

Review:

Kevin A. Browne. *Tropic Tendencies: Rhetoric, Popular Culture, and the Anglophone Caribbean.*

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In a departure from localism, disciplines such as rhetoric and composition have found themselves between abandoning a singular/totalistic universal story and rushing to instantaneous interconnections (Massey 14). What has been evidenced in recent scholarship on globalism, however, is that the rhetoric of scale is the globe and that descriptions of people are made within these claims rather than the *ideologies of scale* and politics of *scale-making* (Tsing 347-348). Scholars have re-imagined the common local and global distinction as a dialectical relationship (Pred 1077-1078). Still, there persist generalizations for talking about place and culture, risking the erosion of the local culture and the production of homogenized global spaces (Cresswell 8).

“We is people” reverberates throughout *Tropic Tendencies* as Kevin Browne illuminates how Caribbean people acknowledge the past but do not remain there. For those of us who are people of color and/or teach marginalized communities, this idea of acknowledging our

past but not remaining there is a powerful one. For Browne, public rhetoric is central to his argument that

Caribbean rhetorical performance is a vernacular response, a “practice of judgment and a critical redress” that is the result of “invisibility and silencing” (3). The Caribbean community has the capacity to cultivate a collective ethos capable of critical redress. To prove this, Browne explores the practical use of Caribbean public rhetoric and Caribbean public expression.

Browne’s project proposes to heighten our understanding of what is at stake for the Caribbean people. He reveals how public rhetoric is about people, performativity, and the systems of difference they are situated in and by (Sheller and Urry 214). It is about how time, place, culture, and history mark the black body as “bearer of abject subjectivity” (Sharpe 182) but also about how the Caribbean people express unwillingness to be “contained by that position” through vernacular traditions that exhibit critical re-invention (Hall 202; Baldwin xii). The presence of Caribbean rhetoric and its practical use for community expression and assertiveness, again, allows Browne to explore the efficacy of Caribbean rhetorical performance and the possibility of a Caribbean ethos. This work begins in offering a different interpretive account of Caribbean rhetorical tradition and performance, as opposed to Russian dialogism, one that considers Caribbean desired citizenship that bespeaks democratic impulses (15; 167). Browne’s animation of the interplay of place, knowledge, and meaning-making, which positions ways of being, seeing, and doing to enactments of Caribbeanness that are dialectical and deliberative, substantiates a claim for a Caribbean vernacular ethos.

Comprised of five central chapters, Browne’s topic-oriented ethnography and rhetorical analyses of Caribbean rhetoric, tradition, and performance situates an epistemological framework of traditional practices that “persist and enable meaningful identification with others who share a stake in the effort to be seen and heard” (7). Browne is adamant, “No attempt was made to cover the vastness and depth of Caribbean culture...Nor have I attempted to provide a complete catalog of expression” (161). Yet, re-conceptualizing rhetorical terms such as *doxa*, *metonym*, and *epideixis* into the

“dialectical vernacular” context, *Caribbean carnivalesque*—a “means by which Caribbean people can define the(ir) world and a lens through which they can see it” (8)—is interpolated across sites as a means of redress and method of creolized rhetorical (re)invention. Caribbean carnivalesque, as an epistemological framework, comes to personify a claim made throughout the chapters. “We is people,” is contingent upon the interplay of effective discourse of rhetors and the disposition of audiences to be receptive and engaged. Caribbean carnivalesque is public (and visual) rhetoric and is “desirous of democratic consequences” (12). Following his introduction, a corrective to Caribbean misrepresentations (chapter 1) and discussion of the parameters of Caribbean discourse, expression and (re)invention (chapter 2), Browne brings attention to several sites (e.g. performance, texts, and cyberspace) where “extant traditions” persist with varying rhetorical modes (code-switching, wordplay, etc.). These sites exhibit how collective identification can be carried out by Caribbean discourse and how rhetorical traditions and performances can be sites of memory that register a collective vernacular ethos.

I am interested in how Browne brings into focus what anthropologists Anna Tsing refers to as *scale-making projects, ideologies of scale, and friction*. *Scale-making* is exhibited in the “interplay of how Caribbean people make meaning and what they make of those meanings” (Browne 12). Browne asks the reader to look at the carnivalesque activity through the use of masque (materially and symbolically), as a form of doxa and vernacular epideictic, which “ties its adherents to the region” and implicates the audience, as spectators and judges, “to give an account of themselves” (20; 23). This type of public rhetoric and display of Caribbeanness plays out in *scale-making* projects such as proto-calypso and prophetic calypso (chapter 3) that “break silence” and “maintain noise” by provoking social responsibility, awareness, and action through tradition and innovation (90). Then, there is chapter 4, where Browne focuses on Earl Lovelace, a Caribbean author, who forwards a conception of ethos (and self-definition) by invoking memory (116) to enable audience members to “recall the legacy of emancipation” and be engaged in “more productive inclusion in contemporary democratic life while simultaneously negotiating the constant threats of erasure” (123). There is also chapter 5, where Browne focuses on chatting, cariblogging, and video sharing in cyberspace that are “largely underwritten by a carnivalesque

imperative" (129). In each instance, the rhetorical enterprise of the carnivalesque, more than a trope and beyond carnival, is both a personification of historical bodies and space and a representation of (re)invention that plays out in the practice of culture (12; 28).

The Caribbean carnivalesque, representative of "shifting situationalities of everyday life" and related to "region and its descendants," must be understood in and on a people's own terms (12). What becomes clear is how important body-graphical, geo-graphical, and mobile-graphical cultural displays of expressions are to being seen and heard. Browne notes, "We perform out of a history—or, more accurately, a memory of history—that has shaped our identity" (162), which "functions as an articulation of collective agency and cultural intention, existing in conflicting or oppressive situations as the expression of a realistic desire for successful participation in contemporary society" (7). The Caribbean identity is itself a cultural claim (e.g. *ideology of scale*) about locality, regionality, and globality ("The Global" 472). Browne does not forward an argument of homogeneity or monolithic societies. As geographer Allan Pred notes, "the purely or 'authentically' 'local' has very probably never existed. Even under the most isolated of circumstances," but, "local differences persist for there is nothing which is literally 'global'" (1075; 1077). As Browne situates place, knowledge, and meaning-making practices within a Caribbean cultural and political economy, whose definitional struggles over meaning in which they participate in characterizes the region, enactments of Caribbeanness reveal the possible critical regional-to-global interactions and illuminates the potential for a collective Caribbean ethos.

The idea of *friction*, not as a "synonym for resistance" but rather that which "gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power" and "refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine" (*Friction* 6) is an important one in *Tropic Tendencies*. There is a "great tendency to characterize Caribbean culture solely in terms of resistance," Browne argues (28). This is a cautionary tale. Both the academy and Western conceptualization of agency, as exhibited with resistance and subversion, at times fails to consider a community's intentions and desires for citizenship and democratic participation. Browne writes, "all performances remain, to some degree, subject

to hegemony” and homogeneity is resisted “through the conscious practice of difference” (161). Difference matters. The idea of *friction* in *Tropic Tendencies* makes it so the regional to global critical interaction is acknowledged and seen as productive to a collective ethos shaping and shaped by meaning. The pedagogical imperative we find ourselves pursuing, vis-à-vis, often revolves around implication, receptiveness, and participation. Browne reminds us that we must understand the Caribbean community’s struggle over creating meaning on its own terms. This is central to the efficacy of community-building and even coalitional building.

Tropic Tendencies does not outright propose a decolonial agenda. But, for those who are interested in de-colonizing, Browne’s critical work does demonstrate how place (and geography), knowledge, and meaning-making constitute body-graphical, geo-graphical, and mobile-graphical cultural displays of expressions. This much is part of the political and ethical project of decolonizing. Decolonizing is not a metaphor nor should it stand as an occasion to further academic desires. A focus on enunciations, the loci of enunciations, and its local histories serves as a reminder of not only where, but how the “repressed” are saving themselves. Browne’s concept of Caribbean carnivalesque, tied to region and descendants, reveals the complex and dynamic ways vernacular public rhetoric is used and towards what ends. Browne writes, rhetoric “involves the probability of persuasion rather than the certainty of it” (6). This much indicates the limitations and strengths of such an epistemological framework. In the complicated work of rhetoric and decolonizing, there is never certainty.

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