New World drama: the performative commons in the Atlantic world, 1649–1849 / Elizabeth Maddock Dillon.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

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This book begins and ends with scenes of violent execution: it opens with the beheading of King Charles I in Whitehall in 1649 and closes at the moment when twenty-two protestors and bystanders were gunned down by police in the streets of New York City at the Astor Place Riot in 1849. What do these
scenes of violence have to do with theatre? With the Atlantic world? Both, I argue, stand as turning points in the history of popular sovereignty and theatrical performance in the Atlantic world. Specifically, I draw on these two scenes to serve as bookends of an account of the development of a performative commons in theatrical spaces that emerges with the advent of popular sovereignty and Atlantic modernity.

On the day of the public execution of King Charles I, on January 30, 1649, the House of Commons officially declared “that the People are, under God, the Original of all just Power; And do also declare, That the Commons of England, in Parliament assembled, being chosen by and representing the People, have the supreme Power in this Nation.” This declaration announced the power of the commons, investing state sovereignty in the people of England. The English Civil War, with the beheading of Charles I, thus commenced a revolution that dislodged power from above (in the king), in the name of locating it below (in the people). The history of the shift from monarchical to popular sovereignty enacted in a series of revolutions around the Atlantic world—from the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, to the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Haitian Revolution—is a long story, and the moment of regicide cited here is one among many episodes in this broader history. But at this decisively theatrical moment in the history of popular sovereignty we see the significance of the commons as the new location of political authority.

Ironically, just at the moment when the commons as a body of people gained new meaning as the source of political power, a second form of the commons dramatically diminished in scope. This commons—namely, the land held in common use for time immemorial in England including forests, pastures, and manorial “wastes”—was increasingly subject to privatization. Across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, common lands were wrested from the collective use of community members, who subsisted in part by hunting, herding, and farming on such land; this property was placed in the hands of private owners, who then held exclusive rights of use to the land. The enclosure of the commons accelerated dramatically in the eighteenth century, coinciding with new property ownership regimes and the development of capitalism. As Karl Marx writes,

The forcible usurpation of [common property] generally accompanied by the turning of arable into pasture land, begins at the end of the fifteenth century and extends into the sixteenth. . . . The advance made by the eighteenth century shows itself in this, that the law itself now becomes the
instrument by which the people’s land is stolen. . . . The Parliamentary form of the robbery is that of “Bills for Inclosure of Commons,” in other words decrees by which landowners grant themselves the people’s land as private property, decrees of expropriation of the people.²

According to historians, the English Parliament passed no fewer than 2,208 separate acts of enclosure, privatizing specific portions of the English commons from 1710 to 1801.¹ From 1649 forward, then, Parliament simultaneously declared the political power of the common people and fenced off the common land used by those very people to survive.

Locating the rise of popular sovereignty and the enclosure of the commons in rough historical proximity reveals a political story that moves in one direction—toward the rising power of the commons—coupled with an economic story that moves in the opposite direction—toward the eradication of the commons. These two narratives are arguably distinct, circling around two different definitions of the commons: the first concerns a common body of people—a demos, the people of a democracy or a republic who wield the power of sovereignty; the second concerns a common body of land, a shared resource, a material entity possessed and/or used by a multitude of people. In this book, however, I argue for and explore the mutual constitution of the commons as a people and as a material resource, the shared terrain of which is the complex and entwined nature of embodiment and representational force.

Tracing a movement from the loss of the commons as shared use rights in property, toward the rise of the commons as a political force, reveals what I describe as a “virtualization” of the commons: the collectivity of the commons that was once embedded in material and economic practices is increasingly understood as an abstraction—as a virtual body that appears less in material than figurative terms. And indeed, the question as to how to represent the virtual body of the people, and most particularly, the political will of the people, is a central one in the history of the rise of popular sovereignty in the Atlantic world.⁴ Yet it is a mistake to imagine that the physical, embodied dimensions of the people disappear and/or cease to matter as their abstract prestige rises. The virtualization of the commons is, precisely, a practice—one that occurs at the intersection of the material and the representational, at the crossroads of the ontic and the mimetic. A dimension of political rights, I argue, is inextricably bound to the materiality of embodiment and the figurative nature of the representation of the commons: moreover, the entwined material and figurative nature of the “people” appears forcefully in the space of the theatre in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.
The theatre proper may seem like an odd place to turn to examine the political force of the “people”: a site of leisure and entertainment, the theatre might appear to be of marginal importance to the tectonic shifts in political life that occurred in the revolutionary Atlantic eighteenth century. However, the theatre was a singular space at this time—a space at which large numbers of common (and elite) people gathered with regularity and, thus, a space at which the body of the people was, literally, materialized. Moreover, the people not only gathered at the theatre, but also performed themselves as a people in the space of the theatre. Attention to the mutually informing practices of embodiment and representation found at the theatre ultimately reveals that the dichotomy that apparently separates the two commons—the materiality of the commons as land and the abstraction of the common people as a sovereign political force—is itself false. The common lands that were enclosed in the eighteenth century were never simply material in nature, any more than the common people who wield popular sovereignty are simply virtual. As Lewis Hyde suggests, the commons, understood as commonly used property, structure a social and political relation: “The commons are not simply the land but the land plus the rights, customs, and institutions that organize and preserve its communal uses. The physical commons—the fields and woods and so forth—are like a theater within which the life of the community is enacted and made evident.” Hyde’s language is particularly evocative for my purposes given that he describes the physical commons as a theatre: in this book, I argue that the “theatre” of the physical commons was, in some sense, replaced by the theatre itself in the eighteenth century—the location at which a new performative commons appeared. What such an argument proposes is an understanding of the commons as a relation rather than an object: the property that was held in common use for time immemorial created and sustained a set of social relations—an “assemblage” to use Bruno Latour’s term—in which both land and persons were actors in a shared network of relations. In the space of the theatre, in turn, audience and actors together form an assemblage that both embodies and represents the collectivity of the people.

As the chapters that follow demonstrate, eighteenth-century audience members attended the theatre as much to represent themselves as to watch a play unfold before them on the stage. Thus in 1804, a writer to Boston’s *Columbian Centinel* complained about the lack of audience lighting in the theatre: “We think the Manager deserves well of the public; and would more, were he not quite so economical of the candles by which the house is, or rather ought to be illuminated. . . . We are satisfied, the Manager has not yet to learn, that all the visitors of a theatre do not attend solely to witness the stage exhibi-
As this complaint indicates, audience members did not attend the theatre to sit in the dark and silently watch what occurred on stage: rather, they sought to display and represent themselves in public and represent themselves as a public. In a configuration far different from that which obtains in today’s theatre, audience members assumed an extraordinarily active status in eighteenth-century theatres around the Atlantic world. Voluble and volatile, audiences might, for instance, demand that a given song within a play be performed multiple times in succession should it particularly please them; or pelt the stage and one another with apples, nuts, and epithets; or join the actors on stage in moments of heightened excitement; or, indeed, mount a full-blown riot to express their displeasure with a manager’s misbegotten casting of a given actor in a given role. Consider, for example, the following scene: in the closing sword fight of Richard III as performed at the Bowery Theatre in New York City in 1832, more than three hundred audience members joined the actors on stage to assist in the successful slaying of the tyrannical king. And while the size of the crowd enjoying the “freedom of the scenes” in this instance was unusual, the participatory vigor of the audience was anything but in the two centuries of performance explored in this book (see figure 1.1).
The particular scene of regicide within Richard III that drew New Yorkers onto the stage arguably enacts a transition from monarchical to popular sovereignty and, as such, echoes and cites the regicide of Charles I at the hands of the commons. In 1832, then, the crowd of audience members on the Bowery stage is both literally and figuratively enacting its collective sovereignty by performing the killing of the king. The action of the audience thus reveals a key structural aspect of the theatre: the meaning of what occurs at the theatre, between spectators and performers and at the complicated intersection and crossover of the two, unfolds in both symbolic and material terms. What is particularly intriguing about the theatre, then, is the oscillation that occurs there between physical embodiment and representation. To enact a relation—an assemblage of the commons—is both to occupy space in some significant way and to stage the occupation of space or to foreground a relation of bodies to one another. If the older, physical commons was largely understood as material in nature, and the new political commons of the people is largely construed in terms of representation and abstraction, theatricality and the specific space of the theatre foreground the inextricable nature of these two dimensions of the commons.

The physical geography of the theatre is germane to this process as well. With seats arrayed in hierarchical order, the seating sections (each with a different ticket price) segmented the audience in terms that roughly spoke of class distinctions in an arrangement maintained around the Atlantic world. As Peter Buckley argues, the audience of the eighteenth-century theatre was construed as “the town”—that is, the audience served as a corporate body that was representative of existing social relations within the polity. The historically stratified hierarchy of seating arrangements mirrored widely accepted social stratification and enabled a “transparency of roles and actions” that permitted a “ritual of mutuality” among audience members. In short, audience members understood themselves as a collective that represented the town as a whole. Dispute among audience sectors and active participation of the audience in the stage performance was possible because of the mutual understanding of all players (including those in the audience) about the nature and limits of their roles: in this way, Buckley contends, “the nature of the game made the town a self-policing arrangement.”

The not infrequent scenes of riot and riotous participation that occurred in theatres around the Atlantic in the eighteenth century thus partook of an oxymoronic status: that of the well-regulated riot. The theatre was a space where relations structuring social belonging were performed and legitimately contested as well. At once out of control and within bounds, theatre riots bore
some resemblance to riots over food prices that E. P. Thompson describes in an earlier era in England. Such riots, protesting soaring prices of bread or other food stuffs in small towns across England, were not merely chaotic scenes of self-interested violence: according to Thompson, they typically had at their core a notion of collective norms and economic justice for the community as a whole. As such, writes Thompson, these riots enacted a “moral economy”—a notion that the economic realities of a community (such as the price of bread) should reflect a morality that protected the whole of the town. Thompson writes that price riots “operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking . . . grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community.”

The “moral economy of the crowd” that Thompson, and numerous historians since him, have traced in the direct action of riots is thus, like the theatre riot, both within and without bounds: it is a riot that has at its center a view of collective order. Understood as performance, the price riot described by Thompson might, further, be viewed not as simply citing traditional social norms but as creating them through the act of performative citation. The price riot convokes, in its performance, a concept of the commons and the common good, announcing a set of relations and obligations among the members of a community aimed at the sustenance of the whole. Similarly, the theatre riot is what we might call a commoning practice—one that generates a performative commons by articulating relations of mutual belonging in a collective whole.

My thinking concerning the political force of the theatrical crowd draws on and intersects with a range of work on commoning and collective practice, including the recent work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which foregrounds the biopolitical power of the multitude over and against the “republic of property” embodied in state authority. Hardt and Negri argue that the radical democratic possibilities of the republican revolutions of the eighteenth century were curtailed by an imbrication with capitalism, one that ultimately took the form of protecting the rights of property over those of people:

In the course of the great bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the concept of the multitude is wiped out from the political and legal vocabulary, and by means of this erasure the conception of republic . . . comes to be narrowly defined as an instrument to affirm and safeguard property. Property is the key that defines not only the republic
but also the people, both of which are posed as universal concepts but in reality exclude the multitude of the poor.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Hardt and Negri, then, “the establishment of the constitutional order and the rule of law served to defend and legitimate private property,” and as a result the people were fundamentally not represented: rather, “‘a people of property’ faced off against ‘a multitude of the poor.’”\textsuperscript{16} In Hardt and Negri’s republic of property we can see the way in which a capitalist logic of absolute ownership and enclosure forms an unholy alliance with the political logic of popular sovereignty such that a severely curtailed system of popular sovereignty results—one in which unpropertied persons are written out of political representation as well as, on a biopolitical level, deprived of the resources to sustain themselves as social, living beings.

Hardt and Negri’s account of the role of law and capitalism in the erasure and exploitation of the “multitude” is compelling, and I share an interest in turning attention to practices of commoning that are foreclosed from cultural visibility by the centrality of property ownership within modern political dispensations: nonetheless, I take issue with both the history of Hardt and Negri’s multitude and its future in this book. Central to my account of the performative commons in the Atlantic world is a deeper history than that addressed by Hardt and Negri; specifically, the history of what I call the “colonial relation”—a geopolitical relation that underpins capitalist modernity and that enables settler colonialism racialization to serve as the bedrock of an expropriative biopolitics from the late seventeenth century forward to today.\textsuperscript{17} In this book, I argue that colonialism subtends and structures new dispensations of political freedom insofar as they depend on a shadow economy of dispossession, specifically, the dispossession of property (from Native Americans) and labor (from New World Africans) that fuels the property ownership regimes of metropolitan and creole Europeans. The colonial relation (discussed at greater length in the first chapter of this book) names a geopolitics that simultaneously fosters capital accumulation among the propertied—in the European metropole, initially—and renders the scene of expropriative violence in the colony “invisible” (distant, dismissable, nonpertinent) to those who reap its economic and political benefits. Further, as settler colonialism transforms the colonies of North America into the white-identified nation of the United States, a theatrics of erasure becomes increasingly significant in rendering scenes of racialized oppression politically unintelligible and thus “distant” while they remain materially present within the early national United States. The “multitude” of the Atlantic world thus comes into being as a condition of colonialism, capitalism,
and the republic of property: the geographical and racial dimensions of this history must be central to any account of commoning that follows.

With respect to the future of the multitude, I place far more value on the possibilities of representation than do Hardt and Negri. According to Hardt and Negri, the move from the “multitude” to the “people” who are represented as enfranchised citizen-subjects is necessarily imbued with violence: “representation” is, for Hardt and Negri, premised on a logic of erasure insofar as models of political contract constitutively fail to represent the multitude when the multitude is reduced to the sovereign “people.” With respect to Hobbes's and Rousseau's accounts of social contract, for example, Hardt and Negri conclude, “The contract of association is intrinsic to and inseparable from the contract of subjugation.” While I do not disagree with the broad terms of this analysis—it is indeed the case that the multitude and the sovereign people are not identical—I nonetheless am not ready to abandon representation as a key aspect of political power: rather, I would contend that representation must be rethought in far broader and more complex terms than it often is within contemporary understandings of the political.

Representation (and political power attached to representation) should not be understood solely in terms of the right to vote: to limit representation to suffrage alone is to foreclose arenas of cultural contestation and meaning making that have political force and value. At the theatre, for instance, no one aims to cast a ballot, but the public that stages and debates its own representation there nonetheless wields cultural and political authority that has effects in the lives of the multitude. In this sense, my understanding of the political force of theatrical publics is related to the account of the political articulated by Jacques Rancière. In contrast to the move toward abandoning representation proposed by Hardt and Negri, Rancière effectively drills down within representation itself to locate the political. Specifically, Rancière suggests that the struggle over what constitutes representation is the core of the political, and thus representation is a signal location of political action.

According to Rancière, politics is located in the shifting site of the division between two modes of sensory apprehension, namely, *phonê* and *logos*—sound (mere noise) as distinct from language. What constitutes noise (the “babble,” say, of a foreign tongue) and what constitutes language (meaning shared among a group of people), is determined by the contingent line drawn between the two at any given time and place by those collected there: the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*—we could even say, “division of sense”) that divides those who accede to the power of meaning making from those who do not is both a political and an aesthetic divide. Indeed, for Ran-
cière, the disruption and rearticulation of this divide is the precise location of the political: “The essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division.” On this account, representation does not effect the exclusion of the multitude but describes a constant form of engagement by the multitude in the debate over new articulations of the people and equality.

The significance of Rancière’s account is threefold with respect to the core ideas explored in this book. First, much of Rancière’s conceptualization of how political commons are created relies on theatrical metaphors: his work thus underscores the particular force of theatricality itself in understanding the commons. Second, his understanding of politics is centrally concerned with the relation between the “part of no part” (whom he also calls, simply, the “poor”) and the demos or the “people” who have access to representation. Thus, he offers a fluid account of the way in which commoning is a political practice that unfolds in contestations over the representation of the people: this account has particular purchase for understanding the way in which Atlantic world publics coalesce and assume authority insofar as such publics rely heavily on strategies of representation and erasure. Atlantic publics do not comprise individuals who are fully formed subjects in advance of assuming political status; rather, Atlantic publics are generated out of ongoing contestations over who accedes to the status of meaning-making subject in a territory defined by the colonial relation—a relation that imposes an uneven distribution of humanness across racialized bodies. And third, Rancière’s account of the political gives a prominent role to the aesthetic: in doing so, it locates an understanding of the political constitution of publics in the field of culture, and not simply in the traditional domain of official citizenship and suffrage rights in which contestations over the sensible have been largely constrained in advance.

What is the specific force of theatrical metaphor in Rancière’s work, and what relation does this metaphor bear to the reality of theatrical performance in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world? “Politics is always about creating a stage,” writes Rancière. “Politics always needs to establish those little worlds in which . . . forms of subjectivation can take shape and stage or enact [mettre en scène] a conflict, a dispute, an opposition between worlds. . . . Politics is about the establishment of a theatrical and artificial sphere.” In contrast to a Habermasian subject, who enters the public sphere fully formed as a rational speaker, the subject-citizen does not preexist the stage on Rancière’s account; rather, we could say that the stage itself opens the occasion for a performance
that brings a people—and the contest over the limits of that people—into view. Significantly, Rancière defines this stage as “artificial” rather than natural. And indeed, this artificiality is key to the political possibility opened up by theatricality insofar as the theatre is a location at which, as discussed above, the relation between embodied (ontic) persons and represented (mimetic) subjects is definitionally in play. In other words, it is not the ontically present multitude that manifests itself on stage; rather the stage opens a space in which a visible mediation transpires between materiality and mimesis—one that is made possible by the artificiality of the stage. Any representation that emerges is thus clearly staged, not given in advance by nature. As such, any representation of the people is also historically contingent, which is to say, political.

For an example of this contingency as it plays out in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, we might turn to Charleston, South Carolina, the subject of the fourth chapter of this book. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Charleston, the theatre saw the largest regular gathering of physical bodies that occurred in the city: the theatre, built in 1793, housed fourteen hundred seats during a time when the population of the city was roughly twelve thousand persons (of all races). Laws on the books prohibited blacks, including free blacks, from attending the theatre: as a result, historians have assumed that blacks were not a significant part of the Charleston audience and thus of its theatrical public. However, archival evidence indicates that blacks regularly attended the theatre in substantial numbers occasioning decades-long debates over their presence there in the pages of Charleston newspapers. Moreover, evidence indicates that blacks were participatory members of the “town” at the Charleston theatre, able to make use of the freedom of the scenes to appear on stage despite being legally forbidden from even being present. What one 1793 theatre-goer in Charleston condemned, in a beautifully telling phrase, as the “promiscuous multitude” that gathered at the theatre thus opened up the possibility for staging a version of the “people” that was far more inclusive and subject to open debate than that countenanced by the juridical system of the state.

Riots over who could and should have access to the theatre as audience members as well as who and/or what ought to appear on stage (which occurred with regularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in diverse Atlantic locations including London, Boston, New York, Charleston, Philadelphia, and Kingston, Jamaica) might thus be understood as stagings of “the part of no part,” or of what Rancière defines as “dissensus”—namely a contestation over what constitutes the “common” of common sense, a contestation over the shape of the commons. And indeed, the “part of no part”—that is, the part of
the multitude that is excluded from representations of the sovereign people—
takes concrete shape in both England and early America in the form of what
is known as “the people out of doors.” The phrase was often used in the late
eighteenth century to describe the public that was literally outside the doors
behind which elected officials deliberated. Newspaper reports at the time reg-
ularly describe and debate, for instance, the mechanisms by which information
from the Continental Congress, state assemblies, and other representative
bodies is conveyed to the “people out of doors” in late eighteenth-century
North America. Thus, in one case, the *New-York Daily Gazette* reports in 1790
on the deliberations of the first U.S. House of Representatives, at which James
Jackson (of Georgia) argues in favor of printing bills under review in commit-
tee such that they can be distributed to the “people out of doors” for further
discussion: “[Jackson stated that he] thought that printing reports and bills
was generally advantageous; it gave the members an opportunity of obtaining
an opinion of the *people out of doors* and he was ever inclined to pursue mea-
sures the best calculated for acquiring full and complete information on every
subject that came before them, whether it arose within or without the walls
of the house.”

Given that the franchise was extremely limited prior to the
mid-nineteenth century, even among white men, the “people out of doors”—
or those with no legal voice in the workings of the state—were a considerable
portion of the population. And as this newspaper account indicates, they were
not entirely absent from political conversations, although the nature of their
political “voice” was by no means formalized or guaranteed.

Indeed, the expression of the people out of doors was precisely not that of
electoral representation, but that of the “part of no part.” Thus, as Benjamin
Irvin explains,

The people out of doors articulated their political will through the vernacular of folk ritual. They hanged and burned effigies and buried them in mock funerals; they assaulted houses and public buildings; they carted offenders about town to the discordant rhythms of “rough music”; and they paraded mock heroes, often persons of low social standing, in saturnine parody of their “betters.” . . . When not acting collectively, in a theatrical or violent fashion, the people out of doors found other ways to participate in the making of, or in the critique of, revolutionary civic tradition.

Irvin here describes persons who were not represented by the Continental
Congress at the close of the eighteenth century in North America, but we
might apply this description more broadly, as well, to a range of historical per-
formances around the Atlantic world—theatrical, visual, and sonic—among
members of the multitude, including slaves, free blacks, women of all classes and colors, Native Americans, and the unpropertied. Notably, the modes of representation adopted by the people out of doors as described here (folk ritual, performance, music, riot), constitute something of a contest over voice itself: that is, these modes of collective action challenge the distinction between what counts as noise and what counts as sensibly apprehensible, and politically legible, shared forms of meaning. The very term “rough music”—one that describes the sound of a crowd beating on pots and pans—has an oxymoronic edge that speaks precisely of the uncertain line between noise and music, between chaos and collectivity. Significantly, as well, performance is a key category through which the part of no part—the people out of doors—achieves visibility and provokes dissensus within existing regimes of representation.

However, unlike the street performances richly described by Irvin and other historians, the theatrical performances that are the subject of this book occur within doors, not outside them. The theatres that are built in urban enclaves around the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century create stages that are enclosed by walls and doors. As such, these are not spaces in which the multitude, or the people out of doors, finds an unfettered or unstructured space of gathering or representation. Nonetheless, the theatre is a space where contestations over the right of access to enter the doors and the right to occupy various spaces within those doors are actively played out. While the theatre proper is largely associated today with cultural elitism, historically the opposite has been the case. Associated with crowds and public festival, eighteenth-century theatre attracted broad swaths of the population—so much so that state authorities often sought to limit the ability of theatres to gather “promiscuous multitudes” in which persons commingled across lines of class, race, and gender. The London Licensing Act of 1737 (discussed at length in the third chapter of this book) attests to official anxiety about crowds that gathered at theatrical performances. Further, as Peter Reed argues, the theatre had an ongoing association with an Atlantic underclass in the eighteenth century—a “lumpen proletariat” of shape-shifting rogues and tricksters who appeared on stage as well as within a mobile Atlantic population consisting, in part, of slaves, servants, sailors, soldiers, pirates, planters, players, prostitutes, and projectors—all of whom were (con)scripted into the performance of colonial modernity. The rabble as well as the elite had seats (or standing room) marked out for them inside the theatre: in this way, the theatrical public was of a distinctly different shape than the white, male, property-owning electorate on either side of the ocean and distinct, as well, from a literate print public.
The distinction between embodied, theatrical publics and the print public is important, in part because the field of early American literature has, in recent decades, been largely dominated by the model of the print public sphere—a model articulated at the intersection of the work of Jürgen Habermas and that of Benedict Anderson, and taken up in relation to the early national United States in the work of Michael Warner, as well as myself and critics from Joanna Brooks to Trish Loughran. New World Drama began, in part, as an effort to understand what an Atlantic (rather than American) public sphere might look like, as well as an effort to understand the role of the early American theatre in the public sphere. What emerged from my work with this material is a change of frameworks: rather than “public sphere” I have moved to the framework of a “performative commons” to understand the relation between the politics of popular sovereignty and cultural production both in print and in person in an Atlantic geography.

There are two key issues that necessitate this shift: first, the print public sphere is decisively limited by literacy in such a way that often renders this limitation largely outside the field of political and cultural vision and analysis. Individuals who do not read and write in English in the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic world tend to disappear from view in accounts of the print public sphere; more significantly, the a-literate are erased from the scene of cultural analysis as if access to literacy were a preexisting, structural constraint rather than a contingent, political division among diverse peoples. Attention to the colonial relation—to the geopolitics of the uneven distribution of humanness in the colonial Atlantic world—reveals the deeply political nature of literacy and access to the print public sphere. Unpropertied whites and many propertied women had little access to education. More significantly, however, the enslaved African diasporic population of the Americas was not simply denied access to education but was also subject to corporal punishment for seeking access to any form of literacy; colonial laws made it a crime to teach slaves to read or write; Africans who shared languages were separated from one another by slave-holders to prevent any common language other than English from generating communities of sense among the enslaved. Forced a-literacy is thus a key political dimension of the colonial relation, but it is one that fades from view in accounts of Atlantic world culture that center on the print public sphere.

Second, the model of the print public sphere in the work of both Habermas and Anderson is implicitly (if not always explicitly) national; as such, it is difficult to account for Atlantic publics with this model. Habermas’s model of the public sphere centers on the concept of persons joining together in acts of
communicative reason to offer a critique of the state in the name of the people of the nation. The nation-state is thus the preexisting and determining frame of the Habermasian public sphere. For Anderson, in turn, the technology of print (in the form of newspapers and novels, most particularly) enables a fantasy of nationalism—a shared, language-based, national identity—among readers (defined as “print nationalism”) that emerges out of the geography of empire. The eighteenth-century Atlantic world, however, is a field imaginary that is not organized by the nation-state.

At the forefront of the field of Atlantic studies, historians have traced, in particular, the colonization of the Americas, the competition for imperial wealth and influence among European powers, and the development of the slave trade between Africa and the Americas: this is a history, then, of the circulation of goods and bodies embedded within a network of relations that traverse the oceanic basin of the Atlantic and its littoral. It has been more difficult to talk about an Atlantic public sphere than an Atlantic history, however, because the Atlantic is not a unified political or communicative field and cannot be imagined as one by recourse to the fictional unity of the nation-state, as is the case with a nationalized public sphere. How, then, might we describe Atlantic publics that do not correspond to national frameworks? What is the defining field imaginary of the Atlantic world? The latter question is difficult to answer, in part because there is not a single “imaginary” that defines the field: the Atlantic world is geographically framed by the Atlantic ocean, economically framed as the site of the advent and growth of the capitalist world system, and politically framed as the “first” scene of European colonial expansion and empire. Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein use the term “Americanity” to describe the sense in which the European colonization of the Americas constituted a new world system, rather than just a larger geographical sprawl of European power: “The creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas, was the constitutive act of the modern world-system. The Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world-economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas.”

The Atlantic field imaginary conjures the network of political, economic, religious, and cultural relations that constituted a new world system—one in which colonialism and capitalism structured new relations of belonging and nonbelonging across disparate and distal sites around the Atlantic.

This model of developing capitalist and colonial relays, or “nodes and networks,” presents an uneven spatial field; or rather, it describes a field that is spatially distended and contracted in various ways so as to form anything but a unified territory. Thus, for instance, historian Lauren Benton evocatively
describes the “the peculiar and enduring lumpiness of imperial legal space”—space that places colonial subjects both far from home, and on new ground that they seek to configure as home in relation to communities comprising indigenous peoples, New World Africans, and Europeans of a variety of stripes. As Benton points out, one of the effects of the uneven spatiality of this world was a resultant uneven or bifurcated construction of subjecthood in relation to the dual poles of metropole and colony: the “politics of subjecthood in early European settlements” involved “a process that blended preoccupation with imperial claims and anxieties about membership in colonial political communities.”

In related terms, I have come to think of the communities of the Atlantic world as structured by ties of “intimate distance.” As I argue in the first chapter of this book, maintaining relations of intimacy across great distances was crucial to the structure of empire: thus, for instance, colonials sought to maintain close connections with metropolitan culture as well as with individuals—friends, family members, employers—and social and political knowledge networks in the metropole despite inhabiting opposite shores of the Atlantic. Conversely, European colonials sought to assert that vast cultural (if not biological) distance separated them from the individuals with whom they shared the intimacies of daily life and physical habitation in the colony, including New World Africans and Native Americans. Uneven structures of intimate distance thus required creating a sense of presence in the face of physical absence, and generating a sense of absence or erasure in the face of physical presence. This configuration is fundamentally structured by the colonial relation—namely, an ideology according to which race and geography subtend understandings of humanness, cultural intelligibility, and political belonging.

Furthermore, territorial sovereignty in the Atlantic world was often highly negotiated, and negotiated from below rather than above, as Benton suggests. Geopolitical models that rely on a post-Westphalian map of discrete territorial nations fail to catch at the on-the-groundness of negotiated and contingent sovereignty that held sway in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. A shift to an Atlantic geopolitical frame (away from that of the nation-state) makes it clear that shared space (held in common, politically or culturally) must be assembled and created; moreover, such shared spaces of collectivity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world are repeatedly disputed, redrawn, and recreated. The framework of the Atlantic performative commons, in contrast to that of a national print public sphere, thus gives us a sense of the spatial unevenness of collectivities formed in an eighteenth-century Atlantic world as
well as their provisional and contested natures. At the site of the theatre, the framework of the performative commons brings into view the extent to which collectivities were generated from the ground up. But insofar as scripts, actors, and languages at the center of theatrical performance traveled the routes of empire and diaspora, the performative commons simultaneously speaks of (indeed, performs) claims to larger associations and collectivities that structure the Atlantic world. Enacting relations of intimate distance, the performative commons links the material nature of the multitude and the figurative nature of the people insofar as it generates a public with both ontic and mimetic dimensions.

Importantly, clearing and creating the space of a performative commons and forming a public therein is as much a matter of erasure as it is one of appearance. And it is for this reason that I turn to aesthetics to describe the uneven spatiality of Atlantic publics, rather than to the political model of a sphere that has been invoked and elaborated by theorists from Hannah Arendt to Habermas. The various spatial terms I use here—unevenness, distension and contraction, nodes and networks, provisional clearings, assemblages and reassemblages—all aim to unsettle the dominance of the metaphor of the sphere for understanding the framework of culture in this period. If the Atlantic is fundamentally disjunctive in spatial terms, then the image of a spatially homogenous and extensible sphere fails to capture key aspects of cultural production, dissemination, and meaning making. Briefly put, the “sphere” model implies that a boundary delimits the space of the sphere, but the precise nature of that limit is often not addressed by those who envision the public as a sphere: what, for instance, lies beyond the edges of the sphere? Can the persons engaged in scenes of imperial encounter, violence, settlement, and unsettlement be accounted for by simply expanding the sphere? I would posit that they cannot, although this is often the implicit suggestion of accounts of the public sphere.

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 labor 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. Enslaved Africans in Jamaica or Virginia, for instance, had no voice in matters of state in England, whereas their white owners insisted on their rights in this regard: while crucial to the story of the creation of British imperial wealth, diasporic Africans and Native Americans are largely absent from accounts of English national
identity and of the emergence of the public sphere in England. The account of aesthetic commoning I explore in this book—one that involves generating a sensus communis (to use Immanuel Kant’s term for the aesthetic)—presupposes debate over epistemic belonging (and erasure) as determinative at the site of the representation of the people.

It is significant, then, that the two most powerful existing accounts of Atlantic culture—those articulated, respectively, by Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach—both give considerable scope to the power of erasure, evasion, and substitution: as Roach and Gilroy persuasively demonstrate, to speak of representation in the Atlantic world is to speak as much of what disappears as of what appears or, in somewhat more complex terms, to speak of the way in which appearance and disappearance, speech and silence, are entwined with one another in Atlantic culture and history. Indeed, Gilroy advances a model of diasporic African-Atlantic culture—a “counter-culture of modernity”—which is antithetical to norms of Habermasian communicative reason and print publicity. Instances of the African-Atlantic counterculture Gilroy describes include music and memory—aesthetic forms that are, pointedly, “not reducible to the cognitive.”

Specifically, Gilroy argues that “the extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognise the anti-discursive and extra-linguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts.” Gilroy thus suggests that because slaves within an Atlantic plantation culture were forbidden from self-expressive, rational communication, an alternative counterculture of expression developed, characterized by its resistance to the form and content of procedural rationality. Indeed, the knowledge regime that enforced a system of racial oppression was precisely what slaves sought to evade. In this way, then, meaning might profitably be lodged, for the enslaved, in the locations where an imperial, plantocratic public sphere ended—in sites and sensations that were precisely not self-evident to the master class. As Édouard Glissant writes, “Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout . . . . This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise. There developed from that point a specialized system of significant insignificance.” And indeed, I would argue that the nonparticipation of New World African voices in a plantocratic public sphere might be understood as more than a matter of self-camouflage or protective secrecy: the very fact of race slavery contradicted the premises of the liberal equality and popular sovereignty alleg-
edly embedded (proceduralized) in a public sphere of rational critical debate. Slaves occupied a position that gave the lie to the epistemology of the public sphere and its logic. From the point of view of the enslaved, communicative norms based on such a logic could only be understood as epistemologically unsound—namely, illogical.

In Joseph Roach’s influential account of circum-Atlantic performance culture, the presence of absence is equally decisive. Performance, as Roach points out, operates by way of substitution—substitution that both stands in for (represents) and takes the place of (erases) that which is absent. In the specific context of the Atlantic world, the violent effort to erase indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans are foundational acts whose unspeakable terrors have been elided from dominant European accounts of the westward progress of empire. However, as Roach argues, “the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible.” In acts of performance, the play of memory and forgetting, of substitution and surrogation, both creates new worlds and revives unspoken pasts: “the scope of the circum-Atlantic interculture may be discerned most vividly by means of . . . performance traditions . . . because performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded.”35 For Roach, then, the phenomenology of performance has a specific ability to address the violent and contested history of the multiple peoples who inhabit the Atlantic world.

Both Roach and Gilroy thus reach beyond protocols of reason, rational debate, and print nationalism in order to account for the varied and uneven field of Atlantic culture. Drawing on these meditations on the politics of Atlantic world representation, I would suggest that accounts of the Habermasian public sphere, insofar as they focus primarily on print, risk reinscribing the technologies of “social death” associated with race slavery (such as forced a-literacy) rather than attending to the rematerializations and resignifications of enslaved and indigenous peoples that take place through performance. The term “social death” is derived from Orlando Patterson’s account of the workings of race slavery. As I argue in the chapters that follow (most particularly chapters 4 and 5), although slavery sought to impose forms of social death on slaves through diverse technologies—technologies operating by way of law, language, and corporal violence—the plantocracy ultimately did not and could not effect the social death of slaves; however, the social life that emerged in the shadow of such technologies was marked by the structural violence visited on New World Africans by slavery.36 Further, I argue that scenes of performance often transform the absences produced by technologies of so-
cial death into the substance of creole culture. The performative commons of an Atlantic public that I explore in this book is thus above all aesthetic: at stake is creating a sensus communis on the ground—perhaps in the form of a scream or a curse that voices “significant insignificance,” perhaps in the death of Richard III at the hands of the audience or his revival in a Jonkonnu dance—that extends in relations of intimacy to immediate and distant sites of empire.

Reframing the study of theatre in Atlantic rather than national terms also throws into relief the vitality of theatre as a cultural form in the colonial Americas and the early national United States. Such a framing recasts a familiar narrative of cultural nationalism that has been largely used as the lens through which to view the history of the theatre in the United States—a narrative in which the fledgling nation of the United States had no drama of its own while still in cultural leading-strings to its British parent following the American Revolution. Only the nineteenth century saw the first signs of an independent national drama as Americans sought to cast off British models and express their own ideas in theatrical form. According to this narrative, the nineteenth century served as a boisterous, albeit unattractive, adolescence for U.S. drama: homegrown performances included the raging successes of black-face minstrelsy and popular melodrama with U.S. themes, such as Metamora, Nick of the Woods, and Uncle Tom’s Cabin—all forms of drama authored in the United States; yet not until the coming of Eugene O’Neill in the twentieth century would the United States have a recognized, canonical dramatic author of its own.

In the shadow of this narrative, early American theatre has received scant attention from literary critics or historians, in large part because of the way in which the field of literary studies privileges a national frame for the understanding of culture, and determines the national character of a performance on the basis of a play’s authorship rather than on the basis of the location at which a performance is staged or the composition of the audiences and actors involved in the performance. The vast majority of plays performed in North America prior to 1820 were of British authorship; often the actors performing on stage were British as well. For this reason, studies of early American drama have tended to focus on a narrow range of scripts—Royal Tyler’s The Contrast and William Dunlap’s André, for example—that represent the merest fraction of theatrical performances viewed by the throngs of audience members who regularly attended the theatre in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Scholarship on pre-Jacksonian U.S. theatre has thus often consisted in what Jeffrey Richards describes as a “search for national needles in the (British)
theatrical haystack.” Further, a focus on the written script or “work” over “performance” in the field of literary studies has contributed, as Loren Kruger has observed, to critical neglect of American drama: “dramatic texts look insufficiently literary or only impurely and illegitimately autonomous.”

However, the “impurity” of the dramatic work—the promiscuous circulation of scripts and the improvisational local revisions of these scripts—in sites around the Anglo-Atlantic world is precisely what generates the significance of the theatre as a cultural site at which the dynamics of political belonging, modern sovereignty, and aesthetics are coarticulated. The innovation of an Atlantic, performative commons that I explore in this book disappears from sight when literature is viewed through the conceptual lens of authorial ownership (including its attendant discourses of privatization such as copyright) and that of the author function as it has shaped the discipline of literary studies. Thus, viewed through an authorial optic familiar to the field of literary studies, it might be possible to imagine that scripts first written and performed in England somehow lose their force as they migrate from metropole to colony—that such a movement entails a derogation of cultural and aesthetic value as the original performance is imitated in a fashion that is increasingly derivative and distant. However, viewed through the optic of the performative commons, the opposite is the case with respect to New World drama, as tracking the movement of plays that galvanized audiences around the colonial Atlantic littoral demonstrates. The performance of the colonial relation did not lose force as it circulated to locations distant from the metropole; rather, the contradiction inherent in the colonial relation achieved hyperbolic proportions when geographic distance disappeared as a means of ameliorating the paradoxical interrelation of British liberty, colonialism, and race slavery. The pressing questions of sovereignty that convoked and animated the embodied public in England achieved new force in the space of the colony where the contradictions of the colonial relation were posed in a more condensed and insistent form: out of these performances emerged stagings of what we know as modern sovereignty in its racialized forms.

Central to the whole of the book, moreover, is a chapter on theatre and the performative commons in eighteenth-century Jamaica. Eighteenth-century Jamaica has had little place in cultural and/or theatrical histories of England, the United States, or even Jamaica, despite the fact that a thriving theatre existed in the colony for much of the eighteenth century; indeed, the American Company—the most prominent touring company in North America in the eighteenth century—decamped to Jamaica for the duration of the Revolutionary War after Continental Congress outlawed theatre (to-
gether with cockfighting and expensive funerals) as, in effect, a British luxury good, the consumption of which was presumably antithetical to U.S. independence. The fact that Kingston was a regular stop on the theatrical circuit of such a touring company (together with cities such as Boston, New York, and Charleston) gives one a sense of the extent to which Jamaica was very much on the cultural map of the Anglo-Atlantic world. However, Kingston, Jamaica was not only one node in the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic economy—it was, perhaps, the key node. Far more than Boston, for instance, Kingston was at the center of the production of wealth for the British economy, and theatres most often appeared in wealthy urban enclaves around the Atlantic.

Indeed, Richardson Wright’s 1935 history of the theatre in colonial Jamaica proposes, “Anyone looking up the family tree of the American theatre soon finds . . . that one side of its lineage stems from Jamaica.”41 I am not interested in advancing a genealogical argument about the relation of colonial Jamaican theatre and a U.S. national tradition of theatre; however, I would suggest that it is significant that colonial Jamaican theatre was of a piece with colonial North American and early national U.S. theatre. Placing colonial Jamaican theatre back on the map with that of colonial Charleston and early national/Jacksonian-era New York City, as I do in this book, reveals the Atlantic/colonial nature of the theatrical commons in the eighteenth century as well as the extent to which that very coloniality was later the subject of both active erasure and citation in Jacksonian-era theatre in the United States. Located at the center of the Anglo-Atlantic performative commons, rather than assimilated to British imperial, U.S., or even African traditions, Jamaican theatricality stages the colonial relation in its most unmitigated, contradictory form and thereby reveals the force of the aesthetic in its capacity to open a performative commons.

In order to define and explore the Atlantic performative commons of the long eighteenth century, this book begins with a chapter on what I call the colonial relation. The colonial relation names the sustaining structure of economic dependence by the metropole on the colony at the core of capitalist modernity and the bourgeois ascendency in Europe. But I use the term, as well, to foreground a relation that is often rendered invisible in nationally framed accounts of history and culture: specifically, the circumscription of full human identity in relation to race. The racialization of Native Americans assisted in the systemic disappropriation of lands inhabited by indigenous people by European
settler colonialism in the Americas and the racialization of Africans enabled a system of forced labor at the same time that theories of universal human rights gained political ground on both sides of the Atlantic. The story of the rise of freedom in the Atlantic world—the newfound authority of the commons within a politics of popular sovereignty—cannot be separated from its hidden dependence on the colonial relation. Much of this first chapter addresses, then, the complex articulation of “English liberty” in the Atlantic eighteenth century as a simultaneous naming of the authority of the commons and as a site of colonial racialization. I consider, as well, the structures of intimate distance that assisted in sustaining the contradictions of the colonial relation in the Atlantic world. Further, I argue that performance in the space of the theatre, where presence and absence appear in tandem, affords a particular lens onto the colonial relation and its connections to the commons and popular sovereignty that is not found in print.

The second chapter, “London,” opens a geographical and historical narrative of the Atlantic performative commons that unfolds across the whole of the book: this narrative begins (in chapter 2) in 1649 in London with the regicide of Charles I and ends (in chapter 6) in 1849 in New York City with the Astor Place Riot. As indicated at the outset of this introduction, I take the regicide of Charles I to be a decisive moment in the history of the commons—a moment at which new authority was lodged in the common people. But it was also a decisive moment in the history of theatre, precisely because the physical gathering of the multitude as a common body acquired new meaning and political significance at this time. The second chapter thus focuses on the creation of an English “people” in the space of the theatre in London, with specific attention to the changing shape of theatre at this time, from the performance of monarchical authority in the court masque before the regicide to the shifting optics and political dispensations on display at the patent theatres of the Restoration. At the historical core of this transition, I locate the centrality of the performance of imperial scenes—dramas concerning the New World, and most particularly, William D’Avenant’s *Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* in relation to Oliver Cromwell’s “Western Design” and the figure of the tortured Native American king—as they directly shape concepts of the people in England. In short, this chapter suggests, New World drama reveals the workings of empire that subtend the creation of a domestic English people.

I use the term “New World drama” to speak, narrowly, about theatre in the Atlantic world that directly performed and engaged scenes of American-ness: scenes concerning Native Americans, European colonialism and wealth extraction in America, race slavery, and forced or coerced “transportation” across
the Atlantic. I use the term “New World drama,” as well, to speak more broadly of the drama of Americanity—a drama concerning the newness of a modern world system that took shape in the Atlantic world in the long eighteenth century. I am keenly aware that the term “New World” has a history of imperialism and settler colonialism embedded within it: the notion that America was “new” was so only from the point of view of non-indigenous peoples, and thus the term carries with it a freight of assumptions about the erasability of indigenous peoples and the inevitability of imperial conquest. However, it is precisely the history of imperialism and the performances of erasure embedded therein that I seek to trace and make visible in this chapter and others: moreover, the “newness” of Americanity, as I argue throughout, was one that redounded in all directions, such that, for instance, new forms of popular sovereignty in England were in significant part performed and instantiated (as I argue in chapter 2) in relation to the figure of the tortured Native American king and such that the ascendancy of Whig property regimes in England (as I argue in chapter 3) was fueled by the stolen labor of enslaved Africans in the Americas. To the extent that it is possible, then, my analysis throughout aims to dislodge the term “New World” from a geographical and ideological binary opposition with an “Old World”—a Europe construed as temporally and spatially prior, static, and given in advance of America—in favor of analyzing an Atlantic conjuncture of modernity that exceeds the national borders that have typically framed scholarly analyses of eighteenth-century culture.

While the second chapter attends to the emergent politics of popular sovereignty in London and the relation between English liberty and imperialism, the third chapter, “Transportation,” turns to the developing economic picture of the Atlantic world and most particularly to the segmentation of the commons in relationship to the need to conscript labor for imperial projects in the New World. English settler colonialism required the production and reproduction of bodies that could people the colonies in the name of England and bodies that would perform forced labor to extract value from the colonies to enrich the English metropole and fuel the development of capitalism. Initially, forced labor in the colonies was performed by transported English convicts, paupers, and political enemies of the crown. By the close of the seventeenth century, however, racialization had become the central mechanism for segmenting the labor force in the English Atlantic world, and Charles II had created (and profited mightily from) the Royal African Company, which transported kidnapped Africans from their homes to slavery in the New World. In this chapter, then, we see the foundational terms of racialization embedded in the colonial relation materialize in an Atlantic context.
In theatrical terms, the chapter explores the appearance of the colonial relation on stage in plays such as William D’Avenant’s *The Enchanted Island*—a play that adapts Shakespeare’s *Tempest* to address the peopling of the New World with English bodies—and in Thomas Southerne’s representation of the geographically bifurcated identity of the title character in *Oroonoko* as both African king and New World (laboring) slave. The chapter tracks, as well, efforts to enclose the physical commons in England and to segment the body of the commons as a people to suit the labor and capital needs of the new Whig-controlled economy in the eighteenth century. In a reading of John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* (1727), I suggest that the widely popular ballad opera helped to generate the new performative commons that took shape in response to enclosure legislation, including the reviled Black Act of 1723, which prescribed a punishment of transportation for convicted members of the bands of poachers who donned blackface to transgress laws prohibiting hunting and foresting on newly privatized common lands. Then prime minister Robert Walpole responded to the popularity of the *Beggar’s Opera* with the Licensing Act of 1737—an act that sought to curtail the gathering of large mixed-class crowds (multitudes, we might say) at the theatre by banning popular forms of entertainment such as pantomime from patent theatres and implementing state censorship of all scripts performed at the patent theatres. Ironically, one direct effect of the Licensing Act was the creation of the American Company of Comedians by William and Lewis Hallam: after William’s theatre in London was shut down by the Licensing Act, he and his brother created the first major touring company to assay the Anglophone Atlantic. This company would, in the coming decades, transport plays such as *The Enchanted Island* and *The Beggar’s Opera* to audiences in Williamsburg, Virginia; New York City; Philadelphia; Kingston, Jamaica; and Charleston, South Carolina.

The fourth chapter, “Charleston,” turns to late eighteenth-century South Carolina to explore the creation of a creole performative commons in colonial America and the early national United States. In Charleston, the contradiction embedded within the colonial relation was intensified: a politics of “freedom” (popular sovereignty) was embraced in a society that was founded on the appropriation of Native lands and peoples together with the forced labor of enslaved Africans. Political claims to popular sovereignty thus stood in direct contradiction to the economics of race slavery, particularly in a location where the majority of the population was black. The geographical distance between colony and metropole that enabled slave labor to seem unrelated to English popular sovereignty in London was collapsed into scenes of daily intimacy between enslaved blacks and free whites in Charleston. The chapter thus explores the tension
between a political imperative to erase from view the black majority and an economic demand to enumerate and increase the black population. Here, then, the dual structure of intimate distance comes to the fore as white colonials work to both distance themselves (through legal codes, biologism, civic performance) and benefit from the black-white intimacies at the core of everyday life in the colony. This chapter traces the ontic and mimetic presence of a genealogy of theatrical figures of the enslaved laborer as it assumes aesthetic form, from Caliban to Friday, looking forward to Jim Crow. Despite the more than occasional degradation associated with such theatrical figures, a second scene of colonialism arises, I contend, in relation to the theatrical presence of such figures—one in which the relation of the ontic and the mimetic enables an aesthetic commoning (a dissensus) that contests and revises the boundaries of the people.

In Charleston, the racial status of the creole commons was a matter of extreme contestation. However, the existence of a creole commons was not, in itself, a matter of controversy: the political break between England and the United States at the close of the eighteenth century underwrote the legitimacy of the increasingly non-British (creole) shape of this commons. During the same period of time in Jamaica, however, no such political break occurred: as such, the white plantocracy in Jamaica sought to disavow not only the presence of a black majority on the island, but also the creole nature of life in the colony. Slave labor was a central aspect of life in Jamaica; moreover, the brutality of the conditions of enslavement, together with the sustained violence required to maintain the enslavement of such a large population of slaves, resulted in an implicit (and oftentimes explicit) state of ongoing war between the enslaved population and the white plantocracy. In such a situation, colonial whites in Jamaica insisted more strongly than ever on their British identity, precisely because only the claim to “English liberty” justified their own standing within a starkly bifurcated society, and because a break with England was unfathomable given the need for British military support to keep a majority slave population from revolting against plantocratic rule.

The deeply contradictory imperatives that informed white creole life in Jamaica were ones that required the performance of erasure in the face of a set of lived, material realities—realities that placed political and economic narratives in direct conflict with one another. For black creole and African enslaved peoples in Jamaica, the contradictory, non-sense of life in the public square was even more pronounced, and in particularly vicious terms. New World Africans in Jamaica lived at the crossroads of two theatricalizations: one a theatre of terror, in which brutalized black bodies were spectacularly displayed as a means of enforcing a life of what I describe as “bare
labor”—a life stripped of official access to forms of social life, identity, and belonging. The theatre of terror that sought to reduce slaves to “bare labor” was coupled with a theatre of erasure: one in which the meaning-making capacities and social lives of New World Africans—whose lives were unavoidably not bare, but necessarily imbued with social and collective meaning and identity, albeit meaning produced in the shadow of technologies of social death—were performatively screened from imperial sight lines and imperial knowledge.

In the fifth chapter of the book, “Kingston,” I thus describe Jamaica as the site of what we might call an impossible commons. The colonial Caribbean was, within the emergent system of capitalist modernity, understood as the site of production (of sugar, of coffee), geographically distant from the metropolitan scene of social reproduction where juridically recognizable human subjects were christened, educated, coupled, and endowed with Englishness. This division between sites of production and social reproduction is one of fundamental un-commoning: it is not only a form of enclosure that privatizes property needed for communal survival, but also one that seeks to enforce social death by separating a community of persons from the resources (cultural, legal, social) through which they might live as social beings. Social reproduction for both whites and blacks, and particularly among a creole community comprised of both whites and blacks, can appear, in such a site, only as hors-scène—as off-scene and obscene with respect to imperial and capitalist structures and sensibilities. But it is precisely in the space of this impossible commons, I argue, that we see the emergence of the full force of the aesthetic as a materialization of dissensus. The Jamaican performative commons thus encapsulates the core possibility of the aesthetic Atlantic—a poesis of the people arising from the very grounds of enclosure, erasure, and social death. The haunted and haunting nature of this poesis is pronounced: this is not a narrative of triumph, but it is one that speaks to the political possibility of the aesthetic insofar as it reveals the aesthetic origins of the “people” and, as such, points to modes of aesthetic mobilization in the face of the systemic violence embedded in capitalist modernity and the colonial relation.

The final chapter of the book, “New York City,” locates the structuring presence of the colonial relation at the heart of Jacksonian-era performances of a national white “people” in the nineteenth-century United States. At such a nationalizing political moment, one might conjure a narrative describing the emergence of a “new” people—a tale, for instance, of the way in which a new American people articulates itself as distinct from its colonial British “parent.” And indeed, this is precisely the narrative that has solidi-
fied around the iconic Astor Place Riot that took place in New York City in 1849, a riot in which more than two dozen people were gunned down in the streets following controversy over the performances of two competing actors—the “native” American actor Edwin Forrest, known for his muscular embodiment of roles such as the Indian King, Metamora, and the British actor, William Charles Macready, accused by his foes of exemplifying an effete aristocratic acting style. The riot has been viewed as emblematic of a desire for a nationalized American culture—a desire for white Americans to cut their ties to British cultural domination. Taking the Astor Place Riot as endpoint rather than origin, however, I explore the Atlantic history of the nationalizing U.S. performative commons in relation to a series of theatre riots that took place before the Forrest/Macready feud erupted in 1849 into violence—riots in which both Native Americans and African Americans figure prominently.

Stylings of Native American kingship by black actors at the African Theatre and by white actors at the Bowery Theatre suggest competing efforts to engage in strategies of performative commoning that rely on indigenization and “playing Indian.” The performances of the African Theatre were violently shut down—both by the physical destruction of the theatre and, perhaps more significantly, by the development of blackface minstrel performance, a “native” U.S. theatrical tradition that emerged at precisely this historical moment (with specific ties to efforts to destroy and denigrate the African Theatre) and found astounding and enduring commercial success. An analysis of riots preceding the Astor Place event thus suggests that creating a white, national performative commons in the United States requires embodying both New World African figures and Native American ones: in other words, the shift from a creole commons to the performance of a white-national “people” in the Jacksonian era involved a theatrics of indigenization performed by way of invoking, erasing, and rewriting a history of settler colonialism and the racial politics of the Atlantic world’s colonial relation.

I take the Astor Place Riot as the endpoint of both the sixth chapter of the book concerning New York City and the narrative of the Atlantic performative commons that the book as a whole relates. The riot marks the closing of an Atlantic performative commons insofar as it is indicative of a shift in the public nature of theatre itself. Following the Astor Place Riot, as Lawrence Levine and Peter Buckley have argued, a new segmentation of theatrical audiences in the United States takes place along class lines; as Levine contends, “highbrow” culture was increasingly performed in venues distinct from “lighbrow” ones in the second half of the nineteenth century. Norms of
audience participation (audience “sovereignty”) were curtailed, particularly in highbrow venues, and the understanding of the audience as an embodiment of the “town” or the collectivity of the people receded from public view. Accordingly, I suggest, the mid-nineteenth century saw the enclosure of the theatrical commons as the audience itself was subject to segmentation and privatization; significantly, theatrical scripts were privatized as well under new copyright law that enforced exclusionary models of ownership of cultural texts. In this regard, the privatizing force of capitalism triumphs rather decisively over the democratizing possibilities contained with a politics of popular sovereignty. However, as I suggest throughout this book, the aesthetic force of the performative commons works to open and give scope to the material and representational nature of the multitude, even as capitalism and racialized forms of nationalism circumscribe the radical possibilities of popular sovereignty. The performative commons emerges at the site of the nonidentity of capitalist enclosure and popular sovereignty: while it is certainly possible (if not normative) for capitalist privatization to conscript popular sovereignty toward its own ends, the performative commons emerges as a condition of the dissonance between capitalist privatization and popular/democratic collectivization. In such a world, sites at which an unpropertied public can appear and achieve representational force become deeply important and potentially revolutionary. More importantly, the performative commons introduces the aesthetic as a key modality needed to augment our understanding of the relation between economics and politics: the sensate, aesthetic nature of the performative commons enables us to attend to a world mediated by the relation between materiality and figurality, and to the deeply political nature of this mediation.

The regicide of Charles I marked the beginning of popular sovereignty—a political dispensation in which the crowd—now the “commons”—had new meaning. The Astor Place Riot, in tandem with copyright law, marked a decisive privatization of the commons, a closing of the theatre as an institutional site at which a collective—a commons—might legitimately seek to perform itself as the embodiment of the town. The Atlantic performative commons I trace in this book remains, however, a rich archive of figures, costumes, sounds, dance steps, and scenarios with which to perform the material relations of common sustainability (moral economy) and the embodiment of the “promiscuous multitude” that capitalist enclosure eradicates. The local and embodied nature of the performative commons renders it fragile in its material evanescence; however, the simultaneously virtual and mimetic nature of the performative commons lends it enduring force in its historical repertoire of commoning
possibilities—possibilities that can be mobilized at the site of the ontic and mimetic intersection of the embodied public, possibilities that can be (and still are) mobilized in scenes of dissensus and epistemic disruption. If the theatre no longer offers a fixed site for the emergence of the Atlantic performative commons, this does not mean that such a commons cannot still find itself present in the theatre from time to time, or convene elsewhere, whether within or without doors.
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8. Of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century audiences in the United States, Richard Butsch writes, “Fitting the revolutionary rhetoric of egalitarianism, the audience was conceived as a body of equal citizens, all of whom held rights. These were fiercely asserted as rights of a free citizen, linking rights in theatre to larger political rights. Thus the theatre was defined as a public space in which the body politic deliberated” (*The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 14).

10. “Freedom of the scenes” was a custom dating to the seventeenth century according to which audience members were allowed to stand on stage during performances; this custom was largely eradicated by the mid-nineteenth century but persisted in various forms until that date. For further discussion see chapter 4.

11. The version of *Richard III* that was most often staged in the United States during this period was Colley Cibber’s redaction of Shakespeare’s play—one that often went by the title *The Fall of Tyranny*. Cibber’s revision offers a far more direct critique of tyrannical monarchy than does Shakespeare’s play and more clearly stages the fall of Richard III at the hands of popular sovereignty. For further discussion, see chapter 6.


17. Hardt and Negri do not wholly ignore the history of colonialism and empire in the early Atlantic world; however, they attend to it primarily in passing. See, for instance, Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 70.


27. I use the term “a-literate” in preference to “illiterate,” to underscore that lack of literacy in English is less the result of failure than force; for further discussion, see chapter 4.


39. As Jonathan Elmer argues with respect to literary representations of sovereignty in the Americas, “The ideological space of the new world that [literary] texts depict is not . . . a solution to, or ‘exoneration’ of, a European problematic of sovereignty, but that problematic’s more intense and volatile expression” (*On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], 14).


43. I use the term “bare labor” with reference to and in distinction from Giorgio Agamben’s well-known concept of “bare life.” Agamben defines “bare life” with respect to the Roman concept of “homo sacer”—someone who can be murdered without the
killer being regarded as a murderer: “bare life” is not granted juridical protection as human life. On bare life, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). However, I use the term “bare labor” rather than “bare life” to describe the position of slaves in the Atlantic economy of capitalist modernity because, despite receiving inhuman treatment, slaves were assigned economic and juridical value—albeit value according to which they registered as “units of labor” alone. Slaves, as Sylvia Wynter argues, were seen as “not men essentially, but so many units of labour power” in the colonial Caribbean (Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 [June 1970]: 36). For further discussion of bare labor see chapters 4 and 5.


CHAPTER 1: THE COLONIAL RELATION


5. For related discussion of the displacement of regimes of punishment to the colonies, see Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake*