Carol Bailey

A Poetics of Performance: The Oral-Scribal Aesthetic in Anglophone Caribbean Fiction. Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014. 231 pp. (Paper \$35.00)

This study of the performative aspects of Anglophone Caribbean fiction focuses on those particular literary texts that, although fully inscribed into the tradition of writing, nevertheless rely on the elements of orality and strive to incorporate them into their composition. Carol Bailey argues that this feature of orality within what she calls a “scribal” canon is particularly relevant, if not ultimately central, to the Caribbean literary production of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “Performing fiction” is her term for the kind of fiction that engages the intersections and ensuing tensions between literary and performance cultures, or between writing and “orature,” itself understood as a deliberate appropriation and re-visioning of the oral aesthetic within the written form. This kind of literary text is, she proposes, fundamentally shaped by performance and shows features of improvisation, incompleteness, and inclusivity, rendering the reader a member of a literary “audience.” The structure of “performing fiction” thus seeks to insert voice and body as well as the spaces of their agency into the literary form.

In the Caribbean context, the elements of performance that permeate and shape the literary text have been employed by many authors and scrutinized by literary critics—so much so that discussions of orality tend to shape the perception of the Caribbean literary canon. As Bailey reminds us, from story telling, *picong*, and the Carnival to the various highly influential musical forms such as calypso, reggae, or dance hall, performance has historically served as a vehicle of self-expression and resistance in the Caribbean. Although the recuperation of the oral components into the literary text is by no means unique or exclusive to the Caribbean, these oral elements are centrally important to the kinds of literary forms and experiments that emerge from the region. From Bailey’s perspective, the most valuable contribution that “performing fiction” brings to the distinctive regional aesthetics involves the overt literary recuperation and legitimation of the cultural creations of the underclass with whom the oral cultural forms are primarily associated. Secondly, the hybrid form emerging from this dialogue between the written and the oral creates a particular “woman-centered poetics” and emphasizes the integral role that women have had in shaping the Caribbean expressive culture throughout its historical struggle for decolonization and its contemporary efforts at a postcolonial self-understanding.

Each chapter subsequently emphasizes a particular facet of performance

culture as it shapes the select fictions. The first explores Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* alongside Vic Reid's *New Day* as the two path-breaking experiments in shaping the language of literary orality and the poetics of performance in West Indian fiction. The next chapter turns to Merle Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting* and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* with their structural reliance on story telling. Here, the tension between oral stories and written records shapes the ideas of history and the practice of remembering, signaling the fraught relationship of memory to both oral and written cultural representations. In an effort to reread gender dynamics in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Bailey focuses on Lovelace's engagement with gender ideologies by exploring his revisionary use of the calypso as a performance genre that complicates the masculinist vision of nation-building. The final chapter, on the performative dimensions of the yard narrative, offers a salient reading of the spatial components of "performing fiction," theorizing yard culture in the Caribbean as a locus of cultural trafficking and self-evaluation. Here, Bailey focuses on two stories, Earl Lovelace's "Jobell and America" and Colin Channer's "How to Beat a Child the Right and Proper Way," making valuable use of the Trinidadian *picon* in reading the way the oral form foregrounds the cultural space of the yard.

Any study has to make practical selections that, unfortunately, can exclude valuable possibilities. One such exclusion involves the comparative view of the Caribbean region with its linguistic variety and complex transregional treatments of literary orality. Bailey's study would have profited, in my opinion, from a sustained theoretical engagement with Édouard Glissant and, more broadly, with the Martinican Créoliste movement with respect to their reflections on oral tradition and "oraliture" as precisely the form of writing that negotiates between the cultural indebtedness to orality and the contemporary dictates of written culture. Secondly, the book could have profited from a theoretically more nuanced discussion of performance and performance studies, particularly when it comes to the defining features and effects of the various kinds of performance genres and the well-established theoretical uses of performance and performativity in shaping ideas about identity, gender, citizenship, and ideology. In order to achieve this broader engagement with the topic, Bailey would have had to step more boldly outside the confines of Anglophone West Indian fiction and its critical reception. It is possibly unfair to expect such theoretical inclusiveness in any single study, but it certainly leaves room for further explorations of this valuable topic.

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