The sixteen essays collected in *Querying Difference in Theatre History* represent a significant step in theatre studies conceptions of difference. The anthology attempts to transform the study of “difference” from examining discrete identity constructions (based on race, gender, economic and political structures, etc.) to finding complex connections across historical periods, national constructions, and identity markers. Purposefully flouting such traditional academic boundaries as eras, identities, and disciplines, editors Magelssen and Haugo attempt a Foucauldian project of theatrical genealogy. This highly readable anthology is more broadly realized than its title reflects, for it covers not only theatre (including popular but generally ignored forms, such as dinner theatre), but also performance (circus acts, for instance).

Part I establishes the ground on which this volume stands and is dedicated, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, to an against-the-grain historiography. In this vein is John Fletcher’s “Ten-Foot-Pole Historiography: Liberal Democracy, Ideological Difference, and Despicable Acts,” in which he examines his own position vis-à-vis Fred Phelps, the leader of the “God Hates Fags” demonstrations that came to prominence during Matthew Shepard’s funeral. Phelps represents that which may be “too different,” too hateful, and so must be kept at a “Ten-Foot Pole” distance (16). Fletcher argues that his detachment, however, complicates a truly reflexive stance, since merely shouting over Phelps disallows a critical look at either those doing the counter-protesting or their democratic values.

The next essay in this generally excellent section is Henry Bial’s lively account of “historiography of strategic naivete,” in which theatre historians must use play reviews as if they were unbiased evidence. Explicating Clive Barnes’s review of *Angels in America*, Bial argues that it is a “performative act” rather than truthful assessment, one that is not merely a part of culture, but indeed helps to fashion culture (27). Bial contends that if we accept the review, we are thus interpellated into a discourse community that, in Barnes’s formulation, reworks Tony Kushner’s “American Fantasia” into a “Gay Fantasia,” as if they were mutually exclusive (27). Robert Shimko, meanwhile, takes a closer look at theatre historiography’s “relation to its own historicity” (37). Shimko forcefully argues that Richard Flecknoe, Restoration critic and playwright, should be looked at as a theatre historian of his time, rather than faulted for not meeting current historiographic standards.
The essays that follow are case studies that, while not examples of Part I’s specific historiographical approaches, nevertheless usefully illustrate how scholars may forge new concepts of difference. Part II, “Performance and Cultural Exchange,” takes up anxieties, desires, and conflicting constructions of identity and nation in a range of performances of and by Others. Dongshin Chang, for instance, explicates three “Chinese” plays (written by, produced by, and often starring whites) performed in early twentieth-century England. He posits that Chinese people on stage allowed the “British to project and weave fantasies which do not necessarily correspond to the realities of the Other” (77).

Kate Roark’s essay, “‘People Who Went to Ridicule Remained to Admire’: Ira Aldridge, Stephen Price, and the 1828 Coburg Theatre Lawsuit,” mounts a fascinating transatlantic consideration of African American actor Aldridge, whose theatre management was sued under a specious invocation of the Licensing Act of 1737. Roark carefully argues that the lawsuit reveals the threat Aldridge’s performances of Shakespeare posed to American and British “aesthetic, national, and racial identities” (70).

The case studies continue on a larger scale in Part III, “Imagined Communities and The Performance of Cultural Identity,” this time invoking nations and groups, rather than one or two performative representatives of them. An exceptional example is Katie N. Johnson’s “From Camille to Lulu Belle: Constructing the Black Courtesan in the American Brothel Drama.” Neither a simple condemnation of racism in these plays, nor an unproblematic, celebratory recuperation, Johnson’s essay serves as useful exploration of inter- and intra-racial audience heterogeneity.

Included in this section is also one of the anthology’s most insightful essays, in which Sara Freeman scrutinizes the potential reverberations that Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play Credible Witness holds for current political situations, as well as post-colonial theory as it applies to the study of theatre. Freeman outlines “a poetics of diaspora: a theory/structure of drama built on the terms of displacement and estrangement, but reaching toward new formations of home and citizenship” (136). In a dissimilar, though no less astute, examination of space, Elena García-Martín theorizes spatial difference, in which alternative theatre artists in Puerto Rico claim a literally marginal space away from the metropolis, leading to a “re-conceptualization of the artist[…as material part of the people” (143).

Although it contains other trenchant essays, which I have not the room here to summarize, Part III falters when pieces are included that, while dealing with fascinating topics, fail to adequately theorize the performances with which they engage. An examination of battle reenactors of American wars, for instance, merely rectifies the common stereotype of reenactors as “‘paramilitaries’ and ‘skinheads,’” and thus misses an opportunity to theorize, beyond a cursory nod, how battle reenactments interrogate the notion of historical authenticity (150). That said, Magelssen and Haugo have brought together a bold anthology that, at its best, is enjoyable and lucid, without sacrificing probing research or thought. Querying Difference in Theatre History is a provocative sampling of the work being done by theatre artists and scholars in “the ’post-multicultural’ discursive landscape of the twenty-first century,” in which timeworn notions of difference are often no longer practical or meaningful (1).

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