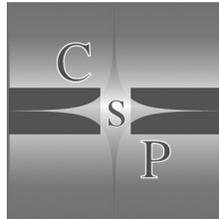


Querying Difference in Theatre History

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Edited by

Scott Magelssen and Ann Haugo



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PREFACE/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to use this space to acknowledge their sincere gratitude to those who helped make this volume possible: First of all, to the authors herein, each of whom took up the initial call to “query difference” at the Mid-America Theatre Conference’s Theatre History Symposium in Chicago in the spring of 2006, and then contributed their essays and shared their enthusiasm for this project. We are also grateful to the members of the 2005-06 MATC executive committee, especially John Poole, Bill Jenkins, and Rhona Justice Malloy, and to Bob Schanke and Don Wilmeth, who provided excellent advice as we assembled the project. We owe particular thanks to Wendy Arons, who helped us think through the ways we wanted to present the work and choose our audience, especially in regard to the length and number of essays. Many thanks to Jonathan Chambers, Michal Kobialka, Peter Kivisto, Dan Lee, Pramod Mishra, and Warren Fincher, who also offered advice on early stages of the project. Thank you to Amanda Millar, Carol Koulikourdi, and Andy Nercessian at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for advocating for this project and bringing it to print. And finally, we are deeply grateful to our families for all their patience and support.

INTRODUCTION

SCOTT MAGELSSSEN,
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY
AND ANN HAUGO,
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Terms such as race, ethnicity, otherness, and pluralism are becoming increasingly problematic as we grapple with issues of identity in the “post-multicultural” discursive landscape of the twenty-first century. *Querying Difference in Theatre History* draws together a cohesive selection of scholarly essays that address and complicate circulating notions of difference as they apply to the way we understand theatre and performance in the last few centuries. Together, these essays draw out the dilemmas that emerge when attempting to constitute ideas about difference from ideological or scientific points of view, and offer new modes of inquiry and critical vocabulary for contemporary students and scholars of theatre history.

Querying Difference in Theatre History is comprised of sixteen essays that examine constructions and contestations of difference in the history of theatre and performance. These essays were selected from the nearly sixty papers presented at the Theatre History Symposium of the Mid-America Theatre in Chicago in March 2006, and appear herein revised and in a more substantial form. The papers for the volume were selected on the basis of scholarly rigor, savvy in dealing with complex notions of identity and performance, and with an eye toward a balance in methodological approach, geographical location, material, and time period. While many of these essays deal with complex theoretical notions, each are written to be accessible and “pleasurable” to read.

To query implies both an expression of doubt as well as a question—that is, an opening for critical dialogue that generates new knowledge as often as it responds to received knowledges. The essays in this volume move beyond the repetition of received categories of difference in theatre history and instead probe the boundaries and intersections of seemingly

disparate identity formations. We also sought papers that incorporate discursive modes that challenge traditional notions of the archive and the text, to give voice to the lived pasts of historically disenfranchised groups and individuals whose pasts have often gone unrecorded in academic spaces. While “difference” may immediately conjure issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality, we include essays that examine differences more broadly construed: nationalisms, economic gradations, and so forth.

The critical issues probed in the essays range from: emerging critiques of “multiculturalism” and alternative discourses (for instance, “trans-“ or “interculturalism,” diaspora, multi-locationality, and flexible identity), historiographic methods for researching and writing about historically disenfranchised groups and/or individuals, questions of theatre and “otherness,” postcolonial and decolonial representations of racial/ethnic identity, national identity, and so forth, case-studies and analyses of performance of difference, such as indigenous theatre and performance, contact and border zones, “fantasy heritage,” and historic dilemmas in the practice of theatre.

The essays are grouped in the volume according to similarities in methodological approach, modes of inquiry, or discursive lines of connection, rather than by “kind of difference”—which the editors feel, at best, would merely replicate or reiterate historically-perceived notions of identity and culture, or, at worst, threaten to “ghettoize” papers into categories by discipline, time period, or subject. We have chosen to group papers into those that examine and interrogate “Historiographic Practices,” those that treat case studies dealing with “Performance and Cultural Exchange,” and those that treat case studies dealing with what we have termed (taking our cue from Benedict Anderson) “Imagined Communities and the Performance of Cultural Identity.”

While we have deliberately selected essays that comprise a wide scope, the reader will find that the pieces cohere with one another very well. Taken together, the collection asks about ways of seeing and interpreting difference *across* geographic region, theoretical approach, and periods of theatre history. It is logical, and even necessary, to include works that treat subject matter usually outside of familiar terrain to studies of difference (essays, for instance, about difference in nineteenth-century America, or seventeenth-century England), in order to broaden the range of application of theoretical models the book has to offer, and therefore be more helpful to teachers, students, and scholars of theatre history.

We hope that this book will be helpful to students in graduate programs and upper-division undergraduate students in the fields of

theatre history and performance studies as well as scholars and researchers in those fields, while secondary audiences in history, cultural studies and comparative literature, visual communication, and media studies should also find these investigations thought-provoking. Specific essays in the volume will appeal to students and scholars in Native American Studies, women and gender studies, and programs with courses treating issues of race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.

Before this book, no single collection has treated the theoretical concepts of difference vis-à-vis a multiplicity of events, individuals, groups, and periods of theatre history. Often, book-length works on theatre and difference center on theatre and performance having to do with particular racial categories (black theatre, Asian theatre, etc.), political categories (feminist theatre) or other socially constructed categories (Gay and lesbian theatre). On the other hand, similar collections of smaller works have also served to either reinscribe or reconstitute notions of difference, to deconstruct notions of difference without offering scholars new approaches in their place, to confine their analysis to geographically specific regions, or to examine primarily dramatic literature, rather than theatre history and performance.

Querying Difference in Theatre History contrasts with these works in that it approaches its wealth of material from multiple discursive areas and foci, and, in so doing, allows for parallels, echoes, and connections in theory and vocabulary across events and performances that may not normally be grouped together. We feel that this approach will foster new and dynamic discussion in the classroom—as it certainly did at the conference at which early versions of these papers were presented—as the approaches inspire connections across the often rigid borders between areas of varying identities and time periods. The essays in our collection, taken separately or together, neither deconstruct, nor reinscribe difference, but realign ways of thinking about difference. In this way, *Querying Difference in Theatre History* contributes to new discussions and understandings of the ways identity, difference, and otherness have been constructed and contested in theatre history in the last few centuries.

We begin the first section of the collection, “Historiography,” with John Fletcher’s compelling essay on the limits of objective discourse when grappling with the subject matter of difference; “Ten-Foot-Pole Historiography: Liberal Democracy, Ideological Difference, and Despicable Acts.” As Fletcher reminds us, to query difference is an action demanded of us if we are to be democratic scholars and citizens in their fullest enunciations. Fletcher looks to Chantal Mouffe’s notion of radical democracy as a starting point. “Radical democracy,” explains Mouffe,

“demands that we acknowledge difference—the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous—in effect everything that had been excluded by the concept of Man in the abstract.” But there are some forms of difference that push us to our ideological and ethical “limit-points,” especially when it comes to those individuals or groups that actively solicit belief in the illegitimacy of our own existence (i.e., our destruction and condemnation). “How, then,” Fletcher asks, “do we as difference-querying historians and scholars represent those who are politically different from us—not just different than us, *despicable* to us?” While it is tempting, and, at times, necessary to distance ourselves from these individuals and groups through rhetorical strategies and other means in our scholarly work, Fletcher warns of the dangers of using what he terms ten-foot-pole historiography as a methodology.

Similarly highlighting both historiographic subjectivity and the historian’s confrontation with what cannot be responsibly ignored, “The Play Review as a Means of Querying Difference,” by Henry Bial, “zooms in on” performance reviews to point out the particular ways in which the use of language in the Critic’s essay shapes our own view of difference. “When it comes to issues of identity,” writes Bial, “the categories or ‘frames’ through which productions are evaluated and assessed do more than simply reflect already-existing constructions of ‘difference’; they also produce (and reinforce) those constructions, those differences.” Bial’s essay begins with the difficulties in gleaning the specific relationship between audience and performer in particular recent productions. He argues that “any theatre historian who depends on published reviews to determine What Actually Happened must employ what I call ‘a historiography of strategic naivete,’” recognizing, on the one hand, that the critic is not the objective viewer he or she may claim to be through third-person reportage-style journalism, but on the other hand needing to accept some of the critic’s subjective categories in order to access—and engage in—that critic’s discourse. “The historian’s strategic naivete is the third corner of the triangle which – along with the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief and the actor’s “As if”—comprises the collective fiction necessary to the theatrical enterprise.” Bial takes on contrasting critical reviews of Kushner’s *Angels in America* that, through acts of elision and assumption of reader’s complicity in category production, either create and disseminate disturbing notions of Jewishness, or homosexuality, for example, or constitute also unhelpfully simplistic imagined communities of ideological and aesthetic sameness.

When Robert B. Shimko takes on the field (and the very “health”) of theatre historiography in “Who is the Historical Theatre Historian?

Unearthing the Roots of Positivist Assumptions in Theatre History Studies,” he probes the borders that past practitioners of theatre history have established and shored up, and by which they have policed the canon of legitimate theatre-historical writings. Shimko traces a conservative and positivistic strain among those past historians who have sought to exclude certain sections of the archive because they do not fit to a tightly conservative genealogy. These historians, Shimko argues, establish difference through a kind of pedigree, the celebration of bloodlines of the family proper, while dismissing those works that do not fit the nineteenth-century and largely accepted model. Shimko looks to alternative genealogy-tracing, specifically that of Foucault. “Foucaultian genealogy allows us to abandon lingering preconceptions of theatre historiography as the progressive working out of increasingly sophisticated methods for writing about the theatre of the past,” and instead, “invites one to examine the historicity of a multiplicity of writers who dealt, each in their own way and under specific conditions, with various aspects of theatre in the past.” As a case study, Shimko examines the work of Richard Flecknoe in the years shortly following the period of civil war and interregnum in seventeenth-century England during which theatre was banned—a decidedly vital shift whereby Flecknoe began to historicize English Theatre in a new way—and situates past historian’s relegation of Flecknoe’s work into the margins of theatre history as particularly telling junctures where historiographic dilemmas of difference emerge.

In the final essay of the section, “The Trouble with Tribades: Transgressive Desire and Performance During the French Revolution,” Alan Sikes directs us to another dilemma in theatre historiography. While historians (in many fields) have used both class-based politics and sex-based politics as lenses through which to view their subjects at particular historical moments, seldom do these historians examine the intersections between these two areas. Taking on these intersections, Sikes advises, allows for the possibility of rich discursive terrain that is especially key in understanding the ways in which these moments have been commented upon by the artists and theatre practitioners that experienced them. Sikes demonstrates such possibilities in his analysis of the “tribade” in anti-royalist pamphlets and short satirical performances composed in the years immediately following the French Revolution of 1789. The portrayal of Marie Antoinette, the wife of Louis XVI, and Mademoiselle Raucourt, a famous eighteenth-century actress, as tribades in these works signals the emergence not only of discourses on same-sex desire, but also “a proliferation of debates over the acceptability of that desire and the social status of those who exhibit it,” which will unfold throughout the modern

era. The ascription of tribade in these texts renders the identities of their characters unstable, writes Sikes, and links the instability of the tribade to the concomitant instability of the nobility and the revolutionary at this moment of flux. Indeed, Sikes reminds us, theatre “has long been a site for troubling the truth or falsity of identity.”

We begin the second section of the collection, “Performance and Cultural Exchange,” with Shauna Vey’s fascinating look circus performance, blackface minstrelsy, and cross-dressing equestrians/ennes in antebellum America, focusing specifically on two of the most famous pop-culture phenomena of the era, Mademoiselle Zoyara and Master Eugene. Vey’s essay, “The Master and the Mademoiselle: Gender Secrets in Plain Sight in Non-Text Based Antebellum Performance,” won the Robert A. Schanke Research Award at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in Chicago in 2006. In the essay, Vey queries the period-specific notions of gender, sex, class, and race that circulated around these figures in their billing and advertising, and in the way reviewers responded to their performances in the U.S. and abroad. She argues that much of the contestation of these categories emerged at the particular moments when performers broke not only the conventions of their venue (e.g., the circus trick), but the very conventions of the feminine ideal—conventions held tightly at a time when white, working-class audiences were anxious about the state of flux in which they found their own identity and agency.

Next, in “‘People Who Went to Ridicule Remained to Admire’: Ira Aldridge, Stephen Price, and the 1828 Coburg Theatre Lawsuit,” Kate Roark takes us across the Atlantic where we find a similar transgression of the comforting boundaries whites have historically put in place to shore up their destabilized identity. Roark examines the particulars of an intriguing 1828 court case in which London’s Coburg theatre was found to be in violation of the nearly century-old Licensing Act of 1737. While the verdict, on the face of it, seemed merely to censure the theatre for breaching the financial rights of the patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Roark finds that this case showcases the monopolies’ anxiety over the emergent boom of minor theatres in London, and a (failed) attempt to exert control over them. Much more insidiously, however, argues Roark, behind the financial reasons stated in the suit lay a deeper anxiety over the blurred national and artistic boundaries resulting in the Coburg’s employment of black American actor Ira Aldridge. “An examination of the 1828 lawsuit against the Coburg in the context of Aldridge’s career” writes Roark, “demonstrates how the serious English drama was integral to both England and American cultural identities, and how the performance of this serious drama by an African American actor

created a crisis in both cultures over the racial boundaries of those national identities.”

Dongshin Chang’s essay, “Proximity and the Demarcation of the Other: Three ‘Chinese’ Productions on the Early-Twentieth-Century London Stage,” treats the manner in which the London stage has handled another cultural intersection (and sometimes perceived threat), this time the cultural and economic “proximity” with China that had reached a peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chang notes that depictions of Chinese had been long been a popular draw for London theatres, and that practitioners since the late seventeenth-century sought to incorporate examples from real-life ethnographic sources for authenticity—or at the very least, theatrical effect. Chang points to three particular turn-of-the-century pieces that demonstrate the manner in which U.S. and British theatre practitioners utilized their connections with local Chinese communities, or the high-profile presence of China in popular Western culture, to portray the Chinese in three very different genres and with three very different approaches. Chang illustrates the way that playwrights not only played upon the British fascination and anxieties that accompanied their newfound proximity with China, but also how these fascinations and anxieties were picked up on and expanded in the comments of the reviewers. “The critical receptions of these pieces, especially,” writes Chang “reveal the British’s fantasy, doubt, hope and inspiration—a wide range of responses—toward the increasing proximity of the Other and the possible consequences of that proximity.”

Andrew Gibb’s essay, “The *paduanos* and the Construction of California’s Mexican Past,” treats the “fantasy heritage” performances of Mexican and Mexican-American identity in 1930s southern California in his close examination of the popular dinner theatre and other enactments staged at the Padua Institute. The Institute’s “Mexican American Players”—preferring to call themselves “*paduanos*”—a mostly Mexican American company under an all-white management, have historically brought issues of agency and other politics of ethnicity to the fore in critic’s attention. Gibb’s analysis, however, circumvents the traditional critiques of the Institute’s “fantasy heritage” performances, and instead offers a fascinating analysis of the way the Institute’s use of space, the dual role of “actor” and “server” the performers’ bodies were required to fulfill, and the manner in which pop-culture notions of “Mexican” and “Mexican American” were both reinscripted and contested in order to offer a compelling account of the way the *paduanos*, in their specificity, shifted the notions of fantasy heritage in the early twentieth-century United States. “While it is true that the costumes and settings of the

fantasy heritage plays historicized the bodies of the *paduanos*,” writes Gibb, “their open transformation from wait staff to *californios* and back suggested the historically continuous presence of Mexican-descended peoples in California. It legitimated, in a sense, the *paduanos* as citizens of California, and in so doing undermined the tenet of the fantasy heritage that California’s Mexican heritage was a thing of the past.” Yet, Gibb points out, the end result was still the perpetuation of the Mexican American as a “foreign” entity never fully absorbed into the modern California landscape. Gibb looks to the ways in which these performers, ambivalent about their complicity in perpetuating such notions, needed to negotiate the way they resisted or embraced the identity they produced and disseminated.

In “Haunted Landscapes: Ping Chong’s East/West Productions,” Kay Martinovich explores the “haunted landscapes” of the first two installments of theatre practitioner Ping Chong’s *East/West Quartet*, *Deshima* and *Chinoiserie*. The former treats the complex encounter of eastern and western cultures and identity in the history of Dutch-Japanese contact and the Japanese confinement of Dutch traders and missionaries to the island of the play’s title. The latter’s title refers to both the influence of Chinese motifs in visual and decorative art, but also acts as a catchall term for the Orientalist consumerism on the part of westerners. *Chinoiserie* functions, too, as an autobiographical performance as Chong “witnesses to and participates in” his own Chinese-American history, even taking to the stage himself at points in the production. Invoking Jacques Derrida’s notion of hauntology, the trace, and the notions of mis- and dis-remembering, as her historiographic approach, Martinovich submits “that Chong creates these haunted intercultural spaces to lament the loss of “other” narratives and to contend with the embedded hostilities and contentious relationships that constitute ‘race’ in Japan and America, China and Britain, East and West.” By framing the productions in this manner, Martinovich demonstrates how Chong’s subjects defy easy (and traditional) western discursive categorization: as Martinovich put it: “[t]he ghost, as an undecidable—both absent and present—upsets stability and certainty.”

The third and final section of the collection, “Imagined Communities and the Performance of Cultural Identity” begins with Katie N. Johnson’s essay, “From *Camille* to *Lulu Belle*: Constructing the Black Courtesan in the American Brothel Drama.” Johnson draws together a telling taxonomy of turn-of-the-century plays centering around prostitutes, fallen women, and “hooker-with-a-heart-of gold” characters, and articulates a set of troubling observations. While by the early twentieth century, brothel

dramas (extensions of the progressive-era captivity narrative, and almost exclusively featuring white women) had stopped “killing” their female protagonists at the end, David Bellasco’s 1926 revival of the *Camille* story, *Lulu Belle*, featured a black title character, and subjected her to a gruesome death scene at the close of the play—seemingly answering to white anxieties regarding the danger of a black courtesan’s incontinent sexuality. To further complicate the matter, while the chorus of this “negro drama” consisted of over one-hundred real-life black residents of Harlem, the leading characters were played in blackface by white actors including Leore Ulric and Henry Hill. Johnson’s essay feels out the contours of the cultural and political milieu in which *Lulu Belle* emerged and with which it intersected, looking to critical reception of the performance at the time, to the theoretical work of Harry Elam and E. Patrick Johnson, and to the discourses on blackface minstrelsy of Eric Lott, Errol Hill, James Hatch, and David Krasner. Noting not only how the play functioned within the “Harlem Renaissance, the rise of realism, and modernism’s obsession with primitivism,” Johnson also draws our attention to the manner in which “notions of so-called racial ‘authenticity’ were deployed both on and off stage.”

Next, in “The Moral Tetralogy: American Social/Political/Cultural Commentary in the Later Writings of Steve Tesich,” Michael Rothmayer examines the last four plays of Serbian-born American playwright Steve Tesich, drawing our attention to a distinct shift in the Tesich’s successful writing career in film and theatre up to that point. Terming these plays Tesich’s “Moral Tetralogy,” Rothmayer takes the reader through an increasingly pointed and bitter critique of America’s increasing moral ambiguity in regard to social issues, both domestic and abroad. Over the course of his work in the late 1980s to the late-mid 1990s, Tesich confronted his audiences with pointed critiques of Americans’ apathy and failure to realize the promises of their social engagement of the 1960s. Concomitantly, Tesich signaled the growing censorship of social criticism on the part of the government and other powers-that-be. Tesich’s frustration, with his adopted fellow citizens, writes Rothmayer, “came with a growing sense that societal apathy was being supplanted by a conscious choice to marginalize and even censor critical points of view.” Throughout his career, however, and especially during the years he composed this “tetralogy,” argues Rothmayer, Tesich’s writing was motivated by a deep and complex love for America that made his criticism all the more poignant. In his final months before dying of a heart attack in 1996, Tesich leveled his harshest critiques in what might be considered a supplement to his tetralogy: a series of unpublished letters to the *New York*

Times. At the end of his essay, Rothmayer includes an excerpt from one of the most damning letters, “Niggerization: Everything, Not Just Charity, Begins At Home.”

Beginning with Diana Taylor’s recently articulated notions of the archive and the repertoire, Julie Pearson-Little Thunder’s essay, “Acts of Transfer: The 1975 and 1976 Productions of *Raven and Body Indian* by Red Earth Performing Arts Company,” focuses on a particular moment in a two-decade period of Native theatre production the author terms, “Native Emergence Theatre.” Engaging specifically with the Red Earth’s first two productions, Pearson-Little Thunder explores the manner in which, in both cases, the artists’ performance was a way of moving beyond heavy reliance on the “archive” of Native theatre at the time (that is, a limited number of previously-written scripts), instead engaging in “acts of transfer” or “embodied transmission” of identity, values, knowledge, collective memory and emotions between the performers and the audience—the repertoire—through the commissioning and creation of the company’s own scripts. Of primary essence in discussing these works is a consideration of the ways (in the author’s words, the “why and the how and the what”) Red Earth adapted oral traditions and lived Native experience for the stage. By looking at the intersection of playwrights’ textual choices and the performing bodies of the actors, as well as audience reception, Pearson-Little Thunder illuminates the way that the actors not only performed the scripts, but also drew upon “Native habitus, gesture, and attitude” in order to exteriorize and transfer the “living practice” of their identity to their Native and non-Native spectators.

Jodi Van Der Horn-Gibson’s “Constructing the Fruited Plain: The ‘red,’ the White and the imbued,” also takes the construction of Native identity as its case study. In this instance, however, Van Der Horn-Gibson focuses on the construction and perpetuation of negative stereotypes of the Indian in popular stage manifestations of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. It is clear, she argues, that the characters of the Pickaninny Tribe, the Lost Boys, and Tiger Lily emerged within a very specific milieu of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American Frontier mythology and accompanying racialized discourses of Positivism, Manifest Destiny, and Survival of the Fittest (not surprisingly, *Peter Pan* was roughly contemporaneous with touring Wild West shows and “Real Indian” displays). But, more disturbingly, these troublesome images are re-emergent in stage productions of *Peter Pan* well into the current century, with, for example, the Caird and Nunn-produced revival’s inclusion of additional dialogue for the Pickaninnies, smacking of the worst kind of exoticization. Van Der Horn-Gibson aligns her analysis

within recent work by Philip Deloria (*Playing Indian*) and William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., to argue that the native's place in current American identity production is not as far off from late-nineteenth-century categorizations as we might assume.

Sara Freeman's essay, "The Immigrant, the Exile, the Refugee in Wertebaker's *Credible Witness: A Poetics of Diaspora*," looks to Gabrielle Griffin's reading of the theories of Avtar Brah in order to rethink outmoded notions of post-colonialism in dramatic literature, probing instead the emergent notion of "diaspora space." Such space, writes Freeman, resists "ghettoization and opens possibilities querying difference from many locations. In this way, the notion of diaspora can migrate, for instance, to the work [of] Wertebaker, whose theatre purposefully queries the multi-sourced nexus of national identity, ethnic identity, historical consciousness, and self-transformation." Freeman uses Griffin's figures of the "immigrant" and the "asylum seeker" to trace the way such figures operate in "internationally-minded" Wertebaker's treatment of the denizens of an immigrant detention centre in her play *Credible Witness*. Freeman articulates the way the playwright uses her characters to probe diasporic identity and the dilemmas of transnational exile, migration histories, the collision of nationalisms, and political and psychological abjection.

The discourse on identity construction continues with "Puerto-Rican Stages: Theatre in the Metropolis, on the Island, on the Margins." Elena García-Martín organizes her essay "along the broad lines of the Puerto Rican search for communal and national identity through theatre." García-Martín departs from traditional framing of Puerto Rican theatre with temporal metaphors ("tradition, history, or usable pasts"), and instead constructs her history along what she terms "spatial coordinates." By privileging a spatial approach rather than a temporal one, García-Martín "emphasize[s] the importance of spatial continuity as a strategy of identity construction, but also, and more importantly, allude[s] to presence—both of bodies and spaces—as a dimension that links theatre and the spatial bindings of identity." Drawing our attention to the disparity fomented by the academy's foregrounding of commercial theatre produced in Puerto Rico's capital San Juan and its relative neglect of the rich and compelling "unconventional" theatre and performance initiatives in the "margins," the author examines the way these emergent initiatives challenge the narratives of identity perpetuated by the traditionally mainstream commercial venues. García-Martín offers as examples communal, site-specific theatre such as "Teatro Rodante" and "Agua, Sol y Sereno," and performances like Myrna Renaud's "La Ruta Cangrejera" and those staged

by the artists of “Museo del Barrio,” informed by the work by Deborah Hunt, which protested the expropriation and gentrification of the Santurce district in San Juan—highlighting the spatial relationship between subversive, populist theatre and the non-commercial spaces outside the metropolitan centers and logocentric cultural institutions where such theatre is found.

The subject of Leigh Clemons’ essay, “Querying Difference on the Battlefield,” offers perhaps one of the largest numbers of queries of difference in the volume. Clemons’ deflates traditional scholarly dismissal or misconceptions of the complex performative and historiographic projects contemporary battle enactment hobbyists engage. Her essay approaches the rich and relatively un-traversed conceptual terrain, then, from many trajectories. Drawing from both observer-participant accounts and cultural anthropology, as well as Gilles Deleuze’s notion of “contrariness,” Clemons cites tricky areas of difference in regard to friend and foe, soldier and supporting roles in historical in-character enactments or “impressions,” difference between reenactor and the general public (and the media’s role in perpetuating tensions between the two), difference (and tensions) between professional living historians and living history hobbyists, difference between rigorous, “authentic” reenactors (“hardcores”) and their “farb” counterparts within reenactments, and, delving into trickier areas, differences between reenactors who choose to portray “us” (the good guys) and those that opt to portray “them” (those the historical record has assigned the status of “bad guy,” e.g. Confederates or German soldiers in World War II). Clemons also looks at complex notions of race, gender, and ethnicity at these performances. “Disallowing the presence of persons who do not “look right” is defended as necessary to preserve authenticity,” she writes. “[T]o allow a person to play anyone he/she wanted would be bowing, in the minds of some reenactors, to revisionist political correctness and dilute the hobby’s educational mission.” While these performers strive for historical accuracy as a touchstone for authentic witnessing to the common-man soldier, Clemons notes counter-performances in these events that run against the grain of mainstream history. Even so, she argues, reenactors engage in identity management that often obfuscates deeper areas of difference. “The distinctness of the details provide a patina of similarity—the experience of the common soldier—that masks the very real differences implicit in their impressions and the arguments of authenticity which make those differences possible.”

In each of these case studies, then, the author teases out some of the limitations of discourse concerning difference in theatre history today,

whether it be racial, ethnic, geographic, sex-based, gender-based, economic, or particular amalgams thereof. Incorporating new approaches and theories for dealing with such issues, each serves as a complex and rigorous—yet readerly and pleasurable—text. As a collection, it is our hope that these essays will constitute a set of entry points into a dynamic and vital scholarly conversation.

PART I:
HISTORIOGRAPHY

TEN-FOOT POLE HISTORIOGRAPHY: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE, AND DESPICABLE ACTS

JOHN FLETCHER

When is difference *too* different?

Consider the activist demonstrations of the Rev. Fred Phelps, the pastor of the tiny Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. Over the last fifteen years, Phelps and his congregation (much of which consists of his extended family) have gained infamy for their vitriolic protests of churches, conventions, celebrations, funerals—any event that they perceive as advocating or enabling a gay agenda. Or, in his words, Phelps bears witness against “fags,” “fag enablers,” “fag churches,” and the “fag nation” that enables them—all because, as his website proclaims, “God Hates Fags.”¹

Westboro mounts as many as forty protests a week at points across the nation. The average demonstration (church members call them “Love Crusades”), often but not always led by Phelps himself, consists of a small band of church members (usually less than ten). Demonstrators drive out to the location of the event they are protesting, park their cars, coordinate with local police about where they can stand, and unload their paraphernalia. For the next four to five hours, the group heckles passersby about God’s impending judgment upon America for its refusal to reject (that is, “impose the death penalty on”) gay people.² Declaiming their invective-filled sermons, they display bright, neon-colored, foam-core placards featuring catchy phrases like “Thank God for AIDS,” “USA = Fag Nation,” “Your Pastor is a Whore” and, the standard, “God Hates Fags.” Phelps typically attracts the most media attention for his protests of funerals: funerals of AIDS victims, of celebrities, and of late, of US soldiers who die in Iraq.³ Apparently Iraq is God’s righteous punishment for America’s toleration of “fags.” “Thank God For IEDs,” read their latest signs.

As a scholar of activist performance, I cannot responsibly ignore Phelps. Over the last decade, he has gone from backwater kook to

nationally-known pariah, securing a place in any history of grassroots American protests. Phelps, or recognizably Phelpsian characters, regularly figure as the star villains in pro-tolerance dramas like *The Laramie Project* or in Human Rights Campaign literature, acting as a rhetorical spur to those unsure about supporting gay rights, as if to say, “See the end result of intolerance?” Meanwhile, the more mainstream conservative, “pro-family” (as opposed to “anti-gay”) movement now carefully contrasts itself as the sane, loving alternative to Phelps’ militant extreme.⁴ And, for the good, old-fashioned anti-gay crowd, Phelps serves as valuable free-speech pioneer, trailblazing his way into cultural celebrations and memorials of others.

Given his importance, then, my scholarly task is clear: I am to place Phelps in a cultural context, situate his methods in terms of antecedent demonstrators, and evaluate his influence upon other political and cultural movements—in other words, *historicize* him. This I can do. After hours or research, I can discuss Phelps’ theology, explain his logic, position him in relation to other protest groups both past and present. I can acknowledge Phelps’ contributions to the field of political activism and public protest. I can even relate my own experiences of being protested by—and counter-protesting—Phelps himself. I could write an essay about how he and his hate-filled signs trigger passionate discussions about the limits of tolerance in US democracy.

Which is a good thing, because I’ll tell you: I have trouble tolerating Phelps. The more I study him, read his web pages, collect articles about him, hear his sermons and interviews, watch him in person—the more I feel coated with slime. He emits hatred like radioactivity. Watching archival footage of Phelps in action reminds me of those movies where Dracula passes and the grass around him rots into black ash. And my dislike—my discomfort at the difference he represents—influences how I represent him in my scholarship. I find myself needing to distance myself from him, to talk about him at a remove, and to mark the difference between myself and him and his poisonous ideology through various rhetorical markers (sardonic prose, meta-narration, jokes about Dracula).

In other words, I engage in ten-foot pole historiography when it comes to Fred Phelps, and I’m uncomfortable about that. The theme of this volume challenges us to query and contest difference, a project with both political and scholarly dimensions. I’m troubled because Phelps—his followers, his tactics, his views—go beyond mere *difference* for me. They represent something despicable, anathematic to my core convictions about what democracy should be or should tolerate. I struggle with the fact that Phelps’s particular brand of difference represents a limit-point to my

critical and political ethics, the very commitments that spur me to query and contest difference in the first place. In this essay I try to clarify some of the issues around my ten-foot pole historiography, teasing out some of the reasons why what Phelps embodies so complicates my politics and my scholarship.

I ground my scholarship and activism in what political theorist Chantal Mouffe calls a radical democratic ethic.⁵ Radical democracy endorses the democratic principle of liberty and equality for all. But it also recognizes that, at present, these principles remain only partially realized, tethered to an Enlightenment model of Man in the abstract as holder of rights and sovereignty. Many people remain excluded from effective recourse to human rights or political representation due to various divergences from that (white, male, European, Christian, straight) Enlightenment subject. Thanks to a the rise of what Mouffe calls “new social movements” based on differences of sex, gender identity, race, nationality, and culture, however, *liberty* and *equality* imply newer, more plural definitions and applications. Radical democracy seeks to expand and multiply the reach of liberty and equality in response to these new configurations of identity, exploring new arenas for human rights, new horizons for political representation, and new modes of citizenship. This volume’s challenge to query difference can be said to embody a radical democratic project. “Radical democracy,” explains Mouffe, “demands that we acknowledge difference—the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous—in effect everything that had been excluded by the concept of Man in the abstract.”⁶

And thus the problem: I approach Phelps primed (I would hope) for the bracingly democratic confrontation with difference, ready to theorize new and exciting ways for his difference to deepen and enrich the scope of liberal democracy. But I simply balk when confronted with signs boasting “Matt Shepard in Hell” or “Thank God for 9-11.” I can laugh at Phelps, share his more bizarre offerings for shock value, and even dare myself to prove my liberal credentials by “understanding” him (*after all, he’s probably repressing his own homosexuality...*). But I have trouble representing him neutrally. I would like to believe that I would never consciously treat a racial, national, sexual, or economic other with as much cynicism or condescension as I do with Phelps. I don’t find his point of view merely different in an uncomfortable-but-I-can-extend-tolerance-toward-him sort of way; I find his world view despicable. It behooves me, then, to clarify the nature of the difference Phelps poses and to explore why I have difficulty incorporating it into even a radical and plural democratic ethic.

I'll begin by saying that I don't think that "religion" adequately characterizes this sense of difference. I'm surrounded daily by religious difference—Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Pentecostals—heck, some of my best friends are non-Methodists. I have relatively little trouble tolerating them, by which I mean recognizing legitimate differences, affirming the relatively stable status of those differences, but committing to bracketing the existence of those differences in order to go about the process of social co-existence. In other words, for instance, I'm Methodist, not Mormon. Mormons and I are different; I'm not going to become Mormon any time soon, but for the most part we can agree to disagree. I can't do this with the Westboro Baptist Church members. They don't just preach intolerant messages in their church building; they deploy their messages in public, effectively insinuating themselves into the public rituals of civic religion—parades, memorials, fair days, and so forth. Moreover, the crux of Phelps' beef with me has nothing to do with the fact that I don't go to his church; indeed, Westboro Baptist is flatly uninterested in winning converts. His job is to state his sense of the truth; if this convinces some people to repent, that's business between them and God.⁷

Instead, I characterize the difference between Phelps and myself as *ideological* or *political* difference. That is, Phelps and I hold competitive, mutually incompatible views concerning the proper makeup, purpose, and future of society. Through their speeches, their demonstrations, their web presence, their media interviews, Phelps and his band disseminate the viewpoint that an entire class of people ("fags") holds no legitimate claim to human rights or political equality. It isn't just that gay people are sinners; it's that they should not *be*. Between this view and my own radical democratic ethic, no level of tolerance, of "agreeing to disagree" is possible. We lack even a common language to describe the issues that divide us. Terms I imagine as neutral—homosexual, gay, GLBT—have no place in Westboro Baptist's lexicon, and to say that Phelps "dislikes" gay people is a corruption of his message. As Phelps has explained on several occasions, he uses the word *fag* intentionally for its etymological implications: the contraction of faggot—that which burns.⁸ The word for him accurately embodies the proper fate and status of homosexuals. I cannot represent their views neutrally because nothing about their viewpoint fits within a schema I recognize as value-neutral. The reverse is also true. He could not discuss my own beliefs about GLBT equality and human rights without betraying the language that defines his world-view. Each of us is, in each other's eyes, fundamentally irrational and immoral.

So why not just exclude him—treat him as a criminal element, as sociopathic vermin? After all, exclusion per se isn't unethical. Indeed, a

certain degree of intolerance is a necessary part any system, even a democratic one. No government could survive if it had to tolerate people or groups actively devoted to bringing about its destruction. Democratic systems have the right and the duty to exclude the Tim McVeighs who use para-political violence to impose their authoritarian world view on the rest of society. Yet, tempting as it might be to ban him from my society, Phelps is simply not in the same class as an antidemocratic terrorist. Unlike a Ku Klux Klan arsonist or a Neo-Nazi gay basher, Phelps does not actually disrupt anyone's access to democratic liberties. Nor does he advocate personal violence against homosexuals and their supporters. Punishment, like conversion, is in Phelps' eyes God's job, and God clearly chooses to punish fag nations with hurricanes, terrorists, and Iraqi wars.⁹

In fact—and in contrast to many other protesters on the right and the left—Phelps and his group are scrupulous about staying within legal bounds. Civil disobedience (e.g., arranging sit-ins or sympathy-garnering mass arrests) isn't one of their tactics—quite the opposite. Phelps' family and congregation claim a surprising number of lawyers. Through legal savvy and years of experience, Phelps' protesters are often better versed in the peculiarities of local protest law than are the officers assigned to protect/corral them. They know exactly where to stand, how far they can go, and they are quick to press charges through standard legal channels if their rights have been ignored. In a recent interview, Phelps boasted that as many as eleven of his close family members are lawyers. When asked about legal and media harassment, Phelps laughed, “A federal judge gave us \$175,000 in fees for having to sue so many of the people over the laws they passed who were trying to run around the First Amendment.”¹⁰ Despicable as their stances may be, Phelps and his group choose to publicize them in strictly civil ways. Unlike terrorists or extreme activists, the Westboro crowd observes the rules of the political game, presenting its views as legitimate ideological positions in a larger democratic context.

Phelps thus represents for me a political difference in Jacques Rancière's precise sense of politics—a struggle not between opinions of how to distribute power among democratic players (say, Republicans versus Democrats) but a fundamental, irreconcilable disagreement over who counts as a player in the first place.¹¹ Phelps and his followers simply do not consider fags like me legitimate participants in a political process. They live grudgingly in a society run by people they honestly and deeply consider irredeemably irrational and corrupt. Indeed, our co-existence within the same society depends upon the fact that the Westboro Baptist Church comprises only a hundred or so members,¹² whereas the political community of people who don't think, for instance, that gay people should