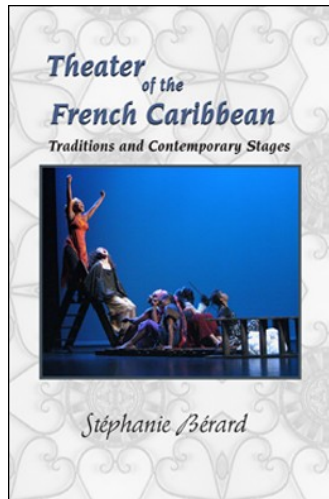


A review of *Theater of the French Caribbean; Traditions and Contemporary Stages* edited by Stephanie Berard (Coconut Creek, Florida: Caribbean Studies Press, 2013. 332 pp., ISBN: 978-1626321762) by Yunina Barbour-Payne (barb4006@neo.tamu.edu), Graduate Student, Department of Performance Studies, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.



If you choose to take on the journey of reading this book, you may be surprised to find yourself in liminal spaces of the “in between.” The space I refer to is one between French, Creole and English; between the stage and the page; between resistance and empowerment; and between Guadeloupe and Martinique. You will find yourself between all of these nations and topics as you turn the pages of Stephanie Berard’s edited volume titled *Theater of the French Caribbean*. Aime Césaire, Ina Césaire, and Vincent Placoly are just a few notable Caribbean scholars whose works appear in this book on Creole performance traditions. In this work, Berard offers an analysis of four different aspects of Caribbean theatrical performance, text, language, oral tradition and popular culture. Approaching Guadeloupian and Martinican performance traditions in contemporary spaces specifically, Berard unearths the resistance, power and struggle of the Caribbean aesthetic.

This book is arranged into four chapters with a lengthy index of Caribbean playwrights, directors, companies and their works. In four chapters, Berard moves from theater texts to the performance of bodies on stage to argue that Caribbean theater redefines performance through the appropriation of European texts, the inclusion of oral tradition and the fusion of folk and popular culture.

For those unfamiliar with Caribbean performance art or more generally Caribbean history, Berard first chapter, “A Short History of French Caribbean Theater,” sets up a friendly introduction of the book by committing a brief history of place and its various performance spaces. In this chapter, with a daunting task of offering enough context from which the reader may understand the remaining chapters, the author begins with the history in a colonial Caribbean era and then traces to more contemporary one. Within this history, she cites a number of significant cultural institutions and performance venues in Martinique and Guadeloupe that have had a significant influence on Creole theatrical performance culture. In addition to the institutions, Berard also offers context through a list of major themes historically associated with Creole dramatic works, including comic theater, the dramatization of collective history and the struggle for freedom. This performance context centered in Creole culture, history and language immediately introduces the identity and politics that underscore the remaining three chapters in the book.

In the second chapter, “Dramas of the In-Between,” Berard’s analyzes the reappropriation of European canonical texts by Caribbean playwrights. The author uses Pierre Laurette’s “literary reterritorialization,” as a guiding theory for understanding cultural and political consequences of Caribbean theater adaptations. In this chapter, the works of Brecht, Shakespeare, Koltes and Beckett are explored. These works are approached through the Creole adaptations by Maryse Conde, Aime Cesiare and Georges Mauvois. Berard’s close reading of the adaptations demonstrates a recontextualization of Cesiarian adaptations of Shakespeare, evidences Caribbean Don Juanism and archetypes of the Creole repertoire. Berard focuses on the strengths and difficulties of translation – arguing that Creole itself is an equivalent match to the French language in realms of creative representation and power. While Berard’s analysis is concentrated within the language transposition of play scripts, she fails to completely support the “failures” of some Creole translations on the stage at the chapters end. Linguists will greatly appreciate the length at which Berard offers examples and analysis of French to Creole play script translations.

In the third chapter, “Dramas of Orality,” Berard shifts from looking at written language to expressions of language by performers on stage. In this chapter, Beard emphasizes the weaving of oral tradition and Creole folktales in Caribbean theater. Here, Berard argues for the “Caribbeanization,” of European repertoires through oral traditions. The staging of folktales as analyzed in this chapter, presents linguistic choices made by Creolophone playwrights and directors as acts of resistance. The resistant acts are made real through the dramatization of narration in storytelling, narrated theater and narrative theater. Across these performances, the author discusses instances in which directors and playwrights incorporate storytelling events into the performance itself. Ultimately, these theatrical performance conventions show the way in which theatrical transposition contributes to reappropriation of European texts. This specific turn to description of what happens in performance, serves to flesh out the failure alluded to in the prior chapter. Berard chooses examples from performance that exemplify the ways in which audiences are captivated and encouraged to be spectators through the incorporation of cultural performance markers. In this way, Berard’s emphasis on Creole culture stresses the community character of Creole theater, an aspect unattended in the previous chapter. Though this chapter does yield an imbalance in the discussion of folktale and poetry, Berard indeed supports her resistant claim that “the stage is a place for oral transmission of collective memories” (p. 232).

In her last chapter, “Ritual and Stage Aesthetics,” Berard builds upon her discussion of oral tradition by looking to Caribbean popular culture. In this chapter, she moves her attention from the dialog used by performers in French Caribbean performance to the dialog on stage between the audience and performers. Carnival, music, songs and dance are themes that narrate transposing cultural traditions performed on the stage. “Turning the theatrical into theater,” her rich discussion of the theatrical and visual aesthetics borrowed from popular culture include: visual elements of carnival incorporated into theater productions through costume, auditory elements of gwoka incorporated through character and music, and religious sanctity elements of Vodou incorporated into spectacle. Berard’s analysis of the cultural significance and identity dynamics located in these performances argue for symbolic cultural and political power manifested in Creole performance.

Some of the other major themes of this book include cultural tradition, ritual, performances, oral tradition and language. This nonfiction work is intended for those interested in Caribbean theater, Pan African Studies, and Theater scholars. If you are familiar with the Negritude movement and the works of Caribbean scholars, this book will offer a greater appreciation for an in-depth analysis of their works as well as the symbolic representation of the Black diaspora located in performance texts and contexts. Elements of performance are explored in isolation and converge in later chapters, an arrangement most appropriate for performance scholars and theater practitioners. Those seeking a list of Caribbean playwrights and theatrical creations will find this book very useful. The index of this work is a treasure filled with the names and descriptions of well-known and lesser known contributors to the Caribbean stage.

As the title of her second chapter suggests, Berard locates herself within a balanced place between language and text. She shifts between of her and other authors French and Creole translations, offering the reader an opportunity to both witness and learn the struggle that resides in translation. Her text in some ways embodies the very complexity hashed out in this book, regarding a struggle between words and transposition in different cultural contexts.