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The long and the short of it: Review of *Communities in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Short Stories*

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Lucy Evans, *Communities in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Short Stories* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 230 pp.

One of the biggest events in the recent history of Anglophone Caribbean literature was the awarding of the 2015 Man Booker Prize to Marlon James for *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014). Not only did the award bring renewed attention to Caribbean fiction, but James' novel itself was a 'big' deal – a sprawling, near-700 page epic spanning three decades and the lives of multiple characters. If the publication of the ironically titled *Brief History* represented a stand-out moment in Caribbean letters, however, the magnitude of its achievement and the sheer size of the novel should not obscure the continuing importance of the short story as a vehicle for new writing from the region. A glance at the roster of the 2015 Bocas Literary Festival, for example, or at recent releases from Britain's principal independent publisher of Caribbean writing, Peepal Tree Press, should be sufficient to confirm the short story's ubiquity and vitality. Work by Rhoda Bharath, Kwame Dawes, Barbara Jenkins, Keith Jardim, Sharon Millar, and Jennifer Rahim attests to what Lucy Evans, in her illuminating study, calls "the continuing prevalence of the short story form within late twentieth and early twenty-first century Anglophone Caribbean writing" (1).

Such has been the importance of the short story in Caribbean literature that in his 1997 essay "The West Indian Short Story," Kenneth Ramchand would claim: "There are no West Indian novelists, only short story writers in disguise; no West Indian novels, only fabrications taking their shape and structure from the transfigured short stories they contain" (qtd. in Evans 1). Ramchand's assertion is surely an overstatement; but the pivotal role played by the short story in the consolidation of an Anglophone Caribbean literary culture cannot be gainsaid. In the first half of the twentieth century, the flourishing of small magazines and periodicals such as *The Beacon*, *Kyk-over-al*, and *Bim* provided a platform for the publication of short fiction and poetry and nurtured the early careers of such writers as Martin Carter, George Lamming, and Wilson Harris. The radio program *Caribbean Voices* was another important outlet that encouraged writers to experiment with the short story form. Recorded and edited in London and broadcast weekly to listeners in the Anglophone

Caribbean through the BBC's General Overseas Service, the program ran from 1944 to 1958 and was hugely influential in shaping the Caribbean canon.

Evans offers a useful overview of this history, but the focus of her book is on the work that has appeared since a revival of the short story form in the 1980s (following the novel writing 'boom' of the post-war period). This renaissance "has involved a shift in the story's prevalent mode of production; the practice of including individual stories in local magazines and newspapers has been overtaken by anthologies, single-author collections and short story cycles published mainly outside the region" (17). Evans's concern is with the way such developments have impacted on the aesthetics of Caribbean short story writing, and more specifically with the relationship between narrative structure and the portrayal of community. Her analysis focuses on work by Jamaican, Guyanese, and Trinidadian authors, including Olive Senior, Kwame Dawes, Alecia McKenzie, Earl Lovelace, Robert Antoni, Lawrence Scott, and Dionne Brand. Anyone glancing at the list of texts covered by her study will be struck immediately, I suspect, by her proposal that we consider Scott's *Witchbroom* and Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* not as novels, which is how they are usually categorized, but as short story cycles. Evans's arguments for doing so are sound, relating to the formal logics of the works. But it would have been interesting to have heard more on why she thinks it is that these texts, for all that they have affinities with short story cycles, are nonetheless presented and marketed as novels.

The trajectory of Evans's study is neatly structured around the move from country to city, and from local to national to global communities. The first chapter begins by exploring Olive Senior's representation of village life in *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*. It aims to read Senior's collection in relation to various anthropological studies of Jamaican rural communities, drawing on the work of thinkers such as Edith Clarke and M. G. Smith, as well as that of Sidney Mintz and Jean Besson. There is always a danger that comparing literary texts to anthropological studies in this way can feel overly programmatic, the critic dutifully assessing the extent to which the fictional representation measures up to or departs from the anthropological findings. Aside from one or two moments early on in the book, Evans sidesteps this danger with aplomb. Moving from Senior to Lovelace's *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*, she provides an excellent reading of the latter in the context of Trinidad's oil boom of the 1970s. The registration of the boom in Trinidadian fiction has not received the critical attention it deserves, so that Evans's careful consideration of the way stories such as "The Coward" and "The Fire Eater's Journey" depict the rise in consumerism precipitated by the oil bonanza is most welcome.

Evans next turns her attention to Kingston and the impact of a divided and uneven urban geography on literary aesthetics. Again, her readings of her

chosen texts – in this instance Dawes’s *A Place to Hide and Other Stories* and McKenzie’s *Satellite City* – are supple and acute. She is particularly interested in the role played by representation in the shaping of urban space. Noting the way the form of the short story cycle allows Dawes and McKenzie to present a multiplicity of competing perceptions of Kingston, she argues that the city in their stories “is not a stable or singular reality but a site of multiple realities; a palimpsest where diverse experiences of the city collide” (120).

The degree to which the formal properties of story cycles allow for the expression of unity in diversity is equally significant to Evans’ consideration of the representation of national communities. She offers a suggestive reading of *Witchbroom*, for example, which turns on Scott’s use of the musical conventions of the fugue as a means to orchestrate the narration of Trinidad’s diverse cultural histories. In her final chapter – perhaps the best in the book – Evans jumps scale again, this time to the global. Her compelling reading of Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is notable for the way it eschews common interpretations of the novel as celebrating “an aesthetic of deterritorialization” and as abandoning the nation-state to “offer an alternative mode of belonging” (168). Warning against the kinds of uncritical celebrations of ‘hybridity’ that were so common in postcolonial studies throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Evans views the novel, rightly I think, as far more ambivalent in its presentation of the motifs of drifting and wandering than is often assumed.

This is a measured, detailed study that shines a light on a hugely significant literary tradition within the Caribbean. One key question the book raises implicitly is why is it that the short story form should come to such prominence at certain historical moments? Evans notes the reasons why Caribbean writers are drawn to the form, ranging from its aesthetic possibilities to commercial or sociological pressures. But can we also view upsurges in its popularity in terms of long-run economic and political transformations in the world-system? Is it significant, for instance, that the two periods in which the Caribbean short story is generally held to have flourished – in the early part of the twentieth century and from the 1980s onwards – both represent moments of deep systemic crisis for global capitalism and an unravelling of hegemonic power structures? This is not a question directly broached in this study, but Evans’s insightful analyses open the way to considering it.