

***New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849* by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon**

Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 368 pp, ISBN 978082233416 (paperback)

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In 1795, authorities in the black-majority city of Charleston, South Carolina, banned the stage version of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* (1688) and passed an ordinance that forbade black people from attending the theatre. On the surface, this appears to be yet another shameful episode in the litany of white supremacism, with the erasure of a black presence from the stage and even from the audience. However, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon conjures a more complicated reality, mining contemporaneous letters to newspapers to demonstrate how that ordinance was regularly flouted: she highlights complaints that black theatregoers continued to form a noisy majority and that actors played to them specifically. Dillon explains the proximity of the Haitian revolution, which began in 1791 and concluded with the creation of the first black republic of the Americas in 1804, during which large numbers of both white and black refugees from Saint-Domingue arrived in Charleston during the 1790s. The Francophone presence, riven with political divisions, found creative outlets in theatre and were initially welcomed before the reputation of the French Revolution soured and fears over black revolution sharpened. By 1797, one letter writer complained that the popularity of the 'French style' had led to the 'ruin and destruction' of the Charleston Theatre (p. 146). The manager is lambasted for the recruitment of poor actors, shoddy stagecraft, and for failing to keep his theatre 'clear of people of colour' (p. 146). Although such letters promote the ideal theatre as a space that is regulated, orderly, white, and Anglo, Dillon skilfully reads between the lines to paint a more combustible, subversive scene in which the manager is charged with 'failing to erase' the black presence (p. 147). In addition, the letter suggests that the audience, including 'mulatto wenches', has been exercising what is known as the 'freedom of the scenes' where theatre patrons—especially wealthy ones—insisted on their right to display themselves on stage. 'In short, then, women of colour have joined spectators on stage and have performed their own identity as legitimate and visible members of the Charleston polity' (p. 147).

Dillon's superb and engrossing account abounds in such provocative readings of an Atlantic *performative commons*. The historical period in question opens with the regicide of Charles I in 1649 and closes with the Astor Place Riot in New York in 1849; while the locations of detailed analysis range across the Anglophone North Atlantic with chapters

devoted to London, Charleston, Kingston, and New York. This features scintillating readings of stage plays as well as the performative nature of executions, riots, sounds, dance steps, and fabrics; this includes a fascinating discussion of clothing in colonial Jamaica, a crucial site so often overlooked in both British and American national histories. Dillon therefore advances upon Joseph Roach's attention to performativity that eschews the usual carving out of a national tradition, and instead identifies the mobile relations of transnational capitalism and colonialism as its social fabric. There is the salty whiff of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *Red Atlantic* here too as this tumultuous, bolshy, rumbling, riotous, history of theatre-from-below is peopled with the 'rogues and tricksters, slaves, servants, sailors, soldiers, pirates, planters, players, prostitutes and projectors' who were all '(con)scripted into the performance of colonial modernity' (p. 13).

Dillon's title indicates its incisive interventions in a number of key fields. 'New World Drama' concerns theatre which put 'scenes of American-ness' (p. 23) on stage: native Americans, European colonialism, race slavery, and transportation in plays like *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (1677), *Oroonoko: A Tragedy* (1695), *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), *Polly* (1777), *Robinson Crusoe* and *Harlequin Friday* (1781). But equally Dillon is keenly attuned to the off-stage 'drama of Americanness' in terms of a performative reading of the 'newness of a modern world system that took shape in the Atlantic world in the long eighteenth century' (p. 24). The study is animated by close attention to the foundational contradictions of modernity: Dillon opens by exploring the simultaneous enclosure of *common lands* at the same time as revolts provided increased political representation for the *commons* in seventeenth century England. This is elaborated into the striking concept of an 'Atlantic performative commons' that is advanced to include the embodied experiences of Atlantic peoples who are often left out of Jürgen Habermas's literate, rational and national public sphere. Dillon convincingly argues that the 'imagined community of the nation—and the public sphere associated with it—writes out of its purview the indigenous peoples and diasporic Africans who inhabit the Americas side by side with creole European functionaries, while nonetheless relying on the land and labour of these peoples to generate the economic wealth that sustains the rise of the European bourgeoisie who find their political voice in the public sphere' (p. 17).

Theoretically sophisticated, Dillon draws on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work on *multitude*, yet proposes a deeper history of the *colonial relation*, emphasising the simultaneous centrality and erasure of colonial violence. Dillon insists too, via Jacques Rancière, that representation 'must be rethought in far broader and more complex terms than it often is within contemporary understandings of the political' (p. 9). And Dillon engages with recent work on slavery, qualifying Giorgio Agamben's term of 'bare life' with the more suitable 'bare labour' (p. 27). This rich and compelling account surveys a deep history to

identify the emergence of an 'Atlantic performative commons' which still continues to materialise in the present in fragmented ways whether within or without the doors of a theatre.