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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 by Jennifer E. Row, University of Minnesota

In the acknowledgements of Julia Prest's *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Saint-Domingue*, she reveals how some seeds of this project were planted, thanking Yale University's Chris Miller for hinting at the existence of theater in Saint-Domingue. The origin story of this monograph reflects the many circuitous, unforeseen and unexpected flows of knowledge, passed-on thought and hidden and surprising archives that contributed to this project, an impressive project that seeks to narrate a complex, complicated and overlooked story of theater in the eighteenth-century French colony of Saint-Domingue. Indeed, like many readers–early modern specialists, theater historians, or scholars interested in the history of race and slavery (myself included in the above categories)—prior to reading Prest's book, I too was largely unaware of the existence of theater in colonial Saint-Domingue. The book not only shines a light on the mere existence of this theater, but also on the fact that "enslaved people—mostly enslaved urban domestics—were an integral part of the story of public theatre in Saint-Domingue and not merely a part of the uncomfortable backdrop against which that story unfolded" (p. 6). This fragment of an existence, told in passing, blooms into a rich and complex story, a painstakingly researched and detailed monograph.

The twofold question then becomes: how to tell such a story and through what evidence? Prest relies on an ingenious source of information: local newspaper theater announcements for performances in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français (the major publications being *Affiches américaines* and *Supplement aux affiches américaines*). These newspapers not only furnish Prest with the knowledge of the rhythms of staging, the types and kinds of spectacles staged, but also runaway notices and for sale advertisements that illuminate the types of enslaved people who may have been working in and around theater production at the time. However, Prest is extremely careful not to pad or conjecture too fancifully, writing "I have attempted to distinguish clearly between different levels of certainty—between what is *certain, probable, or possible*—and what is informed speculation [...] making room for things that are uncertain is essential when dealing with the stories of enslaved people" (my emphasis, p. 9). For example, in Prest's chapter 4, "Mitigated Portrayals: Enslaved Figures in Creole Repertoire," she is careful not to equate the simple fact of Black fictional protagonists onstage with liberation. In her analysis of the anonymous *Le mariage par lettres de change ou le Négociant du Cap* (1785) as we lack a published text, we must deduce if it is an adaptation or a slight modification of another text (she proposes Clément's *Figaro au Cap-Français,* 1785). Attention-generating news articles highlight that this play features "a local Figaro, who is a black valet…an enslaved or formerly enslaved man" (p. 111) but do not offer substantial details about this Figaro's particular characterization. Other newspaper articles reporting the latest news from France allow Prest to contextualize the excitement in Paris surrounding Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* and the

imagined sustained interest in Saint-Domingue. Then she carefully offers speculation about the ways that *Le Mariage par lettres de change* might have adjusted for race and class differences. While Beaumarchais's comedy toys with the power dynamics of a "master" and a witty "servant," here the vectors of oppression, resistance, mockery and domination become more richly complex once read through the angle of race. She asks, "What, then, are the implications when an ingenious white barber cum valet in a European context becomes an ingenious black valet in the context of colonial Saint-Domingue? Figaro's intelligence—and especially his cunning—is potentially problematic: 'slave owners' in Saint-Domingue wanted capable domestics, but they were afraid of domestics who might use their capabilities against them" (p. 112). While disability does not prominently figure in this book, Prest hints here at the twin vectors of the emergent values of capability versus disposability and the desire to domesticate such abilities; a concept that I will return to shortly. Prest concludes by reminding the reader that the Black valet was not played by a Black actor, but rather a white actor in blackface. Blackface performance, she suggests "allowed the white population to control theatrical portrayals of black behaviour and to fashion it in ways that they found entertaining and, more importantly, non-threatening" (p. 112).

The ease with which Prest navigates the thorny terrain of "certain, probable, and possible [...] and informed speculation" is admirable. Her task is challenging in multiple ways, as we are called upon not only to analyze something as ephemeral as performance–but also and especially performances that lack published texts. By using her knowledge of the traditions of theater practices (audience expectations of accent, the received notions of blackface), Prest carefully constructs avenues of possibility of the effects of this play and the affective and socio-political implications of the theatergoing public. She juggles an astute comparison between what is "known" (Beaumarchais's comedy) and what might have been altered, changed, or probable in the context of a Black valet from Saint-Domingue. Faced with the dearth of explicit evidence, she very prudently and delicately weaves together threads of speculation or possibility.

I highlight Prest's level of care and attention to these details in order to open the door to another, larger question. The contemporary historian of French colonies like Saint-Domingue must walk this fine line between recovery of the past, bearing witness to atrocities or violence while also respecting the absences and lacunae in the archives. But what, exactly, are the limits of this kind of speculation? Early on in the book, Prest suggests that there may be a bit of creative speculation demanded by the context: "Since these people barely make it into the record as human beings [...] in the first place, we have an ethical obligation, as Fuentes has argued so convincingly in relation to enslaved women in particular, not to 'let our desires for empirical substantiation remand these fleeting … lives back into oblivion'" (Fuentes 2016, 138; cit. Prest p. 9). This sort of narrative suturing, proposed by Saidiya Hartman in "Venus in Two Acts," can be thought of as what Hartman calls a critical fabulation:

> How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from "the locus of impossible speech" or resurrect lives from the ruins? [1]

The ethical question then becomes how much of a poetics should the researcher indulge in? Is poetic speculation the site of a restorative politics? Or does the historian's voice threaten to override or supplant the fragments of voices lifted out of the archives? Prest takes a much more prudent stance than some researchers, justifying each of her speculative questions as queries, or mere sites of possibility. Take for a comparative example the approach of Hershini Bhana Young in her monograph *Illegible Will*: *Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*:

> Rather than presuming one can find what has been missing, [Anjali] Arondekar theorizes a reading practice that departs from the assumption that recovering lost or new evidence can somehow excavate illegible subjectivities. Instead of the search for an object that leads to a subject, the scholar's search should be for a subject effect: a ghostly afterlife or a space of absence that is not empty but filled. In other words, rather than insisting on excavating factual evidence that may or may not be there, but that can never adequately fill the holes in the archive, my work performs politically urgent narrations or informed critical conjurings, a method at which some historians might balk.[2]

Young's performance studies approach takes more liberties with the archival absences, electing instead to dance with the "ghostly afterlife" of the "subject-effect." This is not to judge Prest's or Young's approaches as being empirically better than the other, but rather to highlight a divided tendency in a field that tends to lost or missing archives and addresses in different modes the urgency of rendering the invisible at least partially visible.

This choice—toeing the line between more fanciful critical imaginings and more historically-supported musings—brings me to my second point. While mitigation does not appear in the title of Prest's *Public Theater*, it is a concept that is not only tackled historically but also theoretically. Prest writes: "I introduce the notion of the 'mitigated (i.e. unofficial, partial and involuntary) spectator as a way of conceiving of the enslaved people present, considering this alongside the noisy and often inattentive spectatorship of the official audience" (p. 13), underscoring the simple, but oft-overlooked point that we cannot assume a homogenously white audience when we consider the plays of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue. Mitigation becomes part and parcel of the archive-object. When we understand the historical realities of the mixed nature of the theatergoing public, as well as the important contributions of enslaved and free people of African descent onstage (as musicians, as wigmakers, as supernumeraries or as seat-holders) it unearths another, remarkable level of how we (contemporary scholars) may be able to imagine the public's varying abilities to see, hear, contribute, learn, or take pleasure in the spectacles at hand. However, in this soup of mitigation, we may be tempted to conjecture about the possibilities of resistance or of dissent. Indeed, in the course of reading *Public Theatre*, I often found myself desiring more fanciful conjectures, more possibilities of critical Black resistance or troubling. At the same time, I noted that it was the very bubbling-up of this desire itself—and the fact that Prest (and the archive) left it activated, yet unmet—that was part of the story of mitigation.

Mitigation—this partial, involuntary, and unofficial nature of viewing—is therefore also part of the *telling* of the story of the public theater. The historian cannot fully know, view or see, especially given the unpublished nature of the archives, the proliferation of "anonymous" or "unknown" contributors, authors, theatermakers (many of whom may have been enslaved or freed Black subjects). Mitigation becomes part of the historian's burden and a critical part of the

reading experience itself. How can we track our desires not for empirical substantiation, but for more glimmers of agency? And what do we then do with this ignited, yet thwarted desire?

My third point concerns the notion of disability in Prest's archives. In her analysis of *Le Cadi dupé*, Prest analyzes how the Cadi's betrothal to a disabled and "frighteningly ugly" daughter offers comedic effect, in uncomfortable tension with the real-life mutilations and disabilities experienced by enslaved people of African descent (as analyzed by Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy). In the rest of her brilliant chapter on enslaved contributors to the public theater, she tracks the fragmentary stories of builders, wigmakers, musicians, and painters. While she concludes that "we can begin to acknowledge the extent to which the metropolitan-inspired theatre tradition in the colony was reliant on the world of enslaved people of African descent" (p. 187), I wonder if she might have gone even further in probing the complex divide between capacity and incapacity. Disability scholar Sami Schalk proposes the following:

> Consider, for example, how disability, in terms of claims of lesser intellectual abilities, was used to justify the enslavement of black people, while at the same time an understanding of black people's bodies as hyper strong and impervious to heat and pain also justified conditions of slave labor. This racial double bind, to borrow from Marilyn Frye, positioned black people as at once disabled and hyper able and yet suited for slavery in both cases.[3]

Schalk calls upon us to hold on to this "disparate historical understandings of the black body, to parse the ways in which both disability and ability were used discursively to justify violence and oppression." In the aforementioned example of the witty and clever Black Figaro or, to take a few examples from Prest's book: a trio of young enslaved domestics belonging to Sieur Tasset, a musician in the cap, two of whom "lisant assez bien la musique sur toutes les clefs indifféremment et en état de faire leurs parties dans un concert" (Fouchard 1988c, 57; Prest p. 155), or a popular violinist, "Julien," "identified only by a first name and referred to as 'le nommé' [...] it is clear that he is recognized for his exceptional talent, which sat alongside that of the more prominent white performers, Charles and especially Petit" (p. 160), we must contend with the fact that disability as well as hyper-ability were part of the story of the public theater and enslaved people's contributions. If eighteenth-century discourses reduced people of African descent to "physically, spiritually and mentally disabled and ultimately sub-human" (Hunt-Kennedy; Prest p. 158) then hyperability must walk another fine (mitigated) line, between not being so exceptional as to humanize, but being talented enough to be fungible or at least domesticable. Prest points out that in the advertisement regarding Tasset's three young men, Tasset stresses that they would lose "their value if sold separately [which] reminds us that his primary motive for training them as musicians was profit [...] not least because between them they could make up a significant portion of the orchestra" (p. 156).

Earlier in the book, Prest speculates about the reasoning and interest behind mitigated portrayals, such as *Jeannot et Thérèse* which depicted "the temporary phenomenon of interracial erotic relations' (p. 130). She imagines that "the work may thus have acted as a temporary, theatrical outlet—and perhaps also as a safety valve—for thoughts and feelings about something that was both accepted and denied, tacitly condoned and publicly condemned in the colony. If colonies are the 'safety valves for metropolitan excess' (Dayan 1995, xv–xvi), then Creole theatre may have acted as a local safety valve for the safety valve (p. 130). One more affordance of the public

theater—and a byproduct of this mitigation—may be not only to operate as what Prest calls a "safety valve" but also a site in which hierarchies of capable and incapable, human and inhuman, able and hyper-able were staged, sifted and sorted. Must we then consider the ways that the public theater contributed to the sedimentation of notions of disability and ability, and would we then need to imagine the theater as a tool that allowed for a certain justification of violence and oppression? How might we track these complex, mitigated spectacles as also part of histories of disability?

NOTES

[1] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* (Vol. 12, no. 2), June 2008, pp.1-14; 3.

[2] Hershini Bhana Young, *Illegible Will*: *Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

[3] Sami Schalk, "Critical Disability Studies as Methodology." *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. Volume 6, number 1, spring 2017. https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk/ retrieved 29 Jan 2024.

Jennifer E. Row
University of Minnesota
jjrow@umn.edu

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