



DAVID ROMÁN

## PERFORMANCE IN AMERICA

CONTEMPORARY U.S. CULTURE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS



**P E R F O R M A N C E   I N   A M E R I C A**

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# **PERFORMANCE IN AMERICA**

CONTEMPORARY U.S. CULTURE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

**David Román**

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**FOR SUE-ELLEN CASE**



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## INTRODUCTION

### Here and Now

*Performance in America* argues for the significance of the performing arts in contemporary U.S. culture by challenging the conventional wisdom that performance is marginal to the national imaginary. The book takes seriously the role that the performing arts play in shaping American culture, especially around ideologies of race, citizenship, and national identity. Through a series of case studies drawn from contemporary culture, the book demonstrates the vitality of theatre, performance, and dance to local, regional, and national communities and poses the question: What might be gained by placing performance at the center of current national inquiries and debates?

In order to begin answering this question, the book proposes a way of thinking about performance as a practice that both shapes and informs a space that I call the “contemporary.” I here understand the contemporary as a critical temporality that engages the past without being held captive to it and that instantiates the present without defining a future. Performance proves an especially effective means to engage the contemporary in that artists and audiences are constituted and composed as a provisional collective in a particular temporal moment and in a specific localized space. They may or may not share the same history or future, but in the moment during which they compose a group, they enact and perform a temporary and conditional we. Performance’s liveness and impermanence allow for a process of exchange—between artists and audiences, between the past and the

present—where new social formations emerge. These new social formations constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being and belonging assumed both in the national culture and in the subcultural worlds that form a part of it. While *Performance in America* is especially drawn to understanding how performance critically reinvents what is meant by “America,” it is equally committed to understanding how the contemporary engages with the histories that precede and help produce it. The book understands the contemporary as that which both carries and reinvents particular moments and performances from the past.

The three keywords of my project—*performance*, *America*, and *contemporary*—converge in the book’s various case studies. While drawn from contemporary American performance, each case study holds a different set of relations to, and investments in, these three terms. Rather than attempt to unify these keywords in such a way as to prescribe the work that contemporary performance in America enacts, I wish to open up interpretive possibilities, rather than foreclose them. Although the book is organized under a central theme that showcases performance’s critical engagement with contemporary American culture, my consideration of the contemporary results in retrieving previous historical moments and performances that might seem anachronistic to the book’s mission: *Performance in America*’s archive is expansive without being exhaustive, and it includes unlikely sources and events.

The primary archive consists of work performed between 1994 and 2004, a ten-year period during which dramatic and unanticipated events unfolded throughout the nation and the world. From the profound results of innovative HIV/AIDS treatments introduced in the United States in the mid-1990s to the changing demographics of the American population at the end of the twentieth century, from the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to the ongoing effects of the second Iraqi war, performance engages the contemporary as a dialogue about the country, its people, and its history. In staging these conversations, performance creates its audiences as critical subjects of this now; the provisional gathering that characterizes performance opens up a space in the public sphere that might challenge or refute local or national sentiments prioritized by other media. This moment, although local and

temporal, should not be underestimated: not only does it rehearse new forms of sociality but those involved experience it in the process of the event itself.<sup>1</sup>

Yet not all of the performances examined here engage the national culture with equal force or overtness. While this book mostly preoccupies itself with performances that address many of the pressing issues of our times, it also is interested in considering performances with less explicitly global implications. The focus in these moments rests on performances emerging out of particular communities or demographics and those exploring and mining questions of identity and affiliation. I am especially interested in the ways certain artists mark themselves as historical subjects whose genealogies might be found outside of traditional systems of identification and belonging. The performances I address here are located in critically undervalued genres such as cabaret, female impersonation, and Broadway entertainment. These performances also tell us much about contemporary American culture, even if their political themes appear less transparent than those more directly aligned with national political issues. As much as they engage contemporary matters, they also enable a reimagination of history and genealogy, both individual and communal, and demonstrate how performance functions as an archive itself. Throughout the book I thus explore the various connections that the contemporary makes with the past, not as a means to anchor the contemporary within an accepted tradition that needs to be either rescued or upheld, but as a means to trace the remains of history within our present moment so as to better understand that present. My project constitutes as much a historicization of the contemporary as a reflection on the relationship between the past and the present, thus exploring the dynamic relationship between performance, history, and contemporary U.S. culture.

*Performance in America* imagines performance as relevant and meaningful, and as fully capable of enacting cultural critique within multiple public spheres. It refutes the notion that the advocacy of performance is something merely romantic, as if a belief in the arts is a form of benign naivety, well intended but ultimately misinformed. In this sense, *Performance in America* can be understood as a polemical project. It argues for its subject matter so that others might be persuaded to



better understand the work of performance, what it does and what it achieves. The book remains unapologetic in its commitment to the arts. The work's thesis—that performance in America matters—is meant to be provocative.

Throughout *Performance in America* readers will be invited to sample different events that make the case for performance as a specific form of cultural critique and engagement. I draw my examples from the worlds of dance, theatre, and music, discussing work performed in local, regional, and national venues. The performing arts provide multiple entry points into many of the key questions and concerns that constitute and preoccupy the contemporary, questions about history and politics, citizenship and society, culture and nation. They often articulate positions that shift the current conversations already in place on these issues. The performing arts not only provide a critical space to rehearse key questions of our time; they also allow us to renegotiate the way these questions are conceived of in the first place. In this sense, the performing arts might be understood as embodied theories that help audiences restructure or, at the very least, reimagine their social selves.

*Performance in America* archives performances that embody what cultural theorist Raymond Williams describes as “new structures of feeling,” modes of experience that begin to shift individual and communal lives. Williams takes special interest in the ways that values are dynamically experienced and felt, that particular historical meanings and values emerge. Literature and the arts play an important role in this process. He writes:

The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming. . . . as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not as derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced.<sup>2</sup>

In several of his writings, it is worth remembering, Williams relied on the archive of theatre and drama to illuminate many of his most important ideas, and he devoted an entire book to the study of modern tragedy. *Performance in America* builds on Williams's work on performance, history, and politics, as well as their relation to cultural change. And it privileges performance as a charismatic cultural site that enables new forms of sociality and alternative models of being.

Performance, as Jill Dolan has argued, is uniquely positioned to do such work. "Live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world," she writes.<sup>3</sup> Given its convictions about the power of theatre and performance, my work is interested in identifying performances that advocate for the theatre's capacity to shape daily life. I am drawn to texts that strive to make a difference, that promote a progressive point of view, and that engage in contemporary concerns. I am also committed to calling attention to performances that are innovative and creative, and that move their artistic medium forward. Politics and aesthetics are mutually interdependent, and my book aims to think through their relation.

The individual chapters offer case studies that provide specific readings of local performances in particular moments in time. Beyond calling attention to individual artists and productions, the chapters contextualize how performance participates in far-reaching conversations within contemporary U.S. culture and demonstrate how these performances can be understood historically. I begin with a chapter on dance and consider the choreography of two of the most interesting artists from the dance world: Bill T. Jones and Neil Greenberg. Jones and Greenberg have been creating dance since the 1980s, but I highlight the work they produced in the mid-1990s. The work of these artists, both HIV-positive, marks a shift in AIDS in light of the new drug treatments that became available in this period, while offering a radically different way of thinking about the crisis. This chapter, entitled "Not about AIDS," follows on my own earlier work, in part by insisting on AIDS as ongoing and unresolved, both in the United States and abroad. Despite the tendency to bracket AIDS from the political priorities of

queer communities in the 1990s, especially in light of an increasing interest in marriage and the military, both choreographers, burdened with AIDS materially and symbolically, pushed the discussion of living with HIV forward through their own creative corporal moves.

Chapter 2, “Visa Denied: Chay Yew’s Theatre of Immigration and the Performance of Asian American History,” shifts the focus to Los Angeles and the new wave of immigrants who have changed the racial and cultural demographic of Southern California in recent decades. I am interested in mapping what I call the “vernacular imaginary,” a mode of experience that departs from official narratives of citizenship in the United States and the nationalist myths they promote. These myths circulate globally and inspire many immigrants to abandon their homelands for what they imagine will be a better life in America. In this context, I look at *A Beautiful Country*, a collaborative production between the playwright Chay Yew and the community-based Cornerstone Theatre, that offered, according to the show’s promotional materials, “one hundred and fifty years of Asian American history through dance, drama, and drag.” The site-specific performance of *A Beautiful Country* in L.A.’s Chinatown district opens up new critical possibilities for thinking about migration and exile, citizenship and belonging, and the costs of each for those who traverse these borders and boundaries.

The next chapter, “Latino Genealogies: Broadway and Beyond—The Case of John Leguizamo,” moves from the vernacular worlds of the Asian diaspora in America and the localized production of a community arts project in a Chinatown school auditorium to the bright lights of the Great White Way and the premiere of *Freak*, John Leguizamo’s one-person show at the Cort Theatre on Broadway. I here wish to consider what Leguizamo’s hugely successful Broadway debut might tell us about contemporary Latino life in the United States. I discuss the material conditions that enabled Leguizamo—and, by extension, Latino audiences—to arrive on Broadway, and the cultural implications of such a move. I also offer a reading of *Freak* that attends to the models of kinship and genealogy that Leguizamo promotes in his show. *Freak* both pays tribute to a history of pan-Latino popular mainstream performance and traces a historical trajectory that offers new models for imagining Latino identity.

The chapters on AIDS and dance, Asian American theatre and immigration, and Latino performance and cultural history each showcase centrally the ways that performance intervenes in contemporary national concerns. As such, they highlight how particular communities find in performance a means to critically engage and reconstitute the experience of living in contemporary America. These chapters thus combine to form a cluster that illustrates the gains of imagining performance as central to the national culture. But they also begin to articulate the book's interest in the contemporary's relation to history. Each of the book's chapters will examine both of these themes—the political, the historical—and address the ways in which they are related. In the chapter on AIDS and dance, for example, I situate the discussion not only in the political context of the mid-1990s but also on the performers' relationship to their own bodies, themselves an archive of lived experience, social movement, and artistic expression. The chapters on Asian American theatre and Latino performance ruminate more broadly on questions of history and genealogy, even as they attend to the specifics of the contemporary culture in which they are now posed—I point out how contemporary performances provide an archive of previously forgotten or neglected histories. The two chapters document minoritarian relations to physical places and their symbolic capital—urban downtowns, theatre districts, commercial venues—as well as the high stakes involved in claiming rights to these locations in the contested public sphere. At the same time, all three chapters archive histories of resilience, many of which are found in the history of the performing arts.

This theme of performance as itself an embodied archive becomes more prominent in the following two chapters that foreground the ways in which questions of gender and sexuality contribute to the book's larger themes. These chapters expand the book's ongoing discussion of history and performance by focusing on work that provides a glimpse of previously contemporary performances in America as recorded in theatre history, Hollywood film, and popular music. As these chapters highlight, when the book takes an archival turn, the contemporary returns us in unpredictable ways to history. Admittedly, this makes for an unexpected move for a book on the contemporary, but it nonethe-

less proves a critical one if we wish to more fully understand how the contemporary is constituted in American culture. Chapters 4 and 5 also begin to answer the following question: Where in contemporary American culture are the arts acknowledged?

In Chapter 4, "Archival Drag; or, The Afterlife of Performance," I consider the work of contemporary female impersonators who revive the legacy of performers from a different era and whose work within queer subcultures preserves the role of the arts. If the previous chapters moved backward in time from contemporary performances to the historical moments they recall, this chapter begins with a distant historical moment so as to move forward to the contemporary. I begin in the eighteenth century with the celebrated British tragedienne Sarah Siddons to trace the ways theatre, gender, and celebrity operated in eighteenth-century British culture, and how that cultural influence shaped the popular culture of Hollywood in the 1950s. From there I look at the influence of 1950s Hollywood film on gay popular performers of the 1980s, ending with a discussion of the legacy of this archival drag on contemporary female impersonators. I am interested in tracing a genealogy of performance that also serves as an archival system of popular performance. The chapter concludes with speculations on the potential loss of this archive, carried across the centuries through embodied performances.

"Cabaret as Cultural History: Popular Song and Public Performance in America," the fifth chapter, focuses on cabaret performance and is similarly concerned with how contemporary performance functions as an archive of a historical past. Here, I make the case that cabaret performance provides one of the few venues in public culture where American cultural history is passed on and preserved. It is also a genre in which women and, in particular, older women, emerge as the main practitioners. Looking at the anecdotal narratives that many of these performers introduce between songs, I argue that this pattern serves as a form of cultural memory, both personal and national, public and private. Rather than simply dismiss cabaret as an elite genre, I approach it through the lens of its archival function of preserving the songbooks of American popular composers and the personal and professional experience of the women who have sung them. In particular, I discuss three

women who arrived in New York in the 1940s and found themselves performing one-woman shows on the Broadway stage nearly sixty years later: Elaine Stritch, Bea Arthur, and Barbara Cook. But I also look at a later generation of women singers who perform in the celebrated cabaret venues of New York, including Mary Cleere Haran, Donna McKechnie, and Andrea Marcovicci. Taken together, the chapters on drag and cabaret suggest how contemporary American performance involves a serious interrogation of the past, and that the performances themselves involve a critical reassessment of American nostalgia. The legacies that these artists perform in their work rupture the primacy of patriotic history by summoning other sentiments, other trajectories, of popular culture.

My book concludes with a return to the discussion of performances embedded in overt political themes whose ongoing impact remains in effect. This final section unites the topics introduced throughout the book's other chapters while showcasing the important role the performing arts hold in the national culture. "Tragedy and the Performance Arts in the Wake of September 11, 2001," addresses the response of the performing arts to the terrorist attack of 9/11. The chapter departs from the earlier writing in the book in that it is composed in the first person and as an account of my own experiences of the events. I begin by discussing the idea of tragedy and how it structures contemporary life before considering how the performing arts, especially in New York City, became a central component to the national economic and symbolic recovery. I survey a wide range of performance events—Broadway musicals, fund-raisers for the families of fallen firefighters, and classical concerts—all in the wake of September 11. I conclude with a discussion of new work engaged with global geopolitical events including U.S. military actions in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Iraq.

In the book's afterword, "The Time of Your Life," I take one final archival turn by discussing the 2002 revival of William Saroyan's 1939 play *The Time of Your Life* by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, perhaps the most esteemed theatre company in the United States. The production was restaged in 2004 in premier regional theatres in Seattle and San Francisco. I juxtapose the play's initial contemporary moment of the late 1930s and early 1940s—the Great Depression, the eve of World

War II—with the current contemporary to see what Saroyan’s work might offer us now. The book concludes in 2004, the year in which it was completed: the ten-year period between the 1994 dances of Bill T. Jones and Neil Greenberg in New York City and the 2004 performances of the Steppenwolf revival of Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life* in Seattle and San Francisco forms the book’s contemporary. The chapters appear chronologically, moving forward in time sequentially before arriving at the time of the now. The chapters can also be read as an archive of this period, one that includes the historical materials summoned to enrich the book’s concern with the contemporary. The same can be said for the book’s collection of images, many of which are also historical. I use images less as illustrations of the performances, although they help in that regard as well, and more to expand the book’s scope to include a visual component meant to complement the writing. The images help contextualize the contemporary in historical and visual terms. Performance’s impermanence is challenged by its ephemera, which paradoxically can be the evidence of its loss. These remains, however, document more than simply the constraints of writing performance history even in the contemporary period. The images and other ephemera included in the book provide yet another entry point into thinking about contemporary performance in America, its contribution to the national culture, and its engagement with the historical past.

## ON THE CONTEMPORARY

The book’s claim for the vitality of the contemporary performing arts necessitates an interrogation of the concept of the contemporary and its relation to history. When is the contemporary? For whom does the term hold meaning? And what work does it do when it is employed? In thinking through these questions, we begin to challenge the amorphous quality of the term *contemporary*. Throughout the book, I call attention to the contemporary period’s virtually instantaneous movement from the present to the immediate past, a process that shapes the historical context of the period and underlines the philosophical challenges that come with thinking about history. “The question of ‘the contemporary’ is,” as Thomas Docherty has written, “almost by defi-

nition, a problem of representation.”<sup>4</sup> He explains: “A presentation of the present must always involve a representing, which has the effect of marking the present moment with the passage of time.” But like most scholars drawn to the “question of the contemporary,” Docherty focuses on literature, philosophy, and theory. Interest in the contemporary rarely focuses on the performing arts, a regrettable omission given the temporal attributes of performance that lend themselves to discussions of representation and time. I argue that performance’s own nowness, which is to say its own ephemeral nature, provides an entrance into contemplating these questions around the contemporary and the interpretive and political issues attached to them. The act of writing itself delivers the contemporary into history. *Performance in America* is interested in addressing the temporality of performance, the historiography of theatre, and the practices of theatre criticism.

Scrutinizing the idea of the contemporary enriches the discussion of both recent and current American performances. Despite its ubiquitous usage, the term *contemporary* remains surprisingly undertheorized.<sup>5</sup> This undertheorization allows for the term’s continued usage as a shorthand for something assumed but never explained. *Contemporary* is often used interchangeably with other literary or philosophical terms such as *postmodern* that set it up as a historical period, an aesthetic category, or both at once. My interest in the contemporary moves away from these discussions and focuses on the idea of the present as a time in which an audience imagines itself within a fluid and nearly suspended temporal condition, living in a moment not yet in the past and not yet in the future, yet a period we imagine as having some power to shape our relation to both history and futurity. My thinking here is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s ideas on historical materialism, where the relationship between history and the present moment is put under pressure, demystified, and fully explored. With Benjamin’s practice of historical materialism, the present becomes “the time of the now.” In this poetic phrase, introduced in his influential and much-quoted “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin sets out to conjure a process in which the historian breaks away from understanding history as a sequence of events and instead “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”<sup>6</sup> History, therefore, does not make



for a story of progress, where each period sequentially improves on the previous historical period. Benjamin's time of the now is set in an intimate yet unpredictable relation to the historical past. I argue that performance both embodies Benjamin's time of the now and exploits it to great effect.

The undertheorization of the term *contemporary* also allows it to circulate widely but amorphously. It enables the critical derision of the contemporary as something either ahistorical or unproven. Critical efforts to theorize the contemporary are often accused of being "presentist": a focus on the contemporary is presumed to come at the expense of history, as if the contemporary could only be understood as antagonistic to the past, or in a mutually exclusive relationship to it, two positions I contest throughout the book. The charge of presentism reprimands the critic for presumably holding little interest in or knowledge of history, as if the contemporary emerged outside of history or ideology; for understanding history in ways only valid and appropriate to the current period in which the interpretation is framed, as if the contemporary were incapable of historical nuance; and for overvaluing the contemporary with positivist notions of historical progress, as if the contemporary were the culmination of history. *Performance in America* refutes these charges, providing a model for how to think about contemporary productions in both historical and political terms.

In terms of performance, the anxiety around the focus on the contemporary period as a sign of presentist bias also shapes the cultural unease around new American theatre. Since contemporary performance has yet to stand the test of time, critics import previous cultural values to assess it. But contemporary performance becomes shortchanged in this process, as do contemporary audiences who bring other interests to their theatregoing practices. The contemporary exists as neither the future nor the past, although its links to each of these frames of time define it. It raises suspicions of its relevance since it cannot be mined nostalgically for past insight or tradition, and it cannot be forecast as necessarily significant for future generations.

Throughout this project I take on the allegation of presentism in two ways. First, I demonstrate how contemporary performance is itself already embedded in a historical archive of past performances that

help contextualize the work in history. In this way, the contemporary participates in an ongoing dialogue with previously contemporary works now relegated to literary history, the theatrical past, or cultural memory. Although the case studies I address are drawn from the period 1994–2004, they lead me to examine other historical periods and practices, including eighteenth-century British theatrical and visual culture, nineteenth-century American popular entertainments, the songbooks of the Great Depression in the earlier half of the twentieth century, and the 1950s and the golden age of Hollywood. Theatre and performance scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Joseph Roach, and Diana Taylor, among others, have made explicit the relationships between theatre and performance and history and memory. “Drama,” writes Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*, “more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory.”<sup>7</sup> Carlson’s important project on theatre and memory focuses on the material aspects of theatre production—actors, scripts, buildings—and on how these elements become repositories of meaning for audiences over time. While Carlson’s ideas help dilute the binary between the contemporary and the past as specifically addressed in theatre, Roach and Taylor consider performance in the broadest sense to include a wide range of cultural practices outside of the traditional theatre, examining its relationship to cultural memory.

In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach demonstrates how performance and cultural memory are not simply linked but in fact form a genealogy indispensable to understanding the circum-Atlantic world. For Roach, “genealogies of performance also attend to ‘counter-memories,’ or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire* goes to great lengths to differentiate written and embodied histories, especially as they serve to commemorate a contested past, and demonstrates how performance functions as a “system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowl-

edge.”<sup>9</sup> The efforts of Carlson, Roach, and Taylor to understand how performance functions in relation to history and memory shape my own project’s explorations of the relationship between the contemporary and the past.

While many works in contemporary theatre summon past performances in order to conjure the ghosts of previous cultural moments, other works invest little interest in anything but the present moment. My second argument against presentism offers a defense of cultural productions whose primary interests fall outside of traditional aesthetic models or social concepts of theatre. These works might intervene in an immediate social or historical problem, participate in a larger cultural inquiry where performance is one of many modes of address, or hold minimal regard for the business-as-usual standard practices of the theatre. Here, in these performances, the emphasis falls on audience relations and the politics of spectatorship.

One of the reasons that the contemporary remains undertheorized is because the term seems to fold into its own hermeneutics. In other words, the contemporary cannot be explained because it is still in process. Once it passes, it is no longer the contemporary moment, but the immediate past. *Performance in America* sets out to redress this concern by theorizing the contemporary in historical and political contexts and by divesting it of its attachment to teleological time, a project that feminist theorists have already successfully undertaken. According to Robyn Wiegman, teleological time “covets the ideas of origins and succession” and follows a model that builds on what Judith Roof has described as the “generational legacy” paradigm, in which the present remains continually indebted to the past.<sup>10</sup> For Wiegman and Roof, the generational legacy model proves problematic given the reproductive logic it assumes. “Generation’s reproductive familial narrative assumes a linear, chronological time where the elements that come first appear to cause elements that come later,” Roof explains.<sup>11</sup> My book aligns itself with these scholars’ efforts to rethink the politics of time as a relation to the past that is not causal or direct, but unpredictable and nonlinear.

Following feminist models, my book likewise refutes the reproductive mandate of the generational paradigm that sees the contemporary as indebted to the past and bound to the future, a model of history

whose deference to heteronormative biases seems especially problematic. I find the power of the contemporary precisely in its nowness and argue that the significance of contemporary performance need not be based either in tradition or futurity, both biases that privilege heteronormative models of cultural reproduction. Such models value the contemporary only as the product of already legitimate cultural traditions or as the potential ideal for an imagined future. Neither of these positions prioritizes the contemporary's contribution to the time of the historical now. Rather than holding the contemporary to a standard that insists on its utility to future generations, cultural critics should consider how the contemporary speaks to its own historical moment. *Performance in America* challenges the presumption that the contemporary is obligated to recognize the past or gesture to the future. Here is where the book's indebtedness to queer theory is strongest. Queer theory has taught us to question the systems of normativity that govern daily life and culture.<sup>12</sup> Again, this does not mean to say that the contemporary or its study is ahistorical or outside of time. I am simply suggesting that the contemporary performing arts should not need to prove relevant to future generations in order to be valued today, nor should they be obliged to build on conventional models of tradition to be deemed significant. Rather, the contemporary should be evaluated primarily in terms of how it serves its immediate audience. Inspired by work in queer and feminist theory, *Performance in America* promotes different methods of reading the contemporary and writing theatre history.

I have organized the book around a set of related questions, each springing from my central thesis about the vitality of the performing arts to the national culture. These questions include: In what ways and at what moments does performance emerge as a progressive site of cultural production? What does performance achieve that differentiates it from other artistic practices or other forms of cultural engagement? Who invests in the performing arts and for what reasons? How do contemporary performing artists themselves understand their role in local and national cultures? How do contemporary performances engage with the historical past without replicating the norms and ideals of previous eras? What does performance tell us about American culture?

Along with its interrogation of the contemporary, *Performance in*

*America* demonstrates how new work in the performing arts will now and then return to past artistic practices and customs, though not in the teleological or positivist sense of exceeding, advancing, or improving on the past. Such a rehearsal of previous performances positions contemporary performance as a repository of American culture and theatre history. In this sense, contemporary performance can be understood as both an archive of past theatrical moments and an ongoing engagement with, and revival of, this history.

Much of the work I consider in *Performance in America* emerges out of minority and subcultural communities in the United States. These queer, racialized, and immigrant populations have alternative histories and often even oppositional relations to the sexual and racial normatives of conventional America, including its theatre. In *Performance in America* I am interested in publicizing the work of those artists whose commitment to the performing arts refutes the various antitheatrical discourses that permeate contemporary American culture. *Performance in America* also examines undertheorized and undervalued sites of performance including cabaret performance, the Broadway musical, and commercial theatre.

Antitheatricity in the contemporary period takes many forms, from outright efforts to stifle artistic practice to economic cuts to funding sources for the arts to efforts to censor works imagined as offensive to theatre audiences. But there also exist antitheatrical biases that trivialize the performing arts and their audiences as irrelevant or bourgeois. Such bias knows no political affiliation; it is as likely to be found among self-professed leftists as it is among conservatives. While social conservatives might prove more anxious about arts funding and are more likely to stifle alternative forms of artistic expression, progressives practice their own form of bias by devaluing and underestimating the work of the performing arts in general. Lack of engagement with the arts perhaps constitutes the Left's most subtle and prominent form of antitheatrical bias. *Performance in America* sets out to redress this problem by examining a wide range of performance practices, venues, and audiences. Despite the emphasis on community-based, alternative, and progressive performance, the book is also committed to examining mainstream theatre. Here I focus especially on traditional genres and

commercial venues, and the possibilities they offer to initiate critical conversations with innovative artistic forms and not-for-profit performance spaces. Thus the book refuses to place community-based performance and commercial theatre in an oppositional or antithetical relation. *Performance in America* attends to the various forms of cultural contestation available within a rich spectrum of the performing arts. For this reason the book, while primarily focused on theatre, also discusses music and dance.

*Performance in America* examines diverse theatrical performances and spectatorial communities shaped by race and ethnicity, class and region, and sexuality and citizenship. The book is situated at the crossroads of the new American studies—especially in terms of the rigorous reimagining of American identity and culture that have transformed the field—and the new theatre studies—where the reconceptualization of performance has inspired a new interest in the performing arts. The book does not position performance as either oppositional or acquiescent to mainstream American cultural practices. Rather, it sets out to understand how different communities might find in performance a way to embody and articulate new social formations within contemporary American culture. *Performance in America* promotes contemporary performance both as a critical engagement with the historical past and as a fresh interrogation of, or necessary separation from, the past through new articulations of culture and identity.

The next two sections of this chapter, “The Unacknowledged Drama of American Studies,” and “The Romance with the Indigenous,” will address the broader issues at stake in the fields of American studies and theatre and performance studies. I argue that the critical bibliographies of both these fields reveal particular assumptions about performance in America in need of challenging. *Performance in America* sets out to revive certain debates in both these fields, debates about performance and America that often occur simultaneously and generally without the other field’s direct acknowledgment. It also attempts to consider the kinds of artistic works valorized by scholars in these related fields. At first, I will look closely at some of the ways that American studies and performance studies have engaged each other, and at the limits of this engagement. At stake in this section is the tension between