



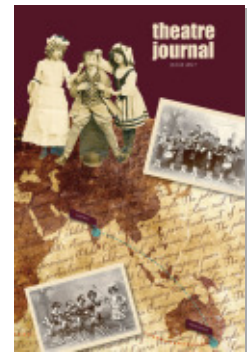
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Performing Whiteness in the Postcolony: Afrikaners in South African Theatrical and Public Life by Megan Lewis (review)

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Part 4 takes up themes that have been the focus of the most vibrant recent critical discussions and provides an overview of how they play out in different countries. This part includes such topics as “Gender Performance and the Rise of the Actress in Traditional Asian Theatre,” “Intercultural Theatre and Shakespeare Production in Asia,” and “Modern Musicals in Asia.” While the essays are uniformly strong, one standout is Aparna Dharwadker’s “Modern Indian Theatre,” which deftly handles the enormous scope it has to cover with useful thematic divisions, such as “Anatomy of Modernity,” “Authorship, Print and Performance,” and “Multilingual Literacy, Translation, and Transculturation,” which allow Dharwadker simultaneously to provide enormous detail, clarity, and critical understanding on a wide range of regions, practices, and productions. John Gillespie’s chapter on “Modern Japanese Theatre” also takes the reader through a good deal of material with thoughtful, sure-footed strides. Part 4 is perhaps one of the most valuable segments of the book, as it gathers and summarizes topics that have motivated intriguing recent scholarship.

An enormous undertaking, *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* collects for a more general readership both established understandings and new explorations in the field of Asian theatre studies, bringing together in one volume the essays of scholars who have been working through these issues in more specialized publications. It is a comprehensive resource that can, in different ways, serve both advanced scholars and novice students, and would be a useful text for both undergraduate and graduate courses covering Asian theatre. It will inspire and facilitate faculty to move curricula beyond the familiar genres usually covered in this arena to include more updated views of the subject. It also honors the dedicated scholars who have devoted themselves to this research.

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PERFORMING WHITELY IN THE POST-COLONIAL: AFRIKANERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE.

By Megan Lewis. Studies in Theatre History and Culture series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016; pp. 272.

Troubling rises in white nationalism, xenophobia, and economic protectionism occasioned both the 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the advent of so-called Trumpism in the United States. These recent events have underscored the

necessity of scholarship that engages critically with performances of whiteness. In this regard Megan Lewis’s *Performing Whiteness in the Postcolony: Afrikaners in South African Theatrical and Public Life* offers a prescient case study in the creation, enactment, and contestation of whiteness and hegemony. For Lewis, performing whiteness connotes “a state of being, an ideology, a set of behaviors or habits, or an enactment, performance or staging with distinctly white attributes” (11). Taking inspiration from John Fletcher’s provocation that “you can’t afford to treat communities and groups that you politically oppose, however fiercely, as if their motivations and habitus aren’t as complex and historically intricate as any other community or group” (qtd. in Lewis 5), Lewis deftly delves into the history and culture of Afrikaners, the white South African minority notorious for creating the legally sanctioned racist system of oppression known as apartheid.

Unlike previous studies that touch on Afrikaners and performance (Kruger [1999] and Hutchison [2013]), Lewis focuses on the *laager*—the literal circle of wagons that signified safety for the Afrikaners’ ancestors as they trekked inland to avoid the advancing British—as a metaphor not only for Afrikaner self-definition, but also for the system of whiteness itself. In her description the *laager* consists of two self-contradictory parts: the circle of wagons, seemingly impermeable and exclusive; and the spaces in between the wagons, the sites of vulnerability and potential contamination. “Like whiteness,” writes Lewis, “the *laager* must maintain a belief in its infallibility to remain intact and powerful and, like whiteness, it becomes vulnerable to anxiety when its porousness is revealed” (28). Lewis chronicles various incursions into and renegotiations surrounding the Afrikaner *laager* from its inception in late-nineteenth-century nation-building projects, to its culmination in the 1948 elections that brought the Afrikaner-led National Party to power, to its eventual decline and precarious post-apartheid position.

Over the course of six insightful chapters she traces how Afrikaners “have performed and continue to perform themselves *into, around, and out of power*” (18; emphasis in original). In “Laagers of Whiteness: Afrikaner Ascendancy and the Staging of the Nation,” Lewis tracks how Afrikaner nationalists, eager to transform their defeat in the disastrous Second Anglo-Boer War into a foundational myth, imagined a unified *volk* (Afrikaans for nation) out of a group of disparate agrarians known as *boers* (Afrikaans for farmers) (25). She argues that the 1916 silent film *De Voortrekkers* epitomized this effort by romanticizing the 1830s Great Trek and outlining the internal-white-*laager* / external-black-threat discourse that later defined apartheid.

Lewis rightly holds that Afrikaner narratives of “rugged masculinity and docile femininity” buttress white patriarchy (15). Central to Afrikaners’ nation-building project, in her estimation, is the icon of the *Volkmoeder*, or “Mother of the Nation” (40). Contemplating the Volkmoeder statue guarding Pretoria’s Voortrekker Monument, Lewis states that “she preserves civilization and light amid the brutality and darkness of Africa and is the emblem of the Afrikaner’s future” (44). Lewis’s critical readings of the monument, as well as of the 1938 celebrations surrounding its dedication, expose the gendered nature of Afrikanerdom. Following this first chapter, she proceeds by thickly describing the performance strategies of five contemporary male Afrikaner artists: playwright Deon Opperman, satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, and performance artist Peter Van Heerden, as well as rappers Watkin Tudor Jones (aka Die Antwoord’s Ninja), and Zander Tyler (aka Jack Parow).

Spanning the book’s second and third chapters, Lewis’s treatment of Opperman represents one of the most thorough examinations of the provocateur’s prodigious output. The most prolific Afrikaans-language playwright working today, he frequently tackles controversial subjects such as racism and white Afrikaner identity from a paradoxical position that is both backward-looking and timely. In “Rehearsing a Whately Nation: Afrikaner Performances of Volk Identity (1904–2009),” Lewis considers *Ons Vir Jou*, Opperman’s 2009 Afrikaans-language musical about the Second Boer War, alongside the 1904–05 “Boer War Circus” (48). Two years after the Boers capitulated to the British in 1902, American audiences in St. Louis and Coney Island watched as actual Boer soldiers reenacted their defeat, recasting their loss as a heroic effort against overwhelming odds. Lewis contends that Opperman’s *Ons Vir Jou* similarly combated feelings of shame from apartheid by presenting Afrikaners as honorable in defeat. Lewis’s transhistorical argument locates feelings of longing, nostalgia, and shame in two restagings of the Second Boer War separated by over a century. She develops this argument further in the third chapter, “Hyphens of Humanity: Whiteness and Nostalgia in the Work of Deon Opperman” (68). By closely reading Opperman’s epic saga *Donkerland* (“Dark land”) and *Tree Aan* (“Roll Call”), his play concerning South Africa’s Border War with Namibia, Zambia, and Angola (1966–90), she details how the playwright deploys nostalgia as a strategy, creating a post-apartheid space for Afrikaners that is curiously disconnected from the shame of apartheid.

Lewis’s remaining three chapters catalog different strategies for dismantling the exclusive circle of wagons at the heart of Afrikaner identity. “Queering Afrikanerdom: The Performative Maneuvers of Piet-

er-Dirk Uys” follows the playwright and performer—best-known as his alter-ego Evita Bezuidenhout, the self-described “most famous woman in South Africa”—from his early clashes with the apartheid-era censorship board to his recent AIDS awareness advocacy (95). Where Opperman reinterprets the Afrikaner laager, excising its racist history, Uys satirizes the laager from within. Performance artist Peter Van Heerden, the subject of chapter 5, “Abject Afrikaner, Iconoclast Trekker: Peter Van Heerden’s Performance Interventions within the Laagers of White Masculinity,” also works from within the Afrikaner laager. He deconstructs white privilege by abjecting his own male body (135). Lewis theorizes that Van Heerden frequently appears nude in performances, bereft of dignity and exposed, to betray “what it means to be an Afrikaner—stoic, reserved, and distinctly never airing dirty laundry in public” (151). Finally, in “Vuilgeboosted Gangstas and Romanties Afrikaner Rappers: The Zef Whiteness of Die Antwoord and Jack Parow,” Lewis considers denizens of *zef cultcha*, which she defines as “a contemporary countercultural movement of Afrikaner heterodoxy and self-deprecation” (164). Zef adherents embrace a gritty “white trash chic,” an unapologetic and self-aware poor-white pride that belies the “chosen people” myths underlying the Afrikaner nation (164). Rave rap group Die Antwoord (Afrikaans for “The Answer”) and Parow both advance new white performance strategies, such as identity sampling and boer kitsch, that use irony to question and incorporate Opperman’s nostalgia, Uys’s satire, and Van Heerden’s abjection.

Although studies of whiteness often skew toward the Global North, Lewis utilizes her subject position as a half-English/half-Afrikaner who has spent her adult life in America to write a vital study of whiteness from the Global South. Her emphasis on white Afrikaner masculinity necessarily places contributions by female Afrikaner artists like Reza De Wet and Afrikaans-speaking “coloured” (a common South African term for mixed-race individuals) performers like Soli Philander and Quanita Adams outside the book’s purview. Still, South African performance scholars will find exciting new material in Lewis’s study, particularly her illuminating chapters on Opperman, Uys, and Van Heerden. For students of critical race studies, *Performing Whately* proffers a compelling methodology for dismantling whiteness, making whiteness strange, and unseating whiteness from its privileged position.

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