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ENGLISH VARIETY: POPULAR THEATER AND THE POST-CONSENSUS NOVEL

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

English Variety: Popular Theater and the Post-Consensus Novel

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English Variety sets out to explain the late-twentieth-century English’s novel’s interest in a series of performance genres native to an archaic tradition of popular theatrical entertainment. It does so by reading what I call “the novel of variety” in the context of both a renewed critical interest in English national culture, and an urgently felt need to reassess the possibility of postimperial collectivity marked by racial, ethnic, sexual, and cultural difference. As I understand it, the novel’s belated uptake of popular theatrical genres like pantomime, comic monologue, and male impersonation represents a form of generic dynamism that mirrors the social dynamism of popular theatrical enterprise, that is, by simulating the theater’s defining attributes: its variousness, its vulgarity, its topicality, and so forth. Moreover, the novelists at the center of this project—Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Sarah Waters, and Ian McEwan—recognize that the theater, unlike the novel, depends upon embodiment, co-presence, and collective enterprise; as such, they strive to adapt the theater’s forms in order to dramatize more clearly the novel’s relationship to the social. In taking on the social and generic features of the popular theater, then, the contemporary novel performs its own commitment to vernacular, populist collectivity, a kind of collectivity that assembles around popular will rather than democratic protocol, and thus becomes a more
capacious genre for organizing people and managing difference. In moving away from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” as a primary marker of national culture in the novel, *English Variety* focuses on micropolitical scales in which the collectivity that thrives in spontaneous, even amateurish, entertainment genres substitutes for abstract notions of civic belonging. In short, theatrical variety expands the contemporary novel’s methods for representing the social, and, in the process, helps to diversify Englishness as a demographic category. To this end, I suggest we make space for “the novel of variety” in our critical histories of the late-century British novel.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................................ii

Acknowledgments................................................................................................................iv

Table of Contents.................................................................................................................iv

Introduction
   The Post-Consensus Novel of Variety................................................................................1

   That’s the Way to Do It!
      Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.......................................................................27

   The Other Side of Imperialism
      Angela Carter’s Late Fiction......................................................................................72

   Stranger and More Various
      Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*..........................................................................111

   The Messiness of Other Minds
      Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.......................................................................................162

Bibliography..........................................................................................................................202
INTRODUCTION

The Post-Consensus Novel of Variety

As of today, the annual Christmas pantomime—on its face a ritualistic and spectacular adaptation of classic folktales—counts among the last vestiges of an incredibly diverse class of theatrical entertainment in Britain. From the urban pageantry of medieval guilds, through Shakespeare and, later, the Restoration, to the Victorian age of melodrama and spectacle, popular theatrical enterprise endured as the preeminent genre of mass entertainment for centuries. In the twentieth century, the shabby informality of the Victorian music hall transformed into the more orderly genre of theatrical “variety,” a bourgeois institution that nonetheless preserved some of the trademark forms of its indecorous predecessor: comic and sentimental songs, male impersonation, topical sketches, variations on contemporary dance fads, and borderline pornographic tableaux. This broad repertoire of theatrical entertainment stayed popular, for the most part, through both World Wars, and seemed to persist in spite of the growing popularity of cinema. By midcentury, however, local and regional theaters folded at an alarming rate, while television viewership increased exponentially. Conversely, the legitimate theater consolidated itself as the dominant venue of the dramatic arts, and ultimately absorbed what was remaining of its illegitimate counterpart: the pantomime.

As if by accident, the English pantomime—the weirdest, ugliest, and most inconsistent of theatrical genres—was spared from the fate of its peers and subsequently became a living relic with a powerful influence on how the English conceive of the nation’s
popular theatrical traditions. “Its central modes,” writes Julian Barnes, “are farce and melodrama, with large openings for the miraculous and the sentimental.”

It retains, if in an attenuated form, a worldview in which Britannia rules the waves and foreigners are a humorous supporting act... it boasts a promiscuous permeability to modern culture, so that at any moment the stage is likely to be invaded by some two-minute television cult that the parents have barely caught on to. Darth Vader outfits jostle with TV magicians, old Empire racism with Green jokes, and all is resolved with much audience participation and a join-in-or-die singsong.

In short, he says, the pantomime “has always been a ramshackle, catchall, demotic genre... it has always been debased—that’s to say, various, eclectic, vulgar, referential, and topical.”

With its generic mutability, its combination of enduring racist-xenophobic antagonisms with throwaway pop-cultural references, and its uncanny knack for coercing even the most unwilling participants into its playful economy, the pantomime is an iconic and irreducibly English form of entertainment. The Englishness of pantomime, however, seems importantly different from other strains of Englishness; while Barnes notes that the Englishness of, say, “cricket, marmalade, [and] the humor of Benny Hill” had been successfully “exported” to other regions, he asserts that “the pantomime remains stubbornly local.”

Angela Carter apparently agrees: “There’s no other country in the world where you have pantomime with men dressed as women and women dressed as men, and everybody thinks this is perfectly suitable for children. It’s part of the great tradition of British art.”

To say that the pantomime is all that remains of English popular theater following its midcentury decline, however, is to misrepresent an important development in the history of English culture. While the pantomime may indeed represent the last remaining iteration of the popular theater as it appears on the stage, popular theatrical genres nonetheless persevered on the page, that is to say, in the late–twentieth-century English novel. Among the earliest examples of a novel reviving a seemingly extinct theatrical genre, J. B Priestley’s *Lost
Empires (1965) looks back to provincial music-hall entertainers working in the months leading up to the First World War. Later examples accumulate with greater frequency: Daphne du Maurier’s comedy of national insularity, Rule Britannia (1972), follows an aging actress-cum-Peter Pan as she resists the occupation of Cornwall by US troops; A. S. Byatt’s The Virgin in the Garden (1978) commemorates the coronation of Elizabeth II by staging a play on a Yorkshire estate; Penelope Fitzgerald’s At Freddie’s (1982) revolves around an unconventional stage school at the periphery of London’s theater scene; Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus (1984), a true farrago of a novel, pays close attention to theatrical marvels such as clowning, acrobatics, and waltzing tigers; the farcical romance at the center of Beryl Bainbridge’s An Awfully Big Adventure (1990) takes place during rehearsals for a regional pantomime; Hanif Kureishi’s Buddha of Suburbia (1990) famously casts its protagonist as Mowgli in a staged adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book; the esteemed playwright Christopher Marlowe doubles as an international spy in Anthony Burgess’s A Dead Man in Deptford (1993), while in Peter Ackroyd’s Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem (1994), the preeminent music-hall comedian Dan Leno becomes a suspect in a series of gruesome murders; Doris Lessing’s Love, Again (1995) centers on an al fresco performance depicting the life of a folkloric West Indian émigrée; and Barry Unsworth’s Morality Play (1995) follows a medieval theater troupe as they investigate a mysterious death. Though popular theatrical genres were virtually extinct as theater, they nonetheless enjoyed a vibrant novelistic afterlife well beyond their departure from the scene of mass entertainment.

English Variety explains the late-twentieth-century novel’s belated interest in these “stubbornly local” genres by reading it in the context of both a renewed critical interest in English national culture and an urgently felt need to reassess the possibility of postimperial collectivity marked by racial, ethnic, sexual, and cultural difference. As I understand it, the
novel’s uptake of popular theatrical genres like pantomime, comic monologue, and male impersonation represents a form of generic dynamism that mirrors the social dynamism of popular theatrical enterprise, that is, by simulating the theater’s defining attributes: its variousness, its vulgarity, its topicality, and so forth. Moreover, the novelists at the center of this project—Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Sarah Waters, and Ian McEwan—recognize that the theater, unlike the novel, depends upon embodiment, co-presence, and collective enterprise; as such, they strive to adapt the theater’s forms in order to dramatize more clearly the novel’s relationship to the social. In taking on the social and generic features of the popular theater, then, the contemporary novel performs its own commitment to vernacular, populist collectivity, a kind of collectivity that assembles around popular will rather than democratic protocol, and thus becomes a more capacious genre for organizing people and managing difference. In moving away from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” as a primary marker of national culture in the novel, English Variety focuses on micropolitical scales in which the collectivity that thrives in spontaneous, even amateurish, entertainment genres substitutes for abstract notions of civic belonging. In short, theatrical variety expands the contemporary novel’s methods for representing the social, and, in the process, helps to diversify Englishness as a demographic and cultural category. To this end, I suggest we make space for “the novel of variety” in our critical histories of the late-century British novel.

English Variety covers a period of British history loosely referred to as the “post-consensus era,” that is, from 1979 to 2001. In the political history of the UK, we tend to view the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher as the event that marked a shift from the postwar social contract, often called the “consensus era,” and towards a political culture that espoused newly re-energized racist-imperialist values. But the period includes both the ascendance of Thatcher’s New Right and, at the opposite end of the mainstream political
spectrum, Tony Blair’s New Labour. As such, we tend either to divide the period into two separate eras, or to conceive of it as an inchoate moment defined exclusively by an emergent neoliberal consensus. It would be misleading to suggest that, with the project of a “New Britain” underway, the political culture that gave rise to and empowered the New Right during the 1980s had simply disappeared (a fact made painfully obvious given the steady strengthening of a reactionary right-wing base in the UK from 2001 to the present day). On the contrary, many left-wing writers and thinkers of the 1990s knew that the state-sanctioned racism and xenophobia exacerbated during the heyday of the New Right would not be defeated as a result of transformations in political discourse alone; rather, antiracist political critique (exemplified by the likes of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy) continued throughout the 1990s to oppose state-supported racism, such as police violence, the tokenization of black people and other people of color in public discourse, and racial disparities in access to social services. This is the political milieu of the “post-consensus”: a variegated yet coherent period in which the continuity of political culture under the New Right and New Labour is once again made visible and problematic.

The post-consensus era, remembered as it is in the political fictions of the 1980s and 1990s, has thus acquired a fickle, multivocal political tenor: it is both the era of increasing right-wing nationalism and the era of “British multiculturalism,” the era of a return to “Victorian values” and the era of a “New Britain.” On the one hand, the literary novel of the 1980s is either deeply melancholic, grappling with the loss of political and social clarity associated with the years immediately following the Second World War, or bitingly satirical, seemingly (and probably rightly!) overdetermined by its representation of Thatcher as an arch-antagonist—often it is a combination of both. On the other hand, the novel of the 1990s reflected a more optimistic reality; though it was still deeply critical of the political
establishment—see, for example, Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000)—it was nonetheless softened by the promise of a “post-national” new millennium.⁷

Literary histories of the late-twentieth century appear to be overdetermined by this late-breaking development in political culture. Upon surveying critical writing on the transitional period between the New Right and New Labour, one could understandably conclude that the period is remarkable for its consistently utopian and cosmopolitan visions of a diverse future, an imminent future optimistically, though not uncritically, heralded by postcolonial, feminist, and queer authors and scholars alike.⁸ Indeed, the contemporary novel’s apparent commitment to a liberal politics explicitly opposed to Thatcher and her legacies often takes the form of an explicit celebration of multicultural diversity, to the extent that “the novel of multiculturalism” has become a cruelly optimistic genre, taken as proof of an already inclusive culture rather than an argument for inclusion.⁹ In accounting for this political ambivalence, *English Variety* takes its cue from Simon Gikandi’s *Maps of Englishness* (1996), which describes the era following decolonization as “a disjunctive moment in which imperial legacies have come to haunt English and postcolonial identities, their cultural formations, and their modes of representation.”¹⁰ My hope is that, by invoking “the post-consensus novel” as a representative genre of this postimperial disjuncture, we might restore some historical texture to the period and thus account equally for its reactionary origins and its promising futurity.¹¹

For Gikandi and others, the institutions at the center of debates regarding postimperial identity and culture are those, like Shakespeare and cricket, that once circulated from the metropole to the colonies (and back again).¹² As Barnes suggests above, these institutions have thus proved to be remarkably durable in ways that the popular theater
simply has not. Nevertheless, the generic properties of the popular theater, in my view, clarify some of the social and political ambivalences of the post-consensus novel, in part because they augment the novel’s ability to grapple with issues related to social interaction, collective enterprise, and demographic volatility. Equally, during its prominence as the nation’s pastime, the popular theater profited by exploiting racial and sexual difference: the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, anti-Irish sentiment, and orientalist iconography guaranteed success for any theatrical entrepreneur. I want to insist, however, that the post-consensus novel of variety selectively takes up this history in order to reform how we conceptualize the social function of the novel as a form. They grapple with the ugly history of the theater only to celebrate its vernacular forms, forms capable of adapting to the inclusive political mandates of the age. I thus contend that the popular theater’s variable cultivation of both inclusive and exclusive paradigms enables novelists to offer up forms of collectivity that emerge paradoxically from within a divided national culture.

The Theater and Its Novel

In focusing on the post-consensus novel’s belated uptake of popular theatrical forms, English Variety contributes to a well-established tradition of criticism that attends to the role of the theater in the novel. Some such studies, like Terry Castle’s Masquerade and Civilization (1986), Francesca Saggini’s Backstage in the Novel (2012), and Anne F. Widmayer’s Theatre and the Novel, from Behn to Fielding (2015), look to the eighteenth century and earlier to determine the impact of theatrical culture and performance on the emergence of the novel as a form. Most, however, tend to focus on the nineteenth century, in part because the nineteenth century oversaw the consolidation of both the theater and the novel as synchronous genres of mass entertainment. This wide body of work, which includes Joseph
Litvak’s *Caught in the Act* (1992), Deborah Vlock’s *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (1998), Alan L. Ackerman’s *The Portable Theater* (1999), J. Jeffrey Franklin’s *Serious Play* (1999), Penny Gay’s *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002), Emily Allen’s *Theater Figures* (2003), and David Kurnick’s *Empty Houses* (2012), takes up the theater as a foundational structuring and stylistic influence on the development of the realist novel. For example, in her work on the production of novelistic distinction in the nineteenth-century British novel, Allen casts the relationship between theater and the novel in antagonistic terms, arguing that both were popular forms competing for supremacy in a broader cultural milieu. Ackerman makes a similar sort of claim regarding the novel’s uptake of theatricality in nineteenth-century US fiction, though he presents the relationship as somewhat more symbiotic, arguing that there was widespread dramaturgical competence that enabled US novelists to take up “existential and ethical problems” native to theatrical performance. In short, the generic exchange between theater and the novel has been robustly theorized as either conflict, ambivalence, or symbiosis. Building on this work, *English Variety* works to explain how that exchange is mediated on the one hand by a century’s worth of history and on the other by the demotic energies of explicitly popular genres.

Very few critics have sought to explain the role of the theater, popular or otherwise, in the novel across the twentieth century. Of the work that does exist, there remains a critical bias towards fin-de-siècle and modernist fiction. The writing of Henry James, which straddles continents and periods, has enjoyed pride of place. As perhaps the most self-evidently theatrical literary oeuvre, James’s novels reflect his desire to adapt the public forms of theatrical performance to the manifestly looser and more introspective protocols of narrative fiction, a practice James himself called “the scenic method.” And, although critical accounts of James’s theatricality differ in method and scope, they tend to constellate around
the idea that theatrical forms help James think through the issue of collectivity; in Kurnick’s words, the theater for James is “a technology of collectivization, a mechanism for the production of the plural.”19 James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1918) and Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941) are important examples of how the modernist novel takes up diverse theatrical forms, and, like James, they have received the lion’s share of critical attention. “Circe,” the Symbolist closet drama at the climactic center of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, could be understood as the final triumph of the modern novel over non-novelistic forms, insofar as it performs the novel’s total absorption of drama, which was already undergoing increasing novelization at the time. Martin Puchner, however, rightly rejects this conclusion, and suggests instead that *Ulysses’s* absorption of drama in fact “creates an entirely new [dramatic] genre” that necessarily depends on the existence of theatrical forms.20 Likewise, Kurnick detects in *Ulysses’s* representation of dramatic form the novel’s “most explicit desire for the social.”21 In short, our critical understanding of the theater’s role in the novel depends on three basic principles governing the sociality of the theater and its associated discourses: 1) the physical theater relies on embodiment and co-presence, 2) theatricality serves as an enduring metaphor for behavior and social identity, and 3) the cultural and perceptual dynamics of spectacle shape modern intersubjectivity.22

Indeed, the theater’s self-evident relationship to collective life is consistently used to explain its place in the novel. For the moderns, popular and traditional forms of performance possessed an archaic, folkish element that helped them reconceptualize the relationship between their art and collective life.23 In his exemplary work on the moderns’ relation to public life, Justus Nieland argues that popular performance, “for modernists, is particularly freighted with emotional attachments, the site of some of their more intense longings, their fiercest nationalism, their most nostalgic reveries.”24 Moreover, Nieland
argues that theatrical variety represented a generic analogue to social difference to such an extent that it became “an overdetermined site of retrospective investment.” This conception of the relation between popular performance and the public was not exclusive to theater practitioners and theorists, however; as Jed Esty argues, in *Between the Acts*, we see Woolf taking up the twee form of the traditional pageant play in order to toggle between “the fading world of elite cosmopolitanism and a revived core of insular nativism.” In this respect, the late-modernist theatrical novel, unlike its Victorian and fin-de-siècle counterparts, already seems to register the transformation of popular theatrical traditions from a contemporary genre of mass entertainment into a sentimentalized relic with some vital and inalienable relationship to collective life. As the twentieth century progresses, then, the novel begins to read the theater less as a contemporary genre with equivalent cultural weight and more as a messy, residual feature of an increasingly inaccessible and amorphous folk tradition.

*English Variety* thus shares the concerns of its critical predecessors regarding the ability of the theater to reform the novel’s figuration of collectivity and social life. But it differs insofar as the forms of the theater that ultimately interest late-century novelists are non-synchronous. That is, though—with the exception of Waters—the novelists covered in subsequent chapters were alive during the last years of the popular theater’s heyday, their novelistic appropriation of earlier theatrical forms constitutes as much a transhistorical innovation as it does an intergeneric one. While eighteenth-century, Victorian, and modern novelists were with few exceptions proximate to the theatrical forms they borrowed, the relationship between post-consensus novelists and the forms they take up is marked by historical distance. To be sure, Carter and McEwan wrote screen- and radio plays, and Rushdie and Waters played important roles in adapting their novels for both television and
the stage—but, unlike many of their predecessors, they were not seriously engaged with contemporary theatrical culture.\textsuperscript{27}

Why theater, then? If these novelists are committed to reconceptualizing how people relate to one another \textit{in the present}, why resort to a series of archaic popular artforms instead of something more contemporary, like film or television? The short answer is that, to varying degrees, they in fact \textit{do} resort to film and television as contemporary genres of entertainment. But they are also writing in a period of renewed critical interest in the playful and the demotic, spurred on the one hand by theories of literary postmodernism and on the other by the translation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the novel into English.\textsuperscript{28} It would of course be possible for \textit{English Variety} to focus on the late-twentieth-century novel’s uptake of specifically postmodern iterations of the theatrical, for instance, Guy Debord’s totalizing theory of the capitalist spectacle in \textit{Society of the Spectacle} (1967), Michael Fried’s resistance to the aesthetics of theatrical distance in “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Michel Foucault’s theatricalized portrayal of modern surveillance in \textit{Discipline and Punish} (1975), Laura Mulvey’s influential critique of the male gaze in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), or even Judith Butler’s rendering of performativity in \textit{Gender Trouble} (1990).\textsuperscript{29} Novelists of the 1980s and 1990s trafficked heavily in such theoretical concepts, to the extent that it becomes almost impossible to appreciate the materiality of the actual theater that forms the basis of theoretical expression.\textsuperscript{30} (Carter’s \textit{Nights at the Circus}, in particular, represents a text whose liberal uptake of theatricality as a theoretical discourse has apparently overdetermined its critical reception.) Simply put, attending too strictly to postmodern theories of the theatrical simply because of their contemporaneity with late-century fiction risks leaving us with too much theatricality and not enough theater.
Further, postmodern theories of theatricality frequently reproduce what Jonas Barish influentially called “the antitheatrical prejudice” in that they conflate the theatrical with the alienated, the inauthentic, and the antisocial.\textsuperscript{31} For my part, I am much more interested in showing how popular varieties of the theater enable and augment social intercourse through embodied co-presence, and, more still, in demonstrating how far post-consensus novelists are invested in using these attributes of the theater to enhance the novel’s social function. To that end, Bakhtin’s theories of social dialogism and the carnivalesque have a far more prominent place in \textit{English Variety}'s methodology. Translated into English in 1981 and 1984, respectively, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination} and \textit{Rabelais and His World} have enjoyed an outsized role in contemporary readings of the novel as a form. Bakhtin’s notion that the novel is the preeminent genre of the social derives from his sense that the novel is essentially heteroglossic, that is, it “permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized).”\textsuperscript{32} The history of literature, according to Bakhtin, can thus be explained as “the novelization of other genres” drawn “ineluctably into [the novel’s] orbit.”\textsuperscript{33} In other words, they “become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and. . . a certain semantic openendedness.”\textsuperscript{34} These features of the novel derive from a much earlier expression of comic sociality, i.e., the carnival, which for Bakhtin represents the ideal model for social collectivity since it absorbs everything into its “inside-out” logic.\textsuperscript{35} As Dick McCaw points out, however, this formulation of the novel is indebted to the history of diverse popular theatrical forms: “the puppet booth, the hawker’s cart, and the booth and trestle stage of the morality play.”\textsuperscript{36} Though I am sensitive to critiques of Bakhtin’s totalizing vision of the novel’s sociality, I am nonetheless attracted to it as an influential theoretical and contextual basis for the novel rooted in the material and social history of the popular theater.\textsuperscript{37}
And yet, as the narrator of Carter’s *Wise Children* (1991) so succinctly states, “The carnival’s got to stop, some time.”

*English Variety* consequently entertains a somewhat obtuse relationship to Bakhtin’s sense of the novel as a social form; throughout, where one might expect a fairly standard Bakhtinian reading—for example in scenes that reflect the comic, freewheeling sociality of the carnival—I have instead opted to attend more precisely to the theatrical forms that sustain collective enterprise. I cast my attention thus not on “the novel,” per se, but rather on what I have taken to calling “the novel of variety,” a stubbornly local genre of the post-consensus novel that seeks to enact a demotic, playful kind of social intercourse and inclusion. “Variety,” in this sense, denotes something like “difference,” “diversity,” or “alterity,” but it preserves nonetheless some of the less readily legible heterogeneity that constellates around the popular theater as a vernacular form. To be sure, “variety” carries with it some of the banal sentimentality associated with the “spice of life” truism; but I want to insist also on its critical application in the novels under consideration here. That is, in its belated uptake of popular theatrical genres, the novel of variety maintains a quaint affection for theatrical variety—or, more precisely, for its demotic range—but it also looks to update variety, to render it newly capable of performing collectivity in the post-consensus era. If the novel of variety is committed, as I think it is, to rerouting issues related to postimperial diversity through a residual but psychically powerful cultural repertoire, then it does so primarily by revitalizing the original genre of English variety: the popular theater.

**Vernacular Forms**

*English Variety* takes up a wide range of popular genres with roots in theatrical entertainment and performance: pantomime, musical theater, club culture, comic monologue, popular song, the theatrical revue, male impersonation, music hall, variety
theater, theatrical adaptation, melodrama, the pageant play, and amateur dramatics. By grouping these diverse genres variably under the headings, “the popular theater,” “popular theatrical culture,” “popular theatrical enterprise,” or “popular theatrical entertainment,” I mean to emphasize their generic commonalities while avoiding giving the sense that the popular theater is simply one thing. Importantly, these genres are all comic, or, at the very least, belong to a tradition of entertainment whose principal mode is comedy. That is to say, even if a sentimental song about a lost lover brings an audience to tears, that song would inevitably be sandwiched between a “High-class Comedy Sketch” and a wise-cracking pianist. This comic, performative variety neither confused contemporary audiences nor caused them to divide themselves up into groups depending on what kind of entertainment they preferred. Rather, as Penny Summerfield has pointed out, theatrical variety on the stage promoted “social mixing” in the audience. Further, according to Peter Bailey, the comic variety of popular performance effectively established “a second language for all classes, whose penetrations had a powerful integrative force in English society.” In an earlier echo of that claim, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel draw attention to the music hall as a “transitional form... between earlier ‘folk’ and later ‘popular’ art,” a form with an implicit though extensive “area of agreement,” that is, a performative zone structured by “accepted and endlessly repeatable” conventions. There is thus something entirely promising about the kind of social collectivity offered up by the popular theater. This, seemingly, is the logic of variety: there is something for everyone.

For all this generic variety, however, the popular theater remained fairly hostile to cultural difference. As historians of the theater have shown, popular theatrical institutions were central to the production and dissemination of racist-imperialist narratives. In her work on black character and the early Victorian theater, Hazel Waters has suggested the racist
representation of black people on the popular stage served to sustain both racial stereotypes and powerful national myths, especially surrounding political liberty and imperial virtue in the years after the UK abolished the slave trade in its colonies. As the century progressed, so too did the theater’s desire to represent the empire on the domestic stage. Jeffrey Richards’s essay on the imperialism of Drury Lane—a microimperial jurisdiction presided over by theater manager Augustus Harris, popularly known as “Augustus Druriolanus”—catalogues a staggering range of imperial melodramas, whose plots were systematically mined from news reporting on the military and the state of the empire. Indeed, Richards’s essay takes its cue largely from Marty Gould’s impressive work on the “imperial encounter” in nineteenth-century theater. Building on extant analyses of “popular imperialism,” that is, “metropolitan manifestations of imperial culture... that exceed the occasional outburst of aggressive jingoism,” Gould argues that the nineteenth-century theater manufactured consent for the UK’s imperial project by making visible the spectacle of empire and subsequently “domesticating” it for a home audience. Jingoism is not, however, tangential to the history of popular theatrical entertainment: as Summerfield points out, the term itself derives from G. W. Hunt’s song, “By Jingo” (1877), made popular by the lion comique, G. H. MacDermott. The following repertoire of “jingo” songs not only concretized an already existing trend of intensely nationalistic music-hall turns, but it also, Summerfield argues, “contributed to the legitimation of a more bellicose foreign policy.” The popular theater was evidently not simply a venue for staging the sentimentalized exploits of the British empire for a domestic audience (although it was surely that, too); rather, it was a crucible of cultural and political exchange, to the extent that the theater accommodated the realities of imperial expansion and transformed them into an enduringly popular repertoire that had real effects on the psychic lives of its audiences.
As social and cultural historians, late-century novelists recognize these multivalent properties of the popular theater, and indeed they work to preserve its complexity in their fiction. I therefore do not mean to suggest that the popular theater represents an unproblematic, conflict-free site of inclusion. Instead, I have undertaken throughout *English Variety* to characterize it as a loose assemblage of “vernacular forms,” a term I borrow from Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai’s work on comedy:

Comedy’s propensity to get in trouble—sometimes greater even that genres like horror or porn—gets thrown into sharper relief when we think of it as a vernacular form. What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it.49 For Berlant and Ngai, a “vernacular form” is a form that is potentially radically altered by the context in which it appears. Moreover, it depends upon its contexts in order to successfully communicate its pleasures to the extent that, in the event of its translocation or adaptation, it can become an entirely different object altogether. Like the pantomime, then, vernacular forms are stubbornly local genres. And yet, paradoxically, this thing that makes the vernacular stubbornly local—that is, its “sensitiv[ity] to changing contexts”—also makes it entirely adaptable. The vernacular forms of the theater appear differently in different sites and at different times, and they travel in spite of their commitment to the local and the embodied. Sustained only by the whims of popular pleasure (and by the potential of such pleasure to be converted into capital), the theater is characterized by its semiotic flexibility.

In characterizing the adaptability of popular theatrical forms as vernacular, *English Variety* refines the image of collective sociality and belonging offered by Summerfield’s “social mixing,” Hall and Whannel’s “area of agreement,” and Bailey’s “second language.” Comedy’s vernacular forms are “epistemologically troubling,” Berlant and Ngai argue, because they draw “insecure boundaries as though it were possible to secure confidence
about object ontology or the value of an “us” versus all its others. . . Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say ‘us.’ Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear.”50 To be sure, vernacular forms—and especially the vernacular forms of the theater—perform a kind of collectivizing function; that is, they tacitly mark out parameters that loosely denote inclusion. But they perform that function by “crossing lines,” violating established norms, and, in the process, confirming inclusion within this performative sociality by identifying those outside of it. This is the primary challenge contemporary novelists face as they take up the social history of the popular theater: in the context of late-century political mandates articulated in antiracist, feminist, and queer critique, these novelists find themselves at risk of crossing lines they in fact have no desire to cross. Throughout *English Variety*, we see novelists—who are otherwise committed to preserving the dignity of people of color, women, and queers—take up a diverse range of genres that, during their prominence on the national stage, supported racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. A double-edged sword, then: popular theatrical entertainment offers up necessarily protean genres that, on the one hand, enable and sustain playful, demotic forms of inclusion beyond those usually guaranteed by the democratic state apparatus; on the other hand, however, the historical content of those same vernacular forms risks undermining any commitment to antiracist, feminist, and queer collectivity.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the popular theater’s vernacular forms are not inherently equitable, emancipatory, or revolutionary. In fact, the opposite tends to be true: popular theatrical entertainment sustained racist and heterosexist structures of feeling throughout its lifetime. The novelists covered in *English Variety* are sensitive to the historically racist content of the English popular theater. Indeed, they know that they walk a fine line between reproducing imperial sentimentality and reintegrating demotic sociality into
public life. In the hands of contemporary novelists committed to social inclusion, the popular theatrical forms are not simply emptied of such content; their project is no naive, ahistorical reclamation of the past. Rather, we can see these novelists working selectively in their uptake of theatrical genres in order to articulate a vision of English national culture inclusive of a culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse body politic. In turning to the theatrical past, these novelists seek out forms that are generically hospitable to variation and difference in spite of their historically hostile content. The resulting novels thus perform a dramatic cultural and historical negotiation—a generic analogue to urgent political discourses around diversity and inclusion—which frustrates any simplistic or retrograde appeal to England’s native genres. In the wake of Thatcher’s appeal to the so-called “Victorian values” of imperial grandeur, civic responsibility, and hard work, these novelists offer up a set of alternative Victorianisms: social play, political dissent, and sexual anarchy. Accordingly, I have endeavored in each of the following chapters to highlight (and ultimately evaluate) the extent to which each novelist manages the tension between hostile content and hospitable form in their work.

“A ramshackle, catchall, demotic genre... debased—that’s to say, various, eclectic, vulgar, referential, and topical.” How far could Barnes’s characterization of the pantomime serve equally as a description of the post-consensus novel of variety? Like the pantomime, the novel of variety is a playful, protean genre designed to entertain a diverse crowd. But, as we will see, it also possesses a critical edge, a seriousness that supplements rather than negates the comic energies at the core of the vernacular. My research sets out to clarify the formal, cultural, and political ambivalences evident in the novel of variety’s seriousness and its playfulness by historicizing its belated uptake of popular theatrical genres. Moreover, it identifies the extent to which vernacular forms enable contemporary novelists to deal with
urgent questions surrounding sociocultural collectivity and difference in the post-consensus era. In doing so, I offer a new history of late-twentieth-century British fiction that accounts for the multigeneric play of the novel without resorting to our habitual critical milieux. That is, while literary histories of the novel at the end of the century tend to emphasize its reflection of the condition of postmodernity (Jameson), its metafictional engagement in previous narrative forms (Hutcheon), or its unparalleled status as a form for representing social totality (Bakhtin), English Variety instead emphasizes the novel’s reliance on the variegated history of the popular theater, which it uses to reach outside of itself and reform its ability to imagine expansive forms of postimperial collectivity.

*English Variety* tells the story of the popular theater once it begins its bizarre afterlife in the post-consensus novel. It is composed of four chapters separated into two major arcs: the first outlines some of the productive tensions manifest in the popular theater’s relationship to imperial culture and its promise to expand the novel’s methods for revitalizing postimperial collectivity. Chapter 1 focuses on Salman Rushdie’s representation of the formal and social antagonisms native to English theatrical culture in his controversial novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Though he remains deeply critical of elite forms of Englishness, and indeed uses the novel to satirize both “Englishness” and “the English,” Rushdie nonetheless sees something productive in the vernacular rituals offered up by pantomime, musical theater, and club culture. These theatrical forms serve as micropolitical proxies for broad-scale inclusion and, as a result, prioritize co-presence over abstract notions of belonging. Faced with the inadequacies of transnationalist, multiculturalist, and pluralist discourses—which rely too heavily on postimperial renderings of “the Commonwealth”—Rushdie encourages us to view Englishness tentatively as a localist demographic category
open to ethnic and racial difference. In *The Satanic Verses*, therefore, we see Rushdie strategically navigate the historical antagonisms that underpin both theatrical culture and British imperialism in order to articulate an agnostic vision of multicultural Englishness rooted in civil unrest.

Rushdie’s ambivalence regarding the ability of the popular theater to reconceptualize the demographic scope of Englishness, which *The Satanic Verses* never quite resolves, is echoed in Angela Carter’s late fiction, the subject of my second chapter. While Rushdie’s treatment of the promise of theatrical culture is careful and tentative, however, Carter’s is characteristically explosive. In taking seriously Carter’s playful treatment of race and imperialism in her short story “Black Venus” (1980), *Nights at the Circus*, and especially *Wise Children*, I argue that Carter represents popular theatrical culture as a demotic variety of Englishness, as a popular rejoinder to an Englishness overdetermined by the history of empire. She thus reveals a paradoxical tension at the heart of her politics: namely, the idea that one can sustain a serious antiracist or anti-imperialist politics while simultaneously taking pleasure in the popular forms that underwrite “Englishness” as a demographic category. In reading the comic monologue as a central feature of the novel’s narrative strategy, I suggest that Carter adopts the critical edge of comic performance to establish a dissenting, oppositional relationship to imperial culture and its legacies. Carter’s *Wise Children* is the novel of variety in its most idealized form: though it maintains a certain ambivalence alongside its radical vision for the future of English collectivity, it nonetheless remains committed to the inclusive promise of demotic life.

*English Variety’s* second arc examines the novel of variety at the turn of the millennium. While the first two chapters centered issues related to race and imperialism as they cut across the novel of variety’s aspirational tenor, the last two chapters shift the
project’s geopolitical focus from the national and the imperial to the urban and the rural. It considers two powerful sites of Englishness, namely, London and the country estate, which are held up respectively as the epitome of demographic variety and a symbol of cultural and genealogical closure. Chapter 3 examines the role of male impersonation and music hall in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) in order to think about the limits of “knowingness,” a socio-theatrical paradigm that, in its ideal form, enables unrestricted inclusion. Like Rushdie and Carter, Waters problematizes the vernacular forms of inclusion offered up by the popular theater, but she does so by routing them through the history of queer (in)visibility and male impersonation. If the knowingness of theatrical inclusion depends on one’s visibility within the theater’s spectacular economy, then that poses a series of problems to queer people whose visibility as queer places them at greater risk. As it works to preserve its half-knowing theatrical economy, the novel strategically performs its own adaptation. The chapter thus argues that inclusion within popular theatrical culture can only ever be partial, since it both demands a baseline level of cultural competency (i.e., knowingness) and also requires continuous, agonistic adaptation in order to survive as a collective enterprise.

In turning away from *Tipping the Velvet’s* representation of urban variety, chapter 4 focuses on McEwan’s uptake of theatrical form in his estate novel, *Atonement* (2001). The novel is self-consciously designed to assert its place in elite traditions of cultural heritage, namely, the Leavisite “Great Tradition” and the country house. However, McEwan frames the novel with a play written by its thirteen-year-old protagonist, Briony Tallis. In doing so, he exposes a generic tension between narrative and playwriting: drama, Briony argues, is an incorrigibly messy form insofar as it depends too much on what Briony calls “the messiness of other minds”; narrative, on the other hand, is uniquely capable of preserving historical, cultural, and genealogical continuity. However, Briony’s taxonomic distinction between the
messiness of drama and the tidiness of narrative is ultimately unsustainable, and in its place emerges an implicit critique in which Briony’s desire for narrative continuity cloaks a more pernicious desire to preserve the cultural hegemony symbolized by the white family. Simply put, the structuring presence of the messy, vernacular forms of the theater in *Atonement* enables the novel both to perform its own self-ironizing discontinuity and to expand its horizons beyond the limited purview of the country estate.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
6. Consider, for instance, the distinction between Margaret Drabble’s *The Radiant Way* (1987) and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988). The former, to borrow from Dominic Head, presents “a vision of post-war society in which hopes and aspirations are partially fulfilled, only to be deflated or devalued through the perceived social disintegration of the 1980s” (31–32), while the latter counters the explicit homophobia of Thatcher’s government with an equally explicit depiction of gay sexual conquest in what Head calls a “combined mood of withdrawal and assertion” (115). Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).
On the cultural promise of “the novel of multiculturalism,” Jesse Matz writes frankly: “Ready for linguistic diversity, for questioning realities, for making life new, the novel promised to help in the fight for cultural success” (147). Rebecca L. Walkowitz, on the other hand, carves out a smaller space for the multicultural novel by setting it against the more agonistic “minority novel”: “If the minority culture novel emphasizes separation, which it attributes to national divisiveness and the assertion of traditional ethnic communities or sexual orientations, the multicultural novel privileges mixing, which it presents both as a spur to divisiveness and as an occasion for new collectivities” (231). Head attributes this promising tenor to “a kind of hopeful defensiveness,” meaning that the presence of “a handful of novels celebrating an alternative multicultural experience. . . attests to a cultural advance” in spite of self-evident “racism, intolerance, tribalism and the violence they spawn” (State of the Novel, 92). Head, The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Jesse Matz, The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The Post-Consensus Novel: Minority Culture, Multiculturalism, and Transnational Comparison,” in The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel, ed. Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 223–37.

On the politics of “the post-consensus novel,” see Head, Modern British Fiction, 29–38.


Allen, 7–8.

Acknowledgment, 39.

A recent exception to this trend: Graham Wolfe’s Theatre-Fiction in Britain from James to Lessing, as the title implies, covers the length and breadth of the twentieth century in an attempt to establish “theatre-fiction” as an “intermedial genre” that “engage[s] in concrete and sustained ways with theatre as artistic practice and industry” (2). Graham Wolfe, Theatre-Fiction in Britain from James to Lessing: Writing in the Wings (New York and London: Routledge, 2020).
Kurnick, 109. Echoing Kurnick, Wolfe asserts that “what is both attractive and deeply troubling about theatre for James is its manyness” (28, original emphasis), while Litvak suggests that James’s “theater of embarrassment” mediates the relation between author and reader by showing them both to be “moving back and forth across the footlights,” that is, by dramatizing the spectatorial economy that substantiates collective enterprise (214).

20 Martin Puchner, Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 100.

21 Kurnick, 157.


23 T. S. Eliot’s celebration of the music-hall actress Marie Lloyd is perhaps the most famous example of the modernist interest in the popular. For Eliot, Lloyd epitomizes the communal, collaborative potential of popular theatrics: “And popularity in her case was not merely evidence of her accomplishment; it was something more than success. It is evidence of the extent to which she represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest” (T. S. Eliot, “Marie Lloyd,” in Selected Essays [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960], 405). For a finer sense of the relationship between literary modernism and popular theatrical culture, see Barry J. Faulk, “Modernism and the Popular: Eliot’s Music Halls,” Modernism/Modernity vol. 8, no. 4 (2001): 603–21.


25 Ibid., 12.


27 An exception that proves the rule: Carter’s only stage play, an adaption of Frank Wedekind’s “Lulu” plays—Earth Spirit (1895) and Pandora’s Box (1904)—was originally commissioned in 1987 by the National Theatre. In 1988, however, the production was abandoned due to the unavailability of an adequate English translation, creative differences between Carter and the play’s would-be director, and difficulties in staging (Clapp, ix; Bell, 510). The play was eventually staged by Andrew Manley at the Harrogate Theatre in 1997, five years after Carter’s death. Mark Bell, “Production Notes,” in The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera, by Angela Carter, ed. Mark Bell (London: Chatto and Windus,
1996), 503–10; Susannah Clapp, introduction to The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera, by Angela Carter, ed. Mark Bell (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), vii–x.

28 For an account of the “play” of postmodern theory and criticism, see Franklin, 10–23.


33 Ibid., 7.

34 Ibid.


37 In her work on the place of Bakhtin and others within a general trend she calls “social formalism,” Dorothy J. Hale argues that novel theorists overstate the novel’s primal relationship to the social: “Such a belief that the novel can formally both encapsulate and fix a social world is, I want to argue, the strongest link between the new cultural study of the novel and the formalist tradition of novel theory from which it so much wants to depart” (8). In other words, Hale detects a critical slippage that reveals the desire of twentieth-century novel theorists to see the novel not only as the ideal form for representing the social world, but also “as formally producing social change” (10). Dorothy J. Hale, Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).


39 This abridged line-up is lifted from a 1907 programme for the Empire Variety Theatre, Ardwick Green, reproduced in Dagmar Kift, The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict, trans. Roy Kift (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 60. For a fuller picture of the popular theater’s comic variety, see Kift, 53–61.

40 Penny Summerfield, “Patriotism and Empire: Music-Hall Entertainment, 1870–1914,” in Imperialism and Popular Culture, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986), 22–24. It is worth pointing out that a “socially mixed” audience, per Summerfield, denotes an audience constituted of people from different social and economic classes. Later in the essay, she clarifies that the “social mix. . . was predominantly male, and the songs were performed in the main by men. If the late Victorian music hall had a strongly masculine gender identity, then so too did the aggressive nationalism which pervaded so many of its performances” (31).


Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 53. Waters writes, “When this powerful national idea [i.e., of “gifting. . . liberty to traded African slaves”] was reinforced by the dramatic reconstruction of the genuinely valiant role of the navy in patrolling the high seas against the slave trade, it gave such dramas a powerful extra charge. That national, semi-mythic hero, the true tar, was directly involved in slave liberation. And although the actual numbers of vessels seized and captives liberated were small in comparison to the size of the trade still being carried on, nonetheless, the myth and the reality reinforced each other” (53).


Gould, 1–2.

Summerfield, 25.

Ibid., 26.


Ibid., 235.

CHAPTER 1

“That’s the Way to Do It!”: Theatrical Antagonism and Postimperial Collectivity in Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses

About halfway through Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988), Allie Cone remembers her father, “a Polish émigré [and] a survivor of a wartime prison camp,” in explicitly theatrical terms. Eager to assimilate into English culture, Otto Cone (né Cohen) rejects his ethnicity and adopts an affected English persona: “I am English now,’ he would say proudly in his thick East European accent. ‘Silly mid-off! Pish-Tush! Widow of Windsor! Bugger all.’ In spite of his reticences he seemed content enough being a pantomime member of the English gentry” (297). One could quite easily read this description metaphorically as an example of self-delusion: as “a pantomime member” of an elite class of the English body politic, Otto’s adoption of Englishness constitutes nothing more than a farcical performance, a naive attempt to mimic a cultural identity that does not belong to him at the expense of his own. Such a reading, however, risks eliding an undeniably more literalist iteration of Otto’s pantomimic Englishness. Allie remembers one Christmas, a holiday Otto describes as “an English rite,” where he had burst “into the salon where the assembled company was relaxing in the glow of a log fire, Christmas tree lights and brandy, got up in pantomime Chinee, with droopy mustaches and all, crying: ‘Father Christmas is dead! I have
killed him! I am The Mao: no presents for anyone!” (296). Appearing in this layered image as a Holocaust survivor, as a “pantomime Chinee,” as Chairman Mao, and as the murderer of Father Christmas, Otto rehearses the characteristic racist and xenophobic iconography of English pantomime in part to demonstrate his faithful adherence to Cold War liberalism. To this end, the kind of Englishness on display here is a durable, solipsistic Englishness sustained by xenophobic assimilationist principles.

Otto’s pantomimic Englishness is thus more than merely a classed affectation; it also demonstrates how far Otto’s commitment to a local, small-scale variety of English culture reflects broad-scale ideological and cultural antagonisms. As Janice Ho has shown, The Satanic Verses is invested what she calls “the politics of extremity” and “the politics of antagonism.” According to Ho, the politics of extremity/antagonism in the British context counteracts the passive tolerance of state multiculturalism and, in the process, “portray[s] new and alternative political sites cultivated by Britain’s ethnic citizens as a consequence of their exclusion from more formal political institutions.” Though I am entirely convinced by Ho’s argument, I wonder to what extent the popular theatrical tradition signified by Otto’s pantomimic performance counts among the “more formal political institutions” Ho has in mind. To be sure, Otto’s pantomimic Englishness shores up contemporary ideological antagonisms, but it does so by resorting to an informal repertoire of antagonisms native to popular theatrical culture in England. Moreover, although Otto Cone is “only too aware of the fragility of the performance” (298), he is also confident that, by performing these
theatrical antagonisms, a Polish Jew with a thick eastern European accent might be admitted to an ostensibly closed demographic. The variety of Englishness to which Otto Cone aspires, then, seems to be far more than simply the elite Englishness of the English gentry; it is instead a second-order, demotic Englishness supported by the comic trappings of theatrical culture, a culture flexible enough to appear on the national horizon as potentially and paradoxically cosmopolitan.

Rushdie consistently satirizes the elite first order of Englishness depicted above. After all, Otto Cone is both a target of irony and a tragic figure: having spent the bulk of his adult life performing his own comic variety of Englishness, he “jumped into an empty lift-shaft and died” (298). His widow, Alicja, changes her name “straight back to Cohen” and declares that there would be “[n]o more imitation to life” (298). Otto’s assimilationist impulse is further satirized in the novel’s treatment of one of its main protagonists, Saladin Chamcha, the Indian national who finds himself drawn to a sentimentalized, quasi-Victorian version of Englishness, only to discover time and again that such an Englishness either does not exist or is unavailable to him. As early readers of the novel have made clear, *The Satanic Verses* thus performs a sustained critique of Englishness through the remapping of cultural boundaries and postcolonial belonging. For example, in his reading of *The Satanic Verses*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that the “atavistic” national past “introduces a form of alterity of address. . . which suggests that the national narrative is the site of an ambivalent identification; a margin of the uncertainty of cultural meaning that may become the space for
an agonistic minority position.”7 Moreover, the novel’s self-evident interest in a transnational postcolonialism, especially in the wake of Rushdie’s subcontinentally oriented breakout work, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), has invited readings that emphasize its cosmopolitan outlook.8 From within this critical context, however, Timothy Brennan suggests that *The Satanic Verses* reveals a general failure of cosmopolitanism: “Despite the fresh thinking about national form, about a new homelessness that is also a worldliness, about a double-edged post-colonial responsibility, *The Satanic Verses* shows how strangely detached and insensitive the logic of cosmopolitan ‘universality’ can be.”9

To be sure, when the character Whisky Sisodia stutters the memorable refrain, “The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means” (343), readers are invited to be critical of Englishness due to its foundational role in the imperial project.10 And yet, in spite of its investment in the postcolonial, the transnational, and the cosmopolitan, *The Satanic Verses* is not quite prepared to dispense with Englishness altogether.11 As Simon Gikandi reminds us in his reading of the novel, “Rushdie cannot. . . write except from within the spaces he critiques”; Rushdie’s “oppositionality,” Gikandi argues, is dependent on “modern temporality, the space of the nation, and the foundational moments of culture.”12 Following this tract, further readings of the novel tend to emphasize the novel’s uptake of recognizably localist forms of Englishness alongside its manifest interest in international or global scales. Ian Baucom, for example, insists through a careful reading of the novel’s climactic riot scene as “one of England’s
contested spaces of memory” that Rushdie’s representation of Englishness reveals “the need to give the multiple ways of being English a local habitation and a name.” Peter J. Kalliney, like Gikandi and Baucom, also reads Englishness as a site of opposition or contestation, though for him it is an metropolitan kind of Englishness that “flourishes in the tension between provincialism and transnationalism.” Importantly, all three of these readings—in addition to Ho’s more recent one—revolve around a variety of Englishness whose trademark is ambivalence: ambivalence about the racial and ethnic makeup of the UK’s post-Windrush citizenry, or about different competing appeals to national identity, or about a seditious metropolitanism masquerading as local color. In this light, then, to emphasize the novel’s Englishness is in no sense to deny its relevance to extant discourses related to postcoloniality, or even to the Indian subcontinent; it is, rather, to denote the myriad ways in which even an apparently transnational or cosmopolitan novel contributes to a sense of a more expansive national demographic.

Given this critical consensus around the contested nature of various Englishnesses at play in *The Satanic Verses*, I want to insist that Rushdie sees something productive within the antagonistic structures proffered by English theatrical culture, in particular. Attending to the novel’s intermixing of non-novelistic genres is hardly a new approach; as critics of the novel have illustrated, *The Satanic Verses* freely takes up a broad range of other genres, such as film and television. But it nonetheless casts a wide net in its incorporation of specifically theatrical genres: its two main protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, are both
professional actors; the terrorists that hijack an airplane at the beginning of the novel “were actors, too, they were stars now, shootingstars or falling, and they had their own stage-names” (78); in Jahilia, the mythic pre-Islamic nation at the core of the novel, a religious festival descends into “masquerade and madness” (116–17); and there is also a metatheatrical brothel named “The Curtain,” whose customers are all “issued with masks” (381). This liberal uptake of theatrical motifs, I argue, is consistent with Rushdie’s commitment to transnational cultural forms. In his well-known polemic, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist,” Rushdie writes, “Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done both in the visual arts and in literature.” In taking up the forms of popular theater, and “leaving the rest,” The Satanic Verses exemplifies this kind of eclectic harvesting of cultural artifacts. Rushdie is doubtlessly skeptical of the antiracist potential of popular theatrical forms with such an intimate association with racist-imperialist culture, and, as such, invariably treats English theatrical culture with some degree of irony. And yet, in spite of this skepticism, this chapter argues that Rushdie’s appropriation of English theatrical culture contributes productively to his cosmopolitical project by recalibrating the criteria for inclusion that underpin contemporary claims to Englishness, resulting in new forms of collectivity produced around a more expansive form of Englishness.
In other words, the novel’s consistent meditation on “the trouble with the English” can be further clarified by thinking through the problem of postimperial English collectivity as a problem of genre. By representing English theatrical genres—namely, pantomime, musical theater, and club culture—as localist examples of what Raphael Samuel quasi-metaphorically calls “theatres of memory,” Rushdie imports a theatrical kind of antagonism into his work. Unlike those antagonisms discussed by Ho, Gikandi, Baucom, and Kalliney, which result primarily from macropolitical conflict (i.e., British antiracism, race riots, and metropolitanism), theatrical antagonism derives from the flexible, vernacular, and importantly comic tradition of popular performance. Such antagonism, I argue, sets the stage for small-scale sociopolitical negotiations designed to test how far England’s “vernacular forms” enable postimperial collectivity. Although English popular theatrical culture is, as we will soon see, rooted in a nativist cultural and political tradition underwritten by English exceptionalism and the British imperial project, it is nonetheless for Rushdie a rich and dynamic set of intertexts that depends upon a theatrical economy of embodied and collective co-presence. In this light, then, I suggest that Rushdie’s selective adoption of theatrical antagonisms rooted in a flexible English repertoire allows him to simulate the expansion of the English body politic beyond its historically nativist boundaries. If acting, performance, and theatricality following Michael Fried, for instance, denote something like the self under erasure, then *The Satanic Verses* suggests otherwise: theatricality in Rushdie’s hands starts to look less like its inauthentic postmodern equivalents, and more like a half-ironic, half-earnest
attempt to establish a vernacular form of postimperial collectivity without submitting to the neolibera pluralism mandated by the multiculturalist state.\textsuperscript{24}

How can any appeal to national cohesion rooted in Englishness—loaded as it is with imperialist, xenophobic, and racist forms of being and thought—be hospitable to a racially diverse body politic whose experience of the contemporary nation is inseparable from ubiquitous manifestations of state-sanctioned racism? In laying out the histories of racial and imperial antagonisms as they inhere in Englishness as a demographic category alongside a repertoire of theatrical genres emblematic of Englishness as such, I show how antagonism informs the novel’s representation of contemporary collective life. Though the popular theatrical repertoire that interests Rushdie is not a singularly coherent entity, its place in \textit{The Satanic Verses} nonetheless enables Rushdie to stage the productive overlap between the theater’s jingoistic structures of feeling and its more flexible vernacular forms. This overlap, I argue, dramatizes the central role of small-scale antagonisms in the production of new criteria for inclusion offered up by the multicultural novel. To that end, if the post-consensus novel paved the way for an increasingly global or transnational field of production and reception, it is not because it effaces the localist discourse of Englishness; rather it exploits generic differences within Englishness in order to reassess how far the novel is capable of cultivating an expansive body politic.
Englishness and Theatrical Antagonism

From a twenty-first-century perspective, it might appear that the popular theater in England is a fairly consistent thing. Seventy years since the midcentury decline of popular theatrical enterprise as the primary mode of public entertainment, there remain only vestiges: the annual pantomime at Christmas, sideshows at village fêtes or amusement parks, the occasional travelling circus, and, of course, Punch and Judy. But the popular theater in England has in fact never been consistent. Emerging from drinking culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, modern popular theater went through many transformations, starting with the bawdy music hall, then on to the more respectable variety theater and pantomime spectacles, until the interwar vogue for revues and stripshows. In spite of this generic variability, however, one of the most consistent elements of popular theatrical culture is its relationship to jingoism and empire. Supplementing the manifest racism and xenophobia exemplified by enduring popular forms like blackface minstrelsy and orientalist tableaux, theatrical culture shored up national and imperial feeling through popular song, character sketches, and dance, which often parodied non-English cultures ranging from the Middle East to the Outer Hebrides. Though some of this nativist content was only tacitly conveyed in the early years, by the time World War Two was under way theater practitioners had worked hard to consolidate the historical link between theatergoing and patriotism.

Even as the popular theater disseminated and profited from this nativist content, it has nonetheless attracted critical attention from theater historians for being formally open.
In Peter Bailey’s influential account of late-nineteenth-century popular theatrical forms and their audiences, the popular theater worked by producing a “culture of knowingness,” a temporary and ad hoc assemblage unified by a shared cultural literacy. Within this performative theatrical economy, the mode of relation between performer and audience signaled by a well-timed nod or wink produces a communal sense of knowingness. This “conspiratorial” encounter, to borrow Bailey’s term, thus invites a spectating audience into a playful collective enterprise in which knowing participation denotes belonging. Further, in her history of London’s Soho theater district at the turn of the century, Judith R. Walkowitz argues that English variety theater managed to maintain its reputation as a quintessentially English form of popular entertainment, even as it came to be associated with “foreign” or “cosmopolitan” forces from outside the nation. While theater audiences were sometimes differentiated along class, gender, and racial lines, belonging within the English popular theater principally hinges on reciprocal participation within the theater’s playful performative economy rather than on conventional identitarian criteria. That is, mere presence at the event of the popular theater as a subject of its address, whether as a swell, toff, punter, prostitute, or purity reformer, is qualification enough to belong to the collectivity produced within its space.

Both macropolitically and micropolitically, then, English popular theater represents an enduring symbol of social antagonism: on the one hand, it riffs on the racial and xenophobic trappings of late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century jingoism and, as a result,
sustains contemporaneous antagonisms around race, class, and gender; on the other hand, however, it performs and enables a variety of ad hoc, vernacular inclusion that departs from conventional criteria for civic and/or democratic incorporation by the state. By analyzing Rushdie’s selective uptake of theatrical entertainment over and above other, more contemporary entertainment genres, I hope to clarify how far postimperial collectivity depends on the theater’s vernacular forms. These forms, I argue, allows for a dramatic negotiation of the boundaries of “Englishness” as a demographic category that importantly does not rely on civic and statist discourses; and yet, far from conforming to the kind of pluralist utopianism that gives contemporary antiracist critics such as Paul Gilroy pause, Rushdie’s simultaneously indulgent and critical uptake of English theatrical genres requires a politically ambivalent rereading of the popular theater and its audience. It requires that we ask: How do minorities and former colonial subjects stake a claim to an English cultural repertoire that has been historically denied to them, and what sociopolitical value can be drawn from recuperating a distinctly English national past in a postimperial present?

*The Satanic Verses* famously opens with its actor protagonists falling from an exploding airplane into the English Channel. During the fall, Saladin and Gibreel compete in a singing contest: Gibreel sings an English translation of a popular song from the Hindi musical film, *Shri Charsawbees* (1955), while Saladin, antagonistically, sings *Rule Britannia* (5–6). Gibreel sings: “O, my shoes are Japanese. . . These trousers are English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart’s an Indian for all that” (5). Gibreel, “translating the old
song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation” (5), imports a Hindi popular cultural form into an explicitly English cultural context. The novel thus casts him, here if not elsewhere in the novel, as a culturally eclectic herald. Further, the antagonistic dynamic between Gibreel and Saladin occurs within a theatrical mode: “the one busy performing, the other booing the performance” (5). As the Hindi song gets absorbed into an English context, it is met with the “boos” reminiscent of English pantomime. After Saladin and Gibreel descend into the English Channel, they discover they have transformed, respectively, into a devil and an angel. Shortly after seeking shelter at the home of Rosa Diamond, a widow who lives alone on the English coast, Gibreel experiences the first of many dreams in which he stars as a Bollywood version of the Archangel Gabriel; meanwhile, immigration police arrive and arrest the devilish Saladin, who has grown several feet taller, possesses a set of horns with hooves to match, and, much to his shame, has an uncontrollable and unconcealable erection. Abject and vengeful, Saladin decides to take revenge on Gibreel by making a string of prank phone calls—one iteration of the novel’s many “satanic verses”—and thus contributes to his worsening mental state. Such is the central drama of the novel: Saladin anticipates a confrontation with an unwitting Gibreel. While the novel’s opening scene casts Gibreel and Saladin as divine antagonists, angelic versus satanic, it begins with a competition between Indian and British popular song, which subsequently stages the conflict between cosmopolitan and nativist cultural forms.
Conversely, existing scholarship on *The Satanic Verses* reads Gibreel as a figure for unchanging Indianness and Saladin as a cosmopolitan. Shailja Sharma argues, for instance, that competing examples of migrancy in the novel produce yet another form of “ambivalence” that reflects the variability of the immigrant experience in Britain.\(^{34}\) According to Sharma, the singing competition establishes an “opposition between the good and the bad immigrant”\(^{35}\): Saladin, the multicultural, “translated man” par excellence, versus Gibreel, who remains “untranslated.”\(^{36}\) However, it seems more accurate to describe Saladin in terms of English nativism, since the features of British culture he so covets cohere in generally classist and racist preconceptions of Englishness broadly construed: “When the England cricket team played India at the Brabourne Stadium, he prayed for an England victory, for the game’s creators to defeat the local upstarts, for the proper order of things to be maintained” (37). Saladin’s adoption of the trappings of imperialist discourse here implies a kind of translation, to be sure, but importantly the version of Englishness upheld is exclusive, monocultural, and xenophobic, in a word, *untranslated*. Gibreel, on the other hand, possesses a more obviously cosmopolitan status: as a Muslim actor, he stars in Hindi theological musicals, has an interracial and interreligious relationship with Allie Cone, and travels, via dream, to a wide range of geopolitical sites. Moreover, when Gibreel, deep in the throes of an hallucination, resolves to “tropicalize” London, he cites Frantz Fanon, and thus aligns himself with an international anticolonial tradition (353–54).\(^{37}\) By reversing thus the critical tendency to associate Saladin with a generally transnational subjectivity and Gibreel as
an unchanging figure for Indianness, readers are better prepared to understand Saladin’s indulgence in an English cultural repertoire less as an example of transcultural migrancy and more as an acquiescence to an historically specific form of English nativism.

Importantly, though, the novel’s engagement with popular cultural iterations of English nativism exceeds the conflict between Saladin and Gibreel. Throughout *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie raises the specter of an English cultural repertoire to perform a critique of its constitutive place in racist-imperialist discourses; but, in doing so, he also recognizes that such a repertoire nonetheless accommodates an interesting and dynamic form of sociocultural antagonism. This becomes quite literal approximately two thirds of the way through the novel at a party that takes place on the stage set of a new film adaption of a popular West End musical, itself adapted from Charles Dickens’s novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), “renamed *Friend!*, with book and lyrics by the celebrated genius of the musical stage, Mr Jeremy Bentham” (421). The stage is a miniaturized facsimile of Dickensian London: it contains various landmarks from Dickens’s novel, a makeshift Thames “flowing beneath two bridges,” and even a “dry ice pea-souper” (422). Here, London is an “arena,” a theatrically “reborn” and “rearranged” space coded simultaneously as a site of pleasure and, through Bentham, a site of discipline (422). Though London in 1988 may be a global city in a globalized world, Dickens’s London, or at least the Merchant-Ivory version presented in the novel, is “English” to the core. As he steps into the party, Saladin quite literally enters into a theatrical arena and is thus subject to the disciplinary conditions of theatrical performance.
The theatricality of this space establishes social interaction as a form of theatrical action, in which the social adopts a distinctly staged quality, and thus begins to reconfigure normative social collectivity in terms of the kind of theatrical collectivity internal to theatrical institutions.

The party is thus a strange hybrid of theatrical and social space: circulating among the invited guests on this stage are also professional actors performing as their Dickensian characters in order to promote the new film. Within this socio-theatrical space, the party’s guests become bodies on stage and begin rehearsing a set of dramatic tropes that supplement the normative sociality of human interaction. Seeking shelter from the spectacle in an “old curiosity shop,” an overwhelmed Saladin encounters an actress who, having described “an outbreak of lust among the cast” (423), attempts to seduce him before she is called to perform her next role as the Dickensian arch-nationalist, Mr. Podsnap: “Whereupon, arranging herself in an expert parody of the Marine Insurance agent’s self-important posture, she launches into her own version of the scheduled musical Podsnappery” (423). The interaction between Saladin and the actress begins as a normative, though bizarre, social exchange—the actress, “evidently in the grip of the libidinous fever of which she speaks” (423), makes a sexual advance. However, since the actress adopts the “self-important posture” of Podsnap to supplement her advance, the seduction acquires a discomfiting level of irony as Saladin is the subject of the actress’s (libidinal) desire and her (xenophobic) disdain.
What starts off as social interaction transforms into a theatrical form of address, and Saladin, an unwilling spectator, is subsequently absorbed into *Friend*'s performative economy. This absorption takes place within an explicitly nativist paradigm and subsequently reveals the continuity between Podsnap's coercive nationalist discourse and Saladin's voluntary participation in an English cultural repertoire.


The creature has been approaching [Saladin] while delivering herself of these lines; – unfastening, the while, her blouse; – and he, mongoose to her cobra, stands there transfixed; while she, exposing a shapely right breast, and offering it to him, points out that she has drawn upon it, – as an act of civic pride, – the map of London, no less, in red magic-marker, with the river all in blue. The metropolis summons him; – but he, giving an entirely Dickensian cry, pushes his way out of the Curiosity Shop into the madness of the street. (424)

The interaction between Saladin and the actress represents a typological racist-imperialist set piece exaggerated to a comic extreme, operating doubly as seduction and play. The actress, playing as Podsnap in the mode of Rex Harrison, addresses first an “invisible Foreigner” and spouts racist-imperialist discourse under the sign of English nationalism. This brand of nationalism appears at first intensely attractive to Saladin; however, his desire for sexual gratification and the actress’s conflation of imperial London with her exposed breast ultimately horrifies Saladin, who, “giving an entirely Dickensian cry,” quickly departs. Unable
to deny his attraction to the actress, who stands in for both popular Englishness and English racism, Saladin’s “Dickensian cry” reveals that he has been coerced into theatrical play. The actress’s nationalist discourse originates in a fictional Dickensian figure, to be sure, but it finds an uncanny correlative in the racist discourses of contemporary Britain. In this respect, Saladin’s attraction to and rejection of Podsnap discloses the fundamental overlap between the kind of Englishness Saladin himself looks to perform (Dickens) and the kind of Englishness that would cast Saladin out as an inassimilable other (Podsnap).

The Podsnapping actress’s theatrical address thus constitutes a coercive mechanism by which Saladin’s participation in traditional English iconography is enforced. And yet, within this coercive environment there seems also to be a marked level of irony that promises to expand the confines of tradition. Immediately following Saladin’s encounter with the actress, the novel itself shifts into a form of “literary-theatrical” exegesis (424) in which the narrator attempts to taxonomize the events of the party according to the generic protocols of comedy and tragedy: “What follows is tragedy. – Or, at least the echo of tragedy, the full-blooded original being unavailable to modern men and women, so it’s said. – A burlesque for our degraded, imitative times, in which clowns re-enact what was first done by heroes and by kings” (424). Conspicuously, the narrator’s description of present tragedy, or “the echo of tragedy,” sounds very much indeed like a description of comedy, the locus of burlesque, camp, clowning, and parody. It sounds, too, like a fairly precise description of Saladin’s encounter with the actress; the bizarre duplicity of her extended
seduction of Saladin alongside her exaggerated and condescending xenophobia could quite easily be described as “a burlesque of our degraded, imitative times.” What stands out in the novel’s adoption of theatrical address, therefore, is an enduring doubleness, a perpetual sense of irony in which the gravity of the scene (its racism, xenophobia, drama, etc.) is accompanied by a salient comic or irreverent tone. For instance, as Saladin moves to meet Gibreel and exact his revenge, “[fr]om a nearby red-and-white-striped puppeteer’s booth, Mr Punch – whacking Judy – calls out to him: *That’s the way to do it!*” (428). The seriousness of Saladin’s demeanor is doubled by a timeless figure of slapstick humor, in the image of Punch, a folk devil, an entirely singular, transhistorical, pop cultural figure, who rehearses his abuse of Judy ad infinitum to the continued enjoyment of adults and children alike. To be sure, the novel’s theatrical address coerces Saladin into a hostile encounter with a highly sexualized version of Dicken’s arch-nationalist, Mr. Podsnap, but it also produces a comic affinity between Saladin and Punch, an affinity predicated on a shared taste for violence. My sense here is that Rushdie’s adoption of this protean form of address, rooted in a traditional English theatrical repertoire, dramatizes the flexible potential of such tradition outside of an exclusively xenophobic or conservative cultural paradigm.

The London party scene thus has an important set of functions in the novel: first, it provides an historical set piece upon which a traditional English repertoire intersects with contemporary social life; second, it dramatizes the extent to which such a repertoire traffics in an explicitly racist-imperialist conception of Englishness, with Podsnap as its avatar; and,
third, it reveals the mechanisms by which theatrical address absorbs its audience into a performative economy internal to Englishness. While this absorption begins quite surely as coercion, the theatrical play of the party ultimately exceeds the racist-imperialist address of the Podsnapping actress, extends to include the novel’s primary drama—the conflict between Saladin and Gibreel—and thus restores a dynamic established at the very beginning of the novel between Saladin’s incorrigible desire to play at Englishness and Gibreel’s hybrid cosmopolitanism. In this respect, English theatrical culture provides an historically complex locus in which transnational and multicultural antagonisms can play out; within such a locus, Englishness counts less as a normative state against which racial difference might be measured (although it does still count as just that), and more as an important historical and cultural context within which dramatic renegotiations of racial, cultural, and national identity may take place.

Demotic Englishness in the Age of Multiculturalism

In *The Satanic Verses*, Englishness in its most expansive sense becomes a site of multicultural friction. Rushdie’s configuration of popular theatrical iconography in the party scene and the modes of socio-theatrical interaction therein produce an arena open to characters historically excluded from a traditionally English cultural repertoire. The variably coercive and absorptive logic of theatrical address dramatized in the party scene reveals that participation by non-white people *within* Englishness calls into question the racist-imperialist
habit of conflating whiteness and Englishness. In *Small Acts* (1993), a collection of essays laced with allusions, both implicit and explicit, to Rushdie’s novel, Gilroy celebrates the effect of black British art on contemporary iterations of Englishness, suggesting that “the fissures, stress cracks and structural fatigue in the edifices of Englishness become more interesting and acquire their own beauty” as a result.\(^3\) That is, for Gilroy, the deliberate participation of black artists internally within Englishness, coupled with the pressure under which such participation places whiteness, produces new aesthetic criteria, and subsequently broadens our understanding of what exactly counts as “English.” Rushdie’s treatment of English theatrical culture in the party scene reveals the racist-imperialist conceptions of Englishness that tend to underpin such culture, but it also gestures outward toward a new set of cultural associations necessary for the gradual dismantling and reconstitution of Englishness beyond essentialist ethnic and racial categories.

However, I would like to emphasize here the obvious point that the social, cultural, and political terrain upon which this process of absorption within Englishness takes place is, for the most part, contested. The nationalist dogma offered up by the Podsnapping actress, coded doubly as repulsion and seduction, overdetermines the space of the party scene by casting racial and cultural difference precisely as *difference*, as something external to Englishness itself. And yet, the antagonism that characterizes the contested space of the party is not, as one might imagine, a result of this specific locale; rather, it signifies a broader problem in the reconstitution of Englishness outside of racial absolutism. That is, contested,
antagonistic participation within a space marked as English counts as a necessary
democratizing feature of the new forms of Englishness presented by the novel. The new
criteria for inclusion within Englishness are thus not naively utopian or “color-blind”;
instead, they demand the kind of collective, engaged political negotiation described by
Jacques Rancière as the necessary “unsticking” of consensus through dissent. By
reintroducing contestatory politics into Englishness, and by casting a diverse set of actors in
the novel’s performative economy, Rushdie restores dissent to the body politic in a fashion
that revives Englishness as a viable, expansive, and necessarily shifting demographic
category. Antagonism is thus not purely a feature of racial animus cultivated by imperial
machinery in decline; it is, more importantly, a vital mode of political negotiation in which
the boundaries of inclusion are continuously redrawn.

Rushdie’s commitment to antagonistic forms of sociopolitical engagement rooted in
popular theatrical culture becomes most apparent when he shifts his focus from the nativist
arena of Dickensian London to a more obviously syncretic cultural zone, namely, Club Hot
Wax, where the West Indian and South Asian residents of “Brickhall” (a fictional amalgam
of Brixton, Southall, and Brick Lane, neighborhoods known for their large immigrant
populations) spend their evenings. Club Hot Wax, “formerly the Blak-An-Tan,” an
underground dance venue concealed behind an unmarked door (291), bears the trace of the
dance hall, an unmistakably Jamaican cultural form; and yet, as Sonjah Stanley Niaah argues
in her cultural and geographical survey of the genre, even though dance hall “is synonymous
with Jamaica,” is also manifests a kind of “boundarylessness” in which its “mediates local, regional and global zones.” Additionally, as a postcolonial import in the UK, dance hall acquires a localized cultural and political specific charge. In delineating a critique of capitalism baked into black British musical genres, Gilroy argues that the absorption of dance hall, among other genres, into an explicitly English cultural repertoire, signaled in part by British artists’ simultaneous uptake of Cockney vernaculars, has produced “syncretic cultures” that “reconstruct and rework tradition as they pursue their particular utopia.” In representing this kind of syncretic subcultural space in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie activates a cultural zone distinct from the monocultural whiteness of Dickensian London, one rooted not only in the emancipatory, collaborative pleasure of former colonial subjects from across the globe, but also in the history of colonial violence and its transformation into postimperial enterprise.

The syncretism of Club Hot Wax is embodied, in part, by its DJ, Pinkwalla, a patois-speaking, “seven-foot albino, his hair the palest rose, the whites of his eyes likewise, his features unmistakably Indian, the haughty nose, long thin lips, a face from a Hamza-nama cloth. An Indian who has never seen India, East-India-man from the West Indies, white black man” (292). In Pinkwalla, Rushdie represents the contradictions of racial and cultural absolutism. Rather than ascribe to Pinkwalla a string of negatively defined identities (i.e., non-white, non-black, non-Indian, non-Afro-Caribbean), Rushdie presents him as a figure of cultural abundance: “East-India-man from the West Indies, white black man.” Further,
Pinkwalla’s audience, “bodies shaking themselves, singly, in pairs, in threes, moving towards possibilities” (291), dances among a group of waxworks that are in fact effigies of historical figures: “Still the motionless figures dance between the shimmying of sisters, the jouncing and bouncing of youth. What are they? – Why, waxworks, nothing more. – Who are they? – History” (292). At the Club, black and brown historical figures, including Mary Seacole, Abdul Karim, George IV’s barber, and Grace Jones, are cast in wax and “dance motionlessly” through the night. Within the Club, dancers participate in a living history, symbolized both genealogically by the relation between the dancers and the waxworks and kinesthetically through dance. The historical repertoire on display at the Club is not the same as that represented in the party scene: black and brown bodies are not subject to nationalist dogma, and they are not coerced into the scene’s performative economy. However, the Club does stage English cultural history as an arena open to non-white participants, not simply by inviting its attendees to participate in the kinesthetic collectivity on offer, but by historicizing the unequivocal centrality of black and brown participants within Englishness. This episode thus confirms something antiracist and postcolonial theorists have argued for decades: that syncretism does not enter belatedly into the English repertoire; rather, it has always been there as a primary constituent of Englishness itself.

Club Hot Wax represents, on one hand, an earnest representation of the contribution of colonial and postcolonial subjects to an enduring English cultural tradition. On the other hand, it stages, too, the necessary antagonisms that promise to democratize
Englishness, to expand it beyond its nativist roots, and to resist the state-sanctioned forms of racism that obscure the status of syncretism within a nominally “quintessential” English tradition. These antagonisms are first offered up in an architectural juxtaposition: separate from the beneficent waxworks of color, “bathed in evil green light, wax villains cower and grimace: Mosley, Powell, Edward Long, all the local avatars of Legree” (292). Aside from functioning comically as pantomime villains, these waxworks symbolize the UK’s racist institutional history. The clubgoers call for a “meltdown,” and Pinkwalla willingly obliges: “Who’s-it-gonna-be? Who-you-wanna-see? Names are shouted, compete, coalesce, until the assembled company is united once more, chanting a single word” (292–93). This preamble to the meltdown, that is, the ritual sacrifice of one of the waxwork villains, dramatizes in miniature an alternative democratic process at work: the clubgoers briefly disagree, but disagreement quickly coalesces into unity as a single word rises above the noise and reveals a consensus has been reached.

While the assembled group at the Club have reached a consensus, the antagonism that underpins the scene as a whole persists and, moreover, escalates to the level of macropolitical dissent. Mosley, Powell, and Long are spared from sacrifice; instead, the clubgoers opt for Margaret Thatcher.

Attendants move towards the tableau of hate-figures, pounce upon the night’s sacrificial offering, the one most often selected, if truth be told; at least three times a week. Her permaweeded coiffure, her pearls, her suit of blue. Maggie-maggie-maggie, bays the crowd. Burn-burn-burn. The doll, – the guy, – is strapped into the Hot Seat. Pinkwalla throws the switch. And O how prettily she melts, from the inside out,
crumpling into formlessness. Then she is a puddle, and the crowd sighs its ecstasy: *done*.

The crowd calls for “Maggie” to burn, melting her in a microwave oven playfully called “the Hot Seat.” At Club Hot Wax, Rushdie presents public melting as a perverse and comic inversion of burning at the stake using the traditional image of Guy Fawkes (“the doll, – the *guy*”), a figure whom Britons continue to burn at the stake every year. The ritual sacrifice of Thatcher in the Club, which apparently takes place not once per year, as it does with Guy Fawkes, but three times per week, activates and revises a particularly English folk history—the thrice-weekly melting of a waxwork in the image of Thatcher mimics the burning of a political dissident whose execution is rehearsed all over the country, year after year. Club Hot Wax is thus an incredibly performative space, in which several histories are reproduced in order to forge a distinctly antiracist English collective in the present. In melting an effigy of Thatcher, the clubgoers participate in an English folk tradition by dismantling and reconstituting it in an act of explicit political dissent aimed at destroying, over and again, nativist forms of Englishness associated with Thatcher, all the while sparing forms of Englishness flexible enough to allow for the continual renegotiation of cultural boundaries.

In reading the scene at Club Hot Wax as an extension of the kind of cultural renegotiation that begins in the London party scene, I hope to have made three things clear: first, that English theatrical culture, whether rooted in either a Dickensian or a postcolonial repertoire, activates a performative economy that promotes, rather than inhibits,
contestatory participation; second, that such participation works by contesting not only the
archive from which we produce, discursively and materially, contemporary forms of
Englishness, but also the very terrain upon which Englishness plays out; and third, that the
antagonisms produced within this theatrical locale, often with pleasure, reflect a broader
form of political engagement that operates at the level of the nation-state. In other words,
theatrical antagonism enables a contestatory politics to emerge that shuttles between micro-
and macropolitical scales, and thus confirms that antiracist dissent is not necessarily external
to Englishness; rather, by taking up the mutable, vernacular forms of English theatrical
antagonism, Rushdie demonstrates that the formal expansiveness of theatrical genres might
usefully exceed its thematic and/or historical exclusivity. This is a demotic variety of
Englishness rooted in an historically nativist, localist repertoire that, in the right hands,
works paradoxically to diversify the macropolitical viability of intranational dissent.

Collectivity and/as Genre

In The Satanic Verses, Rushdie offers up Dickensian London and Club Hot Wax as
two companion pieces that reveal the various types of demotic collectivity enabled (and
disabled) by the popular theater’s vernacular forms. Both episodes clearly situate popular
theatrical enterprise within the history of British imperialism, either as an implicit critique of
the popular theater’s jingoistic roots or as an explosive critique of state racism. Further, both
episodes depict the absorption of large groups of people in pursuit of pleasure into a
theatrical economy that exceeds the ordinary bounds of social intercourse: at the London party, Saladin utters a “Dickensian cry” and witnesses his demonic double, Punch, calling out to him; at the Club, partygoers blend kinesthetically with historical waxworks of color and “coalesce” in the ritual vilification of villains, past and present. But the novel’s uptake of theatrical culture does more than simply introduce theatrical themes into the novel; rather, it borrows the theater’s representational forms in order to establish a new paradigm for thinking about how narrative representation interpellates an actually existing body politic. My intention in closing, therefore, is to demonstrate how far the problem of postimperial collectivity in an age of sociopolitical division might be further clarified as a problem of genre.45 By tracing the extent to which the theatrical antagonisms manifest in the novel’s social world operate at a macropolitical scale that escalates beyond the micropolitical locales presented thus far in this chapter, I show that the novel has an important metatheatrical form of narrative address, one in which the boundaries erected by the novel are demolished in order to broaden Englishness as an inclusive demographic category.

The novel is quite obviously interested in diverse forms of narrative address: its various representations of “the satanic verses” highlights for readers that the meaning of words changes depending on who is speaking and who is listening. Critics have noted, too, that the narrative voice of The Satanic Verses is an inconsistent voice, variably pious and profane, serious and playful, angelic and satanic.46 Readers of The Satanic Verses are thus encouraged to view themselves as an audience subject to variable forms of address. In
particular, however, the novel’s metatheatrical form of address ultimately supplements narrative address by conceiving of “the reader” as an embodied and co-present audience drawn into the novel’s performative economy. In “Return to Jahilia,” one of the novel’s dream sequences, Rushdie forms a narrative frame borrowed from metatheatrical convention, “a balcony scene of hatred instead of love” (370), and creates a sense of multiple spectating audiences—one within the text itself, and at least one outside of it. This scene asks the reader to compare alternative modes of theatrical attention, one in which the audience’s attention falters and the crowd disperses, and another in which the reader continues to read despite the apparent closure of dramatic action. Jahilia’s leader, the Grandee Abu Simbel, argues publicly with his wife, Hind, as the townspeople watch: “The town is full of rumours and there’s a crowd in front of the house. After a time the sound of Hind’s voice lifted in rage can be clearly heard. Then at an upper balcony Hind shows herself and demands that the crowd tear her husband into small pieces” (370–71). After her sudden appearance on the balcony, Hind breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, and addresses the crowd directly and orders them to murder the Grandee. Unfortunately for Hind, after three attempts to incite the crowd to violence, she fails, and “the people begin to leave” (371). Hind’s theatrical failure—the failure to captivate the audience’s attention—here mirrors her political failure—the failure to mobilize them towards collective action.

The balcony scene asks us to see theatrical address within the novel as a performative political act. This is achieved in part by the novel’s conflation of theatrical
space (the balcony) with political space (the Grandee’s home), but also by the distinction between Hind’s audience and Rushdie’s. To suggest as much is to echo an influential strain of socialist drama that extends at least as far back as Bertolt Brecht, in whose theatrical work alienation from dramatic action allows for careful circumspection of contemporary social and political life. But Rushdie benefits equally from the novel as a form, which allows him to approximate an extant theatrical tradition without relying on the material structures of theatrical production. Thus, as the novel’s crowd disperses and the Grandee announces, theatrically, that “This is the end” (372), the reader, armed with the dramatic irony afforded to someone only two-thirds of the way through a 600-page novel, continues to read. Theatrical action calls an end to itself, and one audience obligingly leaves the arena, while another continues to observe. As a result, the reader discovers that Hind, an arbiter of theatricality, continues to plot and scheme. In distinguishing between the audience in the novel and the audience of the novel, and by highlighting the different modes of perception afforded at different narrative levels, the novel draws attention to itself as a stage for dramatic action that exceeds the various stages represented diegetically.

The novel’s metatheatrical address demonstrates that inclusion within Englishness is not simply a discursive or rhetorical process; rather, it is enacted through embodied and collective participation in a living cultural repertoire. If we view readers as theatergoers whom the novel addresses as an extradiegetic audience participating directly in the novel’s performative economy, then we are able to identify a larger organizational structure implicit
in the novel’s uptake of theatrical culture. That is, not only does the novel’s approximation of the popular theater manifest as an attempt by Rushdie to renegotiate the boundaries of Englishness, but its metatheatricality, too, alters narrative modes of address in a way that absorbs the reader into a vision of antiracist, embodied collectivity. As such, the novel stages the gradual demolition of narrative form and gestures towards inclusive forms of collectivity that exist, necessarily rather than accidentally, outside of narrative representation. By replacing narrative address with theatrical address, by integrating the reader into forms of collectivity that exceed its own representational boundaries, and by demolishing the very forms through which such boundaries manifest, *The Satanic Verses* formally dramatizes the social and theatrical antagonisms that promise to open up Englishness as a demographic category.

The novel’s absorption of the reader into its performative economy prepares readers to become critical participants in the novel’s political critique, not as mere spectators of political action but rather as embodied and co-present actors in an actually existing sociopolitical world. Towards the end of the novel, a tragedy occurs: the novel’s fictional civil rights’ activist, Dr. Uhuru Simba, has died suspiciously while in police custody. In response, Brickhall’s black and Asian communities take to the streets in protest, and Rushdie reanimates a mode of political dissent that originates in Club Hot Wax: “the clubs and dance-halls beginning to yield up their excited, highly charged populations” and the Metropolitan police declare “riot conditions” (453–54) in a clear allusion to the 1981 Brixton
Riot. The line between subcultural entertainment (dance hall) and political protest (riot) has here been blurred; the excitement and charge of a socializing public within Brickhall’s entertainment venues becomes synonymous with political dissent that challenges the brutality of a racist police force. Antiracist antagonism originates principally within theatrical space of the Club, rather than narrative exegesis, and ultimately exceeds its theatrical confines by bursting into the civic space of the streets. Importantly, then, the antagonistic, subcultural terrain of the Club is not subcultural after all; rather, it manifests at a macropolitical level as a dominant articulation of race relations and their primary status in contemporary political life.

Since the underground club population stands in for an agitated public, there is something to be said about the novel’s desire to overstep its own boundaries. This transformation—in which content finally exceeds form—expands the sociopolitical stakes of representing the antagonisms internal to Englishness. During the riot, the novel adopts the perspective of the news media by focalizing a television camera, represented as an instrument of the state: “A camera requires law, order, the thin blue line. Seeking to protect itself. . . it chooses side” (454–55). The camera dominates the representation of the riot and prioritizes not the voices of those participating in it, but rather the voice of a police inspector—“a good man in an impossible job. A father, a man who likes his pint”—and a string of talking heads (455). As the media and the state work to control the narrative of the riot, the novel itself gestures outward, to another frame of representation: from nowhere, a
voice calls, “And the *Wax*: they smashed the place up – *totalled* it! – Now it’s war’ (457).

Once again, antagonism is reintroduced into the novel’s discursive fabric, accompanied now by the language of martial combat. Importantly, however, the novel fails to represent the impending conflict; instead, readers are told, “This happens, however – as does a great deal else – in places which the camera cannot see” (457). The excessive, expansive political dissent that originates within a space of theatrical entertainment—the Club—erupts into a space of civic unrest, before moving out of the representational frame of the novel itself.

The novel’s engagement with the immediate macropolitical present reveals that, for Rushdie, the representation of collectivity has become a problem of genre. By addressing its reader as if they were a co-present audience, the novel establishes a flexible, demotic mode of collectivity rooted in its informal theatrical and metatheatrical institutions; and, indeed, the destruction of Club Hot Wax subsequently escalates small-scale antagonisms native to these institutions to the level of macropolitical dissent. However, in adopting television—the so-called “machine of the state” (454)—as its principal representational genre, the novel loses its micropolitical specificity and tends toward abstraction: the news camera, we are told, is “less gifted than the human eye [and] less sensitive than. . . the human ear” (454), and even after the novel eschews the camera’s lens, “The city becomes vague, amorphous. It is becoming impossible [for Gibreel] to describe the world” (459). At the end of the chapter, one character reminds the reader: “What has happened here, in Brickhall tonight is a socio-political phenomenon. Let’s not fall into the trap of some damn mysticism. We’re talking
about history: an event in the history of Britain. About the process of change” (469). With this remark, the novel draws our attention to the lasting significance of events and the representation of those events precisely as representative, as exemplary moments in historical time; however, it also reveals how far different genres of representation enable (or disable, for that matter) social organization. Rushdie conflates televisual representation with state power and highlights the degree to which the machinery of state representation drowns out the sounds of the event itself. Later, the police inspector provides the official (and inaccurate) account of the riot via television and concludes, “That’s all we have” (465). In this respect, televisual representation is the enemy of experience and the co-conspirator of the state; and, although the social collectivity contained within Club Hot Wax ultimately exceeds its bounds, the news report describing the riot remains a closed circuit while order is maintained.

Just as the Club’s collectivity exceeds its own form, the novel’s capacity for representing a social world outgrows its own representational limits. While the novel as a form might present the reader with an ideological view different from and even preferable to the news media, it is nonetheless a form of representation, and thus distinct from embodied experience. The novel, like the television camera, can only approximate the human eye and the human ear. In spite of its claims on social reality, the novel is not in itself reducible to human experience. By setting up this ongoing negotiation of the social within the theatrical dynamics of audience and address, Rushdie emphasizes the experiential and collective
features that, even beyond the realm of the novel, continue to shape the interplay between social reality and the novel as social form. In this respect, the novel gestures to a world beyond itself, a world characterized by organic human experience. Perhaps we are not supposed to view the novel’s representation of the riot in purely optimistic terms, as a revolutionary catalyst for a utopian, antiracist, multicultural state; we are, however, encouraged to see how contemporary antiracist politics confronts state power in a local and embodied popular-cultural dynamic.

*The Satanic Verses* ends as Saladin returns to India to attend his dying father. Saladin’s homecoming stages a “process of renewal, or regeneration” in which his “old English life, its bizarries, its evils, now seemed very remote, even irrelevant, like his truncated stage-name” (534). Eighteen months after the Brickhall riot, England and Englishness have become remote features of Saladin’s past, and he no longer covets the “bizarries” of English life; his new life will take place in India, and he reclaims his given name, “Salahuddin Chamchawala.” Critics have read this homecoming, Saladin’s reconciliation with his father, and his rejection of Englishness as a return to some form of bounded, distinctly Indian, cultural cohesion. Gane, for instance, argues that “Saladin/Salahuddin not only turns back, but *turns his back on* hybridity. . . and on his earlier deracinated and divided self, choosing instead such traditional values as wholeness, roots, and ‘great verities.’”50 If the end of the novel signals Saladin’s reintegration into a monocultural national tradition, even one as hybrid and multiple as Indianness, then surely we ought to read Saladin’s departure from
England and, by extension, from Englishness as a final departure from antagonistic, multicultural forms of inclusion. However, once Saladin resolves to leave his “old English life,” the life in which he antagonized Gibreel, readers are told, “But a history is not so easily shaken off . . . and his old life was about to surge around him once again, to complete its final act” (535). In adopting, again, a metatheatrical conceit in order to represent narrative conflict, the novel returns to its central drama, that is, the conflict between Saladin and Gibreel. The antagonism that begins as they fall toward the English Channel while singing popular songs comes to a close in their final encounter, in which Gibreel confronts Saladin one last time, before killing himself (546). Indeed, Gane suggests that “Saladin in the end appears to transcend the opposition between. . . continuity and discontinuity, between migrancy and return: instead of either one condition or the other, he performs the impossible feat of achieving both.”51 What Gane sees here as yet another form of hybridity, of the simultaneous possession of cosmopolitan and native subjectivities, exemplifies the kind of antagonism I see operating internally within the contested terrain of Englishness, rather than between cultures. Even as Saladin departs from England and Englishness, the forms of antagonistic, contestatory participation that took place within an English theatrical repertoire earlier in the novel recur, tragically, as the novel resolves its central conflict.

The novel’s adoption of popular theatrical culture rooted in a traditional English repertoire reveals that even the most quintessentially English forms are in reality contested. Moreover, it is precisely the contested nature of these vernacular forms that makes it a
potentially and paradoxically inclusive category, since the antagonisms that take place within Englishness work to produce flexible demographic boundaries. This contested variety of Englishness asks readers to see Englishness as a localized category capable of raising complicated questions about postimperial collectivity. As the novel closes, Saladin thinks to himself, “Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born” (547). The demolition of a view that Saladin associates with a happy childhood now comes to symbolize a future, of new childhoods to be born in the place of the old. “To the devil,” of course, reanimates the novel’s interest in adversarial conflict, and suggests that demolition and rebirth is not, as one might expect, a cyclical, organic process; rather, it is a violent, antagonistic one that has to be continuously negotiated. Even as Saladin abandons his old English life, the novel itself continues to dramatize the breaking and remaking of forms and boundaries. If Englishness is understood finally to be a cultural category hospitable to antagonism, whether as theatrical enterprise or macropolitical dissent, then Rushdie’s uptake of Englishness within theatrical culture inheres in a generally cosmopolitan project. That is, in diversifying Englishness, in dismantling and reconstituting it with new, open criteria for inclusion, *The Satanic Verses* claims a localist, though dynamic, form of Englishness that exists antagonistically alongside the novel’s otherwise international status.
Rushdie is not alone in his sense that the vernacular forms native to English theatrical culture might be usefully if problematically applied to contemporary issues surrounding sociopolitical division in the age of British multiculturalism. As I show in the next chapter, Angela Carter sees the popular theater as an enduring figure for “radical dissent and continuous questioning,” as a simultaneously serious and playful collection of comic genres that share a critical edge even as they rehearse imperial themes. Faced with the New Right’s renewed uptake of imperialist and jingoistic culture, Rushdie and Carter turn counterintuitively to the same repertoire to illustrate how far an inconsistent culture rooted in collective pleasure might support anti-imperialist and anti-xenophobic goals. As I have shown, Rushdie’s representation of theatrical antagonism as a vernacular form internal to Englishness suggests that the conservative vilification of non-white Britons in the post-consensus era is evidence less of “little England” insiderism than it is evidence of a vital struggle between a closed, reactionary Englishness and an open, demotic variety.

Notes


2 There are echoes, here, of Homi K. Bhabha’s understanding of colonial mimicry, which he articulates as “an ironic compromise” between “the synchronic panoptical vision of domination. . . and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history” (126, original emphasis); in other words, as a compromise between “stasis” and “change.” Although Bhabha’s sense of irony and farce in the colonial context seems to me to be markedly humorless, Otto’s pantomime Englishness literalizes mimicry, which is not here strictly colonial, and subsequently resituates it within an explicitly comic context. Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” October 28 (1984): 125–33.
It is important to comment here upon Rushdie’s apparent relationship to (neo)liberalist discourses. Prior to the fatwa issued against him by Ayatollah Khomeini on the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie maintained a fairly consistent critical stance against liberal ideology; indeed, Janice Ho suggests that *The Satanic Verses*, in conversation with prevalent antiracist discourses, “articulat[es] an important critique of liberalism’s superficial toleration of cultural difference and of the inadequacies of state multiculturalism” (158). Shortly after the fatwa, after he was forced to go into hiding, Rushdie wrote emphatically: “I have never seen this controversy [i.e., the so-called “Rushdie affair”] as a struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom” (“In Good Faith,” 396). This assertion has been treated, however, with some skepticism; Timothy Brennan, for example, writes, “The point is not to reprimand Rushdie for using the [Anglo-American political] resources at his command, only to note how the affair had dislodged him from his earlier views” (“Cultural Politics,” 118). Or, more precisely, the point is to note how Rushdie could no longer sustain his vocal criticism of Thatcher’s Britain, “which led him to say honorable things he could not, for tactical reasons, repeat when the affair broke out because he found himself relying on the British state for his bodily protection” (Brennan, “Cultural Politics,” 120). Janice Ho, *Nation and Citizenship in the Twentieth-Century British Novel* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015); Rushdie, “In Good Faith,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 393–414; Timothy Brennan, “The Cultural Politics of Rushdie Criticism: All or Nothing,” in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. Keith Booker (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999), 107–28.


10 Aside from Sisodia, who possesses a notable “corpus of statements about The Trouble With The English” (343), the only other character to riff on the phrase is Gibreel: “The trouble with the English was that they were English: damn cold fish!” (352) and “the trouble with the English was their: / Their: / In a word, Gibreel solemnly pronounced, their weather” (354).

11 As Mookerjea suggests, “the novel’s ‘cosmopolitan’ valorization of ‘plurality,’ ‘hybridity,’ and ‘difference’ . . . inscribes the novel in a counter-hegemonic national-popular project” (118, emphasis added). Similarly, though Brennan was one of the earliest critics to offer a sustained reading of The Satanic Verses (see Salman Rushdie, 143–66), he later recognizes that “the hugely neglected political center of the novel is a solidly social democratic demolition of Thatcherite Britain, its fatuous advertisements for a new middle class, its adventurist war in the Falklands, and its increasing police brutality and immigrant exclusionism” (“Cultural Politics,” 118).


13 Baucom, 195.

14 Ibid., 210.


16 Ambivalence about the sociopolitical value of “Englishness” characterizes some of the most important recent scholarship. Kalliney, for example, views Englishness as both a reactionary expression of “cultural exceptionalism” after empire and as “a culturally productive, and fiercely contested, narrative” (6, 7–8). Jed Esty, too, suggests that the late-modernist turn to Anglocentrism provided an opportunity for social and cultural “repair,” in which the failed imperial project of universal Englishness manifests again as a particularistic,


The most extended account of Rushdie’s uptake of theatrical culture in *The Satanic Verses* comes from Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru’s *Performance and Performativity in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* (Leiden and Bristol: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 161–88. While my focus in this chapter is on the cultural, political, and formal logics of a particular genre of theatrical culture, namely the English popular theater, Alexandru’s approach centers on Rushdie’s debt to dialogic forms of performative storytelling; to that end, Alexandru argues that “the performativity of the narrative engages the audience in a dialogue with the text in which the act of reading becomes an act of negotiating between the meanings in the text and those gaps mentioned by [Wolfgang] Iser which need to be filled with material coming from the outside” (165–66).


My use of the phrase “vernacular forms” derives from Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai’s essay on comedy, in which they argue that comic genres are tied to hyperlocal contexts that make it difficult to say who exactly is “in on the joke”: “What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it. . . It is also epistemologically troubling, drawing insecure boundaries as though it were possible to secure confidence about object ontology or the value of an ‘us’ versus all its others” (234–35).


In his essay, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Fried offers one of the twentieth century’s most memorable instances of critical antitheatricality. An important part of Fried’s complaint regarding the theatricality of “literalist art” (read: abstract art) is its situationality: “the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” (153, original emphasis). In other word, art becomes theatrical when it incorporates its audience. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1998), 148–72.

In her essay on the “situated cultural hybridity” of Rushdie’s novels, Ghosh argues that Rushdie adopts an “English vernacular”—i.e., “a localized or regionalized urban (Bombayite) use of English”—in order to offer up “a new vision of India, a global-local postmodern nation whose set of cultural references no longer constitutes a stable and homogeneous national register” (130). Though there are many similarities between Ghosh’s use of the term “vernacular” and my own, most notably exemplified by our shared sense that the vernacular serves to connect micro- and macropolitical scales, I am less interested in “the vernacular” the linguistic sense than I am in its formal and cultural denotations. Ghosh, “An Invitation to Indian Postmodernity: Rushdie’s English Vernacular as Situated Cultural Hybridity,” in Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie, ed. M. Keith Booker (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999), 129–53.

As Barry J. Faulk succinctly states, “It is difficult to generalize about music hall, since it tended to be as various an entertainment as the heterogeneous ethnic, gendered, and classed groups hailed by the form” (12). Barry J. Faulk, Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture (Athens: Ohio UP, 2004).

The mutability of the popular theater during this period can be explained by drinking and entertainment regulations established by the London County Council. The LCC was newly formed in 1888, and it was responsible for (among other things) licensing diverse forms of entertainment including music halls, sporting venues, and exhibition halls.


28 For a definitive account of the relationship between popular theater, patriotism, and jingoism, see Penny Summerfield, “Patriotism and Empire: Music-Hall Entertainment, 1870–1914,” in Imperialism and Popular Culture, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986), 17–48. For an excellent case study depicting the popular theater industry’s active cultivation of an interwar nationalist character, see Walkowitz, 275–85. Walkowitz traces the entrepreneurial exploits of Laura Henderson and Vivian Van Damm, creative leads at London’s Windmill Theatre, who “embrace[d] variety’s homely pleasures as a national, cultural treasure” in the face of the “new threats” of cinema and radio (257). Although, as Walkowitz notes, this nationalistic enterprise supplemented the theater’s otherwise cosmopolitan character, the Windmill gained itself a patriotic reputation: “as the only West End theater to stay open throughout the Blitz, its motto, ‘We Never Closed,’ came to symbolize the resilience of ordinary Londoners improvising to fight off the German Luftwaffe” (Walkowitz, 253–54). Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop would later satirize this patriotic development in popular theatrical history in the popular stage musical, Oh, What a Lovely War! (1963).


30 Walkowitz, 18.

31 This claim thus echoes Ho’s suggestion that The Satanic Verses portrays “ethnic Britons” who, “[i]nstead of accepting the state’s method of integrating minorities as passive
citizens through a multicultural consensus... challenged the terms of their inclusion by redefining the domain of the political” (151). However, the present chapter also sets out to contextualize Ho’s sense of the contemporary conflicts motivating Rushdie’s work within a longer history of intracultural antagonism.

32 While criticizing the habitual pluralist utopianism of prominent leftist social historians, including Benedict Anderson, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson, Gilroy asks a set of questions with enduring significance: “Who do [these plural forms] include, or, more precisely for our purposes, do they help to reproduce blackness and Englishness as mutually exclusive categories? Why is the racial inflection in the language of nation continually overlooked? And why are contemporary appeals to “the people” in danger of transmitting themselves as appeals to the white people?” Gilroy, “There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 55–56.

33 Aravamudan questions the hybridity of Gibreel’s song and suggests that, at its root, it is addressed to a knowing Hindi audience (6–7); however, in my view, the song’s multiple signification—both as an exclusive reference to Bollywood production and as an English translation of such a reference—opens the song up to a multilingual audience.

35 Ibid., 607.
36 Ibid., 611–12.
37 For an exemplary reading of Gibreel’s tropicalization of London, see Ho, 151–53.
41 Ibid., 154.
42 Gilroy, “There Ain’t No Black”, 195. Dance hall has an important place in post-Windrush British fiction: more notably, it serves as a primary locale of collective pleasure in Sam Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners (1956).
43 Ibid., 217–18.
44 Although the novel in many respects depicts interracial solidarity among Brickhall’s South Asian and black populations, some critics have rightly expressed some concern regarding Rushdie’s representation of black people in particular. For example, Brennan has suggested that the novel’s “characterizations of West Indians... are often embarrassing or offensive” (Salman Rushdie, 164), while Gane is struck by “the absence... of the man called Uhuru Simba, and the even more palpable absence of the continent of Africa—evoked in a
name, a song, the waxwork figures of historic migrants of color, but otherwise nowhere to be found” (43).

David Kurnick has theorized the relationship between theatricality and collectivity in the novel in his work on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels of interiority. In addition to suggesting that the theater leaves a “formal trace” in the novel, Kurnick argues that the “spatial imaginary indexed by this dethematizing theatricality suggests that novels can be read not only as records of fictional events but also as shelters for imagined forms of collective being” (18–21). For Kurnick, theatrical collectivity occurs not only when characters in a novel are assembled quite literally as members of a stage production, but also as novelists begins to reconfigure the spatial dimension of the novel in theatrical terms in order to reimagine alternative forms of collectivity. David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2012).

Critics have identified one of the many kinds of “satanic verses” implicit in the novel as a satanic or demonic narrator, who appears momentarily throughout the text in order to shape narrative action and discourse in a way that seems at odds with the novel more generally. For more on this kind of narratological work, see Roger Y. Clark, *Stranger Gods: Salman Rushdie’s Other Worlds* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2001), 128–144.

In her reading of official state accounts of the 1981 Brixton riot and the 1958 Notting Hill riots, Nicole M. Jackson has compellingly argued that discourse surrounding the postimperial nation has worked tirelessly to erase imperial history from Englishness, and, in the process, has “strengthened the relationship between Englishness and whiteness” (210). Further, she writes, “[W]hen police officers, as representatives of the State, harassed Black youth with sus arrests, they reinforced the idea that Black people did not belong in England. To be English was to be white. Without a claim to residence or the hope of full assimilation, Black Britons were cast as the perpetual other within the nation—a colony within the metropole” (213). In Rushdie’s fictionalized version of the riot, however, Englishness has become synonymous with an explicitly anti-statist form of cultural enterprise depicted in Club Hot Wax. What we have here, then, is an imaginative reversal of the nationalist discourses that surrounded the Brixton riot in a fashion that resituates Englishness within a broader state assemblage. Nicole M. Jackson, “Imperial Suspect: Policing Colonies within ‘Post’-Imperial England,” *Callaloo* 39, no. 1 (2016): 203–15.

The most sustained political reading of the novel’s riot scene comes from Baucom (190–218), although Ho, Kalliney, and John McLeod offer important rejoinders. For example, Ho suggests that Baucom’s “ambivalence toward the dangers of rioting and violence,” an ambivalence he seems to inherit from the novel itself, risks reducing the novel’s view of political to “moralistic aversion” (167–68); Kalliney, on the other hand, argues that Baucom’s “reading downplays the extent to which England’s urban class system, in conjunction with the novel’s understanding of ethnicity and metropolitan racism, informs
the novel’s discussions of national inclusion and exclusion” (200). Also departing from Baucom’s reading, McLeod suggests that “Rushdie appears particularly anxious about the nature of popular protest in 1980s London” (153). In any case, there remains a critical consensus that the riot scene performs (if not necessary endorses) a localized antiracist politics that seems intent on marking out the effective limits of political violence. John McLeod, Postcolonial London: Re-Writing the Metropolis (London: Routledge, 2004).

49 Baucom argues that contemporary riots were disseminated into people’s homes in a newly invasive way, which created the widespread feeling among white middle-class television viewers that they had effectively “experienced” the riots in their homes (192–93).

50 Gane, 36 (original emphasis).

51 Ibid., 37.

CHAPTER 2

“The Other Side of Imperialism”: Comic Monologue and Narrative Address in Angela Carter’s Late Fiction

In 1991, Angela Carter wrote in defense of science fiction author Michael Moorcock’s self-identification as a “popular” writer:

[T]o be a “popular” writer, these days, means giving the reader something that the reader can’t get from television – an excitement, an impulse of play, a seriousness. . . If [Moorcock’s] essential generosity of spirit refuses to be contained by the orthodox rules of space, time and narrative, he is also, in a complex but irreducible way, very English. Not, never! In the “teddibly English,” self-congratulatory way of, well, your average Booker short-list victim, but English in the great tradition of music hall and penny dreadful, seaside pierrot show and pantomime, of radical dissent and continuous questioning, the other side of imperialism, if you like.1

On first glance, Carter’s defense of Moorcock is composed of seeming contradictions: characterized simultaneously by playfulness and seriousness, Moorcock’s writing displays both an “essential” unorthodoxy and an “irreducible” Englishness. And yet, that Moorcock might reject the constraints of literary orthodoxy and, at the same time, conform to a discernible English tradition presents no contradiction to Carter. On the contrary, the exciting fusion of tradition and dissent in Moorcock’s writing, as in Carter’s own, makes for popular writing.2 Popular writing is, for Carter, writing that can be “enjoyed communally,”3 writing with an appeal broad enough to remind its audience, etymologically speaking, of “the people” at the root of “the popular.” In other words, to be popular in England is to
represent a *demotic* variety of Englishness. Carter’s subsequent description of Moorcock’s popular Englishness depends upon its distinction from another classed form of Englishness associated with what Carter perceives to be a male-dominated, elite cultural institution (i.e., the Booker Prize). And it also depends upon the association of popular Englishness with popular theatrical forms—music hall, pierrot shows, pantomime—all of which Carter consigns, along with penny dreadfuls, “radical dissent,” and “continuous questioning,” to “the other side of imperialism.”

How might we interpret this ambiguous phrase: “the other side of imperialism”? Are we to understand that popular forms of Englishness constitute either imperialism’s binary opposite or, rather, its fundamental counterpart? On one hand, Carter’s use of the phrase to describe music hall, pierrot shows, and pantomime cuts across an element of Carter’s writing that has received a great deal of scholarly attention, that is, her liberal uptake of popular theatrical culture. On the other hand, it also raises the specter of race and empire in her work, an area that is, at present, critically under-researched. In distinguishing first between two classed forms of English culture (the Booker and music hall) around which Englishness tends to constellate, Carter seems to participate in a radical critical tradition, exemplified by E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy, that works to unveil the social and political logics that underpin demotic varieties of Englishness. But the lingering significance of those final, throwaway clauses, “the other side of imperialism, if you like,” also suggests that Carter’s distinction between elite and popular cultural forms constitutes no
easy binary; rather, like Gilroy, Carter seems aware that even non-elite entertainment genres intersect meaningfully with the history of racism and imperialism in the UK. Unlike Gilroy, however, Carter celebrates these genres precisely as entertaining despite any haunting presence of imperialism one might detect within them. As the following chapter shows, while Carter is not blind to issues surrounding racism and xenophobia in the 1980s and 1990s, her representation of popular theatrical culture as quintessentially though radically “English” calls into question the extent to which any kind of antiracist and anti-imperialist collectivity might be forged around Englishness as a demographic and cultural category.

Though Carter without doubt understands and values the seriousness of anti-imperialist and antiracist critique at the end of the twentieth century, she nevertheless consistently treats the history of imperialism with the playful humor native to “the other side of imperialism,” that is, native to popular theatrical culture. In this light, this chapter suggests that the ambivalence displayed in Carter’s assessment of Moorcock’s work, an assessment laced with both Carter’s trademark informality (“an impulse of play”) and her keen political insight (“a seriousness”), clarifies the ambiguous place of imperialism in Carter’s work as a whole. Though critics have noticed this ambiguity, little work has been done to explain how Carter’s playful treatment of imperial and postcolonial themes contributes to a serious political vision. Indeed, there exists a general skepticism regarding the politics of race in Carter’s work: invariably, Carter’s representation of non-white people risks recapitulating the fetishization of “the other” as described in classic postcolonial texts. In my view, however,
to suggest that Carter is either mis- or uninformed about the antiracist politics circulating during her career threatens to close the door permanently on a promising area of postcolonial inquiry in her work. Departing from such a trend, then, I contend that Carter’s anti-imperialist politics operates, problematically and paradoxically, in tandem with her approbation for a demotic, dissenting Englishness latent in popular theatrical genres. Indeed, Carter’s comic treatment of imperialism in her late fiction provides readers with a model for rethinking collectivity within Britain’s political climate at the end of the twentieth century, a climate in which the racism and xenophobia manifest in the longing for an imperial past maintained a firm foothold even as the idea of a “multicultural Britain” began taking concrete form.

Although literary histories at the end of the twentieth century tend to emphasize the English novel’s promising cosmopolitan and multicultural tenor, Carter’s representation of theatrical culture in her late fiction reveals the lingering presence of the old antagonisms of imperial culture within the sociopolitical discourses of the 1980s and 1990s. With this in mind, this chapter contextualizes Carter’s treatment of race and imperialism within the broader context of her uptake of theatrical culture—namely, the comic monologue—in order to advance an account of both her narrative strategy and, furthermore, her ambivalent literary and cultural politics. Formally, the comic monologue provides Carter with a performative narrative voice that works to draw readers into some form of collective, collaborative relationship with the text. The demographic constitution of this body of
readers, however, is not entirely clear. Hypothetically, any non-British reader of Carter’s work becomes the subject of this monological address even if he or she possesses no direct relationship with British imperial or national culture. The same might be said of any non-white reader whose relationship to Englishness has been historically contested and whose relationship to imperial culture has always been critical. To be sure, throughout this chapter I show how Carter uses monological address to problematize the category of “reader” across her late fiction.

Crucially, however, the comic monologue also possesses a set of social and cultural associations with an historical moment in which no real line between imperial culture and popular culture existed. Indeed, the forms of racism, xenophobia, and imperial nostalgia we tend to associate with Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech appeared before as constitutive features of English comic theater, which, during its prominence, trafficked heavily in the trappings of racist-imperialist culture: blackface minstrelsy, orientalist iconography, and anti-Irish sentiment. As far as Carter is concerned, however, to treat these issues comically is not to treat them as trivial. Rather, by adopting the critical edge of comic performance, Carter offers up a variety of English culture that on one hand challenges the racism and xenophobia at the heart of postimperial culture and, on the other hand, affords broad-scale communal pleasure in the rehearsal of a popular theatrical tradition. This narrative strategy constitutes neither an easy indictment of empire nor an uncritical celebration of a nation’s imperial nostalgia; rather, it exemplifies a manifest tension within
Carter’s playful and serious treatment of imperialism, and as a result encourages readers who might otherwise ignore the lingering presence of imperial culture in contemporary culture to inhabit a critical, oppositional form of collectivity.

In what follows, I trace the interrelation of theatrical culture, imperialism, and racial politics as it develops through Carter’s last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991), and her short story, “Black Venus” (1980). Though the earlier texts reveal Carter’s investment in cultivating a comic, dissenting narrative voice derived from the other side of imperialism, they ultimately fail to resolve Carter’s ambivalence regarding the political promise of demotic forms of Englishness. Only in *Wise Children* does Carter come close to articulating a form of “radical dissent and continuous questioning” that enables a truly popular, demotic variety of Englishness to emerge.

Comic Monologue as Narrative Address

To write about Carter’s fiction is almost to guarantee writing in some fashion about her theatricality. Critics who discuss the role of the theater across Carter’s work fall into two major trends: the first associates theatricality with the performance of gender, while the second reads theatrical culture, and Shakespeare in particular, as a literary and thematic intertext. Carter’s last novel, *Wise Children* is no exception: the novel takes place on April 23rd, St. George’s Day, and the day traditionally marked as Shakespeare’s birthday. Ostensibly a family history narrated by an elderly former music-hall star, Dora Chance, *Wise Children* is a
novel obsessed with “other sides.” The theatrical family at the center, “the imperial Hazard dynasty,” represents an elite stock of Shakespearean actors who “bestrode the British theatre like a colossus for a century and a half” (10) and sailed “[o]ff to the ends of Empire” to perform in the colonies (17). (The historical coincidence of Shakespearean drama and British imperialism is not Carter’s invention: as scholars of theater and imperialism have demonstrated, the cultural history of Shakespearean drama traces with alarming precision the history of colonial expansion and domination.) Dora and her twin sister, Nora, however, constitute the “left-hand line” of the Hazard family (59): as the illegitimate daughters of Melchior, the Hazard’s centenarian patriarch, Dora and Nora made names for themselves in music halls and variety theaters as “The Lucky Chances.” Dora and Nora are thus “illegitimate” in more ways than one. And yet, out of all Melchior’s children, Dora and Nora are the only ones to follow in his theatrical footsteps. What begins in the nineteenth century as a form of theatrical-imperial expansion ends, appropriately enough, in a national tragedy, in which the “last gasps” (10) of a theatrical dynasty forego the theater altogether and become minor television celebrities.

In establishing Dora and Nora as Melchior’s illegitimate children—in both the theatrical and genealogical sense—Wise Children activates two related strains of English theatrical heritage, Shakespeare and twentieth-century popular theater, and in doing so underscores the contributions of English theatrical entertainment (both popular and otherwise) to the British imperial project. However, while the theatrical and imperial
history of Shakespearean drama undoubtedly informs a large portion of *Wise Children*, the theatrical genre with the greatest *formal* footprint on the novel is the comic monologue. Indeed, *Wise Children* stages three monologues diegetically: a character takes the stage and speaks broadly and at length about some topic—unrequited love, mistaken paternity, and marital infidelity—in front of an attendant audience. As a hallmark of popular theatrical entertainment and an historical precursor to later forms of comic performance such as stand-up comedy, the comic monologue appears not as a genre unto itself but rather as a constituent feature of other genres across the spectrum of theatrical culture during its prominence from the 1880s to the 1950s. Staged within or alongside a wide range of theatrical entertainment—e.g., tableau vivant, comic and sentimental song, acrobatics—the comic monologue contributed to what theater historian Peter Bailey has called “a second language *for all classes*, whose penetrations had a powerful integrative force in English society.” Within the popular theater, the comic performer says something hilarious, gives a nod and a wink, and the audience peals with laughter. Under these conditions, suggests Bailey, this knowing laughter establishes among the audience a collaborative and conspiratorial, if also temporary, form of collectivity organized around the comic figure on stage.

Within the performative economy of the English popular theater, the comic monologist possesses a privileged and individualized voice, a voice that commands attention within the social space of the popular theater. But the rhetorical power of monologue
originates not from within the monologist’s individual, exemplary psyche; rather, it derives its comic value from a finely attuned sense of national, regional, and local culture. There is without a doubt some conservative element to comic performance, insofar as it establishes collectivity by playfully rehearsing cultural norms, which, in the theater especially, tend to be rooted in xenophobia, racism, and sexism. And yet, comic performance also engenders what Mikhail Bakhtin once called “popular laughter,” which he saw as an essentially subversive feature of carnival culture and social dialogism. The conservative or radical potential of comic performance surely depends as much upon its local content and contexts, or what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai have called comedy’s “vernacular form,” as it does upon its generic elements. On this topic, Berlant and Ngai write, “Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say ‘us.’ Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear.” In other words, some nebulous feature of the comic gets attached to a given collective or community in the present performance of comedy and, in the process, tentatively marks out the boundaries and parameters that define the collective as such. If readers, following Carter, associate comic performance with a popular theatrical “tradition of radical dissent and continuous questioning” (i.e., “the other side of imperialism”), then the comic monologue as a theatrical genre represents an exciting and potentially transformative paradigm whose cultural contexts and formal logic effectively draw its audience into a collective, collaborative encounter with the performer. The comic monologist, in this respect, is not really a monologist at all; rather, she is a non-individualist individual, a popular
emblem whose success as a comic relies on her ability to speak to and for an already assembled body politic.

Understanding the historical, cultural, and formal logic of the comic monologue in this fashion clarifies the place of theatrical culture within Carter’s narrative strategy in *Wise Children* and other texts. Further, it reveals the degree to which the monologue alters the novel’s narrative address in general. That is, by approximating the comic monologue in her narrative fiction, Carter radically alters narrative address in order to cultivate a reading public whose sense of collectivity, like the comic monologue, relies on co-presence, shared culture, and collective laughter. In some respects, then, Carter’s monological address depends upon the assumption that her reader has to be “in on the joke.” That is, if the reader is to understand his or herself as belonging to the variety of demotic collectivity anticipated by the novel, then he or she must possess some relationship to Englishness, however minimal. This is not to suggest, however, that all readers must possess the same relationship to Englishness. On the contrary, Carter’s monological address functions by drawing in heterogeneous readers, many of whom might already maintain a critical relationship to Englishness, and establishing among them a common criticality. That some readers, especially those who have been historically excluded from Englishness as a (racialized) demographic category, might already be in on the joke indeed affirms Carter’s sense of the possible antihegemonic force of such address.
There is perhaps no more exemplary a figure for demonstrating the performative nature of comic address than Sophie Fevvers, a winged aerialiste and the protagonist of Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*. Critics of *Nights* have already documented the novel’s broad interest in performance, especially as it corresponds to the novel’s related interest in the ambivalent politics of storytelling made evident in Fevvers’s slogan, “Is she fact or is she fiction?” Like the comic performer, whose monological speech is really no monologue at all, Fevvers possesses a paradoxical relationship to the body politic. In one sense, she is a freak of nature, distinct from the rest of the world thanks to her gigantic wings; in another sense, however, she symbolizes a host of exemplary women who have come before her: Helen of Troy, the Virgin Mary, and Scheherazade. Part One of *Nights* depicts an interview with Fevvers conducted by Jack Walser, a disbelieving journalist who spends the novel trying to expose Fevvers as one of the world’s greatest humbugs and whom critics often take as a figure for the reader. The novel’s interview format emphasizes the iconic timbre of Fevvers’s voice, which is indeed remarkable: “Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with; it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones. Her voice, with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren’s” (*Nights*, 43). The idiosyncrasies of Fevvers’s voice (discordant, warped, random, rusty, etc.) here contribute paradoxically to its appealing musicality and its seductiveness. Whether we read this voice as “polyphonic” or as a “multi-voiced exchange,” as some critics do, Fevvers’s status as an exemplary performer is underpinned
by her status as an emblem, an orator who speaks not exclusively for herself but also for an assembled audience. As a result, it identifies her as a performing figure who is paradoxically both a part of the body politic and apart from it.

And yet, while the comic performer in general speaks to an assembled, collective audience, Fevvers’s enigmatic and captivating voice serves principally to address a singular audience, Walser, whose singularity and masculinity is marked from the very first sentence: “‘Lor’ love you, sir!’ Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids” (Nights, 7).

Though the novel starts with a kind of direct address (“‘Lor’ love you”), it nonetheless immediately specifies that the subject of that address is a male auditor (“sir!”). However, Fevvers is more than a mere storyteller; she is a theatrical native who has spent a lifetime being looked at (“being the object of the eye of the beholder,” 23) and who relishes the opportunity to tell her unlikely autobiography to a captive audience. The effect of the performative dynamic between Fevvers and Walser—in which Walser comes to view himself as a “prisoner of her voice” (43)—becomes clear only once Fevvers has finished her tale, at which point Walser finds himself feeling a strange sense of abandonment:

She spoke so flatly he could not tell whether she spoke ironically. She said nothing else. Walser was intrigued by such silence after such loquacity. It was a though she had taken him as far as she could go on the brazen trajectory of her voice, yarnd him in knots, and then—stopped short. Dropped him. (89)

Fevvers’s style of narration is here presented as something like a wild goose chase. That is, Fevvers’s “loquacity” has drawn Walser in to such an extent that, once she finishes speaking altogether, he finds himself confused, disoriented, and yet still thoroughly entertained by her
“performance” (90). In these opening chapters, Carter establishes a narrative strategy that highlights the collective and performative elements of storytelling by having Walser serve as a proxy for the reader.

It is nonetheless problematic (politically and narratologically speaking) that Walser represents an overdetermined and particular type of reader: the straight, white man. In Wise Children, however, Carter’s absorptive, comic, monological strategy anticipates a somewhat less precisely defined reader who might be drawn more easily into a collective, performative relationship with the text. As numerous critics have suggested, the inauspiciously named Dora addresses the reader as if she were in fact a stand-up comedian addressing a co-present audience.29 Like Fevvers, Dora addresses an attendant audience whom she draws into dialogical relation with the text: “There I go again! Can’t keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative” (WC, 158). Dora functions as the novel’s monological narrator, the agent “in charge” of relating narrative action to the reader, but the question, “Can’t keep a story going in a straight line, can I?”, anticipates a frustrated reader, whom Dora then ventriloquiizes in the subsequent sentence. This form of address persists throughout as Dora determines, and incorporates into the novel, an implied reader’s response: “High time! you must be saying” (11), or, later on, “Hard to swallow, huh?” (227). This rhetorical structure, in which the narrator incorporates this amorphous reader into the novel by anticipating her thoughts, emotions, and anxieties, recurs throughout the novel and, as such, reflects the not-quite-monologue of the comic performer—an act addressed to an
actual audience, who might be invited to interact in some way, but whose interaction is promptly reincorporated into the act itself. This rhetorical strategy asks readers to imagine Dora as the autonomous, though drunk, controller of narrative; the reader, like the punter, has a voice in the text, but that voice is subsumed by a general *narrative* voice that reflects the form of the monologue proper.

To view Carter’s narrative strategy as indebted to the social and cultural history of comic monologue involves understanding, on the one hand, how exemplary, charismatic performers come to speak to and for an assembled body politic, but also how such performers subsequently enable new forms of collectivity to constellate in their presence. When compared with other notable first-person narrators, such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s Stevens or Ian McEwan’s Briony, Dora stands out insofar as she understands the reader to be a co-present collaborator. Though *Wise Children* is ostensibly a memoir that Dora has been diligently typing on an old typewriter (*WC*, 3), readers are later encouraged to experience *Wise Children* not as a textual document but rather as an oral one, delivered by an old woman who has grown tired of writing and who insists instead on performing: “Well, you might have known what you were about to let yourself in for when you let Dora Chance in her ratty old fur and poster paint, her orange (Persian Melon) toenails sticking out of her snakeskin peep-toes, reeking of liquor, accost you in the Coach and Horses and let her tell you a tale” (227). While the novel begins quite surely as a writerly text, the reader is frequently cast as one of the novel’s characters, represented within the novel’s diegesis as an
(unwilling) auditor in Dora’s local pub and also as a member of “the public” whose presence is recorded in the novel’s dramatis personae (234). The slippage between the textual and the oral highlights the flexibility of narrative performance, and in the process highlights the extent to which Dora uses comic and theatrical forms of address to manage her readers. Like the interview format in *Nights at the Circus*, this kind of narrative address functions by inviting the reader into dialogical relation with the text; unlike *Nights*, however, it also suggests that any meaningful expression of collectivity achieved in the act of reading relies as much on the illusion of embodied co-presence as it does on rhetoric. That is, while “the reader” could ostensibly be anyone, *this* reader nonetheless occupies the same space as Dora: a pub in South London.

**Comedy and/as Critique**

Reading first-person narration as a form of monological address reveals how the novel works to integrate the reader into a collaborative enterprise with the text, which itself gestures toward Carter’s strategy for animating or anticipating new iterations of collective assembly in an age characterized by imperial nostalgia. Such a reading demands that we look beyond extant conversations regarding Carter’s theatricality by following her lead and reincorporating the history of popular theatrical culture into the history of British imperialism. As Carter’s last novel, and the novel most evidently concerned with the twin histories of theater and imperialism, *Wise Children* lends itself well to this project. And yet,
critics seem less willing to discuss the novel’s imperial imaginary than they do its theatrical intertexts, perhaps because it might appear that Dora’s apparent nostalgia for the imperial past contradicts Carter’s professed socialism and the radical feminist stance attributed to her. In an attempt, therefore, to correct this critical omission, the remainder of this chapter demonstrates Carter’s use of the comic monologue as a tool for reconceptualizing popular varieties of Englishness that contribute to a broader image of a postimperial, multicultural body politic.

To be clear, Carter’s narrative strategy is no naive, apolitical, ahistorical appeal to unity; she is in fact keenly aware of the blurriness that characterizes the distinction between her playful variety of Englishness (“the other side of imperialism”) and reactionary forms of Englishness that underwrite imperial culture. Accordingly, in *Wise Children* Carter invents Gorgeous George, a comedian active in the 1920s whose stand-up routine Dora and Nora see one afternoon on Brighton Pier with their Uncle Perry. George, adorned in plus fours, brandishing a golf club, surrounded by Pierrots dressed in white, occupies a stage drenched in pink limelight and tells an extended joke that, at its core, pokes fun at paternity, using the club ingeniously as a suggestive prop and wiggling his eyebrows in order to signal, without much subtlety, the lewdness of his routine. Though within the context of the novel George is a new face on the comedy scene, the subject of his joke is nonetheless a familiar trapping of comic performance: a young man tries to marry on three separate occasions, only to learn that his father has already slept with all of the women he meets. When the young man
complains about the situation to his mother, she responds, “You just go ahead and marry who you like, son. . . ’E’s not your father!” (WC, 65). The theme of illegitimacy and cuckoldring has a long and not purely English tradition in comic performance, and marks George’s brand of humor as particularly conventional.31 Uncle Perry, an American, is apparently the only member of the audience who experiences the act for the first time and thus functions as a foil for English audiences. He remarks, “Well, God bless the bloody British. . . I never thought they had it in them” (65). The conventionality of the scene and the humor it activates, for both early- and late–twentieth-century audiences, generate a marked sense of nostalgia that hinges on the collective recognition of George’s routine as a staple of English comic performance. In this sentimental moment of nostalgic recognition, Carter draws together diegetic and extradiegetic audiences alike.

However, for Carter, depicting a shared sense of humor is no trifle. Rather, she works to unveil the cultural and political attitudes that inform such humor and its ability to forge collectivity. Indeed, Dora devotes as much attention to the audience as to George. While some members of the audience escort their children from the enclosure as the jokes get more and more lewd, others stamp their feet in appreciation, and the audience roars with laughter (WC, 64–65). We soon learn that George is more than a comedian, however; he is also a patriot: “George clasped his hands together on his club, adopted a reverential air, and, would you believe it, there, in his pink suit in the pink spot, on the end of Brighton Pier, on August bank bloody holiday, he gave out with ‘Rose of England’” (65–66).32 While the
sentimental tenor number is a common enough feature of comic performance, its presence in *Wise Children* is nonetheless remarkable, since it introduces into the novel for the first time an explicit conflation of the patriotic and the popular, and thus highlights the presence of imperial culture even within provincial iterations of popular entertainment. George’s blue comedy transforms into the “reverential air” of patriotic song, and in the process engenders a complementary shift in the audience, which quietly stands “as if by sheer force of habit” as the accompanist plays the opening notes for “God Save the King” (67). If this routine depicts any kind of collectivity organized around comic theatrical culture, then it is collectivity rooted in a bland albeit ubiquitous variety of national pride.

Dora’s monological narration, however, simultaneously establishes a supplementary, extradiegetic kind of collectivity between text and reader. If the bland, habitual patriotism of George’s audience constitutes a normative variety of national collectivity, then Dora’s comic treatment of George, as material for her own performance, offers up a more expressly critical engagement with national culture. As George sings, he removes all of his clothes save a Union Jack gee-string “of very respectable dimensions” (*WC*, 67), and reveals a tattoo of the globe covering his body, with the British Empire colored in pink. Though the diegetic audience responds approvingly to the second part of George’s routine—the applause “never quite died down during the entire display but sometimes rose in greater peaks than at other times” (67)—Dora finds it altogether hilarious. By making Gorgeous George the butt of the joke, Dora inducts her own extradiegetic audience into a generally critical position. If this
audience understands itself to be “in on the joke,” that is, if it understands George and his audience to be symbols of a risible patriotism, then it starts to reconstitute itself as a new audience assembled in the act of reading. In this respect, being in on the joke not only provides the reader with a sense of collectivity otherwise denoted by popular performance—co-presence, shared culture, collective laughter—but it also furnishes him or her with the critical lens necessary to identify Gorgeous George as a target of satire. In other words, the collectivity to which the reader might belong here depends not upon some essential relationship to Englishness or to imperial culture, but rather upon whether or not the reader understands the joke around which such collectivity is forged.

Dora’s humorous treatment of Gorgeous George’s routine suggests that comedy, even the most playful kind, has a serious critical function—and Carter uses this critical function not only to make fun of the past, but also to point the finger at the enduring legacies of imperialism in the present. To be sure, George is the “prime spectacle” of this routine (WC, 66), with a “global tattoo” grafted onto his white, male body as a local representative of imperial rule. But a discerning spectator, here modeled by Dora, sees something other than imperial glorification on George’s body, and Carter sees fit to make light of it: “Amply though the garment concealed his privates, now you could see the Cape of Good Hope situated in his navel and observe the Falkland Islands disappear down the crack of his bum when he did his grand patriotic ninety-degree rotation” (67). South Africa and the Falklands evidently had a different cultural and political value in the 1920s than they
did upon the publication of *Wise Children* in 1991. And yet, by identifying locations on the world map that have a vital and contentious place in contemporary political discourse, Dora draws a line of continuity from 1920s comic performance to British neoimperial policy. This continuity gestures towards, without naming, the lasting effects of the imperial state and, in the process, draws anatomical humor into the realm of sociopolitical critique.

As ever, Carter wants it both ways. Gorgeous George is both a twee representative of old-fashioned English humor and a patriotic symbol of imperialism. His global tattoo is simultaneously a gross transcription of imperial conquest, and an opportunity for an anatomical joke. Dora’s dissent from George’s patriotism represents a critical rejection of facile and nostalgic appeals to imperial culture, and yet it also depicts a problematic politics of postracial solidarity. Dora tells us, “And as regards the pink bits on his bum and belly, we already knew in our bones that those of us in the left-hand line were left out of the picture” (*WC*, 67). This “we” here anticipates a new collective, thus far unseen: in appealing to a sense of solidarity between Dora and her sister, the illegitimate descendants of “the imperial Hazard dynasty,” and the (neo)colonial spaces of South Africa and the Falklands, Carter articulates a transnational and transhistorical form of interracial collectivity unified by its co-presence in the “left-hand line” of English national and imperial culture. But this “we” is also tendentious: it reveals in *Wise Children* a fantasized politics of class and racial solidarity, defined solely in relation to the macropolitical image of the British Empire tattooed on the body of a stand-up comedian, and, as a result, obscures the effects of racial inequity as it
unevenly conditions the kinds of claims white and non-white Britons can make to Englishness. Even if Carter’s comic and critical representation of Englishness enables some vernacular form of collectivity to emerge in the process of reading, it does not guarantee the unproblematic inclusion of all readers. Instead, it suggests that belonging within this demotic Englishness depends upon the ongoing and escalating practice of dissent.

The Monologue in the Age of Multiculturalism

Reading first-person narration as a form of monological address clarifies how the novel works to integrate the reader into a collaborative enterprise with the text, which itself reveals Carter’s strategy for animating or anticipating new iterations of collective assembly in an age characterized by imperial nostalgia and sociopolitical division. And yet, the question of who exactly Carter’s comic monologists are speaking to and for, in an age in which the demographic constitution of “multicultural Britain” is under intense scrutiny, is an entirely open one. Carter’s strategy is not unproblematic: even though Carter’s sense of “the other side of imperialism” as a site of “radical dissent and continuous questioning” enables, as we have seen, a broadly critical subjectivity to emerge, it remains true that this subjectivity, like the history of comic entertainment in England, remains principally white and generally racist. In order to demonstrate, then, how the “radical dissent” inherent Carter’s vision exploits the spectacularized, racialized non-white body, the remainder of this essay turns to Carter’s representation of the voices of three black women characters in her late fiction: Jeanne
Duval, the Princess of Abyssinia, and Tiffany. In doing so, I show how Carter’s treatment of the first two (Duval and the Princess) constitutes a failed politics of “giving voice” to black women; her treatment of the third (Tiffany), however, reveals that multiple scales of dissent constitute the other side of imperialism. That is, while Dora’s dissenting though fantasized politics of postimperial solidarity suggests an underlying white feminism at the root of Carter’s demotic Englishness, Tiffany’s refusal to participate in the nostalgic fantasy of the postimperial state exemplifies the necessary inclusion of an escalating oppositional subjectivity within any appeal, however critical, to national culture.

More so than many of her white British contemporaries, Carter takes seriously the politics of race and imperialism; however, the representation of blackness (and black womanhood in particular) in Carter’s late fiction reveals a set of contradictions manifest between her radical politics and antiracism more broadly. This tension characterizes Carter’s treatment of Jeanne Duval, a Haitian actress, dancer, and sex worker, who appears as the title character in Carter’s short story, “Black Venus.” As Charles Baudelaire’s muse, Duval represents an iconic, though silent, figure in the history of Symbolism and literary modernism. In “Black Venus,” however, Carter looks to rewrite this narrative by attending to Duval as a living, breathing historical actor, rather than as an essentially silenced, exoticized, and eroticized object. While some critics have suggested rather optimistically that Carter’s “Black Venus” redresses the representation of Duval in Western culture by restoring her voice, agency, and “sheer humanity,” Christina Britzolakis has suggested more
precisely that the story “enacts with great skill the ambiguities of Carter’s relation to one of her major literary models, Baudelaire, and to the fetishistic economy of the feminine, which forms the very substance of his aesthetic.” In other words, in “Black Venus,” Carter grapples with her contradictory interests in participating in a Western cultural tradition that is always already an imperial cultural tradition and also in registering dissent therein. Similarly, Jill Matus suggests that, “even as it disclaims the truth of its own representations, and teases out the racist and colonialist assumptions that inform traditional versions of Jeanne Duval, Carter’s fiction appropriates and reconstructs Jeanne in its own politically-interested image.” This is an important point, since it reveals at the core of Carter’s recuperative project in “Black Venus” a form of racist ventriloquism. In an attempt to represent Duval outside of her relationship with Baudelaire, Carter ultimately overdetermines Duval’s voice and, in the process, represents an overabundant, metropolitan whiteness in the place of black sovereignty.

Carter’s Duval represents an imperial antagonism that Carter herself is unable to fully resolve. That is, while there is a liberatory political promise in having Duval speak, Carter cannot fully rid herself of the racist and patriarchal histories that underwrite both Duval’s place in Western culture and Carter’s narrative ventriloquism. In Wise Children, Dora attempts to cultivate an anti-imperial, postracial allegiance between the white working poor of the UK and the racialized subjects of the Commonwealth; relatedly, in “Black Venus,” Carter attempts to liberate Duval from her fetishized state in an elite form of literary
aestheticism by integrating her into an English vernacular tradition. In one such instance, Baudelaire fantasizes about the pair of them whisking off into “the dark vault of the night” toward the Caribbean, while Duval comically interjects: “Not the bloody parrot forest! Don’t take me on the slavers’ route back to the West Indies, for godsake! And let the bloody cat out, before it craps on your precious Bokhara!” On one hand, by substituting a generic Cockney English for Duval’s Haitian patois, Carter deflates Baudelaire’s lyricism with the language of London’s working class and, in the process, draws an aural connection between Duval and Sophie Fevvers, her “Cockney Venus.” And yet, given the straight substitution of Duval’s raced vernacular for a classed alternative, any resemblance established between Duval and Fevvers seems tendentious: like Dora’s appeal to solidarity among constituents of England’s “left-hand line,” Carter seems to deprioritize the politics of race in order to promote a contemporary fantasy of postracial allegiance.

It is evidently possible to compare Duval and Fevvers as two near-contemporary Venuses; and yet, if we are to understand Carter’s Duval, like Fevvers, to be a figure whose voice represents an incomplete form of antisexist and anti-imperial restitution, then we must also understand her to be a comic agent who serves to unveil the contradictions at the root of such restitution. That is, if in “Black Venus” Carter ambivalently performs her commitment to a radical liberatory politics alongside her affection for a demotic cultural tradition rooted in imperial culture, then in Nights she appears to retreat from the self-evidently racialized implications of such ambivalence. In Nights, Carter introduces another
silent black woman from the West Indies named the Princess of Abyssinia despite having “never visited, even on business, the country whose royal title she usurped” (Nights, 148).

Like Fevvers, Dora, and Duval, the Princess is a performer, but she is remarkable in that she never speaks. Although “she lived in closest intimacy with her cats” (149), a host of not-so-tame tigers who dance while she plays the piano, the Princess eventually cuckold the circus’s strong man and begins a homosexual relationship with the frail German soprano, Mignon. To be sure, the Princess inherits Duval’s historical silence, but she also maintains a degree of autonomy in declining to participate in the human social world afforded to her by the circus environment, with the important exception of her relationship with Mignon.

While there is certainly a latent antisexist, anticolonial politics at work in Carter’s characterization of the Princess, like her treatment of Duval in “Black Venus,” it comes at the expense of a more thorough engagement with the politics of race.41

_Nights at the Circus_ and “Black Venus” exemplify the manifest tension between Carter’s radical politics and the politics of race. Though in each of these texts Carter appears committed to centering the voices of black women within both the history of a white Western literary tradition and also the history of popular theatrical genres, her narrative ventriloquism ultimately forestalls the emergence of an antiracist politics. In _Wise Children_, however, Carter adapts this narrative strategy into a more explicitly self-critical account of the racism that underpins English collectivity by casting the novel’s only black woman, Dora’s goddaughter Tiffany, as a primary dissenting voice within the novel’s demotic variety.
Tiffany represents the final inheritor of imperial culture: though she belongs, with Dora and Nora, to the illegitimate side of the Hazard family tree, she has nonetheless become pregnant by Tristram Hazard, Melchior Hazard’s youngest legitimate child and the “last gasp of the imperial Hazard dynasty” (WC, 10). Having been spurned by Tristram, Tiffany appears in a state of mental distress to deliver a distinctly tragic monologue live on television: “She was a spectacle to move the hardest heart, I must say... There was a bit of wallflower stuck in her hair, over her ear, and her hands were full of flowers, daffs, bluebells, narcissi” (43). Channeling Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Tiffany sings a series of lewd songs and, like Gorgeous George, undresses, revealing her swollen abdomen, before leaving the stage in tears. A mutilated body is later found floating in the Thames, and the authorities erroneously identify it as Tiffany’s. (Only at the end of the novel do Dora and her readers discover that Tiffany is in fact alive and well.)

Tiffany’s is the first of a set of monologues that take place in the novel, and is unique insofar as it is reported via television recording. Television seems like an appropriate medium for representing contemporary social life in the 1990s. Having supplanted theater and cinema as the dominant entertainment genre of the era, television has a particularly timely edge to it that could signal Carter’s own desire to keep up with the times. And yet, in the context of the novel’s interest in early twentieth-century popular theater, we would do well to treat Carter’s representation of television with some skepticism. Not only does television set the stage for Tiffany’s tragic death, but it also negates the collective function of
popular theater proper, since it forms an artificial divide between spectacle and spectators.

As a result, Tiffany’s performance is twice mediated, and thus produces a string of spectating audiences—the studio audience, those watching the video playback, and the reader—each with its own particular and incongruous relationship to the spectacle of Tiffany’s performance. In Gorgeous George’s performance, all audiences are encouraged to participate in the pleasure of a bawdy comedy routine on Brighton Pier, until a shift in mode—from comic to patriotic—fractures the diegetic audience from the extradiegetic.

Here, however, the audiences are fractured from the start. Dora describes the studio audience:

And then a change comes over the invisible audience, the only evidence of whose existence we’ve had so far the odd cough and titter, some patters of applause. But now there is an audible shiver. They can see something that we can’t, and it bewilders them. An uneasy silence falls. And then is broken. (IFC, 42)

The silence is broken by Tiffany’s song, a “wordless song that didn’t seem to have an end nor a beginning, that created the silence in which you heard it” (42). Unlike Gorgeous George’s routine, which incites raucous laughter among some and causes others to leave in outrage, Tiffany’s song stuns to studio audience into silence. Importantly, Dora marks a difference in perspective—the audience, invisible to her, can see something that she cannot.

The televisual frame thus alienates different categories of spectators from each other, a function that ultimately forecloses the possibility of collective entertainment evident upon Brighton Pier in the 1920s.
The sociopolitical stakes of this intra-audience alienation are dramatized by the different affective responses to the spectacle on offer. Eventually, the camera focuses on Tiffany, and the Chances, watching after the fact in a Brixton basement, are horrified. The revelation of Tiffany’s pregnant body produces a deep sense of empathy among them and anger towards Tristram, the unwitting father (WC, 44). Even the reader has the context of Tiffany’s family tree necessary to understand the dramatic significance of this revelation. The studio audience, on the other hand, despite having the best view of the action, has virtually no understanding of it: “The audience hadn’t the faintest what was going on and shuffled and tittered a bit, half trying to convince itself that this distraught girl was just another part of the action and would do something funny, shortly; or else take off her football shirt and give them all a treat” (43). Without context, or without a shared sense of the meaning of the performance, the studio audience is unable to respond appropriately to the stage; the divide between action on stage and audience reaction is exacerbated precisely because the spectacular setup of televisual entertainment has forgotten, or ignores, the fact that the relationship between comic spectacle and spectator exceeds the dynamics of the visual and, of course, hinges upon collective knowingness. Unable to integrate Tiffany’s tragic performance into their understanding of Tristram’s comic game-show format, the audience thus performs its disconnect.

Tiffany’s “death” introduces into the novel a rare moment of tragedy that cuts across the novel’s otherwise dominant comic tenor. The studio audience’s reaction to the tragic
spectacle of Tiffany’s monologue reveals a general failure of knowing theatrical collectivity described by Bailey as a “second language for all classes.” While it experiences the monologue first-hand, the audience ultimately fails to appreciate its gravity. Further, while the audience ostensibly experiences the monologue as comic, the failure of knowing collectivity produces a clear sense of tragic irony. The studio audience is thus separated from other audiences—the Chances and readers—who, all too knowingly, understand the tragic implications of the monologue, and thus understand the present action of the novel within a generally tragic mode. This detail, along with Tiffany’s dual status as “the first black in the family” (WC, 35) and the inheritor of the imperial Hazard dynasty, foreshadows her future role as the disruptive force behind the novel’s vision of the radical dissent implicit in demotic varieties of Englishness. The narrative interruption posed by Tiffany’s “death” distracts Dora from her memoir, but only briefly. For Dora, an incorrigible nostalgic, the past represents a site of comic escapade in spite of its sorrows; the present, however, is a tragic site overdetermined by Tiffany’s “death.” In fact, she explicitly distinguishes tragedy from lesser sorrows, such as heartbreak: “Sad. Nothing more than sad. Let’s not call it a tragedy; a broken heart is never a tragedy. Only untimely death is a tragedy” (153). In this respect, Tiffany’s “death” manifests throughout the novel as repressed content, as a tragic event that occurs within and haunts the novel’s present tense without substantially altering the comedy of Dora’s nostalgic narration. Within the context of Tiffany’s blackness and her subsequent premature death, the risks involved in valorizing demotic forms of Englishness
in postimperial Britain become clear: not only does it threaten to undermine ongoing anticolonial and antiracist struggle by sanitizing the history of imperial domination, but it also eclipses the vital collaborative role of non-white Britons in the production of vernacular forms of collective life. By virtue of both her Englishness and her blackness, then, Tiffany serves as the sole inheritor of imperial culture and, paradoxically, symbolizes an imminent multicultural Englishness.

For Dora, the past is the site of comedy because it can be treated, however nostalgically, with a kind of critical distance; the present, however, appears tragic because of its frighteningly unknowable immediacy. But, of course, this taxonomic distinction between the past-comic and the present-tragic does not quite hold up. The novel’s finale reintroduces comedy into the present, and in doing so promises to assert the critical edge of comedy as demonstrated in Carter’s satirical treatment of Gorgeous George. *Wise Children* ends with two comic reprisals: in the first, Dora’s Uncle Perry, presumed dead in the jungles of Brazil, arrives at the party on a magical wind; in the second, Tiffany steps out of a trunk Perry brought with him. She looks, according to Dora, “sound in mind and body almost to a fault,” and “lovelier than ever, enough to make you blink” (*WC*, 210). The unlikeliness of Tiffany’s reappearance inspires laughter, but it also summons tears. Dora and Nora “were all tears and laughter,” and Tristram, too, “was down on his knees in front of [Tiffany] in a flash, laughing and crying at the same time or doing a fair simulacrum thereof” (210). If the novel worked in a purely realist mode, the combination of tears and laughter would not
strike readers as anything particularly remarkable. However, their combination here intersects directly with Dora’s sense of the distinction between comedy and tragedy; we will remember Dora’s insistence that if the tragic mask replaced the comic mask, then she would refuse to play. Upon Tiffany’s return, there has been no straight substitution of the comic with the tragic; instead, the novel overlays tragedy with comedy, offering Tristram’s joy as a perverse imitation of Dora and Nora’s. Tiffany’s reappearance, then, cannot be subsumed into a general comic convention of mistaken death, and instead points to somewhat larger stakes regarding the future of the postimperial nation.

When compared to Perry’s sentimental reappearance, Tiffany’s reprisal represents an ironic departure from comic convention. While Perry’s function in the novel is to offer characters and readers a sense of comic relief, Tiffany reappears to pose a clear-eyed, critical challenge to the dominant order of things. As Perry lets Tiffany out of the trunk, he announces to Melchior, “I give you. . . the future of the Hazard family” (WC, 210). Tiffany, pregnant with the next generation of the Hazard family dynasty, symbolizes a future in which the white imperial emblem—“Hazard”—finally intermixes with the “left-side of history.” It is doubtlessly ironic that the imperial family, founded on racial purity and propagated via an incestuous desire for the white self, finds itself reproduced in the body of a black woman. Tiffany represents the future of the Hazard line, to be sure, a line that has become virtually synonymous to Englishness itself. In this respect, Tiffany begins to resemble Gorgeous George, who has the imperial nation quite literally grafted onto his body.
And yet, when faced with the dregs of the imperial dynasty, Tristram, who begs her to forgive him and take him back, Tiffany responds, “Fat chance” (210). When he asks her to marry him, she says, “Not on your life, you bastard” (211). Carter’s representation of demotic Englishness thus hinges both on Perry’s announcement, that Tiffany is the future of the Hazard dynasty, and, importantly, on Tiffany’s refusal to participate in the collective fictions of postimperial culture. In a final paradoxical flourish, Carter identifies the continuation of the imperial dynasty in Tiffany and simultaneously marks the discontinuation of imperial culture itself.

In this spirit, critics have invariably understood Tiffany’s reappearance at the end of Wise Children as an example of antihegemonic “writing back.”\(^{44}\) This view, however, seems to oversimplify the matter. Though it is true that Tiffany’s expletive-laden address exemplifies a broad-scale rejection of the imperial culture epitomized by the Hazard family, it also serves to induct non-critical reader (e.g., white English readers who might other maintain an habitual and uncritical relationship to imperial culture) into a critical position. Moreover, while Carter places too much emphasis on the power of the black female body to enact sociopolitical critique and embody a postimperial future, she nonetheless also suggests that the burden of renewing a collaborative politics rests on the ongoing cultivation of a critical body politic rather than on an individual performer. As Tiffany leaves the party, there is a “fusillade of flashes” as the press begins taking pictures, and Dora remarks: “Quite like old times, lights, music, action. There was a patter of applause as Tiff and Bren and Leroy
departed for their cab and were followed by no photographers after Leroy sent one of them downstairs on his ear” (WC, 211–12). Not only is Tiffany able to escape the prying cameras, but she also departs the novel altogether. If indeed Tiffany represents the future of an antiracist demotic Englishness, then it is surely not up to her, in Carter’s view, to sustain it. After all, the responsibility of sustaining sociopolitical critique belongs neither to a single character nor to a single novel, but rather to a generation of readers holding the object in their hands. By inviting these readers into a collaborative encounter with the text, Carter ultimately demonstrates her enduring commitment to the performative power of comic address in forging critical, dissenting collectives.

The radical politics that underpins Carter’s adoption of the comic monologue as a narrative strategy coincides with conventional literary histories of the end of the twentieth century that emphasize the period’s cosmopolitan and multicultural promise. Indeed, Carter’s fiction has served as a central example within such histories. However, as I hope to have shown, a certain ambivalence persists alongside Carter’s radical vision for the future of English collectivity. For Carter, the other side of imperialism constitutes a playful variety of Englishness with serious antiracist and anti-imperial potential, but as we have seen this demotic Englishness also risks trafficking in the racism and xenophobia associated with a particularly regressive and reactionary brand of imperial nostalgia. Across Carter’s oeuvre, these issues are never fully resolved and, as a result, critics have treated Carter’s engagement with the politics of race and imperialism with some embarrassment. And yet, by advancing a
variety of dissenting Englishness rooted in the vernacular logic of a lively, collaborative theatrical culture, Carter’s late fiction demonstrates that, if any kind of collectivity is going to be forged around the demonym “English,” then participants within it have to be keenly aware of the historical antagonisms that underpin it. It may be true that this form of collaborative participation may in fact never possess the subversive force necessary to begin dismantling enduring legacies of imperialism. If so, then perhaps now we can see more clearly how Carter’s iconic cosmopolitanism dovetails fundamentally, and not accidentally, with the history of English racism. In any event, across the last decade of her career, Carter makes clear that any uncritical, unknowing rehearsal of popular varieties of Englishness will continue to obscure the structuring place of imperialism and its legacies in contemporary sociopolitics.

Notes


2 One need only remember the famous aphorism at the beginning of Carter’s essay, “Notes from the Front Line” (1983): “Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (37). Carter, “Notes from the Front Line,” in Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings, ed. Jenny Uglow (New York: Penguin, 1998), 36–43.


4 Carter held the Booker Prize, for which she was never nominated, in low regard. Her editor Susannah Clapp reports that, three months before her death, Carter “had a plan to put this last omission right: she had cracked what made a Booker Novel and she was going to write it—it would feature a philosophy don, his mistress, a bit of time-travelling, and many pages, and was to be called The Owl of Minerva” (vii). Susannah Clapp, introduction
5 On the need for further research into the racial politics of Carter’s work, see Charlotte Crofts, “‘The Other of the Other’: Angela Carter’s ‘New-Fangled’ Orientalism,” in Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Context, Intertexts, ed. Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 88–89, 104.


8 Crofts has suggested that Carter’s treatment of empire exhibits “a paradoxical tension” between Carter’s felt allegiance to non-Western cultural traditions and “the remnants of the ‘old-fashioned’ Orientalism of the white male literary heroes whose work she admires” (104). Noticing this tension in her reading of Carter’s fiction, Kate Webb argues, “Theatre, and particularly the theatre of Shakespeare, has played its role in colonising the minds of other countries, but it is also a potentially destabilising and subversive force” (292). Kate Webb, “Seriously Funny: Wise Children,” in Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 2007), 287–314.


11 For a finer sense of how the British imperial project appears in and underwrites popular theatrical forms, see Marty Gould, Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Imperial Encounter (Oxford: Routledge, 2011).


15 Emily C. Bartels describes Shakespeare’s moment as “a historical moment when globalization is still somewhat embryonic, when political and economic relations are organized increasingly around an expansive and expanding ‘world’” (7). Further, during the centuries of the British Empire’s increasingly influence, Shakespeare’s plays came to be regarded not only as national texts, but also as colonial exports around which colonial hegemonies in the world of arts and letters, as in the world of politics and economics, could be sustained. As Ania Loomba suggests, “Shakespeare’s plays have been an extraordinarily powerful medium between generations and cultures, a conduit for transmitting and shaping ideas about colonialism and race” (5). Emily C. Bartels, Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008); Ania Loomba, Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

16 Melchior’s younger, legitimate children forego the theater altogether, and instead pursue careers in television (with the exception of Gareth, who ends up in the clergy): Saskia develops a cooking series and a line of cookbooks; Imogen stars in a children’s show as an anthropomorphic goldfish; and Tristram becomes the host of a game show. While it might seem natural and beneficial for a family of actors to capitalize on a popular new entertainment genre such a television in order to maintain their relevance within national culture, the novel clearly portrays such development as decline: “Lo, how the mighty have fallen,” says Dora (WC, 10).


Kérchy, 109

Helen Davies, Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 74

Linden Peach, Angela Carter, second edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 151; and Webb, 302. Dora’s name is an important choice for Carter. Webb considers Dora’s name to be an act of “writing back” (300): Sigmund Freud’s famous analysand, “Dora,” suffered from “aphonia,” a condition characterized by loss of voice, and
subsequently became a central figure for psychoanalytical feminism. Carter’s Dora, however, suffers from no such condition. For a related discussion regarding the literary and cultural politics of “talking back” to the nineteenth century and “giving voice” to historically silenced actors in Carter’s fiction, see Davies, 70–76, 92–93.

30 *Wise Children* opens with a question (“Q. Why is London like Budapest?”), but Dora quickly follows it up with an answer: “A. Because it is two cities divided by a river” (1). On the one hand, this is a familiar comic structure; however, it is also represents an actual question posed to an actual audience (i.e., readers), and thus simultaneously invites the reader to engage dialogically with the novel even as the novel performs its own monological work.

31 On illegitimacy and cuckoldng in the novel, see: Chedgzoy, 74; and Peach, 160.

32 This anachronistic reference to Ivor Novello’s song, “Rose of England” (1937) characterizes Dora’s faulty memory. On the same day, Dora remembers hearing “Is You Is or Is Your Ain’t My Baby,” a song popularized by Louis Jordan in 1943, which Dora claims to have heard at some point during the 1920s, when she remembers seeing an African-American jazz band performing on Brighton Beach (*WC*, 68). The anachronism here has precise function: “Perry went purple in the face” (68), and the sisters subsequently encounter a poster depicting their father in a touring production of *Hamlet* (69). The song thus contributes to the novel’s principal joke, which, like Gorgeous George’s, centers on the issue of mistaken paternity and cuckoldng.

33 The status of the black performer as a figure of dissent is not Carter’s invention: in her work on 19th- and 20th-century black theatrical culture, Daphne A. Brooks identifies “the performance of dissent” as a form of antiracist critical play with subversive and liberatory potential (8). The continuity between Carter’s and Brooks’s language does not suggest, however, that Carter’s representation of the dissenting voices of black women corresponds even roughly to a black feminist tradition; on the contrary, Carter’s treatment of black women as representatives of “radical dissent” is often indistinguishable from the fetishism and solipsism inherent in antiblack racism. Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).


36 Britzolakis, 51.

37 Matus, 467.

38 Davies uses the term “ventriloquism” to characterize Carter’s narrative strategy in *Nights*: “voices are always already ventriloquial: displaced, performed, and possessed by echoes of other utterances” (92). She does not, however, extend her analysis to include the racial politics of such ventriloquism as it appears in both *Nights* and elsewhere.

40 Day, 178; Matus 471


43 Bailey, introduction, xviii (original emphasis).

44 Davison, 205; Webb, 297.
CHAPTER 3

“Stranger and More Various”: Knowingness and the Limits of Inclusion in Sarah Waters’s

*Tipping the Velvet*

In 1889, Nancy Astley, an avid fan of the popular theater and the protagonist of Sarah Water’s debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), arrives in London for the first time. Deep in the heart of London’s theater district, Leicester Square, Nancy is joyously overwhelmed by the spectacle of the capital’s demographic variety: “I had not known that there was such a place as this, at all – this place that was so squalid and so splendid, so ugly and so grand, where every imaginable manner of person stood, or strolled, or lounged, side by side.”¹ Nancy goes on to describe the precise manner of these people, remarking upon their ethnic, racial, class, sexual, and gender identities, and, in the process, representing the length and breadth of cosmopolitan culture in turn-of-the-century London.² Nancy’s chaperone, a theatrical agent named Walter Bliss, notices her wonder, and exclaims, “We are at the heart of London. . . the very heart of it. Over there’ – he nodded to the Alhambra – ‘and all around us’ – and here he swept his hand across the square itself – ‘you see what makes the great heart beat: Variety! Variety, Miss Astley, which age cannot whither, nor custom stale” (66). In this primary encounter, London’s theater scene stands in for the city’s demographic constitution writ large—“*Variety!*” flourishes both on stage and off it, and thus
marks late-Victorian London as a thoroughly modern incubator of social and cultural difference.

Later, however, Nancy returns to Leicester Square and observes an entirely different scene. In the interim, Nancy has taken to the stage as a male impersonator dubbed “Nan King,” part of a double act she devised with Kitty Butler, also a male impersonator and Nancy’s love interest. Nancy and Kitty, both in drag, perform throughout London in front of droves of adoring audiences. Nancy’s time on stage, however, is short-lived: when she walks in on Kitty having sex with Bliss, now their manager, Nancy flees her theatrical life and becomes destitute. Finding herself once again in “the heart of London,” Nancy reflects on her earlier assessment of its cosmopolitan makeup:

How had my sense of the world been changed, since then! I had learned that London life was even stranger and more various than I had ever thought it; but I had learned too that not all its great variety was visible to the casual eye; that not all the pieces of the city sat together smoothly, or graciously, but rather rubbed and chafed and jostled one another, and overlapped; that some, out of fear, kept themselves hidden, and only exposed themselves to those upon whose sympathies they could be sure. Now, all unwittingly, I had been marked out by one such secret element, and claimed by it as a member.” (200–01)

Nancy does not deny the essential variety of the theater and the streets beyond. Upon that first encounter with Leicester Square, she had indeed “seen rich and poor, splendid and squalid, white man and black man, all bustling side by side,” and she had “seen them make a vast harmonious whole, and [had] been thrilled to think [she] was about the find [her] own particular place in it” (200). But what she had failed to see, on that first day in London, was the “stranger and more various” elements of life that worked to remain hidden in spite of the
relative heterogeneity of urban life. That there could in fact be members of the body politic rubbing, chafing, and jostling alongside this “harmonious whole” had not previously occurred to Nancy, and, after her second encounter with it, she comes to see that heterogeneity itself does not guarantee unproblematic inclusion. With these two visits to London’s theatrical heart, readers of the novel are presented with two varieties of “variety”: in the first, London’s theatrical culture—and its enduringly harmonious “Variety!”—reflects its diverse demographic makeup; in the second, some elements are “more various” even than “Variety!”—internal to but nonetheless imperceptible within it. This second, discordant variety becomes visible only after Nancy has been claimed, “unwittingly,” as “a member” by some “such secret element.”

As a novel concerned with “variety” in both its theatrical and demographic senses, *Tipping the Velvet* takes steps not only to identify how late-Victorian theatrical culture corresponds to social life broadly construed, but also how it fails to correspond. If the popular theater, following the old theatrical conceit, is indeed a mirror that reflects a given culture, then Waters’s novel suggests that the recognition and validation of certain non-normative participants within that culture requires the adoption or cultivation of a secondary perceptual faculty, one that denotes a form of subcultural collectivity that cannot be squared easily with mere civic belonging. Nancy’s post-theatrical destitution introduces her to a world hitherto unknown to her, a world populated by queer, vagrant social actors unincorporated into the fabric of a civil society usually denoted by the term, “the body
politic.” “Variety,” in the sense intended by Bliss, includes only those who are readily visible and legible within the spectacular economy of cosmopolitan London; it is thus a limited, hegemonic form of variety, one that fails to account for stranger forms of variousness that exceed the metonymic frame of London’s theatrical scene.

*Tipping the Velvet* is a picaresque novel that depicts the life of a young gay woman as she navigates the theatrical and para-theatrical worlds of London at the turn of the century. In using male impersonation as its principal motif, the novel demonstrates Waters’s interest in an historical moment laced with public (and popular) subversions of gender. Judith Butler’s sense of gender as performance—that is, the reiterative social performance of gendered codes and conventions—obviously informs Waters’s uptake of popular theater.

To be sure, Waters’s representation of male impersonation also constitutes a deliberate investigation into queer subcultural formations as they appear at the center of mainstream popular entertainment. Adjacent to the theater, however, are other historical set pieces related to queer subculture: Soho’s sex work economy, a well-to-do widow’s coterie of “Sapphists,” and an East End-based charitable and political organization headed by Marxist lesbians. Thus, in addition to depicting Nan and Kitty’s commercial success in London as part of the “harmonious whole” of theatrical variety, *Tipping the Velvet* spends a considerable amount of time representing London’s “secret element” as *queer*, the “stranger and more various” ways of life that ultimately fail to be absorbed into the horizon of the visible.
Like Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Angela Carter in *Wise Children* (1991), Waters in *Tipping the Velvet* takes up forms of the popular theater in order to work out how far popular theatrical culture might serve as a marker of inclusive demographic heterogeneity at the end of the twentieth century. While male impersonation—the theatrical genre at the center of this chapter—first manifests in the novel as a primary thematic concern (i.e., it problematizes, as above, the apparent inclusivity of the theater’s vernacular forms), it also performs a vital formal function rooted in the theater’s imitative and adaptive economy.

Male impersonation represents a particular kind of social looking; it requires the impersonator to go out into the world and “scrutinize” members of the public, to “[c]atch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits,” to “copy them, and make your audience know it in their turn” (83). To imitate, adapt, and subsequently make new the dominant social characters of the age is the work of male impersonation, which instantiates in its audience the same habits of social scrutiny that give rise to the act in the first place. But this is the work of the novel, too, if it is invested in anatomizing the forms of collectivity available to reading audiences in the present: “I cannot say what it was that made the crowds like Kitty and me together, more than they had liked Kitty Butler on her own. It may just have been . . . that we were novel: for though in later years we were rather freely imitated, there was certainly no other act like ours in the London halls in 1889” (125, emphasis added). As a theatrical genre predicated on the careful imitation and subsequent adaptation of various gendered and classed ways of being, male impersonation enhances the novel’s own imitative
and adaptive capabilities, and thus underscores its ability to simulate a looser, more nebulous kind of variousness in the face of the normative image of *Variety*. By integrating the adaptive protocols of male impersonation to the novel, and marking how such integration renders visible (or not) certain social actors at the scale of the civic or national imaginaries, *Tipping the Velvet* serves to highlight the limits of an inclusive discourse predicated on theatrical variety.

In considering the novel’s strategies for adapting the stranger and more various modes of variety that constellate around male impersonation as a popular theatrical genre and queerness as a subcultural way of being, this chapter focuses on “knowingness” as a discourse central to both. As Peter Bailey has argued with respect to the social history of the popular theater, “knowingness” denotes “a closed yet allusive frame of reference, and implicat[es spectators] in a select conspiracy of meaning that animates them as a specific audience.”⁷ According to Bailey, this so-called “culture of knowingness” functions according to a general logic of cultural competency in which membership to an assembled audience has to be earned by performing a tacit form of knowingness, by laughing at the right moments, or by recognizing the social, cultural, and political referents signified in a wink or a well-timed moment of silence.⁸ In other words, the music-hall venue establishes what Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel call an “area of agreement” affirmed by “accepted and endlessly repeatable” conventions.⁹

In social theories of queerness, however, knowingness denotes semi-public forms of mutual recognition used to affirm subcultural belonging within and in spite of a predominant
heterosexual culture. If theatrical knowingness, as I will show, constitutes a normative mode of self-perception available to heterogeneous members of an assembled audience, then queer knowingness represents a smaller, more precise scale of self-perception only partially legible by those who do not belong. The representation of knowingness, as an operative discourse within both popular theatrical culture and queer subculture, enables a reading of *Tipping the Velvet* that makes sense of the discrepant versions of “variety” as they are included within or excluded from a popular theatrical repertoire that itself stands for civic belonging writ large.

In what follows, I suggest that Waters’s uptake of male impersonation, as a visibly queer theatrical genre, problematizes Bailey’s sense of theatrical knowingness as a basic collective-forming paradigm, and thus furnishes readers with alternative forms of collective enterprise predicated on an elucidation of the discordant relationship between “Variety!” and “more various” forms of belonging. In demonstrating the discursive exchange between theatrical and queer varieties of knowingness as they inhere in male impersonation as a theatrical genre, I suggest that queer and theatrical knowingness both enable an implicit, uneven, and thus epistemologically unstable form of social knowing to take place. Opposed to these implicit forms of knowing is knowledge proper—an explicit form of knowing that exposes the tacit languages native to queer and theatrical culture—and, in the process, undermines the demotic flexibility that male impersonation facilitates. In order to demonstrate the necessity of implicit forms of knowing in the cultivation of heterogeneous collectivity, the novel subsequently offers up a series of para-theatrical milieux—the streets
of Soho, a “Sapphist” coterie, the lesbian bar, and political oratory—in which the
collectivizing energies of male impersonation are once more rendered implicit. The novel
actively resists any sense of theatrical culture as a monolithic, normative institution, and
instead emphasizes its role as an adaptive, co-produced enterprise that ultimately exceeds the
space of the theater. In concluding, then, I suggest that Tipping the Velvet, cognizant of the
ways in which it both cultivates a unique style of readerly, extradiegetic knowing and
excludes certain “secret elements” from its “harmonious whole,” anticipates into own
adaptation within a broader cultural sphere.

Male Impersonation and Queer Knowingness

In an interview with Kaye Mitchell, Waters explains her interest in male
impersonators: “At the time, of course, they were part of mainstream entertainment.

Nevertheless, I still think there might have been something going on, some sort of queer
element to them.” Here, Waters establishes the same distinction between the popularity of
male impersonation and its queerness as that between the two versions of variety discussed
above; Waters suspects that non-normativity not only flourishes within a normative cultural
institution, but also that it conditions the normative institution at a formative level. The
popular and the queer are, in a word, co-constitutive. To read Tipping the Velvet, then,
represents in part a process of uncovering the theater’s constitutive “queer element.” What
makes male impersonation an important historical intertext for Waters is its sociocultural
legibility, the ways in which it appears on the scene of mainstream culture as undeniably queer.\(^\text{11}\) The figure of the male impersonator is subject to various cultural (mis)readings by different populations, enabling it to stand in at once as a staple of normative entertainment and as a radical emblem for lesbian feminism and queer historiography.\(^\text{12}\) In this respect, the male impersonator complicates any sense of the popular theater as a comprehensive “culture of knowingness,” in Bailey’s sense, since the contours of knowingness drawn around the male impersonator are themselves various. A new set of questions therefore arises: What happens when the knowingness furnished by a comic performer fails to be taken up by its attendant audiences? How might we attend to myriad failures of knowingness, in which it is not among the known or the knowing where collectivity is forged, but rather in the unknown and the unknowing? And, finally, what forms of collectivity emerge from a popular theatrical culture in which knowingness can only ever be partial?

Even though male impersonation belongs somewhere close to the center of mainstream popular entertainment at the turn of the century, it is nonetheless an institution that cultivates—and indeed profits from—gendered forms of play that were inadmissible in the broader Victorian social scene. As J. S. Bratton notes, for instance, male impersonation on the stage contributed to “a widespread matrix of gender play that took an active part in challenging boundaries between the sexes.”\(^\text{13}\) That such gender play took place in an arena of heightened public visibility, that is, in the theater, is surely remarkable given restrictions placed on queer people in other areas of public culture, perhaps most notably in the widely
publicized trial of Oscar Wilde. And yet, while Bratton cautions against reading the presence of an actually existing lesbian subculture in and around male impersonation, the place of male impersonators on stage at the turn of the century nonetheless provides fruitful conceptual ground for imagining the “stranger and more various” heart at the center of popular theatrical culture. In *Tipping the Velvet*, then, when Nancy goes to the local variety theater and sees Kitty perform for the first time, she remarks:

Here you knew yourself to be not just at a show but in a *theatre*: you caught the shape of the stage and the sweep of the seats; and you marvelled to see your neighbours’ faces, and to know your own to be like theirs – all queerly lit by the glow of the footlights, and damp at the lip, and with a grin upon it, like that of a demon at some hellish revue. (9)

Nancy here represents the space of the theater not as a mere container of theatrical enterprise, but as an architectural triumph designed precisely to facilitate an orgiastic variety of collective interaction. The theater, as far as the novel is concerned, is a quasi-erotic space to watch and be watched, either as performer or spectator, and to revel in the collective pleasure that ripples mimetically across the bodies present. But, more importantly, the “queer” glow of the limelight touches every person in the theater and marks them, not as some inassimilable other outside of the mainstream, but rather as “neighbours,” as co-present members of a theatrical community.

Male impersonation uncovers the instability of theatrical knowingness, and any coherent culture that forms around it, due to its cultivation of multiple sociocultural meanings, meanings that are only partially legible within heterosexual culture. For Tracy C.
Davis, these meanings are not unique to male impersonators; rather, they constellate around the figure of the actress in general as a result of her contested moral status in an increasingly respectable profession. Davis argues,

Spectators’ ability to read impropriety into the stage appearance of the actress—to scandalize the idealized femininity—required knowledge of the referential context of female erotic topography. Such encodings were intended to be perceived by only a limited portion of the audience attuned to the covert meanings and prone to enjoy sexuality that flagrantly violated general ethical standards. Without the full referential vocabulary, a spectator could not understand the covert meanings.¹⁶

Supplementing Bailey’s general sense of theatrical knowingness, then, is a sublimated erotic knowingness whose potential to entice and to scandalize is importantly enhanced in the case of the male impersonator. Nancy and Kitty’s double act is a commercial success: they perform comic and sentimental songs and expertly imitate a series of masculine archetypes, including the ever-popular lion comique, a well-dressed upper-class man (related to “the toff”), which is both a specialty of “Nan King” and also a staple of popular performance in the period.¹⁷ The presence of these social archetypes on the popular stage seems to furnish the audience with a normative form of knowingness, since they know that impersonators are “in fact” women performing as recognizable kinds of men.¹⁸ And yet, the centrality of drag as subversion within late-twentieth-century feminist theory is an obvious precedent for the novel and should lead us to think twice about asserting such a claim.¹⁹ To the contrary, by using the male impersonator as a partially or potentially illegible figure around which both normative theatrical culture and queer collectivity form, the novel demonstrates the central role that non-normativity has to play in the formation of collectivity within mainstream civic
belonging. *Tipping the Velvet* is a novel interested in how things appear both at the level of the (gendered and sexualized) body and within mass culture. To that end, it reveals that social and cultural legibility determines how gender and sexual identities appear on the scene of mass entertainment.

As male impersonation demonstrates, appearances can be deceiving, but they can also confirm for us what we already know, or think we know. Moreover, appearances can produce in the observer a sense of knowingness, an affirmative sense that the apparent object can be recognized for what it is. In general, however, knowingness is an epistemologically unstable condition. It denotes a way of seeing, a mode of apprehending the world from a given position, but also a set of performative social relations between knowing subjects and the object of knowingness. Theatrical knowingness does not correspond closely with knowledge in any systematic sense, although there is useful overlap. For instance, when a person laughs at a joke she fails to understand, she still performs knowingness, even if she knows herself to be partially unknowing (knowing in recognizing a joke has been told; unknowing in failing to understand it). The spectator who laughs unknowingly also participates in the conspiracies of meaning denoted in Bailey’s “culture of knowingness,” but she is not participating fully. The joke—or patter, or skit, or song—produces an intelligible social field in which collective laughter signals belonging. The unknowing spectator who nonetheless performs her knowingness laughs not for the sake of social decorum or politeness (e.g., it would be rude not to laugh), but because failing to laugh
risks outing the unknowing spectator as an outsider. Rather than walking out or, worse, falling asleep, the unknowing spectator laughs because she understands that knowingness is the price of admission into the collectivity forged by the theater. In this light, it becomes clear that theatrical knowingness does not produce a universally knowing assemblage; rather, it produces an assemblage that knows to perform its knowingness via a series of social, theatrical, and cultural conventions. Knowingness, in its theatrical sense, is thus uneven and incomplete.

Like theatrical knowingness, queer knowingness establishes a conspiratorial subculture. As something that sits uneasily in relation to the normative body politic, both etymologically and materially, queer collectivity constellates around knowingness as a form of tacit recognition used to affirm subcultural belonging. In taking up and reformulating Nancy Fraser’s sense of the distinction between “publics” and “counterpublics,” Michael Warner suggests that publics are formed through “mere attention”: if one understands oneself to be addressed in public speech, then one belongs to a manifest public. A counterpublic, however, manifests when attention to circulating speech marks the addressee as a particular kind of person: “ordinary people,” Warner writes, “are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene.” While the heteronormative response to queer collectivity may indeed be disavowal, and while the circulation of “speech that addresses any participant as queer” is limited to “special, protected venues,” there nonetheless persists in queer speech an
agonistic, open appeal to a broader audience, that is, a desire “to seek more and more places to circulate where people will recognize themselves in its address.” Warner’s distinction between publics and counterpublics is helpful in understanding the extent to which queer collectivity depends precisely on something like queer knowingness; to be addressed as queer, and to recognize oneself as the subject of that address, is to enter into a conspiratorial social encounter predicated on tacit recognition. As with knowingness in general, queer knowingness denotes a performative social relation, or a form of wish-fulfillment around which shared identities, desires, and interests might constellate.

Moreover, as male impersonation makes evident, queer knowingness happens in plain sight: the male impersonator, like the pantomime Dame or the Principal Boy, introduces an explicitly queer erotics into a dominant heteronormative culture, and thus subjects the audience to forms of address that risk marking it as a queerly knowing body. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on “the closet” has demonstrated, queer forms of knowingness arose in a period (from roughly the end of the nineteenth century) in which the performance of sexual ignorance became a marker of heterosexual culture. That is, ignorance of sexuality—manifest in the erasure of sexuality from public life—represents something like performative unknowingness, a self-contradictory position produced by the simultaneous impulse to refuse and acknowledge sexual desire. In a sexual, social, and political economy in which sexual ignorance represents the heterosexist norm, queer knowingness, ostensibly legible only in the codes and conventions particular to queer people, allows a queer
subculture to emerge while tempering, perhaps insufficiently, the risks involved in the public performance of same-sex desire. Alongside other forms of tacit meaning-making, such as irony and camp, knowingness enables the persistence of queer subcultural collectivity by rendering it only partially legible within heterosexual culture.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, queer knowingness operates at a smaller and more intimate scale than theatrical knowingness, and yet the former’s centrality in male impersonation highlights the incompleteness of the latter. Once Nancy joins Kitty Butler’s act, the act becomes double, in the obvious sense that now two women impersonate two men, but more importantly in the sense that their routine is a public performance of same-sex desire: “After all, the two things – the act, our love – were not so very different. They had been born together – or, as I liked to think, the one had been born of the other, and was merely its public shape” (127). But the double act is a kind of secret publicity, or even an open secret; while Nancy sees the routine as identical to her romantic relationship with Kitty, the audience apparently fails to identify it as such: “A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language, in which we held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing” (128). No matter how familiar the audience might be with the trappings of comic and sentimental performance, here, apparently, “the crowd knew nothing” of the same-sex desire at the center of the act; Nancy thus suggests that the double act does not correspond entirely to “the act the audience thinks it.” At the level of the novel,
however, the audience’s relationship to queer spectacle appears less as a lack of knowledge and more as performative unknowingness; the novel seemingly ironizes Nancy’s sense that “the crowd knew nothing” by highlighting a collective desire to ignore the manifest queerness of the socio-theatrical encounter in order to preserve the fiction of compulsory heterosexuality.

In this respect, queer knowingness is an ancillary feature in the novel’s vision for popular theatrical collectivity insofar as it presents queer spectacle as a holistic, abundant form of collectivity rather than a marginal one. For Waters, male impersonation exemplifies the twin ideas that some things are not as they appear and that other things are more than they appear. As it inheres in the figure of the male impersonator, same-sex desire accrues partially and variably legible meanings, depending on the relative degree of one’s knowingness, and thus enables new criteria for inclusion to emerge within the collective enterprise of the theater. Though the normative late-Victorian theater audience would without doubt be familiar with the concept of the male impersonator, the novel produces another implicitly knowing discourse that ultimately excludes the heteronormative audience: “As Kitty had said, when I had whispered that wearing trousers upon the stage would only make me want to kiss her: ‘What a show that would be!’ But, that was our show; only the crowd never knew it. They looked on, and saw another turn entirely” (128). Nancy and Kitty’s act constitutes something like a missed connection: the audience is present, and they are paying attention, and they are participating in the conspiratorial economy of the act;
however, they refuse to see the smaller scale of same-sex intimacy that informs the act as a whole. If collectivity in the theater is indeed produced via a conspiratorial encounter between the performer and the audience, then Nancy and Kitty’s performance reveals that there is a deeper conspiracy at play, one in which same-sex desire takes center stage even as it works to remain hidden.

To remain hidden is, in fact, precisely the point; queer knowingness works because it serves to protect queer people from the ever-present risks of exposure. When Nancy arrives in Leicester Square for the second time and encounters the “stranger and more various” forms of life she had not noticed before, the novel supplements theatrical variety—that is, the normative Variety of spectacular, cosmopolitan London—with another kind, one that “chafes” and “jostles” alongside more readily legible forms of social life. But this supplementation does not imply some further ameliorative contribution to civic culture writ large. Rather, it suggests a deeper sociocultural antagonism in which some members of the city’s “great variety... out of fear, kept themselves hidden, and only exposed themselves to those upon whose sympathies they could be sure” (200–01). While Nancy and Kitty’s performance counts, in some respects, as an act of exposure insofar as their intimacy is there, on stage, it constitutes more precisely an act of partial exposure: the sexuality displayed on stage is performatively ignored by normative theater audiences, though it is welcomed, too, by sympathetically queer audiences.29 Centralizing same-sex desire within mainstream entertainment, then, represents a kind of strategic exposure, one that exploits the implicit
knowingness of theatrical audiences and works subliminally within the normative gender and
sexual paradigms of heterosexual culture. As such, it also risks undermining the demotic
collectivity furnished in the popular theatrical encounter by constantly towing the line
between the permissibly and impermissibly queer.

The real risks of exposure become readily apparent during a performance in which
the tacit knowingness of the audience—an unverifiable, conspiratorial feeling of knowing—
evolves into what can only be described as knowledge proper. This performance takes place
in front of a “rough” crowd at Deacon’s Music Hall in Clerkenwell. The crowd, agitated by a
lackluster comedian who played immediately before Nancy and Kitty were due to go on,
initially responds approvingly to the male impersonators’ double act (138). However, a
“clearly drunk” man, having woken up in the middle of their second number, walks down
the aisle toward the stage and interrupts their performance (139). The man begins heckling
from the foot of the stage, which results in the audience heckling him: one man shouts,
“Throw the old josser out!” (139). In some respects, this episode depicts the vital,
productive, and pleasurable interaction characteristic of a lively music-hall act in which the
audience takes an active role in determining the shape and character of the performance,
voicing opinions and counter-opinions as part of the performative economy of popular
theater in general. Accordingly, Nancy and Kitty continue with their act.

The heckler, too, is unphased. He continues his assault, “banging on the stage with
the heel of his hand,” while the doormen move towards him in order to eject him from the
theater (140). Before they can apprehend him, however, he exposes the same-sex desire at
the center of Nancy and Kitty’s act.

‘Call that a song?’ he shouted. ‘Call that a song? I want my shilling back! You hear
me? I want my bleeding shilling back!’

‘You want your bleeding arse kicked, is what you want!’ answered someone from
the pit. Then someone else, a woman, yelled, ‘Stop your row, can’t you? We can’t
hear the girls for all your racket.’

The man gave a sneer; then he hawked, and spat. ‘Girls?’ he cried. ‘Girls? You
call them girls? Why, they’re nothing but a couple of – a couple of toms!’ (140)

What starts off ostensibly as a critique of the song becomes, crucially, a moment of outing.

The word “tom” historically connotes gender and sexual alterity, whether in its licentious
sense as a coarse synonym for “prostitute” or as shorthand for the word “tomboy,” used to
describe women and girls who display masculine traits. In labeling Nancy and Kitty as
“toms,” the heckler effectively outs them as excessively queer, more than simply women
dressed as men for the sake of popular entertainment. The heckler, who seems so
disconnected from the collective pleasure of the audience, also outs himself as the most
knowing member of the audience. In spite of his drunkenness, in spite of his alienation from
the audience, and in spite of his disgust at the on-stage action, the heckler displays the
discriminating and critical knowingness of the music-hall audience proper. Simply put, he
has identified and made public the underlying, private language of romantic and sexual
intimacy that, while central to Nancy and Kitty’s act, has hitherto eluded public detection.

In publicizing the private language of Nancy and Kitty’s sexuality, the heckler
effectively breaks the spell of theatrical enterprise altogether: “At the sound of [the word,
“toms”], the audience gave a great collective flinch. There was a sudden hush; the shouts became mumbles, the shrieks all tailed away. Through the shaft of limelight I saw their faces – a thousand faces, self-conscious and appalled” (141). The “great, collective flinch,” like laughter and heckling, also denotes a form of knowing, marked by the audience’s growing silence, self-consciousness, and disapprobation, but it does so by breaching the pleasurable participatory enterprise of the theater. Unlike the laugh, the flinch signifies knowing displeasure and performs a subtly hostile reaction to the object of knowingness.31 As the limelight falls on the faces of this audience, Nancy no longer sees “queerly lit” grins unified in collective pleasure (9); instead, collective displeasure circulates among audience members who not only see the queerness on stage before them, but also recognize that they are no longer able to perform their own ignorance. The audience’s homophobia, latent—and indeed suppressed—throughout Nancy and Kitty’s queer spectacle, manifests as the performers rush from the stage: “There were shouts from the hall, at last, and cries of ‘Shame!’” (142). Since collectivity in the theater originates from within a tacitly knowing culture in which Nancy and Kitty’s desire sustains their performance and popularity even as it remains hidden or ignored, its exposure and the emergence of the audience’s homophobia retroactively demonstrate the protections offered by tacit forms of knowing active within heterosexual culture.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, male impersonation renders visible the overlap between mainstream entertainment and queer forms of expression in order to dramatize the extent to
which the popular and the queer are co-constitutive. Approving audiences come from all
over to experience, if not necessarily see, queer spectacle, and the novel dramatizes as a
result a new social order in which non-normativity paradoxically constitutes the normative.
But the novel also exhibits some skepticism about this kind of non-heteronormative variety
as a fundamental component of normative theatrical culture. Indeed, Nancy and Kitty’s
experience at Deacon’s music hall starkly highlights how male impersonation, despite
appearing on the scene of mass entertainment as demonstrably queer, represses its explicitly
queer content in order to preserve the theater’s conspiratorial economy. If it is true that
queer modes of expression are indeed central to mainstream heterosexual culture, then it
might also be true that the explicitly queer is only viable in a social world characterized by
“Variety!” as long as it remains beyond the horizon of the visible. Once Nancy and Kitty
leave the stage, and once Nancy leaves the world of the theater altogether, the novel turns to
alternative, para-theatrical milieux in order to problematize the idea that shared access to or
participation within a normative cultural repertoire enables unqualified inclusion within a
various, but not too various, body politic.

Exposure and Risk

Nancy and Kitty’s double act relies of a particular form of private intimacy that,
when staged, fails to translate properly into the normative variety of theatrical knowingness
described by Bailey as an essential feature of late-nineteenth-century popular culture. This
implicit, conspiratorial knowingness supports the open secret of same-sex desire in mainstream entertainment; however, its transformation into explicit knowing, coded at Deacon’s music hall as shame, risks Nancy and Kitty’s status as popular performers. Once Nancy and Kitty’s queer private language is irreversibly exposed to a generally hostile audience, they are forced to reassess their act and, moreover, their place in broader civic culture. Explicit knowing, as opposed to knowingness, effectively destroys the conspiratorial function of popular theatrical entertainment. While knowingness allows room for comic looseness—missed connections, ironies, double entendres, etc.—explicit knowing introduces a set of disciplinary structures into the theatrical event, and as a result limits the range of possible meanings latent in socio-theatrical encounters. In an environment in which everyone knows everything equally, theatrical variety is systematically and paradoxically limited to include only those who fit into normative sociocultural categories; the stranger and more various elements of public life are subsequently excised from the image of London as cosmopolitan Variety!

Despite deriving much of its formal energy from popular theatrical genres, then, Tipping the Velvet maintains a deep skepticism concerning the theater’s claim to demographic heterogeneity formed within a collective culture of knowingness. If we invest too fully in the popular theater as a mirror image of society writ large, the novel seems to say, then we risk validating and propagating an image of the body politic that fails to account for its more
various elements. A contradiction emerges: “Variety!” becomes homogeneous, an imperfect reflection of bleaker and more actual forms of variousness.

Explicit knowing highlights this contradiction and recurs in the novel at the level of the body. Having been shamed off stage at Deacon’s following a “great, collective flinch” with which the audience signals, automatically, that it knows too much, Nancy tries to console Kitty: “I stepped up to Kitty and reached for her arm; she flinched as if I had raised my hand to strike her, and instantly I fell back” (142). In mirroring the audience’s flinch, Kitty—who flinches throughout the novel every time she comes close to verbalizing her relationship with Nancy—asserts her desire to belong within heterosexual culture. Accordingly, she enters into a relationship with Walter Bliss, whom she eventually marries and with whom she later begins another double act, fearful of rumors and their effect on her ability to work. When Nancy finds out about Kitty and Bliss’s new sexual relationship, she confronts Bliss and announces that she, Nancy, had “fucked” Kitty, too; as a response, Walter “flinches,” but is not surprised (173). The flinch circulates in the novel as an inversion of the theatrical knowingness conventionally signified by the wink or the laugh, as a gesture that discloses both shameful knowledge and an accompanying desire to separate or distance oneself from such knowledge. Flinching denotes an excess of knowing, or a kind of knowledge that one would prefer not to possess; it denotes further the failure of a theatrical enterprise intent on establishing collectivity, and necessitates Nancy’s and the novel’s departure from theatrical life altogether.
Para-theatrical queer subculture affords Nancy a degree of freedom from the homophobic norms of heterosexual culture. During her new life as a male-presenting sex worker, for example, Nancy finds she can navigate civic space with newfound ease. In the nineteenth century, like today, Soho represents an explicitly queer social scene: here, Nancy belongs to an illicit community of sex workers whose fluid gender and sexual identities appeal to a clientele with wide-ranging desires. Nancy’s new life is not dissimilar to her previous one: “It might seem a curious kind of leap to make, from music-hall masher to renter. In fact, the world of actors and artistes, and the gay world in which I now found myself working, are not so very different” (203). Like the theater, Soho’s para-theatrical sexual economy requires its participants to adopt certain roles devised for the sake of attracting a receptive audience. But Nancy soon discovers something is missing, and it does not take her long to realize exactly what:

My one regret was that, though I was daily giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. I would gaze about me at the dim and dreary place in which my gentleman and I leaned panting, and wish the cobbles were a stage, the bricks a curtain, the scuttling rats a set of blazing footlights. I would long for just one eye – just one! – to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gullied and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner. (206)

In other words, although sex work bears certain similarities to theatrical performance proper, Nancy misses the “bold and knowing eye” of a critical audience. Her new audience—made up principally of gay men—is in fact no audience at all. They are so thoroughly unknowing that Nancy takes pity on them, excluded as they from the conspiratorial, pleasurable
enterprise manifest in the theater proper. We might think here once more of Walter Bliss’s assertion that the variety in theaters mirrors the variety of the city; Nancy’s performances on the streets of Soho, however, devoid of both the architecture of the theater and a knowing audience, reveals that performance in general, no matter how skilled, depends upon the spectatorial dynamic of theatrical enterprise.

A knowing audience serves as a kind of collective guarantee: without a co-conspirator capable of identifying and appreciating the strength of Nancy’s impersonation, no meaningful connection between participants can be sustained. The sex act overdetermines the potential for collective pleasure by prioritizing the punter’s sexual gratification over Nancy’s theatrical skill. (Readers, of course, know that Nancy’s skilled impersonation is precisely what enables the punter’s gratification in the first place.) An audience, at least as far as Nancy is concerned, would recognize her performance for what it is and thus guarantee her role as a conspiratorial member of Soho’s social fabric. Curiously (and alarmingly!), Nancy does in fact have an audience: an unknown figure traveling in a horse-drawn carriage who follows her through the streets. The figure identifies herself as Diana Lethaby, an upper-class widow and self-identified “Sapphist,” who has been secretly watching Nancy for an undisclosed amount of time (236). Confronted finally by Diana, Nancy experiences an explicit sense of erotic pleasure: “the idea that she had watched me went direct to the fork of my drawers and made me wet” (237). Nancy moves into Diana’s home, adopts a new name, “Neville King,” and finds herself performing a set of new roles.
The first is explicitly sexual: she loafs around Diana’s mansion in St. John’s Wood waiting for Diana to summon her to the bedroom, where she will inevitably encounter a wooden chest filled with sex toys. An additional, public-facing role supplements Nancy’s sexual one, though it is still laced with an erotic charge: as “Neville King,” Nancy accompanies Diana to a series of public functions, including a luncheon at Diana’s ladies’ club and a visit to the opera.

Nancy’s time as Diana’s sexual plaything reintroduces sexual pleasure into Nancy’s para-theatrical life, but it manifests at a markedly smaller scale. Like renting, this work bears certain similarities to her theatrical career: “It was quite like dressing for the halls – except that that, of course, I had had to change at the side of the stage, while the band switched tempo; now, I had entire days to prink in” (264). Although Diana frequently treats her like a servant, merely another feature of the household economy, Nancy derives pleasure from the work: “I liked her kisses, I liked her gifts still more; and if, to keep them, I must obey her – well, so be it” (262). Nancy understands her role in the household to be precisely that: a role. “There was a drama to be had in the choosing of the chamber, and the pose, in which I would arrange myself for her. . . My pleasure at her appearance, however, was real enough” (265). The similarities between Nancy’s new life as Diana’s servant and her previous life are clearly not lost on her. Of course, the discrepancy between these performance venues—the halls versus Diana’s home—is a difference in scale, rather than a difference in kind. That is, as Nancy notes, “Diana was [her] only audience,” which subsequently reduces the scale of
Nancy’s performance to that of a chamber play. Confined by the desires of a reduced audience, of “just one eye,” Nancy’s new act is determined entirely in relation to a lone spectator.

The pleasurable looseness associated with popular performance is replaced by an encounter overdetermined by an audience capable of exerting greater-than-usual power over the singular performer. While Nancy enjoys both the thrill of playing as “Neville” and her sexual encounters with Diana, she is denied the flexibility afforded by the theater proper.

Nancy’s time in Diana’s service represents a period in which explicit knowledge dominates even within a queer subcultural space:

These, then, were my public appearances. There were not too many of them – I am describing here a period that lasted about a year. Diana kept me close, for the most part, and displayed me at home. She liked to limit the numbers who gazed at me, she said; she said she feared that like a photograph I might fade, from too much handling. (280)

Just as Nancy and Kitty’s double act expressed a level of erotic intimacy, Nancy’s time in Diana’s employment is erotically charged. And yet, this in an erotic performance importantly structured by differentials in power. Nancy knows this: “I must keep her, or have nothing. She had awakened particular appetites in me; and where else, I thought, but with Diana, in the company of Sapphists – where else would those queer hungers be assuaged?” (282). On the one hand, the arrangement allows Nancy to exist as a gay woman within an apparently sympathetic environment, but it also forecloses any alternative forms of queer life. Nancy’s own desires are dependent upon her continued subjection within Diana’s. There is no form
of life, queer or otherwise, beyond Nancy’s experience as Diana’s servant. This is a queer subculture in its own right, to be sure, but it is manifestly not a popular one; rather, the popular has been superseded by the exclusive.

Although Nancy’s para-theatrical performances in Diana’s employ afford her a degree of leisure that she has never enjoyed, the novel is clear: Nancy’s new life is conditioned by explicitly classed forms of sexual and social labor. Nancy had previously made a name for herself by impersonating the toff and other archetypes of the leisure class, a staple of an entertainment genre with its roots in the classed locales of music halls and penny gaffs. Now, however, she has been absorbed into a leisure class as the kind of person who goes to ladies’ luncheons, the opera, and bourgeois theaters.

It was with Diana that I returned to the theatre again – flinching to find her lead me to a box beside the foot-lights, flinching again as the chandeliers were dimmed. But they were terribly grand, the theatres she preferred. They were lit with electricity rather than gas; and the crowd sat hushed. I could not see the pleasure in it. (279) Nancy flinches as she realizes that she is participating in the very same bourgeois habits her original performance was designed to parody: sitting quietly in a box as the lights dim and the audience quietens could not be further from her experience in the halls, an experience characterized by lively if hostile exchange between audience and performance. If Nancy’s erstwhile career in the music halls and variety theaters afforded her the opportunity to take pleasure in the comic distance between her—a working-class lesbian—and the targets of her impersonations, then her role as “Neville King” closes the distance somewhat and thus diminishes the range of possible pleasures Nancy might take in theatrical performance.
Neither the normative cultural environment of the music hall nor the queer subcultural space of Diana’s coterie allows Nancy to flourish as an autonomous person capable of pleasure. Indeed, her entrance into the leisure class—a class that should ostensibly increase her access to the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment—is the very thing that highlights Nancy’s exclusion from leisure as such. The “harmonious whole” of theatrical variety includes Nancy only when she can be read as a willing participant in heterosexual culture; once she becomes legible as queer, she is casted out. Conversely, once she becomes a part of London’s “secret element,” as a contingent member of queer high society, she is denied the performative flexibility that attracted her to the theater in the first place.

Though her integration into Diana’s Sapphist coterie promises a certain degree of protection, particularly when compared to the open hostility of the audience at Deacon’s music hall, the Diana episode as a whole suggests that belonging within London’s more various secret element demands more than a shared sense of (marginal) sexual identity. Instead, the novel offers a vision of non-theatrical variety that counts as non-theatrical precisely because it has to constantly shift beyond the horizon of the visible in order to remain autonomous within and in spite of heterosexual culture. In Diana’s circle, for instance, Nancy is hopelessly exposed, subject to an excessively knowing gaze. Diana sets up a velvet curtain in her drawing room and begins putting Nancy on display for her friends: “I would be behind the curtain, striking some pose; and when she was ready, Diana would pull a tasselled cord and uncover me” (281). These scenes of exposure carry erotic pleasure for
Diana and her friends, while Nancy finds herself disassociating, thinking of Kitty and wondering “if she was still wearing suits and a topper” (281). There is a fundamental disconnect, then, between performer and audience: “For when I twitched and cried out there were smiles in the shadows; and when I shuddered and wept, there was laughter” (281). Here is a spectatorial conspiracy, to be sure, but it is a conspiracy, formed among members of the leisure class, that depends upon the consistent subjection of an abject queer woman.

(Diana’s maid, Blake, previously detained for homosexuality, also fits this type.) Nancy, whose twitches, cries, shudders, and tears are met with smiles and laughter, is excluded from the affective unity of her audience. There is no mutual, pleasurable exchange between performer and audience; rather, collective pleasure has been replaced by object fetish. In juxtaposing the classed pleasures of popular entertainment with the classed fetishes for domestic labor, the novel encourages an increasingly skeptical view of popular performance as a viable expressive outlet for members of the body politic who find themselves consistently marginalized within heterosexual culture. If to perform means to risk rendering oneself entirely legible in a culture in which legibility is tantamount to control, then refusing to perform may be the only viable option for those who want to subsist without being seen.

Both Nancy’s career in the music halls and her time with Diana demonstrate that an excessively knowing and homogeneous audience disciplines the exposed performer into objecthood. There is, in other words, no space to act, and performance becomes the exclusive site of disciplinary spectatorship, a perverse contraction of normative audiences’
collective managerial desire. As she grows more and more exhausted by the Sapphists and their pretensions, Nancy makes a joke related to Diana’s age: “You were there, weren’t you, at Hadrian’s palace?” (316). This small act of rebellion constitutes Nancy’s reprisal as a comic agent: she has acted beyond the bounds of her ascribed role in Diana’s circle, and, in the process, earns a few laughs from the attendant audience. Once Nancy reclaims her agency as a comic performer, she exceeds the normative paradigm of this space, and becomes, yet again, the target of abuse:

It was a mild enough insult, after all that I had said. But as I said it, there came a titter from the crowd. It was only a small one; but if there was anyone who could not bear to be tittered at, that person was Diana. . . She had still held Dickie’s book, all this time; and now she had struck me with it. (316)

As Nancy reclaims her comic persona, and thus oversteps the disciplinary parameters of her performance, the novel refers back to the moment Kitty and Nancy were shamed off stage at Deacon’s. Kitty had flinched as if Nancy were going to strike her; here, Nancy is actually struck. While Nancy’s audience, made up exclusively of queer women, does not shame her here in quite the same way as the audience at Deacon’s, the threat (and fact) of physical violence still represents an overdetermined and excessively knowing claim over her body and identity, and subsequently requires Nancy to relocate once more. While explicit knowing at Deacon’s results in the destruction of a conspiratorial popular theatrical paradigm and Nancy and Kitty’s secret language therein, in Diana’s Sapphic coterie explicit knowing results in the destruction of Nancy’s role as “Neville King.” In both cases, knowledge works to undermine the pleasurable performative economy in which theatrical entertainment takes place, and
thus necessitates a subsequent adaptation that itself requires new roles, parameters, and contexts to emerge.

Impersonation and Adaptation in Context

In 2015, the playwright Laura Wade adapted *Tipping the Velvet* into a play. The play follows the plot of the novel and incorporates its salient themes—gender, sexuality, and class. There is, however, one major difference, one that arises in part from the formal distinctions between fiction and drama, but also as a result of a creative liberty: that is, while Nancy narrates the novel, the play introduces an entirely new character, the Chairman, who assumes Nancy’s narratorial role. The play opens as the Chairman “saunters” out in front of the curtain, “looks out into the auditorium, admiring,” “catches the audience’s eye,” and greets the crowd thus: “‘Ello. Alright?” The Chairman, unseen and unheard by the actors on stage, serves as a narrator of sorts by providing the audience with the contexts necessary to understand and appreciate Nancy’s story, and in the process allows the play to progress more swiftly than it otherwise would. The Chairman also functions, as one might imagine, as a music-hall master of ceremonies, intermediating between on-stage action and the audience. In this role, the Chairman—who never once leaves the stage—interjects in order to clarify, or to ask the audience a question, or to make a joke at a character’s expense. Scene changes occur only after the Chairman “clacks” his gavel, which he seems to do most frequently on a whim. By introducing the Chairman into the play version of *Tipping the Velvet*, Wade manages
both to overcome some of the generic difficulties in adapting prose fiction for the stage and to create a highly suggestive theatrical environment rich with the trappings of the late-Victorian popular stage.\textsuperscript{35}

But the Chairman also poses a problem for the play, which, like the novel, is concerned with the pleasures and pains entailed by the popular representation of same-sex desire on the national stage. The Chairman, managerial by nature and by profession, controls not only what happens on stage, but also how it is represented to and received by the audience. His managerial presence is entertaining, to be sure, but it is also stifling. As the play draws to a close, Kitty approaches Nancy in an attempt to reconcile; as readers of the novel know, Nancy refuses. Before Kitty has a chance to leave the stage, the Chairman intercedes: “Whoa whoa whoa, hang on a minute ladies and gentlemen this ain’t right.”\textsuperscript{36} When he asks Nancy to think about her decision, she looks at him directly and responds: “I am thinking about it.”\textsuperscript{37} The Chairman, shocked not only that Nancy can hear and see him but that she has always been able to hear and see him, tries to convince her to reunite with Kitty; an increasingly aggravated Nancy begins to rebel, first by tearing down the curtain at the back of the stage, and second by seizing the Chairman’s gavel from his hands.

\begin{quote}
CHAIRMAN: Come on Nancy, give it back. 
You think you can do without it, do you? All this? 
Don’t you understand, Nancy? You think you can get through life by being you? 
No. What is there about you for anyone to love? 
You’re not enough, you know that. That’s why we’ve worked so hard, built all this. 
NANCY: And I want to stop.
\end{quote}
CHAIRMAN: You can’t risk it, Nancy.
NANCY: I’m going to.
CHAIRMAN: This is not how the show ends!
NANCY: It’s not your show.38

In this exchange with the Chairman, Nancy reclaims control of her own life in the play, and with a clack of the gavel dismisses the Chairman from the stage. But the terms of the exchange are important, too: by using the language of risk to coerce Nancy into a version of the play that is not hers, the Chairman plays upon the Nancy’s real concerns about belonging, exposure, and same-sex desire. However, by wresting the gavel from the Chairman, and by declaring that it is in fact the Chairman who does not belong, Nancy reorganizes theatrical hierarchies and restructures the performance around her desire to be free from Kitty. Nancy thus rejects the normative logic of romantic closure that would bind her to Kitty and opens the play’s ending up to a range of new performative iterations.

The metatheatrical antagonism between Nancy and the Chairman in Wade’s adaptation is useful for thinking in general about adaptation in Waters’s novel—evident in Nancy’s various impersonations—as a strategically destructive act in which the limits of inclusion within demographic variety are constantly redrawn. The Chairman symbolizes both the normative enterprise of late-Victorian theatrical culture and the masculinist structures that circumscribe queer expression therein. In destroying the theatrical paradigm, by tearing apart the stage and seizing creative control, Nancy performs, metatheatrically, the necessary steps in ensuring that mainstream entertainment genres remain loose enough for non-normative social actors to flourish. The stakes are clear: while late-Victorian popular
theatrical culture is laced with what Waters calls the “erotic charge” of queer intimacy and thus cultivates a form of collectivity established doubly with both mainstream theatrical entertainment and queer subculture, this collectivity is undergirded by the ever-present risk of knowingness transforming into a surer and more disciplinary epistemological category: the known. Adaptation, as a destructive and reconstitutive practice, inhibits the solidification of theatrical culture and subsequently enables a more various kind of variety to subsist. That is to say, actual variety, of the kind that sometimes works to remain hidden beyond the horizon of the visible in public culture writ large, thrives when the very limits of inclusion are in flux.

The narratological distinctions between the novel and the play clarify the extent to which *Tipping the Velvet* incorporates the formal elements of male impersonation—i.e., parody, imitation, repetition—in order to instantiate (and not simply represent) a set of adaptive protocols native to theatrical culture. Further, adaptation emerges in the novel as a feature of the picaresque, a novelistic genre characterized by the narration of a central character’s exploits as they navigate diverse situations, contexts, and locales. Over the course of *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy appears in multiple roles in multiple venues: a server in her father’s oyster shop in Whitstable, Kent, a music-hall masher in the East and West Ends of London, a sex worker on the streets of London’s Soho, a sex worker in the mansions of St. John’s Wood, a squatter-cum-housekeeper in Bethnal Green, and a socialist orator in Victoria Park. As a comic genre, the picaresque requires the picaro to belong outside of the social environments into which she enters, since the drama and comedy of the novel depend upon the jarring
encounter between inside and outside; at the level of form, the multiplication of social environments in the picaresque rehearses, time and again, the casting out of the picaro.\textsuperscript{39}

*Tipping the Velvet* is comic in this sense, but the violent gendered and classed terms of Nancy’s exclusion from these environments can only really be seen as tragic. Rather than depicting the comic exploits of the archetypical picaro, the novel is invested in representing the queer woman as a social outcast, as a figure who, in Isobel Armstrong’s terms, “exist[s] in antithesis to groups and communities.”\textsuperscript{40} The novel thus establishes a tension between the generic impetus of the picaresque and the sociological precariousness of the working-class queer woman at the turn of the century, a tension in which the ability to adapt to new contexts not only enables the abject woman to survive in stranger and more various environments, but also demands that the groups and communities that form around such environments adapt, too.

This tension can be better explained if we separate the novel’s adaptive economy into two more precise orders of adaptation: the first is assimilationist in nature, since it requires Nancy to adapt to each new context through an embodied imitative practice, i.e., impersonation; the second, however, is reconstitutive, since it engenders a broader reorganization of social hierarchy and cultural convention. The smaller, more localized trope of Nancy adapting to various new contexts recurs throughout the novel and depends upon Nancy’s skill as an impersonator. In each new context, Nancy has to learn a set of behaviors and protocols that enable her to adapt to the social environment at hand. In order to
become a successful male impersonator, for example, Nancy walks the streets of London attempting to anatomize the habits and gaits of men (83); when she takes to the streets once more, this time as a male-presenting sex worker, Nancy again strives to adapt to her new circumstances by imitating those around her: “For on every visit I found some new trick to better my impersonation” (195). Each new context requires Nancy to learn a different kind of cultural competency, which she then performs. In order to establish herself as a social actor who belongs to London’s queer subcultural space, she engages her body in the physical process of adaptation. As a keen observer of this kind of space, Nancy is able to adapt her body in order to assimilate to a new life, one that is both like and unlike her previous one, but also, more importantly, a life to which she belongs by virtue of her ability to perform convincingly. Armed with her uncanny ability to pose as a man, Nancy dons her old costumes and walks the streets of Soho hoping to attract the attention of gay men who, all unknowingly, regard her as a member of their own secret element.

Impersonation in this context paradoxically allows Nancy to reassert her identity and autonomy as an anonymous participant in a broadening public sphere. Further, the distinction produced by simultaneous likeness and unlikeness between her public persona and private identity clarifies Nancy’s status as an agential social actor. Though she worries early on that, as a woman, her working the streets places her at a greater risk than her male counterparts, or that, as a woman in drag, she will become subject to even greater hostility, Nancy soon discovers that her performance actually protects her: “With every glance that
came my way, I flinched; at any moment I expected the cry to be let up: ‘A girl! There is a
girl, here, in boy’s clothing!’ But the glances did not settle on me: they only slithered past me,
to the girls behind. There was no cry; and I began to walk a little straighter” (194). The
straightness of Nancy’s walk demonstrates the new ease with which she navigates Soho, an
ease afforded to her by her ability to adapt performatively to its local conventions.

Moreover, the unknowingness of her new audience, the gay men who take Nancy to
be a man, produces a strange perceptual economy in which Nancy’s successful participation
in queer subcultural space depends upon various failures of recognition. A man approaches
Nancy, disguised as an army private, and Nancy quite consciously plays along with his desire
for “a suck or for a Robert [Browning]” (198). Nancy hesitates, however: “I made to shake
my head – to tilt my cap to him and move away, with the joke quite finished” (198). The
“joke” to which Nancy refers here is, of course, a residual feature of her music-hall career;
having successfully convinced this man that she is, in fact, a private in the army, Nancy goes
to leave. But she is no longer working within the theatrical economy of the music hall, and
finds herself agreeing to the man’s terms.

As Nancy adapts to making a living within this new subcultural context, the novel
reestablishes a performative culture situated between mainstream theatrical space (public)
and domestic queer space (private), representing the underbelly of London as the locale for a
partially exposed, partially hidden, queer body politic. Sex work in Soho requires Nancy to
participate in some form of theatrical enterprise: as she escorts the man to a semi-private
alleyway, she encounters a woman “pressing her skirts between her legs to dry herself” (198). The woman winks at Nancy, signaling a form of knowingness Nancy recognizes from her time in the theater, and yet which remains only partial given Nancy’s act. The intimacies between Nancy and the man versus Nancy and the woman—denoted by either the embodied homosexual encounter or the knowing wink—are both real intimacies; and yet, they manifest along different lines and within different discourses, and thus they produce distinct though overlapping assemblages arranged around Nancy’s performance. Social performance, in this respect, denotes something more than either deceptive or artificial masquerade or the basic condition of social intercourse; rather, it represents pleasurable and conspiratorial forms of sociocultural expression that allow the actor to appear on the horizon of the visible and also to remain partially and variably concealed.

The second, reconstitutive order of adaptation operative within *Tipping the Velvet* exceeds Nancy’s status as an individual performer. Instead, it shows how, once marginalized, the free expression of same-sex desire reprises itself in new cultural contexts, where it once again enables collective participation within an extant cultural repertoire. Late in the novel, in a lesbian bar located in London’s East End, Nancy is approached by two strangers who have placed a bet: is she, or is she not, the famous music hall star, “Nan King”? (419). This is a difficult question on two counts: first, Nancy has kept her past a secret from her new friends and is thus nervous about being caught in a lie; second, however, Nancy has not appeared as “Nan King” for years, and she has undergone many trials and transformations since then. Is
she still that person who appeared in front of an adoring theatergoing public? Even when Nancy reveals that she was “Nan King,” she admits that she “felt like an imposter” (419); looking at a picture of Kitty and herself, she says, “it was like gazing into someone else’s past” (420). When Nancy declines a request to perform one of her songs, the one “about winking at the pretty ladies” (421), the bar strikes up with its own version:

> It sounded very different here, in this rough cellar – and yet, it had a certain trueness, too, and a new sweetness all of its own. . . In a moment I had knelt upon my seat and joined my voice with theirs; and afterwards, they cheered and clapped me, and I found I had to put my head upon my arm, and bite my lip, to stop the tears from coming. They started on another song, then – not one of mine and Kitty’s, but a new one that I didn’t know, and so could not join in with. (422)

Though this assemblage has formed around “Nan King” as an icon in popular culture, it cannot be reduced to Nancy as a participant within that culture. This interaction demonstrates a marked shift from the kind of explicit and disciplinary knowing exemplified at Deacon’s and by Diana—in the act of recognition, the people at the bar make a request, and in declining and having her wishes respected, Nancy avoids the abuse leveled at her on earlier occasions. Additionally, however, the song has been adapted to suit its newfound context: twenty women singing in a basement bar, and when Nancy starts to sing, her voice “joins with theirs,” signifying a participatory, knowing union active in a song that no longer belongs to Nancy, but which in fact belongs to a cultural repertoire that exceeds her.

Moreover, while this scene depicts a successful identification, in some respects like the successful identification depicted at Deacon’s theater, the form of collectivity active in the lesbian bar centers not on the collective identification of an individual performer—which
is posed here as a question rather than an accusation—but rather on the collective participation in an current popular cultural repertoire; once the singers start a new song, Nancy, unfamiliar with it, stops participating. In staging the lesbian bar as the locus of a queer cultural repertoire (that is also, quite simply, a mainstream cultural repertoire), the novel performs the adaptive logic of a live, ongoing popular theatrical culture. What begins as a knowing recognition of Nancy as “Nan King” eventually subsides, leads to an adaptation of one of her songs, and subsequently shifts to a new paradigm that ultimately excludes Nancy. Nancy’s exclusion from such collectivity does not necessarily stand as yet another tragic casting out; instead, it re-centers the attention of the assembled public on collective if partial participation within a cultural repertoire, rather than on an individualized, laboring body.

In emphasizing the status of popular theatrical culture as an adaptive, co-produced enterprise, the novel suggests that any collectivity forged within such a culture depends upon its local adaptations and its variable meanings and conspiracies as expressed in particular locales at particular times. The lesbian bar community offers up its own version of Nancy’s theatrical legacy and, in doing so, underscores the novel’s interest in adaptation as an ongoing cultural process, a process that dissolves and reconstitutes itself in unanticipated ways. In this respect, the vitality of popular theatrical culture as an expression of civil society writ large emerges as a result of its ability to become more various than itself, to resist ossification, and to appear in times and places distinct from its source. At the scale of the
individual, adaptation signifies a kind of assimilation into a broader dominant culture; however, at the scale of the collective, adaptation involves an organic refashioning of culture to suit the interests, passions, and pleasures of collective enterprise. Even as it reaches into the past to source its materials, this variety of adaptation principally resides in the present and constellates around a thoroughly live and embodied cultural repertoire that cannot be reduced to any abstract sense of demographic variety.

Reading and the World beyond the Stage

As we have seen, the kind of knowingness characteristic of late-Victorian audiences poses a problem for Waters, since it can be too easily exploited to cast theatrical variety itself as a metonym for demographic variety. That is, a metatheatrical conceit in which anything that appears on stage also appears in public loses steam once we acknowledge that not all members of the body politic appear equally on the horizon of the visible. If the music hall produces a general “area of agreement,” as Hall and Whannel once argued, then *Tipping the Velvet* depicts those actors who fail to be taken up within such an area or whose presence therein threatens the normative conspiracies produced in such a space; more still, it dramatizes the structural limits around which collectivity forms.

*Tipping the Velvet* uses the genre of male impersonation to emphasize the productive possibilities of an adaptive cultural repertoire, a repertoire constantly moving beyond its origins and creating new and partial forms of collectivity within and in spite of heterosexual
culture. But another problem emerges from within this strategy: in reading the novel, readers themselves constitute Nancy’s most knowing audience, since only they are privy to Nancy’s various disguises and routines. On the one hand, addressing the reader in the first person mimics the structure of late-Victorian popular performance. On the other hand, as a novel of interiority, *Tipping the Velvet* anticipates an all-too-knowing reading audience, an extradiegetic audience with first-hand knowledge of Nancy’s thoughts and feelings. Readers possess knowledge both of the cultural and social scene depicted in the novel and also Nancy’s own “private language,” a language laden with Nancy’s secrets pleasures and desires. Even as the novel in general teaches readers to be skeptical about the kinds of collectivity that might be forged in the theater’s knowing economy, it nonetheless produces an extradiegetic audience that can see through Nancy’s disguises and effectively read her mind. If the theater is the venue where knowing remains implicit, partial, conspiratorial, etc., then the novel’s representation of that venue ends up overdetermining the act of reading itself as a kind of comprehensive knowingness. Simply put, the reader knows too much.

*Tipping the Velvet* anticipates this problem in its closing scenes, where it begins to gesture toward broader forms of public life that exist outside of the novel itself. Importantly, the novel closes not, as one might imagine, with Nancy’s climactic return to the theater proper, but instead with an open-air socialist extravaganza, at which Nancy takes the stage and performs a dazzling lecture on the state of the working classes in England.
“Go home tonight,” I went on, moving forward again, “and ask yourselves the question that Mr Banner has asked you today: Why Socialism? And you will find yourselves obliged to answer it as we have. ‘Because Britain’s people,’ you will say, ‘have laboured under the capitalist and the landlord system and grown only poorer and sicker and more miserable and afraid. Because it is not by charity and paltry reforms that we shall improve conditions for the weakest classes—not by taxes, not by electing one capitalist government over another, not even by abolishing the House of Lords!—but by turning over the land, and industry, to the people who work it. Because socialism is the only system for a fair society: a society in which the good things of the world are shared, not amongst the idlers of the world, but amongst the workers—amongst yourselves: you, who have made the rich man rich, and been kept, for your labours, only ill and half-starved!’

There was a second’s silence, then a burst of thunderous applause. (459)

Nancy’s peroration depicts some of the strategies evident in the previous chapter’s discussion of comic monologue: Nancy, an exemplary and charismatic individual, works to marshal her spectating audience into a generally assenting sociopolitical assemblage by throwing her voice, as it were, into the mouths of her spectatorship. The audience’s members, who had hitherto been heckling Mr. Banner, have their response to Nancy’s speech determined for them, on stage. First, the speech gestures towards the novel’s broader interest in dissenting political voices, voices that rise up to challenge the political status quo within the context of an explicitly theatrical performance. But second, and more importantly, the speech works by folding the voices of its spectators into the primary fabric of the performance itself, and subsequently reveals the degree to which, within the parameters of the novel, a socialist consensus might derive from an explicitly theatrical form of assembly.

The effect of the socialist meeting and its place in the novel is twofold. On one hand, it marks the overlapping features of the novel’s interest in popular theatrical culture and its
political messaging. On the other hand, the meeting demonstrates the contribution of an explicitly queer form of collectivity to the prehistory of consensus politics in the twentieth century. Not only does the meeting depict Nancy’s grand admission into the nation’s emergent socialist movement, but it also serves as the backdrop for her maturity as a gay woman. After the speech, Nancy confronts her new lover, Florence, a socialist who works with destitute women and who organized the meeting. In this final scene, Nancy pledges her allegiance both to love and to socialism: “Only say—only say you’ll let me love you, and be with you; that you’ll let me be your sweetheart, and your comrade” (472). As Nancy and Florence kiss, “careless of whether anybody watched or not. . . a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause” emanate from the speakers’ tent in the distance (472). The novel thus ends with a semi-private scene of one-to-one intimacy (the kiss) and a vague but discernible trace of collective enterprise (the cheer and applause). The overlapping dramas of the novel’s closing scene represent the overlapping narratives of individual development and collective action.

As a novel invested in the partiality of collectivity as it constellates around theatrical entertainment and in the vital role adaptation plays in collective enterprise, Tipping the Velvet ends with a scene in which an important political history—the history of socialist action—occurs, as it were, off stage, secondary to the more intimate sphere of the novel’s queer protagonist. If the novel has taught readers anything, however, then surely we know that what appears at the margins of representation “rubs” and “jostles” alongside what appears at
the center. Since *Tipping the Velvet* takes such active steps in representing the “stranger and more various” elements of public life, it makes sense that the novel should self-reflexively gesture to its own margins—that which remains outside the novel’s own horizon of the visible. As a novel, as an example of a genre known for its representation of individuality and interiority, *Tipping the Velvet* takes up the values and methods of an adaptive cultural repertoire (i.e., the popular theater) to gesture towards forms of demographic variety that are both central to and illegible within the cultural mainstream. The socialist meeting might appear in the novel as a strange development in the personal history of Nancy Astley, but its centrality to the history of collective enterprise in London—and the nation at large—reveals the extent to which its partial representation in the novel renders visible the novel’s own omissions. A truly knowing reader of the novel, then, knows quite simply that there is more to the history of demographic variety than even *Tipping the Velvet* can represent. And yet, from within such skeptical knowingness emerges a finer sense of popular culture’s role in determining and destroying the limits of inclusion within a stranger and more various variety of public culture.

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Notes


2 The novel’s representation of these versions of variety corresponds roughly with Judith R. Walkowitz’s characterization of Soho in *Nights Out* (2012), in which she asserts: “Despite its diversity, Soho was not so much a cultural melting pot as a space of intimate and sometimes tumultuous interaction between men and women of many walks of life: rich and poor, unschooled émigrés and Bloomsbury literati, moral purity campaigners and

3 In *The Popular Arts* (1965), Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel suggest that music hall represents “a truer reflection of the life and culture of the urban classes than was to be found in any other art form” (56). Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1965).


5 In this respect, Waters, writing at the end of the twentieth century, exemplifies what David Kurnick describes as the “conjuring [of] a series of emphatically non-normative spaces with emphatically undefined outer boundaries” evident in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels of interiority (22). In other words, the theater’s lingering presence in *Tipping the Velvet* (and, to be sure, other theatrical novels) opens up a discourse of sociopolitical belonging that ultimately exceeds, or resides adjacent to, the normative public sphere. David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2012).

6 Butler would call this the “heterosexual matrix,” that is, “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized” (151n6).


8 Ibid., 158–59.

9 Hall and Whannel, 56–57.


11 Angela Carter acknowledges this overlap implicitly in her commentary on British pantomime: “There’s no other country in the world where you have pantomime with men dressed as women and women dressed as men, and everybody thinks this is perfectly suitable for children. It’s part of the great tradition of British art” (187). Lorna Sage, “Angela Carter” (Interview), in *New Writing*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (London: Minerva, 1992), 185–93.


As Bratton and Walkowitz note, however, the theater was not exempt from the period’s increasing cultivation of sexual moralism. According to Bratton, the “cultural negotiation” dramatized by male impersonation “took place against a background of music hall development which was very hostile to such transgressive activity” (95) including but not limited to the censorial role of morality reformers and the Lord Chamberlain’s Office. See chapter 2 of Walkowitz’s *Nights Out* for a fuller account of the role morality reformers played in censoring the theaters.


The most famous examples of the lion comique would be “Champagne Charlie,” an alter ego of the performer George Leybourne, and Alfred Vance; however, according to Gillian M. Rodger, male impersonators performing during the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Bessie Bonehill, Millie Hylton, Annie Hindle, Katie Lawrence, Vesta Tilley, and Ella Wesner, imitated the songs and styles of male performers (98–99). In the twentieth century, even after the gradual feminization of male impersonation as an act (Rodger, 168), performers like Hetty King and Ella Shields continued to adopt the role. Gillian M. Rodger, *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2018).

Claire O’Callaghan, for instance, acknowledges that Nancy’s uncanny masculinity might unsettle late-Victorian audiences. In costume, Nancy “looks like a real boy” (Waters, 118) and, as a result, Bliss and Kitty adapt her attire to “redress her masculinity” and to assure audiences that she is actually a woman in a men’s clothing (O’Callaghan, 26). As Bratton acknowledges, however, male impersonation produced “a new unease, a specific need to make sure that the sexuality of the display stays within the realm of titillation address...
There are important distinctions to be drawn between male impersonation as an historical theatrical genre and other examples of “cross-dressing,” especially those that emerged in the twentieth century and which have formed the basis of theories of gender and sexuality. On the distinction between the impersonator and the drag king, see Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1998), 232. On the distinction between the drag king and the drag queen, the latter of which has had an outsized role in the production of gender theories, see Annabelle Willox, “Whose Drag Is It Anyway? Drag Kings and Monarchy in the UK,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3/4 (2003): 263–84.

Simon Goldhill describes “knowingness” as “the glue of social discourse” (722). It denotes neither knowledge nor belief, but rather signifies some looser relation between the speaker and its object. As an example, Goldhill offers the seemingly innocent phrase, “I know what you mean,” and parses it thus: “Even when it is uttered apparently as a claim of transparent linguistic success, it is rather an indication that a speaker wishes to record sympathy or empathy for an interlocutor (whose received meaning may seem opaque, baffling, or clear). It usually also registers the potential for misunderstanding or misrecognition” (722). Simon Goldhill, “On Knowingness,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 708–23.


Ibid., 86. Fraser uses the term “counterpublic” to describe any subaltern social group arranged antagonistically in relation to the normative public sphere (67), whereas Warner uses it more broadly to describe any oppositional group operating outside of mainstream public discourse (85–87). Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

See Sedgwick’s discussion of the performative, “readerly ignorance” of Diderot’s editors (*Tendencies*, 27).

David Bell et al. are rightly skeptical of the potentially “subversive” effects of queer subcultural trends that depend upon certain “in jokes,” as they demonstrate in their essay, “All Hyped up and No Place to Go” (1994). In thinking about how far the “heterosexual performances” of gay skinheads and lipstick lesbians challenge heterosexist conceptions of
sexuality, Bell et al. are unable to devise (or agree upon) the social or political utility of in jokes: “The case studies highlight the important difference between knowing and not knowing. What kinds of (gender) trouble are most troublesome, and to whom? Ultimately, then, through trying to theorise the performance of identities and spaces, and attempting to explore our theorising in the context of gay skinheads and lipstick lesbians, we have ended up creating trouble for ourselves” (45). David Bell et al., “All Hyped up and No Place to Go,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 1, no. 1 (1994): 31–47.

28 LGBT+ novelists have consistently integrated this form of knowingness into their work. Notably, for our purposes, Alan Hollinghurst’s first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), features an episode in which Will, the novel’s gay protagonist, goes to the opera with his friend, James, and his grandfather, Lord Beckwith. The opera, Benjamin Britten’s *Billy Budd* (1951), provides a knowingly queer context in which Will, James, and Lord Beckwith are able to speak covertly, though assuredly, about the opera’s gay histories. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (London: Vintage, 2015), 171–72.

29 That Nancy and Kitty receive love letters from women implies that there are in fact queer members of their audiences. The idea that women in the audience might be romantically attracted to male impersonators on the stage is not without historical precedent. As Rodgers notes, Vesta Tilley “related [in her autobiography] a number of episodes in which she sought to cool the ardor of her most fervent female fans” (177).

30 Earlier in the novel, Kitty uses the word pejoratively to describe women who “make a—a career—out of kissing girls” (131).

31 In her astounding monograph on the history of flinching in theatrical and scientific culture, Tiffany Watt Smith argues that “a flinch, as any gesture, enjoys what Clifford Geertz called ‘thick meanings’, signifying as a ‘speck of behaviour, a fleck of culture’” (13–14). In identifying the flinch and comparable gestures—winces, starts, and cringes—as central performative features of Victorian looking, in both its theatrical and scientific senses, Watt Smith argues that the flinch signals both reflexive repulsion and self-reflexive participation; in short, the flinch discloses a knowingly theatrical and performative engagement in the spectacle of Victorian entertainment culture. Tiffany Watt Smith, *On Flinching: Theatricality and Scientific Looking from Darwin to Shell Shock* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

32 Since Plato, at least, antitheatrical critics have compared acting to sex work. However, throughout the twentieth century, proponents of the theater re-appropriated the image of the actor as prostitute to various ends (Davis, 19). In the second half of the twentieth century, playwrights and authors adopted the trope to leverage explicitly antisexist critiques of what Laura Mulvey calls “the male gaze” in her influential essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) serves as a powerful example.

33 The play, directed by Lyndsey Turner, premiered in London at the Lyric Hammersmith in September 2015 before moving to the Royal Lyceum Theatre in
Edinburgh late in October 2015. Wade was not the first person to identify the novel’s adaptive potential: in 2002, screenwriter Andrew Davies adapted the novel into a well-received mini-series for the BBC, while London’s Guildhall School of Music and Drama commissioned playwright Amanda Whittington to turn it into a play in 2009.


35 A note at the beginning of the play text indicates, “a number of moments in the play. . . are told in the form of a Music Hall turn, and some of these include songs” (Wade, 6). The original production included contemporary pop songs “arranged in a Music Hall style” to supplement the play’s primary action, “instead of using songs from the original Music Hall canon, or writing our own pastiche versions” (Wade, 6).

36 Wade, 122.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 124.


40 In *Novel Politics* (2016), Isobel Armstrong writes, “To be outcast is to exist in antithesis to groups and communities. To be alone always means that there is a social body elsewhere. Solitude is always a form of exile. Rejected by the body politic, persons at the margins of the social exhibit the limit case of a society’s understanding of the human. The margins, and the destitution they define, are socially made” (183). Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016).

41 It is likely that Waters invented this euphemism for anal sex in order to simulate something like Rhyming Cockney Slang or some other style of cant. The effect seems deliberate: the novel generates its own closed vernacular to mark the reader as unknowing.

CHAPTER 4

“The Messiness of Other Minds”: Playwriting, Narrative, and the Problem of Other People in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*

Ian McEwan’s first novel of the new millennium, *Atonement* (2001), begins with the promise of entertainment. Briony Tallis, McEwan’s thirteen-year-old protagonist and an habitual writer of narrative fiction, has composed her first play, *The Trials of Arabella*. With it, she intends to welcome her brother, Leon, back to the Tallises’ estate in Surrey. Whereas in the past, we are told, Briony would generally perform her stories solo, the news that three of her cousins will also be visiting the estate inspires her to switch genres in order to make use of these three additional bodies. As soon as her cousins arrive, Briony begins distributing scripts and assigning roles, ignoring all the while their minor protests. Unfortunately for Briony, however, rehearsals fall apart and she soon abandons preparations for the play entirely. Though the scrapping of the play could arguably be explained by her younger cousins’ inability to take rehearsals seriously, Briony takes a somewhat more sophisticated view: the failure of the play comes down to the inadequacies of dramatic form.

The simplest way to have impressed Leon would have been to write him a story and put it in his hands herself, and watch as he read it. The title lettering, the illustrated cover, the pages *bound*—in that word alone she felt the attraction of the neat, limited and controllable form she had left behind when she decided to write a play. A story was direct and simple, allowing nothing to come between herself and her reader—no intermediaries with their private ambitions or incompetence, no pressures of time, no limits on resources. In a story you only had to wish, you only had to write it down and you could have the world; in a play you had to make do with what was available: no horses, no village streets, no seaside. No curtain. In short, theatrical entertainment is too complicated, too untidy, for the task at hand. While Briony had previously surmised that dramatic form, with its elision of narrative’s
redundancies—“It was a relief not to be writing out the she saids, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine’s face” (7)—would elevate The Trials of Arabella to “tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity” (8), she later resolves that the inclusion of other people within her artistic project introduces the undesirable “messiness of other minds” (74). The play’s ultimate failure convinces her that narrative fiction is in fact far tidier than drama, and thus she decides to avoid the “shallowness” and “hopelessness” (74) of playwriting altogether.

The ironies presented here have not been lost on readers. Most critics recognize that Atonement, whose first section takes place on a single day in 1935 and whose second and third sections take place over several months in 1940, is invested in and indebted to the history and aesthetics of literary modernism, especially as exemplified by the fiction of Virginia Woolf. As Lynn Wells has suggested, McEwan’s uptake in Atonement of literary modernism alongside other genres, such as the gothic, the realist novel, melodrama, the dumb show, and psychological realism, “takes the form of a veritable traffic-jam of intertextual influences on McEwan’s part.” If Briony covets a tidy variety of narrative fiction without intermediaries, then McEwan’s performative, “traffic-jam” intertextuality surely undermines any sense readers might have that Atonement will be a tidy novel.

Indeed, Atonement’s narrative messiness derives in part from its narrative complexity, which consists of a series of metafictional asides, an unreliable narrator, Woolfian focalization, and several moments of subtle analepsis and prolepsis. The novel’s long first section lays the groundwork for the crime for which Briony must eventually atone: having become convinced by her own imagination that Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallises’ cleaning lady, is a criminal “maniac” (119–20), Briony erroneously accuses him of raping her cousin, when in fact he has all the while been pursuing an entirely consensual romantic
relationship with Briony’s older sister, Cecilia. Robbie is swiftly tried and sent to prison and
maintains an epistolary relationship with Cecilia, who cuts ties with her family. The
remainder of the novel—which takes place in Dunkirk, where Robbie, having been released
early from prison to join the army, awaits evacuation, and London, where Briony trains to
become a nurse—explores Briony’s maturation, as a person and a writer, and her
concomitant awareness that her childhood convictions had been predicated on a general
failure of the real world to conform to narrative tidiness. What’s more, McEwan
supplements *Atonement*’s abundant intertextuality and narrative complexity with a further
metafictional element in which it is revealed, at the very end of the novel, that Briony is the
author of *Atonement*, and that some of its plot developments—including the happy reunion
of Cecilia and Robbie—have been invented for the sake of narrative cohesion. Hence, the
novel establishes its central ethical claim regarding both the risks of fiction-making (i.e.,
historical-narratological erasure) and the (im)possibility of atonement through fiction (i.e.,
historical-narratological reconciliation), which has been the subject of much writing on the
novel.⁴

What emerges from this brief survey of *Atonement*’s narrative messiness is the general
sense that, in one way or another, the novel engages with its eighteenth-century, Victorian,
and modernist literary predecessors. Within this critical consensus, however, is a sustained
dismissal of *The Trials of Arabella* as merely a juvenile experimentation with dramatic form, as
either a naive foray into an unsophisticated genre (i.e., didactic melodrama) or as a necessary
but embarrassing first step toward the narrative sophistication that *Atonement* itself displays.⁵
The narrator herself—whom we later discover is Briony, aged 77, writing in 1999—describes
“how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through the whole history of literature,
beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with
simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism” (41). Though I find explorations of the novel’s interaction with literary history to be useful and clarifying in general, this critical emphasis has nonetheless obscured the novel’s broader investment in non-literary, i.e., theatrical, intertexts like The Trials of Arabella. As Wells has argued, Atonement performs a kind of “generic anxiety” insofar as it self-consciously and ambivalently manages the literary and cultural histories that underwrite it.⁶ And yet, as this chapter shows, the novel’s uptake of theatrical entertainment enables a particular kind of sociocultural collectivity to emerge. Indeed, attending to The Trials of Arabella as a primary intertext enables a more comprehensive assessment of the novel’s generic admixture and, in the process, clarifies its representation of collective life in an age characterized by sociopolitical division.

In a fashion similar to Salman Rushdie’s representation of musical theater and club culture in The Satanic Verses (1988), Angela Carter’s uptake of the comic monologue in Wise Children (1991), and Sarah Waters’s dramatization of male impersonation in Tipping the Velvet (1997), Atonement engages the history of theatrical entertainment in order to reveal a series of omissions and erasures that sustain contemporary representations of collective life. As I have shown in previous chapters, novelists writing in the transitional years between Margaret Thatcher’s New Right and Tony Blair’s New Labour understood contemporary issues surrounding sociocultural division to relate to the ongoing representation of “Englishness” in public life as an ethnically, culturally, and socially coherent (and thus exclusive) whole. In Atonement, McEwan announces the problem of other people first at a small scale, as a socioformal problem introduced by dramatic form as the “messiness of other minds,” which works to undermine the singular coherence of Briony’s creative vision; it also appears, however, at a broad scale, as the discrepancy between overvalued varieties of cultural heritage (e.g., the country estate and the literary canon) and a contemporary body politic
whose relationship to such heritage has been consistently overdetermined by the historical realities of racism, imperialism, sexism, and classism. As critical accounts of the novel attest, this discrepancy can be addressed by interrogating *Atonement’s* ambivalent relationship to its literary predecessors; however, as this chapter suggests, readers would be better served by historicizing the novel’s uptake of theatrical genres.

Instead of romanticizing the past, *Atonement* indexes the omissions, mistakes, and erasures that underpin dominant genres of cultural heritage. Though hotly contested, heritage tends to shore up a collective feeling of historical and cultural continuity by misrepresenting itself as an accurate and effective abridgement of history. In the 1980s, when debates over history and heritage became increasingly public and political, “the heritage” came to denote the collective history of “the English” as a discrete national, demographic, even ethnic category. The variably implicit and explicit continuity activated in heritage discourses is not only temporal or historical; as a marker of geopolitical and demographic continuity, the heritage also establishes boundaries between one collective and another. And, since the dynastic architecture of the ruling classes—castles, palaces, and country estates—inevitably served as the primary icons of such a heritage, the heritage itself became a shorthand for an elite, homogeneous form of classed inheritance that, at the scale of the nation, substituted for the cultural legacy of a heterogeneous population. In *Atonement*, McEwan makes room for somewhat messier heritage genres to emerge from within the respective shadows of the country house and the literary canon by prioritizing the practice of heritage through the theater’s vernacular forms over and above the sacred, codified image of heritage.

By 2001, with all eyes on the future of a Blairite “New Britain,” public debates over heritage had partially faded from view. As such, McEwan’s *Atonement* represents a somewhat
belated contribution to the topic. In the wake of that 1980s moment, McEwan’s self-avowed “Austen novel,” set on a country estate in Surrey later renamed “Tilney’s Hotel,” appears to be a deliberate reexamination of a genre—the estate novel—that had already received a great deal of scholarly attention. In a famous reading of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814)—a novel, like *Atonement*, famous for its agonistic portrayal of an aborted play—Raymond Williams considers the social and history meaning of rural “great houses,” characterizing them as “a visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe.” In an equally famous parallel reading, Edward Said suggests that *Mansfield Park* “enacts the disaffiliation (in the literal sense) of some members of a family, and the affiliation between others and one or two chosen and tested outsiders: in other words, blood relationships are not enough to assure continuity, hierarchy, authority, both domestic and international.” While we may surmise that the country house, as a marker of an elite form of heritage, depends upon the active cultivation of an exclusive bloodline, Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* suggests that the “stamping of power” made visible through heritage discourses is in fact sustained by a kind of strategic mutability. As long as the symbolic power of the heritage is preserved, then the institutions that underwrite the legitimacy of the heritage are free to incorporate whomever they like. Though Austen’s novels predate what we now understand by the term “heritage”—i.e., formalized institutions such as the National Trust, the English Heritage Trust, and Historic England—they are nonetheless a formative part of it. Indeed, *Atonement’s* uptake of Austen has the supplementary function of invoking the “Great Tradition” of English novelists as first expounded by F. R. Leavis, whose “sovereign *topos*,” Francis Mulhern reminds us, “was precisely the continuity of Englishness.”
As interested as *Atonement* is in the historical and demographic continuity of English heritage, its inclusion in the novel as historical setting, thematic intertext, and literary context is not uncritical. Rather, as Cynthia Quarrie and Katherine C. Henderson have shown, McEwan undertakes to identify heritage as an illusion: the Tallises’ home, we are told early in the novel, is an ugly reproduction of an original Adam-style house that had been “destroyed by fire in the late 1880s” (19); surviving the original house is “an artificial lake” and “a crumbling stuccoed temple” (19), built “in the late 1780s [with] no religious purpose at all (72); and, as Cecilia discovers when she attempts to construct a family tree, the Tallises’ ancestors were irretrievably sunk in a bog of farm labouring, with suspicious and confusing changes of surnames among the men, and common-law marriages unrecorded in the parish registers” (21). McEwan’s engagement with heritage reflects the conclusions of earlier cultural critics, including Mulhern and Williams, who argue that the history of heritage is in fact the history of discontinuity and systemic erasure. That is, in order for a continuous heritage to appear on the national-cultural horizon as continuous, a vast, heterogeneous history has to be suppressed and disconnected from everyday life. In this respect, by problematizing heritage in *Atonement*, McEwan appears to be responding to urgent questions posed by Stuart Hall in his lecture, “Whose Heritage?” (1999), in which Hall calls for the reintegration of heterogeneous, hybrid, and marginal popular cultural forms into the heritage.

In what follows, I focus first on Briony’s *The Trials of Arabella* in order to lay out the novel’s investment in historical and narratological continuity as mediated by theatrical performance. Since Briony’s play bookends the novel, I want to take seriously Briony’s naive taxonomy of genre—i.e., the messiness of playwriting versus the tidiness of narrative—in order to demonstrate more precisely how the messiness produced in/by collective
performance genres unsettles the singular neatness of historical and cultural continuity.\textsuperscript{18} 

\textit{Atonement} is a novel self-consciously designed to consolidate its place in a markedly “English” literary and cultural canon, that is, to perform its own continuity; however, it also critiques the desire for continuity by rendering visible the gaps and omissions whose necessary obfuscation sustains heritage narratives. As a vernacular theatrical intertext in a sea of celebrated literary intertexts, \textit{The Trials of Arabella} provides readers with a lens that helps explain why \textit{Atonement} stages the problem of other people—or what Briony calls “the messiness of other minds”—as a problem of genre. If the estate novel in general sustains a necessarily abridged narrative of cultural continuity, then \textit{Atonement}'s uptake of popular theatrical performance aims to expand and diversify that narrative by representing a sociocultural repertoire whose messiness makes room for inconsistency and difference. In McEwan’s hand, popular performance neither supplements nor replaces normative varieties of heritage with an agonistic, vernacular kind; rather, the messiness of popular performance furnishes readers with a manifest sense of discontinuity. \textit{Atonement}'s performance of this self-ironizing discontinuity, I argue, provides a more accurate picture of the demographic reality of the nation at the turn of the millennium.

\textbf{Child’s Play}

Briony conceives \textit{The Trials of Arabella} to entertain, impress, and ultimately instruct her brother, Leon, in the ways of life appropriate to a man of means in his early twenties. In this respect, it introduces novelty into the humdrum monotony of the Tallises’ domestic life by turning an ordinary midsummer’s day, characterized principally by genteel idleness, into a markedly special occasion. The play is also designed, however, as a source of entertainment for Briony herself. A child of thirteen, Briony is diverted by the composition of the play, an
endeavor that the adults around her understand to serve as a generously entertaining
distraction for her visiting cousins, whose parents are in the midst of a complicated divorce (65). Although *The Trials of Arabella* arrives on the scene to commemorate a special occasion (i.e., the return of Leon), the writing, rehearsal, and eventual failure of the play are in themselves rather ordinary: “She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so” (4). The technical formal and generic language retrospectively introduced around the play’s composition by the narrator (i.e., “she had written her way through a whole history of literature,” 41) distracts readers from appreciating the sheer banality of the scenario: Briony, the child, devises a performance to impress the adults in her life. The elder Briony, encouraged by a fictitious version of the editor Cyril Connolly, who thought “how much nicer [it would be] if we had the flavour” of the play (313), decides to incorporate this mundane detail into her autobiographical novel, and thus imbues it with some primal importance;¹⁹ however, such self-psychologization need not necessarily contradict the reader’s sense that the devising of a play is an entirely commonplace mode of self-distraction among children of a certain age and disposition.²⁰

To emphasize the ordinariness of Briony’s play is not to diminish its centrality to the formal and generic economies of the novel. On the contrary, the play’s ordinariness renders visible the novel’s ongoing interest the sociocultural function of vernacular forms of entertainment. Though, diegetically, the play enables Briony to offer up a false dichotomy between the entertaining and the mundane, the novel consistently ironizes Briony’s sense of what exactly counts as a subject worthy of interest in order to demonstrate the value of the commonplace. In writing *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony resolves that a wedding, “with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy
promise of lifelong union,” would satisfy the collective desires of “a whole society” (9). The novel, on the other hand, thinks differently:

She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unravelling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of disorder... Like re-armament and the Abyssinia Question, it was simply not a subject. (8–9)

To perceive divorce merely as “a mundane unravelling,” when it is precisely the divorce of her aunt and uncle that provides the occasion for her cousins to visit, and which, in terms of narrative plot, ultimately leads to the rape of Lola and Briony’s subsequent need to atone, represents a categorical error on Briony’s part. Further, the association of divorce with re-armament and “the Abyssinia Question,” two additional non-subjects, suggests that Briony’s misapprehension of the world’s thrills and mundanities has somewhat graver implications than we might otherwise have thought. That is, the irony evident here in Briony the child’s distinction between the entertaining and the mundane suggests that readers ought to pay close attention to the kinds of subjects (and, ultimately, the kinds of genres) Briony the novelist assigns value to. As Briony the child’s sense of the distinction between subjects and non-subjects demonstrates, one person’s sense of the rare or occasional, such as the messy separation of one’s parents, might appear in another’s own view of things as simply an everyday occurrence, worthy of no one’s attention.

But it is precisely The Trials of Arabella’s status as a mundane genre of entertainment that makes it worthy of the reader’s attention. While Atonement obviously takes up other genres—most notably, the literary novel and, therein, the estate novel—it nonetheless invests a great deal of energy in child’s play as a vernacular genre uniquely capable of accommodating and managing a co-present group of people. The collective capabilities of this kind of theatrical entertainment are nowhere more apparent than in the history of the
amateur or community theater, a spectacular enterprise motivated less by the desire to achieve aesthetic distinction or maximize financial returns and more by the collective desire to entertain and be entertained. As Nadine Holdsworth, Jane Milling, and Helen Nicholson observe,

Amateur theatre groups are primarily founded from communities of interest—those who are driven by a love of theatre for its own sake and a desire to make theatre accessible to as wide an audience as possible. As such, communities of interest become what Etienne Wenger refers to as ‘communities of practice’ rooted in shared experience.21 These “communities of practice” possess a shared commitment to the democratization of leisure beyond mainstream cultural institutions. Not only are amateur companies frequently made up of members who otherwise share lives and/or experiences in common, but their audiences, too, often consist of “family members, neighbours, friends, and work colleagues.”22 In this light, to analyze the vernacular forms of collective performance is to pay attention to the collectivity produced and sustained between community members in the active practice of common and ordinary interests.

The precise nature of these common and ordinary interests, however, is subject to change. In literary and cultural studies, we tend to associate the amateur with the passionate, open-minded lover of knowledge, thanks in no small part to Edward Said’s lectures on “the representation of the intellectual.”23 While Holdsworth et al. recognize that the love of theater is indeed a significant motivator for community theater participants, they acknowledge that amateur theater also has a series of broader, sometimes contradictory sociocultural functions, as either “a place for avant-garde innovation and politically resistant forms” or “a conservative cultural force, aesthetically and politically conventional, centred on questions of cultivation or education.”24 More importantly for our purposes, however, Holdsworth et al. identify a third sociocultural function of amateur practice:
A third characterisation of the amateur in cultural practice sees amateurs as expert guardians of traditional forms, legitimated not by their high aesthetic value, but as important markers of national or community identity. This conception of being an amateur is already nostalgic, and produces the amateur as responsible to cultural heritage, particularly vernacular performance forms, examples of which from the UK might include folk dance, Morris sides, or mummings.25

This view establishes amateur practitioners as expert preservers of technical knowledge and agents of cultural continuity. In this respect, vernacular forms of collective performance serve to reintegrate the habits and customs of an earlier, residual culture into the dominant cultural make-up of contemporary life. To be sure, amateurism represents some form of non-pecuniary “love for and unquenchable interest in” a broad cultural and intellectual economy,26 but it also generates communities of practice whose primary function mirrors the conservationism of heritage and its advocates.27

At the beginning of Atonement, Briony’s The Trials of Arabella takes several steps towards becoming the kind of amateur enterprise capable of forging a community of practice intent upon preserving a classed, patriarchal variety of cultural and historical continuity. As we have seen, Briony eventually abandons the play because she resolves that playmaking itself is an unmanageable endeavor: the rehearsals had “offended her sense of order” and she could not rely upon the messy “scribble of other minds” (36, 74) to bring her dramatic vision to fruition. But we will also remember that Briony did not always view playmaking as such: The Trials of Arabella had been conceived as “tidiness indeed” (8), narratologically seamless inasmuch as it excised all the “she saids” and “and thens” and simply presented the events themselves (6).28 Thematically, too, the play promises Briony a sense of genealogical continuity: “it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid” (4). The return of the prodigal son
to the family estate, a marriage to “the right form of wife,” and the integration of Briony herself into a renewed family unit as bridesmaid, promises for Briony the continuation of an at-risk familial line.\textsuperscript{29} In this respect, the play represents more than just a juvenile departure into dramatic form before settling into a lifelong career writing psychological realism; it also reveals Briony’s investment in producing and maintaining a coherent, continuous line from the past to the present and, ultimately, the future. Its formal potential underpins its cultural purpose. As a result, once the play disintegrates, Briony finds herself rejecting the form wholesale and insisting upon the potential for continuity in narrative fiction, instead.

While Briony goes on to have a career as a successful literary professional, her play has an entirely more banal future. In 1999, aged 77, Briony is invited to the old Tallis estate, now Tilney’s Hotel and Golf Course, to celebrate her birthday with her family: Leon, the children and grandchildren produced by “four marriages and dedicated fathering,” and her cousin Pierrot who, along with his since deceased twin brother Jackson, “had fairly peopled the room” (366). As a surprise, the children of the family perform “an entertainment in [her] honour” (366): \textit{The Trials of Arabella}. With the successful completion of the play, \textit{Atonement} stages, too, the reconstitution of a family estranged by war, secrets, and lies. The discontinued play thus contributes paradoxically to a broader narrative of cultural continuity. As Briony watches a young cousin perform the play’s Prologue, a role originally intended for her, she has a vision of her younger self: “Suddenly, she was right there before me, that busy, priggish, conceited little girl, and she was not dead either, for when people tittered appreciatively at [her idiosyncratic use of the word] ‘evanesce’ my feeble heart—ridiculous vanity!—made a little leap” (367). Seeing herself (however vainly) in the performance of her young cousins, Briony notes with pleasure the afterlife of her childish endeavors. The implications of this are twofold: first, it traces a remarkable genealogy from the ordinary
machinations of child’s play to an event that has, over the course of half a century, accrued vitality and meaning otherwise unimaginable to its original creator; and second, it represents the eventual production of The Trials of Arabella as the final reconstitution of the family. If Atonement itself is a text concerned with the continuity of culture, then it marks the dramatic play text, produced as a result of the coordination of independent minds and bodies and not in spite of it, as the performative endeavor around which such collective continuity constellates.

And yet, this newly reconstituted family is markedly different from the one that found itself fractured in the summer of 1935. Leon is senile (and Briony is slowly losing her memory), Jackson and Cecilia are dead, and Lola continues to be estranged having married her rapist. Briony’s first impression upon entering the room “was of recognising no one,” though she soon identifies her brother and cousin (365). Once the play is underway, however, she “recognise[s] the heroine immediately as Leon’s great-granddaughter, Chloe. What a lovely solemn girl she is, with her rich low voice and her mother’s Spanish blood” (368). This throwaway reference to Chloe’s “Spanish blood” suggests that, after three more generations, the Tallis family has expanded beyond its elitist genealogical aspirations—though there is surely some irony present in the implication that this version of the Tallis family, still monochromatically white, has diversified itself by incorporating a foreign national. And yet, in spite of this reconstitution, it is also abundantly clear that no amount of procreation and goodwill can account for the alienation and estrangement that took place during the missing half-century at the center of the novel, i.e., the years 1940–1999, which remain conspicuously absent from the novel’s field of vision. This absence, coupled with Briony’s and her family’s desire to reconvene, creates a sense of ersatz or skewed continuity, one that depends on the erasure of harm and conflict: indeed, Briony remarks that, between
her and Pierrot, it is “accepted that we never mention his sister” (365). Such discontinuity is further reflected in Briony’s own experience of the play: “I knew the words were mine, but I barely remembered them, and it was hard to concentrate, with so many questions, so much feeling, crowding in” (367). Briony’s hand in writing the play is self-evident, but its ultimate performance has almost nothing to do with her. Like Nancy Astley in Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, who hears her old songs performed by a group of lesbians in a basement bar, Briony is both affiliated with and disaffiliated from *The Trials of Arabella*. The play promises a certain kind of historical, cultural, and genealogical continuity, but that continuity is undermined, or at least qualified, by the traces of estrangements and missed connections that nonetheless persist until the novel’s end.

Of all *Atonement*’s intertexts, it is ultimately the play—in its composition, its rehearsal, and its production—that dramatizes the issues inherent in representing the collective life of the nation at the turn of the millennium. By taking up a genre that depends on the ostensibly seamless integration of other people, *Atonement* stages its own reading of the problem of collectivity in an age characterized by sociopolitical division. Initially marked by failure due to “the messiness of other minds,” *The Trials of Arabella* succeeds not because it manages to overcome that messiness, but because it manages to accommodate messiness. If tidiness is the marker of a cohesive, continuous narrative—and if, by extension, tidiness is a marker of a cohesive and continuous body politic—then *The Trials of Arabella* introduces a prominent and enduring example of messy co-presence. On the one hand, the messiness afforded by the play threatens to undermine collectivity by failing to sufficiently cover up its internal inconsistencies; on the other hand, however, that same messiness reflects a truer picture of an actually existing body politic. The fraught but ultimately successful involvement of other people in the production of the play reveals the potential of vernacular performance genres
to conserve certain varieties of collectivity and continuity in an age of increasing
estrangement; but it also renders visible the erasures that take place in the very process of
that conservation. If continuity is indeed necessary for the maintenance of narrative, cultural,
and historical cohesion, then the performative refusal of *The Trials of Arabella* to conform to
narrative tidiness demonstrates that such cohesion requires a series of strategic, and not
necessarily desirable, omissions. As I show in the next section, the formal tension in
*Atonement* between tidy narrative and messy theatrics both reflects and clarifies a larger
cultural tension related to the representation and inclusion of other people in an otherwise
exclusive national heritage.

The Messiness of Popular Performance

Heritage, as we understand it today, has several sociocultural meanings. As we have
seen, it denotes on the one hand an attempt to conserve what has come to be understood as
“the national past.” This conservationist function of heritage has its roots in politically
diverse movements dedicated to warding off the increasing modernization of the British
landscape. Upon its founding in 1895, the National Trust (a registered charity) became a
prototype for government-sponsored heritage initiatives. Ever since, the preservation of “the
heritage” has been an enduring priority of British governments. Over the course of the
twentieth century, however, “heritage” acquired a supplementary function: it became a
lucrative source of tourist revenue. The heritage-themed tourism industry, or what Hewison
influentially called “The Heritage Industry,” resulted from the combination of the
conservationist impulse at the root of the heritage movement and a boom in disposable
income, itself stemming from an expanding domestic middle class. As a result of this late–
twentieth-century development, heritage became near-synonymous with entertainment.
Moreover, the popular consumption of heritage as entertainment ushered in a large-scale shift in the way that non-historians related to history; rather than understanding history to be an invented discourse, as had become commonplace in academic circles, the general population came to view history as heritage, as a continuous catalogue of names, dates, and locations duly represented by a variety of heritage sites dotted about the country. Travelling to these sites of a Saturday afternoon and paying the price of admission effectively guarantees historical knowledge to a heritage leisure-seeker.

However, heritage tourism does not cover the full extent of heritage enterprise. Though “The Heritage Industry” as such did not exist during the 1930s and 1940s, it would be misleading to suggest that heritage enterprises did not exist before the postwar commercialization of heritage. In fact, the genres of entertainment that would come to constitute an important part of “the heritage” were, as they to some extent remain, entirely commonplace elements of everyday life. As I have suggested above, in the light of Holdsworth et al.’s work on amateur theater, these commonplace genres of entertainment—e.g., community theater, Morris dancing, village fêtes—work to establish “communities of practice” whose shared interests are negotiated and defined in the process of collective, embodied interaction. In contrast to “The Heritage Industry,” which presents cultural heritage as timeless and static, these non-commercial, small-scale enterprises enable us to view collective entertainment as the vernacular performance of heritage. Such a view, I argue, reveals that Atonement understands the problem of other people to be a problem of genre; accordingly, the following section sets out to show that McEwan’s uptake of theatrical entertainment genres ironizes Briony’s desire for narrative cohesion. Indeed, the novel’s representation of spectacular entertainment generates a distinct sense of narrative messiness
and, in the process, renders visible the manifest discontinuity between members of an ostensibly unified body politic.

Briony’s *Trials of Arabella* serves as a pivotal genre in Briony’s creative development from folklorist to psychological realist (a personal and professional telos designed to reflect the whole history of English letters), but it also stretches the span of the novel and establishes genealogical continuity between discrete generations of the Tallis family. In its conception, rehearsal, and production—by both the characters in the novel and by the novel itself—*The Trials of Arabella* counts as a heritage artifact designed to preserve historical and cultural continuity through popular performance. Equally, there are other varieties of collective leisure in *Atonement*, some of which appear only in passing: Briony’s cousin, Lola, pretends to have seen *Hamlet* when she had in fact see “a matinée pantomime at the London Palladium” (60), while Leon takes a date to see a Gilbert and Sullivan libretto and happens to see King George V during the interval (108). Although none of these activities achieves quite the same status as *The Trials of Arabella*, they nevertheless reveal a consistent and variegated attempt on the novel’s part to engage vernacular heritage genres. In this respect, the popular performance of heritage in *Atonement* is not a simple alternative to the codified image of heritage; rather, as I will soon show, it enables a pointed critique of how normative heritage images underwrite retrograde national myths. Representing these necessarily messy genres of entertainment restores texture to the national past and combats the systemic erasure of non-conservative/conservationist patterns of life.

As *The Trials of Arabella* demonstrates, the content of popular performance is often intended to establish a collective vision among its audience: in Briony’s view, the ideal iteration of *The Trials* would legitimize marriage and reject divorce, convey the singularity of her creative vision, and instantiate genealogical purity. For McEwan, however, the messy
forms of popular performance tend to ironize that very intention. In May 1940, Briony moves to London to train as a nurse and assist in the war effort. After the student nurses are given an impromptu break from their duties, Briony and her colleague, Fiona, decide to cross the river and take a stroll through St. James’s Park. Despite the immediate context of the war, we are told that “it was still an innocent time” and that “London had the outward signs, but not yet the mentality, of war” (287). Briony and Fiona purchase some tea and rent a couple of deckchairs “to listen to elderly men of the Salvation Army playing Elgar adapted for brass band” (287). The scene is idyllic, and markedly so. Not only are Briony and Fiona entirely at their leisure, but the surrounding environment is characterized by the pursuit of collective pleasure: children “who seemed to have escaped evacuation ran about on the grass shouting and laughing, the band struggled with music beyond its capabilities, and deckchairs still cost twopence” (288). Moreover, the scene is faintly patriotic: though the band struggles to play Elgar (whose most famous compositions are the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* [1901–1930], the first of which is the self-evidently patriotic song, “Land of Hope and Glory” [1901]), they soon improve as they move on to the less formal, popular songs, “‘Bye ‘Bye Blackbird” (1924) and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1912). The attendant crowd eventually starts to sing along with the band, while Briony and Fiona gossip about work.

This scene depicts what I would call “soft patriotism,” that is, the pleasurable performance of positive national feeling (somewhat short of national pride) that fits almost seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life. We have seen already an example in Angela Carter’s depiction of the stand-up comedian, Gorgeous George, in *Wise Children* (1991). George’s blue comedy routine shifts gears once he adopts a “reverential air,” sings a series of patriotic songs, including Ivor Novello’s “Rose of England” (1937), “God Save the King” (1745), and “Rule, Britannia!” (1740), and performs a military-inspired turn accompanied by
“Land of Hope and Glory” on the piano. In *Wise Children*, it becomes clear that George is a target of satire: the soft patriotism of his routine reaches a fever pitch when he removes all of his clothes save a Union-Jack gee-string and, in the process, reveals on his body “a complete map of the entire world” with the British Empire colored in pink. Although McEwan’s Salvation Army band never becomes quite as ludicrous as Carter’s Gorgeous George, the performance’s own variety of soft patriotism briefly acquires a discomfiting tenor: “People in their deckchairs were joining in, and some were clapping time. Communal singalongs had a faintly coercive quality—that way strangers had of catching each other’s eyes as their voices rose—which she [Briony] was determined to resist” (289). In *Wise Children*, the audience joins in with George’s routine “as if by sheer force of habit,” while in *Atonement* “habit” has become “coercion.” On its face, Briony’s resistance to the faint “coercive quality” of communal singing seems to reflect a general reluctance on her part simply to participate in collective enterprise that she herself has not organized. (Readers who recall Briony’s authoritarian style of direction during the rehearsals of *The Trials of Arabella* may indeed be satisfied by such a reading.)

But there seems to me to be some deeper irony at work. The singalong offers Briony with the opportunity to belong, to feel part of a collective enterprise that exceeds both the exclusivity of her family (which she has forsaken) and the formality of her new profession (which she has chosen). And yet, she rejects this broad-scale collectivity in order to cultivate and preserve a smaller encounter with Fiona. Half-distracted from the band’s performance, Briony and Fiona share their “grievances” about nursing “with self-conscious enjoyment and increasingly with a great deal of giggling” (289). On the one hand, this laughter represents a carnivalesque departure from the soft patriotism of the Salvation Army band: although those who participate in the communal singalong do so with evident pleasure, Briony and Fiona
implicitly reject the normative show of national feeling by experiencing and performing their own private conspiracies. They are in the crowd, but they are not of it, and thus McEwan marks the more intimate forms of collectivity that persist in spite of the faint coercion of collective enterprise. On the other hand, however, he also makes clear that this ostensibly coercive enterprise is in actual fact entirely hospitable to Briony and Fiona’s non-attentiveness:

heads began to turn in their direction, and fingers were laid theatrically over lips. But these gestures were only half serious, and most of those who turned smiled indulgently from their deckchairs, for there was something about two young nurses—nurses in wartime—in their purple and white tunics, dark blue capes and spotless caps, that made them as irreproachable as nuns. (289)

The theatrical, “only half serious” admonishment directed from the soft patriotic audience to Briony and Fiona bears the hallmarks of true displeasure, but it in actual fact reveals an underlying consistency between both the willingness to participate and the performance of withdrawal. In other words, the image of “two young nurses—nurses in wartime” sustains the spectacle of national feeling even as those nurses perform their withdrawal from it. As a result, Briony’s perception of the “coercive quality” of collective singing loses some of its persuasive force.

Like The Trials of Arabella, the Salvation Army band’s performance and its surrounding environment is a decidedly messy enterprise: the musicians are amateurs and its audience is only half paying attention. And, while it represents a real scene of performative collectivity sustained by patriotic feeling, its messiness is nonetheless enhanced and ironized by the looming specter of World War Two. Bracketing either end of the park scene are two haunting reminders of the war: “It was hard to believe that barely a hundred miles away was a military disaster” (288) and, when Briony and Fiona arrive back at the hospital to see the first casualties following “the miracle of Dunkirk,” their “eyes met and something passed
between them, shock, or shame that they had been laughing in the park when there was this” (292). It would be easy to conclude piously that, while these nurses were enjoying themselves in the park, they should have been focused on the imminent tragedies of war, or that recreation during wartime is somehow inevitably unethical, or simply gauche. My impulse, however, is to resist such easy moralism. Rather, for Briony, the experience of shame derives from her desire to erase exactly these kinds of tragedies from her life: “Her secret torment and the public upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime. The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened” (288). To Briony’s mind, historical erasure is quite literally the solution to her inability to tell the truth, in the first instance, and to atone, in the second. As my reading of The Trials of Arabella suggests, the messiness of popular performance resists Briony’s desire to forge cultural and historical continuity through narrative cohesion, that is, by rendering visible the gaps and omissions that necessarily sustain continuity as such. In the case of the Salvation Army band’s performance, these haunting references to the war illuminates the messy backdrop against which the band’s patriotic performance of collectivity takes place and, in the process, indexes the material circumstances of those people, i.e., soldiers, whose sacrifice legitimizes such patriotic displays in the first place.

Given the way that Atonement is organized, readers have already been exposed to the horrors of Dunkirk. Briony’s park-side stroll occurs in Part Three of the novel, while Part Two focuses on Robbie Turner’s concurrent experience of travelling to and ultimately waiting on the beach at Bray Dunes after British forces received the order to withdraw. To my mind, these two episodes are companion pieces, with the earlier serving as a grotesque parody of the soft patriotism on display in St. James’s Park. As Robbie arrives on the Dunes—an historic resort town—he is reminded of “some long-forgotten childhood treat, a
carnival or sports event” (241); accordingly, the “police were organising the parking [of military vehicles], lining up the rows, like stewards at a county show” (243). This coincidence enables McEwan to appropriate an enduring image of national sentimentality and pride—i.e., “the miracle of Dunkirk”—and subsequently to graft it onto the rather more banal, though no less ritualistic, history of collective entertainment. In doing so, McEwan presents us with a remarkably mundane description of one of the most sanctified and sensationalized events in British history:

To the left was the resort of Bray, a cheerful front of cafés and little shops that in a normal season would be renting out beach chairs and pedal bikes. In a circular park with a neatly mowed lawn was a bandstand, and a merry-go-round painted red, white and blue. In this setting, another, more insouciant company had hunkered down. Soldiers had opened up the cafés for themselves and were getting drunk at the tables outside, bawling and laughing. Men were larking about on the bikes along a pavement stained with vomit. A colony of drunks was spread out on the grass by the bandstand, sleeping it off. A solitary sunbather in his underpants, face-down on a towel, had patches of uneven sunburn on his shoulders and legs—pink and white like a strawberry and vanilla ice-cream. (248–49)

While Alastair Cormack quite rightly argues that here “the notion of the ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ is savagely demythologized” and that “the retreat is replayed in all its contingent horrors,” the after-images of recreation could not be more evident in this scene. The “cheerful front of cafés and little shops,” the “neatly mown lawn” and its accompanying bandstand, the vibrantly and patriotically painted merry-go-round, and the casual acts of drinking, laughing, cycling, and sunbathing all contribute to McEwan’s depiction of the Dunes as a site of collective pleasure rather than simply a locus of nationalistic feeling. To be clear, I do not think McEwan intends to ironize here the catastrophic (and, in many respects, miraculous) events of Dunkirk. Rather, by highlighting the ghostly traces of collective entertainment at the site of a military disaster, McEwan offers up a critique of the underlying political and cultural logics that motivate both the ad hoc, soft patriotism of the Salvation Army band and the hard, enduring symbolism of Dunkirk. If anything, the subject of McEwan’s bleak irony
here is the patriotic solemnity and national self-righteousness that tends to accompany overly sentimentalized representations of British military history.\textsuperscript{38}

The novel’s representation of Dunkirk and its perverse pleasures reveals a persistent desire on the part of the novel to establish continuity between seemingly disparate or unrelated phenomena. In other words, while the macabre connection McEwan establishes between St. James’s Park and the Bray Dunes serves in part to undo the systemic erasure of the messy realities of war from everyday nationalisms, it nonetheless sympathizes with the collective desire for continuity and cohesion that motivates the impulse to erase. This tension can be seen most evidently when Robbie, desperate for a drink of water, enters a crowded pub only to find that all potable substances have long since been consumed. The scene is not entirely fruitless, however: “The noise and press of bodies and damp tobacco air satisfied a homesick yearning for a Saturday night pub. This was the Mile End Road, and Sauchiehall Street, and everywhere in between” (250). The pub “satisfies” Robbie, not by providing him with a much-needed drink, but rather by sensorially evoking the trappings of yet another commonplace scene of collective pleasure. In spite of the evident differences between one’s local pub and a commandeered one at the site of a military rescue, Robbie’s experience of drinking culture is markedly restorative. Indeed, any such differences are essentially erased by the unequivocal assertion that “This was the Mile End Road, and Sauchiehall Street,” an assertion that compresses the distance between locales in London and Glasgow. Since the miracle of Dunkirk, given its sacrosanct place in self-aggrandizing national myths, resists even the subtlest irony, McEwan appears to make an uncharacteristic concession: that the desire for cultural and historical continuity, the kind of continuity promised most readily by contemporary heritage discourses, can serve a yearned-for palliative function.
The novel’s enduring sympathy with the desire for continuity in spite of its erasing tendencies can be explained by the novel’s most controversial feature: the end. After the roaring albeit delayed success of *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony makes a half-confession:

But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station... How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never meet again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?” (370–71)

Critics of the novel have almost universally interpreted this revelation to indicate that Robbie and Cecilia did “in fact” die in 1940 and that the novel of atonement comes at the expense of some kind of diegetic truth. We are returned, then, to the novel’s central quandary: at what point does historical-narratological cohesion become historical-narratological erasure?

Briony indicates her final assessment of the matter when she writes, “No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there’s always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish” (371). The problem with rejecting Briony’s assessment, as “a certain kind of reader” inevitably does, is abundantly clear. That is, if we prioritize the truth-claims of “the bleakest realism,” to borrow Briony’s phrase, then we would appear to be left without continuity, without cohesion, and, more problematically for literary critics, without a novel that actually tells the story it claims to tell. Readers are ultimately left to decide for themselves between continuity (erasure) and discontinuity (“the bleakest realism”), or, put another way, between the palliative function of tidy self-delusion and the hopeless satisfaction of clear-eyed critique.

Whatever one decides regarding the diegetic truth of the novel and the ethical viability of Briony’s atonement, it seems to me that *Atonement* itself remains consistent: a
work of fiction designed to offer up cultural and historical continuity where no such continuity exists. To the very end, the novel entertains the impulse to substitute historical and cultural messiness with tidiness. And yet, Briony’s metafictional reference to another possible narrative—that is, her reference to the bleakly realist deaths of Robbie and Cecilia—makes a mess of what could have been a tidy ending. Briony makes this clear by way of a further, smaller confession: “I have not travelled so very far after all, since I wrote my little play. Or rather, I’ve made a huge digression and doubled back to my starting place” (370). Although the younger Briony sets out to write *The Trials of Arabella* in order to promote narratological and genealogical consistency and to preserve the singularity of her creative vision, her turn to the theatrical in fact captures the messy realities of her home life, the lives of those around her, and ultimately the lives of those not yet born into the Tallis family. To be sure, the act of writing (both fiction and plays) offers Briony complete control over her creation and, as a result, enables her to achieve a kind of narrative atonement; however, the final *enactment* of the play, which requires the inclusion of other, messier minds, disrupts that narrative project. Briony’s final act as a novelist, then, an act designed to confer upon her a godlike authority over her stories and characters (371), results in the opposite: her metafictional aside to the novel’s theatrical origin reveals an underlying messiness that not even Briony can contain. To this end, the novel’s uptake of popular performance—in *The Trials of Arabella* and elsewhere—ironizes its own desire for cultural and historical continuity by rendering continuity itself an impossible feat.

Heritage Discontinued

*The Trials of Arabella*, as we have seen, tends to resist Briony’s authorial-managerial control. It is in fact far messier than either the child or the adult Briony realizes. The play
initially introduces the promise of some form of continuity—variably genealogical, narratological, cultural, and historical—but time and again it fails to make good on that promise. Instead, we are left with a prevailing sense of discontinuity, of narratological and historical fissures or omissions that, in spite of the work of the literary critic, cannot be assimilated into Atonement's master-narrative. By way of closing, then, I will consider how the novel's representation of a discontinuous heritage, a messy version of heritage whose strategic omissions remain visible, helps us to reconceptualize the relationship between popular performance genres and their audiences. In doing so, I turn first to Stuart Hall's lecture, “Whose Heritage?” (1999), in order to determine the residual value of critical heritage discourses and to raise some questions about the demographic expansiveness of Atonement's representation of collectivity. This requires a slight conceptual shift from an understanding of “continuity” as temporal cohesion to a closely related understanding of “continuity” as socio-spatial or demographic cohesion. In other words, by attending to Hall’s analysis of the demographic basis of “the heritage,” I hope to explain how McEwan’s uptake of various heritage discourses in Atonement reflects not only an engagement in the historical-narratological processes of storytelling, but also a concern regarding the demographic constitution of the contemporary body politic. By representing heritage as discontinuous, that is, by rendering visible those discontinuities that are otherwise erased within normative heritage iconographies, Atonement seems to gesture knowingly towards a diverse body politic under erasure.

Delivering the keynote address at a 1999 critical heritage studies conference entitled, “Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage,” Stuart Hall revises the everyday traditionalist and conservationist meanings of “heritage” to “include the active production of culture and the arts as a living activity.” He continues,
however, by suggesting that heritage “is also a classic example of the operation of what Raymond Williams called ‘the selective tradition,’” that is, the selective inclusion and exclusion of histories (both discursive and material) from the nation’s image of itself in order to “develop a deep investment in their [i.e., national institutions] own ‘truth.’”

Given the essential investment of heritage discourses in shoring up certain varieties of the national past, Hall asks: “who is the Heritage for?” The remainder of his lecture-cum-essay consists of Hall’s attempts to explain how various challenges to this conservative conception of heritage—namely, “the inclusion of domestic vernacular” heritage through a process of “democratisation” and post-Enlightenment critiques of knowledge—have unsettled heritage to the extent that it seems newly capable (in 1999) of reflecting the diverse heritage practices of an actually existing postimperial body politic. This is no naive boosterism on Hall’s part: he makes clear, in fact, that the diversification of heritage still requires a “major culture-change,” “a major redirection of resources,” and “the massive leverage of a state and government committed to producing, in reality rather than in name, a more culturally diverse, socially just, equal and inclusive society and culture, and holding its cultural institutions to account.”

If the heritage is always already abridged, then it stands to reason that heritage discourses consistently offer up narratives of continuity in the place of discontinuity. This does not seem to be at issue for Hall here, however. Instead, Hall is concerned by the manifest discontinuity between the heritage and the people whose always-already abridged history it claims to represent. In other words, heritage is problematically discontinuous not only because it makes a series of selective historical-narratological omissions, but because those omissions subsequently place an underrepresented part of the body politic under erasure, and, as a result, serve white supremacist ends.
Across the great cities and ports, in the making of fortunes, in the construction of great houses and estates, across the lineages of families, across the plunder and display of the wealth of the world as an adjunct to imperial enterprise, across the hidden histories of statued heroes, in the secrecy of private diaries, even at the centre of the great master-narratives of “Englishness” like the Two World Wars, falls the unscripted shadow of the forgotten “Other”. The first task, then, is re-defining the nation, re-imagining “Britishness” or “Englishness” itself in a more profoundly inclusive manner. The Brits owe this, not to only us, but to themselves: for to prepare their own people for success in a global and de-centred world by continuing to misrepresent Britain as a closed, embattled, self-sufficient, defensive, “tight little island” would be fatally to disable them.44

On the one hand, this statement, with its invocation of “the unscripted shadow of the forgotten ‘Other,’” offers up a fairly standard postcolonial critique of the place of imperial history in the national heritage. Many of the trappings of heritage—great houses and estates, lineages of families, statues, and war—are here supplemented by an “unscripted shadow,” “hidden histories,” and “the secrecy of private diaries,” and thus index a less obviously public undercurrent supporting heritage discourses derived from the history of imperialism. Importantly, however, Hall does not see this discontinuity as a problem with “Englishness” as such; rather, he asserts that a comprehensive redefinition of “Englishness” as a racially and ethnically inclusive cultural and demographic category might enable a more demographically representative heritage to emerge on the national horizon. In spite of Hall’s claim regarding the continued and fatal misrepresentation of Britain “as a closed, embattled, self-sufficient, defensive, ‘tight little island,’” a prescient claim that effectively forecasts 21st-century developments in state-sanctioned ethno-nationalism, it nonetheless remains true that there can be no historical-narratological continuity without demographic continuity. This is quite plainly not an argument for social, cultural, or ethnic homogeneity; rather, it is an argument in favor of constructing a diverse heritage from actually existing cultural diversity.

It hardly seems likely that Hall had a novel like Atonement in mind as a suitable antidote to England’s heritage ailments; and yet, McEwan composed Atonement precisely in
this context: a moment in which heritage debates were being renewed not in order to undergird the reactionary ethnic myopia characteristic of the 1980s, but rather to curate a heritage repertoire broad enough to reflect the cultural diversity of the UK at the turn of the millennium. Perhaps this explains McEwan’s decision to have the novel jump directly from 1940 to 1999 without comment, ultimately omitting from the novel the boom in cultural diversity that accompanied the second half of the twentieth century. But to what end?

*Atonement* is an abundantly white novel, with only a few minor suggestions of racial and ethnic diversity: Robbie Turner’s mother, for example, seems faintly coded as ethnically different since, in addition to working as the Tallises’ cleaner, she serves as an “occasional clairvoyant” for local women (86). The more readily available example of racial difference, however, comes at the very end of the novel, as Briony travels by taxi to her former home, she remarks that her “driver, Michael, was a cheerful West Indian lad” (362). A small instance of cultural conflict occurs between Briony and Michael when Briony “established that [she] would not tolerate the thumping music at volume from the speakers on the ledge behind my head,” although she eventually backtracks and insists that he turn it back on: “the thumping twanging bass noise resumed, and over it, a light baritone chanting in Caribbean patois to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme, or a playground skipping-rope jingle. It helped me. It amused me. It sounded so childish, though I had a suspicion that some terrible sentiments were being expressed” (362–63). Though Briony’s desire not to have loud music playing during a long car ride is doubtlessly understandable, this encounter nonetheless serves as another example of Briony’s authoritarian desire to have things just so. Like other authoritarianisms, it involves an ugly and racist form of cultural solipsism.

And yet, on the novel’s part, this encounter appears to respond to what Hall calls “the demand that the majority, mainstream versions of the Heritage should revise their own
self-conceptions and rewrite the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside.” Hall continues, “This is not so much a matter of representing ‘us’ as of representing more adequately the degree to which ‘their’ history entails and has always implicated ‘us’, across the centuries, and vice versa.” Briony’s microaggression of course reveals more about her than it does about Michael: her lifelong commitment to continuity has made her an agent of erasure, which, in the British context especially, reproduces the racist solipsism characteristic of imperialist history. In this light, the novel’s jump from 1940 to 1999 effectively elides post-Windrush cultural diversity from the novel’s historical record, only to appear at the end in the form of Michael as repressed content. But it seems, too, that the novel makes no excuses for itself: it is staging its own complicity—as an estate novel and as a metafictional riff on the “Great Tradition”—in the systematic erasure of non-white and especially black Britons from heritage genres.

Further, as is typical of the estate genre, Atonement’s representation of class difference works only insofar as readers understand that Robbie, the Cambridge-educated son of a domestic worker, belongs to the Tallises’ family exclusively as part of the household economy. Though he is the beneficiary of Mr. Tallis’s goodwill, and although he is the object of both Cecilia’s and Briony’s romantic desires, he is nonetheless external to the family unit as demarcated by classed genealogical bounds. When, towards the end of Part One, Robbie returns to the house having located Briony’s young cousins, who had run away, and having been in his absence accused of rape, the first sign that he is no longer a part of the Tallis unit comes as he is refused entry to the house: “It might have been that Mrs Tallis did not want the polluting presence to step inside her house” (182). In order to maintain the ersatz genealogical purity for which the Tallis estate has come to stand, the man whose success in life depends on an equally ersatz performance of a class identity he does not possess must be
ejected; for the sake of the family to which he does not belong, Robbie can no longer be permitted to play at social mobility. This paternalistic and classist view has serious consequences for Robbie and for the novel; namely, it condemns him to prison and ultimately to die in war, and it identifies Briony’s crime not simply as a grievous lie, but moreover a lie designed to preserve class hegemony. True atonement, then, would involve not only reversing the lie (and rewriting the past), but also addressing the underlying desire for continuity that motivated the lie in the first place. If readers, as so many critics assert, read *Atonement* in search of an historical-narratological ethics of atonement, then it strikes me that no such ethics is possible without a concomitant recognition of the discontinuity at the novel’s core.

If the estate novel in general is designed to shore up cultural continuity through an exclusive and elite form of genealogical continuity, then *Atonement* surely fails. In its place, discontinuity rules. This can be seen most obviously in the breakdown of the Tallis family: Leon fails to marry properly and instead has multiple children by multiple wives, Cecilia leaves the home and cuts off her parents entirely, and Briony eschews the family tradition of attending Cambridge in favor of becoming a nurse. Even more obviously, the estate itself—the original symbol of the Tallises’ genealogical coherence—is inherited by none of the Tallis children. Instead, it gets absorbed into a late 20th-century heritage tourism economy as Tilney’s Hotel. When Briony returns to the hotel for her birthday party, it has of course changed, but Briony resists the urge to feel nostalgic: “It was a relief not to see everything in terms of tasteless decline. . . the building itself surely embraced more human happiness now, as a hotel, than it did when I lived here” (365). It is this version of the Tallis estate, disconnected from family drama and from Briony’s crime, that ultimately accommodates the “renewal of family bonds” (361) with the successful staging of *The Trials of Arabella*. 
Atonement is a messy novel designed, in the interest of preserving a fictitious sense of historical and narratological continuity, to look tidy. The revelation that the novel we have been reading was in fact written by Briony herself both clarifies and complicates this design insofar as, on the one hand, it illuminates Briony’s desire of historical-narratological reconciliation (or “atonement”) and, on the other, it sheds light on some of the historical-narratological erasures that have taken place to ensure such reconciliation. In McEwan’s hands, the estate novel—and the heritage discourses for which it has come to stand—performs a similar function: it announces itself as a heritage artifact even as it works to undermine the continuity that such an artifact is positioned to sustain. Reading the novel’s representation of messy performance genres, that is, reading the novel’s representation of silly melodrama and child’s play, amateur performance and communal singalong, enables us to account for those vernacular forms of collective enterprise that tend to be erased in the master-narratives of heritage. In the final analysis, Atonement offers up an image of heritage discontinued, which, rather than mourning the loss of continuity, strategically undermines the solipsistic impulses of conservative heritage discourses and their advocates. The effect of this might have been, following Hall, a more organic and inclusive living heritage that reflects the cultural diversity of the British body politic as it exists today. In actual fact, a majority of white Britons rejected this vision of a diversified, democratized heritage when they elected to withdraw from the European Union in June 2016. To my mind, heritage discourses surrounding the so-called “Brexit” decision reveal all too plainly the underlying logic motivating both conservationism and reactionary ethno-nationalism.

With Atonement, then, we are left with a relatively recent novel that nonetheless functions somewhat like a time capsule: it wades into debates surrounding cultural politics and the national heritage that, twenty years later, seem to be utterly lost already. Perhaps this
is true for Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, and Sarah Waters, too. Perhaps this belated optimism regarding the democratized future of Englishness and racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is in fact a defining feature of the post-consensus novel. And perhaps it is why, to some, our present political moment feels like such an abrupt departure from the promising teleology of the twentieth century. In any case, I shall end with a final quotation from Hall, which to me seems to preserve some of the promising energy distilled in the work of my chosen authors. At the close of “Whose Heritage?”, Hall writes,

> Perhaps this aspect of cultural production [that is, work by young black and South Asian musicians] needs no ‘archive’ or ‘heritage’. But it is proceeding unrecorded and unanalysed, consigned to the ephemera of its day—expendable. Yet it represents one of the most important cultural developments of our time: the stakes which ‘the margins’ have in modernity, the local-in-the-global, the pioneering of a new cosmopolitan, vernacular, post-national, global sensibility.  

Here lies Hall’s ever-characteristic turn to the popular arts with which he began his intellectual career. In the midst of an intellectual period that we now tend to call “the global turn,” Hall continues to prioritize those smaller-scales of analysis central to the study of popular culture. His “new cosmopolitan, vernacular, post-national, global sensibility” is not the global sensibility of statist neoliberal cooperation, nor is its post-nationalism identical to the post-nationalism of the UK’s pro-Europe constituents. On the contrary, Hall’s global, post-national, vernacular cosmopolitanism lives on in the messiness of popular performance, in the adaptation of established repertoires for new audiences, in the ready give-and-take of comic play, and in the remixed rehearsal of antagonistic cultural forms. Although the contemporary novel seems to have abandoned its promising turn-of-the-millennium tenor, these practices persist nonetheless.

Notes


3 Wells, 103.


6 Wells, 103.

7 This is not to say the novel eschews all romance. Reflecting on her representation of her childhood self, Briony (the elder) writes that she “was well aware of the extent of her self-mythologising, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone” (41). Could we call this something like “performative romanticism”? In her book on “romances of the archive” (i.e., postwar novels that investigate the past via fictional representations of historical data), Suzanne Keen nicely glosses this kind of ambivalent romanticism: “romances of the archive seek and find solid facts, incontrovertible evidence, and well-preserved memories of times past” (3). The romantic treatment of the past is not ahistorical

A key text in these debates is Robert Hewison’s now classic book, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), in which he defines the heritage industry as a state-sponsored effort to turn the nation’s past into a marketable product. With the advent of Blair’s “New Labour, New Britain” agenda in 1994, there was a discernible shift from the state’s desire to recuperate (and relitigate) the past. Debates over the heritage obviously continue to be relevant in conservationist and academic circles, and indeed “Critical Heritage Studies” remains an energetic field of study in cultural anthropology.

McEwan, Interview with Jeff Giles, “Luminous Novel from Dark Master,” *Newsweek*, March 17, 2002, https://www.newsweek.com/luminous-novel-dark-master-141927. Though McEwan claims he had neither *Northanger Abbey* (1817) nor *Mansfield Park* (1814) in mind as he was conceiving the novel, he nonetheless lifts *Atonement’s* epigraph from the former. It depicts Mr. Tilney scolding Catherine Morland for having entertained the idea, supported by her avid consumption of Gothic fiction, that Tilney’s father had murdered his wife. So much can be said—and indeed it has been—about the epigraph’s representation of the dangers of reading and misreading, which are central to both novels. Pilar Hidalgo, for example, observes that “Briony Tallis, like Catherine Morland, is a heroine whose perception is distorted by literature and an imperfect knowledge of the world” (83). More pointedly, Cynthia Quarrie connects the *Northanger*'s cautions about reading explicitly to the estate genre: “Ironically, the mode of reading we are being cautioned against here is not Gothic (as it is in Austen’s text), but has to do with our nostalgic expectations for the genre of the country house novel within which *Northanger Abbey* participates” (195). Pilar Hidalgo, “Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement,*” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46, no. 2 (2005): 82–91; Cynthia Quarrie, “‘Before the Destruction Began’: Interrupting Post-Imperial Melancholia in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement,*” *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 2 (2015): 193–209.


Francis Mulhern, “English Reading,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 253. Leavis appears briefly in the novel when Robbie reflects on his time at Cambridge studying English Literature and attending the Leavis’s lectures. How far McEwan is critical of Leavis’s “Great Tradition” has been the subject of some debate, usually with emphasis on the novel’s abundant intertextuality and allusions to novels and authors expressly excluded from Leavis’s tradition, such as Joyce and Woolf. But Leavis’s influence on the English literary canon can also tell us something about the intersection between literature, criticism, and cultural continuity (or heritage). That is, as readers of his work have suggested, Leavis maintained a general anxiety about the future of English culture (and not just English letters), and understood his literary criticism and pedagogy to serve as a bulwark against the ongoing decay of some originary form of Englishness. In addition to Mulhern, see Genevieve Abravanel, “English by Example: F. R. Leavis and the Americanization of Modern England,” *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 4 (2008):


14 Quarrie argues that Atonement “investigates our relationship to [cultural] inheritance and argues for a certain skeptical orientation toward British identity and nationhood” (195), while Henderson illustrates that Atonement’s representation of the country house “exposes political backwardness not just in England’s provincial past but, indeed, at the heart of the more contemporary New Britain conceived as the antithesis to English Heritage” (“New Britain, Old England,” 715).


16 In his critique of Leavis, Mulhern argues, “Tradition, usually said to be received, is in reality made, in an unceasing activity of selection, revision, and outright invention, whose function is to defend identity against the threat of heterogeneity, discontinuity and contradiction. Its purpose is to bind (and necessarily, therefore, to exclude)” (253, original emphasis). Likewise, in his critique of country houses, Williams writes, “It is fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses: the extended manors, the neo-classical mansions, that lie so close in rural Britain. People still pass from village to village, guidebook in hand, to see the next and yet the next example, to look at the stones and the furniture. But stand at any point and look at that land. Look at what those fields, those streams, those woods even today produce. Think it through as labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that many houses, on that scale” (105).


18 In his chapter on the pageant play in Virginia Woolf’s Between the Acts (1941), Jed Esty describes a similar tension: “Several times in the novel, Woolf reverses course between collective and recuperative ideas of Englishness and her fundamental wariness (as both artist and woman) about any kind of national or collective participation” (87). For Woolf, pageant plays are tricky because they have inherited a dull, paternalistic patriotism, but they are promising, too, because they represent a public, indigenous form of collective expression. The singularity of Miss La Trobe’s creative vision in Between the Acts without doubt serves as a precedent for Briony’s own; further, like the Trials of Arabella, Miss La Trobe’s production is ultimately enabled and sustained by its own messiness (e.g., the half-attentive audience, the


20 Phelan seems to miss this point when he suggests: “Briony’s hopes for a grand performance of *The Trials of Arabella* are dashed by the nonromantic realities of everyday life” (117).


22 Holdsworth et al., 12. Erin Walcon and Helen Nicholson describe this blurring of the distinction between theatrical enterprise and ordinary life as “[o]ne of the distinctive qualities of amateur theatre”: “it is so often both integral to the everyday lives of participants and yet its activities are somehow separate from the quotidian or mundane realities of ‘normal’ living.” Erin Walcon and Helen Nicholson, “The Sociable Aesthetics of Amateur Theatre,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27, no. 1 (2017): 19.

23 Said, “Professionals and Amateurs,” in *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 76. In the twenty or so years since Said’s essay, scholars in media studies and communications have adopted the keyword “amateur” to explain the impact of the internet, new media, “do-it-yourself-ism” on the discourses of professionalism and expertise. As Caroline Hamilton notes, “the discourses of modern day [sic] amateurism, informed as they are by prevailing cultural norms relating to work and identity, and the flows of economy and information, are significantly more complicated than simply doing something just ‘for the love of it.’” Caroline Hamilton, “Symbolic Amateurs: On the Discourse of Amateurism in Contemporary Media Culture,” *Cultural Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2013): 188.

24 Holdsworth et al., 6.

25 Ibid., 7–8.

26 Said, “Professionals and Amateurs,” 76.


28 Briony’s desire for continuity, as we shall see, exceeds her sense of the literary. In fact, she seems to have an ingrained intolerance of gaps and fissures, which leads her to spend some time contemplating the seamless crooking of her finger: “The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between moving and not moving, when her intention took effect. It was like a wave breaking . . . When did it know to move, when did she know to move it? There was no catching herself out. It was either-or. There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self—was it her soul?—which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command” (35–36). She later associates the writing of fiction with “a form of telepathy”: “Reading a sentence and understanding it were the same thing; as with the crooking of a finger, nothing lay between them” (37). Tidiness and continuity, for Briony, are tantamount to the same thing.
Henderson notes that this desire for genealogical continuity persists to the end of the novel: "By reserving the revelation of her authorship until the end of the text, McEwan effects another double take by forcing the reader to look back on the section just completed, in which Robbie and Cecilia end up happily married and with the expectation of reuniting the family. In doing so, they will resolve any discontinuity in the Tallis family through the convention of inheritance narratives" ("New Britain, Old England," 723).

Holdsworth et al., 10.

"'Bye 'Bye Blackbird" is a US jazz standard with music by Ray Henderson and lyrics by Mort Dixon. Its sociocultural meaning in the British context is not yet clear to me. “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” however, has a far clearer cultural tenor: originally a music-hall song describing an Irishman’s longing to return home to County Tipperary, it soon became a popular marching song. It still enjoys its status as a patriotic song.

My use of the term “soft patriotism” derives in part from Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism,” which denotes the everyday “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced” (6). Further, Billig argues that “banal nationalism can hardly be innocent: it is reproducing institutions which possess vast armaments” (7). Banal nationalism is thus dangerously performative: through repetition over time, it sustains the nation. However, it is important for my purposes here that soft patriotism, unlike banal nationalism, must be performatively pleasurable: e.g., singing the national anthem (and not simply standing to attention), clapping and cheering for the National Health Service, binge-watching the soft spectacle of *The Great British Bake Off*. Though these activities may indeed be covered by “banal nationalism,” reserving space for the habitual performance of patriotism in scenes of collective enjoyment seems important if we are to understand fully the actual appeal of such activities beyond shoring up national feeling and legitimizing distant wars. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).


Ibid.

Ibid., 67.

That Briony and Fiona are “irreproachable as nuns” reflects the postwar status of the NHS. On the one hand, the NHS serves as an enduring icon of national pride. During the COVID-19 crisis, Britons were quick to establish new patterns of soft patriotism around front-line health workers when they instituted a weekly moment of collective applause to say “Thank you” to the NHS. On the other hand, the NHS is frequently held up as an example of bureaucratic inefficiency, to the extent that the “COVID clapping” phenomenon was soon replaced by a widespread sense that the NHS had in fact done very little to combat the spread of the virus. Although the NHS stands as an enduring feature of postwar heritage, it also nonetheless embodies the mutability of heritage iconography as it relates to national feeling.

Cormack, 80. Head echoes this view when he writes, “McEwan’s portrayal of the retreat to Dunkirk as a hellish ordeal puts a different perspective on a historical event usually viewed through a patriotic lens, as a rescue of heroic proportions. It is not exactly that the heroism is denied (though some inhumanity within the ranks of the allies in retreat is depicted); but, rather, the horror of death and mutilation is foregrounded” (156).

Interestingly, the 2007 film adaptation of *Atonement* withdraws entirely from McEwan’s tangible desire to ironize patriotic feeling around Dunkirk. In the film version, the scene of Robbie and the Corporals’ arrival on the beach consists of an extended, sepia-toned panorama that sentimentalizes the event in a fashion that seems, at least to me, inconsistent with its historical and narratological functions in the novel. That is, the film
adaption of the novel reproduces, perhaps unknowingly, the historical and narratological erasure at the center of McEwan’s critique.

39 Hall, 4.
40 Ibid., 5–6.
41 Ibid., 6 (original emphasis).
42 Ibid., 7.
43 Ibid. 8–9 (original emphasis).
44 Ibid. 10.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
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