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Reviews

SOYICA DIGGS COLBERT. *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 344, illustrated. \$99.00 (Hb).

Reviewed by Stephanie L. Batiste, University of California at Santa Barbara

The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage provides a survey of performance and performance forms in twentieth-century African American theatre. Seven compelling chapters, encompassing in-depth analysis and broad analytical contextualization of signature black plays from nearly every decade of the twentieth century, offer exciting revelations about painfully elusive concepts – time, history, and futurity as experienced in the present and in the body. Colbert’s “Overture” and “Epilogue” also include rigorous analysis of primary material. Canonical playwrights addressed include Parks, Hansberry, DuBois, Hurston, Hughes, Baldwin, and Baraka. Each is linked to additional forms of black and American creative production with an emphasis on literature. Colbert harnesses the impression evoked in the theatrical moment to parse in words its thick communications, significances, opportunities, possibilities, and exclusions. Colbert’s vast interdisciplinary approach plumbs layers of literary and performed theatre through materials including the page, stage, anticipated and live audiences, as well as the textual, environmental, cultural, historical, kinetic, sonic, and embodied symbolism of black plays, dramaturgy, publicity, and reception. This ambitious venture has beautiful “notes,” revealing the stunning breadth and depth of Colbert’s far-reaching research.

The letters “Re” appear in each chapter title, so that black movements, black histories, and meanings of blackness visited and constructed again and again in cyclical language mirror the cyclical nature of West-African epistemologies. Theatrical hands knead and reform history to revisit, criticize, and remake the meaning of blackness. Black theatre creates a foundation, a nexus for movement – at once choreographic, gravitational, and projectile – into a re-faced future. Colbert also offers a theoretical dyad of repetition/reproduction through which she understands black theatre’s engagement with the past and facilitation of a black future. Black theatre (1) intervenes in history and (2) challenges and remakes temporality. It engages in one project concerned with the past and another concerned with manipulating the historical timeline – the significance of events that have a trace in history (and those that don’t) – folding history into the present and

extending a repaired future layered upon that same line. African American theatre emerges as modelling a dynamic present that rides the slash between repetition/reproduction. The “re,” a syllabic placeholder for going back, doing over, and making again, conveys the flexibility and change for which Colbert argues.

In a reading of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, Colbert explores movements in home space and of bodies through repeated black migrations. Colbert positions the play’s set, a living room and its theatrical manifestations, as a (re-emerging) liminal space of compulsory and chosen movement through US geography and generational dreams for a better life. The performance history of the play provides a parallel trajectory of achievement for black theatre and black actors on the American stage. Colbert analyses this play in concert with Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem,” so that its urban spatial symbolics of deferred dreaming resonate with Colbert’s theory of black theatre’s engagement with time. Deferred dreaming is encapsulated as repetition in the physical structure of the partial, stunted pathways of the stage apartment, without doors or additional rooms in its condensed space.

Colbert’s central claim is that the African American performing body is made flexible in theatre via experimentations with history and time. The body onstage manifests and manipulates history. A “flexible body” is constituted through the “multi-sensory registers” of black performance (12). Black cultural and embodied memory is enacted and changed in the recalling and repetition of black performance traditions by black performing bodies. Complex layers in Suzan Lori Parks’s *The America Play* show how theatre can deploy a hyper-representational black body to rupture time and defamiliarize experience. Colbert masterfully positions Parks’s melee of birth, death, bastardization, displacement, complicity, and heritage as a model for theatre making. Colbert identifies a temporal flexibility embedded in Parks’s psychological, historical, and linguistic play regarding the second generation gravedigger, “The Foundling Father,” and the way “he digged the hole and the whole held him” (4, 9).

The flexible body is the body in action, in scenarios that remake the materiality of the body constructed through the culturally packed visual signifier of skin and features – a visuality that has taken on meaning because of slavery. Instead of being a haunted and pathological past, slavery as history and re-memory becomes a marker of the operation of race and hierarchy and of the necessity of resisting the continued shortcomings of support for democracy in American culture. Remaking slavery, among other things, results in the remaking of the black body, as such, in twentieth-century stagecraft. In remaking scenarios, visuality, and sound to challenge the reliability of sensory expectations of blackness developed through convention and stereotype, black theatre draws upon black histories in ingenious ways to

refigure blackness and to reshape black history, to reconfigure bodies and futures imbued with a remade and deformed history.

In chapter two, Colbert reveals how the pageant as national form in Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* not only affords black people a transnational epic history but also remakes the presence of women in black culture. Colbert engages *Star of Ethiopia* in relation to *The Clansman* and its minstrel shows, *Birth of a Nation*, *Rachel*, and other lynching plays. Colbert implies that lynching serves as a mark of the larger horrors of the middle passage and the scourging of Africa by white slavers, which causes the death of the allegorical figure Ethiopia. The American visual field of blackness becomes transformed in the presentation of the middle passage, as directed through the eyes of Ethiopia watching thousands of black performers at work.

Turning her imaginative eye to Hurston's *Colourstruck*, Colbert astutely examines the kinetic dimensions of repetition/reproduction in the cakewalk's material and historical resonances as the central sustained event in this underestimated Harlem Renaissance classic. The cakewalk – its performance history, citational politics, critical uses in black culture, and exciting, dynamic impact in the theatre space – operates as the core producer of meaning in the play. Colbert's argument, like Hurston's social dance, brings together a discussion of iconic mulatta womanhood as characterizing the New Negro with an examination of the symbolic politics of abjection and silence signified by Hurston's deep-toned heroine. Colbert's cakewalk gestures multi-directionally in ripples of dance, minstrelsy, Broadway, gender, New Negro womanhood, colourism, and the possibilities of integration and free black expression. In this way and others, Colbert not only identifies a dramatic tradition but also synthesizes that tradition and the broader context of black cultural production in the twentieth century. Rhythmic and packed sentences, weighty symbolic interventions, allow us to see familiar texts and reworked moments in history anew.

ABSTRACT: This interdisciplinary cultural study theorizes black theatre as a heuristic for understanding the relationship between creative production, history, collective trauma, and identity.

KEYWORDS: theatre history, performance and black futurity, African American drama, African American literature, African American aesthetics



CHRISTIN ESSIN. *Stage Designers in Early Twentieth-Century America: Artists, Activists, Cultural Critics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xiii + 264, illustrated. \$76.50 (Hb).

Reviewed by Christopher Baugh, University of Leeds