Review: *African-American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance and Stage*. Soyica Diggs Colbert, ed. (Cambridge University Press: New York. 2011) $99.00. 334pp.

André Carrington
Drexel University

In the *African-American Theatrical Body*, Soyica Diggs Colbert argues that the history of African-American drama displays the centrality of performance to the construction of black identity in the U.S. As opposed to the axiom that live performances are distinct from other forms of culture due to the inherent impossibility of reproducing them exactly, Colbert embraces theories forwarded by other scholars of African-American culture that find "performative" varieties of meaning-making instrumental to everyday life and evident throughout history. Unlike "constative" language, which *refers* to meaning, performative language—including the non-verbal variety—*creates* meaning. Colbert constructs the canon of black theatre as a repository of speech acts, signifying gestures, and rituals that instantiate the material conditions of being black through their iteration in real time. The resulting assemblage of performative tropes comprise what Colbert's fellow performance theorist Diana Taylor might call the "repertoire" of American blackness.

The refrain of the text, "repetition/reproduction," exemplifies the dense analytical language *The African-American Theatrical Body* relies on. At times, this framing assumes the reader's familiarity with the divergent schools of thought that inform the field of performance studies. To wit, the repetition/reproduction approach that Colbert introduces in the first chapter of the text, on Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, is one of several strategies she suggests to undo biases in the way we treat certain themes in culture, such as loss, that take on particular significance for people of African descent in the U.S. Like a number of performance studies scholars, Colbert relies on a critique of psychoanalysis to ground her discussion of loss, tracing it through in the work of Hortense Spillers, David Eng, and Jacques Lacan, throughout the text. Pointing out the flaws in psychoanalytic criticism, such as its preoccupation with visual perception, sometimes overwhelms the force of Colbert's analysis, however. The role of hearing in shaping enslaved people and their children as witnesses to suffering

comprises a rich and underexplored touchstone for African-American subject formation, as Colbert cites Fred Moten to argue, but alternative genealogies of blackness rooted in sound can collapse into essentialism, as well.

The African-American Theatrical Body commends performance as a frame of reference for the construction of race by maintaining a broad suspicion about the discursive apparatuses privileged in historiography. In an instructive take on a topic germane to literary history, Colbert questions the structure of "influence" by recognizing how the textual aspect of a play, so thoroughly identified with the proverbial body of its playwright, gets uncoupled from its sonic, visual, choreographic, and spatial counterparts in the course of rehearsals and reproductions over time. Rather than installing an Oedipal "death of the author" model into black theatre, however, Colbert's treatments of Baraka's *Slave Ship* and Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, both of which deal with the Middle Passage, reassert the agency of black artists by noting how Wilson invoking the Black Arts movement as an influence is the performative act that inflects the latter with its status as "historical." Efforts to interpret stage directions rely on the non-verbal understandings negotiated between artists and audiences in during an event, thus constructing black collectivity according to the contingencies of specific stagings.

The specificity of performance studies is not the only source of strength in the book; Colbert brings a rich perspective on early 20th century American mass culture to bear on works by W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston, making the reader aware of how these writers recruited the forms of the pageant and the cakewalk, respectively, into critiques of the color line. The massive productions of Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* portray blackness taking shape diachronically on the world stage, and the cakewalk that provides the climax of Hurston's play *Color Struck* displays the vicissitudes of color and gender synchronically and locally within a small ensemble of black actors. Langston Hughes's *Tambourines to Glory* is a delightful example of the inventiveness of black vernaculars that encompass both the sacred and the profane, and Colbert's account of the gospel play's reception conveys an impression of performance as a venue for black communities' questioning of their own cultural politics. To that effect, Colbert cites Hughes signifying on his detractors (who considered *Tambourines to Glory* dated in the 1960s) with a sign that read: "YOUR MAMA LIKES GOSPEL SONGS."

The tradition of black self-regard documented in this book is as melancholy as it is satirical, however. Colbert recognizes Susan Lori-Parks as the ideal interlocutor by bookending the volume with Parks' evocative renditions of American history for the postmodern era. *The African-American Theatrical Body* merits a place in contemporary scholarship that could usefully be called "legacy of slavery" studies. Along with titles that it invokes toward their common objectives, including Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead*, Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Colbert's new book contributes to recent scholarly efforts to revise and expand what slavery and reparation mean to African-Americans. The book will be of interest to those exploring black literary and theatrical traditions in the U.S. as well as Diaspora scholars reconsidering the legacy of slavery, but following its insights will prove more fruitful if you have an affinity for its performance studies bibliography.