

FROM THE SPECIAL EDITORS

Catherine M. Cole and Leo Cabranes-Grant

As this special issue on African and Afro-Caribbean Performance goes to press, the United States has just inaugurated Barack Hussein Obama as its 44th president, a historic event that illustrates on a grand scale just how fundamental are the relations between Africa and the American hemisphere to our understanding of the cultures produced on both sides of the Atlantic. The election of an American president whose parents were from Kenya and the United States adds yet one more link to a long series of interactions—which are frequently violent or unequal but are always mutual—between these regions of the world. Finding a critical language that both honors and unpacks the complexities of such an exchange was and still is one of the major challenges confronted by theatre and performance scholars who study the theatrical and performative expressions produced within the circumatlantic rim.

The gestation of this special issue coincided with a Conference on African and Afro-Caribbean Performance that took place at the University of California, Berkeley (26–8 September 2008).¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, in his reaction to that conference published here in our “Critical Stages” section, identifies the predicament of language that both the conference and this special issue face: “The conference was seeking, not always explicitly, not always consciously, the grammar with which to address the ghosts that haunted it”—the legacy of slavery chief among these ghosts. Yet also haunting the conference was the ghost of a not-yet-dead area-studies approach to the academic study of Africa. Area studies

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historically cherished the acquisition of advanced language skills and extensive field research, but these otherwise admirable “babies” of area studies too often were awash in a fetid bathwater: a colonizing penchant for objectification, an obsession with the formation and boundaries of the nation-state, and an unholy alliance between scholarship and state surveillance. While an area-studies approach errs in all these ways, it also fails to grapple with the reality and complexity of transnational movements of peoples, cultures, and ideas beyond the bounds of the African continent—flows that, as Wilderson points out, must be foundational to the very conception of Africa. While it is important to recognize national differences and boundaries, it is also imperative to deconstruct them in order to gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of their historical genealogies and movements of peoples. “Diaspora,” an alternative concept that has gained currency in recent years, is much more agile in embracing a larger transnational frame.² But it too has its biases, such as a tendency to assume that origins are stable locations and to collapse geographic specificity into a larger macronarrative in which African Americans, in particular, have preeminent place. As historian James Campbell reminds us, “Africans have ideas and experiences of their own, which sometimes have little to do with preconceptions of western visitors, white or black.”³ Barak Obama was one such black visitor to Kenya who, as a young adult venturing to the motherland (or fatherland, in his case) for the first time, felt acutely his “uneasy status” as “a Westerner not entirely at home in the West, an African on his way to a land full of strangers.”⁴

It was precisely to avoid this kind of impasse between approaches that VèVè A. Clark (in a canonic, though recently out of print, essay that is partially reproduced in this issue) suggested the symbol of the *marasa trois*. For Clark, the idea of a third stage of consciousness breaks the shackles of dualistic analysis and enables a dialectics without sublation, one that improves upon or replaces the famous Hegelian indictment of Africa. Nonetheless, Clark’s effort still relies on a cumulative narrative of history that is not devoid of positivistic implications. What is needed is an epistemic model that describes the outcome of the Middle Passage without rigid polarizations. Such a model should provide a philosophical framework that accounts for displacements and modulations without privileging the experience of exile over domestic initiatives. The conference at Berkeley tried to articulate a diplomatic truce between these options, or at least to chart an alternate approach. This approach may be best understood by reflecting on what our title is *not*: “Black Performance,” “Pan-African Performance,” “Performance in the African Diaspora,” “Black Atlantic Performance,” or merely “African Performance,” which would posit the continent in isolation from the Caribbean—or, alternatively, “Caribbean Performance” without the adjectival preface “Afro.” The title of the conference and of this special issue of *Theatre Survey*—“African and Afro-Caribbean Performance”—asserts a geographic frame that embraces transcontinental connections and affinities while retaining a commitment to geographic specificity and locally produced knowledge as well as an avoidance of racialized essentialism. Departure and arrival are not the only valid tropes for the stories of Africa and the Caribbean. Leaving is as relevant as staying; there is,

as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, a plurality of centers that resist linear vectors or comfortable dichotomies.⁵

The special issue begins with the voice of an ancestor, the late VèVè A. Clark, to whom this issue is dedicated. We reprint an excerpt of her highly influential essay "Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness," in which Clark reminds us that no matter what frame we use to consider the cultures of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean, we must be literate—that is, possess the "ability to comprehend the literatures . . . from an informed indigenous perspective." Diaspora literacy, like language literacy, is a skill that can be acquired. It is our hope that Clark's essay and, indeed, this entire special issue will foster a greater diaspora literacy among *Theatre Survey* readers. This intervention is particularly notable inasmuch as this issue also happens to mark the 50th anniversary of *Theatre Survey*, a journal that, for all its strengths, has only recently begun to reflect on its disproportionately European and North American preoccupations. In 2006, Carol Fischer Sorgenfrei did a systematic study of forty-six years of *Theatre Survey* and determined that only nine articles had appeared in all that time that dealt "solely or significantly with Asian theatre in the broadest sense."⁶ To venture that articles on Africa and the Afro-Caribbean have been even fewer would not be a reckless assumption.

Clark's essay is followed by a soulful contribution from Sara E. Johnson that helps contextualize and give personal perspective on Clark's generative impact within the several disciplines and fields in which she worked.

The next essay, by Tejumola Olaniyan, asks a question of broad universal significance: "Why perform at all?" And his answer asserts that performance is the guardian deity of the gap—whether it is the wealth gap, the achievement gap, the gender gap, the race gap, the belief gap, or the gap between expectation and reality in postindependence Africa. These gaps demand that we "do" something, and that something is perform. While Olaniyan's subject is universal, his exploration focuses on three suggestive examples provided by Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, and Femi Osofisan—respectively a Martinican psychiatrist, a postcolonial theorist from India, and a Nigerian playwright. Olaniyan concludes by drawing our attention to an aspect of performance that is not often discussed: "its inherently conserving and therefore conservative nature. We hear a lot about its subversive effects, but there is the other side too." Perhaps we should "mind the gap" a bit more than we have, be a bit more realistic about its magnitude and humble about the limits of our performances to leap across or bridge these gaps.

Christina S. McMahon takes us to Cape Verde, an archipelago of islands off the coast of West Africa, where the Mindelact International Theatre Festival enacts a postcolonial negotiation between vernacular traditions and adaptations of Shakespeare. McMahon emphasizes the fact that although Shakespeare serves as an entrance ticket to an international arena, audiences in Cape Verde are very much aware that they are also using the Bard as an ideological mask. Adapting Shakespeare authorizes aesthetic experimentation while channeling an active critique of local politics.

Emily Sahakian confronts a parallel conundrum in her reading of Ina Césaire's play *Island Memories*. In Martinique, Creole is seen as the language of

difference and French is hailed as the language of universality. This severe distinction between subaltern and dominant languages traumatizes the practice of memory. To remember your past in Creole implies that you can repossess your local history only at the cost of jeopardizing your political identity as a French citizen. *Island Memories* manages to navigate this wounded verbal landscape by enacting the experience of translation itself, engaging both Caribbean and European audiences in a shared game of mutual recognitions.

Gibson Alessandro Cima traces the long perambulations of the South African play *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*. According to Cima, the collaborative process among Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona serves as a template to study how issues of artistic control are inflected by racialized expectations. Cima reveals how, in this case, the production history of *Sizwe* uncovers a constant friction between the oral and the written. The international success of *Sizwe* only amplified that tension, translating it into a different register: Who owns South Africa? Who is entitled to speak for it, both during and after Apartheid?

Finally, in our “*Re: Sources*” section, Lesley Ferris draws our attention to the challenges of ephemerality in a form like Caribbean carnival and to the way that the Internet itself is opening up new venues of preservation and access.

These essays are invested with a desire to map African and Afro-Caribbean experiences in a global context. Each essay pays molecular attention to nuances of meaning and positioning that are easily overlooked. Clark focuses on postitionality; she challenges us to become “literate” in the diaspora and to strive to understand cultural productions on their own terms, in their own contexts. Olaniyan, on the other hand, asks us to interpret postcolonial theorists from Africa, the Caribbean, and India *alongside* Karl Marx and Herbert Blau, as well as in view of the philosophies embedded in popular culture such as in the music of Nigeria’s legendary Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. McMahon astutely argues that normative genres such as tragedy and comedy can be entirely refurnished by the needs of postcolonial representation. Sahakian reminds us that there is more than meets the eye—and the ear—when people decide to recall their emotional archive in an environment where colonial relations force language to reflect the existence of divided loyalties. Cima suggests that authorship is inflected by the body of the actor as much as by the name of the playwright, a realization that acquires special weight when a performance is produced and exported in the context of political oppression. The essays are refreshingly pragmatic: instead of confirming prevalent theoretical molds, they prefer to expose the vulnerabilities of them, motivating us to reconsider and ponder other alternatives for our critical discourses. They take us through a gamut of major circumatlantic languages: French, English, Portuguese, and various Creoles. None of them is exactly conclusive or definitive: their task is not to end the conversation but to expand it. This, too, has been our hope with assembling this special issue, which includes the voices of ancestors, elders, and the emerging generation of newer scholars in a field that is still being born.

You will note that *Theatre Survey*’s cover for this issue has a whole new look, thanks to a design “makeover” provided by Cambridge University Press—a makeover to which perhaps any fifty-year-old is entitled. This redesign is just one

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of the several innovations the journal will see in the coming issues. We are in the process of expanding our editorial board from six to twelve members and wish to extend a special welcome to our new board members Daphne Brooks, Susan Foster, Helen Gilbert, and Joseph Roach. We are thrilled to announce that Leo Cabranes-Grant is not only coeditor of this special issue but will also be taking over as Associate Editor of the journal. Finally, we wish to extend a special thanks to Kate Babbitt, Charlotte McIvor, and Renu Cappelli for their editorial assistance preparing this issue for press.

ENDNOTES

1. See www.berkeleytdps.org for more information on the conference.
2. See Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 66 (19.1) (2001): 45–73.
3. James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), xxii.
4. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995; New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 301.
5. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (Oxford: James Currey, 1993), 2–11.
6. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, "The State of Asian Theatre Studies in the American Academy," *Theatre Survey* 47:2 (2006): 217–23, at 219.