Dialoguing Borders
The African Diasporic Consciousness

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Quoique le personnage de Ella ne croise aucune frontière physique dans le livre de Edna Brodber, « Louisiana », elle en traverse plusieurs métaphoriques, telles la tradition, la culture et la conscience de la diaspora. En explorant les influences et les aspects de l'ensemble des diasporaa africaines, américaines, caribéennes et même européennes, Elle est physiquement et spirituellement transformée.

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Erna's Brodber's haunting novel *Louisiana* details the life of Ella Townsend, a young woman who sets out to investigate the lives of African-Americans living in Louisiana during the Great Depression. As an academic, her belief in the supremacy of science and empirical knowledge is shaken as she and her partner Reuben come upon strange events that cause them to realize and recognize their ties to the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. When one of the subjects of Ella's study, an older woman named Mammy, suddenly dies, Ella inexplicably begins to hear different voices on her recording device. Ella's otherwordly experiences with the tape recorder lead her to learn about the lives of Mammy and her friends Lowly and Silas. Through these encounters, Ella becomes "Louisiana Kohl" and confronts the painful memories of her relationship with her parents and her childhood in Jamaica.

Although the character of Ella does not physically cross any national borders during the narrative she does traverse several metaphorical borders of diasporic tradition, culture, and consciousness. Exploring the various influences and aspects of the African diasporic body, America, Africa, the Caribbean, and even European, Ella is physically and spiritually transformed.

The construction of borders and boundaries, both physical and metaphorical, has long been a source of human obsession. In the realm of both the public and the private, one can specifically notice perimeters erected to contain transgression and police designated territory. The most obvious example of this type of mobilization is the anxious frenzy with which national and cultural borders are regularly guarded and scrutinised. Recent global events, such as the attacks in New York and Bali, have simultaneously provoked great efforts to secure national borders while creating a heightened awareness of cultural difference in the name of jingoistic patriotism. Nationalist rhetoric can often sacrifice plurality and diversity in the name of cultural solidarity. It is the resistance of these impositions that is at the heart of the struggle for the recognition of diversity.

Much of the battle against various hegemonic practices has often taken place in the literary sphere. Many diasporic writers have attempted to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of such boundaries and the possibilities of fluidly traversing these imposed barriers. Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, for example, depicts the elusiveness of identity while portraying the movement of several of its characters across bordered lines, both real and imagined. One can easily argue that the most prominent borders that *Louisiana* attempts to dismantle are those that seek to isolate the African diaspora into different disconnected factions. Brodber states:

> It is my hope that this information [her novels] will be a tool with which the blacks and particularly those of the diaspora will forge a closer unity and, thus fused, be able to face the rest of the world more confidently. (1990: 164)

Louisiana, then, creates a discursive space that positions the African diaspora along a fluid and rich continuum of shared traditions and experiences. The novel tirelessly highlights and establishes the links of its characters to Africa, the Caribbean, America and even Europe. In fact, the title of the work refers not only to the American state, Louisiana, but also to the name of a parish in Jamaica. The back cover of *Louisiana* states that "through this blending of localities, Brodber shows how elements from the African diaspora are kept alive in the Creole culture of the Americas."

When Brodber's protagonist, Ella Townsend, is first introduced in the novel, she is firmly situated as American. Her project, to catalogue the lives of black people in Louisiana, is sanctioned and sponsored by President

in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*

Roosevelt and the American federal government. Her initial construction as American is also marked by her academic position at Columbia University. Ella is shown to both live and work in the heart of what is, arguably, the centre of America: New York City. Ella describes herself as "an adult, in my late 20's, my own and sole breadwinner" (Brodber 1994: 33). Her description of her life is marked by a sense of capitalistic individualism that is unmistakably American. She prides herself in her career, her financial independence and her ability to support herself.

Ella's project, too, is rooted in western notions of knowledge based on secular and rational empiricism. She has come to Louisiana to observe, interview and record data about the lives and testimonies of the black people of south-west Louisiana. The technological centrepiece of her research is a recording machine that she uses to record her conversations with Mammy. Ella is completely bewildered when she hears different voices, including her own, on the machine saying things that she does not recall ever recording. She refuses to believe that these odd events could be supernatural in origin. As Ella begins to investigate the strange occurrences, she states: "I stepped back a bit to ask myself what was my head into—the anthropology of the dead? Celestial ethnography? Crazy" (Brodber 1994: 61).

As she settles down and tries to grasp the situation, her analysis is ordered and is focused on classification. Ella organizes her work into weekly reports and categorizes the information on the recording machine into four files: people, places, terms and expressions, and lastly, one about herself. Her methodology to understand the information on the reel is still traditionally empirical and academic. Ella explains:

> An analytical scheme was developing as I was transcribing. When I had the contents of the reel on paper I would look at Mammy's personal history, at her relationship with her friend—that would be the academic part—then for my own curiosity, I would look at their perception of me, the interviewer. What did they really mean by 'This is the horse will you ride'? Could it mean what I thought it meant? I resembled them; they looked like me ... but let discipline prevail. I would deal with that when its time comes. (Brodber 61-62)

Although Ella now begins to ask questions about a possible otherworldly relationship with Lowly and Mammy, her scepticism is still quite strong as is evi-

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denced in her reactions to Reuben. As Reuben begins to feel a sense of belonging with the American locals, Ella declares: "his research was becoming more subjective than was good science" (Brodber 1994: 63). Later, as the locals start to believe that Reuben is a union organiser that had left years before, Ella exclaims in exasperation: "[i]t was too much to ask a person to deal with her own private flight from reality as well as this public one, all in the same month" (68). At this stage, Ella's life and perspectives are still firmly grounded in her American upbringing, lifestyle and scientific belief system.

One should note, though, that Ella's life in America has not been completely ideal. Although she is successful in her professional life, her familial relations with her mother and father are not particularly warm or intimate. Ella's parents left her with her grandmother as an infant when they immigrated to America from Jamaica. Even when they did reclaim her, they are not described as being very engaging or affectionate. Discussing her father, Ella states that: "[h]e walked in a dream in the road intensely preoccupied with measuring the distance as if his computation was key to world peace" (Brober 1994: 69). She adds that she "could see this man absent-mindedly inventing me" (69). In reference to her mother, Ella asserts that she "held her head erect, swivelling it right or left only when she needed to see what the world was doing and these were rare occasions" (68).

Ella's childhood, then, is spent in various degrees of estrangement from her mother and father. Even near the end of the novel, Ella's parents leave it to their lawyer, Mr Lukas, to deal with her after they have retired to Jamaica. She discovers that they have paid for the recording machine that she had neglected to return. Ella pro-

nounces, "[t]hrough him my parents had somehow paid for that first-edition-and-difficult-to-replace gadget and had paid off whatever else was necessary to expunge me and my history from their records" (Brodber 1994: 134). One can surmise that the "history" that Ella feels the Townsends are trying to erase is not just her history as their daughter. They are also denying Ella her "history" in Jamaica as a child. She is anxious to discover the events of her infancy that took place after her grandmother died and before her parents arrived to retrieve her. Ella writes to them and asks: "[t]ell me whether what I have seen of my early life is really so" (132). Her mother and father do not respond to her letters and instead leave it to their lawyer to give Ella a cash payment to stay out of their lives. Not only do the Townsends deprive her of a familial connection, but they also choose to erect barriers that deny Ella her history as well.

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It is Ella's voyage from north to south, New York to Louisiana, that allows her to discover cultural pasts that had previously been hidden from her. She does not cross a national border, as she remains within the United States, but she does negotiate different metaphorical borders of culture and family, demonstrating the arbitrary and imagined quality of physical space and boundaries. As Ella begins to shed various aspects of her life in New York, she undergoes a profound transformation that affects her both physically and spiritually. Her Louisiana wardrobe begins to consist of "long loose fitting white dresses in summer and long black robes over them in winter" (Brodber 1994: 125). Ella begins to wear her hair differently as well. Of her hair, she proclaims:

> I no longer press. I don't know if this represents spiritual movement or intellectual movement or just plain convenience but there it is: my hair is natural and untouched. And I wrap it. Reuben says I look like Nefertiti and I like that. (98-99)

One should note that the reference to Nefertiti, the Egyptian Queen, is just one of several instances in which *Louisiana* makes allusions to the African continent. The text states that Reuben is originally from the Congo and that as a child he was taken to Europe by a priest working in Africa. Upon his arrival in Louisiana, Reuben immediately starts to experience a sense of belonging amongst the African-American locals. Ella describes Reuben as "the little boy who had been stolen from Congo drums and planted in the silent North and the man wandering in search of a connection" (Brodber 1994: 42). Later, she posits that in the American South, Reuben

> had found that little capillary that was to take him right back to the tall oak he was trying to find in his Congo, in the heart of Africa.... Reuben had found black men. Startling! Yes. But not for a chap who had been brought up seeing only whites. (52)

Reuben's desire to experience all things African is also reflected in his choice of costume for the annual Mardi Gras carnival in New Orleans. He dresses as a Zulu for the festivities. Ella proclaims: "Reuben is going to be an African and in Africa and I am making his costume" 1994: 107). Reuben's embrace and articulation of Africa demonstrates that diasporic identity is not fixed, and that crossing boundaries is not necessarily a physical act.

Aside from Reuben's relationship with Africa, there are other moments in which the continent appears in the text. There is the striking description of the people at Mammy's funeral. Ella relates that, "such a gathering of black people, dressed in white, did look like a multitude of white birds in some African forest" (Brodber 1994: 51). One can also note that the jazz haven that Ella and Reuben go to in New Orleans is called Congo Square. It is their venture here and their encounter with Madam Marie that leads to Ella's gradual metamorphosis. It is at this moment in the novel that Brodber begins to congeal the different elements of the African diaspora. As mentioned, Ella's physical appearance changes. The clothes that she chooses to wear, a head wrap and loose and long dresses, do sound traditionally African or possibly even Caribbean. Her attitude towards the search for knowledge changes as well. Whereas she had previously relied on rational empiricism and a western tool like the recording machine to reveal things to her, she now decides to sit back, relax and allow matters to be divinely divulged in their own good time. Ella coins this new attitude of hers the "hegemony of the spirit" (98). She opines, "[p]rophets wait for God.... Nobody turns on prophets nor do they turn on themselves. They wait for God's orders" (101). Ella's change in dress and thinking illustrates the fluid possibilities of diasporic identity.

Ella does indeed become much more spiritual living in New Orleans with Madam Marie. She starts to read the Bible and introduces various Biblical characters and anecdotes into her speech, such as the story of Elijah and Elisha. This sudden shift towards religiosity is both acknowledged and accepted by Ella. She declares, "I have taken to reading the Bible. I know that I am, with this, further away from the self I knew than ever, but if it is so, then let it be so" (Brodber 1994: 98). One can read Ella's turn towards the spiritual in two different ways. On one hand, this change distances her from the ideologies of the

predominantly secular and scientific Western society that she had previously adopted as an academic living in New York. Conversely, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition that she does accept is undeniably western. It is interesting that as the characters traverse diasporic boundaries that expose them to their ties to both Africa and the Caribbean, Brodber chooses to have Ella follow this particular faith with its links to European colonialism and imperialism. The author could have had her protagonist discover the ways of Obeah or Myalism. Is it that Brodber wishes to capture the complete landscape of the African diasporic experience, including the way it is inextricably linked to Europe and the legacy of colonialism?

There are different examples in which Europe is mentioned in the text. Most obviously, Reuben was raised there as a child. He had been living in Antwerp until he decided to come to America to search for a sense of belonging. Ella states that "[o]nly he in that European community perceived the true scope of his difference from them" (Brodber 1994: 52). There is also the memory that Ella has of people calling West Indians, "King George's negroes," when she was a child. She says, "I didn't like being called King George's negro—I didn't even know in any sensible way who King George was and what he had to do with me" (58). Brodber also makes intertextual references to canonical European literary works. Ella states that "[t]he house was as quiet as Juliet's tomb" which may be seen as an allusion to Shakespeare's famous tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* (35). Elsewhere in the text, there is a mention of the classical mythological figures, "Scylla and Charibdis" (118). Ella also describes the West Indian sailors who visit Madam Marie singing songs from Europe and the Caribbean. Ella proclaims: "[t]hey loved to sing, so did Madam. Folksongs they called it. Sometimes it was Irish, English, Scottish melodies" (84).

These examples illustrate that, in *Louisiana*, the borders and influences of the African diaspora extend not just to Africa, the Caribbean, and America but stretch to the reaches of imperialist Europe as well. There are those who might criticise Brodber for this particular addition because of the terrible way in which European expansionism affected African peoples. Yet, by including Europe in a discussion about the African diaspora, Brodber is creating dialogue and pushing the boundaries of what exactly constitutes this specific diasporic body. In a 1991 interview about her novel, *Chosen Place, Timeless People*, Paule Marshall states:

> I hoped the novel would not solely be seen as a novel about the West Indies, even though it's set there, but a novel that reflects what is happening to all of us in the Diaspora in our encounter with these metropolitan powers, the power of Europe and the power of America. (qtd. in James)

Similarly, although Brodber's *Louisiana* is set in America, the novel explores various shades of the African diaspora, including its relationship with, in Marshall's words, "the power of Europe." Once again, Brodber's text transgresses the imposed and understood borders of African diasporic identity.

The final piece of the African diasporic puzzle that Brodber puts into place in *Louisiana* is the Caribbean connection. As stated, the title of the work refers not only to the American state, Louisiana, but also to the name of a parish in Jamaica. Ella was born in Jamaica and one of her most painful childhood memories takes place there. She recalls the details of her grandmother's death and that she was cared for by Miss Ros and Mass Bobby until her mother returned to retrieve her. As Ella starts to shed tears, she feels purged of a lifetime of repressed anger and anxiety about her early days in Jamaica and her parent's refusal to discuss their time on the island. Ella reveals: "[i]t angered me, angered me deeply, that she had not left the door open for me to say thanks to those people who had cared for me in those crucial years" (Brodber 1994: 92).

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One should also note the important role that language plays in the text. It is when one of the West Indian sailors starts chanting, "Sammy dead, Sammy dead, Sammy dead oh" that Ella starts to become stiff and the submerged memory about her grandmother begins to surface (Brodber 88). The sailor's song is similar to the words that are mysteriously spoken by Ella, "ah who sey Sammy's dead," on the recording machine. Ella's understanding of Caribbean language is also crucial to her dealings with both Lowly and the West Indian sailors. Lowly teaches and familiarises Ella with Caribbean language so that she can communicate more lucidly with the West Indian sailors who look to her for spiritual guidance. Ella posits that with Lowly's help, "I am knowing more about my men and where they are from and in the process, I am becoming. Language is the key" (117). Ella's diasporic self has now grown and fluidly shifted to include her ties to the Caribbean as well.

Ella's grasp of and immersion into Caribbean language and culture is important because of the perspective it gives her into her buried past while also helping to strengthen her ties with the West Indian sailors. Her clairvoyant insight into the lives of these men creates a personal bond between her and them and between Ella and the Caribbean. As the sailors are about to leave for the West Indies, Ella muses:

> More immediate for me though, is that when the boats to the West Indies sound off, they take me with them and I am sitting right here in New Orleans, Louisiana, yet searching grave-stones, stringing duppy bead, going into caves, eating mangoes and jackfruit there. I nearly re-named myself 'Jamaica Ginger'. This bottled drink and I are home for the travellers from the islands. I do feel like a warm homely liquid. (Brodber 1994: 123)

Perhaps the greatest reward that Ella receives from her interaction with different aspects of the African diasporic experience is the sense of familial love and intimacy that has sorely been lacking in her relationship with her biological parents. Figures such as Lowly, Reuben, Mammy, Madam Marie and the sailors become Ella's new chosen family and sources of love and inspiration for her. She, in turn, becomes transformed by the amalgam of people and traditions to which she is exposed.

Ella's metamorphosis is marked by her decision to change her name from Ella Townsend, a name given to her by her parents, to Louisiana Kohl. The two portions of her new name represent the two important relationships of her life in Louisiana. The surname "Kohl" is given to her through marriage to Reuben, but her new first name, "Louisiana," has a significance beyond being the name of a state and a parish. The name 'Louisiana' is a combination of "Louise" and "Anna," the two women with whom Ella shares a deep spiritual connection. She reflects:

> [i]n me Louise and Sue Ann are joined. Say Suzie Anna as Louise calls Mammy. Do you hear Louisiana there? Now say Lowly as Mammy calls Louise and follow that with Anna as Louise sometimes calls Mammy. Lowly-Anna. There's Louisiana again, particularly if you are lisp-tongued as you could well be. Or you could be Spanish and speak of those two venerable sisters as Louise y Anna. (Brodber 1994: 124)

Ella's body, in essence, becomes a conduit for both Mammy and Lowly and serves as a unifying centre in which the many diverse voices and cultures of the African diasporic experience can coalesce. Denise deCaires Narain contends that "[i]n *Louisiana*, Brodber suggests that the woman's body operates as vessel or vehicle for the powerful delivery of the word which can 'reborn' the black diasporic community" (114).

Although Ella does not physically cross any national borders during the course of the narrative of *Louisiana*, she does traverse several metaphorical borders of diasporic tradition, culture and consciousness. Exploring the various influences and aspects of the African diasporic body, America, Africa, the Caribbean and even Europe, Ella is physically and spiritually transformed. She eschews her staid, secular and scientific life in New York for a life of spiritual awareness and clairvoyance in the American South. Through her journeys, Ella is able to find a family, not just with Reuben, Mammy and Lowly, but also with the many diverse factions that make up the African diasporic family. By doing so, she is able to finally deal with a lifetime of pain caused by her poor relations with her parents and their unwillingness to discuss her early infant life in Jamaica. In Louisiana, Ella is able to find a sense of belonging and completeness that had long previously eluded her. In the end, then, the greatest message that one can find in Brodber's Louisiana is of family, unity, diversity and ultimately, hope.

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Errata:

Sincere apologies to Miriam Wyman and Terisa E. Turner. Their names were misspelled in *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme's* Fall 2003 issue on "Women and Sustainability: From Rio de Janeiro (1992) to Johannesburg (2002)" (vol. 23, no.1).