

Repertoire

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I would like to propose that critical infrastructure studies allows us to better understand the cultural lives of nineteenth-century theatrical repertoires. Infrastructures are often conceived as “the ambient environment of everyday life”: unremarkable as long as they function as they should.¹ Facilitating those circulations and exchanges that compose the humdrum background of everyday life, infrastructures are the material structures (roads, railways, ships) and immaterial systems (civic administration, finance, supply chains) that enable the mobility of people, goods and capital. Their mundane inconspicuousness thus contrasts with their typically colossal scale. The supposed invisibility of infrastructure is contingent on one’s access to the services they provide, however. Substantial research in the Global South has shown particularly forcefully that infrastructures are highly stratified “living systems,”² which reinforce “splintered” forms of social and spatial organization.³ Access to infrastructure is bound up with inclusion in the polity as a citizen, and vice versa:⁴ (a lack of) connection to a grid can reinforce the vulnerability of less privileged communities or serve as a vector for biopolitical violence.⁵ Certainly, we should not foreclose opportunities for human agency. Infrastructural processes are diversified, enlivened, and determined by the ways in which individuals and communities consciously and creatively interact with them: siphoning off water from the mains, etc. Nevertheless, this does not alter their unequal opportunities to engage with, or influence, the conditions infrastructures create.

Nineteenth-century theatrical repertoires functioned in analogous ways. By the late century, the term “repertoire” no longer denoted a single actor’s or musician’s customary stock of parts or tunes, but a “wider body of work, [. . . not] tied to one person.”⁶ More than simply a store of familiar and popular plays, which might be grouped by genre,

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playwright, or other thematic criteria, these repertoires were “*multiple circulating recombinative discourses of intelligibility.*”⁷ Through processes of circulation, reiteration, revision, and citation, patterns of symbol, form, speech, and music became taken-for-granted conditions of performance: tacitly understood and routine until turning-point innovations revealed them in a new light. Repertoire was thus a means of habituating audiences to encoded cultural meanings, even while dramas contested political principles and social norms. Particularly as the uptick of theater construction and expansion of theatrical touring saw anglophone theater become an increasingly globalized phenomenon in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, its implicitly understood repertoire operated across vast distances and on an enormous scale. Again, like material-technical infrastructures, however, it undergirded radically uneven relations of power between spaces and communities.

Not only a system through which anglophone culture was transmitted over space and time, repertoire projected and popularized coded interpretations of intercultural or geographic relations onto new territories. Crucially, it reinforced racialized stereotypes that underpinned assumptions about white superiority central to contemporary justifications of imperialism, which hardened around biological race theories from the 1860s on.⁸ Added to the fact that anglophone drama saturated colonial markets in contexts where European expatriates were socially, but not numerically, dominant, we can see that the geographic and cultural spread of this repertoire involved a range of “suppressions, substitutions, and coercions” in line with practices of colonial occupation and emergent settler nationalisms.⁹

Nineteenth-century dramas were thus encoded with asymmetric patterns of belonging and inclusion, proximity and distance, that we see reinforced by infrastructure; however, practitioners’ reinterpretation of individual dramas for far-distant audiences, living under different contexts of occupation and oppression, also allowed for the importation of a raft of alternative political and social inflections. Recent important works in theater history have recovered how transnational practices of theatrical touring held a double potential to reinforce a conservative status quo or to enact forms of dissent, as performances of British theater by diverse actors across metropolitan and peripheral stages enabled non-white peoples to enact alternative collectivities.¹⁰ Analogous to AbdouMaliq Simone’s *people as infrastructure* concept, then, “interactions among bodies and materials” in traveling productions challenge our understanding of cultural circulation, exchange, and elision within and

beyond imperial boundaries, and “[engender] new constellations of sense and capacity.”¹¹

There is, at present, no unified consensus among theater historians about how repertoire should be defined or studied. This causes scholars to variously redraw the spatial coordinates of transnational cultural transit: repertoire is cast alternatively as something bounded and sacred or wantonly flexible. Certainly, for minority or disappearing cultures, repertoire has urgent political stakes. Still, if we consider repertoire as a corporeal repository of cultural memory, anterior to historically white practices of documentation—as important works by Diana Taylor and Joseph Roach have done—it tends to position repertoire as a more or less passive record of the past, commanding a degree of historical reverence.¹² Instead, how would conceptualizing theatrical repertoire as an imaginative infrastructure help us understand its cultural legacies in our own day? Theorizing imaginative infrastructures as systems and processes through which political meanings and social and spatial identities were deliberately shaped and communicated signals the direct entanglement of the arts with contemporary dynamics of colonial power and political resistance. I would argue that we should study repertoire as a means of actively communicating and *managing* meaning, thus “account[ing] for [the] knowledge, technique, and sophistication” of practitioners, and addressing the fundamental instability of meaning itself.¹³

NOTES

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3. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001).
4. M. Ranganathan, “Paying the Pipes, Claiming Citizenship: Political Agency and Water Reforms at the Urban Periphery,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): 590–608, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12028>.

5. Brenda Chalfin, "Public Things, Excremental Politics, and the Infrastructure of Bare Life in Ghana's City of Tema," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 1 (2014): 92–109, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12062>; Dennis Rodgers and Bruce O'Neill, "Introduction: Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Ethnography* 13, no. 4 (2012): 401–12.
6. Tracy C. Davis, "Nineteenth-Century Repertoire," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 36, no. 2 (2009): 6, <https://doi.org/10.7227/NCTF.36.2.4>.
7. Davis, "Nineteenth-Century Repertoire," 7 (emphasis original).
8. See, for example, Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Porscha Fermanis, "Pedestrian Touring, Racial Violence and Bad Feeling in Trans-Tasman Settler Fiction," in *The Making and Remaking of Australasia: Mobility, Texts and "Southern Circulations,"* edited by Tony Ballantyne (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming), 217–32.
9. Tamara S. Wagner, "Introduction: Narrating Domestic Portability: Emigration, Domesticity, and Genre Formation," in *Victorian Settler Narratives: Emigrants, Cosmopolitans and Returnees in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, edited by Tamara S. Wagner (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 2.
10. Christopher Balme and Nic Leonhardt, "Theatrical Trade Routes," *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1, no. 1 (2016); Tobias Becker and Kedar A. Kulkarni, "Beyond the Playhouse: Travelling Theatre in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 44, no. 1 (2017); Gilli Bush-Bailey and Kate Flaherty, eds., *Touring Performance and Global Exchange, 1850–1960: Making Tracks* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Veronica Kelly, "Australasia: Mapping a Theatrical 'Region' in Peace and War," edited by Christopher Balme and Nic Leonhardt, *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1, no. 1 (2016): 62–77; Veronica Kelly, "A Complementary Economy? National Markets and International Product in Early Australian Theatre Managements," *New Theatre Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2005): 77–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000351>; Janice Norwood, *Victorian Touring Actresses: Crossing Boundaries and Negotiating the Cultural Landscape* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Kathleen Wilson, *Strolling Players of Empire: Theater and Performances of Power in the British Imperial Provinces, 1656–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

11. AbdouMaliq Simone, "Ritornello: 'People as Infrastructure,'" *Urban Geography*, March 5, 2021, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1894397>.
12. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
13. Davis, "Nineteenth-Century Repertoire," 7.

