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 Rosemarie K. Bank
 Excerpt
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Prologue

Universal Spaces

“The preface is ruled out, but it must be written.”

– Jacques Derrida, “Outwork, prefacing” (1981)

“She said: ‘What is history?’ And he said: ‘History is an angel being blown backwards into the future.’ He said: ‘History is a pile of debris, and the angel wants to go back and fix things, to repair the things that have been broken. But there is a storm blowing from Paradise, and the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future. And this storm, this storm is called Progress.’”

– Laurie Anderson, “The Dream Before (for Walter Benjamin),”
 from *Strange Angels* (1989)

“I am Odysseus. I have returned from Troy.”

– Tadeusz Kantor, *The Return of Odysseus* (1944)

IN “THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS,” Jorge Luis Borges eloquently describes “an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe” conceived (in contrast to Newton) without belief in a uniform, absolute time. Instead, there are “infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times,” embracing every possibility. We live and die, he writes, unaware of most of these coexisting universes, inhabit some but not others, utter words in one and silently haunt another, while in some worlds we do not exist. Borges’s elegant evocation of simultaneous universes resonates with physics’ recent explorations of parallel universes and at the same time echoes a vastly older Na-

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tive American view: that what has happened in a place is always happening. In this study of antebellum America, two sets of terms – spatial history and theatre culture – attempt to operationalize these senses of history.¹

Borges's elastic universes of time and quantum physics' anisotropic space have much in common with the quest in American historiography for ways to escape an evolutionary and totalized view of the past, usually called "positivist." Focusing upon history as spaces collected in but not wholly governed by time facilitates writing in the peoples and experiences American historical writing has too often written out. One way to work against the grain of positivist historiography is to allow subjects to circulate, to view them as relationships rather than things. By foregrounding these relationships, a subject can be seen as simultaneously occupying multiple spaces. Operationalized in the present study, gender, to take one example, features in Chapter 1's discussion of the city and fashion, Chapter 2's consideration of work and class, and Chapter 3's recontextualization of prostitutes in antebellum theatres.²

Spatial history takes time to locate and describe. Accordingly, the chapters that follow discuss many things in addition to theatre. There are two dispositions that influence the structure of this book and its winding road to and from the playhouse. One seeks theatre in a larger social context, to make historical connections (as theatre scholars have ably done in recent work) between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and abolitionist sentiment, for example, or *The Drunkard* and the temperance movement. This larger context also takes in more indirect relationships of interest to me: how knowledge circulates, for example, or locating investments in and redistributions of culture. The second disposition influencing the structure of this book grew from a restlessness with the view of cultures primarily as reflections of (and so always behind or in front of) the societies producing them. Theatre, within this view, functions as a subject or mirroring of something either before history or outside itself. This book attempts to evade examining theatre as antehistorical or as solely reflective by working the concept "theatre culture," the notion that the peoples in a culture stage themselves and perform multiple roles. In this larger sense of performance, of theatre outside of playhouses as well as within them, culture is not only or even exclusively metaphoric, a figure standing for something else, but is itself taken as constitutive of the relationships that we find circulating in and among the many universes of antebellum America. Operationalized in the present study, the performance of, say, gender promotes considering how,

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in antebellum America, women's volunteer associations, the Bowery G'hal, the call to regulate prostitutes in playhouses, or the publication of etiquette manuals are productive of each other.³

The meditations in Borges's garden of forking paths yield many reflections that are important to a spatial history of theatre culture. Like Borges's author, cultural historiography has accepted incompleteness, viewing culture, as Joseph Roach recently put it, as "not general and universal but local," neither neutral nor transcendent, but partisan, material, and historical. This incompleteness, like Borges's garden, is a far move from the Eden of facts, rules of causality, chains of being, modes of distributing evidence, certainties, accumulations of knowledge, "scientific" hypotheses and pristine methods that were once the stuff of (theatre) historical theory and practice. A nostalgia for completeness is the perhaps inescapable legacy of a subject as evanescent as performance, for while, as Roach observes, "few contemporary historians succumb to vulgar positivism" (of the sort set opposite Borges's garden in the preceding sentence), "some remain more alert than others to its more subtle reappearances – such as in the masking of ideologies as impartial conclusions or the passing off of contested events as historical facts." What constitutes a "fact" about antebellum America is further complicated by what Joyce Flynn identifies as a "complex causality of neglect" that has left American theatre history of the nineteenth century without such "traditional" studies as economic histories (allowing, for example, systematic comparisons of wages between antebellum theatre workers and others or of ticket prices to audience income), day-books of theatrical activities in all of America's major antebellum cities chronicling who did what when; considerations of touring circuits in these decades clarifying where they were, who traveled them, when, and how often; or even publication of scholarly histories of antebellum star actors and managers.⁴

The legacy of incomplete images bequeathed to the present study by an understaffed and fragmented theatre research archive will be evident in every universe it explores. As a result, attention is skewed in the direction of the northeastern quadrant of the United States and, among urban centers, favors New York over the other large cities of that era. Antebellum cultural studies have also posited a world of largely male and white northeasterners. In all these, theatre participates in the general state of studies of American literature before the Civil War, as a 1992 assessment of its scholarly history by MLAA makes clear. Still (lest this rehearsal of inade-

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quacies legitimate a nostalgia of its own), just as recent work in gender history challenges the hegemony of the white male subject, so recent theatre studies have reclaimed a host of subjects – little-known antebellum house playwrights, for example, circus, magic and medicine shows, popular performers, and the tastes and behaviors of worker audiences. The campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s to pluralize subjects have not been unsuccessful, though they remain short of their goals. Taken together with the postpositivist historiographies of the 1980s and 1990s, these theatre studies both yield cultural histories of subjects once considered beyond the pale of theatre history and theorize them in ways that satisfy the cognitive needs of theatre scholars on the threshold of the twenty-first century.⁵

Theatre culture, as developed here, is constitutive of multiple, simultaneous relationships. Chantal Mouffe has cast this interaction against a larger canvas, arguing that

each social agent is inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations – not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity. All these social relations determine positionalities or subject positions, and every social agent is therefore the locus of many subject positions and cannot be reduced to only one.

In this view, as Janelle Reinelt has observed, “individuals and social groups are constantly involved in competing and often contradictory positions.” These multiplicities and inconsistencies not only frustrate the great historical narratives and their underpinning “myths” (as Jeff Mason characterizes these [hi]stories) but also problematize the location of hegemonies, structures, and formations. For American cultural history, as Homi Bhabha has put it,

The grand narratives of nineteenth-century historicism on which its claims to universalism were founded – evolutionism, utilitarianism, evangelism – were also, in another textual and territorial time space, the technologies of colonial and imperialist governance. It is the “rationalism” of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference.

Given the building up and wearing down of these contingencies, a number of antebellum subjects in this study – class, gender, work, and race, for example – are positioned so as to respond to Roach’s sense of “con-

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tested events” rather than “historical facts,” a locating that risks a number of indeterminacies.⁶

The exploration of antebellum America’s stagings of culture begins with two events in 1825 that stand as prologue to the chapters that follow. These events – General Lafayette’s triumphal return to the United States as “the nation’s guest” and the opening of the Erie Canal – collect antebellum political, cultural, and cognitive significations. They do so, importantly, in a context of economic surplus in which the excess necessary to celebrate is itself celebrated. In Lafayette’s case, that celebration is reified and appropriated city by city as he makes what amounts to a royal progress around the America that lay between the Atlantic and Caribbean Oceans, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the Great Lakes. In the waning days of his visit, Lafayette traveled the Erie Canal, whose grand opening would be held less than a month after the general’s departure for France. The look backward in Lafayette’s return and the projection forward in the opening of the Erie Canal offered many opportunities for earlier nineteenth-century American culture – with all its exclusions, resistances, commodifications, and displacements – to stage itself. These stagings yield a topography, a spatial history of what were considered universal American values, the cultural oxymoron identifying the one (“universal” = Euro-American Enlightenment values) and the many (“American” = democratic “refinements” of these).

The two celebratory events (the general and the canal), which serve as a preliminary discourse to the cultural performances that follow, reify the ferment of these decades and its production of mutually constitutive yet conflicting cultures. Chapter 1 engages the locution (movement, mobility) of the oxymoron “universal American” in three antebellum “spaces of representation”: the village, the city, and the frontier. These spaces constitute what T. J. Clark describes as “a battlefield of representations.” The colonization of scholarship by myths – of individuality, transcendentalism, of America as an empty paradise, and the like – has the effect, Cecelia Tichi has argued, of voiding a sense of America as developing through historical, contextualized change. At the same time, while these “stable stories,” around which a sense of American cultural history (and an academic year) could be organized, no longer lure contemporary historians as they once did, they have also – as the story of “manifest destiny,” for example, makes painfully clear – been constitutive of history. In such contested spaces, Foucault observed, authority is bestowed and provisional; hence what con-

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stitutes “culture” shifts, changes, and coexists with its opposites, replacements, and heirs. The “frontier,” for example, yields a classical protagonist in the doomed but noble savage of antebellum Indian removal at the same time Indian delegates stage scalping ceremonies at the nation’s capital or the staged Indian appears in urban theatres. City and town battle for cultural control at the same time the former appropriates national cultural icons from the local representations of the latter. None of these spaces is truer or more real than another; they are all stagings of theatre culture, representations represented in specific antebellum locales.⁷

The cultural tensions evident in spaces of representation yield readily to the liminal spaces of Chapter 2, which is divided between work and “class.” The word “liminal” foregrounds the shifting, transitional nature of these spaces. An antebellum worker might, for example, “pass through” poverty (due to unexpected or seasonal unemployment) or be caught there for a lifetime. Similarly, “class,” a term nearly as complex as the word “culture” itself, often appears in quotation marks in this study so as to emphasize its provisional nature – reflective, as Mary P. Ryan has suggested, of continually changing and contested relationships among, for example, income, ethnicity, youth or age, gender, race, voluntary associations, location, taste, occupation, and the like. Given provisionality, class and culture are not viewed as formed or fixed (a “formation” defined as a state of being, to follow a recent positioning by Simon Frith), still less as hegemonic formations that control what they seek to colonize. Rather, class and culture are considered as practices or acts and their constituents. In such a view, class does not contain culture, nor culture class; they produce each other across the unstable boundaries of desire. People in liminal spaces create and are created by alternative cultures in the threshold areas they occupy. In the Bowery B’hoy and G’hal, to take one instance, liminality becomes a declaration of place, a betweenness that takes definition from what it is not, as does the self-selection of its seeming opposite “gentility.” The vitality of liminal spaces confounds the view of an antebellum “authorized culture” as hegemonic (highbrow, bourgeois, white, gendered) except as a representative space manifesting a historically locatable desire to dominate.⁸

Antebellum control agenda are the focus of Chapter 3’s “spaces of legitimation,” perhaps more accurately written as “[de]legitimation” (to tease the injunction of Marx and Engels against “all this theoretical nonsense which seeks refuge in bad etymology”). The chapter considers three reg-

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ulating arenas: those of the body (health, gender, and prostitutes), of sensation (temperance, abolition, and heroes), and of play (associations, riots, and the staged disorder of American minstrelsy). The antebellum decades witness the creation of professionals (police and firemen) and institutions (asylums, museums, orchestras), the development of movements (diet, temperance, abolition, sex), the discovery of poverty and of the mob, and the advent of the popularly priced newspaper as a creator both of news and of history. Previously private concerns – charity, consumption, gender – become subjects for staging, changing the nature of heroes, heroines, and the challenges they face. In the regulating spaces of amusements and improvement, forces compete for the control of culture and for ownership of its staging, while sensation deregulates such goals in its pursuit of pleasure as release, redirection, or as an end in itself. Legitimation like liminality, then, is treated as a contested interaction (in Joseph Roach's sense) and as culturally constitutive both in attempts at control and in defiance of them.⁹

The Epilogue returns to the cultural oxymoron in its “simultaneous spaces.” It takes up two events, the Crystal Palace exposition of 1851 in London and the New York Crystal Palace of 1853, that demonstrate simultaneity in the ways cultures are staged – that is, that commodifications of material and of entertainments, in hand with ideas and values of nationality and race, undermine the possibility both of universality and of binarized diversity. On the one hand, diversity by its presence challenges ideas asserting hegemonies of, for example, “civilized” over “savage” or “patrician” distinct from “plebeian.” On the other hand, diversity is itself appropriated, transformed, and redistributed by its interactions with other cultural “universes.” A number of concepts affect and are affected by these redistributions and, in turn, suggest useful historiographical approaches to investigating past theatre cultures.¹⁰

Theatre culture as a creator of historical readings is a hoarding of many values. Antebellum America readily illustrates the difficulty of telling cultural history in terms of single values and norms. Hardly an aspect of life in those decades has failed to produce controversy, over matters as seemingly simple as how close workers lived to their work to issues as complex as what the words “middle class” signify. As striking as these distinctions, however, is the struggle for authenticity that the antebellum decades themselves manifest and their inescapable projections of history as a construct. If this book has an objective in seeing theatre as culture and culture as the-

atre, it is to highlight the created nature of these performances of past and present, to suggest that performances are deceptive as well as authentic and always (already) occur in contested and contradictory terrain. Further, although as L. P. Hartley put it, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there,” there is also a sense in which, as Robert Louis Stevenson observed, “There is no foreign land; it is the traveller only that is foreign, and now and again, by a flash of recollection, lights up the contrasts of the earth.” The trick in staging the past, as Brecht knew, is how to realize the critical alienation that makes the familiar seem strange and the strange familiar. “Similarity” and “difference,” “one” and “many” haunt American cultural history and bedevil its study – what is included, what left out, what is developed, what suggested, and over all the twin specters of journeying either to the already discovered country, to a familiar, same, and safe place, or, like Walter Benjamin’s storm-blown angel, to the land of history as wreckage in need of a fix. Theatre culture displays historical spaces of production, consumption, change, and appropriation, but also insists upon class as a performance, ideology a creation, and the “authentic” as the most compelling deception of all. A number of these “universal spaces” are framed in the two national celebrations to which we now give place. In them we meet many of the agents in dramas taken up in the chapters that follow.¹¹

* * * * *

IN 1825, TWO EVENTS TOOK PLACE that set agenda for antebellum America and its definitions of culture. One event looked back to the Revolutionary War and the separation of the thirteen colonies from Europe; the other anticipated the economic and political joining of western lands to the government of the United States. These events offered a cultural performance of “American” intended for both foreign and domestic consumption in which the past and the future became subjects to be staged. The theatre for these stagings was the nation itself. It offered performances on city streets, within playhouses, by churches and legislatures, in backwoods settings and town halls, at the shrines and on the battlefields deemed sacred to American liberty, in foundries, print shops, and glassworks; on the water, in the air, beneath the ground, on foot, on horseback, in carriages, on wagons and floats, by steamship and barge; with music, bells, cannon, tears, and huzzahs, acres of food and rivers of alcohol; per-

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formed by all the nation's races, genders, trades, ages, and political groups, with full hearts and at enormous expense.

From the vantage of nearly two centuries filled with acts promoting a deep cynicism about the claims of democracy, it would be easy to rehearse these events as counterfeits of liberty, justice, and plenty, often depicted in these celebrations via icons of women, Indians, and laboring blacks and whites, the very persons paid in the false coin of a promised but denied future. To center on that rehearsal, however, is to overlook the displacement and appropriation of texts like liberty and justice by parading unions, Indian tribes, African-American Revolutionary War veterans, women's societies, and the like. These performances suggest in a small way what succeeding chapters seek to write in larger terms: that antebellum American cultures do not act themselves out in imitation of an "authentic" against which reproductions can or ought to be judged true or false (though there are protocols, customs, and traditions, and though given actors may have an "ideal real" in mind). Rather, these performances, in their diversity and often in conflict with each other, constitute cultures. The celebrations of individual and communal selves staged for Lafayette's return and for the opening of the Erie Canal would not be surpassed in America, even in a nation given to self-celebrations, until after the Civil War had contested the very idea of universal American spaces.

The Return of Lafayette

When, pursuant to an invitation by Congress to visit the United States as "the nation's guest," General Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, and his party anchored at Staten Island on 15 August 1824 after a month's voyage from France, there were twenty-four states in the union and three territories. The northeastern (Maine) and northwestern (subsequently Montana, Idaho, and Washington State) boundaries with present-day Canada were in dispute, but exploration and trading routes had already established what mapping expeditions subsequently made visible: that Euro- and African-American encroachment upon indigenous peoples extended throughout the eastern portions of the continent from north to south and had crossed into the trans-Mississippi West. As one of many European travelers to the continent during the antebellum decades, Lafayette had ample opportunity to witness the changes

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wrought upon the land since he had first seen it in 1777. Less than a month after the nation's guest took ship for France, New York City staged a fitting afterpiece to the general's visit, culminating a plan afoot since 1792, the tricentenary of European appropriation of the Americas. On 4 November 1825, at the Long Island Sound entrepôt with the Hudson River, the waters of the Great Lakes – recently opened to navigation by the completion of the Erie Canal – were, with maximum ceremony, poured into the Atlantic Ocean. The celebrants were careful to reserve (in a container made for the purpose by Duncan Phyfe) a portion of Erie water to send to General Lafayette.¹²

Lafayette's 1824-5 travels in America – with his son, George Washington Lafayette; his secretary (and the chronicler of the journey), Auguste Levasseur; and Lafayette's valet, Bastien – began in New York City with festivities both national and local. Pressure by Sabbatarians persuaded the New York organizers to delay Lafayette's reception until Monday, 16 August 1824, when he was escorted to the Battery in Manhattan by what Levasseur describes as a fleet of "floating palaces." The order of events in New York set a pattern for subsequent receptions throughout the nation. Ceremonies began with an official reception at the landing site or arrival point, amid discharge of cannon and ringing church bells, followed by a short march through a line of troops leading to a waiting carriage, usually drawn by white horses. Accompanied by music, the carriage moved *en parade* to City Hall, where Lafayette would be welcomed by the mayor and other dignitaries, express his thanks for the city's hospitality, review a large contingent of troops and parading citizens (usually including a wagon or float of aged Revolutionary War veterans), and retire indoors to receive formally the inhabitants whose guest he was. In New York, as elsewhere in America, emotion was freely displayed: Seasoned politicians were overcome in welcoming him, his comrades broke down when they saw him, parents begged him to bless their children, orators fell dumb in his presence, people waited in rain, snow, and dead of night only to catch a glimpse of his passing – and everywhere hands reached out, mute witnesses in after years to touching Lafayette.¹³

If the love affair with Lafayette was both genuine and reciprocated, the general's adoptive home was nonetheless faithful to the edict of the Continental Congress in 1774 that nothing should interfere with "the manufactures of this country." Accordingly, the occasion of Lafayette's visit produced a plethora of both American- and English-manufactured me-