

Lines of Activity

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Lines of Activity

*Performance, Historiography,
Hull-House Domesticity*

SHANNON JACKSON

Ann Arbor

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Preface and Acknowledgments

For some time now, I have found myself trying to integrate performance and scholarship, a combination that took many forms depending upon changing definitions of both of those terms. Sometimes it meant bringing homework to cattle calls; later it meant taking field-notes in rehearsal; and later it meant seeing performance in places not conventionally defined as “theatrical.” At its best, I found that performance functioned as a vehicle for understanding the big questions. Whether conceiving performance as practice, as paradigm, or as epistemological location, it was to me the most useful place from which to speculate upon the nature of identity, space, temporality, and social interaction. More recently, performance provided a point of entry for thinking about memory, history, absence, and presence. My animating belief is that the skills of the performer—her navigation of sight lines, props, and blocking—can be expanded to understand the intimate mediation of visibility, material culture, and embodiment. Practiced in the co-ordination of words, gestures, image, light, and space, it seems to me that the theatrical artist is particularly well-positioned to speculate on the interdisciplinary event of culture. Combining such proprioceptive intelligences in the day-to-day decisions of rehearsal, performance knowledge further requires attention to the operationality of culture, moving between acts of abstract speculation and the urgent and stubborn pragmatics of getting the production “on its feet.”

That someone with such peculiar preoccupations found herself reading Jane Addams’s *Twenty Years at Hull-House* is a geographic coincidence for which I am perpetually grateful. Being a student *in* Chicago meant becoming a student *of* Chicago. For the would-be performance scholar, it meant learning of the relation between highly theatrical episodes of social history and the construction of Chicago’s civic identity. From the Haymarket Riot of 1886 to the Democratic convention of 1968, such events illustrated the distinctively gritty, grimy, pork-barrelling style in which this City of Big Shoulders performed itself. This civic sensibility also underpinned Chicago theatre where companies and playwrights claimed “Chicago” as an adjective

for a theatre that was raw, spontaneous, authentic, wore a crew cut, and suffered no fools. At the same time, the highly gendered, cross-class nostalgia of such theatrical work—what some of my colleagues dubbed Chicago’s “sweaty boy theatre”—braced against another of the city’s performance genealogies. This one—recorded by Jane Addams—had a differently gendered and differently valenced type of cross-class nostalgia. Initiated by women, if not exclusively composed of them, its trajectory of social performance directed itself outward to the Chicago collective, advancing the city’s and indeed the nation’s concept of public welfare. Significantly, it created and maintained the festivals, playgrounds, neighborhoods, parks, community centers, museums, sidewalks, and streets in which Chicago could continually re-perform itself. *Lines of Activity* is an attempt to re-stage that second strain of Chicago dramaturgy.

This re-staging would not have been possible without the support of numerous individuals and organizations. The first round of thanks goes to the members of my exceedingly encouraging and patient dissertation committee at Northwestern University—Dwight Conquergood, Tracy Davis, Margaret Thompson Drewal, and Micaela di Leonardo. I will always appreciate this group for the different types of expertise each brought to this project and for their encouragement during the rewriting process. Other colleagues from Harvard and numerous professional sites commented on different parts of this manuscript, and I am grateful for their generous and luminous insights: Lawrence Buell, Marvin Carlson, Dorothy Chansky, Gay Gibson Cima, Natalie Crohn-Schmidt, Elin Diamond, Judith Hamera, Loren Kruger, Jeffrey Masten, Nancy McLean, Ann Pellegrini, Della Pollock, Rebecca Schneider, Marc Shell, Werner Sollors, Lynn Wardley, Stacy Wolf, and especially Joseph Roach. This group joins another list of people whose advice and teaching have strongly influenced this project and/or who affectionately and ironically maintained my professional and emotional equilibrium: Marilyn Arsem, Leo Damrosch, Jill Dolan, Nancy Fraser, Frank Galati, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Jacqueline Dowd Hall, Ewa and Martin Lajer-Burchardt, Françoise Lionnet, Gregory Nagy, Alex Owen, Peggy Phelan, Susan Pedersen, Alice Rayner, Janelle Reinelt, Sandra Richards, Bernie Sahlins, Jonah Segel, Alan Shefsky, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Doris Sommer, Edward Wingler, Nancy Yousef—and most especially Marjorie Garber, Barbara Johnson, and Bill Handley.

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Shannon Jackson
Berkeley, CA

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