

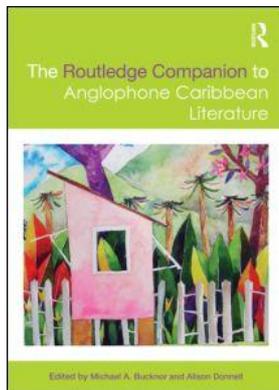
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ERNA BRODBER

A Poetics of Redemption

Antonia MacDonald

The long, keening cry of the enslaved reverberates constantly in Caribbean poetics. Caribbean writers and critics alike have offered the wounding histories of slavery and diaspora as the reasons for this continuing lamentation, and through their recounting of this trauma, have sought to repair the damage wrought. This concern for redressing historical wrongs has created a sub-category within Caribbean poetics: a literature of reparation that returns the pre-colonized person to a former condition of wholeness and provides metaphorical and spiritual compensation for damages suffered because of slavery. While she would eschew both her categorization as writer and critic, Erna Brodber establishes herself as an activist committed to repairing the trauma of Caribbean history. Brodber sets herself the task of piecing together a conflicted and fragmented Caribbean past, so that in the process of her creative reassemblage, diasporic Caribbean people can claim their painful past, acquiring in the process a healing that produces self-knowledge and, more particularly, knowledge of self in relation to community. To this end, Brodber also draws on her formal education as historian and her training as a sociologist. For her, the pain incurred by history is not minimized. Instead, suffering assumes creative potential, becoming what Wilson Harris in 'Tradition and the West Indian Novel' explains as the creative suffering instinct that leaves one open to vision (1999: 145). For Brodber, that vision is at once personal and communal, participatory and celebratory. To engage with the history of her diasporic society is also to write a personal account of herself as participant and one-time victim of that history. Redemption is communal.

Speaking in diverse registers to various communities of readers, continually testifying to the organic relationship between the individual and the community, Brodber creates fictional and non-fictional narratives that emphasize return to psychological wellness as a collaborative process. In her promotion of that agenda, she advocates creative fellowship with persons whose daily practices, like hers in her Woodside community, enact those poetics. Inserting herself into ongoing literary conversations on the constitution of diasporic subjectivity, Brodber uses her perceptions of race, class, gender and education to enlarge these dialogues and to build solidarity with discursive

communities that share the same history of trauma. The form and style that Brodber deploys depend on the community of readers she is addressing. Her fiction – manifesting the elliptical nature of theorizing-in-process – rehearses ideas which she repeats and reformulates in her non-fictional works so that they can have lay-person applicability. What remains always apparent is Brodber’s commitment to discursive modalities that are open-ended yet accessible, ones that leave space for other voices, other dreamers, other healers.

Leading by example, Brodber’s essay, *The People of My Jamaican Village, 1817–1948*, is one such recuperative venture. It is the historical documentation of Woodside, a Jamaican village that serves both collective and individual memory restoration. In the foreword, Brodber explicitly addresses her rootedness within this community and, thereby, her insider status and commitment to promoting self-understanding in the people of her village: ‘It is my hope that linking the present inhabitants of Woodside with their enslaved ancestors who lived and worked on Neilson’s Woodside coffee plantation in the early nineteenth century ... will give us, the new generation, a sense that we are part of a process from slavery to freedom and will lend us a greater measure of responsibility’ (1999: n.p.). The richly detailed historical account of the constitution of this Jamaican village emphasizes the complex systems of relationships that attend migrations, both voluntary and involuntary. The creolization of a community that such journeys bring about makes it difficult to classify oppressor and oppressed, insider and outsider. What remains transparent is the contribution of various ethnic groups to the history and to the socio-economic development of the Woodside community. It is this knowledge of connections that Brodber offers her readers as a means of repairing the schisms created by colonial history. The practical value of this community’s biography is the provision of a sense of belonging to peoples who have been uprooted and a sense of connection that serves as a spur to organic community development.

Similarly, in her larger non-fictional work *Woodside Pear Tree Grove PO*, Brodber argues for knowledge-sharing as core to community development. Data-heavy, no detail too insignificant to be mentioned, *Woodside Pear Tree Grove PO* is Brodber’s revisionist offering of ‘the history of the underclass – the enslaved and indentured worker – in interaction with their social and physical environment’ (2004: viii). In this anthropological and historical exploration of her native Jamaican community, Woodside, Brodber meticulously maps out its social and economic history so as to show the inhabitants of modern-day Woodside how they are part of this history and how their history has shaped who they are in the present. Notably, in her recuperation of this lost history, Brodber interweaves the social and economic interactions of white plantation owners who originally founded the Woodside community. In so doing, she provides the descendants of the enslavers with accounts of their history, for even though the large and general history of the colonizer has always been available, this day-to-day account of the activities of the colonizer in rural Jamaica helps personalize and humanize. While it does not explicitly make this point, *Woodside Pear Tree Grove PO* is also showing how intricately interwoven is the history of these two racial

groups coexisting in Woodside and the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships in a post-emancipation Jamaica. To present Woodside's history is to outline the history of the British land-owners such as the Neilsons, the Forbes and the Pollocks, slave-owners whose descendants are still part of Woodside community. It is also to acknowledge the descendants of Quino and Quaco, Cupid and Cato, Jupiter and Nero – the slaves who interacted with their British slave-masters toiled on these estates and their labour sustained the Woodside community. Miscegenation, migrations, inter-marriages together create a community that from the nineteenth century to present time had its own socio-economic rhythms: people cultivated lands that bore coffee or bananas; paid government taxes; celebrated births and marriages; mourned deaths. It is through historical narratives such as these that the Afro-Jamaican person can confirm self in community – a reparative gesture for historically dislocated people. It is this rootedness that will in turn allow for social and economic development.

For Brodber, rootedness within the local is a first and necessary step to redemption. There are, however, for diasporic people, locations of belonging that exceed the local. Where then is one's place? Brodber's essay 'Where Are All the Others?' is a robust engagement with this issue. The essay begins with a vignette about the two Miss Mandas, one who knows her place as the object of village charity and the other Miss Manda who, though similarly indigent, does not receive village patronage because of her disregard for the linguistic register appropriate to her social status as village charity case. This Miss Manda speaks Standard English and sings Irish songs – cultural practices that make her out of place in the local. This inability to root Manda Chiss within the Woodside community allows Brodber to make the more cogent point about interconnections. Manda Chiss becomes a reminder that the experiences of diaspora have created scatterings and disjuncture that affect yet connect peoples from Jamaica to Barbados, Australia to North America. Brodber in this essay advocates that it is only through the local community's acceptance of the multiplicity that characterizes Manda Chiss – the other ancestors who inflect her voice – that she can gain a place and a space to be different.

Brodber's intent in her fiction is no less didactic than that which obtains in her essays. The fictional narratives of *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, *Myal*, *Louisiana* and *The Rainmaker's Mistake* also explore the personal and internal consequences of colonial enslavement and politicize the historical trauma incurred by Europe's entry into the New World. Similar to the polemic adopted in her essays, in Brodber's novels, the treatment of these issues forecloses on rehearsals of blame, or litanies of lamentation. Instead, she situates her poetics of redemption within narratives of healing, empowerment and community activism. Where in her essays her prose is unadorned and transparent, Brodber's creative writing, in its tendency towards allegory and symbolism, is more opaque. In his Nobel Laureate lecture V.S. Naipaul references Proust to differentiate between the writer as writer and the writer as a social being. He argues that creative writing is a personal process, and the book – the product – is the result of an intuitive mental journeying (2001). Likewise, Brodber's novels are revelations of theory-in-process. Privy to Brodber's creative imaginings, her reader is often called

upon to establish, without much guidance, connections between abstract ideas which, in her non-fictional writings, Brodber postulates with straightforward clarity. Moreover, her novels acquire further complexity because of her experimentation with form and her deliberate rejection of linear narratives. This formal strategy is fundamental to her politics of restoration and healing – it becomes a wilful dismantling of the pieces of a violent and exploitative past and a reformulation that allows for an imaginative repositioning of a recuperated Caribbean self. Brodber in her layering of narratives within narratives is able to replicate the multi-dimensional texture of Caribbean history where victims and villains sometimes wear the same faces. In so doing, she is simultaneously engaging compassion and indictment, and as a result is able to foreclose on facile judgments of blame. Now, the reader too is redeemed. In the speaking out of one's history, knowledge transmission occurs and in the sharing, the possibility of transformation.

Brodber's poetics of redemption manifests itself in various iterations – each novel proposing a different form of engagement, a different strategy for rehabilitation; yet they all share the same emphasis on the importance of community. In her first novel, *Jane and Louisa*, Brodber focuses on the personal attempt at self identification. Created originally as case study material for a course on Human Growth and Development, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, is both a discourse on Caribbean sociology and a daring work of Caribbean literature. The personal journey towards self-understanding and self-identification is central. The quest for selfhood is shared by the subjects who make up Brodber's case study material, the fictional protagonist seeking to heal her split self and a diffident Brodber who aspires to be a creative writer. Nellie, whose education disconnects her from her community, gradually, albeit painfully, comes to the realization that internalized racism is responsible for her psychoses and that, ironically, it is only within the community that she has rejected, can self be truly reformulated. In her processing of trauma, Nellie understands and is reconciled to the various narratives of hurt that had interpellated her. She learns that the past is a gateway to the present and future and must necessarily be dealt with. Nor is her psychic regeneration an individualized event. In forcing her out of muteness, in helping her retrieve and integrate past experiences, Baba – a neighbour from her childhood – becomes the representative of the community that is making a space for itself in Nellie's future.

Fellowship and community are also forces shaping the writer Brodber. It is through the intervention of her sister, Velma Pollard, that her cyclostyled teaching material becomes a literary manuscript that is published by a leading independent press. Like Nellie, external action releases one from repressed fears. The publication of this novel is for Erna Brodber, confirmation of her literary talent. *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* has the practical value of providing its readers – be they literature lovers, sociology students or fledgling writers – with what Brodber describes in 'Fiction in the Scientific Procedure' as a clearing space wherein one can 'do their own dreaming, their own thinking and their own planning' (1990: 166).

The issue of community-based restitution is further developed in *Myal*. In her second novel, Brodber engages with redemption as the act of gaining freedom from

ignorance – the coming to know of ‘the Half that has never been told’ (1988: 67). Brodber’s poetics is played out in her invocation of the West-African-derived spiritual tradition of *myal*. She uses this tradition of healing as a framing device for her narration so as to demonstrate the potency of community-based rituals as metaphorical and literal modes of resistance undertaken to repel physical or spiritual appropriations. Additionally, Brodber redeems this tradition of healing from the negative associations that colonial authorities had ascribed to it, and is able to write a truth about this spiritual practice that has never been told. Spirit thievery constitutes the thematic core of the novel. The protagonist Ella, like Nellie in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, has been thoroughly socialized by a colonial education and is unable to recognize herself as a free-thinking Jamaican female or to identify herself as a black woman who is part of the Grove Town community. Unaware of her oral antecedents, disconnected from her folk roots, devaluing the traditions of faith and *communitas*, an American-based Ella willingly participates with her husband Selwyn’s theatrical misrepresentation of the Caribbean. She then has a nervous breakdown – the necessary disconnection of an imperilled psyche – and returns to Jamaica. When the zombified Ella is healed, working as a primary school teacher she commits herself to rewriting the British texts of her childhood. These new subversive texts are psychically productive because they allow her young students to insert themselves and their oral history into a discourse that had previously marginalized them, and they give Ella control over the imperial language that had stolen her spirit: ‘Get in their books and know their truth, then turn around ship and books ...’ (1988: 67).

In her third novel, issues of voice acquisition and memory retrieval continue to be Brodber’s focus. *Louisiana* is not a self-contained, self-sufficient literary text but rather a community-produced narrative – a history that becomes fully ‘readable’ because of the other narratives with which it enters into conversation. The need to clarify and solidify connections is one which Ella, the protagonist of *Louisiana*, must learn to recognize and then to actualize. Ella is a student of Anthropology who has been commissioned by her university to capture on a tape recorder, the memoirs of an elderly African American storyteller, Sue Ann King. Mrs King, referred to by Ella as ‘Mammy’, is hard to interview. Where ‘Mammy’ may suggest plantation compliance, Mrs King is wily and constantly frustrates Ella’s effort to get her on tape by asking questions instead of answering them. Mammy King dies during Ella’s project and her spirit passes on to Ella through the metaphysical medium of the tape recorder. As the unwilling medium for this non-logical and ‘unscientific’ form of communication, Ella accesses Mammy’s story and that of Mammy’s Jamaican friend, Lowly. It is in the cacophony of those stories that Ella discovers the intricate twinning of her early childhood history in Jamaica with that of Lowly and Mammy, and in her gradual assembling of the details of Mammy’s life, Ella becomes the nodal point for a story about migrations between diasporic people. The multi-dimensional narrative space that Mammy creates houses the intersecting histories of African-American and Caribbean people. In this novel, Brodber rhetorically manipulates the cultural connections between these two groups, creating what she describes as a community song: ‘Different chords, different tunes, different

octaves. Sheer jazz. One sound. From one body' (1994: 161). *Louisiana* is a celebration of humanity, and an affirmation of communities that stretch from St Mary's Louisiana New Orleans to Louisiana, St Mary's Jamaica. Brodber makes explicit her pedagogy of knowledge retrieval as redemptive. In this novel, the past is represented as prismatic: when it enters into the present, it creates new perceptions, corrects distortions and dispels illusions so that one can see the future more clearly.

Where her first three novels explore the reconstituting of memory of historical trauma, in her most recent novel Brodber presents ignorance or the wilful lack of remembering as a survival strategy erected because of the brutality of the past. In *The Rainmaker's Mistake* she presents protagonists who through the process of coming to know of violence perpetrated against them must, in the claiming of this experience, accept responsibility for the wounds and scars incurred by their enslavements. In her protagonists' acceptance without question, the improbable tale of their origin as yam people cultivated by Mas Charlie, Brodber shows the desirability of the comfort that is derived from ignorance, when to know is to abandon the safety of not having to think for oneself, not having to take responsibility for one's life. This child-like state of ignorance of her main protagonists is allegorically represented in their inability to age. It is through London's memories, gained through hypnosis, that the mystery of their past is revealed: the protagonists learn the truth about their origin; the role that Woodville has played in the enslavement of his progeny; the scientific means by which they have been kept in a child-like state; and the memory-altering experiments that Woodville and Mas Charlie conducted on them. London's difficulty in releasing this memory symbolizes his desire to retain the *status quo* as established by Mas Charlie and maintained by Woodville.

Careful to avoid Manichean formulations of villain and victim, Brodber positions Woodville as destroyer and saviour. His hurricane-like laughter uproots Mas Charlie's house from its foundation and destroys the society which had nurtured these slaves. His return provides them with a connection to the past that they use to moor themselves as they excavate their past. Silent when he needs to speak or explain, accomplice to the betrayal of his people and a drain on the resources of a community that is trying desperately to eke out a living, Woodville is nevertheless admirable in his silent and tenacious hold on life, so that through his non-verbal interaction with them he can signpost the facts of their past. Avoiding blame and recrimination as large compensatory gestures, Brodber offers her readers redemption that comes from claiming a painful past. The violence suffered, the psychic dislocation notwithstanding, to face the past is to free oneself from victimhood, so that members of former slave societies can move beyond debilitating sorrow and communities can live lives that testify to a recuperative Caribbean psyche: 'It is naturalness twinned to mortality accompanied by hope and duly tempered by responsibility. I embrace them with both hands' (2007: 150).

Widely published, critically acclaimed and deeply involved in Woodside community activism, Brodber currently heads Blackspace – an interactive community enterprise that promotes emancipation. Engaged in literary evangelism, she remains committed to giving voice to those silenced by colonialism, and in her recuperative work in her

community puts all her training in research, sociology and history at the disposal of her community. While she has advocated writing as transformative, Brodber's poetics of redemption extends beyond words into action.

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