

BOOK REVIEW

Review: Aiyejina, Funso. *Earl Lovelace*. University of West Indies Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-976-640-627-1. Pp. 114. Cloth \$25.00

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This concise and comprehensive biography of Earl Lovelace reads as a celebration of the man, both as author and local figure in Trinidad & Tobago. Aiyejina wastes no words praising the man committed to telling the stories of Trinidad's rural and urban communities, who has become beloved both locally and abroad. Emerging at the end of Earl Lovelace's life (now aged 82) there is a sense of urgency about this biography, a palpable desire to pay tribute to the author within his lifetime. But scholars of Caribbean literature will find the biography carefully researched and a welcome addition to the field. Anyone involved in Lovelace scholarship will know the difficulties in accessing the slim and often out-of-print resources available on the author, including Aiyejina's own compilation of Lovelace's essays and lectures *Growing in the Dark*, which to my knowledge is only available at one European library. Fortunately for us, Aiyejina has long been dedicated to collecting written and spoken records of the author.

The book is organized into four parts: a preface, introduction, and three chapters. In the preface Aiyejina discloses his personal relationship with Lovelace, which began in scholarly esteem during Aiyejina's doctoral studies at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in the late seventies and over the years has emerged into a close collaborative friendship. The preface also details the sources for collating the material for this book, which includes interviews, informal chats, archives at UWI St. Augustine, autobiographical references in Lovelace's own essays, and the manuscript for a forthcoming autobiography. In the introduction Aiyejina endeavors to explicate Lovelace as 'native' author, what it means to have stayed in a region that the previous generation of writers often fled (the so-called Windrush generation) and how Lovelace's work connotes a commitment to the people, language, and culture of Trinidad. Entrenched in this commitment is a belief in the 'responsibility of the self to the community, and the obligations of the community to its constituents, especially those who have been disadvantaged' and a focus on articulating 'people's desire to belong, their need to claim and understand their landscapes and intricacies of their histories' (2).

Chapter One provides a summary of Lovelace's early life, and the significance of many events are not lost on readers familiar with Lovelace's novels who will see, for instance, a similarity between Lovelace's own failure to pass the college exhibition exam with that of the character Alford George in *Salt*. Aiyejina carefully guides the reader through many such connections, at times I must admit feeling a sense of not wanting to know how much of Lovelace's fiction is autobiographical. This chapter also suggests Aiyejina's own angle for the biography: to provide confirmation of a prediction Lovelace received as a child from a Hindu holy man that he would become 'a good man for the world' (21).

Chapter Two situates Lovelace and his work within the changing political climate of the Caribbean during the author's lifetime, opening with the arrival of Eric Williams in 1956 and Lovelace's initial admiration then rejection of the People's National Movement. It also details Lovelace's own argument for reparations (an idea seen subtly in *Salt*) his personal affiliation and dissolution with the Black Power movement (reflected in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Is Just a Movie*), and most interesting perhaps, Lovelace's growing belief in the New World African and his desire to portray and uplift folk cultural in the Caribbean, both in the celebration of traditional African song and dance, but also in its reinvented cultural forms such as, Carnival, calypso, and the steelpan. This would have been an ideal place for Aiyejina to include more on Lovelace's engagement with Trinidadian Creole in his writing; a fact glossed over by Aiyejina as local language, or connected to elements of bacchanal or calypsonian traditions. While Aiyejina has made strong cases for the bacchanal tradition in Lovelace's writing elsewhere (see 'Novelypso: Indigenous Narrative Strategies in Earl Lovelace's Fiction' (2000) and 'Unmasking the Chantwell Narrator in Earl Lovelace's Fiction' (2005)), this case can be made even stronger with attention to Lovelace's use of creole as narrative strategy; a conscious choice that is not lost on many scholars in discussions of Lovelace's work (see Merle Hodge 'Dialogue and Narrative Voice in Earl Lovelace's *The Schoolmaster*' (1998) or 'The Language of Earl Lovelace' (2006)). Chapter Two is by far the most rigorous and fascinating

in the biography. Additionally, it covers Lovelace's experience in the United States at the height of Civil Rights tensions and his return at the wake of the Black Power movement. By the mid 1980s Aiyejina writes that Lovelace had arrived at his major theme and defined narrative style, outlined by Aiyejina as 'reparatory justice and narrative possession' (72).

While the first two chapters concentrate on the biographical details of the author's life and the content of his novels, Chapter Three concludes by considering the author's aesthetic principles. Aiyejina declares Lovelace's commitment to reclaiming African folk culture to be the guiding principle of his writing style. Quoting Lovelace in one of the lectures printed in *Growing in the Dark*, Aiyejina explains how the author saw the reinvention of African culture in the Caribbean to be the foundation for the region's culture and consciousness. This New World African aesthetic presents itself in Lovelace's writing through the inclusion of dance, carnival, song, and in particular calypso, or a narrative bacchanal. Aiyejina briefly goes through each of Lovelace's novels reading them for signs of this aesthetic, though he curiously omits the most recent, *Is Just a Movie* (2011), which would have provided rich material for such a reading. Aiyejina's chief contribution to Lovelace scholarship is this very idea of narrative possession; an aesthetic stemming from the bacchanal tradition and rituals of Orisha and Spiritual Baptist faiths that allows Lovelace to render a multi-vocal, multi-perspective narrative. Such a narrative is replete with elements intrinsic to calypso, to the extent that Aiyejina deems many of Lovelace's novels 'novelypsos.' The effect of such an aesthetic, Aiyejina claims, works to give voice to the complex cultural makeup of the Caribbean while signaling the dominance of reinvented African culture within the region. However, this could be seen as problematic by those wondering why the voices of Indo-Trinidadians are represented in New World African aesthetics.

The only of its kind, this long awaited monograph on Earl Lovelace provides a valuable overview of the writer and his work. While by no means impartial and a clear homage to the aging author, the biography is an enjoyable read and will be an asset to scholars and students alike.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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