Performing Settler-Colonialism

Populism and Nineteenth-Century Theater in the United States of America

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Abstract This essay brings together conceptualizations of populism in political science with those in literary and cultural studies. Theater historian Elizabeth Mad-dock Dillon's theory of a »performative commons« (from 1649 through 1849) are applied to three US-American nineteenth-century plays. The first two examples confirm Dillon's points regarding strategies of erasing Native Americans from evolving definitions of »the American people«. In the third play, which was popular between the 1860s and early 1900s, Native Americans are completely absent, and the populist nostalgia related to the central character and star actor privileges white male entitlement to personal freedoms at the expense of women's rights within the newly minted New World republic.

Keywords Populism · Settler-Colonialism · Nineteenth-Century Theater · USA · »Indians« · Erasure · Nostalgia · Gender

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Siedlungskolonialismus auf der Bühne

Populismus und US-amerikanisches Theater im 19. Jahrhundert

Zusammenfassung Dieser Beitrag verbindet Populismuskonzepte aus der Politikwissenschaft mit literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Ansätzen in der Theatergeschichte. Elizabeth Maddock Dillons Theorie eines von 1649 bis 1849 bedeutsamen »performative commons« wird auf die Untersuchung von drei US-amerikanischen Dramen aus dem 19. Jahrhundert angewendet. Die ersten beiden Stücke bestätigen Dillons Argumente im Hinblick auf die Unsichtbarmachung von »Indianern« innerhalb der Definition »des amerikanischen Volks«. Im dritten, zwischen den 1860er und frühen 1900er Jahren populären Drama kommen keine indigenen Charaktere vor. Die populistisch ausgerichtete Nostalgie im Hinblick auf den Protagonisten und den ihn verkörpernden Schauspieler betont die Privilegien weißer Männer, deren persönliche Freiheit mit der Benachteiligung von Frauen in der frisch gegründeten Republik einhergeht.

Schlüsselwörter Populismus · Siedler-Kolonialismus · Theater des 19. Jahrhunderts · USA · »Indianer« · Unsichtbarmachung · Nostalgie · Geschlecht

1 Studying Populism through North American Theater History

Scholars from various disciplines have been grappling with populist theory and praxis in cultures around the world. Following a brief discussion of approaches developed in political science, I will first elucidate theater historian Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's approach to the transatlantic phenomenon she dubs »performative commons«, which extended from the mid-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century from Europe to North America and the Caribbean. This essay will then discuss three works, among them one Dillon incorporates into her analysis: John Augustus Stone's play *Metamora* (1995 [1829]), a fictionalization of King Philip's War (1675–1676) and of the Wampanoag leader Metacom (1638–1676). This wildly popular melodrama constituted a centerpiece of American actor Edwin Forrest's (1806–1872) career. Forrest's physically forceful acting style figures prominently in the paradoxical populist rhetoric regarding the protagonist's Native American royal greatness paired with his »inevitable« death in order to make room for and relinquish leadership to the settler colonialism that produced descendants like the actor who embodied *Metamora*. I will frame the discussion of this play with two others – one in which Native American characters are depicted in relation to white European or Euro-American characters in the early seventeenth century and one in which Native Americans have already become invisible, although the play is set in the Catskills during the transition from the colonial era to the Early Republic.

The title of James Nelson Barker (1784–1858) and John Bray's (1782–1822) 1808 »operatic melo-drame« *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage* (1997 [1808]) refers to Pocahontas (c. 1595–1617), the daughter of Powhatan (b. 1540s/50s–1618). She supposedly rescued John Smith from execution and quickly became a mythical figure in colonial historiography. The post-*Metamora* example is a play derived from

American writer Washington Irving's (1783–1859) story »Rip Van Winkle« (1983 [1819]) which – comparable to Forrest's starring role as a Native American chief – dominated the career of comedian Joseph Jefferson III (1829–1905) for decades. This example demonstrates two feats: first, how Jefferson III successfully merged the stage character with his own public image and, second, how this adaptation of a well-loved American tale satisfied popular discourse on the United States as a blessed land of personal fulfilment – at least for white men.¹

When read through the lens of populist communication and representation strategies, this triad of plays demonstrates that theatrical renderings of settler colonialism bear witness to some of the paradoxes identified by the study of populism subsequent to the invention of the term. In Barker and Bray's *The Indian Princess*, newly emerging forms of US-American populism and nationalism display fork-tongued depictions of (old and new, white and non-white) social elites and of an emerging homogeneous society based on ostensibly universal values. Stone and Forrest's *Metamora* promotes a supposedly naturally good masculinity that tempers the Indian leader's demise with nostalgia and that shifts the burden of continuing a legacy of unschooled virtue onto white, particularly male American shoulders. Jefferson's performance as Rip Van Winkle romanticizes the colonial era *sine* a visible indigenous population and manages the paradoxical feat of declaring socially transgressive self-indulgence to be an emotionally appealing form of individual freedom – a value that (by implication) can hardly be criticized because of its foundational function within the republic. Just as the female characters become complicit in solidifying the title character's entitlement to his whims, the famous actor's social and economic rise does not interfere with his public image as a model citizen who stands up for the downtrodden. As these examples indicate, a long gestation period preceded the emergence of the term »populism« in the late nineteenth century.² Yet, all of the three case studies highlight the theater's function as a place of forming and experiencing »peoplehood«.

2 Populism

2.1 Terms and Concepts

The term populism has become ubiquitous, but its origins and nuances are not commonly known, let alone taken into consideration. Currently, the term is »often used pejoratively« (Kaltwasser/Taggart/Espejo/Ostiguy 2017, p. 3). First employed in the United States in early-1890s newspaper articles, the noun designated those engaged in the People's Party (p. 3). In the same decade, the concept also became popular in Russia and France. All three contexts shared special appreciation of »the

¹ I have discussed these works in previous studies which, however, did not focus on populism as a thematic and theoretical framework but rather on characterization through music, on trends in depictions of Native Americans in the theater, and on strategies of adapting American fiction into spoken and musical drama (see Balestrini 2003 and 2005).

² Also see Kelly (2017, p. 4) regarding precursors of late-nineteenth-century populist thought.

›true‹ common rural people«; they characterized »›the people‹ as inherently virtuous and dutiful or disadvantaged« (Kaltwasser/Taggart/Espejo/Ostiguy 2017, p. 4); and they expressed a decidedly »nationalistic or national pride« (Kaltwasser/Taggart/Espejo/Ostiguy 2017, p. 5). Although the word populism has only been used in the United States since the late nineteenth century, political scientists have been studying its significance from earlier historical periods to the present (e.g., Kazin 1995). Considering the crucial role of agrarian ideas with a strong morality-focused undertone, as formulated prominently by seventeenth-century Puritan settlers as well as by Thomas Jefferson during the colonial era and the Early Republic, researching the concept before the emergence of the term makes sense.

Surveying the current state of political science research, Kaltwasser/Taggart/Espejo/Ostiguy identify »three definitions of populism«: »ideational,« »political-strategic«, and »socio-cultural« (2017, p. 14). This essay, which scrutinizes theater culture from a perspective of literary and cultural studies, situates itself within the third category and intends to address one of the desiderata in populism research: rather than assuming that »populism and democracy« are necessarily diametrically opposed phenomena, understanding »the *how* of populism« (Kaltwasser/Taggart/Espejo/Ostiguy 2017, p. 18) also involves researching the workings of populist methods of appealing to individuals and groups that see themselves as proponents of a democratic society. Plays about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lend themselves to analyses of how the newly evolving political and social system was in the process of being defined.

The interpersonal characteristics of populism provide a helpful entry point into questions regarding the public presentation and performance of the discourse and the ostensible embodiment of who ›the people‹ are and what they stand for. Scholars who choose a socio-cultural perspective point out populism's relationality (Ostiguy 2017, pp. 1 f) and its emphasis on a seemingly silenced or unappreciated majority (a »low« in the sense of not being in power although they should be) whose authentic kind of peoplehood leads to »public *flaunting*«, which frequently is »transgressive, improper, and antagonistic« (Ostiguy 2017, p. 2; also see p. 4, p. 20). As this effect requires a communicative situation that centers on »a very peculiar kind of *rapport*« (p. 2), the theater as a space in which performers and audience members come together offers itself as a location that closely resembles publicly voiced political rhetoric (also see Lowndes 2017, p. 8). Recurring antagonists in this setup are a specific elite (depending on the respective socio-political and historical context; see Ostiguy 2017, p. 5, pp. 19 f; de Cleen 2017, p. 5) or anyone who is not defined as belonging to the ›authentic‹ group. Methods of political communication include many of the sign systems associated with theater: verbal »discourse« as well as »behavior, body language, expressions, even dress codes« (Ostiguy 2017, p. 19). The main trajectory of performed populism resides in representing »a homogeneous notion of the people and their right to self-rule« (Lowndes 2017, p. 12). The supposed homogeneity of ›the people‹ then often results in an uneasy marriage of a rhetoric of egalitarianism and of the rejection of »those outside the collective identity« (Lowndes 2017, p. 12).

Populism in the United States from the 1890s to the present has elicited manifold contradictory interpretations. For instance, the People's Party has been read as »a provincial, moralistic form of agrarianism that was marked by xenophobia

and a hatred of cities and cosmopolitanism«, as »a revolt that created a culture of participatory democracy«, and as a workers' and peasants' movement towards »progressive moderniz[ation]« (Lowndes 2017, p. 1). More crucial for the discussion of pre-1890 American theater, Lowndes points out that this involuted, rhetorically manipulative phenomenon of populist appeal goes further back in US history. Instead of mentioning class as a central issue in the oppressive system favoring a specific elite at the cost of the less materially fortunate masses, populists foregrounded »popular sovereignty« – thus implying that the elites undermined the sacrosanct principles of American political philosophy at the expense of morally sound, hard-working common people; at the same time, non-white workers were described as not fulfilling the requirements of representative »bearer[s] of republican virtue« (Lowndes 2017, p. 2; also see p. 14). As I intend to show through analyzing the earliest of the three plays to be discussed, this phenomenon predates the Jacksonian 1830s by at least 20 years.

2.2 Populism and Theater in the United States Before 1900

While twenty-first-century populism is closely linked to social media and twentieth-century populism to radio and television, the theater provides insights into pre-1900 forms of populism. As the young American democracy, which was widely perceived as a daring experiment, sought to establish and legitimize itself and to create a democratic public between the American Revolution and the late-nineteenth-century Gilded Age, theatrical performances were often geared toward strengthening a sense of the white mainstream as the »real« core of U.S. democracy and toward fostering notions of the United States being exceptional.

In the theater, both the artistic work that is performed and whatever we may know about those who paid to watch the show can provide insight into specific historical contexts in which a sense of who »the people« are and what they stand for is communicated. This communication process is not only reciprocal (contents and performance, on the one hand, and audience response, on the other), but its microcosmic setting and temporally limited occurrence also invite discussion of larger socio-cultural considerations. In times when many people, especially from the lower classes, were illiterate, public address directed at »common people« used theatrical performance to enthrall large audiences and sway public opinion. The theater thus was a venue where notions of being-in-common were negotiated: Who was to be considered part of the »common people«? Which rights and duties did these individuals have? How were those who did not belong to be treated? As the Early American Republic was fundamentally shaped by so-called settler-colonialism, such questions often revolved around the right place of Native Americans and other non-whites within American national imaginaries, as the first two plays will demonstrate. And in plays in which indigenous peoples of North America did not figure as racial »Others« that vanished either by assimilation or death, notions of belonging to and owning land put a hands-on, common-man masculinity center stage.

In her conceptualization of what she terms, in the subtitle of her book, »the performative commons in the Atlantic world,« theater historian Elizabeth Maddock Dillon understands the theater as being both a gathering of »a common body of

people – a *demos*, the people of a democracy or a republic who wield the power of sovereignty« and »a common body of land, a shared resource, a material entity possessed and/or used by a multitude of people« (Dillon 2014, p. 3). This combination politicizes the »performative commons« by transcending a purely artistic or entertainment-focused notion of the theater. According to Dillon, »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« (Dillon 2014, p. 4). Watching a stage performance while participating in an off-stage performance of »a set of social relations« in the sense of Bruno Latour's »assemblage« (Dillon 2014, p. 4) emphasizes processes of constituting specific kinds of social coherence, which lead to reading theatergoers as metonymic representatives of »the town« (Dillon 2014, p. 6). Thus, Dillon's approach coheres with one specific perspective in the study of democracy theory, that is, the notion of »the people as process« (Espejo 2017, p. 6), which in turn allows us to think about the conflict between (mostly liberal) »hypothetical« conceptualizations and (mostly populist) »historical« definitions.

The feeling of being part of »the people« was, Dillon argues, often used to imply that such an in-group had the prerogative to exclude those who were simultaneously defined as not belonging, as being outsiders. White supremacy thus came to dominate representation and reception practices in the theater: »[...] 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«« (Dillon 2014, p. 8). While non-white characters were represented on stage and a minority of non-white audience members continued to share the material space of the theatrical commons, the economic and political stratification that privileged the white mainstream resulted in making the theater a site of a restrictive definition of »the people«.

Dillon stresses the political dimensions of the performative commons by pointing out the permeable boundaries both between on-stage and off-stage processes of creating a commons and between goings-on inside and outside the theater. As argued by Jacques Rancière, to whom she refers, the political scene is theatrical and performative enough to use concepts of theatricality and performance when discussing how the political subject is constituted (Dillon 2014, p. 10). People reacting to what they consider the political dimensions of theater participated in processes of establishing a commons/people through making their viewpoints visible and audible in the streets, most notably through theater-related riots in the first half of the nineteenth century (Dillon 2014, p. 13). In other words, distinct yet intersecting locations of performing peoplehood speak in favor of contextual studies of early American drama and theater in light of broader socio-political discussions.

3 White Male Settler-Colonialist America on the Stage

3.1 Benevolent Newly-Minted American Leaders and Their Native American Wards

American playwright James Nelson Barker and English composer John Bray produced what was presumably the first stage work about Pocahontas. *The Indian Princess or, La Belle Sauvage* (1997 [1808]), subtitled *An Operatic Melo-Drame in Three Acts*, premiered at the Chestnut Street Theater, Philadelphia, on 6 April 1808, to be followed by productions in, for instance, New York, Charleston, Richmond, and Baltimore. The work includes an overture, spoken dialogues and monologues, twelve vocal numbers (solo songs, duets, ensembles, choruses), and melodramatic instrumental music which provides an atmospheric sonic backdrop for pantomimed actions or which prepares moments of intense suspense (Balestrini 2003, p. 267–69). *The Indian Princess* thus combines features of European comic opera and of melodrama, that is, of spoken drama with so-called action music.

As Barker describes in his introduction, John Smith's writings about his experience during the settlement of Jamestown through the London Company of Virginia, a joint-stock company which received a charter from the British crown, served as a source of information on Pocahontas (Barker 1997 [1808], p. 117). Recalling the events of 1607, Smith describes his abduction by the Powhatan tribe. His three weeks of captivity concluded with what became one of the longest-lived American myths: supposedly, twelve-year-old Pocahontas, the favorite daughter of chief Powhatan, prevented Smith's execution – a deed that Smith ascribes to divine providence. Whether Pocahontas simply played her assigned role in a mock-execution as part of an adoption ritual still remains a matter of debate. What is well-documented, however, is that Pocahontas married colonist John Rolfe in 1614, traveled to England to be introduced at court as an ›exotic‹ princess from the American wilderness, and died in England.³

Creating a stage show about an early-seventeenth-century English colony for an audience living two hundred years later in the very republic that sprang – via a revolution – from that same colony is challenging in the sense that an early-nineteenth-century U.S. audience will have perceived what was unexplored, untested, and not-yet-their-own territory to John Smith as one of the core sites of their national founding myth. Whereas the English colonists laid claim to part of the New World on the basis of a royal charter, audience members in 1808 lived 32 years after the Declaration of Independence. Barker's text construes the founding of Jamestown by anachronistically projecting a revolutionary-era perspective on what it means to be a post-independence American white male onto the English settler-colonialists. The characterization of white male leaders antedates or, in an abstract sense, follows the script of populist appeal: a rural community of virtuous individuals – some of whom stem from disadvantaged circumstances – thrives because the characters that are presented as ›authentic original Americans‹ fulfilled their civic duties and figured as precursors of an idealized form of popular sovereignty. Conflicts and struggles are

³ See Tilton (1994) for a discussion of historiography on Pocahontas and of artefacts inspired by the myth.

overcome by manly courage and heroism within a system that clearly differentiates leaders from followers, good from bad, and a future-oriented versus a misguided backwards-glancing perspective.

First of all, the libretto implies that the settler-colonialist endeavor was destined to succeed and thus invites audience members to celebrate the enterprise that, by implication, led to their very presence as Americans in an American theater watching a play about their history. When Smith, Rolfe, and their men reach the shore, the men intone a chorus about gratitude for their safe arrival, made possible because Nature (and thus God) allowed them to survive storms (Barker 1997 [1808], I.i, p. 118). The emphasis on the aesthetic appeal and immediately perceivable possibilities of the New World feeds into related feelings of national pride: Smith refers to the landscape as providing »cheery aspects« and being »a goodly land« (Barker 1997 [1808], I.i, p. 118).

In an *avant la lettre* move, Barker »Americanizes« some of the leading figures from the British Isles by letting them evince subsequent national persuasions such as natural rights philosophy and a Protestant work ethic. Thus, Rolfe's sense of freedom and concomitant manliness (»In this free atmosphere and ample range/The bosom can dilate, the pulses play,/And man, erect, can walk a manly round« (Barker 1997 [1808], I.i, p. 119)) prefigures arguments promoted by Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and Héctor St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813) in the revolutionary era. Smith's subsequent soliloquy – a curious mixture of class-conscious praise for the British monarchy and for his own leadership qualities, on the one hand, and of the promise that they will be remembered as »[m]en born for acts of hardihood and valour,/Whose stirring spirits scorn'd to lie inert,/Base atoms in the mass of population/That rots in stagnant Europe« (Barker 1997 [1808], I.i, p. 119) – appeals to »[u]nion« as their main »strength:/Be that remember'd ever« (Barker 1997 [1808], I.i, p. 119). While Smith may here be anticipating the near-demise of the first permanent settlement due to infighting, his appeal may also have struck a chord among theatergoers who were still figuring out how to define themselves. Harping on social cohesion among those who »built« the nation works rather well as a way of evoking »the people« in a populist sense.

Similar to the understanding that populist rhetoric and social dynamics frequently rely on leaders who are decidedly not socio-economically comparable to their adherents, *The Indian Princess* keeps up social hierarchies among the settlers. Several characters of lower social standing represent the fears and the unwillingness to toil among less enlightened colonists. These characters simultaneously embody different degrees of simplicity or of the ability to learn, so that the *dramatis personae* are variegated enough to imply the possibility of development. As a result, these characters can be read as depictions of »the people as process«, which feeds into a progressive historiography. The most fearful one, a young man aptly named »Robin« after a small songbird, complains about Smith's work ethic (Barker 1997 [1808], I.ii, p. 121) and is worried that they will be killed by »the Indians« (Barker 1997 [1808], I.ii, p. 122; II.ii, p. 137); throughout the play, he wants to find a mate and dreams of a land of milk and honey. While the character Larry is presented as a stereotypical Irishman and stage type (speaking brogue, loving potatoes, rhapsodizing a love interest called Katy McLure) who provides comic relief, he is loyal

to Smith and hard-working. At the top of the common-man group, Walter admires Smith, invests much effort into his tasks, and is a dedicated husband – but even he worries about Native Americans. Upon Smith's capture, however, both Walter and Larry decide to courageously search for their captain (Barker 1997 [18089, I.v, p. 128; II.ii, p. 136). Although the plot gives ample time to multiple love plots and to suspenseful adventures, the closing of the libretto (Barker 1997 [1808], III.iv and »Finale«) foregrounds the ostensible conquest of Nature's »savage frown« by »a social smile« (Barker 1997 [1808], III.iv, p. 164) expressive of »Freedom«, »Peace«, virtue, prosperity, and »Hospitality« (Barker 1997 [1808], »Finale« p. 164). By having forged a model society, the English colonists are represented as authentic and good »American« ancestors.

Barker's list of *dramatis personae* groups the characters into »Europeans« and »Virginians«. Not surprisingly, the »Virginians« – i.e., Powhatan, Pocahontas, her brother Nantaquas, Miami (a prince of another tribe), Grimosco (an evil priest), and Nima (Pocahontas's attendant) – are absent from the joyful finale which celebrates the »American people«. Besides the curious act of naming indigenous characters after a place name derived from a European virgin queen, the work clearly appeals to an audience that is meant to celebrate its own founding moments which come at the cost of eradicating Native Americans. The stereotypical »Indian« characters disappear either through branding them as evil (Powhatan, Miami, Grimosco) or through their willing submission to their »great white teachers«. Just as a love-struck Pocahontas declares Rolfe to be her sun (Barker 1997 [1808], III.ii, pp. 148–51; also see II.ii, pp. 140f), Nima yields to Robin's charms (Barker 1997 [1808], II.ii, p. 138), and Nantaquas asks Smith to teach him Western civilization (Barker 1997 [1808], II.i, p. 134). One might also try to explain the invisibility of the title character through Smith's closing dialog which, as explained, describes the taming of »Wild Nature« (Barker 1997 [1808], III.iv, p. 164). Once Pocahontas has rescued Smith, he verbally encapsulates Pocahontas's role as an ideal woman: »O woman! angel sex! Where'er thou art,/Still art thou heavenly. The rudest clime/Robs not thy glowing bosom of it's [*sic*] nature« (Barker 1997 [1808], II.i, p. 134). As this woman is a heavenly creature, her female nature is not negatively affected by wilderness. Furthermore, Pocahontas already voices the dichotomy between »wild« and »social« which recurs in Smith's final monolog, when she says to Rolfe: »Thou'st taken me from the path of savage error,/Blood-stain'd and rude, where rove my countrymen,/And taught me heavenly truths, and fill'd my heart./With sentiments sublime, and sweet, and social« (Barker 1997 [1808], III.ii, p. 149). Barker may have felt it necessary to stress that this particular interracial marriage was a model for absorbing Indians into dominant white society – an option that retained traction until the late eighteenth century but which became less popular after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. In 1808, this functions primarily as a romantic notion which – to the urban audiences of the play – is distant from their own reality. But idealizing the Rolfes' union supports attempts to create an American identity which required positive images of settler-colonialism. This being said, Pocahontas and all other Native American characters remain safely absent in the closing scene. Rather than having created an intricately developed stage work with impeccably logical nuances, Barker and Bray pulled

numerous well-known stops of comic opera – only a few of which I was able to discuss here – in ways that possibly produced a populist ›performative commons‹.

3.2 The Mass Appeal of Performing (Native) American Masculinity

One example of an upsurge in populist sentiment in the history of the United States is linked to the two presidential terms (1828–1836) of Andrew Jackson (1767–1845). Born in South Carolina, Jackson fought in the Revolutionary War as an adolescent. He subsequently studied law and relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, where he worked as a prosecutor, judge, congressman, senator, and militia general. More famously, he fought successfully against the British in the War of 1812 and, in the same decade, against the Creeks and the Seminoles. His public image as U.S. president was that of a patriotic warrior of modest origins and a defender of the common man who, at the same time, ignored the distribution of powers and promoted the superior importance of the executive branch over the Congress and the Supreme Court. He particularly represented the settler-colonialist sense of entitlement to land and resources which brought with it renewed efforts to displace and disown Native American tribes as well as support slavery.

The time period of Jackson's rise to the highest office coincides with the development of the so-called star system in the theater. Rather than celebrating playwrights, theaters featured actors. Creating a specific role and, possibly, playing it for decades erased the memory of dramatists at the expense of performers whose names were indelibly etched into the public perception of specific plays. Edwin Forrest advertised his first playwriting contest in 1828, asking for a ›star vehicle‹ – that is, a leading role – for himself. Among the well-known stage works that resulted from a series of such contests is John Augustus Stone's *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1995 [1829]).⁴

Like Barker, Stone also divides the play's characters into ›Indians‹ and ›English‹ (Stone 1995 [1829], p. 55), including titled aristocrats as well as nameless soldiers, farmers, and so on. The plot embeds King Philip's War within standard parent–child conflicts, love plots, mistaken identities, dark family secrets, and last-second rescues. Relations between some ›English‹ and some ›Indians‹ are harmonious enough that they rescue and support one another. But despite moments of heroism and kindness towards young Oceana and towards his own family, *Metamora* kills and curses white people – his cloyingly metaphorical language notwithstanding. The play ends with his death as the ›last of his race‹ (Stone 1995 [1829], p. 78). Though dead, the protagonist lies at the center of a tableau, accompanied by ›[d]rums and trumpet‹ (Stone 1995 [1829], p. 79). The epilog, then, implores audience members to understand the play as thoroughly American: ›A native bard – a native actor too,/ Have drawn a native picture to your view‹ (Stone 1995 [1829], p. 79). Similarly, the prolog lists audience reactions such as ascribing ›merit‹ to the play, being moved to shed a ›tear‹ and heave a ›sigh‹, and even keeping the critic ›mute‹ because he ostensibly cannot ›find a fault‹ (Stone 1995 [1829], p. 79). The prolog and epilog framing the play are certainly standard features of new productions at the time. It

⁴ See Balestrini (2003, pp. 279f) for a brief discussion of the play's main features.

is nevertheless significant that the hoped-for broad appeal focuses – as in the first professional play production of a work by an American author, that is, Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* of 1787 – on the ›native‹-ness of the work.⁵

As Dillon points out, nineteenth-century theater in the Atlantic world was studied with characters that are supposed to represent Native American royalty (Dillon 2014, p. 230). She argues »that the business of what Philip Joseph Deloria describes as ›playing Indian‹ was important theatrical work in the era of Jacksonian ›democratization‹« (Dillon 2014, p. 230).⁶ More particularly, in the United States, such plays included »metropolitan English, creole Americans, and Native Americans« (Dillon 2014, p. 233). The »creole Americans« are white settlers who disassociate themselves from negatively depicted English colonists, who develop an emotional bond with Native Americans, and who themselves emerge seemingly unscathed from their European origins as new and authentic people who take over as ›real‹ Americans from the erased indigenous people. Thus, *Metamora* – like other theater ›Indians‹ – blesses these new Americans before his own demise. According to Dillon, »[t]he American audience of the play effectively views an origin myth of white nationalism that produces the United States as the consecrated future of a contentious native and English heritage« (Dillon 2014, p. 234). As is typical of settler-colonialism, the colonized is erased in the process of developing a founding myth (Dillon 2014, p. 237). The same mechanism is already at work in Barker and Bray's *Indian Princess*, albeit in the rather clumsy decision not to include the title character or any other Native Americans in the final scene. At the same time, it was easier for Barker because he was able to feature white characters celebrating their collective new-found American-ness rather than having to deal with the death of the central character embodied by a star performer.

Forrest is primarily remembered for »his embodiment of a muscular, American masculinity« (Dillon 2014, p. 234) – a phenomenon that requires further discussion as a mechanism of populist theatrical appeal. Promotional photographs of Forrest as well as nineteenth-century interpretations of what his physique and his body language implied suggest an organic link between rugged, unschooled manliness and a strong sense of duty and virtue. Whether Forrest played a gladiator or a Native American king, his stage costumes highlighted his muscular build.⁷

Moreover, he was seen as a naturally gifted and hard-working artist rather than a pampered, elite-trained one. In the words of an appreciation published in the 1840s, Forrest

possessed a fine, untaught face, and good, manly figure, and, though unpolished in his deportment, his manners were frank and honest, and his uncultivated taste, speaking the language of truth and Nature, could be readily understood; and yet so intrinsically superior to the minds of the class of persons among whom his fortunes had thrown him, that he could call to his aid requisites well

⁵ See Tyler (1995 [1787], p. 21).

⁶ See Deloria (1998) for additional information on the concept of ›playing Indian‹ and an extended analysis on the appropriation of Native American culture.

⁷ See, for instance, Mathew Brady's (1861 and c. 1861) photographs of Edwin Forrest.

calculated to make both friends and admirers. Early left to the care of a widowed mother, her fond indulgence or painful necessities had deprived him of an education even equal to his peers. This stumbling-block to his success he most keenly felt. With praiseworthy ambition, and the means his advancing fortunes furnished, with unwearied industry he laboured to remove this obstacle in his path to fame, and may now compare in acquirements with those whose early life was cradled in ease, and learning made a toy. (Cowell 1844, p. 74)

Cowell depicts Forrest as simultaneously ›superior‹ to other poor people *and* part of them, as he evidently did not partake in the advantages of the wealthy. This characterization resembles the in-between yet, *qua* good character, upwardly-mobile settler-colonial figures in *Metamora*. It also smacks of what Ostiguy (2017, pp 1 f.) calls the ›public flaunting‹ of the ›low‹. Whatever may seem ›transgressive, improper, and antagonistic‹ (Ostiguy 2017, p. 2) – such as Forrest’s public display of his rough-hewn physique and his booming voice – is lassoed in to create ›a very peculiar kind of *rapport*‹ (Ostiguy 2017, p. 2), which mostly relies on stylizing the actor’s type of masculinity as part of a rags-to-riches story. Forrest’s status as a star with an extensive fan base also replicates notions prevailing in the Jacksonian era: a ›man of the people‹ may very well stand above ›the people‹ without being interpreted as elitist in a negative sense.

A journalist writing for the New York *Albion* on 2 Sept. 1848 bluntly claims that ›[t]he masses are with him‹ (Albion 1848, n.pag.) and that Forrest stands for a new histrionic practice that reflects the paradox inherent in nationalistic populist thought:

We are inclined to believe that Mr. Forrest is not to be judged by the ordinary canonical standards of criticism, at least on his native soil. He has created a school in his art, strictly American, and he stands forth the very embodiment, as it were, of the masses of American character. Hence his peculiarities. Hence his amazing success. And further, Mr. Forrest in his acting is not merely the embodiment of a national character, but he is the beau ideal of a peculiar phase of that character – its democratic idiosyncrasy. Of this, both physically and in his artistical execution, he is a complete living illustration. [...] In London and Edinburgh, where the people are influenced, perhaps, to a certain extent by aristocratic association, Mr. Forrest was considered too strong in his delineations, with the democratic denizens of the large manufacturing towns his success was unbounded. (Albion 1848, n.pag.)

The journalist’s catch phrase of ›democratic idiosyncrasy,‹ (Albion 1848, n.pag.) which combines ›the people‹ and individualism as well as the claim that only non-aristocratic theatergoers at home and abroad can stomach such a show of force makes Forrest a populist representative of American exceptionalist thought.

This newspaper article appeared only a few months before the most notorious and deadly theater riot in the nineteenth-century United States. Dillon’s detailed analysis of the dynamics of such riots over several decades leads her to the conclusion that the Astor Play Riot of May 1849, which pitted Forrest supporters outside the theater against supporters of the English star performer William Charles Macready inside the elitist Astor Place Theater, ›serves as a closing point of sorts for the history

of the Atlantic performative commons insofar as it enacts a resolutely nationalized theatrics« (Dillon 2014, p. 259). Thus, the decades-long rivalry between two actors brings to the fore a central tension in mid-nineteenth-century society: the assertion of a national U.S. culture independent of England's stamp of approval. One might add that the Atlantic world is still part of the debate in the sense that, for example, the above-quoted journalist assumes that the direction of influence and the distribution of cultural power may very well be reversed. If Forrest's acting style instills fear in European aristocrats by being »too strong in his delineations,« (Albion 1848, n. pag.) his ostensibly authentically American acting style manages to touch – and possibly rile up – workers in urban centers. Referring to them as »democratic denizens« (Albion 1848, n. pag.) rather than royal subjects adds to the populist strain in this review.

3.3 Post-Atlantic Populist Nostalgia: The ›Original‹ European-American Free Masculine Self

The previous section highlighted some of the populist features in an actor's style, public image, and interpretation by contemporaries. The focus on specific performers as embodiments of dramatic characters or at least of a character type continued to play a prominent role in U.S. theater culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. Joseph Jefferson III stemmed from a family of actors, began to perform as a small child, subsequently served as a supporting actor for major stars (among them, Edwin Forrest), but is remembered most prominently as Rip Van Winkle. Washington Irving's story »Rip Van Winkle« (Irving 1983 [1819]) became an all-time-favorite so quickly that the first dramatization debuted in 1825.⁸ Jefferson took up the baton in the late 1850s, elicited the help of the successful playwright-actor Dion Boucicault (1820–1890) in the mid-1860s, and became such a runaway-success that his stage version of Irving's protagonist was more engrained in collective memory than the Rip Van Winkle of 1819. The star comedian gave his last performance in this role on 2 May 1904.⁹

Washington Irving's »Rip Van Winkle« is set in a village in the Catskills mostly populated by descendants of Dutch colonists hailing back to 1609. The title character prefers squirrel hunting and drinking at the local tavern to earning money to feed his family. The stereotypical henpecked husband enjoys all the more popularity with the rest of the village. One day, he leaves to hunt in the hills and falls asleep. Upon hearing a voice calling his name, he joins an odd fellow and encounters seventeenth-century Dutchmen whose liquor he gleefully tries. He wakes up with a long beard, without his dog, and next to an astonishingly rusty gun, returns to the now unfamiliar-looking village, and causes havoc with his appearance and with his loud appeal to King George III. It turns out that he slept for 20 years, missed the American Revolution, and arrived home in the midst of an election campaign. Now a widower, his daughter takes him in, and he settles into old age as the village storyteller.

⁸ For an overview of stage adaptations from 1825 through 1990, see Balestrini (2005, pp. 106–211).

⁹ A voice recording of a short segment is available on YouTube (see CurzonRoad 2009 [1903]).

Irving's tale has been read in contrasting ways.¹⁰ To some, Irving transferred the English picturesque tradition to a North American (albeit colonial) setting. With mild humor, he told a story about human failings, while showing the compatibility of American fictional characters with elements of European folk traditions (for instance, by adapting fairy tales and legends involving long time periods of magic slumber and by replacing the Romantic scenery of the Rhine with equally picturesque and mythical sites on the Hudson River). Other critics claim that »Rip Van Winkle« can only be understood in depth if it is read contextually as one of the stories in Irving's *Sketch Book*, in which the story was originally published. Relatively recently, scholars have been re-reading the story as political satire on the Early Republic, and particularly as a critique of capitalist greed and the destructive potential of political parties.

In the stage version that evolved over the course of Jefferson's career (Jefferson 1895), Rip Van Winkle does not fall asleep in the mountains during a pleasant squirrel-hunting foray, but Dame Van Winkle ejects him from their home in the middle of a fear-inspiring thunderstorm amidst his daughter's doleful protesting. Rip also has a local nemesis – a scheming lawyer and money-hungry miser – who tricks him into excessive drinking and financial ruin. After Rip's departure, Dame Van Winkle marries this nemesis and suffers more greatly under this villain than ever before. At the end of the play, she is still alive and so delighted about Rip's return that she even offers him liquor, which he accepts.

How, then, did a stage Rip Van Winkle who shies away from ›masculine‹ heroism as much as from hard work and upward social mobility turn into an iconic figure with broad appeal? Two main factors emerge from reviews and general audience-oriented articles published during Jefferson's career: first, Rip Van Winkle as played by Jefferson breaks with middle-class social conventions, especially with regard to his duties as his family's breadwinner, but he is such a lovable person that his failings pale against his proverbial heart of gold. Second, the ›natural genius‹ of the actor's subtle stage artistry moves heterogeneous audiences to the same emotional responses and coheres with his own exemplary character as a private individual. These strains in criticism published during about forty years of Jefferson-as-Rip illustrate that the stage character's transgression against norms was read positively in ways that privileged the male protagonist's personal freedom and prevented an empathetic response to his wife's suffering; in fact, she was made to regret being termagant and to emerge from her painful second marriage as a ›reformed‹ subservient wife (see, for instance, »Editor's Easy Chair« 1875, p. 754; »Jefferson as ›Rip‹« 1902, p. 9). In contrast to the erasure of non-white characters in the era Dillon discusses, Jefferson's Rip banishes all thought of women's rights within or outside the domestic sphere (accordingly, his return also leads to his daughter's imminent marriage). Jefferson's star vehicle reverses the arguments and plot lines that prevailed in sentimental and temperance literature of the time period, in which drunkards repent and reform (see Balestrini 2005, pp. 123 f). The foregrounding of Rip thus also entails presenting the father–daughter relationship as outdoing the mother's role and capacity as a loving parent (e.g., Davis 1879, p. 69; Wedmore 1875, p. 490).

¹⁰ For details, see Balestrini (2005, pp. 95–106).

Condoning Rip's drinking and laziness does not make this play populist, of course. This is rather achieved by the nativist readings of the play's and the actor's all-American features – which are simultaneously transcended by a universal, human appeal beyond moral reproach. This notion of shared peoplehood apparently worked solely through fascination with the main character and the actor, and it led to removing the story's anchoring in history. Consequently, when the ghosts of Dutch colonists appear on stage, they remain absolutely silent and only Rip's voice is heard. Also, the contentiousness of electioneering found in Irving's tale is replaced by a focus on Rip's domestic and social relationships. The transatlantic and historical elements of a colonial and revolutionary past are only retained as local-color picturesqueness, which is subsumed under the star's embodiment of Rip Van Winkle. One major factor in the populist appeal, then, resides in the vicarious experience of a performed national myth that encompasses an enticing paradox: an ›authentic‹ common man can flaunt his impropriety as long as he is inherently virtuous deep inside. Remarkably, he ends up as an economically well-situated man living in domestic bliss. His land-ownership places him within the realm of settler-colonialist fulfilment.

Critics used their understanding of Rip's ostensible heart of gold to refute criticism of the character as a drunkard; they promoted him as an everyman who has retained his child-like purity. Thus, readers of one of the largest general-interest magazines, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, were instructed to see the character as »one of the men who are every where [*sic*]« and »a kindly human soul« (»Editor's Easy Chair« 1871, p. 615). His fairy-tale and child-like lovability shield him against moralizing: »It is not a mere tipsy vagabond; it is a simple-hearted wanderer in woods and fields that we behold; [...] To bring the moral batteries to bear upon him is to open a broadside upon a butterfly, a blossom of the air. He does not kindle moral indignation« (»Editor's Easy Chair« 1887, p. 480). By elevating Rip to a representative of »humanity« (Davis 1879, p. 59, p. 60, p. 61), another critic argues that »[w]e see the possibilities of our own lives reflected as in a mirror which he holds up to us« (Davis 1879, p. 59).

Construing Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle as a generic human being, then, easily connects with claims about the actor's seeming lack of artifice: praising his acting as ›natural‹ and as emanating from an inherent quality of ›genius‹ allows the same critics/fans to make the boundary between actor and role as well as between dramatic protagonist and viewer more permeable. As Frederick Wedmore poignantly puts it: Jefferson »does not act the piece: he lives in it« to an extent that »we cannot seriously separate the actor from the man«; he performs »in a manner so entirely natural that you are constantly forgetting that it is a performance« (Wedmore 1875, p. 490; also see »Editor's Easy Chair« 1871, p. 615). To some of Jefferson's contemporaries, this naturalness which is a gift rather than a skill immediately makes the actor an equally natural intellectual and good person without the kind of education the

›general public‹ relies on (see Davis 1879, p. 66, p. 71, p. 75; Runnion 1869, p. 173).¹¹

In addition to praise for the lovability of Jefferson's Rip and for Jefferson's heart-warming acting skills, multiple reviews emphasize the performances' appeal across boundaries of class, gender, and generations. A London critic claims that »it was an assured success of the most unequivocal kind« and that Jefferson's performative »delicacy, refinement, and sweet geniality are an exquisite refreshment to the higher class of play-goers; but *Rip* is popular with all« (F. 1875, p. 2). In Cincinnati, »the house was filled to overflowing with people of every position, for there is no play upon the American boards capable of drawing such a heterogeneous audience as this same Rip Van Winkle. Everybody and all classes go to see it, not only once, but upon every opportunity, and yet the interest is always unabated« (»Rip Van Winkle« 1871, p. 1).¹² Even after more than three decades of performing the role,

Mr. Joseph Jefferson and Rip are always so heartily welcomed when they give the New-York public an opportunity of seeing them [...] The crowd that greeted Mr. Jefferson last night was, as it always is, distinct among New York audiences. People were there, representative of the olden New York, who are rarely to be seen at any theatre. (»Rip Van Winkle« Again« 1893, p. 5)

Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle performance apparently had enough drawing power to bring together theatergoers that would, on other occasions, attend performances within their more proscribed social circle.

The decades during which Jefferson successfully toured in England and, more importantly, during which masses of American theatergoers thronged to see him raise the question as to the significance of the balance between ›American‹ and ›universal‹ features in his career as Rip Van Winkle. Jefferson was certainly celebrated as a scion of an American dynasty of actors (e.g., Runnion 1869, p. 173; Davis 1867, p. 753) whose acting style »has established a school of his own« which could evolve into »the American school« (Runnion 1869, p. 174). His mass appeal combined the public image of a well-to-do star who has not been corrupted by success but who has retained his love of the rural and the good (Bloom 2000, p. xvi) with the politically laudable appreciation of ›the people‹ ascribed to Jefferson during his career (e.g., »Rip Van Winkle« 1878, p. 150).¹³

The »performative commons« of Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle (after the time period for which Dillon developed the phrase) emerges to be one that focuses on a de-historicized nostalgia for a pastoral world which favors male freedom and female domestic subservience. As Robert Nisbet points out, »[n]ostalgia is very different from respect for or genuine intellectual interest in the past; [...] The great danger

¹¹ Less romanticized perspectives on Jefferson's acting emerged after his death. Ford argues: »But although much may be said in his praise, the plain truth is that the laurels that he won were due not so much to his own spontaneous efforts as to the coldly calculating skill of one of the most adroit stage craftsmen of modern times« (Ford 1906, p. 72).

¹² For similar responses, also see »Rip Van Winkle« (1871, p. 1) and »Rip Van Winkle« (1878, p. 149).

¹³ Jefferson's mansion, built in 1870, is currently a tourist stop on the »National Register of Historic Places«. Its marketing reflects the unabashed indulgence in mixing notions of pastoral ›simplicity‹ and plantation-style grandeur. See Rip Van Winkle Gardens (2019).

of nostalgia is that it narcotizes us and helps prevent a proper sense of the past [...]» (Nisbet qtd. in Scherke 2018, p. 91). Sociologist Katharina Scherke points out two phenomena that, to my mind, need to be considered when reading Jefferson's Rip through the lens of nostalgia: first, the distinction between nostalgia that is directed at an individual's memories of the past and nostalgia for a specific time and place that the individual did not experience (cf. Scherke 2018, p. 91) and, second, the distinction between actual feelings of nostalgia in individuals and nostalgia mediated by artefacts (cf. Scherke 2018, p. 90). The situation of an actor performing in a play set in a specific historical past and of an audience member in a specific place taking in the play at a specific point in time complicates matters. While nobody in the nineteenth century could personally remember seventeenth-century Dutch colonists, audience members may very well have had some notion of who these people were. The historical backdrop and its palimpsest of historiographical interpretations aside, the multi-decade career of Joseph Jefferson III adds the layer of seeing the actor through a long-term lens, of possibly remembering earlier instances of seeing him perform, or of having heard family and friends talk about their memories. And, as an intra-dramatic feature, the evocation of the supposed *Gemütlichkeit* of a bygone era and the sentimental appeal of suffering with Rip Van Winkle collaborate in possibly creating a collective response that, in a populist sense, facilitates a sense of belonging and of homogeneity, at least during the performance in the theater.¹⁴ The lack of precise historical detail in the play strengthens the emotional focus on perceiving something universally human in Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle, albeit at the expense of erasing the female characters' concerns, even though such concerns gained decidedly more visibility in the half-century of this Rip Van Winkle play. This strategy easily includes Jefferson's Rip within the boundaries of populist stock figures of later eras. According to Lowndes, in the 1960s, »[t]he representative figure of populism [in the United States] was an aggrieved white man displaced from his centrality in politics, workplace, and the home« (Lowndes 2017, p. 11). In the world of theater from the postbellum years into the Gilded Age, this white male protagonist gains what he considers rightfully his: a piece of land, a comfortable home, a caring family, and widespread social acceptance.

4 Concluding Remarks

In his 1832 *History of the American Theatre and Anecdotes of the Principal Actors*, William Dunlap surmises: »Here the theatre is the people's, as all things are; and the representatives and guardians of the people ought to prevent the misuse and perversion of it in any way« (Dunlap 1963 [1832], pp. 407 f). In this vein, he rejects the tight grip that European monarchs exert on their theaters and expresses the hope that in the United States the theater »would only be used, if used as a political engine, for purposes congenial to our republican institutions« (Dunlap 1963 [1832], p. 292). To him, the inherently positive features of a democratically organized republic go hand

¹⁴ Also see Scherke (2018, p. 193), regarding political rhetoric, nostalgia, and specific settings and social compositions that favor certain group responses.

in hand with its universal applicability: Dunlap optimistically assumes that all of humanity desired the theater to be an institution they can call their own. Nevertheless, it remains open whether they will manage to develop a theater culture expressive of »purity«, »power«, and a »high moral purpose« (Dunlap 1963 [1832], p. 361). These contemplations prefigure populist theater and a »performative commons« as a prerogative of »the people«, even if Dunlap seems unsure about the success of such an endeavor in ethical respects.

As I hope to have shown with the three case studies, nineteenth-century theater history bears out some of the paradoxical features in populist discourse – most of all the clash between rhetorical appeals to »the people« as an inclusionary concept and the simultaneous exclusion of specific groups from the privilege of belonging. Among the particularly US-based features are the erasure of actual Native Americans as representing »American-ness« (a role which is usurped by white settlers) and the relegation of women to supporting roles of subservience. White men emerge as »authentic« and as entitled to newly acquired freedoms: these evolve from Barker's anti-English/anti-elite rhetoric and the promotion of the New World as realizing (some characters') Lockean natural rights all the way to Joseph Jefferson's interpretation of Rip Van Winkle's eccentricity as offering audiences the vicarious pleasure of valuing one's own (white male) freedom above the rights of others. The elevation of an anti-hero to everybody's darling also comes at the expense of de-historicizing the Rip Van Winkle story for the sake of emotional impact. Continuing the intertwining of Edwin Forrest's public image, acting style, and roles, Joseph Jefferson's immense grip on the popular imagination regarding what ideas he stood for exemplifies the strategy of flaunting »man-of-the-people« myths in and through theater.

Nostalgia for the »good old days« of the colonial era thus cuts across the three case studies and predominately emphasizes that in these performed conceptualizations »the American people« are most of all white and male. Mainstream and commercial theater, most prominently on Broadway, remains a prime location for the negotiation of national self-definition(s). The ongoing debate about the smash-hit *Hamilton: An American Musical* serves as a case in point (Balestrini 2018; Romano/Potter 2018). Interdisciplinary research on populism and theater history offers a fruitful field in need of more ploughing.

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