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Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook edited by Philip C. Kolin (review)

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performers displace a sense of the “real” from the bodies before the attendants to the disembodied recording whose authenticity must, in the end, be taken on faith. Kaye then tracks how the sense of imbalance offered by the collision of many media and styles was brought into greater coherence by playwright John Jesurun and The Builder’s Association. Both of them encouraged the use of narrative to structure encounters with unstable perspectives revealed through shifting scenography (*Everything that Rises Must Converge* [1990]) and characters (*Jet Lag* [1998–2000]).

Although the artists providing documentation for this volume offer ample illustrations of their work through still images, schematics, and performance scores, only Fiona Templeton takes advantage of the opportunity to raise doubts about the function of documentation; she interrupts her description of the piece *Recognition* (1992–96) with sidebars noting moments of her process when material was lost, and closes with a criticism of the images just presented. In a way, this early intervention signals an unfulfilled promise of the book—namely, the opportunity to make a clearing for future investigation of the topic. While Kaye’s analyses are, as is to be expected at this point, clear and compelling, they are perhaps overly familiar; the book often seems to offer only the illustration of previously made arguments about the division and production of presence. His heavy reliance on Weber indicates that Kaye’s main contribution here is not so much the theory as its application to select artists from the 1960s onward. The isolated, but very noticeable misspelling of the names of two prominent scholars leaves an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise handsome and worthy volume.

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CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS: A CASEBOOK.

Edited by Philip C. Kolin. Casebooks on Modern Dramatists Series. New York: Routledge, 2007; pp. x + 214. \$120.00 cloth.

Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook demonstrates the depth and breadth of accomplishments by several black female writers of the twentieth century and new millennium. Arranged in approximate chronological sequence, with the occasional exception to allow for thematic comparisons of plays, the collection highlights and contextualizes the works of Alice Childress, Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Pearl

Cleage, Aishah Rahman, Glenda Dickerson, Anna Deavere Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Lynn Nottage as leading voices in the rich tradition of plays by African American women.

David Krasner provides an introductory overview of historical “precursors” to the playwrights examined in the book (9). Highlighting three principal female authors of the Harlem Renaissance—Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marita O. Bonner—Krasner explores their contributions to American theatre and their influence on Lorraine Hansberry’s establishment of “a socially conscious African American theatre” (22). These women’s emphases on folk drama, theatricality, avant-garde techniques, and social realism respectively are to be credited for the establishment of a “black theatrical aesthetic” (25) on which the dramatic innovations of the women discussed in the remaining essays are founded. Krasner argues that understanding the legacy of these playwrights is crucial to recognizing the ways they continue to create and challenge American culture through an “interpretative illumination” (24) of the black female experience.

Next, Soyica Diggs examines the performance of intersectionality in Alice Childress’s plays. She extends previous work on Childress as part of a militant tradition, arguing that Childress’s heroines “talk back to the cultural mandates of shame and fear that support and maintain the materialization of race” and gender (30). Diggs hails Childress as an author representing women, who were previously relegated to secondary roles, as leaders in the African American community. Next, Jacqueline Wood acknowledges Sonia Sanchez’s lifelong efforts to illuminate “the value and rights of black women in the black community” (50). Wood highlights Sanchez’s challenge to historic social and theatrical boundaries of black female subjectivity through an overview of Sanchez’s plays, such as *I’m Black When I’m Singing*, *I’m Blue When I Ain’t*, read through the postcolonial, sociopolitical theories of Franz Fanon as representative of the “racist, economic, and social oppressions” (57) that continue to plague women in the black community. In “American History / African Nightmare: Adrienne Kennedy and Civil Rights,” Philip Kolin argues for Kennedy’s effective method of embedding historical events such as lynchings, hate crimes against African American youths, and urban racial profiling into her plays. Considering over forty years of theatrical production, Kolin’s careful analysis fulfills his goals to bring “a renewed immediacy to her [Kennedy’s] canon while at the same time profitably expand[ing] how it might be evaluated” (64).

James Fisher’s treatment of Ntozake Shange’s dramatic/poetic collages emphasizes each of the

artist's plays as "a rainbow of complex emotional colors expressed through language, movement, and music, emphasizing variations . . . [on the] dominant theme" of the journey from adolescence to womanhood (96), thus creating "a portrait of black womanhood for black women" (85) that has had a significant impact on subsequent African American women playwrights. Next, Beth Turner underscores Pearl Cleage's accomplishments as a popular and consistently produced dramatist writing from a feminist/womanist perspective within the tried-and-true format of the well-made play. Turner celebrates the "truth-telling and activism" (112) of Cleage's works such as *Flyin' West*, *Hospice*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, in which Cleage develops characters who extend "beyond the border of normative gender restrictions to exist as a fully-realized human being" (103). Brandi Wilkins Catanese notes in her essay, "'We must keep on writing': The Plays of Aishah Rahman," that the quest for full subjectivity continues in Rahman's work as a playwright and educator. Catanese emphasizes Rahman's use of black iconography, jazz aesthetics, spirituality, and gender politics as a multi-pronged approach to the intersectionality of black existence in America, offering a "useful perspective from which to locate Rahman within the larger community of (African) American (women's) drama" (129).

The final chapters in the collection highlight those writers working to create dialectics between history and the present, and between performers and audience in radical and successful ways. Freda Scott Giles unpacks the political and social advocacy of Glenda Dickerson's work as an educator and the director of numerous stylized and expressionistic works, such as her *Transforming through Performing* project. Giles cites Dickerson's performance dialogues as "a combination of historical documents, testimony, myth, and ritual, transformed through performance by women of color into a participatory dialectic with the audience on the universality of women's experience" (142). Next, Joan Wylie Hall positions Anna Deavere Smith's docudramas *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* in conversation with her contemporaries, negotiating an understanding of Smith's work as "political art based on the democratic ideal of full representation" of all community members (159). Through a sophisticated close reading of *Venus*, Debby Thompson provides a theoretical, archeological analysis, noting that Suzan-Lori Parks's work "[does] to race . . . what Foucault . . . did to sexuality: it 'dis-(re-)members' the ruptured strands of discourse that produced contemporary knowable identities" (172). The final two chapters by Sandra Shannon, "An Intimate Look at the Plays of Lynn Nottage" and an interview with the playwright, demonstrate Nottage's unique approach to plays as time capsules for her family's history.

While the collection is masterful in positioning these playwrights in conversation with one another across time, it emphasizes the celebratory while neglecting to identify opportunities for learning through the missteps of the past or citing areas of potential growth for future work by black women playwrights. Nevertheless, Philip Kolin has amassed an impressive volume of essays that is invaluable to any scholar of contemporary American theatre.

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NEW WOMEN DRAMATISTS IN AMERICA, 1890–1920. By Sherry D. Engle. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; pp. x + 276. \$74.95 cloth.

Sherry Engle's zeal to win recognition for the five playwrights covered in this book is engaging. Even more importantly, she underpins her enthusiasm with assiduous searches in public-records offices and archives for the arcane data that would enable her to reconstruct her subjects' career trajectories. *New Women Dramatists in America, 1890–1920* makes a genuine contribution with its reader-friendly narratives, exhaustive listings of productions for each author (as well as plays not staged or published), and an invaluable appendix of New York productions (theatre, opening date, length of run) of plays between 1885 and 1925 by hundreds of different women.

Engle's five chosen women, each of whom earned substantial recognition as an author of Broadway-produced plays during the Progressive Era, are Martha Morton, Madeleine Lucette Ryley, Rida Johnson Young, and collaborators Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland and Beulah Marie Dix. Morton and Young are deservedly well-known in American theatre studies of the era, the others less so. Each of the five becomes a distinctive personality through Engle's deft analyses. She certainly achieves her modest aim of presenting their lives and work as representative of the experiences of countless women who tenaciously wielded the pen during those years. While "acknowledging and celebrating their accomplishments" (11), Engle seems tacitly cognizant that there is no pressing need to resurrect the plays themselves.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Martha Morton (1865–1925), long acknowledged as the "dean of American women playwrights," not only for her oft-signaled leadership in getting women admitted to the organization that would evolve into the Dramatists Guild, but also for her exemplary track record of plays written for and toured by star performers like