
Juliane Braun. 2019. *Creole Drama: Theatre and Society in Antebellum New Orleans*. Writing the Early Americas 4. Charlottesville, VA/London: The University of Virginia Press, 280 pp., 12 illustr., \$ 69.50.

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Two of the most relevant paradigms that have shaped American literary studies in general and New Orleans literary studies in particular over the past two decades are transnationalism and multilingualism. The former, and certainly the more prominent of the two, has manifested itself in numerous studies that no longer view the Crescent City as un-American, unique, or exceptional, but have rather analyzed the city, its history, and its culture within transnational frames of reference that include the (circum-)Caribbean (see, for example, Lowe 2016) and, moving outwards from New Orleans in larger and larger concentric circles, the Western hemisphere (see, for example, Gruesz 2002: 109–110), the (circum- or French)

Atlantic (see, for example, Boelhower 2010), and, finally, the globe (see, for example, White 2012: 186; 190–191). With respect to multilingualism, the effort of, for example, Les Éditions Tintamarre to reprint texts from Louisiana and New Orleans written in languages other than English – an effort that was begun in 1998, the very same year that Werner Sollors's collection *Multilingual America* was published – appear to have been fruitful: T. R. Johnson's recent *New Orleans: A Literary History* (2019) contains several chapters that also discuss the Crescent City's francophone literary heritage.

Both the transnational and the multilingual paradigm have also influenced Juliane Braun's compelling study of francophone theatre in antebellum New Orleans, *Creole Drama: Theatre and Society in Antebellum New Orleans*. Published precisely 200 years after the opening of the Théâtre d'Orléans in 1819, the most important venue for French drama during the first half of the nineteenth century in the Crescent City, and precisely 100 years after francophone theatre in New Orleans ended when the Théâtre de l'Opéra or the French Opera House burned to the ground in 1919, *Creole Drama* combines imaginative close readings of francophone dramatic texts with thoroughly researched historical analyses of local theatre legislation, architecture, and production practices as well as broader social and political developments (students of New Orleans and/or American drama who do not speak French may rest assured: the author uses English translations of French quotations in the main text, providing the original in footnotes). Thus, Braun succeeds in not just richly contextualizing her history of antebellum francophone theatre in New Orleans, but rather in telling the history of antebellum Creole New Orleans *through* that of its theatre.

Comprising five chapters, *Creole Drama* is organized along at least two axes: one is roughly chronological, with Braun taking her readers from the 1792 opening of the Théâtre de la Rue St. Pierre, the very first permanent playhouse in Louisiana and in the American West in general, to the 1859 opening of the Théâtre de l'Opéra, which would dominate francophone theatre in New Orleans during the second half of the nineteenth century. The other axis is inspired by the transnational perspective adopted for the volume, with Braun devoting a chapter each to circum-Atlantic, local, hemispheric, national, and transatlantic relations in the world of the theatre. However, the author here engages not only with different scales but also with different forms or levels of transnationalism: some chapters focus on the transnational lives and careers of theatre personnel (for example, those of the immigrants from France and the refugees from the Haitian Revolution who first shaped New Orleans's francophone theatrical culture; see chapter 1); in other chapters the transnational mainly plays out on the textual level of specific plays (see, for instance, the hemispheric imagination of Latin American-themed plays at New Orleans's free black theatres discussed in chapter 3); still others ex-

amine both biographical and textual transnationalisms (chapter 5, for example, which focuses on New Orleans-born playwright Victor Séjour, who had moved to Paris at a young age but nevertheless engaged with the New World in both his short stories and his plays).

In addition, each chapter also has a specific thematic focus. Chapter 1, for instance, offers an institutional history of the major French-speaking playhouses in the Crescent City from 1792 to 1859 – the Théâtre de la Rue St. Pierre, the Théâtre de la Rue St. Philippe, and the Théâtre d’Orléans –, thus tracing how through managerial decisions and policies, “the francophone theatre in New Orleans slowly moved away from the Caribbean theatrical traditions” (41) that had shaped its beginnings and increasingly focused on direct connections to the (former) mother country, from where actors, plays, as well as props and costumes were imported. Chapter 2 discusses the dramatization of the 1768 rebellion of French Louisianian settlers against Spanish imperial rule in historical plays by local playwrights Thomas Wharton Collens (*The Martyr Patriots; or, Louisiana in 1769*, 1836), Auguste Lussan (*Les Martyrs de la Louisiane*, 1839), and Louis Placide Canonge (*France et Espagne, ou La Louisiane en 1768 et 1769*, 1850) in order to show how they all “used the theatre to negotiate the present status of their communities through a reinterpretation of Louisiana’s colonial past” (49). Whereas Collens places the 1768 uprisings in the larger context of the American Revolution and, hence, “fram[es] Louisiana’s future within the contours of the United States” (55), however, Lussan’s and Canonge’s plays register the “increasingly tenuous position of New Orleans’s francophone community at the end of the antebellum period” (70).

Chapter 3, certainly one of the highlights of *Creole Drama*, revisits the history of the Crescent City’s free black playhouses and their repertoires. After the Théâtre d’Orléans had given in to mounting racial tensions and ousted the ‘*gens de couleur libres*’ from its auditorium in 1837, free black New Orleanians founded their own playhouses – the Théâtre Marigny (1838) and the Théâtre de la Renaissance (1840) – in the city’s Faubourg Marigny. Both differed from the rest of the city’s professional stages not only through their audiences – whereas the Marigny was frequented by black and white patrons alike, white spectators were officially banned from the Renaissance – but also and especially through their repertoires. Rather than on contemporary dramas (as well as operas and vaudevilles), the free black theatres focused on seemingly outdated plays – most prominently, Voltaire’s tragedies *Zaïre* (1732), *Alzire ou Les Américains* (1736), and *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* (1741) – that, when staged in front of a free black audience, however, “responded to issues specifically relevant to the free black community” (9): ‘*plaçage*’ (the arranged liaisons between white men and mixed-race women), Haiti (the possibilities and dangers of black liberation efforts under one powerful

leader), and Latin American emigration (as another strategy for survival). In Braun's reading, then, New Orleans's free black playhouses sought to circumvent strict censorship laws by using dated marriage plays, religious tragedies, and Latin American-themed pieces in order to negotiate the increasingly precarious position of the '*gens de couleur libres*' within the social fabric of the city.

Questions of community and identity are also at the centre of chapter 4, which returns to the work of Lussan and Canonge in order to discuss their plays *La Famille Créole* (Lussan, 1837) and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (Canonge's 1846 adaptation of Dumas's eponymous novel) against the background of contemporary French Louisianian claims to an American citizenship. At the same time as the Société louisianaise des loyaux Américains sought to oppose the tenets of the Louisiana Native American Association, according to which immigrants in general and immigrants from France in particular were unable to abandon their loyalty to their former home and its non-democratic form of government, Lussan shows "that even those who grew up outside the boundaries of the United States could appreciate and adopt American democratic values" (115) and Canonge, through his critique of French politics, "reminded his audience of the superiority of the American political system" (128). By contrast, chapter 5 illustrates that at least some Louisianians preferred to renounce their Americanness for a life in the very same country whose system Canonge had criticized in *Le Comte*. More specifically, the chapter focuses on Victor Séjour's immensely successful career as a playwright in Paris and traces his changing social and political affiliations through the evolution of his position on slavery from "explicit indictment" (in the 1837 short story "Le Mulâtre") to "veiled endorsement of legislated emancipation" (in the 1858 drama *Le Martyr du Cœur*; 160). After more than two decades in France, Braun suggests, "the amenities of his life in France were perhaps more important [to Séjour] than social justice in Louisiana" (160).

A fascinating and in numerous ways exemplary study, *Creole Drama* is not without its limitations. As the author herself points out, the book focuses on spoken drama performed at professional playhouses in New Orleans, ignoring not only private performances and venues in the Crescent City as well as French playhouses in rural Louisiana and the touring activities of the Théâtre d'Orléans during the long summer holidays, but also the many other forms of performance that entertained antebellum New Orleanians, for example, opera, ballet, the circus, masked balls, and parades. Even so, some readers may wish Braun had more deeply engaged with theories and concepts of performance studies in addition to those of transnationalism and multilingualism. Finally, while the focus on local periodical networks surrounding the Paris-based *La Revue des colonies* and the New Orleans-based *L'Union/La Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orléans* and *La Renaissance louisianaise* may provide some essential background for the discussion of Séjour's

career in chapter 5, some may also argue that Braun occasionally strays a bit far from the main interests of *Creole Drama* here. Yet none of this takes away from the interest and quality of Braun's volume, which thus not only proudly joins the ranks of studies of such other (antebellum) New Orleans performance spaces and practices as Congo Square or parades (see, for example, Sublette 2008 and Mitchell 1995, respectively), but which also constitutes essential reading for anyone interested in the history of New World theatre and multilingual America.

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