

*The Rainmaker's Mistake*

Erna Brodber

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Reviewed by Curdella Forbes, Howard University

*The Rainmaker's Mistake* exemplifies Erna Brodber's refusal of traditional literary ways of seeing, including Caribbean ones, albeit these are known for their radical, heterogeneous modalities. In *Jane and Louisa* (1980) and *Myal* (1983), the traffic between the spiritual and the material, the dead and the living, is neither metaphor nor belief system but commonsensical, everyday fact, moreover replacing culture and knowledge as the basis for social transformation. *Louisiana* (1994) goes even further, bringing science, technology and literature into a common narrative along shared epistemological indices. For Brodber, spheres of knowledge are not oppositional or exempt from the rules of narratology; they complement each other and are all exposed as produced through narrative. This makes perfect sense in the folk cultures of the Caribbean and African diaspora, which delight in subjecting Western science to the powers of 'high science' (traditionally termed the occult arts). In this latest example of her ongoing search to re-narrativize the history of how black space is engineered in the New World, Brodber makes a turn to the novel as fable.

Yet the rigorous historical, anthropological and philosophical imagination that energizes the book complicates this designation. *The Rainmaker's Mistake* rests on intricate reworkings of ancient myths, their distortions and Brodber's re-formations of both; in this way the book demonstrates and demystifies the fabulizations of history while exploring the possibilities of fable and myth as transformative ways of knowing. The fabulistic core is layered with the scientific and historical – indeed, provides a space from which to understand the inter-relation of knowledges. Brodber's fable draws on myth, religion and philosophy from West Africa, ancient Greece, the Western canon (Plato especially), and The Bible, weaving them ironically, sometimes satirically, into each other. The story is told also as a historical riddle; it is not until the end that we learn who the rainmaker is and what the mistake is that he has made. *The Rainmaker's Mistake* is the most ambitious and the most difficult to decipher of Brodber's novels, and her most exciting to date.

The novel tells the post-Emancipation story of ex-slaves on a New World plantation, owned by one Mr Charlie, a paternalist who represents himself as their owner and progenitor. Mr Charlie's version of how his slaves came into being ironically references the West African yam harvest,

celebrated in honour of the earth's fertility and the gods who provide.  
According to Mr Charlie,

he pulled his shirt out of his trousers, loosened the flap on his fly, knelt down and with fingers roughened and hardened by tedious labour, he dug a hole in the ground and planted a wash of seed from his body. (2)

The result? His slave children in the form of fully grown ("born big") or child yams, dug every year "from an everlasting underground source" (2). Much later we learn that Woodville, the rainmaker, who appears throughout the story in the guise of Mr Charlie's overseer, is the source of this myth of origins. This is not surprising, since Woodville is really the African Tayeb, who like Silas, Dan and Ole African in *Myal* has traversed centuries of living. Woodville's myth reveals both his collusion with the slave owner and his subversive potential: as the myth effects colonial brainwashing yet instantiates the underground survival of African cultural forms (marronage), so Woodville performs a dual role as rainmaker/potential liberator and spirit thief.

Mr Charlie's yam children are incapable of reproduction, being frozen outside time in a sexual innocence that plays upon Western readings of Genesis 3. Their ignorance of themselves as sexual (human) beings is linked to their eternal childhood and ignorance of the outside world. Their acceptance of Mr Charlie's myth recalls Plato's cave allegory, in which the philosophically uninitiated mistake for reality the world of shadows projected on the walls of the cave where they are confined. Of significance is the fact that at Emancipation, where the novel begins, there are several groups of slaves on Mr Charlie's plantation: the adult, the pickney and the soon-to-be pickney gangs. There is also the group that we later learn are Mr Charlie's half-black biological offspring and their mother, not quite yams but rather semi-humans. Emancipation arrives as a great sneeze from the ambiguous Woodville. Woodville's sneeze becomes a tornado that blows down the Great House and apotheosizes Mr Charlie to an unknown heaven, later revealed as a cave on his own plantation.

Each group is infected differently by Mr Charlie's lie and it is the pickney gang that has the greatest potential to heal/free the others. While some older ones wait for Mr Charlie's second coming, looking up to heaven in a perverse replay of 1 Kings 18 (Mr Charlie as descending Baal) and Luke 24 (Mr Charlie as ascending Messiah), it is the younger set's unrelenting curiosity that allows them to ask questions, explore, excavate untold histories, discover and venture into new places, harness knowledges and technologies from the world outside, and create their own ways of knowing that set the community free. Yet everyone has a part to play: for example, Woodville squirts semen into the eyes of Jupiter and London, two of the yam children, and initiates a process of physical maturation leading to psychological maturation, the entry into time and the

experience of mortality. London expresses this claim to humanity, the emergence from Plato's cave:

And with that carcass rotting in the cave, goes the eternity and peace he offered. We have no choice ... It is naturalness twinned to mortality, accompanied by hope, and duly tempered by responsibility. I embrace them with both hands ... and continue the search ... In the free. (150)

In merging myth and history, Brodber elucidates the forces at work in African diaspora ontology: the ways colonial myth and practice invented the African as incapable of creativity or self-reproduction, the ways African cosmogony carried over in the bodies and psyches of slaves undercut this narrative. Akan cosmology undercuts Plato as the novel's protagonists undercut Mr Charlie's mythic attempts at post-Emancipation enslavement.

The many I-narrators evince Brodber's commitment to the novel as "a community song" (*Louisiana* 161). Their stories intertwine to produce expansions, ironies, dialogisms. Additionally, they produce a text "on the edge of writing and speech" (Glissant 147), its classical mythic base energized by its folk idioms and rhythms. The shift among narrators, who remain unidentifiable for long tracts, contributes to the reader's sense of the novel as a riddle. This is complicated by the narrators' double identities, revealed at the end where readers witness the triumph of African ways of seeing. Queenie the main narrator's use of technology and psychoanalysis married to the 'high science' of the spirit elicits from London the revelation that binds the story together: as Abdul and Kofi back in a previous lifetime in Africa, he and Luke had followed their leader Tayeb (Woodville) in his dreadful mistake. They had allowed themselves to be tricked into following the white man's star, thereby unleashing the history of slavery that they had to endure, witness and dismantle by staying behind in the present. In London's revelatory narrative hubris is rainmaking, the gods' gift, gone out of control.

The African envisioning of a seamless relation among temporalities appears in the protagonists' growth into freedom, as each character moves freely among different zones that are places as well as times. Queenie the community leader, traveling through Legba's gateway (48), harnesses the resources of past, present and future while pointing towards a more liberating time/space dimension, a way of being that transects all three. Only such an understanding of time and space could avail people who must become human overnight, unlike others who have been afforded centuries to develop a sequential (therefore distorted) perspective on time.

This is only a glimpse of the issues raised by this extraordinary novel. Class and colour, the role of eugenics in un-creating the African in the New World, diasporan divisions, and sexual outcasting, are other fractures that Brodber seeks to heal through her fabulist re-history. *The Rainmaker's Mistake* emphasizes Brodber's stature as one of the Caribbean's foremost philosophers, cultural activists and writers of

fiction. The story of her contribution to the theory of the novel is yet to be written.

#### Works Cited

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