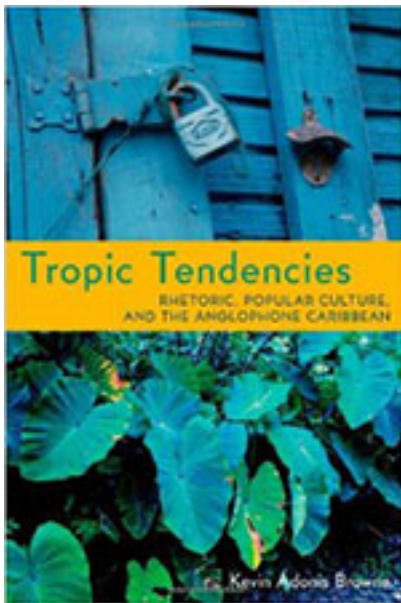


## ***Tropic Tendencies: Rhetoric, Popular Culture, and the Anglophone Caribbean* by Kevin Adonis Browne**

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*Tropic Tendencies* forecasts its queries immediately, as the pronunciation of the title's initial vowel epitomizes Browne's analysis of tropical people's troping strategies. Building on at least a half century of African diaspora discourse analysis, Browne aims in this study to answer two central questions: is there a discernible Caribbean rhetoric? Assured that there is, he asks: how is this rhetoric used in Caribbean popular culture? In an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, Browne reads Caribbean rhetorical performance(s) through a matrix he names the "Caribbean carnivalesque" (7). The "Caribbean" with which Browne is concerned is an ethos, a "subscription to a characteristic way of framing the world and making meaning within it" (5). Consequently, the "carnavalesque" is "an embedded practice ... a definitive method for understanding and enacting" the ethos. An adept rhetor, Browne reorganizes these familiar, over-determined concepts into a new structure.

Browne's introduction frames the critical project with the vernacular experience that catalyzes his work: "Labor Day. Crown Heights, Brooklyn. 1999." Relying on the simultaneity of what is seen and unseen during this public celebration/display, in chapter one, Browne defines the carnivalesque as a lens through which Caribbean "oral, aural,

visual, and scribal” cultural texts are both produced and understood (13). Mapping the carnivalesque onto existing rhetorical frameworks is perhaps the book’s main strength. Chapter two begins the analysis and application of his theory. The modes of discourse Brown excavates—code switching, word play, circumlocution, call and response, boasting/shaming, proverbs, the sermonic, and nonverbal/visual semantics—evoke those defined by Geneva Smitherman in her *Talkin and Testifyin* (1975). Conceptually, Browne adds nothing new, and Smitherman’s work challenges the unique vernacular Caribbeanness to which Browne is committed. Regardless, the rhetorical intertextuality of these two works brings into relief an intervention Browne does not claim: an African diasporic rhetoric that, while sharing modes, is characterized by a range of performances and strategies. He redraws the boundaries of the discursive in the section “Nonverbal/Visual Semantic.” There, Browne suggests that photography’s relationship between the symbolic and the material is the best evidence of vernacular rhetoric hiding in plain sight. His analysis recalls Patricia Mohammed’s *Imaging the Caribbean: Cultural and Visual Translation* (like Smitherman, briefly mentioned and footnoted). Browne’s work extends Mohammed’s project by focusing on the people’s own imaging as an engaged and conscious act with ethical, cultural, and social imperative. Chapter three focuses on music, particularly the calypsonian, as working within the carnival matrix. Convincingly, Browne articulates the degree to which the form and the lyrics of particular performers evidence his strategies at work.

He moves in chapter four to Earl Lovelace’s literary projects. Structurally, chapter four serves to elucidate two key figures within the discourse, the masque and the dragon dance, which anchor chapter five, “Inhabiting the Digital Vernacular: The Old Talker, the Caribloggers, and the Jamettes.” Here, the masque and dragon dance are linked to make clear that the carnivalesque is not simply spectacular performance, but “a recuperative project” that must be read in terms of “a masque tradition rather than be masked as tradition” (120). Browne moves the Caribbean into the “virtual community” where key aspects of the carnivalesque are excavated in his analysis of caribloggers’ strategies for framing their voices and accessing “embodied vernacular knowledge” (132; 105). Cyberspatial conversations are especially enabling of the collective identity Browne explores. Absent physicality, the inclination to focus on individuals, bodies, and social and material conditions become more present, more visible. In these virtual communities, masques of concealment become masques of revelation (152-53).

Like Carnival, Caribbean rhetoric exists at the nexus of revelry and revolt, manifesting both through a reliance on and invocation of particular vernacular practices. It is at this junction where my review finds itself stuck, for Browne’s work eschews the rhetorical work of women, both as practitioners and critics of Caribbean rhetorical performances. Yet, I want to understand its gendered absences within the discourse it maps. In the first three chapters, he references critical women scholars and performers (i.e., Carolyn Cooper’s work on music; Louise Bennett, Paule Marshall, and Lorna Goodison’s fiction and poetry). But this small space for women exposes the limits of Browne’s argument about the prevalence of these vernacular strategies. Nonetheless, I would recommend this book to scholars of

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traditional rhetorics as well as those, like myself, interested in vernacular discursives. I wanted to like *Tropic Tendencies*, and found reason to in chapters two and five. While the neglect of gender somewhat dilutes its impact, Browne nevertheless serves as a wonderful example to young scholars of how to perform extended rhetorical analysis across genres and form, and to synthesize conventions to argue for a tradition as the beginning point for a new, more complex discussion about Caribbean textual, bodily, artistic and/or rhetorical performance. *Tropic Tendencies* is at once an engaging study of rhetoric and a rhetorical study in itself.

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