

January 2018

## Fortunately Deformed: A Review of *Providential* by Colin Channer

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### Recommended Citation

Ariza, Mario A. (2018) "Fortunately Deformed: A Review of *Providential* by Colin Channer," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol14/iss2/5>

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Fortunately Deformed: A Review of *Providential* by Colin Channer

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Colin Channer. *Providential* (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2015), 96 pp.

The scholar Rhonda Cobham once described Caribbean societies as having been created by “a cycle of deformed human relationships that left all parties morally and aesthetically maimed.” Colin Channer, in his first book of poems, has us stare unabashedly at those wounds. The book probes and pokes at, moans from and mourns the physical, psychic, familial and historical damages suffered and inflicted by Babylon’s brutal enforcers - the Jamaican constable. A bold book of poems from this well known novelist, *Providential* gets its hands dirty by speaking to and from the subject position of the (post) Colonial State’s blunt instrument. At their best, the poems in this book map out the ways in which power maims not only the subaltern, but also the officiants who exercise it daily. The collection, even though tremulous at parts, comprises a curious and necessary intervention in the realm of Caribbean poetry.

Channer, the author of five novels, muscles through the opening poems with an open, narrative line that shows most strength when scrying into past. “First Recruits,” “Lea” and “Neville's Logic” are three pieces early in the collection that grapple with the police force’s founding trauma - the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865. That indiscriminate slaughter of rural Jamaicans by British troops prompted the establishment of that island’s constabulary, and its first recruits - boys who helped bury the bodies of those slain in the rebellion - are seen “Walking Proudly. / Traitors falling into place.” In “Lea,” Channer draws deeply on the power of persona, personification, and family oral history to tell of the rebellion’s aftermath from the point of view of a young man who survived it. Channer has us “follow born-free and ex-chattel, going home at twilight, slow marching...folks grief struck / heads down.” In Channer’s hands, this grim march of defeat and complicity is made magical: “Now to this moment add rain.”

“Neville's Logic” captures the promise that a post on the force could have held for a poor country boy in the late 19th century, and the powerful attraction of national pride, black respectability and middle class comfort that the force held for later generations. “Occupation” puts the weltanschauung of the constable into memorably musical terms: “Imagine a Jamaica, he says, creaking, / where we still

had ska, if not ska then rocksteady.../ Imagine the discipline round here if them damn reggae rascals didn't overthrow the music." The revanchiste sentiments expressed by Channer's constables will be familiar to many with older family members in the Caribbean, and not just in regards to musical taste. Yet the author's keen eye for detail puts such expressions of class contempt in the mouths of men who lost eyeballs to rudeboys, who killed their wives in fits of rage and now live in terrible, biblical loneliness, or who drink unceasingly to drown out their disillusion and regrets. In doing so Channer traces the psychic and physical toll that enforcing power takes on power's enforcers.

The tragedy of unchecked police power, so familiar to citizens of the United States today, is in this collection its own dark comedy. A persona poem like "First Kill" surprises and delights in unhurried, unrhymed, unmetered couplets of variable line length even as the reader discover that this constables' "first" "Wasn't no gunman, really," but was instead the narrator's wife's lover, who "Said *ay yi yi* when my bullet bored / his batty as he fucked, pushed his luck. / The second was my wife." Uxoricide is dark stuff, and in a brilliant twist of intersectionality the violence against women perpetrated by Channer's constables mirrors the violence the constables practice on the job. "Clarkey and Elma," narrated in the same strong, open manner of some of the collections earlier poems, focuses on the preparations for a retired constables birthday party. Because Clarkey is a widower, the retired constable's friends aid in the preparation for the feast, slaughtering animals and "then the true butchering begins / the slow unmaking of the puzzlements that God fit together easy." But the collegiality and brotherhood involve a darker complicity:

"The men who know  
Clarke best, who've seen him spatchcock a chicken  
then rub it down tender and right,  
will think of Elma's phone calls at all hours,  
crying, begging them to come,  
trembling how the squaddie flung her to the rug  
and pressed a knee between her shoulders"

It's moments like this that make Channers book extremely worthwhile. By eschewing the lyrical and almost baroque bent of much modern anglophone Caribbean poetry, Channer brings an Olive Senior like narrativity to these sharp character sketches, and by deploying his keen novelist's eye he can trace the actions

and effects of power on these men and their families in interesting and compelling language.

Less stable but equally as compelling are Channer's attempts to depict his domestic life in Providence, Rhode Island. The two longest poems in the collection, *Fugue in Ten Movements* and *Providential* tackle the tough themes of redemption, diasporic dislocation and paternal love and abandonment. Yet their extended sequences read somewhat like a live Grateful Dead concert, in which moments of jaw dropping sublimity emerge from a noisy background. Sections where Channer writes to his son, or about him, epitomize this dynamic. Particularly weak is a section where he imagines his son as a neolithic cave painter, and yet just two sections before, while meditating on the absent figure of his father, Channer gives us such gems as:

I could have used a man like that  
to lead me on the quest  
to find my tender,  
teach me that the greatest word is fail  
that flaws are clues to patterns,  
compassion, bravery's secret name,  
and death nothing but a crackle,  
the leaving of a shell, a lifting into legend.  
Flight

A parallel can be drawn between the moments when Channer's lines breaks down into confusion and the confusions that absent and imperfect paternal figures engender. Channer's muscular scrying into the bloody genealogy of the Jamaican constabulary is his attempt to come to terms with the forces that destroyed his father, and turned him into an alcoholic, a chicane, and a wreck. The cycle of "deformed human relationships" that Channer's poems so brilliantly capture have, however, been broken through his own artistic and personal search for wholeness, and so his lines stumble to describe the domestic tranquility of a life in Providence, Rhode Island. Given the geography of historical and domestic pain the book traces, such a failing can be more than excused, and perhaps could even be treated as terrain that Channer should explore in his next book of poems, which we hope comes soon.