

*H-France Forum*

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 5, #1

Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. xvi+278 pp. Notes, figures, bibliography, index. \$129.99 (cl). ISBN 978-3-031-22690-8. \$99.00 (eb). ISBN 978-3-031-22691-5.

Review Essay by Ashley M. Williard, University of South Carolina

Julia Prest's study of public theater offers significant new insights on the histories of slavery and enslaved people. These pages bring the urban spaces of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue to vivid life. As the chapters unfold, we learn to see the playhouses in cities like Le Cap and Port-au-Prince as central sites where the fundamental violence of slavery was at once on display, resisted, and denied. Prest offers a model of creative interdisciplinary work by drawing on and contributing to diverse fields in her nuanced approach to a brutally fragmented archive.

The chapters analyze a diverse corpus through complementary approaches that demonstrate the originality of Prest's contributions. Whereas Chapter 4 ("Mitigated Portrayals: Enslaved Figures in Creole Repertoire") traces the representations of enslaved people in theatrical texts performed in Saint-Domingue, Chapters 2 ("Mitigated Spectators: Enslaved People in the Playhouse"), 3 ("Unsustainable Tensions: 'Slave Ownership' Among Theatre-Makers") and 5 ("Concealed Contributors: Enslaved Participation in Theatre-Making") identify the actual presence and contributions of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue's playhouses. Chapter 6 ("New Citizens: Shifting Roles in Revolutionary-Era Theatre") then brings these approaches together to examine the texts and contexts of theater during the revolutionary period. Rather than separate the metaphorical from the material, both are constantly intertwined. A focus on theatrical production exposes social dimensions of urban slavery in the French colony; attention to evolving conflicts in Saint-Domingue brings meaning to literary works and performance practices on both sides of the Atlantic.

For those familiar with Prest's website, *Theatre in Saint-Domingue, 1764-1791*, it will come as no surprise that her corpus is both wide-ranging and deep. The main sources are theatrical works and local performance records, but Prest expands to a range of other documents, such as printed narratives, notary documents, and legal decrees. Most significantly, she makes rich use of Caribbean newspapers like *Les Affiches Américaines*, where theater announcements appeared alongside more direct evidence of slavery's violence: prisoner lists, sale advertisements, and marronage notices. The consideration of sources not obviously related to theater concretely situates playhouses in a slave society and allows Prest to meticulously reconstruct quotidian aspects of enslaved people's lives.

No matter how thorough, accumulation alone cannot meaningfully respond to archival silences, which require patience, creativity, and acceptance of limits, as Prest demonstrates. Drawing on profound knowledge of the sources, Prest brilliantly recomposes stories presumed lost to history, including literary works with no extant text and individuals never permitted to write their own narratives. To do so, she zooms in on important details and links them to larger patterns,

contextual clues, and related examples. She remains grounded in the texts even as she connects them to a network of events, practices, and institutions.

As a potent example, Prest unpacks *Arlequin mulâtresse protégée par Macanda*, a farce-pantomime with no known author nor surviving text performed in Saint-Domingue in 1786. With careful consideration of the title's five words, she elaborates for ten compelling pages to resituate the commedia dell'arte character in the colonial world of enslaved revolt, marronage, and vaudou (pp. 114-23). The unknown play takes on meaning by cross-referencing performance history and the traditional characterization of Harlequin with contemporary accounts and historical studies of Makandal. While newspapers indicate the play ultimately disappointed audiences, Prest posits that "Macandal will have been domesticated and contained by his presentation here as a force for light-hearted entertainment" (p. 119). She thus elaborates on the function of the theater as colonial safety valve, by which enslavers performed mastery that exposes anxieties and contestation. As Prest concludes regarding the representation of slavery in the largely comic Creole repertoire: "Our works deal lightly with some weighty matters and create the illusion that everything is under (white) control" (p. 150). In unpacking the significance of these plays in the context of slavery, the author exposes complex new dimensions of power and racial violence that circulated and evolved in the French Atlantic world.

However, white enslavers were not the only ones present in the playhouses of Saint-Domingue. As Prest convincingly shows in Chapter 2, enslaved and free people of color were also in the audience, making sense of the theater on their own terms, a fact that complicates and enriches her analysis throughout the book. In direct and indirect ways, Africans and people of African descent also participated in the creation of theatrical performances. Especially in Chapter 5, Prest introduces readers to individuals, such as the talented violinist Julien (pp. 158-61). She scours minute details from newspapers—the word *nommé*, terms of racial categorization, the playing of a duet—to chart his life and representation in the colony. Such details situate the musician and others like him as significant contributors to eighteenth-century theater history.

Aside from named performers like Julien or Minette, countless enslaved people toiled behind the scenes and remain unnamed in the archive. Prest responds with a systematic analysis of the multifaceted presence of enslaved artists, artisans, builders, domestics, and others. Indeed, she insists on the goal to "to cast our net as widely as possible and to consider all people—and all contributions to theatre production—on an equal footing" (p. 153). Since records do not identify individual enslaved women or men, Prest notes the obligation "to look for scraps of evidence that bring us closer to what we want to know about enslaved people" (p. 178). And so she turns to tracking down, for example, the runaway ad published by a contractor, or the rental ad mentioning enslaved men working for a playhouse owner (pp. 178-79). As the author concludes in reference to enslaved domestics: "near invisibility in the theatre records belies what was, in all likelihood, a significant presence and contribution" (p. 175).

As her engagement with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* attests (p. 7, p. 178), Prest carefully reflects on and interprets such invisibility. She animates the book with questions that at once introduce informed possibilities and confront the limits of existing records. While interpreting a runaway ad for the maroon woman Sophie-Elizabeth posted by a theater director, Prest notes: "Given the lack of detail, we must ask ourselves a number of questions and speculate

on some of the answers” (p. 54). Often, those questions focus on facts, such as Sophie-Elizabeth’s age, status, access to papers, and the punishments she may have received. Prest elaborates with possible answers found in, for example, potential archival references, parallel case studies, or colonial policies. On occasion, Prest’s questions shift from objective to subjective considerations. For example, considering the possibility of enslaved porters pulling a chariot onstage, she asks, “How did they experience this cross-over from their daily chores to a theatrical performance of those same chores in an entirely different context?” (p. 166). The question mark forces the reader to pause, shift perspective, but does not direct them to an answer. Prest recenters enslaved people as the subjects of history without presuming to appropriate their internal lives. The author is careful with language, making frequent use of modifiers—*likely*, *possible*—and verb forms—*will have*, *may*, *might*—as constant reminders of conjecture despite the most diligent documentation. Prest foregrounds multiple processes of mitigation at work, as evidenced by the titles of Chapters 2 and 4. While enslaved domestics may have only overheard bits of song or caught brief glimpses of characters, researchers’ access to the history of enslaved people remains mitigated by the authors who represented them. Even as—indeed, *because*—she grapples openly with uncertainty, Prest forges productive meaning from those scraps.

The author’s concluding sentence explicitly invites future research, which her book will surely inspire (p. 242). The field is already developing in exciting ways, as recent edited volumes attest.[1] Prest’s bibliography and notes, along with the sources on her website, provide generous material for future scholars to reveal further details and nuances to the place of theater in colonial Saint-Domingue. I hope, too, that this book will encourage a re-framing of theater in hexagonal France, as well as (comparative) studies of theater in other (French) colonies. Read alongside Noémie Ndiaye’s work on race in performance culture, Prest’s book makes new questions possible within early modern French studies.[2] What of the enslaved and free people of color in theaters in France? What performance cultures existed in the earliest period of colonial occupation of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Canada? How were definitions of race and slavery made, unmade, and remade in playhouses throughout the francophone world?

One particularly promising avenue of research is studying sources in Kreyòl. For example, Prest productively analyzes the presence of Creole passages in several plays (e.g. p. 103, p. 124) and unpacks the term “cale” with reference to a Haitian folk song “Sou lan mè” (p. 106). Ongoing identification and interpretation of such material could provide innovative insights into Caribbean history, literature, and performance. Beyond traditional scholarship, theatrical interpretations, such as the Bénac-Giroux’s staging of *Les Veuves Créoles* (note 10, p. 108), highlight the creative potential in Prest’s corpus and research.[3] I can only hope we will one day see a freshly imagined Harlequin/Makandal.

In this groundbreaking book, Prest has discovered unknown content, expanded knowledge of understudied sources, and made innovative meaning from established material, ultimately expanding French and francophone studies in important new directions.

## NOTES

[1] Jeffrey Leichman and Karine Bénac-Giroux, eds, *Colonialism and Slavery in Performance: Theatre and the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean* (Liverpool: Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment/Liverpool UP, 2021); Julia Prest, ed., *Colonial-Era Caribbean Theatre: Issues in Research, Writing and Methodology* (Oxford University Press/Liverpool University Press, 2021).

[2] Noémie Ndiaye “Rewriting the Grand Siècle: Blackface in Early Modern France and the Historiography of Race,” *Literature Compass* 18, no. 10 (2021); *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

[3] See also part three of Leichman and Bénac-Giroux, *Colonialism and Slavery in Performance*.

Ashley M. Williard  
University of South Carolina  
awilliar@mailbox.sc.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, #1