



The University of
the West Indies
Centre for Gender and
Development Studies



Issue 2 – 2008

Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Caribbean Literary Field: Crossing Boundaries in Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*

Michael Niblett

Abstract

In his 1996 article “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories”, Sidney Mintz returned to a theme that has been central to his work on the Caribbean, that of the region’s fundamental and historically specific modernity. Discussing the rise of the plantation system from the sixteenth century onwards and the importation of enslaved and indentured labour, he observes as follows:

The enterprises for which these people were carried across oceans were intimately associated with Europe and its growth. Their development was an instance of precocious modernity, an unanticipated (indeed unnoticed) modernity — unnoticed especially, perhaps, because it was happening to people most of whom were forcibly stolen from the worlds outside the West. No one imagined that such people would become “modern” — since there was no such thing; no one recognised that the raw, outpost societies into which such people were thrust might become the first of their kind. (1996, 298)

Underlying this “precocious modernity” was the complex agro-industrial character of the plantation, its unity of field and factory and the application of technical features in

operations that predated the Industrial Revolution (Mintz 1996, 295).¹ Equally important, though, was the impact this economic organisation had on the labour force. For Mintz, the particular form of socialisation occasioned by conditions on the plantation imposed a modern cast on those shoehorned into its structures. The stripping of kinship and community, the extirpation of familial matrices, the forced transportation and resettlement alongside culturally unlike peoples — all this constituted a form of brutality that, while underwritten by the seemingly pre-capitalist institution of slavery, in fact reflected the harsh exigencies of modern capitalist industrialisation. And as the enslaved, the indentured, and later the free sought to resist such pressures and reassemble in the Caribbean those traditions they had preserved in conjunction with those they had been newly exposed to, they built ways of life that were both unique and paradigmatically modern

¹ Throughout his work, Mintz has reiterated this view that Caribbean peoples were the first modernised peoples in world history (see also Mintz 1974, 1993). See too David Scott's thorough discussion of Mintz's perspective in "Modernity that Predated the Modern" (2004).

Introduction

A number of important implications follow from Mintz's line of argument. Modernity is here defined centrally by the process of capitalist industrialisation. But the emphasis on the "precocious modernity" of the Caribbean underscores that this is not a reiteration of the (Eurocentric) view of modernisation as identical with Westernisation. Indeed, Mintz's reasoning rests on a challenge to that notion of capitalism and modernity as essentially "Western" phenomena that have their telos in that quasi-geographical area, a telos subsequently exported elsewhere as part of the continuous expansion of capital.² Rather, the emergence of capitalism is seen from the start as the emergence of a capitalist world system and of a modern global history, within which particular responses and formations take shape. The accent, then, is on the discontinuity of capital and its differential effects. On this view, capitalist modernity, as Neil Lazarus puts it, "is characterised by unevenness: that is, by the dynamics of development and underdevelopment, aut centrality and dependency, the production and entrenchment of localisms (to a point approaching irreducibility) within larger processes of globalisation, incorporation, and homogenisation" (1999, 25). The historical circumstances of the Caribbean bear out this perspective, not only in terms of the integrality of the plantation economies to the expansion of capitalism in Europe, but also precisely in relation to the region's precociously modern stamp.³ For this last serves to emphasise how, far from pursuing a model of modernisation pioneered in the "West" and behind which it lagged, the Caribbean was negotiating its own distinctive experience of modernity, one that saw precipitately modern forms emerge in tandem with underdevelopment.

I begin with these comments on modernity since its articulation in the region is inextricable from the particular shape assumed by the Caribbean's cultural and literary fields. In this article I intend to explore how this relationship has been registered at the level of literary form through an analysis of Erna Brodber's 1980 novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. In its juxtaposition of narrative modes, its evocation of Afro-Caribbean religious and ritual practice, and the attention it draws to the social significance of the body, especially the female body, Brodber's text highlights how the singular shape of the Caribbean cultural field has influenced the representation and interrogation of the region's colonial past and post-colonial present. However, her work also challenges the way in which the theorisation of this cultural field has tended to reproduce the gender blindness that characterised many of the debates of the 1960s and '70s over decolonization and nationhood. Attempts by writers and critics in this period to establish the contours of a cultural nationalism that would complement political independence saw issues of gender marginalized, with feminism often regarded as secondary to or even a distraction from the nationalist project. In *Jane and Louisa*,

² I use the term "quasi-geographical" here to emphasise the ill-defined and ideologically loaded nature of the category of the 'West.' On those perspectives that assume the history of capitalist modernity in the 'West' corresponds to the telos of modernity as such, and the problems with this position, see Lazarus (1999, 16–29).

³ Mintz has discussed this connection between industrialisation in Europe and the plantation economies of the 'New World' in explicitly world-systems terms (see Mintz 1977).

Brodber not only underlines the necessary centrality of the struggle for women's rights to the struggle for nationhood, but also highlights the limitations of any attempt to articulate the historical experience of modernity, or to refashion its legacies, that forgoes a critique of gender relations.

If the Caribbean's modernity was precocious, as Mintz claims, then it was also violent and explosive — an “irruption into modernity” in the words of Édouard Glissant (1989, 100). Although Glissant is referring specifically here to the literary sphere, and to the emergence of a national literature with decolonization (a point I will return to later), his characterisation could just as well apply to the impact of the region's conquest and its integration into the capitalist world system. Indeed, he talks also of the Caribbean's “lived modernity,” defining lived as “that which is abruptly imposed” (1989, 148). Certainly this reflects the socioeconomic development of the area following colonization, its subjection to the brutal imposition of — and disjunctive transitions between — externally oriented economic models. However, not only did the demands of the metropolitan core — its appetite for commodities, its thirst for primitive accumulation — push the colony towards the precipitate semi-industrialisation Mintz identifies; these same demands also had a countervailing effect: they required that the colony be locked into a state of underdevelopment as the condition for its being the pedestal for development elsewhere.⁴ Nothing illustrates this better than that seemingly contradictory circumstance of slavery existing within capitalistic agro-industrial enterprises, an overlap of realities exacerbated by extreme internal uneven development resulting from the grossly lopsided concentrations of wealth produced by the plantation system.⁵

The resistance undertaken by Caribbean peoples to the dominant socioeconomic order further complicates this picture. Across the region, the establishment of peasantries — albeit at different times and in varying contexts — has been a common means by which communities have sought to secure some level of independence. Of significance, however, is Mintz's well known description of such peasantries as “reconstituted”, a term used to emphasise the fact of their “having begun other than as peasants — in slavery, as deserters or runaways, as plantation labourers, or whatever — and becoming peasants in some kind of resistant response to an externally imposed regimen” (1974, 132). Thus these peasantries were formed as a way to negotiate the pressures of industrialisation and modernity, rather than being gradually superseded — as happened in Europe — as commodity capitalism expanded. Indeed, the Caribbean peasantries were not absolutely disjoined from the colonial economy: in many instances peasants would take up part-time work on the plantations and produce goods for sale in local markets.⁶ A complex coexistence of realities is again evident, therefore, with certain social forms and practices

⁴ For a classic account of the development of underdevelopment, see Rodney (1972) and Frank (1967).

⁵ On this issue of the apparently contradictory situation of slave-labour systems existing within a capitalist mode of production, see Mintz (1977). From a global perspective this contradiction is precisely one in appearance only since the coerced systems of labour found in the periphery were not self-contained entities but rather underwritten by the capitalist mode of production that structured the world economy.

⁶ On these points see Mintz (1974) and Holt (1992).

retained or reconstituted to provide a means of survival for the poor and the otherwise dispossessed.

Even as the plantations declined and the economic focus shifted, this situation persisted in various Caribbean countries throughout the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. In the Anglophone Caribbean in the 1950s, for example, increased migration to urban areas and investment from the colonial centre led to the expansion and development of a number of cities (Cross 1979, 112). However, the surrounding rural areas continued to support alternative modes of subsistence. This was especially the case in those states such as Trinidad where the influx of indentured labourers had resulted in the formation of large Indian peasantries. Such was the background for the work of many of the authors emerging in the Anglophone Caribbean from the mid-twentieth century onwards as they sought — in the context of decolonization and independence — to articulate the reality of the West Indian experience. In his 1978 article “The Folk in Caribbean Literature”, Gordon Rohlehr suggested that the problem for West Indian literature was “one of understanding and expressing the flow between rural ‘folk’ sensibility and experiences of semi- or total urbanisation” (28). Commenting on George Lamming’s emphasis on the peasant theme as integral to the West Indian novel, he noted that a “more pliable theory is required, one which can accommodate the interplay between country, town and big city, between peasant, artisan and city-slicker or factory worker, and between the ill-defined classes of the West Indies” (1978, 28).

In a different context — that of post-1945 Martinique, where the island’s status as a French *département* has led to the even greater overdetermination of its socioeconomic structures — it is just this situation Patrick Chamoiseau captures in his epic novel *Texaco*. Here the modernised city-centre of Fort-de-France, with its French-subsidised service economy, overlaps with the rural peasant sensibility and means of survival retained in the outlying slums. The city is thus said to comprise two spaces: one is the “centre living on the new demands of consumption” and the other is the “suburban crowns of grassroots occupations, rich with the depth of our stories”. In the former, all “dissolves in the modern world”, in the latter, “people bring very old roots, not deep and rigid, but diffuse, profuse, spread over time” (Chamoiseau 1997, 170).⁷ This coexistence of realities is not only described in the text, however; it is also registered at the level of form, allowing us to discern the impress of the relationship between the literary field and the fields of politics, economics, and other areas of social life.

At this point I should emphasise that I use the term “field” specifically in the sense of the concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the field is the structured space of

⁷ Chamoiseau draws on the work of urban geographer Serge Letchimy in his portrait of urbanisation and migration in Martinique. Letchimy has investigated the emergence of coexistent social orders in and around the city. He explains how in Fort-de-France, during the first post-war wave of rural-urban migration, the need to establish a means of survival meant that “in the course of the first years of settlement, the [migrant] families rediscovered the countryside (or almost) . . . Consequently, life in the quarter [the settlements that comprised the main residential areas around the centre], between 1958 and 1968, was organised on the model provided by the country peasant, on spaces that made reference to the material world” (My translation. Letchimy 1992, 60).

a particular domain (be it the political, educational, cultural and so on) in which there exists a series of possible positions occupied by “agents” or “products” (including cultural products like the novel) whose relations structure the shape of that field. These relations are determined by the amount of capital — not only economic but also cultural, social or other types of symbolic capital — agents possess. The fields are structurally homologous but not identical. Each is relatively autonomous and cannot be reduced in crudely deterministic fashion to, say, economics: changes in one field are not directly reflected in another but rather played out in accordance with the laws of functioning of that other field. Thus, in discussing the literary field, Bourdieu argues that the “important fact, for the interpretation of works, is that this autonomous social universe functions somewhat like a prism which refracts external determinations: demographic, economic or political events are always retranslated according to the specific logic of the field, and it is by this intermediary that they act on the logic of the development of the work” (1993, 164).

With this in mind we can not only return to *Texaco*’s portrayal of Martinican social reality, but also look to *Jane and Louisa* and Brodber’s narrative strategy in depicting the Jamaican context. In Chamoiseau’s novel, the subject matter — the coexistence of the late capitalist structures of the city-centre with the peasant occupations on the outskirts — is refracted through the literary field in being incorporated into the text. Retranslated according to the logic of this field, it now appears in the form of an overlap of literary genres. Thus, in its account of the foundation of *Texaco*, the novel combines elements of Homeric epic with a demystification of this and other founding myths; it evokes creole oral discourses while simultaneously playing on high modernist narrative techniques. Similarly, in *Jane and Louisa* (which sees characters moving between rural and urban areas, as well as between bourgeois households and working-class tenement yards) the narrative exemplifies, as Carolyn Cooper points out, “an interpenetration of scribal and oral literary forms: a modernist, stream-of-consciousness narrative voice holds easy dialogue with the traditional teller of tales, the transmitter of anansi story, proverb, folk song and dance” (1990, 279).

Glissant’s characterisation of the national literatures of decolonizing countries as marked by their “irruption into modernity” provides a useful further perspective on the logic of the literary field in which Chamoiseau’s and Brodber’s texts can be situated. The liberation and decolonization movements have “allowed peoples who yesterday inhabited the hidden side of the earth . . . to assert themselves in the face of a total world culture” (Glissant 1989, 99). The context in which this self-assertion takes place — a context that is itself the product of imperialism and the combined and uneven development that typifies the capitalist world system, the context of a “total world culture” — is, however, an overdetermined one. For these emerging national literatures confront a series of literary and cultural forms — both imported genres and indigenous styles — all at the same time. They must articulate and affirm the community while simultaneously critiquing the imposed models through which this has been done elsewhere; they must deform and reconstruct traditional styles in order to be able to express the contemporary situation. “The main difficulty facing national literatures today, as they are defined here,”

writes Glissant, “is that they must combine mythification and demystification, this primal innocence with a learned craftiness.” He continues as follows:

The fact is that these literatures do not have the time to develop harmoniously from the collective lyricism of Homer to the mordant scrutiny of Beckett. They must include all at once struggle, aggressiveness, belonging, lucidity, distrust of self, absolute love, contours of the landscape, emptiness of the cities, victories, and confrontations.

“This,” he concludes, “is what I call our irruption into modernity” (1989, 100). Thus, the shape of the Caribbean’s literary field — very different from its European counterpart, which imposes the strict categorisation of forms and their assignment to a particular moment in an extended literary evolution — emphasises the region’s distinctive experience of modernity, refracting its precocity and unevenness. But this, in turn, also renders the structure of the field a means by which such experience can be negotiated. Just as a peasantry was reconstituted within and against the dominant economic order to resist its externally oriented demands, so in the literary field narrative forms are reconstituted and reworked to articulate the community on its own terms.

Yet if Glissant’s formulation provides that “more pliable theory” that Rohlehr argued was necessary for the articulation of Caribbean experience, it nevertheless continues the elision of gender issues evident in the debates of the 1960s and ’70s over cultural production and politics. In the Anglophone Caribbean at that time, many writers and critics — including Rohlehr, Lamming (whose initial theory it was Rohlehr sought to modify), Edward Baugh, and Sylvia Wynter — were engaged in an attempt to map an indigenous Caribbean literary aesthetic and critical practice, seeking to drive forward cultural decolonization as part of the push for radical political change. As Alison Donnell has convincingly shown, such imperatives meant emphasis was placed upon works that were politically engaged and spoke to the social situation, resulting in the production of a literary field which canonised those texts that chimed with the cultural nationalist moment while excluding those less amenable to this agenda (Donnell 2006, 27–43). At the same time, as noted earlier, the foregrounding of nationalist issues led to the marginalization of gender concerns, which were construed as not integral to the national struggle but as something separate to be dealt with later lest they distort the nationalist focus. According to Hilary Beckles, even some “feminist historians were swept along by the compelling tide of a hegemonic male representation of the nationalist project. While their participation in the discourse was guided by considerations of intellectual decolonization and nation-building, they applied brakes to the advancing theoretical critique of patriarchy in order to facilitate the suppression of political dissonance” (1995, 125). What was obscured by this masculinist framework was “the fact that for Caribbean women as historical subjects the struggles of nationalism were always gendered and the struggles of women’s rights were always informed by the politics of race and colonialism” (Donnell 2006, 147). In *Jane and Louisa*, this integral connection between gender politics and national politics is made clear, central as it is to Brodber’s re-visioning of community and nationhood, and to the laying bare of the

shortcomings of those anti-colonial ideologies that perpetuate the patriarchal categorisation of women.

Jane and Louisa describes the protagonist Nellie's attempts to reconstruct her family history and, more generally, to reconnect to her community and society. The novel is framed by lines from the children's ring game alluded to in the title. In the first section, "My Dear Will You Allow Me", the narrative records fragmentary voices and snippets of childhood experience. The second section, "To Waltz With You", is a more chronologically straightforward account of Nellie's involvement in radical politics and her traumatic breakdown. The third and fourth sections, "Into This Beautiful Garden" and "Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home", return to the events and experiences introduced in the first part as Nellie seeks to come to terms with her past. The central image in the text is that of the kumbla, the ambivalent significance of which reveals the complex network of values that — freighted with the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and differing in their impact according to the varying race and class positions of those affected — weigh on the bodies of the novel's female characters. Described as a "round seamless calabash that protects you without caring" (Brodber 1980, 123), the kumbla represents the strategies by which women shield themselves against such pressures. At the same time, however, it signifies the detrimental impact these strategies can have on the body and self they encase: "[T]he trouble with the kumbla is the getting out of the kumbla. . . . If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate. Makes you albino: skin white but not by genes" (130).

The ambivalence of this potentially damaging form of protection can be traced back to the status of the black female body under slavery. As Rhonda Cobham observes in the following passage:

Historically, the Black woman in the New World has always been associated with qualities such as physical strength, sexual independence, and economic resourcefulness. These qualities were imposed on her as part of her status as non-person (and therefore non-woman) during slavery but, like the kumblas of Brodber's vision, the disfigurement functioned dialectically to protect and extend African traditions of female independence and physical prowess. (1993, 52)

Here the protective devices assumed in and against the plantation system do provide resources for survival and a route to self-expression. However, in a testament to the complexity and ambiguity of such identifications, these resources are at equal risk of slipping into a denial of elements of selfhood and of the social background that conditioned them. This is particularly so in certain class contexts where such denial becomes conformity to colonial bourgeois norms. Again, these problems have their roots in the legacies of the physical and ideological violence perpetrated on the plantation, where the colonizer's disgusted fascination with the "transgressive" black female body, born from a mixture of lust and fear, fed into the desire to contain it. This containment — part of a strategy to repress the cultural practices of the enslaved, to negate their rituals, traditions, and material crafts as sites of a resistant history — was passed off

under the guise of the so-called civilising mission (the subordination of bodily impulses by the rational mind having been established in European Enlightenment discourse as the marker of civility). While the invidious nature of this “mission” was soon exposed by the violence of slavery, several of its ideological pillars did persist: the association of “civility” with the repression of the body became entrenched, forming part of a series of homologous binary oppositions that pitched high against low, the refined against the vulgar, the written against the spoken, the masculine against the feminine, and the European against the African.⁸ In this schema, the “vulgar body of knowledge produced by the people . . . is devalued” (Cooper 1993, 8), while the “vulgar” body of the Black woman emerges as an especially overdetermined site of stigmatization.

Jane and Louisa illustrates the way in which these values have saturated the thinking of the Jamaican bourgeoisie depicted in the novel. For this group, the protective device of closing oneself off all too easily becomes a distortion of selfhood determined by colonial norms. The character of Aunt Becca represents just this kind of respectability-through-repression. Her grandmother, Tia Maria, sought to erase her own black body from the family history; and Aunt Becca has continued in this vein: her “shaming eye” rules over the family, on the lookout for any perceived (especially sexual) impropriety. Her strict and censorious manner is reflected in her buttoned-down appearance:

Aunt Becca’s crinkly hair scooped away from her face, stuck out in a point barely touching the top of her shoulder like a fish tail in a trapped hair net. . . . Aunt Becca’s round, brown self, her thin lips pursed together like a shrivelled star apple. Aunt Becca’s fish eyes shamed everyone into unworthiness. (92–93)

However, Aunt Becca’s demeanour indicates also the level of censure she works on herself. The pinched posture of her body emphasises the self-denial that has left her “shrivelled” and desiccated. Indeed, it emerges that such imagery has a literal complement: Aunt Becca has become sterile after aborting a child by Mass Tanny in order to be able to marry the more “respectable” schoolteacher Pinnock.

Nellie too is affected by the pressures that have so ingrained themselves into Aunt Becca’s habitus. Having gone to live with the latter in town, Nellie is shown “where to find and how to wear my kumbla” (142). “Those people,” says Aunt Becca, meaning the poorer classes and men in particular, “will drag you down child. You have to be careful of them” (142). While such advice and the refuge provided by Aunt Becca’s home allow Nellie to concentrate on her education, she becomes alienated from her own body:

So the black womb is a maw. Disinfect its fruits with fine sterilised white lint if you can. You suck a wasp’s sting from a child’s hand, clear its nose of the bluish green blockage and spit. The black womb sucks grief and anger and shame but it does not spit. It absorbs them

⁸ On the wider impact of these homologies, especially as they impact on the black female body, see Cooper (1993), 1–36.

into its body. Take an antidote. Silence it. Best pretend it doesn't exist. Give it a cap of darkness, take a pill (143).

The consequence of such repression and internal self-mutilation is an individual and collective neurosis, the impact of which is registered in Nellie's own eventual breakdown.

Emphasising that any resolution to these problems must be sought on a political and social level, and not just in the domain of individual psychology, Brodber weaves the story of Nellie's traumatic collapse into an account of her involvement with a group committed to a form of radical politics. Although events in the novel are not dated explicitly, the group's enthusiasm for Marxism and Black Power suggests the context is that of the Jamaica of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a tide of radicalism swept over the country in reaction to economic difficulties and disappointment with the post-independence political settlement.⁹ While such radicalism was vital in challenging the status quo, Nellie's group reveal themselves to be just as alienated from the community they seek to represent as Nellie is from her cultural background. Indeed, there is something of the ambivalence of the *kumbla* evident here: the group's ideological debates form a protective vessel around their ideals of change, yet serve too as a barrier to establishing the kind of connection to those in the tenement yard with whom they live that would facilitate this change. Their approach to political radicalism is an abstract, theoretical one that only drives a wedge between themselves and the popular classes:

We have unfortunately to make a distinction between them and us. Those people throw dice, slam dominoes and give-laugh-for-peasoup all day long. . . . They have no culture at all. No interest in helping their leaders keep their heads up high. We get no co-operation from them. How will we ever lead them out in the right and proper way (51).

This denial of the culture of those they claim to lead underscores the failings of the group. The portrayal of their inadequacy can be viewed as a more general critique of those forms of nationalist politics that break the dialectical link to the mass of the people. Their complacent talk of leadership recalls the approach to revolutionary nationalism rebuked by Fanon, for whom the "relationship between 'the masses' and 'intellectuals who are highly conscious and armed with revolutionary principles' is not to be viewed from the standpoint of elitist assumptions about leaders and led, seekers and followers, shepherds and sheep" (Lazarus 1999, 102). If the new social structures that emerge are to do so out of and in relation to the practices and culture of the "masses", then this

⁹ The late 1960s and early 1970s in Jamaica (as in many other Caribbean countries) was a period of great social unrest and revolutionary upheaval. There were widespread disturbances, particularly in the urban working class area of West Kingston. These were "fanned by the teaching of militant Black Power advocates heavily influenced by the Black Power movement in the United States of America, but also, as a University of the West Indies report noted, by the blending of Marxist analysis and what they termed 'the ideology of Rastafari racism'" (Maingot 2004, 318).

dialectical link is crucial. Only thus will political representation by the “elite” not just be in good faith but point towards the thoroughgoing transformation of society.

However, the group’s failings also point to the limitations of any nationalist project that does not tackle issues of gender and the subordination of women (itself articulated differently across class and colour lines). Nellie begins to grasp this problem after the death of her lover Robin, whose radical fervour causes him to self-combust. She recognises that the group’s very approach to the social world promotes their own disconnection and reification: “Suddenly, it struck me that our path led to desiccation. We were bent on exterminating water . . . Robin had reached our highest phase of evolution: he had become a dried up bird and could only crumble into dust” (53). This emphasis on the dryness and sterility of the group’s politics, as a result of their abstraction from the everyday practices of the wider community, foregrounds the link to that denial of the female body explored earlier in the novel, and in particular to the literal sterility of Aunt Becca. As such, it underscores how the latter’s psychopathological relationship to her body is also a national–political problem: full decolonization must include the decolonization of the psyche, a process inextricable from the dismantling of the patriarchal frameworks imposed upon women. In both the political and personal contexts — in fact inseparable — it is, to borrow Carolyn Cooper’s terminology again, the “vulgar” popular body of the people, and in particular the doubly stigmatized female body, that must be reincorporated to transform that politically abstract or personally ‘respectable’ (and in both cases desiccated) condition. Any project for progressive change, if it is to bear fruit, must be grounded in this revalorised “low” materiality, integrating the reconstruction of gender relations such revalorisation presupposes.

Interestingly, the way in which Brodber’s novel exposes the limitations of a radical politics that fails to take these imperatives into account can also be read as establishing a critique of the literary/critical field of the 1960s and ’70s, a critique effected through the mediation of the wider Caribbean literary field within the text itself. Cobham points out that certain early Jamaican and Trinidadian works of fiction — the barrack-yard stories of the 1930s, for example — feature strong, independent female characters whose “masculine” traits serve to erode gender boundaries. “The existence of such representations,” argues Cobham, “acknowledges the tenacity with which the first generation of Black women after emancipation fought for the right to an independent and emotionally satisfying existence for themselves” (1993, 53). However, she goes on to note their “disappearance from later Caribbean fiction, or their truncation into stereotypes in the work of the nationalist writers of the 1950s and 1960s,” pointing out that this “did not mean they had ceased to exist. Rather it reflects the ambivalence of the emergent Black elite, from whose ranks these writers were drawn, about their connection with a female tradition so at odds with the normative gender roles of their new class” (53). With this in mind, Brodber’s depiction of the failure of Nellie’s radical group to make the necessary connection to the “masses” in the tenement yard, which is bound up with their failure to integrate the “vulgar” female body into their political thinking, could be understood as the translation into the logic of the literary field of that gender blindness which marked many of the literary/critical debates of the 1960s and ’70s. The history of female agency and the struggle for women’s rights (as part of, not separate from, the

struggle against colonialism) is translated into that literary history of strong, independent female characters, a history figured here by the tenement yard — a location that recalls the earlier barrack-yard stories — and its female inhabitants. As textual figures, in other words, the tenement yard and Nellie's group of radical middle-class intellectuals are literary mediations of particular politics of gender. Hence, the failure of Nellie's group to connect to the yard, as the sign for a history of female agency, represents both the occlusion of this history in the work of nationalist writers and critics, and the subsequent gender blindness that characterised the attempt to define the Caribbean cultural field.

The necessity of engaging with such gender issues in order to achieve the progressive transformation of the personal and the political, as well as to rethink the cultural field, is figured by Nellie's reconciliation with the inhabitants of the tenement yard as the prelude to overcoming her psychic fragmentation. Her reintegration into the community (the "vulgar" popular body) is effected via Baba Ruddock, himself one of those "vulgar" boys stigmatized by Aunt Becca when Nellie was young as likely to "drag you down child." When Baba and Nellie meet as adults, she recognises that in contrast to the dried up members of her political group, he "still had oodles of moisture" (68). And it is he who paves the way for her being healed by those in the yard she had previously dismissed as having "no culture at all." As we will see in a moment, central to this healing process is Nellie's coming to terms with her own repressed "vulgar" corporeality. First, however, I want to turn to the way this emphasis on the body as integral to the attempt to reconfigure self and society returns us to the question of literary form and the shape of the Caribbean literary field. More specifically, it raises the issue of how the unique character of the latter underpins the novel's ability to incorporate formally this bodily imperative.

Earlier we saw how the Caribbean literary field, refracting a precocious and uneven modernity, is distinguished by an overlap of genres confronted simultaneously, something manifested in the mix of narrative techniques deployed in Brodber's novel. However, as the earlier references to her use of oral forms might suggest, the uniqueness of this literary field is not confined to its internal structure: the relationship between it and other fields must also be seen differently from similar relationships in the European context. For in the Caribbean, the literary field is not exclusively "literary"; it also contains, or overlaps with, non-canonical or non-literary forms that have historically provided a means of expression in the region, often emerging as a bearer of identity or culture when other outlets have been restricted — most obviously during the time of slavery. These forms of course include the aforementioned oral discourses, storytelling practices and proverbs, as well as musical forms like calypso or *tambor*, and religious practices such as Vodou, Santería, Shango, and Myal, in addition to rituals like Carnival, *damier*, and stickfighting. The Caribbean literary field draws on and is enmeshed in these cultural fields, producing narrative styles informed by the above practices — many of which are practices revolving around bodily movement as a means of communication. This marks a crucial point of difference from the structure of similar fields in Europe. There, a greater separation has been maintained between the spheres, with the literary field often construed as decisively removed from other fields — an idea that reached its apogee with the ideology of the autonomy of the aesthetic in European modernism, which

disavowed any connection between the artwork and other kinds of social life or experience.¹⁰

The key point here, of course, is that such autonomy is itself the result of historical processes, having as its condition of possibility wider changes in the social world. The expansion of capitalism from the sixteenth century onwards meant the increasing rationalisation of society, whereby “the traditional or ‘natural’ [*naturwüchsige*] unities, social forms, human relations, cultural events, even religious systems, are broken up in order to be reconstructed more efficiently in the form of post-natural processes or mechanisms; but in which, at the same time, these now isolated broken bits and pieces of the older unities acquire a certain autonomy of their own” (Jameson 1981, 48). The separation of nature from culture integral to this process of autonomisation was inextricable from the entrenchment of the division between mind and body, with the corporeal now subject to increasing regulation as part of the reprogramming of the individual for insertion into the capitalist economy. These transformations were registered too in the intellectual sphere, the ever more formalised division and ordering of knowledge resulting in the growing autonomisation of the disciplines.¹¹ Likewise, the eighteenth century in Europe saw the development of the concept of literature in its modern form, the consequence in part of a process of specialisation in response to “the socially repressive and intellectually mechanical forms of a new social order: that of capitalism and especially industrial capitalism” (Williams 1977, 50). The nature of this reaction however — the demarcation of ‘literature’ as the “relatively removed but again ‘higher’ dimension”— set the stage for that denial of comparability between a supposedly transcendent literary realm and other levels of social life (Williams 1977, 147). An autonomous sphere of “high” literature had necessarily to position itself against “low” cultural forms and practices, and so by extension against the body, itself categorised as “low” materiality in opposition to the elevated dimension of the mind.

Significantly, the processes driving this autonomisation of areas of social life were inextricable from the colonial project, not only in terms of that economic link between European industrialisation and plantation slavery, but also in relation to the kinds of organisational practices and justificatory ideologies surrounding the latter. Most notably, the regulation and containment of the body in Europe, alongside the reduction of the corporeal to “low” matter, had its extreme and bloody underside revealed in the colonies. Here the veiled institutional coercion behind the production of monadic subjects became the naked violence of slavery, with the discourse of the “civilising mission” its pathetic fig leaf, and the declared need to “tame” the “wild” bodies of the enslaved being but a reflection of the concern to neutralise the potential for resistance and stifle the claims to historical agency carried in the subjects’ cultural practices.

¹⁰ On the ideology of the autonomisation of the aesthetic in European modernity, see Jameson (2002).

¹¹ Indeed, for certain modes of enquiry this was the moment of their emergence as disciplines. On this and the increasing division and ordering of knowledge more generally, see Foucault (2002).

Given the connections between the demands of capital, the autonomisation of levels of social experience (including the more rigorous separation of intellectual disciplines), the containment and regulation of the body in the colonies, and the denial of cultural practice as a denial of historicity, it is possible I believe to see why the overlap and merging of cultural and literary fields might take on a particular significance in the context of the Caribbean's involvement in modernity. Not only does it allow for the expression of the irruptive precocity and uneven development that characterised this involvement; it is also what enables the articulation of alternative models of community and selfhood. Those "low" cultural and corporeal practices, as the repositories of a world view radically different from that promulgated by colonialism, must be incorporated into literary and other intellectual discourses. Only thus can a full sense of the Caribbean past — including the agency of those whose historicity is excluded in colonial/imperial frameworks — be recovered. To uphold the rigid segregation of forms of social and cultural life, and so too of the intellectual disciplines, would be to perpetuate the occlusion of vital areas of historical experience. It is not only the narratives constructed by the colonizer that distort and repress: the partitioning and reification of the fields in which these narratives are located has the same effect also.

It is for this reason that so much work by Caribbean writers looks to exceed disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. Glissant, for example, has argued explicitly for an approach to history that moves beyond the customary understanding of this mode of enquiry. The destructive impact of colonialism and the imposition of a non-history mean that a history other than that narrative of loss and deprivation is not always self-evident. "Because the collective memory was too often wiped out," he contends, "the Caribbean writer must 'dig deep' into this memory, following the latent signs that he has picked up in the everyday world" (1989, 64). These "latent signs" (contained in routine cultural practices, for example) provide a gateway into the submerged consciousness of the community, otherwise imperceptible to conventional historiography. From such traces, that which has seemingly been "wiped out" can be reconstructed. And it is here that history begins to overlap with fiction — itself transformed in the process — as a way to achieve this reconstruction:

As far as we are concerned, history as a consciousness at work and history as lived experience are therefore not the business of historians exclusively. Literature for us will not be divided into genres but will implicate all the perspectives of the human sciences. These inherited categories must not in this matter be an obstacle to a daring new methodology, where it responds to the needs of our situation.

(Glissant 1989, 65).

Brodber herself, in her role as a social anthropologist, has stressed the importance of going beyond the bounds of conventional historiography in order to create a social history of the Caribbean (Brodber 1983). *Jane and Louisa* participates in this project. Originating in another intellectual field, the novel's initial purpose was "to serve as a case study of the dissociative personality for [Brodber's] social work students" (O'Callaghan 1983, 61). This crossing of disciplinary borders not only bears out Glissant's conception

of a literature that “will implicate all the perspectives of the human sciences”, but also emphasises the crucial role the imagination can play in Caribbean historiography. For as O’Callaghan notes, Brodber’s novel can be seen as “a therapeutic exercise, a case-study of sorts, with the therapeutic tool being the process of ‘going back’ to the past” (1983, 61). Engaged in a “digging up” of the collective memory of the community, the narrative — as its use of oral tales and folk traditions indicates — looks to forms of cultural practice to unearth legacies that might otherwise remain overlooked in conventional historiography. By so doing, it is able to enact within itself that which it suggests is required to overcome psychological and political blockages so as to refashion understandings of community and nationhood.

This is illustrated most clearly through the healing process Nellie undergoes in the tenement yard. Significant are the elements of religious and ritual practice associated here with this process. The novel not only shows their importance to the life of the community, but also registers the influence of the religious field formally: the resources and traditions connected to this field provide both a means to unbind Nellie from the once protective integument that now stifles her and a way for the text to narrate the resolution of this contradiction between security and freedom. Nellie’s experiences take the form of a disintegration of the psyche and a descent into madness in which her body is felt precisely as a constrictive husk, one that she begins to scratch at until tearing her skin. Yet her breakdown is also an opportunity to break out of the kumbla; it offers the possibility of being reborn through and into the community, as well as of connecting both to her own “vulgar” corporeality and to that history of female emancipatory agency, the literary mediation of which the tenement yard serves as a figure for. After losing consciousness at the height of her mania, Nellie awakens with a new sense of the people around her, of the texture of life in the yard. Her convalescence “[a]mid the smell of beef soup and ginger tea, the commotion of tipping toes and tired thoughts” (67) becomes a rediscovery of her body and a renewal of her muted sensorium. At the same time, it signals the start of a return to and a re-examination of the past. One of the defining moments of this “physical and spiritual rebirth”, observes Cobham, comes when Nellie ventures into a dance hall and the sounds of the voices and movements of the people around her “merge into a seamless fabric of humanity in which the lines of demarcation between human bodies are no longer of importance” (Cobham1993: 59). It is after this experience that the novel circles back to those incidents alluded to in the fractured prose of the first section, seeking at last to make sense of their implications.

Given the historical importance of bodily movement as a vital repository of memory, it is clearly significant that it is at the dance hall that Nellie establishes a sensual connection to the community and begins her retrieval of history. On the level of structure, moreover, her path from psychic disintegration to rebirth can be read as patterned on the trajectory marked out in various Afro-Caribbean religious practices. Central to a number of these practices, including Vodou, Santería, and — most pertinently in the context of Jamaica — Myal, is the temporary displacement of an individual’s consciousness as part of the rites of possession, a voiding of the self aimed at opening up a gateway to the spirit world and enabling the manifestation of the ancestors. In Myal, the “ecstatic trance” of possession “allows for the possibility of a direct interaction between ancestral spirits and

the living, who in turn become the spirits' vehicles for prophecy, healing, advice, and revenge" (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003, 144). Drawing on these resources, *Jane and Louisa* finds a way to organise the painful shards of experience introduced in the first section which mark Nellie and her family's history, but point also to the conditions incubated by uneven development and the pressures and excisions of colonialism.

What I want to suggest, then, is that the novel's form works this ritual practice on its content — on Nellie's experiences. It turns her madness, which significantly sees her become a "public spectacle" (65), into a voiding of consciousness that renders her a vessel through which (like the possessed in Myal) the past is manifested. By way of this rite, Nellie is unbound from the kumbla and reincorporated into the community. But she is also enabled to reconnect to her own and a collective history: the immersion in the past facilitated by ritual, during which "linear time dips down into the reservoir of collective experience and repairs the apparent fissure between then and now" (Spiller qtd. in Juneja 1996, 59), allows Nellie to bring to light the repressed legacies of her childhood and organise them into a coherent structure in which the problems of the present can be made sense of now in relation to the pressures of history. Critically, this means of organising — of coming to terms with — the past pulls that personal world into the communal; it of necessity motivates the working out of conflicts in the social domain rather than re-privatising them in the psychology of the individual (an approach that would perpetuate the enclosure of the self in the shell of the privatised monadic subject instituted by capitalist modernity). As the "public" nature of her breakdown emphasises, Nellie's disintegration and recovery become a restaging for the whole community of the difficulties from which it suffers; the working through of her vexed history entails the simultaneous working through of a vexed collective history.¹² Discussing the displacement of the ego of the *serviteur* during possession rites in Vodou, Maya Deren notes as follows:

In the growing control accomplished by the ordeals and instructions of initiation, and in the prospective vigilance of houngan and *société*, he [the *serviteur*] is reassured that the personal price need not be unpredictable or excessive. In the principle of collective participation is the guarantee that the burden shall, in turn, be distributed and shared
(1983, 249–50).

The ritual act reaffirms the dialectical link between the individual and the community: the individual is temporarily "lost" with the voiding of the ego but simultaneously "gained"

¹² The way in which Nellie's madness here becomes a public spectacle that plays out for the community its own vexed history corresponds to Glissant's analysis of routine verbal delirium in Martinican society. Of the four types of delirium he identifies, Glissant highlights that of *théâtralisation* or dramatisation as having a potentially progressive effect since it enables its sufferers to externalise the "torment of history," acting out the repressed conflicts and disjunctions lived by the community (Glissant 1981, 655).

to the community, leading in turn to a renewal of the self through the support of the collective, which is itself strengthened in the process. Something similar underpins *Jane and Louisa*, where Nellie's integration into, and healing by, the tenement yard folk opens the way to the reappraisal and revitalisation of the community.

Thus, the uneven development and overlap of realities that characterises the Caribbean's involvement in modernity — the coexistence of late capitalist structures alongside other forms of social organisation — is here refracted through the “literary” field (itself not purely “literary” in the conventional sense, as we have seen) to be retranslated into an overlap of “formal realities”. The novel form, which (when it emerged as a process of narrative mimesis in an industrialising Europe) had as its “historic function” the “secular ‘decoding’ of those pre-existing inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms that are its initial givens” (Jameson 1981, 138), here coexists with just such sacred paradigms, with narrative patterns derived from forms of religious experience. *Jane and Louisa* works out of this overlap. By integrating into its structure those religio-cultural resources and elements of ritual, the text is able to posit on the level of form the utopian resolution of that contradiction between security of self and freedom amongst others — between protecting the female body and asserting oneself in society. The dialectical relationship between individual and community enacted in ritual practice points to the way in which the kumbla could be shed and yet protection maintained in the shape of the renewed communal body. But this image of utopian resolution indicates also the concrete changes required for its fulfilment. It becomes clear, especially when read against that explicitly political narrative strand concerning the failure of the group of radical intellectuals with whom Nellie is involved, that the “communal body”, by which is meant the devalued “vulgar” body of popular knowledge and experience, must be legitimised and afforded structural viability; and for this to be truly successful, the Black woman must have an equal and independent place within it. Any project aimed at social reconstruction has therefore to establish these “vulgar” bodies as the ground upon which to erect itself. In “literary” terms, *Jane and Louisa* performs this same political manoeuvre: it too draws on such “vulgarity”. Its form incorporates and valorises ritual practice, making this integral to the reassembly of its own fractured “body” — those early fragmented chapters — in the final sections of the novel. As cultural production, then, it crosses into the political field, constructing a form able not only to articulate the complex legacies of colonialism and uneven development, but also to recuperate and reaffirm a history that provides the resources to rethink and reshape the national body politic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beckles, Hilary. "Sex and Gender in the Historiography of Caribbean Slavery". In *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, edited by Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1995.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Brodber, Erna. *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. London: New Beacon Books, 1980.
- . "Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History of the Caribbean". *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4(1983): 2–11
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Texaco*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- . *Texaco*. Translated by Rose-Myriam Rejouis and Val Vinokurov. London: Granta Books, 1997.
- Cobham, Rhonda. 1993. "Revisioning Our Kumblas: Transforming Feminist and Nationalist Agendas in Three Caribbean Women's Texts". *Callaloo* 16, no.1 (Winter 2001): 44–64.
- Cooper, Carolyn. "Afro-Jamaican Folk Elements in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*". In *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990.
- . *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan, 1993.
- Cross, Malcolm. *Urbanization and urban growth in the Caribbean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Donnell, Alison. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Fernández Olmos, Margarite and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge, 2002.

- Frank, Andre Gunder. *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Le Discours Antillais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- . *Caribbean Discourse*. Translated by J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989.
- Holt, Thomas C. *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labour and Politics in Jamaica, 1832–1938*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge, 1981.
- . *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Juneja, Renu. *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature*. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1996.
- Lazarus, Neil. *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Letchimy, Serge. *De l'habitat précaire a la ville: L'exemple Martiniquais*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992.
- Maingot, Anthony P. "Political Processes in the Caribbean, 1970s-2000". In *General History of the Caribbean. Volume V: The Caribbean in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Bridget Brereton. London and Oxford: Macmillan and UNESCO, 2004.
- Mintz, Sydney. *Caribbean Transformations*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1974.
- . "The So-Called World-System: Local Initiative and Local Response". *Dialectical Anthropology* 2 (1977): 253–70.
- . "Goodbye Columbus: Second Thoughts on the Caribbean Region at Millennium". Warwick: Centre for Caribbean Studies, 1993.
- . "Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: The Caribbean Region as Oikoumene". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 289–311.
- O'Callaghan, Evelyn. "Re-discovering the Natives of My Person: A Review of Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*". *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 3 (1983): 61–64.

Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972.

Rohlehr, Gordon. "The Folk in Caribbean Literature". In *Critics on Caribbean Literature*, edited by Edward Baugh. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978.

Scott, David. "Modernity that Predated the Modern: Sidney Mintz's Caribbean"
History Workshop Journal 58 (2004): 191–210

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.