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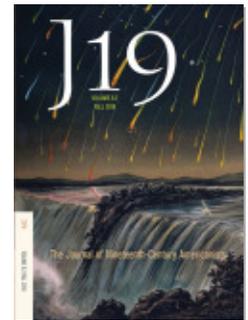
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J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 6, Number
2, Fall 2018, pp. 419-426 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2018.0031>



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Performance; or, Answering a Call from the Nineteenth Century

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To a historian of performance, the most important thing to know about the nineteenth century is that it isn't over yet. Even today it continues to reappear as a mixed legacy of durable behaviors. Defined by Richard Schechner as "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior"—that which can be reiterated the second time or "the nth time"—performance, however ambitiously innovative it may seem to be, tends to adhere to preexisting prompts. As drama means action, so performance means the fulfillment of a potential: the former arranges events in a sequence, the latter answers their prompt. Answer the prompt, actors will tell you, and the embodied experience will follow. Even though any performance by living actors cannot happen *exactly* the same way twice, imposing the need for improvised adjustments and spontaneous reinventions, the "constancy of transmission" of performances across "many generations" can be "astonishing."¹ That prompts can and do travel across time as well as space suggests an expansion of the "call-and-response" structure of choric antiphony into social and cultural performances of many kinds. My larger purpose here is to demonstrate that the nineteenth-century theater even today issues calls that continue to elicit performances, sometimes not recognized as responses to prompts, which historians can recover by studying plays, which are the residue of performance in its most concentrated form. My immediate disciplinary purpose is to argue that the putatively separate methods of theater and performance studies work best when they work together.

Some preliminary definitions and distinctions obtain. *Theater*, though it manifests itself in a great variety of forms across thousands of

years of world history, is the narrower term. At its root, the word refers to a special place, one designated for witnessing representations of dramatic action. More broadly, it refers to the entire ensemble of elements pertaining to those representations, including but not limited to actors, plays, costumes, settings, and the audiences who assemble on purpose to see them. *Drama* refers to the scripts that theater stages. *Performance*, by contrast, refers to a much wider range of actions, repetitions with the possibility of revision. By definition, no performance ever happens for the first time. Every performance, whether successful or not, consists of a response to a preexisting call, a prompt that sets in motion sequences of actions that resemble nothing so much as stage business. As ritual, work, or play, such sequential behaviors may be carried out any place where performers and spectators meet, actual or virtual, including specially designated places or those with no prior designation at all. Wherever performances occur, live or mediated, they share this fundamental definition: to perform means to carry out an intention, fulfill an expectation, or realize a potential.

Worshipping counts as performance, as does flirting or gaming. Interior decorating counts as performance, as does surgery or sales. Performances most often feature human beings as the performers, but not necessarily so: automobiles perform on test tracks; software programs, in hardware devices. But with reference to social actors in human history, where do these prompts come from? The theater historian Marvin Carlson calls the call-and-response process of recurring prompts "ghosting"; the performance theorists Diana Taylor and Rebecca Schneider, "scenarios" and "remains," respectively. I call it "surrogation," by which I mean the practice of trying out stand-ins to fill vacancies created by the departure of well-established incumbents.² All of the above are *of* the theater, even if they are no longer *in* it.

Abstractly understood by critics as ideologies, these sequences—manifested as customs, habits, and observances—operate concretely at the sharp edge of social struggle in schools, courts, public accommodations, and streets. As legacies producing consequences that could not be more contemporaneously urgent, they propagate through time like genes and through space like viruses. They pass through multiple generations like the human waves in a stadium, rolling through the present, cresting at the precise moment of individual embodiment, and disappearing from direct experience only as they become the future. Such calls from the past should be understood separately from the kindred phenomena of *memes*, which are signs, "pieces of thought," rather than sequences

of restored behaviors. Entrained in connected links, restored behaviors tend to pulsate, expanding and contracting as they descend through time. Even some patently obnoxious performances initiated on a large scale before 1900, including ones that optimists once thought had been explicitly superannuated—silencing Darwin, redeeming Dixie, or re-branding dungeons as correctional facilities, for instance—continue to bedevil the present. I will return to the last of these examples, specifically the mass incarceration of African Americans, which Michelle Alexander has termed the “New Jim Crow,” but with the intention of reinforcing the bitter irony, implicit in her reference, that what she calls “new” is in fact a time-honored response, rooted in a behavioral sequence of racial surrogations, to a prompting call from the nineteenth century.³ Not a rebirth but a legacy, this call projects the violence of the real perpetrators onto their victims, specifically African Americans and Native Americans, who may stand in for one another even as they take center stage in the productions of their genocidal oppressors.

Happily, not every example of a recycled nineteenth-century performance need be the source of exacerbated social grievance or catastrophe. On the contrary, popular culture has yielded a number of more genial performances. *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *The Nutcracker* (1892), for instance, combine annually to epitomize the experience of bourgeois holiday festivity in North America. Their ubiquitous co-appearance every season inspired Emily Coates, who directs the dance studies program at Yale, and me to imagine them hybridized as a superproduction titled *Scroogecracker!* As special events, however, these scenarios also fit into a general context of many quotidian performances derived from the nineteenth century. Organized as orgies of sentimental consumption, Yuletide rituals as we know them (such as exchanging presents and greeting cards) are largely a Victorian creation, haunted by the ghosts of Christmases past, 175 of them to be precise, and counting. Even though *A Christmas Carol* and *The Nutcracker* have their critics,⁴ their enduring success is hard to dismiss as a bad thing entirely. They infuse the high-cultural canon with popular and mass attractions. They transfuse box-office revenue into the typically anemic budgets of many regional repertory theaters and ballet companies. They circulate to the capillary level of cultural production through adaptation—so much so that the name “Scrooge,” which archetypically sums up the vices of stinginess, selfishness, and lack of fellow-feeling, has even become a verb, as in the Bill Murray vehicle *Scrooged* (1988). “Bah! Humbug!” is a speech act of proven efficacy, which, though Scrooge originally meant it to burst the bubble of festive sentiment,

can now be turned ironically on the would-be party-pooper, perhaps in order to shame him or her into reluctantly reciprocating a cheery greeting of "Merry Christmas," itself a currently contested verbal performance of micro-aggressive encounters—border skirmishes in the dreaded "War on Christmas"—which happens to owe more to the popularity of *A Christmas Carol* than it does to that of the Bible.

Toward the exploration of a more harrowing call from the nineteenth century, obliging theater historians and performance scholars to work together for the common good, the recent discovery by Caleb Smith of the memoir of Austin Reed, titled *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict* (written 1858–59), offers an especially promising brief. Reed's autobiographical narrative recounts the life of an African American who was born a freeman in Rochester, New York, in 1823. Despite his natal status, he was subjected to the nearest equivalent of enslavement by a life of almost continuous incarceration, first as a child in indentured servitude, next as a rebellious youth committed to the New York House of Refuge (the first juvenile reformatory in the United States, opened 1825), then finally as an adult repeat offender serving out a number of terms in Auburn State Prison. His various criminal convictions included those for arson and multiple counts of larceny. His ordeals included torture by beating, whipping, chaining, hanging by the limbs, and protracted drowning in the dreaded "showering bath," a forerunner of waterboarding.⁵ His aspirations included leaving a written record of the many cruelties and injustices to which he had been subjected, and he admirably succeeded in doing that, composing the substantial autograph manuscript that came to the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library in 2009, where it was verified by Smith with advice from David W. Blight and Robert B. Stepto and published by Random House in 2016.

By way of introduction, Smith writes about his first reading of the manuscript before the identity of the author had been firmly established: "Whoever he was, Reed seemed to be writing for an audience, pacing his adventures with a novelist's sense of plot and connecting his personal struggles to the public conflicts of the antebellum years."⁶ Like many good storytellers before him, Reed was also a performer. In addition to savage punishments and unremunerated labor, the curriculum of the reformatory included opportunities for elocution, singing, and dramatic recitation. Reed left an informative account of one such performance, in which he was cast in the leading role of a play that he called the "Indian piece," supported by two of his friends and under the direction of Samuel S. Wood, assistant superintendent of the House of Refuge:

Mike and Wm. Tealling and me was studying an Indian piece to perform on the stage in the presence of some ladies and gentlemen that was coming from Philadelphia in the course of a few weeks on a visit, and for that purpose a suite of Indian clothes was made for all three of us over to the female House to perform in. I was to be the Indian, Mike was to be a young female laying in her bed with an infant in his arms, and Tealling was to be the little infant, wrapped sweetly in the arms of his mother, in deep sleep.⁷

The “Indian piece” is clearly a version of the last scene from John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora; or, the Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), which won a prize for “the best Tragedy, in five acts, of which the hero or principal character shall be an aboriginal of this country,” or one of the popular parodies of it.⁸ The scene was followed by a comical after-piece, which was in part sung by Reed. From the material details of the reported stage directions, the tone of the presentation of the main piece, decorously addressed to the ladies and gentlemen visitors from Philadelphia, was likely to have been as serious as three boys in buckskin drag on a makeshift stage could make it. Rehearsals began “a few weeks” before the visit, suggesting sufficient time for memorization of dialogue, working out physical business, and arranging the stage, which included special lighting. Any work on the production, however, would have had to have been coordinated with the regular work schedule of the inmates, as the boys were hired out to private contractors to work seven or eight hours a day, every day except Sunday, profits returning to the House of Refuge.

In the scene that they ghosted, *Metamora*, the Native American protagonist whose character was based on Metacomet (King Philip, 1638–76), the leader of an uprising against the New England Puritans known as “King Philip’s War,” stabs his wife Nahmeokee to death over the lifeless body of their child, who earlier was unintentionally shot and killed by the English as they closed in on the family’s wigwam. Stone wrote the part for the great-lunged Edwin Forrest.⁹ Here the rhetoric-rich role is assigned to the pubescent African American reformatory inmate, Austin Reed:

The day that was appointed for us to be ready had arrived, and the school room was lit up that night with extra lights, and there was to be no studying that night. Mr. Wood called us three out and gave us the warning that the company had come, and to step out and

dress ourselves as soon as possible, while he stepped to the office after the spectators. Being all ready, the three little bells rung, and the curtains drop. There laid little Mike on a bed, dressed in the attire of a female, with his cheeks painted red, and the little infant Tealling wrapped in his arms in deep slumber and sleep, while I was dress in a little red gown coming down to my knees and a pair of buck skin leggings on with little bell buttons attach to them, and my face painted red and black. A large scalping knife stuck in my belt. The little bell rung again, and then the piece began, which end by my cutting a bladder that was full of red water representing blood and tied close up under the chin. The bell rung again, and the curtains drop, and we went out of the back door into the wash room where we change our clothes, and came upon the stage, where we spoke a piece call Old Snacks and the Steward, and as I had a clear silver voice for singing, Mr. Wood permitted me to close our piece by singing at the close of each piece.¹⁰

Metamora premiered as debates over Indian removal proceeded in Congress. By the time the House of Refuge produced its version, however, the Trail of Tears was already well trodden by thousands of Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles. The title character, before he dies in a hail of bullets, imagines the genocidal extinction of the Wampanoags, synecdoche for American Indian peoples and cultures generally. One of his closing speeches, which is very likely to have been included in the scene and spoken by Reed, highlighted the status of the play as one of the apparently inexhaustible "last of" narratives in American literature. They stretch from John Eliot's *Dying Speeches of Several Indians* (1685) to the oft-revived musical *The Fantasticks* (1960), in which the American Indian character repeatedly performs dying scenes by popular request. *Metamora* concludes: "We are destroyed—not vanquished; we are no more, yet we are forever."¹¹

What kind of prompt figures here? What long-term performance? The violence of the action as recounted by Reed is confined to his character, made up in black-and-red war paint and armed with a scalping knife. He appears to cut his scene-partner's throat, releasing the torrent of stage blood that requires all three actors to retire to the wash room to change clothes before returning to perform the comic afterpiece, or olio, "Old Snacks and the Steward." The curtain falls between main piece and after piece, suggesting a clear break. What the audience witnessed in the first part was the bloody murder of a white child by a black one,

both of them playing Indians. Such triangulated scenes of sacrificial violence, with one of the three races standing in for another, became a fixture of the popular melodramatic repertoire in the nineteenth century, as in Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859), in which the American Indian character lynches the white villain to avenge the murder of an enslaved child.

The presence of a child in such a narrative is telling and chilling. Austin Reed's haunted memoir shows how the child actor, brandishing his knife as what Robin Bernstein calls a "scriptive" prop in a school play, became father to the man in the tormented imaginations of his captors.¹² Escaping the House of Refuge, Reed eventually found himself ensnared in a lifetime of imprisonment, deprivation, and torture. In their prefatory note to *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, David Blight and Robert Stepto point to the resonance of his story in "our era of mass incarceration."¹³ Such a resonance, however, is not simply a random echo across the gulf of time. The United States has achieved the highest incarceration rate in the world, with African Americans imprisoned at a rate six times that of whites, by incremental steps of law and custom pioneered in the nineteenth century. Historians of performance, imagining a new paradigm based on their research, are coming to see these myriad local restorations of behavior, enactment of scenarios, animation of remains, and sacrifice of surrogates as an ever-growing congregation of ghosts, as tangibly real and present as any life can be.

Notes

1. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.

2. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 13; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 37; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

3. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

4. See, for example, Sarah Kaufman's mordant "Here Come Those Sugar Plums and Chestnuts," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2009.

5. Caleb Smith, introduction to *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, Austin Reed, ed. Caleb Smith (New York: Random House, 2016), xlv and lviii.

6. Smith, introduction, *Haunted Convict*, xv.

7. Reed, *Haunted Convict*, 44.

8. Qtd. in Gordon M. Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 124. In Chapter 3, "Metacom," 80–125, Sayre interprets *Metamora* as the most successful work in its expansive genre of historical melodrama.

9. For the context of this prompt-laden production, see Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 191–226; Matthew Reburn, "Edwin Forrest's Redding Up: Elocution, Theater, and the Performance of the Frontier,"

Comparative Drama 40, no. 4 (Winter 2006–7): 455–81; and Bethany Hughes, "The Indispensable Indian: Edwin Forrest, Pushmataha, and *Metamora*," *Theatre Survey* 59, no. 1 (January 2018): 23–44.

10. Reed, *Haunted Convict*, 44–45.

11. John Augustus Stone, *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, in *America's Lost Plays*, ed. Barrett H. Clark (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 14:38.

12. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 69–91.

13. David Blight and Robert Stepto, foreword to Reed, *Haunted Convict*, v.