
H-France Review Vol. 20 (May 2020), No. 82

Juliane Braun, *Creole Drama: Theatre and Society in Antebellum New Orleans*.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. xv + 260 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. \$69.50 U.S. (cl). 978-0-8139-4231-5; \$69.50 U.S. (eb). 978-0-8139-4232-2; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8139-4233-9.

Review by Felicia McCarren, Tulane University.

At a moment when historians of the French Atlantic are focusing on the particularity of New Orleans' francophone cultural forms, Juliane Braun's book provides welcome archival research on the city's nineteenth-century French theaters, their repertoires and audiences.^[1] *Creole Drama* documents theater history, studies political and social valences of particular performances, and reflects on the history and contemporary resonance of "créolité" on the stages that give the book its title. In spite of the conservative definitions of the institutions of "Theatre and Society" announced in the subtitle, the book gives theater a leading role in reflecting, if not shaping, opinion in a diverse French-speaking community of nineteenth-century New Orleans.

That this community was doomed to fail in the inexorable Americanization of Louisiana after its purchase in 1802, and that its disappearance was somehow outlived by francophone theater in the Crescent City, are the founding points of this book. While no one would contest the fact that in 2020 French in New Orleans is dead (if not yet the case for Louisiana cultural production in general), nor contend that its stages rival those of New York (as the French Opera house on Bourbon Street did until it burned down in 1919), multiple performance forms representing an alternate, Caribbean, "French" and African-diasporic "Creole" heritage continue to define the city today. *Creole Drama* begins to fill a gap between archival research on the Crescent City's racial and linguistic diversity and the repertory of performance forms that made it a crucible for the field of Performance Studies, forms that fire the imagination of researchers, ethnographers and tourists as well as the local population that, at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, included an urban majority of color.

Across its five chapters the book gives examples and illustrations of French-speaking theaters. These include theaters in the *Vieux Carré* with professionals relocating to New Orleans from St. Domingue at the time of the Haitian revolution, touring and mixed-race francophone performers, and multi-racial audiences; as well as the "free black" theaters created in the Marigny and Washington neighborhoods led by *gens de couleur libres*. This also includes the case of a New Orleanian exile, Victor Séjour, who became a popular dramatist in Paris. *Creole Drama* opens with a nineteenth-century view of New Orleans as a cosmopolitan, multilingual city in which theater as a key "political, social and cultural" institution brought people together: "it united in one place

people from multiple origins and different social classes” and instructed “morals” (p. 1). Theater brought “an exchange of good sentiments” between “rival” francophone and anglophone factions in the city (p. 4). The city’s French theaters were spaces of sociability, sometimes annexed to a ballroom and a café-restaurant, which drew English speakers seeking evening entertainments, not unlike Bourbon Street today. And English-language theater allowed French speakers to “practice their English” while appreciating, for example, a touring English actress in a French playhouse in the French Quarter (p. 40). Yet theaters as social centers also served to “manage the city’s heterogeneous population” (p. 2) and were controlled, after the Louisiana Purchase, by the new American censor. The theaters contributed to the formation of a new national identity—in this case a non-English one—that grounds the book in “the multilingual roots of transnational American studies” (p. 169).

Given this goal, the book might have devoted more time to questions of race theory and performativity, and francophone performance history, that made—and make—New Orleans unique. While Louisiana has been a site of racial tensions from the Code Noir to Jim Crow, I wonder if the book might have explored race, not from an outsider’s perspective, with the very categories that so troubled the hybrid realities on the ground in New Orleans, but in its historical making. Rather than emphasizing the black-and-white of the law, the theater examples in this book might be read to suggest that the theater was a space not only for the creation, but also for the contestation of “race” nuanced by many factors: the background of the performers, their language, the practices of attendance. Braun’s book does much to show how racial categories and identities modulated across French and American systems of classification and were inflected by class; I wanted it to do more to flesh out the particular ways that race was created, presented, or circumvented in New Orleans performance practices and venues.

The author does acknowledge a choice to focus on spoken drama and playhouses that anchored “political and cultural sovereignty” in the city (p. 9) rather than those performances in private homes, salons, circus tents, ballrooms, city streets and parks—with the exception of a brief mention of the “equestrian dances” (p. 37), a popular ballet and horse-show in a historical gathering place for the enslaved engaged in African performance traditions, and known today as Congo Square. Braun’s history is one in which performance forms arrive in NOLA, rather than emerge there: “Theatre in New Orleans began when violence, bloodshed, and revolt temporarily suspended theatrical operations elsewhere in the French Atlantic” (p. 15). This archeology of cultural exchange organizes chapters in which themes are sketched across historical performances, revealing the different stories unfolding simultaneously on stages and in audiences. I wanted to know more about synchronous performances available on a given night or season.

The book’s history of New Orleans’s theaters takes their production contexts and their narratives as its basis for decoding their significance to local audiences. The chapters show a range of attitudes on the part of the French-speaking population that are described or solidified in theatrical events. Theaters “reflected the ways in which the city’s French-speaking residents attempted to reconcile their desire to be full citizens in an increasingly anglophone United States” without giving up their “culture rooted in the French Atlantic” (p. 8). At the theater, New Orleans creoles with or without an African component in their heritage “engaged with questions of creolization, Americanization, and belonging.” (p. 8). The book examines francophone theater’s “role in the city’s political and social fabric” (p. 8) and traces the “processes of circum-Atlantic cultural exchange that led to the formation of a francophone theatrical culture that blended Old

and New World influences,” one that “was able to thrive despite Spanish anti-theatre legislation and American competition” (pp. 8-9).

In chapter one, “Circum-Atlantic Theatrical Relations,” Braun argues that the Caribbean element dropped out of francophone performance across the nineteenth century following the revolution in Haiti and a devalorization of the term *créole*. French theaters in New Orleans adopted more exclusive bilateral relationships with theaters in France as “directors renounced creolization and their theater’s Caribbean roots” (p. 9). The founders of French theater in NOLA brought experience from Saint-Domingue, Martinique and Guadeloupe on managing theaters in tropical climates and “knowledge on how to manage a racially, ethnically and socially diverse population in a public space” (p. 41); yet, “[a]s did their English-speaking counterparts, francophone Louisianans uncoupled their Creole heritage from the term’s perceived negative associations with the Caribbean” (p. 41). Some of these French professionals made NOLA their home and raised the stakes of legitimate theater and opera in French. The chapter charts the rise of three French-speaking stages in New Orleans: the Théâtre de la rue St. Pierre, the Théâtre St. Philippe and the Théâtre d’Orléans (active 1819-1859) which prospered with a highly professional ensemble company, and was destroyed by fire in 1866.

For me, the book’s greatest contribution is to make accessible the archival history of these buildings and their repertoires. The Théâtre de l’Opéra, known as the French Opera House (opened December 1, 1859, destroyed by fire in 1919), “ushered in a new era of French opera in the Crescent City” (p. 35) that rivaled New York as a site for French repertory in the U.S. The book includes important details about the culture of each venue (for example, those attached to francophone ballrooms and their so-called *quadroon* balls) and information on seating and segregation in theaters, ticket prices, and practices of attendance. These buildings are no longer visible in the architectural landscape of the city and the book restores their significance as cultural institutions. For Braun, “[i]gnoring this rich Creole heritage” of most of the founders and directors of NOLA’s French language theaters “fundamentally misunderstands the impact of the French Atlantic, both in its trans-Atlantic and circum-Atlantic iterations, on the development of theater in Louisiana from its inception in 1792 until the end of the antebellum period” (p. 41). The volume will be helpful for teaching (in English) the early history of performance forms that made NOLA unique in the U.S., attached it to the Caribbean and the French Atlantic, and also to African diasporic cultures.

In chapter two, “Local Struggles Past and Present,” Braun studies three plays that “transported” conflicts between English- and French-speaking factions onto the stage (p. 43) in a “battle for cultural sovereignty” (p. 42). Two tragedies, one in English and one in French, both by New Orleans-born playwrights, “recast an episode in the insurrectionary history of Louisiana’s French-speaking community” (p. 43): the 1768 ousting of the region’s Spanish governor by francophone patriots, most of whom were executed. In Braun’s reading of Thomas Wharton Collens’s *The Martyr Patriots* (1836) and August Lussan’s *Les Martyrs de la Louisiane* (1839), the plays ultimately recommended cooperation and Americanization. A third piece, Louis Placide Canonge’s 1850 *drame, France et Espagne ou La Louisiane en 1768 et 1769* “reflects the anxieties of an increasingly marginalized French-speaking citizenry at the end of the antebellum period” (p. 43) in the face of Americans’ demand for equal representation in city government and their characterization of a “Creole minority” dominating an American majority (p. 56). Braun shows that this episode of urban history had as much to do with American economic development and business practices constrained by the French laws as it did with political power. Canonge, born in New Orleans and

educated in Paris, is “educating his audience in republican principles” (p. 130). He has his martyrs’ leader Lafrenière intone that “We will be Louisianians, that is to say independent!” (p. 66) as Braun notes, “anachronistically projecting the ideas of the 1789 French Revolution onto 1768 Louisiana” (pp. 66-67) and “emphasizing Spain’s role as a colonizer and oppressor” (p. 70). These history plays, Braun suggests, were staged to comment on local struggles but also to advise audiences in shaping current policy and future commitments.

In chapter three, free Black theaters are studied as a site for the consolidation of a local identity with both French- and English-speaking facets. Reading plays performed in spaces alternately open to all and sometimes segregated or excluding people of color, or white folk, or the enslaved, this chapter pushes further in the consideration of how theater texts both reflected and countered currents in the contexts of their production. What emerges is a continuous ebb and flow of racial definitions and practices within redrawn urban district borders, rather than any clear narrative concerning social divisions instituted by or in francophone theater. Braun tries to chart the changes in the definitions and politics of race and the social nuances of racial belonging and, in this difficult task, the chronology of the plays studied occasionally confuses rather than clarifies the complexity of the history. Racialized social conflict in response to immigration from Haiti in the century’s first decade and the local 1811 revolt of enslaved people, Braun writes, reached theaters and fed racism among actors, with white actors refusing to play in the same theater as a Haitian actor the following year.

While the history of racial antagonism must be acknowledged, the chronology can be confusing: “the first” actors (p. 75) at the Théâtre de la rue St. Pierre, under the direction of St. Dominguan refugee Madame Durosier, who presented quadron actresses, were popular; however, “[t]wenty years after the arrival of the first black performers in New Orleans the tide had turned against them” (p. 76). Yet as the previous chapter showed, racial tensions were reconfigured as power balances shifted. The startling act here is the “legal segregation of New Orleans playhouses in 1816” into three tiers of *loges* (p. 76), but it is unclear how members of the public self-identified or were meant to identify. Patrons both black and white frequented the theaters founded for *gens de couleurs libres* such as the Théâtre Marigny from 1838, sitting together without segregation, while slaves were not admitted (p. 81). Thus class functioned, along with color, to define the theaters’ public spaces, and none of these exclusions seems to have been definitive. Conflicts within a community identified by the author as “black” continued as well. I would like to know more about how the theaters created “race” in sync with the law, but also permitted or facilitated “unofficial” racial practices. As the author writes, “even in 1840, New Orleans’ racial makeup was so complicated that it was practically impossible to enforce this law” (pp. 82-83) that excluded white patrons from the Théâtre de la Renaissance: “Phenotype as a distinguishing feature was unreliable, and it was common practice for slaves to accompany their masters to the theater. The Théâtre de la Renaissance therefore likely continued to cater to both black and white patrons, albeit unofficially” (p. 83). This is arguably the book’s most crucial point. This venue was exemplary, for instance, in challenging stereotypes and reversing practices with white actors appearing onstage there, even after the exclusion of white audience members (p. 83).

Braun writes that these free black theaters may have been staging French plays from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with plots about arranged or mixed marriages, as a way of getting around the censor representing the new American authority.[2] More could be said about how or why audiences saw themselves in these plays. The chapter includes reflection on a play deemed too problematic to be performed, Victor Escousse’s 1831 *Farruck le Maure*,

announced in 1840 with a white actor as Farruck and black performer Edmond Orseaux as a Portuguese slaveowner, a variation on the captivity narratives about the Orient that shifted focus away from slavery in the colonies.[3] What, then, was the effect of playing such French Orientalized dramas of Islamic rulers and leaders, for example by Voltaire, to mixed-race audiences in New Orleans? Braun concludes that Voltaire's *Zaïre* or *Mahomet* played in 1838 and 1840 as "cautionary tales" (p. 96) of despotism that for a local audience would have resonated with recent Haitian politics. However, it would also be possible to decode performances of Voltaire's Muslim plays alongside the history of Louisiana Muslims identified through African linguistic groups and active in slave revolts.[4] There is more work to be done in unpacking and interpreting these significant moments of performance history in their specific Louisiana contexts.

The French-speaking theaters which Braun types as conservative apologists for the Crown in St. Domingue represent an alternative in America, with plays alternately consolidating creoleness, recommending Americanness, or registering flight to France; but these very different movements were happening simultaneously. Braun's final chapter, "Transatlantic Vistas," follows New Orleanian Victor Séjour to Paris. Along with many of his class and cohort, Séjour studied in France and later chose to live there rather than fight the Louisiana battle for Creole cultural survival. Braun anchors the chapter's analysis of Séjour's later stage plays in his early story, *Le Mulâtre*, published in 1837 in *La Revue des colonies*. Braun notes that the story follows the structure of Greek tragedy in five sections, presenting slavery as a "universal tragedy" (p. 150), but misses the possible influence of the very popular stagings of Aphra Behn's tragic narrative of an escaped slave, *Oronooko*. Working in France, Séjour's strategy of "not offending Napoleon III" (p. 154) meant circumnavigating the Emperor's leanings toward the U.S. South and slavery. Séjour's play *Le Martyre du Cœur* (1858), advocating the British path to emancipation via law, included a Jamaican character rather than one from the French Antilles. In Séjour's example, Braun finds a choice to opt for "amenities" at court rather than social justice in Louisiana in the late 1850s (p. 160). She concludes that the white creoles lost by trying to ally with France (and the Confederacy) rather than negotiating with the North or Anglo-American interests. Séjour became French in 1870 and when he died in 1874 was memorialized as a "French author" in *The New York Times* (p. 164).

How did the rise and success of francophone theater in NOLA correspond to the decline of the people who supported it? *Creole Drama* goes a long way to helping us understand that the French theater drew broader constituencies but also reflected many internal contradictions in the francophone community in the Crescent City. It might have gone much further: the book argues for the recuperation of creole history without working through the more complex history of creoles, although it does suggest further work to be done in archives. Braun describes Caribbean theater in her introduction as a dominant and conservative form, at times solidifying the power of the French crown: theaters could divert citizens in troubled times, but they "could also prevent citizens from degeneration and moral decline" (p. 19). But she seems also to want to rewrite the history of a regional minority in the U.S. via a Caribbean-rooted theater. Braun traces New Orleans French theater to St. Domingue, but writes that the tide of antislavery movements inspired by the French Revolution closed down the theaters in Haiti: "unable to resist that tide, the theaters too fell victim to revolutionary warfare During the revolutionary period, theatrical activities on the island came almost to a standstill. The theater in Port-au-Prince ceased to operate in 1791, that in Cap-Français in 1793" (p. 19). Yet plays were performed even as battles raged.[5]

Creole Drama confirms the political and cultural shift that made an independent Haiti no longer a theater capital because it was no longer a colony, and no longer wealthy because deep in war debt to France. Yet if New Orleans francophone communities ultimately lost by dropping their connections to Haiti, renegotiating alliances with France and a French second empire, then the very potential that this study seems to reserve for theater, to do more than simply reinforce existing power structures, seems negligible. French theater in NOLA, instead of confirming a French cultural or political superiority, also allowed the expression of an alternative Americanness, one linked to the Caribbean, challenging certain identifications and segregations. Performance's capacity to lead ideas and create social configurations, the power of social rituals, all continue to haunt New Orleans. The author's call to recuperate the Creole heritage resonates with the presence of many surviving creolized performance forms in New Orleans' diverse communities. While helping to bring the archive to life, this book might also inspire readers and researchers linking this history not to the death of French, but to a continuum of performance in New Orleans that has always represented something "creole"—something different from the rest of the U.S.

NOTES

[1] Recent research on New Orleans includes work by the international research network PARIFA based at Tulane University, the Historic New Orleans Collection Williams Research Center, and historians of performance and of New Orleans based at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. See, for example, Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race and the Making of a Slave Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Mélanie Lamotte, *Making Race: Policies, Sex, and Social Orders in the French Atlantic and Indian Oceans, c. 1608–1756* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[2] The focus on the marriage plot as an allegory for social control brings to mind related work by, for example, Kristin Okoli reading Louisiana cultural production on the so-called "tragic mulatta" or Lindon Barrett's definition of race as a marriage protocol. See, for example, Kristin Okoli, "Œdipal Erotics of Place and *Plaçage* in *Les Cenelles*," under review, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*; and Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1998]).

[3] That pattern was identified in French cultural production before 1870 by historians of French Orientalism and colonialism such as Madeleine Dobie and Elsa Dorlin. See, for example, Madeleine Dobie, *Foreign Bodies: Gender, Language, and Culture in French Orientalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Elsa Dorlin, *La Matrice de la race: Généologie sexuelle et coloniale de la Nation française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

[4] Ibrahima Thioub has emphasized this history as the Director of Whitney Plantation Slavery Museum. See also the recent volume *New Orleans, Saint-Louis, and Senegal: Mirror Cities in the Atlantic World 1659–2000s*, ed. Emily Clark, Ibrahima Thioub and Cécile Vidal (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2019).

[5] Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec notes in *L'armée indigène : la défaite de Napoléon en Haïti* (Editions de l'Université d'Etat de Haïti, 2014) that in September and October of 1803, shortly before the final

rout of the French at the battle of Vertières, a comedy by dramaturge Julie Candaille *La belle fermière*, as well as Molière's *Le dépit amoureux* played at the Cap; on the 27th of October, Dorvingy's *Les battus payent l'amende* went up at the same playhouse, "as if Saint Domingue were still viable, as if Haiti would never come to be" (p. 73, my translation).

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ISSN 1553-9172