

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

Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*. Cham: 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.

Response by Julia Prest, University of St Andrews, Scotland

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to H el ene Bilis for editing this issue of H-France Forum and to Ashley Williard, Olivia Sabee, Karine B enac and Jennifer Row for their generous engagement with *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*. This was not an easy book to write, so it was all the more heartening to read that colleagues whose work I respect and admire deemed the final product “groundbreaking” and “a painstakingly researched and detailed monograph” telling a “rich and complex story.” I was pleased they concluded that it expands “French and Francophone studies in important new directions,” offers “significant new insights on histories of slavery and enslaved people” and “renouvelle enti erement notre regard” in Theatre Studies.

The big discussion point to emerge from the reviews is the one that posed me the greatest methodological challenge as I researched and then wrote the book: what sources to use and what to do with the material, including “absent” material. This is, of course, a challenge that confronts all researchers, but it is particularly pressing for those interested in enslaved people for at least two related reasons: first, the lack of personal testimony coupled with a deliberate (if not always conscious) attempt at writing enslaved people out of the sources that do exist; second, the ethical obligation to try to tell that story precisely because it is important and has been overlooked owing to a (perceived) dearth of source material and, historically, to a lack of interest in the lives of enslaved and Black people. On the first reason, in addition to some directly relevant and, when needed, comparable theatre sources, I was able to draw on a range of non-theatrical, broadly “colonial” sources and to read them critically both along and against the grain for what is and is not there. I also learned to read scraps of trace evidence for what is barely there. At the same time, the fact that sometimes a theatre-maker advertised an upcoming performance in the local playhouse and publicly performed his (or occasionally her) participation in the local slave economy by advertising for the return of his enslaved “property” in the same edition of the local newspaper helped me to develop my core argument whereby the story of public theatre in Saint-Domingue is inseparable from that of its enslaved people. If that point sticks, then I will have achieved my main goal in writing the book.

On the second reason, I took my inspiration to move beyond what I could find out (my previous academic comfort zone) from my reading of Marisa Fuentes’s *Dispossessed Lives*, in which, in relation to enslaved women in particular, she urges us not to “let our desires for empirical substantiation remand these fleeting ... lives back into oblivion.”[1] This made me realize that the careful use of language, noted by both Williard and Row—distinguishing between what’s certain, probable or possible and what is informed speculation—was to become a key part of my methodological toolkit. My response to Fuentes was to pursue questions to which I could not

necessarily find the answer and to begin raising possibilities, many of which will never be proven or disproven (though some, no doubt, will). Keeping an open mind about what I might find and learning to “imagine what cannot be verified” were also methods that I had to hone.[2] As I gradually became comfortable with it, I found this approach liberating and illuminating, and I am glad that Williard finds it to be one that “introduce[s] possibilities and confront[s] the limits of existing records” and that led to the forging of “productive meaning.”

Row agrees that I am “extremely careful not to pad or conjecture too fancifully” and comments on my “prudent” approach. Unlike Williard, she wishes for “more fanciful conjectures, more possibilities of critical Black resistance or troubling” and raises another important question: “what, exactly, are the limits of this kind of speculation?” Where Fuentes gave me the courage to ask and sometimes explore questions to which I didn’t have clear answers, it was Saidiya Hartman who helped me to see my own personal limits in this regard.[3] As Row points out, the critical fabulation method advocated by Hartman is one that also raises questions about writerly writing and poetics. Tiya Miles, in the introduction to her brilliant book, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, acknowledges the influence of Hartman on her work and makes it clear to the reader that what follows is “more meditation than monograph.”[4] As someone untrained in non-academic writing, I, however, needed to write something that was much more monograph than meditation. It is also, perhaps, a question of self-positioning: one reason I do not, as Williard puts it helpfully, “presum[e] to appropriate” the “internal lives” of enslaved people is that I am mindful of my own position as a white, European theatre researcher.

The fact that I do not adopt the same methods as Hershini Bhana Young (whose approach is highlighted by Row) and others is in no way a rejection of those methods. Surprisingly perhaps, Young’s description of her own approach as one “at which some historians might balk” resonated with me.[5] Even my “prudent,” “cautious” and “careful” raising of questions and informed speculations has been balked at by some of my colleagues over the years. Only a couple of months ago, a set of such questions was deleted from a proposed publication of mine by the editor who opined that they unhelpfully drew the reader’s attention away from what is known, even though I had spelled out the importance of asking questions to which we have no clear answers earlier in the article. So, while Young and I position ourselves for good reasons at different points on the beyond-pure-facts continuum (or maybe constellation), we are certainly not at opposite ends of it. As Row acknowledges, it is not necessary to rank our respective positions. Indeed, the exploration of a range of different thoughtful methodological approaches is, surely, to be encouraged as we in the academic community grapple –collectively and individually—with tough questions and challenging areas of research.[6]

Turning to theatre in performance, Sabee, who is an expert in pantomime, helpfully picks up on my brief observations about enslaved domestic servants (my “mitigated spectators” who experienced theatre mostly from the back of the boxes and the corridors of the playhouse) having aural access to performance. She suggests that my notion of mitigated spectatorship might usefully be applied to different theatrical genres, especially those, such as musical works or pantomime, that rely particularly heavily on aural or visual elements. It is such a good idea that one wonders why something similar hasn’t been done before, particularly given Edward Nye’s fascinating account of the emergence of pantomime-ballet in eighteenth-century France, which he reads alongside that of the Abbé de l’Épée’s pioneering sign language.[7] In fact, we should

ask not just how spectators with restricted visual access to theatre (be it owing to their location within the playhouse or to a physical visual impairment or disability) experienced pantomime in comparison with opera and other musical genres, but also how hearing-impaired/deaf/Deaf people (of whom I am one) responded—and respond today—to the whole range of different theatrical genres.

Disability is something that Row picks up on more explicitly. She rightly notes that disability doesn't figure prominently in the book, and I admit that, if I were starting the same project now, disability would indeed be foregrounded more and the “complex divide between capacity and incapacity” probed further. A forthcoming and very preliminary piece of mine on performances of Monsigny's *opéra-comique*, *Le Cadi dupé*, in Saint-Domingue begins to investigate, among other things, how this and other disability works will have resonated with the lived experiences of two groups among the theatre audience in particular: enslaved people and members of the military.[8] But as Hunt-Kennedy has demonstrated, the relationship between slavery and disability and the tension between disability and hyper ability is so fundamental to contemporary narratives justifying slavery as to be deserving of a more central place in any study of this kind.[9] Row's point about the hyper ability of enslaved people “not being so exceptional as to humanize” made me wonder if the opposite might be true: being hyper able might also be seen in some way as de-humanizing because, like being disabled, it departs from received notions about what it is to be “normal.” This is something that I am beginning to explore further in a new project on theatre and disability in metropolitan France and Saint-Domingue and, as I turn towards that, I am inspired by Row's observation about the theatre as a site where “hierarchies of capable and incapable, human and inhuman, able and hyper-able were staged, sifted and sorted.”

Returning to performance matters, Williard picks up on a footnote about Karine Bénac's recent production of *Des Veuves créoles* (an adaptation of the anonymous three-act colonial-era comedy, *Les Veuves créoles* set in Martinique but performed in Saint-Domingue) and the creative potential of the corpus I examine. At the risk of stating the obvious, I would like to emphasize the mutually enriching relationship between modern theatre production and historical theatre research. The process of creating a new production today can function as a valuable research tool in and of itself, while the performance that results from such a process offers a welcome means of disseminating that research in an engaging way and reaching audiences far beyond academia. The experience of acting as dramaturg for Bénac's adaptation of *Les Veuves créoles* helped me to pay more attention to—and reflect upon—what might happen off-stage in the play and to delve more deeply in my monograph (compared with my earlier edition of the play) into the enslaved domestics' role as disseminators of information as they perceive it, something that Bénac, who is both a practitioner and a researcher, in turn develops in her response here. I confess that I hadn't thought about the significance of the play featuring a white daughter figure called “Rosalie” alongside a Black enslaved servant called “Marie-Rose.” Given the significance of names in this work, I agree that this is no coincidence. The fact that Marie-Rose is almost the same as Rosalie in reverse—Ros-Alie, Ali-Rose, Marie-Rose—serves to highlight what separates the two characters, but also what they have in common. In the original, Marie-Rose is perhaps a silenced Rosalie (who is the most perceptive character of the play); in Bénac's adaptation, Marie-Rose shares her insights and experiences directly with the audience.[10]

I would like to end by responding to Williard’s enthusiasm for a “freshly imagined Harlequin/Makandal” i.e., *Arlequin mulâtresse protégée par Macanda* (1786), a particularly intriguing local pantomime that references an enslaved runaway and rebel leader who had been executed in Saint-Domingue some twenty-eight years earlier. Although we have no text and little direct information about the work, I have, as Williard notes approvingly, tried to piece together and interpret the scraps that remain alongside information derived from other Harlequin pantomimes, accounts of Makandal and our knowledge of contemporary society and theatre practice. But a performance project would enable us to find out even more about this fascinating work. It might also offer an opportunity to explore the intersection between theatrical genre, theatrical experience and disability, as well as making further use of Creole/ Kreyòl, both in terms of sources and, perhaps, as a performance medium. If there are any practitioners out there who would like to accept this challenge, I will eagerly act as dramaturg.

## NOTES

[1] Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 138.

[2] Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe, Number 26* 12.2 (2008), 1–14 (12).

[3] Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe, Number 26* 12.2 (2008), 1–14.

[4] Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (London: Profile Books, 2024), 21.

[5] Hershini Bhana Young, *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles or Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

[6] For a recent volume dedicated to exploring the methodological challenges of researching colonial-era theatre from across the Caribbean region, see Julia Prest, ed, *Colonial-Era Caribbean Theatre: Issues in Research, Writing and Methodology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023).

[7] Edward Nye, *Mime, Music and Drama on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: The Ballet d’action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[8] “*Le Cadi dupé de Monsigny-Lemonnier à Saint-Domingue: opéra-comique orientaliste ou capacitiste?*” in *Musique et société dans les Caraïbes françaises, 1750-1810*, ed. by Pedro Memelsdorff and Philippe Vendrix (Paris: Classiques Garnier, forthcoming 2024).

[9] Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

[10] For details about another research-based production – an entirely new work by Catherine Bisset, called *Placeholder* – see Catherine Bisset, Flavia D’Avila and Jairus Obayome, “Knowledge Exchange Theatre and the Colonial Caribbean: Creating *Placeholder*” in *Colonial-*

*Era Caribbean Theatre: Issues in Research, Writing and Methodology*, ed. by Julia Prest (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), 231-55.

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