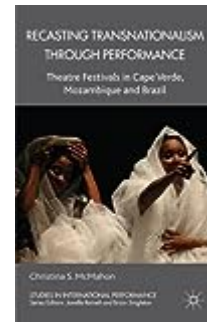


Christina S. McMahon. *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique and Brazil.* Studies in International Performance Series. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 248 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-00680-6.



Reviewed by Fernando Arenas (University of Michigan, Dep. of Afro-American & African Studies)

Published on H-Luso-Africa (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Philip J. Havik (Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical (IHMT))

Christine S. McMahon's *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Brazil* is an interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional study of the phenomenon of theater festivals in the Portuguese-speaking world. Festivals—particularly in the case of theater, film, and music—have become key sites for showcasing and disseminating cultural production across the globe. As such, they offer a fertile ground to explore manifold questions related to (trans)national identities, cross-cultural relations, transnational communities of affect, political economy, geopolitics, and history. In the case of the Lusophone world, as demonstrated by McMahon's study, theater festivals provide a case study in order to critically explore the promises and perils of building a highly asymmetrical community of nations resulting from centuries of colonial rule and slavery, that remains peripheral vis-à-vis major centers of global power. By the same token, her work privileges African theater troupes whose productions intervene in socio-historical, cultural, and political questions that are germane to young nations still in formation, but that resonate differently among audiences in Europe and the Americas. The productive tensions arising from this set of circumstances structure the chapters of *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance*, culminating with

the climatic conclusion, centering on the Forum Theater method based on the work of Brazilian director and theorist Augusto Boal, which was practiced at the end of the Rio de Janeiro Lusophone Theater Festival (FESTLIP) in 2009.

Recasting Transnationalism through Performance is divided into six chapters (including the introduction and conclusion). The study as a whole focuses primarily on Cape Verdean, Angolan, and Mozambican plays staged at international theater festivals in Mindelo (Cape Verde), Maputo (Mozambique), and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)—MINDELACT, Festival da Agosto, and FESTLIP, respectively.

McMahon's methodology includes multi-sited participant-observer ethnography, archival research, close readings of play texts (including description and analysis of casting, performance, and stage design, as well as audience reception), interviews with actors and directors, historicization of play texts, analysis of theater reviews, cultural contextualization of plays as well as festival locations, analysis of political economy of theater festivals, analysis of global geopolitics of cultural production, dissemination, and circulation. As suggested above, all of these critical instances are carefully theorized in

order to highlight key conceptual points.

The introduction, "Global Casting Calls: Performing (Trans)National Identity on Festival Circuits," provides a conceptual framework to understand how meaning is constructed through theater festivals that are affected by globalization in the process of national and transnational community building. Furthermore, it offers a theoretical meta-reflection on research methodology and experience.

Chapter 2 ("Mapping Festivals: Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Brazil in the Lusophone World") offers an analysis of the political economy of theater festivals and the cultural politics in the Portuguese-speaking world surrounding the concept of "Lusofonia" as an imagined community and as a lived experience in the locations where the plays are staged. Various plays and festivals position themselves as sites of contestation of neo-colonial visions of "Lusofonia" or as pragmatic postcolonial sites for transnational community building. Chapter 3 ("Recasting the Colonial Past: History, Imagination, and Fantasy on Festival Stages"), analyzes three plays that offer differing approaches to staging Cape Verdean and Angolan colonial history in the construction of national identity: *Txon di Morgadu* (The Proprietor's Land) by the Cape Verdean company OTACA, *Mãe Preta* (Black Mother) by the Portuguese company Este, and *Kimpa Vita: A profetisa ardente* (Kimpa Vita: The Burning Prophetess) by Angolan Grupo Elinga Teatro.

Chapter 4 ("African Women on Festival Circuits: Recasting Labor Roles and Female Sexuality") explores how multiple divergent interpretations emerge in connection to plays representing female agency, labor, and sexual practices. This chapter discusses how the Cape Verdean play, *Duas sem três* (Two Without Three) by acclaimed troupe Raiz di Polon and the Mozambican play, *O homem ideal* (The Ideal Man) by the Mãbeu company, performed at festivals in Brazil and Cape Verde, were read as "definitive" of national culture, rather than contingent upon the local realities from which they emerge. Chapter 5 ("Adaptation and the (Trans)Nation: Creolized Shakespeare, Intercultural Cervantes") features Cape Verdean

adaptations of *King Lear* by the GTCCPM company and *Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Solaris troupe, performed in Kriolu, as well as a Mozambican-Basque play, *Dulcinéia e o cavaleiro dos leões* (Dulcinea and the Knight of the Lions), based on *Don Quixote*, co-produced by the Mozambican troupe Luarte and Basque troupe Agerre Teatro and performed in Portuguese and Spanish. These plays offer rich platforms in order to reinvent national identities as well as discuss dynamics related to transcultural translation, postcoloniality, and meta-theater.

The final chapter, "Toward a Conclusion: Forum Theatre in Festival Venues," as pointed out earlier, highlights Augusto Boal's method that was adopted at Rio de Janeiro's FESTLIP in 2009, providing a unique opportunity for complex cross-cultural conversations within and beyond the confines of the festival. These revealed cultural misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa held by Brazilian audiences (mostly middle-/upper-class whites), but also offered opportunities for African artists to educate Brazilians. Thus, the forum method emerges as a type of "invisible ethnography," according to McMahon, that complicates the discourse of Lusophone solidarity championed by the Rio festival. In fact, the author argues, "if a 'Lusophone' family does exist, it is only through constant debate and disagreement about individual cultures and differing national identities" (p. 177). McMahon's *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance*, thus, demonstrates the power of ethnography as an epistemic tool in the study of theater festivals built around a transnational linguistic community (in this case, "Lusofonia"), capturing its complexity, as witnessed by the productive tensions stemming from an open engagement between artists and spectators, that official political rhetoric imbued with affect and diplomacy simply cannot capture. The final chapter offers a potent empirical conclusion to a brilliant academic study. In the field of Lusophone cultural studies there is nothing comparable to McMahon's study. It stands alone as a most unique and necessary contribution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-luso-africa>

Citation: Fernando Arenas. Review of McMahon, Christina S., *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique and Brazil*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42114>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.