

Erna Brodber's Theory of Celebratory Resistance in Louisiana

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□ ABSTRACT □

This paper demonstrates how Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* introduces a genre of utopian transformation that articulates the reality of "what should have happened," hence presenting a form that discontinues dominant power relations. Brodber posits a revolutionary theory of writing that initiates discursive resistance to colonial history. Arguably, Brodber's narrative suggests a revisionary epistemology of language in order to initiate transformation and a progressive therapy of union and celebration. Such epistemology recalls the primordial black story that transcends the reality of colonization. In this context, Brodber's *Louisiana* reads George Lamming's theory of colonial limitation of language to propose a healing strategy that recovers the history of meanings unrecognized by the colonized subject. Reading celebratory resistance in *Louisiana* invokes a cultural dialogue with the Caribbean poetics of resistance and accentuates the narrative's contribution to the genre of resistance writing.

Keywords: Celebratory resistance, Black diaspora, Primordial reality, Cleansing of language

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نظرية الكاتبة ارنا برودبار حول مفهوم المقاومة ذات الطابع الإحتفالي في رواية "لويزيانا"

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□ ملخص □

يوضح هذا البحث كيف أن رواية "لويزيانا" لارنا برودبار تقدم أسلوباً للكتابة المقاومة ذا طابع تحولي طوباوي والذي يتبنى واقع "ما توجب أن يحدث"، وبالتالي أنموذجاً لوضع نهاية لعلاقات القوة السائدة. يمكن القول أن برودبار تقترض نظرية ثورية للكتابة مناهضة للتاريخ الاستعماري إذ تطرح روايتها مفهوماً يعيد تصور اللغة بوصفها وسيلة للتحويل والتغيير كما وتطرح علاجاً لها متسماً بالإحتفالية التي تتغنى باستعادة قصة الأصول الواحدة والتألف بين السود والتي تتجاوز واقع الاستعمار. وفي هذا السياق، تعد "لويزيانا" قراءة لنظرية جورج لامينغ عن التهميش الاستعماري للغة إذ تقترح إستراتيجية لتطهير وإزالة الضرر عن اللغة وذلك بإعادتها إلى أصولها التاريخية التي تم طمسها من قبل الاستعمار. إن قراءة المقاومة الإحتفالية في "لويزيانا" تبرز مساهمة هذه الرواية في إغناء آليات السرد القصصي المقاوم وإقامة حوار ثقافي مع إستراتيجية الكتابة المقاومة في الأدب الكاريبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقاومة الإحتفالية، شتات العرق الأسود، الواقع الأصلي، تطهير اللغة

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Introduction:

Erna Brodber's third narrative *Louisiana* (1994) completes her trilogy of resistance against colonial history, already initiated in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988). *Louisiana* is set in the American southern state of Louisiana during the 1930s. It portrays resistance to the ruptures of the black diaspora that refers to the scattering of the blacks away from Africa, their ancestral culture and homeland. Such diasporic situation entails cultural and spiritual disconnections induced by enslavement and colonization. Brodber's narrative suggests a spiritualist epistemology of resistance, hence an alternative theory of writing, which is directly opposed to the tragic tradition of resistance. In this respect, postcolonial critic Edward Said posits that this tragic resistance "to a certain degree work[s] to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire" (Said, 1994: 210). Said's definition is highly pertinent as it implies that these tragic resistance strategies extend the mechanism of "answering back." As history suggests, this mechanism is the norm in the initial stages of all resistance movements and the obvious imperative of the moment. Such prolonged "answering back" resistance suggests that patriarchal power is pervasive and that resistance is an offshoot of power and ends up by locking the resister into the paradigm constructed by the oppressor. Brodber belongs, instead, to a situation where certain types of resistance have been fought through and a space cleared beyond the initial moment when "answering back" is necessary. Arguably, Brodber's *Louisiana* resists the cultural abuse of the black diaspora and transcends colonial disconnections through celebratory resistance. Such strategy of resistance is based on the subversive articulation of a primordial reality defined as a pre-colonial past of spiritual and cultural union of the blacks. As *Louisiana* suggests, this primordial reality still survives despite the diasporic experience.

Louisiana is about Ella, an American anthropologist of Jamaican descent, who is sent on a mission to retrieve the history of the blacks in South West Louisiana. Being an unsympathetic researcher, Brodber's Ella arrives in Louisiana with certain ruptures and disconnections from the African American world of Mammy, her key informer. Ella orally conducts her research project using a tape recorder to report her interviews. As Ella plans to send her employers the scanty information assembled in a methodical order, Mammy and her spirit-friend Lowly/Louise correspond with Ella via the tape recorder. During her childhood, Ella has been raised as a "self-contained" person (Brodber, 1994: 39), who is in love with work and incapable of identifying herself with her Jamaican roots. Upon her arrival to Louisiana, Ella calls herself an "egg" (39). This "egg" signifies fragility and singularity as it is easy to break and discontinue its transmission of a new life. The symbol of the "egg" is reminiscent of one of the implications of the complex image of the *kumbla* that Brodber defines, in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, as the "round seamless calabash that protects you without caring" (1980: 123). In this narrative, the protagonist Nellie has severed linkage with her folk culture. She is entrapped in the *kumbla* that, in this context, belongs to the "world of book-learning and the brittle rhetoric of political slogans" (285). Likewise, Ella's *kumbla* of love for anthropology turns out to be brittle and vulnerable as it is severed from all ancestral connections: "if I fell I could break and splatter all over their faces" (Brodber, 1994: 39). Ella is the product of a discontinued past and cannot pass down her family history.

Ella retrieves the history of Louisiana with detachment and transforms the tape-recorded interviews into an abusive language based on interrogation. Ella's reports reduce Mammy into a passive storyteller whose narration merely receives interrogative questions from her interviewer. The mechanism of interrogation does not reveal the listener's

personal reactions or transformations. Such responses may include empathizing with the narrator's story, reliving his/her story and past, recognizing any unrevealed experience or any cultural connections with the reporter, or healing the traumas of the past. In *Louisiana*, the abusive use of the tape recorder exposes the absence of a call-and-response communication between Ella and Mammy. Such absence is further accentuated in Ella's explication of the recording method: "Now, see this red button. It is pushed right down to record what you say. After about an hour, it will jump up with a ping. Don't let it worry you" (Brodber, 1994: 17). Such technological description cancels any expectation of personal response from Ella, being the listener.

Ella's interrogative language is not different from the colonial documents. As mentioned before, the recorder's abusive interrogation not only isolates and monologizes Mammy's voice but also silences Ella's personal voice. This strategy of isolation is developed into a monologic, objectifying, and impassive way of registering the history of Louisiana. In this context, the interrogative recorder, being the "white people's recording machine" (Brodber, 1994: 32), becomes a trope of colonial abuse that prohibits any transcultural dialogue or mutual storytelling between Ella and her reporters. Ella even ignores the futility of her abusive oral reporting: "I would try the historical reconstruction of the life of Mrs Sue Ann Grant-King. A voice said, 'To what avail' but I ignored it" (64). As such, Ella's recorder calls off any cultural communion between the African American and Caribbean voices.

Methodology:

The proposition of colonial and abusive language in *Louisiana* invites examining the narrative's intertextual evocation of George Lamming's theory of linguistic damage. In *Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming defines language as a reservoir or a "history of meanings" (1984: 156) that maps out the genealogy of being and the definition of the future. Thus, the possession of language endows all individuals with the power of seeing themselves, of reconstructing their past and identities, and of knowing the others. Lamming explicates how language has suffered deformation and limitation through colonialism. For the effect of securing power, Prospero/the colonial agent deprives Caliban/the colonized from the habit of seeing himself and of understanding his existence. The word is the tool that Prospero has tried in order to ultimately separate Caliban from the reservoir of meanings and "the original ground where the colonizer found him" (157). Such separation limits Caliban to one tradition of seeing, which is the colonial condition that becomes "the normal way of seeing" (157). Such reading of Lamming's theory suggests that the "abuse of language" (Forbes, 2002: 13), as a colonial reality, is shaped by hidden facts and silences that impose certain distorted identities on the colonized subject.

Revisiting Lamming's theory in Brodber's *Louisiana* translates Ella's distorted identity as a re-imagination of Caliban's experience of separation from his history of meanings. Ella's birth is surrounded by all circumstances of exile and fragmentation. Only her mother feels her presence while the father is away. Ella even acquires the language of disconnection. The song "Green turtle sitting by a hole in the wall," which she hears in her childhood, suggests invisibility and loneliness. As Ella's grandmother remarks, it is a sad song that isolates the child: "That singing voice connected to nothing. It worried me [. . .] this child would think she was nothing but water or air and let that stream—and we wasn't short of them—pull her to its innards" (Brodber, 1994: 111). Such ontological and linguistic fragmentation develops into Ella's cultural estrangement from the African community, translated in her diasporic ruptures.

Brodber's narrative can be read as an intervention into the colonial historical records. Such narratological intervention attempts to produce and impart what Said has referred to as "new objects for a new kind of knowledge" (1985: 91) that requires a "rewriting of the historical record and the present agenda" (Harlow, 1987: 116). Narration in *Louisiana* celebrates wholeness as suggested in the prologue that becomes an "automatic" transcription of the "textual community of black women that negotiate their relationship to language and power discourses" (Gertzou, 2011: 1). Such discursive community is created in the conversations between Ella and the sisters-in-spirit after Mammy's death. These conversations communicate harmony and union that represent the new knowledge beyond the current abuses or mutilations. Ella keeps repeating the refrain of Lowly's folk song "Ah who sey Sammy dead," celebrating salvation beyond death. So, the prologue becomes a séance that affirms wholeness beyond the limitations of slavery and disconnection. The narrative structure further develops this intervention into a series of therapeutic rituals. This series includes chapter headings such as "I heard the voice from heaven say: first the goat must be killed, out of Eden, I got over, Louisiana, and Ah who sey Sammy dead" (Brodber, 1994: 5). The order of these titles communicates a message that revives a repressed ancestral past of union. This revival rewrites the present agenda of mutilations and defines the stages of healing. So, these headings observe African, Caribbean, and African-American folklore (including songs, dances, and rituals) that embraces resistance and the movement towards oneness and unity through the rituals of celebration and revival.

Louisiana proposes a revisionary epistemology of language that initiates transformation and discursive resistance to colonial history. By exploiting language as an "agent and effect of alienation" (Edwards, 2002: 62), colonialism has generated linguistic failure translated in the colonized's inability to assert subjectivity in the language of the colonizer. However, Brodber's Ella, as a colonial subject, resists such failure using a strategy that recalls Caliban's opposition defined by Lamming as ironic. As *Pleasures* suggests, though Prospero has imposed a "deformed" language on Caliban, he has unintentionally acquainted him with the "awareness of possibilities" by providing him "speech and concept as a way, a method, a necessary avenue towards areas of the self which could not be reached in any other way" (Lamming, 1984: 109). Brodber translates such awareness in her theory of "cleansing language." Brodber's definition of this "cleansing" indicates returning language to its unconscious and aboriginal reservoir that Prospero does not recognize. In *Louisiana*, Ella must embark on the difficult task of healing the abuse of language and imposing her own identity on Prospero's language by "christen[ing] Language afresh" (Lamming, 1984: 119). In other words, Ella has to redefine herself, her personal and cultural history. Such "christen[ing]" enunciates the need for Ella to reconcile herself to the historical gaps and silences that the colonizer has created. Such reconciliation implies severing the continuity of the colonial history that has shaped Ella's personal history and rediscovering the possibilities of changing the future.

Louisiana stages Ella's liberatory ritual of revisiting the past through the church ceremony. Ella's collapse in the church enunciates her entrance into the stage of the unconscious that prepares for revisiting the flux of unformulated language that prepares for a new linguistic formulation. Such contact with the reservoir of language will enable Ella to grasp the terminology of cultural connection and reformulate her previous language of rupture and isolation. For Ella, the realization of a new language demands embracing a new reality that transcends dislocation and isolation. Ella's rebirth substitutes her childhood's linguistic absences with the codes of cultural continuity. For instance, Lowly's song "Ah who sey Sammy dead," which implies spiritual continuity and catalyses Ella's

rebirth, replaces her childhood song "Green turtle sitting by a hole in the wall" that has marked her invisibility. The substitution of songs complicates Ella's language of fragmentation and separation to initiate her journey into the unconscious of language and the "mythic past" (Wilson-Tagoe, 1998: 89) that liberate her from the confines of a distorted narrative of history. Ella performs what Lamming calls the "drama of returning" (1966: 64) and reaches a world where all tropes of her falsified history are removed. Such a world is the collective blackspace that Brodber reconstructs in order to re-celebrate meeting across the black diaspora. Such trans-cultural blackspace embraces African-American and Caribbean traditions to fill the cultural vacuum created by enslavement and colonization (Brodber, 1997: 70-81). Thus, *Louisiana* revises colonial history by disrupting the diasporic feelings of dislocation caused by the shared experience of colonialism in order to relocate the primordial blackspace.

Objectives:

Louisiana presents a narrative about spiritual union and cultural healing that enunciate the first step in recapturing the primordial black story that preceded the abuse of colonization. Such therapy is to be conducted by Mammy, the ancestor who does not accept or internalize the enforced reality of disconnection; rather, she recaptures the ruptured African and Caribbean connection. Mammy embraces the ritual of spirit possession, "which is the ecstatic moment of displacement central to the religious practices of Africans in the diaspora, [and] literally embodies the transmission of cultural values across the Middle Passage" (Cooper, 1992: 64). Mammy is the creative repository of spiritual and cultural wisdom and another "Sammy" whose spirit will live and correspond with Ella. The reconstruction of Ella's history and childhood is a prerequisite for telling a black diasporic story that involves both the narrator and the listener. Thus, Ella has to be reborn again in order to relive her past, recognize her cultural roots, heal her social disruptions, and participate in Mammy's story. In this context, both Mammy and Lowly refer to the shared intimacy with the "child" that Ella has to nourish for she has "bits" of both of them (Brodber, 1994: 17). In spiritual terms, Ella has to be reborn as a child and carry the womb of the black diaspora to induce continuity. The death of Mammy leads to depositing her spirit with Ella (38). And Ella announces her spiritual marriage: "I was no longer just me. I was theirs. The venerable sisters had married themselves to me—given birth to me,— they would say" (33). This marriage becomes an oral ceremony for it represents a union of the women's voices, whether dead, alive, or recorded.

The instigation of this marriage is rooted in both a cultural and spiritual ceremony. Ella's attraction to the oral culture of Louisiana recalls such spiritual union. Lowly's song "Ah who sey Sammy dead" announces Ella's transformation. This folk song is a ritualized re-memory that celebrates the spirit as a creative person that lives after the body dies. Lowly's song develops into a spiritual rite—that is of the church. What happens to Ella in the church ceremony echoes the return into the early stage of childhood: "Reuben says I kicked, fought, foamed, stared, had to be taken from the church and given water" (35). Lowly's song also initiates the entrance of Ella's "other self" into Mammy and Lowly's space (33). So, Ella's other and un-lived childhood of cultural celebration unites with Mammy's spirit that enters Ella's body, producing a new and rich childhood. Thus, Brodber uses the context of sexual conception and marriage to transcend it into spiritual impregnation and cultural union that incorporates Ella, Mammy, and Lowly.

The spiritual marriage between Ella and the African American venerable sisters prompts a gradual change from fragmentation into wholeness. After Mammy's death, Ella

begins to feel her transformation: “I could feel the change. There was that morning and after, no doubt in my mind that I had heard things that nobody had said to me and that I had said what I could not have said but what I was to hear myself say thereafter so often when they were about to make contact with me” (Brodber, 1994: 32-33). After her rebirth that celebrates cultural connections, Ella has to nourish herself from the sisters’ rich cultural experience. The two sisters-in-spirit become new mothers for Ella. Gradually, Ella receives the sisters’ cultural nourishment and becomes the womb that carries inside the new word, as she remarks: “I had been officially entered. I was going to be, if I was not already, a vessel, a horse, a somebody’s talking drum” (46). Ella now owns the internal womb, which is full of cultural sensitivity that enables her to see and to help. The journey of passing and maturity initiates Ella’s change from a passive child into an active woman through the vision of seeing that enables her to live her and others’ stories, as she announces: “I had broken through that membrane and was in, ready and willing to be and see something else. Transform, change [. . .] I was a woman among women” (52).

The new relation between Ella and the sisters is evident in the change of Ella’s relation to the tape recorder. The recording machine becomes the empirical chord and the external womb that nourish Ella. The sisters-in-spirit begin to feed cultural impulses into the recorder, to be later transcribed by Ella. At the same time, Ella’s relation to the recorder becomes a mother-daughter relationship in which the mother (Ella) protects and the daughter (recorder) gives the mother a sense of continuity. Ella even communicates motherly concern and care about the recorder: “Without planning it, we were demystifying the poor old thing. It was this process that finally led me to opening the recording machine gently and reverently as if I was cleaning my baby daughter’s private region” (50). So, the recording machine changes from a transmitter of data and voices into an external womb through which stories proliferate. The recorder/ external womb becomes Ella’s new *kumbla*, which is shaped by an “act of [spiritual] creativity” (Cooper, 1980: 284). Ella becomes the “vegetarian seer” (Brodber, 1994: 102) who helps people, such as Ben, to excavate their past and find their connections. Ella’s cultural reservoir enables her to gradually desert the external womb/ the tape recorder in the end (131).

Ella’s fresh acquisition of spiritual power and cultural wholeness is translated into her transcendence of physicality. Such transcendence is evident in the change of her physical appearance. Before her union with the sisters-in-spirit, Ella was obsessed with the correctness of her looks, by pressing her hair and wearing slacks (Brodber, 1994: 26-27). However, after the spiritual union, Ella’s appearance becomes more spiritualized:

Other changes have been taking place. They are relatively small things. My hair for instance, I no longer press. I don’t know if this represents spiritual or intellectual movement or just plain convenience but there it is: my hair is natural and untouched [. . .] With my headdress and my long dress, I know I present a dignity rather like hers and an aura which turns heads. (98-9)

Ella becomes the new healing mother whose body transcends its corporeal quality and longs towards a more “abstracted, or disembodied, notion of the female body” (Narain, 1999: 114). The fact that Ella becomes the spiritual healing mother explains why she is biologically childless. She becomes an “asexual vehicle” (Narain, 1998: 270) but a generator of the black diasporic stories that reconnect the African American, Caribbean, and African heritages. Ella’s childlessness emphasizes the narrative’s transcendence of physical entities and its celebration of spiritual inspirations embodied in stories. Ella continues what Mammy and Lowly have started and becomes the new Louisiana. She becomes an essential link in the black diasporic community, as she announces:

I am 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 word of the spirits [. . .] I am Louisiana. I wear a solid pendant with a hole through its centre. I look through this hole and I can see things [. . .] I am Louisiana. I give people their history. I serve God and the venerable sisters. (Brodber, 1994: 124-5)

Such link celebrates the oneness and resilience of the black diaspora as it possesses the spiritual "common chord" (130) that "crossed the seas and earth and heaven and held the hope of a more productive bonding and subsequent action" (62). Healing her past disconnections, Ella is now entitled to reconnect with the ancestry of storytellers and to become a Moses of narration: "I do not doubt you Mammy, nor any of the things you said, and for me, even if what you relate did not happen to you, it happened to someone's granny, someone's mother [. . .] I know why myself was chosen to write the story you dictate. I have been there too. Chimboraza, Cotapaxi took me by the hand" (139). Thus, the black community earns the capacity of "handing down family histories" (108), as every member is now able to recollect stories from the black diaspora.

Brodber's paradigm of celebratory resistance also encompasses the transgression of gender boundaries in creating the primordial black story. Brodber does not join the essentialist feminists who insist on constructing binary oppositions that assert the biological difference between the male and the female. Instead, she deconstructs gender "binarisms" (Narain, 1999: 97) without becoming entrapped in these culturally constructed categories through establishing new hierarchies of female empowerment and male frailty. Brodber even believes that black males play a major and equal role with females in constructing and passing stories of war, slavery, and the middle passage (Brodber, 1994: 117-8). As such, Brodber's deconstructive strategy proposes exploring whether *Louisiana* presents a "reconciliatory gender discourse" (Forbes, 2007: 15). Such discourse can be constructed through a strategy of inclusiveness that transforms both the female and male characters into "intermediary figures" (Narain, 1999: 111), who contribute to the narration of a black story.

In *Louisiana*, the significant participation of the male figure in narrating the black diasporic story emphasizes the narrative's ethic of transcending gender differences. Ella's vision of oneness in the black diaspora is not complete without the male mediators who cherish stories from America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Throughout the narrative, the West Indian men become mediators who help women recognize their past, find their voices, and reconcile with their families. For instance, Ben, whose past sufferings tie him with Ella, is one of the "cooperative" (Brodber, 1994: 103) male figures who help Ella find her place in Jamaica: "I understand from Louise and Ben that I am from a place not too far from their Louisiana" (123). Also, through his wanderings Ben helps Ella track the movement of her parents and keep connections with her people in Jamaica, like Mass Bobby (124). Silas King, Mammy's husband, is another male character who participates in Ella's conversations with the venerable sisters. His readings about "the mind, telepathy and that whole area of mind control, of outer body experiences" (154) teach Ella that the established relation in the Chicago kitchen is duplicated all over the place (154). Reuben, Ella's husband, becomes a significant collaborator in telling Ella's and Mammy's stories when he is transformed into Ella's "scribe" (143) and starts to recognize Mammy's voices in Ella's silent conversations. Moreover, the West Indian men's exchange of songs from Barbados, Virginia, and West Africa emphasizes the "common chord" (130) that nourishes the black diasporic community. Mrs. Forbes's remark to Ella reinforces the West Indian men's significance: "she wouldn't do it for us. It took some West Indian men to get her

over” (97). So, though Brodber uses the female body to reach her theory of telling a story, she does not deny the significance of the male figure in the process. Brodber reuses gender “polarities” and embraces a “principle of plurality” (O’ Callaghan, 1993: 66) which includes both men and women in her cultural project.

Conclusion:

Reading the celebratory ethics of spiritual union and cultural healing in Brodber’s *Louisiana* foregrounds the narrative’s contribution to the genre of resistance writing. In this respect, *Louisiana* invokes a cultural dialogue with the politics and aesthetics of resistance posited by major Caribbean writers, such as Wilson Harris, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Kamau Edward Brathwaite. For instance, Brodber’s historiography has resonance with Harris’s mythpoetics in *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960), defined as healing cultural disconnections. Like Harris’s, Brodber’s narrative calls for asserting cultural oneness and rewriting a history which is not shaped by silence that suppresses the voice of the other. Both Brodber and Harris initiate similar cross-cultural approaches by deconstructing and rejecting the binary oppositions that justify marginalization. Also, Brodber’s *Louisiana* evokes Marquez’s search for the primordial language to grasp the pre-colonial Latin American reality that preceded colonialism in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Brodber’s cultural task is consistent with Brathwaite’s call, in *Rights of Passage* (1967), for the evolution of Afro-Caribbean culture and the rediscovery of what had been suppressed in the African and Caribbean past as an outcome of imperialism.

Defining celebratory resistance in Brodber’s *Louisiana* envisions a further call for investigating the trans-cultural translation of this concept. A promising research could explore how Brodber re-imagines the heritage of Third World resistance literature. A possible reading is a comparative study of Brodber’s *Louisiana* and “The Path of Affection” by Palestinian poet Layla Allush. Returning to Haifa after twenty years of migration, Allush weaves a poem that seeks the perdurance of an “essential eternity” (Harlow, 1987: 84) in constructing the history of Haifa. Allush’s discovery of eternity is translated by Brodber as a subversive celebration of primordial reality and language. As such, reading resistance in Allush’s and Brodber’s works is crucial as it presents the cultural variations of discontinuing colonial disruption through celebration.

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