

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

5-2018

Under the Influence: Drinking and Immersion in New York City Theatre and Popular Entertainment, 1850 to Present

Chloë R. Edmonson

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2616

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

UNDER THE INFLUENCE: DRINKING AND IMMERSION IN NEW YORK CITY
THEATRE AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT, 1850 TO PRESENT

by

CHLOË RAE EDMONSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018

© 2018

CHLOË RAE EDMONSON

All Rights Reserved

Under the Influence: Drinking and Immersion in New York City Theatre and Popular
Entertainment, 1850 to Present

by

Chloë Rae Edmonson

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Date

David Savran,
Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Peter Eckersall,
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Marvin Carlson

James F. Wilson

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Under the Influence: Drinking and Immersion in New York City Theatre and Popular Entertainment, 1850 to Present

by

Chloë Rae Edmonson

Advisor: David Savran

This dissertation contends that the social practice of drinking alcohol is a significant yet under-analyzed factor in the creation of immersive theatrical spaces that house a variety of historic and contemporary performance practices in New York City. Each chapter thereby analyzes intoxication as a phenomenon functioning both physiologically and ideologically within a variety of spaces in New York: the themed, theatrical spaces of mid-nineteenth century concert saloons of lower-Manhattan, segregated jazz clubs of Prohibition-era Harlem, interactive dinner theatre of the late eighties, and contemporary immersive theatre productions by Punchdrunk and Cynthia von Buhler. The claim that unifies these diverse sites of immersive performance, which span over a century-and-a-half of history, is that immersion and intoxication are never ideologically neutral practices; rather, both have played significant roles in reinscribing certain racial, spatial, gendered, and economic inequalities in New York City. As alcohol and temperance historian W. J. Rorabaugh argues, “drinking often occurs in proximity to power,” and this project seeks to outline these proximities within the theatre and performance situation.¹

Though my analytical focus shifts between producers and consumers of immersive performance across these chapters, one ingredient of immersive experience remains of utmost

¹ W. J. Rorabaugh, “Consumption of Alcohol (United States),” entry in *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, edited by Jack S. Blocker, Jr., David M. Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrrell (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 19.

interest throughout: alcohol, of course, and the various ways that drinking co-produces immersive theatrical space. In chapter one, for example, I focus on the concert saloon's waitergirl, who not only sold alcoholic drinks to her patrons, but performed a version of affable, submissive feminine sexuality that played directly into a dominant masculine sporting culture of the time. Chapter two, in turn, shuttles between the perspective of white slummers and black performers at Harlem's Cotton Club during Prohibition. At a time when drinking was legally taboo but still commonplace, white slummers in Harlem got drunk physically and ideologically on both bootlegged liquor and the fantasy of blackness as exotic, erotic, and primitive. Moving into the 1980s, chapter three focuses on the interrelationships between theatre producers, New York theatre critics, and a population of increasingly entrepreneurial audience members attending early immersive theatre productions such as *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*. Drinks consumed within these novel theatrical experiences were physically real but fictionally integrated their surrounding immersive world of the play, such as the champagne toasts made in honor of the titular characters of both productions: Tamara, Tony, and Tina. Finally, chapter four focuses on the intentionally vague participatory contracts that are implicit within immersive theatre spaces such as *Sleep No More*, which informs participants upon entry that "fortune favors the bold." This invitation is further blurred by the ubiquitous presence of drinks and drinking, which has emboldened some masked spectators to cross participatory boundaries, thereby increasing the risks for other performers, crew, and audience members sharing the theatrical space. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to prove that while drinking is not part of every spectator's lived experience of immersive theatre for a variety of reasons, every participant, whether knowingly or not, is still "under the influence" of the spatial and social effects of alcohol when it is made available within public theatre and performance venues.

For Michelle

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to extend the warmest of thanks to my advisor, Distinguished Professor David Savran, whose continued support carried me through the ups and downs of writing this dissertation and whose thoughtful critiques lit up its dark corners. It has been an absolute pleasure to think and learn and laugh with you since day one of this process. I would also like to thank my committee, Distinguished Professor Marvin Carlson and Professor Jim Wilson, as this project has benefited tremendously from your insight and care. To the whole committee: trading immersive theatre stories in your respective offices has been one of the greatest joys of my graduate career!

Major thanks are also due to History Professor Karen Miller, a dear friend and mentor whose intrepid feedback unlocked a pivotal “aha moment” at an early point in this project’s development. I happened to meet Karen through the Graduate Center’s Anne Ellis, to whom I am very grateful for arranging my Writing Across the Curriculum Fellowship, which was absolutely crucial to my ability survive in New York City while completing this project. In my final year of writing, Anne also secured me an assistantship with Matthew Gold, Associate Professor of English and Digital Humanities, whom I thank for being an understanding and supportive boss. I am also grateful for the institutional support I received from the Graduate Center’s Doctoral Student Research Grant, which enabled me to see some incredible immersive theatre in Shanghai.

I would also like to thank the fantastic faculty and staff in the Program in Theatre & Performance at the CUNY Graduate Center, who have each helped me out in different ways: Peter Eckersall (for supporting my scholarly visit to the Shanghai Theatre Academy), Jean Graham-Jones (for reading and re-reading my CV and so many other materials), Erika Lin (for

sharing your wisdom in both academic professionalization and fashion), and of course, Lynette Gibson (who has cheerfully helped me navigate all kinds of bureaucratic obstacles along the way).

My sincere gratitude also goes to Performance Studies Professors José Muñoz, Karen Shimakawa, Sujay Pandit, and Ricardo Montez, who all provided valuable insights into this project while I was studying at NYU. José, we dearly miss you. I also owe so much to Professors Kyle Gillette, David Rinear, Sheila Rinear, Stacey Connelly, and Thomas Jenkins, who nurtured the seeds of this project when I was but a wee undergraduate at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas!

Not only did I receive enormous support from my professors, but my colleagues and peers were absolutely essential to this project's development. Huge thanks to Bess Rowen for never tiring of my questions, Benjamin Gillespie for never tiring of our friendship, and Brad Krumholz for never tiring of my gripes in those final days. I am deeply grateful to Ryan, Joseph, Andy, and Phoebe for showing their support at my dissertation defense and to my colleagues cheering me on from afar. I should also thank Columbia PhD and fellow Trinity alumna Laurie Hemberger for sharing her secrets to success.

This project would not have been possible without the support of my press outlet, Offoffonline.com, through which I was able to secure press tickets to many of the cost-prohibitive shows cited in these chapters. Specifically, I thank Ed Karam, my stalwart editor, and Helen Mills, the site's founder.

Of course, I am indebted to my dear family and friends who extend far beyond the academe and often felt confounded by the mire of processes involved in writing a dissertation, but nonetheless never stopped supporting me emotionally (and sometimes financially). To my

Mimi and Papa, who never stopped asking “now, when are you graduating?”; to my cousins Mo and Lizard, who flew all the way to New York City from Texas to celebrate my dissertation defense; to Lacey, with whom I spent many an hour typing away and exchanging knowing looks at our neighborhood coffee shop; to the “homegirls” (Vicky, Catie Jane, Jen, and Lauren) whose love I could feel from an entire time-zone away; to Megan and Scott, who were undoubtedly the best choice of humans to bring to *Tony n’ Tina*; to Kate, who is another strong woman doing her thing in New York City; and to David, for sponsoring some of my favorite (and least favorite!) theatre excursions.

Last but not least, I owe my fundamental existence to my parents Rodney and Robin, who have listened intently to my creative streams of consciousness, who sat patiently through teary breakdowns, who applauded every joy and salved every disappointment, and who never, ever let me think or feel that this project was unworthy of doing. We three wish Michelle were here too; but she is here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Under the Influence.....	1
CHAPTER ONE “Any Orders, Gents?": The Concert Saloon Waiter Girl and Immersive Theatricality.....	25
CHAPTER TWO “The Aristocrat of Harlem”: Slumming, Immersion, and Intoxication at the Cotton Club.....	53
CHAPTER THREE Tamara, Tony, and Tina: The Immersive Experience Economy in Late-Eighties New York.....	77
CHAPTER FOUR “Fortune Favors the Bold”: Contemporary Immersion, Drinking Culture, and the Entrepreneurial Spectator.....	102
CONCLUSION <i>In Vino Veritas</i>	141
BIBLIOGRAPHY	149

Introduction: Under the Influence

Oddly enough, I found the inspiration for this New York City-based project in London, at the bottom of a goblet of wine. In 2007, I was meandering through the catacombs of Punchdrunk's *Masque of the Red Death* at the Battersea Arts Center. At that point I was a naive undergraduate from Texas, overseas for the first time, and very much new to theatre-going. Thus, every production I saw in London was unprecedented and exciting, but immersive theatre was definitely the most sensually-heightened experience of them all. *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-2008) by British theatre company Punchdrunk immersed participants in a tactile world evocative of Edgar Allan Poe's stories, characters, and symbols – with an overall ambience of terror reflecting the tone of his tales. In the signature Punchdrunk style, I was presented with a white plastic mask and encouraged to roam freely through the space, separate myself from my companions, and remain silent. I had never experienced immersive theatre before, so the experience felt more akin to previous visits to haunted houses and theme parks. I relished every tangible interaction with the detailed set and props for *Masque*. I explored the space, which reeked of cloves and old linen and was honeycombed with rooms and hidden chambers. Indeed, every surface seemed studded with trinkets reminiscent of the author's lore. These objects appeared used, with a story to tell: tiny scrolls of parchment, medicine bottles containing bits of teeth or pills, piles of books, old photos, little wooden drawers and cabinets begging to be open and shut.

Amongst all of this lively clutter, however, the thing that most influenced my experience of *Masque* was that goblet of wine, which was offered to me in a darkened wine cellar (evocative of Poe's *Cask of Amontillado*). Inside the cellar, five or six of my fellow masked audience

members were already exploring the space. Two suited actors stood behind a bar – one portly man and his sidekick. The larger man wore a dingy pinstriped vest with a gold pocket watch glinting from the pocket; his balding sidekick donned a monocle. They spoke to each other in low whispers as I strained to eavesdrop. The performers, seeming hardly aware of me, poured blood-red wine into three goblets and arranged them on a tarnished silver tray. Quite suddenly, the portly man pivoted toward me and made eye contact with me through my mask.

Well, I thought, he's caught me.

Sure enough, the man picked up the tray and crossed toward my corner of the cellar. Before me, he slid the goblets around each other in a magician's sleight-of-hand. He extended the tray toward me. "Choose wisely," he boomed. I took the nearest goblet, lingering awkwardly with it in hand. "Drink," he ordered. I did, and tasted the red wine's flavors: woody, bitter, not too strong. After finishing, I placed my goblet back on his tray with a *tink*. After he returned the tray to the bar and wiped his hands on his vest, the performer re-focused on me. "One of those," he grinned, "was poisoned." I felt a flash of dread, which turned to embarrassment as I remembered that I was participating in a fictional play and that my safety was not *actually* at stake. Or was it? Until then, I had yet to witness such a transgression of the actor/audience divide. The result was dizzying, and I felt disoriented, unable to draw a line between reality and theatricality. In any case, would it not be impolite to refuse to drink the wine? Was I drunk? It was too much information to process in that moment, as this actor's "hospitable" gesture felt like a penetration of my lived reality via a distorted, Eucharistic ritual – with the wine acting as a physical link between our separate realms of the real and theatrical. One thing was certain: the interaction left me reeling with questions about the interrelationships between theatrical performance, drinking

culture, and the power dynamics that play out between performers, producers, and consumers of immersive experiences.

Immersive theatre has exploded in popularity during the decade of time since my 2007 encounter in London. This is especially true in New York City, where Punchdrunk took residence in 2011 with *Sleep No More*, their immersive take on *Macbeth*, which continues to run in a converted warehouse in Chelsea. Beyond Punchdrunk, my research for this project has led me to countless other strange and wild immersive theatre experiences across the city, which is now saturated with productions deeming themselves “immersive.” In my attempts to historicize this contemporary trend, I also immersed myself in the archives of the New York Public Library, poring over newspaper descriptions of mid-nineteenth century Bowery concert saloons and listening to interviews with former Cotton Club dancers. Indeed, one of the central aims of this project is to reveal who and what might be at risk within certain intoxicating, immersive theatre and entertainment spaces of historic and contemporary New York. Therefore, my biggest takeaway from this project, which focuses on New York City and spans over a century-and-a-half of history, is that immersion and intoxication are never ideologically neutral practices; rather, both have played significant roles in reinscribing certain racial, spatial, gendered, and economic inequalities in New York City. As alcohol and temperance historian W. J. Rorabaugh argues, “drinking often occurs in proximity to power,” and this project seeks to outline these proximities within the theatre and performance situation.¹

¹ W. J. Rorabaugh, “Consumption of Alcohol (United States),” entry in *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, edited by Jack S. Blocker, Jr., David M. Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrrell (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 19.

Definitions and Scope

Though the term notoriously resists definition and is prone to misuse, this project defines as “immersive” those productions and experiences that place spectators within the theatrical space and/or story, allowing them to roam, interact with props, set pieces, and actors and, sometimes, to eat and drink as part of the show. Immersive theatre scholar Josephine Machon deftly points out that the term immersive “once solely applied as an adjective” but is now “increasingly used to define a genre.”² Indeed, the existing field of literature on this relatively new genre contains a great many definitions, all of which distinguish immersive theatre by certain spatial, phenomenological, and political markers. I emphasize along with Machon that immersive theatre is uniquely sensual – appealing strongly to senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and rhythmic entrainment.³ Due to this heightened sensual interactivity, objects, spaces, and sensuality are prioritized over storyline. As in *Masque of the Red Death*, the aesthetic of contemporary immersive theatre often features extensively detailed props, sets, and costumes that enhance the feeling of an authentic world.

Another feature of immersive theatre (highlighted by Gareth White, Adam Alston, and Jen Harvie) is that it is highly individualized – placing the participant’s physical, intellectual, and emotional experience at the center of the production.⁴ Contemporary immersive theatre often deemphasizes any kind of complex narrative content; rather, the content of immersive theatre *is*

² Josephine Machon, “On Being Immersed: *The Pleasure of Being, Washing, Feeding, Holding*,” in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 29.

³ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 80.

⁴ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016), and Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

the participant's experience. Immersive theatre often claims to endow participants with some degree of agency as a co-producer of the work, such as being able to move freely around the space, to interact with actors, to pick things up, or to eat and drink during (or as part of) the performance. Whether or not that agency is real or just the faulty promise of skillful advertising is a point I take up throughout this project; indeed, some subjects may feel or be empowered by a sense of agency within an immersive space, while others may feel disempowered or sometimes even in danger within that very same space.

The term “immersive” as a descriptor for theatre is relatively new. In the mid-eighties, the term first gained popularity amongst virtual reality creators like Jaron Lanier, who created head-mounted display masks that visually immersed users in digitized environments.⁵ The term has since migrated to advertising, entertainment, and theatre – but retains its core notion of participant or viewer absorption. Today, public relations managers for theatre productions often misuse the term, which has garnered cultural buzz, to advertise shows that could more accurately be described as site-specific, site-sympathetic, or simply taking place in a venue that is not a traditional theatre (such as a bar or public park). It is true, however, that immersive, site-specific, site-sympathetic, and environmental theatre overlap in many ways. “Site-specific” is a term that originated in the visual art world, referring to works created expressly for certain sites, environments, or locales; therefore, the meaning of a site-specific theatre performance is intimately and inextricably linked to its spatial specificity, and to “restage” it in another place would be to create a whole new production altogether.⁶ Alternatively, a production is “site-

⁵ Michael R. Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 111-114.

⁶ For a wide range of analyses in this genre, which sometimes overlaps with immersive theatre, see *Performing Site-specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, eds. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

sympathetic” if its creators integrate some spatial inspiration from a certain venue into their production. Punchdrunk’s artistic director Felix Barrett, for example, claims their productions are site-sympathetic because he “takes pains not to impose the company’s work on the spaces he finds” and describes his artistic process as a letting a space tell him “the show it wants to have inside it.”⁷ A production like *Sleep No More* is not site-specific but site-sympathetic, then, because it has been restaged in different venues throughout London, Greater Boston (Cambridge), New York City, and Shanghai. Furthermore, while the production has retained its overall aesthetic, each iteration responds organically to its unique space. Like immersive theatre, space is paramount in site-specific and site-sympathetic theatre; immersive theatre, however, differs by almost always adding some element of audience participation, which is not always present in the former. Like Richard Schechner and The Performance Group’s “environmental theatre” of the 1960s, immersive theatre makes a point of removing the proscenium that traditionally separates actors and audience. Chapter three further elaborates on key similarities and differences between environmental theatre and contemporary immersive theatre, but one significant difference is that, unlike the radical environmental theatre of the sixties, a lot of contemporary immersive theatre does not lay claim to any politically or socially critical message. Rather, its politics are embedded in its form, and, as chapters three and four will show, it quite often embodies the aspirations of an experience economy and a neoliberal spirit of entrepreneurialism.

While the final two chapters of this project focus on immersive theatre in its recognizable contemporary format, its larger scope considers how early popular entertainments in New York

⁷ Dominic Cavendish, “Punchdrunk: Plunge into a World of Extraordinary Theatre,” *The Telegraph*, June 20, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/10127892/Punchdrunk-plunge-into-a-world-of-extraordinary-theatre.html>.

City were also immersive. The examples in this dissertation reach back to the mid-nineteenth century in New York City – long before “immersive” became a buzz word – and I thereby apply the term retrospectively to concert saloons in chapter one, jazz clubs in chapter two, and participatory dinner theatre in chapter three. By analyzing examples of early American popular entertainments in trajectory with contemporary immersive performance, I wish to complicate the common narrative that immersive theatre was simply “imported” to the United States from the UK (via Punchdrunk). In actuality, there exists a fascinating genealogy of variety entertainment venues throughout New York City history that are immersive by design. Rather than viewing immersive theatre simply as an import and historically “new,” one major project of this dissertation is to situate the genre’s place in an unfolding history of immersive performance and recreational activities in New York City.

There is a plethora of theatrical factors that engender immersive space, including but certainly not limited to tangible props, atmospheric music, audience keepsakes and masks, and labyrinthine set designs. These factors have been explored a great deal through existing academic conversations on immersive theatre and performance practice. One powerful but overlooked contributor to the creation of immersive experience, however, is the ubiquitous presence of alcoholic drinks such as beer, wine, and cocktails. Indeed, the presence of alcohol in public space and the social practice of drinking is the common thread connecting every example in this dissertation, both historic and present. This project is the first to consider the complex ways that alcohol facilitates many spectators’ experience of immersive space and performance. I also illuminate, when appropriate, how alcohol is often an important part of the production or venue’s business model for commercial success.

My decision to investigate the service of alcohol and audience drinking in immersive performance practice is highly calculated. In significant ways, the history of theatre and popular entertainment in New York City is bound to the history of American drinking culture, yet no existing study examines the relationship of alcohol consumption to the experience of so many theatregoers and performance venues. One must consider the triadic relationship between drinking, legality, and space: laws and regulations around drinking have greatly influenced various venues of popular entertainment and theatre throughout history, dictating when and where they can occur. Legislative and political reinforcements of racial segregation and gender inequality also make drinking a historically racialized and gendered practice in this city. Experientially, when integrated into the theatre and performance situation, intoxication and drinking culture involve the drinking spectator on a bodily level – upping the stakes of the sensual experience – and at the same time, drinking behaviors at the theatre operate in relation to larger structures of legality, morality, exclusion, and power. Even participants who choose not to imbibe within an immersive space featuring alcohol will still be subjected to the various effects that drinking and intoxication have on public space.

As a popular and pervasive social activity in New York City, drinking alcohol is so worked into our urban history that it can be easy to overlook. “Common” in every sense of the word, drinking has not yet merited the full attention of theatre scholarship altogether, let alone the field of immersive theatre studies. Perhaps the topic is simply not considered serious enough for academic attention. Indeed, this dissertation intervenes in the field of theatre studies by demonstrating how drinking culture has influenced theatre practice in New York City – far more so than existing theatre scholarship cares to admit. I posit that drinking and immersion are not simply coincidental practices, but they share at least some metaphorical and embodied likeness

that continues to bring both practices together in the same rooms. After all, the god Dionysus unites both theatre and intoxication under the guise of altered states. As a substance, alcohol is endowed with a degree of semi-magical power because of its potential to intoxicate. Indeed, both theatre and intoxication can potentially alter rigid everyday notions of time, identity, and agency. Immersive theatre, arguably, is particularly equipped to metaphorically intoxicate a spectator with its uniquely sensual and visceral tactics and hermetically-sealed spatiality. Since audience participation is so central to immersive theatre, the inhibition-lowering powers of alcohol can also act as liquid courage for participants who shirk at the notion of interaction. It can also work as an antidote to the discomfort of crowding, intimacy, or voyeurism. In so many ways, alcohol can potentially transform immersive experience from something awkward or uncomfortable into something sensual, enjoyable, or memorable. On the other hand, drunk participants can exert a great deal of influence on the experiences of other persons engaging with the same immersive space. Therefore, while drinking is not part of every spectator's lived experience for a variety of reasons, I argue an even more important point, which is that every participant, whether knowingly or not, is still "under the influence" of the spatial and social effects of alcohol when it is made available within public theatre and performance venues.

Considering the essential importance of drinking to the development of leisure and amusements in New York City, this dissertation observes how alcohol culture intersects with certain immersive theatre and performance practices. More importantly, in every example in this dissertation, I explore intoxication's potentiality as both a physiological and a metaphorical phenomenon. For example, in the case of the concert saloons of chapter one, male patrons could not only get *physically* intoxicated on the drinks served by young waiter girls, but *ideologically* intoxicated by the gendered fantasy of masculine sporting culture supported by the venue's

spatial design. For the white slummers of chapter two, the ideology of immersion in Harlem's world of exoticized blackness doubled as one's ticket to engaging in excessive drinking and sexual promiscuity. In early immersive productions of the eighties, social drinking was a way for individual audience members to cross into newly participatory theatrical worlds, such as the fictional wedding of Tony and Tina, which portended an emerging experience economy as well as the coming to power of neoliberalism. Finally, chapter four demonstrates how the availability of alcohol and the opportunity (and often encouragement) for patrons to drink in *Sleep No More* and *The Illuminati Ball* might intensify the risks to facilitators, performers, and participants within the already-ambiguously regulated theatrical space of these productions. Ultimately, each example in this project explores the meaningful connections between the aesthetic goals of immersion, audience consumption of alcohol, and larger contexts of social and economic precarity or inequality.

Despite my conviction that drinking culture has exerted significant influence on theatre and performance practice, I nevertheless recognize the pitfalls of overemphasizing the effects of alcohol on participant experience. It is not my intention to construct or advocate any kind of universally-intoxicated reception theory. After all, as I have mentioned, it is always an audience member's prerogative whether to drink, or how much. The essential point, however, is not whether the audience member imbibes, nor I am seeking to measure the ratio of drinkers to non-drinkers in any particular audience. Rather, the point I am emphasizing is that the mere availability and abundance of alcohol within theatrical space is a significant factor in the physical and psychological construction of immersive experience. As a social marker of leisure, celebration, and sometimes hedonism and excess, the availability and presence of alcohol in its own right is enough to at least subtly influence the mood and quality of a space.

This is in part because, as a regulated substance, alcohol obviously carries a more complicated relationship to public space than other everyday beverages. Importantly, it is illegal to drink just anywhere; in New York City (and most cities), laws delimit spaces where drinking is or is not permitted. Drinking can take place on certain outdoor patios, for example, but only within licensed and approved partitions.⁸ In party destinations like New Orleans or Las Vegas, these regulations are relaxed: in certain commercial areas, drinkers may legally carry a drink outside of a bar or residence and onto the city streets. For many tourists and revelers, this legalized freedom and the laissez-faire spatiality it engenders is exactly what drew them to these destinations for events such as Mardi Gras and the ever-present bachelor party; the fluid environment embodies Bakhtin's carnivalesque – where the usual strict boundaries of space and behavior may be transgressed.⁹ It is a small liberty – the ability to carry one's drink on a city street or through an interactive theatre experience – but this dissertation seeks to prove that it is a significant one for reasons that are culturally embodied and legally circumscribed.

Questions of legality are especially important to the concert saloons and jazz clubs of chapters one and two, which both operated during historic moments when forces of temperance and Prohibition were at odds with patrons' desires to drink and indulge. In the case of concert saloons, proprietors had to constantly navigate (or at least be aware of) new legislation such as the Concert Saloon Bill of 1862, which sought to prohibit the distribution of alcohol in the same spaces as entertainments and women workers. Though alcohol was technically illegal during the heyday of venues like the Cotton Club in Harlem, proprietors still found ways to facilitate

⁸ For a more complete index of New York's liquor laws, see <http://www.sla.ny.gov/>.

⁹ For a translation of the foundational text on the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 219.

customer intoxication, such as suggesting where to stow one's smuggled bottle of bootlegged liquor or selling half-glasses of mixers such as ginger beer. Though Prohibition is long over, many contemporary immersive theatre productions (and bars, for that matter) in New York City reproduce a "speakeasy" ambience nostalgic of venues like concert saloons and Harlem jazz clubs, wherein alcohol consumption and intoxication were doubly marked as taboo and on trend.

By allowing or sometimes even encouraging participants to drink and socialize within a theatrical space, immersive theatre productions like *The Illuminati Ball* distinguish themselves from a more traditional theatre setup wherein the bar and concession stand are separate from the theatrical space of the play. Like the relaxed alcohol laws in Las Vegas, this affords the drinking spectator a certain sense of bodily freedom (associated more with bars or clubs than the theatre). This is especially true for productions such as von Buhler's *Speakeasy Dollhouse* and *Illuminati Ball*, wherein participants can carry their drinks with them as they interact with characters such as mobsters and prostitutes. Productions by von Buhler often blur bar space with theatrical space. Again, this diverges from a more traditional set-up of non-immersive theatre productions, in which patrons may purchase drinks at the theatre's lobby bar – a transaction that is almost entirely divorced from the fictional world of the play. Even in the case of *Sleep No More*'s Manderley Bar, great care (in terms of design and service) is taken to aesthetically blend the world of the club into the world of the ensuing immersive theatre experience. In other words, the space of The Manderley is theatricalized in a way that typical lobby bars are usually not.

Although the watershed moment for this project occurred in London at *Masque of the Red Death*, it inspired me to investigate the genre's development in historic and contemporary New York. Personally, I am "immersed" every day in New York City's densely-populated, socioeconomically diverse, and vertically crowded landscape. My daily business in the city is

haunted by various historical sites explored in this dissertation; on the way to meet friends, I walk up the Bowery, where the architecture echoes the former concert saloons that overflowed with rowdy patrons during the nineteenth century. I teach in Harlem, where white slummers used to travel to immerse themselves in African American music and culture. I attend shows at the Armory on the Upper East Side, where the early immersive production *Tamara* took place in the eighties. Living here has allowed me to attend *Sleep No More* four times; each experience has been markedly different, and I have been able to watch the production evolve. Indeed, my personal involvement in the intense and storied panorama of New York City – with its skyscrapers, high contrast colors, strong smells, and multilingual throngs – is central to my critical perspective and focus on immersion.

In a city that contains a lot of literal and metaphorical “velvet rope” partitions, the spatial politics of exclusivity are especially observable throughout the urban geography of New York City. This is true not only in immersive theatre, but in other specialty experiences such as conceptual dining restaurants, speakeasy bars, and luxury fitness studios, which saturate many affluent (and gentrifying) neighborhoods in the city. Indeed, producers of these experiences seek to meet the demands of affluent New York consumers, who expect to be immersed in the best experiences available. Spin class participants at boutique cycling gyms, for example, expect chilled cucumber water, dimmed lighting, and impeccably-curated playlists on blast during their workout. Diners at fine restaurants expect ambient lighting and music, knowledgeable waiters, and well-timed service. At the core of these businesses’ appeal is the idea that they provide a service or product that is exclusive and sought-after. Hysteria over *Hamilton* tickets in recent years, for example, is one manifestation of a culture of distinction in New York that places great value on attaining experiences that are rare: from coveted event tickets and pastries that sell out

before 7am, to hard-to-get restaurant reservations or having one's name on a "list" for an exclusive party. Indeed, the spectacular spatiality of crowding in New York – both vertical and horizontal – exaggerates the gap between those with and without symbolic and cultural capital. As a consumer metropolis and home to many "flagship" stores, New York City also offers an accelerated version of the experience economy. The city is often at the forefront of innovative consumer experiences, providing a testing ground for new theatre productions, restaurant concepts, and fitness trends. While immersive consumer experiences can be found in almost any global city, the economic energy and physical geography of New York City make it a uniquely world-class destination for these types of venues.

Review of Literature

While the first three chapters of this dissertation cover examples that technically precede immersive theatre as a genre, I argue that concert saloons, Harlem jazz clubs, and dinner theatre productions of the eighties precipitated the arrival of the genre in New York City by implementing certain immersive tactics. These practical approaches include an emphasis on theme via music and décor, the hiring and training of staff who must labor doubly as servers but also as embodied performers of the venue's spatial theme, and the creation of a physical "interior" that is sealed off from everyday mundanity, often by theatricalized processes of entry. These strategies are uncannily similar to those called for in B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's "experience economy," which emerged as a business philosophy in the-late nineties but had been practiced by New York entrepreneurs in various ways for over a century. The idea of an experience economy is central to many current books and articles on immersive theatre, for good reason. In this economy, experience itself has commercial value, and the consumer's

participatory labor is sold back to her as part of a totalized and exclusive experience.

“Companies stage an experience when they engage customers in a memorable way,” Pine and Gilmore advise, and “even the most mundane transactions can be turned into memorable experiences.”¹⁰ In other words, the creation of memorable experiences is also the creation of capital. Though Pine and Gilmore are hardly theatre theorists, their constant appeal to theatre metaphors in their marketing strategies is itself an illustration of link between theatricality and consumerism. Bits of their theory are evident throughout this dissertation but come to bear most heavily in the final two chapters, as contemporary immersive theatre continues to commodify audience “experience.”

Another foundational theoretical concept for this project is Jane C. Desmond’s “kinesthetic semiotics,” which she applies specifically to dance but argues also applies to other embodied performances.¹¹ In this theory, Desmond’s goal, like my own, is to “further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement;” instead of doing this through dance studies, however, I am looking at the intersections of drinking culture with immersive theatre and performance.¹² How is drinking socialized, racialized, and gendered? How so with immersive theatre? Indeed, as highly embodied practices, the physical ways that people drink socially coupled with the ways they physically interact with theatrical experience can indicate a great deal about society at large and its associated belief systems pertaining to gender, race, sexuality, class, and a whole host of identity codifiers.

¹⁰ B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore II, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 4.

¹¹ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 34.

¹² Desmond, “Embodying Difference,” 34.

Matthew Wilson Smith's idea of "theming" has been especially essential to my theorizing of both concert saloons and jazz venues like the Cotton Club, which used theatrical tactics quite similar to what Smith observes in his analysis of theme parks.¹³ The idea behind theming is to create memorable spaces that erase everyday indications of labor, such as dirty bar rags, electrical cords and outlets, and belabored cashiers. In a themed space, employees should play characters and part of their labor is to appear as if they are not, indeed, at work. Laura Levin's *Performing Ground* also factors heavily into my consideration of bodies within immersive spaces, particularly her gendered theorizing of audience behavior and her attempt to use scholarship as a way to "unconceal" the female bodies and bodies of color that typically become camouflaged by a space's immersive theme.¹⁴ Both Smith and Levin provide valuable insights into the specific mechanisms through which immersive space enacts and reifies certain ideologies and ways of being, while perhaps obscuring and restricting others.

While the historical examples in chapters one and two serve to contextualize the emergence of immersive theatre in the late eighties through the present day in New York City, I conversely rely upon contemporary theories about immersive theatre to illuminate the theatricality of these early popular entertainment venues. Though many New York theatregoers are now familiar with contemporary immersive theatre as an aesthetic, it was essentially defined in the late-nineties by renown British companies such as Punchdrunk and shunt. Therefore, UK scholars have thus led the academic conversations on immersive theatre. The first critical analyses focused on the difficult task of defining the aesthetic elements of this format of theatre

¹³ Matthew Wilson Smith, "Disney Theme Parks," *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 114-134.

¹⁴ Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84.

performance. In *Immersive Theatres* (2013), Machon categorizes immersive theatre with three distinguishing features: audience involvement, the centrality of sensual experience, and the significance of space.¹⁵ She outlines various ways that contemporary immersive theatre prioritizes bodily and personal experience. Like many immersive thinkers, Machon appeals to Jacques Rancière to think about ways that immersive theatre “emancipates” its spectators by centralizing their bodily experience.¹⁶ Another early and important contribution to defining immersive theatre is Gareth White’s *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013).¹⁷ Distinctively, White focuses less on immersive theatre and more on the aesthetics of participation, which he characterizes by elements such as invitation, choice, risk, and agency. Like Machon, White construes audience experience as the very medium of immersive theatre and considers the emancipatory possibilities in the participants’ world of choices.

More recent British scholarship, however, takes an increasingly critical approach on the participatory and emancipatory possibilities of contemporary immersive theatre. In *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (2016), Adam Alston considers the various ways that the contemporary genre is symptomatic of a neoliberal economy, which rewards individualism and entrepreneurialism.¹⁸ This line of inquiry converses with Jen Harvie’s earlier study *Fair Play* (2013), which explores the complex labor tensions created in participatory theatre, which always demands some form of labor from its spectators.¹⁹ On one hand, Harvie admits that immersive theatre offers us the

¹⁵ Josephine Machon, “Definitions and Details,” *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 53-70.

¹⁶ Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 117-120.

¹⁷ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁸ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁹ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

“pleasures of action, self-determination and discovery,” but on the other, the labor of participating as an audience member can also be inherently “insecure, deskilling and alienating.”²⁰ Indeed, immersive theatre demands much more from its audience than traditional theatre; as co-producers of the experience, immersive audiences often engage physically, intellectually, and emotionally with the theatrical environment.

This dissertation follows the lead of Alston and Harvie by thinking critically about the ways that immersive theatre participates in and sometimes reinforces structures of power and inequality. This project adds an important factor to the existing academic discussion by focusing particularly on the aspect of audience drinking within immersive theatre and performance, and how this physical and social practice can work to co-produce an immersive environment that is a liberating ludic space for some and a precarious workplace for others. This environment is one that is not universally freeing or emancipatory for the drinkers, performers, staff, and other subjects within the immersive space. Of course, this was also true in the case of my historical examples. In order to identify the belief sets and behaviors producing these historical spaces, I rely on the work of historians and sociologists who define particular cultural zeitgeists predominating each snapshot in time. In the case of concert saloons, for example, the ideology prevailing over the drunken saloons was generally in line with what Cindy R. Lobel and Brooks McNamara call male sporting culture, which reified the prototypical bachelor and shirked the oppressive duties of family and community.²¹ Additionally, I use the historical and theoretical findings of Chad Heap and Shane Vogel to theorize how segregated spaces like the Cotton Club

²⁰ Harvie, *Fair Play*, 50.

²¹ Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 133; Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82.

practically and ideologically separated white propriety from black exoticism.²² Finally, I employ the economic history of neoliberalism written by Daniel Stedman Jones to narrate an emerging spirit of Reagan-era economics during the eighties, which are deeply reflected in the immersive theatre of the time.²³

Methodology

As Machon and other scholars have emphasized, the selection, composition, and maintenance of *space* is essential to understanding the workings of immersion, both theatrical and otherwise. Therefore, each chapter herein devotes considerable attention to describing and analyzing the spatiality of the respective immersive venues. From the subterranean entryways of concert saloons and the plantation décor of Harlem clubs, to *Tamara*'s expansive and opulent setting within the historic Park Avenue Armory and *Sleep No More*'s lively and crowded Manderley Bar, I have taken care to give as clear a picture as possible of the spatialities outlined herein. After all, while not every spectator or participant is under the influence of alcohol, they are all under the influence of a venue's spatial design. In turn, these spaces are often designed to disorient, awe, or confuse the spectator.

While analyses of space are woven throughout this project, each chapter differs by shifting its focus on different subjects operating within those spaces. Indeed, there are many kinds of human subjects involved in the creation of immersive space, including producers,

²² Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Shane Vogel, *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 77.

²³ Daniel Stedman Jones, "Economic Strategy: The Neoliberal Breakthrough, 1971-1984" in *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 215.

performers, crew, wait staff and bartenders, and audience members/consumers. The larger methodological reasoning behind each chapter's shifting of subjects is to illuminate the *networks* behind immersive experience creation. Indeed, though the logic of immersive design tends to focus on the experience of the individual spectator, there are entire networks of labor fomenting these highly individualized experiences. In chapter one, for example, I focus on the concert saloon's waiter-girl, who was a significant producer of individualized immersive experience for her patrons but has also been largely eclipsed in most historical literature on the subject. Chapter two, in turn, shuttles between the perspective of the Cotton Club's white slummers and black performers in an attempt to elucidate the recycling of black racial stereotypes in response to demands of white patron. Chapter three focuses on the sometimes-conflicting interrelationships between theatre producers, increasingly entrepreneurial audience members, and the theatre critics whose reviews disseminated knowledges about how to behave within these early immersive theatre productions, which were largely a novelty at the time. Finally, chapter four focuses on the archetype of a badly behaving and intoxicated spectator who constitutes a minority but nonetheless exercises an undue amount of influence on the space of *Sleep No More*. Indeed, the drunken and emboldened masked spectator increases the risks for performers, crew, and other audience members sharing the theatrical space, thereby becoming a sort of "specter" who haunts and influences the participatory space even when he is not present.

Though my analytical focus shifts between producers and consumers across these chapters, one ingredient of immersive experience remains of utmost interest throughout: alcohol, of course, and the various ways that it supports and produces immersive experience. Since intoxication is an embodied and socialized phenomenon, I often turn to feminist critiques of the body to make sense of the inequalities embedded in immersive spaces and the drinking practices

taking place therein. For this reason, I begin each chapter with a relevant personal account drawn from my own bodily experience as a spectator of immersive theatre and performance. While this methodological choice runs the risk of coming across as solipsistic or reductive, it is my practical attempt to embody and illuminate the logic of immersive performance design, which almost always emphasizes the experience of the individual over any communal narrative. Especially in the case of my historical chapters, I use these concrete personal descriptions of contemporary experience as a “way in” to performances of the past.

Chapters

The first chapter begins in the concert saloons of the mid-nineteenth century and configures their atmospheres as both immersive and theatrical. I argue that the immersive atmosphere of the concert saloon, and especially its gender-specific experience of intoxication, began a long trajectory of immersive drinking experiences within a theatre and performance context. A traditional concert saloon setup decentered the performance space (stage) to the back or corner of the space, putting the drinking and camaraderie at the physical center of the experience. Most importantly, concert-saloons were masculine spaces; women (on stage and as waiter girls) were an essential part of the immersive experience but were largely viewed as decorative. With a specific focus on gender performance, this chapter re-views the waiter girl as a stage manager who facilitated her participants’ desire to partake in the male “sporting” culture of the time. It is the first installment in an overarching historical project to illuminate the performative ways in which drinking is related to power and labor and connect this back to a tactical aesthetics of immersion.

Chapter two looks at the early twentieth-century practice of slumming in Harlem. For middle and upper-class white slummers in Manhattan, drinking was part of a membership in a leisure class possessing the bodily and economic mobility to immerse themselves in racialized spaces such as the segregated Cotton Club. In order to create an immersive experience, proprietors theatricalized spaces in Harlem, manipulating the atmosphere to evoke a commercially viable configuration of blackness. These venues staged stereotypes such as the exoticized black body of the jungle, or the domesticated black body of the plantation; proprietors required servers to dress to fit this theme and directed performers to embody these fantasy stereotypes as well. During Prohibition, drinking smuggled booze was central to slummers' experiences of "taboo" in Harlem, and their intoxicated behavior was made permissible by a constructed, caricatured idea of blackness that was imagined in opposition to notions of white propriety. In a similar way that concert saloons patrons objectified and consumed the female waiter girl's body, the typical white slummer commodified and consumed bodies of color in Prohibition-era Harlem. These first two historical chapters demonstrate that the social drinking and spatial exclusivity of immersive entertainments is not innocuous but actually complicit in reinscribing inequality in New York City.

Advancing to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the final two chapters deal with an advanced consumer culture in the form of the experience economy and the advent of neoliberalism. While chapters one and two analyze the theatricalization of bars and drinking spaces, chapters three and four observe an inverse phenomenon, in which theatre begins to absorb the spatiality and sociality associated with bars and other recreational spaces like themed restaurants, haunted houses, and amusement parks. Chapter three explores two early examples of immersive theatre in NYC and their relationship to class distinction during an economically

booming era and, thus, the emerging prototype of the entrepreneurial spectator. The two key examples in this chapter, *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*, represent (respectively) highbrow and lowbrow examples of the convergence of the experience economy, theatre practice, and drinking culture. In contrast with the environmental and political theatre of the late-sixties and seventies, which also diminished the proscenium separating audience and performers, both productions featured alcohol and were highly publicized and profitable; their early successes were a sign of the commercially successful immersive theatre trend to come. By analyzing reviews of the productions, this chapter makes critical connections between immersive staging and greater economic structures of Reaganomics and the coming to dominance of neoliberalism in 1980s New York City.

Finally, moving into the contemporary moment from which I write, chapter four analyzes two important and highly successful productions in New York City's vibrant immersive theatre scene: Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* and Cynthia von Buhler's *Illuminati Ball*. While there exists a diverse range of immersive productions to choose from in New York City, these two productions particularly embody the ambiguities inherent to the "contract" between an immersive theatre production and its spectator. Parts of this contract are made explicit by pre-show speeches, but the rest is left intentionally vague in order to promote a spectator's feeling of possibility and potential in terms of what she can or cannot do within the space of the production. When coupled with alcohol and binge-drinking culture, I argue, the boundaries between what is and is not acceptable audience behavior is further blurred. In the case of some particularly emboldened spectators, this ambiguous contract can be a way of facilitating behaviors endemic to rape culture. Indeed, chapter four analyzes the ways that this precarity of immersive space is particularly relevant in light of the contemporary #metoo movement, which has garnered much

attention around the everyday precarities facing women, people of color, people with disabilities, and queer people in the workplace and home. Important too is the fact that we are living in a larger economic and cultural moment wherein social media and technological entrepreneurialism are championed, and almost anyone can imagine themselves as an Instagram-celebrity or billionaire App-creator. These economic fantasies, I will demonstrate, subtly manifest themselves in the immersive spaces of *Illuminati Ball* and *Sleep No More*.

Indeed, as technologies accelerate and genres of consumer experience continue to blur, I conclude this introduction with a forward-looking question: what is next in the future of immersion? As entrepreneurial fans become savvier in the conventions of immersion, how will artists and proprietors advance the genre? As long as consumers continue to participate in the experience economy and demand increasingly intimate, exclusive and memorable experiences, producers will continue to develop and innovate tactics of immersion – creating the next new experience we did not even know we needed to have. Whatever these advancements look like, moreover, it is quite likely that drinks will be available.

Chapter One

“Any Orders, Gents?": The Concert Saloon Waiter Girl and Immersive Theatricality

On an unusually hot October afternoon in 2017, I find myself with a group of friends watching football at “Twin Peaks,” a sports bar located off the interstate in an affluent suburb of Houston. This is just one franchise of the vastly popular American sports bar, which – like the classic Hooter’s bar and grill – offers alcohol, bar food, sports on multiple televisions, and their signature “girls,” or young waitresses dressed in revealing uniforms (or costumes, depending on the season). Twin Peaks’s atmosphere is lively and aggressively casual, with Classic Rock music competing with the voices of various broadcasters announcing the games on TV. Both the interior and exterior of all locations are themed to simulate a hunting lodge in the mountains, with log ceiling rafters, fireplaces, and rustic “stone” masonry.¹ At the center of this theme is the signature “Twin Peaks Girl.” According to the company website’s “Careers” page, an ideal Twin Peaks Girl is “friendly and attentive...offering their signature ‘Girl Next Door’ charisma and playful personalit[y].”² To be sure, their everyday uniform of winter boots, tiny denim shorts, and tied-up flannel shirts underscores the venue’s irreverent and impractical mountain lodge theme. Indeed, the display of young women’s bodies is a central draw of the Twin Peaks experience, and bars of similar ilk; the chain’s logo, for example, features two overtly breast-like “mountains” atop the motto “Eats. Drinks. Scenic Views.” Even the menu reflects the hetero-masculine consumption of women’s bodies, offering three different house beers on tap: Blonde,

¹ Though it is tempting to make a connection, Twin Peaks is *not* a nod to David Lynch’s cult classic 1990s television show of the same name, which featured a private casino and flophouse called One Eyed Jack’s.

² “Careers,” *Twin Peaks Restaurant Website*, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://www.twinpeaksrestaurant.com/work-it/>.

Brunette, and Redhead. During my visit, I order the Blonde from our waitress (who herself happens to be a brunette). As she departs, I scan the interior of the bar. Most of the patrons are groups of men, but there are a few heterosexual couples and even a few families with young children. It appears that Twin Peaks is a quite popular Saturday afternoon destination for many members of this suburban community.

Later, in the parking lot, I notice a group of waitresses posing atop a customer's vintage sports car. After snapping some photos, the car owner hands each waitress a roll of bills and they return to work. Apparently, posing for photos is part of being a "friendly and attentive" Twin Peaks Girl. Though the Twin Peaks franchise was founded in 2005, this type of male-centered leisure activity is anything but new in the United States. Indeed, the mainstream confluence of drinking, sports, men, and feminine sexuality on display is historically embedded into the fabric of American leisure culture. The very concept of Twin Peaks echoes an important historical example of drinking immersed in male-dominated camaraderie: the concert saloon. The mid- and late-nineteenth century concert saloons served nearly identical goals to the contemporary Twin Peaks franchise, whose concept "feeds the stomach and the ego at the same time."³ Indeed, alcohol and temperance historian W.J. Rorabaugh argues that "in American society, male drinking has also been associated with manhood" and much of the socializing that goes on in these spaces "is about victory of conquest, real or imagined."⁴ These venues immersed (and continue to immerse) customers in a space that caters to a bachelor's sporting culture, where

³ "Franchise," *Twin Peaks Restaurant Website*, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://www.twinpeaksrestaurant.com/franchise/concept/>.

⁴ W. J. Rorabaugh, "Consumption of Alcohol (United States)," in *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, eds. Jack S. Blocker, Jr., David M. Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrrell (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

women are perceived as decorative, and alcohol fuels the sporting, gambling, or entertainment activities of choice.

It is important to note that, while the Twin Peaks franchise subscribes to a similar ethos to the early concert saloons of New York, the atmosphere of nineteenth-century saloons was certainly wilder and less regulated. Concert saloons were veritable melees of revelry and violence, song and sexuality, and drunk men and the attendant “waiter girls” who, unlike the girl-next-door waitresses of Twin Peaks, often worked overtime as prostitutes. Unlike Twin Peaks’ uniformly franchised “cabin” theme, each concert saloon in New York City had its own unique ambience. As the first section of this chapter will reveal, the spatiality of saloons varied greatly, from holes in the wall to extravagantly-themed venues. No matter the décor, liquor and beer flowed freely as variety performances took place on small, sometimes raised, stages usually located on the periphery of the bar space. As Parker Zellers points out, “sometimes the stage was no more than a crude platform standing unadorned against the wall.”⁵ Other venues staged performances in separate side-rooms that operated as miniature theatres. Indeed, concert saloons distinguished themselves from everyday bars of the time by featuring these variety entertainments, which added a great deal of conviviality to the venue’s drunken atmosphere. These acts included music, dance, minstrelsy, and other diversions. Instead of the televised games of modern sports bars, many saloons featured card tables and shooting galleries to further entertain patrons while they drank. Concert saloons were bedlams of constituent elements: drinks, performances, music and chatter, the seductive appeal of the waiter girls, games and gambling, and camaraderie amongst almost exclusively male patrons. Overall, like Twin Peaks,

⁵ Parker R. Zellers, “The Cradle of Variety: The Concert Saloon,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 4 (1968): 579.

concert saloon proprietors aimed to stage dynamic, multisensorial experiences for their target audience of working class men – though in a much rowdier fashion than any franchised bar today.

By framing concert saloons as an important example of early American immersive performance practice, this chapter analyzes the practical ways that saloons employed elements of theatricality to reify the dominant masculine sporting ideology to which most of their customers subscribed. While this themed experience was centered around men and masculine culture, this chapter puts a special emphasis on the female waiter girls, who – much like the Twin Peaks Girls – stage-managed these saloons by choreographing patron experiences and cueing the hedonistic atmosphere with their embodied performances. Rather than focusing on the types of variety entertainments that took place on the stages of concert saloons, this chapter considers first the intoxicating immersiveness of the physical spaces of concert saloons and secondly the role that waiter girls played in stage-managing the customer experiences within. This chapter views the conceptual theming of concert saloons as distinctly theatrical, with both patrons and employees performing social roles that are scripted in accordance to an ideological theme of heteronormative masculinity. Like the Twin Peaks franchise openly claims on its website, the concept guiding the spatial design and atmosphere of these venues fed the hetero-masculine egos of customers.

The Immersive Worlds of Concert Saloons

Rather than being ideologically neutral spaces, concert saloons, and the drinking and performances that took place there, were immersive and largely in service of a male sporting culture that emphasized individual debauchery over domesticity and family. Indeed, just as Jane

C. Desmond argues that performances of dance and theatre can codify social identity, I argue the same for the immersive space of concert saloons, which were “both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations” of the time.⁶ The social identity being codified by concert saloons was that of the male “sport.” Cindy R. Lobel connects the increase in sporting culture to the rise of consumerism in New York City. She writes that sports, or working-class bachelors, spent their money on

bawdy and sometimes bloody entertainments. These included various forms of gaming, such as cockfighting and prizefighting; consorting with prostitutes; and visiting theaters, concert saloons, and other salacious venues. The antebellum sporting man’s culture was a very visible one on the streets of New York, with groups of rowdy youths (known as “sports”) roaming its avenues and sometimes wreaking havoc with their boisterous and occasionally violent behavior.⁷

With expendable income and an insatiable desire to drink and rabble-rouse, this rising demographic of working-class bachelors certainly shaped the types of paid entertainments offered in New York’s pleasure districts. While not every concert saloon patron was technically a sport in the sense that Lobel describes above (some were higher or lower in class, some were married, some were tourists, and towards the end of the century, some were even women), the hyper-masculinity and hedonism of male sporting culture created an especially visible ethos, which thereby shaped New York’s entertainment districts. In other words, while a certain sporting ideology drove the aesthetics of concert saloons, these spaces were still available for

⁶ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 38.

⁷ Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 133.

men of all ages and classes to physically and ideologically immerse themselves in masculinized debauchery. This continues to be observable today, when spaces like Twin Peaks restaurant clearly cater to a dominant male archetype but allow families, women, and queer people to partake in the space. At the end of the day, however, the space is not “for” them.

Furthermore, though men were the target audience, women were essential to the success of concert saloons. It is fair to assert that male sporting ideology operated and continues to operate largely at the expense of women, particularly those working in concert saloons. Known diminutively as “waiter girls,” these women would wait on and mingle with the male patrons, charged with keeping both the conversation and the cocktails flowing. Their reputation was not much better than prostitutes; in fact, a good portion of them also moonlighted as sex workers for extra cash. Herein lies this chapter’s critical intervention within existing work on historic popular entertainments and theatre. While waiter girls are almost always mentioned in contemporary literature on concert saloons, including Brooks McNamara’s pivotal *Devil’s Own Nights*, very little has been written about their active roles in fostering the immersive space of these venues. Instead, in most scholarship and historical archives, these women are usually described as props to the overall experience. In his own description of archival papers, McNamara observes how waiter girls are almost never fully identified, with their first names appearing “in documents from time to time, but their last names almost never.”⁸ He also points out that accordingly, “waiter girls were non-persons and any contact with them was never to be mentioned in conversation with respectable people.”⁹ Zellers refers to waitresses as “a lost and wretched sorority.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, any discussion of these women laborers often stops there, with little

⁸ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 84.

⁹ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 84.

¹⁰ Zellers, “The Cradle of Variety,” 582.

inquiry into their actual roles. Though society may have viewed waiter girls as “non-persons,” as McNamara remarks, these women were integral to maintaining the ideal concert saloon environment. Unfortunately, since most waiter girls were likely illiterate, there exists very little archival evidence such as journals or letters directly from their perspectives. Therefore, to account for their significant contributions to these saloons, I must read between the lines of existing archival accounts and literary descriptions, which devote a great deal of word count to describing the appearances of these women – and not always favorably. While maintaining an attractive physique was one important part of a waiter girl’s job, she also performed subtler forms of affective labor that maintained the patriarchal ethos of her workplace.

Though waiter girls acted as accessories to the male patrons, their physical and emotional presence was key to facilitating the very atmosphere of intoxication that was so simultaneously attractive to male sporting customers and appalling to moral reformers. In the second part of this chapter, I attempt to foreground these female waitresses (and sometime sex workers), whose historically embodied labor has been largely eclipsed by the glorification of male sporting culture and its associated exploits. I seek to ask the same question that Laura Levin poses in her book on camouflage and performance; “what does it mean,” she asks, “to unconceal the backgrounded environment when women are often constructed as always already closer to the background – as propping it up and coincident with it?”¹¹ What is revealed when we “unconceal” the women workers who were active facilitators of the immersive atmospheres of concert saloons? What can be revealed when we bring these women from the background of the archive to the foreground of our critical consideration? Levin uses theatre, performance, and visual art as

¹¹ Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 110.

ways of understanding women's often invisible laboring presence. This chapter takes a similar approach in considering the highly immersive and theatrical elements of a typical concert saloon and the waiter girl's functioning within that environment.

City guides on New York City by author James D. McCabe and a series of newspaper articles on concert saloons from *The New York Clipper* entitled "Broadway Below the Sidewalk" constitute the primary sources for this chapter. In circulation between 1853 to 1924, the *New York Clipper* covered all things entertainment including theatre, circus, bars, and restaurants. The *Clipper* also published short stories and popular poetry such as "Susie Knight: or, The True History of 'The Pretty Waiter Girl,'" which portrays the life of a fictional waiter girl in a surprisingly complex, though not unproblematic, light. Many of these sources are cited throughout McNamara's *Devil's Own Nights*, but this study aims to re-imagine the intoxicating, immersive environment of concert saloons and, to use Levin's phrasing, unconceal the complexity of women's historical labor.

Concert saloons originated on the frontier of the American West, but they eventually flourished in great numbers in New York City. Don B. Wilmeth estimates that up to 300 concert saloons had operated in the city by the end of the nineteenth century.¹² The two main thoroughfares of saloon activity during the 1860s were the Bowery and Broadway in Lower Manhattan, which were reputed hotbeds of vice in the imaginations of mid-19th century New Yorkers. While the consumption of alcohol was the essential *raison d'être*, concert saloons were far more theatrical in their spatial design than the usual grog shop or saloon. Some saloon proprietors decorated their spaces with themed wall hangings of nude women or scenes of

¹² Don B. Wilmeth, "Foreword," *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xi.

hedonism. Even one's entry into a saloon was dramatized; many were located below ground in basements, so patrons would descend into their environments through subterranean passageways. As such, the rowdy worlds of concert saloons were largely contained and private; they did not spill out onto the sidewalks or public space nor were their inside activities always visible to passersby. This architectural feature was not coincidental; rather, it served the dual purpose of hiding any rowdy activities from police interference, as well as increasing the gentlemen patrons' feelings of exclusivity and privacy.

Many concert saloons were also set up to encourage lingering and a sense of getting lost in the atmosphere, much smaller in scale but not unlike contemporary Las Vegas casinos, whose labyrinthine designs intentionally encourage wandering and the suspension of everyday time and space. Some venues, such as the Bon Ton on Broadway, possessed an outward "appearance of an ordinary drinking salon," but contained secret rooms beyond privacy screens, containing the requisite saloon entertainments and the ubiquitous hostesses.¹³ Other saloons drew audience members into entirely separate theatres, where the benched seating featured built-in cup holders to ensure that a patron would never get thirsty while taking in a comedy, music, or dance performance. After all, the longer a patron stays and the more enjoyment he derives from the environment, the more money he will spend. Concert saloons spatially enveloped patrons in a fantasy world. The subterranean, hidden-away, and sometimes labyrinthine feel of many of these saloons insulated male patrons from daily stress such as the difficulties of wartime, the demands of family life, or their workaday routines in the rapidly urbanizing city of New York. It also physically separated them from the judgement of a burgeoning Temperance movement.

¹³ "Broadway Below the Sidewalk," *New York Clipper*, February 13, 1864, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

Indeed, the existence of saloons was greatly opposed by temperance activists and the saloons' functioning was intermittently regulated by city ordinances. According to Lobel, many saloons originated as "liquor groceries" in compliance with laws in the 1840s allowing greengrocers to sell alcohol in addition to their regular foodstuffs. In poor and working-class neighborhoods like the infamous Five Points (now the site of modern day Little Italy and Chinatown in Lower Manhattan), these "groceries" sold very little in the way of actual food, and existed simply as bars with a paltry selection of expired produce and stale bakery items for sale at the back of the space.¹⁴ Eventually, many of these groceries dropped the disguise and became full-time grog shops. By the Civil War, despite reform efforts, concert saloons were commonplace; in fact, many of the patrons were furloughed soldiers. There existed quite a range of venues, from dive bars to top-tier establishments frequented by politicians and lawyers. As Lobel points out, liquor vendors would make investments in certain saloons in exchange for the exclusive sale of their wares. This "competition among the wealthy liquor interests" helped saloon proprietors enhance the atmospheres of their venues.¹⁵ More importantly, concert saloons were becoming vibrant points of sale for the nation's booming liquor industry.¹⁶ Indeed, "big liquor" had a vested interest in cultivating the immersive environments of concert saloons, which appealed directly to male sports – their target demographic.

Worried that good men would be swallowed by these dens of vice, however, Temperance activists and reformed city organizers built their agenda on the demonization of concert saloons and drinking culture. They saw the saloons and their associated codes of behavior as direct threats to the virtuous pursuits of morality and family. Temperance crusaders particularly

¹⁴ Lobel, *Urban Appetites*, 80.

¹⁵ Lobel, *Urban Appetites*, 184.

¹⁶ Lobel, *Urban Appetites*, 184.

opposed the freely flowing alcohol and sexual promiscuity that were fixtures of concert saloons in the public imaginary. Guide writer McCabe was not a known temperance crusader, but his entries in *Secrets of the Great City* are certainly tinged with a postured mistrust. McCabe's and other contemporary accounts navigate Victorian attitudes around sex and alcohol, describing concert saloons and their rowdy patrons with equal parts fascination and contempt. McCabe's books are sprinkled with warnings such as "those who do not wish to fall into trouble should keep out of the way" of the concert saloons on the Bowery and elsewhere.¹⁷ At the same time, McCabe gladly took on the anthropological duty of recording, and personally experiencing, many sordid facets of New York's red-light districts. As a primary source, his writings are just as valuable for their moralizing tenor as they are for their concrete descriptions of concert saloon environments. Regardless, the risky reputations of concert saloons served to heighten the level of seductive risk associated with them and, thereby, their appeal to the male sporting class.

One particularly effective narrative purveyed by the Temperance movement and its associated propaganda was a good man's fall from grace. This was further dramatized by temperance melodramas such as William Henry Smith's *The Drunkard* (1844) and William W. Pratt's *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* (1858). One illustration of this narrative is the frontispiece for McCabe's *Lights and Shadows of New York*, which depicts a sequence of tableaux leading to the demise of a young, working-class family man who loses himself to the dark underworld of New York City.¹⁸ His first stop, after he abandons his wife and children at home, is a lively concert saloon, where he is depicted sitting at a table and cavorting with a group of waiter girls. He is

¹⁷ James D. McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; Or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1872), 193.

¹⁸ 1872 wood engraved frontispiece by Van Ingen and Snyder, "The Sights and Sensations of New York," Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-2cbd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

then portrayed gambling his life savings away and getting swept up into a drunken brawl. This frontispiece's subject represents a sort of Everyman, his immoral journey ending when his body must be fished out of the East River by police. Clearly, concert saloons were highly sensationalized subjects in the Temperance-era imagination. Supporters of the movement portrayed the seductive culture of immersion and intoxication as a risk not worth taking, as it could destroy one's life in just one night. This narrative also polarized the concert saloon waiter girl as the moral opposite to the good wife and mother.

Many city officials also took efforts to curb the success of saloons, though not with any great success. One key piece of legislation affecting the operation of concert saloons in New York City was the Concert Bill, which went into effect during the Civil War on April 24, 1862.¹⁹ This bill restricted "performances" (a purposely vague term) to licensed venues only; establishments that served alcohol and other libations were denied licenses. The goal of this bill, according to the *New York Times*, was to rid the city of "the public pests of our thoroughfares" and "to purge our places of public amusement of most of their evils."²⁰ In other words, the bill sought to separate popular entertainment from drinking culture, gambling, and sex work. This was just the beginning of a long trajectory of legislative efforts to "purify" leisure culture in New York City. In theory, the Concert Bill made waiter girls illegal; in practice, many venues continued to operate as usual, through loopholes, or under the protective cover of corrupt government officials who enjoyed frequenting these establishments themselves. Some venues ordered their waiter girls to don plain clothes to blend in with the crowd in case of an unexpected police raid. The precarious moral standing of the concert saloon is essential to understanding

¹⁹ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 18.

²⁰ "The Concert Saloon Bill," *New York Times*, April 15, 1862, 4.

their environments, because their reputation made them even more infamous, exclusive, and desirable to many members of the male sporting culture. Even McCabe expressed ambivalence towards saloons, writing that “bad as they are, the concert saloons of Broadway are the best in the city.”²¹ Tourists reading McCabe’s guides would plan their itineraries accordingly.

Moral critics accused concert saloons of purveying vice, but they also scrutinized their lowbrow quality of performance. Zellers highlights the “blue” nature of performances, wherein “Pulchritude was the rule – precision, the exception.”²² In his writings, McCabe admonishes the quality of saloon singers and dancers, who were

provided by the proprietor as a cover to the real character of the place. It may be an old cracked piano, with a single, half-drunken performer, or a couple or more musicians who cannot by any possible means draw melody from their wheezy instruments.²³

It is true that concert saloon performances were known to host some of most amateur entertainments one could find in mid-nineteenth century Manhattan. The performances taking place on concert saloon stages were often free or very low cost. “Cracked pianos” and “wheezy instruments” seemed not to deter visitors, however. According to Zellers, patrons came for the drinks and stayed for the light-hearted performances, which were an “‘olio’ or mélange of specialty acts and skits deriving from blackface minstrelsy and the circus.”²⁴ Accounts in *The Clipper* newspaper extol saloon performances, which included musical performances such as one

²¹ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 312.

²² Zellers, “The Cradle of Variety,” 582.

²³ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 595.

²⁴ Zellers, “The Cradle of Variety,” 578.

songbird's performance at The Boulevard, which touched "the hardest heart and tone[d] down the rougher natures."²⁵

Whatever the presentation, alcohol surely played a role in enhancing the reception of these performances; drinking remained the main appeal of these saloons, and the onstage performances simply added to the agreeable mood. McNamara argues that "like the medicine show, the concert-saloon show represented one of the beginnings of the use of entertainment as an advertising device" for all kinds of alcohol in the mid-19th century.²⁶ Indeed, performers would often encourage patrons to drink more beer, wine, and liquor. While these variety performances certainly contributed to the intoxicating atmosphere, they were just one part of a whole range of spatial and experiential factors at work in the immersive environments of concert saloons.

Most importantly, concert saloon audiences enjoyed great freedom to participate in the performance environment, as well as the atmosphere of the bar space. Since the bar and performance space were often one in the same, concert saloons did not require their audiences to be quiet during a performance; if anything, the opposite behavior was encouraged and activities such as heckling added to the rogue atmosphere. The saloon audience demographic did not take kindly to sitting quietly and remaining in one seat for the duration of a show. Peter C. Baldwin argues that nineteenth-century patrons sought out concert saloons precisely because "they encouraged an informal spectatorship that was otherwise disappearing from stage performances."²⁷ By the late nineteenth century, male sports felt that their days throwing peanut

²⁵ "Broadway Below the Sidewalk," *New York Clipper*, January 2, 1864, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

²⁶ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 26.

²⁷ Peter C. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 90.

shells during a theatrical performance were numbered. As Baldwin says, in the concert saloons, “men enjoyed the freedom to drink, talk, and walk around during the acts,” which was a freedom no longer afforded to them in traditional, higher brow theatres which were becoming increasingly restrictive in terms of audience noise and movement.²⁸ Herein lies yet another way that the environmental design of concert saloons celebrated a masculine notion of freedom from constraint. It is worth noting that contemporary immersive theatre has circumnavigated back to emphasizing this kind of audience freedom, though perhaps with a less overtly gendered appeal. Part of the appeal of immersive productions like *Sleep No More* is that an audience member may “choose her own adventure” in terms of moving around the space and deciding which rooms and character subplots she wants to explore. Like the rowdy men of concert saloons, many patrons of contemporary immersive theatre relish the convergence of theatrical space with leisure space, which makes it possible to drink, talk, and walk around during a performance.

Straddling both the service and entertainment industries, concert saloons redefined the social drinking experience. Spatially and ideologically, saloons were “themed” in such a way that patrons could forget outside reality and be masters of their own fantasy world. Matthew Wilson Smith utilizes the concept of theming in *The Total Work of Art* to convey the ever-immersive Disney theme park experience. According to Smith, theming is “the translation of signs of labor into elements of landscape” like when “the electrical outlets at Disneyland are themed to resemble the bark of living trees, speakers themed to look like rocks.”²⁹ Today, Disney theme parks and Las Vegas casinos may be the ultimate American exemplars of Smith’s notion of theming. These venues manage participant experiences down to the last detail. Even the

²⁸ Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 90.

²⁹ Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 127.

appearance of an electrical outlet in Disney's Magic Kingdom is considered a detraction from the park's highly-managed theme. While certainly not on this scale, concert saloon proprietors also made efforts to update everyday saloons into lively and engaging themed atmospheres. For example, saloons transformed typical signs of bar room labor such as gloomy bar counters and gruff bartenders into lively and colorful spaces replete with attentive, flirtatious waiter girls. Compared to the existing and relatively unadorned pubs and grog shops of the time, these extra elements coupled with the lively atmosphere of the concurrent performances elevated the theme of these drinking spaces.

Even simple touches, such as wall decorations, were more adornment than the average bar venue. One proprietor purports to own two framed pictures on display, one of Bacchus (the Greco-Roman god of wine and intoxication) and another of King Gambrinus (a legendary German patron of beer-brewing).³⁰ Others depicted more risqué content, such as one painting hanging at the Occidental “of Nell Gwynne (or someone else) dressed somewhat like Mazeppa undressed, just after performing the great bareback act.”³¹ Not only did these wall decorations disguise the drabness of an everyday bar, they often reified drunkenness and celebrated the perception of women (especially stage performers and waiter girls) as sexual objects to be consumed by masculine appetite. Some saloons went even further than a few pictures on the wall. One writer describes such a space in an 1864 article for “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” a series for *The New York Clipper* that furnished periodic forays into the city's most infamous saloons. Unlike McCabe's sensationalism tinged with hysteria, the *Clipper* articles catered to the

³⁰ as described in John Maier's deposition for the Society for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (June 13, 1877) cited in McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 68.

³¹ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” *New York Clipper*, February 27, 1864, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

sporting class of men. This article describes the interior of the New Oriental saloon as “gorgeous, fairly dazzling to the eyes,” with “illuminated walls, parti-colored cut-paper ceiling ornaments, brilliant gas-lights, [and] variegated costumes.”³² By dressing the typical bar room and its employees, proprietors “themed” their spaces, thereby creating landscapes that were more “fantasy world” than “bar.”

In another passage of the same *Clipper* article, the author describes his magical journey into the saloon, which “made us think we had been transported (not by government, but at our own individual expense) into [a] fairy-land, like Aladdin and his wonderful lamp. To use a Cockneyism, ‘it was stunning’!”³³ Clearly impressed by the saloon’s decorative elements, his account relays the experience of entering the bar space as being transported “into fairy-land, like Aladdin.” Indeed, by creating a more exotic atmosphere, this saloon exemplifies what Smith refers to as the “translation of signs of labor into elements of landscape,” which occurs in the process of theming a space. By renovating their bars, proprietors created sexier atmospheres for patrons. To understand this in a historical sense, it is necessary to move away from a twenty-first century perspective, where there exists a plethora of bar spaces: from the seediest corner pub to the swankiest rooftop patio. There are even password-protected bars reminiscent of a bygone speakeasy-era, as the next chapter will reveal. Today, the idea that bar owners put calculated effort into designing their spaces is commonplace. To the male sports of the nineteenth-century, however, this was an innovative surge in drinking culture. Unlike the family-friendly German beer gardens which were also popular at the time, the spatial design of concert saloons catered specifically to men. Perhaps the most explicit sign of labor in a bar, however, is the labor force

³² “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” *New York Clipper*, April 23, 1864, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

³³ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” April 23, 1864.

itself: the bartender and waiters. By hiring young, attractive women to attend to patrons, concert saloons were effectively masking the labor of selling alcohol with the available sexuality of its female employees.

Waiter Girls as Stage Managers of Ideological Immersion

In returning to my attempt to “unconceal” the waiter girl from her historically camouflaged positionality at the periphery of the concert saloon, I present an alternative way of looking at her: rather than being a simple object for consumption, the waiter girl was an intrepid employee who knowingly stage-managed the atmosphere of the bar and performed the patriarchal fantasies of her patrons. These women were often immigrants or estranged from their families, and with few employment opportunities available to them at the time, the concert saloons provided means for economic survival. For example, *The New York Clipper* published a serial poem about a character Susie Knight, or “The Pretty Waiter Girl,” who was disowned by her family after being caught in a premarital embrace with a visiting suitor from the city. Susie is depicted as naïve and flawed, but industrious. After her father disowns her and her errant suitor abandons her, she flees to New York, where “innocently, Susie tried her chances / Of finding work to improve her circumstances.”³⁴ She is employed at a saloon where the other waiter girls scrutinize on her first day in the dressing room, knowing “full well what powers Miss Susie had / Though she was rural, and but poorly clad.”³⁵ Though the story of Susie Knight is fictional, it portrays the reality that waiter girls were active participants in a competitive industry whose patriarchal standards often pitted young women against each other. As a working woman during

³⁴ “Susie Knight: or, The True History of ‘The Pretty Waiter Girl,’” *The New York Clipper*, September 19, 1863, Canto II, *New York Clipper*, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

³⁵ “Susie Knight,” Canto II.

a time when many women remained at home as wives and mothers, young Susie Knight “quickly learned the duties they expected her to perform; make money – that was it.”³⁶ She built a life for herself, independent of her family, by developing her skills as a waitress and sex worker and currying favor amongst saloon regulars. Indeed, to support themselves, waiter girls had to perform a very specific version of femininity and to comply with the rules of their saloon.

This framing of the waiter girl goes against the grain of historical accounts of women saloon workers, which often fixate on their appearance and objectify them as fixtures of the concert saloon space. McCabe, for example, describes the waiter girls of his time as “a collection of poor wretches” that used to be pretty but are no longer fresh in the face; rather, their immoral lifestyles have transformed them into

beastly, foul-mouthed, brutal wretches. Very many of them are half dead with consumption and disease. They are in every respect disgusting. Yet young and old men, strangers and citizens, come here to talk with them and spend their money on them.³⁷

It is likely that McCabe’s harsh account of the waiter girls is an exaggerated performance of disgust, meant to declare his own moral propriety and to publicly distance himself from “the meanest human rubbish” who unapologetically enjoyed concert saloons and the company of their hostesses.³⁸ Regardless, his account shows that waiter girls did not occupy a high stature in the social stratification of mid-nineteenth century New York City. This is one reason why patrons regarded them as theatrical props supporting the lively atmosphere of the saloons more than individual and active participants in the creation of themed space.

³⁶ “Susie Knight,” Canto II.

³⁷ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 596.

³⁸ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 596.

Saloon signage crowded the perimeters of the avenues of New York's red-light districts of the Bowery and lower Broadway, enticing male patrons inside with images of attractive women. Just as the Twin Peaks franchise places its waitresses' bodies at the center of its advertisements, the signage for New York concert saloons foregrounded the sexual appeal of the hostesses working inside. An obviously titillated McCabe describes "exquisite card photographs," displaying "portraits of the young ladies employed" within the saloons on Broadway between Spring and Fourth Streets.³⁹ Saloon signage dramatized the entrances of thirsty patrons by giving them a taste of the world beyond the saloon doors. This was one way that the reputation of Bowery waiter girls preceded them; signs informed men visiting these venues that they would be paying for company as well as the booze. The publicizing of private feminine sexuality held an illicit appeal, engendering an exclusive "club" environment.

Waiter girls were more than just the pretty faces plastered on saloon advertisements, however. They tended bar and fraternized with their customers, encouraging them to mill about the saloon, and asking the perpetual question "hany horders (any orders), gents?"⁴⁰ Some waiter girls were also sex workers, recruiting clientele at the saloon. Proprietors knew there was great commercial value in the social and sexual performance of these saloon workers; some venues even rented private quarters for sexual activities. Concert saloons offered the commercially successful triumvirate of sex, entertainment, and booze – while traditional flophouses, theatres, or liquor groceries only offered one or the other. Robert Allen argues in *Horrible Prettiness* that "what distinguishes the concert saloons of the 1860s was their incorporation of feminine

³⁹ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 594.

⁴⁰ "Broadway Below the Sidewalk," April 23, 1864.

sexuality as part of the entertainment.”⁴¹ Onstage and off, women’s performance was central to concert saloons at their zenith of popularity during the Civil War Era. In contrast to everyday male bartenders and waiter who had little incentive appeal to their patrons, waiter girls trained specifically in the art of male flattery.

As employees, waiter girls were particularly successful when they emphasized their feminine sexualities. “Without a doubt,” McNamara writes, “waiter girls recognized that they were in a male-oriented tourist business of a sort; they were, in fact, among the popular sights.”⁴² While she was on the serving room floor, a waiter girl was always performing. After a few shifts in her saloon, young Susie Knight learned that “she must needs keep beauty, dress, and wit / And all her charms subservient and handy / to aid the bar in selling beer and brandy.”⁴³ Indeed, a waiter girl’s success depended on her drink sales, and her drink sales heavily depended on her desirability amongst male patrons. Some waiter girls would take a moment from their shift serving alcohol and socializing to perform a song or two on stage, augmenting their cult of personality. Like a Twin Peaks Girl, a waiter girl was crucial to the spatial theming of the concert saloon. To be sure, a great deal of affective labor went into these performances. While these socio-spatial demands were certainly oppressive, many women laborers worked from within these confines to make a living in nineteenth-century New York City.

While social moderates like McCabe and more serious moral reformers looked upon waiter girls with disgust, writers who were themselves embedded in the male sporting culture of the time were far more complimentary. For example, we get a very different depiction of waiter

⁴¹ Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 73-74.

⁴² McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 87.

⁴³ “Susie Knight,” Canto II.

girls in *The New York Clipper*. One 1864 article describes “dull Sunday Evenings [when] a person could go and sip sherry cobblers and mint juleps, served up by delicate lily white hands belonging to young girls with alabaster” décolletages on display.⁴⁴ The same author demonstrates an honest penchant for waiter girls, going on to exhaustively list his favorite women at The Oriental saloon as “Henrietta, Lena, Georgianna, Emma, Ida, Joe, Celia, Mary, Sarah, Libby, Amy, Rachel, Lizzie, Mary Ann.”⁴⁵ Unlike McCabe, who claims that only wretched, lowlife men enjoy the company of waiter girls, this article accounts for men of stature (such as lawyers and judges) who also paid for and enjoyed their company.

The article goes on to describe waiter girls’ costumes of the time, and its colorful description sounds like a ride through Disney’s “It’s a Small World” attraction. Indeed, The Oriental proves a veritable Epcot of feminine costumes; each waiter girl dressed in a different global garb, including women in Highland Plaids and the emerald green hues of Ireland, as well as others in Turkish “turbans and trouserloons gathered in tight round the ankle.”⁴⁶ Another *Clipper* piece describes a scenario at the New Oriental saloon with waiter girls in

Polynesian costume, a second the Japonican, another the Sclavonian, and out of the thirty really interesting, and many of them extremely handsome, girls in attendance, no two are rigged alike, all being dressed in the national and picturesque costumes of Europe. What is more, they can “parlez vous Francaise,” “spragle Dietch,” and talk all languages, like Hampson’s Hibernian bar-tender, Johnny.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” January 2, 1864.

⁴⁵ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” January 2, 1864.

⁴⁶ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” January 2, 1864.

⁴⁷ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” April 23, 1864.

Unlike McCabe's description of the waiter girls as diseased and disgusting, *The Clipper* portrays them as interestingly dressed, exotic, and conversant. Regardless of their ethnicity, these women were tasked with performing an exotic range of characters to create a feeling of bountiful femininity. The wide ranges of costumes created an illusion of choice at the New Oriental; a waiter girl who worked there was quite like an actress playing a character.

Waiter girls were constantly subject to scrutiny and variously portrayed according to their beholders' moral agenda. From the women's perspective, however, a great deal of labor, and often talent, went into the maintenance of costumes, makeup, and posturing. A waiter girl was doing her job well if she appeared simply to her male patron as a decorative object, a prop reflecting their masculine fantasy. The *Clipper* writer applauds the wide range of waiter girls, commenting that "no two are rigged alike."⁴⁸ In this case, the word "rigged" resonates in a theatrical sense as well, as in theatrical rigging, or the operational mechanisms behind scenery – such as ropes and pulleys. As "rigged" women, the waiter girls actively yet furtively performed the role of scenery of the concert saloon environment. At first glance, a waiter girl functions as simply two-dimensional and decorative; upon closer inspection, she is crucial to meaning-making and signifying the ethos of the venue. Though the female workers at concert saloons were certainly objectified based on their bodies, costumes, and demeanors, their labor was essential to engendering the concert saloon's immersive environment and thereby, the venue's financial success. In turn, they would be compensated for their work. Sources indicate that some saloons, such as the highly-themed Oriental mentioned above, would pay the girls a fair wage

⁴⁸ "Broadway Below the Sidewalk," April 23, 1864.

plus commissions on every cocktail and bottle of wine sold.⁴⁹ Workers for other venues, however, were not so lucky.

Indeed, many concert saloons relied on shoddy business practices to compensate their women workers. In an interview with McCabe, a proprietor of yet another saloon described his business as “a gin-mill on an improved plan.”⁵⁰ This proprietor believes that by adding entertainments and hiring waiter girls, he has slightly improved upon the business structure of an everyday bar or a seedy flophouse. Of course, according to the philosophy of an experience economy, a beer drunk in an everyday bar is worth far less than a beer that is part of an “experience.” The actual quality of the added experience, however, mattered little to bar-owners like him. The same proprietor goes on to divulge that “the music don’t cost much” and the “liquor is cheap, and I don’t mind telling you its damn nasty, then we charge double prices for it.”⁵¹ Concerned more for his profit margins than the quality of his wares, this proprietor represents the very image of an opportunistic entrepreneur in a quickly accelerating consumer economy like New York City.

Of course, this exploitative attitude also extended into the ways such owners paid their employees. This proprietor goes on to say that he only pays his waitresses a commission on alcohol sold, since his “girls won’t work unless they have to.”⁵² He does not simply incentivize the sale of drinks; he creates a system in which the entire livelihood of a waiter girl depends on her sale of alcohol. The poem of Susie Knight reveals a similar pressure, that “by [Susie’s] success her wages were affected / (Gold often times ambition’s fired has lit) / And if she failed –

⁴⁹ “Broadway Below the Sidewalk,” April 23, 1864.

⁵⁰ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 594-5.

⁵¹ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 594-5.

⁵² McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York*, 594-95.

why, she would be ejected.”⁵³ Therefore, the stakes were quite high for his female employees to create a lively environment in which patrons would want to buy drinks, and a lot of them.

McNamara cites an archival account of a patron observing a fleet of thirty or forty waiter girls at a saloon, “all busy endeavoring to quench the thirst of several hundred men” while also finding “sufficient time to distribute their photographs, to talk and to drink with visitors.”⁵⁴ Some would even garner a flirtatious mood of competition with their male guests, challenging them to duels at the bar’s shooting gallery.

Additionally, at many venues, a drink was worth more in a waiter girl’s hand than in her customer’s. The prices of drinks were not the same across the board. A patron would take his own drink for one price but would pay a much higher price for a drink for his attendant waiter girl. This system of value demonstrates the interdependency of intoxication, sexuality, commerce, and immersion within these concert saloons. Today, a version of this “ladies’ drinks” pricing structure is still in use in many exotic dance clubs. Since the waiter girl’s drink comes with the added experience of feminine company, it costs the patron more. A waiter girl’s own consumption of alcohol had a premium price, so she was worth more to the venue if she was drinking. Though it is probable that these ladies’ drinks were watered-down or sometimes nonalcoholic, the performance of drinking was integral to a waiter girl’s livelihood. An observer cited in *Devil’s Own Nights* points out that the waiter girls “consumed nearly as much [alcohol] as the men...the excesses of the poor creatures are sure to bring their miserable lives to an untimely end.”⁵⁵ Indeed, an overall sense of intoxication pervaded concert saloons. Waiter girls drank to encourage camaraderie, consumer spending, the loosening of inhibitions, and a drunken

⁵³ “Susie Knight,” Canto II.

⁵⁴ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 85.

⁵⁵ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 85.

atmosphere; quite directly, drinking was their job. Again, we can look at their actions not as merely submission but as an entrepreneurial performance; ultimately, enhancing the mood meant enhancing her paycheck. One common tactic was to suggest that a patron buy a drink to “toast” to a waiter girl’s beauty.⁵⁶ Intoxication fueled patrons’ desire to visit the saloons in the first place, amplified their sexual desire for the waiter girls within, augmented their enjoyment of the variety performances on the stages, and enlivened their perception of the colorful spaces staged in the space.

At this moment in history, a young, single immigrant woman had few options for employment. If she could not find domestic labor such as cooking or cleaning, working as a waiter girl in a concert saloon might be an attractive opportunity. It is essential that we view these laborers not simply as victims of patriarchal and economic circumstances, but as performers of normative sexuality and, perhaps, covert manipulators of a system of gender inequality. To conclude, amateur variety performances were not the only performances at play in the highly intoxicating atmosphere of nineteenth-century concert saloons. By theatricalizing the interiors of their bar spaces, some saloon proprietors made early attempts to create an otherworldly environment to attract and retain customers. This was a clear development away from traditional liquor groceries, which lacked any sort of themed atmosphere. This theatricalization of space marks an important event in the history of drinking culture, wherein the experience of getting drunk became further manipulated, elevated, and monetized. Simultaneously at the periphery and the center of this phenomenon stood the waiter girl, who performed an affable version of sexuality in ways both overt and subtle, wore appealing costumes, and accelerated the sale and consumption of alcohol. Historical descriptions often

⁵⁶ McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon*, 87.

view these women as victims of circumstance, morally bankrupt, or simple decoration, but it is crucial to push against this version of history to view them as working women who navigated an emergent experience economy and facilitated a very theatrical kind of intoxication to earn a living. Their labor was far more complex and demanding than maintaining a pleasing physical appearance.

While only some of these female employees doubled as sex-workers, their reputation signaled overt feminine sexuality and, thereby, immorality. As the century turned, New York City saw a gradual shift towards more entertainment venues claiming a family-friendly appeal, such as museums and vaudeville houses. As tides of modernization and the suffrage movement brought more women into the public eye, entrepreneurs saw an emerging demographic of untapped consumers emerging. Around this same time, not coincidentally, waiter girls fell out of favor as fixtures of concert saloons, marking the end of their heyday in New York City. In their effort to clean up popular entertainments, then, venue entrepreneurs wanted women in their audiences and spending money, not tending bar and flirting with customers. Despite their tremendous popularity, the institution of the concert salon eventually subsided to other popular entertainments and leisure activities. The decline of the concert saloon occurred around the turn of the century and was due in part to the migration of variety performance to more family-friendly spaces like vaudeville theatres. Many of the same amateur variety performances available in concert saloons were widely popular in other venues throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These entertainments included acts such as minstrel skits, comedic bits, sentimental songs, and dancing.

For this reason, concert saloons occupy an important, though under-documented, place in American theatre history. Zellers dubbed concert saloons the “cradle of variety” because many of

the same performance styles that were so popular in concert saloons would eventually become the bread and butter of vaudeville troupes. However, as Zellers puts it, vaudeville proprietors would eventually make considerable efforts to “tame the coarse manners” of early saloon audiences and “win the stamp of respectable approval from family audiences.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the vaudeville industry – led by entrepreneurs such as Tony Pastor, Benjamin Keith, and Edward F. Albee – largely succeeded in divorcing popular entertainments from male sporting culture and its associated vices. To be commercially viable, performers and musicians had a lot to gain in dissociating themselves from the hyper-masculine and debauched ideology represented by concert saloon venues. The waiter girl was a red flag for entrepreneurs in this emergent, family friendly leisure industry; therefore, she largely disappeared.

By the end of the 19th century, the concert saloon had all but subsided to its more family-friendly counterpart – vaudeville; after all, the narrow demographic of working class “sports” would never generate the same revenue as family audiences – and especially the women therein – who had money to spend on entertainment. As a precursor to vaudeville, though, concert saloons play a significant role in the development of family-oriented American leisure culture. While the waiter girl has long disappeared, a new (slightly cleaned-up) version of her has manifested in the contemporary *Twin Peaks* and *Hooter’s Girl* (and other affable, young, barely dressed waitresses), whose sexual suggestiveness is apparently family-friendly enough for the families who patronize the popular franchises. Additionally, though the era of the concert saloon waiter girl would be over by the turn of the century, the next chapter will show us that the era of highly theatricalized drinking experiences had only just begun: now with a fantasy version of African Americans driving its thematic ethos.

⁵⁷ Zellers, “The Cradle of Variety,” 585.

Chapter Two

“The Aristocrat of Harlem”: Slumming, Immersion, and Intoxication at the Cotton Club

The Bowery concert saloons of chapter one reveal proprietors’ use of basic immersive theatrical techniques to stage leisure spaces for male customers in the sporting culture of the mid-1800s. Essential to these underground immersive experiences were the saloons’ waiter girls, whose objectified bodies functioned as scenic properties within the themed space. This chapter will yield an even later example of immersive theatre by another name: slumming. We must travel further uptown to the historically black neighborhood of Harlem, which spans from the northern edge of Central Park at 110th Street to the 150s in Manhattan. As Prohibition took hold, both male and female leisure-seekers flocked to Harlem to experience a newly hot taboo – the Negro vogue of Harlem.

First, however, we should consider present-day Harlem – where the heyday of Prohibition slumming is long over but the remnants of an immersive culture hang heavy in the neighborhood’s cultural memory. It is a cold clear day and I am standing at the intersection of Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 125th street in Harlem. As I cross the street, a double decker bus labelled “CitySights NY” rolls past. Bundled up in scarves and winter coats, the tourists atop the roof deck hurry to one side of the bus to photograph the historic Apollo Theatre. According to the popular tour company’s website, CitySights NY offers a handful of different tours through Harlem. Perhaps their most extensive offering is the “Harlem Gospel - Soul Food and Jazz” bus tour, which (for the ticket price of \$175) includes historical sites formerly home to the Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom. To make this expedition even more immersive, customers may “mingle freely with the locals,” dining on soul food at the famous Sylvia’s restaurant before they

partake in two “complimentary” cocktails at a live jazz performance. According to the description, this tour combines a slice-of-life version of local Harlem with “the high-stepping, fun-loving nights of the 1920s!”¹ CitySights NY is not the only commercial enterprise that capitalizes on the bygone era of hot jazz and bootlegged liquor in New York City. There is also a preponderance of faux speakeasy bars, such as The Raines Law Room, and cabaret-style entertainments, like the pre-show at *Sleep No More*’s Manderley Bar or Cynthia von Buhler’s murder mystery, *Speakeasy Dollhouse*. Like the Harlem tour, these contemporary venues immerse participants in a certain ambience of an imagined historical era in which intoxication and black sexuality were doubly marked as taboo, but also in vogue.

Indeed, one of Harlem’s most romanticized eras is the 1920s and 30s, when Prohibition was in full swing but bootlegged booze flowed freely in the neighborhood’s jazz clubs and speakeasies. What CitySights NY describes as the “high-stepping, fun-loving nights” of the Cotton Club, however, is a version of Harlem that was in many ways only available to middle and upper class white people. The 1920s and 30s were Harlem’s heyday of “slumming” – the practice of white thrill seekers trekking uptown to experience top-notch variety entertainment. This chapter focuses on the immersive environments of segregated venues like the famous Cotton Club, which catered to white audiences only, yet featured almost exclusively black entertainers and wait staff. Originally located on Lenox Avenue and 142nd Street, the Cotton Club was the most famous of these segregated clubs. Founded in 1923, the venue attracted celebrities, wealthy socialites, and other high-profile patrons. Shane Vogel describes its theatrical interior as “an entire mise-en-scene of antebellum nostalgia and modernist primitivism, setting

¹ “Harlem Gospel - Soul Food and Jazz Tour,” *CitySights NY*, accessed April 1, 2017, www.citysightsny.com/harlem-gospel-soul-food-and-jazz.html.

jungle designs amongst plantation motifs.”² Dinner was served until late, and the menu included everything from Southern fried chicken to broiled lobster. The music performances were large-scale and extravagant, including jazz luminaries such as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Cab Calloway’s Cotton Club Orchestra. Revue-style dance numbers featured light-skinned African American chorus girls were also very popular. Ultimately, every aspect of the Cotton Club was elaborately produced to immerse patrons in a fantasy world that was part jungle and part plantation.

Within the highly-controlled immersive atmosphere of segregated performance venues like the Cotton Club, every black employee was in a sense a performer – instructed to convey a fantasy version of blackness as entertainment for white patrons. At the same time, Prohibition (1920-1933) placed liquor and beer distribution in the hands of organized criminals such as Al Capone and Owney Madden, the mobster owner of the Cotton Club. The illegal consumption of alcohol, as we will see, was essential to facilitating the physiological experience of slumming in Harlem. In this chapter, I begin with a brief historical look at the development of slumming in greater New York City. Then I will look to the archive to reveal how white slummers’ physical experiences of intoxication colluded with their intoxicating fantasy of blackness to create the frenzied crescendo of cultural practice that was Harlem’s zenith of slumming. By focusing on both physical and metaphorical intoxications as modes of experience, I hope to provide an embodied account of the historically productive relationship between alcohol, spatiality, and performance. Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, slumming in Prohibition-era Harlem

² Shane Vogel, *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 81.

contributed significantly to the historical development of immersive theatre practice in New York City.

Origins of Slumming in New York City

Harlem was not the first or only neighborhood to which New York slummers flocked. An 1884 article in the *New York Times* forecasted the popular practice to “be all the rage [that] winter” – a prediction which largely proved to be true.³ Early slumming expeditions in late nineteenth-century New York penetrated the crowded tenements of the city’s Lower East Side, Chinatown and Bowery regions, as well as immigrant settlements on the waterfronts and the historic Tenderloin district in midtown. Chinatown was a particularly popular and exoticized destination.⁴ Slumming was also popular in major cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and London. In New York, slummers toured poor or ethnic neighborhoods for charity or for sport (and sometimes a little of both).

On the philanthropic side of the spectrum, slummers would interact with locals, perhaps spreading their church message or temperance philosophy. Others would hand out money and food to residents in need. In its early days, slummers were perceived as risk-takers, threatened by gangs eager to harass or rob unseasoned visitors. Slum residents were depicted primitively. “It is simply impossible to suppress the inclinations of a certain depraved class” the *New York Times* article states, “they will crowd together promiscuously, and will be unclean and dissipated.”⁵ Slummers traveled to poor neighborhoods to behold this sordid vision of huddled, miserable throngs, usually under the supervision of police escorts. Temperance reformer Mollie Hay went

³ “Slumming in this Town,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1884: 1.

⁴ “Lady Duff Gordon Sees China Town,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1907, 9.

⁵ “Slumming in this Town,” 1.

slumming in New York, Chicago and London, claiming that New York's slums were the worst of all.⁶ Other philanthropists, religious proselytizers, and sociologists documented their slumming encounters in articles and books, which were distributed to the wider public to educate readers about urban poverty. One of the most iconic examples is Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, which is a photojournalistic account of New York's poorest slums and an early example of muckraking journalism.⁷ Middle- and upper-class whites became fascinated with the drama of poverty and what they perceived as the exotic underworlds of ethnic neighborhoods.

There was also the popular practice of slumming for entertainment, which is the focus of this chapter, but cannot be fully divorced from the practice of philanthropic slumming because of the moral superiority inherent to the practice. Though sporting slummers sought pure leisure, they did so under the same auspice of white propriety and exceptionalism. Sporting slummers sought exotic foods in local restaurants or drink in the neighborhood's dive bars and speakeasies. Slummers in Chinatown might go for a hot meal of chop suey and then partake in the exploits of an opium den.⁸ Engagement with prostitutes was not uncommon in the city's red-light districts, especially during the early days of slumming. By engaging in these illicit activities within the geographical confines of the slum, white slummers disassociated these behaviors with their own home neighborhoods.

Whether for sport or for charity, early slumming expeditions were often organized by the philanthropists and thrill seekers themselves. All-male or mixed-gender groups might make the journey independently; while groups of women would hire a police or detective escort for protection. As slumming gained popularity, tour guides appeared on the scene at the end of the

⁶ "W.C.T.U. Women Go 'Slumming,'" *New York Times*, October 23, 1893, 5.

⁷ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

⁸ "Chop Suey Resorts," *New York Times*, November 15, 1903, 20.

nineteenth century to guide customers to the best kept secrets of the slums.⁹ The appearance of these guides flags a turn toward the increasing commercialization and theatricalization of New York City slumming that would eventually become commonplace in the 1910s and 20s.

Inhabitants of neighborhoods of interest also sought to absorb their share of the disposable income weighing down the pockets and purses of middle- and upper-class slummers. Restaurant and bar proprietors in the neighborhoods of interest would set up their businesses to perform slumminess in various ways, sometimes going as far as staging gang shootouts or drug overdoses.¹⁰ In Harlem, slumming guides competed by claiming to have access to the most “authentic” neighborhood experiences.

Slumming parties and tours were commonplace by the time Prohibition began in 1920. By that time, the efforts of Temperance crusaders finally came to fruition with the enactment of the Volstead Act, which would carry out Prohibition as mandated by the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In theory, this amendment prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors ...for beverage purposes.”¹¹ In practice, however, Prohibition was a massive failure – especially in New York City, where organized crime bosses cashed in on the underground liquor and beer industry. In his travelogue *New York Nights*, Stephen Graham demonstrates the utter inefficacy of Prohibition through his drunken accounts of 1920s Harlem and other parts of Manhattan.¹² Graham rejoices in the remarkable possibilities offered by a night of drinking on the town during Prohibition, remarking that “one can never be quite sure what

⁹ “Ban on China Town Trips,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1909.

¹⁰ Chad Heap provides a more detailed account of the various uses of theatricality by industrious slum residents and tour guides in *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 145-149.

¹¹ Section 1, “Amendment XVIII,” *Cornell University Legal Information Institute*, accessed April 2, 2017, www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxviii.

¹² Stephen Graham, *New York Nights* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 245.

will happen to you after a New York cocktail.”¹³ Indeed, despite the legal restrictions, it seems as if no space was off limits to Graham – a white man with a cocktail in hand.

Indeed, despite the efforts of Temperance reformers and politicians to demonize alcohol, Prohibition was one of several catalysts for the slumming craze in Harlem. Speakeasies abounded, and many organized criminals used Harlem as a hub to distribute and sell bootlegged alcohol. The dawn of the bootleg industry and speakeasies made necessary by Prohibition commercialized the business of drinking in a new way, providing more and more spaces to drink for New Yorkers (and less regulation of the processes involved in making alcohol). Another contributing factor to the slumming craze in Harlem was a swell of white preoccupation with black performance and culture. This emerging fad was in part due to the smash success of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s all-black musical revue *Shuffle Along* which premiered on Broadway in 1921. Another influential Broadway play was *Lulu Belle* (1926) by Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur, which was lauded for its full-scale recreation of a Harlem club and Charleston dance number.¹⁴ Even for Americans who did not attend *Shuffle Along* or *Lulu Belle*, the popular novel *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten also played an important role in dramatizing Harlem nightlife as a never-ending party.¹⁵ Through these media vehicles, many Prohibition-era whites imagined a highly-theatricalized experience of blackness—wrought from a proliferation of stereotypes about black life in Harlem distributed by mainstream media and advertising.

Literature and theatre such as *Shuffle Along*, *Lulu Belle*, and *Nigger Heaven* portrayed Harlem as a premier nightlife destination. Although it was home to nearly two hundred thousand

¹³ Graham, *New York Nights*, 66.

¹⁴ Vogel, *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret*, 77.

¹⁵ Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926; Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Citations refer to the 2000 edition.

black Americans by 1930, Harlem indeed offered a wide array of performance venues and social spaces to suit visitors possessing any pocketbook and any desire. Not all slumming destinations were strictly segregated like the Cotton Club. In fact, racial mixing in Harlem was the motivating appeal for some slummers. Robertson et al. describe the buffet flats common at the time, wherein Harlem residents opened their homes to visitors wishing to engage in drinking, gambling, and prostitution in a more private setting.¹⁶ James F. Wilson also writes about rent parties where hosts charged a small fee for apartment parties¹⁷ and Kathleen Drowne points out the existence of some smaller, mixed race cabaret venues.¹⁸ Both types of venue enticed more “adventurous” slummers with the promise of interracial mingling. As a contrast to the moneyed crowds at the Cotton Club, Wilson notes the interracial and primarily middle-class makeup of rent parties, asserting that “some Harlem residents would have regarded them as the antidote to the overpriced, exclusionary cabarets.”¹⁹ There was a wide array of options for white New Yorkers to participate in the slumming trend. One element that was almost always present, however, was alcohol – often accompanied by dance and music. These elements contributed to the embodied experience of both mixed and segregated venues.

Given the meticulously staged atmosphere of the Cotton Club, Vogel argues that performers assumed the “aesthetic principles and performance conventions” that served to impose considerable “limits on creative possibilities for black performers, but also fetishized and

¹⁶ Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, “Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 3 (September 2012): 460.

¹⁷ James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁸ Kathleen Drowne, “‘Theah’s Life Anywheres Theah’s Booze and Jazz’: *Home to Harlem* and *Gingertown* in the Context of National Prohibition,” *Callaloo* 34, no. 3 (2011): 934.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 12.

spectacularized a primitivist construction of blackness.”²⁰ Chad Heap, who outlines a thorough historical account of slumming in New York City from the mid-nineteenth century, similarly argues that slumming “reinforced white middle-class sexual propriety and social respectability by casting racialized immigrant and working-class groups as ‘primitive,’ highly sexed populations.”²¹ In the context of slumming in 1920s Harlem, the maintenance of white propriety absolutely depended on the containment, definition and exaggeration of blackness. Indeed, for many white slummers, the appeal of visiting Harlem was the opportunity to gaze into a type-cast world of performed and eroticized blackness, thereby reinforcing their own idea of white “sexual propriety and social respectability.” To be a slummer, then, was to possess mobility and distinction. The performance of selectivity in these club’s admission policies compounded an idea of white exceptionalism by spatially defining exactly who had access to this immersive experience (and conversely, by making black people responsible for creating and maintaining this immersive atmosphere).

Vogel and Heap thoroughly outline the ideological structuring of fetishization and primitivization that categorized blackness in these segregated cabarets. Club proprietors ensured that their venues projected the kind of fantasy world of blackness sought by slummers. But what did this experience of immersion in blackness *feel like* to participants? The historical archive is rife with documents providing a literal feel for how the white racial imaginary was embodied, especially under the influence of alcohol – which was ever present at the Cotton Club and the city at large. Alcohol played a large role in the Cotton Club’s commercial project of viscerally augmenting the atmosphere of fantasy blackness while simultaneously camouflaging the racial

²⁰ Vogel, *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret*, 91.

²¹ Heap, *Slumming*, 102.

tensions at play in Harlem. Indeed, bootlegged alcohol was just one of a whole network of material forces hard at work in fomenting the bodily experience of the slummer, who was quite literally intoxicated on bootlegged alcohol but also metaphorically intoxicated by the socially-constructed fantasy world of blackness which the Cotton Club labored to produce.

My analysis begins with close readings of first-person accounts of slumming in Harlem, both from the perspective of the black performer and the white slummer. These close-readings illuminate the material ways that intoxication as an embodied practice helped stimulate the white slummer's ideological fantasy of immersion in black culture. Far removed from the everyday experience of Harlem life, Prohibition-era slumming relied on a depiction of blackness cultivated in the white imaginary. To slummers, a visit to Harlem meant an exclusive excursion into an exotic, carnal and festive atmosphere; the consumption of alcohol facilitated that imaginary transition between "worlds" in a physical and perceptual way. In the second part of this chapter, I consider how contemporary theories on immersive theatre can help us understand how the intoxicated experiences of slummers were staged. Indeed, club owners fabricated elaborate and theatricalized worlds of "blackness," which physically immersed slummers in their own racial fantasies. Immersive theatre theory can help us better understand the material mechanisms at work in producing these embodied fantasies, which in some ways continue to be reproduced in Harlem and wider New York City. I also hope to broaden our understanding of immersion and intoxication as fraught historical practices that have played a significant role in reinscribing the inequality of bodies and spaces in the city.

Intoxication and Fantasy Blackness

Despite Prohibition, booze fueled the bodies of Harlem slummers during the Roaring Twenties. Part of the fun and mischief for white slummers was figuring out where to stow their bottles of bootlegged booze. In *New York Nights*, travel writer Stephen Graham describes his party hiding their bootlegged bottle of gin “on the floor under the table” at a Harlem dance club to avoid any wayfaring Prohibition agents.²² Steven Watson notes the “classier” convention of smuggling booze at the Cotton Club, where waiters informed guests “that bottles of bootleg liquor should be carried in the pocket rather than set on the floor.”²³ Barney Josephson, a white proprietor who would eventually become the owner of the integrated performance venue Café Society, recounts his own “BYOB” experience at the Cotton Club. The club served “splits of ginger ale or soda water” to patrons whom they knew possessed smuggled bottles. “They would charge you ... a good price for it,” Josephson recalled, “they made as much on that shit as they did on whiskey.”²⁴ Josephson’s candid account indicates that Prohibition laws were hardly more than a minor annoyance for slummers; booze flowed freely and underscored bodily experience at a whole host of venues.

Privileged white slummers were not the only New Yorkers getting intoxicated in Harlem during the 1920s and 30s. As indicated by Wilson and Vogel, everyone drank at mixed race parties as well as in the primarily black speakeasies that existed in Harlem. Invited in the afterhours by his employee (the singer Lena Horne), Josephson describes being a white visitor to an insulated black space of intoxicated creativity – a basement, awash in red light, where guests

²² Graham, *New York Nights*, 245.

²³ Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 126.

²⁴ Barney Josephson, interview by Jeff Kisseloff, *Jeff Kisseloff Oral History Interviews*, December 16, 1986, audio, 47:12, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

took turns plunking away at a piano stacked with beer cans.²⁵ Indeed, plenty of black people partook in the popular practice of getting roaring drunk during New York's Roaring 20s. On the other hand, however, intoxicated behaviors are racialized, and the overtly embodied practices of drinking and intoxication were designated as white-only privileges in segregated venues like the Cotton Club. The stronghold of segregation on the urban spatial imaginary allowed white slummers to feel free to drink and become intoxicated in almost any space in Harlem, while black residents were largely constrained to mixed-race, primarily black, or domestic spaces to attain the bodily experience of letting loose.

Cotton Club dancer Howard “Stretch” Johnson and his family moved to Harlem from Orange, New Jersey, so that his sister Winnie (a chorus girl) could perform at the Cotton Club. Its mobster owners set up the Johnson family in an apartment next door to the venue. After rehearsing with his sister in their basement, Johnson was also eventually hired in 1934, thus beginning his revered career as a tap dancer. The siblings performed together with their brother Bobby as the Three Johnsons. As a black transplant from New Jersey, nineteen-year-old Johnson was both an outsider and insider to Harlem in 1934. As a black man, a resident of Harlem and a Cotton Club employee, he witnessed the conditions of struggle in his neighborhood in contrast to the extravagance of his workplace. He describes the “high prices, low employment” that riddled everyday Harlem, and the “second rate food in the grocery stores, which were all owned by whites.”²⁶ Amidst these precarious conditions sat the Cotton Club, nicknamed “The Aristocrat of Harlem, where Broadway, Park Avenue, and Hollywood rub elbows.”²⁷ Thus, Johnson and other

²⁵ Josephson, interview.

²⁶ Howard “Stretch” Johnson, interview by Jeff Kisseloff, *Jeff Kisseloff Oral History Interviews*, January 27, 1987, audio, 47:16, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

²⁷ “Stretch” Johnson, interview.

residents of Harlem experienced their home as multi-faceted – at once a site of racial and economic struggle, hunger, everyday perambulations, commerce, and a nightly playground for slummers.

The proprietors of the Cotton Club and its patrons, however, were uninterested in the mundanity of Harlem as a lived-in neighborhood and the venue did not cater to the black community. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, Harlem resident Claude McKay described Cotton Club-era Harlem as “an all-white picnic ground with no apparent gain for the blacks.”²⁸ In fact, club owners took great pains to ensure that the interior of the space, and its resultant atmosphere of festivity, would camouflage this everyday reality of Harlem. As Drowne points out, the entry fee for high-profile clubs was cost-prohibitive for most residents of Harlem. For artists, Johnson explains, this also meant cloaking sophisticated dance and musical performances in “exotic garb ... to appease that appetite for a certain type of black performance.”²⁹ This meant reproducing such stereotypes as the “the smiling black, the shuffling black, the blackface black [and] the minstrel” as well as throwing in the “obligatory jungle number with shake dances” and “a lot of flesh exposed.”³⁰ Indeed, patrons who frequented the Cotton Club sought to experience this fantasy version of blackness. As an exceptionally white space in a predominantly black Harlem, the Cotton Club was, to again use Desmond’s phrasing, “both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations” of the time which, in this case, were the social relations of white exceptionalism.³¹ While it is unfortunate that black artists, dancers, and

²⁸ Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007): 106.

²⁹ “Stretch” Johnson, interview.

³⁰ “Stretch” Johnson, interview.

³¹ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 38.

music-lovers could not also sit back and enjoy the performances on offer in the white-only Cotton Club, there existed many other non-segregated spaces (both public and private) above 125th Street wherein the creative energy of the Harlem Renaissance could exchange more freely. In turn, artistic expression within these alternative spaces was less limited by the pressure to convey stereotypes in their music and dance.

For the purposes of this project, the Cotton Club serves as another example in New York City history of an immersive environment that amplified and codified existing inequalities. The fantasy world craved by Harlem slummers was not simply ideological but experiential; not unlike the visceral thrills found in a theme park, slummers sought a thrilling experience of blackness that they could physically feel in their bodies. Pricks of desire, excitement, titillation, and fear seized the slummer's body – before, during, and after his or her jaunt to Harlem. Johnson describes his captivated audience as being exhilarated by the racial fantasies performed on stage, yet blissfully “unaware of just what it was about the performance that was exciting them.”³² In other words, in collusion with the bootlegged whiskey swirling in their highball glasses, the performances of blackness enacted on stage at the Cotton Club intoxicated many slummers intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

This visceral experience began even before slummers stepped inside the Cotton Club. Harlem's reputation preceded it, and slummers were intoxicated by its very idea. Johnson vividly narrates the experience of the slummer en route to Harlem. As they travel, they are already (at least metaphorically intoxicated) by

the idea of coming to a club called the Cotton Club in the middle of deep

Harlem, on Lenox Avenue, you know. When they hit 110th street in their

³² “Stretch” Johnson, interview.

limousines or cabs, they're immediately entering into a segregated community wherein 99% of the population is black, so it's like they're taking a trip from their white world into another, mysterious dark world – already they've got the gooseflesh and goosepimples flyin', just crossing 110th street!³³

It is significant that Johnson describes this white voyeur's "trip from their white world into another, mysterious dark world" as a visceral trip, one that sends their "gooseflesh and goosepimples flyin'." Existing scholarship on slumming tends to focus on ideological constructions of whiteness and blackness in the racial imaginary. Yet Johnson's account above emphasizes the visceral ways these ideologies played out on and upon individuals' bodies. These are the goosebumps, raised hairs, sweat, salivation and quickened pulse of racial fantasy upon the white body, sensations brought forth by the polarized impulses of desire and fear.

Johnson's portrait of her provides a sober perspective of the slummer as perceived by a black performer living and working in Harlem. This slummer in her limousine is experiencing an immersion: a dramatically visceral entrée into a dark and seductive world. Unlike Johnson, a black dancer whose physical behavior and performance style was constrained by the dictates of the Cotton Club and its audiences, the slummer's whiteness allows her to revel in the entire city-as-playground. Rather than feeling physically constrained, we can imagine the slummer's body as buzzing with anticipation of potential urban adventures and sexual encounters, both fueled by alcohol and adrenaline.

Graham recounts his visits to secret drinking spots, commenting that speakeasies are "a remarkable feature of the new American life. Every time you go for a drink there is adventure. I

³³ "Stretch" Johnson, interview.

suppose it adds to one's pleasure...there is such a to-do about letting you in."³⁴ The idea that the process of "getting in" to a speakeasy "adds to one's pleasure" of that experience illustrates the remarkable theatricality of bar culture and the effect of alcohol on spatiality during Prohibition. The illegal service of alcohol in certain spaces necessitates exclusivity, as well as dramatizing what Graham calls the "to-do," or the staged process, of being let in. This is *leisure* for Graham because, as a white person with financial and physical mobility, he possesses everything he needs to be let in to these speakeasies, transitioning smoothly between spaces. It goes without saying that Johnson's bodily experience would not have been so leisurely.

Graham experiences a convergence of alcohol, intoxication, and adventure when he finds himself on a cramped, sweaty dance floor somewhere in Harlem. From within the throng, Graham describes

Tall elegant Negresses with carven faces, held by bellicose fighting bulls, sunbonneted mammas with crazy rustic boys, mighty hipped hostesses keeping time by contorting their buttocks in unison with the males who gripped their waists in the vice of their arms – all these and many others bumped us.³⁵

Graham's highly sexualized description of getting "bumped" by black subjects in Harlem is explicit and primitivist, encompassing a spectrum of black stereotypes: the tall picturesque beauty, the buxom hostess, the sexually-aggressive male. Like so many depictions of black people at the time, Graham's description objectifies their bodies, enacting what Desmond calls the "rhetorical linkage of nondominant races, classes, gender and nationalities with 'the body,' to physicality instead of mentality."³⁶ When describing the black people of Harlem, Graham

³⁴ Graham, *New York Nights*, 69.

³⁵ Graham, *New York Nights*, 253.

³⁶ Desmond, "Embodying Difference," 35.

regurgitates a litany of type-cast black bodies to evoke a fleshy, crowded still-life of Harlem that completely eclipses the residents' mental, emotional, and intellectual existence. He later describes his experience of being carried away "in the eddies of the dance," surrendering to the visceral fantasy throng of blackness – but also to the whiskey cocktails.³⁷

At the end of Graham's wild and drunken night in Harlem, Graham theorizes that one transforms "into a bit of a Negro when you join the dance" and that "some of the black comes off on you," while "none of your white comes off on them."³⁸ In this portrayal, he assumes the perspective of the "hipster" white male, recreating an experience for a reader with less taste and cultural adventurousness; indeed, Graham is part of the first wave of hipsters, as the term emerged during Prohibition as a term for men who carried clandestine flasks of booze on their hips.³⁹ Van Vechten observes a similar fantasy of miscegenation in *Nigger Heaven* when describing "an unknown blonde in raspberry velvet, so light in complexion and yet so typically Negroid in her movements that it was impossible to be sure whether she were white or coloured."⁴⁰ Graham and Van Vechten portray the physiological experiences of intoxication and dancing as ritualistic transformations into blackness. Graham imagines the blackness of the surrounding dancers as physically transferrable, as if it were a material substance that could be smeared onto the white subject's skin. Van Vechten finds himself indescribably aroused by the racial ambiguity of the "unknown blonde." At the same time, their own white propriety is non-transferable and unavailable – whiteness is not a material entity but the status quo. The apparent paradox here is that Graham imagines himself *consuming* blackness (as he swallows his

³⁷ Graham, *New York Nights*, 253.

³⁸ Graham, *New York Nights*, 254.

³⁹ "The Original Hipsters," *Merriam Webster Word History*, accessed September 25, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-original-hipsters>.

⁴⁰ Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 152.

whiskey), while also *being consumed* by blackness (as he becomes engulfed on the dance floor and stained with blackness). Yet at the end of the night, Graham demonstrates control of his own immersive experience by going “home,” left only with a souvenir of “their blackness,” which has rubbed off on his white skin.

Like the club owners, slummers like Graham sought a brand of theatrical blackness, rather than any mundane, slice-of-life version of Harlem. Nonetheless, this theatrical blackness was not acknowledged as such; rather, it was framed as authentic or somehow essential. In Graham’s configuration, black Harlem is the Dionysian wild, while his own predominantly white home base – which he refers to as “the domain of civilisation”⁴¹ – was the Apollonian norm. Nietzsche’s dualism is also useful for framing Graham’s embodied experience on the dance floor.⁴² In the popular white configuration of slumming, black Harlem was a Dionysian world of chaos, drunkenness, and ecstasy. Graham imagines his own white body as the idealized, closed, and orderly Apollonian form; in the presence of the Dionysian black other, however, his body becomes sweaty, intoxicated, and disordered. He imagines that the presence of the black unconstrained Other gives him license to temporarily lose the bodily control he associates with his latent white propriety.

The paradox of this racialized perspective is revealed when we juxtapose Graham’s sense of bodily unrestraint via intoxication with Johnson’s account of the highly-constrained performance styles of himself and his colleagues. Black performers appeased the tastes of white slummers (and thereby stayed commercially viable) by performing white fantasies of blackness. For example, while musicians could be dark skinned, chorus girls were expected to be no darker

⁴¹ Graham, *New York Nights*, 255.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14-21.

than “high yellow,” or light-skinned black.⁴³ Their obligatory performances, described by Johnson as the “jungle number” and “shake dances with a lot of flesh exposed” intoxicated slummers with the racial fantasy of black sexual availability.⁴⁴ Yet from the dancer’s perspective, these performances were constrained and highly stylized to create the illusion of black bodily wildness for a white audience. Again, the paradox is that the dancers’ bodies at the Cotton Club were highly trained and virtuosic in their talents; it was the intoxicated white observers whose bodies were wild and messy with drink.

Slumming is Immersive Theatre

The historically embodied practice of slumming features notable precursors to contemporary immersive theatre practice. Wilson makes a similar observation when he compares rent parties to environmental theatre, pointing out that these gatherings “offered audiences a setting to publicly enact their private fantasies.”⁴⁵ A closer look at the practical similarities between slumming and immersive theatre illuminates the production elements at play in creating a physical and mental experience for slummers. Rancière’s idea of the “emancipated spectator” for example, is a central theory to many academic studies on contemporary immersive theatre. Josephine Machon considers how immersion “emancipates” its spectators by centralizing their bodily experience and giving them a choice of where to go and what to view within the theatrical space.⁴⁶ The idea of bodily emancipation resonates especially poignantly in the historical context of American slavery. Though not in a Rancièrian sense, slummers of the 1920s were

⁴³ Vogel, *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret*, 81.

⁴⁴ “Stretch” Johnson, interview.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 25.

⁴⁶ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 117-18.

emancipated because they could move freely between their white neighborhoods and the black clubs of Harlem. This is evident in Graham's spirit of spontaneity when he claims that "one can never be quite sure what will happen" while drinking in New York. In a sense, white spectators like Graham were reenacting their colonial histories within Harlem by consuming alcohol, jazz, and dance to the point of intoxication. This bodily experience of emancipation and potential was not available to black performers like "Stretch" Johnson. Embodying the constraints of a history of slavery and Jim Crow, the bodies of black performers were legally "free" yet still physically disciplined by the racist sentiments of their audiences.

Many venues also created themed immersive space to fabricate patrons' intoxicated experiences of blackness. Matthew Wilson Smith defines "theming" in the context of amusement parks, wherein "signs of labor" are translated "into elements of landscape, such that the electrical outlets at Disneyland are themed to resemble the bark of living trees, speakers themed to look like rocks."⁴⁷ In Harlem, club proprietors shrouded the labor of the servers and dancers in the theme of fantasy blackness. Theming encourages participants to forget about the "real," or non-immersive, world. Although his experience was not in Harlem, in *Restaurants of New York*, author George Chappell describes his highly themed entry into a midtown restaurant called The Plantation, which was "managed with clever showmanship. Lights gleam from a huge half watermelon, and near the entrance a black Mammy cooks waffles in her log cabin. Around the dance-floor runs a white picket fence."⁴⁸ Like many of the clubs uptown in Harlem, The Plantation's "clever" entrance was staged to create the illusion of another world of blackness and to physically envelop patrons as they entered the venue. A black performer themes herself as a

⁴⁷ Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 127.

⁴⁸ George Chappell, *Restaurants of New York* (New York: Greenburg, Inc., 1925), 119.

“Mammy” cooking waffles. A large watermelon – a recognizable symbol of fantasy blackness – camouflages the venue’s everyday lighting fixtures. Chappel’s experience of entry is unlike entering an everyday bar or restaurant. A door cannot just be a door in immersive theatre; it must be themed so that the entryway is a portal to another world.

Alcohol, too, plays a role in the theming of immersive environs. In fact, as Drowne notes, alcohol was on a lot of minds at the time, with the “liquor question” ranking “as one of the most divisive social issues confronting America during the turbulent 1920s.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the prohibition of alcohol precipitated the creation of discreet and often password-protected entryways to speakeasies and clubs; eventually the drama of entering a speakeasy or exclusive club became part of the experience. Graham describes his experience of entering a speakeasy as transforming “into a pirate or a dark character entering a smuggler’s cave.”⁵⁰ He goes on to dramatize the experience of approaching the “locked and chained door” as a pair of eyes considered him “through peep-holes in the wooden walls.”⁵¹ In historic Harlem, after being deposited from their limousines, white patrons were led into the Cotton Club’s horseshoe-shaped parlor, which featured “artificial palm trees” and “ersatz jungle décor,” which would literally envelop patrons in a primitive and exotic fantasy.⁵² For flaneurs like Graham and the Cotton Club patrons, Prohibition was only a suggestion. The entire city was a playground and intoxication was child’s play.

In contemporary immersive spaces, alcohol is not merely a concession but a material part of the experience. The cultural theme of the speakeasy has maintained a stronghold on cultural

⁴⁹ Drowne, “Theah’s Life Anywheres Theah’s Booze and Jazz,” 930.

⁵⁰ Graham, *New York Nights*, 69.

⁵¹ Graham, *New York Nights*, 69.

⁵² Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 124.

practice, as evidenced by a whole host of bars in New York City that use highly choreographed entry tactics today. Patrons of East Village's Please Don't Tell bar must enter through a hot dog shop and pick up the receiver in an abandoned phone booth to contact the hostess. Similarly, the Raines Law Room cocktail bar lies at the bottom of an unmarked stairwell, where a small brass plaque instructs customers to ring a doorbell for entry. These theatrical entries create the illusion of a secret world awaiting patrons when they arrive to the bar. Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* also features a themed entrance, wherein guests must take an eerie elevator ride up to the tucked-away Manderley Bar. In this lavish, speakeasy-style cabaret, guests are not so subtly encouraged to drink before the performance. By staging dramatic entrances, venues invite audience members to play in a ludic space by interacting with characters and props in ways that neither a proscenium stage nor an everyday bar would allow.

Similarly, we cannot underestimate the influence of alcohol on the embodied behaviors of slummers. As we have seen, part of the slummer's mischief involved bringing and hiding bootlegged bottles of alcohol, which was attained through New York's extensive underground channels of production and distribution. In immersive theatre, audience members are often encouraged to drink before and sometimes during the immersive experience. In the case of *Sleep No More*, a character might offer an audience member a drink as part of the interactive experience. Even the mere presence of alcohol influences the bodily behaviors of many participants in immersive theatre, because bar behavior seems to be suddenly permissible within the theatre. Laura Levin observes the "intrusive, aggressive, and drunken" bodies of a rowdy group of masked men at *Sleep No More*, whose presence made her feel "hyper-aware of [the

production's] atmosphere of intoxication."⁵³ Levin's hyper-awareness was especially keen when one member of the group began "jumping up and smacking an exit sign in the corridor," causing a company member to ask him whether "he would act that way in his own home."⁵⁴

When probed further, this rather mundane interaction illuminates the physical entitlement that many participants feel in spaces that are not "home." This audience member's behavior is precisely *not* how he would behave at home, perhaps because the immersive environment has successfully convinced him that he is free to behave however he pleases. Levin also notes the significant ways that gender can orient our bodies within immersive spaces; as a woman, her hyper-awareness was a result of feeling slightly threatened by the unrestrained and intoxicated physical behavior of the male strangers with whom she was sharing space. Levin's theory applies just as well to the intoxicated slummer or the concert saloon patrons of Chapter 1, who also embody "the contours of capitalist and ecological resourcism, treating the environment as a site of conquest and unrestrained consumption."⁵⁵ Indeed, the project of "conquest" and the ability to engage in the "unrestrained consumption" of alcohol and performance by these participants is an embodiment of their own racial, gendered, and economic privilege. White male slummers were at the top of the food chain in Prohibition-era Harlem, just like the white male concert saloon patrons in the first chapter. In both instances of historical immersive practice, the design and execution of immersive space has not been a neutral endeavor; on the contrary, both concert saloons and white-only slumming venues catered primarily to the physical and ideological

⁵³ Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84.

⁵⁴ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 84.

⁵⁵ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 84.

whims of white male patrons. Both provided themed spaces for the fulfillment of white male sexual desire, spatial entitlement, and assertion of power.

Prohibition-era slummers traveled uptown to Harlem to enact various desires, both ideological and physical. The experience of intoxication fulfilled both kinds of desire at once. In Harlem, slummers could shed their cloaks of white propriety and assume the mantle of fantasy blackness, which was associated with drunken abandon. In an embodied form, this meant swaying, swallowing, and sweating to excess – all ostensibly in service of experiencing the new Negro Vogue. At the end of the night or in the early hours of the morning, however, the music faded, the flavors of food and drink transformed into an aftertaste, and the crowd dispersed. The slummers stumbled back to their ordered and proper homes – spaces that embodied virtue and propriety, features that many slummers imagined as intrinsic to whiteness itself. As daybreak brought on the discomfort of a hangover, the carnivalesque underworld of Harlem dissolved into a distant, feverish dream.

Returning to the chilly street corner in present-day Harlem, I soberly reflect upon my own orientation within this historical neighborhood – a white scholar immersing herself in the stories this neighborhood tells about the history of race and racism in New York City. I watch the tourists atop the CitySights NY bus, wondering whether they might access some part of the historically racialized experience of intoxication while under the influence of their two complimentary cocktails at the jazz club later that night. While Harlem's heyday of slumming is over, its trace lingers in New York City today.

Chapter Three

Tamara, Tony, and Tina: Immersive Experience in Late-Eighties New York

It is an extremely hot day in late July 2016, and we are stuck in a long vein of traffic stretching as far as the eye can see on Long Island's Interstate 495. "So, is this a real wedding or a fake wedding?" asks my best friend Megan from the back seat of the rental car. We are on our way to a one-off revival of the hit 1980s immersive musical *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* at the Suffolk Theatre in Riverhead, a small town just west of the Hamptons. Megan's question is legitimate, since every aspect of *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* is designed to simulate a real wedding – down to the awkward small talk and lackluster buffet food. Since we are stuck in traffic, I take time to explain that no, this is not technically a real wedding, but it is an immersive piece of theatre that requires some degree of audience interaction. Upon hearing this, Megan, her husband Scott, and our friend Natalie spent the next hour in traffic crafting the character names and backstories they will assume upon arrival to *Tony n' Tina's Wedding*.

When we arrive at the "wedding" we find our seats, which are located at a bar at the back of the theatre. The bartender, whose thick Long Island accent indicates that he might be part of Tony and Tina's fictional world, serves us our first round of drinks and we toast to the bride and groom. The cast enters and, almost immediately, we find ourselves "catching up" with a variety of characters – groomsmen, bridesmaids, the mother of the bride, and random family members and friends. By the end of the night, Scott had engaged in a secret "drug" deal with a groomsman, Megan had gotten locked in the bathroom with Tina, wiping cake off her face, and Natalie had exchanged numbers with Tony's best man.

I attended this special presentation of *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* with a particularly outgoing group of people who did not fear interacting with the actors or the theatrical world of a spoofed Italian wedding. Not coincidentally, they also took full advantage of the bar (hence our seats there), and alcohol became the social lubricant facilitating interactions between our reality and the theatrical world of Tony and Tina. Under the influence of these drinks, the boundaries between those worlds became especially unclear: did Natalie receive the actor's real phone number, or a made-up number fabricated for his character? (For the record, the phone number was real.) Was the tiny plastic bag of cocaine pressed into Scott's hand real, or powdered sugar? The Italian buffet we enjoyed was most certainly real, although consumed under theatrical circumstances; the same goes for the drinks we ordered at the bar. In fact, alcohol helped facilitate the blurring between reality and theatricality, which provided the moments our group enjoyed most. At the end of the night, Megan announced to the group that Tony and Tina's wedding was possibly the most fun family function she had ever attended. Indeed, thirty years and countless touring cities later, *Tony n' Tina* still holds an appeal. What makes a "wedding" more fun than a wedding? What makes *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* more enjoyable and memorable (for audience members like Megan) than a traditional sit-down theatrical play?

While we had an excellent time rubbing elbows with Tony and Tina's boisterous Italian family in the summer of 2016, this kind of interactive theatre is no longer a novelty in the contemporary theatrical landscape. In New York City during the late-eighties, however, the original *Tony n' Tina* was one of the first productions of its kind, as was *Tamara*, another groundbreaking production of the time. The following chapter outlines a historical moment of burgeoning interactive and immersive theatre in New York in the 1980s, when these productions first opened. One key to the success of *Tony n' Tina* (and other immersive, interactive, and

dinner theatre productions in New York City of the time) is that they endowed audiences with a newfound freedom and space to play, or in the words of Elinor Fuchs, to “‘try on’ the physical and imaginative conditions imposed by the surrounding space, as one might try on a piece of clothing at a retailer.”¹ These early types of immersive theatrical experiences borrowed from the interactive and spatial logic of bars, video games, and theme parks – where individual user experience is centralized and rewarded. The first two chapters of this dissertation consider what bars and clubs have taken from theatre practice to gain and entertain their patrons. Now, I consider what kinds of spatial and social tactics *theatre* has derived from *bars* and other popular entertainments. Of course, always at the center of this analysis is the ubiquitous availability and consumption of alcohol, which often influences audience experience in ways that have not been sufficiently analyzed in the field of immersive theatre studies. As I have emphasized throughout this study, it matters little whether an individual audience member actually chooses to drink; even just the availability of alcohol for sale throughout Tony n’ Tina’s “wedding” indicated to theatregoers in the eighties that the production was more than “just a play.”

Additionally, I will connect these advancements in immersive theatre and entertainment to a larger picture of economic change in New York City and the country at large during the late eighties. Indeed, both England and the United States saw a surge of neoliberal ideals in the 1970s and 80s as a counter to economic “stagflation” or the “combination of high unemployment, high inflation, and low or no growth.”² Margaret Thatcher’s election as British Prime Minister in 1979 just preceded Ronald Reagan’s election as President in 1981, and both leaders ushered in a new

¹ Elinor Fuchs, “Theater as Shopping,” *Theater* 24 no. 4 (1993): 28.

² Daniel Stedman Jones, “Economic Strategy: The Neoliberal Breakthrough, 1971-1984” in *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 215.

era in which neoliberalism triumphed; according to Daniel Stedman Jones, Reagan's four main economic goals were "increased deregulation and market liberalization, tighter control of the money supply, tax cuts, and cuts in public spending."³ Indeed, two major successes symbolized Reagan's new era: the busting of air traffic control union strikers and their subsequent termination and the legislative passage of unprecedented tax-cuts.⁴ This new era celebrated a radically free market, deregulation, and shrinking bureaucracy. Why did immersive theatre begin to flourish at this particular time? What kinds of productions were on offer? This chapter begins this line of inquiry by analyzing two of the most popular examples of early immersive theatre from the 1980s, where drinks and drinking became ideologically entwined with the idea of audience mobility and taste. As this chapter will reveal, the historic success and relevance of these productions had much to do with the larger social, economic, and political moment that was New York City in the late 1980s.

Early Immersive Theatre in New York, Historically Contextualized

The male-dominated concert saloons of chapter one and the segregated Harlem clubs of chapter two are historical examples of traditional bar spaces that incorporated theatrical themes and performance techniques to enhance the patron experience. In turn, these theatrical innovations created new and different avenues for nightlife and leisure culture in New York City. The costumes and performances of concert saloon waiter girls on the Bowery, for example, breathed new life into the dull, depressing atmosphere of dreary grog shops. In Harlem, venues like the Cotton Club implemented elaborate and decorative themes to immerse patrons in

³ Jones, "Economic Strategy," 263.

⁴ Jones, "Economic Strategy," 265.

primitive jungle or plantation homestead environments that played to white racial fantasies around black culture. Their proprietors acted much like theatre producers, making crucial design and performance decisions for their bars that would appeal to audiences and, thereby, generate more business. Patron experience was often carefully designed by venue proprietors and carried out by the employees and performers. In both cases, proprietors theatricalized the space of their bar to evoke and appeal to certain dominant ideologies of power: in the case of concert saloons, this dominant ideology was male sporting culture and the assertion of male dominance over women; in the Harlem jazz clubs, it was the maintenance of white propriety in contrast to an unbridled and eroticized conception of blackness.

At this point the project pivots away from theatricalized bar spaces and instead focuses on theatre productions that adopt some element of popular bar culture. In other words, chapters three and four illuminate an inverse phenomenon from the first half of this project, which focused on bars that used theatrical tactics to create more dynamic experiences for patrons. Conversely, the second half of this dissertation examines examples of theatre productions that have adopted certain aspects of the spatiality and ambience of venues for everyday drinking and sociality. Indeed, in New York City in the 1980s, various theatre productions began taking on significant aspects of popular bar culture, such as the ability to move around and socialize with others and the incorporation of food and drinks. As concert saloons distinguished themselves from everyday bars of the time, the two early immersive theatre productions analyzed in this chapter distinguished themselves from other pieces of straight theatre in the 1980s by adopting an interactive but still theatrical atmosphere that included not only socializing, but food and alcohol. The aforementioned *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* (1985) and the Canadian touring production, *Tamara* (1987), were unlike anything to hit New York City's off-Broadway circuit

by the late eighties. While they both featured catered dinners and interactive theatrical elements, their approaches to immersion differed because the productions gave audience members varying degrees of freedom to move about and talk amongst themselves, as well as with theatrical characters.

Yet most importantly (for the purposes of this study), audiences for both productions were enabled to drink at certain intervals or throughout the show. This was not mere intermission drinking at the lobby bar, in which one might partake on Broadway or other traditional venues; rather, in both productions, the drinks and drinking were blended into to very fabric of the experience. In sharing a drink with Tony and Tina at their wedding, for example, an audience member embodies her own crossover into the characters' fictional world. This phenomenon of theatre productions incorporating such diegetic drinking denotes an early turn towards the kinds of immersive theatre that would become very popular in the early 2000s in London with the arrival of Punchdrunk and continues to be quite popular today in New York City; early immersive theatre in New York centralized the physical and emotional experience of the audience member by inviting them into an increasingly interactive and tactile experience. Fuchs theorized this late-eighties turn towards audience experience in her 1993 article "Theatre as Shopping" as "familiarization," or an inversion of Brecht's alienation effect. The *v-effekt*, she writes, is "an exercise in dialectics, an effort to see clearly through questioning, criticism and resistance. In Fuchs's familiarization it is just the opposite: the spectator is "plunged bodily into the action" and his "spatial saturation essentially takes the place of his experience of characters in a drama."⁵ Indeed, unlike much of the participatory theatre of the sixties and seventies, early immersive theatre like *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina* were not especially known for being politically

⁵ Fuchs, "Theater as Shopping," 27-28.

resistant or critical. Instead, like the ornately-designed jazz clubs of Harlem, these productions aimed to saturate audiences in a fantasy world. Fuchs's use of the verb "saturate" is especially salient to this chapter, wherein I propose a confluence of saturations happening simultaneously in shows like *Tony n' Tina*: spatial, alcoholic, and ideological saturation. While contemporary theatregoers in New York City may have experience with (or at least knowledge of) these highly saturating immersive environments, spectators of the late 1980s were still new to the idea. In other words, while *Tony n' Tina* feels gimmicky and spoofy in 2018, it was actually quite an innovation on the New York City theatre scene of the 1980s.

At the time of their openings, *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina*'s innovative staging techniques made them difficult to classify, especially since the term "immersive theatre" was not yet popularized; one 1988 *New York Times* article went so far as to deem both productions "avant-garde...for fearless audiences."⁶ Yet the experimental and avant-garde theatres of the late 1960s and 70s had already introduced limited New York audiences to nontraditional, and often radically political, theatrical practices. Judith Malina and Julian Beck, for example, had long been experimenting with theatrical form, content, and space in the work of The Living Theatre which sought to demonstrate "that there could be no separation between art and life."⁷ In the early sixties, Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre used large-scale puppets to comment on war and consumerism, all while sharing bread with communities around New York City.⁸ The Performance Group's iconic *Dionysus in 69* had already implemented audience interaction and

⁶ Stephen Holden, "Avant-Garde Antics for Fearless-Audiences," *New York Times*, February 5, 1988.

⁷ John Tytell, *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), xi-xii.

⁸ Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre* (New York: Applause, 1973), 84.

largely disavowed the proscenium “fourth wall.”⁹ Like *Tamara*, which is devised in part from a set of found diaries, *Dionysus in 69* was devised from Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Its staging was also interactive: audiences for *Dionysus in 69* sat around, in, and above the playing space on set of wooden scaffolds that the actors also used for their movements. During the now-infamous ecstatic orgy scene, audience members for *Dionysus in 69* were invited to dance, play music, and sometimes undress in a scene that ended with actors and audience members lying together in tangled piles on the floor. While *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina* certainly share some practical and spatial similarities with the experimental avant-garde productions that went on below 14th Street in the sixties, both carried a far more mainstream appeal.

Indeed, *Tony n’ Tina* and *Tamara* certainly expanded upon the participatory tactics of Schechner’s environmental theatre of the sixties by inviting audience members to follow or talk to characters. Both productions of the eighties, however, opted for a safer overall audience appeal that eschewed the overt political and social criticisms that largely defined *Dionysus in 69*, *Bread and Puppet*, and *The Living Theatre*. It is interesting to note also that, despite its titular citation to the god of wine, *Dionysus in 69* did not feature alcohol as part of the participatory experience, perhaps in part because it encouraged audiences think critically about power and politics (rather than be fully “saturated” or intoxicated by the experience). By stripping down or avoiding political or social agendas altogether, *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina* introduced participatory and immersive theatre to a more mainstream, and thereby larger, demographic. Indeed, one of *Tony n’ Tina*’s original producers and former Wall Street trader, Joe Corcoran, claimed in an interview that the production team wanted *Tony n’ Tina* to attract very wide

⁹ Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, 31.

audiences – especially people who had never had before possessed any desire to attend theatre.¹⁰ Corcoran and his team wanted to make theatre for people who were explicitly *not* the intellectual theatergoers that would enjoy mulling over the political undertones of *Dionysus in 69* or a heady straight play on Broadway. Alternatively, *Tony n’ Tina*’s implicitly anti-intellectual brand of interactivity could appeal widely to a spectrum of audience members, regardless of political orientation; not coincidentally, it was far more commercially successful than the limited audiences of experimental and interactive theatre of the 60s and 70s. Indeed, both *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina* were decidedly not the “difficult, vigorous, and controversial” productions like the Wooster Group’s in the 1970s, which David Savran argues “addressed pressing social issues, including the victimization of women, racism, and the multifarious process of dehumanization.”¹¹ In other words, while experimental and environmental theatre is certainly a feasible part of immersive theatre’s genealogy, it is only part of the picture; there are a range of other influences in 1980s New York that led to the extreme success of interactive productions. Interestingly, as Fuchs points out in her metaphor of theatre-as-shopping, many of these factors have far more in common with mainstream capitalistic practices and popular culture than with avant-garde or experimental traditions.

Both *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding* played extended runs in New York City in the late eighties, received a lot of press coverage, toured to multiple cities, and were widely advertised and heavily attended. Since both productions were considered a “hot ticket” during their runs, these experiences came at a higher price. Like a contemporary *Hamilton* ticket, audiences were willing to pay competitive prices to attain the culturally-relevant experiences

¹⁰ Joe Corcoran, Personal Interview, August 23, 2017, phone.

¹¹ David Savran, “Introduction: Writing History,” from *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 1-8: 1.

associated with these productions. Both productions also featured a meal, which was a novelty because it eliminated the extra step of a pre-theatre dinner, but also added to the production costs. A ticket to *Tony n' Tina* cost \$40 in 1988, but to put this in context, this ticket price was just \$10 shy of the most expensive seats for the most popular Broadway show at the time, *The Phantom of the Opera*.¹² Marvin Carlson describes *Tamara*'s weekend evening ticket prices (\$135) as the highest he had yet to see in New York City. Today, considering historical inflation, that is comparable to the highest-tier ticket for Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (\$325 on a weekend evening).¹³

The logic behind what B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore would eventually deem the “experience economy” in the late-nineties justifies these expensive ticket prices, which include not only a theatrical experience, but food, drinks, and socializing as well. Indeed, shows like *Tony n' Tina* and *Tamara* set the stage for the experience economy outlined in Pine and Gilmore's 1999 book, subtitled *Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage*, which would encourage retailers to connect with customers and create memorable sales experiences with many products rolled into one: a meal, entertainment, atmosphere, and service (amongst other possibilities).¹⁴ Considered in light of Pine and Gilmore's emerging experience economy, *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina* were absolutely in line with the consumer-centered, individualized, and experience-driven economic moment of the late-eighties.

¹² Marvin Carlson, “Tamara,” in *10,000 Nights: Highlights from 50 Years of Theatre-Going* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 142.

¹³ Calculated using the Bureau of Labor Statistics “Inflation Calculator,” accessed March 16, 2018, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹⁴ B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore II, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 4.

Tamara

Canadian playwright John Krizanc wrote his play *Tamara* about the Italian literary figure and socialite Gabriele D'Annunzio, who lived in 1920s fascist Italy. Krizanc loosely used the actual 1927 diaries of a housekeeper working in D'Annunzio's villa, Il Vittoriale, as the historical source material for *Tamara*.¹⁵ One of the characters in these diaries was the seductive Polish art deco painter, Tamara de Lempicka, whom D'Annunzio had commissioned to paint his portrait and was also attempting to woo. *Tamara* was a smashing success from its opening, playing extended engagements in Toronto, Los Angeles, and New York. Though Krizanc's play does contain themes of sex and political intrigue in Mussolini's Italy, what actually drew audiences to *Tamara* was the production's innovative staging within the expansive space of the Park Avenue Armory. Krizanc worked closely with director Richard Rose to create a theatre experience in which groups of audience members followed key characters from room to room, watching their individual stories unfold as part of the larger narrative tapestry.

Due to its immersive and sprawling staging concept, *Tamara* necessitated the procurement of nontraditional theatre spaces in all the cities in which it was mounted. To create the feeling of D'Annunzio's lavish Italian villa, the producers selected lavish but slightly decrepit mansions or other vast spaces with multiple rooms. *Tamara* was first produced for the 1981 Toronto Theatre Festival in the Strachan House – a historic downtown mansion.¹⁶ The production moved to Los Angeles in 1984, where its creators revamped an American Legion building for the performance space. When *Tamara* arrived in New York City in 1987, the production moved in to the Park Avenue Armory, a large former military facility and event space

¹⁵ Eileen Blumenthal, "'Tamara' From the Ground Floor Up," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1987, 7.

¹⁶ Blumenthal, "'Tamara' From the Ground Floor Up."

on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that worked well with the play's historically opulent setting. Built in 1861 by the National Guard's Seventh Regiment, the armory is a 55,000 square foot brick building with a vaulted roof that makes the inside space feel even more capacious, especially considering its context of a crowded Manhattan.¹⁷ While the Park Avenue Armory is currently renowned as a large-scale performance and fine art venue, this was not so in 1987. According to Eileen Blumenthal's *New York Times* write-up of the show, the vast space of the Armory was still in use by a very random assortment of tenants, such as a homeless shelter, a Veterans' Association chapter, tennis courts, a shooting range, the headquarters for the National Guard, a junior cadet club, and a restaurant.¹⁸ The fact that a theatrical production took residence in a non-theatrical space removed some of the social expectations of appropriate behavior for "the theatre," allowing for a deeper sensation of what Fuchs calls the spectator's "spatial saturation."¹⁹ It also added to the novelty of *Tamara*'s reputation at the time as a new and different format for theatre. Of course, this use of non-theatre spaces to stage immersive theatre continues today in shows like *Sleep No More*, which takes place in an old Chelsea warehouse and *Then She Fell*, which has converted a section of St. John's Lutheran Church in Williamsburg into Kingsland Ward, a "mental institution."

As in contemporary immersive theatre, every aspect of the *Tamara* experience was themed to create a fantasy world of Italian high society during World War II. Paul Lasley and Elizabeth Harryman describe their entrance into the Los Angeles production, where rooms of the

¹⁷ "Building History," Park Avenue Armory website, accessed December 14, 2017, http://www.armoryonpark.org/about_us/history.

¹⁸ Blumenthal, "'Tamara' From the Ground Floor Up."

¹⁹ Fuchs, "Theater as Shopping," 28.

Hollywood American Legion were “furnished with antiques...the walls hung with rare artworks,” and

upon arrival, each audience member is issued a “passport,” which doubles as a theater program. The large double doors swing open, and piano music drifts down the staircase. Girls dressed as 1920s maids greet patrons with “Buongi’orno” and offer complimentary beverages. A black-clad soldier stamps each passport and warns that losing it could result in deportation. Suddenly we are all in Mussolini’s Italy of 1927.²⁰

In *Tamara*, even the programs were themed to create the feeling of transport into another time and place. Additionally, instead of traditional bartenders or ushers, *Tamara* employed costumed “girls dressed as 1920s maids” and “a black-clad soldier” to serve drinks and orient patrons within the space. Details like this demonstrate how early immersive theatre like *Tamara* attempted to camouflage the theatrical apparatus and thereby create a more “totalized” experience of immersion for spectators. *Tamara* presaged the philosophies of Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy by transforming the “most mundane transactions” of receiving a program and finding one’s orientation within the theatrical space into “memorable experiences” that tie into the overall narrative.²¹ The passport also doubled as a sort of coupon for reduced ticket prices for each future visit to the show, encouraging spectators to return again and again, increasing their familiarity and expertise as repeat participants. Whether they intended to or not, the creators of *Tamara* precipitated what Pine and Joseph would eventually call “A Refreshing

²⁰ Paul Lasley and Elizabeth Harryman, “‘Tamara’: Audience Follows Cast from Room to Room,” *Christian Science Monitor*. July 9, 1985, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1985/0709/ltamara-f.html>.

²¹ Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 4.

Experience” for consumers. wherein “experience stagers must constantly refresh their experiences, change or add elements that keep the offering new, exciting, and worth paying money to experience all over again.”²² Though the staging of *Tamara* remained relatively the same every night, audience members could individually manipulate their experiences to create a “new, exciting” experience each time.

Indeed, by returning multiple times or through sharing word-of-mouth tips, audience members could manipulate their experiences to find the sexiest and most thrilling scenes. This kind of audience entrepreneurialism is also a precursor to contemporary “superfans” of shows like *Sleep No More*, who create websites such the “Scorched the Snake” fan site and Brian Moylan’s article “How to Find All the Nudity in *Sleep No More*,” which I will take up in the next chapter.²³ Unlike *Tony n’ Tina*, *Tamara* did not explicitly provide a platform for direct conversation or interaction between audience and actors, but its promenade-style staging offered an unprecedented element of choice regarding audience mobility. Spectators were assigned an original character to follow but were offered the option of breaking off and following other characters they might meet on the way. Audience members could choose to stay in the physical and symbolic “upstairs” of the production, following the intrigues of the upper-class characters, or (like Fuchs) could opt to follow the maids, butlers, and kitchen staff downstairs to the servants’ quarters. Like the popular “Choose Your Own Adventure” children’s books of the time, there was no one way of experiencing *Tamara*, but a myriad of possible combinations. This

²² Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 95.

²³ “About Scorched the Snake,” *Tumblr* site, accessed March 7, 2018, <http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com/about>, and Brian Moylan, “How to Find All the Nudity in *Sleep No More*,” *Gawker*, December 8, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5866346/how-to-find-all-the-nudity-in-sleep-no-more>.

freedom of choice was what convinced many consumers to return to the experience again and again.

Interestingly, Krizanc felt that *Tamara*'s unusually mobile approach to staging – which came about organically in Toronto rehearsals and was never intended to define the production – began to overshadow the playwright's political themes. "I've had to acknowledge that a lot of people are there just to have a good time running around the house," he told Blumenthal, "so much of the press is saying, 'Follow Alexis Carrington up to her bedroom' ... It was never our intention that the play would be about those kinds of things. We did it very seriously."²⁴ In other words, unlike the producers of *Tony n' Tina*, many of the theatre makers behind *Tamara* felt like their production was being received more as a novelty experience than a serious drama. Nevertheless, *Tamara*'s immersive staging techniques are undoubtedly what made the production so commercially successful in so many cities within the nascent experience economy of the late eighties. The production's experiential appeal is emphasized by newspaper and magazine articles at the time, which are equal parts theatre reviews as they are how-to guides and restaurant write-ups. Gael Greene's "Insatiable Critic" column for the *New Yorker* suggests that audience members "be in great shape and sneakers to keep up with this fast-moving exercise in voyeurism and histrionics" adding her special insight "for sensualists and gourmands, there are at least two highlights – the chauffeur naked after his bath, and watching d'Annunzio make an omelet."²⁵ Despite Krizanc's desire to draw out the themes of Mussolini's Italy as a possible commentary on political corruption of the time, the majority of critics focused on the production's more visceral elements, like nude actors and live omelet-making. As is often the

²⁴ Blumenthal, "'Tamara' From the Ground Floor Up."

²⁵ Gael Greene, "Two on the Aisle," *The Insatiable Critic*, *New York Magazine*, March 21, 1988.

case with immersive theatre, the storyline falls to the background, and the user is free to make their own meaning out of the experience.

Tamara's experiential appeal was definitely heightened by the production's emphasis on food and drink. Before the show began, Fuchs recalls "waitresses in starched white aprons serv[ing] 'Tamara cocktails' courtesy of Seagram's" brand rum.²⁶ According to Greene's write-up, the signature Tamara cocktail was a mix of "dark rum, grenadine, orange juice, and pineapple juice." Greene instructs readers to grab two Tamaras before the show, and spring for "the banal eggplant caponata on toast – that's all there is till dinner."²⁷ During intermission, audiences indulged in unlimited Perrier-Jouët champagne and a dinner buffet catered by chef Daniel Boulud's Le Cirque, which at the time was one of the trendiest dinner reservations in the city. The dinner itself was framed as a celebratory feast welcoming the arrival of the titular Tamara, D'Annunzio's much-anticipated guest. Le Cirque's name certainly elevated the taste level (and ticket price) of the production, but as a supremely visceral way of consuming experience, Fuchs insists that the haute cuisine was also the production's "experiential and symbolic core."²⁸

Besides being a mark of distinction, then, the dinner also provided an important pause for some audience members to divulge their unique experiences with each other. Marvin Carlson recalls his experience, wherein

the audience gathered around the elegant buffet and almost the entire conversation concerned the exchange of information. Everyone had only a piece of the story and was curious to see how it fitted elsewhere. What was that upstairs shot? Or that

²⁶ Fuchs, "Theater as Shopping," 21.

²⁷ Greene, "Two on the Aisle."

²⁸ Fuchs, "Theater as Shopping," 20.

apparent fight on the stairs? What had happened in a previous scene to make a particular character act in a certain way. And most important, what were the various intrigues, political and romantic, that seemed to involve in some way almost every character?²⁹

Carlson's dining experience denotes the gossip-like sociality engendered by *Tamara's* meal break, in which participants could compare notes and collectively try to piece together a larger sense of the theatrical universe created by the immersive production. While any restaurant or bar could provide a champagne buffet, this communal and theatrical meal served the purpose of deepening the audience's engagement of the play and mirroring the opulent lifestyles of *Tamara's* upper-class characters. As a marker of celebration and class, champagne seems the perfect choice to accompany Le Cirque's coveted cuisine. Like our experience at *Tony and Tina*, Fuchs's and Carlson's experience of *Tamara* demonstrate how the sharing of food and drink can act as social lubrication for the immersive experience, saturating the bodies of the participants and creating a bold sense of ownership amongst patrons who seemed quite happy to be "there just to have a good time running around the house."³⁰

Tamara's successful five-year run in New York City did not exist in a vacuum. Just as concert saloons and jazz clubs reflected dominant historical ideologies of their time, *Tamara* played to its surrounding socioeconomic landscape of New York City in the eighties. As Carlson also points out, many economic and cultural theorists refer to the 1980s as New York's "Second Gilded Age."³¹ Indeed, the 1980s saw the glory days of Wall Street and the coming to dominance of neoliberalism in the form of Reaganomics. In his 1981 address to the nation on the state of the

²⁹ Carlson, *10,000 Nights*, 145.

³⁰ Blumenthal, "'Tamara' From the Ground Floor Up."

³¹ Carlson, *10,000 Nights*, 143.

economy, Ronald Reagan marked the early 80s as the “the worst economic mess since the Great Depression” and wanted to cut taxes for the rich, which he claimed would “trickle down” and stimulate the economy in such a way that would ostensibly benefit everyone at every class level in the nation.³² Regardless of the efficacy of Reagan’s plan, it came with a pervasive and highly popularized conservative logic, which championed the virtues of individual effort and hard work in the face of economic hardship. In his speech, Reagan claimed his policies would “begin to reward hard work and risk taking” and would place “the direction of your life back in your hands.”³³ The zeitgeist of Reagan’s political logic – an “every man for himself” attitude and a rejection of governmental intervention in individual choices, was certainly at play amongst the uber-wealthy classes of New York in the 1980s. When considered in light of a Reaganomics value system, it is unsurprising that theatre reviews of *Tamara* focused on practical suggestions for consumers, such as the importance of wearing sneakers, what buffet items were outstanding, and how to find the cooking scenes and nudity. These “tips and tricks” for potential customers indicate a newly forming prototype of the entrepreneurial audience member/consumer, who arrives to an interactive theatrical experience with knowledge that will give them a leg up in comparison to other audience members. Indeed, we can see how, like Reagan’s ideal economy, the theatrical world of *Tamara* also rewards individual participants for their “hard work and risk taking.” As the next chapter will demonstrate, contemporary immersive theatre continues to promote this kind of audience engagement, but to an even more extreme degree by implanting

³² Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Economy”, February 5, 1981, transcribed by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley for *The American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43132>.

³³ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Economy.”

exclusive “one-on-one” encounters like Easter Eggs within the immersive landscapes, for only the most hard-working audience members to find.

From a spatial perspective, the production’s venue was a striking metaphor for New York City’s urban landscape of wealth inequality. After all, as Pine and Gilmore would eventually explain, one significant reason for the rise of the experience economy is “rising affluence.”³⁴ Every night, ticketholders for *Tamara* would inhabit the same building as the tenants of the Park Avenue Armory’s homeless shelter. In fact, the shelter’s entrance was re-routed to avoid mixing *Tamara*’s well-heeled audiences with visitors to the homeless shelter. As audiences clinked their champagne glasses together before their catered feasts, homeless tenants would be living quite different lives a few rooms over in the Amory. Director Richard Rose remarked how difficult it was to soundproof the performance space from “noise filtering down from the homeless shelter.”³⁵ Indeed, the overt excess embodied in all aspects by *Tamara* contrasted starkly with the scenes of poverty occurring in the same building. Under the logic of Reaganomics, though, the champagne toasters and homeless persons both were getting what they deserved.

Indeed, Reaganomics also emphasized the economic agency of the individual with a bootstraps narrative of self-empowerment, while deemphasizing the structural factors at war with this narrative, such as a widening income gap and the increase of contract and service labor. With the growing popularity of shows like *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina* in New York City, we begin to see a pervasive theatrical ideology emerge: that the quality of one’s experience is highly dependent on one’s individual choices and actions within the participatory world of the play. The greater degree to which one participates (within certain confines, of course) will produce a

³⁴ Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, 5.

³⁵ Blumenthal, “‘Tamara’ From the Ground Floor Up.”

better-quality experience. Participants are expected to “work” for their own entertainment, whether that labor is simply moving around as in *Tamara*, or in improvising one’s own offshoot storyline, as in *Tony n’ Tina*. In the case of both productions, participants can (and should) share notes over a plate of food and an alcoholic beverage.

Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding

Though *Tamara*’s playwright and producers may have felt conflicted over the voyeuristic exploits of their audiences, “having a good time and running around” seemed to be the unapologetic point of *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding* (1985), which features a cast of very loud, stereotypically Italian, blue-collar characters. Indeed, *Tamara*’s low-brow equivalent in the late eighties was certainly *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding*, which caused a similar splash in the 1980s theatre scene but with a slightly different approach to immersive staging. Originally devised by actors Nancy Cassaro and Marc Nassar after extensive people-watching on Long Island, *Tony n’ Tina* is an unapologetic send-up of New York Italian families and their elaborate weddings.³⁶ The prototype of Italian wedding culture had already pervaded via popular cinema in movies like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Scarface* (1983), but *Tony n’ Tina* took a comic approach, lampooning the customs and familial quirks to a much wackier effect. With a ticket price of nearly \$100 less than *Tamara*, it follows that there was no champagne dinner catered by Le Cirque at Tony and Tina’s wedding; instead, there is a menu of lasagna and baked ziti, replete with overdressed Caesar salad and Italian dinner rolls with plenty of butter to go around. The production takes Fuchs’s idea of “familiarization” to a whole new level, walking audiences through a familiar social script: the series of events and customs in a traditional wedding. Indeed, the night includes

³⁶ Corcoran, personal interview.

every element, from the awkward mingling upon arrival, to the procession and ceremony, to dinner, cake-cutting, and dancing. Like *Tamara*, *Tony n' Tina* would eventually tour to many different cities worldwide, but its original iteration began with a ceremony at Washington Square Church in Greenwich Village and processed to Carmelita's restaurant for the ceremony and the evening's continued antics. Eventually, *Tony n' Tina* would move uptown near Times Square, but its premiere in a culturally "hip" neighborhood demonstrated its initial reception as a piece of innovative, "Downtown" theatre.

Unlike *Tamara*, which minimized audience involvement in the actual plot of the play, the actors in *Tony n' Tina* are highly engaged in improvised conversations with individual audience members. Producer and performer Corcoran recalls his most successful actor-audience interactions as when the audience participants developed their own unique role, such as Tony's first grade teacher or a long-lost uncle of the bride. Indeed, the highly familiar and predictable structure of a traditional wedding creates space for creativity and mischief on the part of the audience members. The point is to "make people forget that they're not at a real wedding," Corcoran said, adding that "there's a lot of comfort in that."³⁷ Typical wedding events, such as the ceremony, speeches, and bouquet toss are interspersed with drinks, food, and mingling with the cast. In this familiar environment, one could decide to indulge in extra rum-and-cokes (just like they might at an actual family wedding).

While the elevated food and drink at the center of *Tamara* signified classiness, taste, and distinction, the central meal in *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* indicates family, comfort, and a bit of tongue-in-cheek culinary humor. Indeed, when Fuchs attended *Tony n' Tina* in the eighties, she reported "a satirical wedding feast that begins with Ritz crackers, goes on to ravioli and ends in a

³⁷ Corcoran, personal interview.

triple-story wedding cake.”³⁸ The idea behind *Tony n’ Tina*’s family-style food service seems to be quantity, not quality. The satirical approach extends beyond the food and into the tacky bridesmaid dresses and the actors’ over-the-top accents. Indeed, *Tony n’ Tina* pokes so much fun at the stereotypical Italian family that one begins to wonder if this, too, is part of the production’s “familiarization” technique that both Fuchs and Corcoran claim brings comfort to the participating spectator, who will ostensibly recognize the exaggerated stereotype of the working class Italian family. Deeming it acceptable to laugh at these extreme antics and ethnic idiosyncrasies, *Tony n’ Tina* saturates the audience in a kind of mentality that is not completely different from the upper and middle-class slummers of chapter two, who were voyeurs of a stereotyped lifestyle of urban lower classes. In fact, Corcoran also points out that when the production tours to other cities, the cast changes the script to refer to whichever neighborhood in that city traditionally houses the area’s blue collar, Italian population to appeal to local humor.³⁹ At the end of the production, audiences can be content to have shared a slice of the Italian wedding cake but might still leave with the feeling that at least their dysfunctional family is not quite “that bad,” since the Italian stereotypes in *Tony n’ Tina* are truly exaggerated to the point of absurdity.

As evidenced by the careful partitioning of the homeless people in *Tamara*’s Park Avenue Armory, the containment and definition of an immersive world depends on spatial and ideological exclusion of the outside world. The comparatively expensive ticket prices have often eliminated a substantial population of potential theatregoers to immersive theatre. Additionally, in the case of *Tony n’ Tina*, the anti-Brechtian technique of “familiarization” proposed by Fuchs

³⁸ Fuchs, “Theatre as Shopping,” 23-24

³⁹ Corcoran, personal interview.

applies only to people familiar with an American wedding culture in the first place; American wedding culture is very different from China's or India's, for example. One would also have to be familiar with the Italian and Jersey Shore-type stereotypes set forth in *Tony n' Tina's Wedding* – popular stereotypes that are largely regarded as benign but are nonetheless deeply seated in historical attitudes of condescension towards immigrants. In other words, we might be careful to regard what Fuchs describes as “familiarization” as a technique that is universal, but instead it is quite particular to each audience member and always depends on existing cultural knowledge and socialized referents.

While seemingly convivial in nature, this “shared” economy of theatrical experience also encourages comparison – and thereby, inequalities – in spectator experiences. Belying the friendly notes shared at dinner in either show, might there exist a notion that there are good and better ways to engage with the theatrical worlds of *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina*? As the contemporary nomenclature indicates, “immersive” theatre is often constructed with a certain degree of gaming logic – as a live, interactive puzzle for audience members to solve. Unlike video games, there is not usually an explicit winner or loser of an immersive theatrical production, but there does exist an implicit idea that one's individual choices will directly influence the quality of one's experience (and that some experiences are better than others). As Fuchs, Carlson, and Blumenthal all point out, this is especially reflected by *Tamara*'s twenty percent return rate of audience members. Corcoran described another example of fan culture in *Tony n' Tina*, where one group of women would show up to performances dressed as nuns, claiming to have been impregnated by the groom, Tony. The game-like nature of the immersive experience of these productions opened up opportunities for some particularly bold audience

members to become “fans,” or even partial owners of the immersive worlds, seeking to perfect and sharpen their experience of the theatrical universe by returning again and again.

The acceleration of participatory and commercially successful immersive theatre productions continued throughout the following decades, influencing an array of contemporary productions that will be discussed in the final chapter. *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding* was so successful that it became something of a franchise and was installed in various Las Vegas casinos for over a decade. The show also inspired a series of spin-offs in the early nineties, including *Bernie’s Bar Mitzvah* and *Grandma Sylvia’s Funeral*. Interestingly, the immersive tactics of eighties-era theatre productions also began to seep into other areas of American commerce, such as shopping and dining. Like the concert saloons of the mid-nineteenth century and Prohibition era jazz clubs, developers and entrepreneurs began to employ theatrical techniques to their commercial ventures. Barrie Wexler, one of *Tamara’s* original producers, told Fuchs in a phone interview that he thought of himself more as a “retailer” than a theatre artist, anyway. After *Tamara*, Wexler went on to spearhead the development of an interactive, experiential shopping mall in Los Angeles. He portended to Fuchs “that as the 90s progress...playing environments in which you shop, and shopping environments in which you play - the line between these two will become thinner and thinner.”⁴⁰

Indeed, by the end of the nineties, both Wexler’s prediction and Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy had come to fruition in theatre, dining, fitness, and many other industries. Performance franchises like *Stomp* and *Blue Man Group* attracted large audiences in the early and mid-nineties with their genre-bending and experiential performances that decentralized narrative in favor of spectacle. Themed bars like *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Cowgirl Hall of Fame* also

⁴⁰ Fuchs, “Theatre as Shopping,” 30.

gained popularity by (to borrow another catchphrase from Pine and Gilmore) “experientializing” the everyday bar and grill experience with costumed waiters, elaborate décor, and intermittent themed performances. So, the highly “saturating” theatrical productions of *Tamara* and *Tony n’ Tina*, which achieved success during the heyday of Wall Street and Reaganomics, would also lay the groundwork not only for future immersive theatre productions, but for an emergent experience economy that is now highly embedded in American consumer culture today.

Chapter Four

“Fortune Favors the Bold”: Contemporary Immersion, Drinking Culture, and the Entrepreneurial Spectator

On the night of Saturday October 17, 2015, I stood in a line waiting for entry into Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* with a group of three friends. It would be my fourth time attending the show – a widely-popular immersive adaptation of *Macbeth*, which had then been running for four years. My companions were buzzing with anticipation; one was a seasoned attendee like myself, another had seen the production once and was eager to try her hand at the experience again, and the third friend was an out-of-town visitor whose experience at the theatre – let alone immersive theatre – was quite limited. We had briefed her on what to expect from the experience, and she appeared very excited. In contrast, I was irritated. After a long day of walking around the city, I was cold, and my feet hurt; I also had a major writing deadline coming up, and the woman standing in front of us in line kept jabbing me with her handbag. In short, I was not in the mood for another round of *Sleep No More*. Quite honestly, I most looked forward to a strong cocktail from The Manderley, *Sleep No More*’s themed lobby bar and holding area for participants. After showing our IDs, the bouncer permitted us beyond the velvet ropes and; once we checked our coats and belongings, we were finally ushered into the elevator and brought up to the bar.

The interior of The Manderley is designed as a speakeasy-era jazz lounge, dimly lit with velvety walls, and tables clustered around a stage. Once admitted to the bar space, audiences receive a playing card from a deck, the suit of which indicates when they can enter the production. Meanwhile, audience members can enjoy sultry performances by cabaret and jazz style musicians until their card is called. On this particular Saturday evening, The Manderley was

more crowded and noisy than I had ever experienced. To my dismay, the line for the bar was four people deep, but a woman in a sequined dress was pushing a cart through the crowd containing a decanter of absinthe cocktails. I ordered one for myself and one for my friend, drank mine quickly, and felt slightly better about my claustrophobia-inducing surroundings. Standing elbow to elbow with the other attendees, it was hard to chat with my companions in the very loud space. I wished for one more of the absinthe drinks, but our cards had been called time and it was time to enter The McKittrick.

For some attendees, drinks and socializing are integral to the overall *Sleep No More* experience. Even for those who choose not to drink, the presence and availability of alcohol is hard to ignore within the space of The Manderley Bar, especially on weekends when the audience tends to get rowdier. Whatever one's mode of engagement, drink sales are definitely important to the *Sleep No More* business model. Indeed, a "Champagne Table" reservation for Sleep No More costs \$325 per person, featuring line-cutting privileges as well as a private table with pre-show bottle service in The Manderley Bar; at their private, roped-off table, these participants can be literally and figuratively set aside from the rest of the "Standard" \$145 ticketholders while they wait for their *Sleep No More* experience to begin. In this chapter, I push this observation further to consider how the effects of alcohol and intoxication might be complicit in blurring the already-ambiguous boundaries of what is and is not permissible behavior within immersive theatre environments.

In the field of immersive theatre studies, many authors have deftly situated *Sleep No More* within contemporary political and economic ideologies. Much has been made, for example, of immersive theatre as a sign and symptom of neoliberalism. Jen Harvie (2013) theorizes the participatory theatre spectator as a "prosumer" of theatrical experience, or "the

consumer who also designs and produces what she consumes.”¹ The prosumer is a byproduct of neoliberalism’s flexible labor market, which requires

workers more frequently to change both their work practices and their employers.

Workers therefore have to adapt to new conditions of labour and new colleagues more frequently. Rapidly evolving technology means that workers need constantly to update their skills. And, when work fails, the welfare structures people might formerly have relied on to bridge them to their next employment are now also less secure.²

Therefore, Harvie argues, the ideal immersive theatre spectator is flexible and willing to labor in a variety of ways towards her own theatrical experience. This might include running after an actor, pushing her way towards the front of a crowd, or perhaps even ordering a drink so she feels emboldened to make these choices in the first place. Alston (2016) takes up a similar idea of a laboring spectator, “whose immaterial and enterprising productivity is valued, celebrated, and incorporated as an expectation” in immersive theatre.³ Neither Harvie nor Alston’s work, however, directly addresses the role of drinking and intoxication as part of the flexible, bodily labor demanded by immersive theatre.

While drinking is not a requirement of the immersive experience in the shows analyzed in this chapter, alcohol is certainly a fixture of the immersive environment. Additionally, in James Frieze’s diverse collection of essays on immersive theatre (2017), alcohol and drinking culture

¹ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 29.

² Harvie, *Fair Play*, 47.

³ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2016); “Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre.” *Performance Research*, 18 (2), pp. 128-138 (2013): 12.

are only mentioned in passing when the authors describe and analyze their chosen sites of immersive theatre. Yet as this dissertation has shown, immersive theatre and performance often coincide with drinking culture and practice. Case in point: Punchdrunk carries intoxication in its very name. It is ironic then, considering the visceral and sensual appeal of immersive theatre and the major role that drinking plays within, that the conversation on immersive theatre as a manifestation of neoliberalism or other structures of power tends to become disembodied and overly theorized to the point of ignoring one of the most powerful material forces at work in producing contemporary immersive experience.

This chapter aims to fill part of this critical lacuna with a more embodied, feminist critique of contemporary immersive theatre productions and the drinking practices that circumscribe them. This is my most personal chapter because it comes directly from my bodily, intellectual, and emotional experiences as an audience member. Moreover, I write specifically from the perspective of a white, privileged, female drinker and theatregoer navigating the urban drinking culture and sites of immersive theatre in New York City. It is a marker of privilege even to attend the immersive productions cited in this chapter, tickets for which are at least \$100, and which can often cost much more. As I have argued throughout this project, the immersive performance environment is never an ideologically neutral space and always reflects many facets of the producers' and consumers' historical paradigm. As a methodology, this chapter analyzes two examples of contemporary immersive in New York City theatre through a feminist lens. Geraldine Harris points to a dearth of feminist analyses of immersive theatre in her critique of Josephine Machon, who discusses “Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and playwright Caryl Churchill,” in *Immersive Theatres* but takes “great pains to avoid mentioning the term

‘feminism’ at all.”⁴ As women, we cannot deposit our bodily experiences and memories outside of the immersive theatre situation; indeed, nobody can do this. Laura Levin also points to the fact that scholars of immersive theatre “rarely acknowledge gender relations in the course of their investigations.”⁵ She begins to fill this gap with her feminist reading of the “detective frame” of *Sleep No More*, and this chapter follows her lead in approaching contemporary immersive theatre in New York City from an embodied feminist perspective supported by critical attention to the crucial role that drinking culture plays in shaping certain immersive spaces.

The two central examples of contemporary immersive theatre in New York City analyzed in this chapter are, of course, Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* (ongoing since 2011) and Cynthia von Buhler’s *The Illuminati Ball* (ongoing since 2016). British artistic director Felix Barrett founded immersive theatre company Punchdrunk in London in 2000. Their current website rightly claims that the company “has pioneered a game changing form of theatre in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds.”⁶ Indeed, the formidable Punchdrunk “formula” of immersive theatre, which often devises content from classical material and emphasizes dance and tangible, interactive environments, has been replicated by many other immersive theatre companies – such as New York’s Third Rail, Journey Lab Theatre Company, and even Cynthia von Buhler. Their New York production of *Sleep No More* was first staged in London and then at the American Repertory Theatre in

⁴ Geraldine Harris, “Differences in Degree or Kind? Ockham’s Razor’s *Not Until We are Lost* and Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*” in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 279.

⁵ Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 86.

⁶ “About Punchdrunk,” *Punchdrunk UK*, accessed March 2, 2018, <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/about/>.

Cambridge; it blends elements of *Macbeth* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* within a multi-floor warehouse in the fashionable Chelsea district of Manhattan. During its first year of shows, *Sleep No More* was something of a novelty in the New York City theatre scene. Now, seven years later, it attracts traveling businessmen and their hosts, tourists, and "superfans" who, like the repeat attendees of *Tamara* and *Tony n' Tina*, have found ways to outsmart the production's design in order to procure one-on-one encounters, nudity, and spectacle.

It was actually the experience of seeing *Sleep No More* in 2011 that inspired New York performer, playwright, musician, illustrator, and socialite Cynthia von Buhler to create her show *Speakeasy Dollhouse* that same year. *Speakeasy Dollhouse* was an immersive murder mystery which quickly became a hot Off-Broadway ticket. Upon seeing *Sleep No More*, von Buhler realized that immersive theatre "was something that I had been creating for years...with my parties that I had been known for throwing."⁷ Indeed, von Buhler's brand of immersive theatre combines her themed gatherings with other elements borrowed from Punchdrunk's use of elaborate sets, selective nudity, and interjections of dance; her productions, however, feel almost like parties or social gatherings since they allow audiences a greater degree of freedom to interact with each other and the performers or characters. Her most recent and exclusive project, *The Illuminati Ball*, which I will analyze later in this chapter, began as a highly intimate experience that transports small audiences an hour outside the New York City to a mansion in an undisclosed location, where they partake in a boozy dinner interspersed with various "illuminati" rites of passage.

⁷ Charley Layton, "'Experience' with Cynthia Von Buhler," *Neo-Bohemia* episode 9, Podcast audio, April 23, 2016.

Despite their many differences in scale and design, *Sleep No More* and *The Illuminati Ball* both involve masking the audience members and both have built a reputation for their sexy performances and seductive interactions. Importantly, the design and staging of both productions draw from pagan and occult imagery, such as the hooded figures in *Illuminati Ball*, the witches' rituals in *Sleep No More*, and both productions' use of half-human, half-animal hybrid creatures. Additionally, both have been compared *ad nauseum* to Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut*.⁸ In each production these references to the occult engender an atmosphere of secrecy, sexuality, and darkness. Such themed, immersive environments distinguish the act of drinking from its counterpart in the more mundane drinking cultures of New York City, such as the ubiquitous after-work happy hours occurring daily in bars all over the city. In fact, a 2013 study of whiskey drinkers found that multisensory, immersive atmospheres exert "significant influence...on people's experience and/or enjoyment of a drink."⁹ In other words, immersive drinking atmospheres like The Manderley can physiologically elevate and distinguish the experience of drinking as well as the drinker's opinion of the drink itself. In our social media-saturated contemporary moment, the accumulation and online presentation of distinguished experiences represents one's level of taste and possession of cultural capital. A quick search of the hashtag "#sleepnomore" on Instagram demonstrates the production's popularity as an experience for tourists and New Yorkers alike; since photos are not allowed in The McKittrick, a

⁸ For a sampling of comparisons of immersive theatre experiences to *Eyes Wide Shut*, see "Macbeth meets *Eyes Wide Shut*," Trip Advisor Review by Chris0718 (June 4, 2017); Gautam Balasundar, "Naked Dancing, Sacrifices, and Milk Baths: Scenes from the *Eyes Wide Shut*-esque *Illuminati Ball*," *PaperMag*, June 29, 2016; "FAQ" page on *The Illuminati Ball Website*; "This Sleep No More Thing is Fucked," staff article in *Vice*, May 10, 2011.

⁹ Carlos Velasco, Russell Jones, Scott King, and Charles Spence, "Assessing the Influence of the Multisensory Environment on the Whisky Drinking Experience." *Flavour* 2 no. 23 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1186/2044-7248-2-23>.

lot of these photos are taken in The Manderley. As this chapter will demonstrate, the intersection of social drinking culture and immersive theatre very much takes part in this competitive, comparative spirit of entrepreneurialism and individualistic self-distinction.

If, as I suggested in chapter one, today's immersive theatre champions similar audience freedoms that defined concert saloons and, later, Harlem jazz clubs and eventually dinner theatre of the eighties, then we also ought to analyze what kinds of contemporary ideologies and cultural norms might be producing the current demand for these types of audience experiences today. Like concert saloons and the Cotton Club, the instances of contemporary immersive theatre analyzed in this final chapter represent productions that bill themselves as the “Wild West” of theatrical experiences in New York; in other words, productions like *Sleep No More* and *The Illuminati Ball* bill themselves as part of a theatrical genre wherein the traditional constraints of theatre drop away, allowing some audience members to feel as if, to purposefully borrow the words of President Donald Trump, “they let you do anything” if you have enough money and power.¹⁰ Most spectators who attend these shows do not feel entitled to misbehave or cross boundaries, but as my analysis of *Sleep No More* will show, there is a minority who does; in turn, performers and crew members know to look out for these kinds of participants.

The paradox is that, even though the average spectator in immersive theatre is passive and at least sober enough to walk about on his own, an invitation to misbehave (or at least “be bold”) is built into the ethos of immersive theatre, which invites a certain sort of spectator anarchy – in theory, but not necessarily in practice. In a video interview entitled “Burn the

¹⁰ Donald J. Trump to *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush in 2005, video released to the public by the *Washington Post* on October 7, 2016. On October 8, 2016, Penn Bullock transcribed the interaction for the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.

Seats,” artistic director Felix Barrett suggests that Punchdrunk’s theatre metaphorically burns away the seats of conventional theatre and places the audience member in an “empowered” position of a character within the story. Barrett’s reframing of the spectator comes with a degree of seductive riskiness; “what happens,” he asks, “when the audience member shifts from the security of that status [as a passive viewer] and becomes a character?”¹¹ Herein Barrett frames the experience of stripping away the “security” of passive spectating as precarious, but in an exciting and sexy way. Indeed, this claim to audience freedom largely accounts for immersive theatre’s (sex) appeal to contemporary audiences. In practice however, Barrett’s position is largely falsified. He constructs an archetype of an active spectator who plays a character in the story but in reality, most masked spectators, even if they have had a bit to drink, are little more than peripheral voyeurs with the exclusive exception of coveted one-on-one interactions, wherein an actor might de-mask a spectator momentarily. This sham of emancipation, which is touted by the producers and advertising for the show, plays more to an idealized “spectator” archetype than the average spectator’s lived experience. The tension between this idealized “spectator” and the actual spectator, I argue, underlies the ambiguity of the rules which implicitly regulate immersive spaces.

Punchdrunk’s portrayed atmosphere of unrestraint makes sense when considered in the context of a historical moment that David Neilson describes as a “present era of neoliberal-led global capitalism,” which is defined by “increasing circumstantial precarity.”¹² Indeed, when many of us feel disempowered by economic precarity, the position of an empowered spectator is

¹¹ “Felix Barrett - Burn the Seats: Audience Immersion in Interactive Theater,” *Future of Storytelling*, accessed March 2, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/79522231>.

¹² David Neilson “Class, Precarity, and Anxiety Under Neoliberal Global Capitalism: From Denial to Resistance,” *Theory and Psychology* 25 no. 2 (2015), 184-201: 184

an attractive position indeed. By resisting the “sexiness” of contemporary immersive theatre, however, this chapter considers who and what might be at risk when such audience freedoms are promised, such as whose body is distinctly *not* liberated by some of the intoxicated behaviors encouraged within certain contemporary immersive theatre situations. Indeed, I argue that the liberated participant constructed by Barrett and other producers of immersive theatre is modeled after an idealized consumer who is at liberty to enjoy a simulation of precarity, and not an everyday subject for whom genuine precarity, especially of the bodily sort, is a lived reality.

It should be noted that, since the arrival of *Sleep No More* in 2011, a very wide range of immersive theatre productions has burgeoned in New York City.¹³ The main examples selected for this chapter represent a relatively thin slice of the contemporary immersive theatre moment in the city, and they perform a very specific theoretical function in demonstrating immersive theatre’s capacity to participate in certain projects of entrepreneurialism and to create precarious possibilities for women’s’ and other at-risk bodies. What I am not proposing is that contemporary immersive theatre in New York is only or always in service of neoliberal, anti-feminist ideologies. When considered in tandem with feminist critical theory and the undulations of contemporary gender politics, however, the ways that space and behavior are gendered within the immersive theatre situation come to light. In other words, this chapter surveys some of the normative ideologies circumscribing certain immersive theatre spaces today, with the hope that

¹³ In conducting my research on immersive theatre in New York City, I attended and took field notes on a wide range of productions before selecting the central examples for this chapter. These other productions include, but are not limited to, Fuerza Bruta’s *Look Up* (2011), Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More* (2011, 2012, 2014, 2015), David Evans Morris and Kristin Marting’s *Trade Practices* (2014), Michael Counts’s *Play/Date* (2014) and *Paradiso Chapter 1* (2016), Cynthia von Buhler’s *Midnight Frolic* (2015) and *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2016), Third Rail Project’s *Then She Fell* and *The Grand Paradise* (2016), Journey Lab’s *The Alving Estate* (2016), Ars Nova’s *KPOP* (2017), James Scruggs’ *3/Fifths* (2017), and Live In Theatre’s *The Trial of Typhoid Mary 1915* (2017).

more critical approaches might engender more conscious modalities of production and consumption for the genre. At the very least, I hope to demonstrate another manifestation of the process that Desmond describes as “social identities” becoming “codified in performance styles.”¹⁴ In this case, it is the codification of an entrepreneurial, emboldened, and possibly intoxicated spectator by the ambiguously regulated space of mainstream immersive theatre.

Furthermore, by looking specifically at how drinking practices manifest in the immersive theatre situation, I am not advancing any kind of reception theory nor claiming that all or most spectators of immersive theatre are drinking or drunk. I am, however, proposing that the presence and availability of alcohol serves to augment the kinds of precarity and ambiguity upon which the “sexiness” of much immersive theatre is founded. In the first section of this chapter I analyze the role of alcohol in *Sleep No More*, particularly in the context of the contemporary #metoo movement. In the second part, I use von Buhler’s *Illuminati Ball* to analyze a current fixation on secret societies and exclusive soirees and to pinpoint ways that immersive theatre and intoxication feed our desire to participate in rare and inaccessible experiences (and how this might serve an entrepreneurial, counter-feminist project).

#SleepNoMore and the #metoo Movement

While not everyone at *Sleep No More* drinks or gets drunk, there are definitely audience members for whom *Sleep No More* is just one installment in a longer night of drinking. Additionally, audiences have access to much more information about the show on the internet and through word-of-mouth with which to make the most of their experiences. At this point,

¹⁴ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 34.

repeat attendees like myself are inevitable, and the show has become something of a permanent installation available for tourists and natives alike. As aforementioned, I have found that audiences are especially boisterous on weekends; in my most recent experience, I felt especially guarded against errant (male) spectators who would stop at nothing to pursue a running actor. In an article released February 6, 2018, *Buzzfeed News* reporter Amber Jamieson exposed the salient risk of so many intoxicated and emboldened audience members, whom at least eight *Sleep No More* staffers and performers claimed have “just reached out and groped them.”¹⁵ One actor, Billy Bell, recounts an audience member grabbing his genitals and another anonymous actress reports audience members groping her three times in less than two years of performing in *Sleep No More*; these are just two of the many claims of harassment outlined in Jamieson’s article. She points to *Sleep No More*’s “ghoulish white masks” which promote “a sense of anonymity amid the production’s fantasy setting” as one culminating factor in this unfortunate phenomenon of sexual harassment.¹⁶ She also points to the ambiguity of the ground rules laid out for audiences before they are admitted to the *Sleep No More* experience. Upon entry, the elevator operator or hostess instructs audiences to never talk and always wear their masks; this speech concludes with the vague declaration that “fortune favors the bold.” Nothing, in my experiences, was ever mentioned regarding touching the actors or respecting bodily boundaries. Therefore, the logistical framing of *Sleep No More* is at least partially to blame for audiences “boldly” crossing the line and inappropriately touching performers and crewmembers. Jamieson writes that “several former employees said the fundamental setup that makes *Sleep No More* so alluring to

¹⁵ Amber Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More’ Say Audience Members Have Sexually Assaulted Them,” *Buzzfeed News Online*, February 6, 2018,

https://www.buzzfeed.com/amberjamieson/sleep-nomore?utm_term=.grnorVwYV#.dlkMbvw7w.

¹⁶ Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

audiences – mystery, anonymity, and a sexually charged performance – enables sexual misconduct.”¹⁷ Despite these claims by former employees, however, lawyers for the production maintain that rules for conduct are clearly communicated to audience members and that performers are also trained in how to respond if a spectator does cross the line. The problem is, of course, is that it remains unclear where “the line” is drawn.

Another factor that Jamieson spends less time analyzing, but nonetheless deserves greater attention in the academe and beyond, is the peddling of alcohol in the *The Manderley*. The pre-show drinking that goes on inside *The Manderley* is often convivial, but it sometimes manifests a larger cultural problem of binge drinking and culturally “acceptable” bad behaviors. These normalized and gendered behaviors are endemic to rape culture in New York City and beyond; indeed, they are one manifestation of the selfsame behaviors against which the contemporary #metoo movement strives to take action. The #metoo was certainly a catalyst for Jamieson’s article, as well as countless other media exposés. On October 16, 2017, five months before the *Buzzfeed* article on *Sleep No More* broke, I woke up to a deluge of content collated under the online hashtag “#metoo”; from news stories to millions of public tweets and personal Facebook statuses, women were coming forward to publicly share their encounters with sexual harassment. The #metoo movement peaked within a year of the election of Trump, who became president despite numerous sexual misconduct allegations and the 2016 public media exposure of his misogynistic comments to *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush about inappropriately grabbing and kissing women. Yet the most galvanizing factor for the #metoo movement was the *New York Times* exposé of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and his decades of harassment of

¹⁷ Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

actresses and other coworkers.¹⁸ While the phrase “me too” was originally coined by black activist Tarana Burke in 2006, it eventually went viral as a hashtag on October 15th, 2017, directly following the Weinstein debacle. The hashtag was popularized by actress Alyssa Milano, who took to Twitter to identify herself as a survivor of harassment and abuse and encouraged others to come forward.

This dissertation project has outlined various ways that ideologies of power have historically become spatially and theatrically realized within immersive performance situations. Overall, the #metoo movement has brought attention to ways that misogyny has been normalized and embodied in a variety of spaces, both public and private. Jamieson’s article on *Sleep No More* demonstrates how theatre practices can also overlook and normalize sexual harassment. Of course, this is not to say that all performers or participants who take part in the immersive world of *Sleep No More* are implicitly endorsing or participating in rape culture or misogyny. However, I do wish to trouble the valorization of audience intoxication and “bold” behavior within the immersive theatre frame by presenting some alternative, more precarious, modes of experience that are decidedly not “fortune favoring the bold.” To quote Jamieson, there are other ways of looking at the *Sleep No More* experience if we consider “how the familiar dynamics of power and entitlement play out in an anonymized, disorienting setting that allows some guests to act on their worst instincts.”¹⁹ Indeed, when audience members are cast in the role of an anonymous entrepreneur of their own experience, their behavior often fits the role.

¹⁸ Two media pieces were key in breaking the Harvey Weinstein story. First, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s piece in the *New York Times*, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades” (October 5, 2017). And secondly, Ronan Farrow’s investigation for *The New Yorker*, “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories” (October 10, 2017).

¹⁹ Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

Academics have long turned to psychoanalytic studies to theorize the idealized spectator's paradigm. In film studies, Laura Mulvey (1975) famously conceptualized a male spectator with her notion of the "male gaze," which conversely demonstrates "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form," wherein the woman is "signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions."²⁰ Entire fields of film scholarship have used Mulvey's theoretical frame to understand the ways that filmmakers often subconsciously cater to an idealized male spectator. In turn, theatre scholar Levin takes up Mulvey's psychoanalytical theory to account for the idealized masked spectator in *Sleep No More*, who is a "confident masculine detective" derived from the Hitchcockian oeuvre upon which the production's environment is largely based.²¹ Identifying as a woman, Levin nonetheless describes her experience as a *Sleep No More* participant as shuttling between a feminine mode of passive and polite spectatorship and the opposing "masculine" mode of aggressive assertiveness which the show's prologue seems to encourage. While there is a myriad of modes through which we can engage in immersive theatre, I argue that the ideological framing of *Sleep No More* proposes an emboldened, hetero-masculinized modality of spectatorship, in which the spectator is seemingly allowed and sometimes encouraged to "conquer" his environment. In significant ways, the productions invite participants to behave brazenly and imagine themselves *as if* they are in a position of ultimate power, regardless of one's actual gender, race, class, or other orientation. In practice, most spectators know better than to take full advantage of this "invitation," which is faulty at best; this is because most participants understand that, despite our wildest fantasies, even transgressions

²⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975) 6-18: 6.

²¹ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 87.

taken under theatrical circumstances have real consequences. On the other hand, an emboldened minority of spectators still feel entitled to reach out and grope performers; these spectators are the subjects who make immersive space riskier for everyone, particularly the non-unionized performers and crew members who must deal with them personally. Indeed, just as the contract for audience behavior is ambiguous, Actors Equity has yet to develop a consistent boilerplate contract for immersive theatre productions, and therefore the actors for *Sleep No More* must be non-union.

The themed, lively bar environment of The Manderley creates a certain atmosphere of intoxication and detachment from reality, regardless of whether or not one chooses to imbibe. Jamieson cites one performer inciting participants “to ‘get drunk’ while they waited.”²² Specialty punches and cocktails such as the “McKittrick Gimlet” are available at the bar, and – as mentioned – absinthe is sometimes for sale from a pushcart staffed by green faery-like performers. I noticed that during the performance cited at the opening of this chapter, that the server at this cart called her absinthe drink a “potion,” endowing the fluid with the magical qualities already historically associated with absinthe via literature and art. The ritual of socializing and drinking in a lobby bar before a performance is not new, but the highly-theatricalized atmosphere of The Manderley is designed as a first step in the audience member’s immersion in the world of *Sleep No More*. It is helpful to think of The Manderley as a liminal space: accessible only by elevator, it is not a bar open to the public (until late-night after the performances conclude); at the same time, however, it is not fully a part of the *Sleep No More* experience. The wait staff and stage performers interact with ticketholders in a stylized fashion, often using old-Hollywood speech patterns and wearing period costumes. They do not, however,

²² Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

take on the signature, contact improvisational dance physicality of the *Macbeth* characters within the McKittrick. To borrow Victor Turner's famous phrasing, the liminal space of The Manderley lies "betwixt and between" the real world and the immersive world.²³ This spatial design is carefully calculated: to steep in the bar's ambience is itself an integral part of *Sleep No More*, and the space is constructed to generate the audience's individual expectations and to cultivate a feeling of exclusivity. Spatially and temporally, The Manderley exists to the exclusion of the outside world. It is a subtle detail, but audiences are instructed to check purses and coats, so they will arrive to The Manderley unburdened by their everyday possessions, making it easier for them to navigate around the space. Furthermore, participants are specifically encouraged to return to this space if they feel overwhelmed by the immersive experience beyond the velvet curtains. In this sense, the bar is a home base where one can be relieved of the intensity of the participatory world of the McKittrick Hotel.

Since 2011, *Sleep No More* has added a few offerings to the Chelsea food and drink scene with two venues – Gallow Green, a rooftop bar and The Heath, a restaurant. These venues are part of the same building and open to the public, though one might expect to stand in line for entry on weekend evenings. The Manderley, on the other hand, is exclusively limited to *Sleep No More* ticketholders until the last performance of the night. Furthermore, while not fully a part of the *Sleep No More* space, the space of The Manderley Bar lets audiences adjust to the theming of The McKittrick's immersive world with its detailed interior design, dim lighting, costumed performers, and mustached bartenders. Importantly, however, a participant cannot carry her drink into the space of The McKittrick. For this reason, entrance announcements often encourage

²³ Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Rochester: Cornell University Press, 1966), 95.

audience members to quickly finish any remaining drinks before entering. Personally, I have witnessed more than one participant “chugging” the remainder of their cocktail or wine before masking-up for the *Sleep No More* experience. For many, this last-minute demand to excitedly finish one’s drink adds a physiological element of intoxication to their upcoming experience in The McKittrick.

The recreational drinking that goes on in The Manderley, however, can result in challenges for the production’s stagehands and actors. Jamieson interviewed steward Avery Johnson, who after working on *Sleep No More* for two years remarked that “a more inebriated audience is a more difficult audience,” and that especially “the weekend shift would just dissolve into this mess of drunkenness.”²⁴ For actors and stewards, this is a large responsibility to manage, especially when their employer does not fully acknowledge the risks of serving alcohol to patrons. Indeed, Punchdrunk publicly denies that superfluous drinking is encouraged at The Manderley, stating that participants only have time for one or two drinks before the show. In a statement cited by Jamieson, the theatre company claimed that, “as at other Broadway and Off Broadway shows, drinks are not served in the performance areas, must be purchased at full price and are not included in the ticket cost” (even though this is not entirely true about other shows).²⁵ Indeed, this statement runs counter to what Jamieson, myself, and other colleagues have personally experienced at The Manderley Bar, wherein *Sleep No More* is just one stop in some individuals’ ongoing night out. On the other hand, Punchdrunk’s public disavowal of responsibility makes sense in the context of a flexible labor market, wherein the onus of responsibility is placed on the individual consumer or employee, and not its governing entity.

²⁴ Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

²⁵ Jamieson, “Performers and Staffers at ‘Sleep No More.’”

As we have seen, alcohol often functions to embolden participants to take risks as minor as picking up props and as major as touching a performer inappropriately. This idea that “fortune favors the bold” is part of the framing of the ideal immersive theatre participant, whom I argue is an entrepreneur of his own experience and the ultimate recipient of the spoils of a neoliberal economy. Indeed, I agree with Keren Zaointz’s argument that “the act of producing your own experiential reception can provoke a competitive stance in audiences” and that spectators “are implicitly called on to prioritize their multisensory encounters over one another.”²⁶ As with all things, this “competitive stance” produced by immersive theatre is also gendered. Levin recounts an especially gendered bodily experience of *Sleep No More*, wherein audiences are driven to, in a sense, be the star of their own film noir who “like gumshoes...follow characters from scene to scene piecing together the story.”²⁷ Levin was intrigued by the license several *male* spectators seemed to be taking within the

space - rifling through drawers and cupboards, splaying out on beds, pressing close to performers - while women, for the most part, tended to be more hesitant in their exploration, moving in pairs or small packs. I gravitated towards rooms where other women spectators were present and felt greater safety in areas where groups were assembled.

Indeed, I personally identify with Levin’s uneasiness when isolated with groups of men or individual men in the smaller rooms of the McKittrick. Again, it is important to avoid overgeneralizing the ways that gender dictates how we navigate space, but Levin’s observation of certain men’s entitlement to space in *Sleep No More* certainly links into the project of the

²⁶ Keren Zaointz, “Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (October 2014), 405-425: 408.

²⁷ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 85.

contemporary #metoo movement, which is interested in dispelling the ways that many men have historically used their power to take up physical space and to accumulate things like sex, wealth, and other markers of status. One of the gropers cited by *Sleep No More* article was a woman, but I argue that the feeling of entitlement to touch and grope bodies within theatrical space is yet another manifestation of the straight, masculine, entitled American entrepreneur, who feels permitted to (in the words Donald Trump) “do anything” because he is “a star,” including grabbing a performer “by the pussy.”²⁸

Like Zaointz and Alston, Olivia Turnbull also makes the claim that immersive theatre lends itself to a mode of narcissistic, selfish, and emboldened spectatorship, but in relation to a similar kind of engagement that occurs when we interact with social media and video games. “It can be no coincidence,” Turnbull argues, that the immersive theatre “movement into the mainstream has coincided with the entry of video gaming into the wider public consciousness.” Turnbull uses sociologist Erving Goffman's notion of a “‘front-stage’ self, where identity is less a true depiction of our real selves than a deliberately constructed, socially-desirable version of the self to which individuals aspire.”²⁹ This “socially-desirable” self, I argue, is modeled after a male prototype who has almost unfettered access to sex, wealth, and notoriety and is the ultimate beneficiary of a flexible labor market. Turnbull compares the kind of meticulous identity construction that happens on Facebook and other social media avenues with audience engagement in immersive theatre, which “can variously offer [them] the chance to temporarily fulfil dreams or become that ideal self in the context of a safe environment.”³⁰ As I have argued

²⁸ Donald J. Trump, as cited in the *Access Hollywood* tape transcript by Penn Bullock, *New York Times*, 2016.

²⁹ Olivia Turnbull, “It’s All About You: Immersive Theatre and Social Networking,” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 4, no. 1 (2016) 150-163: 156.

³⁰ Turnbull, “It’s All About You,” 157.

above, however, immersive theatre is not a “safe environment” for all inherently *because* audiences are so encouraged to act out the sorts of idealized selfhood encouraged by an increasingly social media-obsessed culture.

The Illuminati Ball: Uber-exclusivity, Intimacy, Intoxication, and Immersion

In February 2018, Bloomberg journalist Emily Chang published a *Vanity Fair* piece entitled ““Oh my God, This is so F---ED Up’: Inside Silicon Valley’s Secretive, Orgiastic Dark Side.” Its feature photo by digital artist “Darrow” superimposes the banquet hall of Thomas Couture’s 1847 *Romans of the Decadence* before a fog-enshrouded Golden Gate Bridge in the distance. Darrow’s doctored image intermixes a few anachronistic, laptop-sporting men in cargo shorts amongst Couture’s original Roman revelers in barely-there togas – who lie entangled in piles, languidly stroking and feeding each other. The symbolism is obvious: the indulgent, uber-exclusive parties of Silicon Valley’s tech elite have attained a neo-Roman reputation of excess. At the center of these soirees stands the prototypical, hoodie-wearing billionaire web developer; indeed, it is around his sexual appetites and “male gaze” that the spaces of these immersive parties are built. In the immersive situation of Silicon Valley sex parties, he is the ideal avatar of the masculinized participant.

Chang’s article, however, focuses more on the *women* attending these hedonistic sex gatherings, which are popular especially amongst the mostly-male moguls running California’s booming tech industry. The gender makeup of the parties usually favors the straight male attendees looking to “hook up,” since plus-ones are often limited to women. An anonymous female attendee describes her invitation to one such gathering, which was themed “a party on the edge of the earth,” and required a dress code of “glamazon adventurer, safari chic and jungle

tribal attire.”³¹ According to this unnamed source, guests usually arrive for a dinner paired with lots of wine, after which the drug MDMA (a dopamine stimulator) is often served on platters, facilitating a sense of group euphoria and resulting in group sex “cuddle-puddles,” for which the parties are infamous. Since the drug’s effects can last hours, the gatherings will often extend all night into the next day. Chang describes the embodied rhythm of these parties as “eat, drugs, sex, repeat.”³²

Though she paints a salacious portrait, Chang’s article is important less for its lurid descriptions of Silicon Valley hedonism and more for the connections she makes between the immersive, exclusive spaces of the sex parties and a larger ideology of gender and power circumscribing this historical moment in the United States. We need look no further than the skewed male-to-female ratio and the “safari chic” dress code of Chang’s central example to notice parallels between the theming of these parties and a white hetero-masculine paradigm of conquest and domination. Like the rowdy concert saloons of chapter one and the lively jazz clubs of Harlem, the sex culture playing out in the living rooms of Silicon Valley is as liberating for some as it is oppressive for others. Indeed, Chang proposes that despite their claim towards utopic sexual liberation, these parties are completely symptomatic of the toxic, discriminatory, and highly-exclusive work environments of Silicon Valley, where women are scorned for being sexually adventurous yet chided for being too uptight. “You’re damned if you do, damned if you

³¹ Emily Chang, ““Oh my God, This is so F---ED Up’: Inside Silicon Valley’s Secretive, Orgiastic Dark Side,” *Vanity Fair Online*, February 2018, accessed March 2, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/01/brotopia-silicon-valley-secretive-orgiastic-inner-sanctum>.

³² Chang, ““Oh my God.””

don't," remarks one anonymous female tech entrepreneur about her place in Silicon Valley's "open" culture of sex and dating.³³

To be sure, the examples of New York City immersive and participatory theatre cited in this chapter are not as extreme nor as strictly exclusive as any Silicon Valley sex party, but these parties nonetheless illustrate an important feature of the contemporary moment from which I write. The Silicon Valley tech mogul is the very portrait of a neoliberal entrepreneur, as he has, to quote Raewyn Connell, "had astonishing success in creating markets for things whose commodification was once almost unimaginable."³⁴ From Uber to Facebook to Amazon to bitcoin, lightning-quick advancements in technology coupled with an economic climate of flexible labor and social media-powered entrepreneurialism have resulted in astounding individualized wealth accumulation, which manifests itself both ideologically and physically in the creation of exclusive spaces for leisure and entertainment. With so much power and capital at their fingertips, the leisure cultures of the moguls ruling Silicon Valley, Silicon Alley (as its New York equivalent is called) and Wall Street can be highly exclusive and hedonistic. Slightly voyeuristic media coverage, such as Chang's article, on these lifestyles demonstrates a larger cultural fixation on such seemingly unregulated spaces. Articles like Chang's shed light on the seemingly limitless lifestyles of the uber-rich; while the tone is overall critical, it is also voyeuristic. Indeed, there is a degree of salacious pleasure associated with "peering in" to the opulence and excesses of the rich and the famous, and Cynthia von Buhler's *Illuminati Ball* taps into this exact pleasure.

³³ Chang, "Oh my God,"

³⁴ Raewyn Connell, "Understanding Neoliberalism," *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, eds. Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 23.

Exclusive, password-protected, or roped-off space is a phenomenon explored and sometimes exploited by many examples of contemporary immersive theatre in New York City. To return to an idea introduced in chapter two, immersive theatre in New York City often mirrors the spatial tactics of the segregated jazz clubs of Harlem as they construct what Gareth White calls “interior spaces” which aim to create “impressions of being on the inside of somewhere that is normally hidden.”³⁵ Indeed, both *The Illuminati Ball* and *Sleep No More* aim explicitly to create special access to an experience of an interior space that feels “hidden” from the general public. *Sleep No More* is now considered rather mainstream as a New York City theatre offering, so companies like Punchdrunk and Cynthia von Buhler have been devising ways to make their experiences even more exclusive. To elevate the intimacy and thrills of their theatrical experiences, Punchdrunk has been experimenting with longer distances of audience transportation and smaller numbers of overall audience members. Their 2017 *Kabeiroi*, for example, traverses the city of London, lasts for six hours, and is designed for audiences of just two.³⁶

Yet the most obvious recent example of a theatrical manifestation of this fascination with uber-exclusivity and secret society in New York City is Cynthia von Buhler’s *Illuminati Ball*, which played for very small New York audiences (less than twenty people) every weekend in Spring and Summer 2016.³⁷ The sponsorship of a press outlet allowed me to eschew the intimate production’s hefty \$450 ticket price for a performance on April 23. At a price point I could not

³⁵ Gareth White, “On Immersive Theatre,” *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 224.

³⁶ Anne Corlett, “Punchdrunk’s Kabeiroi: a shapeshifting six-hour mystery tour of London” *The Guardian Online*, September 27, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/sep/27/punchdrunk-kabeiroi-immersive-experience-aeschylus>.

³⁷ In late 2017, the show was adapted to run for larger audiences in the Weylin, a venue in the former Williamsburg Savings Bank building Brooklyn.

afford as a graduate student, I felt like a spy sneaking into a world of theatre that, for me, would normally be inaccessible. Weeks before the event, I was instructed to fill out an online “application” to attend the ball, which included questions inquiring into my knowledge of the Illuminati and other oddly practical questions, such as “are you a heavy or light drinker?”³⁸ Once approved – I received detailed instructions on what to wear (formal dress) and where to meet (at a vaguely disclosed meeting point on the Upper East Side, where a limousine would await me along with the other guests for the evening). This process of “applying” to be included in the theatrical experience allowed me to create an avatar of sorts by imagining who I might be within *The Illuminati Ball*; it was also the production’s first step in creating an imagined “interior space” that felt immersive and exclusive before I even set foot in the limousine to travel to the secret destination.

I arrived solo to the meeting point, right on time, and wearing my only long evening dress and a hand-me-down fur stole, both of which seemed like something a fancy person would wear. The other guests were well-dressed, milling about in spirited anticipation of the evening to come. Most participants I spoke to were already familiar fans of von Buhler’s work, having seen one or more of her previous shows such as *Speakeasy Dollhouse* and *Midnight Frolic*. Each seemed to express a keen desire to increase the intensity of their previous immersive experiences with this particularly exclusive event. Our transportation arrived in the form of a black party bus with dark tinted windows. Once aboard, we all received a personal bottle of champagne, snacks, and were treated to an on-bus magic show by a performer whose slightly odd costume and demeanor made him feel like a permanent inhabitant of that liminal realm between the real world lives we were

³⁸ “Apply To Attend *The Illuminati Ball*, An Immersive Excursion,” *The Illuminati Ball Website*, accessed March 2, 2018, http://www.theilluminatiball.com/store/c1/Featured_Products.html.

leaving behind in New York City and the theatrical experience to come. We chatted with the magician between his sleights of hand, and he purposefully obscured the exact location of the *Ball*. Once our limousine had made it out of the city, he saw that the shades were drawn shut so we could not see our surroundings. We felt the bus turn off a main highway but could only hear tree branches scraping the vehicle's sides and feel its wheels rolling over what felt like an unpaved road. Finally, the doors of the bus opened, and we were led onto an expansive lawn half-lit by a dusky sunset, where hooded figures, fire-breathers, and naked women in fur wraps stood before a large lodge-style estate located on a small lakefront. The disorientation created by our bus journey produced a surrealistic effect far surpassing the experience of entering The Manderley Bar.

Upon our arrival, a bare-chested butler in a monkey mask checked us into the lodge (which I found out later is von Buhler's personal summer home) and led us to our respective seats at a banquet table in the dining hall, where an elaborate mask sat atop each of our plates. We were instructed to wear the mask throughout the evening to maintain anonymity. Unlike the uniformly commedia-inspired masks of *Sleep No More*, each mask for the *Illuminati Ball* was handmade, influenced by a unique surrealist look from wealthy Parisian socialite Marie-Hélène de Rothschild's original and elaborately occult "Illuminati Ball" in 1972. Honored guests at this historical gathering included Salvador Dali and Audrey Hepburn, and the formal invitations requested "black tie, long dresses, & Surrealist heads."³⁹ At von Buhler's estate, actors milled about the space in costumes designed by Kat Mon Dieu to mirror the "leaked" photos of the

³⁹ Invitations viewable online via *Leaksource* Archive, "1972 Rothschild Illuminati Ball (26 Photos)," accessed March 13, 2018, <https://leaksource.wordpress.com/2013/08/31/1972-rothschild-illuminati-ball-26-photos/>.

original ball, such as a woman in a white ball gown wearing an antlered deer head speckled with crystal tears; a suited man in a many-faced mask that seemed to leer from every angle.⁴⁰

After we took our seats at the long dinner tables, the monkey-butler announced each guest's name, occupation, and "kinship" (groups with animal names that one was sorted into based on the information in their application). Throughout the night, we indulged in several courses of delectable food, beginning with the first course, which was meant to be eaten blindfolded (it tasted like a warm, candied date). The rest of the meal was accompanied by variety performances – such as burlesque dancing, singing, and aerial artists suspended from ropes in the ceiling's rafters. Each course was interspersed with bits of plot development that took place at different locations on the estate grounds. Overall, however, *Illuminati Ball* was not driven by its plot – a muddled storyline about genetically modified human-animal hybrids masquerading as illuminati candidates and vying for their freedom from an evil genetic engineer (and eventually, in a strange twist towards social commentary, it was revealed that each course in the dinner had been vegan). Rather than focusing on plot, *Illuminati Ball* was an immersive, experiential environment designed to create a variety of sensual encounters for its very small, very exclusive audience. In this sense, it was more of an actual ball (or party) than a play. Despite the masks, but also because of them, there were many opportunities to socialize freely with characters and the other guests; some "guests" even turned out to be embedded characters later in the evening.

During one of the scenic interludes between dinner courses, I personally found myself alone in a bathroom with the other couple in my "cow" kinship group. A large, muscular bouncer

⁴⁰ Photos viewable online via *Leaksource*, "1972 Rothschild Illuminati Ball," accessed March 5, 2018, <https://leaksource.wordpress.com/2013/08/31/1972-rothschild-illuminati-ball-26-photos/>.

stood at the bathroom's door to make sure no other audience members from other kinship groups could join us. Inside, we were met by an actress wearing only a cow's head and a bedazzled breast-pump bra, our kinship leader, who was playing with rubber duckies in a large Jacuzzi tub. She invited us to undress and join her in the milk bath; without hesitating, the adventurous couple stripped down completely and got into the water. I, on the other hand, lingered awkwardly on the side of the tub with my feet dangling in the water. This encounter palpably invoked my status as a single woman navigating the immersive space on my own; even with the bouncer present, I felt particularly aware of my own bodily vulnerability. Levin describes this phenomenon as "the disquieting sensation of simultaneously being in the space and being the space."⁴¹ As an observer, I felt that I was *in the space* when watching the cow-goddess interact with the naked couple in a bathtub. At the same time, as a clothed participant presented with the option of removing my clothing, I felt like I was the theatrical object on display, experiencing Levin's disquieting sensation of "will she, or won't she?" The cow-woman encouraged me to relax, and that fresh towels were available to dry myself off after the bath if I wanted to join; *relaxed*, however, was the last word I would use to describe my bodily state at that particular moment in time.

Other less intimate but equally unstructured activities at the *Illuminati Ball* included a fire pit atop a dock on the lake, where guests could smoke cigars and drink whiskey, as well as a drum circle-cum-dance party that took place in a wooded clearing behind the lodge. Again, several participants decided to remove their clothing and dance barefoot in the moonlight. Though explicitly not a sex party (von Buhler's "FAQ" web page specifies that "the evening will be decadent and sensual and the show will contain some nudity, but this is absolutely not a sex

⁴¹ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 84.

party”), the participatory nudity still sets this immersive experience apart from shows with more audience constraints, such as *Sleep No More*.⁴² Overall, regardless of who elected to undress and who remained clothed, the production produced an elevated intimacy amongst many participants. By the end of the evening, several of the audience members including myself had exchanged Facebook information to keep in touch. On the bus ride back to New York City, we drunkenly chatted about what we had individually encountered throughout the evening, since other kinship groups had very different experiences. This exchange mirrors the structure of *Tamara* of chapter three, wherein guests traded secrets over the champagne buffet during intermission. One particularly intoxicated woman, an airplane pilot, was displeased with her experience and enraged that she had spent \$450 per ticket for herself and her husband. When I asked her why she was so unhappy, she mentioned being disappointed with the evening’s performance, which she believed paled in comparison to other shows by von Buhler. She also held up her designer leather handbag, which she claimed an actor had ruined by toppling over a glass of red wine. She explained to me that the bag itself had cost more than the tickets to *Illuminati Ball* and that she planned to email von Buhler for a refund.

Indeed, by the time we all piled into the bus at the end of the evening, which had in total lasted a good six hours, the majority of us was at least somewhat intoxicated. For some audience members like myself, drinking can be a coping mechanism for the discomfort of audience participation. My encounter with the couple and the cow-woman in the milk bath, for example, was made much more tolerable by the champagne on offer in the limousine and a few vodka drinks with dinner. At this production’s price point, the drinks were particularly high quality and

⁴² “FAQ,” *The Illuminati Ball* Website, accessed March 2, 2018, <http://www.theilluminatiball.com/faq.html>.

included in the ticket price. Underscoring the entire evening was an unlimited slate of artisanal cocktails crafted by the onsite mixologist, Bootleg Greg (Gregory Genias). Throughout the night, cast members would bring us drinks according to our tastes, keeping most everyone well-lubricated. For many participants like myself, drinks and drinking were part and parcel of the immersive experience of the *Ball*. Like many immersive theatre productions in New York City today, drinking is one of the many tactics employed by *Illuminati Ball* to seduce the senses and remove inhibitions.

Since its 2016 iteration as a highly exclusive and intimate excursion to her country estate, von Buhler has increased the scale of *Illuminati Ball* by restaging the show inside the old Williamsburg Savings Bank (now known as The Weylin). The venue's spacious, 6,500 square-foot interior allows for larger audiences of up to one thousand participants.⁴³ Von Buhler has increased her advertising efforts, sending weekly email blasts and posting "leaked" photos of illuminati rites to Instagram and Facebook. The production's increase in audience size has inversely effected ticket prices, which now start at just \$100. However, in this restaging, unlimited cocktails are not included in either the basic nor the VIP ticket price. In fact, in a Forbes interview von Buhler intimated that "one of the biggest contributors to the [*Illuminati Ball NYC*]'s profits is the sale of alcohol" and that her "high-end ticket buyers imbibe heavily at her shows... at times she has negotiated rental of a venue free of charge, unless a certain amount of drinks were not sold—which has never been a problem."⁴⁴ That an immersive production's financial stability would be so heavily intertwined with its drink sales and an audience of heavy

⁴³ Carey Purcell, "How Cynthia von Buhler Turned a Crowdfunded Party into a Lavish 'Illuminati Ball,'" *Forbes Online*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/careypurcell/2018/02/19/how-cynthia-von-buhler-turned-a-kickstarter-one-night-only-party-into-a-lavish-illuminati-ball/2/-5387223757de>.

⁴⁴ Purcell, "How Cynthia Von Buhler."

drinkers is quite telling of the inextricable relationship between drinking culture and contemporary immersive theatre in New York City today.

The alcohol for sale at *Illuminati Ball NYC* serves to augment the production's thematic promise, which von Buhler describes is "to not only give people an incredible experience but help people with what they're seeking."⁴⁵ She goes on to claim that "there are five things that everyone wants," which are "wealth, power, love, respect and fame. We're trying to give people who come to *The Illuminati Ball* at least one of those five things."⁴⁶ This is a hefty promise, but as entrepreneurialism and flexible labor continues to thrive, especially amongst the very privileged classes, so does the power and promise of drinking. Unlike food, which is also sometimes featured in immersive experiences to stimulate the senses but is also necessary for maintaining life, alcohol is primarily an indulgence and thereby lends its hedonistic qualities to immersive theatre environments. It is also, quite obviously, able to intoxicate the consumer, and gleans an aura of power from that ability. In the context of the *Illuminati Ball*, alcohol can also attain ritualistic qualities. Like immersive theatre, alcohol promises a consumer more than just a service or a good – but a felt *experience*. Throughout this project, we have seen various ways that drinking and alcohol – as a cultural practice and as a legally regulated good – have played a huge yet under-analyzed role in the unfurling of New York's history as a mecca for theatrical performance. From an experiential, economic, and thematic perspective, the sale and consumption of alcohol continue to be central to intoxicating productions like von Buhler's *Illuminati Ball*. In dreaming up her next creative venture, von Buhler muses that she "may even venture into the food and drink industry" since she sells so much alcohol at her shows and that

⁴⁵ Purcell, "How Cynthia Von Buhler."

⁴⁶ Purcell, "How Cynthia Von Buhler."

she “‘might even open [her] own speakeasy and have [the death of [her] grandfather] be the theme.’”⁴⁷ Indeed, von Buhler has excelled within the experience economy because she knows how to turn an everyday cocktail into an experiential elixir that might even enchant audiences with the promise to change their lives.

Yet one of the fallacies embedded in von Buhler’s portrayal of drinking and experiencing within *The Illuminati Ball* is the construction of intoxication as a panacea for the mundanity and shortfalls of “everyday life,” or the time and space outside of one’s experience as a member of her illuminati. What falls out of this construction is the other, less pleasant effects of alcohol, such as hangovers, poisoning, and regretful decision-making. This is not unique to von Buhler and her art but is rather a subliminal omission consistent with alcohol advertising in general, which almost always promises the consumer some degree of power, beauty, fame, wealth, class or some other elevated facet of identity by simply drinking the beverage advertised. Usually the only nod to alcohol’s physiological risk factors in these advertisements is the obligatory disclaimer to “Drink Responsibly,” a rushed maxim that often airs at the very end of the ad. In practice, “drinking responsibly” runs counter to the kind of sexy, intoxicating, and all-encompassing kind of experience staged by both von Buhler and alcohol marketers. Together with their almost magical potentiality to transform or transport a participant’s mind and body, alcohol and theatricality conspire to create immersive experiences that focus on the pleasurable effects of intoxication and eschew any possible risks or consequences.

Alston explores intoxication “in relation to product placement as a means to this end” in *The Black Diamond*, which was a 2011 immersive production in London produced by Punchdrunk’s commercial alias Gideon Reeling, and underwritten by the popular beer brand,

⁴⁷ Purcell, “How Cynthia Von Buhler.”

Stella Artois.⁴⁸ As a result of this branding sponsorship, the experience (and the beers served within) was completely free for participants, though Alston argues that in attending, participants still “bought into” the sex appeal of the performance and thereby the product of Stella Artois.⁴⁹ In opposition to this immersive advertising, however, Alston proposes that the drunkenness resulting from the production’s featured product can produce a rogue type of spectatorship, which rubs

up against the logic of dramaturgic scripting in dampening critical steeliness whilst encouraging deviant behavior and inducing a boldness that offers a form of autonomous strength, at least in relation to the standardization of “good” audience behavior, that is, good mannered, supportive, attentive and, depending on the performance, quiet, conscious of disrupting the event to the displeasure of others and, all too often, *subservient* to the demands of the artwork.⁵⁰

In other words, Alston makes a case for “‘intoxicated engagement’ producing an ‘induced agency’” wherein he imagines an audience member being emboldened by the physiologic effects of alcohol, thereby asserting himself as not subservient to the rules imparted by the immersive world in which he participates. On a July 23, 2016 performance of Cynthia von Buhler’s *Speakeasy Dollhouse*, I witnessed a group of bachelorette party attendees enact what I interpreted as Alston’s idea of “induced agency” in the show’s final court scene, wherein the audience is invited to determine the fate of the play’s villain. The women, who had clearly been drinking copiously, took over the scene with shouting, heckling, and by pushing one another

⁴⁸ Adam Alston, “Funding, Product placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk’s *The Black Diamond*,” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, no. 2 (2012) 193-208, 193.

⁴⁹ Alston, “Funding, Product placement and Drunkenness,” 198.

⁵⁰ Alston, “Funding, Product placement and Drunkenness,” 205.

onto the stage. In that moment, this group of induced spectators became the spectacle, totally stealing the focus from the actors, but perhaps providing another source of entertainment. Additionally, in his invocation to “burn the seats,” might Felix Barrett be suggesting this kind of anarchic audience engagement, as well?

Though Alston proposes the possibility of intoxication as a participatory loophole in the obligatory and restrictive contract imposed onto the spectator by immersive theatre, I argue that this nearly-libertarian construction of intoxication as a means for spectatorial agency could be seen as just as fallacious as von Buhler’s framing of the promises of intoxication within her *Ball*. Of course, though some do, not every participant who drinks within the immersive theatrical frame will feel entitled to misbehave or act boldly. It is important to interrogate the assumptions and privileges that must be in place for an audience member to feel or be entitled to the kinds of “deviant behavior” or “induced agency” that Alston, von Buhler, Barrett, and other artists and theorists propose as a promising possibility of immersive theatre.⁵¹ Personally, I have never felt entitled to interject myself into a scene without invitation, let alone reach out and grab or even touch a performer in any immersive theatre situation – even under the influence of alcohol. Unlike Alston, I do not feel that drinking unlocks any kind of “induced agency.” This is in part because of my own embodied boundaries, but it is also part of my conditioning as a woman and seasoned theatregoer whose body has been disciplined to take up as little physical space as possible, to watch my drink, and to always move out of the way for others, whether in a theatrical space or an everyday public space. When I enter an immersive theatre situation, I continue to practice these wary habits of spatial navigation. This embodied spectatorship is part of an implied contract to which I implicitly agree every time I participate in immersive theatre.

⁵¹ Alston, “Funding, Product placement and Drunkenness,” 205.

As this chapter has shown, however, my behavioral contract is not actual but implied, and not at all communal or shared; it is up to the spectator to make their own rules, and many other participants, such as the intoxicated bachelorettes cited above, define their boundaries of bodily participation quite differently.

According to von Buhler, *The Illuminati Ball* is not a sex party. But to borrow the psychoanalytic turn-of-phrase popularized by Richard Schechner, is it also not *not* a sex party?⁵² Herein lies the paradox of the spatial politics of von Buhler's immersive theatre, and others: *The Illuminati Ball* alludes to the liberated, anti-hegemonic sexual politics of queer and alternative sex cultures, while steadfastly also reserving itself as "just" a piece of theatre. David Savran navigates a paradox of similar nature in the 2009 restaging of the 1968 musical *Hair*, which ironically (yet, as Savran eventually points out, not-so ironically) "allowed hedge fund managers and strategic marketing analysts to... leap upon the stage, party with the hippies, and be initiated retroactively into the 'Age of Aquarius.'"⁵³ Indeed, this moment of harmony between flower children and brokers proves to be latently symbolic, since *Hair* was a musical that "even in 1968, was criticized for its inauthenticity and commercialization of the antiwar and anti-capitalist movements"; therefore, this participatory interaction between actors-playing-hippies and actual finance and marketing professionals could also be read as a brilliant stroke of meta-theatricality.⁵⁴ A similar kind of ideological tension exists within *Illuminati Ball*, in its blurry status as not a sex party yet not *not* a sex party; at once, the *Ball* endears itself to lifestyles on the

⁵² Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985): 110-113.

⁵³ David Savran, "Branding the Revolution: *Hair* Redux," in *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* eds. Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 76.

⁵⁴ Savran, "Branding the Revolution," 67.

fringes of society while also appealing to the very core of a neoliberal economy of entrepreneurialism and a masculinized sense of spatial entitlement.

For example, while von Buhler does maintain that *Illuminati Ball* is strictly a theatrical experience, there are elements to the production and its marketing that make sexual transgressions feel and seem possible within the production's parameters. Part of *Illuminati Ball*'s sex appeal derives from the participatory nudity and intimate bathing rites described above, but the performance also contains visual references to BDSM, such as dungeon and ritual imagery and leather and metal details integrated into character's costumes. These are subtle references, but von Buhler herself deems the production a cross between *Eyes Wide Shut* and Burning Man, two references that point to alternative lifestyles and experimental sex communities.⁵⁵ In fact, over the course of our night together, two of the couples I met at *The Illuminati Ball* mentioned their personal involvement in BDSM circles. Although it is emphatically not a sex party, *The Illuminati Ball* liberally cites and incorporates many aspects of kink culture and apparently even appeals to some members of that actual community. Coupled with the intoxicating effects of Bootleg Greg's designer cocktails, one can see how boundaries could very easily be blurred for some participants. This ambiguity of genre, I argue, is intentionally part of the experiential design and marketing for contemporary immersive theatre like von Buhler's.

Similarly, *Sleep No More* has also accrued a sexy, slightly kinky reputation due to its various intimate nude scenes and a highly sought-after orgy scene that takes place in the McKittrick's darkened nightclub. In his *Gawker* article entitled "How to Find All the Nudity in

⁵⁵ "FAQ," *The Illuminati Ball* Website.

Sleep No More” Brian Moylan gives readers a road map for finding this exact scene (and all other *Sleep No More* scenes containing nudity). According to Moylan, a participant should go through a few rooms to a narrow hallway that ends in a bar. When you get there, the three “Witches” are already having a randy time. When Macbeth [sic] shows up, it turns into a full-on rave orgy complete with drum-and-bass music, a strobe light, two topless lady witches and a completely naked male witch (well hung, uncut) who puts on a bull's head mask.⁵⁶

Though his article unabashedly objectifies the performing bodies in *Sleep No More*, Moylan presents the very picture of Harvie’s “prosuming” spectator who both produces and consumes experience. His “map” to all of the nudity in *Sleep No More* represents just one of the ways that, much like the active spectators of *Tony n’ Tina* and *Tamara* in the eighties, spectators are becoming even bolder entrepreneurs of their own theatrical experiences within a contemporary context of neoliberalism. If a spectator wants to produce an experience that emphasizes seeing topless actresses and “well hung, uncut” actors, Moylan has already done part of that spectating labor for him. Considered in this light, it is unsurprising that so many *Sleep No More* performers have endured harassment and groping at the hands of particularly entrepreneurial spectators. Regardless of any possible ethical implications or consequences to Moylan’s article and this mode of “creepy” spectatorship, Jamieson’s *Buzzfeed* accounts demonstrate that there are really no limitations in place within the *Sleep No More* frame to prevent a spectator from producing this particular kind of experience for himself.

⁵⁶ Brian Moylan, “How to Find All the Nudity in *Sleep No More*,” *Gawker*, December 8, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5866346/how-to-find-all-the-nudity-in-sleep-no-more>.

Of course, it may be these same blurry boundaries between looking and creeping that distinguish consensual performances of nudity and some spectators' transgressions or harassment. Besides the obvious difference of actual sex acts taking place, there is one key difference that sets Punchdrunk and Cynthia von Buhler's "sexy" immersive theatre performances apart from the consensual practices of kink and BDSM communities: the latter almost always requires some verbal or written contract between *consenting* participants. Additionally, alcohol, when used in BDSM settings, is often avoided or taken with caution to ensure that participants remain in control of their own bodies. Of course, performances like *The Illuminati Ball* and *Sleep No More* do not feature such contracts, nor do they explicitly demand much moderation in their participants' drinking. Indeed, quite the opposite is true when one considers the intoxicating environs of these productions and their accompanying bar spaces, which valorize hedonism in practice and design.

This, I argue again, reflects the conditions of a neoliberal labor market that I have cited throughout this chapter, wherein laborers are expected to remain flexible even in paradoxical conditions that are seemingly boundless in possibility yet also completely bound by implied rules and regulations. In this market, entrepreneurs administer labor contracts (when they exist) to put any burden of responsibility on the laborer rather than the employer or provider. The assumption may be that spectators "know better" than to transgress certain physical and behavioral boundaries, but do these assumptions also enable the transgressions? Perhaps it is unsexy to demand that spectators do not touch actors, but opportunistic prosumers of experience like Moylan will continue to take advantage of theatrical spaces ruled by no contracts or highly flexible, implicit contracts. The entrepreneurial spectator uses his mask as a token to enable and anonymize his bad behavior; any alcoholic drinks taken are elixirs empowering him to transgress

implied boundaries of consent and safety – though all in the spirit of the intoxicating environment. While the entrepreneurial participant might imagine himself in a ludic mode of play, not unlike a video game, his transgressions may have very real consequences for others sharing the immersive space.

Indeed, uncontracted, unmediated performance situations are less ideal for other bodies who cannot, will not, or choose not to entrepreneurialize their experience or parts of their experience; conversely, these are the bodies that are increasingly at risk in the sometimes-precarious theatrical space of contemporary immersive theatre. *Sleep No More* performer Bell describes the most emboldened of the intoxicated spectators in the immersive space, who acts out “in this atmosphere that we’ve created [for them] where there are no limits, there are no rules, we’re in a magical land right now — but in reality, you’re[, the performer, is] still a person.” Indeed, the ambiguity of the rules for participation in *Sleep No More* create precarious situations for performers, just as so many women in the workplace find themselves in precarious situations with men in power. Considered in the context of neoliberalism and #metoo, the next wave of immersive theatre makers might do well to encourage other modes of spectatorship when crafting, and explicitly contracting, new participatory experiences and the spaces in which they occur.

Conclusion: *In Vino Veritas*

How do the immersive, exclusive, and potentially intoxicating experiences outlined in these chapters reflect the state of things in New York City, both historically and today? This dissertation project, like most, has undertaken a very specific object of analysis (immersive theatre and performances that involve drinking), but not for the sake of parsing out minutiae. Quite the opposite, this project seeks some larger meaning through its focused scrutiny, with the hope that by closely viewing and reviewing something mundane, we might glean some insight. Mundane, to be sure: social and recreational drinking are so commonplace in New York City, from beers cracked in East Village comedy clubs and business deals made over neat scotches in Midtown, to picnics with smuggled wine in Central Park and outrageous cocktails served with aplomb in Williamsburg. Drinking customs and rituals lie at the heart of so many New York City social, recreational, and consumer experiences. As I have shown, drinking is often a part of immersive theatre and performance.

This sampling of performance practices spanning over a century-and-a-half of New York's history has, I hope, demonstrated the ways that drinking culture influences theatrical space but also how it can reproduce structures of inequality. In viewing intoxication as both a physiological phenomenon and a metaphor for ideological saturation, it becomes clear how alcohol and drinking can work doubly upon the experiences of many audience members. As I have attempted to prove throughout these pages, this is true regardless of whether one imbibes; just the presence of alcohol has great potential to endow space with experiential themes of hedonism, taboo (in the case of speakeasies), and sexuality – to name just a few. To appeal to Desmond one final time, drinking practices, like dance and other embodied arts, have the ability to codify identities – both empowered and disempowered, white and black, male and female, and

so on.¹ One need not be intoxicated nor partake in social drinking to experience or observe these embodied processes. Though immersive theatre often promises a lot in terms of empowering the spectator or participant, one major goal of this project has been to highlight how other bodies might experience risk, danger, discomfort, restriction, or compromise due to the inequalities enacted by socialized drinking practices in New York City.

Despite what I have outlined as the shortcomings of immersive experience in New York City, however, the consumer demand for these entertainments does not show any signs of slowing down. Smaller off-off-Broadway companies like Journey Lab and Third Rail continue to experiment with the form in shows like *The Alving Estate* and *The Grand Paradise*, while more prominent producers like Punchdrunk and von Buhler continue to sell out experiences, both large-scale and intimate in design. The bar and restaurant industry, too, continues to take cues from immersive theatre design. As the experience economy would have it, bar proprietors can charge a lot more for drinks accompanied by some kind of memorable experience. As chapter two indicated, speakeasy bars are particularly popular in New York City, such as the Back Room on the Lower East Side, where customers must walk through a dirty alleyway and up a flight of rickety stairs to find themselves in a bar decorated with portraits and oriental rugs and cocktails are served in teacups. Diners at SoHo's Café Select can walk through the kitchen to find a secret ski-lodge-themed bar where fondue is served; a similar experience lies behind iron bars in the basement of La Esquina, a SoHo taqueria. (I should add that although each of these bars promises "secrecy," it is fairly easy to find their address and how to "get in" on the Internet.)

¹ Jane C. Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994), 38.

While this project has focused on New York City, which is saturated with immersive, exclusive, and intoxicating offerings, the demand for immersion has of course taken hold of other cities such as Los Angeles and even overseas in Shanghai. *The Willows*, a two-hour psychological thriller by JPI Productions, takes place in a creepy Los Angeles mansion, where audience members can roam around and try to piece together the mysterious history of the eccentric family who lives there. Hors d'oeuvres and drinks are on offer throughout the experience, though the website claims that “not just anyone deserves a seat at our table.”² Indeed, the idea that customers are accessing some kind of exclusive experience is always a feature of the advertising for experiences like *The Willows*, whether theatrical, culinary, or otherwise.

The image of exclusivity is an actual reality in the case of *Sleep No More* Shanghai, where tickets are extremely hard to come by. Indeed, immersive theatre and experiences are essential to the leisure culture of the moneyed classes in this worldly city, where Western cultural exports are in high demand by culturally savvy Chinese consumers. While teaching at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, I was lucky to secure tickets to a sold-out run of *Sleep No More* through a student who works as an usher. Attending would have been impossible otherwise, since every single show had already sold out for the two months that I lived there (in any case, I was unable to read the ticket-buying guidelines in Mandarin on the website). The McKinnon Hotel is Shanghai’s version of New York’s McKittrick, and is a title change manifesting Felix Barrett’s site-*sympathetic* approach, which organically alters but does not completely change the production as it moves from space to space. I was fascinated by two key differences in the *Sleep No More* experience; first, while there was a bar in which to wait before entering The McKinnon, my fellow audience members seemed far less interested in drinking than their American

² *The Willows* Website, accessed March 20, 2018, <http://www.thewillowsla.com/aboutwillows/>.

counterparts. In fact, very few patrons had alcoholic drinks in their hands, and there was no line at all for the bar. For me, this only reinforced the very socialized and specifically enculturated nature of social drinking. In the Shanghai bar, for example, there was no bedazzled servers wheeling around a decanter of absinthe, encouraging a spirit of intoxication. The overall mood was excited, but not necessarily about the drinking portion of the night. Another key difference is that audience members are forced to stow phones in a locked pouch worn across the shoulder. This is because, as my theatre-going experience in China would prove, taking pictures during a theatrical production is often allowed and quite popular as a practice. However, it seemed like the producers of *Sleep No More* Shanghai wanted to maintain the exclusivity and secrecy of The McKinnon's theatrical environment, which is impossible if people are sharing and posting pictures and videos of their experience on social media. In terms of choreography and sound, set, and costume design, the production was very similar to its New York sister. One interesting plot addition is the integration of the Chinese myth of the White Snake, a complex fable involving nothing other than an enchanted bottle of wine, which was a new prop integrated into the scenes that take place within The McKinnon's bar (where the rave scene takes place).³ All of this is to say that the Punchdrunk model of immersive theatre will adapt and be quite successful in places other than London and New York.

Another highly immersive experience that I encountered during my summer in Shanghai was James Turrell's *Immersive Light* exhibit at The Long Museum on the West Bund, which literally immersed spectators in massive installations of jewel-colored or bright white light. Entire, vast spaces within The Long Museum were totally immersed in Turrell's signature light

³ For a good summary of the myth, see the introduction to A. Fullarton Prior's illustrated book, *Legend of the White Serpent: Retold from the Chinese* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1960)

works, and participants could play in and roam freely through many of the pieces. Finally, Cixin Liu's popular science fiction novel *The Three Body Problem* was adapted for the stage in a multimedia, laser and projection-heavy production whose intense level of spectacle surpassed Broadway sensations like *Wicked* and *Lion King*. Immersive, sensational spectacles like these examples most certainly have a stronghold on Shanghai arts scene.

Back in the United States, it should also be mentioned that the idea of ultimate user freedom, whether virtual or real, is part of a cultural zeitgeist being explored in spheres of entertainment beyond theatre, such as retail, literature, television, and film. As Fuchs points out in "Theatre as Shopping," even retail can be an immersive, individualized experience. In *Performing Consumers* (2006), Maurya Wickstrom analyzes the experience economy at work in the Nike and American Girl Doll flagship stores in New York City, where the experience of shopping for shoes and toys is theatricalized via vibrant spatial design, interactivity, and consumer choice.⁴ In film and literature, Steven Spielberg's forthcoming movie adaptation of Ernest Cline's 2012 book *Ready Player One* imagines a dystopian future America, where the Earth has become so overpopulated and over-resourced that citizens opt to spend the majority of their lives rigged into a virtual utopia called the OASIS. When immersed in this virtual world, however, inequalities still exist, and money still buys power and freedom; the wealthiest users, for example, have access to the most exclusive virtual experiences and can afford the most attractive, fit, and well-equipped avatars. In television, HBO's show *West World*, based on the 1973 film and Michael Crichton's book of the same name, envisions a prohibitively-expensive

⁴ Maurya Wickstrom, "On the Move at Niketown and Ralph Lauren," and "Making Americans: The American Girl Doll and American Girl Place" in *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 13-43 and 96-153.

Western theme park hosted by realistic android hosts, towards which guests can behave however they wish, without consequence. Similar to the “fortune favors the bold” ethos of *Sleep No More*, this Wild West mentality brings out the worst in some participants. Like *The Illuminati Ball*, the OASIS of *Ready Player One* and the theme park of *West World* both promise to deliver participants the quintessential markers of status such as sex, money, beauty fame, and wealth. The overall thematic message of these cultural products is that the higher the ticket price one can afford, the less participatory restraint will be imparted by the experience’s producers.

To conclude, I want to specify that by illuminating the ways that immersive theatre and drinking culture intersect to reproduce hegemonic identities, it was not my intention to demonize the theatre producers behind the creation of these experiences or disavow the genre altogether. As artists and academics living in New York and working in theatre, we are all trying to navigate and make a living within an experience economy that values entrepreneurialism and a bootstraps mentality of self-sufficiency. Artists like Cynthia von Buhler and Felix Barrett have indeed forged their own ways to commercial success through the medium of immersive theatre. Like von Buhler and Barrett, all of the producers and proprietors of the experiences cited throughout this project are quite convinced that they are providing unprecedented and exciting experiences for their valued customers. Advertisements dating all the way back to concert saloons have promised sex, fun, and a general escape from reality as a draw for potential consumers of immersive experience. Indeed, many participants walk away from these experiences highly satisfied, titillated, and wanting to return. Part of this critical bent of this project, however, has been to scrutinize whether or not the proprietors and artists are delivering on the promises disseminated in advertisements, interviews, and other promotional materials.

In other words, this project has dwelt in the space between each production or venue's "promise" of immersive experience and the actual, delivered experience (which is, of course, different for every spectator, but certain generalizations can and have been made). Where does the producer's promise of immersion and intoxication fall short? Late nineteenth-century concert saloon proprietors enticed patrons by created spaces that fomented an atmosphere of sporting culture. They also posted ads that splashily reinforced male dominance over submissive female waiter-girls. Once a patron stumbles home at the end of the night, however, he is subjected to the same workaday responsibilities that burdened him when he entered the saloon in the first place. During Prohibition, proprietors of the Cotton Club promised a slice of authentic black life via their hired performing bodies. The environments they actually produced, however, was not at all reflective of the everyday existence of Harlem residents and instead exaggerated stereotypes drawn from white racial fantasies. *Tony n' Tina* producer Joe Corcoran claims that there is comfort in reenacting the traditional events of a wedding, but what about those of us who are highly discomforted by audience interaction in any form? In addition, what comfort is there in the notion that there are good, better, and best ways of interacting with experiential products of a neoliberal experience economy? In perhaps the wildest promises of all, the contemporary immersive theatre productions cited in this dissertation have promised to do things like "burn the seats" and advance participants towards their hopes and dreams of "wealth, power, love, respect and fame."⁵ Of course, I did not attain wealth, power, love, respect or fame by attending *The*

⁵ "Felix Barrett - Burn the Seats: Audience Immersion in Interactive Theater," *Future of Storytelling* video, <https://vimeo.com/79522231>, and Carey Purcell, "How Cynthia von Buhler Turned a Crowdfunded Party into a Lavish 'Illuminati Ball.'"

Illuminati Ball, but I did wake up with a massive hangover. What will immersive theatre, and the drinking that helps facilitate its experiential and ideological design, promise next?

Bibliography

- “1972 Rothschild Illuminati Ball (26 Photos).” *Leaksource* Archive. Last modified August 31, 2013. <https://leaksource.wordpress.com/2013/08/31/1972-rothschild-illuminati-ball-26-photos/>.
- Allen, Robert. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Alston, Adam. “Funding, Product placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk’s *The Black Diamond*.” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, no. 2 (2012) 193-208.
- . *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- “Amendment XVIII.” *Cornell University Legal Information Institute*. Accessed April 2, 2017. www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxviii.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Baldwin, Peter C. *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- “Ban on China Town Trips.” *New York Times*, December 23, 1909.
- Birch, Anna and Joanne Tompkins, eds. *Performing Site-specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Blumenthal, Eileen, “‘Tamara’ From the Ground Floor Up.” *New York Times*, November 29, 1987.
- “Broadway Below the Sidewalk.” *New York Clipper*, April 23, 1864. Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

- . *New York Clipper*, February 13, 1864. Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.
- . *New York Clipper*, February 27, 1864. Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.
- . *New York Clipper*, January 2, 1864. Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.
- Bullock, Penn. "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women." *New York Times*, October 8, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.
- Carlson, Marvin. "Tamara." In *10,000 Nights: Highlights from 50 Years of Theatre-Going*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, 141-146.
- Cavendish, Dominic. "Punchdrunk: Plunge into a World of Extraordinary Theatre." *The Telegraph*, June 20, 2013. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/10127892/Punchdrunk-plunge-into-a-world-of-extraordinary-theatre.html>.
- Chang, Emily. "'Oh my God, This is so F---ED Up': Inside Silicon Valley's Secretive, Orgiastic Dark Side." *Vanity Fair Online*, February 2018. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/01/brotopia-silicon-valley-secretive-orgiastic-inner-sanctum>.
- Chappell, George. *Restaurants of New York*. New York: Greenburg, Inc., 1925.
- "Chop Suey Resorts." *New York Times*, November 15, 1903.
- CitySights NY. "Harlem Gospel - Soul Food and Jazz Tour." Accessed April 1, 2017. www.citysightsny.com/harlem-gospel-soul-food-and-jazz.html
- Connell, Raewyn. "Understanding Neoliberalism." In *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*. Edited by Susan Braedley and Meg Luxton, 22-36. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.
- Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993-1994): 33-63.

Drowne, Kathleen. “‘Theah’s Life Anywheres Theah’s Booze and Jazz’: *Home to Harlem* and *Gingertown* in the Context of National Prohibition.” *Callaloo* 34, no. 3 (2011): 928-942.

“‘Experience’ with Cynthia Von Buhler.” Interview by Charley Layton. *Neo-Bohemia* Podcast episode 9, April 23, 2016. Audio, 44:44. <https://audioboom.com/posts/4474187-neo-bohemia-experience-with-cynthia-von-buhler>.

“Felix Barrett - Burn the Seats: Audience Immersion in Interactive Theater.” *Future of Storytelling*. Accessed March 2, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/79522231>.

Fuchs, Elinor. “Theater as Shopping.” *Theater* 24 no. 4 (1993): 19-30.

Graham, Stephen. *New York Nights*. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927.

Greene, Gael. “Two on the Aisle.” *The Insatiable Critic*. *New York Magazine*, March 21, 1988.

Harris, Geraldine. “Differences in Degree or Kind? Ockham’s Razor’s *Not Until We are Lost* and Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*.” In *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* edited by James Frieze, 265-287. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Heap, Chad. *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Heim, Michael R. *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Holden, Stephen. “Avant-Garde Antics for Fearless-Audiences.” *New York Times*, February 5, 1988.

Jamieson, Amber. "Performers and Staffers at 'Sleep No More' Say Audience Members Have Sexually Assaulted Them." *Buzzfeed News Online*, February 6, 2018.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/amberjamieson/sleep-no-more?utm_term=.nsZxZyX1y-.hqp3MDE8D

Johnson, Howard "Stretch." Interview by Jeff Kesseloff. *Jeff Kesseloff Oral History Interviews*, January 27, 1987. Audio, 47:16. The New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

Jones, Daniel Stedman. *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Josephson, Barney. Interview by Jeff Kesseloff. *Jeff Kesseloff Oral History Interviews*, December 16, 1986. Audio, 47:12. The New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

"Lady Duff Gordon Sees China Town." *New York Times*, December 23, 1907.

Lasley, Paul and Elizabeth Harryman. "'Tamara': Audience Follows Cast from Room to Room." *Christian Science Monitor*, July 9, 1985. <https://www.csmonitor.com/1985/0709/ltamara-f.html>.

Levin, Laura. *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Lobel, Cindy R. *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Machon, Josephine. "On Being Immersed: *The Pleasure of Being, Washing, Feeding, Holding*." In *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, edited by James Frieze, 29-42. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

- . *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- McCabe, James D. *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; Or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City*. Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1872.
- McKay, Claude. *A Long Way from Home*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- McNamara, Brooks. *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Moylan, Brian. "How to Find All the Nudity in *Sleep No More*." *Gawker*, December 8, 2011. <http://gawker.com/5866346/how-to-find-all-the-nudity-in-sleep-no-more>.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18.
- Neilson, David. "Class, Precarity, and Anxiety Under Neoliberal Global Capitalism: From Denial to Resistance." *Theory and Psychology* 25 no. 2 (2015): 184-201.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Park Avenue Armory. "Building History." Accessed December 14, 2017. http://www.armoryonpark.org/about_us/history.
- Pine, B. Joseph and James Gilmore II. *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage*. Watertown, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999.
- Punchdrunk UK. "About Punchdrunk." Accessed March 2, 2018. <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/about/>.
- Purcell, Carey. "How Cynthia Von Buhler Turned a Crowdfunded Party into a Lavish 'Illuminati Ball.'" *Forbes Online*, February 19, 2018.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/careypurcell/2018/02/19/how-cynthia-von-buhler-turned-a-kickstarter-one-night-only-party-into-a-lavish-illuminati-ball/2/#5387223757de>.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address to the Nation on the Economy." February 5, 1981. Transcribed by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley. *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43132>.

Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

Robertson, Stephen, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White. "Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, No. 3 (September 2012): 443-466.

Rorabaugh, W. J. "Consumption of Alcohol (United States)." In *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, edited by Jack S. Blocker, Jr., David M. Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrrell. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

Savran, David. "Branding the Revolution: *Hair* Redux." *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres Performance Permutations*, edited by Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ybarra, 65-80. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

—. *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

—. *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Applause, 1973.

"Scorched the Snake." *Tumblr* site. Accessed March 7, 2018. <http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com/about>

"Slumming in this Town." *New York Times*, September 14, 1884.

- Smith, Matthew Wilson. *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- “Susie Knight or, The True History of ‘The Pretty Waiter Girl,’” Canto II, *The New York Clipper*, September 19, 1863, Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.
- The Illuminati Ball*. “Apply To Attend *The Illuminati Ball*, An Immersive Excursion.” Accessed March 2, 2018. http://www.theilluminatiball.com/store/c1/Featured_Products.html
- . “FAQ.” Accessed March 2, 2018. <http://www.theilluminatiball.com/faq.html>.
- “The Sights and Sensations of New York.” Wood engraved frontispiece by Van Ingen and Snyder, 1872. Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-2cbd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.
- The Willows* website. Accessed March 20, 2018. <http://www.thewillowsla.com/aboutwillows/>.
- Turnbull, Olivia. “It’s All About You: Immersive Theatre and Social Networking.” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 4, no. 1 (2016) 150-163.
- Turner, Victor. “Liminality and Communitas.” *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Rochester: Cornell University Press, 1966.
- Twin Peaks Restaurant, “Careers.” Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.twinpeaksrestaurant.com/work-it/>.
- . “Franchise.” Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.twinpeaksrestaurant.com/franchise/concept/>.
- Tytell, John. *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage*. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

- Van Vechten, Carl. *Nigger Heaven*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926. Reprinted with introduction by Kathleen Pfeiffer. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Page references are to the 2000 edition.
- Velasco, Carlos, Russell Jones, Scott King and Charles Spence. "Assessing the Influence of the Multisensory Environment on the Whisky Drinking Experience." *Flavour* 2 no. 23 (2013): <https://doi.org/10.1186/2044-7248-2-23>.
- Vogel, Shane. *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- "W.C.T.U. Women Go 'Slumming.'" *New York Times*, October 23, 1893.
- Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.
- White, Gareth. "On Immersive Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221-235.
- . *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Wickstrom, Maurya. *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Wilson, James F. *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Zaointz, Keren. "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance." *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 3 (October 2014), 405-425.
- Zellers, Parker R. "The Cradle of Variety: The Concert Saloon." *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 4 (1968): 578-585.

Interviews:

Corcoran, Joe. Personal Interview. New York City, August 23, 2017. Phone.