

H-France Forum

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 5, #2

Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. xvi+278pp. Color plates, notes, and index. \$129.99 US (hb.) ISBN 978-3-031-22690-8.

Review Essay by Olivia Sabee, Swarthmore College

Julia Prest's *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* approaches the colony's theatrical culture through a direct interrogation of the evolving roles played by enslaved people in theater making and spectatorship. By nature, some of these roles change in the years leading up to and following the Haitian Revolution; in the book's conclusion, Prest also includes comparisons to practices in New Orleans and Charleston, where anxieties about the recent revolution led to the institution of very different regulations and practices around performance and spectatorship.

The book's throughline is defined by its treatment of theater and enslavement in this context as indelibly linked to one another. How would theater in Saint-Domingue have been produced if not for the enslaved laborers who not only built the theaters but also dressed actors, performed in orchestras, and fabricated wigs? Building on recent approaches to theater studies that foreground the material conditions of art production, Prest accounts for ways in which enslaved labor was not only implicated in theatrical production but establishes and emphasizes the fact that Saint-Domingue's vibrant theatrical culture could not have existed were it not for the enslaved laborers who contributed to its production and performance. Yet Prest's monograph also bridges the gap between performance production and reception, demonstrating how enslaved people engaged with theatrical performances in what Prest terms "mitigated spectatorship" throughout the monograph. By this Prest refers to a practice by which enslaved people and free women of color alike gained aural and sometimes visual access to performances.

Although some free women of color were permitted to purchase tickets to the theater in Le Cap, this was initially limited to those with lighter skin color (sometimes referred to as *mulâtresses*).^[1] Yet beginning in 1775 (during a financial crisis, Prest notes, underscoring a profit-related motive), women identified as *négresses* (free women of color with darker skin) were offered access to the theater. These spectators, however, were initially restricted to standing in the corridor at the back of the theater, a space not constructed for performance viewing, thus allowing primarily aural rather than visual access to performances. Later, in 1784, additional boxes were added to the theater, at which point, Prest writes, "the *négresses libres* achieved a fuller form of spectatorship" (p. 31). Similarly, enslaved domestics often arrived prior to performances to save places in the loges for their masters; some of them, it seems, remained in the backs of the boxes for some portion of the performance or heard the text of the performance from the corridor outside the boxes whose doors were opened because of the stifling heat in the theater. This line of inquiry provides a fuller picture of theater attendance in Saint-Domingue, nuancing investigations of the spectatorship and repertory by emphasizing the fact that (like in

other venues and in other settings), full attention to the performance would have been the exception and not the norm.

Theater and enslavement also intersect via thematic elements of repertory Prest considers in her study. Broadly speaking, the question of freedom underpins a substantial line of intervention related to eighteenth-century French theatrical performance.[2] Yet here a comparison between colony and metropole is particularly revealing, given the prominence of themes related to freedom and enslavement in repertory initially performed in the metropole. A running question throughout *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* is how freedom would have been understood and represented in the colonies, where the lack of freedom for enslaved individuals would have been manifestly impossible to ignore. Many works (including numerous works addressing these themes) were adapted or revised in one or more iterations for their colonial performances, possibly resulting in shifts around the representation of enslavement. Prest's attention to these transformations addresses several key questions: How would this paradox—in which actors who “owned” enslaved domestics performed roles in “works that seem to condemn human slavery” (p. 99)—have been dealt with in performance?[3] How would these performances in turn have been interpreted by spectators of different races and social classes? Building on her definition of mitigated spectatorship of enslaved people and people of color, Prest focuses on what she terms throughout the monograph “mitigated portrayals” of enslaved people in the Creole repertoire, crafted in ways that would limit real comparison to local practices of enslavement. By this, she references the impossibility, in this social context, of its representation: “Creole portrayals of enslaved characters are [...] paradoxical,” she writes, “Enslaved figures in these works are undoubtedly recognizable as figures from contemporary life in the French Caribbean, but they are not recognizable by their enslavement” (p. 151).

Prest treats the performance and reception of several pantomime works in the book, which she appraises as noteworthy in the colonial and revolutionary context. Pantomime, with its potential for a multiplicity of interpretations and its potential to reach spectators without mastery of a shared verbal language (as well as its prominence in eighteenth-century theater) is particularly important in multilingual contexts, where corporeal expression provides another lens for interpretation. Pantomimes treated at length include *L'Héroïne américaine* (Arnould), *Arlequin, mulâtresse protégée par Macanda* (unknown author), and *Le héros africain, ou la traite des noirs* (unknown author). Yet the experience of attending a pantomime would have been vastly different for viewers with primarily aural access to a performance. One area for future research might be to apply Prest's theories of mitigated spectatorship to a study of performances by genre, focusing specifically on musical genres and on pantomime works, the former reliant on music to convey, in some cases, non-verbal emotional content and in others, non-verbal content via corporeal performance. In these two cases, the experiences of a spectator without full access to the performance's visual aspects would be radically different: in the former example, a spectator could interpret or imagine elements of the performance on the basis of its aural qualities, which might or might not include text. In the latter, the lack of visual access to the performance would likely obscure major elements of its meaning. This is intriguing in that pantomime was often considered to be dangerous based on its ability to communicate subversive ideas. At the same time, as Noémie Ndiaye's recent work and an earlier article by Prest underscore, Black dances performed by white Europeans played a key role in shaping understandings of race, both in

Europe and in the colonies.[4] How would such corporeal performances have shaped the spectatorship of those audience members with mitigated experiences?

In the book's final chapter, Prest links theatrical culture directly to revolution in her detailed gloss of Pierre-Jean-Louis Boquet's *Le Pillage du Cap, Révolte de Saint-Domingue* (1793), underscoring the theatrical costumes present in the image. The painting, reproduced in color both in full and in two detailed close-ups, reveals people of color dressed in costumes (one harlequin and one Pierrot) presumably looted from the theater. Prest notes the potential here for a multiplicity of readings of the use of such costumes, but underlines questions of access, noting that they certainly "break[...] down the barriers that prevented most people of colour—and indeed most poor whites—from attending such performances and raises the stakes of this kind of costuming as portrayed by the violence that is taking place elsewhere in the picture" (p. 214).

In closing, Prest summarizes the transformations of repertory in the years following the 1791 slave revolt, both in Saint-Domingue and in the United States, following the exodus of numerous theatrical performers. In Saint-Domingue during this period, repertory was largely French and comic in nature. Seating in the Cap-Français playhouse, however, seems to have become racially mixed during this time. In the United States, refugees founded French theater companies in New Orleans and Charleston, performing repertory from France as well as Saint-Domingue. Yet in Charleston, Black people were not permitted to appear onstage nor were they allowed to attend the theater. As Prest writes, "Once again, it is clear that the theatre was thought to shape the understanding and behaviour of black and enslaved people, especially in performances included representations of those people" (p. 240). *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* makes this case convincingly and provides a grounding for further study that rigorously takes into account the significance of people of color in the making and viewing of theater in Saint-Domingue.

NOTES

[1] Here I follow Prest's convention of retaining the French terms for numerous reasons including their untranslatability.

[2] See for example Hedy Law, *Music, Pantomime and Freedom in Enlightenment France*. Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell Press, 2020.

[3] Here again I follow Prest's convention of using quotation marks around this term in order "to challenge the notion that an individual could possess and enslave another individual" (p. 51).

[4] See Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022, especially pp.187–234 and Julia Prest, "Pale imitations: White performances of slave dance in the public theatres of pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue," *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* vol.16, no.4 (2019), pp.502—20.

Olivia Sabee
Swarthmore College
osabee1@swarthmore.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum
Volume 19 (2024), Issue 5, #2