

Redeeming the Word: Religious Experience as Liberation in Erna Brodber's Fiction

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Locating Brodber Within and Without Traditional and Current Discourses

The sociological and historical literature of the Anglophone Caribbean indicates that religion, both Christian and syncretic, has played a positive role¹ in the liberation movements of the region, and that it continues to play a role, albeit in less overtly public ways, in the Caribbean's ongoing construction of itself.² Literary artists and critics have treated religion from a range of perspectives: as a tool of oppression, deprivation and misdirected heroism in Caribbean history, or as a diffuse strand in a larger matrix of triumphant cultural or political manifestations.³

¹ This is particularly true of the anti-slavery movements and rebellions, and religio-cultural activity in the post-Emancipation period. Cf. Barry Chevannes (Ed) *Rastafari and Other Afro-Caribbean World Views*. The Hague: Macmillan in assoc. with Institute of Social Studies, 1995 (esp. Jean Besson's "Religion as Resistance in Jamaican Peasant Life: The Baptist Church, Revival World View and the Rastafari Movement," [45-76]); Barry Chevannes (ed) *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, Syracuse UP, 1994; Moira Ferguson, (Ed). *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals and Radicals*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993; and *Religion as a Social Force in the Caribbean*: Papers Presented at the 12th Conference of History Teachers Association of Trinidad and Tobago, 1987. In that volume, see for example Robert Stewart's essay "Religion and the Challenge of Freedom in Nineteenth Century Jamaica."

² See for example Barry Chevannes, "Revivalism: A Disappearing Religion," *Caribbean Quarterly* 24. 3&4 (Sept-Dec 1978), 1-17; M.G. Smith, F.R. Augier and Rex Nettleford. *The Rastafarian Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*. UWI, Mona: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1960; *Caribbean Quarterly* Special Issues on religion: 1978, 24.3-4.; 1991, 37. 1; and 1993, 39.3-4; also Chevannes (ed) 1994 and 1995 cited above. In addition to the evidence from writings such as these, the Caribbean's continuing engagement with religious expression (ism) is apparent in the increasing proliferation in some territories of North American-based Christian denominations; the popularization of televangelism via cable television; and the increasingly open endorsement of previously denigrated Afrocentric faith healers.

³ In a few instances, mainly in poetry, such as that written by Kwame Dawes and in traces in Jean Breeze's work (cf. *Spring Cleaning* and *The Arrival of Brighteye and Other Poems*), religion is linked to spirituality. In Breeze's early work (*Answers*) and Mutabaruka's work, religion is uncompromisingly humanist, and as fiercely linked to political liberation as the Caribbean's early liberation movements have been. Kamau Brathwaite's invocation of African gods in their role as spirit possessors in *The Arrivants* is more linked to that larger matrix of triumphant cultural manifestations of which I speak—as is Walcott's treatment in some plays. Fictions in which religion plays a major role include Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962); Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of*

In the latter type of representation, religion has been subsumed under folk culture, which in its turn has been subsumed under nationalism, the rubric which by and large directed Anglophone Caribbean writing and criticism up to the early 1980s. In the overall picture created by the literary perspectives, religion does not appear as a central organizing dynamic of liberation and certainly not as an unproblematic dynamic, even when it is represented as a factor in liberation processes.⁴ (The very paucity of critical writings focusing on religion is an indication of its lack of centrality in the literary tradition.) Generally too, its value, if any, is seen as being outside of itself, and outside of the personal, having to do with how far it achieves or retards the goal of national, specifically cultural, identity. And it is generally conceived of in what I refer to as “humanist” terms; that is, in terms of human *production* of the experience.

This essay is concerned with Erna Brodber’s novel *Louisiana* (1994) and to a lesser extent, its precursor, *Myal* (1988). These two novels to different degrees exhibit a concern with religious experience. I argue that *Louisiana*, in particular, can be read as a two-fold shift in the traditional approach to religious experience in Caribbean literature. First, it recreates religious experience as the organizing dynamic of liberation, in the process making this experience the heart of its epistemology; and second, it recasts religious experience within a language and etymology radically removed from those which characterize the rhetoric of nationalist liberation. In the latter regard, *Louisiana* is an extremely important novel in the tradition of Caribbean thinking about language and the word. For while in using a different language to conceptualize liberation, Brodber shows resonances with the Caribbean nationalist concept of language as

Astonishment (1982); and Andrew Salkey’s *A Quality of Violence* (1959). Lamming’s *Season of Adventure* (1960) and *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) also make use of religious forms and experience; and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) could arguably be read as an exploration of Caribbean folk religion.

⁴ Wynter’s and Salkey’s texts cited above provide contrasting as well as complementary perspectives on folk and grassroots religion. Wynter’s portrayal of a type of Revivalism seems paradoxical: the religion is at once part of a national impulse towards liberation, and deeply trammled and compromised in negative personal projects. Salkey’s portrayal of pocomania is uncompromisingly negative, inured in class biases, and driven by an ideology of liberalist education as the road to national progress, which is hampered by the religious practice. On his scale of religious acceptability, mainstream Christianity receives a considerably higher rating than pocomania, though it remains the handmaiden of nationalist education. Lamming’s *Castle* looks briefly at colonialist Christianity within the context of a satirical critique of the agents of colonial education. *Season of Adventure* removes the Haitian *vodun* Ceremony of Souls from its immediately religious context, recreating it as a trope in what might be termed his philosophy of Caribbean history. Lovelace is especially interesting in his treatment of the Spiritual Baptist sect of the 1930s, presenting it as one manifestation of an ethos of resistance which outlives the essentially “dated” religious tradition to reappear in the secular dynamics of calypso/popular culture. Not much has been done in the critical field, but the existing work includes PhD theses by Joan Patricia Bathersfield (Michigan 1977) and Kwame Dawes (U of New Brunswick 1992).

central to identity,⁵ she also breaks with the humanism of a nationalist epistemology of the world and the word.

I focus on *Louisiana* rather than on *Myal* since although the spiritualist intention and epistemology that underlie *Louisiana*'s religious discourse are manifest in that novel as well, it is in *Louisiana* that this intention and epistemology arrive at the paradigm shifts in which I am interested. I include *Myal* in the discussion to show that these shifts are part of a continuum that reaches its fulfillment in *Louisiana*. Brodber's first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), despite showing some spiritualist elements, participates more fully than the later novels, in cognitive-humanist discourses, and indeed the implicit definition of spiritualism in that novel has more to do with logico-critical awareness⁶ than with inhabiting "discredited knowledges" (Morrison 1985) as seen in *Myal*, or with deistic connections, as seen in *Louisiana*. The fact that Carolyn Cooper, one of the few critics truly sensitive to the "other-worldliness" of Brodber's fictive art, in 1990 highlighted the "folk elements" in *Jane and Louisa* rather than the spirituality that she recognized (1991) as the unmistakable ground of *Myal*'s possibilities, is as good an indication of this point as any.

Myal and *Louisiana* are of importance to literary scholars for a reason other than their unique treatment of religious experience. In 2006, movement away from nationalist thought is merely par for the course, given the beleaguered status of the concept of nation and nationalism in global discourse since at least the early 1990s. But writing her novels in 1988 and 1994, Brodber is an important "marker" of discourse shifts, for she emerges as one of the earliest visionaries of a non-nationalist world view after the advent of nationalism (I say "after . . . nationalism" to signify the fact that other non-nationalist world views obviously predated

⁵ The central and foundational place given to language in Caribbean concepts of identity from the very beginning—and highlighted in the nationalist period—is perhaps best exemplified in the Caliban-Prospero trope first explicated by George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), but also in Walcott's concept of the Caribbean writer as invested with Adam's task of naming things, as well as his own sense of his personal struggle with language in terms of a "mulatto of style." (See "The Muse of History" in *Is Massa Day Dead*, Orde Coombs (ed) (1974); and "What the Twilight Says," in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1970). This preoccupation with language appears as well in Brathwaite's many essays on "nation language" as for example in "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" and "History of the Voice" (see *Roots* 1993), and in Carpentier's and Márquez's concern to find a language adequate to represent Caribbean/[Latin] American "marvellous reality" (see for example Carpentier in *Magical Realism* edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris [2003], and Márquez's Nobel Lecture in Joan Mellen's *Literary Masters: Gabriel García Márquez* [2000]).

⁶ In *Jane and Louisa* the most obvious example of spiritualism is Baba, a Rastafarian who smells of lime, which is associated with spiritual healing. Although Nellie must learn to use intuitive processes as well, her liberation takes place mainly as she becomes more analytical and critical, more able to "read" the hidden, circulated, essentially *social* codes and discourses that have imprisoned her or have the capacity to free her. Baba, despite his association with the spiritual, is the catalyst for this "logico-critical" (and emotional) rather than spiritualist "awareness."

nationalism—that is to say, Anglophone Caribbean nationalism). And even more than this, Brodber remains unique in the specific mode in which she inserts her non-nationalist voice; that is to say, in the particularities of her religious perspective.⁷

At one level, Brodber's religious thought may be easily placed among several paradigms that have been gradually replacing nationalism in Anglophone Caribbean writing since the 1980s.⁸ Pan-African and pan-colonial linkages have become valorized in the crafting of an idea of pan community rather than nation, and there is increasing celebration of "Caribbean gone abroad" as diaspora rather than exile from the (geographically located) nation. Equally, there is increasing assertion of a right to a place in the (adopted) space of the metropole; and increasing loss of nostalgia for homespace as geography—in other words, a direct opposition to the features that had characterized writing in the nationalist period.⁹ Examples of this tendency include Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1994), Dionne Brand's *In Another Place Not Here* (1997), the second generation black British Caryl Phillips, and, in a paradoxical kind of way, Jamaica Kincaid.¹⁰ In the critical and theoretical discourse, there are Carole Boyce Davies' (1994) well-known and celebratory location of Caribbean women's writing in an (Afro-American mediated) African diasporic frame; Belinda Edmondson's (1999) argument of an African American feminist genealogy for Caribbean women writers, that brings Caribbean women, Caribbean women's history and Caribbean women writers into a diasporic relation of sisterhood; Paul Gilroy's (1993) subsuming of the Caribbean into his seminal concept of the "black Atlantic" that defeats stultifying boundaries; and Brent Hayes' Edwards' (2003) argument, drawing on seminal moments and figures in American, African and Caribbean thought, that cultures translate across diasporic fissures, giving rise to a new internationalism.

⁷ Ten Kortenaar (1999) however argues (70) that *Myal* is self-consciously part of the rise of a national literature.

⁸ This is in no way meant to suggest that nationalism is a thing of the past in the Caribbean, although the prominence of post/trans nationalist and diasporic discourses in the work of Caribbean scholars located abroad may tend to obscure this fact.

⁹ I use "nationalist period" to refer loosely to the thirty year period from the 1950s to the 1970s, the period in which the anti-colonial and independence movements came to a head and most of the Anglophone territories attained independence. This terminology is meant to indicate the heightened extent to which nationalist ideology dominated discourse, and does not mean to ignore the fact that nationalist currents were abroad in the society from much earlier and still exist in the present period. The period I designate as "nationalist" in this sense also saw the emergence of what may be termed the first generation of Caribbean writers, most of whom went abroad to write and in fact felt themselves forced to do so. The strain of mourning and exile as a trope in Caribbean writing stems in large part from this experience of forced migrancy.

¹⁰ I describe Kincaid as paradoxical since while her work exhibits this absence of mourning for lost Caribbean geography, it does not so much celebrate/appropriate the alternative geographical space in which her protagonists find themselves, as it discards all exterior spaces in favor of a singular interior consciousness—what might be termed an internal geography—as the site of identity.

Landmark texts such as Meeks' and Lendhal's edited collection *New Caribbean Thought* (2001) and Balutansky and Sourieau's *Caribbean Creolization* (1998) point to the specific currents that have spawned these new paradigms, and to the new issues by which they have been directed—new issues around the question “What is Caribbean?” There are questions about its “whereness” (where it really is); its plasticity (is it something fixedly identifiable or is it a product of the complex negotiations between diaspora and host nations?); its connectedness (for example, what does one make of the putative dual nationality of Caribbean people abroad and second generation Caribbean people in diaspora?).¹¹ New issues emerge too around the question “What is Caribbean literature?” What is the place of the female Caribbean writer; what are the boundaries of this paradoxically canonical yet intensely fluid literature?

Interestingly, these texts also show the extent to which nationalism, though beleaguered, remains an important category in Caribbean thinking, in ways that are often obscured in the current preoccupation with post/trans nationality and globalization. And if the continuing legacy of the nationalist agenda may be liminally traced in Brodber's sense of the liberatory power of language and the word even within her break with nationalism, it appears more directly in the struggle of theorists such as Antonio Benítez Rojo (1992/1996) and Édouard Glissant (1981/1992, 1990/2000) to induct the Caribbean into global forms via postmodernist thought, even while insisting that a unique entity called “Caribbean” may be categorically identified.¹² There is a sense too in which much feminist writing and writing by female authors has remained within the nationalist paradigm: at once in opposition to and in tandem with the male authored fictions and criticism, these aim to insert the voice of women and their varying “erased” ethnicities, into the nationalist canon and discourses from which women are seen as having been absent or erased.¹³ Of

¹¹ In Balutansky and Sourieau's text Maryse Condé's essay “Créolité without Creole Language?” (101-109) is of particular importance with regard to this question of “whereness”. In the same volume Ernest Pépin and Raphaël Confiant's “The Stakes of *Créolité*” (96-100), written in defense of the controversial *Eloge de la Créolité* published by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Confiant himself in 1989, argues for a movement away from the Afrocentric “matrix” that has been posited as the basis of Caribbean identity under classic nationalism, and a movement towards the more “plural conception of identity” (99) towards which Glissant was moving in *Caribbean Discourse*.

¹² For an extended treatment of these contradictions—or paradoxes—in Benítez-Rojo's and Glissant's attempts to grapple simultaneously with Caribbean (national) identity and the perceived need for a more global identification that disrupts national boundaries, see my essay “The End of Nationalism? Performing the Question in Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* and Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*,” in *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10. 2 (2002).

¹³ As examples: Lakshmi Persaud and Shani Mootoo write as female Indo West Indian voices; Michelle Cliff addresses the place of the female of mixed race in the crafting of the nation; Patricia Powell (*The Pagoda*) has sought to imagine/insert a female Sino West Indian voice; and in the area of literary criticism, Evelyn O'Callaghan (see *Woman*

fascinating interest is Charles Carnegie's (2002) figuration of the dundus, the black albino, as the ultimate test of the boundaries of nationhood—a completely different spin on the concepts of race and color within nationalism and the discursive refusals of it.

An emerging paradigm that has not yet received critical attention is the paradigm of individualism, which seems to structure from (often radically) different perspectives the fiction of Jamaica Kincaid, the work of V.S. Naipaul, the overarching attention given to the private concerns of sex and romantic love in the work of Colin Channer and Oonya Kempadou, the image of the homosexual as outsider in the construction of the community, whether national or otherwise, in the fiction of Dionne Brand, Patricia Powell, Shani Mootoo, and Lawrence Scott's *Aelred's Sin* (1998). In the Caribbean context this concept of individualism is of extraordinary importance and awaits definition since (for reasons that cannot be discussed here since the issue is outside the immediate concerns of the essay) it cannot be conflated with the familiar concept of individualism within the discourse of Western modernity, and since it both draws on and goes against the grain of Caribbean nationalism and indeed the communal ethos that marks Caribbean tradition in general.

I mention all of the above to recognize the possibility of simply locating Brodber's work within the present field of writing and discourse in which diaspora, globalization, a complicated and contested nationalism, concepts of sexual, gendered and ethnic difference, as well as concepts of the individual, flow within and against each other as markers of our present state of post/modernity and post-coloniality. These terms, "post/modernity" and "post-coloniality," highlight the ways in which this field of writing and discourse self-consciously engages with its own historical conditioning. And certainly Brodber treats all or most of the issues I have mentioned. Diaspora, globality, gendered identity, sexuality, difference constructed around ethnic/racial lineages, the movement away from nationalist frames, the individual in her private, personal role, all feature prominently in both books, as attested to in discussions by critics such as Page (2005), Smyth (2002), James 2001, Ten Kortenaar (1999), Narain (1999), Cobham (1993), Dance (1990) O'Callaghan (1990), to name a few.

But the frame of history, the mediation by history, becomes insufficient to speak of Brodber's work. The further and distinguishing element of Brodber's thought that I want to highlight in this essay is the way in which she inserts Caribbean metaphysics into the heart of globally dispersed communities and seeks to replace not only nationalist thought but also the hegemony of history with what Brodber herself in *Louisiana* explicitly terms the "hegemony of spirit" (98). That this "hegemony of spirit" remains largely unremarked is both a function of the critical codes

Version, 1993) has looked at the role of women of European descent in shaping some concerns of Caribbean literature, while Belinda Edmondson (1999) has charted women writers' ambiguous relation to their male counterparts.

that drive current criticism, and a function of the fact that this hegemony is not made explicit in *Myal*, the text in Brodber's oeuvre that has attracted the most attention. *Myal* may be considered the first Anglophone Caribbean novel in which the ancestors as "living, active dead" and the world of the spirit are not historical descriptors or tropes, but factual reality. Yet most critics, while unanimously recognizing the book's spiritualist foundation, and the fact that this foundation represents a paradigm shift, do not go on to place primary emphasis on the spiritualism itself. Indeed, this foundational element has been read diversely as a trope (cf. Tiffin's 1993 reading of it as the suturing of the "mind-body split"); a means to focalize the healing power of communal re-memory (Feng 2002, Dance 1990); the encoding of a moral causality that denies sexual pleasure (cf. Narain's [1999] feminist reading of sexuality/textuality in Brodber); an example of the role Caribbean syncretism plays in political (particularly female) liberation (Smyth 2002, O'Callaghan 1993); and an act of narrative resistance and decentering (Puri 1993; O'Callaghan 1993).

However, Tabish Khair (2002) in an unusually insightful reading states that ". . . *Myal* can very easily be read as an unambiguous spiritual narrative. In that sense, it is not just a novel . . . it connects to the prose and poetry of spirituality, religious discourse, Biblical text . . . and even apocalyptic writings in a deeply non-ironic manner" (121). Carolyn Cooper (1991) and Neil Ten Kortenaar (1999) are also both unusually sensitive to the spiritualist element in *Myal*, recognizing the literal as opposed to metaphorical or tropological nature of Brodber's spirit world, and its grounding in historical fact and practice. But even these two insightful critics place *Myal* within the humanist tradition where human beings, whether in the spirit or material world, are ultimately the prime movers of destiny. Ten Kortenaar speaks of the community "us[ing] the spirit forces for communal health" (58) and concludes that the "national" literature to which *Myal* belongs is the result of "an inoculation campaign . . . by local ancestral spirits" (70); Cooper's feminist thesis is that Brodber's women appropriate agency by deploying the "discredited knowledges" of their collective history against Eurocentric domination of the gendered subject (84). Yet, in the end, as the title of her essay shows, even Cooper dovetails spirit possession in *Myal* back into tropological frames. Khair in a far-reaching insight recognizes that it is in its *spiritualist grounding* (not in the "postmodernism" perceived by other critics) that *Myal* "presses against the historical and generic elements of the novel form" (123) but assesses this spiritualism as limited by what he sees as its oppositional Creole poetics. These critics' humanist focus is merely faithful to the humanism of *Myal*, in which all spirits are human actors. We find a different scenario when we examine *Louisiana*, the main focus of this essay.

Brodber's Seminal Thought: The Hegemony of Spirit in *Louisiana* is the story of an Afro-Jamaican¹⁴ anthropologist who, in the process of redacting a life history from an old black woman, is contacted by the dead (including the old woman, who dies before the life history can be collected) and drafted by spiritual confluences into a ministry of healing that allows her clients to redeem their personal (and by extension communal) lives from the destructive realities and possibilities set up by negative pasts. Two important effects of Louisiana's religio-spiritual experience are worth noting: first, the movement from data gathering and analysis to ministry is essentially a transformation of the anthropologist's role as mere observer/redactor, no matter by how participatory a method; second, through the surrender to her rewritten role, the eponymous heroine discovers her cultural, geographical and biological connections with ancestors and living persons from Africa, Europe, America and the Caribbean. She, as it were, discovers herself as a member of a globalized rather than a national community.

The term "hegemony of spirit" is crucial in my discussion of Brodber's work. Brodber's conceptualization of "spirit" separates *Louisiana* from the humanism which I earlier defined (humanism as human-driven production of experience). "Spirit" as used in this text indicates both a fundamentally spiritualist worldview, and the groundedness of that spiritualism in a specifically religious interpretation. Central to the latter is a concept of continuing life after death, but more importantly, a concept of a higher than human Power that directs the courses of both the living and the dead, and to which attention must be paid. This is apparent in Brodber's grounding of her text in Biblical tropes and etymology. Her "Cain and Abel" positioning of the Biblical stories of Elisha and the Witch of Endor is instructive. Musing on God's endorsement of Elisha's prophethood (2 Kings: 2 ff) and rejection of the Witch of Endor's activities (1 Samuel 28, Deuteronomy 18:10-12), Louisiana comes to the conclusion that "the little lady was running a private enterprise, her own corner store" (101) while Elisha "took his orders from God" (101). Louisiana reads this difference as an indication that she herself must surrender to divine instruction, instead of taking matters into her own hands.

This passage marks a definitive juncture in Louisiana's spiritual pilgrimage, which is also a pilgrimage to self-understanding. She does not only come to the realization that her role is to allow room to the "Voice [she] hear [s]" and surrender herself to be linked up with the network of spirits which are the Higher Spirit's (Brodber's terms are "the Higher Power" and "the Higher One") instruments in time and space. She also

¹⁴ "Jamaican" refers to a person of Jamaican birth or descent who has become American or Americanized. The term has a pejorative connotation when applied to someone who has become Americanized as a sign of the rejection of Jamaican/Caribbean culture. I am using it here without pejorative connotations to mean simply that Ella is an American of Jamaican descent.

recognizes that those instruments, the dead (who are nevertheless quite living), should not be allowed to direct the course of one's action—they too, as conduits, must surrender to the Higher Power: “She [Mammy King's spirit] wants to hug her secret, let her. But let her and all and sundry know that the definition of my practice notwithstanding, whatever behind-telling is to be done for whomsoever will have to wait until the Higher One has given me the orders . . . so you who are now pulling at my sleeve could just as well desist” (*Louisiana*, 106). The idea of ancestral agency and intervention, which figures so prominently in nationalist cultural imagining, is retained but with a subtle shift from the central place it occupied in the earlier *Myal*, which, as I have said, is part of a developmental process of thought leading up to *Louisiana*.

Already at least one contrast with the nationalist construction of history is clear. In a sense, the nationalist writers lived under the tyranny of history, locked as they were into the paradigm of resistance by which they sought to shake off the yoke of European History (spelled with a hegemonic capital H) by substituting their “true-true” version, what may be termed the history of the little tradition (Brathwaite 1974). But it was essentially the same concept of history—history as human act and invention, history as space and time passing—history as *chronos* and geography. Even Lamming, who rejects linearities of time and literary form and constructs his own mythos to replace that History, in the end is in the service of that paradigm, as is evident in his argument that we must create our own future by a self-directed intervention in H/history.¹⁵ We might compare this to Wilson Harris¹⁶ (see his novels, and his essays in Bundy, 1999), who argues instead for a plangent, quiescent openness—a surrender as it were—of the imagination to the archetypal human mythos which he sees as the immanent reality beneath apparent event and apparent time.

Brodber's is, like Harris', an ethic of surrender rather than an ethic of resistance. The difference from Harris is, of course, that in *Louisiana* the surrender is to a transcendent, immanent Divine, not simply to a way of seeing. The surrender is perfectly logical, for the Higher Power supersedes and acts upon even the most elusive of the submarine/subterranean currents of diasporic history. (Significantly, Brodber uses the definite article, not just “a” but “the” Higher Power.) Her alternative vocabulary is directly linked to this ethic of submission to an immanent Divine Person (for Brodber's Higher Power comes across as a personal Being, not a diffuse force). Verbs in our communal consciousness, such as “fight,” “struggle,” “resist,” “subvert,” “write back,” “deconstruct,” are replaced by “wait,” “called,” “hear,” “pass over,” “prophesy,” “heal,” inserted throughout Brodber's text with Biblical resonance. These are the verbs

¹⁵ See for example the essay “Caliban Reorders History” in *The Pleasures of Exile and Coming Home: Conversations II*. (1995). St. Martin: House of Nehesi Publishers.

¹⁶ Other critics who have noted Brodber's similarities to Harris —though from different perspectives than mine —include Smyth (2002), Feng (2002), and Ten Kortenaar (1999).

that indicate the kind of “action” by which Louisiana will prepare herself for her ministry, and by which she will succeed in that ministry.

Indeed, the Biblical ethos links Louisiana with Christ, since she undergoes a waiting period very similar to Christ’s forty-day sojourn in the wilderness. In this context, the attempts by her other world guides (the women who have “passed over” and are now helping in Louisiana’s induction) to hurry her into an untimely start may be seen as figurations of temptation successfully resisted, as Christ resisted the Devil’s blandishments. And certainly her death, which occurs simply because the work she was sent to do is finished, has Christ-like parallels. The Christ parallel is, however, only partial, in a way that points to the essentially syncretic nature of Brodber’s religious thought. For Louisiana, in becoming prophet(ess), priest(ess) and mediator-conduit, does not put her clients in full contact with the Higher Power. Their interaction with the “Power,” unlike that promised by Christ, is at most partial, at least indirect, since they connect basically through Louisiana. Louisiana’s own closer, mystical connection remains singular, except in so far as it is similar to that of the other women who like her are selected, “chosen.” In this respect, Louisiana’s role is more akin to that of the Old Testament prophet and the West African spirit medium.

In referring to Louisiana’s surrender and waiting as action and ministry, I am pointing to a paradox inherent in Biblical concepts of the relation between God and human—a paradox which transcribes itself into Brodber’s world picture along with the related vocabulary. In this paradox, surrender (to the divine will) is resistance (to destructive human agencies, both personal and historical); waiting is active, not passive (since it is in the place of waiting that one receives empowering, freedom-bringing instructions); listening is speaking (since one’s mouth opens only to voice the utterance that is given at the moment of listening), and submission is power. What we are seeing here is not an abandonment of warfare against historical negatives, but a rethinking of the terms and dynamic agencies of that warfare.

The paradox is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s Christian religious vision, which has the same Biblical base as Brodber’s Twelve Tribes of Israel (Rastafarian) orientation.¹⁷ But paradox is also the sign of Legba/Esu, the West African god of the crossroads, so it is not at all surprising that Louisiana functions both as one who goes between (conduit-facilitator) and as one who stands between (cloaks/hides the god), nor that her other world guides are simultaneously her selectors, tempters and collaborators. This complication of paradox may be said to highlight the pitfalls that may beset the religio-spiritual journey, as well as indicating the incomplete

¹⁷ Cf. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*: “. . . action is suffering/And suffering is action. Neither does the agent suffer/Nor the patient act. But both are fixed/In an eternal action, an eternal patience/To which all must consent that it may be willed/And which all must suffer that they may will it/That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action/And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still/Be forever still.” A similar concept is repeated variously in *Four Quartets*.

nature of a liberatory experience which is still only in process and, at the communal level, not yet fully perceived or apprehended.

An important aspect of Brodber's reconfiguration is the rhetoric of personal sanctification—a movement away from the public to the private as the beginning of liberation. One has a sense that in *Louisiana* the private is not merely a metaphor for the public (as it is often read in Caribbean bildungsroman), but the place where one must begin healing if the community is to be “saved.” In this context, Brodber replaces the discourse of conquistador vs. liberator with the discourse of Sinner/Sinned Against/Redeemer (cf. 113). The ethic, rooted in Biblical doctrine, is self-referential, with its focus on personal responsibility rather than on opposition to external forces—“us/me” rather than “them” as the ones “standing in the need of prayer” (requiring cleansing). This discourse is a shift from *Myal*, which suggests a similar approach to healing but minus the allusion to concepts of sin and redemption. Even so, *Myal* does point latently to the idea of a higher power in the place it gives to prayer as part of the confluence of elements that accomplish Ella's healing.

It is not only history as materialist human action that is replaced by Brodber's spiritualist metaphysics. History as time passing intersects with a concept of eternity (“other world time”: *Louisiana*, 115), as evidenced in the permeation of the veils between the living and the dead, the voiced and the unvoiced, which allows Louisiana to communicate with the dead, those who have “passed over.” This larger concept of time again has oblique resonances with Wilson Harris' sense of a transcultural deposit of the pre-existent sources and products of human imagination and primordial desire immanent within the timeless “womb of space” (and manifested partly in [Jungian] archetypes). The concepts of timelessness and eternity are of course not identical, but more than this, what distinguishes Brodber's metaphysics from Harris' is that whereas for Harris no cultural experience within his “tradition” of the human imagination is privileged over another, Brodber seems to insist on the particularities of experience, attaching a crucial importance to the fact that our connection with eternity is circumscribed by our inhabiting time, space and culture. Her metaphysics then are very grounded in material specifics—at the individual level, at the family level, at the cultural level (*Louisiana* is the story of one Afro-Jamaican woman's reconnections with her lost/ unknown family—lost and unknown because of a particular black diasporic cultural experience, rooted in colonialism). So Brodber espouses the idea of “the S/spirit” acting from the space of “other world time,” while asserting the specificity of the “Spirit's” dealings with a particular culture, space and time. In other words, eternity intersects with and is immanent in time, rather than crossing it out.

It seems to me that Brodber's sense of cross-connections, grounded in her religious epistemology, is not quite the same as the classic nationalist discourse of creolization. In the classic discourses, hybridity, cultural mix and other forms of diversity within the Caribbean were to be celebrated as the ground of our uniqueness, but eventually to be dovetailed into a unity,

a singular identity in which, paradoxically, one racial type (the Afro-West-Indian), one sex (male) and one set of cultural dynamics (that accruing from the experience of slavery) were to be the privileged icons in the drive towards historical redress of the region's image.¹⁸ In Brodber, the oneness among people of different backgrounds is not in a teleological relationship with the diversity implied in cross connections—the diversity is its own *raison*, the oneness is more a matter of acceptance of difference, and of cooperation.

So Louisiana is able to accept the startling similarities of lineage, history and cultural manifestation between the black people of St Mary in the Southern U.S.A. and the black people of St Mary, Jamaica, without trying to dovetail their differences into the service of a singular oneness. It may seem like an obvious thing, but it is important enough to Brodber for her to inscribe quite carefully the initial resistance of members of the community (85ff) to that similarity and difference. And as I indicated earlier, the community she celebrates is globalized: a pan colonial/African community rather than a cross-national or diasporic “nation” (85ff).

Brodber's world view has some interesting resonances with Glissant's postmodernist *Poetics of Relation*, which shifts from the nationalism of his *Caribbean Discourse* to a more globalized view of the world, and to a lesser extent with Benítez-Rojo's, also postmodernist, situation of Caribbean identity within a larger identity of “Peoples of the Sea.”¹⁹ But equally importantly, it fits into a “modernist”²⁰ religious ideology in which the god is not a local possession but the “Redeemer” of all. This universality of the “Higher Power” serves not to erase culturally localized differences but to suggest the basis of their acceptance.

Significantly, the novel does not emphasize a sense of geographical exile even though Louisiana, her husband and the men she serves are all in a sense geographically unmoored and displaced. The point here is that narratives of singularity, whether of origin, place or the destination of identity—and the Caribbean nationalist concept of creolization fits into the latter—are displaced in this text. Again, an implication might be that the

¹⁸ The contradiction at the heart of the nationalism posited by classic nationalists (such as Brathwaite and Lamming) was that while the region's unique cultural and racial plurality was celebrated, the imperative of the concept of nationhood, as inherited from the European tradition, was the identification of the nation with singularity, in the final analysis. The image of the Caribbean nation inevitably became iconized in the black peasant majority (and its males in particular). The current movement towards a view of identity that revalues the Caribbean's plurality is perhaps a creative way of dealing with the racial tensions that inevitably remained from the nationalist solution. That movement is in effect a rethinking not only of nationalism but also of the meaning of creolization. See Condé's 1998 essay cited at (9) above, and “Afterword” by Yanick Lahens in the same volume, 155-164.

¹⁹ Benítez-Rojo's thinking, however, may be considered an attempt to integrate postmodern perspectives into a different kind of nationalism, rather than a break with nationalism in its entirety.

²⁰ I use “modernist” here in a particularized sense to mean “perceiving and embracing relationship to a world outside the immediate and the localized/insular; thinking in terms of abstract principle rather than of discrete, localized event.”

workings of the Higher Power are able to transcend spatial loss. It is the recovery of psychological space through spiritual healing that becomes important. An interesting link to this discussion is provided by Brodber's 1998 essay "Where Are All the Others,"²¹ in which she posits the need for Caribbean people(s) to search out, highlight and value all the racial and cultural strands that have shaped their identities and provided psycho-cultural "homes of spirit."²² Even in the context of speaking exclusively of the Caribbean, Brodber's globalized vision is evident. And this is particularly interesting because in the essay multiple strands of racial and cultural identity are seen as existent not only in different Caribbean ethnicities or in the society as a whole, but in individual persons, including Afro Caribbeans. This is a far cry from the days when it was *de trop* and reprehensible for black Caribbeans to find peaceable accommodation with their European antecedents.

Louisiana's Continuum with Myal

To some extent, the implication of the Higher Power's transcendence of spatial loss, and removal of geography as an index of being, is noticeable in *Myal*. In this novel Brodber's healers come from all over the globe, including Africa—there is in fact a very strong pan-African ethos/sensibility in *Myal*, but the focus is not on the middle passage as a site of mourning, since the current location is not a loss but another site for the S/spirit's manifestation. This is further seen in the embracement of spiritual input from a range of religious persuasions: Afro-Jamaican (Myalism, Kumina), Jamaican-Christian (syncretized Baptist) English-Christian (Methodist), and from a range of racial and cultural figures: the ancestral Ole African shares redemptive agency with the white Christian Maydene Brassington. Brodber's eclectic religious vision and her refusal to stereotype (Europeanism, like myalism is a state of mind and spirit, not a matter of race or of a particular religion) effectively redefine myal, making it a concept of spirituality rather than a particularized, localized practice. The eclectic spiritualism in *Myal* is made explicit in the language of *Louisiana*, which merges Biblical and African traditional cosmogony (the good Lord/Redeemer with the ancestors). I am suggesting that, given the other indices I have discussed, this merger is more an indication of a Caribbean "postmodernist"²³ worldview than of Caribbean nationalism.

²¹ In *Caribbean Creolization*, 68-75.

²² The phrase "original homes of spirit" is from Lamming, *Coming Coming Home*, 24.

²³ I am referring to a particular aspect of postmodernist thought, namely, its celebration of boundarylessness and difference. As the discussion has indicated, while these concepts informed nationalist thought as descriptors of Caribbean cultural reality, the thrust towards an identity that was nationalist in intention tended paradoxically to erect a totalizing view of creolization upon these concepts, so that difference was not so much celebrated in itself as dovetailed into the service of singularity. I do not suggest that either the nationalist or the postmodernist viewpoint is superior to the other; rather I aim to point out their differences.

And I want to emphasize that if Brodber's worldview is not nationalist, neither is it a nostalgic pan-Africanism, but rather an idea of a tensile immanence of S/spirit within the diaspora. This appears in *Louisiana* where the past and the dead are not distant ancestors or a time in antiquity, but the recently dead—the previous generation—and the moment of passing (Mammy communicates with Louisiana at the point of her own death). This supports the suggestion that the spiritual legacy is right here at our fingertips, within reach—it does not have to be excavated from a distant past—it is even now in the making. “Within the diaspora” furthers *Myal*'s connection with *Louisiana*: although *Myal* is firmly situated within Jamaican space, Brodber's view of it as a diasporic text already linked to the non-national community she presents in the later novel, is seen in the essay “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure” (1990) where she says, “*Myal* is my tentative exploration of the way of life forged by the people of two points of the black diaspora—the Afro-Americans and the Afro-Jamaicans” (167). So Brodber makes it clear that conceptually *Myal* and *Louisiana* belong to the same space, even though it is the latter novel that makes the Jamaican-American as well as the deistic, supra-historical connection explicit.

Brodber's spiritual “ecumenism” extends to her representation of issues such as artistic creation, gender and community. Her narrative style, with its dissolution of event boundaries, its crossings to and fro between mental and geographical spaces, its refiguration of the journey as a spiritual rather than primarily cultural odyssey, its employment of multiple voice-narrators, and its removal of attributive hooks so that conversation floats in the air and floats into consciousnesses, is part and parcel of the spiritualist refiguring, mirroring the permeability of ourworld time and consciousnesses by their “other world” counterparts. At the end of the novel, Louisiana's German-African husband Reuben, in four brief sentences commenting on her redaction of the events detailed in the text, erases the concepts of the singular or self-inspired author and protagonist: “A community song . . . It was not hers; she was no hero . . . It was a tale of community action; it was a community tale. *We made it happen*” (161, italics mine). Indeed, even the idea of the Caribbean author as agent inspired by and inspiring the community, an idea popularized by earlier, nationalist writers (cf. Ramchand 1970, Lamming 1960, 39) is dispensed with. Instead, the community, moved by the S/spirit, in a sense writes the narrative. To be sure, it may be argued that Louisiana's superior access as the Higher Power's conduit problematizes the equality of the community, and raises the issue of the need for a larger, more inclusive “redemption.” Even so, Rueben's comment focuses on one of Louisiana's most powerful rewritings of the anthropologist's method and role: the rendition of events in the people's multiple voices, by a totally involved, unskeptical insider. It is a very strong concept of equality, regardless of what may be seen as its contradictions.

The absence of an oppositional feminist discourse, and the development of an alternative, is marked across Brodber's three novels, in

directly complementary ways. In *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), the female protagonist Nellie is healed primarily through the agency of a male figure, Baba, who catalyses and helps direct her healing reconnection with her community. There is no male hegemony here: Nellie remains central as putative protagonist; the community remains central as sign. Baba occupies the (liminal) space of mother, nurturer—a deliberately ideological positioning which is in keeping with the complex reality of Caribbean gender, which I have discussed elsewhere.²⁴ In *Myal*, a mixed cross-race, cross-gender community (Maas Cyrus the Afro-Jamaican myal man, Miss Gatha the Kumina/Revival Mother, Maydene Brassington the white, English expatriate wife of the Methodist minister, Reverend Simpson the Afro-Jamaican Baptist minister, Ole African the liminal ancestral man-spirit from Africa) networks in Ella's healing. Again, there is a female (not so incidentally, mixed-race) to be healed, and again gender roles are blurred. In *Louisiana* the female "protagonist," assisted by a community of females, becomes the agent of healing for a community of men, but a man (Louisiana's husband Ben) shares with the women the role of "midwife" in Louisiana's spiritual "birthing." Thus a balance is created between the first two novels and the third. Here again it seems that, in the *telos*, gender hierarchies are superseded by the hegemony of S/spirit.

One representative sign of Brodber's reconciliatory gender discourse is the story of Ben, whose secret past Louisiana unearths in her role as the Spirit's conduit. Ben, as a headmaster, had impregnated a school girl under his tutelage, then hesitated or refused to marry her, with the result that she attempted an abortion and in the process lost her life. The child's suffering is horrific; the moment is ripe, understandably, for a feminist or nationalist insertion, along the lines of patriarchal/colonial male oppression/ doubly deracinated female victim. The astonishing word Louisiana utters, completely without any middle passage of struggle or hate, despite having utterly experienced the young girl's anguish in her own body, is "forgiveness." This one word, linked to the text's vocabulary of Sinner/Redeemer, radically removes history in its common discursive definitions (keeping a record—of wrongs) from the forefront, and produces a culturally unorthodox resolution—unorthodox, that is, in Caribbean popular and intellectual culture, though not necessarily in cultural manifestations heavily influenced by the Bible.

This uttering of forgiveness may also be seen as being linked to a pattern of excavation and burial in *Louisiana*: the past is excavated, looked squarely in the face, mourned—but not in a debilitatingly protracted way—and reburied in order that the redeemed life may be lived—and here I use "reburied" to mean simply "laid to rest in forgiveness and acceptance of forgiveness." Here, paradoxically, both excavation and burial become acts of resurrection. Ella's pregnancy of

²⁴ "Tropes of the Carnavalesque: Hermaphroditic Gender in Slave Society and West Indian Fictions." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 8. 2. (April 1999), 19-37.

wind which is exorcised (expelled, buried) in *Myal* can be similarly read. The pregnancy does in a sense bear fruit—the fruit of Ella’s healed spirit and resurrected consciousness by which she herself becomes a community healer via her reconstructive teaching. The ethos of acceptance (grace) that informs forgiveness in *Louisiana* informs Ella’s healing in *Myal*, despite the greater presence of a humanist element in the latter.

The centering of community is a very noticeable aspect of Brodber’s paradigm: community as rural kumbla space (*Myal*, following on from *Jane and Louisa*); community as cross- and non- national-boundary space (*Louisiana*); community as cross-gender and cross-race space (both novels); community as cross-cultural space (*Louisiana*, where nobody, no matter how black, experiences any angst about singing Irish, Scottish and English melodies); community as network of spiritually constructed relations and relationships among people of historical connections (all three novels)—in other words, community as a concept in which “nation” is not so much dismissed as simply not featured. It would be easy to say that this concern with inner relations rather than macrocosms is merely a characteristic of women’s writing, but such gender polarities are at best suspect, and arguably contradicted by a significant number of women’s *bildungsroman* and their inversions. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Crick Crack Monkey*, Kincaid’s novels and Cliff’s earlier work, for example, the focus may not be on nation but neither is it on community—rather on the singular female protagonist. And then there are male writers such as George Lamming, for whom community is a central trope, although in his case community dovetails back into nationalist ideology. Brodber places the inner group in such a way that the “public” exists only by implication—and an implication brought in more by our historical knowledge as readers than by the text. In other words, the inner group is the centre of things. It seems to me that this kind of scenario facilitates close treatment of the small rhizomes and criss-cross networks of connection, and of ideas of the spiritual as a cohesive, *relational* force. Brodber’s training in social work and anthropology is undoubtedly an influence here—hers is a very phenomenological approach to writing. (I am not of course intending to suggest that other approaches cannot accommodate similar themes, but rather to highlight the particular efficacy of Brodber’s approach in this regard.)

In placing my discussion of Brodber’s work within the context of shifts in Anglophone Caribbean thought and literary discourse after the 1970s, I have no wish to imply a social evolutionist theory of events or a trajectory of “development” in the region’s writing. Clearly, though socio-political trends influence literature, there is no one on one correspondence and no strict lines of cause and effect or chronology between the two. (As I have said, nationalism is far from dead, and it is also far from being at this point unnecessary, though it has had to undergo major ideological reconfigurations.) I do want to suggest that Brodber’s and other departures may be seen in the context of 20th-century developments on the regional, global and literary scene, which inspire a freedom to suggest

ways of seeing that were previously delayed or underplayed. It seems reasonable to argue that both the creative writers of the nationalist period, and the critics who read them, felt constrained to treat religion, if at all, within an overtly humanist and nationalist paradigm. But texts such as *Myal* and *Louisiana* are an indication that already in the 1980s and early 1990s, scarcely thirty years into the experience of nationalist independence, the initial battles of identity were already becoming exhausted, and new questions had begun to emerge in the context of the times.

And I also want to suggest, in the final analysis, that Brodber adds a provocative nuance to Anglophone Caribbean writing, namely, an idea of ways of knowing which are outside of the rationalist intellectual tradition that informs the academic context in which both history and literature are studied. (And I am insisting that the literary-critical tradition, despite its acceptance of the intuitive and the mythic, is essentially a rationalist, intellectualist one). Granted, she is not by any means the only writer to have challenged this tradition—the history of that challenge is as old as art itself and in Caribbean literature is invoked in various ways by writers as diverse as Gabriel García Márquez, Wilson Harris, Rosario Ferre, Maryse Condé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Nalo Hopkinson, Kamau Brathwaite, to name a few. But what may well be unique to date is that in the process of her provocation, Brodber inserts an alternative vocabulary, rooted in Caribbean religious tradition, into Caribbean literary discourse. Her culturally grounded yet globally inclusive spiritualism allows her to deal with black experience without creating a new hegemony of difference to replace the old hegemony of universalism; to suggest the universal without reinventing it in the image of any one culture; to recognize gender inequalities without bitterness; to centralize community without fixing it to geography or the hegemony of nationalist discourse; to excavate submerged cross-connections without making of the cross a teleology or a line; and, astonishingly, to make of excavation and burial a single seamless moment—to make of death an affirmation of life. It is a tall accomplishment.

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