Tanya L. Shields

Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging.

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Bodies and Bones is an ambitious study of a selection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Caribbean literary and visual works. Tanya Shields employs a lens of “feminist rehearsal,” defined as “a methodological approach to reading texts that promotes multivalent readings and foregrounds gender, encouraging unity and consensus building through confrontation with overlapping histories of knowledge, power, and freedom” (p. 1). Her study offers a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship on gender and the role of women in what have historically been predominantly male-centered Caribbean intellectual circles and literary canons, engaging the work of Jacqui M. Alexander (*Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, 2006), Belinda Edmondson (*Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women's Writing in Caribbean Narrative*, 1998), and others. One only wishes that she had been a bit more explicit about how “feminist rehearsal” builds on, dialogues with, and further develops existing scholarship on gender and the Caribbean.

A particularly innovative feature of the study is the conceptual intervention it makes with the new critical lens of “feminist rehearsal.” Shields is to be commended for developing a bold approach for reading across the Caribbean and thereby going against the grain of the regional and/or national focus of most scholarship on the region. *Bodies and Bones* analyzes the work of writers from the Anglophone Caribbean (C.L.R. James, Marina Warner, Nalo Hopkinson), the Francophone Caribbean (Aimé Césaire, Edwidge Danticat), and the Hispanophone Caribbean (Alejo Carpentier, Ana Lydia Vega), as well as works by often underrepresented Guyanese writers (Grace Nichols, Fred D'Aguiar, Pauline Melville), and two visual artists (Marie-Hélène Cauvin and Rose-Marie Desruisseau). This sweeping trans-Caribbean scope results, perhaps inevitably, in a certain loss of historical and cultural specificity, and the precise meaning of gender and “feminism” in the Caribbean and in different regional contexts is largely unaddressed, nor is the way racial and class formations may intersect and shape meanings of “feminism.”

The book's most important intervention, in my mind, is its critique of existing Caribbean conceptual frameworks that similarly foreground “repetition” and “rehearsal,” such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo's notion of the repeating island. Shields rightfully notes how “gender is a significant factor missing” (p. 13) in them, and makes the excellent point that “being solely or only repetitive could lead to a rut or chaos,” which contrasts with the “emphasis on revision” (p. 169) and “the process of moving *toward* an ideal” of feminist rehearsal that she

stresses (p. 13). Her notion of rehearsal is thus deeply concerned with a reworking of Caribbean pasts and a movement toward more just futures. Yet the connection to the past, namely the linkages that the study attempts to make between the idea of “rehearsal” and the “bodies and bones” of Caribbean history via that of the “hearse” often remains tenuous. (“The etymology of the word ‘rehearse’ includes ‘hearse’ for the carrying of a dead body, an important part of cultivating unrecognized archives and of understanding the bodily implications of Caribbean belonging” [p. 2].) Similarly, Shields remains vague about the way the future “feminist communities of consensus” (p. 8) that “feminist rehearsal” is said to help form would cut across regional, racial, class, and other differences among Caribbean women and successfully displace the masculinist nationalist constructions that the book repeatedly critiques.

While Shields leaves some of the theoretical promises of “feminist rehearsal” unrealized, overall her study constitutes a compelling return to foundational themes in Caribbean literary and cultural history through a gendered lens. The first chapter considers how writers and visual artists re-evoked the experience of the Middle Passage. The next two offer a persuasive contrapuntal exploration of literary representations of the Haitian Revolution. Chapter 2 provides a fine analysis of how some of the most seminal (male) Caribbean writers—C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Alejo Carpentier—have (re-)written the Haitian Revolution, while Chapter 3 explores feminist versions of this foundational Caribbean event. The fourth chapter, going against the inordinate attention that studies of Caribbean literature have paid to the male characters of Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” explores the maternal figure Sycorax and her literary representations. The fifth chapter foregrounds literary representations of indigenous peoples in Guyana, an important and insufficiently explored aspect of Caribbean literary studies, though its relation to the gendered “returns” that unify the previous four chapters remains a bit unclear.

Overall, *Bodies and Bones* offers an exciting new theoretical proposal—the concept of feminist rehearsal—that has the potential to become a significant counterpoint to existing Caribbean-wide (and often male-centric) critical frameworks. This intervention, combined with the book’s competently gendered “returns” to some of the key themes of Caribbean literature, opens up new ground for other scholars to build on and makes this study an important contribution to the field of Caribbean literary and cultural studies.

Maja Horn

Department of Spanish and Latin American Cultures, Barnard College,
New York NY 10027, U.S.A.
mhorn@barnard.edu