“As a Native Daughter of California…”:
Parsing Virginia Calhoun’s Claim on Ramona

In this interactive conversation, Professor Brian Herrera (Theater) will critically reflect upon his ongoing research into the life and work of Virginia Calhoun. Calhoun is a deservedly obscure early 20th century Californian actress, writer and producer, who spent three decades failing to bring her theatrical adaptation of Helen Hunt Jackson’s romantic epic Ramona successfully to audiences. Though Calhoun’s uncommonly sustained record of failure happens to chart key vectors of power in the industrial consolidation of US show business in the century’s first decades (including amateur/professional, local/national, art/commerce, copyright/“fair use”), her story also activates sticky questions about the Anglo American habit of “playing Indian” for fun, for art and for profit. Considered in the broader historiography of competing theatrical modes of performing nativeness (since Edwin Forrest’s Metamora), this conversation will ponder the thicket of contradictions tangled within Virginia Calhoun’s recurring claim that – “as a Native daughter of California” – she was the ideal enactor of the Ramona character and story on the early 20th century American stage.

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