

# Michela A. Calderaro

## *Sheer Bliss: A Creole Journey*

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*Sheer Bliss: A Creole Journey*, recently published by the University of West Indies Press, represents the culmination of Italian scholar Michela A. Calderaro's decades-long effort to rescue creole writer Eliot Bliss from obscurity. It is also an unusual text, eschewing many of the norms of academic writing to allow readers to follow along, step by step, as Calderaro's curiosity about Bliss transforms into an intensive research project. In the process, Calderaro reveals the extensive networks that allow researchers to operate and the under-recognized support systems that nurture writers in the first place.

The author of *Saraband* (1931) and *Luminous Isle* (1934), Eliot Bliss is, as Calderaro outlines in her preface, difficult to categorize: at once modernist, feminist, and queer, stranded between British and Caribbean literary traditions. Like many modernists, Bliss writes semi-autobiographical novels that foreground the internal worlds of their protagonists over dramatic events and depict society on the brink of radical change. Her work also features women who reject the conventional path of marriage and children, with certain passages implying their homosexuality. Intriguingly, this queer subtext actually renders Bliss' characters less radical than the author herself, as she pursued romance with women throughout her life. Calderaro hypothesizes that this reticence in fiction may stem from Bliss's ties to the



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Caribbean, as she laboured under the weight of stereotypes about hypersexualized creole women. Bliss was born in Jamaica in 1903 to British parents, spending part of her childhood there and returning to the island for two years as a young adult. Her second novel, *Luminous Isle*, frankly depicts the racism of white colonial society in Jamaica and features a protagonist torn between cultures, who does not feel entirely European but is also unable to fully identify with the Caribbean's Black population. In this regard, Bliss explores similar thematic terrain to the better known creole writer Jean Rhys, and Calderaro unearths evidence that the two were close friends.

For the uninitiated, *Sheer Bliss's* first chapter give some idea of the texture of Bliss's work, analyzing her two published novels in connection to Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. At the same time, Calderaro details the fortuitous nature of her discovery: she found a copy of *Saraband* in a second hand bookstore while working on another project. Rather than reconstruct the chronology of Bliss's life, the book largely follows Calderaro's own research process, moving from Bliss's published novels to an investigation of her diaries at the University of Tulsa to a long dialogue with Patricia Allan-Burns, Bliss's lifelong companion whom Calderaro met and befriended after several years of research. This structure is both eccentric and compelling, as Calderaro includes email exchanges with librarians and researchers and information about her struggles to secure funding. Some of her efforts are ultimately frustrated: for instance, a note mentioning a third novel by Bliss, *The Albatross*, triggers years of searching, only for Calderaro to conclude that the book must never have been published. Then again, Calderaro unearths entirely unsuspected treasures, finding the manuscript to the unpublished novel *Hostile Country* and two unpublished collections of poetry. While Calderaro provides several excerpts from Bliss's poetry and has published the collection online, readers may find themselves wanting more in respect to *Hostile Country*, as they are forced to make due with a brief description of the novel's premise and its first few lines. Above all, however, these false leads and surprising turns effectively demonstrate that the research process is far from linear.

Why, exactly, Eliot Bliss is worth rescuing as a writer is a question that haunts the book, and Calderaro does not fully engage with its implications. In the course of her research, she unearths a whole network of queer women writing in England in the 1930s, providing short portraits of Anna Wickham, Patience Ross, and Kay Burdekin, among others. All are potential candidates for the kind of treatment Calderaro affords Bliss. Why work on Eliot Bliss in particular? Is it the literary quality of her work, the originality of her perspective, her influence on Jean Rhys? Does she complicate our understanding of queer writing or Caribbean literature in fundamental ways? After all, the vast majority of writers and books are forgotten, with only

a rare few attracting a sustained readership. While Calderaro does not make her case explicitly, her work doubles as a form of advocacy. In this regard, her great triumph is not only the present volume but Emma Garman's 2019 column on Bliss in *Paris Review*, which credits Calderaro for "almost single-handedly sav[ing Bliss] from oblivion" while simultaneously introducing the writer to a larger audience (Garman 2019).

Ultimately, as much as the book is a portrait of Eliot Bliss, it also becomes one of Patricia Allan-Burns, Bliss's lifelong companion. Calderaro begins the text with a meeting between her and the elderly Allan-Burns, slowly filling in the context in subsequent chapters. Allan-Burns met Bliss when she was nineteen and stayed with her for sixty years, providing emotional and financial support until Bliss's death in 1990. The woman Calderaro refers to as Pat worked in a factory and took on extra jobs while Bliss, largely incapacitated by illness and frequently depressed, continued trying to write. Calderaro is obviously enchanted with Allan-Burns, providing long descriptions of their encounters as she negotiates the ethics of prying into Bliss's private life in the company of her partner. At times, readers may even find themselves siding with Allan-Burns against the putative subject of the book. When she comments on not having been intellectual enough for Bliss, and the tragedy of her companion finishing her life far removed from London's literary circles, Calderaro forcefully reminds her: "It was difficult for you too" (107). Allan-Burns provides a striking example of the overlooked support that writers rely on, and her tendency to elevate Bliss's needs above her own calls into question the cult of literary genius.

At the same time, Calderaro unveils the support that her own research has required. She is generous with her praise for the many librarians, archivists, fellow scholars, and well-intentioned individuals that enabled her to overcome various barriers: a lack of university research funds, the scattered nature of her archives, the sponsorship needed to gain access to some libraries. This maneuvering takes place against the backdrop of Bliss's persistent poverty. Her marginalization in the 1930s, when she no longer had nice enough clothes to attend literary events, was only compounded with time, and Allan-Burns describes petitioning for aid with the Writer's Society to help pay for her companion's nursing home. There is room for deeper reflection here, regarding the disjunction between cultural capital and financial resources, the material positions of professors in comparison to the writers they study, or simply how *expensive* archival research can be. As it stands, Calderaro's book will provide a jolt of recognition for most scholars, and acts as a tribute to the many people that make books happen.

Bliss is slowly attracting a larger following, with Evelyn O'Callaghan's early work on the writer (O'Callaghan 1993), which provided Calderaro

with the springboard for her project, now complemented by readings from Natasha Omise'ke Tinsley (2010), Emma Sterry (2017), and Elizabeth McMahon (2016). Yet Calderaro is still the main scholar working on Bliss, and her new monograph vastly increases the amount of information available about the life of this long-neglected writer. *Sheer Bliss* is unconventional, to be sure, and unlikely to satisfy readers that are theoretically inclined, but for anyone interested in learning more about Bliss, the book's wealth of empirical information renders it invaluable.

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