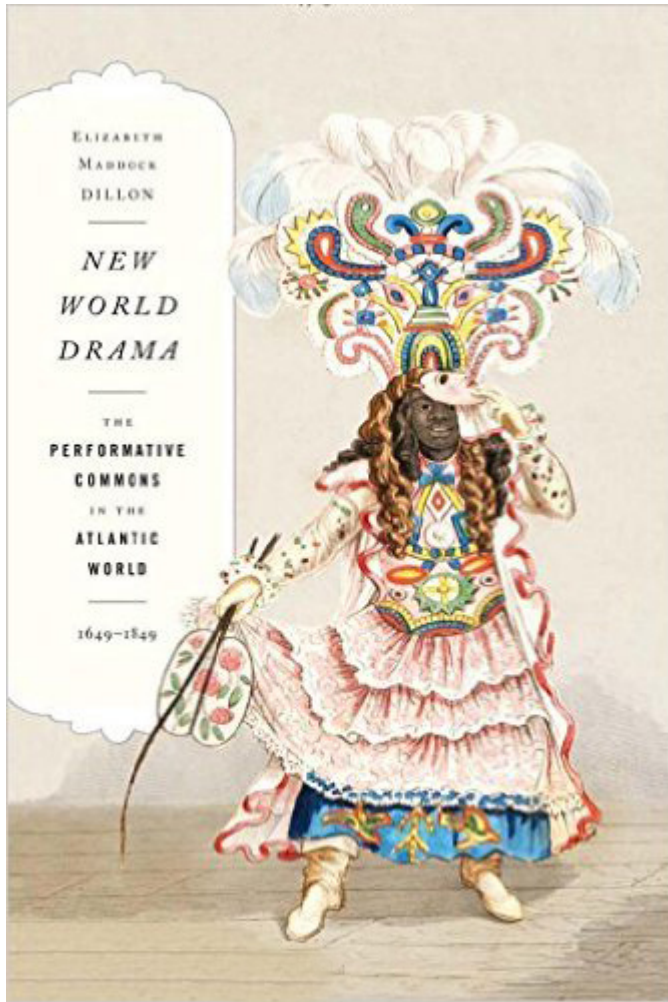


# Performing the Atlantic Commons

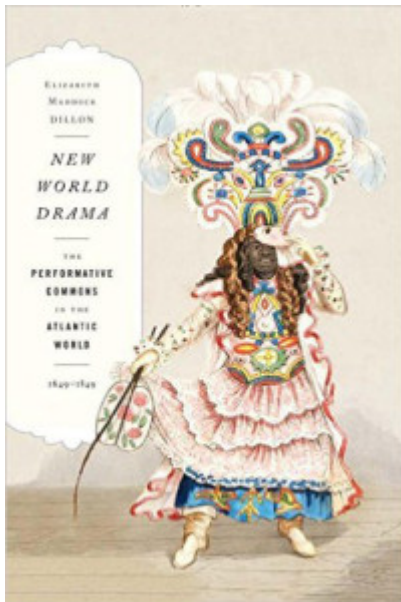


At the heart of Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's *New World Drama* lies an intriguing account of the theater in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1794, rival English and French theaters mounted competing productions of Richard Sheridan's popular 1781 pantomime *Robinson Crusoe, or Harlequin Friday*. Each theater—one tied to provincial English circuits, the other headlined by refugees of the French and Haitian Revolutions—tried to entice audiences with alluring scenes of New World colonialism.

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Both theaters evoked the well-known story of Crusoe's shipwreck, his formative encounter with racial difference, and his efforts to establish a colonial economy and return to the mainland. Those performances show the animated physical, visual, and musical styles of a culture that seems more colonial or provincial than early national. Both playhouses trumpeted their new scenery,

sumptuous decorations, and costumes; advertisements spoke of the “greatest care and attention” each theater devoted to the music and choreography (149). The performances themselves drew on European traditions while showcasing distinctive New World acts, their racial masquerades and “savage dances” transforming the traditional pantomime into something rather different. For Dillon’s account, these performances certainly matter for what they show onstage—for bringing Crusoe’s colonialism face to face with Harlequin’s unruly, unceasing, and transformative motion. Just as important, though, is the way that the performances gathered new Atlantic publics together and represented those publics to themselves. In Atlantic theaters, two linked but distinct colonial traditions competed for the right to call into being a new kind of creole public that, as Dillon’s account has it, deeply engaged both American newness and its persistent connection to the old.



Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2014. 368 pp., \$26.95.

Charleston’s dueling Crusoes make for a strange moment in early American cultural history. The scene seems pointedly local and transient—both theaters eventually became little more than footnotes in their national histories. If one cares most about authorship, originary moments, and integrity of tradition, the performances Dillon explores would seem at best derivative and belated, provincial rewrites produced by second-rate institutions. And from our twenty-first-century academic perspective, it can prove difficult to assign these performances membership in a particular national tradition and equally vexing to decide in what course to teach these texts—difficult, in fact, to even find a text here. But those are the precise reasons such performances are so important to Dillon’s *New World Drama*. Those Charleston performances were, as Dillon shows, just some of the many such acts appearing around the Atlantic littoral throughout a very long eighteenth century. Such theatricals

demonstrate *New World Drama's* central claim that theater, as part of a "performative commons," played a key role in the emergence of distinctive new Atlantic publics and popular cultures in the course of the eighteenth century. Each chapter of *New World Drama* focuses on a specific site, and the structure invites readers to attend to performances in London; Charleston, South Carolina (by way of a chapter on "Transportation"); Kingston, Jamaica; and New York City. Each chapter centers on a particular iteration of the "performative commons," Dillon's term for the collectivities and shared resources gathered together by Atlantic modernity's new cultural practices. London, for example, sees the emergence of a popular commons in both politics and entertainments, while the dispersed Atlantic performances of transportation show the reorganization of the commons under the pressure of the English colonial enterprise. Charleston and Kingston show the increasing transnational and racialized versions of the performative commons in the greater Caribbean. Finally, a series of theater riots and state-sponsored violence leading up to New York City's 1849 Astor Place riots point to a closing of the performative commons after nearly two centuries. Characteristic performances appear at each site, but the circulation of character types and scenarios through the Atlantic world produces new forms. Figures of tortured Native American royalty, for example, crop up repeatedly—in William D'Avenant's 1658 *Cruelty of the Spaniards*, in Thomas Southerne's 1695 *Oroonoko*, in Richard Sheridan's 1799 *Pizarro*, and in John Augustus Stone's 1829 *Metamora*. The figure of Caliban similarly journeys through Atlantic drama, appearing in Dryden and D'Avenant's 1667 *Enchanted Island*, in Isaac Bickerstaff's 1768 *The Padlock*, in the pantomime adaptations of Robinson Crusoe, and even in the gyrations of blackface minstrelsy's Jim Crow. Following these strands gives the study, to my mind, one of its great virtues, namely, its understanding that the dramas of Atlantic modernity did not simply travel and adapt. They did, of course. But more importantly, they also seem to be constantly doubling (and doubling back on) themselves, constantly re-enacting themselves, stepping outside of themselves, re-gathering the old in new ways, and reformulating themselves in each new moment. In framing those complex performance histories, this book offers early Americanists and Atlanticists a clearly defined conceptual vocabulary. Dillon helpfully revisits even apparently basic terms: "New World"—not precisely the same as "Atlantic"—is here a version of "American" that acknowledges the (inter)colonial, the imperial, the transnational. In short, it refuses to take the national as the only framework for understanding these performances. While the study is primarily anglophone, non-English and a-linguistic practices do show up at key moments, and one can imagine attending to the performative commons across an even broader cultural geography. Crucially, the study does not make or imply arguments that inflexibly attach these cultural practices to national traditions. "Drama," for Dillon, has both referential and constitutive ("mimetic" and "ontic") dimensions. Clearly, scripts and defining performances matter some, but performances are constantly adapted, revised, and remade in response to local exigencies. Performances emerge from mashed-up traditions on their way to becoming something new in the constant Atlantic recirculation of people, goods, discourses, and gestures. And they occur amidst a welter of offstage performances, a rich collection of

voices, acts, moves, costumes, and props performing the everyday life of the Atlantic world. It's a lesson learned well from theater history and performance studies, but perhaps most strikingly from the intertwined critical histories of Native American performance, African American theater, and blackface minstrelsy. *New World Drama* seems intimately informed by the perspectives of scholars such as Daphne Brooks, Monica Miller, Saidiya Hartman, Philip Deloria, W. T. Lhamon, and Eric Lott—deeply attuned to the ways in which non-European bodies performed and were made to perform, how forms of blackness and indigeneity were invented, displayed, watched, and suppressed. *New World Drama's* account of Atlantic performance ties economic to cultural explanations, and the colonial to the national, through the concept of a “performative commons,” Dillon's phrase that, to my mind, focuses the book's most distinctive contribution to early American and Atlantic studies. Thinking through the commons by way of E. P. Thompson and the more recent work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the phrase offers an alternative to the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, avoiding the restrictions of literacy-based practices of bourgeois commercial culture. Dillon's performative commons seems broader, if not completely inclusive, and features the constant rehearsal of uneven and indecisive contests on constantly shifting terrain. The performative commons offers open-ended collectivity, belonging, demotic power, and unruly energy. Lest we romanticize it, of course, the performative commons also emerges from a colonial economic system, and it can just as easily share in modernity's new practices of social segmentation, political oppression, and economic exploitation. Precisely for this reason, to my mind, the phrase is generative and useful. It evokes a way of reading culture through economic and environmental problems—issues of scarcity, sustainability, ecological impact, and questions of ownership, use, and distribution of resources that seem increasingly important both today and in the long eighteenth century. *New World Drama*, then, explains some of the stranger and more complex moments in modernity's Atlantic performance history through an ambitious and frankly inspiring reframing of the relationships among cultural, economic, and political power. This study presents the kind of creative synthesis and thoughtful working-out of big ideas that will make it required reading for scholars of early American and eighteenth-century Atlantic culture, and for readers interested in new approaches to the intersections of performance, textuality, and social history.

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