



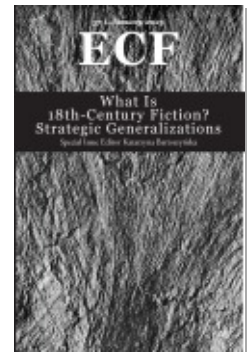
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La Nouvelle-France sur les planches parisiennes. Anthologie
(1720-1786) ed. by Sébastien Côté (review)

Logan J. Connors

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Book Reviews/ Critiques de livres

La Nouvelle-France sur les planches parisiennes. Anthologie (1720–1786),

ed. Sébastien Côté.

Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2023. 428pp. CAD \$69.

ISBN 978-2763748900.

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Sébastien Côté has edited an intriguing and meticulously researched anthology of French-language plays from the eighteenth century that depict La Nouvelle-France (the territory in North America spanning from Louisiana to the upper reaches of today's Canada that was colonized by the French starting in the sixteenth century). The anthology includes an ambitious number of theatrical works (16 plays), several of which appear here for the first time in print. Each play has been edited by Côté, sometimes with the help of eighteenth-century theatre specialists in France or Canada. Owing to the plays' subject matters and objectives (local colour, exoticism, love stories, *arlequinades*, etc.), comedies dominate the volume, although a variety of emotional intensities and tones provides for a rich representation of how playwrights—and perhaps the French public in general—conceptualized the rigours and wonders of early modern French America.

The volume is long at 428 pages and includes a general introduction, the sixteen editions (each of which is introduced with a short *Notice*), and a comprehensive bibliography. With so many editions of plays included, critical analysis is scant, and the general introduction is short. Nevertheless, Côté makes several important claims about the critical necessity for his volume due to the lack of an early modern “Canadian” canon in French. There was no printing press in the colony until relatively late (Quebec received its first printing press in 1763 after the French had already lost most of its territory in the wake of the Seven Years' War). Areas of cultural activity in the colony were spread throughout a massive geographical space, and many writers about La Nouvelle-France had never actually stepped

foot in it. This notable “absence” in theatrical self-representation, Côté points out, is compounded by another dearth of information, that is, the failure of the French canon to include many works about the colony as part of its own dramatic *patrimoine*. The plays in this volume thus appear in between or outside normal literary categories and, “as a consequence,” Côté writes, “[these works] have lived a shadowy existence [*une existence de l'ombre*] for centuries” (4).

Many of the volume’s plays will be completely unknown, even to the most seasoned experts of eighteenth-century French-language drama, especially the anonymous works (e.g., *Zélamire la Huronne, ou La Sauvage*) or those that were never printed during the eighteenth century such as the five plays that Côté cites on page 17. But scholars of Alain-René Lesage, one of France’s most prolific playwrights of the 1730s and 1740s, will recognize several of the author’s “American” works (*L’Île du Gougou*, *Arlequin roi des Ogres*, *La Sauvagesse*, and *Les Mariages de Canada*); relatively well-known works also include the *philosophe* Jean-François Marmontel’s *Le Huron* and Edme-Louis Billardon de Sauvigny’s *Hirza*—a rare tragic work about La Nouvelle-France that was performed at the Comédie-Française in the 1760s. Even these works (considered minor plays despite being penned by relatively major authors) are understudied by both students and scholars of the period and on both sides of the Atlantic. This is Côté’s point: for too long, eighteenth-century French theatre studies has been grounded in canonical works that were staged at the Comédie-Française and penned by three or four authors. Côté’s anthology, by contrast, shows that La Nouvelle-France was a theme that traversed a diversity of tones, character compositions, and theatrical venues: from fairground performances to serious five-act tragedies on France’s most prestigious stage. Even the most lighthearted and comedic plays in the anthology provide serious reflections on themes of otherness, colonialism, nature, and gender relations. Côté’s volume demonstrates that theatrical works about La Nouvelle-France participated in broader Enlightenment projects of both progressive intercultural reflection and problematic colonial justification.

This anthology is further improved by an extensive bibliography of original editions from the period (and subsequent editions of the dramatic works from later periods) and of more recent scholarship on the plays and on La Nouvelle-France as a theme in literary and cultural studies. Côté’s writing is clear and jargon-free, and he poses a

series of essential questions about the function of La Nouvelle-France in comedy and in broader Enlightenment thought. I would have appreciated more contextual and theoretical reflection on several of the themes that Côté touches upon in his introduction. For example, he makes several claims about the uses and functions of the term *sauvage* (14–15) in his corpus of plays. Côté argues that the term was used well before the high age of European exploration and colonization in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries but that the term was charged with new meaning during the eighteenth century, precisely when Europeans sought increased engagement with Native American tribes as a political and military strategy in the Seven Years' War (and precisely at the moment when several of the plays in Côté's corpus were written and/or staged). This conversation would have been even more insightful with an analysis of how the term evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and of how readers today might conceptualize the term (and related terms describing Native American populations). An introduction to the critical literature on Rousseau's theories of the "noble savage" or the *philosophe's* take on nature—reflections that influenced several of the plays and playwrights in the anthology—would also have been helpful, especially for undergraduate readers.

All in all, Côté's volume, like Julia Prest's recent monograph on the theatrical culture of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue (*Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*, 2023), is a welcome expansion of eighteenth-century French theatre studies beyond *la Métropole*. Côté shows that La Nouvelle-France was a popular theme in French-language drama and that plays about the French colony constituted an engaged reflection on geopolitics, intercultural relations, and ecological diversity. Several plays in the volume would make excellent additions to undergraduate or graduate French literature survey courses. With dramatic works of varying lengths and genres, instructors could easily include a "Nouvelle-France play" without adding onerous amounts of reading to their syllabi. Côté's anthology will interest readers from several disciplines: first and foremost, scholars of French theatre studies, as well as specialists of colonial spaces and of the history of North America and its cultural representations across the Atlantic.