with the *New York Times*, she offers the following anecdote to make her point:

"I've told him a hundred times, 'George [referring to Wolfe, her director] there are no metaphors!' I don't know what a metaphor is!" she said. "There are two men in a room. Just take it for that.

The meanings that people love to pull out, like slavery”—she said the word with exaggerated solemnity—“just slaver this thing with sauce. Slavery! Don’t even think about slavery. Lincoln says, when he’s teaching Booth cards. ‘Don’t think about the cards! Don’t think about anything. Just watch. Just look. Just take it in.’”⁵¹

Parks’s desire for the audience to “just take it in” challenges our interest in making sense of the play through the narrative of American cultural history that the play seemingly invokes. She resists easy analogies to history and the familiar associations that surface when discussing race in America. Despite the fact that her characters are named after mythic figures in American history, Parks insists that Lincoln and Booth are not meant to comment on the historical legacy associated with them. “It ain’t about the white man,” according to the playwright. “It ain’t about the legacy of slavery at all. It’s about these two men who are brothers and don’t get along. They love each other intensely and have come through so much together, and are at each other’s throats almost all the time. And that is worth talking about, too.”⁵² Parks’s impatience with the impulse to have her work mean more than she intended is a playwright’s prerogative; she is not the first artist to reject the meanings ascribed to her work. And yet, I find myself sympathetic to her dilemma. The overly quick reduction of her work to familiar racial meanings tells us a lot about our own critical investments in these issues, and it leaves little room to explore what Parks might have otherwise set out to achieve. But beyond what Parks herself might have hoped to inspire, the play provokes other conversations informed by race but not limited to it. There might be other insights that overlap or exist alongside the racial meanings that immediately surface when a play includes two young black men facing economic hardships, familial betrayals, and a loaded gun. Parks is an immensely talented playwright whose comic sensibility and dramaturgical innovations deserve a fuller scholarly engagement. And yet it would be foolish to disregard the question of race entirely. The play is about a con and a competitive one-upmanship that allows for only a sole winner. Someone will emerge the top dog, someone else the underdog. Who determines who will play which role is part of the play’s dramatic tension and part of its pleasure. Like the game of cards itself, the play seduces and manipulates its audience. Parks might

even be out to pull a fast one over her audiences who think they know what they see when they see two black men on stage together.

In the end, one of the characters will lose. But both of the actors will perform the roles again and repeat the scenario for the next audience in a manner not too far off the mark of Lincoln's performance at the arcade. Lincoln might get shot dead repeatedly at work, but at the end of his shift he gets up and leaves. It was only a role, only a job. The same is true of the actor in Parks's play. Though the play ends in death, both actors live to play the role the following day. The difference here is that while the brothers never get to work the cards together, the two men who play them get to work the stage together as actors in Parks's play. Such a metatheatrical commentary might still be about race, but it shifts the emphasis from the historical past to the contemporary. *Topdog/Underdog* suggests a different relationship to history than the immediate one we might expect: this is a play that summons history but is not bound to it. The narrative logic of the play is set, as Parks notes in the program, in the spatial and temporal ethos of "Here and Now." Parks's "Here and Now" does not disavow history—how could it when the characters are named Lincoln and Booth?—but brackets it in order to push the contemporary to the forefront. The playwright is interested in having us consider the immediate drama before us, the time of the now. "There's a relationship with the past, an important one," she explains. "But I think to focus on that relationship and de-emphasize the relationship of the person right in the room with you is the great mistake of American culture and the mistake of history. We have to deal with what's happening right now."⁵³ Parks's proposal that we deal with what is happening right now also offers an entry into rethinking the place of race in commercial theatre and in contemporary American culture at large.

Topdog/Underdog was the first play by an African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, but it was not the only play by an artist of color recently produced on Broadway. Still, the publicity around the play marked much of its achievement as a breakthrough, as the exception to the rule, as almost an anomaly for Broadway. Despite the fact that Wolfe, the director, and Wright, one of the two actors, had already received Tony awards for their previous work on Broadway, the play was

discussed as a departure from the business-as-usual of Broadway. In the review published in the *Nation*, Elizabeth Pochoda begins her appraisal by singling out the play from the standard fare of Broadway entertainments, denigrated along with their assumed audiences: “Occasionally in the murky wasteland of Broadway, where nostalgia reigns and revivals rule, the hopeful theatregoer is led to an oasis advertised as fertile enough to water the desert. Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Topdog/Underdog*, which has just won the Pulitzer Prize, is one of these. Even if its success were to be measured solely by the numbers of young people and black people, both young and old, in the audience on any given night, *Topdog* could be considered a healthy sign.”⁵⁴ Pochoda situates Parks’s achievement in the context of the vague and confusing notion of the “oasis” that a “hopeful” spectator might “occasionally” encounter, although she never names when these other occasions have materialized, or who might had been responsible for them. While I agree with Pochoda’s review, which raves about Parks’s writing, the play’s production values, and its racial politics, I find the introductory frame problematic in that it undermines the play’s very newness. The fact that the play is on Broadway already signals Broadway’s ability to include it in its ranks and in its theatres. The play, too, is “here and now,” and shifting its achievement away from this context fails to recognize one of Parks’s thematic and political imperatives.

Too often, minority playwrights and performers who arrive on Broadway are discussed in this language of exceptionalism, where they are not only the exception to the standard fare of Broadway but their demographic audiences are positioned as exceptional as well. Moreover, the discourse of exceptionalism places these artists in isolation; they are the talented exceptions to the community-based artist of color whose primary achievement is presumed to be other than artistic. This discourse of exceptionalism was revealed as misdirected and downright wrong a few months after the opening of *Topdog/Underdog* when the multiracial cast of nine poets of Russell Simmons’s *Def Poetry Jam* began performing at Broadway’s Longacre Theatre (figure 4). Yet the alternative discourse of “authentic but untalented” did not prove an optional response for this show either. Burdened with stereotypes surrounding hip-hop culture, spoken word poetry, and community-based



4. Promotional flyer for *Def Poetry Jam* on Broadway, 2003.
Collection of the author

arts, all of which have combined to enable the performers to surface in a critical mass in the late 1990s in poetry slams throughout the United States, this group of young artists proved talented and charismatic, and their fresh perspectives a welcome addition to the 2002–2003 Broadway season.

The cast included men and women, some of whom were queer, were Latino, Asian American, African American, Jewish, and Palestinian. They performed solo monologues, duos, and large group poems together, on a range of topics from a critique of American imperialism to a love for fast foods, and from tributes to June Jordan and Tito Puente to attacks on George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.⁵⁵ With no-name actors, an unfamiliar genre—When was the last time poetry was performed on Broadway? Has it been as long as 1975 and Ntozake Shange’s *For*

Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf?—and a compromised economy, it was unclear who exactly would go see a show where young people rhyme dissent to a drumbeat. But the show was a critical success, if not a commercial one. Despite reduced prices and a money-back guarantee, *Def Poetry Jam* struggled at the box office. Few shows recoup their investment, but when a minority production fails, it becomes especially vulnerable to overinterpretation. Throughout its run, the show averaged close to 50 percent capacity of the nearly 1,100-seat theatre. Early in its run it hovered at around 35 percent, before peaking at 71 percent capacity during the final week of December 2002. These numbers might sound discouraging to some, but it is worth noting that between three thousand and four thousand people saw the show per week.⁵⁶

Many people—producers, critics, and others involved in Broadway culture—had hoped the show would bring new audiences to Broadway. New audiences here essentially mean young people, and audiences that better represent the racial demographic of New York City, and of the nation at large. *Def Poetry Jam* delivered on this front, and the audience demographic differed substantially from the audiences at many of the productions at other Broadway theatres. But the desire of producers and the press to change the demographic of Broadway seems to me misinformed and even paternalistic. Young people as well as audiences of color will find the entertainment and venues they need in their lives, and if it happens to be on Broadway, so be it. And, by the same token, if older and/or whiter audiences prefer to see revivals of *Oklahoma!*, *Gypsy*, or *Nine* (with Chita Rivera), all of which were playing at the time of *Def Poetry Jam*, that should be their choice too, and they should not be shamed for doing so. Broadway, of course, should reach out to as many different communities as possible, especially in terms of accessible ticket prices. But my point is that the language of changing the demographic of Broadway audiences is too caught up in a logic of futurity that fails to see the new audiences already attending these shows. Perhaps Broadway is no longer something one is weaned on from an early age, as if theatregoing were a familial inheritance, but a place one might discover at a different moment in time, in an entirely different context than one of generational legacy.

Rather than fetishize these events—*Topdog/Underdog*, *Def Poetry Jam*, and other shows by minority artists—as exceptional or as opportunities to change the demographic of Broadway audiences, why not, as Parks suggests, “Just watch. Just look. Just take it in”? What I found exciting about these shows was that they found themselves on Broadway, and that their audiences, which were diverse and contradictory, found their way there too. “Here and Now,” as Parks would have it. Having sat in these theatres with these audiences it was clear that a change had already come. Parks’s arrival on Broadway, and those of the young poets of *Def Poetry Jam*, might enable us to imagine Broadway differently, less as tired and ailing and needing to be revived by youth and color, and more as a place where cultural production around contemporary concerns might be found and fostered. Parks’s presence on Broadway—and by extension, her audiences, and those of *Def Poetry Jam*—is not so much a “healthy sign” that an ailing Broadway is getting better, as Pochoda diagnoses it, but rather a mark of the ongoing engagement of the commercial theatre with central questions of contemporary culture of, to use Parks’s words, “what’s happening right now.” If this is to be a sign at all, let us see it as a sign of the times.