

Writing America: A Special Cluster

Carnival-Conjure, *Louisiana*, History and the Power of Women's Ethnographic Narrative

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With its reference to the United States' pelican state and her own native parish in Jamaica, Erna Brodber's 1994 novel *Louisiana* compels an analysis of the spiritual and cultural connections between African Americans and black Jamaicans. Brodber creates a broad cultural matrix, linking religion¹ to oral history, myth-making, and carnivalesque self-manifestation. Through these affiliations, she fictionalizes ethnography, critiques it as scientific historiography, and challenges the cultural narratives it produces.² The world-view of *Louisiana* is shaped by what I call Carnival-Conjure, a fusion of fiction, science, anthropology and religion. Just as Christianity, for example, is grounded in a mythic narrative which explains the creation of the world and the situation of humans in it, Carnival-Conjure speaks a people's sense of their individual and collective life histories. In Brodber's novel, Carnival-Conjure is an alternative discourse that challenges epistemological difficulties posed by historical and anthropological representations of black individual and community experiences. Carnival-Conjure is formed at the intersection of two practices and capitalizes on their shared center: the body.

In my discussion of this hybrid, carnival functions as a qualifier for conjure. Generally, *conjure* refers to a body's spiritual beliefs and the activities consummate with those beliefs (conversation and contact with ancestral spirits). *Carnival*, its sister practice, refers to both a celebratory performance (Mardi Gras) and also the immaterial force that guides the physical body's participation in the practice (desire for escape or for invisibility). This Carnival-Conjure merger draws on what Danow refers to as the carnivalesque: narratives which regard the "supernatural as natural, take fiction as truth, and make the extraordinary or 'magical' as viable a possibility as the ordinary or 'real'" (3). But, Brodber's fusion of carnival with conjure intensifies the value of each mythos. *Louisiana*

directs its participants not only to conjure's magic but also to carnival's role reversal and breakdown. In the novel, carnival is not a spectacle creating temporal suspense, allowing for everyday identities to be masked while others are performed. Instead Brodber creates a conjure-infused carnival, as the novel's protagonist and its readers, engage in "revelations that have the peculiarity (like myth in the past) of obscuring as well as disclosing" (Glissant 79). Carnival and conjure in the novel work together to make these seeming oppositions collaborative.

Carnival-Conjure provides a vehicle for Ella to "jump out of [her] body but *still* look at her body" and affords her a space to manifest the spirit she discovers by virtue of getting outside of her physical self so as to experience more intensely her spiritual self (43). The spirit, once obscured by the physical body and its experiences, discloses a greater meaning to that body, allows it to be read as text and to speak as subject. Ella the researcher is transformed into an activist and the body of her narrative becomes a cultural and spiritual black space. Ella's intellectual project becomes "understanding the nature of the spirit" (Brodber "Black Space" in thefray.com). To do so, Ella comes to rely on an aesthetic that weds objective science, oral history, and fiction.

In her contribution to the published proceedings from the first convention of Caribbean Woman Writers and Scholars, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," Brodber describes ethnographic writing as a fiction of "objectivity" (165). In an effort to counter the monotony of this writing Brodber began recording her feelings prior to interviewing the informants. To her mind, ethnographic writing was akin to "vomiting and defecating, and [she] flushed away the effort."³ The relationship between writing and physicality becomes clearer to Brodber when she returns to Jamaica from an ethnographic field trip. She realizes that

the enemy was a ghost that talked through black faces. It was maddening, and to keep my sanity I talked on paper, reviewing from time to time what I had written before. I was now keeping my nonacademic writing for therapeutic purposes. (165)

Similarly, Ella's initial attempts to contextualize her experiences within the objective frame of a traditional ethnographic project led her to a

maddening sanity, the very thing that disrupted her disciplined thinking led her to a freer thinking and more productive intellectual space. The intrusion of psychic voices kept her spiritually sane and nurtured her to a level of comfort in her skin. Indeed, Ella's own body becomes a living book, transcribed to text in her death.

Using Carnival-Conjure, the novel exposes the interdependence of student/studied. The relationship between scholar/researcher and subject/researched defines *Louisiana's* narrative structure. The novel's structure calls attention to the anthropological underpinnings of its central plot. A frame story informs us that the narrative itself is composed of ethnographic data collected by the protagonist Ella Townsend, an African American graduate student at Columbia, with roots in Louisiana, St Mary's Parish, Jamaica. In 1974, forty years after Ella had been given a WPA fellowship to "retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana," the manuscript appears on an editor's desk (5). The "Editor's Note" tells us

Ella Townsend disappeared leaving a blotch on her name. This promising writer, for whom they had even procured a fellowship in Anthropology to upgrade her fieldwork skills, was one of the few to be given the new field aid, an approximation of today's tape recorder. Neither recording machine, reel, transcript nor manuscript was submitted. (3)

Ella's disappearance is Brodber's first carnival-conjure act, for Ella has translated herself into another textual form: the manuscript, *Louisiana*.⁴

An unsigned letter identifies the manuscript, "called *Louisiana*," as the "missing" data from Ella's research, dispelling a forty-year-old rumor that Ella had absconded with the money and "disappeared with a confidence trickster into storefront fortune-telling in receptive New Orleans"(3).⁵ The frame story concludes in the epilogue, where a letter (written presumably by Ella's husband Reuben) describes the importance of the manuscript, its most appropriate disposition, and the disposal of Ella's physical body.

Within the frame story, the manuscript contains two collaborating life narratives: the protagonist-anthropologist Ella Townsend's process

of self-definition and the life history of the novel's second protagonist, Mammy King, the informant whose story Ella travels to Louisiana, USA to collect.⁶ The intertextuality of the two women's life histories underscores the kinship between anthropology—social scientific presentation of peoples and their ways of life—and fiction—creatively licensed representation of people and their ways of life. Erna Brodber constructs a metafictional narrative that traces the development of a new kind of anthropologist, one whose research is psychic exploration. The novel redefines the ethnographer as social science fiction writer. Ella must first author herself before she can record and report Mammy's history (*Dialogic* 29).

Ella's transformation into a new kind of ethnographer/artist exposes disciplinary distinctions as illusory (i.e., that between history and fiction, religion and science). Within this metafictional narrative, Carnival-Conjure emerges as an empowering alternative way to read, know and be in the world. Ella's social science research is not crafted "from the standpoint of an objective observer communicating to disinterested scholars"; it does not "other" her subjects. Instead, Ella becomes the subject of her research as she uncovers her relationship to the people and the place she studies (Brodber "Fictions" 166). Rather than failing, as the Editor's note implies, Ella has succeeded in making the absence of the subject in past anthropological method obvious. Ella's "failure" to return the recorder or the recorded material signifies the silence of black women's historical bodies in the data that has been recorded and translated by traditional ethnographic and interpretive practices.

As Brodber explains, Othering black subjects amounts to cultural theft. In an interview with Evelyn O'Callaghan, Brodber explains that colonialism's erasure of indigenous customs and the people's world views in effect stole the spirit of a people, and "without it, you cannot live; without it you're just plain 'flesh' ... only dry bones, rotten flesh" (229). What Brodber refers to as "spirit" seems both akin to and different from essence. For Brodber, the spirit of a people is the social contexts within which they live and make sense. These contexts are culturally located but are subject to historical change—a change directed by the people for whom the practices are critical.

Brodber's metafiction highlights the influence of both Louisiana's obeah, conjure and voodoo legacies on orthodox anthropological processes, and especially on the ways in which Mammy's historical knowledge is transmitted. Carnival-Conjure is the lens through which this metafictional critique becomes clear. While Ella initially sees conjure as a practice, she learns that conjure, like carnival,⁷ is part of a discursive system which makes Mammy's, Louise's, and Ella's own histories intelligible. At varying points in the novel, Mammy King is referred to as Mrs. Sue Anna King/Mrs. Anna/Mammy King. Lowly/Louise calls her Mrs. Anna, and some of the community folk call her Mammy. Ella initially refers to her as Mrs. King, then lapses into calling her Mammy. But, at the novel's end, she carnivalizes Louise and Mrs. Anna into a conjured text of her self, renaming herself "Louisiana." The symbiosis which joins Ella's recording of Mammy's history and her developing self-awareness situates *Louisiana* within a tradition of myalist fiction,⁸ or to quote Gay Wilentz, "healing narratives."⁹ Ella's previous dis-ease with her body, her circumstance and academic difficulties are ameliorated as she "open[s herself] to the story *as it tells itself*" (O'Callaghan "Cultural Penetration" 73).

The manuscript narrates Ella's journey of (re)construction. The data detail the tension between the intellectual spirit of anthropological research and its disciplinary confinements, and the narrative reveals Ella's need to unite her voice, her body, and the voices and bodies she hears and meets. The readers experience Ella's journey and need to become, herself, a carnival space.¹⁰ The editorial letters provide the context within which the relationship between body and text and body *as* text crystallizes. For just as the body of Ella's research data finds itself in the hands of an American press, shrouded by mystery and ceremony, so too did Ella's physical body find its rest on American soil, with all the carnivalesque trappings of a "real" New Orleans jazz funeral. The location of Ella's corpus and her corpse makes the United States the literal repository for Carnival-Conjure, for it is President Roosevelt's WPA that compels Ella's physical relocation to Louisiana where her encounter with Mammy provokes her spiritual transition. The separate practices mingle in America as Ella the academic is guided by Ella the spiritual conduit, the latter latent within the former.

Through Carnival-Conjure's fluidity of language and being, Ella heals the rift between body and spirit that her discipline as an anthropologist has affected. The novel's initial letter discusses the editor's attempts to verify Ella's corporeal existence. Responding to the mystery of Ella's life, the editor concludes that "she did exist...so be she in her last days petty thief, conjure woman, anthropologist," she surely "started public life as a writer" (4). Here, Ella's spirit is "invoked against the disembodiment of anthropology's imperialist capture-by-script" methodology (Tiffin 912). The editor's comments appear to locate the ethnographic project within a process of *becoming*, the moments wherein Ella fluidly moves between identities as an academic, a writer, an anthropologist and a conjure woman. However, the syntax betrays the editor's reliance on linearity, a grammar of tenses rather than aspect, for she emphasizes that *who* Ella Townsend was at the beginning and *how* her project began are what is most important. The narrative body Ella produces defies such ordering and instead accentuates aspects of being, becoming a performative space where the interactions between the living and the dead, aspects of existence, collaborate in crafting individual and cultural stories.¹¹ The novel's characters, including Ella herself, are presented within a world that is evolutionary, but not (post)colonial; rather their world is centrally grounded in *the black world*, not coincidentally the name of the press which ultimately publishes Ella's work.¹²

The narrative¹³ uses letters to present Ella at the poles of before and after, beginning and end. We first get a sense of her as an academic *before* she begins the Louisiana project; then the epilogue letter provides insights into Ella *after* her research abruptly ends. The manuscript between these letters clarifies the disjunctions between *before* and *after*. The letters explain how an academic became a conjure woman. The image created in the epilogue is based on an objective interpretation of the artifacts of her life, akin to the way anthropologists present the cultures they study.

Yet Brodber uses Carnival-Conjure to (re)construct a theory through which ethnography and fiction can be understood as collaborative endeavors. In fact, she argues that ethnography itself is a genre of fiction. The way anthropologists interpret the world they see and the people

who inhabit it is not unlike the way fiction writers cast their worlds anew in their narratives. Often, neither world is recognizable by the people who inhabit it. The relationship between fiction and anthropology is not unlike that between religion and conjure: when a family consults a conjure woman to heal a sick loved one, her work is black magic, suspect; yet when a congregation prays for healing and a parishioner is cured, that successful resort to a higher power is a miracle. While a scientist might add that both narratives of healing are fictions—for the health that succeeded these appeals may be explainable by some natural or physiological force—Brodber, well-aware of such logic, embeds a scientific dismissal of conjure in the narrative in order to refute it. The novel thus attempts to reconfigure our perception of the divide between science and magic or fiction and reality. As *Louisiana* shows, the validity of Ella's scientific beliefs relies on an erasure of a culture's consciousness and a dismissal of its reality. It is the magic of spirit intervention that provides Ella access to the social history she has come to record. Ella's transformation marks her as a newly focused and directed guide to interpretation and representation.

A researcher objectively studies, but Ella's experience reveals that subjective participation and self-reflective analysis is inevitable in a world of performative culture(s). Manifesting Carnival-Conjure's guiding influence, Ella becomes her own informant as her informants become a part of her. The Editor notes that:

The text argues persuasively that Ella came under the influence of psychic forces. Today the intellectual world understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to our five senses; in 1936 when Ella Townsend received her assignment it was not so. (4)

Indeed, Ella Townsend constructs a new anthropological method, "celestial ethnography," a subjective method of analysis amplified through the novel's use of Carnival-Conjure as metafictional tool.

Ella's celestial ethnography recalls the landmark work done by feminist social psychologists Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule. Their text, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, emphasizes that one of the many ways

women gain knowledge is through listening; they receive knowledge from others and listen to the voices speaking within themselves. Ella Townsend makes these collective voices specific and locates them in the Afro-Caribbean. Like Belenky and her co-writers, Ella relies on interviews to ascertain not only what her informants know, but how they acquire knowledge and also what value their communities place on the knowledge. Yet while Belenky and the others present the women and their ways of knowing individually and chaptered, Brodber allows Ella Townsend to show the ways in which for black women these knowledges are indivisible.¹⁴

Fiction provides Brodber space to explore the dynamics of the ethnographic situation in a way that traditional practices, like those of Belenky and the others, obscure. Rather than focus on the relationship between self (researcher) and other (informant) as separate participants in the ethnographic project, Brodber insists that ethnography is always a fusion of procedure, self, and other. Ella exists consistently in the position of “constructed knowledge.” She attempts

to *integrate* knowledge [she] felt intuitively was personally important with knowledge [she] had learned from others ... [and] weaving together strands of rational and emotive thought.... Rather than extricating [herself] in the acquisition of knowledge, [she] used [herself] in rising to a new way of thinking. (Belenky134–5)

Ella cannot distinguish what she knows intuitively from what she learns listening to others. Throughout the novel, Ella manifests an integration of her self with the selves of her informants. Furthermore, Ella makes clear that when black women anthropologize *other* black women, this integration is especially so.

Ella's primary ethnographic informant, Miss Anna/ Mammy King, is kept company by Lowly/Louise—a friend from the islands—who “passed on” before Ella's arrival. Ella meets Mammy and informs her that as an academic, she intends to “pick [Mammy's] brains and put what's in them into [her] hungry black box” (4). Ella's desire to “pick Mammy's brains” aligns her, in Mammy's mind, with Lowly/Louise.

Ella intercepts a conversation between Mammy King and Lowly/Louise, and it becomes clear that Ella and Lowly fuse. Illuminating the everyday presence of Carnival-Conjure, Mammy questions whether or not, in fact, Ella is a myal spirit, an incarnation of Lowly herself. At this point Lowly's and Ella's voices merge, visually distinguished in the text only by dashes that indicate Ella speaking. Mammy King makes clear that she recognizes Ella as an embodiment of Lowly Louise, "thinking this young woman, is it you Lowly girl, come to usher me home" (12). This fusion foreshadows Ella's embodiment by both women's voices and highlights the degree to which the Carnival-Conjure infused ethnographic project becomes Ella's life narrative.

For Mammy, Lowly/Louise is an extension of herself into a wider realm; Mammy is, in effect, possessed by Lowly/Louise. Brodber insists on the collective narration of the physical and spiritual; Mammy's story is inseparable from the commentary that Lowly/Louise provides. Brodber explained that in the Caribbean, the learned class saw "book-learning" as "the ultimate truth" in terms of understanding and knowing one's self and one's place in history; in contrast, the "unlettered" relied on the "oral tradition" for their sense of self and place. Ella's conflation of these two traditions, story and *history*, empowers the community to participate in their own identity making (qtd in Edmondson 187). This connection between these two realms of existence and narrative methods forms an important cultural, historical and social node for black people's histories. Indeed, Brodber introduces this way of knowing in her short story "One Bubby Susan." There, the narrator calls for "communication knowledge," which comes from people who have lived the experiences being queried (49).¹⁵

Demonstrative of the relation of this knowledge to self-understanding, Ella's participation in the *academic* project reveals her own *personal* participation in the history she shares with her subject. As she progresses with her interviews, Ella uncovers her familial relationship to the people and place that are the objects of her research. When inquiring about Miss Anna's origins, Ella discovers that her informant is from "St Mary's Parish, Louisiana ... right here in these United States of America" (15). Ella confuses this with Louisiana, St. Mary, Jamaica.

Yet her confusion proves productive for in the struggle to locate Mammy's originary home, Ella extracts that Mammy's family was owned by a Grant, and "[a]ll Grants are [her] cousins. They all born and grow where I come from" (15). Mammy again transposes Ella and Lowly, and her transposition is not a coincidence. Serving as a catalyst for Ella's self discovery, Mammy narrates a history of Ella's Jamaica, provided by Louise's stories. Here, Ella is most clearly in line with Belenky's notion of received knowledge: "listening to the voices of others" in Mammy and Lowly's stories. However, unlike many of the white women Belenky interviewed, Ella does not see herself as powerless in the face of these voices. While Mammy surely speaks with authority, Ella sees herself also having authority, whereby she could offer Mammy's voice as story with a legitimating authority. Ella transforms the consensus gathered from Belenky's subjects. Ella's empowerment that strengthens her comes from legitimating Mammy's life story, her community practices and their integrated history.¹⁶ Brodber and Ella thus redefine legitimate sources of historical and ethnographic knowledge. The nonlinear and multivocal narrative undermines the primacy of documentary evidence over oral history and its sources (memory).

Mammy's memory serves as a "spirit telephone" and marks Ella as not only someone who communicates knowledge but also host of a myal spirit. Replacing the recording machine, Ella's body becomes the hungry black box (Brodber 1988 37). This kinship of mutual identification opens doors of communication between Ella and Mammy King (Horton 97). As Robin Horton explains, "a host is attracted to a particular spirit because of its closeness to her own personality; being possessed is a means of harnessing the forces that already govern the host's personality" (97). Like Lowly, Ella needs Mammy's memories; she requires the food of her thoughts for sustenance—financial, intellectual and cultural. Ella realizes the power of the first day's recording only when Mammy King dies before a second interview can take place. Initially, the tape gave her a sense of failure and dis-ease:

One whole side gone, she thought, and not a thing to give to the white people. . . . This woman they say has important things

to say has important data to give; is important data . . . her story is crucial to the history of struggle of the lower class negroes that he want to write. I was chosen to do her. . . . Because of my colour, I could get her talk. Because of my colour, she treats me like a daughter to whom she gives orders. Because of my colour, I have nothing from her but orders on this reel. (21)

Relying on her academic training and trying to maintain its discipline, like “the white people,” Ella objectifies Mammy as “important data,” valuable in so much as she can provide insights into a specified moment in chronological history: “the struggle of lower class negroes.” She also positions herself within this model, noting that race makes her an appropriate observer; she is well chosen for her ability to blend into the world she is to uncover.

However, when she returns the next day to news of Mammy's death, Ella hears voices, voices she recognizes, yet “with so many years of formal schoolin, she cannot think ‘ghost’” (28). Nonetheless, Ella recognizes Mammy as a myal spirit ushering Ella into a new role as host. This shifting of positions emphasizes Carnival-Conjure's centrality in this novel's world. Erasing the fictional line between informant and researcher, the ethnographic enterprise becomes “personal and certainly unscholarastic” (22). Mammy becomes a voice in Ella's head, a myal ethnographer, using her story to encourage Ella to voice her own. Ella realizes the “mutually beneficial” connection, for Mammy gains access to the present, but more importantly Ella has a reservoir of memory, acquires an index to the past (Kortenaar 53).

This “thought transplant” prepared Ella to become Louisiana, another version of herself. As she explains: “I had broken through that membrane and was in, ready and willing to be and see something else. Transform, change, focus. Transform, change. I was a woman among women” (52). The capitalization of “Transform” alongside its small-lettered synonym highlights the nuance of meaning Carnival-Conjure exposes, for *change* suggests a completed substitution, a shift. *Transform* highlights an ongoing process, a redirected focus and desire to see and be anew: Ella's rebirth through the membrane of Carnival-Conjure. Her goal is to

redefine herself, shift locations and focus her energies through her new-found power. Through Ella's reeducation, Brodber actively criticizes the academic scripting of her own education, which forbade "disrespect of scientific procedure" (22). Ella initially reinforces the separation of spirit and flesh, invoking the ultimate scientific sign of disembodiment, ghost. However, she reflects on the experience as a bodily and spiritual regeneration and comforts herself with the reality that her "ears are hearing other frequencies" (28). Ella accepts the voices into her consciousness and her reality and reasons that "the venerable sisters had married themselves" to her and "given birth" to her.

Through her conversations with Mammy and the commentary provided by Lowly/Louise, Ella learns of the power of Carnival-Conjure in the transcribing of histories.¹⁷ When Mammy King passes on, Ella is sent to the "confidence trickster" Madame Marie's to continue her work. Madame Marie operates a refuge in New Orleans' Congo Square, for refugee West Indian men. Here again, Brodber fuses history and anthropology, for her Madame Marie is fashioned after the legendary Marie Laveau, believed to have come to New Orleans after the Haitian revolution. Madame takes Ella in, and during her time there, Ella uncovers the magic Madame wields through her ability to collect and transmit stories and songs. These stories and songs allowed the West Indian men who were Madame's clients to go "back into [their] past" to recall how they learned the song, which always conjures "a memory of a relative in the other world and provides solace in [their] times of need" (86). Thus, Ella learns of conjure's power to heal scarred spirits. Madame uses painful memories of the past to heal, and in the process she rewrites history. The lyrics become a narrative that in effect gives the men their history. Ella's association with Madame increases the community reverence and respect Ella receives, and she is able to reach beyond the limits of the closed sphere previously open to her as a woman.¹⁸

Ella's status becomes more pronounced after her possession. While observing Madame reading for a male client, Ella fell to the floor "fluttering like a decapitated fowl" (88). She feels herself as a nine-month-old child in her grandmother's arms, and speaks with a baby's voice. When she stopped talking, she finds herself able to see "stories. I saw

long deep stories, stretching back and back on stacked, ruled six by eight cards" (89). As a scholar, Ella recalls the men's lives as annotations on the academic researcher's basic tool: the index/note card. This episode marks the dialogue between Ella the academic and her emerging Carnival-Conjure woman self: her nontraditional visions/prophecies are in this way fused with her scientific method, demonstrating that the academic and Carnival-Conjure healer are simultaneous and different, the dialogue between the two captured in visions recorded on note cards. When Ella's physical body collapses, "something else is activated" and this "getting over" enacts a "hegemony of the spirit" (98). Thus, Ella rewrites Madame's conjure as Carnival-Conjure practice.

Now a text, Ella moves between being a body *with* knowledge and living as a body *of* knowledge, and she finds herself more "observable on the streets," possessing "an aura which turns heads" (99). Through Ella's possession, Brodber synthesizes conjure and carnival into Carnival-Conjure. Ella recognizes that she is a body in possession of history and possessed by it. Her "practice had defined itself with divine blessing," she says, and thereby defines herself as one empowered by "the Higher One" who instructs her as to "whose past to see and when" (106). Her seeing is not an act performed for money or profit, but a recreation of history. Ella transforms history from something to be suffered into something shaped, made, recreated, redirected, and performed—evidenced by her own writhing in reliving her infancy.

Brodber's novel manifests and works as a Carnival-Conjure body, representing the internalization of a conjurous experience. By extension, the narrative suggests that through carnivalesque rituals we gain insight into the performers. Opportunely, Ella's manuscript arrives at a time when the publishing industry is thirsty for writings by and about black women. The quest for authentic narrative yields one which constructs a subject's essence, because the framing of Ella's story suggests that both her physical body and her creative body of work are performative vehicles for the delivery of the word which can "reborn" the black diasporic community. Outside the narrative proper, Ella becomes a spirit medium, and the metafiction allows Brodber and Ella, as black women writers, to serve as conduits. Like a celestial ethnographer, Ella becomes

a subject, and is her data. At the end of the manuscript, Ella disposes of the tape-recorder. She explains that “since I named myself Louisiana the sisters have no longer conducted conversations with me via the machine” (131). Under the influences of those “psychic forces,” Ella produces the manuscript *Louisiana* and becomes Louisiana. Not only does her renaming evidence the relationship between textual and lived realities, but it underscores the Carnival-Conjure precept that history in Louisiana, USA, like the many Creole forms that encode it, becomes carnival, a stage upon which the living and the dead interact in the construction of individual, social and political herstories.

This transformation highlights the necessity for the anthropologist to listen and fuse horizons with the informant. Likewise, the reader must accept the tenets of Ella’s new practice in order to comprehend the significance of the results and to comprehend the events of the novel. Like that of the men Ella counsels, the readers’ interpretive performance relies not just on a suspension of disbelief, but on their willingness to challenge what they believe. Just as Ella’s story is to become a part of academic discourse, so too must the reader/ethnographer become a part of the informant’s life narrative.

The integration of reader/ethnographer is underscored, as I mention earlier, by Ella’s name change. Through that act, she changes her place within the academic semiotic system. Initially, Ella gets “a bath and a douche” which “the programme director felt would put her in the informant’s environment and help her formulate the right kind of questions.” (87) This external and internal cleansing foreshadows the cleansing of the mind Ella will later undergo. Later, Ella ceased hot-combing her hair, for how a black woman chooses to wear her hair indicates her cultural positionality. Brodber here emphasizes the synecdochal connection between the body and the mind—hair, the head. Being at home with one’s hair, comfortable in one’s own head, is synonymous with the re-embodiment Brodber’s novel seeks to inscribe and symbolized by the douche’s purging of impurities from the inside. Balanced, Ella becomes a conduit for the women of Louisiana. She sees her reflection in them, sees herself as an extension of them, then sees herself *as* them. Ella’s name and body take on new meanings, and Carnival-Conjure is the

system within which these signifiers play: the textual signifier *Louisiana* is simultaneously a novel, the protagonist, and a state of mind.

For example, after the sisters cease communicating with her via the tape-recorder, they make contact through a pendant Ella wears. In commemoration of her and Reuben's fifth anniversary, Ella envisions a pendant that Reuben later has a jeweler construct. The pendant and its circular form replace the black box and bridge the gap between her text and her body, her task and her self discovery:

Things have been happening to me ... ever since Mammy's death ... My pendant celebrates that peaking. Stand if you will. Let your arms hang loose in front of you. Now put the tips of your index fingers and the tips of your thumbs together. Your extremities now form a diamond. Imagine the diamond to be solid, three dimensional. Now pierce a hole through the centre of this. That hole, that passage is me. (123)

The intense corporeality of this passage signifies the emergence of Ella's new bodily existence. Just as Brodber's writing took different shape and form, framed within Carnival-Conjure, so too does Ella's body. Ella becomes, and Reuben recognizes her as, the body politic:

The link between the shores washed by the Caribbean sea, a hole, yet I am what joins your left hand to your right. I join the world of the living and the world of the spirits.... I am Louisiana. I give people their history. I serve God and the venerable sisters. (125)

Just as she becomes place/space she serves as a link, a bridge between the silent yet still lived histories and those that are recorded and recognized as valid. Her role as conduit is encoded in the sign of not only her writing physicality but her body as well.

Equally significant is the translation of her body into a bridge to wholeness. The symbolic content of the pendant is a gender-coded political message about women's access to historical knowledge and their place in collective history and its narration. The stereotypically female artifact of a pendant signifies Ella's feminine power to transfer the mate-

rial into the spiritual and heightens her performance as a celestial ethnographer. Ella envisions herself as not place or body, but space—a hole. While the hole is arguably suggestive of female sexuality, it too represents a textual gap, lack, or space for the insertion of narrative voices of connection. Ella transcends physicality and through Carnival-Conjure her body becomes disembodied, and this is her novel power. Her possession was a centering experience, and the pendant, in fact, represents Ella's re-embodiment, and it opened her ears and mind to the possibilities of her role as seer, hearer and narrator of lives and stories. Her physicality now provides the absent center of the community and the pendant itself. Ella has moved from an outsider to one who represents balance and kinship.

Louisiana's narrative structure and its voice make penetrating its discourse daunting. Because of this difficulty, though, the novel instigates an ideological revolution. The digressive structure of Mammy's story, the ethnographic data, and the novel itself force the reader, and Ella as researcher, to find its meaning.¹⁹ *Louisiana* compels the reader to recognize that the difficulty in "following" the narrative resides in the reader's desire to work against the narrative's logic. Erna Brodber's metafictional presentation crosses genres as well as forecasts the interpretive significance of Carnival-Conjure practices for literary scholars. Fiction, like anthropology and religion, provides a window into the world of its subjects. Though its "truth" is often discounted because of its creative strands, fiction is pregnant with representational possibilities. These potentialities reveal the degree to which fiction, especially women's fiction, can truly reflect the real. The body of narrative that is Ella's and Brodber's text and the resultant interpretation *Louisiana* yields is meant to transform the reader just as the protagonist is transformed. As Ella becomes an academic inspired by Carnival-Conjure, this reader recognizes the degree to which the discipline and limits of the academy can make academically valorized readerly work impossible.

Notes

- 1 In commentary, Brodber speaks specifically about her second novel *Myal*, when she suggests that religion is a central component of her fictional project. However,

- explains that her fiction evolved from her attempt to locate a methodology that allows a scientist/researcher to go beyond simply representing behaviour but be directed by the concerns of the researched (166–67).
- 2 Brodber clearly builds on Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, which examine the spiritual connections between Louisiana and her Caribbean sister state Jamaica. Hurston's anthropological representations of religious ritual laid the groundwork for Brodber's combination of fiction and anthropology. Brodber's writing also underscores the degree to which ethnography is a scientific approach to historiography.
 - 3 This is precisely the process Brodber describes in "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure."
 - 4 Here I underscore the title of the protagonist's manuscript to distinguish it from Brodber's. Indeed the double titling demonstrates my position that the manuscript represents Ella's transformation from one textual form—a physical body read and misread by her informants—to another—a written narrative of spiritual and intellectual depth.
 - 5 We learn later, though, that Ella herself is a renamed Louisiana making her disappearance performative of her translation from studier to studied; she has made herself an ethnographic artifact.
 - 6 This narrative twinning is characteristic of Brodber's writing; critics have read this as Brodber's "recovery of doubleness" in response to "colonial halving of mind and body." See Puri 100, 112. However, in my reading of the "doubleness," I do not give colonialism any metaphorical space, as the novel directs attention to the interiority of Ella's struggle within a local space that is black-centered. Thus here, the novel does not speak of reactionary developments or behaviours.
 - 7 Here, *carnival* and/or *conjure* refer to the character's represented understandings. At the novel's end, Ella seems aware that what once seemed a separated practice and a ritual no longer exist as such, but at this precise moment, she does not have that understanding. Though I argue that the novel fuses these traditions, and offer a signifier for that fusion, I feel compelled to distinguish the chronological presentation from my holistic interpretation. Carnival-Conjure represents the latter, while here I am referring to the former.
 - 8 According to the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, a *myal* is variously a "sorcerer," "formal possession by the spirit of a dead ancestor," and "the dance done under possession" (qtd. in Cooper 92). *Myalism* is a Jamaican healing tradition, involving the use of balms as well as herbs, a curative practice. Brodber's second novel, entitled *Myal*, also features a protagonist named Ella, encouraging some critics to consider the two novels companion texts (Wilentz 51). In *Myal*, though, Ella's self-recovery is not connected to reformulation of history in the same way *Louisiana's* Ella Townsend's is. Primarily, the protagonist in the earlier novel is bi-racial, and the presence of white characters in the text prescribes an historical narrative in ways that *Louisiana* does not engage.

- 9 Wilentz argues that all three of Brodber's novels demonstrate the writer's undermining Western models of science as they are related to Afri-Caribbean wellness. See 27–52.
- 10 The editor explains that appending Reuben's letter, offering it with a chapter heading and moving it into the manuscript proper, maintains "the distinctly communal nature" of the text itself. The editor's decision mirrors Ella's compulsion to integrate the stories she finds. In the stories from people in a rural Louisiana, USA community, Ella narrates her own.
- 11 Tiffin offers a similar reading of Brodber's first two novels *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and *Myal*. She focuses on the educational practice of recitation as disembodiment and erasure of Caribbean women's voice; the women are "alienated from their own bodies, women become speaking puppets of a deeply classed and gendered Anglo-imperialism" (913). She further states that the return to "folkways counteracts" these oppressive and silencing forces.
- 12 On this point, I agree with Tiffin's claim that Brodber maps the "processes of female reembodyment and the retrieval of Caribbean voices and body from its entrapment/erasure within a European script" (912). However, the colonial script is not as central a focus of *Louisiana's* critique. While it could be argued that traditional ethnography serves as a metaphor for colonialism, I resist reading Brodber as always focused on the postcoloniality of her fictional worlds. Instead, I suggest that Brodber crafts a narrative about Caribbean ways of knowing and presents a subject who lives within and develops within that world and its epistemology. As well, I contend that setting the novel in the United States shifts the focus away from colonialism and directs attention to place and the relationship between one's cultural place and one's interpretation and representation of culture (one's own and another's).
- 13 For clarity, I need to explain my use of terms here. The letters frame the text, and I refer to them according to their writers. But, when I refer to *narrative*, I am speaking of the written text *Louisiana* and all its components. Given its composition and form, and yielding to its logic, *manuscript* refers to the part of the text which presents Ella's data.
- 14 Brodber presents received knowledge, listening to others, subjective knowledge: the inner voice, subjective knowledge: the quest for self, and procedural knowledge: the voice of reason, separate and connected knowing, and constructed knowledge: integrating the voices all through Ella Townsend, yet she does not exist at the intersection of these ways of knowing. Instead, she represents their inseparability.
- 15 Brodber's communication knowledge is like Belenky's constructed however the first emphasizes more urgently oral narrative as history.
- 16 See Belenky, chapter 2.
- 17 Here, Brodber's intertextuality with Hurston's work, again, becomes obvious. In her *Mules and Men*, Hurston documents the existence of legendary New

- Orleans Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau, closely akin to Ella's teacher and counsel, Madame Marie. Through interviews with Laveau's nephew Luke Turner, Hurston learns that Marie Laveau was a Biblical prophet invested with Christ-like powers, possessing the ability to walk on water. Similarly, Madame Marie is a "woman in New Orleans," but her power is in story telling and history creating.
- 18 Indeed, when studying Jamaica, Hurston found that although women were, for the most part, socially inferior, they wielded extreme power as priestesses.
- 19 My sense of *Louisiana* is quite similar to Hortense Spillers' experience of *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* in that, any attempt to summarize "is ultimately frustrating." However, the "single threads" do not "disappear into the whole. The movement between them is the logic of the narrative" (154).

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