

Book Review

– *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture*, by Kevin Adonis Browne, University Press of Mississippi, 2018

In *High Mas*, scholar, poet, and photographer, Kevin Adonis Browne combines four photographic series with a collection of essays, all of which focus on several display traditions associated with Trinidad and Tobago's carnival celebration, of which *mas* holds special interest. While normally denoting the collection of by-now standard costumes worn during the islands' carnival festivities, *mas* (from masquerade), for Browne, is also "the extensive, often elaborate unfolding of a very particular lifestyle choice – an *ethos*" (italics in the original, p. 11). In this respect, *mas* forms a framing device that enables him to explore not only this specific carnival tradition, but also associated carnival practices and their social and political significance within the Trinidadian and, especially, broader Caribbean context. Four essays open this book and serve above all to place the reader in the mindset of the writer and photographer himself, and to outline the creative goals and political intentions that moved him to undertake the project of photographing carnival participants and performers in full regalia and, in many cases, in mid-performance. Using poetic, often florid and Derrida-esque prose, in these essays Browne explains his views on "the Caribbean subject" and especially what it means to be part of the black Caribbean experience, as he frames it: "Is it Mandinka black or Madras black?" (p. 35). All of this is filtered through the literal and metaphysical lens of what he calls "Caribbeanist photography," which Browne explains: "augments our subjectivities, facilitating the interplay of intent, symbolic representation, literal presentation, and interpretive engagement" (p. 34).

Following these opening essays, the rest of the book consists of the photographic series, each coupled with an essay loosely organized around the photographs, their meaning and the context in which they were taken. Overall, Browne has an eye for the dramatic. The 120 photographs that make up the greater part of this book are highly textured and often include close ups of painted bodies and spectacular *mas* costumes and outfits. The first series presented to the reader is the aptly titled "*Seeing Blue*." It features photographs of the street performances of "blue" and "white devils" as they take to the

streets of Port of Spain engaging in simultaneously crowd-pleasing and crowd-taunting antics. A collection of black and white photographs follows, each providing remarkably intimate and touching glimpses of *la diablesse* performer, beginning with her nighttime preparations to take part in Port of Spain's *Traditional Mas Competition*, followed by the competition itself, and concluding with the moving and emotionally-charged moments of contemplation and repose that end the performance. Two of Trinidad's famous stilts walkers/dancers are the focus of the next series titled "Moko Jumbies of the South," of which many of the photographs were shot on the site of the historic Usine-Ste. Madeleine sugar factory. In contrast to the other photos, the two individuals in this series – each perched high up on their long stilts – are captured in dramatically staged poses that make use of the angular structures of the seemingly abandoned and rundown factory. The concluding series brings the viewer back to the brightly sunlit streets of downtown Port of Spain on "Emancipation Day" of carnival where *mas* men and women – variously *red* and *blue devils* among other contemporary characters and costumes – display to the delight, as one photo makes evident, of camera- and smartphone-toting onlookers.

It is a sign of the author's knowledge not only of *mas* itself, but the community of performers and participants, that under every photograph in each of these four series is a caption that, more often than not, includes the person's name and/or sobriquet as well as reference to the year and location plus a few words about the context. The combination of interesting photographs and poetic reflections by the author carries the reader along and offers the reader a window on a unique aspect of Trinidadian culture. However, in a book titled *Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture*, a reader has every reason to expect an examination of Caribbean cultural practices beyond Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed, few people who could rightly claim to be Caribbean themselves or living within the Caribbean basin or students of the Caribbean, would assume that the culture of one nation passes for all. In this respect, the title defrauds the expectations of the reader. The question of what exactly passes for the "Caribbean" becomes increasingly fraught when the reader considers Browne's self-identification as a "Caribbean photographer," which, as far as the reader can see, is entirely grounded in his experience and understanding of the social and cultural history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sean Bellaviti, Ryerson University
seanbellaviti@hotmail.com