
Caroline De Wagter. *“Mouths on Fire with Songs”*: *Negotiating Multi-Ethnic Identities on the Contemporary North American Stage*. Cross/Cultures 163. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. Pp. lxvii, 356. US\$126.00.

Caroline De Wagter's monograph begins with extensive acknowledgments and introductory material that attempt to outline and define what she calls "the vast field of multi-ethnic North American drama" (viii). De Wagter is continuing her investigation of the geographic territory and literature she first explored in 2008, with co-editor Marc Maufort, in *Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama*. In "Mouths on Fire With Songs," De Wagter makes a point of acknowledging that the USA is usually excluded from considerations of postcolonialism and that, therefore, she will draw on, but not "exclusively rely" on, postcolonial theory.

Rather, De Wagter writes: “Weaving postmodernist arguments into the discourses of cultural studies and historiography, my study seeks to achieve a texture that avoids closure in favour of polysemy and meaningful exchange” (xlvi). Certainly, the complications and contradictions of the American versus Canadian contexts are addressed extensively in the introductory material, and De Wagter explains that her project is to be truly diverse: to consider a wide variety of multi-ethnic playwrights across North America, not restricting herself to one group or to one country as most previous considerations have done. She writes that she will focus on “case studies” and that her “project explores lived experiences as translated into the literary expression of identity negotiation in the multicultural contexts of Canada and the USA” (xv). De Wagter limits her consideration of ethnicity to African, (South) Asian, and Native. She claims to have been unable to consider Hispanic drama because of the imbalance in representation between the USA (many examples) and Canada (she can cite only Guillermo Verdecchia). De Wagter expresses a wish to see “an increasing number of Latino Canadian playwrights produced and published”; happily, her wish has gone a way towards being fulfilled with the 2013 publication of a collection of essays, *Latina/o Canadian Theatre and Performance*, and a companion anthology of plays, *Fronteras Vivientes*, both edited by Natalie Alvarez.

A brief gloss on the founding myths of the United States and Canada is followed by a very specific take on the function of multi-ethnic theatre in these nations: “how do the case studies selected in this volume criticize, complement, and/or revise historical narratives of Canada and the USA?” Do they “reflect the founding myths?” Is their “common value” found in “testimonies” about experiences of immigration and racism (xxv)? De Wagter approaches her case studies as educational tools, as a means to understand Canada and the USA, and to investigate how social change might be achieved. The subsequent overviews of various communities seem too brief to give the reader a real sense of the work being done, especially more recent developments. For example, there is no mention of Nina Lee Aquino or fuGen, the Toronto theatre company she founded; De Wagter lists neither Aquino’s two-volume 2009 anthology of Asian-Canadian plays, *Love + Relationships*, nor the collection of essays on Asian-Canadian theatre that she co-edited with Ric Knowles. This is a serious absence for a reader looking to learn about multi-ethnic theatre in contemporary Canada; indeed, most of the plays discussed here date from around 2000 or earlier.

The twenty-five plays that De Wagter does address are “organized around four thematic issues: hybridity and diaspora; shattering the North American dream; cultural memory; and imagined communities” (lxiii). The extensive

introductory material, including summaries about the major theorists employed, takes on an almost textbook-like breadth, while the author's treatment of the plays is deeply engaged and sensitive. For example, De Wagter considers the first Canadian play to be discussed, M. J. Kang's *Noran Bang: The Yellow Room*, from many angles: inspiration and production history; its structure and dramatic techniques; and in comparison with a selection of other Asian-Canadian plays. She calls the play as a whole "an act of resistance, a re-invention of the Asian 'Other' in contemporary multicultural Canada" (12). Her true contribution to the analysis of Kang's play is to first move beyond national boundaries in order to place it in comparison with Asian-American Chay Yew's *Wonderland*, and then to move beyond ethnic boundaries to discuss both plays in conversation with African-Canadian Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*. As she moves back and forth in her points of comparison, bringing in other examples and drawing, here, on Karen Shimakawa's identification of "national abjection" (27) and "Homi Bhabha's concept of in-betweenness" (33), De Wagter's command of the topic becomes increasingly impressive and convincing. She employs this technique through the remainder of her chapters, elucidating the material to fruitful and satisfying effect. Other Canadian playwrights addressed include Rahul Varma, Tomson Highway, Padma Viswanthan, Drew Hayden Taylor, and Andrew Moodie; these playwrights and others are generally compared in groups of three, and several playwrights are addressed more than once to usefully illustrate different themes. The elaborate mechanics of the introductory material seem, in retrospect, unnecessary: the strength of the writing about the plays is demonstration and justification enough.

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Natalie, ed. *Fronteras Vivientes: Eight Latino Canadian Plays*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2013. Print.
- . *Latino Canadian Theatre and Performance*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2013. Print.
- Aquino, Nina Lee, ed. *Love + Relationships: A Collection of Contemporary Asian-Canadian Drama*. 2 vols. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2009. Print.
- Aquino, Nina Lee and Ric Knowles, eds. *Asian Canadian Theatre*. New Essays on Canadian Theatre Volume One. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2011. Print.

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