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ARTICLE

"Put money in thy purse. Follow thou the wars": Othello, the Mexican–American War, and Manifest Destiny

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In the winter of 1845–6 the United States Army languished on the border waiting for an opportunity to provoke what would be the Mexican–American War, or, as the Mexicans would come to call it, *La Intervención Americana*. To break the dull monotony, the army turned to theatre. In January, Second Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant was cast as Desdemona in a production staged for the troops and the local community. Grant would later be the victorious general in the Civil War and the eighteenth president of the United States from 1869 to 1877. He was not yet that person. In 1846 he was a twenty-four-year-old, newly commissioned officer, only three years out of the US Military Academy. His peers, a cohort of junior officers who would become the senior military leadership on both sides of the Civil War, were also actors in the production, as well as its producers. The anecdote is humorous in large part because the Grant of national record and memory is the least Desdemona-like figure anyone can conceive. It has been repeated multiple times across the nineteenth century and still holds in the imagination almost two hundred years later.

The odd anecdote, which is all the funnier because it is based in fact, is usually deployed to demonstrate how familiar people in the nineteenth-century United States were with Shakespeare and how his works permeated national culture. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the infatuation with Grant as Desdemona has come to represent, as historian Lawrence Levine reflected in 1988, "a sense of loss" for "a rich shared public culture that once characterized the United States."[1] Levine frames the army production of *Othello* with Grant as Desdemona as evidence that people in the States "shared a public culture . . . less fragmented . . . than their descendants were to experience a century later."[2] The glue that held society together, Levine claims, was Shakespeare; his work was "a part of life."[3] The 2014 *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now,* edited by literary scholar James Shapiro, opens with the story

I would like to thank the members of the Equitable Arts Infrastructure Research Group—Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Colleen Hooper, Jasmine Jamillah Mahmoud, Derek Miller, Michael Sy Uy, and Sarah Wilbur—as well as Andrew Carlson, Amy E. Hughes, and Domino Renee Perez for their generous help and support with this article.

as evidence of the ubiquity of Shakespeare, one that "transcended region and class."[4] Historian Ron Chernow includes the story in his magisterial 2017 biography of Grant as a "rare thespian interlude" to create a more relatable character out of the historical figure.[5] Even the *New York Times* could not resist the allure of the anecdote and titled its review of a 2020 Shapiro anthology "Shakespeare Conquers America! Starring Ulysses S. Grant as Desdemona."[6] Everywhere it is used, the story serves to humanize the remote and grizzled Grant, romanticize a supposed golden moment in US history when everyone shared a collective understanding of great literature, and/or celebrate ordinary amateurs who engage with the arts solely for pleasure and unsullied by commerce. The implication is that the story allows us to see how theatre specifically (and the arts more generally) was at its best the province of ordinary people who were in thrall to Shakespeare's exceptionalism.

I want to offer a different interpretation of this beloved anecdote, refocusing its meaning away from a highly romanticized narrative of shared culture and onto a close examination of what it reveals about the role theatre played in the still nascent and developing US nation in the early nineteenth century. The danger of romantic stories like the one about Grant is that they attribute sentimental motivations to capitalism. The story of the army's borderland *Othello* produced on the brink of a great land grab should not be understood as a tale about the superiority of amateur culture by which enlightened individuals express themselves through classic works of dramatic literature. The Army Theatre's *Othello* is more productively interpreted as the story of how theatre was imbricated in the developing national infrastructure in the pre–Civil War United States.

Infrastructure is a broad term with multiple possible definitions. For the purposes of my argument about the 1846 *Othello* I focus on two specific types of infrastructure: cultural and material. *Cultural infrastructure* describes the systemic relationships that bring people together in purpose-built spaces for the imaginative experience of ideas while fostering a sense of communion. The term encompasses all the elements of a creative event—including the built environment, finance, politics, social norms, individual identities, producing organizations—and defines them in relation to one another as a dynamic, interactive environment. The first section of this essay examines the cultural infrastructure of *Othello*, including the army's arrival in Texas, how they turned to theatre, and why. *Material infrastructure*, in the context of my argument, refers to the internal structures that make cultural infrastructure possible. The second section interrogates the transportation systems that allow for the efficient movement of people and goods, legal systems enforcing contracts and business arrangements, government policy on geographical and economic growth, and military protection for continental and economic expansion. A focus on material infrastructure demonstrates exactly how theatre participated in and benefited from continental expansion.

The ideological framework that demanded these types of infrastructural operation—including foreign and domestic government policy, commercial and trade practices, and the growth of the arts and entertainment sector—came to be known as Manifest Destiny. The term was coined in 1845 to explain and justify the annexation of Texas and the demand to extend the borders of the soon-to-be US state into Mexican national territory. This particular instance of performing Shakespeare is an early articulation of what territorial expansion meant to those who supported it. The contemporary racial understanding of the play and the practices specific to the moment demonstrate the racial and gendered ideologies at play in national politics and practices. That the production could happen at all is evidence of how perfectly theatre was integrated into the infrastructure that allowed the United States to seize what it so firmly believed was its Manifest Destiny.

Union Theatre/Army Theatre: Cultural Infrastructure

> Brabantio: My daughter! O, my daughter!
> First Senator: Dead?
> Brabantio: Ay, to me.
> She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted
>
> —*Othello,* I.3.70–3

The story repeated since the nineteenth century is that a group of junior officers banded together as amateur entrepreneurial impresarios to organize entertainment for the soldiers. What is typically omitted from the story is that the motivations were also derived from the politics of race, the participation in the commercial opportunities created by national expansion, and the establishment of cultural infrastructure across the United States. When the army first arrived in July 1845 they were stuck by the natural beauty of the setting. Second Lieutenant George Gordon Meade wrote home, "I find the climate thus far delicious. . . . The camp is situated on a beautiful shell beach."[7] Captain William Henry exclaimed that "the scene was charming, and the soft, refreshing sea-breeze . . . is very beautiful."[8] But the weather changed, and the winter of 1845–6 was cold and wet. Firewood was scarce, drinking water brackish, and many in the camp fell ill with dysentery. The charms of the small, "ramshackle settlement" of Corpus Christi were no longer apparent.[9] One historian later characterized the army's experience as one that "begins with elation but erodes into despair."[10] Drunken violence was where most of the men turned their energies. There had been just two bars in Corpus Christi when the army arrived in July. By January 1846 there were over two hundred, a rapid increase that speaks to what the soldiers were doing in their spare time.[11] Camp leadership knew that they had to find less dangerous activities to engage the troops and remind them why there were there.

The idea of starting a business to create acceptable distractions was not unique to bars. Other officers had done so as well—a Captain Kilgor built a tenpin bowing alley and bar, and in 1846 advertised his business in the newly founded *Corpus Christi Gazette*.[12] The junior officers had their eyes on something much larger, and by November 1845 work was underway for an eight hundred-seat purpose-built theatre.[13] There is no record of exactly where the theatre was in the camp or what it looked like. One officer who was not involved in theatre described the building as being of "no inconsiderable dimensions," and eight hundred seats would indeed require a substantial structure.[14] The best-known image of Camp Marcy, "Bird's-Eye View of the Camp of the Army of Occupation," was created in October, before work on the theatre had begun (Fig. 1), and there are no images of the building inside or out. That lithograph also omits the fast-growing civilian portion of Corpus Christi. Within months dry goods merchants, attorneys, hotels,

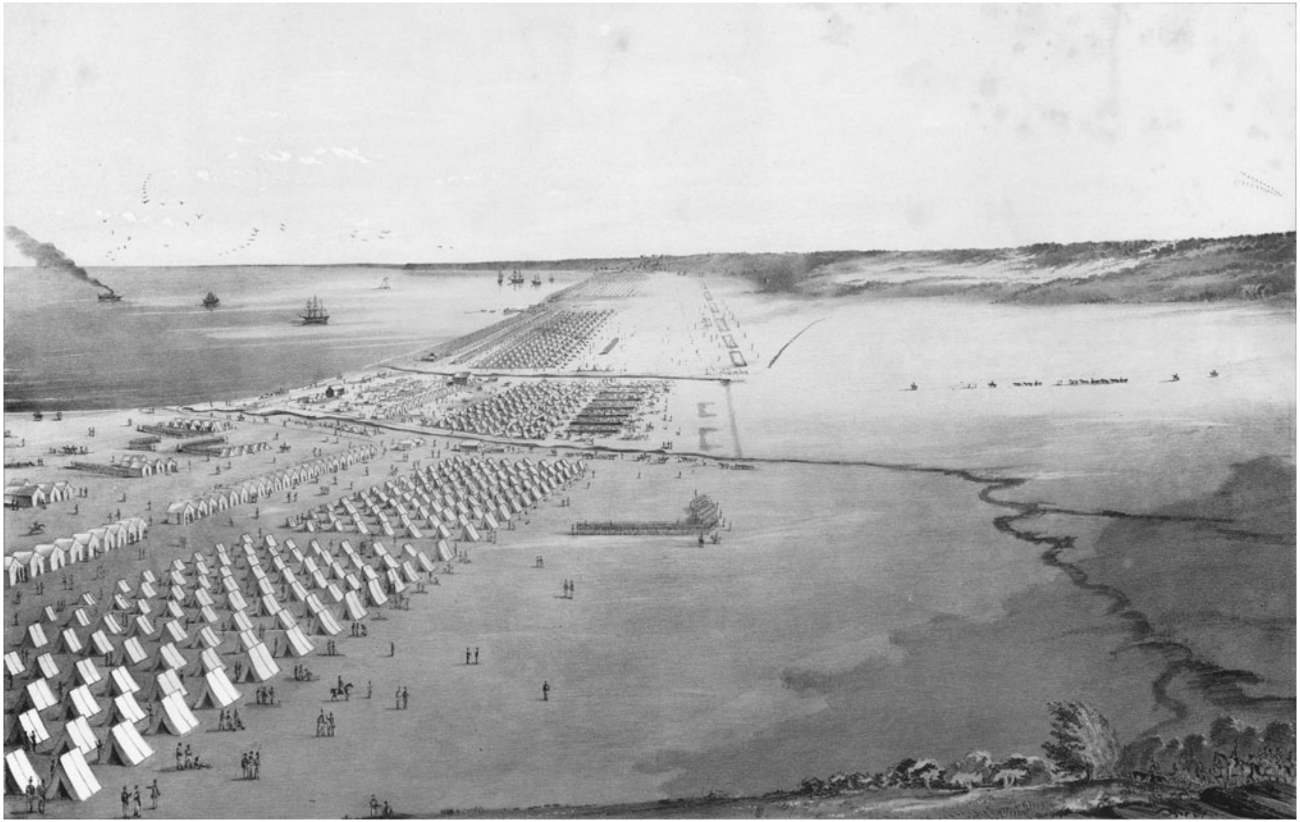

Figure 1. Daniel Powers Whiting's 1847 lithograph "A Bird's-Eye View of the Camp of the Army of Occupation" gives a sense of the enormity of Camp Marcy, but does not indicate how the depicted buildings were used. Public domain.

blacksmiths, restaurants, carpenters, and even watchmakers were advertising their goods and services. The army may have been there to annex Texas, but it was also creating commercial opportunities where there had been none before.

The program for opening night was typical of the era and included a mainpiece (a full-length comedy, melodrama, or tragedy) and an afterpiece, usually a farce. Between the two pieces was singing and dancing. The army's mainpiece was a comedy, *The Wife: A Tale of Mantua* (1833) by James Sheridan Knowles, and James Robinson Planché's variety one-act, *The Loan of a Lover* (1834) served as the afterpiece. The local newspaper reported that every performance was sold out, and the audiences were enthusiastic about what they saw onstage.[15] *The Wife*'s prologue encourages the audience:

> Dear Patrons of [the] Arts . . .
> If in the scenes which follow you can trace
> What once pleased you . . .
> Cry, clap, commend it! If you like them not,
> Your former favours cannot be forgot.
> Condemn them—damn them—hiss them, if you will—
> Their author is your grateful servant still![16]

The recommendation to be rowdy and explicit about their reception must have been a welcome invitation to the bored soldiers.

The tickets were not inexpensive (especially when regular soldiers made seven dollars per month)—one dollar for the boxes and fifty cents for the pit—but they were consistent with the prices at large urban theatres at the time.[17] Meade relished his evening at the theatre and recorded that the actors "murder tragedy, burlesque comedy, and render farce into buffoonery, in the most approved style."[18] Henry remembered that "many an otherwise dreary evening was spent by many of us with infinite pleasure within [the theatre's] walls."[19] Generals Worth, Twiggs, and Taylor encouraged the officers to continue with the theatre.[20] The venture recouped its costs, and with their new funds the officers decided to expand their repertoire.[21] The officers resolved to produce the most popular tragedy of the day by a playwright well known to all: *Othello* by William Shakespeare.

From the distance of the twenty-first century, *Othello* is a baffling choice, especially because the play is typically positioned as "Shakespeare's most agonizing play," as literary historian Kim Hall characterized it.[22] What is now generally "agonizing" was not always so. *Othello* was the most frequently performed of all of Shakespeare's works in the pre–Civil War United States.[23] From the perspective of the nineteenth century, it was the obvious play to include as the first serious production of the Army Theatre Troupe,[24] both because it offered a racial ideology that spoke to why the army was in Corpus Christi and because it was guaranteed to be profitable. *Othello* was a staple of southern theatres: Shapiro records, the play was produced "twenty times . . . in Memphis, and twice that often in Mobile" between 1840 and 1865.[25] In New Orleans the play was produced thirty-seven times in thirty-six years, beginning in 1806.[26] Audiences in many southern cities, including Mobile, Savannah, and Charleston, could expect to see *Othello* at least annually, if not more often. Several southern cities easily rivaled New York as the theatrical hub of the United States. Mobile and Montgomery in Alabama, Columbus and Savannah in Georgia, Charleston in South Carolina, and New Orleans in Louisiana were vibrant theatre cities that attracted artists from all over the country and were also popular touring destinations for theatre companies from England. *Othello*, so popular in all these cities, was not agonizing; instead, it was reassuring. Shakespeare, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would remind the nation in 1850, "drew the man of England and Europe; the father of the man in America."[27] What Emerson offered the nation both in lectures and published texts was evidence of what literary scholar Arthur L. Little Jr. termed "exemplary whiteness," and a guarantee that embracing Shakespeare was to embrace white supremacy.[28]

The conflation of Shakespeare with whiteness lead people to ask how Black exactly was Othello. The years before the Civil War were what some scholars called the US "bronze age" of *Othello*, in that actors did not perform the eponymous character in blackface but merely darkened their skin to a deep tan.[29] Hall points out that "blackness" was "a mark of inferiority and sin," and the choice to portray Othello as bronze rather than Black was a result of transatlantic slavery, which, "with its denigration of African peoples and racist caricatures, translated blackness into both commodity and comedy making it almost impossible to see Othello as noble and Black."[30] Additionally, it was the Shakespeare play most parodied in the first half of the nineteenth century, "and always the parody assured the audience of the absurdity of racial intermarriage."[31] Parodies did not have to change the play's original ending to convey their racist message. The murder of the blameless Desdemona confirmed in the eyes of white audiences the disastrous dangers of miscegenation and the violence of Black men. As theatre historian Andrew Carlson points out, the character's name was often found in the crime blotter: "Othello was a handy sobriquet when white Americans needed a metaphor for black criminal behavior."[32] Whether in bronze- or blackface, whether in the original or a comic parody, *Othello* the play and Othello the character were an essential vehicle for understanding and representing race within the larger project of nation building in the first half of the nineteenth century.

For the US Army, poised on the Texas–México border, *Othello* reminded them why they were there and what the fight was really about. Productions of *Othello* before the Civil War resolved the question of racial equality in the minds of white audiences in favor of white supremacy and Othello's racial identity as Black, despite his occasional bronze appearance. Othello may have been a soldier just like those in the audience, but it was there the resemblance stopped. He represented the "black threat within," as literary scholar Ian Smith summarized the character's status.[33] The army was there to establish dominance over those the United States considered Other—Black, Indigenous, or Mexican people in this particular situation—and ensure their Desdemonas were never defiled. The commercial infrastructure in and around Camp Marcy provided the ideal way to keep the troupes focused on their mission, even in their leisure.

The production may have been a commercial venture, but it was also a collaboration with the junior officers, who were not professional performers. Casting them in lead roles not only emphasized the show's connections to the entire camp, but also increased ticket sales, as the novelty of seeing officers onstage would have been a box-office draw. The first choice for the officer to play

Desdemona was Second Lieutenant James Longstreet. He was quickly rejected as too tall, however: at well over six feet Longstreet towered over the officer playing Othello, Lieutenant Theoderic Porter. The officers then turned to the much shorter Grant. The Grant of 1844 did not yet resemble the enduring image of the hoary veteran general of the Civil War. This Grant was twenty-two, smooth-shaven, and nicknamed “Little Beauty” by his fellow officers (Fig. 2).[34] An early twentieth-century biographer described him as having “a girl’s primness of manner and modesty of conduct. There was a broad streak of the feminine in his personality.”[35] His contemporaries may have been crediting these “girl’s” and “feminine” qualities to Grant when they cast him—in short, everything Longstreet lacked.

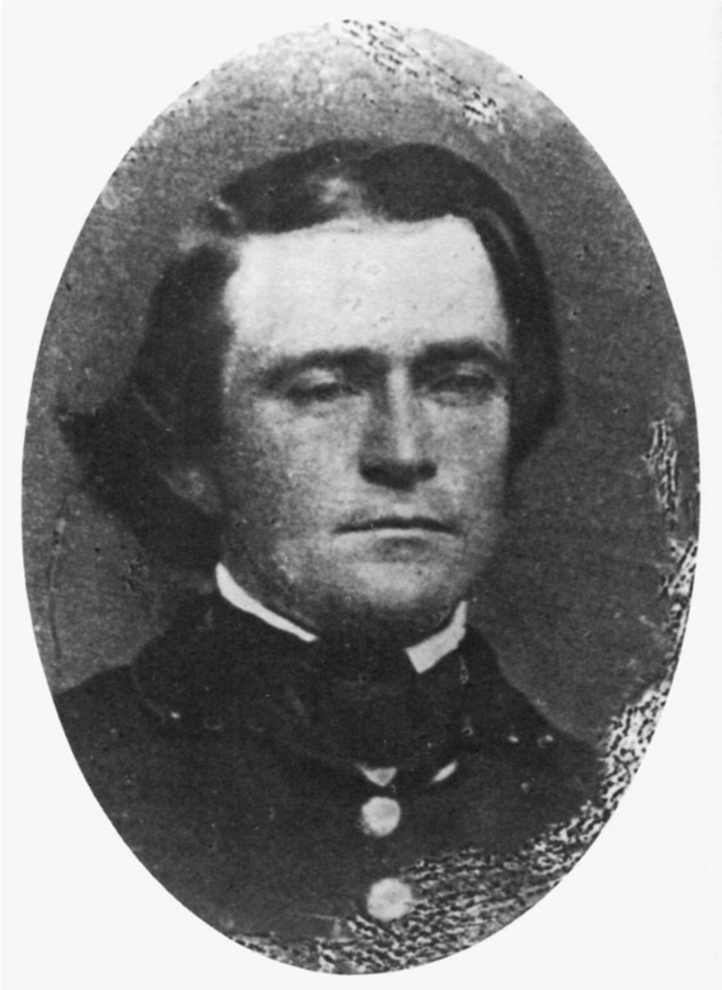

Figure 2. This is the earliest known photograph of Ulysses S. Grant. It is thought to have been taken in 1843 just before he traveled to Camp Marcy. Public domain.

Having a female affect, it turned out, was not the same as being able to act a woman onstage. Porter rejected Grant as Desdemona because, as he told Longstreet, Grant "could not support the character nor give sentiment to the hero."[36] Everyone agreed it was best to obtain the services of female professional performer to take up the role. *Othello*, with a professional actress as Desdemona, was a success. The theatre had met its primary goal of keeping soldiers entertained and engaged. The theatre did not have much longer to run, however. Two months after the triumph of *Othello*, the army was ordered to move to what would one day be Brownsville on the Río Grande, and Camp Marcy was abandoned.

This narrative is one that has been repeated since it was first related by James Longstreet in his 1896 memoir. In 1892, Cadmus M. Wilcox, a Confederate general who had been a captain in the Mexican–American War, had written of going to "theatres at night," but offered no details about his experiences in the audience.[37] Although Wilcox confirms that there was theatrical entertainment, it is Longstreet who first provides the details of the junior officers building the theatre, producing the shows, and trying their hand at the most popular tragedy of the day. The scholarship that follows, especially biographies of Grant, all gets its details from Longstreet.[38]

The narrative based on sources contemporary to the production offers a different story. This version includes amateurs deferring to professionals in a commercial transaction, indicates that profit might be as much part of the story as entertainment, and points to live performance's role in building national identity. The first memoir to come out of the war was by Captain William Seaton Henry in 1847 (before the treaty ending the war was even signed), who collected the letters he had published anonymously in a New York newspaper during the conflict into *Campaign Sketches of the War with Mexico*. His version was clear and differed from what Longstreet would claim almost fifty year later. The officers of the Army Theatre were always in collaboration with theatre professionals and never contemplated running the theatre on their own. On 1 November 1845, two months before the opening night, Henry noted that theatre building was underway and "a company of actors are anxiously awaiting its completion."[39] Of course, the reference could have been to the junior officers who would share the stage with the professionals. Elsewhere, though, when Henry references actors he always distinguishes between the army men and the professionals. There is no reason to believe he is doing anything different in this passage.

When the first production opened it was national news. Readers of the local paper in Port Gibson, Mississippi (a small town near the border with Louisiana), learned that, "the new theatre, located in the camp of the 2d Dragoon Regiment, 'fitted up with boxes, parquette, and orchestra, complete' and large enough to hold 800–1000 persons, was opened on the 8th. . . . The orchestra is selected from the Army Band. The 'professional artistes' and 'amateur performers' make quite a company."[40] An even larger departure from the romantic anecdote of amateurs making their own entertainment is that there were two theatres available to the civilian and military community. The *Corpus Christi Gazette* had two advertisements next to each other on 1 January.[41] The first was titled "ARMY THEATRE" and listed the Knowles–Planché bill with three professional performers. Below that is a second advertisement for the "UNION THEATRE" that on 11 January "will offer a benefit for Mr. Wells." Wells was also credited with providing the dance interlude on the Army Theatre bill. For his benefit he would be dancing "the Popular Dance of the Polka" and "The Ballet Pantomime of 'The Duel or the Ambassador's Ball,'" the newspaper promised. He would be joined, the advertisement noted, by "two gentlemen amatures [*sic*], long favorites in this community." Whether the performers were civilians or military is not indicated.

The two notices differentiate between the theatres, as does a short article elsewhere in that issue of the paper about the Army Theatre. Mrs. Hart, "with the company of the Union Theatre" is "engaged for the first three nights" in the lead roles in both the main- and afterpiece. Anyone can attend, the article indicates, not just those in the army camp, and it gives directions how to find the theatre. A separate article comments on the 11 January benefit and hopes that "our army friends will unite with the citizens, and give him a bumper." The two communities—military and civilian—are marked by separate advertisements and separate theatres.

The theatre in Corpus Christi was proof that a robust cultural infrastructure would allow patrons to encounter and experience luxury, extravagance, and splendor at any price point. The Union Theatre was lavish and fully intended to be a profitable enterprise that catered to a theatregoer's every wish. The impresario C. G. Bryant, in the notice he took out in the paper, assures his potential patrons that the new building is "substantial and commodious" and the entertainment fully professional, under the direction of Mr. Hart and Mr. Wells. The attached restaurant offers an abundance and variety of foods, including "oysters cooked and dished in any style that they may desire, also Hot Coffee and Chocolate, Beef, Venison and Turtle Steaks . . . at all hours of the day and night." There is also "a convenient Bar, where excellent Liquors, Wines &c, &c may be had cheap for cash during the hours of performance on the stage." Bryant also promises that in just a few days "a Billiard Table and Bowling Alley" would be added to the theatre. He ends his piece with a plea: "having been at great expense at fitting up accommodations for the amusement and convenience of the gentlemen of the Army and the Town, he trusts the establishment will be generally patronized." Taken together the Army and Union Theatres are not evidence of genteel amateur theatricals produced by Levine's "rich shared public culture." What the two theatres demonstrate instead is the role cultural infrastructure played in the laissez-faire economic and individualist political historical moment to produce a nation operated within a racial hierarchy based on the ideology of white supremacy. The two, infrastructure and ideology, were interdependent and mutually constitutive.

Union Theatre/Army Theatre: Material Infrastructure

Gentlemen, let's look to our business.

—*Othello,* II.3.116–17

If the content of *Othello* worked within and strengthened the cultural infrastructure, the production itself was possible because of the emerging national material infrastructure. When the Army Theatre contacted the St. Charles Theatre about someone to play Desdemona, they were not hiring an unknown performer; they were hiring one whom they knew well and who was familiar with and to army audiences.

Longstreet records that they "sent over to New Orleans and secured Mrs. Hart, who was popular with the garrisons in Florida."[42] New modes of national transportation made possible by a landmark Supreme Court decision, along with partnerships as the preferred structure for business enterprises, made the production possible for the Army Theatre—as did the domestic policies that promoted the eviction of Indigenous people from their lands. These factors did not just support the production, they also made it exemplary of the processes of nation building that put the army on the Mexican border.

The US Army arrived in Texas in 1845, but professional theatre beat them there by eight years, enabling the Army to draw on existing systems and relationships. In 1836, a G. L. Lyons announced in the *Houston Telegraph and Texas Register* his intention to open "a New Theatre, in the city of Houston. . . . Being convinced that a well regulated Theatre, is always a benefit to any community; and believing that the liberality of the citizens of Texas will support the Drama, he proposes to open the first temple dedicated to the dramatic muse in Texas."[43] Professional theatre would not appear in Houston for another year (and would be under different auspices, Lyons's plans never coming to fruition). Coastal cities Houston and Galveston were only fifty miles apart, and theatre personnel and companies moved back and forth between them with ease. Both cities were directly accessible from New Orleans, which had been establishing itself as a hub of US theatrical activity since the start of the nineteenth century.

That Houston and Galveston, or even New Orleans, could depend on a steady stream of artists and theatrical companies was relatively recent. By the first few years of the nineteenth century, US expansion had outpaced the nation's ability to transport people and goods over the distances growth had created. Transportation was seen as the business of individual states, which tended to grant absolute monopolies not always honored by other states. Companies often found themselves in conflict, as each believed it had the sole right to operate on a given river or from a port. These disagreements increasingly ended up in court, and one case would permanently reshape business practices in the US. *Gibbons* v. *Ogden* (1824) established the precedent that the regulation of interstate commerce was the business of the federal government, based on the Commerce Clause.[44] This decision played an instrumental role in furthering what historians would come to call the "market revolution." Though the work of historian Charles Sellers, who coined the phrase, would be debated for years, his premise stood: the market revolution "mobilized collective resources through government to fuel growth in countless ways, not least by providing the essential legal, financial, and transport infrastructures. Establishing capitalist hegemony over economy, politics, and culture, the market revolution created ourselves and most of the world we know."[45] Theatre historian Arthur Hobson Quinn, writing in 1923, who would not have Sellers's terms to define that historical moment, also noted the shift. "At the beginning of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a change began in the nature of the drama. . . . By 1825 improvements in transportation had brought Boston within two days of New York, New York only eleven hours from Philadelphia, and Philadelphia fifteen hours from Washington. The rapid growth which this condition made possible was revolutionizing industry."[46] Quinn was not alone in seeing theatre as an industry: economist Alfred L. Bernheim labeled the first half of the nineteenth century the "industrial revolution in theatre."[47] Whatever the term used to characterize this moment in theatre, it was clear that entertainment was one of the markets that was revolutionized as interstate travel expanded under federal oversight.

Theatre practitioners were acutely aware that the market revolution had been transformative for US theatre. Actor-manager William B. Wood reflected in 1855, "a spirit of locomotiveness" took hold in the theatre business in the mid-1830s, and there was the general "feeling . . . that we could annihilate time and space by the use of steam vessels across the Atlantic, and railroads across our continent . . . a spirit of change—of exhilaration—of excitement, incident to an end of an old order of things, and the advent of some new and undefined ones."[48] The country was expanding and getting smaller at the same time. The shortening of distances through decreasing the time it took to traverse them allowed theatre professionals to look beyond their immediate geographical locations with greater confidence about fiscal and artistic feasibility. Among the professionals whose livelihoods were made possible by the expanded economy created by a stable and expansive transportation network were those who ended up in Corpus Christi under the auspices of the Union and Army Theatres. Longstreet's memory that Mrs. Hart came to Camp Marcy from New Orleans is incorrect (although she had been recently based there), but it does usefully help create the more romantic narrative of cultured amateurs entertaining themselves in the face of boredom and violence than one of collaborating with commercial professionals to make a profit. Mrs. Hart was already in Texas when she traveled with other performers to Corpus Christi. She was popular with military and civilian audiences, having appeared in the Army Theatre's inaugural bill of *The Wife: A Tale of Mantua*, playing Mariana, and *The Loan of a Lover,* as Gertrude.[49] Additionally, Messrs. Hart, Wells, and Bryant, the impresario entrepreneurs, had likely been in Corpus Christi since November and activating their own professional networks looking for actors to join them there. Actor Harry Watkins, who had been performing in Galveston and hoping to save enough money to get to New Orleans, noted in his diary on 2 January 1846 that his manager "[N. Belden] Clark[e] arrived from Corpus Christi, he says he has procured engagements for us there."[50] By 9 January Watkins had arrived at the army camp and marveled at the "long line of Tents" on the beach, "a beautiful sight to behold."[51] The symbiotic relationship of the army and professional theatre across the growing nation was an integral element of national expansion. Watkins, Clarke, the Harts, Wells, and Bryant were only a few theatre professionals whose career paths had been surveyed by the army.

Court decisions like *Gibbons* v. *Ogden* may have made interstate travel legally feasible, but the US Army was making it logistically possible. National expansion was met with fierce resistance and opposition by Indigenous people everywhere the United States expanded its borders. Military might and the ensuing violence was used to ensure that expansion continued apace. Since 1816, first under Andrew Jackson's command and later during his presidency, much of the US Army was garrisoned in Florida, where they were fighting the Seminole people with the goal of removing them from Florida entirely.[52] While the territory was held by the Spanish, enslaved people in Georgia would cross the border to find refuge among the Seminole, who welcomed the now-formerly enslaved into their communities.

Enslavers would invade Florida hoping to capture those who were now free, but the Spanish objected to these incursions. By 1818, in support of slavery and enslavers, the army had decimated many Seminole and Black Seminole settlements. The Spanish ceded Florida to the United States in 1819, but the hostilities ran from 1816 to 1858, with interludes of uneasy truces, and ultimately decimated the Seminole.

A forty-plus-year war meant that there were a lot of soldiers in Florida for extended periods who needed distraction. W. R. Hart, an actor-manager originally from New York, had heard about opportunities for theatre in Florida, and took over the Apalachicola Theatre in December 1840. He had worked for five years in Charleston, South Carolina, an influential hub for theatre, before moving to Florida.[53] Hart performed all over Florida, finally settling in the panhandle with a permanent company. He merged his existing company with another theatre company run by actor-manager John Carter. Hart married Carter's daughter, Virginia, who was already an accomplished performer.[54] The Florida press compared Mrs. Hart, as she was now billed, favorably to the well-known British actress Fanny Kemble, and one critic noted he would dream that night of Mrs. Hart because she was so enchanting.[55] The Carter–Hart company lasted four years: Hart had the misfortune to begin his partnership with Carter as the economic depression of the late 1830s and early 1840s gripped the nation. With taxes high and ticket revenue low, Hart was forced to close the theatre. By mid-1844 the Harts were in New Orleans and members of the company run by Charles Ludlow and Solomon Smith at the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans, but they were not in New Orleans long.[56] In July and August of 1845 they were performing in Houston, and by fall they were in Galveston.[57] Mrs. Hart was as popular in Texas as she had been in Louisiana; Watkins recorded that the officers thought her "the greatest Actress of the Age."[58] The Harts' story, with its travel and constantly changing collaborators, was typical of the theatre business in the first half of the nineteenth century.

What all these theatre companies had in common was their legal structure. Hart and Carter, Ludlow and Smith, as well as Wells and Bryant, all approached forming and organizing their companies the same way. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries corporations (typically not-for-profit) are the primary legal structures for theatres. Across most of the nineteenth century, however, theatres, like most businesses, turned to the more flexible and personal mode of partnerships to formalize their associations. Corporations were viewed as inappropriate for most commercial enterprises and were used only when it was "advantageous to pool large amounts of capital to improve financial and transportation services."[59] At the time of the Army and Union Theatres, corporations were tightly controlled by the government, and the charters "conferr[ed] quasi-public status on those businesses, effectively making them instrumentalities of the state."[60] Such collaborations were very unpopular in during the early years of the nineteenth century and viewed with great suspicion. Most people eschewed corporate status as an option because, as the authors of *The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea* comment, "Businesspeople . . . didn't like bringing the state into their private affairs."[61] This was additionally true because having a chartered corporation was all too often the sign of political and elitist favoritism that allowed the rich and connected to become much richer and more powerful. Contemporary critics derided corporations as "aristocracies."[62] Most people turned to the business arrangement that seemed the most simple and direct, the partnership, which needed almost no state authorization or involvement.

The absence of government interference, it was believed, allowed people to achieve success through competition and merit. Alfred D. Chandler, in his classic history of big business in the United States, observes that "until well after 1840 the partnership remained the standard legal form of the commercial enterprise."[63] Partnerships could be as simple as a handshake between two people, although most theatre managers did work within formal legal contracts. In a partnership the partners decide, between or among them, how to use any profit, and they are not protected individually from liability of any kind. Most partnerships do not survive the deaths of one or more of the partners, although theatre partnerships were formed and dissolved so frequently that death was rarely at issue. The partnership between Solomon Smith and Charles Ludlow is one of the longer-lasting partnerships from the theatre sector before the Civil War. Between them the two men ran the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans, the St. Louis Theatre in Missouri, and a theatre in Mobile from 1835 to 1853, as well as tours and appearances at theatres between those cities.[64] Smith described Ludlow as his partner and at the same time he called them "the firm of Ludlow and Smith."[65] A "firm" is any kind of for-profit business organization, including a partnership, so Smith was not indicating they were a corporation. What he was underlining was that, despite the large geographical area they covered, they were independent. Their business arrangement, like that of Hart and Carter and those operating in Corpus Christi, was free from government and public scrutiny or directives.

The almost entirely unregulated business arrangements of partnerships exemplified the political and historical moment. For thirty years, 1824–54, the party of and built by President Andrew Jackson redefined US politics. The party championed social and class equality for white men and argued for the noninterference of government in the economy. Historian T. J. Stiles observes, "Jacksonian democrats . . . championed laissez-fare as an egalitarian creed."[66] The figure of the ordinary, independent white man was both the inspiration for and the beneficiary of the policies of the Jacksonian United States. These political policies had a deep and lasting impact on every facet of US life, especially commerce. Economists Jessica Hennessey and John Wallis point out, "there is a deep connection between how we organize ourselves to pursue economic, social, educational, and other private and public goals, and how our democratic system of politics function."[67] The imbrication of how a people approach business arrangements and how they understand themselves in political terms points to a recurring tension in US life between private life/personal goals and the operations of the political sphere. The valorization of partnerships during the market revolution offered to relieve that tension by creating the illusion that private relationships among white men were more trustworthy than public institutions. In *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849–1861,* historian Mark Summers concludes, "the shift to laissez-faire thought was not simply a statement of faith in the business world, but a declaration of a loss of faith in republican institutions to handle business matters fairly or honestly."[68] Under Jacksonian democracy, gender and race, as interpreted by and experienced through white supremacy and the patriarchy, defined commercial opportunity at the same time masquerading as fairness, opportunity, and equality. It was not the people who were sovereign, despite Jacksonian claims, but white men who then partnered with one another to strengthen their hegemony.

Had Jacksonian democracy's embrace of laissez-faire approaches to business—especially through the most individualist of arrangements, the partnership—been the only element of their domestic policy, then the commercial opportunities theatre benefited from would have been much less advantageous. The laissez-faire business approach, however, was imbricated with enthusiastic support for aggressive state intervention into the rapacious project of "conquest of the continent."[69] The war with México was officially about where the US–México border would be, but it was also a product of the larger campaign of continued dispossession of Indigenous lands and the expansion of slavery. Expansion was very much about profit. Historian Claudio Saunt cites a disappointed officer who later reflected that the "'spirit of gain' not the 'vindication of any principle' drove the war" with the Seminole, which had concluded just a few years before the troops gathered in Corpus Christi.[70] Actor-manager Hart's career rested on the wars waged against Indigenous people for their land, first in Florida and then in Texas. Theatre found significant opportunity in army garrisons because of market agglomeration: there were so many of them in places that did not already have theatre but did have eager audiences who could pay.

The policy of "Indian removal" was as much a policy to erase Indigenous people and take their lands as it was to extinguish economic systems that were not aligned with the era's economic ideologies. Since the sixteenth century the Spanish "had defined Texas as the region between the Nueces and Red rivers,"[71] but the United States claimed (without basis) that Texas extended to the Río Grande. The nation was making this assertion because the Río Grande, unlike the Nueces, was a strategically important river that, as historian David Montejano observed, "could rival the Mississippi as the most important trade route of the continent."[72] It was the commercial that made the narrow band of subtropical grasslands, the Nueces Strip—nicknamed the Wild Horse Desert for the horses that roamed free between the two rivers—so desirable. The Strip, "on the periphery of Mexico, was . . . at the forward edge of U.S. economic expansion," as historian Miguel Ángel González-Quiroga emphasized,[73] and ensuring it was US territory was essential to national growth.

In 1845 when Taylor and his troops arrived in Corpus Christi, Texas was controlled not by the fledgling government of the Republic or the barely much older federated republic of México, let alone the Spanish colonial empire that had been in the Americas since the early sixteenth century. Texas was controlled by shifting and changing alliances among Indigenous peoples, primarily the Comanche.[74] Trade, historian Brian DeLay argues, "was the bedrock of these relationships" across the Southwest.[75] In the region there was a "a diverse commercial network" that linked the United States, the Republic of Texas, and México.[76] Texas president Sam Houston's emissaries were amazed at the size and scope of Indigenous commercial networks.[77] What they were seeing, according to historian Anne F. Hyde, was trade that had operated in one way or another for hundreds of years.[78] That system of trade differed significantly from the Jacksonian ideal, as it "was run by families and communities, not individuals."[79] Henry recorded an encounter with two local Indigenous men in Corpus Christi in his 1848 *Campaign Sketches* and described them as soldiers: "Had a visit from two Lipan chiefs. They were magnificent specimens of the Indian race . . . they appeared, in every particular, warriors of the desert."[80] The Lipan he met were far more likely to have been as much traders as they were military men.

Images of traders did not inspire fear and loathing. The relentlessly repeated stories of the Indigenous population of the United States as terrifying, savage warriors rather than savvy traders and defenders of their people justified violence against Indigenous people and military action against México. As the United States pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing they eliminated economic rivals. Commerce as networks or communities would have no place in the market revolution and the stories of individual heroism that capitalism empowered. The developing material infrastructure made it possible to erase stories about the ever-expanding racial and gendered barriers of public life and the horrific dispossession of Indigenous lands, and to promote ones that celebrated individual opportunities for the taking in the empty lands of the West. As the theatre business sector expanded with the nation, it eagerly turned those stories into performances that audiences would pay to see.

Union Theatre/Army Theatre: Shakespeare and Manifest Destiny

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

—*Othello,* V.2.398–9

In *Othello*, Iago lingers onstage for most of act I only to hear his hated superior officer be forgiven for eloping with the senator's daughter and awarded the leadership of the Venetian military. Filled with rage at this turn of events, Iago manipulates the wealthy, naive, and lovelorn Roderigo, who yearns for Desdemona. Sell your lands so you can join the army in Cyprus and reclaim your love, Iago advises: "put money in thy purse. Follow thou the wars."[81] As the events on the border immediately preceding the Mexican–American War demonstrate, theatre was putting money in its purse and following the wars as much as any business in the United States. Iago's urging serves as this article's title because it highlights the two key trajectories: money and war—in other words, the state violence that expands the possibilities for capital expansion. In short, both parts of Iago's advice serve and support cultural and material infrastructures.

Theatre is usually positioned as political in the context of cultural infrastructure. The officers involved in the Army Theatre Troupe certainly saw it this way, and offered *Othello* as a communal cautionary tale to the troops. The message in this production was particularly one of racial and gendered limits and boundaries. Theatre, however, is just as political through its participation in and reliance on material infrastructure. Professional theatre, which in the nineteenth century was solely a commercial enterprise, benefited as much as any other business or trade from the nation's commitment to continental expansion. Historian Ned Blackhawk asserts that "Indigenous dispossession facilitated the growth of white male democracy and African American slavery. Each grew from the same trunk of expansion," and these were the politics that undergirded the popularity of *Othello*.[82] The play's message, at least as it was interpreted by white people in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, represented the dangers of miscegenation, illustrated the fragility of white womanhood, and demonstrated the necessity of white male leadership. These were the same ideological investments that brought the US Army to the Mexican border and that would continue to propel the nation westward.

The south- and westward migration of the Harts, Harry Watkins, and the other theatre professionals who converged on Corpus Christi in the winter of 1845–6 are only a few examples of how theatre benefited from the continental conquest that was becoming known as Manifest Destiny. The term itself was born with the issue of Texas statehood. Just as the theatre producers were investigating the possibility of bringing theatre to Corpus Christi, John L. O'Sullivan, a New York journalist, was transforming the long-held US belief in continental expansion into a divine mandate: "Texas is now ours. . . . Her star and her stripe may already be said to have taken their place in the glorious blazon of our common nationality."[83] For O'Sullivan and the millions who would embrace his polemic, it was not just that Texas was now rightfully part of the United States; it was God's will that the States keep expanding toward "the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."[84] The narrative of a heavenly endorsement was a more effective and flattering social and political story than one of oppression, extermination, and land theft in service of a developing national infrastructure.

The anecdote about Grant's near miss as Desdemona continues to be repeated as confirmation of how all segments of US society were connected through a mutual love of Shakespeare, but not as evidence of the emerging and intertwined cultural and material infrastructures defining life in the United States. In service of this narrative scholars turn to Alexis de Tocqueville's 1840 *Democracy in America*. His observation, "There is hardly a pioneer hut in which the odd volume of Shakespeare cannot be found," is still quoted in the twenty-first century.[85] For de Tocqueville Shakespeare's presence was evidence of the over-representation of Anglophone literature in the States and the lack of native works of literary merit. Levine and Shapiro, in the works I cited at the start of the article, use de Tocqueville to demonstrate that the love of Shakespeare transcends difference. In his 2020 *Shakespeare in a Divided America,* James Shapiro again quotes de Tocqueville as proof of Shakespeare's ubiquity because the Bard "spoke to what Americans cared about."[86] President Bill Clinton cites de Tocqueville as recording Shakespeare's "immense popularity across the land."[87]What these uses of de Tocqueville obscure is exactly what the United States did with Shakespeare and how they were able to do it. Connections among a people or within a nation can be rhapsodized as love for a single author, but that does not explain them fully. Shifting scholarly scrutiny away from romantic accounts of Shakespeare offers a much fuller narrative of US theatre. The examination of the interdependence of cultural and material infrastructures does not offer as amusing a story of theatre's centrality to a developing nation as the jeremiads for lost commonality; what it does instead is offer an understanding of how performing that love helped create a nation that so fully embraced the violence and cruelty of Manifest Destiny.

Endnotes

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