ENVELOPING WORLDS

TOWARD A DISCOURSE OF IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCE

EDITED BY E. B. HUNTER AND SCOTT MAGELSSEN

Enveloping Worlds

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For Alan, Lochran, and Parc
E.B.H.

For Theresa, Trygg, and Ari
S.M.

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Part III: The Pursuit of Happiness

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The genesis of *Enveloping Worlds* can be traced to January 2020, when E. B. visited Seattle for the Modern Language Association convention and to research ideas for a mobile augmented reality project on the history of cities and their arts movements. Scott, based in Seattle, joined E. B.'s intel-gathering, which took them behind the scenes of Seattle's Museum of Popular Culture (MoPop) and into the Meta Reality Labs/Oculus headquarters. Special thanks are owed for our many productive hangouts that week with the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' curator of music and recorded sound, Jonathan Hiam; MoPop's curator, Jacob McMurry; and Meta's audio experiences lead, Scott Selfon.

As we mused over the throughline of *American-ness* that attended these conversations, we wondered how such a perspective might contribute to emergent discourses on immersivity in theater and performance. This question inspired us to launch a working session for the 2020 conference of the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR). This working session, also titled "Enveloping Worlds," was the first in ASTR's history to use immersive performance as its primary theoretical frame. As was the case for most in-person events that year, the global COVID-19 pandemic meant the cancellation of ASTR's 2020 conference. In lieu of meeting on-site, conference organizers invited working sessions to meet online in November 2020, and, lockdowns permitting, to reconvene in person in 2021 with a renewed call for papers and an expanded participant list. A ray of sunshine in a grueling marathon, the two-year incubation of our working session gave us considerable time to marinate the ideas presented in our first call.

We are immensely grateful for the voices that shaped what would become *Enveloping Worlds* in these remote and in-person ASTR working-

group sessions. The participants who gathered online in the fall of 2020 included Lauren Beck, Randi Evans, Barbara Wallace Grossman, Wade Hollingshaus, Adrienne Mackey, Erin Mee, Cindy Rosenthal, Wanda Strukus, Amanda Rose Villarreal, Sean Bartley, Chloë Rae Edmonson, Laura Ferdinand, and Susan Tenneriello. At ASTR 2021 in San Diego, new participants (or folks who sent abstracts that proved instrumental to our thinking, even if they could not join us in person) were Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, James Ball III, Gina Bloom, Mackenzie Bounds, Christin Essin, Bertie Ferdman, and Celia Pearce. The edited collection continued to take shape at various events along the conference circuit. At the 2022 Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in Detroit, E. B. and contributors Bethany Hughes and Christin Essin shared iterations of their chapters at a panel titled "Stepping into the Past, Rehearsing the Future: Immersivity as Reparative Practice" (chaired and moderated by Scott). Laura Ferdinand shared a version of her essay "Encountering the Old South in 'Atlanta's Most Modern Department Store'" at a special plenary session of ASTR 2022 dedicated to the best papers that came out of the preceding year's working sessions. Thank you to all of our conference conveners and organizers, and to all of our interlocutors and supporters in our many audiences.

In the wake of a long incubation and in light of the rapid escalation in remote immersive performance practices that pandemic lockdowns and theater closures catalyzed, we recognized that these conversations warranted an expansion to perspectives beyond those of our ASTR participants, as well as a wider circulation as a published collection. *Enveloping Worlds* has been deepened and strengthened by the essays of contributors who joined the project after the initial ASTR working sessions: Jennifer Kokai and Tom Robson, Michael Chemers and Mike Sell, Michelle Liu Carriger, Michelle Gibbs, and Bethany Hughes. We thank these individuals for generously taking up our invitation to add their excellent scholarship to this project.

Inevitably, no edited volume dedicated to a particular aspect of theater and performance studies can explore every angle, nuance, or case study. Despite this inevitability, we are mindful of the structural inequalities and disparities in access that delimit which voices are amplified in and by published scholarship. While this collection includes essays on a number of perspectives that, historically, have been underrepresented in or excluded from scholarship, the contributions here represent only some of the diversity and diasporic concerns that are uniquely American.

We hope this collection can inspire continued scholarly engagement with the ways in which immersive performance intersects with historically excluded identities and experiences. Similarly, while *Enveloping Worlds* adds a set of distinctly American iterations to a discourse that has focused largely on UK-based companies to date, there is more work to be done to draw attention to productions, events, and attractions in the Middle East, in Africa and Asia, in Australia and the Pacific, in the Americas outside the US, and everywhere artists are engaging in performance practices that envelop their audiences in worlds that delight, inform, and challenge them.

Finally, some readers may wonder why our collection does not engage theater and performance experiences that implement virtual and/or augmented reality. Certainly, these are related questions, as E. B. and others on our author list have explored in previous or in-progress projects that examine how spatial computing technologies disrupt familiar theatrical structures, such as geographic localness or the subject positionality of audience members. For this collection, however, the most cohesive structure emerged from focusing on immersive performance as a live event grounded by the physicality of real-time, US-based interaction between artists and audiences.

We are, as always, grateful to our families for their support, their love, and their patience with us. Many thanks to our department chairs, Geoff Korf at University of Washington's School of Drama, and at Washington University in St. Louis, Pannill Camp and Julia Walker. A big shout-out to our colleagues for their advice and cheerleading, especially Amanda Doxtater, Olivia Noble Gunn, Jasmine Mahmoud, Stefka Mihaylova, Rob Rhee, Daniela K. Rosner, Adair Rounthwaite, Anne Searcy, and Ellwood Wiggins, as well as Will West, Sara Monoson, Ariel Rogers, Dassia Posner, Tracy Davis, and Harvey Young, who not only read multiple iterations of portions herein, but also introduced us several years ago and set us on this collaborative journey.

Support for Scott's work on this volume came from his Donald E. Petersen Professorship. Many thanks to Gabriel Solis, divisional dean of the arts at UW, and the Kreielsheimer-Jones Grant he awarded to fund the open-access e-book edition of *Enveloping Worlds*. On campus, support for E. B.'s work on this volume came from a faculty fellowship at the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis; off campus, much gratitude is owed to Sharon and Andy Bradley and to Callie Hunter for countless hours and overnights of taking care of their grandsons/lit-

tle brothers, and to Dylan Hunter and Shannon Flaherty for their many insights from the trenches of making immersive work.

Finally, enormous thanks to our acquiring editor at the University of Michigan Press, the extraordinary LeAnn Fields, who was our shepherd and our champion from initial conversations in the book exhibit hall at ASTR conferences through the final board approval of the manuscript. Over her decades of leadership at the press, LeAnn's editorial vision, advocacy, and mentorship have revolutionized theater and performance studies and established a strong foundation for the field's continued growth in the twenty-first century. We are honored that *Enveloping Worlds* was included in the last set of projects LeAnn saw through acquisitions before her retirement in early 2024. And, though we only got to work with her for a few months, we are tremendously grateful to LeAnn's successor, Sara Jo Cohen, for ushering the collection through its last stages to publication. Many thanks to other members of the team at the University of Michigan Press who worked with us throughout the process, including Haley Winkle, Danielle Coty-Fattal, Marcia LaBrenz, Michael Hylton, Daniel Otis, and Shiraz Abdullahi Gallab, and the many workers whose names we may not know but were essential to the publication, distribution, and marketing of this volume.

E. B. Hunter, St. Louis

Scott Magelssen, Seattle

Introduction

The Ascendance of the Immersive

In the *New York Times*' "33 Ways to Remember the 2010s" retrospective, theater critic Ben Brantley reflects on how, "[a]round the globe, an ever-multiplying slew of immersive productions" characterized the early twenty-first-century theater scene.[1] Over the subsequent decade, this slew expanded into a genre. Today, immersive work has moved resoundingly into the mainstream, through overtly theatrical contexts such as *Sleep No More*[2]—the inciting event and persistent center of this expanding universe (per Brantley)—and art installations like *Immersive Van Gogh*, the "frenzy" for which art critic Brian Boucher ascribes to its appearance in the Netflix show *Emily in Paris*.[3] As the editors of this collection, we tend to agree with theater theorist Brian Herrera's proposition in a 2021 episode of *On TAP*, the field's primary scholarly podcast, that "if the nineteenth century saw the ascendence of the audio, and the twentieth century the ascendence of the televisual, the twenty-first century is the ascendance of the immersive."[4]

But what is "immersive"? A formal aesthetic? A set of practices? A marketing buzzword? Substantive academic inquiry into these questions can be traced to 2013 and the release of Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*.[5] The first book-length foray into immersive work, Machon's text became a foundational contribution to the scholarly discourse on immersive theatrical practices, due in no small part to the eleven-point scale it proposes for determining the relative immersivity of a production. In the intervening years, a handful of incisive books have taken up aspects of immersivity in theatrical practice.[6] A throughline of these inquiries, however, is their

organization around Eurocentric theater, often with a focus on British theater companies Blast Theory and Punchdrunk, specifically—an understandable privileging, given the extraordinary bodies of work both companies have created over the last decades.[7]

Having watched and benefitted from this evolving discourse from the sidelines as a US-born and -based scholar (Scott) and scholar-practitioner (E. B.), we found ourselves asking a quintessentially American question: "Hey, what about us?"[8] What might uniquely American iterations of immersive work with uniquely American histories contribute to a scholarly understanding of this rapidly expanding mode of theater and performance? This is not to suggest that immersive work in the United States exhibits foundational aesthetic differences from work created anywhere else, or to argue that the twenty-first-century boom in immersive theater began exclusively in our backyard. Rather, this collection is concerned with exploring how the addition of American perspectives to this evolving discourse strengthens a transhistorical framing of immersivity as always already with us.

As this collection shows, well before twenty-first-century developments, American practitioners were employing immersivity to attend to and grapple with the world around them. For example, Susan Tenneriello's essay, "The Immersive Archive: Restoring the All-Embracing View of Nineteenth-Century Painted Panoramas in Museum Display," examines how nineteenth-century touring panorama shows bore witness to and intervened in memory-making around the American Civil War. Similarly, Laura Ferdinand's contribution, "Encountering the Old South in 'Atlanta's Most Modern Department Store'" analyzes how 1930s department store displays in Atlanta used sanitized imagery of the antebellum South to reify Jim Crow racial hierarchies for their clientele. In assembling these and the other distinctly American case studies that comprise this volume—Disney theme parks, tabletop roleplaying games, Native American cultural centers, Renaissance Festivals, tiki bars—a central goal has been to foreground and interrogate the meaning of a US-based positionality within the rapidly growing repertoire of discursive tools for the analysis and critique of the field's immersive turn.

Some of these meanings arise from two social institutions that underlie contemporary immersive theater and performance, which might be called inescapably, even oppressively American: democracy and capitalism. Themes similar to those that underlie visions of American democracy also attend the immersive production choices of several of the case studies our contributors examine. By abolishing the proscenium arch and hierarchical, price-differential seating, much immersive work prom-

ises audience members equal access to an experience that is immediate, intimate, and corporeally embracing. As Hunter describes in "Farewell, Fond Pageant: Remount and Representational Space in *The Donkey Show*," for example, the New York City iteration of the show created *communitas* by allowing attendees to roam its setting of a working nightclub as they joined in singing along to the disco standards that comprised the show's text. American democracy has never been distributed equitably, however, as this country's fraught histories with immigrants, Black and Indigenous people, and Pacific Islanders have long demonstrated. Illuminating these systemic inequities is the central concern of Michelle Gibbs's "The Other Side of the Plexiglass Wall: Fear, Terror, and Defining the Rules of Engagement in a Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy." In this autoethnographic account of her own in-progress one-woman show, Gibbs describes the aesthetic aim of production choices such as offering varying levels of access to the performance's immersive elements based on an audience member's skin color. In Gibbs's hands, immersivity becomes a tool to point out and intervene in entrenched failures of democracy.

Like democracy, capitalism may not have originated in the United States, but it certainly has shaped much of the cultural life in this country. Given this ethos, it follows that many contributors to this collection would engage directly with the ways that immersive performance in the United States intersects with capitalist structures. The immersive Van Gogh experiences Christin Essin describes in "Immersive Van Gogh: A Scenographic Analysis," for example, multiplied quickly once they proved lucrative. Similarly, as Chloë Rae Edmonson notes in "The Immersivity of American Tiki Bars," tiki bar aesthetics developed as a marketing draw for bars in the mid-twentieth century. And at the apex of capitalism-infused live storytelling in the United States, Disney theme parks serve as the backdrop for Jennifer Kokai and Tom Robson's analysis of guests who intend to create disruption but still feed the beast by paying an entrance fee. Gathered under the umbrella of a shared country of origin—itself as kaleidoscopic as the practices that constitute immersive work—the essays herein contribute a rich discussion of immersivity across contexts, offering a range of analytical models with which to clarify and advance this emergent discourse.

Terminology and Genealogy

With the goal of clarification and advancement in mind, we turn first to an overview of terminology, which will lead into a highlight reel of immersive practices in the history of Western theater and performance. Our first

terminological concern relates to the words used throughout the various chapters to refer to the audience. As our contributors took on their case studies, they found the terms that would accurately refer to audience participants in immersive spaces depended on several factors. These factors include, for example, the degree of agency and perceived choice an audience member was granted in the space of the performance. Taking a cue from Josephine Machon, Rosenthal coins the term "collaborative comrade" to capture the ways in which (some) "friends" and "guests" work together with the characters to create the rich worlds of memory in her essay's two immersive performances. Beck's essay follows director Yannick Trapman-O'Brien's term "user" to refer to audience members who dial into his *Telelibrary* interactive telephone experience. While some may balk at the reductive or dehumanizing connotations of "user," Beck finds in the term beneficial connotations that are "active" and "agential."

In other cases, the term for audience participant had to do with the disciplinary or community-specific terminology with which the contributor was working. Magelssen uses "visitors" in his essay, drawing on the conventional term from museum studies. Kokai and Robson employ "guest," Disney Parks' official name for its customers. Bartley uses "participant" to refer to the individual theater-goer engaged in the "complex, multi-staged process" of immersion in the experiential performances he treats. Chemers and Sell refer to participants in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) as players. In addition to the obvious reason for using this term, the authors expand the definition of player as a nuanced and multifaceted contributor to the immersive experience. "Players play multiple roles when they play a TTRPG: actor, narrator, set designer, competitor, teammate, strategist, tactician, referee, host, guest, and critic," they write. "And they're just hanging out—social glue is necessary to the experience, too."

Terminology could also have to do with the primary sensory modes, or the combination of sensory modes, in which the audiences engage the performance. Ball invokes Machon's use of "attendants" to draw out the particular ways in which escape rooms and immersive performances require careful negotiations of participants' attention to the elements that comprise the events. Tenneriello refers to the participant in the panoramic experience as a "spectator-visitor," often omitting the hyphen to "stress the varied articulations between museum display and the theatrical event." Edmonson coins her own term, "imbiber," to capture what she describes as the ideal tiki bar subject's participation in immersive experiences catering to all of the senses. And Carriger, riffing on Walter

Benjamin, along with Claire Bishop and Guy Debord by way of Josephine Machon, offers up "sarteur" (one who wears), from her background in clothing and costuming scholarship, to describe participants in costume—an individual immersive experience on the smallest scale.

Factors informing terminology even included the ways in which the space was perceived to belong to the participant, whether this has to do with the space's relative familiarity, or the particular combination of identities and history they bring with them into the immersive performance. Gibbs uses "audience member," but explains that the degree to which each audience member is invited to be immersed is directly related to how they self-identify—and the degree to which the author's own fear of racialized violence and toxic White masculine policing is felt. Hughes uses "visitors" to describe those who attended the grand opening of the Choctaw Cultural Center (CCC), herself and her family included, in the summer of 2021. The center's layout, experiential exhibits, and dioramas, Hughes writes, offer visitors their own cues for determining the manner and degree to which they will be immersed in the Choctaw story, depending on their own background and identity and how they choose to respond. As she describes in the essay, "CCC visitors are given the tools with which to reform their understanding of what it means to embody and enact the Choctaw Journey, to perceive themselves anew."

And, at times, who exactly the audience is becomes nebulous. Ferdinand refers to the Rich's Department Store shoppers, in this case White, middle-class women, as the "audience" for the Golden Harvest Sale. In a surprising reversal by the end, however, taking a cue from Tracy C. Davis, Ferdinand makes clear that these women were also the performers as they paraded past the Black performer on the log cabin porch embodying the enslaved antebellum Negro with a banjo on his knee.

Terms that appear with more consistency across the chapters are "mainstream" or "conventional," which contributors often use to describe a production that is not immersive, or to establish a contradistinction with the immersivity of the case study an author is analyzing. When used this way, "mainstream" or "conventional" indicates the kind of spectatorship that characterizes a majority of twenty-first-century American performance in contexts ranging from Broadway playhouses to local high schools. In such contexts, audience members generally expect and are expected to (1) sit quietly in a darkened house for the duration of the event, (2) restrict their participation to only laughing, clapping, gasping, or, depending on the cultural codes of their milieu, respond in other audible ways at the appropriate moments throughout the performance,

and (3) on the performance's conclusion, signal their approval through these same audible means, possibly adding a standing ovation once the house lights are raised. Though such productions might have any number of seating configurations, the audience contract is based on a physical and imaginative separation of the audience from the unfolding action. In other words, such audiences are watching and listening to the goings-on of a *separate* world; they are not *part of* that world. Though this collection is premised on a recent expansion of the many ways artists are disrupting these conventions, it remains the case that, compared to the productions our contributors analyze, a majority of contemporary American performance is nonimmersive. Consequently, this collection uses the descriptors of "mainstream" and "contemporary" in recognition of this preponderance.

Importantly, this collection does not use "traditional" to indicate nonimmersive performance. With this choice, we intend to draw attention to the temporally and culturally specific nature of the expectations producers and audience members have about performance contexts. That is, though the theater and performance our contributors describe as conventional may be so *today* and *in the United States*, theater has not traditionally separated audiences in this way from the performances they attend. In fact, the twenty-first-century expectation that audiences will sit quietly in a darkened house to watch an illuminated performance can be traced back only to the late nineteenth century, as directors sought to focus the audience's attention exclusively on the performance. As Jim Davis notes, this aesthetic decision changed the nature of playgoing. Darkened auditoriums recreated the stage as an aesthetically lit and decorated space, drawing the solitary gaze of each spectator, but perhaps negating a sense of shared experience. The notion of the theater as a shared social space was undermined and to some extent destroyed by this new development, made possible by technological progress.[9]

While the playgoing dynamic Davis describes, wherein audience members are isolated from the world of the performance and from each other, has been "mainstream" since the late nineteenth century, this was not always so. Even a cursory review of Western performance contexts predating the nineteenth century reveals that "traditional" theater and performance has more in common with the practices our contributors analyze under the rubric of "immersivity" than it does with mainstream theater in the twenty-first-century United States. Compared to the "domesticated" audiences of recent years, as classicist Martin Revermann calls us, ancient Greek audiences, snacking and drinking in their open-air, ambient-light

theatrons, were "manifestly more unruly and interventionist"—a characterization Hugh Denard echoes in his description of ancient Roman audiences, whose habit of shouting and clapping along to performances was "so highly developed that mass cheerleading became something of an artform in its own right."[10] Leaping ahead a few centuries, medieval drama was even more immersive, as Claire Sponsler notes: "To an extent not found in the traditions of Western theater that preceded and followed it, medieval drama involved perambulation, whether of actors, spectators, or the performances themselves."[11] Thanks to this integration of movement around and through the physical environs, medieval audiences inhabited a spectrum of participation that ran from the spectator to the performer of the unfolding story.[12]

Even as the drama drifted back into purpose-built structures over the following centuries, the immersivity of the "the tumult, disorder, and noise" early modernist Will West describes in the yards and galleys therein grabbed as much (or more) of the audience's attention as did the business on stage.[13] Outside the playhouse walls, the tumult only amplified, with public spaces serving as multisensory backdrops for all manner of early modern performance events, such as religious processions, the spiels of mountebanks, bear-baiting, and more.[14] As the Enlightenment approached, the plots got thornier and the scenography flashier, focusing increasing attention on the stage rather than the shenanigans in the house. This gradual redirection was aided by a range of "reforms" in eighteenth-century playhouses across the Continent and the UK, wherein artist-owners like David Garrick shooed audience members off the stage and enlarged the auditorium to increase revenue.[15] Underscoring these developments were innovations in lighting technologies that, for the first time, allowed the stage to be lit separately from the house. As Pannill Camp has described, more than any other feature of the Enlightenment stage, "it was lighting that truly began to transform into what would become its modern form before the turn of the nineteenth century."[16] By the mid- to late nineteenth century, theater artists such as André Antoine, Richard Wagner, and Henry Irving were doubling down on Garrick's lead and demanding the audience show up on time, shut up, and sit in the dark to witness the singular brilliance of the directorial hand. In other words, as the twentieth century dawned, it was clear the house party was *over*.

So how did it start up again, eventually gathering steam into the commercial foothold it now occupies in the mid-twenty-first century? Kernels of artistic interest in immersivity can be seen as far back as the Dadaists.

These early experiments—like a 1920 art exhibition in a Cologne café that attendees could only access by walking through a public urinal where a young girl dressed for communion read lewd poems aloud—drastically reconfigured what performance could mean outside the Wagnerian stranglehold of a dark, silent house.[17] As art historian Claire Bishop notes, forays like these paved the way for "the eve of the sixties [when] a coherent and well-theorized body of work emerges: Situationism in France, Happenings in the United States, and Neo-Concretism in Brazil."[18] Across these movements, Bishop traces the introduction of "a paradigm of *physical* involvement—taking its lead from Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty among others—[which] sought to reduce the distance between actors and spectators."[19]

Perhaps the most (in)famous reduction in this physical distance came in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the work of Richard Schechner and the Performance Group. In his landmark *Environmental Theatre*, Schechner relays the process and intent of immersive productions like *Commune*, wherein performers selected (often recalcitrant) audience members to function as Mỹ Lai villagers and *Dionysus in 69*, in which (often nude) performers caressed spectators, who regularly "responded with more ardor than a performer bargained for."[20] More recently, the last several years have seen immersive performance take a commercial turn. From literary adaptations such as *Immersive Gatsby* (2019) to live, immersive extensions of television shows like *Peaky Blinders: The Rise* (2022), a slew of twenty-first-century producers are riding a wave that was launched, as E. B. Hunter describes in her essay, by Diane Paulus's *The Donkey Show* and perfected by Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*.[21]

Concomitant with these innovations in avant-garde practices and in experimental offerings by academic programs and commercial companies, a profusion of immersive experiences and attractions have emerged outside the playhouse across the globe in the fields of tourism, industry, education, and even the military. These include living history pageants and festivals, open-air museum environments, simulated locales in world's fairs and expositions, emergency preparedness drills, mock trials, and war-gaming field exercises, among many others. Though academics in the past may have drawn a sharp boundary between these popular performances and what we might call Theater with a capital T, now we recognize how genres of immersivity can inform and cross-pollinate one another.

Scholarly interest in immersive work has expanded alongside its practice. One such analysis is Susan Bennett's discussion of productions that require a "peripatetic audience": "not only does this produce an

expanded role for the spectator's horizon of expectations but, in effect, those horizons now determine what constitutes a performance event."[22] According to Bennett, inviting an audience to experience a performance by traveling from place to place reconfigures their reception. Also instrumental in explicating the meaning-making of immersive practices has been an investigation of "site-responsive" performance—work that transpires in and is attuned to preexisting physical locations rather than utilizing bespoke scenography in a purpose-built playhouse. As Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins explain, site-responsive work "encourages an investigation of how we might understand 'site' as less fixed or less specifically geographical; it broadens the types of relevant 'spaces' we might consider."[23] Similarly, Mike Pearson notes how performance work attuned to the particularities of a given space can draw attention to the many valences of meaning any one site contains.[24]

As this volume developed, our discussions of these and other scholarly perspectives coalesced into an understanding of immersivity as a reconfiguration—or, considering this introduction's historical highlight reel, perhaps a restoration—of two of the relationships that shape any given performance. These are (1) the relationship between an audience and the performance space, and (2) the relationship between audience members and performers. Understanding an immersive performance in terms of its management of these cornerstone relationships became an organizing principle as we shaped the collection. To provide a measure of consistency across the contributions, we asked each author to engage with two theoretical readings that have been foundational to understanding how immersive work reconfigures these relationships.

Shared Readings

The first shared reading is Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, the first substantive and comprehensive analysis of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century immersive performance. *Immersive Theatres* has become a foundational text in part because of the eleven-point scale Machon proposes for measuring the extent to which a production creates "the *feeling* of being submerged in another medium—as with immersion in water."[25] According to Machon, when managed in a certain way and particularly in combination, features such as space, sound, durationality, bodies, and participation (among others) give rise to a "world [that] operates both within and outside of

the time-frame, rules and relationships of the 'everyday' world. These are places that have their own rhythm and choreography."[26] Though a quantitative evaluation of events aiming to create sensorially rich phenomenological experiences may seem counterintuitive, we have found Machon's scale helpful for clarifying a discourse that can be expansive to the point of amorphousness. In addition to providing a critical throughline for this collection, Machon's scale of immersivity gives contributors a common reference for their thick descriptions of the sensory experience of attending their respective case studies.

Audience participation is particularly important in Machon's scale of immersivity: "the direct, actual, physical insertion of an individual audience member within the world of the event, into the performance itself, is paramount and absolute. Where an event is wholly immersive the audience-immersant is *always* fundamentally complicit within the concept, content and form of the work."[27] Given the importance of this feature, we chose as our second shared reading Gareth White's *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, a detailed study of the moment when a performance invites the audience member to cross the threshold from spectating to participating. According to White, closely analyzing the steps preceding this invitation and the larger production or environmental factors that influence its reception are key to understanding "what makes some kinds of audience participation trivial and embarrassing, and others substantial, seductive, and effective."[28] Much as *Immersive Theatre*'s scale of immersivity provides a way to compare how different case studies manage the same set of features, *Audience Participation*'s focus on the moment of invitation functions as an easily identifiable control variable for comparing participatory contexts. Each of the following chapters therefore identifies the rules that govern an audience's participation as well as the mechanisms by which a given immersive context informs the audience of these rules.

Each contribution to this collection engages these readings in a different way. Sometimes this engagement manifests as a contributor utilizing an aspect of a reading to closely read a case study, as does Michelle Cowin Gibbs when she invokes Machon's discussion of scenography in immersive theater to discuss how the plexiglass wall behind which certain participants are relegated kinesthetically shapes the space of her solo performance differently, depending on the individuals' "standpoints in the audience." Just as often, a contributor's case study can be used as an extension of a reading's core argument, as in Bethany Hughes's essay, which expands on Machon's arguments about procedures for reorienting

participants to the rules and logic of the immersive space to describe the way the Choctaw Cultural Center "invites visitors to understand the world as a Choctaw one." Other times, this engagement finds contributors pushing back against assumptions the shared readings embed, as do Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, who find productive terrain in examples of Disney guests refusing to take up what White details as the invitation to enter the immersive world—at least on the theme parks' own terms.

Chapter Summaries

To reflect the American perspectives of our contributors and the case studies they analyze, we organized these fifteen chapters by turning to the first recorded use of the term "the United States of America": the Declaration of Independence. From this most American of documents, we drew on the three thorny, optimistic, and often disingenuous "inalienable rights" of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness to structure *Enveloping Worlds*. In part I, "Life," for example, authors consider the differential challenges various people face in staying alive in the US, as well as keeping theater alive during the pandemic. Similarly, the essays gathered together under part II, "Liberty," explore thematic and historical perspectives on who has had liberty/freedom in the US, as well as production conventions related to freedom, as in "escaping from an escape room." Finally, the contributions in part III, "Pursuit of Happiness," engage twenty-first-century notions of joy as well as the now-dated nuance of "happy" that suggests luck and good fortune—a definition that would have been more familiar when the Declaration of Independence was written.

We begin part I, "Life," with Bethany Hughes's essay, "Building Nunih Waiya: Creating an Immersive Chahta World." Hughes reports and reflects on her own experiences in visiting the grand opening of the Choctaw Cultural Center in the Choctaw Nation's reservation in southeastern Oklahoma, and identifies the manner in which the CCC's designers nested layered cues for visitors as they enter, move deeper into, and navigate throughout the "immersive Chahta world." These cues, argues Hughes, serve as markers by which visitors might reflect on their own identities and backgrounds, and, anticipating the discussions of agency and entitlement in Michelle Cowin-Gibbs's essay, invite them to consider how these might inform the degree to which they will be immersed in the physical and spiritual story of the Choctaw people. Invoking and then moving beyond Machon's description of immersive performances'

ability to "reorient" participants imaginatively and scenographically into other places with their own rules and logic, Hughes offers the CCC as an immersive enterprise that is "not entered and exited but that can be experienced and enacted by choice." Hughes's thick descriptions of the Center's signage, dioramas, exhibits, and experiences allow readers to imagine the physical and aural (and gustatory) spaces that bear witness to the Choctaw journey, but, ultimately, she makes clear, the Choctaw story emerges through a negotiation between what visitors experience in the space and how they "enact and recognize the Nation's sovereignty and futurity outside of the CCC."

Next is Michelle Cowin Gibbs's compelling essay, "The Other Side of the Plexiglass Wall: Fear, Terror, and Defining the Rules of Engagement in a Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy." Gibbs uses this piece to document her process of developing a new immersive performance about law enforcement and what she names as the apathetic gaze that Black women experience at the hands of law enforcement and the media. From the get-go, Gibbs interrogates the perception and widely taken-for-granted promise of audience entitlement. Imposing a literal wall, behind which some kinds of audience members are invited and others are asked to continue to look through respectfully from a detached remove, Gibbs demonstrates that our expectations of a privileged relationship with the performer in immersive experiences are conditioned by the degree of historical privilege we bring to the space. On the other side of the coin, Gibbs's autoethnographic exploration reveals how Black artists and other artists of color have been conditioned to cater to White audience's expectations of comfort and carte blanche access to their emotions and vulnerability. Drawing on Machon's call for ethical guidelines in immersive performances and playfully subverting Gareth White's aesthetics of invitation, Gibbs presents here, through a work-in-progress, a manifesto for rules of engagement that attend to the safety of minoritized artists.

In the third essay of part I, "Immersive Van Gogh: A Scenographic Analysis," Christin Essen takes on a blockbuster immersive phenomenon approaching the success, and certainly the notoriety, of *Sleep No More*: the immersive Van Gogh attractions that offer ticket holders the multisensory experience of being thrust into the Postimpressionist painter's canvases brought to life through a supersaturated barrage of digitally projected hyper-real brushstrokes on every surface, and complemented by three-dimensional set pieces, evocative soundscapes, and even "scent profiles." While art critics have derided these touring shows for reducing Van Gogh's exquisite artistry to derivative and kitschy simulacra, Essin

looks deeper, assessing the important work of the scenic artists and technicians whose expertise in creating and running the automated entertainment technologies in spaces that could accommodate social distancing was vital—and kept them employed—when the global COVID-19 pandemic had closed conventional theater spaces. Essin's fieldwork took her to immersive Van Gogh productions by three different entertainment companies, where she interviewed practitioners. When we attend to these craftpersons' skills and labor, Essin argues, we see that their use of theatrical craft and scenic artistry does not eliminate the original painter's artistry from these productions, but "interprets and performs it as a narrative subject."

In "'*The Telelibrary* Is Here for You': A Theater of Service During a Time of Crisis," Lauren Beck describes how a long-familiar technology, the telephone, was employed during COVID-19 to use the immersive elements of time and attention to help foster connection across the vast distances that the pandemic created between us. Beck focuses on director Yannick Trapman-O'Brien's *Telelibrary* performance, developed in the first months of COVID lockdowns (and while Yannick himself was stranded on another continent and physically disconnected from his home and things familiar to him). Inspired by the technologies and conventions of airline customer service phone networks, Yannick's performances manage to subvert their sometimes alienating effects to create deeply intimate human connections through the generosity of the performer's focused attention. Beck draws on her experiences over several *Telelibrary* immersions, as well as interviews with other "users," to ponder the ways in which telephone performance expands how we think about the immersive turn even as it employs quotidian, even old-fashioned, technology. *The Telelibrary*, as she demonstrates, "utilizes cultural understandings, social conventions, and common uses of the telephone to transport audiences to alternate realities . . . to connect audiences to each other across time and space."

We conclude part I with E. B. Hunter's "Farewell, Fond Pageant: Remount and Representational Space in *The Donkey Show*." In this chapter, Hunter traces the boom in immersive performance that has spanned the United States in the past two decades to a production staged several years prior to the arrival of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (often credited as the catalyst for the immersivity spike in the US). Previously underexamined in immersive theater scholarship, Diane Paulus's 1999 landmark adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, reimagined into a Studio 54–inspired disco sing-along party, set off a chain reaction, argues Hunter, setting up the enabling conditions that allowed for

the subsequent success of blockbuster shows like *Sleep No More*. As such, "*The Donkey Show* marks a foundational shift in US immersive theater from 1960s niche experiment to twenty-first-century popular entertainment." Hunter conducts a historiography of *The Donkey Show*, comparing the original run in New York City to the recent remount in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Key to its success, and germane to the discussions of creating space that appear throughout this volume, is the way *The Donkey Show*'s different iterations cultivated and replicated what Henri Lefebvre theorizes as *conceived*, *perceived*, and *representational* spaces. As Hunter explains, Lefebvre's spatial triad illuminates how theatrical productions create an environment and "narrative world" into which audience members necessarily bring their "direct lived associations" to "co-create the aesthetic experience." Engaging in what Jill Dolan terms "critical memoir" based in her participatory fieldwork, Hunter immerses the reader in the strategies the remounted *The Donkey Show* used to cultivate space for audiences to participate through the iterative acts of selfie culture.

Part II, "Liberty," begins with Susan Tenneriello's "The Immersive Archive: Restoring the All-Embracing View of Nineteenth-Century Painted Panoramas in Museum Display." Tenneriello uses archival research to tell the story of *The Battle of Atlanta*, one of the few surviving nineteenth-century touring painted panoramas, which, on first being shown in 1886, immersed spectators in the decisive confrontation between North and South in the American Civil War. *The Battle of Atlanta*, she writes, along with other commercial touring panoramas depicting the war's monumental battles, experienced a vogue during the nation's reconstruction and efforts at reconciliation, triggering for audiences "the lingering wounds of loss, trauma, and triumph." Describing the 360-degree, nearly fifty-foot-high depiction of the battle, Tenneriello notes how it made meaning differently for Northern and Southern audiences over time, and was even adapted and adjusted to meet the changing memory-scape of the Civil War shaped by nostalgia and popular culture mythmaking. Tenneriello goes on to describe the technologies involved in the recent restoration of the panorama, now housed in a new rotunda built by the Atlanta History Center, and the way it promises to "reanimate the sensation of entering a scene, of being within a surrounding, boundless environment." Tenneriello's close reading of the immersive experience places the reader "deep into the grisly scenic action" along with herself and fellow visitors. Employing her term "immersive archive," she focuses on the dialogue between theater history and the processes of art-historical preservation and curation.

Laura Ferdinand's "Encountering the Old South in 'Atlanta's Most Modern Department Store'" offers another historical analysis, and another Atlanta case study. Ferdinand interrogates the Golden Harvest Sale, an immersive theatrical spectacle staged for customers by Rich's Department Store beginning in 1920s Atlanta that converted the entire first floor into a simulated antebellum plantation in the heart of the American South. The immense labor of illusionistic display included live birds and animals, persimmon trees, fields of cotton, bushels of fresh produce, and "gingham-clad salesgirls." Arrestingly for present-day readers, Ferdinand describes how the centerpiece of this world was an unnamed Black man portraying an enslaved person with a banjo on his knee and holding audience, Uncle Remus–like, in front of a "real" log cabin. Ferdinand's inquiry into the performative staging and the primarily White customers' encounter with this figure explores how the multisensory staging conventions of Rich's Golden Harvest Sale "reified neo-Confederate revisionist historical narratives of the antebellum South" and "reperformed the historical objectification of slavery in a sanitized, White-sanctioned public display of Southern history." Further, she meditates on whether this Black performer had the means to activate the sensorium in ways that could "push back on the very revisionist historical narratives he was positioned to represent."

Next, in "Playing Attention in an Escape Room: Strange Bird Immersive's *The Man From Beyond*," James R. Ball III writes about the "productive friction" he finds intrinsic to his case study's unique combination of game and theater as "competing modes of spectatorship" in this immersive escape-room show based on American illusionist Harry Houdini. Surprising to Ball was the production's invitation to the audience to feel empathy toward the characters even while racing against the clock to solve the many puzzles that unlock and solve the narrative's mystery. In parsing how *The Man From Beyond* negotiates some key moments in which participants are required to shift their mode of attending to the task at hand, Ball advances his claim that such shifts offer a "potential for developing an aesthetics of attention in immersive art." Taking a cue from a serendipitous typographical error in a Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi essay, Ball asks how escape rooms and other puzzle games (until now undertheorized in scholarship about immersive performance) can invite us to "play attention" to our affective state and to that which surrounds us, and how we might "follow those experiences into the intersubjective spaces they open."

In the fourth essay of part II, Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson's

"Why Be a Bad Guy? Immersive Performance and Transgression at the Disney Theme Park," the authors take us on a wild ride into the world of Disney theme park guests who outright refuse the invitation to partake in the Disney experience according to the entertainment goliath's rules of engagement. Instead, these "bad guys" take liberties, throwing off their circumscribed "guest" roles to self-curate their own "unsanctioned" immersive experiences within the imaginative frameworks of Disney parks, sometimes at the risk of their own safety and that of other guests. Taking seriously Gareth White's contention that immersive experiences offer participants the "temporary construction of a utopic liberatory space," Kokai and Robson explore how immersive experiences might promote these kinds of choices and what these guests might derive from performatively constructing themselves as dramatic antagonists. In so doing, and in drawing on Adam Alston's observation regarding the immersive performance participants' tendency to center themselves in the experience, they uncover the ways in which the "balance between individual guest desires and the intended limits and rules of the immersive space is one that is under constant negotiation and threat." This last point both echoes and hauntingly bears out the fear Gibbs voices in part I that the agency granted to audiences is always accompanied by the risk of danger to the performative enterprise and the artists who invite strangers in to partake.

The last essay in part II, Cindy Rosenthal's "*Remembrance* Revisited: Insider/Outsider Perspectives on Immersivity," engages in a close reading of two devised immersive productions by Linked Dance Theatre, *Remembrance* (2019) and *Elle S'envoie* (2021). The former was performed as an immersive site-specific performance in a house on Governor's Island, New York, and centered on the life and times of Margaret, a woman celebrating her sixty-fifth birthday and experiencing dementia with early-onset Alzheimer's, with three actresses portraying Margaret at different stages of her life. The latter, produced during the COVID closures, revisited the themes of *Remembrance* as a remote yet immersive performance via Zoom videoconferencing. Rosenthal performed in both productions. Shifting between the "insider" perspective of one of the performer-devisers and the "outsider" perspective of a scholar inquiring into the obstacles to and potentials of immersive and "Zoom immersive" performance, Rosenthal details, for instance, the challenges posed by a multilevel historic home as a performance space in *Remembrance*. The environment is sensorially rich with carefully curated "in situ" memory installations full of objects from different eras, promising audiences

detailed windows into Margaret's life and relationships with her family. However, requiring audiences to climb stairs to access these details meant that attendees with whom the narrative may have resonated most strongly—people with mobility issues—were excluded from the full experience. The issue of disproportionate audience agency and accessibility was exacerbated by a ticketing scheme that allowed patrons to upgrade their access to Margaret in ways unavailable to those paying only for standard admission. Rosenthal uses *Elle S'envoie* to explore whether Zoom immersive performance can upend such limitations of immersive performance in terms of participant accessibility (the results, she finds, were somewhat mixed). Rosenthal's essay, along with Ferdinand's (and others in this volume), raises pressing questions regarding the audiences for whom immersive performance experiences are intended, whom they may intentionally or unintentionally exclude, and how strategies for democratizing access to these experiences can be purposefully built in by producers, or tactically appropriated by the participants.

Part III, "The Pursuit of Happiness," begins with Scott Magelssen's "Stepping Back into Your Own Timeline: Meaning, Yearning, and Immersive Simulations of the Recent Past." Magelssen analyzes how producers of immersive spaces that simulate environments from the past few decades (i.e., environments the author has experienced "for real") foster feelings of nostalgia and wistfulness in their participants through the careful curation and arrangements of artifacts and the cultivation of evocative sensory milieus. With case studies including a 1980s basement rec room, an early '90s indie music fan's apartment, and a recreated Wisconsin supper club in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, Magelssen pushes against Alston's position that immersive performances catering to individuals' personal memories are necessarily "obsequious" or that they exploitatively sell participants' narcissistic memories back to them as part of the neoliberal experience economy. Instead, drawing on interviews and on recent activist and anti-imperialist nostalgia scholarship, he suggests that nostalgia can be a powerful tool in immersive environments to engender connectedness and community, and can even grant agency to marginalized subjects such as recent immigrants to a new country to curate performances of identity on their own terms.

Next, Chloë Rae Edmonson's essay "The Immersivity of American Tiki Bars" invites us into a thorough investigation of her case studies' exotic and simulacral worlds. Like other essays in part III, Edmonson's contribution details how immersive experiences focus on the sensoria of their participants. In the case of tiki bars, the quasi-Polynesian decor, cuisine,

music, and staff-customer transactions are designed for maximum sensory appeal, though the author singles out "imbibing" as the primary way the participant is immersed in the experience. Edmonson exposes at the outset the reality that the fantasy environments of tiki bars are more a "bricolage of debris from American pop cultural history," and that their history is fraught with complicated legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and cultural appropriation. At the same time, she notes the nuanced ways in which a negotiation with the admittedly inauthentic tradition of tiki bars has given agency to entrepreneurs and artists from underrepresented groups such as young women, People of Color, and immigrants. Germane to discussions of the audience member's positionality and relationship to the performance and space is Edmonson's theorization of the "imbiber" as a coparticipant immersed in "a relationship between colonial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, performance practice, and the escapist aesthetics of American consumerism via drinking culture." Imbibers, Edmonson argues, participate in the reproduction and dissemination of "mainstream American values like escapism, class aspiration, consumerism, and imperialism" through conspicuous excess (she intriguingly maps the theatrical trajectory of Aristotelian catharsis onto the imbiber's intoxication). Perhaps more than in the other case studies in this volume, in the tiki experience, escaping the real world is as vital as immersion into a different one.

In "Time Traveler Day at the Renaissance Festival," Michelle Liu Carriger asks boldly whether we can consider clothing to be a form of immersive performance—and then answers that question with a nuanced analysis of various "collisions" that happen, for instance, when participants already immersed in their own incongruous "sartorial ensembles" enter into larger immersive environments such as the Disney theme park or the Renaissance Festival. In so doing, Carriger offers a meditation on how these immersive performances at the level of the personal costume raise "new questions about who is an audience member, who is a performer, and how we characterize the varying pleasures and possibilities of different immersive spaces and performances." Carriger investigates how costuming choices both participate in and unmask the "fabricated reality of playfully realized generalized European pastness" featured by both Disney parks and Renaissance Festivals, while also needing to negotiate within those spaces' explicit and sometimes more nebulous rules. When felicitous, as when a steampunk time traveler is welcomed into a Ren Fest's medieval village, these choices can "epitomize the possibility of immersive performance at the level of an individual body." But unfor-

tunately, Carriger reminds us, sometimes the normative cultural forces that seek to police the different bodies that dare to deviate from expected sartorial categories can pierce even the most seemingly magical enveloping worlds.

Picking up the conversation in Lauren Beck's and Cindy Rosenthal's essays about technology's role in immersive performance's response to situations in which conventional theater is limited, Sean Bartley's essay, "Introduction, Invitation, and Integration in Immersive Performance," delves into the "expanding range of strategies for transitioning audience members out of their everyday spatial contexts and integrating them into the performance event." Concerned especially with the enveloping world's perceived and constructed boundaries, whether material or immaterial, that separate the performance event from everyday life, Bartley investigates remote technologies that signal to participants that they are being invited "inside the envelope." Bartley argues that while we often regard entry into immersive experiences as a "dip" or a "plunge," to use Machon's spatial metaphors, "immersion, crucially, is a *process*." Employing Louis Marin's work on the textuality of spaces, Bartley theorizes producers' carefully constructed processes of transitioning audiences into their spaces. He then examines several productions offered remotely during COVID, to identify strategies they used for immersion "when co-presence was impossible" (or even, he reminds us, "potentially fatal"). For Bartley, one of the most significant takeaways for in-person theater postpandemic is the attention these companies paid to the ways the "physical, digital, and social interactions *before* the theatrical event" shaped the meaning-making processes for audience members.

Bringing part III to a close in "Turgin' the Dragon! Dramaturgical Immersivity and the Tabletop Roleplaying Game," Michael Mark Chemers and Mike Sell apply a theory of immersive performance, and their own systemic dramaturgy, to multiplayer tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). These experiences (*Dungeons & Dragons* being the most famous of what has become an enormously popular genre of participatory entertainment) invite players to cocreate and immerse themselves into immensely imaginative and dynamic scenarios, often with costumes, decor, props, and other pieces of material culture. One of the compelling contributions of Chemers and Sell's essay is the way they outline the multiple and simultaneous realms of attention involved in maintaining the immersive world, with the "ludonarrative" of a long-form monster-fighting adventure campaign regularly sharing the same temporal and affective space as a social get-together, a family bedtime routine, the autonomous experiences and

improvisations of each player, and an ongoing negotiation about whether to maintain, modify, or ignore the rules. While "all the stuff" going on may seem messy or disorganized to an outsider more familiar with the intensely focused experiences in immersive theater productions, it is precisely "all the stuff," they argue, taking cues from both Machon and Clifford Geertz, that enables the unique forms of immersivity offered by TTRPGs. By identifying and exploring the TTRPGs experience as a processual, improvisatory, and collaborative form of what they term "dramaturgical immersivity," Chemers and Sell "shed light on the broader field of immersive theater, particularly the ways that the practices associated with it can be applied to other media and audience experiences."

The essays in *Enveloping Worlds* can be read or assigned in any order. The thematic concerns of democracy, capitalism, life, liberty, and happiness, as well as the aims of clarifying and advancing a discourse of immersivity in theater and performance, are shared broadly and deeply across the entire collection. We hope readers will find additional rich connections between pairs and groups of essays, whether from the same or different parts of the book. In these fifteen American iterations of "the ascendance of the immersive," to return to Herrera's assessment, we hope we have assembled an array of scholarly lenses, critical terms, and methodologies for approaching the experiential encounters, activated spaces, and bodies that participate in immersive theater and performance.

Notes

1. Ben Brantley, "33 Ways to Remember the 2010s: Spectators No More," *New York Times*, 25 November, 2019.

2. A film noir–inspired adaptation of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, *Sleep No More* is the most widely known production of the British theater company Punchdrunk. After a 2003 premiere in London and 2009 remount in Brookline, Massachusetts, *Sleep No More* has been in permanent residence on W. 27th Street in New York City since 2011.

3. Brian Boucher, "'Emily in Paris' Fueled a Frenzy for Immersive Van Gogh 'Experiences.' Now a Consumer Watchdog Is Issuing a Warning About NYC's Dueling Shows," Artnet News, 15 March, 2021, sec. Art World, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/immersive-van-gogh-better-business-bureau-1951887

4. Brian Herrera et al., "*On TAP*: 053," On TAP, 15 December, 2021, https://soundcloud.com/ontappod/on-tap-053

5. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

6. These include Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016); James Frieze, "Reframing

Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance," in *Reframing Immersive Theatre*, ed. James Frieze (London: Springer, 2016), 1–25; Carina E. I. Westling, *Immersion and Participation in Punchdrunk's Theatrical Worlds* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Rose Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

7. A notable exception is Natalie Alvarez's *Immersions in Cultural Difference* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). Largely North American in focus, Alvarez's work is concerned with intersections of immersive performance, tourism, and the military.

8. Throughout this introduction, our use of "American" as an adjective indicates the United States rather than other portions or the whole of the Americas.

9. Jim Davis, "The Social Function of Theatre," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Age of Empire*, ed. Peter W. Marx (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 61, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208130

10. Martin Revermann, *Comic Business: Theatricality, Dramatic Technique, and Performance Contexts of Aristophanic Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 160; Hugh Denard, "Lost Theatre and Performance Traditions in Greece and Italy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, eds. Marianne McDonald and Michael Walton, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521834568.009

11. Claire Sponsler, "Circulation: A Peripatetic Theatre," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jody Enders (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 108, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208161

12. Kathleen Ashley, "Social Functions," in *A Cultural History*, 39–58, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208161; Laura Weigert, "The Environment of Theatre," in *A Cultural History*, 77–104, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208161

13. William N. West, *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 113. See also Andrew Gurr's descriptions of the multisensory, day-long, social-sorting experience of playgoing in early modern London, as well as the compendium of extant references to playgoing from the time in *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

14. Karen Newman, "The Environment of the Theatre: Urbanization and Theatre Building in Early Modern Europe," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Early Modern Age*, ed. Robert Henke (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 71–91, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208154

15. Daniel Heartz, *From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. John A. Rice, Opera Series, no. 1 (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2004).

16. Pannill Camp, "Technologies of Performance: Architecture, Scenery, Light," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Mechele Leon (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 198.

17. Michael Kirby, "Happenings: An Introduction," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen Sandford (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–25.

18. Claire Bishop, *Participation* (Boston: MIT Press, 2010), 15.

19. Bishop, 10.

20. Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (New York: Applause Books, 2000), 42.

21. See especially the work of Immersive Everywhere, responsible for both *Immersive Gatsby* and *Peaky Blinders*, among a range of other such installations, and Lighthouse Immersive, who, as Christin Essin discusses in chapter 3, is one of the companies producing immersive Van Gogh installations. David Bloom, "Going Live And Immersive Is the Next Frontier for Musicians, Movies, Artists and More," *Forbes*, 19 July 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dbloom/2022/07/19/going-live-and-immersive-is-the-next-frontier-for-musicians-movies-artists-and-more/; "Immersive Everywhere," 2022, https://immersiveeverywhere.com/; "Lighthouse Immersive," Lighthouse Immersive, 2022, https://lighthouseimmersive.com

22. Susan Bennett, "The Peripatetic Audience," *Canadian Theatre Review* 140 (2009): 13.

23. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins, *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

24. Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

25. Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 93, original emphasis.

26. Machon, 93.

27. Machon, 98, original emphasis.

28. Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

PART I

Life

ONE Building Nʊnih Waiya

Creating an Immersive Chahta World

BETHANY HUGHES

> The Choctaw Cultural Center is dedicated to exploring, preserving, and showcasing the culture and history of the Choctaw people. The exhibits are immersive and told from the Choctaw perspective—honoring the physical and spiritual journey of the Choctaw people, the "Chahta Nowʊt Aya."
>
> —"About Us," Choctaw Cultural Center[1]

On July 23, 2021 the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma opened the Choctaw Cultural Center (CCC) on the tribe's reservation in present-day southeastern Oklahoma. A decade in the making, the 100,000-square-foot facility has two exhibit halls, an art gallery, an auditorium, a children's play area, a café, a gift shop, classroom space, and an outdoor Living Village (with a garden, walking path, mound, and space for demonstrations). It is the first of its kind in the Nation's history. Dedicated to supporting cultural activities and education as well as preserving and displaying historic artifacts, the CCC invokes the word "immersive" in its advertisement and signage. "The exhibits are immersive" explains the website.[2] "You will be immersed in the Choctaw story from time immemorial to the present day," proclaims a sign in the Orientation Gallery. The CCC promotes its exhibits as immersive, which, based on my day-long exploration, aligns with the "immersion as transportation" concept noted by Josephine Machon in her influential book, *Immersive Theatres*.[3] Through interaction with life-size dioramas and sensorially complex encounters with historical artifacts and information, CCC visitors are,

as Machon described in her book, "imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place . . . that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic."[4] This chapter contends, however, that the space and scale of immersive performance at the CCC reaches far beyond the dioramas, the realistic ambient noise soundtracks, and the material objects visitors can touch or try out. The CCC invites visitors to understand the world as a Choctaw one, a world that is not entered and exited but that can be experienced and enacted by choice. Shaping CCC visitors' experiences within the walls of the CCC informs them how they could enact and recognize the Nation's sovereignty and futurity outside of the CCC. In this chapter I detail a range of participatory opportunities CCC visitors encounter, including elements that are visual, textual, interpretive, tactile, aural, kinetic, gustatory, linguistic, ambulatory, commercial, and athletic. These opportunities offer visitors diverse opportunities to engage with, perform in, and become immersed in "the Choctaw story."

A Choctaw story of nationhood and perpetuity, from "time immemorial to the present," is unimaginable within the foundational logics of American independence. That Native Americans existed was a given. After all, the Declaration of Independence directly mentions them. In the lengthy list detailing the tyrannical acts by the British crown, the last was, "He has . . . endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." For the founders of America, Indigenous peoples were a tool used by a tyrant to destroy Americans. Because of this, forwarding a Choctaw story, and an immersive and encompassing one at that, is an act of refusal of the American narrative of Indigenous violence. The CCC is a testament to the opposite of destruction, Indigenous creation and resilience. It also provides an alternative narrative, one in which Indigenous nationhood is central to the past and present of the land now called America. To immerse oneself in a Choctaw story is to challenge the hegemony of the United States and to experience the world oriented around Indigenous ideas, not colonial American ones.

The first hint at the kind of immersive experience the CCC designs for its visitors spans the entrance driveway. On an arch over the entrance is the seal of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and next to it, written in English and Chahta Anumpa, is "Choctaw Cultural Center," "Chahta Nowvt Aya/Choctaw Journey." The arch and its accompanying symbolism and communication greet visitors with the information that they are entering a cultural space and a spatiotemporal process, a journey.

Whether that journey is completed or ongoing is ambiguous. Some visitors might understand the signage of the "Chahta Nowut Aya" as indicative of the tribe's journey from their ancestral homelands to their modern-day homelands. Or, the signage might invite visitors to understand themselves as within a Choctaw Journey that is ongoing and enacted through quotidian and heightened actions and events. Their responses to this invitation determine what kind of immersive performance they experience while at the CCC. Theater scholar Gareth White has "proposed that becoming an audience participant involves perceiving a horizon, and accepting a responsibility to act within that horizon, to make choices and to perform those choices."[5] For visitors to the CCC, interacting with the exhibits and cultural offerings is only part of the performance choices they can make. More importantly, their acceptance as a participant in the Choctaw Journey will reveal whether they understand themselves to be living in a Choctaw world or simply visiting one.

Grand Opening

It is about 150 miles from my parents' central Oklahoma home to Choctaw Nation's reservation and headquarters in Durant, Oklahoma. I had invited my family to attend the grand opening of the CCC with me, and they eagerly agreed. The fourteen of us began driving early that Friday morning to arrive around the scheduled opening of 11 a.m. My car was the first to reach the CCC, filled with those who wanted to attend the opening ceremony before the public could officially enter. After parking the car and taking a few pictures of the exterior of the building I approached the entrance with my son, my older daughter, and my mother. The green grass surrounding the CCC remembered the unusually wet summer Oklahoma had that year, but the dry heat of the day was making some attendees uncomfortable. I found a shady spot near the back of the crowd for my children, and my mother found a lemonade for us. I convinced my mother to take a seat in the shade and proceeded to fan myself with one of the rectangular fans, made of cardstock with the CCC logo on it, that CCC staff were handing out to visitors.

The opening ceremony was brief: prayers spoken and sung to the Christian God, appearances by Choctaw Princesses (winners of an annual competition sponsored by the Nation), the Chief (an elected position), and Tribal Council Members (elected positions), as well as recognition of honored guests (the Chickasaw Nation governor and Oklahoma state offi-

cials). A ribbon-cutting culminated the ceremony, and we waited outside as the dignitaries entered first to take pictures. When they opened the doors to the public, hundreds of people crowded toward the entrance. The line to get entrance tickets wrapped around the lobby and led visitors by a stone wall that had a mosaic map of the Nation's twelve districts. A water feature built into the wall sent a continuous sheet of water down over the map, making its surface shiny and very inviting to touch. I stopped my children from touching the wet wall, but I held my hand near it to feel the drop in temperature the water created in the air in front of it.

The map showed only the borders of the Nation's twelve districts. No other land or geographical feature appeared. The map is not just a visual reminder of the shape of the current Choctaw homelands. It is also a reminder that those homelands are in the protected and protective status of a reservation. Reservation land is a particular kind of legal category referred to in American legislation and jurisprudence as Indian Country. While the current reservation boundaries can be traced back to nineteenth-century treaties between the Choctaw Nation and the US, the Nation had been unable to access the full rights of reservation land until recently. For over 100 years, the state of Oklahoma acted as if there were no reservation, no Indian Country, and limited tribal sovereignty, most visibly in the prosecutorial jurisdiction and the legal authority over gas and oil drilling practices that it enacted.[6] But in 2020 the US Supreme Court decided in *McGirt v. Oklahoma* that the reservation of the Muscogee/Creek Nation in Oklahoma had never been disestablished.[7] Subsequent cases determined that the *McGirt* ruling applied to four other reservations in Oklahoma, including that of the Choctaw Nation.[8] The map I stood next to was of the Nation's reservation hung on a wall physically within reservation boundaries. The map did not include any land outside of the reservation. Instead, it focused on current Choctaw homelands, the space of our sovereignty. While the map is of the Choctaw Nation, which is currently inside of Oklahoma inside the USA, it is also a map of something else. It is a representation of our current homelands that denies the presence and the power of the settler colonial nation that surrounds us and whose history is approximately 13,750 years shorter than ours. The map is a reminder of the longevity and the adaptability of the Choctaw Nation.

My place in the line moved past the map, and soon I was called up to the desk labeled "Nan Ikhvna Afimmi/Information." There I was given an opportunity to respond further to the invitation to participate in the Choctaw Journey. Admission to the CCC was free for all who attended the Grand Opening, but tickets were issued to record attendance. However,

all attendees were asked whether they were tribal members or not.[9] This simple question, "Are you Choctaw?" and the simple answers "yes" or "no" sift visitors into two categories. If a visitor is Choctaw, they can move about the space freely, quite literally freely. If a visitor is not Choctaw, they are expected to pay to continue the journey or, framed differently, to invest in an immersive experience of a Choctaw world. This invitation to commit to a specific participatory relationship with the Nation follows after the arch framed the entrance as a space of Choctaw journeying and after the map located the CCC in a solely Choctaw land. The scene has been set. The visitors are within a Choctaw world. The information desk asks them to reveal which character they will play as they continue their journey. It is, as Gareth White might suggest, a "horizon of participation" that demands a "spatial, embodied, time-based response" to its invitation.[10] It is the moment that visitors can recognize as a point of immersion, though the possibility of immersion as transformation rather than mere transportation only becomes clear through experiencing the CCC.

After gaining admission at the information desk, my family and I moved into the Orientation Gallery, a wide hallway from which you can reach the entrance to the Luksi Activity Center, the "Chahta Nowʊt A̲ya" exhibit, and in the rotating exhibit gallery on that day an exhibit called "Hopaki Kash: Chahta Okla Nan Ʊnnoa/Long Ago: Stories of the Choctaw People." The Orientation Gallery itself contained twelve vignettes featuring a community member from each of the Nation's twelve districts. Life-size images of the individuals provide the backdrop for each display, with artifacts or possessions of the individual displayed in front. The majority of the twelve individuals featured in these vignettes were living tribal elders who held a special area of expertise vital to the ongoing cultural life of the Nation. These vignettes introduced visitors to the idea that the Choctaw Journey is one of the present day that extends from a specific past. At the end of the vignettes we reached a waiting area to watch a short film. Encountered in a theater that seats around 30 people on benches, the film prepares visitors for their physical entrance into the first room of the Chahta Nowʊt A̲ya exhibit.

I opened the exit door from the theater room and stepped into a life-size diorama of precontact Choctaw life. In front of me there was a row of corn well over 10 feet tall being tended by a woman and girl.

On the ground were squash plants. Bean plants climbed up the corn stalks, while the woman kneeled on the ground in the act of weeding around the corn. Her bare left arm extended to the head of the farming implement she held; her bicep was decorated with a tattoo. The design

Fig. 1.1. Life-size diorama of a woman hoeing corn, accompanied by a young girl. Photo credit Bethany Hughes.

was about three inches wide and included a wavelike pattern bordered by two thin lines. She wore a poncho-like shirt made from hand-twined fabric and a buckskin skirt.[11] A few feet behind her a young girl stood holding a stick, dressed in a twined skirt that reached her knees and a similar poncho-like garment covering her torso. Her shirt was ornamented by a hand-painted circular design near the top and the bottom of the garment. Behind the diorama was a floor-to-ceiling photo of a forest. Theatrical lighting created an intimate agricultural moment, and a soundtrack of forest sounds filled the room.

A sign at the entrance of the exhibit explained that this was "Chahta Na Holokchi/Choctaw Agriculture." It explained that over 750 years ago Choctaw ancestors lived "in networks of villages and towns, the biggest of which, in present-day western Alabama, is now called Moundville." Surrounding these towns was agricultural land in which crops were grown and forests were managed to support the towns' inhabitants and allow them to participate in the extensive trading network across the region and the continent. Informational displays explained the agricultural tasks various community members would perform, the crops

raised, and the historical agricultural artifacts, such as a mussel-shell hoe. The displays also included images of Choctaw crop varieties and current tribal members or tribal employees in the process of raising these crops. An image of a woman surrounded by large buckets from which corn stalks are growing with squash in the foreground identified her as "part of an effort to preserve our traditional crops." This pattern of sensorially rich encounter supported by textual and object displays continued throughout the exhibit.

The repeated use of the words "we" and "our" in signage and text displays connects visitors with the Nation. These first-person pronouns are used extensively throughout the "Chahta Nowʊt Aya" and the "Hopaki Kash: Chahta Okla Nan Ʊnnoa/Long Ago: Stories of the Choctaw People" exhibits. The sign at the beginning of "Hopaki Kash" opens with the declaration, "Long ago, stories were the main source of history keeping among our people."[12] Visitors can read this sentence as either a Choctaw person speaking on behalf of the Nation or as a Choctaw person including the visitor in the life of the Nation. Interpreting the first-person pronouns of the CCC is another moment in which visitors' interpretations, their contributions or cocreation of immersivity, comes to the foreground. While the CCC is open to and welcoming of non-Choctaw visitors, the pronoun usage in CCC text displays suggests that the visitors who are most expected are members of the Nation. The CCC was created by the Nation through the Nation's labor and expertise for the Nation's members. The call to the Choctaw Journey is a call to understand that all members of the Nation are part of the project of sustaining the Nation. We are all on the Choctaw Journey. Non-Choctaw visitors, however, can also align themselves with the Choctaw Journey by framing their presence at the CCC as experiencing a Choctaw world that extends beyond its walls.

I moved through the extensive "Chahta Nowʊt Aya" exhibit from the beginning precontact forest space with agricultural dioramas to the life-size replica of a Moundville-era house. Near the house was a miniature model of Moundville. Displayed in the same room was a life-size model of a young Choctaw man playing achapi, a game involving rolling stones and throwing spears. Within the Moundville room I ducked into a dimly lit, cavelike room. Inside were three sculptures representing three Choctaw origin stories. These three stories "are different from each other, even contradictory," yet also "complementary parts of a whole."[13] As I exited the cave, I reenacted one of the Choctaw origin stories, that of our Nation being born of our Mother Mound, Nʊnih Waiya.[14] In this story we came

from a cave in the side of a mound. Visitors who go into the cave exit by performing an embodied remembrance, a tangible, physical model of the Nation's birth at Nʋnih Waiya. For Choctaw Nation citizens like me, the act of exiting the cave room might invite us to understand ourselves as the latest in a long line of those born from Nʋnih Waiya, as a continuation of the Nation. For non-Choctaw visitors, including citizens of other Native American nations, the performance of Choctaw origins is not so clearly delineated. Are visitors reenacting a historical event? Are they embodying a mythical abstraction? Are they reminding themselves that Choctaw nationhood is dependent on embodied action? Without visual or textual cues as to the meaning, it is up to the visitor to decide whether exiting the cave room was a sidenote to learning about tribal history or a subtle assumption of their presence within a world continually reproducing the Choctaw Nation.

Before I entered the cavelike room filled with three sculptures, a sign labeled "Chahta Aiishtia Annoa/Choctaw Creation Stories" indicated that "Choctaw artist Jane Umstead has created artworks to portray our stories." Below the text was a picture of Umstead sculpting. The inclusion of imagery and discussion of present-day tribal efforts to preserve or sustain cultural practices was repeated throughout the exhibit. For example, on a display near the life-size replica Moundville house were several images of the tribal members at work building the house, staining deer hide, making pottery, and gathering dogbane to process for spinning. The text describes how Choctaw ancestors would have built such a home and then states that the replica house "and almost all of the furnishings before you were created by artisans in our community." These repeated interweavings of the distant, precontact past with living community members and ongoing cultural practices further reinforces the portrayal of the Choctaw world in which the visitor moves. While the exhibit is advertised as "immersive," which seems to indicate an enveloping of the visitor in a replica of the physical and sensorial aspects of Choctaw history, it repeatedly indicates to visitors that they are part of a moment in which "we are continuing our journey into the future."[15]

More diorama experiences, textual displays, videos and animated films, and replicas filled the remaining rooms of the exhibit. Text-heavy displays described contact and battles with European explorers as well as the development of treaty and trading relationships. A forest diorama filled with animals and plants native to the Southeast was supplemented by interactive computer displays for visitors to learn more about "Aiʋlhpesa/Seasons, Nan Annoa/Connections, Nan Ikbi/Technology,

and Na Moma Apesʊchi/Stewardship" in the postcontact era. Some displays invited visitors to "Please touch the items mounted on this panel."[16] A marked change in the scenography of the exhibit occurred as it shifted from primarily diorama, life-sized models, and replicas with interspersed artifacts to a long hallway full of text-heavy displays on the history of treaties between the Choctaw Nation and the United States. The hallway was built on an incline. As visitors were required to shift from interacting with life-sized models and community-created objects to extensive reading in English, they also had to physically walk up an incline. As the historical and legal weight of land cessions and treaty after treaty weighed on their minds, their bodies labored "uphill." After this uphill walk came "Nishkinokchi Hinushi/Trail of Tears." A series of deeply personal stories of removal filled a hallway and small side rooms where short videos played. The intellectual labor of the treaty hallway and the physical labor of walking uphill were combined with the emotional labor of removal. At the end of the Trail of Tears hallway, visitors entered the postremoval world of Choctaw life in Oklahoma, a space filled with life-sized or large-scale replicas of significant places in contemporary Choctaw life, such as school, church, and home.

The postremoval room was very large and bright. One wall was filled with an image of the old tribal capitol building in present-day Tuskahoma, Oklahoma. In front of the capitol building wall was an interactive screen display with information on the late-nineteenth-century US policy of allotment that gutted tribal land holdings and tribal governance. Next to the capitol wall I walked through a two-story replica of a school, looking at historical objects and peeking in the scaled-down classroom. Beside the school stood a small chapel with several short rows of pews on either side of the aisle. Up front was a pulpit and a video explaining the importance of Protestant churches and faith to postremoval Choctaw life and identity. Choctaw hymns filled the chapel with music and Chahta Anumpa as I sat in a short pew with my children. Next to the chapel was a small set of bleachers enclosed by a chain-link fence, facing a wall with a video about stickball. Beside the sports field stood a yellow, one-story, two-room replica house from twentieth-century Choctaw Nation. Inside the living room were a couch, chair, coffee table, and personal decorations. A quilt was draped across the back of the couch. Over the chair hung a large picture frame holding dozens of black and white and color snapshots of people, presumably a family. A Choctaw/English Bible sat on the coffee table. A small kitchen revealed frybread frying in a cast iron skillet, a pig-shaped cutting board, and dishes drying in a plastic rack over the sink, among

other typical kitchenware. Outside the home was a small garden. This large space filled with quotidian contemporary Choctaw cultural activities and artifacts reminds visitors that the Choctaw Journey is ongoing.

From the house I walked to the final room in the exhibit, a space to honor Choctaw warriors, the Warrior Spirit Theater. Five life-size mannequins stood on five podiums in front of a stone wall. The lights dimmed and an audio recording explained Choctaw esteem for our veterans. The farthest left figure was Chief Tvshkalusa, a circa 1540 Choctaw warrior, followed by the revered Choctaw chief Pushmataha, who served as a brigadier general in the US Army during the War of 1812.[17] The third warrior was Joseph Oklahombi, a code talker from World War I.[18] The fourth was Tony Burris, a Korean War soldier posed to throw a grenade, and the fifth was Shirley Mantaghi, a female veteran dressed for service in the Choctaw Nation Honor Guard.

The final rooms of the Chahta Nowvt Aya exhibit focus on the continued presence and vibrancy of the Choctaw Nation *in* Oklahoma. On a stone wall in the lobby the words "Faith, Family, Culture" hang next to the Nation's map. These are the words the Nation uses to describe its twenty-first-century identity. These words are reflected in the chapel, the family pictures hanging on the house's wall, the reverence for Choctaw warriors, and the school building. Education, military service, Protestant Christianity, ancient games, and a unique language are foregrounded in the final moments of the Choctaw Journey. Participating in these activities is framed as living out the Choctaw Journey. As Gareth White explains, "[t]he practices of audience participation temporarily re-shape our social being, make it special, intensify it or bring its contours into focus, expose folds and gaps in its surfaces and depths, and perhaps, on occasion, allow us to perceive ourselves anew."[19] Visitors who have chosen to identify as Choctaw might consider their own participation in the activities highlighted in the postremoval room and understand them as inherently Choctaw rather than inherently modern. Playing sports, singing Christian hymns, and pursuing education are brought into focus as distinctly and valuably Choctaw actions. To interact within these spaces is not to be less Choctaw but to be precisely Choctaw in contemporary Oklahoma. The Choctaw Journey did not begin or end at the point of contact with Europeans, nor did removal and the trauma of the Trail of Tears finish it. The Chahta Nowvt Aya perpetually moves forward, drawing from and responding to the changes thrust upon the Nation, and persisting despite them. Visitors are given

the tools to reform their understanding of what it means to embody and enact the Choctaw Journey, to perceive themselves anew.

After spending a few hours working my way slowly through the Chahta Nowvt Aya exhibit, and having driven several hours and stood through an opening ceremony, my next stop at the CCC was the café. My family headed to the Champuli Café (champuli means "delicious, tasty, or sweet" in Chahta Anumpa) just inside the CCC entrance. The Champuli Café is an open space filled with tables and chairs separated by wooden dividers shaped like the spines of leaves, curved and structural. I ordered the Chahta Plate, a combination of pan-seared pork butt, pinto beans, and banaha (a cornmeal-based bread cooked inside cornhusks). Other family members tried the Indian Taco (frybread topped with seasoned ground beef and typical taco fixings).[20] For dessert we ate grape dumplings (the modern recipe for this traditional dish involves strips of dough cooked in grape juice). Framed as a space away from the educational and historical exhibits, Champuli Café suggests a separation from the immersion of the CCC, even as it offers a sensory and physiological experience more complex than almost any other there.

Visitors have the option to eat traditional foods or contemporary food that is perhaps more familiar to them (e.g., salads, sandwiches). These choices are not presented as opposed to one another. They are all Choctaw foods, a claim the final rooms of the Chata Nowvt Aya exhibit vehemently support. It is not un-Choctaw to live in a house with modern appliances or serve in the US military. It is not more Choctaw to eat banaha rather than frybread; both are part of the Choctaw Journey. Visitors do not choose between a gustatory immersion in a Choctaw diet or an American one; rather, they choose what foods enjoyed by Choctaw people they want to eat. Smelling, tasting, and even digesting food become part of what it means for a visitor to walk the Choctaw Journey.

After lunch, and with nine children eager to move at more than a snail's pace, my family split into several smaller groups to explore the Luksi Activity Center and the Hopaki Kash exhibit. The Luksi Activity Center is the children-focused indoor play space in the CCC. The most striking feature of the room is a giant luksi (turtle) about fifteen feet tall that children can play inside. While the children got their wiggles out, I looked at the temporary exhibit, "Hopaki Kash." Walking through the exhibit, I stopped to read the "Tanchi/Corn" story. Tanchi was a gift from a woman (ohoyo) to two young boys who were willing to share their food with a stranger. This ohoyo told them to return to the mound where she

stood "after the next moon," and when they returned they found tanchi growing there. The sign containing this story participates in a tribally prioritized project, language revitalization. This two-sentence version of the longer Tanchi/Corn story models how the text introduces Chahta Anumpa words in parentheses, and then utilizes them in the English sentences later in the story. The grammar of the sentences and location of the words follow English language rules. The Chahta Anumpa words, however, are inserted into them, taking the place of an equivalent English word. It is a technique used routinely in language-learning resources.

Well before pandemic constraints shifted education online, the Choctaw Nation developed significant language-learning resources in the twenty-first century, providing in-person and online classes and resources, many of them free. In addition, it commissioned and produced an updated dictionary (Choctaw-English) in 2016, and has invested in teacher education for future language teachers. Chahta Anumpa is still a first language for some tribal members, though the majority are English speaking. The inclusion of Chahta Anumpa words in the Tanchi story links the visitor to the Nation's ongoing project of supporting and encouraging language learning. It invites visitors to draw on their own English language skills to graft Chahta words into their thinking and speech. Framed as it is at the beginning of the exhibit as an invitation to carry forward Choctaw stories, incorporating Chahta Anumpa into twenty-first-century life is precisely what carrying forward looks like. Even through reading the story visitors are invoking a Choctaw future through an embodied practice of using its language in the present.

After several frenetic minutes in the Activity Center I was finished in Hopaki Kash, and we moved to the outdoor space, the Living Village, where demonstrations, replicas, and activities were ongoing. While we were outside, we could enter a replica precontact home, watch an achapi demonstration, look at traditional hunting tools, or learn to play stickball. The children tried everything. The outdoor space also included a heritage garden, a walking path, plenty of open space for stickball and achapi as well as the social dancing demonstrations that occurred earlier in the day. However, the most prominent feature of the Living Village behind the CCC was a mound.

The mound was constructed alongside the CCC and is modeled after the Choctaw Mother Mound, Nʋnih Waiya, located in modern-day Mississippi. Nʋnih Waiya does not translate literally as "Mother Mound." It means "Leaning Hill."[21] Some elders call the mound "Nan Awaya," which means "Productive Place."[22] The CCC does not explain the meaning of

Fig. 1.2. Nʋnih Waiya at the Choctaw Cultural Center. Photo credit Bethany Hughes.

the name, but a sign does describe its significance: "Today, for Choctaws living across the globe, Nʋnih Waiya remains our birthplace. The journey to this sacred landscape restores our sense of who we are." The CCC does not claim that the mound is *the* Nʋnih Waiya. The presence of the mound in the Living Village, however, suggests that Nʋnih Waiya's life-giving properties persist. The Choctaw Nation is a nation with an origin. All our origin stories agree that we are a people of mounds, we are Mound People. Mounds make us who we are even as we make the mounds. They are interactive and revered, a process and a place that demands embodied action and creates embodied relationships.

The CCC immerses visitors in the material, linguistic, cultural, religious, edible, political, geographical, and temporal life of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and its people. From the life-sized dioramas to the interactive screens, from the food to the giant turtle that you can play inside, from the stories to the treaties, and from the garden to the mound, the CCC offers opportunities to engage, participate in, and experience Chahta Nowʋt Aya. After visiting the CCC visitors might understand the experience as a brief immersion in a Choctaw worldview, a space to learn about specific tribal histories, events, and issues. Once they leave the

building and on the way out drive through the archway that reads "Chi Pisa La Chike" ("I will see you later" in Chahta Anumpa), they think they are no longer in Choctaw space. However, they are still on the Choctaw reservation and will be for many miles, no matter which direction they drive. Their journey will be Choctaw for quite some time, whether they know it or not. Other visitors might experience the CCC as something else. It is a marking off of cultural space that attends to "forms of life-objects, appearances, actions and bodies, or events" through a narrative practice that allows these forms "to appear differently to us."[23] Visitors might be immersed in a Choctaw world inside the CCC, but they might also leave knowing they are always participating in an immersive experience, the Choctaw Journey. For the real invitation of the CCC to its audiences is to continue the Choctaw Journey, not just visit it.

Notes

1. Choctaw Cultural Center. "About Us," https://choctawculturalcenter.com/about-us/

2. Choctaw Cultural Center. "About Us," https://choctawculturalcenter.com/about-us/. Accessed 24 May 2022.

3. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

4. Machon, 63.

5. Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 164.

6. Information on how the state of Oklahoma asserted state sovereignty and assumed authority over Indian Country in Oklahoma is clearly articulated in the oral arguments for *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, available online in audio file or transcript document here: https://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/audio/2019/18-9526. Additional legal interests in the case's implications can be surmised from the amicus briefs filed, which are available here: https://www.supremecourt.gov/search.aspx?filename=/docket/docketfiles/html/public/18-9526.html

7. McGirt v. Oklahoma, 591 U.S. (2020).

8. Shortly thereafter, in 2022, the US Supreme Court *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta* decision again limited tribal sovereignty by extending state criminal jurisdiction. Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta, 597 U.S. (2022).

9. Members of the Choctaw Nation receive free admission to the CCC every day with discounts for citizens of other federally recognized tribes and Choctaw Nation associates (e.g., employees of the Nation).

10. White, 168.

11. Twining is a textile creation technique similar to weaving.

12. From the "Hopaki Kash: Chahta Okla Nan Unnoa/Long Ago: Stories of the Choctaw People" sign in the CCC, Durant, Oklahoma.

13. From the "Chahta Aiishtia Annoa/Choctaw Creation Stories" sign in the CCC, Durant, Oklahoma.

14. Nvnih Waiya was the spot where humans emerged from the earth and became the Choctaw people. Sometimes it is described as coming out of a cave. Nvnih Waiya cave and village are on the National Register of Historic Places and can be visited near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

15. From the "Okla Homma Chahta Okla/Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma" sign in the CCC, Durant, Oklahoma.

16. From the "Im Aiʊlhpesa Isht Atoksuli Imponna/Traditional Arts" sign in the CCC, Durant, Oklahoma.

17. A brief biography of Pushmataha's military service can be found at the National Museum of the United States Army website: https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/pushmataha/

18. Choctaw soldiers in World War I were the first code talkers, soldiers who spoke in their Indigenous language to prevent military communications from being intercepted and understood. Navajo code talkers who served during World War II are far better known in the United States, but the Choctaw transmitted coded messages during World War I. A brief history of the Choctaw code talkers can be found at https://www.choctawnation.com/about/history/code-talkers/

19. White, 206.

20. Frybread is a food widespread across Indigenous nations of the United States, due to the commodities (i.e., white flour, lard/shortening) issued to Indigenous people by the US government as a treaty obligation and in response to legal demands. These nontraditional food sources became ubiquitous across Indian Country, and quickly made deep-fried dough a beloved staple in modern Indigenous diets. It is also filled with the heavily processed ingredients typical in the Western diet that have contributed to negative health outcomes for Indigenous people, including obesity, diabetes, and hypertension.

21. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, *Chahta Anumpa Tosholi Himona: New Choctaw Dictionary* (Durant, OK: Choctaw Print Services, 2016).

22. From the "Nʊnih Waiya" sign in the CCC, Durant, Oklahoma.

23. White, 198.

two The Other Side of the Plexiglass Wall

Fear, Terror, and Defining the Rules of Engagement in a Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy

MICHELLE COWIN GIBBS

Prologue

They Don't Really Care About Us: PO-lice, PoPos, Sandra, and Me (*TDRC*) is a work-in-progress immersive solo autoethnographic movement rumination (currently) in eight scenes. I am in the script development process and have not performed this piece for an audience. In the performance, two large-scale transparent plexiglass walls separate me (a Black female performer) from the audience. Despite the separation of audience and performer, the plexiglass wall is a scenographic element that offers an invitation to immersive and participatory performance from the performer to the audience. The immersive convention in the show is the plexiglass wall itself. Its radical presence tosses the audience into a reimagined theatrical environment and shapes a new context for understanding the delineation of active space and a participatory role for everyone involved. At first glance, the plexiglass wall is divisive and racially antagonizing, as it separates and blocks off the performer and audience based on race. At the same time, it is an invitation to build deeply meaningful and shared experiences. We are brought together under circumstances that shape the way we all experience minoritarian racialization. Readers are entering this chapter at the intermission. I have decided to begin here because it is a special moment when audience members are invited to engage with the plexiglass wall from their racialized positionality in the theater. Many

theater spaces, intentionally or otherwise, often privilege White supremacy.[1] *TDRC* attempts to offer the solo autoethnographic performer (me) and audiences an active space to consider the impact of White supremacy (more specifically White toxic masculine policing) and to find ways onstage and in the audience to combat it. The intermission is a critical point in that exploration.

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Scene 3. The Intermission: At the act break of my solo autoethnographic performance tragedy, *They Don't Really Care About Us: PO-lice, PoPos, Sandra, and Me* (*TDRC*), I will repeat the final chorus of Michael Jackson's 1995 hit, "They Don't Care About Us." There is no background music. We don't hear Jackson pound out the lyrics to pulsating music and electric drums.[2] The work lights and house lights will be turned on. My movements will be lethargic, with a soft rhythmic slow flow, like my body is wading in water. Each time I say ". . . care about us," my body will punctuate—shooting explosive energy through my shoulder . . . or my side . . . or my lower back . . . or my hand . . . or my back leg . . . or my head. This will symbolize how, in even gentle moments of movement, my Black body is affected. I am shot over and over again, each time on the downbeat.

All I wanna say is that they don't really care about us (**BANG**)

At each (**BANG**), I fall to the ground, rise to my feet, and sing the chorus, ". . . care about us" (**BANG**). The cycle repeats. During the ten-minute intermission scene, audiences are encouraged to do what audiences do during intermission. The program gives specific instructions that the audience is invited to hang out in the house, use the restroom, come back to their seats, read the program, post notes about their experience on the plexiglass wall that separates playing space from audience, and mingle with other audience members. I will continue to sing, move, and collapse until the ten minutes are up. The stage manager will give me the go-ahead to continue the show. I will stop singing, moving, and collapsing. I will turn to the audience and state:

I will now take a 10-minute intermission. If you identify as Black, you are also welcome to take a 10-minute intermission with me. You may talk among yourselves; you are also invited to move past the plexiglass wall to join me onstage for a quick check-in about the performance. This is an opportunity for Black people to gather and attempt to form some acts of community care. Black

folx, please enjoy free refreshments from the bar. Folx that identify as People of Color can also take a break but they must do so to support the Black people in the room. It is noted among scholars and mental health experts that as Black people we often find it difficult to be unapologetically Black in White-centered spaces. So, White folx, continue to remain behind the plexiglass wall. Let us be unapologetically Black. There are white post-it notes and pens near your seats. Attach your thoughts directly to the plexiglass. Whatever you do, please do not cross the plexiglass wall. Your participation is much appreciated.[3]

• • •

Intermission in my performance tragedy is a complicated negotiation in navigating audience expectations, for two reasons: (1) Intermission is a theatrical convention that signals to audiences that for 10–15 minutes they are not required to pay attention to anything happening on stage. The intermission is their opportunity to commandeer the theater space. But during Intermission in *TDRC*, I will continue to perform. It signals an unconventional embracing of the conventional roles among theater audiences: performers perform and audiences watch. (2) I flip the script when I ask the Black folx (and subsequently folx who self-identify as People of Color) to take an intermission with me and require the White folx to remain behind the plexiglass wall. This is a moment when we can claim the playing space and the theater for our comfort. Yet in both instances, the audience of mostly White theatergoers will watch us, and we will still perform for them. As Black and Brown folx in the US, we know this feeling. We are conditioned to keep White people feeling safe and happy. When we choose not to do this, it is disconcerting, uncomfortable, and a scary feeling for everyone. By insisting they stay behind the plexiglass wall, I refused to make them comfortable. Will the White folx be mad at me? Will they call this reverse racism? Will they be mad enough to hurt me, or even murder me? My fears are buried in pessimism and forbidding emotions, I know, but this is a fear of racial harm that I have not been able to shake.

At the core, *TDRC* displays my inability to shake away fear of racialized violence. In the performance, I lean into comical theatricality as a tongue-and-cheek and playful mask to divert my fear, but each scene ends with me adversely affected. My fear is steeped in distrust in the systems in place that are supposed to keep me safe, namely my distrust of law enforcement. This includes my perception of White men police officers as hostile, aggressive, and violent. To the point, White men with guns terrify me. Thus, White men police officers and White men law enforcement,

government officials, and any White man who thinks he is in charge take up a lot of space in my reality. They engage in a primal dance of White toxic masculine policing that haunts me. White women are also part of my fear, as many White women (i.e., the Karens), engage in a similar style of policing the Black woman's body that asserts authority *over* our existence. I'm scared of them too. It is important to note that I do not treat my fear of toxic White masculine policing as irrational. The history of relations between Black women and White men is complicated, for sure. It is a history of abuse, violence, and terror that has been well documented,[4] so I do not feel the need to justify it. Thus, justification for my feelings is not the centerpiece of my performance tragedy; it is not the focus of this chapter.

Instead, I will focus on one theatrical element in the show that clearly defines the complicated immersive and participatory "affect" of the performer and audience members in the performance space: the plexiglass wall. In the excerpt from the show above, audience interaction with the wall is divided along racial lines and is informed by minoritarian racialization. It is a divisive approach, but as in performance artist Jamal Harewood's immersive and participatory performance, *The Privileged* (2015), theater audiences are brought together under circumstances that shape the way we all experience minoritarian racialization.[5] My desire to include a plexiglass wall puts everyone at the heart of the piece under circumstances where as likely bedfellows we experience fear and terror. Josephine Machon's theories, which center theater as active spaces where immersive experiences can build these kinds of relationships, help to sharpen my intentions in the performance for performer and audience interaction with the plexiglass wall to function as a theatrical nexus point, one that makes clear the potential for meaningful engagement.[6]

While in a few areas of the performance proscenium-style staging is observed (i.e., separation of the playing space from audience space in the auditorium), there are also moments when it is intentionally broken to engage the audience and performer for an immersive and participatory affect (i.e., the flexibility of when playing space becomes audience space and vice versa). The engagement is ignited at the installation of the plexiglass wall. In *TDRC*, the fourth wall *is* the plexiglass wall. It is a theoretical and actual barrier that acknowledges itself as itself: an unconventional convention that will keep everyone "safe." In *TDRC*, the plexiglass wall extends the invitation to and encourages a more participatory, immersive, and meaningful experience than would take place if I were to stage this performance strictly adhering to the conventional fourth wall, which comes with its own restrictive rules of engagement. Australian theater

director Simon Stone, who staged the 2011 production of Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1885) at the Belvoir St Theater in Sydney in an onstage plexiglass house, asked himself, "What would happen if you actually put the glass between the action and audience? What if you make it an obstacle that has to be overcome, that the audience has to lean into?"[7] Despite its physically and emotionally divisive presence, the plexiglass wall, and the ways the audience and I engage with it, encourages everyone to lean in. It is an invitation to participate and for everyone to be changed in the process. We are brought together under circumstances that shape the way we all experience minoritarian racialization. The plexiglass wall helps to channel that exploration.

Gareth White's theories of participatory theater further support how I define the performer and audience rules of engagement that center the plexiglass wall as an immersive and participatory theatrical apparatus tied up in ethics and risk for the performer and the audience in the pursuit of shared engagement. In this chapter, I introduce terminology and *TDRC*'s rules for engagement that clarify the significance of the plexiglass wall as a mode of physical and emotional contact for the performer and audience. Thus, this chapter serves as an opportunity to put words to what I must do in the performance, which will contribute to how solo autoethnographic performance artists engage in immersive and participatory techniques that define and negotiate performer and audience experiences.

They Don't Really Care About Us: PO-lice, PoPos, Sandra, and Me: A Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy

It is important to begin with a thick description of the performance at present, the performance goals, and how solo autoethnographic performance as a foundational approach contributes to the immersive and participatory elements at the center of the play: performer-audience interaction that supports engagement with the plexiglass wall.

Audience Participation

TDRC is a work-in-process performance piece. I am in the development process and have not performed this piece for an audience. At present, there are eight scenes, including the intermission. The performance is about White supremacy, toxic White masculine policing, and my reflections on the last day of Sandra Bland's life. The tone of the piece is sober-

ing and includes cynicism, with huge swatches of irony strung throughout. The mood often shifts from tongue-and-cheek and playful to tragic in the span of a moment, with a look or expression, a breath, stillness, a contemplative slow movement that returns to stillness. The piece ends with me tearfully sobbing as everyone in the performance space watches Sandra's final moments before she enters the cell and we never see her again. The piece is self-reflexive in that I am always aware of my positionality: I am the subject. The piece is about my fears. I am not Sandra. The piece is not about her. Yet I know there is much I can learn with each character and with everyone in the performance space. Everyone in that space learns something about each other as they witness and interact with these moments. It is in those moments that performance gives me the opportunity to "co-construct knowledge with multiple others."[8]

In an immersive and participatory performance event, everyone in the performance space experiences the show differently. Black folx will often be invited on stage to interact with me in my desire to build safe space with them; People of Color are welcome to stand on the outskirts of the playing space to watch, while audiences that self-identify as White are asked to sit at all times behind a large wall of plexiglass that separates me from them. The plexiglass wall is a theatrical device that playfully and soberly physicalizes my fear and terror of toxic White masculine policing. The wall signifies the phrase, "Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt." In that signification, there is also something playful and tongue-and-cheek about this large piece of plastic, which won't really physically "protect" me. All anyone has to do is to walk around it to do physical harm. Even the threat of crossing the plastic threshold is enough to cause emotional harm. Instead, the wall is like what Derek Thompson coined as COVID-19 Hygiene Theater; it gives everyone in the performance space a false sense of security as we "obsess over risk-reduction rituals that make us *feel* safer but don't actually do much to reduce risk—even as more dangerous activities are still allowed."[9] This certainly influences my decision to use plexiglass and not another barrier, such as a solid nontransparent wall, for two reasons: (1) In our COVID-19 reality, many people will recognize the plexiglass wall's function as an object that loosely attempts to keep us "safe," and (2) I want White audiences to see Black bodies on stage as we care for one another in an act of solidarity.

The plexiglass wall reminds me of an experience that the playwright, author, and poet Claudia Rankine describes in her book *Just Us: An American Conversation*. After a performance of Jackie Sibblies Drury's play *Fairview*, the White people in the audience are asked to gather on stage

so that Black actors and audiences in the theater space are held and feel seen. This moment acknowledges the realities of how mainstream commercial theater often caters to White patrons. The move to ask White audiences to gather on the stage is, according to Drury, "an embodied gesture toward dismantling white supremacy."[10] Rankine describes the request as conditional, but begrudgingly White folx begin to ascend to the stage. However, Rankine's White woman friend, with whom she attends the performance, stays in her seat. Rankine begins to resent her friend. Rankine mourns:

> The playwright is a Black woman, and I am a Black woman, and I want her play to have what it has requested. What I assume it needs. . . . I feel betrayed by her [the White friend]. . . . I want to run. Away from what? An embodied refusal I can't help but see as one that surprises me? My own mounting emotion in the face of what I perceive as belligerence? A friendship error despite my understanding of how whiteness functions? I thought we shared the same worldview, if not the same privileges. Be still my beating, breaking heart?[11]

I am currently drafting an introduction to the piece that reflects on this moment. I am unsure if I will keep it in the show. I'm worried that the moment is too divisive for White audiences.

> *Note to the reader:*
> *Here is an example of my fear of making White people too uncomfortable. I'm conditioned to protect their/your boundaries.*

If fear prevents me from including the passage below in the final performance, it does work well for me to include it in this chapter. The passage anchors my reasons for introducing the plexiglass wall and its function in the performance:

> The plexiglass wall has now been installed. As noted in your program, all folx who self-identify as White are asked politely to remain in their seats and stay behind the plexiglass wall. This is to symbolize your inability to (at best) support Black bodies in the struggle for true equality. The tradition of theatre conditions White people to preserve and protect their whiteness. There is a moment in Claudia Rankine's book *Just Us* when during a theatre performance of Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*, White audience members are asked to come on

> stage to give Black actors and audiences an opportunity to be unapologetically Black without White people attempting to contextualize it. For once, White people are the ones on "display." You are out in the open, and asked to, according to Drury, "engage in the embodiment of a gesture to dismantle white supremacy." Rankine notes that a few White folx made (what must have been) the uncomfortable journey toward the stage. Her White friend refused to budge from her seat . . . Rankine was hot about it . . . she stewed in her seat . . . but she never said anything to her friend . . . until after the play was over and they were headed out of the theatre. Why? Why not ask her in the moment? Why not stand up with her and help guide her to the stage? Because Black folx are conditioned to keep White folx comfortable . . . and White people rely on that . . . For folx that self-identify as White, there is a hold that White supremacy has over even the most liberal of you. I don't think you can help it. You have been so enculturated in whiteness that it is difficult to separate where you end and whiteness begins. You aren't capable of holding space for Black folx despite your best efforts. I am not silencing you; I am protecting the space for the free expression of unapologetic blackness which is very frightening and terrifying to experience in your presence . . . I am scared. I don't fear that you will actually hurt me because you are White but I do fear that you will actually hurt me because you are White . . . so, stay behind the wall, please. There are white post-it notes and pens on your seats. If you're sore about it or bored or whatever you are feeling, do feel free to attach your thoughts directly to the plexiglass. I will not read them or consider them in future performances. They are for you to see and sit with . . . on your side of the plexiglass wall . . .[12]

The plexiglass wall has a sobering effect: it points out the lengths I will go to to keep myself and Black audiences safe. Despite the divisiveness of the wall and my approach, in immersive performance the plexiglass wall can actually unify an audience into a shared performance experience. It is performative, and points to how Josephine Machon sees immersive theater enriched by scenographic design that "is not only manipulated to reveal narratives and expose themes and ideas at the heart of the work,"[13] but also has its own story to tell. Machon points to Scott Palmer to suggest that scenographic designs in immersive theater introduce qualities to performance experiences that are an embodied response: "space is felt kinesthetically through multiple senses—it dictates how we feel and how we relate to others."[14] So, even though the plexiglass is for me and Black

audience members, everyone in the performance space can experience it; therefore, we are all affected by the wall from our individual standpoints in the audience.

Movement Ruminations

In *TDRC*, I engage in movement ruminations, which are a staple in the piece. They are choreographed movement excerpts where I can express the feelings of the moment better than I can monologue about it. Rumination is a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible causes and consequences of those symptoms.[15] Ruminating is a habit of obsessing over present or past negative events.[16] Lynn et al. describe rumination as a tendency to repetitively think about something bad, harmful, or unhopeful, for a long time.[17] In each of these definitions, Sansone and Sansone see rumination and ruminating as an active thought process (i.e., excessive thinking) and a type of thought content (i.e., negative), the root cause of which is self-referential and the inability "to disengage one's attention."[18] In the performance, I will engage in a choreographed movement that will attempt to disentangle me from the act of rumination. Yet the "tragedy" of the performance is that no matter how much I try, I cannot shake the foreboding fear and terror that every encounter with White toxic masculine policing will lead to my murder.

Embodying the "We" in *TDRC*

TDRC is a solo autoethnographic performance tragedy. The term "solo performance" assumes a sense of theatricality in its conceit.[19] The solo performance artist draws energy from the audience in ways that promote dynamism and bodily engagement in performance. The body is read as spectacular, and audiences are auditorily and visually dazzled. In what I call the "body spectacular," audience and performer create a shared space for vulnerability and empathy. For women in particular, just as solo performance artist Torrie Wiggins points to how the form resists women as invisible, we become the voice of the unheard: "we transform performatively into being openly vulnerable, exposed, and *seen*."[20]

If solo performance gives me the freedom to explore the fullness of

myself on stage, autoethnographic performance as a methodological approach provides the vehicle for meaning and meaning making in that exploration. The process supports the integration of research-based analysis, personal narrative, cultural experience, and performative ways of doing that undergird the performance.[21]

Solo performance often offers the opportunity for the performer to teach the audience new perspectives. The act of speaking one's truth can be a compelling means of communicating important moral lessons. In *TDRC*, autoethnographic performance as a foundational approach transforms the subject of the performance, from *I* as performer-researcher-teacher, and *You* as audience-receiver, to *We* as *Human-Researcher-Performer-Audience-Participant-Observer (We). Human* represents the ways everyone in the performance space acknowledges our humanity even when that humanity is challenged; *Researcher* embodies the self-reflexive and iterative processes of analysis that propels new knowledge; *Performer* suggests the performatively theatrical stances that carry the transference of emotion in cathartic and dynamic ways; the *Audience*, in a theatrical sense, occupies the receiver stance with the ability to talk back; and *Participant-Observers* who, like audiences, talk back, but in the process of talking back have just as much at stake in the act of communicating. All these positionalities come together to help form a meaningful engagement in the performance space. *We* are transformed by each other in a way that does not rely on a binary approach. Thus, autoethnographic performers and their audiences are in a sustained conversation and collaboration with everyone (and as I will discuss later in this chapter—everything) in the performance space as *We*, so much so that it is often energizing to not know where *I*, as subject, end and *We*, as a collective, begin. The *We* stance also aids in *TDRC*'s immersive and participatory qualities in that, as theater critic Matt Trueman states, "immersive theatre . . . marks a piece of theatre *experienced from within* rather than as an outside observer. . . . You are part of it, rather than looking on fundamentally distinct."[22] Embodying the *We* in *TDRC* can be a very theatrical experience that strengthens the form of solo autoethnographic performance's profundity for everyone and everything in the performance space. In *TDRC*, embodying a *We* stance should ideally afford everyone in the performance space the ability to engage in a dynamic, intensely direct, and emotionally vulnerable performance. The plexiglass wall, as an immersive and participatory performance experience, performs and encourages deep engagement with the *We*.

Defining the Rules for Engagement in a Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy

Defining the rules for engagement in *TDRC* is a set of best practices that helps shape performer and audience expectations to support meaningful performance engagement from a *We* stance. Defining these rules can be an important indicator of how everyone in the performance space is engaging with the themes in the piece. As the performance creator and writer, I am crafting guideposts and check-in moments throughout the piece that contribute to how *We* can collectively experience and deeply engage from our distinct perspectives. Josephine Machon points to how ethical guidelines (as in shared and private agreements) are established before the performance to promote the type of performance environments where, once the rules are established, audiences can spontaneously invest and personally abandon their everyday boundaries to "*become* the event."[23] This practice of *becoming* is the first rule of engagement in *TDRC*.

Becoming

In *TDRC*, the performance space will be open with proscenium audience seating. The first scene in *TDRC* is the plexiglass wall entrance and installation. I will be onstage the entire time to help oversee the installation. The wall is divided into two halves with about 2–3 inches between them.

The wall will hang from a metal fixture above the stage. On the fixture will be four large chains with hooks at the ends at the places where the wall will be attached. Crew members will bring the wall out, attached it to the hooks, and exit the stage. The plexiglass is about two feet in front of the first row of seats.[24]

Guidelines for how audiences are encouraged to interact with the plexiglass wall will be made available to review in their program before the performance. There will be signs around the theater and an announcement made at the top of the show, which states:

> *During this performance, if you self-identify as a White person, you are not allowed to cross the plexiglass wall. If you cross the wall, you are not allowed to:*
>
> *Touch me*
> *If you touch me, you are not allowed to:*
> *Physically and/or emotionally assault me*
> *If you physically and/or emotionally assault me, you are not allowed to:*

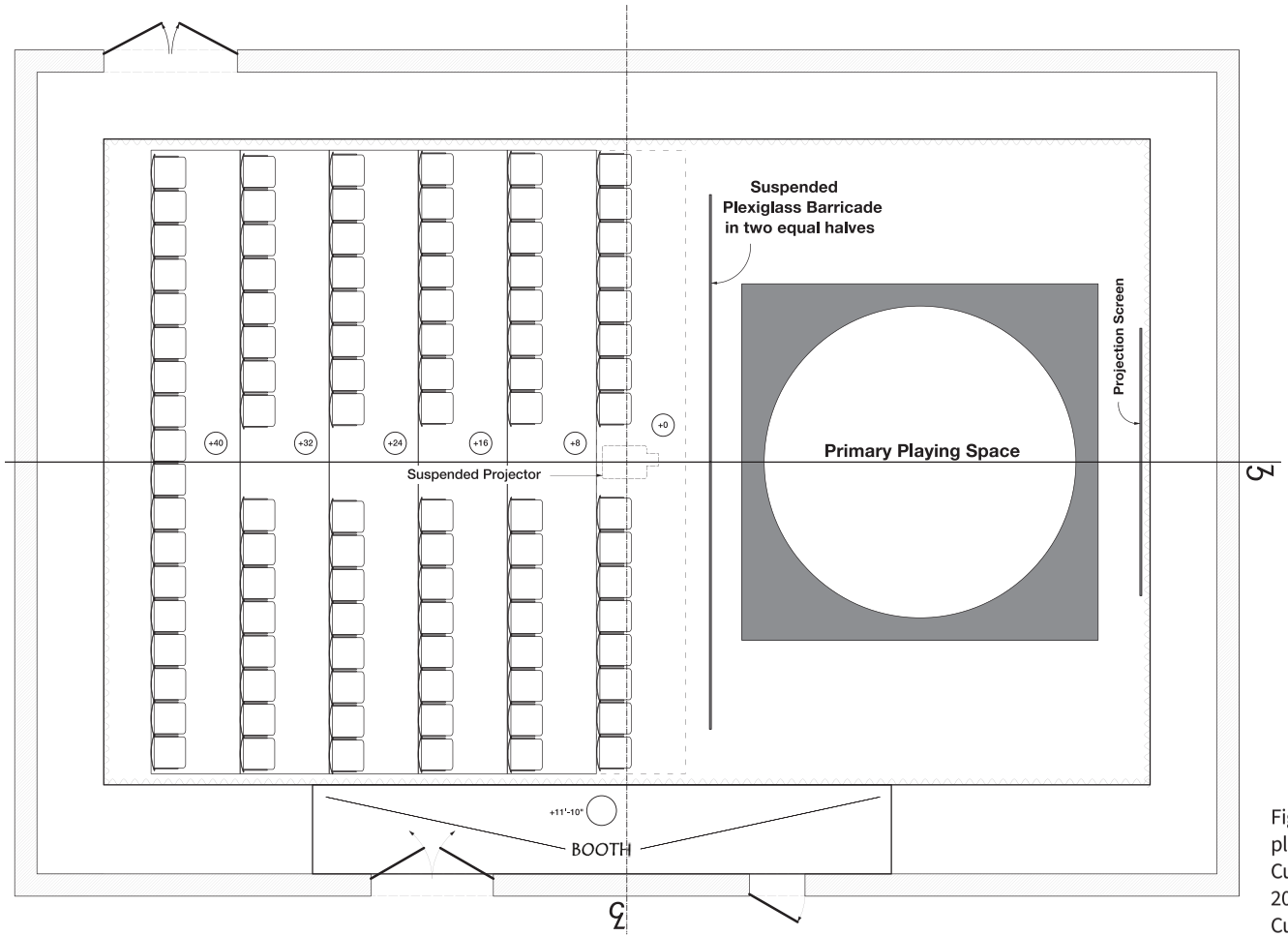

Fig. 2.1. *TDRC* floor plan. Drawn by Curtis Trout in July 2022. Photo credit Curtis Trout.

Physically and/or emotionally kill me
If you physically and/or emotionally kill me . . . well then . . .
I will be dead and that will be the end of the performance.
Thank you.

This disclosure, and thus the plexiglass itself, are, as Gareth White states, an invitation to participate. White points to how invitations for audiences to participate in participatory performance matter because they can challenge the expectations of audiences who are used to conventional theatrical practices. In an overt invitation, performers make it clear to the audience what they want them to do. An implicit invitation is "where a convention does not exist for participation and nothing has to be described to the audience. . . . Implicit invitations can be ambiguous, creating moments where spectators do not know whether invitation is intended or not."[25] Covert invitations "lead an audience . . . into participating without letting them know that this is happening."[26] It is clear that my invitation is overt, but this does not indicate that audiences will respond to the work the way I want (i.e., don't touch me) or expect (i.e., don't kill me). If anything, the disclosures are teasing White audiences and luring them in with a "privilege carrot" that playfully gives them the power over life and death. Unconsciously the disclosure says:

As a White person, you have the power to decide my fate. One of these choices will end up with me dead which is bad for me, and the show over, which is bad for you. What's it gonna be?

So, although the invitation is overt, the audience could observe the invitation as implicit, or even covert, based on a number of ways they could interpret the invitation. White's horizon of participation, which comprises the multiple ways that audiences are invited to participate in a performance, grants the audience agency for how they interpret and perform their role in participatory performance.[27] As White notes:

> When invited to participate we [the audience] construct . . . an essential assessment of the potential activity appropriate to the invitation. . . . The horizon of participation changes as we interact and perform, moving with us and inviting us to advance further. . . . The horizon, therefore, rather than a fixed set of possibilities, is a changing landscape that develops as participants take action and . . . practitioners intervene.[28]

In the *We* stance in *TDRC*, the horizon of participation is not isolated to audience positionality. My positionality is equally affected in the performance. Thus, as the audience considers their choices and I consider my fate with each moment in the piece, *We* are co-constructing *TDRC* in the process of becoming the event.

Live(d) Praesence

The second rule of engagement that *TDRC* must embrace is Machon's theory of *live(d) praesence*. Everyone in the performance space temporarily experiences my fear and terror, yet these dark emotions have a lasting impact on everyone in the performance space long after it is over. Harnessing the power of live(d) praesence means embracing the ephemerality of the event as a "paradoxical experience," in that it can be experienced in the moment "yet it lasts in the receiver's embodied memory" as an impression that will remain for everyone in the performance space.[29] *TDRC* as an immersive performance enhances the live(d) [*We*] interaction and exchange that occurs within the event. Interaction with the plexiglass wall promotes a shared experience that, although it is divisive in the approach, physically affects everyone in the performance space: *We* are all in the process of experiencing it together. The *We* stance is a live(d) praesence that "colludes in a continuing, immediate, and interactive exchange of energy and experience"[30] between the stances of *Human-Researcher-Performer-Audience-Participant-Observer*. *We* engage in the sensorial live(d) praesence of human bodies and performance objects that teach us something about ourselves in fleeting yet affective performance moments.

This does not mean that everyone is experiencing the same emotions or distresses. Everyone in the performance space brings with them their history, culture, and social and political context, which shape the way they interact with the performance and how their physical and emotional interactions inform the people and objects around them and vice versa. Gareth White explores the complicated interactions that arise when participatory performances "*stage being together as a problem* by creating situations of conflict into which to cast the audience participant."[31] White recounts how Jamal Harewood's *The Privileged* (2015) "exposes flaws in social relations rather than seeking to heal them."[32] In the performance, an audience of mostly White Londoners are cast as zookeepers and given written instructions on how to take care of an institutionalized polar bear named Cuddles. They must wake him, play with him, and feed him his

favorite food: fried chicken. The group must control how much Cuddles eats because "his natural survival instincts [have not] adapted to the plentiful supply of food in his captive situation."[33] Finally, written instructions state that the audience must remove Cuddles's bear suit to reveal a Black man who, still "bear-like, doesn't speak, and is fiercely protective of his food."[34] The audience must work together to make sure that Cuddles doesn't overeat and die. The display of White people physically wrestling with a tall Black man over a bucket of fried chicken is memorable for White (who is a White man). He states:

> For me there was some quite conscious consideration of what the performance procedure was provoking as it was under way, a dawning awareness and admiration for how the piece was playing me. And I was aware of other people's emotions: I could perceive amusement, worry, puzzlement among the participants, and to some extent feel what Harewood was going through, intermixed with his performance of a threatened and aggressive animal. . . . Harewood has not only staged the images that we make as a group, he has staged the affects that charge and energise them. His game, his set of performative invitations, has made us act and feel together. Not to feel and act as one, but as expressions of the same field of affect: differently charged and differently energising.[35]

Like Harewood's performance, the plexiglass wall in *TDRC* sets up the conditions through which the audience experiences the wall; even when the audience chooses to not act, they are still experiencing—exposing the larger themes of racialization, fear, and terror by which we are all affected. The stakes are much lower in *TDRC* compared to *The Privileged*. No one is wrestling a bucket of fried chicken from me. Yet, the conditions on which the plexiglass wall is designed to "protect" me in the space from the hypothetical threat of violence are live(d) praesence: *We* all can see it, *We* all can touch it, and even if *We* don't all know how to feel about it—*We* all experience it. White reflects:

> But the dominant memory of the climactic moments of the piece is of a generalised tension, a sense of my own presence in an emerging event, simultaneously aware of it having been deliberately and manipulatively constructed around me *and* that I was still of it and it was of me. It's *sticky*, like the chicken grease that was on the floor of the studio when we arrived, and on the hands of some participants when we left.[36]

Moving beyond the Plexiglass Wall

I have offered two defining rules of engagement that elucidate how the *We* stance can be better supported: engaging in a writing practice that focuses on *TDRC* as becoming the event and acknowledging the powerful engagement that live(d) praesence can have in the work. Approaching *TDRC* from the *We* stance, which is the foundation for how everyone in the performance space interacts as *Human-Researcher-Performer-Audience-Participant-Observer*, can contribute to deeper layers of culture and social and political context that shape the way *We* interact with the performance. *We* acknowledge this context as conflicting standpoints in shared spaces. The plexiglass wall is the anchor that channels our standpoints. The wall does not defuse my fear and terror of toxic White masculine policing, or the fear and terror that others may experience in the performance space. Yet it may provide a way to move past the fear and terror. The wall *is* part of *becoming* the event, and we embrace the live(d) praesence in order for everyone to have permission to fully invest despite the dark, murky, and complicated active performance space *We* will inhabit.

Epilogue

Since the writing of this chapter, *They Don't Really Care About Us: PO-lice, PoPos, Sandra, and Me* (*TDRC*) has continued to be a work-in-progress movement rumination. So much of the topic and portions of the script have caused me great anxiety. Feeling this, I put some of the movement ruminations on their feet in a private dance studio. It felt freeing to express the repetitiveness of my anxiety through consistent rhythmic foot tapping. Next, I allowed my body to move from the rhythmic tapping to sinking into the floor. The experience felt as if I was . . . bleeding out anxiety and fear, *or* giving myself to it.

I had an opportunity to chat with author Gareth White about this chapter and my show. I asked, "When I look at your article about Jamel Harwood's performance, I want to see my work as totally unsettling. Yet, I'm concerned about *my* unsettledness in the work. . . . Is it okay to feel this way and still be brave enough to perform this piece? Is it okay to be unsettled as I attempt to settle into the work?" Gareth stated, "This unsettling that you are referring to is a story about *itself*. . . . The unsettling *is* the story." For now, as I continue to develop this performance piece, I'll lean toward that.

Notes

1. See Dani Synder-Young's *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy* (Northwestern University Press, 2020); Salamishah Tillet, "When Culture Really Began to Reckon with White Privilege." *New York Times*, 9 December 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/09/arts/black-artists-open-letters.html; Michael Pearce, "Making Whiteness Visible and Felt in Fairview," *Humanities* 10, no. 2 (1 June 2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020081

2. Michael Jackson, "They Don't Really Care About Us," track 2 of disc 2 on Michael Jackson, *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, Epic, 1995.

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THREE Immersive Van Gogh

A Scenographic Analysis

CHRISTIN ESSIN

In October 2020, the streaming platform Netflix released *Emily in Paris* for television viewers weary from months of pandemic lockdown and reconsidering their Thanksgiving plans after a third wave of COVID-19 infections.[1] Episode five of the dramedy found Emily—a twenty-something American who wins over cynical Parisians with her upbeat optimism—posting Instagram selfies of exploits with new friends. Their evening ended at the Atelier des Lumière for *Immersive Van Gogh*. "*Starry Night*, one of my favorites," she murmured, as electric blue and garish yellow lights danced over her face.[2] Animated projections of Vincent van Gogh's paintings illuminated the walls as they explored the space. "This is incredible," Emily said. "I feel like I'm actually in the painting." The throbbing beat of club music blended with colorful lights on walls, bodies, and faces, providing the perfect backdrop for Instagram-worthy photographs. Unable to travel to Paris themselves before vaccinations, Netflix watchers in the US could only live vicariously and imagine what it felt like to walk through one of Van Gogh's paintings.

For those who lived near one of the many cities where immersive Van Gogh productions opened the following year, however, travel to Europe would be unnecessary. While conventional performing arts venues mostly remained closed, these immersive Van Gogh exhibits "bloomed like sunflowers," reported Christina Morales, reporting on COVID-weary audiences in such cities as Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, and Seattle.[3] Some cities, including New York and Boston, hosted multiple immersive Van

Gogh experiences created by different companies, prompting confusion for consumers, who wondered which was the "authentic" production, or at least which was the one Emily attended in Paris. With names like *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, *Immersive Van Gogh*, and *Van Gogh Alive*, producers capitalized on one another's success, on copyright laws that placed Van Gogh's images in the public domain, and on the public's eagerness to leave their homes and immerse themselves in a *Starry Night* simulacrum of moving light projections. Unlike theaters with fixed seating, these exhibits could more easily implement pandemic protocols, such as staggering entrance times to limit attendance and ensure social distancing. As such, they attracted sizable numbers of spectators who wanted safety while reasserting their inalienable right to "live again" by attending local cultural events. For furloughed technicians in the entertainment industry, immersive Van Gogh also provided a lifeline; employment with these productions not only returned their livelihoods but also the confidence and productivity technicians feel when using the skills of their craft.

Seeing "Van Gogh" in the title, however, the public associated these immersive exhibits more with the visual arts than with the live-performance industry, and newspapers sent their art critics to review them. The *New York Times* art critic Jason Farago largely dismissed them as trivial entertainment that distilled "fin-de-siècle French painting into an amusement as captivating as a nursery mobile."[4] Farago's review compared his experiences at New York's dueling productions—*Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* produced by Fever and *Immersive Van Gogh* produced by Lighthouse Immersive. "Sensuous selfie backdrops come well before intellectual engagement," he quipped. *Artnet News* reviewer Ben Davis wrote, "these ubiquitous immersive Van Gogh Gesamtkunstwerks have essentially the same relation to Van Gogh, the artist, that the real Paris has to the Darren Star version of Paris of *Emily in Paris*. Maybe less."[5] More familiar with observing Van Gogh on gallery walls, art critics were less appreciative of a visual simulacra of the same. In these "image environments," Joseph Henry wrote for *Artforum*, "Van Gogh's signature arabesque stroke functions as the spiritual opposite of the atomized pixel." By and large, critics bemoaned the lost aura of Van Gogh's canvases, just as Walter Benjamin might in a "new age of mechanical reproduction."[6] In the absence of the original, they were uninterested in examining what *was* materially present: a theatrical rendering of Van Gogh's artistry through scenographic technologies.

The following essay intervenes in this critical dialogue, shaped primarily by visual arts reviewers, to examine immersive Van Gogh productions

as scenographic performances designed and constructed by theater artists and craftspersons. As an artistic practice, scenography encompasses all of the visual, spatial, and temporal components of theatrical production. Architecture, scenery, lighting, sound, costumes—these are the scenographer's tools. The term "scenography" can denote a conceptual practice or a material artistry; it can reference the work of a single person or many creating in collaboration.[7] To analyze immersive Van Gogh as scenography, therefore, is to embrace its inherent theatricality, to insist that the original painter's artistry is not absent but rather interpreted and performed as a narrative subject.

As part of a collection of essays concerned with sharpening scholarly discourse around immersivity, this chapter draws focus to scenography as a primary, productive mode of immersive storytelling and to the role scenographic labor plays in shaping what Gareth White calls immersive theater's "aesthetics of the invitation."[8] Without actors, these productions shape the visitor's immersive engagement solely through scenographic means. The only live bodies engaged are those of the visitors and technicians managing the experience. I use the term "visitor" to differentiate between these two populations engaged separately in leisure or labor.[9] Visitors come, then they go; but those laboring within the performance space stay longer and understand the artistry differently. They are a community of skilled craftspersons immersed in work, that is, producing the immersive experience. By juxtaposing the bodies and bodily experiences of workers and visitors, I draw focus to immersive Van Gogh's materiality—the scenographic elements that produce different modes of immersivity. The critic who situates stagecraft as essential to the immersive Van Gogh experience is more concerned with examining its impact on participants than with identifying what it lacks or how it falls short of Van Gogh's original work.

Between September 2021 and March 2022, I attended four productions of immersive Van Gogh created by three separate companies: Grande Experiences' *Van Gogh Alive* in Denver; Fever's *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* in Atlanta; and Lighthouse Immersive's *Immersive Van Gogh* in Dallas and Nashville.[10] These visits occurred after a majority of the US population had taken the COVID-19 vaccine and domestic travel had resumed with government-mandated safety protocols.[11] Pandemic isolation primed the public's desire for experiences that could, as Josephine Machon describes in *Immersive Theatres*, satisfy their need to feel "sensually and imaginatively alive," but in a relatively safe space for gathering.[12] My first encounter with *Van Gogh Alive* includes more thick description to

establish the participatory aesthetics common to these productions; my access to technicians involved in the Denver production also provides insight into the technologies and labor needed to produce the visitors' immersive experience. Their perspectives as craftspersons bring visibility to immersive Van Gogh's scenography as artistry in conversation with the painter's original work.

While they employ theater artists, immersive Van Gogh productions do not advertise their events as theater. *Immersive Van Gogh* (the production featured in *Emily in Paris*) comes the closest by publicizing their association with David Korins, scenic designer for the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*. In addition to Farago's, Davis's, and Henry's dismissive visual art critiques, an antitheatrical bias characterized Maya Phillips's reflective essay for the *New York Times*. She expressed unease watching visitors interact with the image projections, because they could not fully experience Van Gogh's "resolute brush strokes and tiny gradients of color." Rather, they seemed to treat it "as a backdrop for a kind of theatrical experience . . . [h]ow do you make theater out of art that is so explicitly contained and individual to van Gogh's perspective?"[13] But the intersection between theater and the fine arts is nothing new, as Susan Bennett argued in *Theatre and Museums* (2013). Bennett's research traced a gradual shift in the museum industry from "display to experience," with curators increasingly designing exhibitions that use theatrical techniques to engage the "participatory visitor."[14] Immersive Van Gogh productions expand on this trend, pushing it outside the museum proper.

Similar to productions of immersive theater, they eschew traditional arts venues for unconventional or repurposed spaces in neighborhoods less known as arts destinations.[15] Local press in cities such as Chicago and Cleveland also reported on the revitalization of real estate in neighborhoods hosting immersive Van Gogh productions, previously depressed by industrial decline or the pandemic shutdown.[16] Those I attended took place in a former airport hangar, an abandoned factory, an old Masonic Temple, and a vacant grocery store. Each venue helped local audiences experience a familiar space differently, even whimsically. For technicians installing these productions, the use of nontraditional performance spaces meant they spent many hours building theatrical infrastructure from the ground up. They assembled and hung every truss needed to hang temporary walls and curtains; they positioned and secured every projector mount with precision to create the immersive scenography.

I attended *Van Gogh Alive* (*VGA*) in Denver in September 2021; it had opened the previous July as a coproduction of Grande Experiences and

the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA). Operating out of Australia, Grande looks for local producing partners to secure a venue and provide skilled labor. "We were really lucky to partner with the Denver Center," said Zach Ciaburri, a Phoenix-based production manager who Grande hired to direct the installation. "They are masters at what they do. John Ekeberg [director of DCPA's Broadway Division] took it on because he wanted to put his people back to work. And this show puts so many crafts back to work, not just projectionists, but also riggers, carpenters, charge artists, and props artists."[17] For *Van Gogh Alive*, DCPA rented the Hangar, an event space at the Stanley Marketplace where they previously staged immersive performances in collaboration with Third Rail Projects (2016), and Alejandro G. Iñárritu (2020).[18]

Formerly the site of the Stanley Aviation Company, Stanley Marketplace is now a converted mixed-use development with local restaurateurs, yoga studios, and artisan boutiques. When I arrived late morning on a Saturday, a group of visitors waited at the Hangar entrance. DCPA staggered starting times in thirty-minute increments for crowd control; all visitors wore protective face masks, with the majority maintaining a respectful social distance. A bar stood to the side selling Van Gogh–themed cocktails such as "Chrome Orange," a mixture of prosecco, Aperitivo, and lemon juice with a plastic paintbrush swizzle stick. Those attending appeared to be a mix of families, some with children and grandparents, older couples, and groups of friends extending their brunch gatherings.

Daylight faded as I entered a dark room with theatrical lighting, a replica gallery space with large posters on exhibit walls. They featured Van Gogh's paintings—digitally printed reproductions—including his most famous still lifes, landscapes, and self-portraits painted between 1888 and 1890, the two years before his untimely death. The exhibit text explained that the painter escaped Paris to live in Provence, where the bright sun, blue skies, and blooming gardens inspired his vibrant colors. Each poster specified the museum that housed the original—*Sunflowers* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Starry Night over the Rhone* at Paris's Musée d'Orsay, *Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear* at London's Courtauld Gallery—at once collapsing and emphasizing the distance between locations for a pandemic crowd facing limits on international travel.

An intricate system of trusses installed by the Denver-based riggers held the carefully placed lighting instruments focused on each poster as well as the black curtains, white walls, and projection screens that comprised the exhibit. More visible to visitors was the work of DCPA's carpenters and scenic charges who built and painted a forced-perspective, life-

Fig. 3.1. Author selfie in front of *Van Gogh Alive*'s *Bedroom in Arles* immersive scenography. Photo credit Christin Essin.

sized replica of Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* (1889) located across from the gallery.[19] Seen from a distance, the bedroom approximated the digitally printed painting displayed to its right, only much larger in scale. But when visitors walked *into* the bedroom, they experienced an immersive stage set ready to be explored and photographed. DCPA's props artisans had reproduced the simple items represented in the original canvas with actual objects, each offering a tactile invitation to engage: to sit in Van Gogh's wooden chair, lay on Van Gogh's bed, handle the soap from Van Gogh's wash basin, and place Van Gogh's straw hat on their head.

Up close, visitors could see that the bed was slightly shorter on one side, custom built by DCPA's carpenters to enhance the setting's forced perspective. They also saw and touched the paint applied with a scenographic dry brush technique to all of the bedroom's surfaces, suggestive of Van Gogh's unresolved brushstrokes. The bold colors of the applied paint

that appeared on shirts hanging from wall pegs and the water glass on the side table replicated the same from Van Gogh's original canvas, which he described in a letter to his brother Theo: the "green" window and "pale violet" walls; the "fresh butter" wood of the bed and chairs; the "blue" basin on an "orange" table.[20] Scenic charges often use a dry brush technique on stage scenery, knowing that the unresolved strokes and textures will blend into a polished image when viewed from an auditorium under stage lighting. But seen up close by *Van Gogh Alive*'s (*VGA*'s) visitors, the same coarse brushstrokes reinforced the bedroom's theatricality, inviting them to see it as an artistic creation twice over. The bedroom is the subject of Van Gogh's painting, as evidenced by the information posted on the gallery wall, but *VGA*'s immersive bedroom is a theatrical setting created through the skillful application of scenic impasto, as obvious an application of paint on a human scale as it appears on Van Gogh's original canvases.

Placed across from the replica gallery wall, the scenographic bedroom emphasized *VGA*'s difference from traditional exhibitions in art museums, giving visitors permission to interact tangibly with the subject of Van Gogh's painting. Museums that display his works have more recently recognized viewers' desire to touch Van Gogh's texturally thick brushstrokes by designing newer, interactive exhibits to complement the paintings. Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum developed a touch program for computer tablets placed near each painting, and the National Gallery of Canada produced a scale replica of Van Gogh's *Iris* (1889) with a three-dimensional printer so visitors could touch an approximation of the painted canvas.[21] *VGA*'s immersive bedroom lacked the proximity to the original work that was possible in Amsterdam, but it still functioned as a playful opportunity for sensory exploration in Denver.

Visitors moved into *VGA*'s projection rooms at their own pace, with employees inviting them to linger as long as they wished. Without spoken text or an identifiable chronological narrative, visitors could begin their experience whenever they wanted, starting with the collage of portraits from Arles or the swirl of clouds amid the cypress trees of Saint-Rémy. A few plush benches offered seating, but otherwise the space was open for circulation. Two rooms—the first smaller, the second larger—contained white screens of various sizes and fifteen to twenty projectors that technicians hung above, one for each screen; they also adhered large rectangles of white vinyl to the floor to reflect projections from above. Grande custom-designs the screens for installation at each venue, arranging them high and low to surround the visitors with projected images from all directions.

The recording of projections recycled approximately every forty minutes; the opening scene featured the colors of the French flag spreading from screen to screen across the faces of Van Gogh's self-portraits. The last scene closed with a gunshot and dispersal of crows across the wheat fields of Auvers, not loud enough to distress but suggestive enough to signify the end of Van Gogh's life and career. Through digital editing, the projections operated as a synchronized visual symphony. A specific portrait might appear simultaneously on different screens, with the eyes enlarged on one and mouth enlarged on the other. One screen moved with animation while the next remained still. Extreme close-ups attempted to capture the texture of Van Gogh's thick brushstrokes, then slowly zoomed out to reveal sunflowers in a vase or a garden of irises. A landscape might spread horizontally across two screens or fill the floor with its projected colors and textures, appearing and then fading, scrolling up or down, growing to great heights or dwindling to nothing.

Every few minutes, the recording transitioned scenes, each scored to different selections of classical music. Songs by French composers such as Camille Saint-Saëns ("The Carnival of Animals," "Danse Macabre") and Léo Delibes ("Sylvia," "The Flower Duet") dominated. The complex composition of animated images moved in synchrony with the musical tempo. Sound technicians had placed speakers directly behind the screens so that the music, like the images, emanated from all directions. Although the spectacular projections dominate the visitor's attention, the sound was essential to creating a fully sensory immersive experience.[22]

Technicians also had placed oil diffusers in dark corners that released a production-specific "scent profile": top notes of cardamom and cypress mixed with bottom notes of musk and cedarwood. "Some people notice, others don't," Ciaburri said, noting that the producers experiment with intensity levels at each new location. Theater artists use olfactory or aroma design, Sally Banes has argued, to "evoke a mood or ambiance" as well as "complement" other visual and aural signs in the production of cultural meaning.[23] In connection to Van Gogh's narrative, *VGA*'s "scent profile" references the French countryside he captured through his brushstrokes during his most productive years. The aromatic citation is more subtle than an audible gunshot and the visual dispersal of crows, but as elements of immersive stagecraft, they combine to envelop visitors in a story about the creation of Van Gogh's artistry.

VGA's use of floor projections prompted the most active, visible participatory behaviors from visitors. During my viewing, most adults stood, but a few adventurously claimed space on the floor to take selfies of the color-

Fig. 3.2. Children playing with projections at *Van Gogh Alive*. Photo credit Christin Essin.

ful lights flickering over their faces; some adopted meditative crossed-leg postures. Children, however, eagerly took to the floor to crawl, flip, roll, dance, and skip among the projections. They chased each other and the colorful moving lights, often moving in tempo with slow then fast background music. I only witnessed one behaving as though he registered the subjects of the images; seeing the projected outline of a Provence village on the floor, he jumped from rooftop to rooftop as though he were high above instead of solidly on the ground.

The children's playfulness encouraged everyone to explore behaviors outside those expected in more formal art gallery spaces, where docents stop people from sitting on floors or moving too close to an artwork. The projectors hanging out of reach of visitors imposed no movement limitations as visitors soaked up the illuminated stars on their skin. Visitors who took selfies reveled in the colored light projected across their faces, turning their heads one way or another to catch different shapes and angles.

Within the tight frame of a selfie, the subjects of Van Gogh's paintings would not be discernible, but the colors and textures rendered in light became available to visitors for an intimate encounter. As an immersive performance, *VGA* mines the "sensual potential of digital technologies," providing a scenographic space to "touch" an exquisite composition of colored, textured light that is aligned with, but also distinct from, Van Gogh's artistry.[24]

After *VGA*'s projection rooms, visitors moved into a smaller room covered with silk sunflowers from ceiling to floor. There were "close to seven thousand," according to DCPA's assistant technical director Stub Allison; the properties team sourced them out of China, a task complicated by pandemic-related shipping delays.[25] A U-shaped pathway guided visitors from entrance to exit, but some decided to explore further. "The sunflowers need a weekly fluffing," Allison said, "because some people walk right into the middle of them. Some have even fallen into them while taking selfies." After the visual touch of projected light, some perhaps yearned for a more tactile engagement, to feel more fully "inside a Van Gogh painting," like the character Emily. Like her fictional experience in Paris, visitors to Denver's *VGA* production were inclined to share their experience with others by posting selfies on social media (#VanGoghAliveDCPA).

In her essay exploring the "performative spectatorship of museum selfies," Elizabeth Hunter examines this desire to be seen interacting with art. "Museum selfies are the twenty-first-century version of touching the art—an outlet for museum visitors whose sensory access has been restricted to the visual by multiple protective barriers, but who still crave embodied engagement with artworks."[26] Selfies taken in *VGA*'s sunflower room and in front of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art demonstrate that urge, but the former specifically documents an embodied engagement with scenographic artistry. In placing 7,000 sunflowers in a room designed and built for their display, theater craftspersons provided an immersive scenography that referenced the original painting but also invited a 360-degree sensory interaction. The sunflower room did not replicate a Van Gogh painting, like the scenographic bedroom at the beginning, but provided an imaginative, scenographic interpretation of the joy and abundance one might feel viewing the vibrant floral colors of Van Gogh's original work, a final space for visitors to tell a story about themselves through photographic documentation.

After VGA, I planned to attend *Immersive Van Gogh* in my hometown, Nashville, when it opened in November 2021. But the producer, Starvox Entertainment, had difficulty finding an appropriate venue and delayed

the opening.[27] So in February 2022, I drove to Atlanta to see Fever's *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* (*VGIE*). I had no direct connections to technicians working on the production, and Fever declined my request for interviews (probably because they had received a spate of negative press and an "F" rating from the Better Business Bureau).[28] Fever installed their Atlanta production at Pullman Yard, a reclaimed factory once used for manufacturing railroad cars that now advertises itself as the "South's premiere destination for entertainment."[29] Like *VGA*'s Denver venue, Pullman Yard provided *VGIE* with a large, open space that they could divide into multiple rooms.

VGIE's abundance of preprojection room offerings made *VGA*'s look comparatively restrained. On entry, a jumble of exhibits awaited visitors, starting with an oversized white sculpture of Van Gogh's head that reflected swirls of colored light. As they entered the gallery space, visitors encountered scale replicas of Van Gogh's most famous paintings with accompanying biographical information. A short film in the next room exalted the painter's use of color, and another human-scale approximation of *Bedroom in Arles* prompted visitors to spatially explore the painting's interior. It lacked the same bespoke craftspersonship of *VGA*'s bedroom and, tucked into a corner amid other exhibits, it failed to garner the same attention from visitors. A series of hanging Japanese woodblocks to show the influence of Ukiyo-e prints on Van Gogh's technique and a toy theater replica of a vestibule in the asylum where he painted provided additional visual illustrations. Meant to educate the visitors about the painter's work, these exhibits approximated what one might find at a children's museum, only measured to fit the hands and bodies of adult visitors. The early-evening crowd with whom I attended mostly ignored their invitation to engage and moved to the showcase immersive experience.

VGIE's projection room featured an impressive 360-degree, two-story, panoramic expanse of tall white curtains and screens, distinct from VGA's assemblage of different sizes. The screens' rough edges and stapled seams were visible to a trained eye; the installation crew perhaps had little theatrical experience or faced a rushed production schedule. But most visitors did not look that closely, content to sit lazily on benches or recline in slingback *Starry Night*–inspired beach chairs and gaze upward at the animated images. The opening scene simulated the architecture of a cathedral, accentuating the room's height and rectangular shape; projections of Van Gogh's paintings appeared in gilt frames on red walls in between gothic arches. The cathedral then melted away to reveal the falling petals of almond blossoms or shimmering stars over the undulating currents

of the Rhône. Like *VGA*'s animated projections, *VGIE*'s collage of Van Gogh's most recognizable paintings encircled visitors in an expansive canvas of floating, growing, and swirling. Similarly, the soundtrack featured classical music selections to accentuate the animation. *VGIE* lacked an olfactory component, but the immersive aesthetics essentially duplicated what I experienced with *VGA*.

Once they had their fill of projections, visitors moved into the last room, which offered a video-game-inspired virtual reality experience for an up-charge. By donning a headset, they could walk through a brownish gamescape to encounter more of Van Gogh's paintings. Only those who had previously purchased the add-on experience seemed to engage, however; after the projection room's cinematic spectacle, it felt unnecessary. In contrast to sharing the projection space with others, even if socially distanced, the virtual reality experience had little to offer those who were tired of isolating and craved the normalcy of a date night or evening with friends.

If there is an "authentic" immersive Van Gogh production, it's *Immersive Van Gogh* (*IVG*), produced by Lighthouse Immersive (a partnership between Starvox Entertainment and Show One Productions). *IVG* is the only production that credits artists other than Van Gogh; Massimiliano Siccardi, who producer Corey Ross called "the Steven Spielberg of immersive experiences," arranged and animated the projections, with Luca Longobardi providing a soundtrack of original music and recomposed classical songs.[30] Lighthouse has used the popularity of immersive Van Gogh to sign long-term leases in the cities where they open venues and works with local architects to refashion spaces for their needs.[31] Rather than design a composition of screens or a neutral white room, *IVG* uses the building's existing architecture to dictate the design, adapting projections to fit each wall's specific dimensions. I visited their productions in Dallas, where they converted an old Masonic temple, and Nashville, where they opened in a vacant grocery store after two delays. Once established with the *IVG* production, the new Lighthouse Artspace will offer similar immersive experiences based on other popular artists, such as Frida Kahlo or Claude Monet.[32]

To outfit and maintain their productions, Lighthouse partnered with Production Resources Group (PRG), a global leader in entertainment technologies with scenic shops that employ thousands of technicians in cities including New York, Las Vegas, Toronto, and Los Angeles. With *IVG*'s expansive growth, PRG dedicated an entire department to satisfy their needs, creating a substantial amount of work for employees previ-

ously furloughed by pandemic shutdowns.[33] Technicians who previously maintained Broadway productions now sourced projection equipment to ship to their venues across North America. Scenic charges began to carve and paint oversized bas relief portraits of Van Gogh, designed by Korins for the entrance of their New York production and later replicated for other venues such as Dallas and Nashville.

IVG does not prime visitors with replica gallery walls or bedroom playgrounds. Apart from the scenographic entrance and gift shop exit, Siccardi's animated projections provide the primary immersive experience. Synchronized with Longobardi's orchestration, the projections immerse visitors in an expressive interpretation of Van Gogh's artistry without commentary on his mastery or his works' greatness. The music—an anachronistic blend of classical music and keyboard electronica—breathes life into brushstrokes and figures extracted from different paintings that now interact with one another. The result is a visual sampling of Van Gogh's painterly aesthetic; by carving out and juxtaposing multiple canvases, the animated compilation produces new meanings. The solitary image of a flickering lantern, pulled from *The Potato Eaters* (1885), brings hopeful light to an otherwise dark room; in the original canvas, however, the lantern's light barely breaks through the dreary shadows. The circular animation of Van Gogh's windmills from Montmartre gives mechanical crispness to what were originally the soft, abundant curves of his brushstrokes.

In both Dallas and Nashville, the walls reflecting Siccardi's projections followed the outline of the venue's architecture. Visitors traversed a series of rooms, some with multiple levels for viewing from different angles. Lighthouse scattered geometric mirror sculptures around the space to cast the projections in unexpected directions. The crowds at the *IVG* venues, however, were more content to remain stationary, with most fixing their gaze on the largest expanse of wall. White circles of light projected on the floor, meant to guide safe social distancing, limited the type of lively interaction I had witnessed in Denver. Only a handful "walked through" as Emily had in Paris, with the majority moving only to find a perch to watch the projections as a front-facing cinematic spectacle. When not watching the walls, visitors might watch one another, as when a mother gazed at her toddler responding in awe to the colorful flashing lights. By giving visitors the agency to move around and interact with one another, immersive Van Gogh productions also gave them the ability to refocus their attention, away from the painter's artistry and onto their shared immersive experience. This decentering of Van Gogh is precisely

what disturbed art critics such as Phillips, who expect the artist's mastery always to be the main attraction rather than a potential backdrop for someone else's story.

In Dallas, while on the projection room's second floor, I saw two technicians dressed in all black descend from a third level that was inaccessible to the public. Unlike the mostly stationary visitors gazing around, they moved in an efficient, task-oriented way, unawed by the dazzling projections around them. Rather, they watched for details visitors would not notice—the projectors' precise focus on walls or blending of seams from one unit to the next; the projections' intensity and color quality; the directional sound emanating from each speaker. Their presence, though unobtrusive, provided a reminder of the mechanics necessary to this immersive experience, the technological framework of *IVG*'s scenographic artistry. Their labor solidifies *IVG* as a theatrical production, created not by a solitary artist but by a collaborative team of craftspersons to produce a live experience.

Immersive Van Gogh productions are spaces of leisure and labor, and a recognition of their scenographic medium is essential to analyzing their quality as artistic experiences. In an underfunded arts economy, it is tempting to denigrate these experiences as a subpar simulacrum of true artistry, to grumble about their popularity and the cash made by commercial producers that should rightly go to more austere or publicly accessible cultural institutions. But as someone who researches backstage labor and regularly interacts with technicians, I appreciate the skills necessary to theatrical production, including their application to build an immersive experience, and I was pleased to see so many put back to work using their skills. Acknowledging their labor and the scenographic medium through which they work does not minimize Van Gogh's original work, but brings visibility and value to multiple artistic skills, even disrupting the romantic notion that an artist need be penniless and tortured to inspire others.

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FOUR "*The Telelibrary* Is Here for You"

A Theater of Service during a Time of Crisis

LAUREN R. BECK

I sat on the bed making myself "cozy," as I had been instructed in the email I received. I unlocked my smartphone and called the number I was given. I heard a dial tone, then music, and then a greeting by a blandly friendly voice—one I interpreted as male—that sounded like a recording. The voice asked me to state my name and what I'd like to be called. I said, "Lauren is fine." (He called me "Lauren is fine" throughout the call.) He asked what I'd like to call him. I said, "Uncle Joe," although I'm not sure why I chose that name. He asked if I would consent to be recorded. I was to say either "yes" or "surveillance does not make me cozy." I said yes. He said that I had three credits and asked me to make a selection between 1 and 7. Not knowing what to expect, I said "2." He said that selection 2 was a one-credit selection and asked if I wished to continue. I said yes. He said that at any time I could "pause by saying 'pause,' end by saying 'end,' or access the main menu by saying 'main menu.'" I heard a clicking sound and then someone (I wasn't sure if it was the first voice or someone else) reading a recipe, "One clove garlic, one cup olive oil . . ." It seemed to be instructions for infusing olive oil. At the end, the piece was attributed to *Good and Cheap: Eat Well on $4 a Day* by Leanne Brown. I wasn't sure if this was a real book or not. He asked me to make another selection. He said that at any time I could say, "Hey Uncle Joe," and I would be able to ask a question. I said, "Hey Uncle Joe, what do you suggest?" He said, "It sounds like you are asking me to form an opinion. Allow me to place you on a brief hold while I

form an opinion." Music played for a few moments. When he returned, he said that selections 3, 5, and 7 had positive responses.

This was the beginning of the first of many calls I have placed to *The Telelibrary*. While on a trip to the Netherlands in early 2020, *The Telelibrary*'s creator, Yannick Trapman-O'Brien, was stranded in the UK due to the rapid spread of COVID-19.[1] He estimates that while attempting to get a flight back to the US he was on hold for approximately eighteen cumulative hours with airlines, which may have influenced the style of his telephone performance. Inspired by the generosity of his friends, who lent him a hand while he was stranded—providing food, shelter, and companionship—he began to wonder what *he* could do for others. What could he provide for friends and loved ones while they were isolated during the pandemic? He thought of reading books over the phone, which led to the very basic concept of *The Telelibrary*. Trapman-O'Brien designed *The Telelibrary* as "part theater, part game, part self-care," and he wanted his listeners to feel comfortable stopping him from reading texts in which they were not interested.[2] Knowing that some listeners would feel guilty about offending him, he developed a persona, which he calls a "system." Although *The Telelibrary* system sounds like a robotic interactive voice response system that one might hear when calling a customer service line, Trapman O'Brien's unflaggingly cheerful performance, one that never seems to stumble over his scripted or improvised lines, is a skilled live performance. Trapman-O'Brien's work began as a simple set of phone-tree prompts that quickly grew in complexity as the system adapted to user needs.

As theaters closed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many theater artists and organizations quickly adapted, keeping theater alive by implementing alternate locations and delivery methods that also helped keep patrons alive by increasing safety with social distancing. This shift was eased by the familiarity many artists and audiences already have with performances that take place outside of theaters. Digital technologies such as video calls, virtual reality devices, video streaming, and gaming software allowed flexibility for a variety of theater performances, including interactive and immersive theater. Although seemingly more archaic than the videoconferencing software that became ubiquitous in work, school, and the arts during the pandemic, the telephone saw a resurgence in popularity during the pandemic as "Zoom fatigue" set in. In early 2020, articles in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and elsewhere discussed the unique and forgotten pleasures of the telephone, especially in times of solitude. Voice calls went up significantly during the pandemic. In March

2020, Verizon reported that the average number of phone calls on a given day was double the number of calls typically made on Mother's Day, which has the highest number of calls each year.[3] In pandemic theater, the telephone call—whether emerging from a landline, mobile phone, or IP network—served as both a tool for escaping one's shelter (in place) and for becoming immersed in an alternate reality.

The telephone is an ideal form in many ways for remote theater. As Adrian Curtin notes, the telephone was used to livestream theater to remote audiences before radio or television.[4] During the pandemic, telephone theater took on forms such as one-on-one performances between a performer and audience member (e.g., *Ministry of Mundane Mysteries*); one-on-one performances between two audience members (e.g., *A Thousand Ways* from the Public Theatre); a recorded performance delivered over the phone to one audience member (e.g., Telephonic Literary Union's *Human Resources* from Woolly Mammoth); and more informal telephone calls from actors or other theater artists (e.g., Huntington Theatre at Home). *The Telelibrary* takes on the form of a live, one-on-one performance between the artist and an audience member, yet also provides connection among the collective audience across time. I argue that telephone theater has helped expand the definition of immersivity. In this chapter I focus on *The Telelibrary* because of the innovative way it utilizes cultural understandings, social conventions, and common uses of the telephone to transport audiences to alternate realities, and even, despite its one-on-one format, to connect audiences to each other across time and space. Trapman-O'Brien creates an immersive space of care and service within a fifty-minute performance as well as throughout the duration of call after call.

Although the term "immersive" has been applied to popular entertainment and artistic forms across media, genre, and disciplinary boundaries, the term has shifting meanings depending on just what audiences are immersed within. Video games, cinema, and digital works often use "immersive" to mean "like you are really there," in some ways mimicking what theater already does: being there. Josephine Machon indicates that the central features of immersive theater include an active audience, a sensual experience, and a physically or culturally significant space.[5] *The Telelibrary* may seem to counter these core tenets: the pandemic user was probably sitting at home or perhaps taking a walk, removed from the performer and a physical performance space. While *The Telelibrary* and other telephone performances may appear to lack an immersive landscape, I argue that telephone calls have their own connotations of virtual space

that Trapman-O'Brien utilizes to immerse users. *The Telelibrary* is encoded with an expectation of a convoluted automated phone-tree system, of the type most users will have navigated. First-time *Telelibrary* users have no idea what to expect and no way to make sense of the theatrical world other than by submerging themselves in the world and moving through it by making choices and discoveries. Gareth White explains that to be inside a work of theater is not just to be in a physical and spatial location, "but [to be] inside it as an aesthetic, affective, phenomenological entity [which gives] a different aspect to the idea of a point of view, and of action."[6] *Telelibrary* users are not physically or sensorially immersed, in the space of the call, yet they have the "*feeling*" of being immersed because of the "in-its-own-worldness" that the experience creates.[7]

Many immersive works that rely on sound utilize immersive audio techniques like binaural recording and 3D augmented audio effects that virtually transport listeners to another location by replicating a space's "aural architecture," to utilize Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth Salter's term.[8] For example, Williamstown Theatre Festival developed audio productions accessible on Audible, using selective stereo and binaural effects to create a spatial environment.[9] And Pipe Dream Theatre created "audio shows" meant to provide "immersive, 3D audio."[10] James Lastra, in discussing approaches to recording sound for film, calls this type of sound "phonographic." Phonographic sound aims for the highest fidelity—transmitting all the sounds in an environment in order to present a faithful representation of the sound in that space.[11] This is the type of recording that, when combined with binaural recording techniques and headphone listening, layers the aural architecture of one time and place over another, creating an immersive experience of another soundscape for a listener. Telephonic sound, in contrast, privileges legibility of spoken language.[12] The mechanisms for immersivity are much different in telephone performance. The telephone utilizes conversation, connection, and participation to immerse a listener within a relationship with the voice on the other end of the line. *The Telelibrary* creates a virtual world within the space of the phone call that allows users to build out complex relationships among the user, the system, and other users. So, rather than sonically replicating a space's aural architecture, which can be understood three-dimensionally, *The Telelibrary* creates a network of live and recorded voice interactions in which users build an interdimensional virtual space through their choices.

Trapman-O'Brien calls his audience members *users*, and I embrace that term for immersive theater audience members. Scholars and creators

of participatory, immersive audio theater have adopted or created various terms for audience members since *audience* and *listener* do not quite convey the participatory nature of the works. Terms like *percipient*, *audient*, *experiencer*, *visitor*, *audience-participant*, *playing-audience*, and *guest performer* denote different relationships among the people, objects, spaces, sights, sounds, and actions that constitute the performance.[13] The term *user* rarely appears in works that describe theater audience members. There is even some resistance to the term in disciplines that *do* typically employ *user*, such as user experience research, for example. Some argue that the word is dehumanizing and reduces human beings to a set of actions outside of their whole lived experience.[14] The term *user* is often employed when describing someone who utilizes a service or product to fill a particular need, for example a library or customer-service phone line. The user of these services is typically only referred to *as* a user while their journey within the system is described. When I have encountered the term *user* to describe audience members in participatory performance environments, it has been applied to describe people who are in the *process* of using an object or digital interface during an experience. Thus, whenever the term *user* appears, it suggests an active, agentive person who has a material impact on the experience for themselves and others. It is precisely this element of agency that draws me to the term *user* for both *The Telelibrary* and other immersive works. In *The Telelibrary*, Trapman-O'Brien wants his users to go beyond a surface-level experience of his work. He encourages them to make use of the system in ways that meet their own needs and desires. His users go on a fifty-minute journey in which they can utilize the system as a tool to cocreate an experience.

Although the term *user* is relevant for interactions between Trapman-O'Brien and each individual user during the one-on-one calls, the term *audience* is still applicable to the users once they have finished their calls. Trapman-O'Brien originally conceived of the work as a one-on-one exchange; users would call and request selections, which the system would read. User needs proved to be more complex, however. While some users were content with the original concept (i.e., system reads to user), others began to make requests and suggestions, to which Trapman-O'Brien responded, adapting what the system could do. What resulted is a vast, unmappable, continually evolving web of user creations and options. User 58, the 58th caller and one of the most active, says, "When I first joined *The Telelibrary*, there wasn't all the stuff that we have now. It was just the selections and the user log book, and that was about it. So, for me, when I first got into *The Telelibrary*, it was very much an exploration of what

can be done."[15] Trapman-O'Brien began with a structure, a set of rules, and a library of texts. The experience of each individual *Telelibrary* user, however, is procedural. The users' decisions, the questions they ask, and the conversations they have with the system make unique experiences each time. White argues that procedural authorship in participatory performance works because of the familiar conventions the performance utilizes.[16] In the case of *The Telelibrary*, users can ground themselves in the genre of telephone service, taking on an appropriate role and making decisions within that role. However, the work is never stable, which keeps users constantly making sense of and finding their way through it. User 58 says that he enjoys experiencing the way that *The Telelibrary* evolves over time based on user input. He and other frequent callers enjoy creating new features of the work and new content within existing features. The procedural authorship thus exists on both a personal and a public level. Individual users author their own experiences within the existing world of *The Telelibrary*, leaving their mark for future callers to continue authoring the work.

The telephone as a technology connotes repeated use. As a tool for connection to distant friends and family, the telephone suggests an intimate building of a relationship. Since the late nineteenth century, telephone advertisements have focused on the telephone's ability to bring loved ones close.[17] While landline and early smartphone advertisements emphasized the power of the voice for connection, smartphone ads tend to focus on connection through texting, social media use, and video calling. *The Telelibrary* makes use of these understandings of the telephone, utilizing the audience's associations to its advantage. User 246 explains that she is drawn to "the continuing involvement. It's not like when you go to one performance and then when it's over, it's over. There's a building of this meaningful relationship."[18] User 58 agrees, stating that much of his enjoyment comes from the way Trapman-O'Brien became familiar with his personality and sense of humor over time and personalized his content.[19] Paradoxically, Trapman-O'Brien utilizes the depersonalized customer-service line, a form that many dread engaging with. Interestingly, the repeat *Telelibrary* users I have spoken with dislike telephone calls generally, citing anxiety about misunderstandings due to lack of body language cues, as well as uncertainty about who is on the line and when the calls will interrupt daily life. User 198 says, "a lot of phone calls in my life are necessarily transactional—someone wants information from me or I want information from them."[20] User 346 feels that the design of *The Telelibrary* system intentionally mitigates anxiety and feelings of obli-

gation. User 198 also notes the collaborative nature of the call, explaining that "*The Telelibrary* is about learning and collective contribution and is altogether a much warmer and gentler experience than your typical operator's menu." In contrast to the confusion and lack of control that many *Telelibrary* users typically feel during telephone calls, in *Telelibrary* calls, they sense that they are entering an empathetic system, designed for their exploration in whatever physical space makes them most comfortable.

Trapman-O'Brien explained to me that one of the challenges in adapting his work to the telephone was that his performance work generally relies primarily on "non-verbal, physical, tactile, and interactive" means of communicating with audiences. In *The Telelibrary*, he had to explore "the limits of and capacity of technology as a means of connecting people."[21] Peta Tait asks, "where does emotional feeling happen in relation to the art work?"[22] She questions whether feelings come from a spectator's responses, or if emotions are built into conventions of genre. For example, she notes that just the idea of genres such as comedy and tragedy "suggest[s] that emotional feeling is embedded in artistic communication—that is, felt responses arise within familiar patterns."[23] *The Telelibrary* is built within a genre of care and service. One fan of *The Telelibrary* says, "[t]he way *The TL* treats us is with a sort of distanced intimacy that we often equate with therapy or sex work," going on to explain that this could be the reason many users share many personal details of their lives during their calls.[24] *The Telelibrary* users acknowledge an intimate "charge" that occurs during calls.[25]

Although Trapman-O'Brien intentionally dehumanized the system to allow users a level of comfort in interacting with him, that comfort level led to more intimacy on the calls, which causes users to re-humanize the system. Trapman-O'Brien says:

> People are *very* fond of the system. I have friends who have named it. Everybody names it, obviously, but they'll call me sometimes and they'll say "Oh, how's Bob doing?" and I caught it at one point and said, "You know it's not named Bob for everyone else, right?" And they'll say, "Right . . . but it's named *Bob*." So, what is the function of a system being a facsimile of a person? . . . What are we willing to do *to* and *through* a system that we won't do to a person?[26]

In his *Telelibrary* calls, Trapman-O'Brien frequently insists to users, "This system is here for you," emphasizing that he is there to be of use. The "contract for participation"—to borrow Machon's term—is pre-

sumably wide open. According to Machon, immersive performances have contracts, whether stated explicitly or implied through the performance, that protect the safety of the performers and audience members. Machon says the contracts "invite varying levels of agency and participation, according to how far the audience-participant is prepared to go."[27] Similarly, Trapman-O'Brien envisions immersive performance as a series of doors provided by the artist that invite, but do not require, audiences to enter. His invitation to be of use caused me some anxiety as I imagined the inappropriate ways someone might try to take advantage of his offer. According to Adam Alston, in immersive performances, audiences often feel entitled to "proximate and intimate liaisons with the performers or other audience members that are paid for and expected."[28] Although users have no physical access to Trapman-O'Brien, I imagined all sorts of trauma that mal-intentioned users could impose on him, emboldened by the semi-anonymity of the phone call. He assured me that he has never had users intentionally try to be hurtful to him, the character he plays, or other users. However, some user behaviors in *The Telelibrary* can be understood as, "presumptive intimacy," which is Keren Zaointz's term for narcissistic one-way behaviors of immersive audience members.[29] Many listeners, including myself, have asked Trapman-O'Brien to read his selections in a "sexy" voice (he uses the term "Coy" to describe this mode). Trapman-O'Brien says that one user of the system asked to be called "Mistress," and asked to call him, "Pet."[30] Playing with sexual dynamics in the call and attempting to discomfit the performer are ways to reembody the disembodied voice of the system. The distance between the performer and user can be altered, drawing attention back to the bodies on both ends of the line.

I assert that the most significant immersive element in *The Telelibrary* from Machon's scale of immersivity is "Duration/al." Machon notes the importance of the "*felt* sense of time play."[31] The year 2020 operated with a new set of rules regarding time. Time zones suddenly mattered more than ever, as students, colleagues, and family members were less likely to be in the same one during class, work, and social visits. While many interactions were mediated, choices were made between synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Theater experimented with both. Early in 2020, an abundance of theater performances were suddenly available to stream at no cost for theater audiences with access to reliable computers and internet connections. Many of the recorded performances were made available for a limited time, putting additional pressure on viewers to be as efficient as possible with their viewing. Audiences could

choose to watch prerecorded performances at double speed; they could click through the scrub bar to skip to the most famous scenes; they could multitask (as they often do when watching or working on anything in a browser, having several tabs open at once). Although I enjoyed watching the 1957 Berliner Ensemble production of *Mother Courage*, both versions of the 2011 National Theatre Live *Frankenstein*, and the weekly Neo-Futurists' *Infinite Wrench*, I found myself clicking through the scrub bar to get to the highlights so I could fit everything I wanted to watch into the day. Sarah Bay-Cheng states that the problem with theater during the pandemic "may not be a lack of physical presence, but instead the unrelenting ubiquity and our awareness of performances around all the time, 24 hours a day, which like so much other media no longer has any built-in downtime."[32] Bay-Cheng argues that part of the appeal of a live performance is the absence of everything else that distracts in everyday life. Live telephone theater especially—away from screens, scrub bars, and browser tabs—both allowed and forced audiences to slow down and focus their attention on a performance. Live telephone performances like *The Telelibrary* utilized concrete time slots and performance events that unfolded in real time between the performers and users. The labor of the artist became more palpable when both artists and audiences performed their roles in real time. In discussing Marina Abramovic's work, Diana Taylor explains that in *The Artist Is Present*, "one realizes that performance creates its own time and space not just for the artist but also for the participant who experiences the work."[33] An audience member who considers Trapman-O'Brien's performance of the role of his telephone system as one that occurs multiple times a day, day after day, throughout that long year and beyond, may feel, like I did, a more profound sense of immersion in time for the fifty minutes of the individual phone call. While each call is only fifty minutes, the work as a whole is a multiyear durational performance. As a pandemic performance, this is significant. As of late 2024, Trapman-O'Brien is still regularly performing *The Telelibrary* and has performed more than 1,880 calls. He has spent over 100,000 minutes as the System. In 2020, he was averaging sixteen calls a week, sometimes as many as four calls a day. Each call required skilled, in-character improvisational performance as he interacted with each user. The labor and skill do not go unnoticed. Users marvel at Trapman-O'Brien's ability to customize calls to each user and to improvise so seamlessly.

In 2020, the time spent on a performance became a luxury, a burden, or an act of self-care. Theater, a form strongly associated with liveness, reimagined what presence and immersion could mean. Many pandemic

Fig. 4.1. This photograph of the location where Trapman-O'Brien conducts his *Telelibrary* sessions is sent to each user via text message on completion of a call. Photo credit Yannick Trapman-O'Brien.

theater artists subtly shifted artistic and entertainment goals to those of service, seeking ways to fill needs that could not be met by other media forms. The question, "what do people need and how can we provide it?" was a motivating factor for the genesis of *The Telelibrary*. The work allowed and required remote theater audiences to slow down, immersing them in the individual attention that Trapman-O'Brien gives each user. Perhaps this form of distanced immersion was more immersive than live performance in 2020, when fear of COVID may have prohibited audiences from feeling immersed in more locations with close physical contact. But even three years later, when many are gathering together again, users still find telephone performance appealing and highly immersive. The COVID pandemic has lasting effects on the technologically mediated nature of our daily lives. Remote work, online school, and virtual art and entertainment works have increased, and have prompted closer examination of the ways we define and participate in human interaction. The concept of immersivity and its applications across the realms of art, entertainment, work, education, and commerce will probably continue to be redefined.

The last time I called *The Telelibrary*, my five-year-old daughter joined

me. We curled up on the bed holding the phone between us. As the call neared the end of its fifty-minute runtime—at which point the system always concludes the call, says a firm goodbye, and abruptly hangs up—Trapman-O'Brien was in the middle of reading the folktale "Quack, Quack! Stick to My Back." My daughter was listening intently, and I began to feel nervous about how she would react when the phone call ended before the story was finished. Fifty minutes passed, then fifty-five. At just over an hour, Trapman-O'Brien finished the story. A depersonalized, robotic system, made repersonalized by care, provided just what his listener needed.

Notes

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9. "The WTF Season on Audible," *Williamstown Theatre Festival*, https://wtfestival.org/main-events/wtf-season-on-audible-2020/
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14. For example, see Tamara Hale, "People Are Not Users," *Journal of Business Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (12 November 2018): 163–83, https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v7i2.5601

15. User 58, Zoom conversation with author, 26 February 2021.

16. White, 38.

17. Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994), 223.

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25. Discord chat with Telelibrary fans, 3 October 2021.

26. Yannick Trapman-O'Brien, Zoom conversation with author, 5 June 2020.

27. Machon, 100.

28. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 8.

29. Alston borrows the term "presumptive intimacy" from Keren Zaointz, "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (2014), 405–25.

30. Yannick Trapman-O'Brien, email to author, 5 October 2020.

31. Josephine Machon, 96.

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FIVE Farewell, Fond Pageant

Remount and Representational Space in The Donkey Show

E. B. HUNTER

Introduction

On 23 August 1999, at Club El Flamingo on West 21st Street and Eleventh Avenue in Manhattan, Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner launched *The Donkey Show*, an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[1] Stripped of most clothing and all of Shakespeare's dialogue, *The Donkey Show* reimagined Shakespeare's tale of four mixed-up young lovers and a spat between fairy royalty as a Studio 54–inspired party set in a working nightclub. For the show's hour-long running time, audiences joined performers in singing along and (optionally) binge-drinking to thirteen disco standards arranged to follow the plot of Shakespeare's play. Audiences and critics fell in love with the show, with even the most unimpressible of New York City reviewers trumpeting *The Donkey Show* as a fresh approach to Shakespeare, "surely the most striking and successful, if not the first, of its genre" and "a lark, an exuberant and witty splicing of disparate sources . . . a bacchanal, the sort of libido-driven drug fest one associates with the heyday of Studio 54 and the coke-snorting 70s and early 80s."[2]

After a six-year run in Manhattan, *The Donkey Show* toured Scotland, London, France, and Spain, eventually arriving at the American Repertory Theater in 2009 as the resident production of A.R.T.'s secondary space, a black box theater at Two Arrow Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The black box was renamed Club OBERON and renovated to add the nightclub aesthetic and liquor license that had defined *The Donkey Show*'s New York run. Over the next ten years, the show became a tourist institution and mainstay of Cambridge nightlife, earning "must do" mentions in guides like Lonely Planet.[3] *The Donkey Show* put up its final performance in November 2019, mere weeks before the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the US. Like most live theater, the A.R.T. closed all of its doors in March 2020. Like too many playhouses, the space known as OBERON did not return; in late 2021, the A.R.T. declined to renew its lease on Arrow Street.[4]

With twenty years of performances, hundreds of thousands of audience members, and dozens of bowled-over reviews, *The Donkey Show* catalyzed a shift in immersive theater in the United States from the niche experiment of environmental theater in the 1960s to twenty-first-century popular entertainment.[5] From the show's lengthy production history, this essay focuses on its successful remount in Cambridge. The remount of a beloved production can be an important part of any theater company's plan for financial sustainability, as touring shows from vaudeville to Broadway musicals have long demonstrated. For the A.R.T., *The Donkey Show*'s remount at OBERON certainly had this effect, at once enlivening a fading institution and providing a revenue model steady enough to support multiple experimental theatrical works.[6] Successfully remounting an immersive show is not simple, however, because challenges of replication arise for this kind of theater that do not necessarily attend the theatrical configurations this collection frames as conventional, such as vaudeville or a Broadway musical.[7]

One way to understand the unique challenges of remounting an immersive show is through Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad. According to Lefebvre, any space is constructed by three dimensions: (1) the *conceived* space, which for immersive theater might be the plan the design team makes by booking a venue, writing a script, and deciding on production choices; (2) the *perceived* space or *spatial practice*, which is how the audience behaves within the plan, once it is enacted; and (3) the *representational*, which Lefebvre describes as "space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols. . . . It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."[8] In his performance cartography of New York through Broadway musicals, Dominic Symonds elegantly characterizes this slippery third element as "the mythic city of the representation"[9]—that is, all those cultural imaginings of the magic and horror of "New York City." Or as Stevie Wonder puts it, "Wow, New York, just like I pictured it—skyscrapers and everything."[10]

It is this third element of Lefebvre's triad, *representational* space, that makes the model a useful analytic for remounts of immersive work, because a remount cannot approximate this dimension. For any show, a remount can approximate only the original's *conceived* space, i.e., production choices, and its *perceived* space, i.e., the audience's use of the space in response to these choices. In *The Donkey Show*, for example, A.R.T.'s OBERON in Cambridge more or less replicated the *conceived* space of the El Flamingo nightclub in Chelsea: both featured the same disco playlist and accompanying script, mirrored rolling cubes, open dance floor, full bar, chaotic light scheme, and charismatic but interchangeable performers. Likewise, the *perceived* space of *The Donkey Show*, or the audience's response, was largely the same in both venues, based on the reviews in New York and my observations in Cambridge. This similarity of *perceived* space was hardly surprising. When supplied with a full bar in a mostly standing-room-only dance club where shirtless dancers on mirrored boxes exhort everyone to dance and sing along to beloved disco standards, and the performers aren't recognizable celebrities or such great talents that one wants to be quiet and listen to them anyway, popular audiences in a range of localities will probably participate.

A remount that stops here, attending only to an approximation of the *conceived* and *perceived* spaces of the original, misses the necessary third element, *representational* space, which in immersive work is especially potent. Of course, even a proscenium show on Broadway in 1945 is inflected by being *on Broadway in 1945*. But in immersive work—especially when it involves participation—the audience is asked to cocreate the aesthetic experience. And in so doing, audience members necessarily bring into the narrative world their direct lived associations with the objects and symbols Lefebvre describes as constitutive of *representational* space. As Adam Alston notes, immersive work imbues these associations with elevated importance: "[t]he audience experience produced by an audience's relationships to a set of materials tends to be framed as the primary, aesthetically meaningful element in immersive theatre."[11] In other words, the audience's contributions to the *representational* space of an immersive production become the crux of the dramatic event. Particularly as immersive theater looks to strategies for sustainability in a postpandemic theatrical landscape, it is vital that producers planning to remount a production have a thorough understanding of this dimension of a show's constructed space.

To that end, the analysis below begins with a brief overview of the production before exploring how *The Donkey Show* successfully attended

to two very different *representational* spaces, separated by 200 miles and the digital revolution of social media. Methodologically, the sections below also slide across geography and time to read my own participant observation of the Cambridge production through the lens of what Jill Dolan calls a "critical memoir." As Dolan describes, she draws on her "emotional archive" within critically engaged work, because this mode "documents the affective labor required to make myself and to be made by the force of collective as well as individual moment and will."[12] The tension Dolan notes between self and "the force of collective" are deeply in conversation with Lefebvre's representational space, which can only ever be personalized—"New York City" is at once monolithic and different for everyone. Consequently, to illuminate the representational space of *The Donkey Show* at OBERON, I look back from the vantage point of my fieldwork in Cambridge to my emotional archive of living in New York for roughly the same time span the show was at El Flamingo.

The Donkey Show

Whether in Manhattan's El Flamingo nightclub or at OBERON in Cambridge, *The Donkey Show* featured all of Shakespeare's principal characters: the four young lovers, styled as disco club-goers Mia, Helen, Sander, and Dmitri; the fairy king and queen—"Tytania," a stripper in pasties, lamé panties, thigh-high boots, and a butterfly mask, and Oberon, a drug dealer and club owner in an Elvis suit and white pageboy wig. The production compressed Shakespeare's troupe of Rude Mechanicals into Vinnie and Vinnie, identical twins in maroon leisure suits and ten-inch Afro wigs, who introduced themselves as mechanics from Queens. All eight roles were played by four female-presenting performers, who doubled across gender lines with a wink at the audience by donning cartoonish mustaches and low vocal registers to play the male roles. As *New York Times* reviewer Peter Marks observed, this obviousness was intentional and illuminating: "Something vaguely androgynous has always attended this romp in the woods, which *The Donkey Show* cheekily reaffirms."[13]

The only role not doubled was Puck, Oberon's fairy helper, clad in a gold lamé tracksuit and a winged light-up hat as he skated through the crowd, pretending to snort cocaine, or "fairy dust," off patrons' arms. Though reviews refer to him as "Rollerena"—perhaps remembering the Studio 54 persona[14]—Paulus identifies him as "'Dr. Wheelgood.' He doesn't say a word, but skates like crazy, and he passes out illicit sub-

stances that create all the problems."[15] Flitting around the five performers were Tytania's "fairies" (get it?): three male-presenting performers in body glitter and *very short* shorts who danced atop mirrored, wheeled cubes and exhorted the audience to join in. Though all the performers were charismatic, the show's casting practices never prioritized the skill set commonly associated with musicals. As Weiner describes, the production team looked for performers with "a zest for singing and a passion to communicate the song, but they're not typically great singers";[16] "people who are incredibly high energy, who want to interact with an audience. Everyone's goal in theater is to touch an audience, and in our show, you literally touch the audience. So it's very important that you have the right spirit and you are communicating the feeling of the show, which is a lot about love."[17]

Though the performers bridged gaps between songs by shouting transitional lines in contemporary language, the disco standards generally traced *Midsummer*'s storyline—a synchronicity that charmed theater critics.[18] After considering writing new material, Weiner explains why they used the originals: "These are perfect lyrics! How could you rewrite any of this? . . . 'Don't leave me this way. . . . I can't survive, I can't stay alive without your love, oh, baby'—that's Helena!"[19] In addition to "Don't Leave Me This Way," which Helen sang as Dmitri fled, standout examples included "I Love the Nightlife," which Tytania, borne aloft by her fairies, sang at her first entrance; "You Sexy Thing," which Sander sang upon emerging from Puck's VIP room/drug den to announce his newfound attraction to Helen; and "Never Knew Love Like This Before," which the four lovers sang upon waking from their drug haze at the end of the play.

Representational Space

It's 6 p.m. in Cambridge in early April, 2016. In preparation for back-to-back *The Donkey Shows*, I'm grabbing early dinner at Daedalus, three blocks from Club OBERON. Swirling my glass of second-cheapest Malbec, I imagine what it would have been like to walk to *The Donkey Show*'s first venue, El Flamingo, from the prewar fourth-floor walkup on West 19th Street and 9th Avenue I had for three months when I showed up in Manhattan in 1998. Though Chelsea was already unaffordable on a temp's wages, the neighborhood wasn't yet overrun by the astronomical gentrification that would characterize it in the 2020s. When I lived there, Chelsea Piers was only a couple years old, and the High Line—today a

sculpted jewel of private park funding—was still just an abandoned elevated rail inviting all manner of city shenanigans amid its rusted trestles. My second day in town, walking home from the 23rd Street station of the C train, I found myself bathed in the aromatic glow of dusk on garbage night. As Manhattan residents are quite aware, the borough's near-absence of alleys means that garbage nights (still!) find sidewalks with a "5 o'clock shadow"[20]—mountains of contractor bags filled with food scraps, recycling, and every kind of junk that doesn't fit in a studio apartment, tumbling and oozing into every walkable space. On this night, as I passed an especially tall pile heaped against a public trash can, two teenagers on bicycles weaved by on the street. Cackling, one of them kicked the trash can, his lug sole hitting it with a clang. A half-dozen rats burst from the bottom of the pile, scattering in every direction . . . and across my feet. *Welcome to New York.*

Pulling myself back to 2016, I ask the bartender if I can walk from OBERON to my classically Cambridge bed-and-breakfast after the second show ends at 11 p.m. He blinks, not understanding that I am concerned about being mugged. He asks if I'm worried that I will be tired that late at night. Feeling out of place and time (and only a little tired), I resolve to walk.

• • •

Shortly thereafter, I arrive outside OBERON. Judging by the lamé and fake fur milling around the velvet ropes, it's clear people are here to party. The crowd draws stares from a passing group of parents and their college hopefuls. "Oh, that's just *The Donkey Show*," their local guide explains. "It's a whole thing." Two men in their early twenties queue up behind me, bubbling with excitement. The one on the left muses aloud that he hasn't been to the show in a long time. His friend admits he's never been at all. The repeat attendee reassures him, promising that "there's glitter, so we should be OK. . . . There's a glitter bomb. I don't think any gets on you, but there's glitter." They become quiet, watching more costumed ticket-holders line up. I recall the A.R.T.'s website, which warns, "Need to know . . . this show features glitter."[21] My idea to wear all black and hide in the shadows to take notes now seems flawed. The young men start talking again, this time about their finance careers. At the front of the line, a guy with a clipboard and a SECURITY T-shirt chats up four raucous Baby Boomer couples in full disco attire (and not the cheap, costume-store kind). One of the women asks what pasties are. Her companion makes twirling motions around his nipples. She dissolves into shrieks.

Though it seems familiar now, one of *The Donkey Show*'s more groundbreaking aspects as a popular theater production was its blurring of the temporal and spatial boundaries delineating what Richard Schechner calls "the dramatic structure" within the overall structure of "gathering, performing, and dispersing."[22] Schechner, arguing that "[t]oo little study has been made of the liminal approaches and leavings of performance,"[23] finds significant meaning in the activities that occupy the audience before and after the show proper. Likewise, in her landmark *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett finds a richness of meaning in the crescendo of activities preceding an individual audience member's attention turning to the stage: "the spectator takes on his/her [*sic*] role(s) before the performance *per se* begins . . . planning (or the lack of it) plays a part in shaping receptive mood."[24]

These activities are also part of shows that make no pretense of immersivity as we conceive of it in this collection. But in nonimmersive theater, audiences prepare only to be inhabitants of their own world. Imagine a twenty-first-century remount of *A Doll's House* staged in period dress on a proscenium. Though patrons of this production must decide how much to dress up for an evening at the theater, nothing about such a production suggests they must also decide whether or not to dress like the characters on stage. Similarly, nothing but conformity prevents a patron of such a show from arriving in late-nineteenth-century Norwegian haberdashery. But such preparation would be the result of personal initiative, not the invitation of the production. In contrast, for immersive theater, especially when it is participatory, an audience member's preshow preparation *requires* such calculation. A show purporting to immerse audience members de facto invites them to view themselves as inhabitants of the narrative world, to come inside the snow globe of its storytelling, rather than remain inhabitants of the quotidian world, dressed for dinner though they may be. In other words, an attendee of *The Donkey Show* consciously has to balance how much to dress for the disco world of *The Donkey Show* with how much to dress for the nondisco world of Cambridge. Here at OBERON, a casual read of the spectrum of disco accouterments suggests a positive correlation between the extent to which a given audience member is dressed to be inside the snow globe and the boisterousness of their "receptive mood."[25]

Further blurring the boundaries between *The Donkey Show*'s gathering and its dramatic structure, the Vinnies bound through the doors without warning, howling and jabbering to draw the crowd's attention before loudly welcoming the Boomer couples (fig. 5.1). Anticipatory delight rip-

Fig. 5.1. The two Vinnies, right, trade barbs with Oberon (in white) and the bouncer (in a brown leather jacket). Photo credit E. B. Hunter.

ples through the queue. Who will the Vinnies greet next with the back-slapping selfie-posing they're showering on the costumed group? The performers underneath the roles seem to be watching for another cue, however, and the Vinnies linger at the front. Sure enough, a party bus arrives, depositing a dozen drunk women in their twenties dressed in disco kitsch (the cheap, costume-store kind). The Vinnies descend, catcalling and demanding to know which one is Britney. Giggling, one of the women raises her hand. "The bride!" crow the Vinnies, "*hummina, hummina, hummina*!" Of course—a bachelorette party. Per the A.R.T.'s website and the numerous marketing emails I received post-show, *The Donkey Show* is an ideal site for a "Birthday Party, Corporate Event, Bachelorette, Holiday Party, Ladies' Night, and Class Reunion," all with optional VIP package.

Snickering at the jokes I imagine the Vinnies would make about their packages being the VIPs in question, I'm struck by *The Donkey Show*'s monetizing of interactivity: the VIP treatment continues inside OBERON, where the pasties people and the bachelorettes are the only patrons allowed in a roped-off platform of café tables alongside the dance floor

and invited to pose with the cast after the show. This microtransactioning dynamic isn't new. Theater—always out to make a buck in the face of revenue streams constrained by a finite number of seats and performances—has long boosted revenue through differential ticket pricing and, crucially, ensured the ensuing rewards are visible to the hoi polloi who bought the base level. As patrons of SeaWorld have long known, when a show offers interactivity as a prize, it is an easy leap to attach a price tag to its guarantee.[26]

As the doors open and Britney poses for a last selfie with the Vinnies before they saunter back into the club, blowing kisses, I can't help but be deflated. This gathering didn't at all deliver on the glowing reviews of *The Donkey Show*'s New York run and my own interviews with one of the original New York City fairy dancers. Maybe it was too much to expect the "literate club-going crowd"[27] who came to El Flamingo, but I thought there would be a little "anywhere from Daphne Rubin-Vega to Connie Chung to Alicia Keys coming to see the show and being a part of it,"[28] a little "reports of people having sex during the show,"[29] *just a little* of the gritty Chelsea risqué cool that so enraptured so many notoriously unenrapturable critics in 1999.

But these elements are the lived symbology, the *representational* space, of New York City, not of Cambridge, Massachusetts. And no matter how perfectly OBERON replicated the conceived space of El Flamingo and how enthusiastically OBERON's audiences reenacted its spatial practice, *The Donkey Show*'s remount could never replicate El Flamingo's representational space. In Cambridge or elsewhere, there is no way to replicate what it means that in New York the garbage is always there, that much of the audience lives in a place where rats run across their feet, that only four stops on the E Train and a too-long walk from Eighth to Eleventh Avenue separate *The Donkey Show* at El Flamingo from Studio 54, and that Alicia Keys *might really show up*. In other words, *The Donkey Show* at El Flamingo was not just built in New York City. It was built *from* New York City. A Cambridge reconstruction of *The Donkey Show*'s space could never have included this defining element. However, by the time *The Donkey Show* set up shop on Arrow Street in 2009, it had another representational space to lean into: selfie culture.

• • •

As the crowd enters OBERON's dance floor to the thumping of disco music, the dancing fairies scan the crowd from atop their mirrored boxes. Cheering, they pull up audience members who make eye contact, seem

Fig. 5.2. One of Titania's fairies (in shorts) dances with an audience member atop a mirrored cube. Photo credit E. B. Hunter.

enthusiastic, and (almost always) sport disco paraphernalia (fig. 5.2). Smartphone cameras abound, adding blue LCD rectangles to the swirling lights. It's hard to tell whether the dancers or audience members are more insistent about taking selfies together. This smartphone-forward dynamic would have been alien at El Flamingo, but it seems innate to OBERON's audience, thanks to the emergence of what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture." Writing in 2006, Jenkins explains how the interactivity afforded by then-recent Web 2.0 technologies catalyzed a larger cultural shift, wherein audiences began "demanding the right to participate within the culture" rather than passively consuming media created exclusively by producers.[30] Jenkins's analysis focuses on online fan communities, but a participatory expectation soon permeated other contexts, merging with the ubiquity of selfies into a larger "selfie culture."[31] By the time of *The Donkey Show*'s arrival to Cambridge in 2009 and certainly by its departure in 2019, a fair amount of popular twenty-first-century spectatorship would have been inflected by the expectation of coproducing an experience and featuring in some element of it, even if only via a selfie that proves one's attendance.

This pervasiveness means that, particularly when a space foregrounds participation, selfie culture substantively inflects its *representational* space—the dimension Lefebvre says "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."[32] At OBERON, the representational space was con-

structed in large part by the audience's expectation of using *The Donkey Show*'s *conceived* and *perceived* spaces as a backdrop for their personal shows on social media, in which they are the stars. *The Donkey Show* did not just embrace this aspect of its own representational space, it capitalized on it for free publicity. In addition to encouraging selfie culture with the fairies' invitations, *The Donkey Show* used its brief Discobill (aka playbill) and a shower of paper butterflies that dropped on the audience halfway through the show to foreground the show's online presence, beseeching the audience to "Share your disco memories" and reminding them to tag the A.R.T. and use the preferred hashtag, #TheDonkeyShow. The audience's social media posts also served as an informal, distributed archive: instead of printing a cast list, the Discobill points readers to "Who's Who at the A.R.T." URLs. Perhaps indicating how quickly the cast turned over, the URLs listed only the previous two months of performers, without headshots. The only archive, then, of who played Tytania on any given Saturday resides in the evening's selfies.

It is important to note that one reason the OBERON remount was able to seamlessly integrate selfie culture is the sing-along structure at the core of *The Donkey Show*'s conceived space. Unlike traditional karaoke, which removes a track's original vocals so a live participant can sing instead,[33] *The Donkey Show* preserves the original recordings of its thirteen disco standards. Performers *sing along* to the original vocals and importune the audience to join in. A reliance on audiences to participate by performing is risky—as Gareth White cautions, participation that calls on an audience member to perform for other attendees can create "special opportunities for embarrassment, for mis-performance and reputational damage, such that the maintenance of control and the assertion of agency that protects this decorum is important to the potential audience participant."[34] In other words, the desire to safeguard one's public image can supersede willingness to perform. And singing in public implies significant risk of social embarrassment, especially when selfie culture means a bad performance can go viral.

However, *The Donkey Show* eliminated this risk through a deafening nightclub milieu, a sing-along format, and a playlist of eminently recognizable disco hits. Better still, the club's flashing lights enabled perfectionists like myself to lip-read the mouths of people who knew all the lyrics. Deep in my corner scribbling notes, I am delighted to discover how much I have misheard for years. Thanks to the vamp lipstick of the shrieking pasties lady, I learn that Patrick Hernandez is *of course* not singing "BOY to be a LIAR," a phrase that makes no sense. He is singing "BORN . . . BORN . . .

BORN to be ALIVE," a phrase that makes sense, in addition to being the title of the song. More to the point, because *The Donkey Show*'s conceived space followed the dictum of perceived space outlined in Paulus's own manifesto, "It's All About the Audience,"[35] it was easy for the OBERON remount to lean hard into the representational space selfie culture creates. And despite its occasional silliness, the resulting dynamic is *so darn fun* that by the time Tytania and Oberon reconcile, I've stopped being annoyed with drunk Britney for leaning on me because my outfit blends into the black walls. I stash my notebook so I can sing along with the curtain call, "Y.M.C.A."

Postlude

With *The Donkey Show*'s afterparty still raging across the street, I've stopped into late-night Boston Burger before returning to the bed-and-breakfast. Finishing my "Green Monstah" burger, I'm hypnotized by the bartender assembling the restaurant's signature "Freak Frappes." Currently, she's pouring Skittles into a carafe of green Midori liqueur. Noticing my stare, she asks what I'm up to tonight. I ask what she thinks of *The Donkey Show*. Shrugging, she says she just moved to Cambridge two months ago and only knows about it from seeing customers come in "covered in sparkles." I look down at my tunic-with-pockets and yoga pants, which usually attract every lint speck in the room. No sparkles. Tomorrow, I will discover a few Mylar squares in my carry-on, but *The Donkey Show* never did set off that glitter bomb. I hope the finance guys are not sad. Wistful, I mumble that I must have shown up to the party a few weeks too late. The bartender shrugs again and turns back to her mise-en-place, pouring multiple liquors, ice cream, and a quarter cup of Nutella into a blender, which spins as she rims a glass halfway down with vanilla frosting and rolls it in rainbow sprinkles. She adds the frappe, five inches of whipped cream, and a half-dozen cookies. A server delivers it to a table of college-age patrons who cheer. I realize I *am* tired. I order an Uber.

The next morning, packing up at the bed-and-breakfast, I can't shake my self-flagellation at missing out on the El Flamingo run. I'd decamped to Brooklyn when *The Donkey Show* premiered, but I should have heard about it—I went to Columbia's School of the Arts not long after Paulus and Weiner were students there. *I was an RA for Paulus's mentor.* Sigh. As I watch what will become six inches of April snow burying the row of tulips outside the window, I decide my unearned nostalgia for the New York

The Donkey Show derives from the path I took when I, like the production, left the city in 2005. Though the show went to Europe and I just went to Alabama, I set about creating an immersive Shakespeare project in Birmingham that ran for several years at Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, a restored blast furnace whose industrial-era boilers and cast sheds have anchored the city's skyline and its sense of itself for over a century.[36] Representational space, indeed.

As immersive theater looks toward the future, adopting and innovating the tools and technologies that will allow practitioners to conceive ever more fantastical spaces, and audiences to enact ever more complex spatial practices therein, I hope we remember *The Donkey Show* and draw inspiration from the exuberance with which it embraced its representational space and launched popular immersive theater in the United States.

Notes

1. Robert Simonson, "The Donkey Show Celebrates First Anniversary, Aug. 23," *Playbill*, 9 August 2000.

2. Simi Horwitz, "The Club-Theatre Symbiosis: Rave of the Future?" *Backstage.com*, 4 July 2003; Peter Marks, "Theater Review: They Be Foolish Mortals Who Love the Nightlife," *New York Times*, 27 August 1999.

3. Lonely Planet and Mara Vorhees, Lonely Planet Boston, 6th edition (Lonely Planet, 2015): 17.

4. "OBERON, a Theater Haven for the Local and the Fringe, Closes Its Doors" (WBUR, 23 December 2021), https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/12/23/oberon-theater-closes

5. A conservative estimate of twenty years, half capacity at OBERON's 300-person venue, and twice-a-Saturday shows (assuming more shows/week in the early years to offset the smaller capacity of El Flamingo and overseas venues) yields over 300,000 tickets.

6. The Cambridge remount of *The Donkey Show* was the gambit of Paulus's appointment as the A.R.T.'s new artistic director. With a history of productions in nightclubs, such as *Karaoke Show* (which adapted *The Comedy of Errors*) and *Prometheus Bound* (a rock adaptation of Aeschylus' tragedy of the same name), Paulus had become known for delivering shows characteristic of "[g]eneration MTV in their sensory overload, often with compact running times and orgiastically esoteric in their sourcing." As the *New York Times* described her arrival, "The club kid got the Harvard job. . . . To Ms. Paulus falls the task of revitalizing a theater that has lost luster and audiences since its heyday in the 1980s under Robert Brustein." In other words, expectations were high for radical change at the A.R.T. Celia McGee, "Harvard's Not-So-Square New Director," *New York Times*, 13 August 2008; see also Paulus's manifesto, which outlines how her project to "radicalize" theater relies on nightclub settings and "pop forms." Diane Paulus, "It's

All about the Audience," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16, no. 3 (August 2006): 334–47. For a discussion of the revenue model OBERON provided for experimental groups, see "OBERON, a Theater Haven for the Local and the Fringe, Closes Its Doors."

7. The introduction discusses in more detail the valences of "conventional" or "traditional" that the essays here deploy.

8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 39, original emphasis.

9. Dominic Symonds, *Broadway Rhythm: Imaging the City in Song* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 186.

10. Stevie Wonder, *Living for the City*, sound recording (Hollywood, CA: Tamla, 1973).

11. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 7.

12. Jill Dolan, "Feeling Women's Culture: Women's Music, Lesbian Feminism, and the Impact of Emotional Memory," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2012): 210–11.

13. Marks, "Theater Review."

14. A Studio 54 icon, Rollerena was "a prim Wall Streeter by day, a dream boat by night in a wedding dress and roller skates." Anthony Haden-Guest, *The Last Party: Studio 54, Disco, and the Culture of the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1997); Jane Hogan, "Nice Ass!," *Entertainment Design* 33, no. 10 (1999): 9–12; David Drake, "The Bard and the Boogie," *The Advocate (The National Gay and Lesbian Newsmagazine)*, 9 November 1999.

15. As quoted in Elias Stimac, "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy," *Backstage.Com*, 31 January 2003.

16. Roger Armbrust, "Getting Cast in Today's Musicals On and Off Broadway," *Backstage*, 27 January 2005.

17. Elias Stimac, "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy," n.p.

18. Eric V. Copage, "Not Your Mother's Musical, and That's the Point," *New York Times*, 6 September 1999, sec. Theater; Marks, "Theater Review"; William Harris, "Dance: The Bump in a Midsummer Night: Is It a Dream?" *New York Times*, 15 August 1999; Celia Wren, "A Cure for Mildew: 'The Donkey Show,'" *Commonweal*, 25 February 2000, n.p.

19. As quoted in Lenora Inez Brown, "She Turns the Beat Around," *American Theatre* 19, no. 1 (January 2002): 46.

20. Christopher Robbins, "Trash Town: Here's Why New York Is So Filthy," *Streetsblog New York City* (blog), 22 March 2022, https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2022/03/22/trash-city-new-york-is-filthy-and-the-fault-is-government-inertia/

21. "The Donkey Show," A.R.T.—American Repertory Theater, 2018, http://americanrepertorytheater.org/events/show/donkey-show

22. Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 121.

23. Schechner, 122.

24. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 125.

25. Bennett, 125.

26. In one instance of SeaWorld's robust legacy of animal mistreatment, SeaWorld show-goers can pay extra to sit in the "Splash Zone" and get soaked by orcas who have been trained to launch water over their partition. *Blackfish* (Magnolia Pictures, 2013).

27. Wren, "A Cure for Mildew: 'The Donkey Show,'" 21.

28. Joe Komara, personal interview, 25 November 2013.

29. Paulus, "It's All about the Audience," 340.

30. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 24; Web 2.0 indicates the shift from the web's early years of delivering and archiving static content to its current iteration, wherein users contribute and edit content, as with social media. Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0?" O'Reilly, 30 September 2005, http://oreilly.com

31. Jessica Maddox, Steven Holiday, and Yuanwei Lyu, "From the Ashes of Ubiquity: Selfie Culture as a New Communication Frontier," in *Reimagining Communication: Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

32. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

33. Kevin Brown, *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

34. Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 73.

35. Paulus, "It's All about the Audience."

36. Geoffrey Way, "Social Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet, Social Media, and Performance," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 401–20.

PART II

Liberty

six The Immersive Archive

Restoring the All-Embracing View of Nineteenth-Century Painted Panoramas in Museum Display

SUSAN TENNERIELLO

Few nineteenth-century painted panoramas produced in North America survive. The American Civil War panorama *The Battle of Atlanta* is one of them. The 371-foot cyclorama is currently installed in a new rotunda built to house the 360-degree painting at the Atlanta History Center in Georgia after painstaking conservation efforts; its meticulous restoration included returning the painting to its original 49-foot height, refurbishing diorama figures for the display floor, and—so as not to disturb the all-embracing view of the image—constructing an escalator to bring visitors up onto a raised, central viewing platform. Archival evidence related to panoramas—prints, sketches, brochures, descriptive pamphlets, souvenir catalogs, newspaper reviews, advertisements, and architecture—cannot necessarily revive the theatrical sensorium of being on the spot. The existence of surviving stationary nineteenth-century panoramas constitutes another dimension to this archive, one that, when they are restored and reinstalled, reanimates the sensation of entering a scene, of being within a surrounding, boundless environment. In addition to the museum curation of textual, visual, and object materials, the theatrical treatment of experiential artifacts in museum exhibits comprises a substantial immersive archive. I use the term "immersive archive" in respect to the curatorial attention paid to entertainment practices in the reinstallation of painted panoramas in museum collections, and by extension, to the artifact's experiential mediation not only of visual art and entertainment, but also of its reenactment.

The survival and display of *The Battle of Atlanta* frames my inquiry into the experiential artifact. I consider the panorama's reinstallation for public viewing to be a vantage point for theater and performance studies scholars to investigate the robust cultural production of antebellum and post–Civil War American commercial panoramas, which toured all regions of the expanding nation. How does *The Battle of Atlanta*'s renewed immersive design impact our understanding of the historiography of American touring panoramas, of their lesser-known artists, and of the regional enterprises that fabricated them, as well as the local audiences who viewed them? *The Battle of Atlanta*, in particular, commemorated the brutal combat where Union troops claimed victory toward the end of the Civil War. Yet as we'll see, the panorama held different meanings regarding liberty and self-determination for Northern and Southern visitors over time, expressing an unstable fault line around these "inalienable rights" in the American experience that the Atlanta History Center's curation of the exhibit attempts to balance in the exhibit of this Civil War memorial.

Historically, panoramas contributed to virtual and immersive forms of visual art and commercial entertainment before the development of cinema, television, digital media, or VR simulation. Their branches run through multiple disciplines: theater and performance, visual art, photography, cinema, digital mapping, and new media, among others. Immersive practices found in nineteenth-century stationary panoramas, moving panoramas, and three-dimensional dioramas all contributed to augmented representational and interactive modes of visual illusion and sensory stimulation.[1] I ask how theater history can engage with the temporal and contextual shifts and multifaceted discourse that panoramic artifacts stimulate. How might we examine the entertainment experience in museums, particularly immersive archival objects refabricated for public spectatorship? Moreover, what implications does the restoration of *The Battle of Atlanta* yield to theater history when unresolved questions of freedom and independence circulate within and outside an immersive site of Civil War history?

Theater and performance scholars engaging with immersivity, such as Gareth White or Josephine Machon, invite a widening discourse on immersive theater. The emphasis in immersive studies is often on performance environments oriented toward participatory experiences as well as contemporary theater collectives or companies such as the widely examined UK company Punchdrunk. This essay shifts focus to historical environments and how the emergence of the immersive archive in museum practices restages forms of popular entertainment. Rebecca

Fig. 6.1. Restoration of the *Cyclorama* and viewing platform. Courtesy of Atlanta History Center. Photo credit Hales Photography.

Schneider's probe of the "remains" of the archive in war reenactment when applied to contemporary panoramic exhibits provides a pathway to examine the art-historical reenactment of immersive installations.[2] In the case of *The Battle of Atlanta*, the slippery temporal and physical dynamics of this experiential artifact rejuvenate iterations of immersion and spectatorship in panoramic entertainment that give rise to sensations of being in a never-ending battle to determine the course of the American experience. Moreover, panoramic installations are simultaneously narrative and dramatic shows, interweaving the immediate encounter of the illusion space with guiding documentation. In this sense, I refer to the participant in the panoramic experience as a spectator-visitor—at times decoupling the hyphen—to stress the varied articulations between museum display and theatrical event.

The history of *The Battle of Atlanta*, its reinstallation, and the curatorial approach to experiential reenactment point to a dynamic archive in the conservation of existing nineteenth-century painted panoramas—one that pushes beyond a set of practices, discourses, or an archaeology as theorized by Michel Foucault. As an act of epistemology, Foucault postulates, the archive forms and preserves a way of configuring "the space of

knowledge." In accounting for discontinuity, transformation, and recurrence, Foucault encourages a methodology of spatial analysis that admits conceptual and temporal fluencies.[3] My examination of the immersive archive of panoramic entertainment explores the fluidity of art-historical methods and entertainment practices to critically activate documented and experiential forms of knowing. I find encouragement in the attention drawn to such interdisciplinary processes and practices in immersive display by such performance scholars as Susan Bennett in her study *Theatre & Museums*. Bennett accentuates the collaborative relationships between museum practices and performance as cultural processes of interest to theater and performance scholars.[4] Additionally, Georgina Guy's provocative consideration of displayed performance in museums further collapses disciplinary separation by engaging curatorial practices as interactions among theatricality, performance, and exhibition.[5] Guy's concern is the object status of theatricality in museum exhibits. My focus is on the conservation, preservation, and re-presentation of the experiential spectacle. I argue that the reenactment of immersive artifacts, such as *The Battle of Atlanta*, reinserts a historical field of popular entertainment into museum display, expanding the mediation of what an archive can do. In what follows, I outline the ambiguities of the artwork before examining the curatorial design and the artifact's immersive manner. First, I want to foreground how panoramic installations further problematize theatrical immersion.

The Immersive Turn

The re-installation of *The Battle of Atlanta* now joins other existing panoramas exhibited in various ways and states of condition in North American art or history museums. One of the earliest American-made stationary panoramas was painted by the artist John Vanderlyn, who also built the first exhibition rotunda in City Hall Park in New York. Vanderlyn's 165-foot *Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles* (1818–1819) is displayed in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Portions of another antebellum panorama, the 1848 *Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World*, created by Benjamin Russell and Caleb Purrington, have been shown at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts. The museum completed a conservation project on the 1,275-foot moving panorama in 2017, which now tours museums. Sections of John J. Egan's *Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of*

the Mississippi Valley (c. 1850) are on view at the St. Louis Art Museum. Egan's panorama was one of many highly popular Mississippi panoramas that toured American cities in the antebellum period. One version of the widely traveled (and copied) Civil War panorama *The Battle of Gettysburg* (c. 1880s) by Paul Philippoteaux is in the care of the US National Park Service, and displayed at Gettysburg National Military Park. Like several of these restored panoramas, which allow spectator-visitors entrance into their encircling scenic action, *The Battle of Atlanta*'s installation highlights the immersive turn in theater and performance, dance, live art, and installation art, which reorient museum archives toward the historiography of embodied performance practices and spectacle entertainments.[6]

Josephine Machon's influential treatment of theater immersion is significant to my inquiry into the immersive archive. Her definition builds on the hybrid notion of the experiential and sensorial in combination: "the act of immersion—being submerged in an alternated medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated—with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium."[7] In one respect, Machon's emphasis on the visceral, the ephemeral, and the affect of theatrical immersion obscures modes of critical intervention that art history and theater scholars studying panoramic immersion or living history continue to develop and that current museum exhibits contextualize through accompanying documentation.[8] What emerges in Machon's argument is that a vital component of immersive theater is "the fact that it revels in the liveness and consequent *live(d)ness* of the performance moment"; in other words, whatever form the journey takes, "the sensual worlds created exploit the power of live performance."[9] The theoretical premise suggests that the unique quality of immersive performance privileges the creative agency of participant interaction in the event space(s).[10] While the reenactment of historic panoramic environments troubles the embodied, kinetic performer-participant interactivity characteristic of immersive performance, it is useful to consider how the conditions of immediacy, liveness, and live(d)ness, as developed by Machon, resonate with the panoramic experience, and enter into my consideration of the immersive archive. The static display of painted panoramas complicates the live(d)ness of the experience by inviting the spectator-visitor into a panoptic design of mobility within the scene and beyond.

The particular example of *The Battle of Atlanta* asserts the vigor of contested perspectives over the outcome of the American Civil War. Although it is a static painting, its immersive character situated this spectator-visitor in an endless war. Like its surviving counterpart *The Battle of Gettysburg*,

the panorama is a post-reconstruction-era reenactment of a turning point in the Civil War that edged the misery of the war closer to the end and toward a Union victory. However, these battle scenes render no outcome, only the intensities of combat. The panorama first went on view in 1886, and traveled the Midwest and the South, invoking different meanings and memories for regional visitors. Its history is extensive and weaves through the complicated North/South narratives and mythologies in the aftermath of the Civil War that continue to this day. The curatorial design brings in commentary that not only grants contemporary spectators alternative perspectives on the fighting and its memorialization, but reenacts the panorama's history and restoration. Curators at the Atlanta History Center include the storied trajectory of the artifact's historical movement in a state-of-the-art multimedia installation that features a short film projected across one side of the panorama. A recreation of moments in the history of the panorama, the film features theatrical scenes with actors who portray not only Northern and Southern soldiers, but also visitors who discuss the painting. The augmented visual and audio components animating the historiographical narratives are incorporated to convey the "big picture" to contemporary museum visitors.[11] This aspect of the installation design historicizes an ongoing dialogue with the battle monument, offering an elusive democratizing bridge that stitches together Southern and Northern viewpoints in order to encourage spectator-visitors to determine its significance for themselves.

The Big Picture

William Wehner's American Panorama Company, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, produced *The Battle of Atlanta*. The exhibit opened in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1886 and remained a popular attraction for well over a year before touring cities in the Midwest.[12] It is not entirely clear why Wehner commissioned the work. One widely circulated newspaper account cites renewed interest in Civil War battles stemming from "General Grant's book" and a "series of papers by officers in the late war" published in the *Century Magazine*.[13] Other factors may have also influenced the entrepreneur. In England and France, a major genre of panorama production was the documentation and commemoration of recent wars. The profitable popularity of war re-enactments in Western Europe generated a specialized industry of European artists employed in dramatizing famous battles.

In the United States, the vogue for commercial battle panoramas surged after the Civil War as the country struggled through the human suffering of the war, and with the subsequent reconciliation. On the postwar sentiment, Drew Gilpin Faust writes that "at war's end this shared suffering would override persisting differences about the meanings of race, citizenship, and nationhood to establish sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite."[14] By the second half of the nineteenth century, war nostalgia and its visual reenactments archived living memories and emergent mythologies for later generations. One of the earliest documented war panoramas was a *Sioux War Panorama* painted in Minnesota by John Stephens, who was born in Utica, New York, and later migrated to the Midwest. The artist's depiction of a military massacre of Sioux in 1862 served to reify frontier violence toward Native Americans.[15] Later Civil War panoramas exhibited by Wehner's American Panorama Company, such as *The Battle of Atlanta*, reenacted monumental battles, triggering the lingering wounds of loss and trauma, as well as memories of triumph.

From this period, the most famous panorama was *The Battle of Gettysburg*, which opened in Chicago in 1883; its immense success may have alerted Wehner to the profitable potential of Civil War reenactments. A South Dakota newspaper, the *Warner Sun*, reported Wehner's interest in preparing an American panorama of "artistic merit and historical value."[16] In fact, by the summer of 1887 both *The Battle of Gettysburg* and *The Battle of Atlanta* were on view during the Minnesota State Fair in the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, respectively.[17] Wehner also exhibited the *Battles of Chattanooga* in 1886.[18] The series of battles in Tennessee represented in the panorama included the storming of Mission Ridge, which launched a ferocious flash point of the war. The Union forces held back an aggressive Confederate siege on the ridge; their ultimate success allowed the Union army to advance the march to Atlanta.

Local visibility of war veterans may have been another motive influencing Wehner's investment in the reenactment of monumental military battles. For starters, there were many Civil War veterans in Wisconsin.[19] Additionally, major war heroes were politically visible. In the 1884 election, Republican Party presidential candidate James G. Blaine chose Illinois native John A. Logan as his running mate, but lost to Grover Cleveland and Thomas A. Hendriks. The contentious lawyer (nicknamed "Dirty Work Logan" for his support of enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act) served as a general in the Union army in command of the Tennessee brigades at the Battles of Chattanooga and Atlanta. He later became a

US senator after serving in the Illinois State Senate and as an Illinois state congressman.[20] Atlanta History Center curator Gordon Jones notes that Northern soldiers adored Logan; he had "star power."[21]

After traveling to Europe to view panoramas, Wehner brought the artist Friedrich Wilhelm Heine from Germany to supervise a group of fellow German and Austrian immigrants in composing and manufacturing the battle panoramas. Heine trained in Weimar and was an experienced battlefield artist; he had worked as a field artist during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Heine was joined by fellow artist August Lohr, and together they later purchased the American Panorama Company to form their own company.[22] They led a workshop of artists with expertise in battle painting, landscape, and portraiture on Wells Street in Milwaukee, where they studied documentation, reports, and the actual uniforms of Union and Confederate soldiers to accurately render the warfare.[23] The team of artists' detailed rendering of the battle was further informed by interviews with Union veterans in the North and Confederate veterans in the South.[24]

In making *The Battle of Atlanta*, field studies were conducted at the battle site on the outskirts of Atlanta in 1885. The sketches were then transferred into compositions on six painted panels in the workshop. Each panel was aligned at the horizon line to form a composite, seamless continuous scene when the circular painting was installed. The complete panorama took only five months.[25] The gory battle of Atlanta lasted the entire day on 21 July 1864. The panorama condenses and heightens the daylong timeline to a moment late in the afternoon, when triumph or defeat could go one way or the other. Confederate generals Arthur Manigault and John B. Hood assaulted the Union lines. General Logan (symbolically painted larger than those around him) arrived with reinforcements to shore up General William Tecumseh Sherman's embattled Union forces. The siege is considered a turning point on the path to victory for the Union troops. One month later the Union army occupied Atlanta.

The scenic scale of *The Battle of Atlanta* dramatized the agony and gloom of the soldiers, each painted in personalized detail. Northern perceptions assumed it invoked the Union win. However, its broader, commercial appeal resided in its romantic intensities, tautly theatricalizing the precarious moment between defeat and victory. It is this aspect of the artwork—the suspended animation of battle—that resonated with Northern and Southern visitors. Seen by over 100,000 visitors in Minneapolis, the panorama toured Midwest cities beginning in 1887, including Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Detroit.[26] The exhibit in Detroit

showed a twin copy of the panorama, now lost; it was on view for at least six months, drawing approximately 70,000 people. Hundreds of veterans visited the work. The *Michigan Farmer* reported, "Many soldiers who were on the actual scene that is shown all testify to its perfect reproduction, many coming from the Confederate army, and none even complaining of its being a partisan view."[27] Northern characterizations assert a heroic, reconciliation narrative in play. When the panorama went on view in the South, the painful defeat evoked a different memorial, one of noble veneration.

The war heritage of the Old South prolonged a lost past, or the "Lost Cause," generating an enduring mythology of unresolved loss. In 1890, bankruptcy forced the sale of *The Battle of Atlanta Cyclorama*, as it was billed. Paul Atkinson, a brash promoter from Georgia, bought the painting to show in the South. He quickly modified the panorama by painting the gray uniforms of captured Confederate soldiers blue in one section so that the Union soldiers appeared to be defeated. Atkinson displayed the work in Chattanooga, Tennessee, before bringing it to Atlanta in 1891, where he billed it as the "only Confederate victory ever painted."[28] He sold it before it made its way downtown to a wooden shed in Grant Park; several feet at the top of the painting were cut off when the panorama did not fit the building when unrolled. Atkinson's alterations commemorated the mythic longing for what had passed and what might be. Sometime later, in a letter, the son and brother of Confederate soldiers reasoned, "This is all right to the son of a federal soldier. But it doesn't sit so well with the son of a confederate."[29] Daniel Judt relates that "in the 1890s, a wave of commemoration and nostalgia made the *Cyclorama* a symbol of a Confederate victory that had never happened, a beacon for the Lost Cause, and a reminder of how Atlanta had almost changed the course of the War."[30] Another Confederate veteran from South Carolina, testifying to the intensities of the scenic actuality in the panorama, claimed, "No one can leave the scene without a thorough appreciation for our noble veterans."[31] The panorama's stirring presence in testimonials from Northern and Southern spectator-visitors suggested the live(d) experience of the swaying battle lines, whether through longing, memory, or trauma, in the distant aftermath of the war. The panorama's expressive propensity for fractured perceptions continued to expose its monumentality as an unresolved site over which competing claims of liberty hang.

Decades later, the panorama went through more touch-ups. In the 1930s, diorama elements were added by Works Progress Administration artists. As Atlanta redirected economic growth in the progressive era,

myths of the Old South blended with the commercial enterprise of the New South. Years later, the Southern myth of tragic nobility returned: one of the dioramic figures was changed to resemble a fallen Rhett Butler after Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh came to Atlanta for the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*.[32] With the increasing commercial growth of Atlanta, the panorama become a feature of the city's tourism campaigns. In 1930, the panorama displayed in Grant Park reportedly received 100,000 annual visitors.[33] Over the years, its legacy joined that of the city's other war monuments and landmarks.[34]

A Panorama of a Panorama

The fraught fabric of compound meanings coursing through the panorama's various reenactments is a dominant part of the curatorial design of *The Battle of Atlanta*'s most recent iteration. The restoration project estimated cost was just over $35 million. Prior to installation, the chopped-off upper section of sky had to be mended; artists used advertising postcards and photographs to recreate a benevolent blue sky. Theatrical spotlights ring the upper circumference of the image to enhance its luminosity. Panoramic painting typically uses a high, receding skyline to create the sensation of endless spatial extension and circulation. The fifteen-foot-tall viewing platform places spectators in relation to the horizon line of this monumental battle. The architecture of the circular rotunda, where the panorama is installed, fully embraces the spectator-visitor within this immersive world.[35]

The experience begins when you enter a tunnel with an escalator that transports you from the museum's exhibition hall to the darkened platform. You are positioned in the center of the brightly lit image and can turn in one direction or another or walk around the platform absorbing the vastness of the scene. The site allows for interactivity, whether you're focusing deep into the grisly scenic action, gazing up into the tranquil, cloud-dotted sky, or looking down onto the dirt and grime of the battlefield among the 128 dioramic figures who blend into the bottom of the painting—all while comingling with other spectators in the visitor group. During my visit to the museum, the immediacy of encountering assorted scenic viewpoints, actual and imagined, exerted a boundless feeling of physical and visual motion that was initially disorienting. Once I'd had my fill of admiring the bird's-eye view, examining the scenic details of the painted surface or searching for the diorama figure of Clark Gable,

Fig. 6.2. Opening day of the *Cyclorama*. Courtesy of Atlanta History Center, photo credit Hales Photography.

the aesthetic performance of the artifact revived in me the liveness of history, particularly along its unresolved fractures. The panoramic presence unsettled me, leaving me with all-encompassing feeling of pivoting through an unresolved national narrative. My discomfort awakened most acutely when entangled in the perpetual indeterminacy of the artifact's live(d)ness.

The state-of-the art installation channels the immersivity of the artifact's ambiguities, its multisided commemoration. In this respect, the "interior" posture of immersion as theorized by Gareth White, denoting access inside the performance, inside the historiography of the work, coexists here with the temporal mobility of being part of the battle, and moving beyond the pictorial frame, existing in the reflective space of an ongoing spectacle.[36] Beyond the stimulation in the image space, multimedia interaction—which I return to below—encourages the spectator-visitor's encounter with a variety of interpretations. Among the earlier-mentioned group of displayed panoramas in the United States, *The Battle of Gettysburg* is closest in techniques to those used in the History Center. One ascends into the panorama vista. Theatrical lighting illuminates the artwork—there is no attempt to mask the stage mechanics. A timed

sequence highlights key moments in the days-long battle with sound effects and spotlights shining on particular sections of the painting—the performed sections are documented in a short film outside the installation space. The intensity of violence and suffering is dramatically sustained. *The Battle of Gettysburg*'s restoration opened to the public in 2008, in line with trends in immersive display.[37]

In contrast, the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired Vanderlyn's *View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles* in 1952 from the Senate House Association of Kingston, New York, where the artist was born. The painting suffered significant damage over the years. Originally eighteen feet high, what remains is twelve feet tall and 165 feet long. Although it was displayed briefly in the1950s, not until the American Wing opened did the panorama receive its own specially constructed floor-level circular display room.[38] The exhibit includes a stand or descriptive key in the center of the display space that lists the various sites and the names of figures in the painting. The design of the installation documents the static panoramic displays of the nineteenth century. Whereas *The Battle of Atlanta* by design reenacts a reenactment, the present citation, to quote Schneider, "suggests that historical events, like wars, are never discretely completed, but carry forth in embodied cycles of memory that do not delimit the remembered to the past."[39]

In choosing to integrate the "big picture," the team of 200 curators, historians, painters, and technicians took an evidence-forward approach to counter murky—though still volatile—perceptions of the war and the current experiential amplification of the panorama's historical trajectories. The interwoven North/South discourse throughout the exhibit documents the lasting impacts of the Civil War and its surrounding myths, overlaying the art object with parity to avert the dangerous divisions that simmer beyond its present enactment.

The rotunda opened to the public in 2019 to a glowing reception. Writing in the *New York Times*, art critic Holland Cotter noted, "the Center doesn't treat the cyclorama as art, entertainment or monument. It presents it as a dynamic artifact of the past with complicated information for the present." Multimedia elements disrupt the seamless temporal sequence of entering the panoramic illusion. On the lower wall, the historical accounts of the causes and effects of the Civil War are projected in text, dispelling falsehoods regarding slavery and reconstruction. A twelve-minute video further animates the painting's surface, reenacting stages in the panorama's story, beginning with a Union veteran recognizing that the end of the war did not heal North/South divisions. Atkinson appears,

repainting the Union soldiers' uniforms. The persistent shadow of plantation slavery, the Old South, and the Lost Cause moves through the twentieth century in scenes between a black Union veteran and a white Confederate veteran, as well as a scene in which a mother and daughter discuss their reaction to the panorama. The last scene poses a question to the spectator-visitor: how can a painting be taken for actual history?[40] The underlying educational value encourages critical perspectives. It is left to the contemporary spectator-visitor to embrace, contest, or disengage from the live(d)ness of war layered into the display, to deliberate what the experience reveals. Does the factual accounting of both sides offer another mode of historical reenactment, hinting toward a reconciliatory path, or does the immersive manner of the artifact's immediacy reignite the monument's unresolved tensions? Perhaps the framing narrative attempts to elicit a softer sentiment, invoking an immersive memorial for the spectator-visitor's own personal reenactment.

Indeed, in the larger American panorama there remains now as ever the recoil of battle and memories. While facts persist, so do the mythologies, the liveness of memory, the noble cause, loss and sacrifice, the fragile victory, the enduring desire for the battle to end, for a way forward. The narrated and augmented realities of the installation may curb inaccuracies in the documentation of history, but knowing does not necessarily restore the artifact to a static representation. In a way, the installation design, like the production of painted panoramas, stitches the transhistorical dimensions of the temporal, the narrative, and the spectacle into a composite space of temporary unification—a coherent image—while at the same time moderating the upswells of violence and danger that leave the American experience still wavering on the tipping point of uncertainty.

Notes

1. For more on nineteenth-century American immersive entertainments, see Susan Tenneriello, *Spectacle Culture and American Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

2. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Historical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; reprint London: Routledge, 2002), xxiv; see also *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

4. Susan Bennett, *Theatre & Museums* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Springer, 2013).

5. Georgina Guy, *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed and Performed* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

6. For a guide to participatory museum planning, see Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010).

7. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21–22.

8. See for instance Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007); Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

9. Machon, 43.

10. Machon, 68.

11. Exhibitions, "Cyclorama: The Big Picture," Atlanta History Center, available at http://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/explore/exhibitions/cyclorama-the-big-picture. Accessed 24 February 2018.

12. A second copy of the panorama, now lost, opened in Detroit in 1887.

13. "The Battle of Atlanta," *Warner Sun*, 1886. *Century Magazine*, v. 32 (1886); v. 33 (1886–1887). This extensive background account of the panorama appeared in multiple newspapers at the time.

14. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), viii.

15. See John Bell, "The Sioux War Panorama and American Mythic History," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 3 (October 1996): 283; Bertha l. Heilbron, "Documentary Panorama," *Minnesota History* 30, no. 1 (March 1949): 14–23.

16. "Battle of Atlanta," *Warner Sun.*

17. *Saulk Centre Herald*, 4 August 1887.

18. A San Francisco company may have purchased Wehner's panorama, or a copy of it. *The Battle of Atlanta* was on view in the city in 1888. See "Panorama Battles of Chattanooga," California Panorama Company, 1888. University of California, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b61630?urlappend=%3Bseq=1, accessed 8 March 2020.

19. See Edwin Bentley Quiner, *The Military History of Wisconsin* (Chicago: Clarke & Co., 1866), 342–44; Michael Hendrick Fitch, *The Chattanooga Campaign: with especial reference to Wisconsin's participation therein* (reprint), (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2011).

20. Logan switched from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party during the war. James Pickett Jones, *Black Jack: John A. Logan and Southern Illinois in the Civil War Era* (1967, reprint; Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1995).

21. Quoted in Jack Hitt, "Atlanta's Famed Cyclorama Mural Will Tell the Truth about the Civil War Once Again," *Smithsonian Magazine* (December 2018), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/atlanta-famed-cyclorama-tell-truth-civil-war-once-again-180970715/. Accessed 4 August 2022.

22. Heine and Austrian August Lohr purchased the American Panorama Company in 1887 to form the Lohr and Heine Panorama Company. A year later, with new partners, they renamed the enterprise the Milwaukee Panorama Company. "August Lohr," Milwaukee Journal Gallery of Wisconsin Art, Museum

of Wisconsin Art, https://wisconsinart.org/archives/artist/august-lohr/profile-95.aspx. Accessed 22 September 2021.

23. William Wehner, *The Battles of Chattanooga* (Chicago: W. J. Jefferson, 1886).

24. Hitt.

25. *Manual of the Cyclorama of the Battle of Atlanta*, Detroit Cyclorama Company, 1887, 1–2. For a detailed account of commercial panorama business and production methods, see Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone, 1997).

26. "The Battle of Atlanta," *Little Falls Transcript*, 12 August 1887.

27. "A Huge Success," *Michigan Farmer*, 26 September 1887, 7.

28. Quoted in "Atlanta History Center Timeline," https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/exhibitions/cyclorama, accessed 12 February 2022; "Items in Three States," *Morning News*, 11 April 1892, 6. The newspaper account mentions the panorama on display for "about a year."

29. Daniel Judt, "Atlanta's Civil War Monument, Minus the Pro-Confederate Bunkum," *The Atlantic*, 17 March 2019.

30. Daniel Judt, "Cyclorama: An Atlantic Monument," *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 25; see also, William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

31. "The Cyclorama," *Atlanta Weekly Constitution*, 8 August 1898.

32. Hitt.

33. Frederic J. Haskin, "Answers to Questions," *Evening Star*, 4 March 1930.

34. See for instance, "The Sites of War," *Sunday Star*, Travel, 5 February 1961, A-14.

35. See Machon, 93.

36. Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221–35.

37. For a resource guide on immersive and interactive techniques in museum design, see Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.

38. Kevin J. Avery and Peter Fodera, *John Vanderlyn's Panoramic View of the Palace and Gardens of Versailles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 9.

39. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 32.

40. Judt, "Atlanta's Civil War Monument"; Holland Cotter, "A Victory for the Civil War 'Cyclorama,'" *New York Times*, 21 February 2019.

SEVEN Encountering the Old South in "Atlanta's Most Modern Department Store"

LAURA FERDINAND

On Thursday, October 6, 1921, Rich's Department Store in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, opened its doors for its first ever Golden Harvest Sale, a ten-day sales event that would become a decades-long Atlanta tradition.[1] The event was spearheaded by Rich's general manager, Lucian York, to coincide with the annual Southeastern Fair being held in Atlanta, capitalizing on the scores of fairgoers visiting the city.[2] Just two years before, York—a longtime theater enthusiast—had begun producing theater himself as an amateur stage manager, set decorator, and playwright. In 1919 and 1920, York received public praise for the "glorious" sets he created for the Atlanta Opera Club.[3] Following this success, shoppers and spectators waited eagerly to see how York would bring his talent for theatrical spectacle to Rich's, an anticipation which was heightened by an advertisement appearing in the *Atlanta Journal* the day before the sale began: "The stage is set. The whole store is transformed."[4]

The following morning, Atlantans awoke to a giant tree standing in front of Rich's main entrance, seemingly grown overnight through the sidewalk of Atlanta's urban cityscape, beckoning them inside to find "Atlanta's most modern department store" transformed into a rural plantation.[5] The entire first floor was lined with "literal acres" of murals, which made the walls appear to recede into a pastoral horizon dotted with cotton fields, cattle pastures, and peanut patches.[6] Real birds—including chickens, pigeons, a peacock, and a parrot—clucked and cooed as gingham-clad salesgirls wove their way through rows of corn, sunflowers, and peach

trees.[7] Near the store's grand staircase, ladies were said to have passed uneasily under a towering persimmon tree containing a live opossum.[8] Between racks of clothes and display tables, bushels of fresh produce, stacks of pumpkins, and strings of onions cascaded out of the store onto a side street where York had arranged a special farmers' market, blurring the line between decoration and merchandise.

Newspaper articles lauded York's intricate, expansive display for transporting shoppers to Georgia's agrarian past, giving them a "glimpse of days 'befo' de war'" by resurrecting a premodern Atlanta not yet burned by Sherman or paved over by progress.[9] "This takes me back to my childhood's happy home," said one shopper, "way down on the farm."[10] Each of the newspaper articles recounting the sale and the sense of time travel it afforded highlight one element above all for creating the strongest sense of so-called authenticity: a Black man sitting in front of an old log cabin, "a banjo on his knee."[11] Despite the special attention paid to this man, the articles describe him in the same manner as they do the real birds and fresh produce, a living decoration meant to simulate the Old South. This is probably how York intended to present him. In the same way that the replica peach orchard simulated a feature of Atlanta's past lost to time, the Black man was meant to simulate another bygone feature of the South's past: an enslaved person.

By curating the man as part of the sale's mise-en-scène, York objectified him, rendering him material for performance in a *process of objectification*, defined by Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers as the "forceful reduction of a body to a thing."[12] In *Embodied Avatars* (2015), performance studies scholar Uri McMillan notes the connection between such representations of Blackness to the "historical legacy of objectification and the generations of slaves who did not legally own the bodies they acted with."[13] Therefore, through the scenographic objectification of the unidentified Black man, the Golden Harvest Sale reperformed the historical objectification of slavery. However, in offering Rich's primarily white clientele the feeling of stepping back in time, York provided an immersive encounter with history that recast slavery as a nostalgic part of days gone by.

The Golden Harvest Sale is a potent example of how theatrical techniques were used by Southerners throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to create revisionist public histories that recast the Civil War and its antebellum antecedents in a more positive light. Historian David Blight has written extensively about how the nation chose to remember the war in the fifty years after its end. His *Race and Reunion*

(2001) details how white Americans—North and South—chose reconciliationist nationalism and economic prosperity over racial justice, resulting in the resubjugation of Black Americans emancipated during the war.[14] Importantly, he demonstrates that the North was not only complicit in, but supportive of, the liberties Southerners took in revising Southern history, romanticizing plantation life and whitewashing the horrors of chattel slavery.

Blight highlights many events that obfuscated Blackness in Civil War history and omitted Black voices from the creation of collective memory. For instance, at the fifty-year reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg, in which Yankee and Confederate soldiers ceremoniously marched across the historic battlefield to shake one another's hands, Blight demonstrates how Black people were marginalized. While the event depended on Black labor, only obscure references exist to the possible participation of Black veterans, leaving the emancipationist vision of the Civil War out of its remembrance.[15] Blight adeptly shows how events such as these, which had a strong Northern presence in their design and execution, resubjugated Blackness and thwarted racial justice through omission. My research on Southern public histories, however, reveals a pervasive trend of Southern-made events that situate Blackness *at their centers*, adding an important regional dimension to collective memory of the Civil War and its continued effects on racial justice.

Unlike the North, whose de facto racial segregation resulted in increased physical separation between white and Black citizens, Southern segregation dealt with a lack of physical separation through stratification. The omnipresence of Black people in the South—the region of the US where they have lived in the highest numbers since the beginning of US slavery—presented a challenge to white-supremacist histories. This was even more pronounced in Atlanta, the location of the Golden Harvest Sale and an important site of Black intellectualism, activism, and achievement.[16] In a region where Black voices could not be omitted, white Southerners curated particular representations of Blackness in an attempt to corroborate and add authenticity to their revisionist histories. Despite this careful curation, the question persists: how could white Southerners possibly believe such revisionist histories when they were so antithetical to their lived experiences? In addition to the willing suspension of disbelief, events such as the Golden Harvest Sale demonstrate how immersive historical events used theatrical techniques to give participants a sense of time travel, a visceral encounter with the past that had the power to override historical fact with fiction. Through the dramaturgical analysis

of the Golden Harvest Sale and events like it, this chapter illuminates pervasive performances of public history that have not yet been examined in the literature about Civil War memory, performances that demonstrate how theatrical techniques and curated representations of Blackness intervened on historical memory and racial justice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Immersive Southern History

Starting in the late nineteenth century, antebellum history grew increasingly popular across the nation. Plantation literature produced by prominent authors such as Thomas Nelson Page and Harry Stillwell Edwards captivated white readers. Black caricatures such as the well-known Aunt Jemima figure dominated American advertising, and Dixie Tunes—nostalgic songs with Southern themes—were by far the most popular and frequently produced genre of American music, with sheet music sales soaring into the millions between 1890 and 1920.[17] These nostalgic, supposedly charming representations of the antebellum South helped to create and perpetuate the Old South myth, a revisionist historical narrative that whitewashed the realities of slavery to present a romantic view of antebellum history popular among white Southerners. Simultaneous with this popularity, Confederate memorialization boomed. Spearheaded by Southern white clubwomen—middle- and upper-class members of women's organizations—parades were held, museums were opened, and statues commemorating Confederate battles and leaders were erected around the nation, reaching an all-time high in 1911.[18]

During this period, Southerners became increasingly interested in events that claimed to offer a sense of stepping back into Southern history. In 1892, Atlanta purchased a forty-nine-foot-tall cyclorama (cylindrical painting) depicting *The Battle of Atlanta*.[19] The cyclorama was displayed in Grant Park's Civil War Museum, where visitors would enter through a discrete door, and when the lights rose, visitors found themselves in the middle of the battle. The cyclorama gave them a 360-degree view of the epic vista, which covered more square feet than a football field. Painted with a trompe-l'œil technique, the cyclorama created an optical illusion of three-dimensionality amplified by the inclusion of intricately carved figures, which appeared to walk out of the painting. The Atlanta History Center describes the appeal of the cyclorama to visitors in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century as "an immersive experience—

the equivalent of virtual reality today."[20] As technology advanced over the next few decades, music, sound effects, and voice-overs were added to the experience. Combining Southern history with cutting-edge developments in entertainment technologies, the cyclorama remained popular well into the civil rights era.[21]

The cyclorama only seemed to whet Southerners' appetite for immersive Southern historical events. "Old country societies" such as Atlanta's "Country Collective" hosted events serving up old-fashioned Southern cooking where old-timers and formerly enslaved men told stories of plantation days.[22] Individuals threw "plantation suppers"—plantation-themed parties that gave "a glimpse back into the social life of [. . .] old plantation days"[23]—where guests dressed as antebellum gentlemen, Southern belles, and "famous southern characters," mixing costume pieces with their grandparents' clothing and jewelry.[24] Beginning in the early twentieth century, plantation tourism offered visitors an opportunity to step back in time to experience the old-fashioned way of life supposedly preserved there. During this period, most plantation homes were still privately owned residences, and visitors were typically the owners' white guests, who would spend several days on the plantation, sleeping in the home or on its grounds, eating food grown on its farms and prepared in its kitchens, and interacting with the people who worked and lived there.[25]

Newspaper editor and Georgia clubwoman Isma Dooly recounted many of these plantation trips for the *Atlanta Constitution*. Similar to the articles detailing the Golden Harvest Sale, Dooly's articles describe the plantation's pastoral beauty and its sights, sounds, and fresh produce. Moreover, she, too, lingered on the presence of Black people above all else, sometimes giving the people's names and other times referring to them only as "mammy." In a 1915 article titled "Old-Time Darkies and Old-Time Plantations Passing Away But Few That Are Left Preserve Their Quaint Character," Dooly writes, "It was my pleasure to recently visit a plantation [Oakland Plantation] in South Georgia [. . .] where several of these typical lovable darkies live preserving the traditions as none others can of the old plantation."[26] She then recalls one of the Black women servants whom she met there: "Now 'Liddie [surname not given],'" writes Dooly, "is comparatively young, but she learned from a mother who was taught in the best of all industrial institutions the negro has yet have, the kitchen of the old south."[27] Dooly describes Liddie as being, in addition to a cook and caretaker, "a kind of historian of the tenant darkies on the plantation," an embodied vessel of generational knowledge directly handed down from one Black person to another. As many of the servants

and tenant farmers who worked on plantations in the early twentieth century were people who had formerly been enslaved on the same plantation or their direct descendants, interaction with Black people seemed to give white visitors the strongest sense of stepping back in time.

Recalling one of her own plantation visits, Charleston woman Alice Smith articulated the feeling of time travel that early plantation tourism offered: "I can to this day, not just *remember* but put myself there in the past where I want to be."[28] Like Smith, many of the visitors who attended these events interpreted them as literal encounters with the past, interpretations that I attribute to the immersive, experiential nature of plantation tourism. In *Prosthetic Memory* (2004), museum studies scholar Alison Landsberg explores such phenomena. "Prosthetic memory," she writes,

> emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history[. . . .] [T]he person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live.[29]

While Landsberg demonstrates the conditions in which prosthetic memories are made, she does not fully articulate the process by which people develop these deeply felt memories. Theater and performance studies scholars, including Marvin Carlson, Joseph Roach, and Scott Magelssen, however, pinpoint kinesthetic imagination (i.e., embodied performance) as the means through which history, memory, and imagination may suture themselves together.[30] "When kinesthetic imagination is united with memory," writes Carlson, "the result [. . .] is some species of living history."[31]

The resultant prosthetic memories and living histories, however, are shaped by the historical narratives presented in the experiential site as well as the interpretations made by those who visit them, each individual influenced by their own subjectivities. In the segregated South of the early twentieth century, neo-Confederate revisionist histories dominated Southern education and entertainment. For instance, the cyclorama painting was revised to depict the Confederate victory at the Battle of Atlanta, a battle actually won by Union troops.[32] During plantation tours, the owners typically led the visitors, deeply shaping the narratives presented there. Even though plantation visitors relished the opportunity to speak with

those formerly enslaved on the plantation and their descendants, the recollections they presented were often romanticized myths of slavery and benevolent masters, a result of interracial interactions within a white-supremacist and racially-violent society that has been well-documented in research on the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives.[33] Therefore, the prosthetic memories made at immersive Southern historical events of the early twentieth century reified neo-Confederate revisionist histories by making them seem true, experienced firsthand by visitors. It was in this context that the Golden Harvest Sale debuted, curating encounters with the antebellum South for thousands of white shoppers, influencing how they remembered Southern history and interpreted Blackness as part of it. To understand how shoppers would have interpreted the sale, it is essential to learn more about York and his influences.

Lucian York, Theatrical Representation, and Blackface Minstrelsy

Lucian York (1869–1924) was a well-known theater lover in his native Atlanta. At the age of fifteen, he began working as an usher at DeGive's Opera House, one of Atlanta's premiere theater venues for local and touring productions.[34] For the next fourteen years (1884–1898), York worked the balcony door, watching every show that played the venue. A 1922 book profiling influential Atlantans—*Atlanta, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*—described his time at DeGive's:

> [York] stood at the door of the old theatre for many years, coming in intimate contact with the great of the stage, and accumulating a wealth of information about plays and players such as is possessed by few men. He kept notes in a little red book, and when this first little book was filled, he got another, and there the record of many a great performance was put down.[35]

In those little red notebooks, York diligently detailed not only the shows he saw at DeGive's, but every production that played in Atlanta, establishing him as a well-known amateur theater historian.[36] When Atlantans had a question about theater, the *Atlanta Journal* stated in 1912, "They call[ed] up Lucian York."[37] In addition to his extensive knowledge, York's personal friendships with actors, managers, and producers from across the country established him as a theater tastemaker. He was frequently asked to attend the dress rehearsals of touring pro-

ductions to give his nod of approval, an endorsement that would be well publicized in local papers.[38]

Despite his love of theater, York spent most of his life participating only as a viewer. His theatrical influence, however, manifested in other ways. As a teenager, York began working at M. Rich and Bros. Department Store, earning a living there during the day before heading to the theater at night. In 1898, York left DeGive's to work at Rich's full time, successfully moving up the corporate ladder from "bundle wrapper" to window decorator. Throughout the 1910s, York became well known for his displays, which featured beautifully clothed mannequins in front of bespoke paintings and oversized set pieces, mise-en-scènes reminiscent of Florenz Ziegfeld's luscious tableaux vivants.

By the late 1910s, York had risen to general manager, a role in which he could exert more influence over the store.[39] Around this time, York—aged fifty—finally tried his hand at making theater. In 1919, he cofounded the Atlanta Opera Company, contributing to the company's first two productions as manager, producer, set decorator, and playwright: *The Mikado* (1919) and "The Musical Whirl" variety show (1920).[40] These two productions not only had a direct effect on the themes of Rich's sales displays in the early 1920s, but propelled them to a level of immersiveness and theatricality never before seen in a Southern department store.

York served as set decorator for Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. The hometown production received great praise in local newspapers, specifically for its intricate, lavish sets. The day after the premier, the show's musical director, Cecil P. Poole, published an article in the *Atlanta Journal* praising York, stating that he had never seen a production of *The Mikado* with such a "glorious stage setting."[41] "This setting," wrote Poole,

> was due entirely to Mr. York. It was his idea and carried out in detail under his direct supervision. In addition to this, he took care of innumerable details such as the necessary accompaniments of an amateur production; if something was lacking, he borrowed, built or bought it. It was impossible to overestimate the value of Mr. York's work to the production.[42]

With York involved, it is no surprise that *The Mikado* was filled with visual splendor. York spent his formative years in the theater at the back doors of noisy galleries, so visually striking, lavish sets would naturally have caught his eye. Whereas typically raucous gallery audiences could have easily drowned out dialogue and music, a production's strong visual lan-

guage could still convey the story. York then honed the skill of visual storytelling in a highly visual medium as Rich's window decorator.

As general manager, however, York was no longer limited to the windows, and he began to experiment with large, immersive environments to draw customers to special sales events. In May of 1921, York revisited the world of *The Mikado* as an inspiration for Rich's 54th Anniversary Sale. Erecting a Japanese pagoda in the middle of the store, York decorated the store with lanterns, fans, cherry blossoms, and wisteria.[43] Bringing his Japanese fantasy to life, he dressed salesgirls in silk kimonos, tucking chrysanthemums behind their ears.[44] Here again York's display drew praise: "Rich's anniversary sale," wrote journalist Ward Greene, "represents as much expense, thought and labor as any opera season, in Atlanta or anywhere else."[45] What's more, argued Greene, York's display reached both people who could afford boxes at the opera "and those who [could not]," bringing theater to the masses.[46]

Following closely on the heels of the *Mikado*-themed sale, the Golden Harvest Sale took its inspiration from the second production of the Atlanta Opera Company, "The Musical Whirl," an original variety show produced in 1920. Diverging from the light operetta of *The Mikado* that was fashionable among the social elite, "The Musical Whirl" took inspiration from popular entertainment forms favored by the working class: variety, vaudeville, and minstrelsy. Roughly following the format of a minstrel show, "The Musical Whirl" included three parts: a section of music and comedy complete with "interlocutor" and "endmen," an olio of specialty acts, and, finally, a comedic sketch.[47] For the sketch, York tried his hand at playwriting, penning "Melinda's Wedding Day," a satirical farce performed in blackface. Although no known script survives, the sketch, which featured a cast of eighty, was well-received by Atlanta audiences. Following the premiere, the *Atlanta Journal* wrote that York's sketch "so far outranked the average minstrel sketch that we recommend it sincerely to Nell O'Brien or any other minstrel impresario."[48]

The Golden Harvest Sale revisited the minstrel sketch's plantation setting, probably reusing many of the same set pieces and costumes. While the Golden Harvest Sale was not explicitly advertised as a minstrel show or a minstrelsy-inspired display, York's long-standing relationship to minstrelsy and personal connections to blackface minstrel performers had established Rich's as a site of minstrel performance, influencing how shoppers would interpret the history presented there. On November 15, 1906—fifteen years before the Golden Harvest Sale—famed minstrel performer George Primrose paraded his min-

strel troupe down the streets of Atlanta to promote his touring show.[49] According to a local newspaper, as the parade traveled down Atlanta's busy Whitehall Street, the procession halted

> suddenly and for no apparent reason[. . . .] George Primrose himself, king of burnt cork, rose in his carriage, lifted his hat and a broad, end-man smile spread over his face. At that moment the situation was explained. [Primrose's old friend] Lucian York, who had been standing in the doorway of Rich's store, hurried forward, hat in hand.[50]

Three years later, on March 17, 1909, well-known minstrel performer Lew Dockstader paraded his own touring troupe down Atlanta's streets, pausing in front of Rich's. Dockstader called Lucian York forth and began to serenade him. That evening, the *Atlanta Journal* reported that York "tried to bow his acknowledgements and retire, but Dockstader had held him till the minstrels were through their tribute of music. Then the parade moved on through the city."[51] The same year, the Neil O'Brien Minstrels came to serenade him, but due to a schedule mix-up, York was nowhere to be found. They invaded the store in search of him, but when they discovered that he was still at lunch, they settled in the shoe department, where they performed to a packed audience of shoppers.[52]

Throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, minstrel serenades to York became an established performance tradition, a "time-honored and traditional rite, which no minstrel troupe worthy of the name ever omits in Atlanta."[53] "When a minstrel show comes to Atlanta," declared the *Atlanta Journal* in 1922, "the first place it goes is to M. Rich Bros. department store."[54] These teasing tributes to "Lucian York, dean of Atlanta's theatrical fans and patrons," were soon advertised in local papers ahead of time, drawing scores of spectators while drumming up business for both the minstrel troupes and Rich's.[55] They also established Rich's as a site of minstrel performance that would influence the representations of Southern history and Blackness that shoppers would expect to see there.

The Golden Harvest Sale

In "Performing the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum," (1995), Tracy C. Davis examines how curated physical environments prompt spectators to perform, both directing and constraining those performances.[56] Pinpointing the curation of material authenticity within logically illu-

sionistic environments as the key to facilitating the performative turn in museum displays, Davis argues how such compositions encourage visitors to "step into the material circumstances and the imagined mindsets" of the people and places those environments depict.[57] Surrounded by materially authentic objects (including the Black man rendered as object) placed within a logically illusionistic environment created by murals layered behind replica trees and fields, the Golden Harvest Sale encouraged visitors to imagine themselves as the residents of an antebellum plantation, prompting them to perform their understanding of Southern history. To surmise the kinds of performances prompted by the material objects at the Golden Harvest Sale, I turn to Robin Bernstein's concept of scriptive things and the method of reading material things as scripts. A script, writes Bernstein, is a "set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation."[58] By identifying the particular scripts attached to certain objects, it is possible to interpret the types of things shoppers were invited to do at the sale. "This act of scripting," asserts Bernstein, "this issuing of a culturally specific invitation, is itself a historical event—one that can be recovered and then analyzed as a fresh source of evidence."[59]

Several newspaper articles give insight into the way the unidentified Black man was interpreted and the material objects that may have prompted that interpretation and possible performances. "The sound of a banjo," writes one journalist, "attracted the attention of the crowd towards the elevator to behold a typical old Black Joe seated on the porch in front of a log cabin, which looks as if it had been transplanted from some plantation to give the present day [*sic*] generation a glimpse of days 'befo' de war.'"[60] This description alludes to both blackface minstrelsy and romanticized plantation literature: "Old Black Joe" and "banjo on my knee" are both references to songs written by famed minstrel composer Stephen Foster,[61] while "befo' de war" is a reference to an 1893 poetry collection of the same name written in racist false Black dialect by A. C. Gordon and Thomas Nelson Page.[62] While presuming to give shoppers a glimpse of antebellum history, these allusions evoke the traditions of blackface minstrelsy and plantation literature, genres that whitewashed the horrors of chattel slavery, instead presenting it as a harmonious relationship between "benevolent masters" and "faithful slaves," Black people who, in the words of historian Catherine Stewart, "accepted their places at the bottom of the racial hierarchy."[63] Based on the popularity of these artistic forms, in addition to Rich's reputation as a site of minstrel performance, it is likely that the white shoppers' interpretations were also

shaped by the traditions of these forms. Did shoppers request that the man play minstrel tunes? Did they attempt the comical banter typical of minstrel shows, offering standard joke setups to prompt the man to deliver the punchline?

Other articles allude to other jovial, nostalgic artistic representations of the antebellum South, notably Joel Chandler Harris's eponymous character from his immensely popular 1880 *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* and its many sequels. One journalist even describes the live opossum as Harris's character Br'er Possum, "grinning from the branches of a persimmon tree."[64] Because of this pattern of interpretation, I have always wondered how shoppers may have physically interacted with the man. In Harris's books, Uncle Remus tells his tales to a young white child simply referred to as "the Little Boy," who routinely sits on his knee. Did any mothers sit their own children on his knees? Did a youngster crawl into his lap and request that he tell their favorite tale? There is precedent for such an interaction. Less than a year before the Golden Harvest Sale, another Atlanta store, Jacobs' Pharmacy, staged an interactive Christmas display featuring both Santa Claus and Uncle Remus, as he was "so dear to children."[65]

When shoppers entered Jacobs', they encountered a large and "truly life like" picture of Uncle Remus "seated in his log cabin regaling The Little Boy with stories of plantation lore."[66] The nearby elevator was converted to resemble this log cabin, and the doors opened to reveal Santa Claus, who would welcome children and transport them to the second level, where they would find yet another log cabin, this time inhabited by "Sis Tempy," an "old mammy negro" who entertained children by reading Christmas tales.[67] The link between Uncle Remus and Santa Claus established at Jacobs' the year before, in addition to repeated use of the log cabin, was bolstered by York's placement of the unidentified man directly in front of the elevators, the same place Santa sat each Christmas at Rich's. That Atlanta children had been conditioned to associate the actions of visiting Santa Claus—climbing on his knee, talking with him—with Uncle Remus and his log cabin increases the likelihood that such interactions occurred at the Golden Harvest Sale.

It is through these interactions, however, that the unidentified man may have disrupted shoppers' interpretations of both himself and the Golden Harvest Sale's historical narrative of Southern history. We do not know how his role within the sale was presented to him. Was he a performer? A store employee? Was he told to interact with customers, and did he anticipate the types of interactions he might have? He may have

reveled in the performance, delighting shoppers through music, stories, and improvisational exchanges. He may also have been caught off guard, asked to tell *Uncle Remus* stories he did not know, or prompted to perform minstrelsy music, dances, and jokes. His personal space may have been invaded, and he might have found himself the center of comedic ridicule. The stakes of his performance were high. In the 1920s, Georgia was still the most racially violent state in the nation, and the man may have felt deeply pressured to play along to avoid upsetting white shoppers.

In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach describes a cultural, performative effigy as a "a contrivance that enables the processes regulating performance—kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission—to produce memory through surrogation."[68] Roach also notes, however, that effigies constantly point to the fact that they are an effigy, never fully replacing or replicating the "real thing." Therefore, even though York positioned the man as a material object, an effigy of slavery, his interpolation into an immersive simulation highlighted the division between "then" and "now." Was he prepared to tell one of Uncle Remus's stories? Did he hesitate or tell them differently than Joel Chandler Harris? After days of sitting in front of the log cabin, did he slouch or sweat, calling attention to his humanity, indicating that he was not a fictional character or historical specter, but a part of the here and now? At the same time York used the carefully positioned presence of the Black man to reify whitewashed, romanticized revisionist historical narratives of the Old South, the man's presence may have disrupted the simulation York created, reminding white shoppers of the very Black objectification they wished to forget.

Notes

1. "Tomorrow at 9 in the Morning: Rich's Golden Harvest Sale," *Atlanta Journal*, Wednesday Evening, 5 October 1921, 7, America's Historical Newspapers.

2. "Welcoming the Fair Visitors, Meaning the Ladies," *Atlanta Journal*, Sunday Morning, 16 October 1921, 6, America's Historical Newspapers.

3. Cecil P. Poole, "Lucian York Praised for Work in 'Mikado,' Recently Presented," *Atlanta Journal*, Sunday Morning, 20 June, 1919, D12, America's Historical Newspapers.

4. Advertisement for the Rich's Golden Harvest Sale, *Atlanta Journal*, 4 October 1921, 13, America's Historical Newspapers.

5. Cobbie Vaughn, "Rich's Harvest Sale a Golden Opportunity," *Atlanta Journal*, 16 October 1921, A5.

6. "Old Plantation Scene in Heart of Modern Store," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7

October 1921, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 9. The article does not provide the name of the mural artist(s).

7. "Old Plantation Scene," 9.

8. Vaughn, A5.

9. Vaughn, A5.

10. Vaughn, A5.

11. The identity of this man is unknown. Rich's department store had several Black employees throughout the early twentieth century, but employment records for this period are not extant. It is possible that the man described is a white man wearing blackface, but this is unlikely. Contemporaneous articles from the same outlets that reported on the Golden Harvest Sale routinely omit the names of Black people, particularly Black laborers, whereas the identities of blackface performers (both professional and amateur) are routinely given.

12. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 8.

13. McMillan, 8.

14. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

15. Blight, 385.

16. Notably, W. E. B. DuBois, who began his professorship at Atlanta University in 1897, was an internationally recognized scholar and vocal opponent of romanticized revisionist histories of the US South disseminated by white people, histories which he likened to "fairy tales." (See Combs and Hankins, "'My Real Life Work Was Done at Atlanta': Aldon Morris on W. E. B. DuBois's Career in Atlanta," *Atlanta Studies*, 25 May 2017.)

17. John Bush Jones, *Reinventing Dixie: Tin Pan Alley's Songs and the Creation of the Mythic South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 10.

18. "Whose Heritage? A Report on Public Symbols of the Confederacy," Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy

19. The cyclorama was created in 1886 at the American Panorama Company.

20. The Atlanta History Center.

21. Jim Galloway, "The Cyclorama and an End to a 40-Year Fight over Confederate History," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 15 July 2015, https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/the-cyclorama-and-end-year-fight-over-confederate-history/7qhQVm1jlfTvtGNRGojy5L/. Accessed September 1, 2022.

22. "Ex-Slaves Tell Stories of Plantation Days at First Gathering of Old Country Society," *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 July 1913, 3, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

23. "An Ideal House Party," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 October 1911, 6, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

24. "Plantation Supper Given at Boxwood," *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 June 1931, 13, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

25. See Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

26. Isma Dooly, "Old-Time Darkies and Old-Time Plantations Passing Away But Few That Are Left Preserve Their Quaint Character," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 March 1915.

27. Dooly.

28. Stephanie Yuhl, "Rich and Tender Remembering," *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 243.

29. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

30. See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

31. Marvin Carlson, "Performing the Past: Living History as Cultural Memory," *Paragrana* 9, no. 2 (2000): 247.

32. Atlanta History Center, "Cyclorama. The Big Picture."

33. See Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

34. John R. Hornady, *Atlanta, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (American Cities Book Company, 1922), 179.

35. Hornady, 179.

36. W. B. Seabrook, "Old Theatre Days in Atlanta Told by Lucian York," *Atlanta Journal*, 17 March 1912, 2, America's Historical Newspapers.

37. Seabrook, 2.

38. "Minstrel Rehearsals Have Been Completed," *Atlanta Journal*, Thursday Evening, 8 April 1920, 15, America's Historical Newspapers.

39. Seabrook, 2.

40. The Atlanta Opera Company is also known as the Atlanta Opera Club.

41. Cecil P. Poole, "Lucian York Praised for Work in 'Mikado,' Recently Presented," *Atlanta Journal*, Sunday Morning, 20 June 1919, D12, America's Historical Newspapers.

42. Poole, D12.

43. Ward Greene, "Rich's Store Transformed into Scene of Old Japan for 54th Anniversary Sale," *Atlanta Journal*, 2 May 1921, 7, America's Historical Newspapers.

44. Greene, "Rich's Store," 7.

45. Before working at the Met, Gatti-Casazza was the general manager of Milan's La Scala.

46. Greene, "Rich's Store," 7.

47. Ward Greene, "'Musical Whirl' Scores Big Hit in Its Premiere at Atlanta Monday Night," *Atlanta Journal*, Tuesday Evening, 7 September 1920, 19, America's Historical Newspapers.

48. Greene, "'Musical Whirl,'" 19.

49. "Primrose and York Hold Little Reunion," *Atlanta Journal*, Thursday Evening, 15 November 1906, 1, America's Historical Newspapers.

50. "Primrose and York Hold Little Reunion," 1.

51. "Lew Dockstader Honors Old Friend by Serenade," Wednesday Evening, 16 March 1909, 5, America's Historical Newspapers.

52. "Neil O'Brien Minstrels give Annual Serenade at M. Rich & Bros.," *Atlanta Journal*, Thursday Evening, 24 January 1922, 3, America's Historical Newspapers.

53. "Shrine Minstrels, Like All Good Troupes, Will Serenade Lucian York," *Atlanta Journal*, Thursday Evening, 16 January 1922, 1, America's Historical Newspapers.

54. "Shrine Minstrels Follow Custom and Serenade Lucian York," *Atlanta Journal*, 24 October 1922, 12, America's Historical Newspapers.

55. "Shrine Minstrels, Like All Good Troupes," *Atlanta Journal*, Thursday Evening, January 16, 1922, 1, America's Historical Newspapers.

56. Tracy C. Davis, "Performing the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum," *TDR, The Drama Revue* 39, no. 3 (1995): 16.

57. Davis, 24.

58. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 11–12.

59. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 11.

60. Vaughn, "Rich's Harvest Sale a Golden Opportunity," A5.

61. William W. Austin, *"Susanna," "Jeanie," and "the Old Folks at Home": The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

62. Armistead Churchill Gordon and Thomas Nelson Page, *Befo' de War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000005965069&view=1up&seq=7

63. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 13. For more on the framing of "benevolent masters" and "faithful slaves," see Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (2003).

64. "Old Plantation Scene in Heart of Modern Store," *Atlanta Constitution*, 9.

65. "'Uncle Remus' Land Featured at Jacobs': Pharmacy on Marietta Street Combines Santa and 'Uncle Remus' in Beautiful Display," *Atlanta Constitution (1881–1945)*, 25 November 1920, Proquest.

66. "'Uncle Remus' Land Featured at Jacobs.'"

67. "'Uncle Remus' Land Featured at Jacobs.'"

68. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 35.

EIGHT Playing Attention in an Escape Room

Strange Bird Immersive's The Man From Beyond

JAMES R. BALL III

As our séance concluded, a light came on over the trunk in the corner that had been the site of so much of our puzzling and play over the last hour. The trunk opened, and Harry Houdini emerged holding the straitjacket in which he had been bound just moments earlier, when we spied him through a half-silvered mirror, a vision from a world of spirits. He stepped out of the box and announced himself: "I give you the Great Houdini!" He thanked us for freeing him and then turned his attention and ours to his lost love, the figure at the heart of the enigmas we had unraveled to bring Houdini here. "My Bess, where is she?" he begged. My colleagues and I were silent, perhaps dumbstruck by the ghost. I finally responded, slipping into the affective space of the scene, slowing and softening my voice. "I think she has passed." Houdini asked the year, and we told him. The weight of the afterlife sank in. "I could never tell if I had been fighting for days or years. . . ."

This was the climactic moment of *The Man From Beyond*, an escape room and immersive experience. In the show, two actors play Houdini and Madame Daphne, a present-day medium holding a séance to contact the dead illusionist. The first production of Strange Bird Immersive, *The Man From Beyond* has run continuously in Houston, Texas, since 2015, except for March to October 2020, when it was closed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview, the co-artistic directors of Strange Bird Immersive, Haley E. R. Cooper and J. Cameron Cooper, described to me the difficulties Houdini's question could pose for audiences. Haley recounted,

"We had somebody recently who told Houdini—when [Houdini] was like, 'Where's Bess? Where's my wife?'—and he said, 'I'm Bess!'" Cameron, who had initiated the part of Houdini, chimed in, "That actually happens all the time." Haley was suddenly incredulous, "I'm Bess?!" Cameron continued: "Yeah, they'll point to someone and say, 'Oh, that's Bess.' I'm uncertain if they're screwing with me or if they actually don't know what they're supposed to do. . . . I think it's mostly the latter. I think they think it's a puzzle they're supposed to solve."[1] The moment suggests a productive friction at the heart of *The Man From Beyond*, intrinsic to its unique combination of game and theater, and between competing modes of spectatorship. As Cameron put it, "There's a lot of collisions that take place when you combine the game and you combine the theater, and some of them we've worked to ameliorate. Some of them we've really embraced."

This was my second visit to *The Man From Beyond*, in March 2022. In my notes on my first visit, in October 2019, I recorded my surprise that an escape room had asked me to have an affective, perhaps empathetic, relationship with the characters it invented and staged, to feel something more than the rush of adrenaline that comes from competing against a clock. I noted that dropping into the emotional flow of the scene was not easy; though I did not claim to be Bess, I nonetheless felt the same friction as I shifted from puzzler to theatergoer. *The Man From Beyond* asks its participant audience members to attend differently to the game, story, actors, and each other as it unfolds. Tracing these shifts indicates the potential for developing an aesthetics of attention in immersive art.

My edition of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's collected works contains what I can only assume is a fortuitous typo: "What to *play attention* to, how intensely and for how long, are choices that will determine the content of consciousness."[2] Escape rooms invite us to play attention, to drop into experiences of what Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow," and to follow those experiences into the intersubjective spaces they open. Where Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes an economy of attention, Yves Citton has more recently suggested a shift to an ecology of attention. This shift indicates that "attention is a certain kind of connection between that which I am, that which surrounds me, and that which may result from the relation that unites these interested parties."[3] Where the playground for attention that is an escape room comes into contact with the related but different narrative and spectatorial structures of immersive theater, as in *The Man From Beyond*, we are invited to navigate the attention ecology we inhabit, to consider where we might care differently for that which we are, that which surrounds us, and the relations between all things.

An escape room is an immersive puzzle game: a group of players explore a built environment seeking clues and solving puzzles that promise to secure their release from an ostensibly imprisoning room. Usually the puzzles and space are held together by a narrative with more or less detail, and the game proceeds under a strict time limit. Strange Bird Immersive's artistic directors came to the escape room format from an interest in making immersive theater for Houston audiences. Haley related the genesis of *The Man From Beyond*:

> We were immediately inspired by *Sleep No More* . . . it really felt like it was theatre in your blood. . . . We looked around and said, you know, there's five other escape room companies in Houston right now . . . [I]f we merge immersive theatre with an escape room, we think we will be able to sell better because people are booking escape rooms. [In Houston,] they're not booking immersive theater. They've never heard of that. Not a day in their life. So, from a business standpoint, we were like, let's have our first production be an escape room. . . . And then maybe we can do something more like *Then She Fell*, *Sleep No More*. . . .

Combining immersive theater and escape room aesthetics posed its own challenges that drove particular narrative choices.

Haley's narrative reflects a certain American entrepreneurial ingenuity at the origin of *The Man From Beyond*, framing it as a unique answer to the perennial question of how to pay for art in a system in which the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is not interpreted as a mandate for direct federal funding of culture. Escape rooms also operationalize the figure of liberty as a narrative and ludic structure—the point of the game and the climax of the story is to escape confinement. In the United States, freedom and liberty must always be read in relation to a certain founding paradox: that the liberty our founding documents clamored for was secured by a pervasive system of chattel slavery. In its escape rooms and beyond, America continues to grapple with this paradox and the challenges it poses to making a national community that cares for all.

Haley continued, "[a]n escape room has weird constraints because you need somebody, in order to make sense of it, who has created all of these puzzles and has created them for somebody to solve." In this context, the co-artistic directors pitched potential story ideas to one another. "And Cameron remembered this weird story about the magician Houdini, that he promised to reach his wife after he died and he never did. And

Cameron said, and I quote, 'and I always thought that was really sad that Houdini never reached his wife.'"

Centering the narrative on a famed illusionist and escape artist required puzzles that could easily reinforce the narrative. Because puzzles are the heart of an escape room, any performance studies analysis of an escape room must also reckon with the unique performatic dimensions of puzzling. Yet while there is a significant literature on performance and play, the subset of this literature that addresses puzzles is far more limited. Indeed, even though the puzzles populating escape rooms are exemplars of Roger Caillois's concept of *ludus*, the tendency toward rules and structures in play, these sorts of puzzles occupy just one small corner of his Classification of Games table.[4] So too, the chapter on "Play" in Richard Schechner's textbook, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, surveys reams of literature on the ritual, social, and psychological dimensions of play without taking up a question that must be fundamental in the present context: what is performed, and for whom, when one goes about solving a puzzle?[5]

Well before Houdini emerged on this second visit, my party and I took stock of what was available to us, and where there were obstacles we would need to puzzle out. We opened cabinets and drawers and examined the dozens of candlesticks lining the room's walls. A large mantelpiece dominated one wall, and as I contemplated it, Anne and Rayna (my colleagues in the Department of Performance Studies) approached with a scrapbook page they had found. It featured a photograph of the mantel, laden with a variety of bric-a-brac. In the image, a candle sconce was turned 90°. We turned the corresponding sconce to match and a hidden compartment popped open. Rayna gasped; discovery was delightful. In an email, Haley related, "we lean heavily towards observation and discovery puzzles, wayyyy more than most escape rooms."[6]

With each puzzle, my colleagues and I found ourselves in more or less intense states of flow. As theorized by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, flow is "characterized by complete absorption in what one does," a state in which "experience seamlessly unfolds from moment to moment."[7] Csikszentmihalyi notes that attention "plays a key role in entering and staying in flow. . . . Clear proximal goals, immediate feedback, and just-manageable levels of challenge orient the organism, in a unified and coordinated way, so that attention becomes completely absorbed into the stimulus field defined by the activity."[8] Navigating between puzzles, my attention flitted across potential activities before becoming fixed on the mantel; my colleagues, too, moved into and out of my attention, puzzling

on their own tracks. In an escape room, performing puzzles generates a choreography of attention.

Multiple elements vying for attention in turn produced some of those "collisions" between theater and escape rooms that Cameron had alluded to. "One of the main problems is when you're working with actors and scenes, we want people to pay attention to them," he told me. "They probably want to pay attention to them, but if there's game elements present at the same time that's going to get the attention. . . . [I]f you ignore the game stuff, you're going to lose . . . [so we] make sure that the scenes take place in a time when there's obviously no game elements. Except when we start you off." I thought back to our entry into the séance parlor. Daphne had invited us to sit at a large circular table draped in a red tablecloth. On the table were a tambourine, a flat wooden box containing a slate, and a small pillow on which a pair of solid handcuffs rested. She explained the significance of the objects, and gestured to the many other objects that filled the room, all collected, she told us, by her parents, who had been avid fans of Houdini.

Cameron guided my recollections: "All of this crazy stuff is all around you . . . but you can't pay attention to it just yet. Madame Daphne says, 'Go ahead, look around, take a look.' And it's kind of dark. Here's *this thing* that's going to be important, here's *this thing* that's going to be important." Madame Daphne highlighted a large vertical box, a device that had traveled with Houdini in a circus when he was young; its brightly painted exterior announced it was "The Cabinet of Mysteries." Later, all in our party would spend time climbing in and out of it in an effort to reveal those mysteries. She next pointed to a trunk "used in his most famous magic trick, 'The Metamorphosis.'" This same trunk was the one from which Houdini eventually emerged. And finally, she drew our attention to a display case near the door. Inside was the wedding ring of Beatrice (or Bess), Houdini's wife. "A plain gold band, with 'Rosabelle' inscribed on the inside." This would be the penultimate puzzle to solve before we could free Houdini.

Cameron reflected on the scene's dramaturgical utility. "[It] ratchets up the tension, but it also sort of gets it out of the way. We know you're going to have the instinct to go look at these things and play with them, but no, you gotta come back in here with me, pay attention. We're going to do this thing. It's going to be awesome. And then you're going to get to go." Throughout, Cameron emphasized the role attention played, indicating the degree to which he understood the show to be grounded in the ways it managed its audience's attentions. Haley, in turn, linked this same

quality to the competing agencies of audience and actors as they navigated scenes and puzzles. She described it as "the changing of the reins that we do, that nobody else does, where the actors are in charge and you need to be more passive and now you're in charge, and the actors aren't—are passive—and then it switches again. And then it switches again, and then it switches again." Attention and narrative control become linked in this regard.

Though Cameron and Haley mostly used the terms "audience," "guest," and "player" to refer to those experiencing *The Man From Beyond*, the central role attention plays in escape rooms suggests it may be useful to revisit an alternative term suggested by Josephine Machon: "attendants." She draws the concept from Stephen Di Benedetto's contribution to the 2006 volume *The Senses in Performance* and elaborates on it: "'Attendant' should be understood in terms of 'attending to,' giving embodied attention to the ways in which perception comes to bear, the ways in which one is experiencing the work; of being aware of one's presence and participation in the moment rather than simply 'in attendance' as in 'in servitude' to the work."[9] Insofar as a flow state involves a "loss of reflective self-consciousness,"[10] Machon's attendants offer ways to think about not just the flow that can emerge from the escape room's choreography of one's attentions, but also the frictions with which we began, where the nature of our attention and how we attend produces seams that can be felt and pondered.

Though individuals experiencing *The Man From Beyond* may become "attendants" of this sort from time to time, I remain inclined to save that term for occasional usage, preferring "audience" or "spectators" to keep them on a spectrum of theatrical activity. Indeed, audiences to *The Man From Beyond* are faced not just with puzzles but with a complex multilayered narrative built on the intrinsic theatricality of its subject matter. Early in our puzzling, I found a thin paperback book—Sarah Ruhl's play *Eurydice*. Madame Daphne's name was inscribed inside the front cover, a clue that she may not be the exotic medium she claimed to be. Flipping through the well-worn pages, I found a tarot card. Lines burned across it spelled "META." I snorted at the joke: the existence of the play-text in the world of *The Man From Beyond* indicated that Madame Daphne was an actor pretending to be a medium, when in fact the woman we had interacted with was an actor, Lexie Jackson, pretending to be an actor pretending to be a medium.[11] How meta-theatrical.

Haley described the ways this also could prove challenging to audiences. "We have a lot of layers of reality within" the show, she explained:

> There's the reality of Daphne who is putting on this performance. . . . Daphne playing the character of the medium, putting on a séance. . . . And then we have an actual ghost who shows up dropping Daphne into the real person. And we're asking our guests to note the difference between her show and then the reality of the show. And then of course down here we have the reality-reality, which is that this performer is not actually named Daphne. She's just an actress and this is a show that you're participating at. . . . And this is an escape room. That's a lot.

From attending to puzzles and scenes, audiences must also learn to shift their attentions between narrative and theatrical layers—layers of reality, as Haley puts it. And shifting attention between layers of reality requires affective labor, as I had discovered when Houdini asked me, "Where's Bess?"

Also at stake in the escape room is a question of audience matrixing. Michael Kirby introduces the concept in the context of Happenings staged by artists in the 1960s. "In traditional theatre, the performer always functions within (and creates) a matrix of time, place, and character." In contrast, "a nonmatrixed performer in a Happening does not have to function in an imaginary time and place created primarily in his own mind."[12] Escape rooms invite degrees of matrixing by their audiences, matrixing that may or may not help them make sense of a room's narrative. Solving puzzles, I performed without becoming matrixed to the show as a participating character invested in Houdini's escape. At the other end of the spectrum, Cameron related, "a lot of audience decide that they need to put on a character. . . . We actually just want them to be themselves . . . [b]ut a lot of them very interestingly actually create a character to make the world that we asked them to participate in real, to their character." The invitation to play alongside actors may encourage spectators to reinvent themselves as characters in this new world, self-fashioning that might make the affective work of caring for Houdini easier. But that effort produces tensions in a show that has attended to its audience in other ways.

"We invest so much in onboarding within reality," Haley added. "Stepping foot in our space, everything makes sense, every single step along the way." Strange Bird Immersive is located in a two-story building, in a suite of offices that draw guests in slowly from their lived reality. "I feel like a lot of immersive experiences have a hard threshold, you know, like, here's the world," Haley related. "And then you enter into a

thing, you don't really know who you are, why you're here, what you're expected to do, just go explore, find it out. You know, what is your role in *Sleep No More*? Who are you?" Entering the offices, we found a note on a modern-looking chest of drawers that informed us to be prepared to enter Madame Daphne's Tarot Reading Room and Séance Parlor at our appointed time. Down one hall a locked door was labeled "The Office of the Raven Queen." A directory listed the occupants of the locked offices lining another hallway: "Koko's Guerrilla Art Gallery," "Whiskey & Welding," and similarly playful enterprises.

Haley again: "Our one threshold of suspension of disbelief is that you want to attend a séance. You didn't book a ticket to go to an escape room, you booked a ticket to a séance. . . . And our very first greeting . . . establishes that immediate challenge at the door." At 4:00 p.m. the door to Madame Daphne's Parlor clicked open. Madame Daphne saw me waiting in the hallway, and greeted me: "Good evening. Are you here for the séance?" Haley concluded, "and from there we are already inside the world."

"Another thing I think we've embraced is storytelling through the game elements," Cameron told me. "We decided that all of the puzzles, all of the set pieces would at least in some small way, tell—do either character work or do plot work, or ideally both." Midway through the game, we puzzled over an antique radio. Once we had replaced all its vacuum tubes, it sprang to life. A male voice sang "Rosie, Sweet Rosabel," written in 1893 by Paul Dresser. Over the scratched and fuzzy recording we heard Houdini reminiscing about his lost love—"this was our song!" He waxed nostalgic and then shared the "private code" they had worked out. "Answer. Tell. Pray-answer. Look. Tell. Answer-answer. Tell." The code repeated, and continued repeating as we worked together to decipher it. The moment collapsed together each of the escape room's multiple modes of address: song and speech (in recorded sound), written text, and most importantly, game mechanic. Telling its story across the variety of tools at its disposal, the escape room provides a microcosm of the multimedia landscape we inhabit every day, where multiple modes of address compete for our attention.

The moment had also drawn all our party away from individual puzzling to work together.[13] Csikszentmihalyi argues that processes of socialization and our social systems are both underwritten by an economy of attention: "the survival of social systems depends on the balance in the ledger of attention income and expenditure."[14] Yves Citton, in *The Ecology of Attention*, goes further to consider "attention as an essentially *collective*

phenomenon: 'I' am only attentive to what *we* pay attention to collectively."[15] Citton traces a connective line from the broad scale of collective attention, to the smaller scale of intersubjective joint attention, and finally to the personal scale of individuating attention. "Within the double framework provided by that to which *we* pay attention collectively, in the first place, and then by that which *you* pay attention to jointly with me, it is of critical importance to understand to what extent and above all how—*I* can redirect the attention that gives direction to what I become."[16] Thus the flow state that characterized individual puzzling in *The Man From Beyond* is not independent of the group dynamics that emerged as we puzzled together, and these in turn must inform our approach to the moments of friction that emerged as escape room and immersive theater rubbed against one another.

At the rolltop desk, we passed letters between us, reading correspondence between Houdini, Bess, and others. Together, we developed a picture of the final months of Houdini's life. We also began to see potential clues and pointed each other's attention to what we thought was significant. Each letter was dated, Chris observed. Were the dates important somehow? We scoured the letters for dates. Anne asked, could one of them be the code needed to get at Bess's ring? I charged across to the ring's case and attempted each combination as it was called out to me. The effort came to naught, and Patrick continued our investigations: what about the fonts or locations or who was writing who? We pondered the pages. Rayna, sitting at the desk, noticed that we seemed to have as many letters as we had tarot cards—could they be connected? The desk itself featured five card-sized rectangles marked on its surface. It must be the tarot cards, we decided. With a bit more debate we had them arranged, and another drawer in the cabinet unlocked. We pulled a clock from the drawer, the final piece to complete the mantel image. The game had asked us to redirect one another's attention, and now it pointed our eyes and energies across the room again.

It would not be long before we would have Houdini freed. After we told him of Bess's death, we watched as he explored the room. He recognized an aged Bess in some of the photos, and marveled that Madame Daphne had assembled so much of his stuff. As character, he was matrixed differently to the time and place of the room than we had been as players: these were a lifetime of objects collected together unexpectedly, and with them all manner of affective baggage. Though the Coopers do not ask their audiences to take on characters, Haley told me, "I do want them to invest. I do want them to think that there are real stakes here and that they want to see how the story ends." Houdini described to us his efforts

debunking mediums and spiritualists, despite his sincere belief that communication with the dead might be possible. He gathered together the tarot cards (all Fools) that had been spilled across the table since the start of the evening. "Never mind the claptrap about murder," he told us. "The mediums didn't kill me." He held the deck of cards vertically in front of him, preparing for a card trick. This riveted my attention, as in so many experiences of flow, my mental and physical energy became concentrated. "But it was someone very well known." He waved a finger over the cards. a Fool card appeared to levitate from the deck. "Me." I felt a tingle, a frisson.

Nearly two hours earlier, after Madame Daphne had found us in the hallway, we had filed into her opulently appointed tarot reading room. Bird cages hung from the ceiling around the room, each filled with unexpected assortments of objects—small dioramas or installations related to tarot cards hanging from each. Madame Daphne handed each of us a book inscribed with our name, a personal touch that marked a departure from the usual anonymity of theatrical spectatorship. These were boxes containing a liability release form and a pen. A bookplate on the inside cover of each featured a torn scrap of a tarot card and an invitation to find our fortune by matching them to the cages hanging around the room.

My associates and I jostled among one another in the small space, searching from birdcage to birdcage. A cage holding a lighted lantern sported the card for the Hermit (who carried the lantern on its face). The IX of Wands adorned a cage full of small sticks. My own card, the Tower, led me to a cage with two artist manikins, upside down and limbs akimbo. Turning the card, I read my fortune, "You have overcome disaster." I thought of the not-yet-done pandemic, and the ongoing apocalyptic conditions that characterize our days. (In the mornings as I write this, a whiff of wildfire smoke hangs on the air; calamity seems always near.) I wondered if the Coopers had picked it for me specifically, given how often our conversations over the last two years had turned on the pandemic and its impacts.

"Would anyone care for a tarot reading?" Madame Daphne asked. On this visit I declined, making space for my colleagues to enjoy the experience. Madame Daphne had read my tarot on my first visit, in 2019, and then again in the first months of the pandemic, when *Man From Beyond* had closed and Strange Bird offered tarot readings over zoom to keep the operation running, and then again that fall when I contracted Haley and Cameron to conduct an online workshop with my students in a seminar on theories of spectatorship. My zoom readings in the summer and fall of 2020 epitomized what can be so impactful about one-on-one perfor-

mance. I related the experience to a colleague in an email. "My reading was auspicious, lots of Swords cards. . . . It was really just nice to have 15 minutes of a stranger entering into a care relationship with you—like a haircut or similar sort of service where you can kind of just release a little bit and put yourself in someone's hands."[17] It was a brief moment of intensely personal care in the middle of a season when the world—both the impersonal natural world that gave us the disease and my local community which scoffed at COVID mitigation—seemed to care so little.

To Yves Citton, there is an essential relationship between attention and care:

> The co-construction of subjectivities and intellectual proficiency requires the co-presence of attentive bodies sharing the same space over the course of infinitesimal but decisive cognitive and emotional harmonizations. We find here the foundation of a particular quality of attention rooted in *care*—which is to say, the attentive consideration of the vulnerability of the other, of our solidarity and our responsibility toward them.[18]

Later, he adds, "The essence of *care* is fundamentally rooted in joint attention: be attentive to what preoccupies others."[19] Houdini, in acknowledging that he was ultimately responsible for his own demise, centers the show on a question of care that was present in America's earliest demand for liberty and that has only become more resonant since 2020. Asked how the show had changed since the onset of the pandemic, the creators revealed that they had made few changes to the content of the show, but indeed it did hit differently. "Especially," Cameron offered, when it came to "Houdini's behavior around caring for himself. Sometimes I'll look people in the eye and they'll understand that more than they used to." Haley offered her own reflections: "There's a lot of people who don't advocate for their own health. It's challenging, it's expensive . . . especially in this country. And there's also sometimes a culture—I find it a very masculine culture, actually, that tends to resist going to the doctor; that I think Houdini was maybe a little bit susceptible to as well."

Most theater (immersive or otherwise) asks us to care, to attend, at the very least, to what it has to say and the traffic it drives across a stage. This demand is so fundamental to spectatorial relations that we rarely acknowledge or reflect on it as a prerequisite of our experience of the performing arts. To attend to our attentions is to keep in mind the subtle affective labor we exercise in each moment our sensorium shifts to settle on a new

object, individual, or environment. In this labor rests a capacity to wield spectatorship to train our capacity to care in and for an indifferent world.

Notes

1. Haley E. R. Cooper and J. Cameron Cooper, Zoom interview, College Station and Houston, TX, 9 September 2021. Unless otherwise indicated all direct quotes of Haley E. R. Cooper or J. Cameron Cooper come from this interview.

2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media, 2014), 4. Emphasis added.

3. Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 79.

4. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001 [1961]), 35.

5. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 79–109.

6. Haley E. R. Cooper, personal communication, 5 May 2022.

7. Csikszentmihalyi, 239–40.

8. Csikszentmihalyi, 243.

9. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 83. See also Stephen Di Benedetto, "Guiding Somatic Responses Within Performative Structures: Contemporary Live Art and Sensorial Perception," in *The Senses in Performance*, eds. Sally Banes and André Lepecki (New York: Routledge, 2007), 124–34.

10. Csikszentmihalyi, 240.

11. In addition, our Houdini was played by Andrew Roblyer. On my first visit, the roles had been played by Haley and Cameron, who originated them.

12. Michael Kirby, "Happenings: An Introduction," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7–8.

13. Moments like these are structured into *The Man From Beyond* to facilitate the convergence of gameplay and storytelling. Haley and Cameron call such moments "bottlenecks." On Strange Bird Immersive's blog, *Immersology: Structures & Theories of Immersive Theatre*, Haley highlights that bottlenecks are "moments of undivided player attention." Cooper, "Bookends & Bottlenecks," (blog), posted 20 August 2021, https://strangebirdimmersive.com/immersology/bookends-bottlenecks/

14. Csikszentmihalyi, 14.

15. Citton, 17. Emphasis in original.

16. Citton, 19. Emphasis in original.

17. James R. Ball III, personal communication, 27 July 2020.

18. Citton, 18. Emphasis in original.

19. Citton, 113. Emphasis in original.

NINE Why Be a Bad Guy?

Immersive Performance and Transgression at the Disney Theme Park

JENNIFER A. KOKAI

TOM ROBSON

Since Wagner first began dimming the house lights in the late-nineteenth century, theater has presumed an acquiescent audience. Even when performances began to actively include the audience, they did so assuming that audience members would play their assigned roles. These audience members, even when bashful or reluctant, have generally performed within a reasonable range of expectations, all of which ultimately prove helpful to the performance. This essay, however, focuses on the opposite: the participatory audience performers who seek to disrupt or violate the intended givens. Immersive performances prove particularly vulnerable to this antagonistic engagement, even within the seemingly sugary Disney theme park arena.

In this essay we examine audiences who go out of their way to endanger their own safety—and that of others—in their eagerness to participate in the experience in unsanctioned and unapproved fashions. We want to draw a distinction here between guests (the term Disney uses for ticket holders) simply engaging in criminal activity—attempting to bring in loaded weaponry, engaging in spontaneous violent fistfights—with guests who are clearly still participating within the imaginative frameworks of Disney parks by casting themselves in antagonistic roles. While a simple explanation of such behaviors is selfishness, we believe that the

long history of such transgression indicates that some guests' motivations are more complex, and they have changed over time with the introduction of social media and influencers. If scholars often imagine immersive theater to be the temporary construction of a utopic liberatory space,[1] we take it seriously when guests refuse the invitation to create utopia and ask both what elements of immersive theater might promote this choice, and what participants derive from choosing and constructing a villain role in the story for themselves.

In our book *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, we established the link between Disney parks and immersive theater. Josephine Machon defines immersive theater as experiences "that combine the act of immersion—being submerged in an alternative medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated—with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium."[2] As we have argued elsewhere, the Disney theme park experience mirrors Machon's definition. Within the park environment, Disney's Imagineers utilize forced perspective, artificial scents, and even changing ground textures to create a fully immersive experience for guests, enabling them to pretend that they are truly in a completely fictional land—if they so choose. Further, as we have previously argued, Disney's guests play a highly active role in constructing the fiction of these worlds. Machon stresses that immersive theater "blur[s] spaces and roles,"[3] which is exactly what happens within the Disney theme park environment when the tourist—conditioned by the theming surrounding them—chooses to improvise a conversation with a costumed character performer in Fantasyland or pretends to be a Jedi knight while walking through *Star Wars*: Galaxy's Edge. They become the "tourist as actor," and acting inherently includes the liberty to choose how, when, and why to participate in a performance.

Central to the concept of the tourist as actor is the idea of casting. After all, if the tourist is now a performer, they are playing a role of some sort, and someone has presumably cast them in that part. Many attractions (rides) at Disney assign specific roles to tourists. In *Star Wars*: Rise of the Resistance, guests become members of the Resistance, fighting against the fascistic First Order. Mission: SPACE transforms visitors into astronauts with missions to complete in orbit above the earth. Even stage shows such as *The Festival of the Lion King* historically cast audience members as animals, assigning them the role of lion, elephant, giraffe, or warthog and encouraging appropriate noises at relevant portions of the performance. The park itself, as we have previously argued, also casts guests into roles, conditioning them through presented circumstances

to accept their assigned part. Robson has previously argued that the Magic Kingdom's Main Street, U.S.A.—the entry area for Walt Disney World's first and most popular park—functions as a transitional space for guests to transform from tourist into Tourist, accepting their part. Yet despite Disney's efforts and intentions, not all guests accept assigned roles. Contrary to much writing on Disney, tourists do not unconditionally embrace the assignment. Umberto Eco asserted that Disney guests "must agree to behave like its robots," a claim that we strongly refute.[4] The embrace of antagonistic theme park participation mirrors the Disney fan's endorsement of villainy, as Christen Mandracchia has discussed.[5] Mandracchia establishes the long history of Disney Parks fans identifying with villains, and with that knowledge we can see the transgressive tourists that populate the parks as another extension of the delight that comes from being "bad." Since the opening of Disneyland in 1955, some guests have always rebelled against the park's strictures, and often those guests choose to create alternative roles for themselves that read against the scripted text presented for them by park designers.

Disney and the Id

While immersive theater is frequently connected to the audience participatory theater of the '60s, it is less frequently put into conversation with avant-garde movements such as expressionism or surrealism (or perhaps, given the poop we will discuss later, works like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*).[6] Highlighting these genealogies, however, might illuminate the audience's historical impulse toward destruction. Long before Disney, Salvador Dali was constructing a "surrealist walkthrough" at the 1939 World's Fair, *The Dream of Venus*, that functioned much like a disturbing dark ride. As Kokai has described,[7] the planners for the 1939–40 New York World's Fair were hoping to bring cultural prestige to the Midway by inviting Dali to construct a surrealist funhouse. Drawing on surrealism's concerns with inner psychology, with showing disturbing, grotesque, and sexualized images to reveal the inner workings of the (male) psyche,[8] the attraction used distortion, topless women performers in rubber mermaid tails, a taxi inside which it perpetually rained, and other constructions to attempt to liberate spectators from the polite repression of society and allow them to transcend to a fuller understanding of themselves as individuals. Surrealism is at its core a selfish endeavor, concerned with the internal states of individuals, the suppressed id and ego. Immersing a

spectator in a "surrealist funhouse," Dali thought, might be even more effective at freeing them from their daily prison. The fact that this attraction was on the midway in the entertainment area of the Fair is significant.

Disney might be the last thing that comes to mind when you contemplate avant-garde art, but the core impulse to construct an environment—using expressionist and surrealist design elements—to generate emotional response in the audience is the same. In her book on Disney architecture, Beth Dunlop writes that Splash Mountain "provides critical insight into the essence of Disney's architecture, to the way it speaks directly to the subconscious mind, the collection of images and sensations that constitutes part of memory. For whether it's Arata Isozaki's highly cerebral Team Disney building in Orlando . . . or Baxter's corny Splash Mountain, Disney's architecture works on emotions first and intellect later."[9] Rather than simply being architecture, the design at Disney is full of angles, disorienting perspectives, illusions, strong lighting, and even further, smells and tastes, which try to generate emotions in the audience. If they work, they privilege internal reactions—guests have the experience of feeling what the designers hoped they would feel. Even if it is not precisely the correct feeling, Disney succeeds when guests feel anything at all about their environment.

Unlike the goals of the surrealists, however, Disney theme parks are constructed not to unleash all the inner truths as in *The Dream of Venus*, but to attempt to selectively promote positive emotions only. Cultural historian Justin Muchnik also found a fruitful comparison between *Dream of Venus* and Disney parks, arguing that "in imposing order on its dreamscape and juxtaposition, Disneyland is simply an Apollonian artifice that, however persuasive, hides Dionysian undertones that threaten to flare up at any moment."[10] While we depart from his argument contrasting the two by neatly overlaying Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian framework, we likewise see a difference in what Dali's funhouse and Disney are attempting to do. They are spaces for families and children, and guests are expected to suppress their negative baser instincts, or ids, and to not just follow but go beyond the rules of contemporary polite society.[11] What is meant to be unleashed is unbridled joy and enthusiasm, a willingness to engage in play, which is culturally considered inappropriate for American adults in most spaces. And yet, Adam Alston quotes Keren Zaointz arguing that immersive theater promotes "introspection," or, less charitably, we could say selfishness, "this sense of entitlement as a 'presumptive intimacy' that 'fosters an explicit lack of generosity that ensures that the spectator maintains her place at the centre of her own singular journey.'"[12]

These two design impulses can ultimately perhaps be seen in conflict—an overall park experience that depends on subsuming aspects of the ego into a peaceful crowd *and yet* distinct attractions that purposely generate a highly individualized experience that is entirely about connecting to the emotional id. Some guests, then, might be pushing back against these perceived controlling elements that conflict with what they see Disney truly encouraging for the real fans—the individual, liberatory experience of unleashing inner emotions and desires of all stripes—including negative ones society asks us to contain or modulate—through the use of surrealist and expressionist design practices in individual attractions. In the next sections, we examine guests who choose to liberate themselves from social constraints antagonistically to pursue what makes them happy, and why they see Disney parks as the ideal stage on which to do this.

Disney and Masculinity

While Zaointz uses an egalitarian "she" as the pronoun in her analysis "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance,"[13] park examples and the guidebooks demonstrate that guests who pursue their presumptive intimacy in destructively transgressive ways are more likely to be men. The guidebook *Drinking at Disney* features repeated instances of the female Rhiannon attempting to convince the male Drunky to regulate his obnoxious and self-destructive behavior. Leonard Kinsey, in his *Dark Side of Disney*, is the most graphic, stating "There are only so many times you can ride Space Mountain before it starts getting boring, but riding it on 'shrooms while getting a handjob is a totally different experience!"[14] Even in relatively staid guidebooks such as *The Unofficial Guidebook to Walt Disney World for Grown-Ups*, the author feels compelled to add this bit of advice: "And as you leave, look up at the Pleasure Island sign and consider Jessica Rabbit's quite pneumatic torso and her equally expansive hips."[15] These authors' insistence on hyperperforming male sexuality indicates that the park might be understood as feminizing guests, performing the heavily gendered work that the Cult of True Womanhood pushed out in the nineteenth century, when it was women's jobs (the women in this case being represented by the pastel Marceline buildings of Main Street or the poor Rhiannon mentioned above) to civilize the less thoughtful, less religious, and less chaste man.[16]

Two such Disney antagonists were the somewhat notorious (in Disney fan circles) "Hoot" and "Chief." Rejecting the roles Disney officially sanc-

tioned, they invested enormous amounts of time and energy to performing the masculinized roles of adventurers and experts. In the waning years of the Epcot attraction Horizons (1983–1999), these two patrons discovered that it was now possible to jump out of their ride vehicles and crawl around inside and underneath the scenery of the attraction. Horizons, sponsored by General Electric, was considered by some to be a sequel to the Carousel of Progress. A long dark ride took visitors through scenes of conceptual technologies that would shape the future and then offered visitors the option of seeing a fictional space, desert, or sea colony. As with many Epcot attractions, after GE pulled out, the ride was left to slowly disintegrate, attracting fewer and fewer visitors before eventually being torn down and replaced.

It was during these years of neglect that Hoot and Chief began their documented explorations, which they began sharing on the internet in 2009 in a blog titled the *Mesa Verde Times*. The two were obsessive Epcot and Horizons fans, using cumbersome video recorders and film-based cameras to capture a clearly dying attraction. They claimed to spend up to eight hours at a time in the bowels of the ride. Their blog posts consistently demonstrate a longing for a time when they saw Epcot as more centered on education than entertainment, while at the same time regaling readers with claims of riding the attraction naked and nearly being caught by employees.[17] Though their conduct was illegal and highly dangerous, they viewed it as important documentation of a site they loved, but their decision to share their illegal activities online extends their goal to publicly performing for others.

Leonard Kinsey adopts a similar approach to Disney parks with his blog and book, *The Dark Side of Disney*. Like Hoot and Chief, whom Kinsey socialized with,[18] he revels in exploring parts of the parks that are off limits to guests, and in breaking into areas behind rides. Unlike the *Mesa Verde Times* blog, Kinsey also uses social media to demonstrate how to cheat Disney World, for example by getting free parking or by telling about off-limits entrances to resort water parks. Kinsey's videos also highlight excessive drinking, and he delights in mixing sexually suggestive photographs with Disney imagery; the cover of his book features a topless, tattooed young woman in extremely short, unbuttoned jean shorts, arms crossed across her chest, one hand holding a bottle of whiskey, the other a lit cigarette, and with an off-brand set of Mouse ears atop her head. Although Kinsey's interactions with the parks are purposeful desecrations of the pristine Disney image, Kinsey also considers himself an avid and devoted fan of the park.

Hoot, Chief, and Kinsey and his followers curiously all cast themselves in antagonistic roles. They attempt to construct an ambivalent middle where they both demonstrate fanatical devotion to Disney parks and position themselves in opposition to "normal" tourists, who are looked down on as naïve, exploited, and boring. As Kinsey writes, "by age 16 or so I was bored as hell with WDW, having already visited the (at that time) three parks over 100 times. So I started experimenting with 'alternative activities' every time I got dragged back there."[19] They utilize the same iconographical images, purchase the same goods, experience the same attractions, and occupy many of the same spaces as all other Disney tourists, but they attempt to differentiate themselves through clothing, behavior, tattoos, and other devices that signal they are different.

Despite the fact that they are clearly breaking the rules, both legally and for the stories they are immersing themselves in, their greatest fear, expressed over and over on the blogs, is being caught and losing access to Disney parks. For example, infamous YouTube personality Adam the Woo, who was given a lifetime ban from all Disney parks for breaking into the abandoned Disney's River Country park, released a video choked up and in tears as he announces that his ban has been lifted.[20] While there are many sites for urban adventurers or for enacting toxic masculinity, it is extremely clear that the particular role they want to construct can only be done against the backdrop of the Disney parks specifically. Because Disney is such a looming cultural presence, proving that you have "mastered" Disney and can pursue whatever desire you choose would be a significant achievement indeed.

Disney and Drunks

While Kinsey, Adam the Woo, Hoot, and Chief were comfortable breaking laws in the parks, other guests seek the same liberation from social norms with chemical help. While most who think of a Disney theme park probably picture images of smiling children, flying Dumbo rides, and Mickey Mouse–shaped ice cream bars, those who have spent significant time in the parks recognize how much the ubiquitous presence of alcohol and its concomitant binge consumption shapes the experience. The presence and consumption of alcohol reaches literally staggering levels in Walt Disney World's Epcot, where the nearly year-round special festivals[21] and the celebration of food and beverages in the World Showcase area of the

park has created an at times hedonistic atmosphere, one that is at odds with the park's assumed family environment.

During these annual festivals, numerous kiosks are added to the World Showcase area, each themed to a different cuisine, serving "taster" sizes of food, and each with several beverage options. The menus reflect the reliance on alcohol for these themed experiences. At the 2021 Epcot International Food & Wine Festival, of the thirty-two kiosks in the park, sixteen featured more alcohol options than food, while only nine presented more food choices than alcohol. Not a single booth was alcohol-free. Guests queue in winding lines, step up to a register, and place an order with a cheerful young cast member. Standing outside in the hot Florida sun, guests naturally want a chance to cool down, and faced with the choice between a $4.00 bottle of Dasani water or a $5.00 taster of beer, the value proposition leans toward alcohol. The higher profit margins on alcohol than food certainly explain Disney's emphasis, and especially on weekends and weekday evenings, World Showcase is flooded with guests enjoying the kiosks. The sidewalks become increasingly difficult to traverse, with large groups of inebriated tourists and locals walking four abreast, weaving, and regularly stopping for selfies. During these periods, Epcot transforms from a child- and family-oriented space to one centered on young adults seemingly dedicated to fostering the world's most expensive hangover.

Though the current emphasis on festivals has led to increased consumption, alcohol use and abuse has been part of Epcot's identity for decades. A 1987 travel guide to Walt Disney World makes a point of establishing the availability of alcohol at what was then called the EPCOT Center, devoting an entire paragraph to locations where booze can be found, specifically citing the Rose and Crown pub in the Great Britain portion of World Showcase,[22] which the guide's authors state was very popular, at least partially due to "the availability of beer."[23] A 2005 travel guide also emphasizes the relationship between World Showcase and alcohol when describing many of the pavilions. The first sentences of description for both the Canada and United Kingdom areas mention alcohol. Alcohol appears in the fourth sentence of the France description, the third and fourth sentences about Germany, and at the end of the section on Mexico.[24] The two examples in this paragraph are far from the only guidebooks that spotlight drinking in the park, and we have deliberately chosen guidebooks from periods well before our own to show that this is a long tradition.

Still, the most infamous alcohol-based activity within the park is "Drinking Around the World," described as "the non-Disney-sanctioned practice of treating Epcot's World Showcase as one giant bar crawl, consuming one alcoholic beverage in each of the 11 pavilions."[25] This "open secret"[26] among Epcot visitors began as guests performing an alternative use of the park space, rebelling against the idealistic, family-friendly atmosphere. The tongue-in-cheek guidebook *Ears of Steel*, aimed at an explicitly male (and hypermasculine at that) audience, frames activities such as Drinking Around the World as "not only a sport but a true test of physical prowess. It's certainly a test of your constitution."[27]

Alcohol creates exactly the repression of inhibitions and suppression of ego that the surrealists sought to engender through their art, and can also help overcome potential resistance to generating emotional experiences. The excessive consumption at the parks, though, has well-documented negative impacts on other guests. Alston contrasts "narcissistic participation" in immersive theater with "entrepreneurial participation." In narcissistic participation, Alston argues, "affect is experienced as an art object."[28] This might explain the impulse of Disney guests to document and share themselves and their experiences on social media in general, particularly in the many Drinking Around the World videos, which are abundant on YouTube. Documenting their own personal emotions and experiences and then sharing them is the final step in the construction of the "art object"; it is capturing and sharing their own specific emotional displays that these guests find at the heart of the Disney immersive experience. It is not that the emotions are solely performance; they may be genuinely felt, but in a neoliberal capitalist environment, the art and value in the experience lie in the spectator performing them for others as well.

In the case of the Drinking Around the World videos, the "art object" derives value from its real or perceived opposition to presumed park standards. Disney blogger Shaun Thompson affirms this notion of conflict in his instructions for Drinking Around the World, describing it as "One of the most popular things to do at Epcot's World Showcase, you know aside from all that pesky learning and culture."[29] Thompson here inadvertently establishes binge drinking as a clear alternative to Epcot's intended purpose. In Thompson's view, the theme park's conception as a celebration of education and global understanding becomes "pesky," while Drinking Around the World is a "popular" activity to celebrate. From the beginning, this anticipates the construction of stories one can brag about to friends. Thompson metaphorically urges the tourist to take a seat with the "cool" kids at the back of the cafeteria.

Doing It for the 'Grams

The relative safety and anonymity that come from being inside the theme park environment allow many of these guests to transgress without significant fear of consequences, allowing them the space to participate in liberation from society's expectations and norms, away from their adult lives. As just one example of this—one you may have a hard time forgetting—consider the anecdote shared by Ken Pellman and Lynn Barron in their book *Cleaning the Kingdom: Insider Tales of Keeping Walt's Dream Spotless*. The authors, both former members of the custodial crew at Disneyland, fill their book with some of the more unpleasant tasks these cast members[30] had to perform. Amid stories of fishing garbage out of flowerbeds and dealing with angry tourists, they mention that "guests sometimes love to be their own Picasso with their own feces all over the stall walls."[31] Lest anyone consider the possibility that this statement was hyberbolic, just a heightened way of describing guests having unfortunate accidents in the park restrooms, Barron confirmed the deliberateness of the "artwork" in an email: "I found a stall with names and things written with poop on the stall walls. It was the worst thing I ever seen [*sic*] and wondered how they even did it, if it wasn't with their finger."[32]

Barron's "Picasso of Poop" reflects the "disruptive" potential of empowered individuals in architecture, as laid out by Andrew Filmer. Filmer writes, "Through action users occupy and appropriate architecture; they inscribe it with their own narratives of use; [and] misuse it in ways that cannot be anticipated."[33] Building on work by architectural theorist Jonathan Hill, Filmer theorizes that users of architectural spaces see themselves not just as visitors, but as owners. Whether through the high prices paid for admission to the park or through the emotional ties to the space itself built through frequent repeat visits (especially common for Disneyland, compared with Walt Disney World), Disney guests often exhibit this spirit of ownership. But even if you write a first name in poop, you can evade responsibility for the crime if you wash your hands. The rise of social media has led to a seemingly curious trend of guests recording and sharing their own bad behavior, with the goal of extending this performance of ownership, making potential consequences actually more likely.

In contrast to the often-private off-script behavior exhibited by park guests in previous decades, poop and all, much of the current antagonistic tourism on Disney property aims at public performance. YouTube, Instagram, and other social media sites have thousands of posts related to Drinking Around the World, with some videos having hundreds of

thousands of views, and many others having a few hundred. Popular Disney YouTubers such as Kyle Pallo have found ways to monetize their transgression, cultivating minor internet celebrity status and generating sponsorship revenue through ads placed in his videos.[34] Crystal Abidin has written extensively about the rise of internet celebrity and the various components that go into creating it.[35] Abidin describes these internet celebrities as "often the leaders of trends within subcultures, and perhaps even the highest earners through brand collaborations and ad sales."[36] Michael Goldhaber writes that "obtaining attention is obtaining a kind of enduring wealth, a form of wealth that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers"; thus, the performances of transgressive tourists often aim at acquiring as much attention as possible, with the goal of reaching the increasingly prominent occupation/status of social media influencer.[37] While Hoot and Chief had a blog, they were anonymous and their faces were never included. They could brag about their exploits afterward, but have a personal experience in the moment.

Those posting on social media, for a large influencer audience or a modest personal audience, are putting new constraints on themselves. While we assert that transgressive tourism has existed in Disney parks for decades, the shift to Goldhaber's attention economy has seemingly increased awareness of it and changed the tenor of it. Tourists now document their activities for immediate consumption by those outside their immediate party, fundamentally changing how they engage with the themed environment. Tourists craft intentional narratives about themselves and their experiences to appeal to these personal audiences, designed to elicit emotional reactions (often including envy). As Holly S. Howe, Jordan Etkin, and Alixandra Barasch write, "people who post about an experience online are no longer considering only their personal interests."[38] Further,

> This shift in focus drives consumers to seek different experiences than ones they would ordinarily prefer. Specifically, when consumers anticipate posting about their leisure consumption to a broad audience online, they should be more likely to choose well-known or popular options over more enjoyable, idiosyncratic ones.[39]

The growing presence of alcohol and variations on alcotourism in popular culture create a feedback loop with guests transgressing in the parks. Previous posts about violating boundaries generate news stories about it, leading others to want to emulate the behavior, leading to additional sto-

ries. Guests feel emboldened to perform their antagonism more openly, as they see scores of others doing the same.

But this keen awareness of performing antagonistically for an external audience also potentially impairs the immersivity of Disney and the pursuit of transcendent emotional experiences, either gleeful or destructive. In Josephine Machon's "scale of immersivity," she argues that "It is the process of becoming aware of one's sensual responses that makes an individual aware of *being in the moment* and highlights her or his *presence* within the sensuality of the immersive events."[40] Ultimately focusing on the social media audience does the opposite—it minimizes a focus on being in the moment and encourages using the space as a flattened backdrop for images instantly recorded and transmitted for others, with the anticipation of near-immediate feedback in clicks and likes. This extends to transgressive behaviors, which become less about the internal experience of these actions and roles, less about the adventure, and thus ultimately less immersive overall. Choosing to focus on framing Disney parks within the small window of a camera precludes liberatory experiences of the true inner self through an engrossing experience of distortion, sensory manipulation, and the juxtaposition of unusual elements. So, while choosing an antagonistic role might always have been a reasonable and expected part of immersive theater, the contemporary impulse to do so might negatively impact the immersive experience not just for other guests, but for the antagonist themselves. That is to say, they might have made themselves their own bad guys.

Notes

1. See Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, "Performance and Participation," in *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Matthew Reason, "Participation on Participation: Researching the Active Theatre Audience," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12, no. 1 (May 2015) as examples of how audience participation is often depicted in theater performance.

2. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21–22.

3. Machon, 27.

4. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 48.

5. Christen Mandracchia, "It's Good to Be Bad: Resistance, Rebellion, and Disney Villain Merchandise," *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience:*

The Tourist as Actor, eds. Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 229–46.

6. Adam Alston connects the theater of Punchdrunk to the futurist manifestos. The writings of Felix Barrett, the artistic director of Punchdrunk, "[echo] the political manifestos of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who led the avant-garde Italian Futurist movement in the early twentieth century. . . . Punchdrunk share with the Futurists both a similar distaste for an audience's presumed listlessness, and an aesthetic concern with a viscerally engaging theatre" (110). While we obviously agree that there is more overlap with immersive theater and the -isms of early-20th-century European art than have been explored, we disagree that most immersive theater performances align most closely with futurism in either style or historical performance constructions. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

7. Jennifer A. Kokai, *Swim Pretty: Aquatic Spectacles and the Performance of Race, Gender, and Nature*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017).

8. While there are and were women surrealist artists, works such as *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research 1928–1932* make it clear that originally and primarily, surrealism was focused on the experiences and perspectives of male artists using women's bodies. Pierre Jose, *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions* (New York: Verso Books, 2012).

9. Beth Dunlop, *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 50.

10. Muchnick, Justin. 2017. "Dalí, Disney, and the Dionysian: What's Wrong with the Happiest Place on Earth?" *Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 44: 355–64, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/dalí-disney-dionysian-what-s-wrong-with-happiest/docview/1976405035/se-2. Accessed 30 October 2023.

11. For example, for guests attending the parks, the Disney website includes extensive "Property Rules," including a section on "Guest Courtesy." "Inappropriate" attire or visible tattoos, "such as those containing objectionable language or designs," and the use of profanity are specifically listed as outside accepted behavior for the parks ("Walt Disney World Property Rules," *Walt Disney World*, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/park-rules/#guest-courtesy-and-attire-policies. Accessed 22 June 2022.

12. Alston, 8.

13. Zaiontz, Keren. "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance." *Theatre Journal* 66 (2014): 405–25.

14. Kinsey, 3.

15. Eve Zibart, *The Unofficial Guidebook to Walt Disney World for Grown-Ups* (New York: Hungry Minds, 2001), 112.

16. The Cult of True Womanhood was originally defined by Barbara Welter in her formative essay on Victorian mores. Welter argues that "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (152). Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74.

Main Street is set circa 1910, but the "small town" ideals of the Victorian era including these gendered notions are clearly the guiding light.

17. For example, the dramatically titled "Death of Epcot Center" post from 23 May 2010, which states, "I have always wondered at what time WDI 'jumped the shark' and ruined what was the mighty EPCOT Center. Here is written proof, published by Disney, that by the late 80's they were done trying to expand peoples [*sic*] minds and make them think. The paragraph speaks for itself. Unreal." ("Since the World Began: Walt Disney World"). The paragraph in question cites the shift with "The Wonders of Life" pavilion (now defunct) to a more entertainment-based attraction.

18. See, for example, "The Dark Side of Disney" YouTube channel, "Chief's Backpack of Horizons Awesomeness," YouTube, https://youtu.be/bd7X1Up8ltM, accessed 14 June 2022; and "The Dark Side of Disney" YouTube channel, "Hoot's Journey Into Inebriation @ The Dark Side of Disney Party 11/11/11," YouTube, https://youtu.be/50Gbvh6m2yk. Accessed 14 June 2022.

19. Leonard Kinsey, *The Dark Side of Disney* (Baltimore: Bamboo Forest Publishing, 2011), 1.

20. adamthewoo YouTube channel, "Un Banned from Walt Disney World—Return to Magic Kingdom," YouTube, https://youtu.be/YiszjjqdotU, accessed 14 June 2022. For more on Adam's River Country excursion, see Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, "'You're in the Parade!' Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor," *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, eds. Kokai and Robson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3–20.

21. Between the Epcot International Festival of the Arts (January and February), the Epcot International Flower & Garden Festival (March through July), the Epcot International Food & Wine Festival (July through November), and the Epcot International Festival of the Holidays, only thirty-six calendar days between November 2021 and November 2022 were devoid of festivals ("Epcot Festival Calendar and Tips [2022–2023]," *Mouse Hacking*, https://www.mousehacking.com/blog/epcot-festival-calendar-and-tips. Accessed 22 June 2022.)

22. At Epcot's inception designers split the park into two components, Future World and World Showcase. Future World, in conjunction with Disney's corporate partners and attraction sponsors, celebrated science and technology, while World Showcase saw guests walking through pavilions themed to roughly a dozen international countries, eating, drinking, and shopping.

23. Bob Sehlinger and John Finley, *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World & EPCOT*, rev. ed. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), 45.

24. Jill Safro, ed., *Birnbaum's Walt Disney World without Kids 2005* (Wendy Lefkon, editorial director), Disney Enterprises, 2004, 109–17.

25. Rhiannon and Drunky, *Drinking at Disney: A Tipsy Traveler's Guide to Walt Disney World's Bars, Lounges & Glow Cubes* (Baltimore, MD: Bamboo Forest Publishing, 2016), 292.

26. Jason Cochran, "How to Drink Around the World at Disney's Epcot," *Frommer's*, n.d., https://www.frommers.com/slideshows/848005-how-to-drink-around-the-world-at-disney-s-epcot. Accessed 16 June 2021.

27. Bart Scott. *Ears of Steel: The Real Man's Guide to Walt Disney World*. Branford, CT: Intrepid Press, 2014.

28. Alston, 218.

29. Shaun Thompson, "A Guide to Drinking Around Epcot's World Showcase at Walt Disney World," *The Dis*, n.d., https://www.wdwinfo.com/a-guide-to-drinking-around-epcots-world-showcase-at-walt-disney-world.htm. Accessed 16 June 2021.

30. The Disney Company refers to all employees as "cast members," especially within the parks.

31. Ken Pellman and Lynn Barron, *Cleaning the Kingdom: Insider Tales of Keeping Walt's Dream Spotless* (St. George, UT: Synergy Books Publishing, 2015), 120.

32. Email from Lynn Barron to Tom Robson, 21 February 2022. Quoted with permission.

33. Andrew Filmer, "Occupying the Scene: Architectural Experience in Theatre and Performance," *Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies*, eds. Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford (London: Methuen Drama, 2018), 111.

34. Kyle Pallo YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/c/Elextrixs1. Accessed 1 April 2022.

35. Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2018); Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020), 77–103.

36. Abidin 2020, 79.

37. Michael H. Goldhaber, "The Attention Economy and the Net," *First Monday* 2, no. 4. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519

38. Holly S. Howe, Jordan Etkin, and Alixandra Barasch (2019), "Doing It for the 'Gram': Sacrificing Enjoyment When Posting Online," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 47, eds. Rajesh Bagchi, Lauren Block, and Leonard Lee (Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research), 342–46. 344.

39. Howe et al., 344.

40. Machon, 83.

TEN *Remembrance* Revisited

Insider/Outsider Perspectives on Immersivity

CINDY ROSENTHAL

> Artists who harness more than our eyes and ears encourage us to wake up, to be alert to the world around us, and to interact actively with the objects and creatures around us. It is an invitation to live, to feel, and to be part of a larger community.
>
> —Stephen Di Benedetto
>
> "Guiding Somatic Responses Within Performative Structures"[1]

In late summer and fall of 2019, I was one of three performers who (simultaneously) took on the role of Margaret, a woman with early-onset Alzheimer's celebrating her sixty-fifth birthday, in a devised, immersive work, *Remembrance*, which Linked Dance Theatre presented site-specifically—in "Margaret's house." The company was granted a residency on Governor's Island in New York, where they transformed a decades-old military family's housing unit into a multilevel performance space where select rooms in the house signified key memory-spaces for Margaret.

I had just celebrated my own sixty-fifth birthday; the two other women playing Margaret and devising the work with me (along with the company's two thirty-something artistic directors) were less than half my age. One of the other Margarets is a former student who recommended me for the role. I had never performed in immersive theater before; my performance background is Stanislavski-based. Furthermore, I have had no close experience with individuals with Alzheimer's, nor did I know much about this illness until we began working on the play. Both of the artistic directors had a family member with Alzheimer's.[2]

The run sold out; *Remembrance* won the 2019 Best Site-Specific Immersive Award (ImmersionNation) and was on NoPro's Best Shows and Experiences List for 2019.

This essay shifts between an insider and an outsider perspective in its analysis of two related but different immersive performances produced by Linked Dance Theatre. I am grateful to Elizabeth Hunter and Scott Magelssen for suggesting I use scholar Josephine Machon's "scale of immersivity" as a guide as I describe and analyze, compare and contrast *Remembrance* (an in-person immersive production) and *Elle S'envoie* (a Zoom-immersive production). What was the context for each of these works? What were the rules, the rhythms, the choreographies deployed? What was the impact—and the challenges—of the very different spaces and places of these performances? Questions regarding accessibility in immersive performance became key when I faced the immediate need for accommodations for friends and family with mobility issues who wanted to participate as "collaborative comrades" in *Remembrance*. How was the contract for participation different in each of these works—and how was the impact in terms of empathy and engagement in the lives of the characters and the story different? What is the power and efficacy of immersive performance—live vs. digital? And how did time function in each of these works?

Deploying the charged notion of Liberty in my analysis (the framing principle of this section of the anthology, one of the three foundational tenets of the Declaration of Independence) is useful for my project. I argue here that despite the existence of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), spectators/collaborative comrades with mobility limitations have less freedom of choice and a diminished sense of Liberty at *Remembrance* (and at some other onsite/environmental immersive theater events) than those who are more mobile. If the goal of immersive theater is to open doors to a liberatory experience for all the collaborative comrades attending a performance, what happens to the hoped-for outcome of *communitas* (an empathic, sometimes spiritual solidarity or belongingness with other participants)[3] if some members of the community have less accessibility and agency? In the conception of this and other immersive theater pieces, assumptions about community have been made that illuminate an ethical issue at stake in immersive theater—a clear bias toward nondisabled participants over disabled. I am indebted to Petra Kuppers's work on disability and performance, which points out that the "real" of disability is a very broad spectrum—and not just the "liberal ideal of equality for all." She declares we need

> a call for social justice rather than rights . . . and the desire to craft a world in which all aim to be aware at all times of the histories, practices, and imaginations that have shaped it, and all participate and collaborate in addressing exclusion.[4]

My goal moving forward as a deviser/cocreator of immersive theater work is to answer this call as best I can—via heightening my awareness and expanding my imagination in the collaboration process and making creative production choices that expressively address and eliminate exclusion.

Time and repetition were ongoing tropes in Linked Dance Theatre's *Remembrance*. Losing a sense of time is a marker of Alzheimer's, as is repetition of phrases, gestures, and stories that gradually deconstruct/disintegrate. Margaret moved through "her house" accompanied by "party guests/friends" who were "invited" to celebrate her sixty-fifth birthday. Moving from room to room, the "friends" opted in and out of memory-scenes about Margaret's childhood, marriage, gay son, and the intensifying anguish caused by her illness. We three Margarets were able bodied and, other than me, all of the performers (another performer plays Margaret's son and another her caregiver) have modern dance and/or ballet training. Remembering in *Remembrance* was often expressed through devised and/or choreographed movement sequences, which built on the dialogue in scenes or monologues that occur in the memory spaces/rooms of Margaret's house. In *Remembrance*, dance represents forgetting, the process of forgetting, the corruption of memory. Each room was carefully curated by Linked Dance Theatre's artistic directors, Jordan Chlapecka and Kendra Slack, and functioned evocatively and provocatively as intricate Margaret-memory installation spaces, whether Margaret moved through the space or not. This precise recalibration of Margaret's life in situ, the wife of a Vietnam War veteran, highlighted the powerful site-specificity of the one-time military family housing on Governor's Island. Pete Higgin's and Josephine Machon's understanding of the immersive performance spaces in which they built their own work provides a useful description of Margaret's world:

> . . . [Y]ou get the sense that the space tells a story as well. The sense that the room can hold your attention; even if there was no performer in there you would still be in a performance, within a world, within a storytelling environment.[5]

Even as Margaret becomes more fearful and frail as time moves on in her story, each of the Margarets moves quickly up and down stairs to coordinate with the carefully constructed soundscapes and choreographed room shifts. But the whole performance was not open to all. Hence, if the spaces are not fully accessible—allowing each collaborative comrade to experience a free flow of participation, intimacy, and connection (and potentially, empathy with the characters in the story)—what's an immersive deviser to do? In *Remembrance* and some other immersive performances, only those who can manage stairs and move quickly and into tight spaces have the full experience and a sense of *communitas* with the rest of the community. When I experienced Punchdrunk's renowned *Sleep No More* in New York City a decade ago, I was concerned for a friend who accompanied me and had minor mobility issues. (I recently contacted the New York production office asking about accommodations and accessibility, and a helpful house manager told me that an elevator is available for wheelchair users, or individuals with mobility issues. When I attended *Sleep No More*, I was advised to select a single performer and follow them closely, which I attempted to do. But, since performers often darted and dashed quickly downstairs, this might lead to frustration or a less-than-satisfying, less-democratic experience for an individual with mobility issues, whose movement choices are delineated by the location and speed of an elevator.) The issue of accessibility troubled me as we devised *Remembrance* and staged it in "Margaret's" old house. I believe now I could and should have voiced these concerns more loudly than I did.

For me, the issue was pressing. Gareth White, in his important volume interrogating audience participation in the theater, examines the risk and actual danger to spectators who engage in theater experiences that invite their active participation. Much of White's discussion focuses on the risk of embarrassment that spectator-participants may experience when they leap into immersive (or other) performances. In my view, however, the danger facing some participant-spectators at *Remembrance* was worrying in a different way, and hence, made me see my position as a "procedural author" with fresh eyes and as unexpectedly challenging. (White describes the "role" of procedural author as that of the practitioner who helps write, shape, and guide the performance event for the spectator-participants.)[6] I realized that this was the first time in my life as a performer/deviser that I had to confront and take responsibility for navigating and potentially mitigating the difficulties spectators with disabilities face every day. I knew very well that several audience members (friends and family) who had purchased advance tickets had minor to

major mobility issues. One of these participant/spectators-to-be was my mother, age ninety-one at the time, who is an avid and experienced theatergoer, but cannot manage more than three or four stairs, and with difficulty. There were three staircases in Margaret's house—one made of brick at the entrance (five stairs) and two wooden staircases inside, each with eighteen stairs. Another friend, who has subscriptions to numerous off-Broadway theaters' seasons in NYC, was eager to attend, but because of her health issues, realized (after a conversation with me) that what was required of a spectator-participant for *Remembrance* would be too taxing and opted out.

In addition to negotiating stairs and tight spaces in Margaret's house, another challenge for some individuals seeing *Remembrance* was traveling to the house itself. Governor's Island is a seven-minute ferry ride from downtown Manhattan or Brooklyn. Before boarding the ferry one must wait in lines with no seating nearby, and once the ferry docks on the island there is a twelve-minute, somewhat hilly walk to the house. There is no form of mass transportation on the island, as there are currently no full-time residents—no buses, cars, or taxis—although three golf carts are sometimes available if requested in advance, driven by maintenance workers or security staff.

Another friend journeyed from Vermont with her husband because they were both committed to witnessing a creative response to the life of a person with Alzheimer's, as someone close to them had gone through this experience. My Vermont friend, however, has extreme mobility issues and often uses a cane or a walker and sometimes a wheelchair. But she and her husband were determined to make it to *Remembrance*, and their reports afterwards indicated that they both engaged deeply with the performance, although, because of their different abilities, they had to separate at one point in the performance—breaking a sense of the democracy of the experience and a shared sense of *communitas*. Hence, they had a different kind of engagement with the material (more on this to follow).

In thinking about accessibility and immersive live performances, I have a fundamental question: Is it possible for an individual with mobility issues to fully "get the story"? Can they truly *immerse* in the world of the performance? When timing is key in moving from one experience/event/space/character to the next, what can they do? If an individual cannot move quickly, cannot navigate stairs or tight spaces, and perhaps cannot even easily stand, is the world of immersive theater open and available to them? In the future, I hope these considerations will be more central to the design/devising process of nondigital immersive

theater. In fall-winter 2020/21 Linked Dance Theatre informed me that Lauren and Seth Rogen were interested in remounting and coproducing *Remembrance*. More precisely, given COVID times, they wanted to produce a revised but still immersive piece that could be presented on Zoom, which would again focus on a woman with early-onset Alzheimer's and explore the impact her diagnosis and the journey of her illness had on her family. In 2012, after Lauren's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the Rogens established Hilarity for Charity, a foundation that supports Alzheimer's awareness and education and raises funds for research. The positive buzz on social media about *Remembrance* had reached the Rogens in fall 2019, and they had ventured out to Governor's Island for our final performance. Throughout summer and fall 2020, given COVID realities and restrictions, the Rogens, Slack, and Chlapecka brainstormed about the possibility of a Zoom performance that would substitute for the site-specific, in-person *Remembrance*. Linked Dance Theatre invited me to take on the central role in the new piece. I was thrilled and terrified to dive into the unknown—Zoom-immersivity—as we began the devising process for what would be a new hybrid piece, live-Zoomed and partially prerecorded and filmed, *Elle S'envoie* (Elle Sends Herself).

Could a Zoom production, I wondered, create empathy? I thought of E. M. Forster's epigram for his novel *Howard's End*, "Only connect," as we began to devise the Zoom-immersive production of *Elle S'envoie*. How would this work? I feared the flattening out, the limitations of the "Zoom-room" environment and the difficulties of capturing the three-dimensionality of a woman living with Alzheimer's on Zoom, which we had worked so hard to realize in the many precise details of Margaret's world, found in her (carefully curated) home on Governor's Island.

Creative Boundaries and Participant Agency—How *Remembrance* (Live and Immersive) Worked on Governor's Island

Crossing the "boundaries" into Margaret's world followed directly once a ticket to *Remembrance* was purchased—the spectator received an invitation to Margaret's (surprise) sixty-fifth birthday party. This launched the idea that the spectator would be taking on a "role"—as someone Margaret would want at her birthday celebration. These "invited guests" were welcomed outside Margaret's house by two performers who played Margaret's caregivers. The caregivers explained that Margaret may not remember her guests—or may misremember them—at the party. This

phase of the work coincides with Machon's description of what is customary practice prior to the beginning of an immersive performance: "preparation techniques to gently immerse you in the world: pre-performance rituals and framings to acclimatize the guest participant within the work [where you are] introduced to characters or guides who will take you through the world."[7]

Next, Margaret's "friends" were invited inside the house to help the caregivers decorate with balloons and a banner the living room where the birthday party would take place. Perhaps because each of the spectator-participants became known to me/Margaret as my "friends" and several of them engaged with me and the other Margarets by filling in the open spaces in our performance text imaginatively and creatively, the phrase that best describes how these individuals functioned in relation to my/our work in *Remembrance* is "collaborative comrades." This is my riff on a term Machon uses—"creative comrades."[8] *Remembrance* shifts from the preperformance phase to the performance itself when the "collaborative comrades" encounter Margaret and her son for the first time. Margaret's son brings her downstairs, where she is regaled by her "comrades" and the caregivers, who sing a rollicking (and for Margaret, "surprising") "Happy Birthday!"

Boundaries *between* spectators occur outside the house with the distribution of flower pins that each guest must wear. (Margaret's caregivers remind her friends that Margaret loves flowers.) The flowers are color-coded based on the level of ticket each guest has purchased. A small number of tickets are available on the day of each performance and are free; these guests are given yellow-flower pins and only experience the first floor of Margaret's house, the first birthday party scene, and four of the memory rooms on the first floor. These guests are gently but firmly asked to leave before the second birthday party scene.

Although my mother and my friend from Vermont had purchased tickets that would have granted them access to the second level of the house (signified by blue-flower pins; the majority of the guests had blue flowers), neither of them was able to negotiate the stairs, and hence they remained on the first floor as their companions journeyed up to the second floor and could enter six additional memory-spaces. This barrier to their liberty made me uncomfortable; although each had felt they might be able to manage the stairs, when faced with the flight in front of them on the day, each declined to "go up," although they had "paid up" in advance. At each performance, four guests had pink flowers. These spectators had opted for the highest-price ticket ($80, instead of

$40) and were designated as Margaret's "special friends," both in their original invitation/confirmation and because of the extra attention the caregivers and the Margarets gave them. These four "special friends" participated in "one-on-ones" with each of the Margarets. At the end of the third birthday-party scene (a repetition/skewing of the first and second birthday-party scenes, with Margaret remembering and understanding less and less, where objects disappear, marking the further progression of her illness), blue-flower-pinned guests are gently but firmly requested to depart. Each of those wearing pink flowers are then escorted by a Margaret up the stairs and into a "private" space for the first of their one-on-one scenes with a Margaret. Special friends in these one-on-ones participate in a loosely structured improvisation with each Margaret, who tells a story/shares a memory that is porous/open-ended. Because of the sense of flow established between actor and spectator in these private moments, these last encounters between Margaret(s) and friend(s) take different paths and have different outcomes. This is where the distinct and varying empathic responses of Margaret's collaborative comrades, sequestered with a Margaret in a kitchen, in a "secrets" closet, and in a bedroom, come into play.

Boundaries between artist and spectator—sometimes crouching together on the floor, weeping, or whispering in the dark—fall away. But time presses on and the soundscape in each room provides cues for the Margarets to end the one-on-ones simultaneously, causing the evolving stories and the connective tissues between each of the Margarets and their special friend(s) to be suddenly and irrevocably cut, and a boundary is once again inserted. After Margaret's (blue- and pink-flowered) friends leave her house and restart their lives in the quotidian world, they hear a final message from Margaret, recorded on their voicemail (these same words are printed in "Margaret's hand" on the back of the program they receive as they leave through the outside door):

> Thanks so much for coming to my birthday party. I really appreciated having you around for it.
>
> I know my mind isn't what it used to be but thanks for making my special day special. Sorry if I forgot you, even for a moment.
>
> Love,
> Margaret

And thus, the endpoint/final boundary of *Remembrance* is marked.

The logistical boundaries—the rules—of *Remembrance*'s modified

Fig. 10.1. Margaret (actor Rita McCann) with a collaborative comrade in a "secrets" closet. Photo credit Jordan Chlapecka.

"sandbox" arrangement are verbalized first by the caregivers in the preparation phase and later by the Margarets. (Linked Dance Theatre's artistic directors described our immersive context as "modified sandbox" because very clear ground rules prevented our "friends" from moving and playing freely. Although the definition of the sandbox form indicates that participants have a free flow through the space and myriad choices, in my experiences of other sandbox immersive work, the limitations or rules of the game are always made clear, either at the start or at various times throughout the experience.) In *Remembrance*, we Margarets tell our guests/friends as we perform an abstracted movement sequence following the first birthday party that they may "only go through the open doors" and may not ever open a closed door. But which doors spectators choose to pass through and the order of their entrances into and exits

from scenes chart their paths in particular ways, sometimes to the detriment of "getting the story." If a spectator avoided the back bedroom on floor one of Margaret's house, for instance (as one of my friends with a blue flower did), the fact that Margaret's son was gay could be missed. And again, collaborative comrades with mobility issues, whatever their flower color, were limited in the room choices open to them, and hence had a less liberatory immersive theater experience.

How *Elle S'envoie* Worked—a Zoom-Immersive Production

The premise/context was different, as was the "family" structure in this performance text, *Elle S'envoie* on Zoom. Elle, like Margaret, was a widow, but Elle had two grown children—a twenty-something gay daughter who was a dancer, pregnant, and living in Brooklyn with her partner; and a thirty-something son, straight, single, who was a filmmaker living in LA. Elle's deceased husband, Sebastian, appeared in several memory-scenes; some were filmed solo movement sequences; we also had memory-based "live" Zoom scenes together. The actor playing Sebastian was Brazilian, living in Brazil. Because of COVID and the nature of the performance (Zoom and filmed), we never met in person, although a specific goal in our memory scenes together was developing a level of "intimacy" that would be different from all other Zoom or filmed interactions in the piece. We worked toward this by being in close proximity to our computer cameras and making direct eye contact with the camera as much as possible, creating the effect of an extreme close-up. I had also never met the actor who played my son, who actually lived in LA. And I was never in the same room during rehearsals and performances with the actor playing my daughter, who lived in Brooklyn. However, I shared a Zoom "tile" and a rehearsal and performance space with the actor playing Maggie, my caregiver, who was also the performer who provided the essential preparation for all spectator-participants.[9] Because Elle and her caregiver Maggie occupy the same living space (Elle needs 24/7 care because of the progression of her illness), we always appeared together on the same Zoom screen. Each of Elle's children (and our Zoom guests/friends who paid the top ticket price) was visible on their own individual tiles/screens. (Once a week, throughout rehearsals and performances, the actor who played Maggie [Rita McCann] and I took COVID PCR tests. We rehearsed in a studio that was refurbished to look like Elle's Upper West Side New

York City apartment. We did not wear masks in performances, but we did in rehearsals.)

Instead of a surprise birthday party, the celebratory occasion that "my daughter" and "my caregiver" organized, which was the raison d'être of the Zoom gathering at the center of *Elle S'envoie*, was a baby shower for my daughter and her partner, attended by "invited family and friends."

Why the title *Elle S'envoie/ She Sends Herself?* The use of French was significant because, unlike the very American-based story of Margaret in *Remembrance*, Elle's story encompassed an early-life move to Paris with her husband, a chef. And what about "*Sends Herself*"? When a spectator purchased a ticket to the performance, they received an invitation via "snail mail" to the baby shower from "Elle." To initiate the preperformance segment of *Elle S'envoie* on Zoom, Maggie explained to the spectators/party guests who had signed on/called in that she had accompanied Elle to the post office to mail their invitations. However, what Maggie didn't know (nor did Elle's children) was that Elle on her own had sent out other things to "friends" and "family" at the addresses ticket-buyers provided. As Elle's disease advanced and she realized that her "time is running out" because her memories are disappearing, she sought to preserve them and the things that connected to them. Elle's children and Maggie had created a family scrapbook for Elle with all of her precious memory-objects and purposely hid it, because they wanted to present it to Elle at the shower. But Elle found the scrapbook loaded with her "things," and "on her own" mailed photos, recipes, maps, letters, and even a locket from her past. Some spectators/"guests"—soon to become our collaborative comrades—were those with "premium" tickets. This smaller group—no more than twelve per performance—received these objects in the mail, prior to the performances. At the beginning of the Zoom call, Maggie "accidentally" opened a video file on the computer (seen by all spectators, premium or not) where Elle shares her discovery of the scrapbook with her "friends" and asks them to keep the objects she sent them safe for her, if she ever needs them.

Elle S'envoie spectators had the option of purchasing tickets with two different levels of participation. At the "premium" level, for $125 (although discounts and "scholarships" existed) you could be a visible, audible guest at the baby shower and would actively participate (from your Zoom tile) with Elle, her family, and Elle's caregiver, Maggie. This premium relationship between spectators and actors was similar to the "one-on-ones" that took place in *Remembrance*, because there were unstructured improvisa-

tory exchanges between these participants and Elle, her children, and Maggie. However, instead of being private sessions like the one-on-ones, these were public—or, at least visible and audible to all on the Zoom call. These spectators were addressed by their names on their Zoom tiles, were asked questions, and were sometimes asked to "perform" tasks. (More on these interactions later.) Two or three individuals could participate in one Zoom tile for the price of one ticket (a couple, friends, or a family could participate together). For $30 (there were also discounts and scholarships at this level) a spectator signed on to the Zoom call, but would not be seen, heard, or referred to by others, and hence was not a collaborative comrade in any way.

So, returning to the *boundaries between* spectators—there was an impenetrable divide between the two levels of "guests" present on the Zoom call. The $30 ticket holders were not immersive participants. They were silent, invisible spectators of others' immersive experiences. They bore witness to exchanges, connections, and events through the Zoom format, but their experience was the same as watching a play on Zoom that had improvisatory sections. Most of the people I knew who experienced *Elle S'envoie* were in this group. Indeed, at any performance there were no more than twelve premium tickets sold, while usually sixty tickets were sold at the $30 level. I had the opportunity to speak with a number of the silent, invisible spectators who watched the Zoom gathering/performance; from their vantage point, everyone they watched on screen was performing. A kind of democratization between "professional (paid) performing artists" and "collaborative comrades" took place where everyone appeared to be "acting" to a greater or lesser degree. A few people I spoke with afterward who were at the $30 ticket level believed that some of the premium participant/ticket holders were, in fact, rehearsed actors in *Elle S'envoie*. Thus, in *Elle S'envoie*, the boundaries between "acting and not-acting"[10] became blurred/ blurry.

Creating Empathy and Community in *Remembrance* on Governor's Island

Given the desired outcome of an empathic connection with Margaret, at her surprise birthday party, Margaret's "friends" were situated near her—sitting next to her on a couch, listening to music together. Prior to Margaret's first entrance, a caregiver asked each spectator to sign her birthday card, which she later opened and read at the party. When Margaret's son leads her into the room, spectators cry out (instructed by

the caregiver) "Happy Birthday, Margaret!" In this moment, everyone in the living room loudly, publicly enters the role of Margaret's friends. (The caregiver explained that this could be one of the last celebrations Margaret will remember.) The goal is achieving a kind of *communitas* through this participation. Gareth White describes the possibility of *communitas* in immersive and other kinds of participatory performances and points to liminal phases in such performances that resemble the ritual stages that Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Arnold van Gennep analyze in their seminal texts on ritual and performance.[11] Randomly, prior to Margaret's entrance, a caregiver selects four "special" guests (wearing an assortment of colored flowers) who are charged with a more intensely personal role in the birthday celebration/ritual. They each give prewrapped presents to Margaret. The designated gift-givers have no idea what their packages contain, but when they are opened by Margaret later at the party, each present is of a personal nature, and deeply meaningful to her. This first birthday party, a gathering of the entire group, takes place in the front parlor of Margaret's house and is accessible to all collaborative comrades; there are no barriers to participation because of mobility or flower color. The central "actors" with Margaret are the randomly/democratically selected gift-givers (all flower colors, all mobilities). Indeed, I would argue, this scene of the performance event is uniquely inscribed with a deep, broad experience of *communitas* for all. One of the gifts is a collection of poems by Robert Penn Warren, a writer whose work Margaret loves. She asks a few of her party guests to select a poem to read aloud from the volume—she can no longer trust the words to stay in place when she reads—and Margaret is grateful and delighted to hear these words out loud. From Warren's poem, "Tell Me a Story":

> Tell me a story.
> In this century and moment, of mania,
> Tell me a story.
> Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.
> The name of the story will be Time,
> But you must not pronounce its name.
> Tell me a story of deep delight.

Margaret's struggles, losses, joys, and revelations unfold at her birthday parties (these are repeated/shadowed, twisted/disintegrated progressively in birthday parties two and three, connecting her friends to her empathically. Collaborative comrades move into a liminal phase, saying

yes to uncharted territory, the potential of a new identity in Margaret's world, a transformation of the bonds between self and other. Empathy and community grow in other memory-rooms too. When a group of "friends" in Margaret's son's childhood bedroom witness her discovery that he is gay, for instance, she turns to them to help work this through and figure out how she can reconcile this truth with her husband. (This bedroom scene on the first floor is accessible to all, but because there is Liberty in choosing one's path through the house, not every collaborative comrade will witness/experience it.) They may also be present for the terrifying moment when she first grapples with the diagnosis she and her son hear from a doctor (this role is played by a spectator who was asked to don a white doctor's coat). How can they—how will they—deal with early-onset Alzheimer's? (The doctor's office scene was situated upstairs; only blue and pink flowers had access to it, but this scene was unavailable to those with mobility limitations as well.)

These were the goals of *Remembrance* as articulated by artistic directors Chlapecka and Slack in Linked Dance Theatre's Dramaturgy packet for the cast, designers, and all creatives at the beginning of the process. These statements or versions of them were also public-facing, included in the company's Kickstarter campaign, in press releases and on ticketing sites:

> To open our eyes to what may be going on in the minds of people with Alzheimer's. To imagine who they become. If we are the sum of our memories and experiences, who are you once you can no longer remember? What does this transformation do to the person experiencing it? To the people witnessing it? . . .
>
> Alzheimer's patients and elderly people—especially elderly women—are often shoved aside in American culture. We are what we remember . . . and what we forget.

Remembrance, in the words of its directors, was devised to center-stage the lives of individuals who are too often cast off and made invisible (older women, people with Alzheimer's). Through a variety of frameworks and scenes that culminate in intimate interactions and relational experiences between performers and their collaborative comrades, an embodied awareness of and sensitivity toward individuals with Alzheimer's and their caregivers, friends, and family is meant to grow. Moving forward with this same spirit of generosity and empathy, as a co-deviser, my hope will be to find ways to center-stage an awareness of the needs and expe-

riences of other individuals (those with physical mobility issues) who are sometimes made invisible as well.

In *Elle S'envoie* on Zoom

The goals of the artistic directors were essentially the same for *Elle S'envoie*. As devisers, however, we acknowledged that for individuals with Alzheimer's the frustrations, despair, and fear brought about by increased isolation during the pandemic exacerbated and intensified many of the outcomes of Alzheimer's, not only for individuals with Alzheimer's but for their families and caregivers as well. In *Elle S'envoie*, the immersive sections of the script began with text we devisers referred to as "object monologues." These monologues gave me/Elle the opportunity to "more closely encounter" each of the (premium) guests, while everyone on the Zoom call bore witness.

During each of these monologues, caregiver Maggie moved off-screen and only Elle's and the "premium" guests' Zoom tiles were spotlighted. In these sections, I/Elle directly addressed the "special friends" to whom "I" had sent memory-objects and asked them to open their packages (if they hadn't already) and describe what they found. After object-monologue #1, which concerns my disappearing memories of traveling with my son as a young boy, I asked my friends to take the maps I sent them and sew the route I took using red thread I enclosed in their packages. Following object monologue #2, where I struggle to remember the details of my career as a dance photographer, I asked friends to press their fingers on a photo I sent them, on which (after pressure/warmth is applied to the surface) a previously hidden image was "magically" revealed. In object monologue #3, I ask "a friend" to open the locket I sent them and describe the tiny photos of faces within, which I remember as my deceased parents and my husband. Finally, in object monologue #4 I asked friends to unwrap a key, which becomes the trigger to a filmed and Zoom memory-scene, in which my husband and I deal with the aftermath of my miscarriage early in our marriage in Paris. Indeed, with each of these encounters and participatory actions of engagement, guests on the Zoom call with Elle acknowledge the fleeting preciousness of the present moment for her.

Spectator/participants are asked through this experience to BE PRESENT with/for Elle, to actively create connective tissues between Elle and her fast-disappearing past/life. Indeed, as Machon writes, "immersive

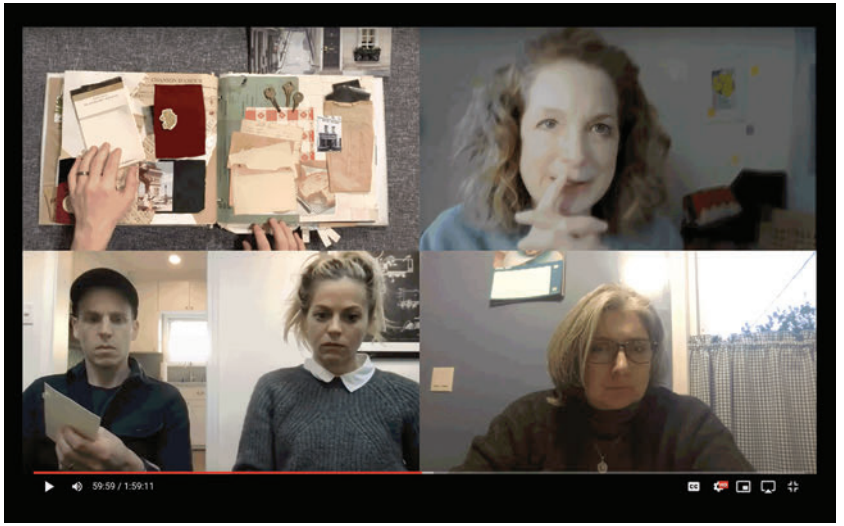

Fig. 10.2. Elle (actor Cindy Rosenthal) asks her "special friends" on Zoom to help her access her memories by using objects from her scrapbook that she sent them through the mail. Photo credit Jordan Chlapecka.

practice can encourage individuals to invest in each other as much as in the work. This can lead to a palpable sense of *communitas*."[12]

Whether moving through the rooms of Margaret's carefully crafted "home" on New York City's Governor's Island or Zooming in to "Elle's apartment" during the pandemic on New York's Upper West Side, these immersive performances seek to create *communitas* between collaborative comrades "in the room." The motivations for and agendas of these works are clear and deeply felt. But in both productions, ticket pricing impacts the level and length of spectators' participation, and in *Remembrance* the challenge of the architecture presented a barrier for some participants too. Although I would always (as a performer or spectator) opt for a live immersive experience over a Zoom performance, there was indeed delight in doing *Elle S'envoie*, knowing that the Zoom format enabled participation from audiences who had called in from disparate rooms and were of diverse abilities, ages, and circumstances, from across the globe. Returning to the epigraph that begins this essay, I echo this call for art that awakens individuals to a more responsive and enlivened understanding of the world and the objects, structures, and humans in it, with the hope of creating a more expansive, inclusive community and sense of *communitas*. I connect that with Petra Kuppers's charge to artists (and

others) to increase awareness as we craft our work. And, following Aimi Hamraie's compelling arguments for more inclusive architecture and her interrogations of the concept of "Universal Design" ("can we build a more inclusive world for everyone"—and "who *counts* as everyone and how can we *know*?"),[13] attention must be paid to a path toward inclusivity in immersive theater design, moving forward, together.

Notes

1. Stephen Di Benedetto, "Guiding Somatic Responses Within Performative Structures: Contemporary Live Art and Sensorial Perception," in *The Senses in Performance*, eds. Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki (London: Routledge, 2007), 134.

2. The other actors playing Margaret were Rita McCann (my former student) and Maya Gonzalez. Kellyn Thornburg Mylechreest performed multiple roles—Margaret's caregiver, her one-time business partner, and her mother. Jordan Chlapecka played Margaret's son and husband, and Edward Mylechreest and Kendra Slack played preperformance caregivers.

3. Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 206, 243.

4. Petra Kuppers, *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 2013), 17.

5. Pete Higgin quoted in Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87.

6. Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 31.

7. Machon, 84.

8. Machon, 83.

9. The actor playing Maggie was Rita McCann (my former student). Maya Gonzalez played Elle's daughter, Nicky Romaniello played Elle's son, Kellyn Thornborg Mylechreest played Elle's friend, and Sebastian Stimman played Elle's husband.

10. Michael Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," *TDR: The Drama Review* 16, no. 1 (March 1972): 3–15.

11. White, 138–41.

12. Machon, 85.

13. Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 5.

PART III

The Pursuit of Happiness

ELEVEN Stepping Back into Your Own Timeline

Meaning, Yearning, and Immersive Simulations of the Recent Past

SCOTT MAGELSSEN

I had the experience recently of stepping thirty-five years back in time. The space was instantly familiar to me: a basement "rec room"—a cozy sanctuary of tertiary colors like the countless ones I had played and hung out in with friends and cousins throughout my childhood in the Midwest. Wooden joists were exposed on the ceiling. Kitschy vintage wall art that presumably once had pride of place upstairs now shared the brown wood paneling with a movie poster from *Return of the Jedi*. The overstuffed chairs were covered with granny-square-knit afghan blankets. Pressed-wood end tables were topped with *National Geographic* and *People* magazines, faded family photographs, and burlap-shaded lamps that illuminated the room with warm yellow light. Bookshelves were stacked with pulpy sci-fi novels and VHS tapes, games like *Battleship* and *Simon*, and vinyl records (Eurythmics, Air Supply, Genesis, Christopher Cross) that I could spin on the hi-fi turntable. If this wasn't an exact replica of my own childhood basement, it was like that of, say, a 1980s friend who was cooler than me, or at least had cooler older siblings. This immersive simulation was part of the *Totally 80s Rewind* exhibit at Seattle's Living Computers Museum + Labs, where visitors (until the museum suspended in-person programming in spring 2020) were invited to experience a day in the life of a 1980s teenager.[1] The centerpiece of the rec room was the faux-wood-paneled big-box television hooked up to working Atari and Nintendo NES home video game consoles. Stacks of cartridge games

like *Kid Icarus*, *BurgerTime*, *Rad Racer*, *Punch Out*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* were piled on top of the TV and the floor. (I spent a little bit too much time playing the exhibit's *Super Mario Brothers* 2, my ancient muscle memory kicking in and getting me through several levels as easily as if I were getting back on a bicycle. I don't often get chances like this to impress my own and others' children.) *Totally 80s Rewind* also included a classroom full of Apple IIe computers (and lockers adorned with Garbage Pail Kid stickers and pinups of Corey Haim and Corey Feldman) and a video game arcade featuring *Centipede*, *Donkey Kong*, *Ms. Pac Man*, and other favorites, along with a change machine that dispensed an endless supply of free tokens for visitors to plunk into the coin slots. The exhibit was lauded by a *CNN Travel* review: "The return of scrunchies and shoulder pads and the popularity of throwback shows such as 'Stranger Things' left you pining for the 1980s? Now there's a place you can go to actually relive the days when your hair was as big as your ambitions."[2]

I've been through a lot of immersive simulations in my research, but this one had a kind of affective quality that I found to be especially, and personally, rich. It was not just the collection of artifacts seemingly drawn directly from my own past. It was the flood of sharp memories they triggered—of friends with whom I've long since lost touch, the feeling of safety and comfort, of endless carefree afternoons unclouded by grown-up worries. In short, I was hit with nostalgia, that bittersweet cocktail of pleasurable memories and pangs of loss. To be sure, nostalgia has always been key to immersive living history museums like Colonial Williamsburg and Plimoth Plantation, magical fantasylands smelling of woodsmoke and fresh straw and peopled by costumed interpreters portraying the likes of Myles Standish or Thomas Jefferson. These institutions sprang up in the twentieth century, according to tourism scholars such as Dean MacCannell, to soothe the collective anxiety we experience in an era of rapid industrialization alienating us from the simpler world of days gone by.[3] In the last few years, however, I've started to see immersive environments like *Totally 80s Rewind* simulating not halcyon days from centuries past, but times from my own lived past. Let me briefly give two more examples.

The tiny Northwoods tourist town where I grew up, Hayward, Wisconsin, was home to the Turk's Inn, an improbable yet somewhat famous supper club opened in 1934 by Armenian immigrant George Gogian. The Turk's was a jewel box of delightful kitsch and orientalist décor, the walls covered with photos of celebrities and politicians who had

made requisite stops there, especially during the restaurant's heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. The menu was a combination of typical Wisconsin supper club fare—porterhouse steaks, prime rib, and broiled walleye—and exotic (for Hayward) offerings like kebobs and *bourek*, a flaky cheese-filled phyllo pastry. My parents dined at the Turk's often, and on occasion I'd get to tag along for the event, which started with cocktails at the bar, and transitioned at a leisurely pace to the dining room before culminating in baklava and thick fragrant Turkish coffee. An evening at the Turks could run several hours, and as a kid I was allowed to wander through the various rooms while my folks hobnobbed with the other guests. On more than one occasion I remember Marge Gogian, George's elegant world-traveler daughter, who gave up a fashion career in New York in the 1970s to help out with the restaurant when her father fell ill, taking time to make me feel welcome, and treating me to my own special cocktail (a slender fluted cordial glass of red syrup with a heavy cream floater and a maraschino cherry).

When the Turk's Inn closed upon Marge's death in 2013 I figured it was the end of era, which is why I was astounded in 2019 to read in the glossy *New York Times Style* magazine that Varun Kataria and Tyler Erickson, childhood friends from Minneapolis who also dined there when their families vacationed in Wisconsin, had bought up at auction the Turk's Inn furnishings, décor, and neon signs and recreated the supper club—in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood.[4] My eventual visit to the New York incarnation of the Turk's in spring of 2022 was an uncanny experience of stepping back into my own timeline, similar to *Totally 80s Rewind*. The restaurant was only offering a reduced menu as it gradually reopened while the pandemic waned, but here was the plush leather bar, the exotic grotto of a dining room, the colorful glass candleholders, the commemorative presidential plates, the photos of the Kennedys, the immaculate collection of vintage Jim Beam decanters, and the framed glamour portrait of Marge. Above all was the gracious, welcoming spirit I remembered from the original when I was that kid in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

And in 2016 the Washington State History Museum opened its indie rock scene exhibit, *A Revolution You Can Dance To*, simulating the early '90s Puget Sound region with an apartment living-room hangout filled with ashtrays, red plastic cups, pizza boxes, a boom box and cassette tapes, and grunge band and Riot Grrrl concert fliers. Here, one could listen to Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney with one's feet up on the coffee table, flip through dog-eared copies of *Catcher in the Rye*, Sweet Valley High paperbacks, or Stephen King's *It*, or even make one's own zine (pre-desktop-

publishing style) by literally cutting text and images and pasting them together.[5] I wasn't living in Washington state at the time depicted (I was in college in Minneapolis), but along with a lot of other people my age, I was vicariously experiencing life there in that short span of the early to mid 1990s when the Pacific Northwest seemed to be the cultural center of the world and its grunge rock and punk music were the soundtrack to daily existence. In this experiential exhibit, then, as in the two examples above, anyone was welcome to immerse themselves in the simulation. If a visitor like me had experienced the time depicted, though, they could step back into it just like in a living history museum, but rather than interacting with costumed characters, they themselves could activate the world with their own memories.

A 1980s rec room, a kitschy Wisconsin supper club, a young adult's messy Pacific Northwest apartment. These seemingly idiosyncratic immersive experiences immediately hooked me with the way they transported me back to my youth. Yet the fact that they existed in the first place defied simple explanation. Why were memories of my own past being simulated as immersive attractions? Has the heritage industry abandoned the statute of limitations on how much time must pass before a period can be a legitimate museum exhibit or themed experience? Or is it simply that Gen X nostalgia is finally proving to be a highly marketable commodity? The answer may be a combination of these things, but as I'll explore in the following pages, even more significant for this volume is that immersive simulations delivering experiences that cater to nostalgia can offer profound connections to others, can be good for mental and emotional well-being (read happiness), and can even be "restorative" in helping shape identity for greater agency and working for good in the present.

For many readers, the assertion that immersive performance can elicit powerful nostalgic experiences will be practically self-evident. Nostalgia is often elicited by sensory experiences (a long-forgotten melody, a smell evocative of one's home or a special place growing up), and scholars like Josephine Machon argue that the efficacy of immersive performance hinges largely on the fact that the audience, placed at the heart of the work, is "deeply involved" in the experience and that "all the senses are engaged and manipulated."[6] The sensory environment holds a primacy, she writes, and "haptic perception" is crucial: to experience an immersive performance means to "feel *feelingly*—to undergo."[7] And in each of my examples, the immersion features generous inclusion of sensory touch—working the cassette players, cutting and pasting zines together, settling into a plush leather supper club banquette or a rattily uphol-

stered, afghan-covered easy chair, manipulating the creaky plastic Atari joystick, and so forth.

For other scholars, an obvious key to the success of immersive performances that feature nostalgic recreations is that they so deeply and exquisitely cater to what Adam Alston calls "narcissistic participation," an aesthetic engagement that centers "the audience member's own affective experience . . . and especially their own appearance within an immersive world."[8] Alston's analysis of such immersive performances bends toward the cautionary. It's not just that they capitalize on the audience members' own most self-directed preoccupations, he argues, but that they commodify them as part of a larger neoliberal ethos. The narcissistic participant's "physiology, psychology and explorative capabilities," writes Alston, "are resourced in the co-constitution of an immersive theatre aesthetic."[9] Here, the personal nostalgia the audience member brings with them is activated and sold back to them as part of the experience economy. Alston's cynical reading brings me to the cultural and political anxieties that have long attended the phenomenon of nostalgia and its utility as a vehicle for eliciting, and exploiting, emotional experience. As enjoyable as a nostalgic immersive experience of the past can be, is this kind of thing good for us?

We've seen nostalgia weaponized, after all, by a presidential campaign (and now the entire MAGA movement) promising to return the nation to a time when America was "Great," a time as much an imagined simulacrum as Colonial Williamsburg or an arcade with an unlimited supply of quarters. Susan Bennett and other scholars rightfully point to nostalgia's tendency to ossify conservative versions of the past by displacing individual memories into one collective and "powerfully regulatory" imaginary, and erasing the voices of those whose experiences differ from that hegemonic vision.[10] And whereas cottage industries based on antiques, collector cars, and golden oldies have been with us for decades, it seems now that any retro TV opening credits sequence, infomercial, or music video, no matter how obscure, is accessible instantly though a YouTube search, suggesting that this is what Jean-François Lyotard was getting at when he pronounced that "the bulimia of western thought is to have everything present,"[11] his anxious word choice equating a yearning for the past with a mental disorder that threatens normative notions of bodily health and comportment on the one hand and the ethics of consumption on the other.

Nostalgia's discursive association with mental illness goes back to its beginnings as a modern concept.[12] Seventeenth-century Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer identified nostalgia as a neurological disease

plaguing soldiers from the mountainous regions of Switzerland, who, he perceived, were wasting away from melancholy when deployed to theaters of war in the lowlands of Europe. In the eighteenth century, this new pathological discourse could conveniently explain why enslaved people from Africa would choose to drown themselves or go on hunger strikes rather than work for their masters.[13] Nostalgia was removed from the books of medical disorders[14] in the 1950s, just in time for it to become a mass culture phenomenon in films like *American Graffiti* (1973) and in reprints of 1940s comic strips like *Flash Gordon*, prompting *Time* magazine to note a "nostalgia craze" in 1971,[15] and setting the stage for a wave of living-history environments like those I described earlier. By the late mid-twentieth century, nostalgia had gone from disease to what Kathleen Stewart described as a "cultural practice" experienced, per Raymond Williams, as a "structure of feeling."[16]

From time to time in the last decades, cultural historians and commentators have warned against what they see as an excessive, wasteful, or civically irresponsible obsession with the past, and have vilified those who use nostalgia as a tool to sell citizens a bill of goods by appealing to their vulnerabilities. By proffering anxious citizens an escape to an idealized past, such arguments go, these performances could further alienate us from the present in ways that historian Philip D. Jordan cautioned in 1975 (when the United States was gearing up for its bicentennial and the *Little House on the Prairie* TV show was a hit) threatened to snowball into nothing less than a national "neurosis."[17] To cultural theorists, nostalgia has been a drug—a means by which the naive subject is anesthetized against recognizing their complicit place in political structures and ideologies. Fredric Jameson wrote that nostalgic films, a symptom of late capitalism, promised belonging to a "historical continuum no longer available."[18]

Read through these lenses, I can imagine why my time playing video games in the Living Computers Museum's rec room made me feel a little bit guilty. Yes, I felt that pleasurable ache of what Rebecca Schneider describes as "touching time," experiencing the not-past but also the not-not-past.[19] But lingering too long in my own memories seemed indulgent—a waste of time that could have been spent more productively. And in spite of its seemingly harmless depiction of a past childhood, the exhibit was not an apolitical selection of what was worth remembering about the 1980s. It was very white, for one thing. The lived experiences of Black or Indigenous people, or of other People of Color, were certainly not being explicitly centered, though this may have less to do with the museum's failure to break from a long tradition of history attractions defaulting to

a generalized white past and more with telling a very specific story: this narrative celebrated techie types like the museum's founder, Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen, an origin story of the curious teenager with a motherboard in their backpack who promises to become the industry driver of the coming decades. And apart from *maybe* the hints in *People* magazine stories (more than one issue contained features about the secret life of Rock Hudson, who died of AIDS in 1985), the exhibit was blissfully mute on the injustice, war, and disease raging in the outside 1980s world. The Living Computer Museum, from this point of view, becomes one more indication that nostalgia is part and parcel with the obsessions of modernism, the hypnosis and suppression of the people, the myopia of discourse, and capitalism's parasitic fixity on the consumer subject.

More recent research suggests, though, that maybe we've been getting it backward this whole time. Maybe it's not nostalgia that we should blame for fomenting and shoring up systems of injustice, exploitation, and naïve scholarship, and maybe we should not be concerned that nostalgia is a wasteful or deceptive feeling. Rather, as the work of psychologists Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut suggests, while feelings of nostalgia have been associated with negative states and situations, correlation should not be confused with causation. In fact, they find, nostalgia is a way that human beings respond to negative or alienating states by reminding the self of what in the past felt good or valuable. They describe "the character of nostalgia," as when

> the individual brings to mind a fond and personally relevant (i.e., self-defining) occasion, typically involving their childhood or close other(s). The individual reviews the occasion with tenderness and rose-colored glasses, yearns for that time or relationship, and may even wish to return to it. The individual feels sentimental, that is, content or happy but with a tinge of longing.[20]

Nostalgia, they write, can foster social connectedness and an augmented sense of self as a way to "buffer against existential threats" such as alienation, loneliness, lack of control over our own situation, or situations in which we feel coerced to labor for or be complicit with systems that are meaningless or against our values. In other words, nostalgia can reinforce, as a kind of defense mechanism, a sense of self-continuity, that we are good, and that life is worth living. "[H]umans are prone to seeking and maintaining meaningfulness," they conclude, and "nostalgizing" is a way, in part, to do so. "By enriching people's lives with meaning," they

continue, "nostalgia contributes to motivated goal pursuit, psychological equanimity, and psychological or even physical health."[21] And while nostalgic memories may not be accurate, Clay Routledge, author of *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource*, told Shankar Vedantam on a recent episode of *Hidden Brain*, "it's not the case that we're necessarily completely fabricating memories so much as we're selecting and kind of weaving these different memories into a meaningful self-narrative that helps us make some sense of our lives and our connection to others . . . massaging the raw footage so to speak."[22]

The tide is turning in cultural theory as well. Some scholars, Jonathan D. S. Schroeder reminds us, have begun suggesting that nostalgia doesn't have to be complicit with nationalist or imperialist narratives of the good old days (read, "Make America Great Again") but can actually be deployed, as Alisdair Bonnett argues, drawing on Svetlana Boym's idea of "restorative nostalgia," as forms of activism.[23] Anti-imperialist nostalgia longs for what never was, writes Jennifer Wenzel: the ways it could have gone but did not.[24] And Susan Stewart talks about nostalgia's utopian face, "the fact that it is always directed toward a future past, a what-could-have-been."[25]

It may be naive, but this makes me less cynical than Alston that the immersive environments I described at the top of this essay are exploiting visitors' narcissistic tendencies to sell their own nostalgia back to them as transactional neoliberal exchange. I certainly didn't get this impression from the curators and planners of these spaces when I asked them about their own goals. For Len Balli, who curated *A Revolution You Can Dance To* at the Washington State History Museum, the immersive apartment was "the best way to tell the story of Olympia's independent music history" in the early to mid 90s and how there hasn't been anything like it since.[26] Working with lead curator Gwen Whiting and head of audience engagement Leah Melber, Balli sought to capture "that zest and that passion" from Olympia's DIY music scene, before the ubiquity of cellphones and social media. "That time," she said, "doesn't exist anymore"—that feeling of "I gotta be downtown every night," because you never know who's going to be playing.

Nailing the look and feel of a young person's Olympia apartment was a project close to the team's experience, so close that they raided their own homes for evocative bits of material culture from the time. The exhibit was originally conceived as one of the rotating period rooms for the Washington State Historical Society's Lord Mansion historic home in Washington's capital, and Balli had initially imagined it as "a kid's bedroom, with a twin bed, guitars and amps, some rumpled up clothes,

[maybe] a few panels on the wall about music and Olympia." With the mansion's closure for renovation, the exhibit was moved to the Historical Society's flagship museum in Tacoma and expanded into a major retrospective of the independent music scene in the Puget Sound region. With the move, the bedroom became the apartment of a "typical 21-year-old," she explained, a space for "[s]omeone just out of the dorms [with] the first apartment-style-look to it." What kind of books would someone have had? Balli and her team asked themselves. What kind of records? What posters? "Basically," they concluded, it would resemble "what our apartments looked like at the time." The books, like Balli's own copy of *A Handmaid's Tale*, were those a nineteen- to twenty-year-old would have read for college or kept from childhood. The pizza boxes (not original) came from the pizza place across the street. Exhibit designer SueSan Chan pulled some of the larger items from the props department. The careworn furniture, for instance, was repurposed from a dioramic exhibit commemorating the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens.[27]

The attention to detail, and the artifacts pulled from the project team's own past, helped invoke an authentic feeling to the apartment, along with a flood of nostalgia. It was a time a lot of people hold close, Balli said.[28] Those who experienced it may not have been financially well-off, but there were "no worries," she explained. There's "only one bill you're paying. Everything is still on the horizon. All the student loans are still way down the line." And life itself was more present and immediate. People weren't on their phones, and memories and experiences were still personal, not meant to be curated for social media consumption. "Only like one friend has a cell phone and there's no one for them to call," described Balli. "There's no texting. All the pictures need to be taken with a camera or a disposable camera. . . . All your experiences are yours. There's no sharing them like there is now." The analog existence of the early nineties was also, Balli noted, why acquiring photos for the exhibit involved going to people's houses and asking to look through their boxes. "You can't find this stuff on the internet," she said. "It was never online to begin with."

The goals for reimagining the Turk's Inn supper club into the Bushwick Brooklyn nightlife were twofold, co-owner Varun Kataria told me.[29] One the one hand, they sought to treat people to a welcoming Midwestern atmosphere that Kataria and Erickson had themselves experienced at the Turk's, an atmosphere that, for transplants and visitors to New York, reminded them of home (the locals are "jaded and gruff," said Kataria, especially in Bushwick, where you have the too-cool individ-

ual "with the arm sleeve of tattoos"). "You can't totally hang your hat on the nostalgic element," though, Kataria continued. "You have to meet the expectations of guest service and great product. When you do this well, the other elements can shine." The Turk's, therefore, is also, Kataria maintains, "one of the coolest spots in Brooklyn—in New York City": a restaurant with an adjoining music venue, the Sultan Room, a rooftop garden and a kebob stand. The Turk's is a place that fulfills the "promise of New York," Kataria said, a city where anything can happen. He gave as an example the evening David Byrne wandered into the dining room, pausing by the tables to take pictures of the décor on the walls. "It was a very New York moment" for the guests.

For Kataria, acquiring and arranging the collection of objects was a "labor of love" and a way to tell the story of the Turk's that they wanted to share. The supper club experience reflects the unique personalities of the owners, so this included "showcasing the tackier stuff," like the whiskey decanters, along with the exotic Eastern items. "I felt more like a museum curator" than a restaurateur, he told me. The comment isn't far off the mark. Kataria brought little experience in the restaurant business to this project. Instead, he took inspiration from unique exhibit spaces like Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence in Istanbul and drew on his own immigrant family's business importing Indian art and textiles.[30]

Turk's manager Natalie Quinn Manion mentioned an additional goal when I spoke with her the evening I visited. She was part of the Midwestern team Kataria and Erickson "imported" to help make sure they got the feel of the restaurant right. Manion described the care and attention that Kataria lavished on arranging the paintings and photographs, the artisanal lighting fixtures, the table settings and menus, and the collections of chinoiserie and Near Eastern exotica. For Kataria and Erickson, the space was a tribute to Marge, the daughter of Armenian immigrants, who gave up a New York career in fashion design to help run her family's eccentric restaurant in backwoods Wisconsin, and who had been so hospitable to those guys the countless times they visited the Turk's.[31] Kataria confirmed this when I asked him about it. They'd gotten the sense that the aesthetic directions the restaurant had taken in its last decades were undertaken by Marge's own hand. "We found her drawings" for the space among the items in the estate, he said, and they wanted to lift up and honor her work as a designer. "Maybe I'm projecting a little," Kataria mused, "but we felt we were doing a service in bringing her back to New York."[32]

Kataria and I spoke a little more about the connections he felt with the Gogian family in a follow-up phone interview a few months later. I'd asked

about what I perceived to be contradictions in the family's story, especially regarding George's history: George had come to the United States from Istanbul at around the time of the harshest persecutions of Armenians under the Turkish-governed Ottoman Empire, including approximately a million Armenians who were exterminated in death marches into the Syrian Desert and the forced Islamization of Armenian women and children, atrocities now globally recognized outside of the Republic of Turkey as a genocide. This is not something I knew about growing up, and as far as I knew, the family never talked about it. It seemed strange to me now that George, an ethnic Armenian, named his restaurant "the Turk's Inn," and moreover, embraced the nickname "the Turk," given this history and given that the timing of George's departure from Istanbul suggests it may have been under duress. Kataria said he'd long wondered about this as well, and confirmed that the Gogians had, to his knowledge, never spoken of the Armenian genocide to those outside the family, probably because it was a different time, and to be open about these things just wasn't as common as it would be today.

But Kataria speculates, too, that George had taken the transfer to the US as an opportunity to fully reinvent himself within the repertoire of Americans' imagined fantasies of the Middle and Near East. "This country was really good to him," said Kataria, and "George fully bought into the American Dream."[33] Coming to America and adopting it wholly gave George a kind of permission to rewrite his past and tell a new story, he explained. George was spinning a tale for an American audience, and in particular a northern Wisconsin audience not so discerning about the differences between Turks, Egyptians, Moroccans, and "Orientals"; he was dealing with narratives they'd be able to understand. By that token, "George the Turk" was more legible—and had a better ring to it—than "George the Armenian." The result for Turk's Inn patrons was an "Oriental fantasy," but Kataria recognizes such reinvention as a common practice among immigrants to the US, including among his own family (he gave the example of his mother's business selling Indian artifacts). The similar pattern has resulted for Kataria in a deeply felt kinship with George's story. "We disguise the complexity of our own past," as he put it, with "a manicured version of where we come from. Tailored to the tastes of our new home and new audience." For George, the reinvention allowed him not only to survive but to thrive. The "non-culturally specific" set of images in the restaurant, while culminating in a Silk-Road nostalgia, was the utterly unique phenomenon in Northwoods Wisconsin on which the Turk's Inn could hinge its success.[34]

I asked Living Computers Museum curator Aaron Alcorn how he saw nostalgia figuring into *Totally 80s Rewind*. The exhibit, he told me, invited visitors to be performers who would activate the space with their own memories.[35] The immersive environment, versus traditional interactive exhibits that are heavy on text-based interpretive labels and instructions, is key to its success. Eschewing labels altogether, Alcorn sought to empower the visitor (oftentimes a parent with their own children) to fill the space with their own interpretive context. In his words, his approach at Living Computers has been to "hack" traditional museum conventions for trafficking visitors through the space, and to structure the exhibits in a way that appeals to our inner human being, including engaging the senses as part of the meaning-making (think here of Machon's "haptic perception"). He wants visitors to discover and come to know the space using the whole sensory apparatus we use as children. "As a kid, when you go to a new friend's house there is a different smell," explained Alcorn, "The furniture is different. Different things are on the shelf. You don't know right away what the logic is. There's a strange foreignness to it, but you know it's important."

Alcorn spent a month scouring thrift stores up and down the Puget Sound corridor to source supplementary objects for the immersive exhibit. He looked to his own experiences growing up to achieve the feel he wanted. An earlier prototype was based on his own childhood home, complete with photos of real family members (the basement rec room is not a carbon copy simulation by a long shot, he said. "I grew up in South Florida. We didn't have basements.")

The exhibit was also driven by what had been happening already in the rest of the museum, where visitors in their thirties and forties, so called "graying geeks" who grew up with home computers and computer games, were interacting with technology from their childhoods and wanted to connect with others to share their memories.[36] "People [were] experiencing vintage systems and confronting their own past and looking around for people to say, 'I remember when,'" said Alcorn. They anticipated mainly the same core audience for this new exhibit: visitors in their 30s and 40s and their own children. Here, "the parent becomes the docent." The actual information about the rooms is "sparse, so the parent can get in and reinforce the relationship with their children." They become the expert, the authority—in Alcorn's words, the "hero" in their child's eyes. In other words, the artifacts are not as important as the stories they engender and relationships they reinforce.

Is this the kind of revolutionary anti-imperialist nostalgia that Bonnett,

Boym, Wenzel, and others discuss? Perhaps not. But it could be that these exercises in nostalgia can foster, if not accurate representations of the past in terms of professional expectations of rigor and objectivity, then affectively authentic connections with what is important in the present: the values one holds dear, connections with loved ones, and so forth. To wit: they can be instrumental in the pursuit of happiness. Objectively speaking, even the sentimental memories of adolescence I experienced in *Totally 80s Rewind*, with which I began this essay in such detail, were tempered with a healthy dose of *baloney*. That time of my life was not nearly as rosy in actuality. An awkward nerd, I was uncomfortable in my body and unpopular at school. The reason I could practically play that old Nintendo with my eyes closed was because of the countless lonely hours I'd logged as a typical '80s latchkey kid at home with video games I bought with money from a dishwashing job at a tourist-trap restaurant.[37] That kid I was back then, if I'm honest, spent more time pining for escape from that little, backwoods town than living the dreamy life of ease my adult brain had "selectively woven" from the "raw footage." That's the powerful—and sometimes ridiculous—thing about nostalgia: it has a profound capacity to trump up whatever it needs to to allow you to remake that past self, and to even long for a moment that you wouldn't have wished on anyone at the time. How much more remarkable it is to consider the enormous reinvention undertaken by George Gogian against that conservative white northern Wisconsin backdrop, to which the new Turk's Inn in Brooklyn now stands testament as a rich and welcoming immersive environment. In each of these cases, then, *Totally 80s Rewind* in Seattle, the Turk's Inn in Brooklyn, and *A Revolution You Can Dance To* in Tacoma, centering the participants' own experience of themselves in the haptic environment need not be read as obsequious or exploitational. Welcoming visitors to "feel *feelingly*" a deeply sensorial immersive environment—an environment into which the producers have invested enormous amounts of time and their own personal memories—can be key to activating their own nostalgic connections to the parts of the past that make them think of themselves as good, and that life is meaningful and worth living. To be the "heroes" in their own timeline.

Notes

1. *Totally 80s Rewind*, Living Computers Museum and Labs website. n.d., https://livingcomputers.org/Exhibits-Events/Exhibits/Totally-80s-Rewind.aspx

2. Francesca Street, "The Place Where 1980s Computers Still Rule," *CNN*

Travel, 23 August 2018, https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/totally-80s-rewind-exhibit-seattle/index.html; see also "Back to the 80s: Nostalgia Exhibit in Living Computers, Seattle," *Blooloop* 10 August, 2018, https://blooloop.com/link/80s-exhibit-living-computers/; Kurt Schlosser, "When Technology Was Totally Radical: Dream of the '80s Lives on inside Working Seattle Museum Exhibit," *GeekWire*, 13 March 2018, https://www.geekwire.com/2018/when-technology-was-totally-radical-dream-of-the-80s-lives-on-inside-working-seattle-museum-exhibit/

3. See *Dean MacCannell, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 [1976]).

4. Ligaya Mishan, "The Chefs Reinventing the Midwestern Supper Club," *New York Times Style Magazine*, 7 October 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/t-magazine/supper-clubs.html; see also Amanda Gabrielle, "How 2 Brooklynites Are Reviving an Iconic Midwestern Supper Club," *The Manual*, 27 August 2019, https://www.themanual.com/food-and-drink/turks-inn-midwestern-supper-club/; Paula Mejía, "Inside Turk's Inn, A Bushwick Recreation of the Kitschy Wisconsin Supper Club," *The Gothamist*, 25 June 2019, https://gothamist.com/food/inside-turks-inn-a-bushwick-recreation-of-the-kitschy-wisconsin-supper-club; Sharyn Jackson, "Minnesotans Resurrecting Legendary Wisconsin Supper Club, the Turk's Inn, in New York City," *Star Tribune*, 24 June 2019, https://www.startribune.com/minnesotans-resurrecting-legendary-wisconsin-supper-club-the-turk-s-inn-in-new-york-city/511726022/

5. "'A Revolution You Can Dance To' Explores the Northwest's Indie Music Scene," Washington State Historical Society website. n.d., http://www.washingtonhistory.org/about/media/news/090616_revolution/; Jonah Barrett, "Dance, Dance, Revolution: Olympia Music History at the Washington State History Museum," OLY Arts, 9 September 2016. https://olyarts.org/2016/09/09/dance-dance-revolution/; Dusty Henry, "The Washington State History Museum Lets You Experience the Origins of DIY IRL," *Seattle Weekly*, 12 October 2016, https://www.seattleweekly.com/music/the-washington-state-history-museum-lets-you-experience-the-origins-of-diy-irl/

6. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatre: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2013), 22.

7. Machon, 77, 22.

8. Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, and Productive Participation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2016), 10.

9. Alston, 10.

10. Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.

11. *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 168.

12. See, for instance, Julie Beck, "When Nostalgia Was a Disease," *The Atlantic*, 14 August 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/08/when-nostalgia-was-a-disease/278648/; Filiberto Fuentenebro de Diego and Carmen Vaiente Ots, "Nostalgia: A Conceptual History," *History of Psychiatry* 25, no. 4 (December 2014), 404–11; Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia—A Polemic," *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); Jean Starobinski, "The Idea of Nostalgia," *Diogenes* 54 (Summer, 1966): 81–103.

13. Jonathan D. S. Schroeder, "Nostalgia," in *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, eds. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (London: Routledge, 2020), 157.

14. Except for seamen, soldiers, immigrants, and first-year university or boarding-school students, for whom it was still a disorder until the end of the twentieth century (Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut, "Finding Meaning in Nostalgia," *Review of General Psychology* 22, no. 1 [2018]: 48).

15. Shroeder, 157.

16. Shroeder, 157, citing Kathleen Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1988), 227.

17. Philip D. Jordan. "The Neurosis of Nostalgia," *Minnesota History* (Fall 1974), 113–14.

18. Shroeder, 158, citing Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), xvii.

19. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 8.

20. Sedikides and Wildschut, 49.

21. Sedikides and Wildschut, 57.

22. Rhaina Cohen, "Nostalgia Isn't Just a Fixation on The Past—It Can Be About the Future, Too," *Hidden Brain* 17 October 2017, https://www.wwno.org/post/nostalgia-isnt-just-fixation-past-it-can-be-about-future-too

23. Schroeder 158–59, citing Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii; and Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (London: Routledge 2016), 8.

24. Shroeder, citing Wenzel, "Remembering the Past's Future: Anti-Imperialist Nostalgia and Some Versions of the Third World," *Cultural Critique* 62 (Winter 2006): 16.

25. Schroeder 158, citing Boym, xviii, citing Stewart.

26. All Len Balli quotes are from my interview with her at the Washington State History Museum, 6 April 2022.

27. The show also included displays of musical instruments, festival posters, backstage passes, and so forth. MoPop in Seattle (formerly EMP) loaned guitars and photographs, but most of the items Balli got from going around and asking what people had in storage. A major contributor was K Records and International Pop Underground Convention founder Calvin Johnson. Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic, who sits on the Washington State Historical Society board, "blessed" the exhibit and helped finance it along with bandmate Dave Grohl and Kurt Cobain's daughter, Frances Bean Cobain.

28. Zine publisher Courtney Bennett was so overwhelmed with emotion when she walked into the exhibit's opening that she had to step out to recover. "It was one of the best times of her life," Bennett told Balli. "It was like she walked right into 1994 and couldn't process it."

29. Varun Kataria, telephone interview, 28 April 2022.

30. Kataria, telephone interview, 28 April 2022.

31. Natalie Quinn Manion, personal interview, 13 April 2022.

32. Kataria, telephone interview, 28 April 2022.

33. Kataria, telephone interview, 30 September 2022. George is a complete

mystery outside of his life in the US, Kataria told me. We have records of a family trip to Egypt, but never back to Turkey. He appears to have lived fully in his life in America and was staunchly patriotic. An avid Democrat, George was politically active: he was invited to John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. Among the Turk's Inn materials Kataria and Erickson bought at auction was lots of American-flag ephemera. George called his daughter Marge by an American name. (Marge's given name was Beatrice). And no one seems to know George's wife's Armenian name. She was always called "Ma" or "Mom." The Gogians' American neighbors, in turn, were always welcoming to them, though Kataria wondered if this would have been as possible with the rising fear of the "Middle Eastern Other" beginning later in the twentieth century and especially after 9/11.

34. Varun Kataria, telephone interview, 30 September 2022.

35. All Aaron Alcorn quotes are from my interview with him at the Living Computers Museums + Labs, 13 February 2020.

36. *Totally 80s Rewind* is actually set in the beginning of the 1990 school year, Alcorn told me. Marketing chose the name.

37. This was a completely different immersive experience—a logging-camp-themed "cook shanty" restaurant that capitalized on Hayward's lumber-town past. I've written about this elsewhere, including in *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

TWELVE The Immersivity of American Tiki Bars

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At the corner of Broadway and 50th Street in New York City, a large neon marquee in the shape of an apple advertises the entrance to an Applebee's Neighborhood Bar and Grill. The chain eatery is hardly noticeable amid the surrounding cacophony of Times Square, with its bustling pedestrian and street traffic, whooshing subterranean subways, technicolor advertisements, and looming skyscrapers. Like so many repurposed buildings in Manhattan, the site of this Applebee's location obscures a rich history of performance and culture from bygone eras. From the early 1960s through its closure in the late '80s, this building at 1638 Broadway housed the Hawaii Kai—billed as "The World's Greatest Polynesian Restaurant."[1] A vintage menu from the 1960s invites customers to take a tropical escape within:

> Let us whisk you five thousand miles away to a Polynesian world of romance and splendor. As you cross our threshold, you become part of the romantic Polynesian world jealously guarded by Tiki Gods. Delight your senses with lyrical waterfalls and glorious lava rock gardens. Inspect our bamboo huts flown in from the distant islands. See our captive Manu birds display their colorful plumage as they serenade you with a cacophony of song.[2]

Indeed, Times Square once had its own tiki bar, where guests were physically and imaginatively "whisked away to a Polynesian world."

While the fun-spirited escapist fantasy of being "whisked away" is fundamental to many immersive experiences around the globe—from *Sleep*

No More to Disney theme parks—the tiki bar began as a uniquely American phenomenon. As a commercial manifestation of what the Declaration of Independence deems the "pursuit of happiness," the tiki bar offers its patrons both individualistic and communal opportunities for pleasure, delight, and fun. Yet scholars have also applied the critical lens of postcolonial theory to the American tiki bar, effectively problematizing the aesthetic of escapism to outline salient concerns such as cultural erasure, histories of violent conquest, and false notions of discovery. Accordingly, this chapter analyzes the American tiki bar as a site of complicated cultural legacy: both as an aesthetic invocation of coloniality and class struggle, as well as a communal space where imbibers are encouraged to pursue happiness by imagining and participating in a world that is more enchanting than our own. I convey some of the complexities surrounding the tiki bar by looking first at its immersive spatial aesthetics and then how it embodies various aspects of American drinking culture. Shuttling between the historical archive and my own rum-drizzled exploits, I investigate how the American tiki bar came to popularity despite—and because of—its cultural inauthenticity.

Tiki bars rose to popularity first in California and then the rest of the United States. Donn Beach (born Ernest Gantt) opened the original Los Angeles "Don the Beachcomber" tiki bar in 1933. In the ninety years since, the tiki bar has come to occupy its own place in the fabric of American popular culture and has weathered many cycles of becoming unfashionable and fashionable again. Ray Buhen, a Filipino American bartender, left Don the Beachcomber to establish the famous Tiki-Ti in 1961, building his career on serving delectable drinks in a kitschy setting. In the '80s, Donald Trump removed the Trader Vic's Polynesian Restaurant from the lobby of his Plaza Hotel in New York City because he felt it was too "tacky."[3] Today, queer bartenders of color such as Shannon Mustipher have reclaimed the genre in celebration of its vibrant flavor palate. Indeed, the story of tiki bars in America includes the creative labor of immigrants, women, people of color, small family businesses, and artists; at the heart of its kitsch aesthetic, however, the tiki bar's original cultural inspiration is Polynesia.

The Hawaii Kai and venues like it lay claim to being "Polynesian," but what does that mean? Polynesia is regionally defined by colonial geography as a vast triangle of islands delineated by Hawaii (north), Easter Island (east), and New Zealand (south); it encompasses various other island systems, too, such as Samoa, Tonga, and the Cook Islands.[4] Yet critics have pointed out that "the roots of tiki are far from the Pacific

Islands."[5] Some anthropologists argue that the term Polynesia itself is "a European construction which nonetheless has acquired a certain cogency since its definition by the French explorer Dumont d'Urville (1832)."[6] Yet this "cogency" only exists from an outsider's perspective, as the many cultures encompassed by this terminology are not monolithic, nor even geographically near each other. For example, New Zealand and Hawaii are about the same distance from each other as are London, England, and Nacogdoches, Texas. To be sure, the Hawaii Kai and similar tiki-themed venues present a version of Polynesia that is essentially romanticized through a colonial lens rather than indicating any authentic island culture. The American "tiki" bar is at its core a Hollywood aesthetic: it was concocted by two White American restaurateurs and popularized and disseminated via television, film, and theater executives. While certain Maori and Polynesian cultures use the word *tiki* to denote a carved icon representing a god or spirit, American tiki bars rarely feature legitimately sacred objects as decor.[7] Their "tikis," like their "lush greenery," are usually mass-produced plastic or ceramic objects. Beyond the obvious fakery of these design elements, however, we can view these infelicitous objects as constitutive of the tiki-bar genre itself, which is essentially a bricolage of debris from American pop cultural history.

Similarly, the food and drink offerings at American tiki bars are an amalgam of influences. In the case of the Jamaican rum-infused mai tai cocktail, the cocktail menu reaches far beyond Polynesia for inspiration and ingredients. The many Chinese dishes often served more obviously fall outside the region the establishments ostensibly evoke. As a genre, then, the tiki bar is celebrated not for its cultural accuracy but for its unique "type authenticity," meaning it has "developed [its] own institutionalized social category with a set of socially expected criteria."[8] By appropriating, romanticizing, mistranslating, and exaggerating various aspects of a large swath of maritime cultures, tiki bars have come to embody their own experiential genre, often recognizable by friendly staff, a relaxed ambience, and strong drinks. The purpose of this chapter is not to argue whether tiki bars are culturally authentic to Polynesian or Pacific Island cultures. They are not. Nor have they ever tried to be (escapism—not authenticity—is the aesthetic end goal). Rather, the immersive and participatory design of American tiki bars reveals a relationship between colonial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, performance practice, and the escapist aesthetics of American consumerism via drinking culture. As a White scholar, I recognize that my analysis of the tiki bar's culturally appropriative relationship to authentic Polynesian cultures comes from

an outside perspective. At the same time, as a dedicated cocktail enthusiast, I have personally encountered imbibers from many walks of life taking pleasure in the American tiki bar's restorative aesthetics of escapism.

As a cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century and beyond, tiki bars have enjoyed widespread success and longevity. Their tacky aesthetic is widely recognizable; a Google search in nearly any major city will produce several options for tropical indulgence. San Francisco tiki-bar enthusiast and web developer Michelle "Humuhumu" Trott built *Critiki.com*, a website that documented hundreds of locations around the world, with the great majority in the United States.[9] The phenomenal reach of the tiki bar makes identifying its impulses and practices even more urgent. I contend that by exploring the American tiki-bar aesthetic—not technically theater, but certainly a performance practice incorporating theatrical, immersive, and participatory elements—and identifying some of the mechanisms and motivations behind this popular and recurring genre, we gain a deeper understanding of how tiki bars both politically and historically reflect and reproduce mainstream American values like escapism, class aspiration, consumerism, and imperialism.

Immersive "Tiki"

In many ways Hawaii Kai's theatrically escapist aesthetic made it right at home in the theater district, on the same city block as Ellen's Stardust Diner and the Winter Garden Theatre. Throughout the years, the Winter Garden has presented many big-budget musicals, including *West Side Story*, *Cats*, and *Mamma Mia*. In its heyday, the Hawaii Kai's elaborate interior, featuring gurgling waterfalls, thatched huts, and expansive dioramas, took many of its design cues from the spectacular Broadway productions next door. The Hawaii Kai was not only a restaurant, but an immersive and theatrical experience.

To be sure, tiki bars are not immersive theater, per se. Most are not ticketed events with a set start time, nor do they usually cohere to any sustained narrative conventions. On the other hand, they are more theatrical than most conventional bars and restaurants, since they incorporate themed dress, roleplay, and scenic and sound design. The performances of Hawaii Kai's hosts, servers, dancers, and bartenders play out the narrative of a tropical escape for paying visitors. Specifically, a series of "floor shows" took place in the Lounge of the Seven Pleasures nightly until 3 a.m. These intermittent performances were a collaboration between the

dancers—dark-haired women in long grass skirts, floral leis, and bikini tops—who undulated to the music of the Tahitian Aires band. The musicians played an assortment of instruments, such as the "electrified Hawaiian steel guitar," a Spanish guitar, and "Hawaiian tom-toms."[10] While the floor show's presentational nature somewhat awkwardly positioned the performers as exotic objects on display, it also provided a platform for native Hawaiian dancers and musicians such as Bill Kelly, Spencer Hall, and Lundy Nelson to create their art.

Behind the scenes, too, there are the restaurateurs, chefs, line cooks, managers, architects, and designers who all contribute their talents to crafting the illusion of an immersive world. But the "audience," or customers, perform a uniquely crucial role because their presence is fundamental to the participatory aesthetic of the tiki bar. As Jacques Ranciere and Augusto Boal might argue, the word "audience" or "spectator" is too conventional to accurately encompass the more active modes of participation demanded by tiki-themed spaces.[11] Since venues like the Hawaii Kai envelop participants in a themed world that appeals to all the senses, and since mixed drinks are central to the American tiki-bar experience, I use the term "imbiber" to denote our ideal tiki-bar subject.

Moreover, while visitors to the Hawaii Kai were technically "customers," this label reduces their dining adventure to a commercial transaction, which conflicts with the core philosophy of the "experience economy" as famously conceived by entrepreneurs Joseph Pine and James Gilmore. Their approach to hospitality in the 1990s popularized the addition of experiential value to otherwise transactional relationships in customer service businesses. Add-ons might include impeccably knowledgeable servers, awe-inspiring interior design, or magnificent views, all of which serve to diminish the transactional feel of a commercial exchange.[12] Unlike a typical business transaction, an Experience (henceforth distinguishable from an everyday experience with a lowercase "e") exceeds expectations and appeals to the senses. The resultant aura of the consumer's Experience distracts from the very real monetary exchange at hand. As we will see, the Hawaii Kai transported, absorbed, and intoxicated its participants using a variety of techniques.

When Donn Beach opened the first American tiki bar, it was the end of Prohibition and monied Californians were uniquely thirsty for escapist pursuits, especially ones involving alcohol. Beach drew on his Hollywood set design experience to create the signature tiki bar style, signified by carved masks, cocktail umbrellas, bamboo railings, and rattan furniture. Every night, a hidden sprinkler system simulated an indoor thunder-

storm, encouraging imbibers (many of them celebrities or other notable personalities) to stay and drink more.[13] Victor Bergeron soon followed suit in northern California with his Trader Vic's chain, which copied Don the Beachcomber's service of rum-forward tiki drinks, but put extra emphasis on the Cantonese-inspired cuisine (adorned with pineapples as a vague nod to tropical flavor). Undoubtedly, the "Polynesian pop" tiki-bar zeitgeist had taken hold of the West Coast by the middle of the twentieth century, and it would soon encompass New York as well. This leads us to the famous Hawaii Kai.

While Donn and Vic expanded their tiki empires in California, Monte Proser, the man behind New York's famous Copacabana bar, imported tiki to the East Coast in the 1940s. Monte Proser's Beachcomber bar took up residence in the aforementioned space above the Winter Garden Theatre (after several shifts in management, the venue would eventually become Lanai and then Hawaii Kai during the '60s).[14] This popular restaurant and bar remained in business for over two decades, renowned for its "Sweet Sixteen" parties and other special occasion gatherings. Hawaii Kai adopted Donn and Vic's signature fruity drinks and exotic dishes in a beach-themed environment, but in the heart of Times Square. Although Hawaii Kai closed in the late '80s, it left behind a reputation for immersive fun.[15]

Josephine Machon observes that immersive theater often differs from conventional theatergoing because it begins long before a participant has physically entered the performance venue. In tiki bars, this aesthetic foreplay can take shape as an "extended or intriguing journey to get to the location," such as a themed antechamber, staircase, or decorated doorway.[16] For example, Three Dots and a Dash is a current "tiki speakeasy" tucked into a relatively discreet alleyway in Chicago's River North district. Once imbibers have successfully located the bar's entrance, they descend a staircase encrusted with dramatically lit skulls, evoking a macabre island tomb. In midcentury New York City, Hawaii Kai sought to attract tourists and locals alike with a street-level entrance featuring a sculpted concrete "stone" water feature enveloped in faux vines. This curious oasis stood out from the gritty midtown sidewalks, beckoning potential imbibers to abandon their workaday realities and ascend the rattan staircase. Street-level advertisements evoked what Machon would describe as an air of "mystery surrounding the event, perhaps similar to that of secret societies."[17] Imbibers did not simply open a door to enter the restaurant from the city street: the elaborate entryway and the process of climbing the narrow staircase physically transported them and invited them to imagine

crossing a threshold via a subtly magical process. At the top of the stairs lay Hawaii Kai's three-chambered venue comprising a bar (the Okole Maluna), dining room (the Island Huts of Oahu), and performance space (the Lounge of the Seven Pleasures).

Hawaii Kai's opening in 1962 embodied a globalizing cultural moment. Tiki-bar enthusiast Sven A. Kirsten observes how, historically, the tiki bar's emergence during the mid-twentieth century coincided with American "economic expansion" and the contentious acquisition of Hawaii in 1959.[18] Thus the mystery and magic surrounding one's entrance into the Hawaii Kai was bolstered by a sense of American imperialism. Additionally, as airline routes to Hawaii increased in the twentieth century, travel to Polynesia became a tangible reality for some mainland Americans and an aspirational dream for many others. Hawaii Kai's colorful menu appealed to this jet-setting lifestyle, with its illustration of White heterosexual couples in floral clothing and lei necklaces indulging in a pig-roast luau. In the darkened background, a pair of Hawaiian dancers are depicted mid-twirl, their faces obscured.[19] This foregrounding of touristic experience is emblematic of Machon's notion of "immersion as transportation," which creates a literal and figurative sense of escape and adventure.[20] Although the term "immersive theater" did not exist when the Hawaii Kai opened in the early '60s, the venue employed many of the same tactics since utilized by innovators in the field of themed and immersive entertainment.

Another cultural trend inspiring tiki's emergence more generally, according to Kirsten, was a surge of "Hollywood South Seas concepts" flooding popular culture, including films like *Blue Hawaii*, starring Elvis Presley (1961), and the very popular 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* (and subsequent film versions in 1958 and 2001).[21] A similar touristic version of Polynesian culture was baked into Hawaii Kai's interior design because it was conceived by Frederick Fox, a preeminent Broadway, opera, and television set designer. Like Donn Beach, who designed film sets, Fox drew on his showbusiness career to envelop customers in the Hawaii Kai's mystery-shrouded interior world. Drawing from the "South Seas" trend, his designs provided a themed backdrop for the Tahitian Aires and the floor-show dancers adorned with floral headdresses and grass skirts. Fox's interior design was so iconic that the location was eventually scouted for the "Bamboo Lounge" in the famous introductory scene in *Goodfellas* (1991).[22]

Within the space, sound combined with taste, smell, texture, and visual splendor to create a South Seas–inspired sensorium. This aligns with what

Machon refers to as immersion as "absorption," which engages "the participant fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest."[23] While patrons of today's Applebee's location might vie for a seat by the window to observe the hustle of Times Square, Hawaii Kai's imbibers were meant to forget about the city's goings-on altogether. Absorption is also commonly achieved spatially in tiki bar establishments by overwhelming visitors with a plenitude, or sheer abundance, of referential objects. Stephen Brown and Anthony Patterson refer to this phenomenon as *plenitude*, a design strategy that creates a theatrical world

> by means of an exaggerated attempt to capture "everything" about the theme in question. . . . Every available signifier and vaguely relevant referent is thrown into the mix and, while the result may strike many as a grotesque caricature, it is nessessary [*sic*] to include "everything" in order to convey a sense of (pseudo) plenitude and create a (counterfeit) cornucopia.[24]

For some, the tiki bar affinity for kitsch in abundance is an assault on the senses, or a "grotesque caricature," but as a design strategy it can be highly effective in absorbing the interest of imbibers. The Hawaii Kai's space was cluttered with totems, grasses, spears, lanterns, buoys, flowers, masks, and other themed knickknacks; in an aesthetic unconcerned with subtleties of authenticity, more is more.

The Hawaii Kai staff enlivened its interiors by dressing to the theme in Hawaiian shirts, grass skirts, and miscellaneous tropical garb. Postcards and other souvenirs described "Sumptuous Delicacies Served by our Native Food Bearers."[25] Indeed, servers and bartenders' performances of overt hospitality reinforced the dynamic of the imbiber-as-tourist becoming immersed in and, importantly, served by, an "Other" culture. It also conformed to romanticized imaginings of Hawaiian native people as "basically gregarious and outgoing" and "accommodating" toward visitors from the mainland.[26] Yet Lisa Kahaleole Hall argues that such depictions of Hawaiians occlude their complexity as a people, which includes a "warrior history" as well as "massive death, colonial dispossession, and attempted cultural destruction."[27] Hall, a Native Hawaiian, warns that tiki bars paint too rosy a picture of Hawaiians and their culture, ignoring uglier truths such as the fact that the "U.S. military was using the Pacific Islands to test nuclear bombs" at the same time the aesthetic reached its heyday in the 1960s.[28] These inconvenient aesthetic incongruencies have no place in Hawaii Kai and other "counterfeit cornucopias" (per Brown

and Patterson), which only incorporate irreverent depictions of island culture as carefree and exotic.

Indeed, carefreeness—and thereby, erasure—is central to the American tiki bar's branding as a commercial enterprise. As a site of communal uplift, the tiki bar mirrors the Broadway musical, which has long provided Americans with escapist entertainment during times of war, conflict, and natural disaster. During World War II, for example "the war proved lucrative for the profit-driven industry of musical theater, whose audiences were swelled in part by soldiers enjoying a few final days in New York before shipping out to Europe."[29] Considered in the context of trying times, however, it understandable why patrons would seek an escape from the harshest realities. The provision of these enveloping worlds and the escapism they provide can also be viewed as an act of hope and communal endurance, or as a return to the foundational American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The proprietors who dream up these immersive worlds, and the performers who creatively embody them, provide weary imbibers with a rejuvenating opportunity to temporarily step into an alternative reality. In the case of tiki bars, alcohol is an essential ingredient for facilitating this escapist aesthetic on an individual physiological level.

Tiki's Participatory Consumption

Libations themselves are an essential element of tiki's immersivity, just as drinking culture is an essential element of social life for many Americans. While Fox's theatrical designs stimulated the eyes and ears of Hawaii Kai visitors, the kitchen staff and bartenders appealed to the nose and mouth. Tiki bar "cuisine" is often a culinary assemblage of broadly Polynesian dishes catered to please American palates and embellished with names such as "Bora Bora Steak" and "Lobster Aloha."[30] Hawaii Kai's cocktail bar, the Okole Maluna, literally translates to "buttocks up." It is not a native Hawaiian phrase, but a direct translation of the English drinking idiom "bottoms up." Some native elders take issue with the saying as they believe it denigrates the sacredness of the human body.[31] Yet Okole Maluna's linguistic vulgarity embodies the spirit of drinking to excess, which is arguably more American in nature than Hawaiian. Indeed, binge drinking is so common among college-aged Americans that the National Institute of Health has labeled it a "significant public health problem."[32] In their *Hawaii Kai Cookbook*, backyard luau enthusiast Roana Schindler

and her husband Gene (formerly the executive director of Hawaii Kai's menu) preface their section of drink recipes with the admission that tiki-inspired cocktails are a "purely Western innovation."[33] The mai tai, perhaps the most popular drink among tourists in Hawaii, was not invented on the island, and as mentioned above, it contains nonnative ingredients (curaçao, for instance).[34] Thus, the tiki bar as a place to drink mai tais has far more to do with a mainland American aesthetic of conspicuous consumerism than any drinking practices intrinsic to Polynesian cultures.

Furthermore, tiki-bar drinks have their own genre, the criteria being that a beverage will first and foremost be a mix of iconic flavors, and secondly, that it will be presented theatrically. Contemporary craft bartenders pay homage to the original era of tiki bartending; many will tell you that the true legacy of the tiki-bar craze lies in the splendiferous drinks—their ingredients, their creation process, and especially their presentation. Though tiki-inspired drinks are often maligned as sickeningly sweet, the original recipes balanced fresh fruit with other complex flavor notes. In fact, Mustipher credits today's "craft cocktail" boom to tiki innovations of the midcentury.[35] Tiki cocktail menus feature dizzyingly long lists of tropical, fantastical, and often off-color drink names. In the case of Hawaii Kai and many others, these lists are brightly illustrated to help imbibers envision each beverage's table appeal. In general, rum is the predominant liquor. The rum recipe book *Smuggler's Cove* distills tiki drinks down to a basic combination: sour, sweet, strong, weak, and spice.[36] This flavor profile results in an alcoholic concoction that is not only delicious, but easily consumable in large quantities. Indeed, tiki bars normalize and encourage excess in both flavor and serving size; a culinary strategy that mirrors the plenitude of objects and cultural referents crowding the physical space.

The experiential nature of drinking adds an element of participation to tiki-bar establishments. Defining what constitutes "participation" in performance situations is notoriously tricky; Gareth White points out that "all audiences are participatory" in the sense that they are usually invited to watch or listen, both of which require a degree of attention or at least attendance.[37] Helpfully, he argues further that participatory performances often *feel* different because they extend an invitation to participate beyond these usual modes, transforming "the audience member into material that is used to compose the performance: an artistic medium."[38] Thinking about audiences *as* performance material resonates strikingly in a restaurant and bar setting like Hawaii Kai. Acts of eating and drinking engage the bodies of imbibers in very intimate ways to include tast-

ing, smelling, swallowing, digesting, and possibly feeling the intoxicating effects of alcohol. Since tropical cocktails are arguably the very foundation of the tiki bar aesthetic, their consumption (and any resultant intoxication) constitutes the synthesis of an imbiber's experience. Arguably, intoxication is the Aristotelian *catharsis* of the tiki bar.

In addition to their recognizable flavors, tiki-inspired drinks also add an essential element of participation to the bar atmosphere. The famous sociological study *The Pub and the People* observes that "within the four walls of the pub, once a man has bought or been bought his glass of beer, he has entered an environment in which he is participator rather than spectator."[39] Most often, cocktails are not consumed for nutritional reasons; rather, they engender ritual, intoxication, or socialization. This is another reason behind the notion of an "imbiber": the verb *to drink* or *to eat* could refer widely to any type of ingestion, while *to imbibe* connotes pleasure, community, and entertainment. Just as the Experience economy invites customers to create memories rather than endure transactions, tiki-bar consumption is uniquely participatory because it invites guests to imbibe rather than simply drink or eat. In her conspicuous consumption, the imbiber embodies the carefree and communal ethos of the American tiki bar. This does not necessarily mean overeating or overdrinking; rather, the excessiveness of tiki bar consumption lies in its resplendent presentation: the ritualistic serving of a suckling pig with musical fanfare, the bright aroma of pineapple in dishes both sweet and savory, a neon red maraschino cherry atop a smoking ceramic volcano cocktail vessel. It is all too much, and yet the ideal imbiber wants more.

Additionally, a tiki-bar menu item's presentation is often a theatrical and participatory performance. Hawaii Kai's menu refers to its bartenders as "native conjurers" who "mix exotic South Sea brews."[40] Tiki-bar drinking is often so involved that it requires a shaman-like bartender to lead imbibers through an established ritual. At minimum, drinks are usually served in exotic receptacles. The Hawaii Kai served many cocktails in "fantastic Kiaha stemware," while others were served in hollowed coconuts or pineapples.[41] Some drinks, such as the communal Scorpion and Volcano, contain far more alcohol than one person should consume in a day. These extra-large drinks are typically served in a massive decorative bowl that is meant to be shared among friends.

The most notable oversized drink was, and arguably continues to be, the Mystery Girl cocktail. Popularized by the family-owned (since 1956) Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the cocktail is served by a waitress in a sarong, who performs a seductive dance as she places the libation atop

the patrons' table. Sometimes, the performer also plants a kiss on the cheek of the drink's special recipient. Purported by the Mai Kai to be "an experience that must be witnessed to be fully appreciated," the Mystery Girl cocktail gamifies and theatricalizes the act of drinking, transforming the ordinarily individual act of drinking into a shared ritual performance. It is also an illustration of tiki theatricality in all its complexity.[42] While the Mystery Girl's silent yet exotic undulations arguably play into colonial stereotypes of "Polynesian" women, her continuing legacy also evidences the enduring popularity of the Mai Kai, which in 2014 was added to the National Park Service's "Registry of Historic Places." Once novel in their "exotic" appeal, venues like the Mai Kai and Hawaii Kai are now quintessential emblems of American pop culture history.

Of course, the bodily Experiences facilitated by communal beverages such as the Scorpion Bowl and Mystery Girl became fraught in a post-COVID era. So did any indoor, windowless venue like the Hawaii Kai, where surgical masks would rival the plastic "tiki" masks decorating the walls. Perhaps a postpandemic context made the novelty of tiki-bar drinking seem more ridiculous and superfluous than ever. It also accrued another layer of nostalgia onto a genre that was already built on kitsch, always yearning toward a fantasy world grounded not in authentic Polynesian culture, or even in reality itself, but in an aspirational aesthetic of escapism. As Beach famously mused, "if you can't get to paradise, I'll bring paradise to you."[43] Indeed, the tiki bar perpetuates the American pursuit of happiness by creating conveniently paradisiacal spaces for imbibers to inhabit the good life, even for just one very happy hour. At once an enormous colonialist mistranslation of authentic Polynesian culture, the American tiki bar has also come to embody its own ethos of unheeding optimism during difficult times. It is a gathering place for pop culture–loving Americans who, collectively and temporarily, wish simply to imbibe somewhere better.

Notes

1. "1967 Hawaii Kai restaurant NYC Great Inu tiki mug goblet photo vintage print ad," *Ebay*, https://www.ebay.com/itm/315382544990. Accessed 23 July 2024.

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4. Patrick Vinton Kirch and Roger C. Green, "Fig. 1.1. Map of the Polynesian Triangle and the Polynesian Outliers," in *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17.

5. Sammi Katz and Olivia McGiff, "Reclaiming the Tiki Bar," *New York Times*, 27 December 2020.

6. Kirch and Green, 54.

7. Scott A. Lukas, "The Cultures of Tiki," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon: ETC Press, 2016), 62.

8. Glenn R. Carroll and Dennis Ray Wheaton, "Donn, Vic and Tiki Bar Authenticity," *Consumption Markets and Culture* 22, no. 2 (2019): 157.

9. Humuhumu Trott. *Critiki.com*, Accessed 1 April 2022. Trott would eventually archive the website in September 2022 because she felt it was "making it harder—not easier—for people to understand the cultures of the Pacific."

10. "Tahitian-Aires–South Sea Island Holiday (1959)" *Voluptuous Vinyl*, https://voluptuousvinyl.com/products/tahitian-aires-south-sea-island-holiday-vinyl-record. Accessed 23 July 2024.

11. See Jacques Ranciere's *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009 [2008]) and Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. Mcbride and Maria Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993 [1979]).

12. See B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore II, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

13. Apparently, Donn didn't invent the sprinkler idea. That credit is due to Ray Haller, the entrepreneur behind the Seven Seas tiki restaurant, which opened shortly after Don the Beachcomber. See Gregory Paul Williams, *The Story of Hollywood: An Illustrated History* (Hollywood: BLL Press LLC, 2005), ebook.

14. "Hawaii Kai - New York," *Mytiki.life*, https://mytiki.life/tiki-bars/hawaii-kai. Accessed 23 July 2024.

15. THYRDEYE, "The Hawaii Kai—NYC Urban Tropical Tiki Paradise, Gone but Not Forgotten!" YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgvMpoNOVRI

16. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.

17. Machon, 54.

18. Sven Kirsten, *Tiki Pop* (Los Angeles: Taschen Bibliotheca Universalis, 2020), 9.

19. "VINTAGE 1960'S MENU HAWAII KAI."

20. Machon, 63

21. Kirsten, 9.

22. "Cast of Characters," *Goodfellas*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1990; Warner Home Video 2004). DVD.

23. Machon, 62.

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THIRTEEN Time Traveler Day at the Renaissance Festival

MICHELLE LIU CARRIGER

Fantasy immersive environments—it's a truism—are nothing new: think of Marie Antoinette's faux pastoral mansionette, le Petit Trianon. Classical Chinese and Japanese gardens from a few hundred years earlier were designed with extensive references to novels and poems, borrowed scenery, or the careful fabrication of the sense of the *sankyo shichu*: a "mountain hut hidden in the city." Horace Walpole built the faux-gothic (which is to say gothic, as the gothic is always already a reimagined history[1]) manse Strawberry Hill in the mid-eighteenth century, made of plaster and paint on the banks of the Thames just outside London. Thus, in the longer genealogy of immersive imaginative environments, Disney theme parks and living history museums, Civil War reenactments and Punchdrunk spectaculars, appear less as a new innovation than a semi-democratization of a long-held human fascination.

And while fabricating a whole space or place is a pretty big undertaking (hence the typical elitist limitation of the historical/fantasy immersive place to royals and aristos with time, space, and money), how small can you go and still be immersive? The possibility of immersion is contingent on a difference in scale: to immerse something (or someone), one needs a larger volume of thing to become immersed *in*. In this essay I want to think about two immersive scales in tandem—the first, less debatable category is the place and space of immersive reenactment and fantasy, like the Renaissance Festival (or sometimes "Faire"), the theme park, an "immersive" play, or a living history reenactment. The second, more ten-

uous category is an outfit, a costume, a suit, clothing. Sartorial ensembles function at the level of the individual and, of course, literally envelop the body. When you wear clothes, you are immersed inside the garment.

Could we therefore possibly think of clothing as a form of immersive performance? And if we do, new questions may emerge about who is an audience member, who is a performer, and how we characterize the varying pleasures and possibilities of different immersive spaces and performances. In this essay, I am looking to articulate what happens when two types of performance practice collide: large-scale immersive environments such as Renaissance Festivals, conventions, or theme parks, where in recent years increasing numbers of costume-based subcultural enthusiasts like goths, steampunks, and street-fashion fans appear, crossing and mixing thematic messages but harmonizing at the overarching level of playful resignification of the everyday into a fantasized alternate reality.

Or, in other words, I'm talking about Time Traveler Day at the Renaissance Festival.

In appropriate fantasy fairy-tale fashion, we are going on a journey now, to two magically immersive places, the Renaissance Fest and Disneyland, as representative poles anchoring a spectrum of aesthetic immersion strategies. We have to prepare for our journey by considering carefully what we wear and carry, and how what we choose will equip us for the challenges (and enjoyments) ahead. By traveling to two very different lands of immersive pleasure (pursuing happiness, as it were) while paying close attention to the clothing and costumes travelers in these lands wear and how the rulers of these lands control their visitors, we will learn to articulate between at least two distinct types of enjoyment obtainable in places of immersive performance. I hope we will return from our quest with some new modes of thinking about immersion at collective and individual scales and more precise ways to evaluate the oft-lauded "agency" and "freedom" of immersive environments and performances.

Do you have everything you need? It's time to go to the Faire.

Renaissance Festivals are a common annual event around the United States, slowly growing in number and popularity since the 1960s and '70s, in conjunction with other forms of immersive and historical education and entertainment, like living history museums, and the rise of battle reenactments and the Society for Creative Anachronism (founded 1966). One of the oldest festivals is Southern California's Renaissance Pleasure Faire (founded 1963), now held annually on the grounds of the Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area in Irwindale, CA, a northeastern part of Greater Los Angeles.[2] Taking the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, one of an incor-

porated chain of faires, as representative, let's think about its immersivity. Like Disneyland or other theme parks, the Pleasure Faire imposes built structures on a given natural environment; in the case of these immersive endeavors, these buildings and environmental alterations are geared toward generating the illusion of another time and place in their visitors. Both Disney parks and the Ren Fest incorporate tropes from a popular sense of European history, particularly the English medieval and early modern (and in Disney's case, also other parts of the world, viewed through a distinctly European colonial lens[3]). The historical images and ideas invoked have to be reasonably widely held beliefs, because for the most part the sense of "rightness" to the scene has no intellectual reference to bolster it beyond the visitor's own preconceived notions of the late medieval European. Popular performance areas include comic dance and skit shows, jugglers, and magic shows. Prime among the attractions of the Ren Fest are the jousting and other tournament games carried out by armor-clad "knights" on horseback, with the assistance of "squires" and "pages," for the enjoyment of a small group of costumed royals and nobles, especially ladies, along with the hordes of visitors.[4] Purchasing a giant roast turkey leg to eat off the bone has become a staple of both the Ren Fest and Disneyland. Although turkey is a New World bird, something about the bigness and messiness of a giant piece of meat to gnaw from its bone activates that popular imagination of the so-called "Dark Ages" as both heartily barbaric and lustily gustatory, imagery that recalls children's books' illustrations of giant joints of meat piled at a medieval banqueting table as much or more than serious historical sources. Besides the invitations to watch entertainment, eat, and drink in a faux historic style (handled mugs of ale or mead of course are imagined to complement the meaty favorites), the third main thing you are expected to do at the Ren Fest is *shop*. Perhaps foremost among the hundreds of things for sale after you've paid to come to the Faire are accoutrements meant to induct you *into* the Faire's mise-en-scène with your own costumes. These costumes run the gamut from highly accurate reproductions of armor, kirtles, and shoes to all kinds of modern interpretations or approximations of the medieval feel, like gauze "poet's shirts," fairy wings, or belly dance wear.

The invitation is clear: you have entered a fabricated reality of playfully realized generalized European pastness—alternately kinda medieval while still typically labeled "Renaissance"—shouldn't you be joining in the illusion? Of course, many visitors to the Faire show up in some variety of appropriate costume. Some more guests will buy and dress the part, but

most will not, so the completeness of the immersive illusion of medieval pleasure faire will remain thoroughly imbricated with the typical aesthetic of whatever the calendar-year fashions are: baseball caps, denim shorts, rubber-soled athletic shoes, sunglasses, phones, phones, phones, and so on.

Costume is of course a key element of theatrical mise-en-scène while also standing apart from a theater academic's typical definition of scenography due to its imbrication so directly with the body of the actor. However, since actors comprise a typical part of the typical stage scene, and immersion thrives on an uninterrupted combination of signifiers, costume comprises a big portion of immersive scenographic technique. And since immersive performances also tend to end up with audience members *immersed* throughout their environments, visitor/audience members too have to be reckoned with as part of the scenography. The blockbuster immersive theater company Punchdrunk has solved the problem of audience integration by adopting the conceit of mandatory masks (of the pre-COVID variety) worn to demarcate the visitors mixed in to the show, cleverly "costuming" the audience in a uniform way that separates them from the action by domesticating them into the frame. (In the "post"-COVID moment, Punchdrunk productions have incorporated air-filtering masks into their audience-marking masks in various ways.) The mix of nonperformer visitors in the immersive scrum can indeed sometimes begin to confuse the performances. In contrast to Punchdrunk's gambit of costuming the audience in uniform masks, Disney theme parks have outlawed adults in costumes, a restriction that is enforced unevenly, but has sometimes caught up analogue practices, such as subcultural gothic lolita fashion aficionados, in its dragnet.[5] Disney's "no costumes" rule unexpectedly poses an interesting ontological question about what is "costume" and what is "clothing," and for whom, as well as refocusing our attention on what audiences mean to various kinds of immersive environments.

Josephine Machon quotes Claire Bishop cribbing Debord in offering "viveur" as a moniker for the immersed audience: "the audience in immersive theatre practice enters the realm of 'viveur' (one who lives)."[6] And anytime a French *~eur* is offered, I can't help but think of Benjamin's flaneur, that icon of modernity, who could also be a likely denizen of the Faire, the park, or the show and who certainly functions as a kind of critical yet detached roving audience member.[7] In conversation with viveurs and flaneurs, I want to offer us a neo-Frenchism that pushes my clothing question into the realm of the immersed audience member, so how about "sarteur"? Our audience member is *one who wears*. This, please under-

stand, is faux French—the "sartorial" that I'm cribbing from is *porter* in French, so, a few mostly Swiss surnames aside, we're on our own here with this *néologisme*. What I want to do with sarteur (or sarteuse, of course, or a yet-to-be-determined nonbinarily gendered French noun) is to concentrate into one word for our audience/visitor/participant a sense that how they are costumed is relevant here—that the costume in many ways constitutes the nature of their immersion, participation, or (mis)alignment with the larger event. And ironically, for some more tightly controlled events, fitting in too well as a sarteur can be worse than standing out as a definite audience member. The notorious Disney theme parks "no adult costumes" rule reenters here. Such a rule is of course self-preservationary: because park authorities have less control and vetting over the behavior of visitors, they have a vested interest in avoiding the possibility of bad, or just contradictory, audience behavior that could be misattributed to park personnel due to visual confusion.

Disney fanatics have found creative ways to incorporate themselves into the ethos of Disney despite their disqualification from full participation in the scenography. "Disneybounding" is a recent, growing phenomenon in which enthusiasts dress in "normal" clothing combinations meant to evoke the appearances of various characters through color combinations, cut, and silhouette. For example, any primary yellow skirt can become "Snow White" with the addition of a blue top and a red headband. At the 2019 Disneyland "Dapper Day" Expo, three women portrayed *Aladdin*'s Jasmine, Aladdin, and Genie by combining those characters' main costume colors in *yukata* (Japanese summer kimono) and obi sashes, along with appropriate accessories, like a carpet-print bag for Aladdin and a gold lamp brooch for the Genie. This practice may have grown out of the no-costumes policy for entering the theme parks, but it also encompasses a certain connoisseur pleasure as participants enjoy identifying each other's creative evocations of shared character and narrative knowledge.[8]

In numerous fan-related activities perhaps you'll see other creative evocations of shared knowledge—and these outfits can be linked to other in-group dressing practices, such as themed T-shirts or pin collection. Themed T-shirts and Disneybounding are indelibly marked as "audience" costume, whereas the closer we get to cosplay,[9] the more confusing the status of the audience/participant becomes. One sarteur group that tends to love both Disneyland and their own fashioned-self-performances are gothic lolita subcultural fashion practitioners.[10] Gothic lolitas dress in historically inflected storybook-style outfits called "coords" (a Japanese-derived abbreviation of "coordinate"). Wearers typically consider these

outfits to be fashion, not costume, although they are occasionally identified as the latter by bystanders and literal Disney gatekeepers, so these unusually clothed audience members begin to roil the usually clean line between audience and performer. While there is an unofficial annual "Lolita Day" in which large groups of enthusiasts organize to descend on a park en masse, at other times, individual lolitas sometimes run afoul of their fashion's similarity to costume, and certain Disney characters in particular (*Alice in Wonderland* comes to mind).[11] Lolitas share horror stories of being stopped at entry gates and forced to dismantle their carefully arranged coords in order to reach a baseline "noncostume" level as judged by gate staff. One detailed account from 2008 has an added zest of sizeism, when a pair of lolitas tried to enter the park on a birthday outing, only to be refused entry.[12] Although staff could not name any characters they were dressed as, they were still refused entry until finally the birthday girl changed into a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt from a gift shop. The friend of the birthday girl was allowed to enter in her original dress after removing her petticoat. The subjects of this incident speculated that the only difference between the two outfits was that the friend was "plus-sized," while the girl who was forced to change into sweats was of a comparable size to the women who play "face characters" in the park. The unstated prejudice here, on top of a ruined birthday trip, is that only a skinny girl would ever be mistaken for a true Disney princess.

In one sense, there isn't very much to be made of certain highly commercial immersive environments carefully controlling the scenography of their sarteuses: theme parks have an illusion to maintain and a brand to protect, and some spectators are bad actors (by which I mean with potential negative motives in addition to being . . . bad at acting). No one wants a rogue Cinderella stealing shoes from children and passing as a park employee while doing it (much less whatever worse things the febrile modern imagination could conceive of a costumed Disney character perpetrating). At the same time, however, looking at the different levels of audience scenographic control suggests an additional mode of evaluating immersive locales on the basis of the level of control they exert over the possibilities available to their sarteur audience participants.

The average Ren Faire has none of the corporate clarity around participants and nonparticipants that Punchdrunk and Disney do; it betrays its amateur participatory origins in the merchandisings' and programming's open invitation to any participant to suit up and join in. This interactivity contrasts with the timed queues to "meet" Disney characters or the exclusive moments-for-one where Punchdrunk performers might

Fig. 13.1. Steampunks (at right) in the scrum of the 2019 Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Irwindale, California. Photo credit Michelle Liu Carriger.

choose one lucky bemasked audience member for a special scene behind a locked door. Maybe that is why the more shoestring operation of the Ren Fest has been much more inviting of an interloping, intersecting brand of counter-immersed performance. For example, "Time Traveler Day" (or sometimes "Weekend") has become a popular themed day at many Faires, acknowledging and attempting to build on the burgeoning growth of another fantasy costume and immersive practice: steampunk. Such a theme day is first of all a commercial ploy to increase attendance at the Faire by a certain predisposed but not primary constituent group.

Time Traveler Weekend is typically sandwiched between Scouting Weekend, Family Weekend, and Romance Weekend—other modes of encouraging specific potential ticket buyers. It shares resonances with other recent innovations that blur invitations to types of audience with a promise of certain themed programming from those on the employee/

performer side, such as Pirate Weekend, Viking Weekend, Faery and Magic Weekend, Highland Fling Weekend, and other specialties that apparently fall within the massive umbrella of "medieval" and/or "Renaissance."[13] But probably closest in valence are the other weekends that also specifically call for paying visitor-participants who will, like a steampunk time traveler, emphatically break the seamlessness of the immersive encounter—like Cosplay Weekend. Steampunk and Cosplay Weekends double down on a broader dynamic that links the smaller and larger scenographic impulses of subcultural fantasy fashion and immersive environmental performance, at the expense of the clarity and specificity of either practice. That is, both are engaged with escaping or reconfiguring "everyday life" into something fictional, but they are not engaged in the same fictions. I suppose the time traveler fits perfectly well into a medieval village, but the medieval village has no need of a time traveler to complete its representation. Still less do Marvel Cinematic Universe characters need a medieval village or vice versa.

The time traveler might epitomize the possibility of immersive performance at the level of an individual body: a time traveler by definition leaves their own appropriate immersive milieu and enters one that's wrong—which is what's *right* about being a time traveler. Of course, in narratives, time travelers typically attempt to blend in with their new surroundings after arrival in the past or future, but once we name the time travelers as a feature of the event, we need to see them in their out-of-timeness. The special affinity of steampunks and time travel is sometimes attributed to the Victorian work of H. G. Wells, especially the 1895 novella *The Time Machine*, but also speaks to the out-of-timeness of steampunk itself as a postmillennial fad. Although the longer genealogy of steampunk stretches from Wells and other nineteenth-century science fictions like Jules Verne through to the 1960s US TV series *Wild Wild West*, a number of Victoriana-inflected science-fiction novels from about the 1980s onward helped to establish a set of conventions that have been gradually codified over the twenty-first century into a recognizable costume template: goggles and lenses, top hats, rivets and brass, corsets as outerwear, mechanical enhancement of bodily abilities (wings, jetpacks, bionic arms), bulbous steam guns, and brown. Brown leather, brown canvas, brass, and khaki. So much brown. One oft-repeated steampunk truism invokes a different genealogy: "Steampunks are just goths who discovered the color brown."

There are now steampunk cons and gatherings all over the US and UK with notable outcroppings elsewhere around the world as well, but

for costume enthusiasts it seems there are never enough places to wear your finery. Which is how, I can only assume, the Ren Fest discovered the untapped potential of inviting "time traveling" steampunks to their own immersive and costumed event. When I first started seriously attending steampunk, goth, and gothic lolita fashion events, I was confused by the crossover. I thought that a goth would surely have little to say to a steampunk since the signified ideas were so different: I saw goth as a luxuriation in the fundamental complexities and difficulties of the world, a recognition and embrace of how pain and darkness persist over time, how history doesn't leave us. By contrast, steampunk seemed much sunnier, invested in the possibility of technological advancement, and even dangerously fond of the Victorian progress narrative and its attendant imperialism, colonialism, and violence. (Remember, weird guns and pith helmets are beloved steampunk props.) Gothic lolitas were accessing a different kind of time travel that was more about storybooks, fairy tales, and Japanese *shōjo* (girls) culture than history. The impetus for each of these fashion activities seemed quite different. And yet what I learned from actually attending these groups' different events was that there are a few steampunk booths at the Ren Fest; there are gothic lolita panels at ComicCons and cosplay events; there was a strong contingency of steampunks at the Whitby Gothic Weekend. I found myself concluding that it's less that there are discrete groups of steampunks, and SCA-renfesters, and goths, and gothic lolitas, and Civil War reenactors, and more that there are two kinds of people: those who want to dress up in a costume in public and those who really, really don't.

One way to think of this dividing line is in terms of Georg Simmel's sociological theorization of fashion, first published in 1904. Simmel describes two fundamental human psychological/social needs: to blend in to a social group and to also stand out and be recognized as an individual. For Simmel, fashion perfectly satisfies both these opposing desires at once. "[F]or we have here on the one hand a field of general imitation, the individual floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for his tastes and his actions, yet on the other hand we have a certain conspicuousness, an emphasis, an individual accentuation of the personality," Simmel observes. "It seems that there exists for each class of human beings, probably for each individual, a definite quantitative relation between the tendency towards individualization and the desire to be merged in the group."[14]

Of course, as the quotation makes clear, it's not so much that fashion, or, more precisely, the person doing it, is one of two types, but rather that

they are negotiating two dynamics of what clothing does, with and without one's explicit intention. Simmel suggests that both of these functions (fitting in and standing out) are necessary psychological components of human subjects in a larger society, and, cleverly, fashion can do both at once. Consider the mass of visitors to the Renaissance Festival: most ticket buyers probably came in "normie" clothes. They are here to audience in a spectatorly way and intend to be ignored within the scenographic whole. They may, as is common in other costume-centric locales like Cons, have chosen another mode of engaging with the day's immersive activity, like wearing a T-shirt with a Viking character or funny phrase on it, rather than costuming themselves in ensembles meant to incorporate them *as Vikings* into the larger mise-en-scène. There's an irony here, though, wrought by the immersive environment, which is that it's these people, blending in as ordinary people, who end up out of place in the medieval milieu.

In contrast, the steampunk time travelers, the lolita frills, and (literal) motley mix of belly dancers, wenches in bodices, and pirates contribute to the overarching sense of Not Here, Not Now-ness. Which is, of course, in the end the primary objective of the Renaissance Festival. Such an anarchy of narratives and scenes contrasts with Disney or Punchdrunk, where, through the means discussed above, "spectators" are disciplined into their roles as spectators or semispectators through sartorial restrictions.

Different immersive performance environments alternately support and suppress competing miniature performances of costumed immersivity. I don't suggest that either of these ways of doing immersivity is better than the other—but I do suggest that they offer very different kinds of pleasures. The pleasure of the Ren Fest invitation is that of anarchic personal agency and creativity: come and riff, improvise a scene in which we might all end up in a tavern together with plastic-bottomed mugs on strings tied to our belts. Meanwhile, the pleasures of Punchdrunk and Disney are revealed to be quite, quite different than those of the Ren Fest when we think about the invitation made to the costumed audience participant. The anarchic invitation of the Ren Fest solicits audience improvisation and agency. By contrast, the pleasures of Punchdrunk and Disney are constituted in submission to the completeness of the illusion. Submission, awe-struck envelopment, the passive activity of allowing oneself to be engulfed: these are not bad pleasures, but they are not, I would argue, necessarily agential pleasures. The agency of choosing where you go and what you look at are the chief ways in which an audience-sarteur interacts within a Disney or Punchdrunk event, but these are freedoms that are pretty small in the end when compared with the narrowness of

the contract for behaviors allowed within the envelope. Again, I attach no moral valence to the immersive pleasure of being engulfed and overwhelmed with the detail of an imaginary world, but in contrast to something like the Ren Fest, such a pleasure is far more about sublimity and spectacle than it is about agential authorship of experience.

There are, thus, several distinct ways to engage with an immersive performance experience: one is as an instigator of narratives or performance gambits, through personal performance that could be carried out without additional scenographic help (like the normie who agrees to play some role in a Ren Fest show or joins some participatory game in the Disney parks' new *Star Wars* areas). Or the performance might happen primarily as a costume, as when a steampunk time traveler strolls the Ren Fest, creating a little narrative of her own without doing anything beyond being dressed. Yet another way to participate is by following the rules—wearing a mask, staying in designated areas—to help collectively create the totality of an illusion. This is also, of course, a performance, even if it is passively executed by *not* causing a counter-scene.

One thing to perhaps hold on to, as we think through these individual exuberant, kind of bad or partial or slapdash popular performance activities, is to ask what, psychologically, sartorial immersion does for the individuals who practice it. Gareth White writes that "performance has a register that comes before the theatrical or the artistic, in which we manage our presentation of ourselves, and in which we find the materials that allow us to become ourselves."[15] Elsewhere, I have described the fashion activity of gothic lolita as a queer form of identity-making: identity forging that relies for its emotional heft on fakery, fantasy, and imaginative self-determination instead of recourse to perceived deep interiorities.[16] Suggesting that what matters about individuals' identities is fake not real isn't much of a declaration, since it's corroborated by basically all of psychoanalysis and poststructural theory, but may bear repeating anyway here, in the register of imaginative and immersive leisure activities, and in the face of pervasive social discourses about the importance of "being oneself."

Simmel's notion of fitting in and standing out through dress is echoed in the two ways I've described of being a sarteur: by playing in harmony to a larger immersive undertaking, or through playing, as it were, contrapuntally with a contrasting narrative. And as Simmel insists, the genius of clothing is that both of these needs may be fulfilled at once in varying capacities and against a shifting background. Even as some immersive environments skew more toward a homogenized social contract and

others toward a cheerful anarchy, all such imaginative entertainments seem to offer varieties of self-realization to their participants, both in the direction of group-identified *communitas* and toward self-expression and individualized attention.

We're nearly through with our journey now, leaving the immersive kingdoms and heading back to the land of "everyday." By following our sarteurs and sarteuses (and hey, French scholars, would you update us on what French is doing about expanding their gender binary?) and watching how they (we!) are accommodated in different immersive environments, which narratives they (we) enact with and against different larger narratives, I hope we have returned with a more precise sense of how individual autonomy works differently in different types of immersive milieux. I also hope that if we started out with an assumption that individual control is a fundamental of immersive performance or that "agency" is better than "passivity" in performance, we may be reevaluating the deep pleasures and aesthetic effects of passivity or playing along—even, perhaps unexpectedly, when playing along means standing out.

Notes

1. Catherine Spooner provides a very elegant explanation of the always-againness of the gothic in Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

2. Sneed, Richard J. *The Faire: Photographs and History of the Renaissance Pleasure Faire from 1963 Onwards* (Santa Cruz, CA: Good Book Press, 1987), OCLC 26491008.

3. Here I am thinking of the Disney-branded imperialist fantasies of "Adventureland" in particular, where beloved rides like the Jungle Cruise, Indiana Jones, Swiss Family Robinson (later Tarzan, and as of fall 2023, back to Swiss Family Robinson) Treehouse, and more anchor immersive environments meant to evoke not the "exotic" cultures of Africa and Asia, but precisely the "romance" of Europeans' and Americans' (read: white people's) forays *into* those cultures. Recent years have been marked by the Disney Corporation's slow but persistent modification of the most retrograde aspects of their colonial nostalgia portfolio, but the white-possessive-of-the-exotic-other-and-elsewhere remains primary to newer park additions such as Disney's Animal Kingdom with its "Asia," "Africa," and "Pandora" (the alien world reworking of the undiscovered tribe trope from the 2008 film *Avatar*). Not to mention that boats and jeeps are still ferrying thousands of people a day around the "jungle" and "temple" in multiple parks around the world. See for example Stephanie Malia Hom, "Simulated Imperialism," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 25–44. On the Treehouse: Todd Martens, "Disney Just Revitalized One of Its

Most Underrated Attractions," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 November 2023, https://www.latimes.com/travel/story/2023-11-16/disneyland-adventureland-treehouse-swiss-family-robinson-history

4. The status of who is a "visitor" and who a professionally costumed performer can be somewhat murky in the realm of the Ren Fest, since many "performers" start out as enthusiastic Faire visitors before becoming cast members who must pay for their own costumes. A better articulation might be between visitors who paid to come to the Ren Fest and those who, while not exactly professional performers, do not pay entry fees in order to fulfill roles in the royal court, jousting tournaments, and so on.

5. Many living history museums and costumed historical sites adopt similar rules about adults in costume, although, for example, you can go to Plimoth in historical costume from a *different* era than that of the museum itself. At Williamsburg, adults in costume are forbidden, but children can even be outfitted in on-site rental costumes (or purchase their own pint-size eighteenth-century gowns and breeches in the gift shops).

6. Josephine Machon. *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 72.

7. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

8. Another related phenomenon might be Disney Social Clubs; see Elizabeth McQueen's essay "The Park as Stage: Radical Re-Casting in Disneyland's Social Clubs," in *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, eds. Jenny A. Kokai and Tom Robson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 247–64.

9. Cosplay is a Japanese-style abbreviation for "Costume Play," which names a fan practice of recreating the costumes and appearances of fictional characters. Originating in Japan and especially associated with anime and manga fandoms, cosplay has become a staple part of fan conventions around the world for many varieties of fandom, covering a range of costume aesthetics from painstaking, perfected replicas of movie characters to mash-up twists, like "steampunk Darth Vader."

10. While members of the subculture themselves alternately use a capitalization and lowercase "L" for lolita fashion, I use lowercase, primarily to better differentiate the fashion from the Nabokov character. I have written at greater length about gothic lolita in my book *Theatricality of the Closet: Fashion, Performance, and Subjectivity Between Victorian Britain and Meiji Japan* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2023) and "'Maiden's Armor': Global Gothic Lolita Communities and Technologies of Girly Counteridentity," *Theatre Survey* 60, no. 1 (January 2019), 122–46.

11. https://disneylandlolitaday.wixsite.com/home

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FOURTEEN Introduction, Invitation, and Integration in Immersive Performance

SEAN BARTLEY

How does the audience's pursuit of happiness begin in immersive performance? Does it start when the show starts? Prior to the performance of *The Winter Machine*, LA-based Nocturnal Fandango simply emails audience members an address, a time, and an instruction to look for a blue lantern. In Street Corner Society's *Subway Orpheus*, a mysterious phone call the night before the performance offers only a time, a stop on Boston's MBTA system, and a character to seek out (in my first visit, I was told to find "The Bird Man" at Park Street Station). Conversely, in many larger-scale immersive performance works by companies such as New York City's Third Rail Projects, the performance process often begins with the most familiar conventions of entering a theatrical space: waiting in line at the doors, scanning a ticket with an usher, and stopping by the coat check. As site-based and site-responsive theater organizations develop increasingly immersive and experiential performance events, they also deploy an expanding range of strategies for transitioning audience members out of their everyday spatial contexts and integrating them into the performance event. This chapter investigates the techniques contemporary practitioners use to signal to audience members a break in the repetition of daily life (and of proscenium theatergoing), with particular emphasis on the changes these artists were forced to make during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As they create "Enveloping Worlds," how do they invite us inside the envelope? Might the process of enveloping us include our pursuit of the performance, and take place before it even begins?

Immersion, as applied to performances, smart televisions, and everything in between, is too often conceptualized as an instantaneous arrival from a nonimmersive state into full immersion. With the flip of a switch, the donning of a VR helmet, or the dimming of the stage lights, immersion is suddenly and completely achieved. The most pervasive metaphor used in explanations and definitions of immersion is that of the sudden and abrupt dive of the human body into a pool. Josephine Machon evokes this widely used image in the very first line of her preface for *Immersive Theatres*, starting with the three words "Take a dip. . . ."[1] But immersion, crucially, is a *process*. When we slow down the video footage of someone's pool plunge, we can see these steps clearly: the buildup of kinetic energy before the leap, the gradual arc upward and downward, the initial shock of the first body part touching the water, the tightening and flexing of each body part as it makes contact with the now-moving fluid, and the flurry of movement that begins immediately to return part of the body above the surface. This chapter seeks to investigate this process of immersion in both theoretical and practical terms, exploring how performance practitioners carefully sculpt all the steps of the transition and articulation (rather than flipping a switch), and detailing how I experienced them as an individual participant.

First, this piece outlines my use of two central terms: *participant* for the individual audience member and *experiential* to describe immersive, site-based, and other participatory forms of performance. Next, I explore the concept of immersion as a complex, multistaged process. Utilizing as a frame Louis Marin's work on the textuality of spaces in *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, I outline a three-step procedure for integration into experiential performances using Third Rail Projects' *The Grand Paradise* as a central example. Then, I survey new techniques that practitioners developed in 2020 and 2021 when theatrical copresence became impossible, highlighting three particularly effective strategies for remote immersion: creating physical isolation through objects (as in Optika Moderna's *Portalezza*), expanding the duration of a performance with phone calls and text messaging (as in Nocturnal Fandango's *754-200-3058*), and encouraging participant socialization via Twitter (as in Fake Friends' *This American Wife*). These three examples stress different, progressively socialized formulas for participation: a solo experience without any live interaction (*Portalezza*), a series of extended live conversations with a handful of performers (*754-200-3058*), and a large-scale Twitter conversation with many fellow participants (*This American Wife*). Finally, I argue that all three of these companies share one central notion that

artists and groups might carry over into the return of in-person performances: a keen understanding that physical, digital, and social interactions made in pursuit of happiness *before* the theatrical event are central to the meaning-making process for audience members. As Susan Bennett notes in *Theatre Audiences*, "the spectator takes on his/her role(s) before the performance *per se* begins."[2]

Scholars of immersive, site-based, and participatory performance use a wide range of terms other than *audience* to describe those who (either individually or collectively) experience the work designed by immersive artists and companies. Since these dramatic forms encourage physical pursuit and participation in the performance and often create increased feelings of agency and authority in individuals, the term *audience* might be too packed with associations to broader and more passive conventions of theatergoing: sitting throughout a performance and remaining in the dark with lights pointed at a stage for the actors that is clearly demarcated (often with a proscenium arch) from the larger space. Henceforth, I will use the term *participant(s)*, previously employed by both Gareth White and Mike Pearson, to refer to individual audience members in immersive performances.[3] White helpfully offers that in becoming a participant, these individuals assume not one central role, but three: "The participant is simultaneously the *performer*, the one who enacts the performance through choice, the *performance* that emerges from their own body and the *audience* as they view it."[4]

Machon worries about the pervasive use of the word *immersive* to describe these participants' experiences, arguing that inside the world of theater, "there is a danger that it is becoming a catch-all term for any work that occurs outside of the conventional, spectatorial theater set-up and/or involves a degree of interdisciplinary practice, which is misleading to say the least."[5] While I would argue that the term has become relatively stable in its uses in the field in the ensuing years, and while the introduction to this volume clarifies our use of it here, I will add one term to support and buttress my usages of *immersive* in certain instances: *experiential*. In the introduction to *Experiential Theatres: Praxis-Based Approaches to Training 21st Century Theatre Artists* and elsewhere in his earlier work, William Lewis defines experiential performance through "a simple taxonomy of experiential theaters that operate under four levels of interactivity: immersion, participation, game play, and role play."[6] Participants first experience sensory immersion, then begin to explore and test their ability to participate by making choices and taking actions. Performances may then go deeper by gamifying these participant choices through feedback and stated goals.

If they reach the state of role play, participants develop a sense of an imaginative character and sense that their choices have a direct impact on the spaces and narrative events around them. Immersion is just the first step in the participant's pursuit, and even the level of immersion must be complicated and explored.

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In *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, semiotician and poststructuralist Louis Marin explores ways that architecture and design create and reinforce the participant's feelings of agency and immersion. In one of his final examples, Marin theorizes the remarkable stability and translatability of Disneyland's spatial rhetoric. Disney theme parks have been a frequent point of reference in recent work on immersive performance. In fact, Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson frame this connection centrally in their recent collection *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience*, titling their introduction "You're in the Parade! Disney as Immersive Theatre and the Tourist as Actor."[7] "The crucial element of Disney as immersive theatre," they contend, comes from Machon's notion of how performances and theme park spaces "blur spaces and roles."[8] Marin noted that the power of Disneyland to create an idealistic impression is remarkably enduring ("I mean to show the permanence . . .") and comes from the fact that it covers such a broad architectural footprint: "These patterns and functions appear in the topography of *a real space* in California and by the visitor's real use of it."[9] But for Marin, the space of the park cannot connect seamlessly with the real space of surrounding Anaheim: "[T]he utopic discourse inscribes the utopic representation in the imaginary space of a map, but at the same time it makes its inscription in a geographical map impossible. There is an insuperable gap between our world and utopia."[10] The streets surrounding Disneyland are filled with hotels, retail outlets, and chain restaurants, but this reality must be promptly left behind for Disneyland's "utopic discourse" to succeed.

Marin articulates a process of three steps, or "limits," to manage the transition. The first, the "outer limit," comprises the parking areas. He describes the spatial decision to leave the family vehicle, particularly in car-obsessed Southern California, as "tantamount to a shipwreck or a loss of consciousness; this is equivalent to the break in former utopic narratives."[11] Next, the "intermediary limit" includes the visitors' tram ride to the entrance and trip to the ticket booths. Marin theorizes the moment where they hand cash to the booth attendants as an even deeper move from normal space into a new consciousness: ". . . a monetary substitution

takes place there . . . this, then, is the second exchange and the second shipwreck."[12] Like the "intermediate limit," the "inner limit" is clearly marked by an exact topographic threshold: the moment of pursuit when visitors cross underneath the Disneyland Railway through one of two tunnels and instantly enter Main Street USA. At this final limit, Marin posits, the outside world is completely abandoned: "On the very last limit of 'Utopia' . . . the endless tension of neutralization within differentiating space between reality and utopia is clear; it really is a tension between the limit and passing beyond the limit."[13]

This multilayered process of immersion, designed to give participants a sense of their own performance in these spaces, is a hallmark not only of theme parks, but of recent large-scale immersive theater projects, perhaps most famously in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. Third Rail Projects' 2016 work *The Grand Paradise*, created by Zach Morris, Tom Pearson, and Jennine Willett, employs a similar series of three limits to create participant immersion. The company describes *The Grand Paradise* in explicitly immersive and experiential terms:

> Set in those hazy and culturally liminal years of the late 1970s becoming the 1980s in the United States, The Grand Paradise was an immersive theater work that combined experiential theater, a late 1970s tropical resort, and a fountain of youth that promised to quench deepest longings. Greeted with a tropical drink and a garland of flowers, visitors encountered the resort's resident population; characters who embodied the era's shifting and blurring values. Audiences explored the resort and beaches, watched a floorshow, followed performers into one-on-one encounters, where faded ideals might be traded for shiny new illusions.[14]

But this performance, crucially, does not actually begin with participants being "greeted with a tropical drink and a garland of flowers." I instead arrived at a nondescript Bushwick storefront and entered the doorway, the outer limit, to find a conventional enough lobby space where I could pick up my ticket, check my coat, and grab a drink. Before long, I noticed subtle gestures to the immersive environment beyond the waiting room. Unseen speakers produced vaguely tropical-sounding music with strains of ukulele and pedal steel guitar. A large model boat topped the lobby bar, dubbed the "Shipwreck Lounge." Most strikingly, the box office attendants checking my reservation handed me, not a small theater ticket, but rather a large, thick airline boarding pass. Once

the participants had assembled and acclimated to the outer limit, a door opened and a flight attendant ushered us into the intermediate limit, a narrow hallway designed to replicate the fuselage of an airplane. Participants were stuffed into narrow, orderly rows and urged to watch an "in-flight video" that outlined the rules for guests at the resort. Once we had spent a few minutes reliving the sights, sounds, smells, and stresses of airline travel in miniature, the inner limit, a door on the opposite end of the hallway from the lobby popped open. As we walked through the door, our eyes adjusting from the cool, stark, blue lighting of the airplane to the sultry, warm illumination of the resort, we slipped even deeper into immersion. Taken by the hand by a performer, I received my flower lei and began to explore the interconnected rooms that make up the performance space. In a final gesture signifying what Marin called "passing beyond the limit," a mermaid performer swam past the participants inside a massive tank stretching along one wall, waving at them.[15] As I waved back at the mermaid, I couldn't help but also feel I was waving goodbye to the world outside *The Grand Paradise*'s three limits.

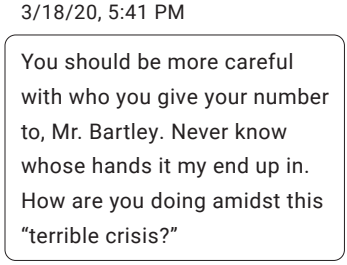
My physical contact with the initial performer would not be my last. During my few hours within *The Grand Paradise*, I was gently guided by the wrist and firmly led by my shoulder. After letting me choose a vinyl LP and placing it on a record player, one performer invited me to "slow dance" with him, taking my hands and guiding them onto his hips and resting his head upon my shoulder as we swayed to the music. Whereas I had been pursuing my own happiness throughout the piece through my movement choices, in this moment the character seemed to be actively pursuing me to realize his own desires. In similar performances by other artists, I have been roughly pushed through rooms and beckoned with seductive gestures, dealt into poker hands, congratulated with high-fives and fist bumps, led to explore and stopped by force from continuing on a particular path. Suddenly, in March of 2020, all the techniques in this theatrical playbook became not just useless, but dangerous and potentially fatal. Sharing a physical space with, touching, or directing airborne droplets toward participants became issues of life and death overnight. How did companies and artists retool the process of immersion in a new theatrical landscape that was seemingly antithetical to immersion itself? I offer three vastly different approaches in the rest of this chapter. I do not mean to be prescriptive or suggest that these are the only possible techniques, but rather to describe why these processes felt successfully immersive as a participant during the period of forced, rapid innovation in 2020 and 2021.

Immersion through Isolation: Optika Moderna's *Portaleza*

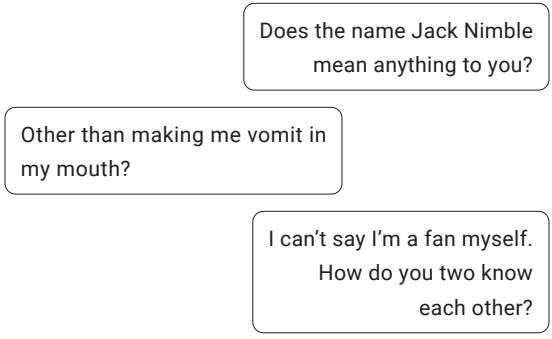
The performance began at my doorstep. After purchasing a ticket to *Portaleza*, the newest work from Optika Moderna, a San Diego–based company that focuses on "creating bold experiences that peer through the eyes of another," I found myself waiting anxiously for a package to arrive.[16] Unlike their two earlier in-person and site-responsive performances for La Jolla Playhouse's annual WOW (Without Walls) Festival, *Walking La Llorona* and *Las Quinceañeras*, *Portaleza* depended on me constructing my own new performance venue at home. Emails explaining that delays at the US Postal Service stemming from the pandemic and the disastrous policies of new postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, might stall my experience served to heighten my sense of anticipation. When the *Portaleza* package finally arrived, I pulled out a strange assemblage of cardboard, glue, and gray and blue ink. This was a "portal" (elsewhere described as a set of "Hypnoculars"), my instructions explained, that I would need to assemble to experience the performance. One unfolded, molded, and glued in place, the portal evokes a Victorian Kinetoscope, featuring two open ends: one for the participant's eyes, and the other for their cell phone screen. When they visit a password-protected URL address and look into the portal, participants experience a series of video performances that have been curated specifically for them: the videos are divided into segments so that there is only a 1 in 416 chance that any two participants will assemble the same video.[17] The silver lining of the portal created a kind of personalized cyclorama, extending the lights and patterns of the video up the sides of the device toward my eyes.

In *Portaleza*, Optika Moderna cleverly negates the pervasive and exhausting role that digital screens have begun to play for participants during the pandemic. For many of us in 2021 and 2022, *all* theatergoing was tiresomely mediated through screens in the forms of live-streamed and previously filmed performances accessed through the internet. *Portaleza* uses a unique physical object to increase participant investment in productions that must be accessed through screens for safety. First, participants wait for their package, building their expectations and curiosity about what will arrive and how it might be central to the performance. Next, they buy in to the immersive and experiential pursuit even more fully by assembling, holding, and beginning to understand their individual portal. Finally, they block out all other visual stimuli with the portal, which makes physical space for the images to creep up the sides of the cardboard creation until they literally approach the eyeballs of the viewer, providing a remarkably inexpensive alternative to costly VR headsets.

Immersion through Durational Expansion: Nocturnal Fandango's *754-200-3058*

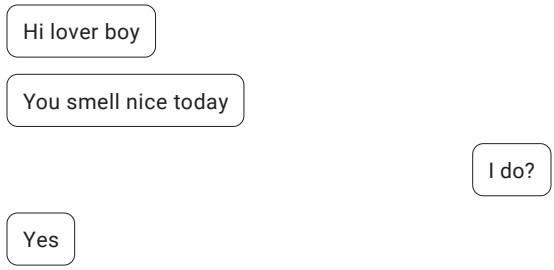


The performance began with a text message. As I chatted with the unnamed central character of *754-200-3058* over several days, a narrative began to emerge. Unhinged and delusional, the character fantasized about brutally murdering characters from Nocturnal Fandango's earlier in-person and site-responsive performances. Before long, these characters began to call me at different times of the day or night, pleading for help or asking me what I knew about the strange killer. I began to sense that my role in this mystery was to put the pieces together and use the information from the phone calls to stop or catch the unnamed texter. I began to work questions into our sporadic text conversations:

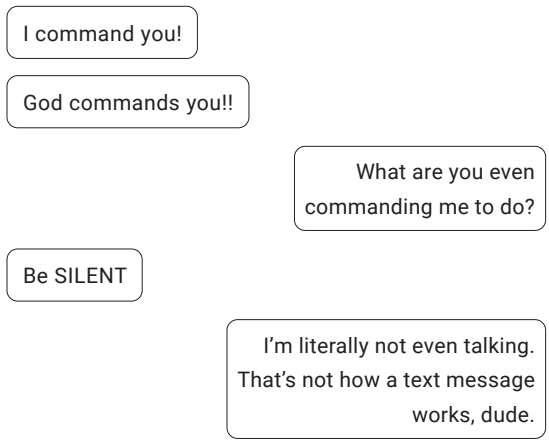


Soon, I learned that I was not the only one trying to assemble a set of clues. The text messages began to include pieces of information about my life, some of them quite personal, that I had shared with individual performers at two in-person, pre-COVID Nocturnal Fandango performances: *Take Me*, which took place in a disused Los Angeles restaurant space, and *The Winter Machine*, which was set inside and around a spectacular mid-century modern estate in the Hollywood Hills. It became clear

that Nocturnal Fandango was keeping and updating some kind of "file" on me. Within a few days, the texts had become incredibly familiar and flirtatious:



But before long, flirtation became frustration for the deranged character on the other end of the text chain. As I learned more and more, I became less and less compliant with the texter's questions and demands. My pursuit became increasingly defiant. When I felt like he was being too personal, I hit back aggressively:



Eleven days after they had begun, the text messages suddenly stopped. The plot of *754-200-3058*, it turned out, would conclude with a phone call from one of the still-unnamed protagonist's victims.

In *754-200-3058*, Nocturnal Fandango capitalizes on the ways in which remote theatergoing has been dulled through routine and repetition. Just as with in-person theatergoing before the pandemic, participants now have a regularized set of procedures for how we experience livestreamed and previously recorded performances. We have learned the best devices to use, the best settings to select, and even the best places to sit for these

at-home theatrical encounters. But in *754-200-3058*, participants cannot bracket the performance off from their everyday lives in the same way. Never knowing when a character might call or text, they must think about the performance throughout the day, and be ready and willing to interrupt a meal, a conversation, or a work task (or, perhaps, another piece of theater they are streaming?) to catch a new piece of the developing narrative. *754-200-3058* creates an immersive, experiential, durational, enveloping world in a way that single-visit, in-person performances cannot.

Immersion through Socialization: Fake Friends' *This American Wife*

The performance began with a blaring pop playlist. Hit songs by Real Housewives, including "Don't Think I'm Not" by Kandi Burruss, "Feelin' Jovani" by Luann de Lesseps, and "XXPEN$IVE" by Erika Jayne, boom at a volume that forces participants to adjust their speakers and set the stage for *This American Wife*, Fake Friends' triumphant follow-up to their 2020 Pulitzer-Finalist work of "internet theater," *Circle Jerk*. In both of these productions, Fake Friends uses Twitter to replace some of the social aspects of theatergoing for participants who stream the performances live. The company uses their Twitter account not just to promote ticket sales or share positive reviews, but to engage with participants who are live-tweeting the performances, sharing and quoting their running commentaries during the show. As Trevor Boffone argues, "the live Twitter conversation around the production is perhaps the best part of watching *This American Wife* live, especially fifteen months after many of us have sat in a theatre alongside a living and breathing audience."[18] In one crucial scene, Fake Friends takes the technique even further than they did in *Circle Jerk*. After more than an hour of playing *Real Housewives* personas and moving around an enormous and tacky Long Island McMansion, the three performers (Michael Breslin, Patrick Foley, and Jakeem Dante Powell) drop their characters and appear as themselves in front of what is clearly a greenscreen. Each is interviewed by a castmate in the style of a reality television show confessional, and each shares a traumatic story from their past. Before long, the format of the interview sessions changes, and participants realize that the questions, which often include hashtags, are being posed by tweeters at home and read by the cast as they refresh the mentions on Fake Friends' Twitter feed. Even if they had not previously joined into the live-tweeting, participants can now pull out their devices and directly contribute to the text and the meaning of the still-unfolding live performance.

In *This American Wife*, Fake Friends takes the contemporary reality of our multitasking, multimodal, and multiscreen existences and utilizes it to create a unique new form of live, crowd-sourced dramaturgy. Rather than discouraging us from texting during the performance (as many in-person venues might) or creating a physical barrier to block out other screens and distractions (as in *Portaleza*), Fake Friends *assumes* we will be on multiple devices at once and works to engage us on each simultaneously. If we watch *This American Wife* alone, we recoup some of the social aspects of theatergoing through following the Twitter feed. And if we watch *This American Wife* with others, we engage with two groups of participants (those in the room with us and those commenting on Twitter) in up to three different ways: by hearing tweets that the actors have incorporated into their interviews, by scrolling through our own Twitter feed, and by reading our favorite tweets aloud to our friends and loved ones just as the performers are doing.

Epilogue: Immersive Invitations

Like in-person, shared-space immersive and experiential theatrical works, remote performances involve a series of preparatory tasks. Participants in the pursuit of happiness must purchase tickets, prepare their digital devices, confirm that they possess the hardware and software necessary to interact with the digital platform, and block off the time needed to experience the show. In *Portaleza*, they must feel the tactile sensations that come from physically assembling their portals. In *754-200-3058*, they must free themselves up to receive the calls and texts and recognize that these phone interactions coming from strange numbers are a part of the performance in the first place. In *This American Wife*, they must log in and simultaneously monitor two separate digital platforms (the video stream and the Twitter feed) if they want to experience the full multiplicity of the work. What all these performances have in common is an ability to make these preparations experiential and immersive: tactile, multisensory, and social. Just as *The Grand Paradise* invites participants to transition into an enveloping world through a shared space, these works use the process of preparation as a key tool to offer richly immersive performance events from the comfort and safety of participants' living rooms, a trend that artists might continue now that in-person works have safely begun again.

Notes

1. Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstroke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xiv.

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5. Machon, 66.

6. William W. Lewis and Sean Bartley, eds. *Experiential Theatres: Praxis-Based Approaches to Training 21st Century Theatre Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 5.

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8. Kokai and Robson, 14; Machon, 28.

9. Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1984), 239.

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11. Marin, 242.

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18. Trevor Boffone, "Waking Up in the Morning, Thinking About This American Wife," *Theatre Times*, 24 May 2021, https://thetheatretimes.com/waking-up-in-the-morning-thinking-about-this-american-wife/

FIFTEEN

Turgin' the Dragon!

Dramaturgical Immersivity and the Tabletop Roleplaying Game

MICHAEL M. CHEMERS

MIKE SELL

Introduction

Picture the scene: five people (we'll call them "players") sit around a kitchen table cluttered with papers, books, bowls of snacks, and dice of varied colors and shapes. Two of the players are in costume—one in a crimson cowl, the other with a painted face and large, ram-like horns. A third is participating by way of a laptop perched at one end of the table next to a bag of corn chips. The opposite end of the table has been commandeered by a player calling herself a "Dungeon Master," who sits behind a cardboard screen on which is printed a vivid scene of warriors and wizards in mortal combat with a fire-breathing dragon.

The player with the horns is arguing with the Dungeon Master (aka DM) while the person next to them pipes in from time to time around mouthfuls of popcorn. None are speaking in their everyday voices—at least not exclusively—and the DM appears to be speaking in multiple voices! The one in the cowl, meanwhile, isn't paying attention to any of that, as they are intently poring through a notebook bristling with tiny Post-it notes. The player next to them, also not paying attention, is holding a garnet-colored twelve-sided die up to the laptop's camera, evoking an audible coo from their online friend. Suddenly, the DM

cries, "Roll for initiative!" and everyone snaps to attention. However, that ripple of excitement is interrupted by the entrance of a toddler, who wants to say goodnight and maybe get their hands on some of those dice.

To the outsider, a tabletop roleplaying game (or TTRPG) session can appear disorderly and unfocused. The mercurial content and tone of conversation, the fussy shuffling of papers and rolling of dice, the eating and drinking, the regular interruptions—those used to the consistent intensity and deliberately modulated pleasures of theatrical experiences created by Punchdrunk, Back to Back Theatre, Silvia Mercuriali, and Nimble Fish will likely find the experience of playing a TTRPG ad hoc and unfocused, a decidedly unhappy experience. However, for the insider (and scholars interested in this kind of experience), the experience can be profoundly immersive and uniquely fun precisely because of its ad hoc, unfocused quality. At the heart of the TTRPG's ability to produce a happy experience for its player is the *ludonarrative*: the particular combination of rules and storytelling that promotes a potent and multiplex form of engagement. But while the ludonarrative dynamic of the TTRPG is the primary engine of immersivity, the fun of the TTRPG is not just about gameplay and storytelling. Immersivity is enabled by all the stuff that an outsider would probably see as distracting or inessential to the performance. But the happiness of roleplaying is often found in the hurly-burly of playful togetherness.

As performance theorists and practicing dramaturgs, we find TTRPGs fascinating, especially in terms of our efforts to understand immersivity as a theatrical strategy and experience. We also love to play them, and consider each other excellent players. In this essay, we'll identify and explore the immersive experiences characteristic of TTRPG performance and how they generate that particular form of collective happiness known as fun. Ultimately, we argue that the TTRPG promotes a processual, improvisatory, collaborative form of immersivity that is best understood as *dramaturgical*. By exploring the dramaturgical fun of the TTRPG, we shed light on the broader field of immersive theater, particularly the ways that the practices associated with it can be applied to other media and audience experiences. In particular, we want to draw attention to the kinds of creative work that can be done by dramaturgs, the analytic tools with which a dramaturg carries out their work, and the kinds of professional opportunities that can and should be embraced by those who work in our field—and those we are training for the future.

What Is a Tabletop Roleplaying Game?

TTRPGs come in a dizzying variety of forms, so formal definitions aren't entirely reliable. In broad terms, the TTRPG is a form of "playable media," to recall Noah Wardrip-Fruin's usefully capacious term. Playable media encompass, on one hand, things that are clearly intended to be played with (e.g., a *Monopoly* set, a ball, a box of Lego, etc.), and on the other, things that can be transformed into playable artifacts depending on the context and intentions of the people involved. Understanding the TTRPG in terms of these two dimensions of playable media draws our attention to artifacts and behaviors both designated by the specific game's rules and transformed through the collaborative, improvisational process of play. Dice, cards, miniatures, words and phrases that signal specific rules (e.g., "Roll for initiative!"), and so on fall into the former; everything else into the latter.

Which goes to say that TTRPGs are, first and foremost, games, and like any other games, are designed experiences governed by rules that enable shared goals, competition, and most importantly, fun. What sets TTRPGs apart from most other games is the focus on storytelling. TTRPGs are storytelling games, so the rules are designed to foster character, world-building, and drama. For example, *Spire: The City Must Fall* sets its narrative in a magical mile-high city. Players take on the roles of members of an underground revolutionary organization struggling to subvert a ruthless ruling class. Rules govern the skills a character has (general skills like fighting, fixing, deceiving, etc., and profession-specific skills like magic, social contacts, scholarly knowledge, etc.), the chances of successfully utilizing those skills, and the effects of actions on characters and the story-world. Like many TTRPGs, *Spire* determines the results of an attempted action with a combination of dice rolls, statistical tables, and storytelling. For example, one might play a Midwife responsible for the community's nest of unhatched eggs, who is able to cast spells that ward and protect. The player running the game (aka the Game Manager or GM) describes a situation that combines tactical challenges and dramatic conflict: a group of city guards attempting to arrest a neighborhood wise-person. The player playing the Midwife might choose to cast a magical spell that protects that person, fire a crossbow purchased from a black-market arms dealer at the guards, or approach them and try to talk them out of it. These are all actions defined by the game's rules. The drama of the moment is produced by the combination of rules, the uncertainty of suc-

cess, and the collaborative storytelling of the players. So, the player might announce, "I cast Blessing of Ishkrah to protect them from the guard's attack." In response, the GM might say, "You intone the blessed syllables and sigils swarm across the wise-person's face and hands. Describe what happens." The player playing the Midwife might then say, "Instead of striking them, the guard shrieks in horror, their mind filled with visions of swarming arachnids. I rush forward, grab the wise-person's hand, and try to pull them into the alley." At which point, the GM will figure out what needs to happen next, both narratively and procedurally, ensuring that play hews to the rules of the game and the reality of the storyworld.

It is conventional to categorize TTRPGs in terms of the complexity of their rules systems. "Rules-heavy" games like *Call of Cthulhu* or *Pathfinder* have lots of rules and multiple rule books. They usually require a GM and tend to give more storytelling responsibility to them. "Rules-light" games *Monster of the Week* or *Dog Eat Dog* have rules systems that are easy to learn and distribute storytelling responsibilities more evenly. Finally, "one shots" like *Honey Heist* can be learned in a matter of minutes, and their narratives can be completed during a play session or two. Regardless of the density and complexity of their rules systems, the subject matter of a TTRPG can be just about anything one can imagine.

Like any game, a good TTRPG engages the strategic and tactical mind—how to get those moments of immersivity is part of the fun. In the same way that a chess player might ponder the opportunities presented by a particular conjunction of pieces on a board, a TTRPG player will ponder the choices presented by a challenge ("Do I have a better chance of saving the wise-person if I cast a spell, shoot a crossbow, or talk to the guards?"). Like any storyteller, a TTRPG player will ponder the choices presented to them by a moment of conflict ("Which would be truer to my character?"). Like anyone working on theater production, a TTRPG player plays to create moments of dramatic action and high-impact story beats. That ludonarrative process is one of the engines of TTRPG immersivity.

The "tabletop" in tabletop roleplaying games refers to several things—first, to the fact that a TTRPG is usually played around a table, as with a card or board game. Yes, they can be played virtually. In fact, the two of us often play in this fashion, our group spread across the US at desks, kitchen counters, and workbenches on which is arranged the stuff they need to play the game. Which is the second connotation of "tabletop": the messy ecosystem of material components that supports play: rulebooks, notebooks, pencils and pens, little figurines, maps, arcane record-keeping documents, food and drink, cards, and quite often, dice, a sometimes-

obscene amount and variety of dice. Finally, "tabletop" communicates the idea that the TTRPG is a social occasion, an opportunity to get together with others and play—to have fun together. The tabletop is where the multiple playable media of TTRPGs are put into play.

Which leads to what is the most interesting thing about the tabletop roleplaying game: roleplaying. Broadly speaking, one roleplays by talking, typically *about* the character one is playing (for example, announcing that the Midwife will be casting a spell) or talking *as* one's character ("Curse on your bloodline, agents of fell hegemony!"). One also roleplays by being a team member, not unlike how one plays with teammates when playing soccer or bridge, collaborating to move play forward ("As Shani the Midwife casts her spell, I'm going to try to throw a stone at the guard swinging the sjambok."). One roleplays in an ongoing story, too, as a member of a cast of fictional characters. TTRPGs are comparable to soap operas in terms of their sustained storytelling. A group of players might play together with the same characters for years, even decades. We'll flesh all of this out further below, but first we need to address some theoretical matters regarding immersivity.

Immersivity and the TTRPG: The Broad Strokes

It's not coincidental that Josephine Machon's theory of theatrical immersivity is deeply influenced by game studies, particularly the work of Gordon Calleja. Immersive theater, like games, requires from its audience a degree of "agency and interaction" that is rarely required by other art forms—and that demands the audience be transformed materially (via their presence in the space and among the objects of performance) and imaginatively (via their engagement with the narrative). Immersive theater, like games, "deals in various levels of involvement: kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective, and ludic."[1] The tactility of immersive theater is also pertinent.[2] Despite this being a primarily verbal activity—perhaps because of it—players tend to develop sensuous, sometimes possessive relationships to the documents, dice, and other material things that support play. Machon is not alone in the value she ascribes to games and game theory. Samantha Holdsworth of Nimble Fish describes immersivity in terms of the "fiction of the space" and the particular forms of "permission to play" enabled by that fiction and constructed and managed by the creators.[3] This will sound familiar to most TTRPG players, since TTRPGs are both systems of rules and a storyworld—a ludonarra-

tive. They will also find familiar what Holdsworth calls the "collaborative devising process" of Nimble Fish's dramaturgy.[4]

Unlike most immersive theater, however, the particular physical space in which TTRPG play occurs tends to be of little concern, but for us it is of great interest because of what happens there. Michael usually plays around his kitchen table or in his study, Mike on a table in his basement; on summer nights, al fresco on a back deck. Although there was a period in the 1980s when the "satanic panic" drove players into secluded spaces like unheated basements or driveway campers, these days people play in hobby shops and crowded cafés, cars, tents, hotel lobbies, and other quotidian spaces. Aside from functional concerns (is there enough room for the players and their stuff?), the performance space of the TTRPG is banal, though extraordinary things can happen in it. Even interruptions by nonplayers (a waiter, a child, a phone call) aren't usually considered much of an annoyance—it's just what happens when you play.

The banality of the TTRPG space should not be equated with insignificance—or as a detriment to immersiveness. Similar to the performance space described by Clifford Geertz in his essay on cockfighting,[5] the tabletop is a conjuncture of the game's "immediate dramatic shape, its metaphoric content, and its social context." That conjuncture "transfer[s] a sense of gravity into what is in itself a rather blank and various spectacle" whose structure will probably strike the outsider as "radically atomistical." The TTRPG experience is radically atomistical, but the experience of playing it glues it together like a world unto itself, "a particulate burst of form,"[6] though there are plenty of loose threads. The tabletop is, as our editors suggested to us, a heterotopic space that expresses the personality of the group through the process of play. The TTRPG experience is a total but not totalizing experience in which focus is in constant motion and fun can be had from all directions.

As a final, preliminary comment on immersiveness, we would mark a few additional similarities to the five criteria Machon identifies:

- An established and palpable world.
- A "contract for participation" that "invite[s] and enabl[es] varying modes of agency and participation" that are both "explicit in written or spoken guidelines . . . or implicit within the structures of that world that become clear in a tacit fashion."
- The activity is deeply involving and engages the senses.
- The body of the spectator mediates the experience, both as something that acts and as something that perceives.

- The audience is "part-author" and an "immersive interactor—a decision-making participant in the process."[7]

Each of these five criteria manifests in distinct fashion in the TTRPG, and more specifically, in a distinctly *dramaturgical* fashion.

What do we mean by "dramaturgical"? "Dramaturgy" is defined by Chemers as a tripartite process that involves (1) analyzing the "aesthetic architecture of a piece of dramatic literature," (2) researching how to transform that text into a "living piece of theatre," and (3) applying that analysis and research to produce a moving, memorable experience for "a living audience at this time in this place."[8] In our book *Systemic Dramaturgy*, we advocate for the application of that process to a radically expanded concept of theater and play by focusing on the multiple, overlapping, mutative systems that constitute a particular performance.[9] Thus, when we characterize the TTRPG as dramaturgically immersive, we draw attention equally to the performance and the collaborative, creative, playful process that produces it. Additionally, we want to honor the specific qualities of immersivity that characterize each element of it, honoring its radically atomistical character. As such, we cannot hope to identify the unique happiness of TTRPG play. Players play multiple roles when they play a TTRPG: actor, narrator, set designer, competitor, teammate, strategist, tactician, referee, host, guest, and critic. And they're just hanging out as friends. The pleasures of play and the challenges of dramaturgy infuse each of those roles. The dramaturgical immersivity of the TTRPG—which is a characteristic not only of the TTRPG, but of the processes and products of many kinds of performance—is dramaturgical because it's playful.

Roleplaying

To understand the dramaturgical immersivity of the tabletop roleplaying game, we need to understand the most essential, entertaining, and mutative process at the heart of the enterprise: roleplay. When one plays most TTRPGs, one plays as a single character, unless one is the Game Manager, in which case one plays not a single character, but all nonplayer characters, whether passersby or big baddies. Depending on the game, one might play a magic-wielding midwife who can transform herself into a spider, a queer dance-club manager in postapocalyptic Bruges, or a teenage werewolf with self-esteem issues trying to make it to high-school graduation without eating a teacher. Like a character in a play, a TTRPG

character is a performed personality, someone who has their own motivations and exists in dramatic tension with the other characters and the broader narrative situation. An actor preparing a character is hoping to achieve some degree of immersivity for themselves and their fellow performers; the player in a TTRPG embarks on a similar journey. Different TTRPGs foster and different players desire different degrees of immersive performance—some really get into character, while others play more casually. And it's all improvised.

A TTRPG character is performed mostly through talking. For example, a player in a superhero-themed TTRPG might describe something they want their character to do: "Rosa picks up the bus and throws it at the alien." The player might then modulate their voice to sound like Rosa, speaking not about, but as the character: "Take that, galactic vermin!" At that point, another player might say, "Ahmed uses his Force Shield ability and tries to protect the tour group." The GM might then respond as one of the other nonplayer characters and also describe how these actions unfold according to the rules of the game. And so on.

But the pleasures of TTRPG talk exceed and often disrupt the dramatic processes of the ludonarrative. These fall under what game theorists call the "meta": talk and other playful practices not *in* the game, but *around and about* the game. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux define metagaming as a practice that engages the "[a]ttitude, affinity, experience, achievement, status, community, competition, strategy, spectatorship, statistics, history, economy, [and] politics" of the game, its players, and the practice of play.[10] It is a practice that ruptures gameplay, intruding "outside" knowledge, and secures it, defining the practical and ethical boundaries of play but also ensuring the happiness of the players, a quality without which it would be impossible to have fun.

Consider the rules. After a player announces that their character is throwing a bus at a bad guy, the GM determines that they need to roll a Thrown Projectile roll, as defined by the rules. Another player raises a question or objection about that direction ("Wouldn't it make more sense for it to be a Super Power roll?") or offer additional information ("Didn't Rosa drink a Potion of Fisticuffs earlier? That would make it a Super Power roll."). Alternatively, the GM might not be sure about a rule and ask everyone else for help. Unlike board or card games, but similar to the improvisatory games of children or actors, TTRPG players often modify or ignore rules to ensure greater fun (this is sometimes known as "the rule of cool").

There are other ways that TTRPG players talk a metagame. Roleplaying

is a social activity, so there tends to be a lot of social talk as there would around any board or card game: catching up, kibitzing, embellishing, trash talking, cheering, sharing. Like talk about rules, it can be tempting to bracket off this kind of chatter as extraneous to "actual roleplay." That would be a grievous mistake. The fiction of the space and the permission to play are constituted, maintained, and adjusted by this metatalk. It is similar to the dynamic among actors and directors during the rehearsal phase of a production: trying things out, going with the flow, agreeing on directions, etc. All of this comprises what Zoë Svendsen calls a "dramaturgy of spontaneity," a process in which listening, reciprocity, and spontaneity play a key role, but "habit, genre expectations, and a shared language of improvisational techniques all feature as the building blocks of potentiality in the creative present, whether or not they are acknowledged as such."[11] Without such chatter, the ludonarrative process is inevitably hampered.

When it all comes together—the roleplaying one does as character, player, and social actor—the result can be an experience that is moving, intellectually challenging, memorable, significant, and fun: immersive. This speaks to the profoundly engaging quality of playful talk, but also the particular ways that playful talk enables and is enabled by analytic, practical, and empathetic process—in other words, by varied and immersive forms of dramaturgical practice.

Distributed Dramaturgy

Thus far, we've framed the immersivity of the TTRPG in fairly abstract terms. We've defined the genre, especially the collaborative devising process at its core. We've described the shifting foci of play: the strategic, the imaginative, the social. We've directed attention to the ad hoc, quotidian, processual, disorderly nature of TTRPG play, discussing the spaces in which play occurs (kitchens, coffee shops, etc.) and the materials that support it (rulebooks, paper, pens, dice, cards, etc.). Most of all, we've emphasized talk: TTRPGs are primarily a verbal activity, and it is talk that is the performative glue linking all the parts in a dynamic of self-regulating happiness. Now, we want to dig deeper into the experience of play, describing the ways that TTRPGs promote a distinctly dramaturgical experience of immersiveness by way of two mutually supportive dramaturgies. The first is akin to traditional dramaturgy in its attention to constructing a vibrant relationship between the texts of the game and its

performance, and the second a dramaturgy of spontaneity that produces new texts through performance.

Despite the proliferation of entertainment media, live, in-person performance has retained its unique hold on hearts and minds. Creators of immersive theater satisfy this desire by inviting their audiences into a distinctly sensuous, embodied, collaborative, and (most importantly) dramatic experience. The five criteria of immersive theater that we listed above and will return to shortly produce what Machon calls "lasting ephemerality" by way of "embodied memory."[12] The TTRPG has unique affordances and traditions to capture performance, among these the textual and object associations produced over the course of play. As Nick Webber notes, "[m]ateriality is centrally important to discussions of players' relationship to tabletop roleplaying games," with the most common and potent relationship being built around the characters they play. Webber explains, "During . . . gameplay, there may be several sites of connection between player and character, manifest through multiple forms of material affordance, including figurines, character sheets and portraits, as well as through imagination."[13] Like any other tabletop game, a TTRPG is played with *stuff*, which simultaneously enables and keeps track of the storytelling.

Character sheets are a particularly interesting element of this relationship. Designed for the practical purpose of recording the abilities, resources, and history of a character, they provide what Jason Morningstar describes as a "focal point of player agency."[14] When a character is first generated and put into play, their character sheet will have a fairly generic quality. However, over the course of multiple sessions, as Rafael Bienia explains, the character sheet "becomes a written account of the life and a material witness of the character beyond the narrative actors alone."[15] If they're made of paper, the sheet (which may become many pages long) becomes dog-eared and palimpsestic as numbers and other data ebb and flow with the dramatic tides. Though less palpable, a digital sheet easily captures the imagination of a player. As script, archive, rulebook, and souvenir, it individualizes and intensifies the player's engagement.

Other kinds of stuff invite comparable sorts of engagement. Dice are one of the more curious. Though not all require dice, they are a common component of TTRPGs, *Dungeons & Dragons* being a preeminent example. Dice fulfill a practical need—they're a low-tech way to generate random numbers with different probabilities. They also generate dramatic thrills. A roll of the dice can doom your character or make her a savior of the day, hit the bad guy with the bus or obliterate the bodega

next to them, keep your emotions bottled up or expressed to your as-yet-unrequited love. They can also become imbued with superstition; players will put them into "dice jail" for rolling unfortunate results. We know people with dozens, even hundreds of dice. They are sold by the dozen and in precious limited editions.

Foods and beverages are a ubiquitous presence on the tabletop—Michael hosts a game that is a veritable potluck. As far as we know, no scholar has deeply explored the relationship of food to games, but it strikes us that it's a ritualized social practice akin to setting the table for guests, acknowledging community, and providing gifts to those who entertain us, a common practice in all kinds of performance cultures—eating as an act that accompanies simple leisure activities or larger entertainments like baseball games and movies. It's conducive to embodiment, a way to stimulate the fingers, nose, and mouth as the eye, ear, and mind contemplate the field of play and the exciting event that will happen on it. It's also a way to welcome friends to one's table. A happy stomach helps ensure a happy table.

The kind of embodied experience fostered by character sheets, dice, food and drink, and the other stuff on and around the tabletop builds drama and immediacy. It's ultimately a synesthetic experience: a vividly spoken sentence provokes laughter, a roll of the dice becomes a twist of plot, a bite of cake a moment of dramatic pause. It's also delightfully nerdy. Players might spend dozens if not hundreds of hours delving through manuals, lore books, and websites to spur their imaginations. While not as dramatic, collaborative, or improvisational as the moment of around-the-tabletop play, it's definitely a playful and often deeply immersive experience, combining dramatic composition, game design, and party planning in equal measure.

Improvisatory Dramaturgy

As we know, immersive theater differs from nonimmersive theater most obviously due to the way the focus of attention is distributed across the space of performance. Rather than following the tradition of using the stage as a single, focalizing space, a work of immersive theater distributes drama in multiple directions, most notably by incorporating the audience into the action. That's true of the TTRPG, too. However, the distribution of attention that occurs in a TTRPG is enabled not just by the dramatic and theatrical experience, but by the strategic, material, social, interpre-

tive, and creative processes that produce that experience. TTRPG play is a systemic dramaturgy whose analytic, practical, and social foci flit from player to player, object to object, and topic to topic, occasionally erupting in moments of high dramatic tension. But it is also an improvisatory dramaturgy, welcoming a roll of the dice or a twist in the plot or the entrance of a toddler or the announcement of felicitous news to achieve that most precious and vital of goals: fun.

So, a question: Is it the game that makes its dramaturgy so engaging? Undoubtedly, yes.

Another question: Is it the dramaturgy that makes the game so fun? Undoubtedly, yes.

TTRPGs foster specific dramaturgical practices that are engaging, suspenseful, playful, improvisatory, and collaborative. Those dramaturgical practices, in turn, make the game engaging, suspenseful, playful, and fun. Each of Machon's five criteria of immersive theater (see above) are achieved through design-minded dramatic play, and that play is guided by the spatial fictions, permissions to play, and collaborative devising process (to recall Holdsworth again) of the given TTRPG and the people who play it.

This is an immersive experience, in the sense that the one doing the dramaturging is *both at play* and *in play*, helping to envision and manifest a dramatic world that is engaging, surprising, emergent, and challenging—and doing so in a fashion that is itself engaging, surprising, challenging, and fun! Every player is performer and spectator. When it works (and it can work in a variety of ways), this consensual, improvisational, rules-guided construction of world, drama, role, and play leads to a high degree of investment in both the ludonarrative process, which leads to greater identification with the characters and the dramatic situation, heightened dramatic experience, and fun as the dice roll and fate unwinds.

Let's consider a couple of examples of this kind of consensual, improvisational, rules-guided construction and the way it promotes immersive experience and distributed dramaturgy. We begin with the improvisatory, collaborative nature of the dramaturgy. A few years ago, Mike was GM-ing a session of *Call of Cthulhu*, a TTRPG set in a storyworld of cosmic horror à la H. P. Lovecraft. The characters arrived at a house in which dwelt a malevolent being who was the object of the investigation. After some preliminary exploration that allowed Mike to establish the general details of the location, one of the players announced that his character had discovered a cryptic sign inscribed on the house's foundation. He then showed

the rest of us a drawing he'd made of it. There was no such sign described in the plans Mike had prepared. Mike held his tongue, though, interested in where the player was going and enticed by the possibility of a challenge. The player explained that they had seen this very sigil on a trip they had taken to Dunluce Castle in Ireland as part of an investigation into the occult activities of the rock band Led Zeppelin. This was news to Mike. Another player asked to see the drawing, then shrieked in horror (and in character!) and informed us that her character was fleeing to the back yard. Mike had no idea why. A third player announced that their character was following the second, concerned about her safety. A fourth, to this point silent, then spoke in character to the first, telling them they had seen that exact same symbol in case files at the Los Angeles Police Department. There was no such symbol and no such case files. Mike knew this because he was the one who was in charge of those imaginary files.

Moments like these are common in TTRPGs. They're a ton of fun, and what makes them fun is the dramaturg-ing of it all. In this case, the choices the players made implicated not just the unfolding narrative, but the world in which the story took place, the backstory of two PCs, and, most importantly, the evolving dynamic of a group of players. The moment demanded dramaturgical improvisation from Mike—the TTRPG equivalent of being in a tough chess situation or in the middle of a high-pressure free kick in soccer. He needed a moment to think, so passed a note to the first two players directing them to get their stories in order. He made a note to himself to change a detail of the house map he had designed. By coincidence, there actually *was* an occult sigil on the foundations, though it had not yet been discovered by the players—which was why Mike was initially gobsmacked by the player with the drawing. With a stroke of the pen, that sigil was now the one the player had invented. While the two characters in the backyard played their scene, he scribbled more notes to guide the moment forward.

Though all the decisions Mike made during this passage of play were improvised, they were guided by the dramaturgical principles we identified earlier. The player decisions were compatible with the larger narrative. They worked within the game's rules. They increased dramatic tension and intensified the atmosphere. They expressed and progressed character and character relationships. They strengthened the group dynamic. They aligned with player preferences and agreed-upon boundaries. Most importantly, all the players were having fun. When that shriek happened, everyone won.

Dramaturgical immersivity isn't just the result of collective storytelling. TTRPGs are games, and like any game, are fascinating in and of themselves. Learning to play a game can be profoundly immersive, attracting multiple kinds of attention to the task. Playing the game according to the rules is another focus that requires a dramaturgical touch. Players of TTRPGs regularly modify or ignore the rules—the current manual for the *Dungeons & Dragons* GM encourages it! This is the metagame of happiness.

But that metagame is increasingly governed by rules. After all, happiness is always precarious and processual. To help ensure happiness, players must be attentive to the unwritten rules of happiness but should also be using safety tools to ensure attentiveness and secure equity among all players at the table. Example one: the characters come across a tangle of gigantic plants that attempt to kiss them in order to deliver a mind-control poison. A player uses the safety tool known as "pause for a minute." In this case, the player felt comfortable explaining to the group that they are uncomfortable with the imagery of forced intimacy. After a short break, the GM rewound the action and play recommences, the GM now role-played the grasping vines differently, to everyone's satisfaction. Example two: a character has become separated from the party, ensconced in the boudoir of a powerful foe who is attempting to seduce him. Noting that this is content that potentially infringes on agreements explicitly made by group members, the GM pauses the action for a check-in to make sure everyone is comfortable, but also double-checks privately with the player playing the character in the boudoir. As it turns out, not only was everyone comfortable, but the player dealing with the monstrous seducer took bolder risks with their character that not only made that moment fun but helped them have more fun in future play sessions.

In both cases, mutual care and clearly delineated rules of play ensured happiness. In both cases, the GM used their knowledge of the rules of the game, their understanding of the narrative, explicit agreements made among players, and the vibe of the moment to make tactical changes in the mechanisms of storytelling. Both cases involve an affirmation of player equity, creativity, and dramaturgical agency, resulting in immersive fun. And both cases underlined the power of improvisatory dramaturgy. Though the first example might strike one as a moment of "no . . . but . . ." and the second as "yes . . . and . . . ," both were "yes . . . and . . ." Both exemplify how careful attention to the written and unwritten rules of the game ensure a happy community and a fun game.

Conclusion

In summary, to play a TTRPG requires a multifaceted awareness that engages deeply and creatively with game rules, the storyworld, and the unfolding, quite specific drama of the players and their characters. But more generally, to play, one must be conscious of the happiness of everyone involved. All of this is oriented toward fun, and one of the best kinds of TTRPG fun is collectively developing and executing moments of dramatic intensity. Again, not all of this happens around the table. The immersivity of the TTRPG is also experienced by the GM when they prepare a rollicking adventure for their players the afternoon before a session, by the person who has just purchased a new TTRPG and is learning the rules of the game, or a player practicing their character's voice as they drive to work. To play a TTRPG is to dramaturg a TTRPG, and everyone in a TTRPG is a dramaturg. It is distributed, improvisatory dramaturgy.

What can we do with this concept of distributed dramaturgy besides enabling a more refined understanding of the TTRPG and ensuring happy play? First, the concept enables a more systemic approach to dramaturgy. As we advocate in our book, systemic dramaturgy involves "an understanding of play that engages its historical, conceptual, aesthetic, and practical dimensions and thus opens opportunities for the application of dramaturgy to a wider range of media."[16] And, as we also advocate in our book, this kind of engagement is all the more powerful because it's playful and quite often really fun. A dramaturg who understands and has practical experience with the collaborative devising process of the TTRPG (to recall Holdsworth again) will be more sensitive to the ludic possibilities of the space, the people, and the material stuff around them. Such a dramaturg can also bring that expanded analytic framework into traditional or conventional theatrical settings, enabling them to ask new kinds of questions of their team. In addition, a TTRPG dramaturg can provide valuable analytic and creative resources to creative teams outside dramaturgy's traditional practices; for example, videogames, boardgames, escape rooms, web content, multiplatform performances, user experience design, and, last and not least, immersive theater itself. Finally, they can bring the best snack to the table.

Notes

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16. Chemers and Sell, 20.

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Michael Chemers is Professor and Chair of the Performance, Play & Design Department at UC Santa Cruz, where he teaches dramaturgy, dramatic literature, and theater history. He is the author or editor of fifteen books on dramaturgy, history, adaptation, and monstrosity in performance. With Mike Sell, he recently coauthored *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age* (SIU Press, 2022).

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Tom Robson is a clinical assistant teaching professor in Purdue University's Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program. With Jenny Kokai he is the coeditor of *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor* and the coauthor of *Disney Parks and the Construction of American Identity: Tourism, Performance, Anxiety* (Lexington Books, 2024). He has also published several essays and articles on theme parks, historical stage technology, African American theater history, and baseball movies.

Cindy Rosenthal is a director and performer and Professor of Drama at Hofstra University. Her monograph *Ellen Stewart Presents: Fifty Years of La MaMa Experimental Theatre* (University of Michigan Press) won the 2017 George Freedley Award. Coedited volumes include *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theatres and Their Legacies* (University of Michigan Press) and *Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the US: 2000–2009* (Bloomsbury/Methuen). Her essays on the performance of age and radical theater have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Performance Research International*, and *TDR*.

Mike Sell is Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is the founder and director of the Digital Storytelling Project, an educational outreach program integrating decision education, storytelling, and game design. He is author of *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion War*, coauthor with Michael M. Chemers of *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age*, and coeditor with Megan Amber Condis of *Ready Reader One: The Stories We Tell With, About, and Around Videogames*.

Susan Tenneriello is Associate Professor of Theatre in the Fine and Performing Arts Department at Baruch College, CUNY, where she currently serves as deputy chair of the theater program. Her scholarship often focuses on spectacle entertainments, immersive installations, and strategies of visual display in mass entertainment from an interdisciplinary perspective. She is the author of *Spectacle Culture and American Identity: 1815–1940*, a study of immersive entertainment in US history.

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