

Traditional Folklore and the Question of History in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*

by

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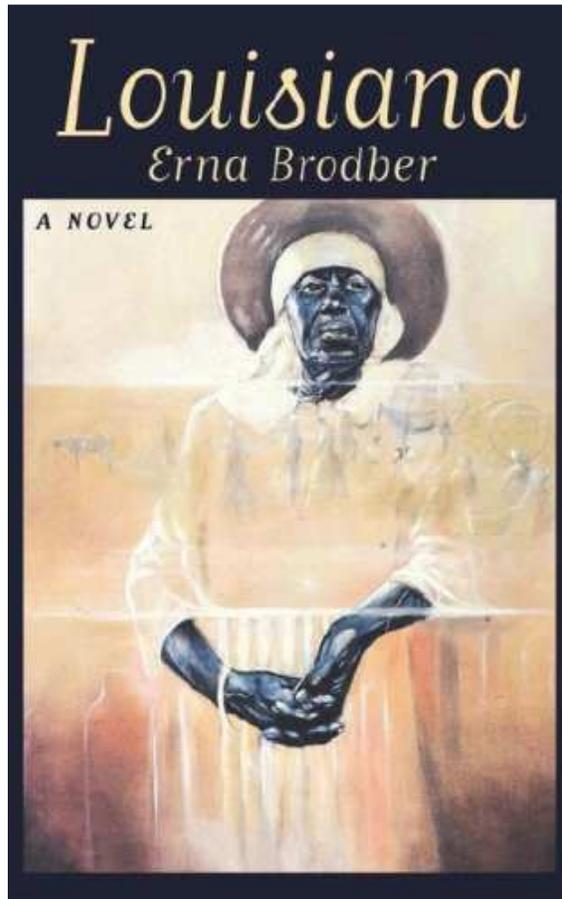
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Abstract

Born on April 20, 1940 in Louisiana (Jamaica), Erna Brodber grew up in a family who took an active part in the community affairs of their small town. Before focusing on writing, Erna Brodber held different positions such as teacher, sociology lecturer and staff member of the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), located on the Mona Campus. While at the ISER, she worked to collect elders' oral stories in rural Jamaica, which partly inspired her third novel entitled *Louisiana*. The book explores the various facets of the Caribbean and African-American experiences. It not only pays a tribute to the folk life and the Afro-Caribbean cults of Voodoo, Obeah and Myal, but it also tackles the question of history, including the themes of displacement and of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African ideology. Thus, this paper is aimed at studying these particular points.

Key words

Dialect; Displacement; Folklore; Garveyism; History; Voodoo.



Introduction

Born on April 20, 1940 in Louisiana, a small town located in the parish of St Mary in Jamaica, Erna Brodber grew up in a family who took an active part in the community affairs of their small town. As a brilliant scholar, she gained a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Science and a Ph.D. from the University of the West Indies (UWI), located in Mona, Jamaica. Before focusing on writing, Erna Brodber held different positions such as teacher, sociology lecturer and staff member of the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER). While at the ISER, she worked to collect elders' oral stories in rural Jamaica, which partly inspired her third novel entitled *Louisiana*¹.

Like Brodber's previous works, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come*² and *Myal*³, *Louisiana* explores the various facets of the Caribbean and African-American experiences.

In the 1930s, the protagonist of the novel, Ella Townsend, a graduate African-American student of anthropology whose roots are Jamaican, is sent to the American state of Louisiana by President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) program to research Louisiana folk life through a series of interviews.

Thus, she intends to tape record the memories and cultural habits of African-American elders. But, her primary informant, an old matriarch named Mammy King, dies only two weeks after the beginning of the project. However, from the hereafter, Mammy King still continues to convey messages via the tape recorder, seeing the student as the medium that would enable her to be released from her life. At first, the academically minded Ella Townsend finds it hard to believe in this mystical connection of the living and the dead. But as time elapses, she gradually changes her mind, discovering enriching mysteries about the past lives of Mammy and of her dead Jamaican friend Lowly, including stories of migrations between people coming from the African Diaspora as well as political anecdotes dealing with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). From this supernatural experience, Ella Townsend also learns a lot about herself and her own history.

Thus, *Louisiana* not only pays a tribute to the folk life and the Afro-Caribbean cults of Voodoo, Obeah (witchcraft) and Myal (an Afro-Caribbean religion in which music, nature and the mystical connection of the living and the dead play a significant role), but it also tackles the question of history, including the themes of displacement and of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African ideology. Brodber positions her fiction on cultural, anthropological and historical parallels. Indeed, like most of her counterparts, the Caribbean writer has recourse to what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction."⁴

This paper is aimed at studying these particular points, namely traditional folklore and the question of history in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*.

Traditional Folklore

Like a number of Caribbean writers, Erna Brodber draws her inspiration from the rural black folklore when writing her novels. In *Louisiana*, like in her two previous works, Brodber examines numerous aspects of the Caribbean and African-American folk life, among which the oral tradition, the rural southern black dialect, Jamaican Patois, the world of mysticism, Voodoo and traditional folk music.

From the very beginning of the novel, in the *Editor's Note*, the Jamaican author puts forward the notion of orality, stating that Ella Townsend "was to retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana using oral sources."⁵ Indeed, as an anthropologist, Ella Townsend is sent to Louisiana to collect oral stories from elders⁶. Before going any further, it is important to mention that two main reasons enable us to understand this notion of orality within the African Diaspora. It is both a historical and social phenomenon. First of all, in African societies, oral tradition has been the primary means of conveying culture – history, stories, folktales and religious beliefs – for thousands of years. No people value oral tradition more than Africans and nobody is more valued within an African tribal group than the griot, the storyteller also known as the "living archives." Then, at the time of slavery, as the law forbade anyone to teach the slaves how to read and write – it goes to the notion that knowledge is power –, oral tradition enabled the black cultures to survive.

Consequently, Erna Brodber being of Jamaican origin and the plot of *Louisiana* taking place in a rural African-American community, the orality issue not surprisingly plays an important part throughout the novel. It is important to underline that the human voice is the key element in oral tradition; it is the medium through which stories and knowledge are passed on from generation to generation. It must be the reason why the tape recorder and voices – both the living and the dead’s ones – are at the centre of Brodber’s novel as the following excerpt indicates:

The recording machine goes ‘ping’ and the girl is Hamlet again; whether ‘tis nobler to turn the tape over and to go on or just throw the towel in.

–One whole side gone–, she thought, –and not a thing to give to the white people. How would it look? This woman they say has important data to give; is important data; she has seen things; had done things; her story is crucial to the history of the struggle of the lower class Negro that they want to write. I was chosen to do her. It was an honour. Because of my colour, I could get her to 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. What can I tell them? How is this going to look? – Without further ado, she bends over, manoeuvres her black box into its case, puts her arm through the strap, and it on her shoulder, takes her bag from the shoulder of the chair that she sat on, put that too on her shoulder, slaps her anger in neutral, for anger it is, and quietly says:

–Venerable Sister. This is a bread and butter matter. My name and my job are at stake– and makes to step off with that, disrespectful of scientific procedure, of closing the interview neatly and leaving a lead for the day thereafter, thinking it is more prudent to admit failure to them than to have them discover it. A null lead is still a lead and Anna you are seizing it.⁷

Another point which must be emphasized is that the graduate student from Columbia University, Ella Townsend, bridges the gap between the oral and the literate worlds. Indeed, thanks to her ability to write and to put the oral language to paper, she materializes the dead’s voices through printing. To conclude with this notion of orality, it is to be noted that through her black scholar character sent by Whites to collect folktales from the South, Erna Brodber not only questions the way Whites tell black stories, but also the way Blacks tell their own stories.

An important aspect in the black oral tradition is dialect. And when collecting folk stories, it is essential to keep this dialect intact as the character of Madam Marie does in the novel:

One of the things Madam took in and let off was stories. The port of New Orleans is a very active one. There are ships and sailors from every conceivable part of the world. Madam was acutely interested in those who looked most like us. The banana boats from the West Indies had a fair share of such sailors. These made up the bulk of Madam’s clientele. She took from them their tales and quickly passed them on. [...]; “Cook mek mi see”. Madam told her tales in the speech and the accent of the teller.⁸

Contrary to Madam Marie who maintains the dialect when telling folk stories, Ella Townsend does not totally preserve the dialectical form when relating the folk stories she heard, at least at the beginning of the novel. Indeed, at the start of *Louisiana*, most of Mammy’s words are told in sort of informal English, instead of being told in pure dialect, as the following excerpt shows:

What you studying at child?– Anna takes up that card. [...]
 –Oh Mammy, what am I studying? Anthropology, Mammy. [...]
 –Where do you come from child?– Anna trips in, distracting the girl. –You really do talk in two different ways. Can’t figure it.–
 –From New York, Mammy.–
 –New York don’t talk so. Where before that?–
 –Nowhere really Mammy.–
 –‘Really’. Meaning what?–
 –My Parents. They are from the islands.–
 –Huh. Lots of them little bitty islands down there. And yours got no name.–
 –Jamaica. Mammy.–
 –Yes. That is right. And that’s why you sounding so very much like her. Both of them girl?–
 –Yes Mammy⁹

But, as the novel progresses, Ella Townsend’s stories gradually tend to remain in the form in which they were told with the dialect and West Indian Patois. The two following passages illustrate the latter point:

My Grandpappy was a thinking man but he ain’t know no word called ‘slave’. He be thinking though and Massa Sutton he always be raising questions with him: “Moses” Massa Sutton he like to say. “Wish I was you. Nothing to worry you. You gets your clothes, you gets your food, you gets your house, you gets your children. Massa Sutton, he pay. Me, I gotta be wracking my brain; gotta be ever asking myself where to get cheaper money, where to get that better price; this here shipper, he be fair? It is a hard life Moses.”¹⁰

and,

Coy me menero
 Kill Tukero
 Coy mi nearo
 Coy me
 Prim strim stamma diddle
 Lara bone a ring
 Ting a rignum
 Bulli dina coy me.¹¹

Actually, this evolution must be due to the fact that *Louisiana* is not only Ella Townsend’s search for Louisiana folk life, but it is also a search for herself and her own background. As the novel moves on, she learns much about her own history and Jamaican origin, and she therefore becomes more aware of black dialects. Moreover, it is not a coincidence if the title of the last chapter, “Den ah who seh Sammy dead,”¹² is written in Jamaican Patois contrary to the former ones which are written in Standard English. The fact that dialect is not an integral part of the novel may also be due to the fact that both Erna Brodber and Ella Townsend are scholars who accordingly may use more naturally Standard English than dialects.

As mentioned on the back cover: “*Louisiana* celebrates the magico-religious culture of hoodoo, conjure, [voodoo], obeah and myal.”¹³ This mystical world is another folk element largely developed by the Caribbean author. As a matter of fact, the religious cultures of Voodoo, Obeah and Myal come from the African continent and appeared in the Caribbean – especially in Haiti, Jamaica and the French Caribbean territories such as Martinique and Guadeloupe – through the slave trade which took place from the beginning of the 16th century to the mid 19th century.

Similarly, the presence of these mystical cultures in New Orleans and Louisiana is mainly rooted in the importation of slaves from Haiti and Martinique to this American state in the 18th and 19th century. Thus, it is not surprising that most of black writers from the Caribbean and the South of the USA explore this traditional folk theme in their novels.

In *Louisiana*, Erna Brodber highlights two opposing worlds: the rational world of Whites – especially white scholars from big towns such as New York – and the mystical world of Blacks – particularly Blacks from the rural part of South Louisiana and the Caribbean. Indeed, the novel is full of criticisms regarding the so-called educated world of Whites. It starts when Mammy asks Ella: “They ain’t teach you nothing at school little green chile?”¹⁴ Then, it goes on with the following passage:

The child knows they are not her words for they are nowhere in her head but she is quite sure that she has heard them and that your lips haven’t moved. With so many years of formal schooling, she cannot think ‘ghost’. Ventriloquist, she thinks. “Can the old flirt”, that’s you Anna, “have this too in her past?” Anna when will you stop teasing! At death’s door as in life?

–Them teachers did teach you nothing ‘bout living; they teach this one nothing ‘bout dying or passing the lifeline. Ain’t know what she did.– She knows that she heard that. Not just thought she heard that.¹⁵

And the following excerpt is another example showing the opposition of white rationality vs. black mysticism:

What are the qualifiers suitable for what I would admit? – ‘Unconscious involvement?’ ‘Subconscious involvement?’. Nothing I had read had prepared me for the notion of thought transplant or whatever name we give to it. Thank God for Reuben. But for him I might have handed myself over to a psychiatrist. It was he who pointed out to me that I hadn’t heard any more voices than he had; that the voices on the reel were there for all to hear and verify; that the only singular experience I had had was of saying things of which I feel I have no Knowledge and that I should wait and watch before committing myself to a path that could label me mad or at best odd. I let myself comforted by that momentarily. This was a position he held even after he had heard all.¹⁶

Thus, the educated Ella is confronted with powerful paranormal phenomena which she had never faced before. She also clearly witnesses African animism during Madam Marie’s Voodoo sessions. By tackling the African notion that death brings an end only to the body, not to the spirit, Brodber develops the idea that the current of Western thought, especially the scientists’ one, is not necessarily the right one. In other words, a person is not automatically insane if she or he hears voices. The West simply holds one perspective out of many.

Finally, traditional folk and spiritual songs play a significant role throughout the novel. Indeed, from the very beginning of it, there is a reference to singing:

Anna do you remember? Can you still hear me singing it?

It is the voice I hear
the gentle voice I hear
that calls me home?¹⁷

Then, Mammy compares music from Jamaica with music from Louisiana and starts singing:

They have brass bands but not as good as ours; they have mento, flat-footed shuffle like ours; they have pukkumina, that's what they call getting the power; [...]. You have green turtles too.– And Anna, my poor Anna, burst into song.

Green turtle sitting by a hole in the wall
hole in the wall, hole in the wall
Green turtle sitting by a hole in the wall
looking at the deep blue sea.¹⁸

One must know that mento is a traditional Jamaican folk musical genre, also called Jamaican calypso, which was rather popular in Jamaica from the early 1900s to the late 1950s. As for pukkumina (also called pocomania), it is a type of religious musical genre in which the drum plays a great part. Throughout the rest of the novel, there are plenty other references to folk songs such as when West Indian sailors turn up at Madam Marie's:

A specially interesting crew turned up at Madam's – West Indians people from Jamaica mostly. Seems they were regulars. They loved to sing, so did Madam. Folksongs they called it. Sometimes it was Irish, English, Scottish melodies. [...]. They had fun. They were not at all like their compatriots around whom I grew up. Madam would intercept with whatever their song brought to mind, "In the sky the brought stars glittered/ On the bank the pale moon shun/ And t'was from Aunt Dinah's quilting party/ I was seeing Nellie home", in her squeaky little quick asthmatic voice. Much clapping would follow and "Teach me that Madam" if they really liked the song. [...] There were times when there was a great dispute. "But Madam that's our song" or "Fellows where'd you hear that. That's ours" and the battle royal went back and forth with Madam telling how far in her distant past she had heard it and it couldn't possibly be West Indian, "Who carried it to you?", and they would counter in a similar vein.¹⁹

Actually, in *Louisiana*, besides entertaining, the role of the folk and spiritual songs of the West Indian sailors, banana boatmen and farm workers who regularly move between the West Indies – especially Jamaica – and New Orleans is to keep the cultural connections between the West Indies and the USA strong. Thus, Brodber's novel is not only a fiction dealing with the relations between the communities from the West Indies and South Louisiana in the 1930s. It also emphasizes the cultural and sociological similarities between the West Indians and Black Americans, and to some extent, it emphasizes the common history of these people.

The Question of History

Like many Caribbean writers, Erna Brodber uses fiction as a way of interrogating the past, which is called, as mentioned in the introduction, "historiographic metafiction." Thus, her novel is "self-reflexive [...] and lay[s] claim to historical events and personages."²⁰ In other words, her fiction is grounded in historical facts. Historiographic metafiction has been often used in black literature, especially in African, African-American and Caribbean literature to fill in the "holes" in a history from which Blacks were largely excluded. Among the numerous historical facts raised in *Louisiana*, there are two major themes: the theme of displacement and Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism.

Before moving on to the theme of displacement, it should be stressed that this is a topic that Caribbean writers have extensively used, constituting the basic rhythm of life in the West Indies for centuries. In the case of Jamaica, for instance, African slaves were forcibly brought to the island by slave traders from the early 16th century to the first part of the 19th century. Eventually, once slavery was abolished, many Jamaicans were transported by white settlers or fled by themselves to the USA, Cuba and South America, among other places, to work as temporary labourers. Meanwhile, white planters called on a new workforce coming from India, China, Europe and the neighbouring Caribbean islands. Then, from the early 20th century up to now, Jamaicans have kept migrating to the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom so as to find a better life. So, it is not a coincidence if Erna Brodber refers to this theme throughout her novel.

To begin with, Ella was born in Jamaica and raised by her grandmother because her parents migrated to America, after her birth, in order to pursue the American dream. After her grandmother's death, her parents took her to the USA. In other respects, Mammy, Ella's primary informant, fled the South to Chicago because of her political activities. In Chicago, she became a domestic and married Silas, a Pan-Africanist and shrewd political analyst who worked from port to port – he had lived in Cuba among numerous places. There, she also met Lowly, a young Jamaican woman who also worked as a maid. Mammy eventually returned to Louisiana because of politics again while Lowly, who had become a nurse, returned to Jamaica to set up a UNIA branch. Lowly died soon after returning to her native island. Madam Marie, another *Louisiana's* key character, also comes from the West Indies, probably Haiti. As for Ruben, Ella's lover, he was born in the Belgian Congo the year his country was annexed by King Leopold II of Belgium. Thus, the story of *Louisiana* is a story of longstanding and interlocking migrations between people belonging to the African Diaspora, especially the West Indies, and Ella is at the crossroads of this story. Indeed, she soothes these numerous displaced souls, such as Mammy and Lowly's, as well as people, such as Benjamin Johnson called Ben, a wandering musician who comes from her own hometown.

Pan-Africanism is also a central issue in the novel, Mammy (Sue Ann Grant-King), Lowly (Louise Grant) and Silas (Silas King) being all Garveyites as the following excerpt shows:

Mammy appears to have been apolitical in Chicago until she met and was courted by Silas King. King had travelled widely and been one of the preening contingents of black Chicagoans who had distinguished themselves in the First World War. He was trying to become an optometrist. In Chicago she also met Louise Grant who was a young Jamaican orphan, fairly well educated in the literary arts and domestic science for a woman of her class, colour and times. They worked as kitchen staff in a guest house. Silas King was a boarder. He undertook the political socialisation of the young orphan. Mammy eventually joined their efforts at education and in the process upgraded her literary skills. Here she seemed also to have developed her gift for second sight. These three devoted themselves to informing themselves about happenings in the black world and to developing strategies for changing this world. Their discovery of the man who was to make such an impact on the minds of black folks, Marcus Garvey, brought them a clearer focus. His UNIA gave them a framework within which to do concrete work.²¹

It must be stressed that Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940) was the founder of the UNIA, founder the Black Star Line and pioneer of the back-to-Africa movement. In other respects, it is also important to mention that, like Silas, Garvey travelled a lot, especially to South America, the USA and the UK, to build up his mind and to spread his Pan-African ideas. His long-term main goal was the transportation of Black Americans, Jamaicans and others to their African homeland: Africa. Consequently, in her novel, Erna Brodber puts together successive waves of African-American and West Indian migrations, stressing the importance of Marcus Garvey's ideology as a unifier of the African Diaspora since the early 20th century onwards. Moreover, "Den ah who say Sammy dead" is a paradigm for immortalising Garveyism.

Conclusion

In *Louisiana*, Erna Brodber shows how African folk elements such as the oral tradition, languages, mysticism, music and social life are kept alive in the African Diaspora. By drawing this Afro-American and Caribbean lifestyles, she opposes two worlds: the Western world with its rational current of thought and the Afro-American-Caribbean world with its hint of mysticism and its own history in which Marcus Garvey, symbol of the African unity, has played a great part. Moreover, it is important to mention that the climax of the plot is the moment when Ella Townsend discovered that Mammy, Lowly and Silas are all Garvey followers. From then on, she started bearing the name Louisiana, a mixture of Louise (Lowly) and Anna (Mammy), symbolizing the common history of African-Americans and Jamaicans, and to a greater extent, the unity of the African Diaspora. Thus, Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* can also be read as an attempt to reduce the cultural stranglehold which the West holds on both history and culture.

Notes

- ¹ Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (1994; London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1997).
- ² Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come* (London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1980).
- ³ Erna Brodber, *Myal* (London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1988).
- ⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 5.
- ⁵ Brodber, *Louisiana* 3.
- ⁶ One must note the pun regarding Ella's surname, *Townsend*: she is *sent* to the town of Louisiana.
- ⁷ Brodber, *Louisiana* 21-22.
- ⁸ Brodber, *Louisiana* 78.
- ⁹ Brodber, *Louisiana* 18-19.
- ¹⁰ Brodber, *Louisiana* 80.
- ¹¹ Brodber, *Louisiana* 130.
- ¹² It is also the chorus of a Jamaican folk song.
- ¹³ Brodber, *Louisiana* back cover.
- ¹⁴ Brodber, *Louisiana* 13.
- ¹⁵ Brodber, *Louisiana* 28.
- ¹⁶ Brodber, *Louisiana* 31-32.
- ¹⁷ Brodber, *Louisiana* 9.
- ¹⁸ Brodber, *Louisiana* 20.
- ¹⁹ Brodber, *Louisiana* 84-85.
- ²⁰ Hutcheon, 5.
- ²¹ Brodber, *Louisiana* 152-153.

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