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Review of Conway's "African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions"

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Conway, Cecelia. *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. 394 pages. Paperback \$25.00.

Scholarly arguments to demonstrate influence—whether of literary style and content or of the development of a practice in its cultural context—are inevitably complex. Cecelia Conway's book works in both areas, so one can anticipate the circuitous nature of the rhetorical threads. Couple this complexity with the passion Conway clearly feels for her thesis and material, and the result is a difficult but engaging study which attempts to prove the preeminence of the African tradition in the development of American banjo playing.

This study consists of several subarguments which combine in support of her thesis. In the process of demonstrating the African influence, Conway (1) presents and analyzes the written history (mostly in the form of instructional materials and brief literary or personal journal references) of the banjo in African-American traditions; (2) studies the impact of slaves' banjo playing on white professional entertainers, an "apprenticeship" that resulted in the formation of a new form of entertainment—the minstrel show; (3) charts the avenues of cultural exchange (circuses, medicine shows, proximity, etc.) which allowed the transmission of the banjo from black folk to mountain white folk; (4) studies the banjo as an artifact of material culture (from the delicate gourd instruments of Africa to more durable wooden creations), putting to rest the idea that the drone string was an American invention; (5) demonstrates the stylistic influence of black playing on the white mountain banjo styles of the

present, (6) posits the existence of a distinct genre of “banjo songs,” and (7) demonstrates the characteristics of this genre through close textual analysis of the songs of one particular black banjo man, Dink Roberts.

It is particularly interesting to note Conway’s approach. To begin, she considers scores of textual references to and descriptions of African-American banjo playing in America, in addition to the primary and secondary banjo literature, much of which pertains to the minstrel tradition. These textual resources are studied in light of another compelling set of data: gleanings from the author’s fieldwork with the small handful of remaining banjo players in the African-American tradition—Dink Roberts, John Snipes, and Odell Thompson. As Conway writes, “Their traditions and practices [provide] a means for reaching beyond the written records to an understanding of a continuous strand of African-American musical culture, its impact upon white tradition, especially in the Southeast and in Appalachia, and its contribution to American folk music.” What results from her study, then, is not only a convincing argument about the dominant and enduring African-American influence, but an engaging portrayal of a living pre-blues banjo tradition and a saga of the evolution of banjo styles and song genres.

Conway says that much of the influence once attributed to minstrel sources in the development of the mountain banjo styles is in fact a direct influence of African-American playing on the white mountain style. She demonstrates that such influence was both possible and likely by proving (1) that more musical contact occurred between mountain whites and blacks than between mountain whites and minstrels, and (2) that the playing styles, musical terminologies, tunes, and tunings of the white mountain folk are more similar to those of black folk than they are to those of the minstrels.

What makes this particular line of argument so relevant and heartening today is that it demonstrates the degree to which banjo playing—“an emblem of white mountain folk”—is in fact a marriage of black and white musical traditions, a union which took place when the relationships that engendered it were most difficult. In spite of all constraints, the art of banjo playing persisted in crossing the cultural boundaries of class and race, creating a democratic, noncommercially mediated, highly sophisticated art form, a form which evolved through artistic interchange and reached its peak in the creation of a new literary genre (the banjo song), the result of combined European and African strains.

My one complaint about the book is that at times the various subarguments do not seem to be aware of one another. Some chapters tend to act as independent units, leading to a kind of repetition that is

occasionally distracting. This is natural for a book that began in part as journal articles, but that doesn't make the reading any easier. That difficulty aside, Conway's achievement here is considerable. She has presented an argument that changes the way we think about the history of the banjo and the importance of the African-American banjo tradition in the American evolution of that instrument. And, simultaneously, she has made available a wealth of engaging primary material—a contribution made all the more poignant by her Epilogue, in which she recounts the deaths of the last three black banjo players in the tradition.

Powell, Lynn. *Old and New Testaments*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. 68 pages. Hardcover \$17.95. Paperback \$9.95.

The poems in this book fulfill the prophecy of the title: they are as rich in biblical allusions as one might anticipate. The first poem, "Nativity," begins like this:

Some parents shy away from the body,
but we hush up about the cross—
rereading our daughter the story about Jesus
we most believe in: mother
and father kneeling after the hard birth,
humbled by the exhaustions of love.

This stanza prefigures the religious struggle that will surface throughout the volume: the narrator does not apparently embrace the faith of her fundamentalist childhood, but neither does she dismiss Christianity easily—or at all.

Indeed, tension arises in the book because she has chosen to rear her children (for whom "God is great and good") in the pale of Christian understanding, attempting to preserve some aspects of her tradition while eliminating some of the more violent and difficult. In "Judgments," for example, she removes the message that "Great-Grandma" has included with her daughter's "Picture-the-Bible Coloring Book": "Jesus / died to save you from your sins. Love & kisses." And later in the poem, she is glad to see that her child—shocked by animal sacrifice—"slowly, with lavender / cools the covenant / salves the unsuspecting lamb."

The daughter's presence, in a work so grounded in family life, is fitting. But she is not the most compelling little girl: Powell herself is. A close engagement with the book reveals that the shadow of a little girl

stands behind every shifting voice. As a result, it seems to me, the psychological center of the volume is this bright, sensitive child growing up as a true believer—fully participating in her Christian fundamentalist subculture. But whether the speaker is mother or sister or mate, we hear those shifting, adult voices as instances of whom that little girl would become.

This centering may have less to do with the quantity of childhood memories than with their stunning acuity, an accuracy which allows her details to resonate, to become cumulatively richer as the book progresses. Powell portrays only too well the emotional strain of many of us who, at fundamentalist church camp, waited for “The Calling” of God: “Jesus noticed me and started to knock. Already saved, / I looked for signs to show me what else He would require.” And she recalls the innocent energy and devotional fervor in “Sword Drill”—here the narrative may be cast in irony, but the sincerity of the Bible racers, as well as the thrill of victory, is real, as the little girl stands “clutching / the coveted words, unsheathed / in time.” Possibly most engaging and unsettling, though, are the vignettes juxtaposed in the triptych “Immersion.” In section one, the child’s emotions swing from guilt that the pictures she has drawn with her finger in the “pew’s pink velveteen nap” will not quite disappear, to the spiritual fervor precipitated by an evangelist’s trumpeting, the music “toppling a domino in my chest that branched its quiver down / my arms, belly, legs longing to come all down the aisle / while his fingers flashed.” In the poem’s second section, Powell achieves a splendid coupling of the holy and the profane in her powerfully incarnational image of a child, who, having assured her mother, “I can wait till after,” cannot, and instead urinates in the baptismal pool, though her legs were “clenched / not to choose what went right on and chose itself...” The poem concludes with still another merging of worlds, as the stock hymn-book image “crimson stain” becomes what the young girl, at the onset of puberty, must guard against, since “Clorox could cleanse a spot, but not some boy’s smirk, his thinking...”

Although the narrative is the strength of the book, it would be a disservice to ignore Powell’s technique. Her consistent if somewhat flat story-telling voice is almost transparent, but a welcome accent occasionally comes through. And her rhythm is the rhythm of good prose. The book is better than any of its poems.

Our attention to the fundamentalist trappings should not obscure the real religious power of the book—particularly when Powell is most thoroughly and biblically incarnational. The old stories become new

when she recalls them especially when she participates in the gospel scenes. The effects of the old and the new are compounded when, in "Nativity," she becomes the manger that held the baby Jesus; when in "FORASINADAMALLDIE" [*sic*], she and her mate, slicing apples in the kitchen, become the Edenic couple; and when in "Raising Jesus," she not only compares her duty to that of Mary, but becomes, by a stunning turn, the woman with an issue of blood (Matt. 9:20), "reaching for Your hem, craving that miracle."

This is a deeply religious book, centered in a single point; it is not, however, the "still point" of Eliot's "Four Quartets." At the center of Powell's turning is most engagingly, the vision of a questioning little girl.

—William Jolliff