

ELIZABETH MADDOCK DILLON, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

In *New World Drama*, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon aims at nothing less than a conceptual and methodological re-conceptualization of early American theatre and drama. Her study critically addresses, challenges, and revises the coordinates that have traditionally informed scholarly debates in this field. In fact, theatre and drama have been routinely exempted from most deliberations of early American literature. In contrast to the few critics who have focused on a performative tradition that simultaneously envisions and enacts “America” as concept and reality, Dillon works within a transatlantic framework which allows her to develop a new critical narrative “that is colonial and Atlantic in scope rather than solely national and one that focuses on scenes of representation, embodiment, and erasure in theatrical spaces as well as the layered and contrapuntal performances of colonial relations therein” (223). Published in Duke University Press’s prestigious *New Americanists* series edited by Donald E. Pease, Dillon’s book thus adds to the growing body of scholarship in transnational American studies. It is no surprise, then, that the chronological reach of Dillon’s study—which begins with the execution of King Charles I. in London in 1649 and concludes with the mid-nineteenth-century theatre riots in New York City—sits uneasily with common periodizations of early American literature that usually focus on a post-revolutionary struggle for cultural emancipation from British and European role models. Her choice to begin her study at the height of Puritan rule in England and to end it with the democratic clamor of antebellum theatre riots is an apt one since it allows her to illustrate what she perceives as the central developments in theatre and drama in a circum-Atlantic world.

Building on the recent transnational turn in American studies, Dillon’s introductory chapter outlines the methodological premises and core arguments of her study. It argues that the Atlantic world of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century saw the rise of a “performative commons.” This new way of imagining collective identities, Dillon claims, is the result of transforming an earlier collective form of ownership and access to limited public resources into the abstract notion of a collectivity that

imagines itself as the carrier of “popular sovereignty” and fundamental political rights. For Dillon, this new “virtual body” has less a material than an aesthetic and figurative shape. Informed by Jacques Rancière’s theories of spectatorship and Erving Goffman’s notion of audience participation, Dillon locates the formation of this “performative commons” in scenes from playhouses around the Atlantic rim where audiences become actively involved in theatrical performances. Her point is not that spectators passively identify with theatrical representations of themselves as audiences. Instead, Dillon concentrates on instances of spectators participating in the enactment of a new virtual form of collective identity. This shift from the representational to the performative level—a shift from the mimetic to the ontic, as Dillon calls it—turns theatrical performances into social events in which a new, abstract notion of collectivity is performatively and sometimes spontaneously created.

In her first chapter, Dillon shows how this idea of a new virtual collectivity, which bears a certain family resemblance with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s notion of the multitude, is further complicated by what she refers to as the “colonial relation.” Building on Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of “Americanness,” Dillon sees in the “colonial relation” a characteristic feature of the Anglo-Atlantic world that describes the growing hiatus between the political ideals of (European) liberty and the new systems of unfreedom and racialization imposed on Africans and Native Americans that result in the expropriation of indigenous lands as well as the extortion of forced labor from African slaves in the New World. Here, Dillon’s study breaks new ground by moving beyond the postcolonial criticism of early American drama. While studies by Susan Castillo and Myra Jehlen, which are conspicuously absent from an otherwise substantial bibliography, have pointed at the performative dimension of European encounters with Native Americans, Dillon shares with these critics the concern about a general erasure of slavery and colonialism in European accounts of the rise of a modern Atlantic world. In her analysis, however, Dillon moves beyond merely juxtaposing the ideals of personal liberty in metropolitan centers and the reality of slavery in the colonial periphery. She takes seriously the economic and material practices that underpin the social reality of the early Atlantic world.

In her second chapter, Dillon begins to combine her critical perspectives on the “performative commons” and the “colonial relation” by focusing on the establishment of a transatlantic theatrical network of performances and productions in the urban centers of the English-speaking Atlantic world such as London, Charleston, Kingston, and finally New York City. As Dillon argues, the dissemination of European performance styles is driven by the policies of implementing early capitalist economic structures in England. Such political measures as the Licensing Act of 1737 not only gave rise to the distinction between popular and elitist forms of theatrical entertainment, but also pushed troupes like the Hallam company out of the country and across the Atlantic. As Dillon’s analyses of popular stage figures such as the “Indian king” and the “royal slave” show, the ideological work of theatrical performance consists in masking and unmasking the inherent economic contradictions of a “new regime of finance capitalism” (112) as well as English settler colonialism in the New World.

In her case studies on Charleston, South Carolina, and Kingston, Jamaica, Dillon then proceeds to illustrate the subversive potential of the performative commons. In her discussion of Charleston Theatre, Dillon finds that “the theatre was a location where the public went in order to explicitly consume performance, as well as to perform itself and thus to debate its own self-constitution” (140). As she shows, this explicitly includes the presence of African Americans even while their presence in the theatrical space was officially disavowed. Dillon demonstrates her acuity as a historian when she builds her argument from archival findings in local newspapers and magazines. Dillon crafts her argument from such records as, for example, a letter reprinted in the *South Carolina Gazette* on April 26, 1797 in which the manager of the Charleston Theatre is accused of allowing too many mixed-race spectators to interfere with the dramatic performance on stage. In a similar manner, she argues, the performative commons of eighteenth-century Kingston allowed “black sociality and cultural production [to] proliferate under the sign of their own erasure” in colonial Jamaica (169). From such examples Dillon constructs her narrative about how audiences of local performances materialize and constitute themselves as new collectivities.

In her last chapter on New York City, Dillon’s argument climaxes in a discussion of the simultaneity of the rise of Jim Crow as a popular representation of blackness on American stages and the urban theatre riots during the first half of the nineteenth century. For Dillon, Jim Crow symbolizes the disavowal of an Atlantic history of slavery and “the eclipse of an Atlantic sensus communis in favor of a U.S. nationalist one” (220). Placing the continental figure of Jim Crow next to the figures of Thomas Southerne’s Oroonoko or the Jamaican Jonkunnu performance, Dillon suggests that the growing popularity of blackface minstrelsy effectively suppressed and expiated the colonial history of slavery from the national consciousness. As this discussion of Jim Crow shows, Dillon’s argument rests on a critical narrative that locates key elements of early American drama in a transatlantic genealogy of dramatic performances and calls for recuperating processes of identity formation that present an alternative to a nascent American cultural nationalism.

While Dillon makes a convincing case for reconsidering theatrical practices and traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, her study also points at more far-reaching questions and problems. It remains open to debate, for example, how the rise and fall of a “performative commons” affected the actual social life of local communities throughout the Atlantic world. Some historians would probably prefer to see some of the claims about the constitution of a performative commons as a new social reality substantiated by further source materials. While Dillon remains minutely aware of the economic underpinnings of theatrical practices throughout the Atlantic world, it would also have been interesting to learn more about how this new form of performative identification relates to the rampant anti-theatrical prejudices in New England and Pennsylvania, as well as the increasing commodification and cultural elitism of theatre and drama since the late eighteenth century. Most importantly, however, Dillon’s study is confined to a consideration of the English-speaking Atlantic world. This results in an omission of other urban centers, which were more ethnically diverse, for example, Philadelphia or New Orleans. Nevertheless, Dillon’s study is not only ambitious in its geographical and interpretative scope. It is also an important book that will shape and instigate further scholarship on

early American drama for years to come. It will undoubtedly stand next to such seminal works as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* or the scholarship of Joseph Roach and Diana

Taylor on intercultural performances in the Atlantic world.

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