HYPERALLERGIC

Performance Reviews Weekend

Revising on the Fly: Adjua Greaves in Performance

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Louis Bury March 19, 2017

Adjua Greaves performing "Writing Like a Flower" at the St. Mark's Poetry Project (photo by Gabriel Kruis)

Many poets and artists theorize about the importance of failure to their work but few manage to incorporate it into their practice with the generosity and grace of Adjua Greaves. In the two poetry readings of hers I've attended, at the Saint Mark's Poetry Project and at Hostos Community College, CUNY, Greaves performed her work by revising it in real time. The revisions typically took the form of a falter or pause while reading a line, followed by several repetitions of that same line, each iteration altered to more precisely and eloquently convey the

intended sentiment: “I love the person beside me/ I feel sunk in love with the person beside me/ I feel sunk in love with the person beside me and loath to say it plain.”

These impromptu revisions bespeak Greaves’ confidence and poise as a performer. At both readings, no prefatory explanations of method were provided. Instead, audience members had to figure out for themselves that Greaves’ unusual silences and repetitions were not the awkward stumblings of an inexperienced performer but the deliberate self-adjustments of a poet comfortable with her own discomfort. An audience member might feel as if on a first date and yet somehow at ease with these potentially awkward silences.

Adjua Greaves (photo by Jeremy Patlen)

In my many years of attending poetry readings, I’ve never encountered a performance technique quite like Greaves’ revisions. Perhaps the closest analogue would be the notorious improvisatory “talk poems” of the late David Antin, in which the poet and art historian would perform unscripted and charmingly digressive monologues on a host of subjects. But Greaves’ improvisations differ from Antin’s in that they are performed upon a pre-written text rather than conjured *ex nihilo*. Where Antin’s talk poems enact the felicitous meanderings of storytelling, Greaves’ performative revisions, so focused upon compositional minutiae, enact the writer’s groping search for *le mot juste*.

Her decision to conduct part of that search in public should be understood as an act of self-care in keeping with her larger poetic ethic. Much of her work details her role as caretaker for a variety of plants and flowers, all of which she bestows human names upon: “Tyrone,” “Shaquille,” “Booker T.” The names’ jokiness is actually a ruse to leave you less guarded about the earnestness of the poet’s botanical mission. Greaves wants to cultivate a relationship with her plants that regards their basic needs with the same dignity and respect that humans regard their own. The decision to identify the plants by human names, rather than Latinate species names, thus serves to recognize each plant as a sentient individual, as when Greaves worries that Shaquille “can feel my lack like sunlight.”

Adjua Greaves performing “We Are Gardners” at the Knockdown Center (photo by Tara Plath)

The plant names, many of which are adopted from black celebrities or historical figures, also situate the poems’ questions about botanical care in the context of race. In human discourses about flowers and plants, color plays an outsized role. Among plants, green constitutes the normative color, the hue we imagine as universal; any deviations, such as browning, seem unusual if not unhealthy. Among flowers, roses especially, petal color carries with it a system of meanings and symbols that distinguishes between the properties of different hues in a manner that verges on hierarchical. By regarding plants as individuals rather than types, even as she acknowledges the failures of her efforts — “killing houseplants is so embarrassing/ it is an instructional humiliation” — Greaves allegorizes the difficulties of extending empathy beyond the precincts of one’s own species, race, or even self.

Interpersonal silence is typically construed as unwelcoming, a signal of rejection, awkwardness, or indifference. Aesthetic silence, too, has a hard-edged and somewhat off-putting avant-garde asceticism about it, even if John Cage’s legacy has made the concept’s reach mainstream. But the unplanned silences, hesitations, and pauses of these performances don’t feel unwelcoming or difficult. They feel like a self-embrace that is also an embrace of the audience. In those moments, Greaves models, through her slow attention to word choice and phrasing, what it looks like to care about language. In so doing, she makes a case for the poetic and performative grounds to countless other kinds of care.