Emily Sahakian, *Staging Creolization: Women's Theater and Performance from the French Caribbean*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. xiii + 274 pp. (Paper US\$35.00)

This book analyzes seven plays from the 1980s and 1990s by Ina Césaire, Maryse Condé, Gerty Dambury, and Simone Schwarz-Bart, including their performance histories and reception. The plays were first staged in the French Caribbean or in France and then played in the United States, and all exemplify what Emily Sahakian calls “creolization”—a process of multi-inflected “cultural transformation” that derives from the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Crucially rooted in a dynamic process of performance, creolization breaks away from pernicious and limiting social scripts.

Sahakian’s richly interdisciplinary analysis of these complex, multi-inflected plays deconstructs two gendered stereotypes of plantation culture: the passive “Chestnut” and the seductive “Marilisse.” In Césaire’s *Rosanie Soleil*, for example, the “Chestnut” façade of seemingly passive women masks the reality of four insurgent revolutionaries gathered around a Haitian drum that evokes the Bois Caiman ceremony. In Condé’s *Pension les Alizés*, Emma is an ageing “Marilisse” who had forged a lucrative career as an “exotic dancer” in France at the *New Venus*, whose name evokes both Saartjie Baartman (the “Hottentot Venus”) and Josephine Baker (the “Black Venus”). Yet, contrary to the seductive-treacherous stereotype of the Marilisse, she befriends and supports a black Haitian political émigré, though it is he who is not interested in constancy, and he leaves her. Alone at the play’s end, she applies white make-up and plays her assimilated role in French culture, objectified and sexualized.

Condé’s *An tan revolisyon* revisits the events of 1789–1802 in Guadeloupe, Haiti, and France, demonstrating that the radical, universalist promises of the French and Haitian revolutions remain unrealized. Ironically glossing Ariane Mnouchkine’s “revolutionary” 1789, Condé’s play, too hot a potato for the establishment in the bicentenary year, was subjected to a high-profile boycott in which a TV screening and an international tour were cancelled. It is a bean-feast of styles and discourses: Brechtian dialectics, creole improvisation, and a vodou-inspired storyteller/MC named Zéphyr, whose black and white facial make-up recalls Baron Samedi. The play’s *leitmotif* of the Revolution as both unborn child and abortion prompts a rich discussion by Sahakian around the *abiku* and *ogbanje* myths (“a paradigm for understanding the re-emerging effects of slavery’s trauma in the African diaspora” [p. 64]) and Caribbean folklore’s images of the aborted child, the *bolôm*, which represents hope for the future intertwined with a profound past pain.

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Similarly, the two female protagonists of Césaire's *Mémoires d'Isles* perform a carnivalesque, vodou-inspired transitional prologue to the play as she-devils, introducing a subversive spice into proceedings. This play creatively embodies a century of Caribbean women's stories, deflating the abstract, deluded conceit of metropolitan French "universalism" along the way, not least through Creole.

Dambury's *Lettres Indiennes* provides a cogent history of Indian indentured labor and relevant cultural practices, charting racialized misunderstandings and violence, as well as a journey toward intercultural solidarity. Sahakian describes how the bizarre first production of the play effectively erased the Indian presence and introduced an arbitrary *yé krik yé krak* orality, much to Dambury's rage.

Taking as her starting point the creole proverb *Débouya pa péché* ("Making do with cunning is not a sin"), Sahakian explores Césaire's *L'Enfant des passages, ou La geste de Ti-Jean* in which the subversive trickster's outrageous quest for "psychic liberation" takes no prisoners, much to créolist Patrick Chamoiseau's ire. Ti-Jean is allied with Eshu, the boundary-crossing god of the Yoruba, and his wandering, as the *Enfant des passages*, "emblemizes the perpetually displaced state of the descendants of enslaved Africans, who were made to cross worlds during the Middle Passage" (p. 110).

Sahakian considers another creole proverb *Bigidi pa tonbé* ("Be off balance, but do not fall") in her exploration of Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Ton beau capitaine*. *Bigidi* is associated with Caribbean dance and is central to the *léwoz*, a popular rhythm of the *gwo-ka* dance. In the play, Wilnor, a Haitian migrant worker in Guadeloupe, separated from his wife by economic necessity, is cuckolded by her and hence feels emasculated. But he makes his way to a new understanding through a range of creole and vodou dances. Guided also by his wife's recorded voice, he embraces his life's precarious imbalance, casts aside conventional morality, and discovers an emotional proximity through ritual.

In the book's final chapters, Sahakian traces cultural (and racial) confusions, anxiety and "cultural literacy" in U.S. "diaspora performances" of the plays at New York's Ubu Repertory Theater and in universities. Her writing can at times be convoluted and repetitious—she has a tendency to overegg the "creolizing" pudding. That said, the subject matter is complex and this book repays diligent lucubration, not least for its fascinating insights and rich, interdisciplinary analysis.

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