

wisdom, a lesson which she does learn and which comes on her very much like a revelation. Ironically, as Lewis points out, Aurora and others learn this wisdom only via male wisdom, yet Lewis argues that this does not matter, since Barrett Browning functions outside gender. This is an odd claim, considering how strongly the poet focused on her role as a woman and on gender issues in general. However, given the title of the chapter and Lewis's opinion of the poet, this statement is not surprising.

Nor is it surprising that in her conclusion Lewis characterizes Barrett Browning as the single British woman poet who paved the way for all her female contemporaries. Lewis argues that Barrett Browning explores and introduces ideas others do not, such as Swedenborg's theories of resurrection, politics, and Divine Wisdom. Lewis then spends the bulk of the conclusion discussing Barrett Browning's successors and their connections with her poetry: Felicia Hemans with her standard Victorian morality and patriotism; Mary Hewitt with her religious poems and ballads; Jean Ingelow with her political, spiritual, and mystical focus and vision of a feminine Victorian Christ. Lewis's longest and best comparison looks at Christina Rossetti's belief that one must at once neither love this world nor leave it but focus on one's work here, anticipating, as Barrett Browning does, her own "face to face" with God. Overall, Lewis sees Barrett Browning as the only godmother of Victorian women religious poets.

Lewis's study does precisely what it sets out to do—explore the implications of Barrett Browning's religious ideologies and poetry and praise Barrett Browning for her work. While her tone is occasionally highly flattering, even to the point of overlooking problems in the poet's theories, Lewis does offer strong and interesting arguments, particularly in her look at "Aurora Leigh" and the poet's discussion of death and resurrection. And while the book occasionally drags with an overabundance of biographical information and comparisons with contemporary works, for the most part Lewis's work is useful and informative, bringing Barrett Browning's religiosity back as an accepted area of study, not merely as a part of her often criticized sentimentalism but as an area that reveals her developing religious ideas.

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Richard J. Douglass-Chin. *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues: The Auto-biographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Evangelists*. Col-

umbia: U of Missouri P, 2001, 228 pp., \$34.95.

Preacher Woman Sings the Blues is a very welcome addition to the critical literature on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's spiritual autobiography in the American literary and historical tradition. This is clearly an Afrocentric womanist-inspired rhetorical analysis of the spiritual legacy of several mostly forgotten nineteenth-century black women preachers. In it the author recuperates and analyzes the spiritual autobiographies of Belinda, an African (no last name), Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Sojourner Truth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Julia Foote, Amanda Smith, Elizabeth (no last name), Virginia Broughton, and, finally, twentieth-century writer Zora Neale Hurston, the writer whom Douglass-Chin locates as the bridge figure between the blues women preachers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries and twentieth-century African-American writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara.

Of particular value is the detailed discourse analysis the author provides of the specific ways in which each of these "evangelists," historical and contemporary, employs a "complex black female narrative economy with its own unique figurations and forms." This tradition, Douglass-Chin argues, emerges as a counter-discourse of black female survival in the face of the white, sentimental, nineteenth-century preoccupation with white bourgeois marriage ideologies, the idealization of the white bourgeois family unit, and the insistence on a white bourgeois sense of class principles concerning conduct, piety, domesticity, and economic consumption with its inevitable semiotics of the commodification of black women. In face of this overwhelming Eurocentric and patriarchal set of dominant cultural codes for white women, these black women blues preachers construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct eighteenth-century and then Victorian conventions applicable only to white women in order to produce their own narratives of black female subjectivity as a potent force of race advancement. With their "eruptions of funk," the author argues, they disrupt the prevailing "American male grammar of white mythology" and produce a renegotiation with the black-mothered past and with the legacy of the African foremothers.

However, key to understanding the Afrocentric spiritual roots of this tradition, Douglass-Chin argues, is the remarkable figure of Belinda, an aging

Yoruban woman living in Massachusetts, who in 1787 published some of the earliest-known words written in the American public domain by a black woman. After having been cheated of her wages by a white employer, she filed a sermonic petition with the legislature in which she called not upon Christian deity but upon her own African Gods. The title of the the petition reads: "The Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like The Moon. Petition of An African Slave, to the Legislature of Massa-chusetts. To the honorable the [sic] senate and house of representatives, in general court assembled: The petition of Belinda, an African, Humbly shews." Published in a Philadelphia magazine in 1787, five years after Belinda began repeatedly petitioning a Boston court for judgment, it stands today as the first known published religious sermon by an African woman in America. In it Belinda makes none of the familiar appeals to scripture, or to genuinely pious Christians, but instead asserts the plurality of male and female Nature spirits of Vaudou, by calling on "the great Orisa who made all things," and the "dishonored deity," presumably Oludmare, the One God of Ifa, in the religion of the Yorubans. In it she condemns Christianity, accuses white men of "gold lust," and indicts hypocritical Western Christian religious systems that worship wealth instead of God. She refuses white standards, asserts her own Afrocentricity, and becomes her own talking book as she conveys orally her African history and her knowledge of the hypocrisy of the racist conventions of the American legal system. Having identified Belinda as the first voice in this black female "signifyin'" tradition, Douglass-Chin then situates her as the African ancestress, the Yoruban founding mother, of a vibrant signifyin' Afrocentric Vaudou tradition of itinerant black blues women spiritual autobiographers and preachers in whose works can also be found the same Yoruban spirit of signifyin', racial defiance, creativity, and healing. She is the first, he argues, in a tradition of African-American blues singing preachers inside of whose spiritual biographies can be discerned the echoes of Africa and the postcolonial rootwork involved in constructing a space for black female spirituality and subjectivity.

Douglass-Chin's book borrows some of its theoretical language from Houston Baker's *The Workings of the Spirit* (1991), and some from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s foundational text *Signifying Monkey* (1988), but takes issue with both critics for not including these women in their studies. In particular he holds Gates accountable for not seeing the black blues preaching mothers as the in-

ventors of the “speakerly text” and as the foremothers of Zora Neale Hurston’s “free indirect discourse.” Furthermore, he contends that, while all the features of white women’s spiritual autobiographies emerge from the Western “enthusiastic” religious traditions, only some of the rhetorical features of black women’s spiritual autobiography emerge from it.

Scholars of American autobiography in particular should be disturbed and pleased to see this contribution of black womanist “difference” to the central narrative of American female autobiography of the nineteenth century which, until recent years, has almost completely focused on white female autobiographies and white spiritual conversion narratives. These preacher-authors, says Douglass-Chin, write out of an abject space as self-conscious, disruptive subalterns who insist on speaking a form of blues subjectivity in the idiom of the blues singer’s voice. This unique performance testimony is analogous to the expressivity of those other “road travelin’” blues “bad” women who also embarked upon itinerant careers in tent shows, vaudeville, and theater performances. Inspired in spirit and theory by Alice Walker’s celebrated book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Douglass-Chin establishes these other blues women preachers as among those remarkable black women who also planted those mothers’ “gardens” which became vital spiritual and aesthetic resources to their twentieth-century novel-writing black daughters.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Douglass-Chin’s study for white readers and scholars is his insistence upon the profoundly spiritual root-connection among blues, spirituals, and preacherly ecstatic texts. Quoting Alberta Hunter who has described the blues as “religious . . . almost sacred” parts of African-American performances, he goes on to show how in the very moment when black women in America were being reduced to abjection rhetorically and physically as “unnatural” women by white bourgeois standards of the day, the preacherly blues sung sermonizings and spiritual autobiographies of the blues “bad” women preachers enacted a very courageous self-fashioning by bringing into question the very notion of what is “natural” in the dominant white discourse. Collectively and across time they created a portrait of what James Olney in his important study *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (1973) calls “nous nous ensemble” or autobiography as autophylography. Emphasizing the Afrocentric conception of a communal self, rooted in the aeons-old collective memory of the African and then the African-American people, rather than the typically individualistic Western conception of

self, these spiritual sermonizers and autobiographers literally knit the community together in their collective rhetorical fashionings of a communally available black female subjectivity.

The strongest part of the book is Douglass-Chin's carefully worked description of the rhetorical markers of the black female spiritual autobiography with its preaching tradition, blues singing thematics, storytelling, and racial signifying. Each blues woman preacher is considered inside the prevailing cultural aesthetics of the moment and then positioned as a self-conscious performer and autobiographer engaged in creating a unique, assertive black female subjectivity which ultimately gives birth to twentieth-century African-American women's literature.

What drives this project, the author tells us, is Alice Walker's famous admonition in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*: "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them bone by bone." By collecting the bones of the ancestors through these particular texts, Douglass-Chin also refigures the traditionally narrower purposes of most standard white-authored literary scholarship by establishing his critical work as both a scholarly and a reverential religious performance through its historical recovery of the ancestral spirits, its scholarly conjuring of the bones of these hitherto unheard black women, thereby establishing their potency in the present moment of high scholarly and popular regard for African-American women writers. This critical work of recuperation, then, stands as his own metablues sermon honoring the ancestors in this literary-critical mapping of Afro-mystical roots in contemporary African-American literature.

The strength of the book lies in its detailed rhetorical mapping of recurring themes, tropes, modes of discourse, and vernacular styles. Within these blues sermons are to be found black women's ideas of spirituality and womanhood, their conversion narratives, their problematic quest for community, their tropes of trial, and their powerful valorization of orality over literacy. More importantly, they include Africanist spiritual forms such as "preacherly" texts as a kind of blues performance, songs, shouts, call and response sequences, anecdotes, West African speech patterns, expressive black vernacular and dialects, prophecy, visions, dialogic patterns, song as a trope for salvation, repetitions, hymn shouting, and climactic celebration.

He further demonstrates their use of “floating thematic bridges” characteristic of traditional and contemporary African-American sermonizing, blackness as a contentious presence, much self-irony concerning the white designation of Africans as “primitives,” and an intriguing subversion of white Christians who will surely be cursed and destroyed as an obstinate, racist nation. Clearly these blues women preachers with their tricksterlike behaviors, conjuring, skilled performances, and systematic undermining of the commodification of black femininity, stand defiantly outside Euro-American white male ontological and epistemological systems. Particularly engaging is Douglass-Chin’s rhetorical account of their contempt for romantic reification of white and veiled resistance. In this way, Douglass-Chin argues, these women writers bring to pass a unique form of black female subjectivity through their “singing texts.”

Beginning with the Yoruban Belinda and her legal sermon of 1787 and ending the book with the women of Toni Morrison’s mythical town of Ruby in her novel *Paradise* (1997), Douglass-Chin argues eloquently that “The blues bad preacher woman has always (re)membered herself against pain. (Per)forming herself out of initial negation of her existence, she becomes—through various strategies of opposition, rememory, recursion and resistance—a figure who stands trial before a jury of her communal peers.” This sense of communal judgment of individual (per)formance is one that permeates the earliest of black women’s life writings, from Belinda’s petition to Jarena Lee’s insistence upon her own truthfulness, to Sojourner Truth’s self-fashioning, to the self-conscious performances of black women both as writers of and characters in contemporary black women’s fiction.

This book is a useful addition to scholarly endeavors in several fields, including African-American studies, autobiographical studies, rhetorical analysis, religious studies, womanist theory, contemporary literary studies, and American history. It is an intriguing, persuasive, and culturally potent study.

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David Lyle Jeffrey. *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans P, 1996, 396 pp., \$37.00.

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