

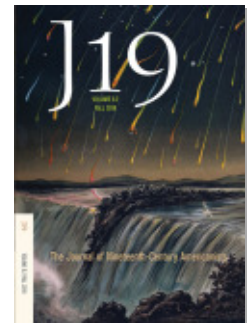


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J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 6, Number
2, Fall 2018, pp. 395-402 (Article)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2018.0028>

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The Nineteenth Century; or, Marking Time in American Performance Culture

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Theaters were draped in black and the nation plunged into mourning as tens of thousands of Americans bid farewell to George Washington after his death on December 14, 1799. Playhouses vied with each other to memorialize the celebrated leader who, for many, emblemized the virtues of the young republic. The revolution that Washington had helped to lead only two decades before had witnessed thousands of funerals—not only those of the soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in battle but also the countless symbolic burials and resurrections of the figure of Liberty.¹ Through these staged rituals, white Americans consecrated wartime deaths as heroic sacrifices with a promised rebirth into freedom. Washington's funeral rites, performed in theaters and throughout city streets, also marked the end of an era of republican restraint in the playhouse and the launch into the emotional drama of the "nineteenth century." The era that would be characterized by melodramatic spectacle eventually witnessed its twilight with the symbolic "closing of the frontier" and a theatrical change that also ushered in an age of realism and shifted perceptions of time on the national stage.

Any national history bookended by Washington's death and Turner's closing of the frontier is obviously one framed largely by events important to the dominant white portion of the United States. It also overlooks alternate timelines and understandings of time performed by Native American, Jewish American, and African American communities, among others. Over the past two decades numerous new studies have challenged narratives of American theater history that map the country's journey from an "infant stage," on its way westward, to the growing

professionalization of its theatrical industry in the modern era. Suggesting alternate historical milestones invites scholars to both un-tell and re-tell well-known stories—not by adding to *existing* timelines, but by positing parallel or alternate ones.² In this essay I turn to texts or performance events from the “nineteenth century” that either tacitly or explicitly acknowledge alternate ways of marking time. Many of these ruptures were embedded in popular texts, performances, or performative acts, and excavating those texts illuminates how unstable the framework of the “nineteenth century” was even to those living through it.

Call Back the Times³

In 1802, Joseph Crosswell penned a historical drama of the Pilgrim Fathers, *A New World Planted*. He declared, “For now, the nineteenth century’s come in view/And blessings on our country rise anew.”⁴ As numerous scholars have observed,⁵ this trope of national infancy overlooks not only the country’s colonial past but the histories of its earliest indigenous inhabitants. In the 1808 *The Indian Princess* (a retelling of the Pocahontas story), James Nelson Barker deliberately sweeps away those histories in the play’s final monologue as Captain John Smith prophesies, “Now flies my hope-wing’d fancy o’er the gulf/That lies between us and the aftertime . . . As the shrill war-cry of the savage man/Yields to the jocund shepherd’s roundelay.”⁶

Yet, as Joshua Bellin argues, Anglo-American culture inevitably felt the impress of both Native American experiences of time *and* concepts of performance—even when those experiences were imperfectly understood or represented. For Bellin, the “medicine bundle” represents the “complex, conflictual, cross-cultural acts” of the Indian performance of Indianness and the white performance of Indianness that came together in a process of “interaction and cocreation,” and he pays particular attention to “ritual or ceremonial experiences in which individuals break the flow of everyday life.”⁷ Bellin’s “medicine bundles” represent eruptions into Anglo-American concepts of both time and space, pushing back against characterizations of rituals such as the “Ghost Dance” as static cultural relics that merely replicate the past. Instead, he argues that such performances mark periods of social upheaval within native communities. Theater scholar Christy Stanlake underscores the dissonances between Anglo-American and Native American dramaturgies, arguing that concepts of *place* (or *platiality*) play a critical role in shaping indigenous peoples’ storytelling and thus their marking of time. As Stanlake notes, concepts of *place* in Native American storytelling are “endowed with a

value that can only be fully realized through a physical interaction.”⁸ Stanlake argues that Anglo-American narratives and dramaturgies have often relied heavily on a Christian-based concept of time, which focuses on linearity and a false sense of universality. That perception of universality has often obscured non-time-based narrative structures.

Not surprisingly, joining Native timelines to Anglo-American ones persisted throughout nineteenth-century drama and fiction. Perhaps more importantly, as scholars such as Jill Lepore and Matthew Rebirth argue, nineteenth-century Anglo-American artists often buried indigenous peoples’ futurity in narratives that placed them resolutely in the past. Even Jewish American artists such as Jonas B. Phillips, Mordecai Noah, and George Washington Harby, who imaginatively linked Native Americans with the lost tribes of Israel (projecting yet another alternate timeline onto native histories),⁹ struggled to foretell a *future* for Native characters in their dramas. For example, in both Noah’s *She Would Be a Soldier* and Harby’s *Tutoona, The Indian Maid*, the Native characters focus on past wrongs more linked to Jewish diasporic identities than Native ones. This act of historical ventriloquism shifts the characters’ relationship to their own timelines. In Noah’s and Harby’s dramas, Native characters’ futures are assimilated into white narratives, even when they offer useful lessons about countering imperialist oppression. As the Indian Chief in *She Would Be a Soldier* charges his white interlocutors, “Call back the times which we passed in liberty and happiness, when . . . we roved through our forests . . . call back our council fires, our fathers and pious priests; call back our brothers, wives and children, which cruel white men have destroyed.”¹⁰ This “calling back” invokes *places* linked to time—forests, council fires, and home hearths—settings disrupted or destroyed by white settlers. As *She Would Be a Soldier* demonstrates, even familiar dramatic texts offer theater scholars clues to disrupted or dissonant chronologies.

Perpetual Fêtes

Bellin’s and Stanlake’s works point to a performative dramaturgy linked to space and place in which chronologies are not tallied through constant repetition. By contrast, French ambassador Edmond-Charles Génét once claimed that the continual celebrations of American independence crowding the national calendar left him with the impression that he dwelt “in the midst of perpetual fêtes.”¹¹ Certainly many white Americans staged lavish celebrations marking not only the nation’s birth but the passage of milestones such as General Lafayette’s triumphal progress

through the United States from 1824 to 1825, almost half a century after the Revolution. The playwright Jonas B. Phillips wrote a song in Lafayette's honor performed at the Park Street Theatre, "Like an angel he came/And immortal his name/Shall forever appear on the records of fame."¹² The "perpetual" and the "immortal" recognize a desire for *permanence* in the performance of white American national identity.

Yet in the same year as Lafayette's return, a different kind of celebration in upstate New York shifted the flow of the "perpetual fêtes" rehearsing American national identity. The year 1825 also marked the year 5585 of the Hebrew calendar. While Lafayette paraded from city to city, honoring a nation that "gave to bigotry no sanction,"¹³ Mordecai Noah borrowed the Richard III costume from New York's Park Street Theatre to mark a milestone in another nation's history.¹⁴ He led the dedication for Ararat, a new Jewish homeland within US borders. Ararat emerged as Jewish citizens across Europe faced increased persecution by the mid-1820s. Within the United States, the Second Great Awakening had brought an upsurge in efforts to convert Jewish Americans to Christianity. Small wonder that even established Jewish American citizens, such as Noah, would consider intervening in the dominant narrative about Jews' place in US American history.

Although Ararat failed, the dedication ceremony marked a timeline beyond the traditional Anglo-American/Christian-inflected history shared by many of Noah's fellow citizens. Noah's ceremony represents an attempt to unite two timelines—a Jewish American one and a Gentile American one. The dedication stone for the settlement reads: "Ararat—A City of Refuge for the Jews—Founded by MORDECAI MANUEL NOAH. In the month of Tzri, Sept. 1825 & In the Fiftieth Year of American Independence."¹⁵ The blending of the Hebrew month, the Gregorian month and year, and the nation's birthday signals Noah's effort to memorialize time differently in US American culture. Unlike the truncated timelines often imposed on indigenous American societies, Noah's celebration invokes the ancient history of the Jewish people but keeps its eye fixed on the *future*, writing Jews into the narrative in a way that emphasizes harmony rather than dissonance.

"She Does Not Know What a Year Is"¹⁶

While Noah and many other Jewish Americans performed a "doubled" passing of time, African Americans found themselves robbed of traditional African chronological markers and coerced into scenarios in which their time was not their own—literally. In one of the most

oft-quoted scenes from George L. Aiken's theatrical adaptation of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Miss Ophelia asks Topsy, her new slave, when she was born. Topsy famously replies that she was never "born," that she just "grewed." St. Clare, Ophelia's brother, adds, "She does not know what a year is; she don't even know her own age."¹⁷

St. Clare's statement points to the ruptured timelines produced by slavery. It also points to white Americans' failure to understand alternate time systems that persisted in African diasporic cultures. The historian Walter Johnson argues that white slaveholders "infused their slaves' lives with their own time—through the daily process of slave discipline, the foreign, the young, and the resistant were forcibly inculcated with the nested temporal rhythms of their enslavement."¹⁸

Rhythms of enslavement appeared everywhere. For example, African names often denoted dates or seasons of birth. When those names were forcibly changed by white slaveholders, they performed breaks in the way African-descended cultures marked time.¹⁹ "Seasoning time," the period during which people kidnapped from Africa adjusted to (or perished from) New World climate and disease environments, also fractured time for enslaved peoples.²⁰ Nineteenth-century dramas represented these temporal fissures as black characters described their renaming by white employers, as in Anna Cora Mowatt's 1841 *Fashion*, or detailed the death of family members during the Middle Passage, seen in A. B. Lindsley's 1809 *Love and Friendship, or Yankee Notions*.²¹ Frederick Douglass underscored these ruptures in his stinging 1852 speech "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?"²² Douglass describes time in slavery as driven by the metronome of the lash in forced marches across hostile landscapes. Tavia Nyong'o suggests that theater not only marked temporal fissures in African American experience but also distorted the shaping of nineteenth-century African diasporic performance history, which he describes as "the circum-Atlantic fold . . . the period and the problematic that appears between the potential and the performance of emancipation."²³ As Nyong'o argues, "Time, space, and mobility all lie in the hollow of the circum-Atlantic fold," and he queries how contemporary performance scholars can trouble teleological narratives (19). Nyong'o turns to "carnivalizing the past" and the function of reperformed memories in shaping nineteenth-century history and time (136). Many African American performances at the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s reflected the impulse to reperform memories and claim a cohesive narrative of the past. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* (1913) encompasses histories of black Americans in slavery but

also depicts thousands of years of Egyptian and African history.²⁴ As one advertisement promised, "The pageant combines historic accuracy and symbolic truth."²⁵ Publicity avoided any overt mention of slavery, instead claiming, "This is the story of the Rise of the Negro Race," tracing its journey from the "primitive discovery of iron . . . across the water where it finally sets the Star of Freedom atop the Pillar of Light."²⁶ Du Bois's pageant situated slavery within the "symbolic truth" of African American agency, shifting the focus of the narrative toward the future.

Calvin Warren argues forcefully against contemporary efforts to "frame" the time of slavery as ending in the nineteenth century. It "is a temporality outside of metaphysical time; it is time that fractures into an infinite array of absurdities, paradoxes, and contradictions . . . Present, past, and future all lose concrete meaning, and we are left with an accretion of undecipherable flashes. In other words, we distort the force of slavery by attempting to temporize it."²⁷ Contemporary African American artists continue to wrestle with this folded, carnivalized, fractured time, as evidenced by the work of playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks and Robert O'Hara, whose plays often show characters struggling with events that supposedly lie in the "past."²⁸ More recently, Scott Magelssen has explored the disturbing phenomenon in some living history museums in which patrons can reenact escapes from slavery. He notes that what he calls "performative historiography" often "infuses the reconstruction of the past with a surrogate body and proceeds to write its history on the surrogate body and that of its spectator. In this manner, the body itself becomes the implicit contract of authenticity."²⁹ As Magelssen points out, writing history on surrogate bodies (as was often the practice of the nineteenth-century stage) becomes particularly problematic when white bodies become the surrogates for nonwhites.

Oh Wonder of the Nineteenth-Century!³⁰

The close of the nineteenth century brought mingled emotions of anticipation and despair to communities that had found themselves denied power and representation in the United States. African American newspapers such as *The Christian Recorder* chronicled with fury the upsurge in lynchings throughout the country, at the same time that they hailed a rising generation that would lead the way to future equality. *The Jewish Messenger* bemoaned renewed evangelical efforts to convert Jews on the eve of the new century, but it also imagined a day when Jews and Christians might celebrate their religious rituals side by side. Similarly the national stage had never offered such a representative

gathering of those who claimed American citizenship. Yet too often those performers—whether they were the Native Americans featured in western shows, Jewish comics creating parodies of immigrant life in vaudeville houses, or African American actors cakewalking for white audiences—found themselves trapped in performative loops that tied their chronologies to “national” time.

As long as scholars continue to imagine theater histories solely in “national” time, those marginalized artists will remain trapped in their performative loops. I hope the brief examples offered here have suggested that by deliberately embracing representations of fractured, folded, carnivalized, and disjointed times, scholars may reveal how *conflicting* experiences of time shaped not only the dramatic literature but the many performance cultures of the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. See Peter Shaw, *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

2. See John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

3. Mordecai Noah, *She Would Be a Soldier, or The Plains of Chippewa* (New York: Longworth, 1819), 65. http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:amdram:Z000619189.0

4. Joseph Crowell, *A New World Planted, or The Adventures of the Forefathers of New England Who Landed in Plymouth, December 22, 1680* (Boston, 1802), 46. http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:amdram:Z100750949.1

5. For studies exploring Native American performance culture, see Joshua Bellin, *Medicine Bundle: Indian Sacred Performance and American Literature, 1824–1932* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Felicia Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier, eds., *The History of the North American Theater: The United States, Canada and Mexico from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (New York: Continuum Press, 1998); Matthew Rehorn, *Pioneer Performances: Staging the Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the New American Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Christy Stanlake, *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6. James Nelson Barker, *The Indian Princess, or La Belle Sauvage* (Philadelphia: G. E. Blake, 1808), 74. http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:amdram:Z000612486.0

7. Bellin, *Medicine Bundle*, 4, 16.

8. Christy Stanlake, “Judylee Oliva’s *The Fire and the Rose* and the Modeling of Platial Theories in Native American Dramaturgy,” *Modern Drama* 48, no. 4 (2005): 820.

9. See Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).

10. Noah, *She Would Be a Soldier*, 65.

11. Quoted in David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fêtes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 134.

12. Quoted in Heather S. Nathans, *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum American Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 60.

13. This quotation comes from an exchange of letters in 1790 between George Washington and the members of the Newport, RI synagogue following Washington’s inauguration. The members of the synagogue wrote to Washington to congratulate him, affirming both their loyalty and

their appreciation for the country's policy of religious tolerance. Washington replied, quoting the original letter, and affirming that the United States, "gives to bigotry no sanction." For the full text of Washington's letter see <http://www.tourosynagogue.org/history-learning/gw.letter>.

14. Nathans, *Hideos Characters and Beautiful Pagans*, 102.

15. For an image of the stone, see http://www.jewishmag.com/142mag/mordecai_manuel_noah/mordecai_manuel_noah.htm.

16. George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Samuel French, 1859), 18. http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:amdram:Z200745716:2.

17. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 18. For more on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see John W. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); and Stefka Mihaylova and Tracy Davis, eds., *Uncle Tom's Cabins: The Transnational History of America's Most Mutable Book*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

18. Walter Johnson, "Possible Pasts: Some Speculations on Time, Temporality, and the History of Atlantic Slavery," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 492.

19. Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 24.

20. See Herbert S. Klein, Stanley L. Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective." *William & Mary Quarterly*, 58, no. 1 (January 2001), 94.

21. See Anna Cora Mowatt, *Fashion; or, Life in New York* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855); and A.B. Lindsley, *Love and Friendship, or Yankee Notions* (New York: David Longworth, 1809).

22. John Stauffer, ed., *The Portable Frederick Douglass* (New York: Random House, 2016), 195.

23. Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 18.

24. See Soyica Diggs Colbert, *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

25. "The Star of Ethiopia," broadside, Washington, DC, 1915, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.2080170a>.

26. "Pageant 'The star of Ethiopia' to celebrate the XIII amendment, October 11, 13 and 15, 1915: (Washington, DC: Goins Printing Co., 1915), <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.20801700>.

27. Calvin Warren, "Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness," in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, ed. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 59.

28. See Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013); Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001); Robert O'Hara, *Insurrection: Holding History* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000). Also see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

29. Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 34.

30. The quotation comes from Eugene Raux, a playwright in Philadelphia in the 1840s. Little is known of him aside from his work, *The Road to Fortune*. Like many authors of the mid-nineteenth century, he likely found playwriting—even on patriotic themes—an unprofitable business. He is cited by James V. Hatch and Annemarie Bean as one of the few US-American playwrights who "did not treat interracial marriage as a serious social problem." See James V. Hatch, Annemarie Bean, Brooks McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 215. Also see Eugene Raux, *The Road to Fortune* (1846), http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:ilcs-us&rft_id=xri:ilcs:ft:amdram:Z100774548:1.