Triumph in My Song: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century African Atlantic Culture, History, and Performance Conference (review)

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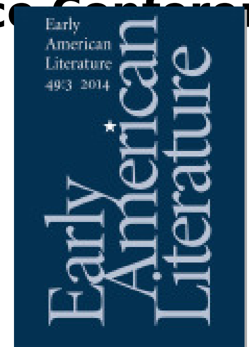

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Conference Review

Triumph in My Song: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century African Atlantic Culture, History, and Performance Conference

University of Maryland, College Park
May 31–June 2, 2012

In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), Diana Taylor presents a concise history of the interdisciplinary field of performance studies. She articulates what she sees as one of the most important contributions of the field, arguing that "by taking performance seriously as a system of learning, sorting, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by 'knowledge'" (16). Taylor surveys the "rift" she discerns in traditional approaches to scholarship (specifically) and human history (in general), a gulf between what she terms the archive and the repertoire, the former consisting of "texts, documents, buildings, bones," and the latter embracing less tangible cultural artifacts, such as "spoken language, dance, sports, ritual" (19). She suggests that scholars may obtain a more complete picture of the phenomenal world by consulting both the archive and the repertoire, and that the field of performance studies facilitates both a particular conception of knowledge—as that which is embodied and manifested in performance—and an accompanying set of heuristic tools applicable to a variety of subjects whose nature renders them incompatible with the rigid materialism of the archive.

In many ways, a desire to explore the productive potential of uniting these ostensibly incompatible epistemologies seems to have been at the core of the "Triumph in My Song" Conference held at the University of Maryland, May 31—June 2, 2012. In particular, the program's interdisciplinary approach and innovative integration of performance was well suited to the conference topic; historians of any diasporic or subjugated population have long grappled with the fact that their subjects rarely leave the type of direct

evidence that can be preserved in the archive, while scholars of performance must confront similar absences when studying a form that, by its very nature, is unrecoverable and ephemeral. At several points, "Triumph in My Song" suggested ways the inclusion of evidence from the repertoire can complement or enhance research drawing on traditional archival material.

One of the Society of Early Americanists "special topics" conferences, "Triumph in My Song" was also supported by the American Society for Theatre Research; the University of Maryland's College of Arts and Humanities, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, and School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies; and the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora. The conference featured a wide range of topics to correspond with this broad funding base, including presentations and performances by historians, literary scholars, ethnomusicologists, and theater scholars and practitioners. Many of the sessions engaged with the notion of "performance" in some fashion, approaches that can be grouped into three general categories: those that took types of performance as their subject matter; those that used performance as a metaphor for the ways relationships between individuals and institutions were established, maintained, or challenged; and those that embraced performance as methodology and heuristic technique. Of course, the challenge for any author writing a conference review is the inability to attend every session. Accordingly, this review offers what I hope will be a representative sampling of the work presented throughout the three-day event.

It was in the first session of the conference, "Voices from the Past," that one of the most fitting examples of performance as metaphor, as well as the potential value of studying both the archive and the repertoire, appeared. Sydney Nathans, in a paper entitled "Alabama Griot: Oral History and Re-Scripting the Plantation Past," related the process of constructing a narrative for enslaved African Americans whose absence from the traditional archive is nearly total, but whose memory and legacy endure in oral histories. He related how his (ad)ventures outside the archive revealed apparent contradictions in the evidence documenting the forced migration of slaves from North Carolina to Alabama in 1844. Ultimately, Nathans's discussion demonstrated the value of reading the archive alongside the "vernacular histories" preserved and transmitted by families whose ancestors were en-

slaved, leading to a richer understanding of the complex relationships that connected freedmen and their former masters, as well as the ways former slaves narrativized and "re-scripted" their experiences in a dynamic process that reveals an agency that the archive is unable to compass.

The subversive potential of dramatic scripts was taken up in a panel called "Irony, Satire, and Resistance." Holly Brewer's paper, "Performing Resistance to Slavery amidst Limits on Freedom of the Press and Speech: Widening Our Historical Vision of the Debates over Slavery in the Early British Empire," examined the life and work of Morgan Godwyn, an Anglican minister whose post-Restoration sojourn in the colonies led him to advocate religious instruction for slaves. Brewer speculated that Godwyn was "disappeared" for his antislavery publishing and speaking, which implicitly challenged the authority of James II. She focused primarily on Godwyn's broadside proposing a bronze statue of a slave, ostensibly advocating slaves' need for spiritual salvation. Brewer argued that this thinly veiled, satirical attack on the morality of slavery was crafted as a dramatic script, shaped as much with an eye for its manifestation in oratorical performance as for its posting. Rather than discussing the creation of a new dramatic script, Cassander Smith's talk, "Black African Women and the Challenges of Racial Performance in Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of Barbadoes*," examined one way existing dramatic structures served as hermeneutic frameworks that mediated imperial encounters. In his 1657 travel narrative, Ligon recorded his interaction with a beautiful black mistress of the Santiguan governor in the tropes and language of formal, quasi-scripted Elizabethan courtship rituals. Performance here took the form of a representational strategy adopted by Ligon to reconcile the disparity between his imperial expectations of the colonized blacks and the reality he discovered. Smith noted, however, that by casting the women in the role of Elizabethan courtiers, Ligon ceded them the authority and agency granted women in such interactions, allowing them to become "active subjects engaged in a New World cultural exchange."

Another session, Kathryn Bentley's "The Du Theatre of the Afro-Surinamese: Artistic Voice of the South American Slave," also examined a courtship ritual, though from a very different perspective; rather than drawing on its hermeneutic potential, the session employed "performance" as a heuristic technique. Bentley's was one of several sessions, each anchored by performances, that iterated an approach begun at the

Society of Early Americanists' Seventh Biennial Conference held last year in Philadelphia, which featured a staged reading of Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787). By working with Afro-Surinamese actors and drummers to construct a traditional Du theatre performance, Bentley and her students engaged in a form of embodied research, not only analyzing but experiencing the rhythms, stories, and characters of a cultural form alongside its actual practitioners. The traditional story that was enacted spoke to the subversive power of performance among slave cultures, telling of a courtship ritual enacted for the master and his slave mistress that provided an opportunity for two slaves to escape. By presenting portions of the play alongside her findings on the form, Bentley demonstrated the value of performance as process and product, as both a means of conducting one's research and the mode of its presentation.

The ways that scholars employ the language and metaphorical potential of performance in conducting and sharing their research was one question addressed in "The Power of the Word," a panel that explored various representational strategies adopted by individuals, historians, and political movements. Kathleen Howard, in "Antebellum Evangelical Creativity and Its Legacy in the Work of Julia C. Collins and Frances E. W. Harper," explored examples of religious tracts and racial uplift fiction from the mid-nineteenth century, publications that—while intended to provide spiritual edification to African Americans—focused entirely on white characters. Howard argued that their authors were interested in "spiritual rather than historical realism," privileging specificity in the scenario's circumstances, rather than the racial makeup of their subjects. This deployment of "universal" scenarios and tropes exhibited a "fixation on eternity," one employing specific representational strategies to align its readers with a transcendent spiritual order. While also addressing representational strategies, Peter Reed focused on those adopted by scholars of the American and Haitian Revolutions in his paper, "Racial Revolution and the Word." Tracing trends in recent histories analyzing Haiti during the turbulent period between 1791 and 1804, Reed explored the fraught and often irreconcilable differences between approaches that tend to privilege either the "revolution" or the "word," invoking Cathy Davidson's influential study. While scholars such as Carolyn Fick have emphasized the degree to which the Haitian rebels drew on "undocumented, indeed undocumentable anti-Western reserves to energize their revolution," Reed suggested such approaches

have the potential to "ghettoize" the revolts and the cultural forms and institutions they established. Ultimately, he called for new "forms of curation" that acknowledge that the Haitian Revolution, as did its American predecessor, "hinged crucially on words in performance, articulating the abstract symbolism of public discourse with the concrete materiality of bodily acts." Steven W. Thomas's "The Performance of Ethiopia in African-Atlantic Culture: A Transnational and Multiethnic Genealogy" traced the rich symbolism of "Ethiopia" for African Americans over the last several centuries. Thomas sketched the ways the term has variously functioned as a metaphor for African American identity, a metonymic substitute for all African Americans, and a physical-geopolitical site, whose supposed stability provided a foundation for pan-African movements. This panel, particularly the papers of Reed and Thomas, also provided an opportunity for a productive question-and-answer session that connected the panel's themes to the present day. In the case of Haiti, discussion focused on ways the nation's complicated lineage and violent past inform potentially neo-imperialist efforts to rebuild and reimagine the country following the 2010 earthquake, while Thomas described how past projections of identity and significance onto Ethiopia have repeatedly destabilized the region and hindered the cooperation of the more than eighty ethnic groups that call it home.

This attention to the contemporary ramifications of legacies of physical and rhetorical violence continued in another performance session, "The Use of Metatheatricality in Telescoping the Slave Past to the Present." Coordinated by Beth Turner, it explored how Gilda Gonfier, a black French Caribbean playwright, uses metatheatricality to "telescope" a documented instance of nineteenth-century slave abuse into the lives of contemporary Guadeloupians who are still coping with the traumatic legacies of slavery. As Turner succinctly defines it, metatheatricality involves the "self-conscious representation of the theatre itself on the stage," which, in the case of Gonfier's *Le Cachot* (The cell), concerns a group of individuals rehearsing a play about an 1842 incident in which a slave is tortured and killed after being falsely accused of poisoning his master's livestock. Turner suggested that metatheatrical techniques, which destabilize the aesthetic integrity of a performance and prevent audience members from complete absorption in an ostensibly fictional world, call attention to the similarities between history and fiction. By showing individuals confronting a past

whose faint echoes in communal memory and sanitized history texts are easily ignored, Gonfier models for an audience the visceral and often painful process of recognition and reconciliation. Metatheatricality was also integral to the format of the session itself, as Turner's hybrid presentation intercut scholarly analysis with portions from the play performed by actors from local universities, permitting her to intervene in the performance and assess the significance of the dramatic events and allowing her to incorporate dialogue from the play far more extensively and engagingly than is possible in the format of a typical conference presentation.

Another performance session seemed engaged in a similar "telescoping" of lost or suppressed voices from the past. Valerie Joyce, a professor at Villanova, and Kimberly Fairbanks, a professional actress in Philadelphia, presented a one-woman show that they had cowritten and produced entitled *(Dis)embodied Voices*. The show imagined the lives of numerous African American women whose experiences have endured only in tantalizing scraps of history, such as the record of a black woman who died nursing white patients during Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic. While these women's lives have been largely invisible to the archive, Joyce and Fairbanks combined meticulous historical research with imaginative dramaturgy to try and recapture some aspect of their experiences.

Returning to the metaphorical potential of "performance," a panel titled "The Uses of Plagiarism: *Clotel* as Performance" featured three papers arguing that the significant "borrowing" in William Wells Brown's novel should be viewed not as problematic pilfering but as "a productive aesthetic and political practice." Lara Cohen's "Notes from the State of Saint Domingue: The Practice of Citation in *Clotel*" analyzed Brown's strategy of juxtaposing, rather than integrating, scenes from both Nat Turner's Rebellion and the Haitian Revolution, using passages from John Beard's account of the latter to discuss the former. Perceiving the performative possibilities of this approach, which she characterized as "at once documentary and counterfactual," Cohen argued that *Clotel* opens up an "interstitial" space of possibility in the mind of the reader, one that, by conflating Turner's failed rebellion with L'Ouverture's successful one, suggests that, for Brown, potential and possibility are more important than the integrity of historical events. Dawn Coleman addressed the extensive appropriation her research has discovered in the sermonic passages of the novel. Her "Performing Religion: *Clotel*'s Borrowed Robes" argued that these passages, lifted from

published sermons and religious tracts, are not evidence of Brown's identification with the religious material, but rather a "species of performance" and a "canny rhetorical strategy," one intended both to capitalize on the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and to "address the readers in their own moral medium." Geoffrey Sanborn's paper, "Stuff White People Like: Audience Analysis in William Wells Brown," pursued Brown's commitment to meeting his audience's aesthetic preferences. Sanborn argued that Brown's work exhibits a variety-show aesthetic, an eclectic mix of both high- and lowbrow cultural forms lifted from popular literature and the stage; for Sanborn, these juxtapositions are "neither accidental nor incidental," and are rather a "sign of [Brown's] attunement to the actual mass culture he encountered on tours."

The conference also featured a performance by Theater J, an award-winning DC-area professional theater company. Actors reprised scenes from Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man* (2011), which explores a showdown between two former slaves (raised in the Jewish faith) and their master at the end of the Civil War. Their confrontation coincides not only with Lincoln's assassination but with Passover and its commemoration of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land. Drew Barker facilitated a postperformance discussion focusing on the complexities of creating and performing a master-slave relationship in such a way as to transcend traditional stereotypes without conflicting with contemporary audience sensibilities.

Reprising yet another tradition inaugurated at last year's conference, SEA past president Dennis Moore moderated a roundtable discussion on a seminal work in early American studies. This year's session focused on Frances Smith Foster's *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America*. Following brief opening remarks by Moore and Tess Chakkalakal, Foster explained that her book stemmed from a desire to write something for her sister and the average NPR listener, something that was "simple without being simplistic . . . accessible without pandering." The bulk of the session was devoted to a discussion between the panelists and the audience (whom Moore deputized as a respondent). Following up on a comment by Chakkalakal, one audience member asked how we can "deploy" history (Chakkalakal's term) in meaningful ways. Foster suggested that one way is to use the writing of history as a way to encourage students to commit themselves to a sustained and active engagement

with the (potential) significance of the past. Such a deployment, Chakkalakal offered, can also take the form of "academic activism," of a willingness to reexamine and challenge accepted claims that may be based on flimsy evidence. Foster echoed the importance of returning to the archive, particularly for graduate students, and rejecting the seductive call of a "rush to the present" that expediently relies on secondary scholarship and "established assumptions." Kristina Bross, following up on Foster's description of her suspicion of the "'I' that presents itself as its own evidence," emphasized the importance of acknowledging that many faculty teach primarily undergraduates, most of whom are not entering the academy; increasingly, these students want to see us acknowledging and interrogating our relationship to the subject matter we teach.

The conference also featured several opportunities to remember and celebrate the life and work of Jeffrey H. Richards, scholar of early American literature and drama, who passed away last year following a battle with cancer. At a reception at the David C. Driskell Center, Dennis Moore offered a tribute to Richards, and asked attendees to raise their glasses in honor of their colleague. In her opening remarks, conference organizer Heather Nathans spoke movingly of her friend and colleague, explaining that the idea for the conference had emerged from a discussion with Richards back in 2007. In many ways, the conference and its interdisciplinary focus was a fitting tribute to Richards, whose legacy will endure both in the wealth of archival material his scholarly studies shared with the world and in the memories of the men and women whose lives and work were shaped by his warmth and generosity.

While the fascinating range of material presented at such an interdisciplinary conference is always refreshing, it was the attempt to unite the different epistemologies embodied in the archive and the repertoire that was, to me, the most innovative aspect of "Triumph in My Song." While the conference format still marked off the sessions involving performance by explicitly labeling them as such, and while it did not feature more traditional panels that integrated or incorporated models of the heuristic potential of performance, "Triumph in My Song" assiduously avoided portraying the performances as novel or diversionary. By juxtaposing them with more familiar forms of scholarly presentations, the conference demonstrated to a diverse audience of scholars and practitioners the intellectual opportunities embedded in all that the term *performance* encompasses. Ultimately,

the most valuable contribution of "Triumph in My Song" was to further the process of building a shared vocabulary of performance across academic disciplines. Such an endeavor has certainly been underway for the past several decades, as more and more scholars of history and literature have been incorporating this vocabulary into their investigation of the archives, while the fields of theater history and performance studies (once seen as essentially separate disciplines) have been closing that gap as well. The integrated format of this conference presented extensive opportunities for those experiments to manifest in actual encounters modeling the ways performance can serve as a technique for producing and communicating knowledge. If the rift Taylor perceives between the archive and the repertoire still keeps many scholars comfortably working on one side or the other, conferences such as "Triumph in My Song" help to build an interdisciplinary bridge between these two forms of knowledge, one that, as it grows stronger, may provide a stable platform from which to survey the past, understand how it informs the present, and discern the possible outlines of a future informed by that understanding.

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