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Emily Sahakian, *Staging Creolization: Women's Theater and Performance from the French Caribbean*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. xiii + 274 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8139-4007-6; \$35.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8139-4008-3; \$75.00 U.S. (eb) ISBN 978-0-8139-4009-0.

Review by Vanessa Lee, University of Oxford.

Emily Sahakian's book *Staging Creolization: Women's Theater and Performance from the French Caribbean* is a fascinating study of French Caribbean women's theater, and greatly contributes to this exciting and developing field. The scope of Sahakian's study focuses on works written and performed at the end of the twentieth century in Martinique and Guadeloupe, French overseas territories in the Caribbean. Former French colonies transformed into *départements* (French administrative units), these islands' inhabitants are French citizens; however, their status in relation to the French metropole remains peripheral for historical, social, and political reasons. French Caribbean drama produced in this context addresses these issues, and draws on multiple performance traditions. Caribbean society is made up of the descendants of several different peoples who settled or were transported to the islands during the colonial period and the Transatlantic Slave Trade: the first indigenous populations of the islands, European colonizers, African slaves, indentured laborers from South and East Asia, and migrants from the Middle East. This has led to a *métissage*, or cultural mixing, that makes Caribbean culture unique.

The writers studied in *Staging Creolization* include Ina Césaire from Martinique and Maryse Condé, Gerty Dambury, and Simone Schwarz-Bart from Guadeloupe. They belong to a second wave of playwrights, the majority of whom are women. The first wave, dominated by major figures of postcolonial and anticolonial thought, such as Martinican Aimé Césaire, was mainly focused on recording anticolonial struggles and nation-building in the postcolonial period. The works of these second-wave female playwrights encompass issues relating, among other things, to gender relations and representations in French Caribbean society, forgotten or marginalized histories, and the legacies of slavery. However, given the cultural mix and fluctuating status of French Caribbean culture, many of the plays have a remit that reaches beyond the Caribbean.

The concept of staging creolization is based on the notion of creolization, which comes from the word "creole" that originally referred to a person born in the Americas during the colonial period. It has been adapted to describe the unique process of cultural *métissage* at work in the region brought about by colonialism, slavery, and migration. Creole is also a term that describes a language made up of multiple linguistic influences, spoken in various areas of the Americas. "Creoleness" can be applied to the development of new cultures and populations. In *Éloge de la créolité*, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé claim that all peoples who have experienced colonialism, who have been uprooted from their homelands and obliged to make a new society in a different land, have gone through the process of creolization.[1] It is a worldwide phenomenon and can be used to look at multiple manifestations of cultural syncretism and interactions. Sahakian contends that the women playwrights she analyses in her book develop the idea of creolization further, by moving beyond "creoleness" as a fixed

identity and aesthetic order as devised by theorists of creoleness, to “creolization” as a process that is continuously reproducing itself. The author demonstrates in the book that while creolization is a limitless and ever-changing process, the process is “anchored in particular historical situations, social structures, and inequalities of plantation slavery and colonialism” (p. 11). For instance, in looking at how gender is explored in the plays, Sahakian argues that it is shown as a fluid performance that functions in a similar way to creolization and allows the writers to surpass binaries inherited from the French Caribbean’s slave and colonial histories.

The corpus of seven plays has been chosen according to the availability of archival material relating to the plays’ performance histories, unfortunately lacking for many works by French Caribbean women playwrights. This is of particular interest for researchers starting off in the field, or who have struggled to gain access to these materials and who may profit from the observations and references made in the book. Sahakian bases her performance studies of the works on several sources to reconstitute as accurately as possible the conception, the context, and the reception of the productions. Through this method the plays are brought to life, and the reader who has not seen the performances is nevertheless made aware of the various conceptual, socio-political, and aesthetic processes and debates undertaken by the creative teams, the authors, and the audiences.

As well as basing the study on extensive archival and investigative work, Sahakian’s work demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of not just Caribbean theater, but also of the broader canon of French Caribbean women’s literature and of Black theater history in the United States and the Caribbean as a whole. Moreover, the book is also accessible to both a specialist and non-specialist audience. Sahakian draws from the English translations of the plays, providing her own translations where there is no existing English version. The plays are summarized in detail, and little prior knowledge is necessary to follow the analysis. The transnational trajectory of the plays’ productions and receptions can appeal to readers in the United States, as well as beyond, and offers North American readers an opportunity to discover the performance history of French Caribbean drama in their region.

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters look at three “transhistorical” themes: gender, the interaction between a universal human condition and cultural difference, and the inheritance of slavery. Chapter one is a study of Ina Césaire’s *Rosanie Soleil*<sup>[2]</sup> and Maryse Condé’s *Pension les Alizés*.<sup>[3]</sup> The plays trouble stereotypes and meanings of gender inherited from the French Caribbean colonial and slave pasts. The two main stereotypes explored are that of the seductress and that of the passive, steadfast female sufferer. Chapter two explores the interplay between universal humanity and cultural particularity in Maryse Condé’s *An tan revolysion*,<sup>[4]</sup> Ina Césaire’s *Mémoires d’Isles*,<sup>[5]</sup> and Gerty Dambury’s *Lettres indiennes*.<sup>[6]</sup> Sahakian investigates how the playwrights meld intercultural and postcolonial theater techniques to transcend the binaries of French and Caribbean, and the polarization between universality and sameness. These plays focus on different communities, means of memory formation and historical commemoration, and how slavery, colonialism, and revolution affect people’s lives. Chapter three investigates how theatrical syncretism is applied to renew and question life lessons learned from slavery. The plays analyzed are Ina Césaire’s *Enfant des Passages*<sup>[7]</sup> and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Mon beau capitaine*.<sup>[8]</sup> Sahakian shows how the plays draw on *bigidi*, which describes the fact of being destabilized but not falling, and *débouya*, which denotes resourcefulness in the face of adversity. These two creole terms refer to embodied knowledge practices found in local performance traditions developed during slavery: dance in the case of *bigidi*, and the Caribbean folk tale with *débouya*. In exploring these art forms in their work, the playwrights represent, renew, and question the moral codes inherited from the slave plantation.

The second part of *Staging Creolization* consists of the final two chapters. These focus on the adaptation and reception of the plays studied in the first three chapters on North American stages, and in particular the role of the New York Ubu Repertory Theater. Extending the reflection on theatrical creolization through the added dimension of what the author terms “diasporic performance,” this part explores how the meaning and authorial intentionality of the plays were adapted by drawing on parallel experiences in the United States of black diasporic history and racial and gender discrimination while still emphasizing

the cultural specificity of the plays. Sahakian argues that these transnational productions often led to miscommunication and misunderstandings; however, this is seen as a further step in the creolization of plays that are already in a state of flux precisely because they are themselves in a process of creolization. In chapter four the adaptations of three plays are analyzed: Césaire's *Mémoires d'Isles* and *Rosanie Soleil*, and Dambury's *Lettres indiennes*. The chapter focuses on how the French Caribbean works were adapted and received in the context of 1980s identity politics in the United States. For instance, the ambiguity and the fluidity of Caribbeanness were understated in order to conform to the fixed signifiers relating to gender and race. Chapter five further explores issues relating to the representation of gender and heterosexual relationships within the black diaspora, and how multiple re-castings of female characters were a function of a desire on behalf of the American creative teams to adapt the plays to explore different cultural, historical, and political contexts and meanings.

The "coda" at the end of Sahakian's informative study extends the reflection started in chapters four and five on the question of performing creolization outside the French Caribbean. It looks at productions of Ina Césaire's *L'Enfant des Passages* at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and of Maryse Condé's *In the Time of the Revolution* at the University of Georgia. Sahakian explains the pedagogical importance of these performances, which allowed students and professors to explore the culture, politics, and history of the Caribbean. The ethical implications were also of interest, for these productions allowed both local artists and audiences to question and shed new light on their own thought-systems and cultural paradigms.

Looking at the process of French Caribbean theater performance as creolization indicates the potential and limitations inherent in producing Antillean theater at home and abroad. The questions asked, while fully anchored in the context of the performance and production contexts, go beyond these and feed into a broader reflection on the performance and reception of theatrical texts in worldwide contemporary theater. And this is what makes this work of interest to both scholars of Caribbean studies and theater practitioners and specialists, who in the disciplinary interstices thrown up in Sahakian's study may uncover as of yet unseen connections and potential inspiration for further interdisciplinary study. Therefore, the book achieves its aims of developing "cultural literacies and knowledges appropriate for any study of French Caribbean women's theater and, more broadly, [proves] useful for any investigation of Caribbean theater and performance" (p. 19).

## NOTES

[1] See Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

[2] Ina Césaire, *Rosanie Soleil*, in Christiane Makward, ed. *Rosanie Soleil et autres textes dramatiques* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2011); translated by Judith Miller as *Fire's Daughters*, in *New French-Language Plays: Martinique, Québec, Ivory Coast, Belgium* (New York: Ubu Repertory Theater Publications, 1993).

[3] Maryse Condé, *Pension les Alizés* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1988); translated by Barbara Brewster Lewis and Catherine Temerson as *The Tropical Breeze Hotel*, in *Plays by Women, Book Two: An International Anthology* (New York: Ubu Repertory Theater Publications, 1994).

[4] Maryse Condé, *An tan révolysion: Elle court, elle court la liberté* (Pointe-à-Pitre: Conseil Général de la Guadeloupe, 1989); translated by Doris Y. Kadish and Jean-Pierre Piriou as *In the Time of Revolution*, *Callaloo* 25.2(2002):454-93.

[5] Ina Césaire, *Mémoires d'Isles: À Manman N. et Manman F.* (Paris: Éditions Caribbéennes, 1985); translated by Christiane P. Makward and Judith G. Miller as *Island Memories*, in Christiane P. Makward and Judith G. Miller, eds., *Plays by French and Francophone Women: A Critical Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[6] Gerty Dambury, *Lettres indiennes* (Paris: Éditions du Manguier, 2014).

[7] Ina Césaire, *L'Enfant des Passages, ou La Geste de Ti-Jean* (Paris: Éditions Caribbéennes, 1987).

[8] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Ton beau capitaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); translated into English by Jessica Harris and Catherine Temerson as *Your Handsome Captain*, in *Plays by Women: An International Anthology* (New York: Ubu Repertory Theater Publications, 1988).

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