Kevin Adonis Browne, *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Photography*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2018. ix + 245 pp. (Cloth US\$70.00)¹

Proustian in its luminous, often nostalgic prose, *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Photography* is also as lyrical as the song of a Malian griot. It is as if Pauline Melville had fallen into bed with Frantz Fanon and given birth to this intricate and sumptuous volume of poetry, politics, criticism, and iconography. After a brief introduction, there are three substantive chapters and a conclusion, interspersed with four photo essays. The story begins with a dramatic descent into blindness. In the introductory chapter, we are thrown into a story of personal traumas, self-reflective and deprecating confessions and at the same time an analysis of photography and *Mas*. What better fodder could there be for a photographer to begin? Yes, just that—to record everything before it fades away. Don't misunderstand, *High Mas* is critical in its methodological approach. In fact it sometimes wades too deeply into the mire of what I consider to be a diasporic critical language, a language committed to proving our ability to speak the difficult semantics of critical theory, but it does not do this too often. For the most part, as readers we are carried along a wave, a flow of dialect that is, to my mind, quintessentially Caribbean, both critical and surreal.

Browne deals primarily with *Mas* as a trope, both as performance and as *ethos* (p. 11). But for him, *Mas* and photography are intricately intertwined, and without question “Empire is a camera,” making metaphors of people, detaching them and freezing them in time (p. 45). He admits his own culpability here and struggles with it throughout the book, but the best evidence of his departure from the colonial gaze are the photographs themselves. Moko Jumbies, Blue Devils, and the demonic femme *La Diablesse* occupy his lens but he knows them all by name and tells their stories, documenting their *Mas* as emancipatory practice, for both his subjects and himself. By inserting his own vulnerable truths into the text, Browne releases his power and with it the colonizing effect of his gaze. He makes reference to this when he states that “the Caribbeanist photographer is able to develop and be read as a body of work and as a site for curating bodies of work and the work of bodies and minds” (p. 47). I know, that feels like a lot, but think about that sentence. It is everything. It allows an escape, an angle for the Caribbean scholar to be poetic, to choose to be seer, without becoming overseer.

1 Editors' note: In May 2019, the book was awarded the prestigious 2019 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature.

There is none of the exoticism of typical carnival photography here. Rather, there are tears and groveling, there is a postpossession cigarette to be had, and a haunting at an abandoned sugar factory. Browne's text brings to mind Mikail Bakhtin and Victor Turner and their work on the grotesque and the liminal. But quite clearly the liminal is lived reality here, not some state to be passed through. The abject and the grotesque are quite clearly illuminated as aspects of the Caribbean everyday existence, working the spirit and all of its pathos. Here, there is real despair and, ironically, also revelry.

His treatment of Tracy Sankar's *Mas* as *La Diablesse* is articulated as an exegesis on "fractured femininity," of trauma and betrayal, a personal *Mas* that offers us the trope of the "tragic mulatto," Caribbean in her very essence. Sankar is captured both in and out of character as a woman embodying the racialized violence that has historically defined the mixed-race body within the colonial sphere. But of all the photographic essays in this work, the *Moko Jumbies of the South*, walking through an abandoned sugar factory, remind one of Africa, of Gabon's Punu *mukudji* masqueraders, white faced spirit maidens on stilts. From their vantage point all indiscretions are seen. But as Browne admonishes, "Bacchanal is unavoidable ... Things are lost at carnival. Things fall apart" (p. 19). The same can be said of this very vulnerable work. You will be lost here. You will fall apart. But go to it. Browne dares to be authentic in this work. His text dares to document and perform the masquerade of our ancestors within the "enduring violence of whiteness" (p. 230). He makes beauty of his suffering and of his subjects. Like the Carnival, this text will "touch you and call you home to it" (p. 19).

Don't run away.

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