Marilyn McKillop Wells

Among the Garifuna: Family Tales and Ethnography from the Caribbean Coast.

Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2015. xiii + 216 pp. (Cloth US\$ 54.95)

Among the Garifuna tells the story of one extended family, from 1926 until 1988, in three parts: the past of family ancestors (who later appear as spirits in ritual events); the author's fieldwork, which began in 1980; and the turmoil surrounding the mounting of a major ritual fete of the ancestors (*dugu*) in 1988. The events are centered in a particular village in British Honduras/Belize, though the narrative describes a people constantly in motion along the Caribbean coast and abroad. It begins with a Garifuna uprising in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and the brutal reprisals that helped to launch renewed migrations to villages on the British Honduras side. Marilyn Wells is likewise often on the move, shuttling between her teaching position in Tennessee, a project in Papua New Guinea, and her fieldwork and family commitments with the Garifuna.

The story is told as a first-person narrative, without notes, citations, or bibliography. Wells avoids familiar ethnographic or historical genres in favor of what she calls "narrative nonfiction" (p. ix). The text leads readers into the intimate, banal everyday routines and ways of speaking of a specific household, as its members respond to challenges from both within and outside of Garifuna networks, including tensions with Creoles, the school system, and the Catholic Church. Working in this mode enables Wells to reflect creatively about the various ways her own life was entwined with specific Garifuna—her adoptive mother, Khandee; her lover and soul-mate, Tas; the children of Tas and his wife Lisa who become, in a certain way, Wells's children as well; and the local priestess, or *buyei*, Helene. She acquired an impressive knowledge of Garifuna religion—its spirits, materials, and ritual techniques—and, more importantly, describes the ways extra-human powers are embedded in everyday life as well as becoming, in large-scale ritual events, something distinct and set-apart.

The book is written engagingly in fluid, almost novelistic prose. One has the sense that it came as a great liberation to finally, near the end of a long career, float free of the usual scholarly encumbrances to simply tell tales. Of course, Wells is strategic and selective in what she includes. Alongside the characters' livelihoods and love-lives, the overarching focus is the rapport with "tradition" and the ancestors. There is no dearth of precedents for ethnographies of African or Afro-Caribbean religions drafted in the mode of narrative nonfiction, from Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938) to Paul and Cheryl Stoller's *In Sorcery's Shadow* (1989), and many more. These works remain compelling in part because of the way they reveal the messiness of fieldwork and illuminate

that, as Karen McCarthy Brown writes in *Mama Lola*, “ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship ... a social art form” (1991:12). Or, as Laura Bohannan (writing as Elenore Smith Bowen) put it in *Return to Laughter* (1954), “When I write as a social anthropologist and within the canons of that discipline, I write under another name. Here I have written simply as a human being.”

These works vary in the way the authors locate themselves in relation to the “ethnographic real.” Bohannan began *Return to Laughter*, for example, by declaring that all characters in the book except the author, were “fictitious in the fullest meaning of that word.” In *Drinkers, Drummers, and Decent Folk* (1989), John O. Stewart characterized his stories from Trinidad as “distillations” of actual experiences. Marilyn Wells’s characters, mostly drawn from the Diego family, are neither distillations nor fully fictitious. Still, the distinctions between Bowen’s fictitious narrative (drawn from the “types” of people she actually knew in Africa) and Wells’s narrative nonfiction aren’t perfectly clear. Wells describes her characters’ lives from participant observation and “stories my Garifuna friends told me,” while the villages are “composites of places” (p. x). In both cases composites, types, and distillations feature alongside more specific renderings of actual persons.

Wherever we place Wells’s rich text on the spectrum of narrative/ ethnography/ fiction, we should note that literary genres are believed by many, including anthropologists, to be better than social scientific writing at depicting “human-ness.” Why is anthropology viewed as having lost track of people as “palpable beings” (as John Stewart has put it)? Obviously there is a productive tension between the mode of anthropology as the view from afar, and anthropology as authentic access to others’ subjective experiences. Yet the trick of the latter is more complicated than it might seem. The restoration of “palpable humans” through a narrative mode is often achieved by assuming the power to describe thoughts and emotions of individuals—all of which remain mostly inscrutable to more doctrinaire empirical rules of ethnographic writing. In works of narrative, the Other is humanized by being endowed a rich inner life, written through the writers’ imagination, presumably by analogy with their own experiences, and in keeping with their own aims. In Wells’s depiction, Garifunas occasionally wax eloquent about “meanings” in a way that doesn’t quite ring true: “[Blanching?] ... Tas flexed his shoulders and stretched his arms. ‘Of course, Garinagu don’t get clear skinned. It means we lose strength. The soul-spirit gets weak. It happens any time we go through a full night of ceremony. Folks get quiet between midnight and three o’clock’” (p. 136). The didactic speeches placed in the mouths of Garifuna actors seem at times overwrought, and remind us that even “narrative nonfiction” involves plenty of artifice and writerly work. Mostly

Wells does that work beautifully, and there is much to learn from this book, easily enjoyed from a hammock or a porch.

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