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Over the last two decades, theater scholars such as Joseph Roach, Peter P. Reed, and Jeffrey H. Richards have studied early American theatrical culture as part of a circum- or transatlantic performance network.1 Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s New World Drama and Jenna M. Gibbs’s Performing the Temple of Liberty build on this body of scholarship and expand its paradigms in pathbreaking ways that chart a course for future work.

In New World Drama, Dillon turns to the theater scene of the Atlantic world in the long eighteenth century to explore how theaters served as “performative commons” (2) for a racially and socially diverse public that included European colonists, diasporic Africans, and indigenous people. Dillon’s Atlantic performative commons supplants a print-centered and nation-based public sphere that, for the most part, excludes transient, nonwhite, and nonliterate populations. Analyzed through the lens of the performative commons, theaters along the Atlantic rim become sites of public consent and dissent, spaces where performers and audiences together enact, practice, and contest popular sovereignty. In this reading, eighteenth-century playhouses, the theatricals staged in them, and their publics wield considerable political, social, and cultural authority and reveal more about eighteenth-century values than the reading, voting, or warring patterns so often at the center of scholarship on the revolutionary era. Throughout her study, Dillon develops a methodology that combines the careful analysis of a range of works, such as Oroonoko, A West-India Lady’s Arrival in London, Richard III, and The Drama of King Shotaway (reportedly the first drama written by an African American performed in the United States) with a nuanced study of their production contexts in various locales along the Atlantic rim. As she tracks the movement of actors, scripts, costumes, audiences, and reviews, she focuses especially on the “‘impurity’ of the dramatic work—the promiscuous circulation


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of scripts and the improvisational local revisions of these scripts—in sites around the Anglo-Atlantic world” (21). All of the productions Dillon examines belong to what she terms “New World drama,” which she defines as “theatre in the Atlantic world that directly performed and engaged scenes of American-ness” (23) or, more broadly, theater concerned with “the newness of a modern world system that took shape in the Atlantic world in the long eighteenth century” (24). Her attention to these pieces of New World drama and their local adaptations and iterations allows Dillon to fully flesh out the relationship between cultural production and popular sovereignty.

Dillon’s argument operates on two levels. Her chapters follow a geographic trajectory that traverses the Atlantic from London to New York via Charleston and Kingston. On the way, each site assumes a particular function as a performative commons. Kingston, for example, represents an “impossible commons” (27) because, in a setting that continued to be dominated by (settler) colonialism and slavery until well into the nineteenth century, the force of theatrical performance to create a commons waned in the face of the gradual enclosure, forced erasure, and social death of the local population, and was ultimately countered by new acts of performance, such as Jonkonnu plays, parades, and dances, that radically rethought the commons in aesthetic and political terms.

Within the chapters, Dillon deploys three critical concepts that inform her discussions of the interconnectedness of performance, political representation, and racial capitalism. Her “colonial relation” (31), embodied in stock characters such as the enslaved African or the tortured Indian king, theorizes “the connection between the colony and the metropole in the Anglo-Atlantic world of the eighteenth century” (31). In general terms, it describes “the centrality of colonialism to metropolitan modernity and denominates the representational strategies that simultaneously conveyed and masked this fact” (31). As a colonial relation, then, the figure of the enslaved African encapsulates “the opposition between English liberty and race slavery” and can help us understand how “the slave is both required to be present to produce English liberty and required to disappear so as not to contradict the premise of English liberty” (100). The colonial relation is closely linked to Dillon’s second concept, that of “intimate distance” (16). Intimate distance describes the contradictions that structured everyday interactions between blacks and whites in the colonies and the colonists’ relation to the metropole. It is “a dual strategy of asserting intimacy across great distance and that of asserting distance in the face of intimacy” (59). In the contested space of the theater, “disavowed presence (ontic intimacy)” and “presence in the face of absence (mimetic intimacy)” (59) appear in their most condensed form and therefore attain a particular force for negotiating the performative commons. With the concept of “bare labor” (132), Dillon refines Giorgio Agamben’s notion of homo sacer, or bare life. “Given the centrality of black labor to the colony,” Dillon convincingly argues,
“the slave is stripped of the prerogatives of social life—consigned to social
death—while nonetheless providing labor that is central to the economic
existence of the polity” (132). Taken together, Dillon’s concepts not only
constitute valuable analytic tools for the study of colonialism, New World
slavery, and capitalism but also open up new ways to think about the poli-
tics of performance. Through its attention to detail, deft theorizations, and
formulations of new critical paradigms, New World Drama offers a model
for future scholarship and brings important new insights to ongoing dis-
cussions in the fields of theater and performance studies, literature, cultural
studies, and history.

While Dillon’s New World Drama engages with a circum-Atlantic geog-
raphy of theater, Gibbs’s book Performing the Temple of Liberty develops a
case study of transatlantic performance culture rooted in two key sites on
the Atlantic rim. Focusing on London and Philadelphia, Gibbs traces the
impact of popular performance on and off the stage on political debates
surrounding slavery, abolition, race, and class. She investigates how plays
and other printed materials, such as images, cartoons, broadsides, poems,
and songs, traveled between London and Philadelphia, and argues that
the permeability and exchange between print and performance “helped
create a transatlantic lexicon of slavery and antislavery” (7). This lexicon,
however, was not stable but was influenced by specific local social and polit-
ical dynamics and shifted considerably over the almost one hundred years
the book covers. In her first set of chapters, Gibbs explores the contested
meaning of liberty and equality on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake
of the American Revolution as embodied in the two neoclassical figures of
Britannia and Columbia. The next set of chapters focuses on two transat-
lantic performance genres that Gibbs describes as “variety show burlesque”
and “urban picaresque” (117) each of which, according to her, functioned
as precursors to the minstrel show. Gibbs’s remaining chapters focus on
more familiar figures, such as T. Daddy Rice’s minstrel character Jim Crow,
Robert Montgomery Bird’s slave leader Spartacus, and the sensationalist
author George Lippard.

Gibbs analyzes a wide range of materials of various genres, some of
which are not usually associated with the theater. She does not privilege
one genre over another, which brings considerable breadth to her study
but could prove puzzling to readers who expect a more sustained treat-
ment of theater as a cultural institution and its larger function in society.
Gibbs’s approach introduces the reader to many hidden linkages between
Philadelphia and London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and
provides a new understanding of the relations between theater and printed
materials. At times, however, this breadth comes at the expense of a more
detailed discussion of terminology and genre. For example, the character-
istics of the two performance genres “urban picaresque” and “variety show
burlesque” are not fully elaborated. Likewise, it would have been helpful if
Gibbs had offered a more expansive explanation of what she means when she writes about the act of “performing” or “performance.”

These points should not take away from Gibbs’s remarkable accomplishment. Her skillful negotiation of the tension between local conditions and transatlantic exchanges rooted in specific historical moments is one of the book’s greatest strengths. Her argument is grounded in thorough research of cultural performance in London and Philadelphia, and she extrapolates from those sites how the transatlantic migration of printed materials shaped pro- and antislavery discourses in Britain, the early United States, and the British Atlantic at large. Her study provides a fresh look at the transatlantic circulation of printed materials, the cultural work these materials performed, and their political and social implications for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates on slavery and abolition. Gibbs demonstrates not only how debates about slavery and race seeped into popular consciousness through performance but also how such performances were crucial in shaping those very debates. Importantly, she examines both proslavery and antislavery discourses and teases out how they influenced each other. Her investigation of the political reach of popular entertainment in the British Atlantic intersects with studies on revolution, slavery, and abolition, the construction of racial discourses in print and performance, and the emergence of a British American public sphere in the Atlantic world. *Performing the Temple of Liberty* constitutes an important contribution to the scholarship on print and performance culture in the British Atlantic.

In their studies of eighteenth-century Atlantic performance cultures, Dillon and Gibbs each structure their works around the paradoxical coexistence of slavery and the emergent politics of liberty. In doing so, both pay particular attention to the formation or (re)constitution of the public sphere through performance. Where Gibbs’s work provides a sound case study anchored in the performance traditions of London and Philadelphia, Dillon rigorously theorizes the act of performing as well as the performance publics in various key sites across the British Atlantic. Both books offer fascinating insights into the performance cultures of the Atlantic world in the long eighteenth century.