

*Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion.* JUNE E. ROBERTS. Westport CT: Praeger, 2006. xiv + 278 pp. (Cloth US\$ 94.95)

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In her recent *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, Alison Donnell deplores the critical neglect of the writers "who retained an island base in terms of the focus of their work" (2006:86), Jamaican Erna Brodber among them. As the first book-length study of this major literary voice, June E. Roberts's *Reading Erna Brodber* is a welcome addition to the field of Caribbean literary criticism. The purpose of this dense, occasionally abstruse volume is to demonstrate the aesthetic and ideological originality of a writer who is not only "engaged in the act of redefining the novel" (p. xii) but, as a radical "intellectual worker" (p. ix), has also developed her own folk-based approach to the Caribbean diasporic discourse.

This book is organized in two sections. The first one, made up of five chapters, is devoted to an extensive contextualization of Brodber's work. It examines its revisionism in relation to the tradition of Caribbean literature as a whole, in particular that of women writers, and illuminates the interdisciplinary nature of Brodber's writing by focusing on the movements that have shaped it, especially Rastafarianism, black nationalism, and African spirituality. The argument throughout is that Brodber's unique, revolutionary aesthetic is informed by an indigenous folk culture which needs to be taken into account if one wants to fully understand the writer's fictions. Nevertheless, insightful and well informed as it may be, Roberts's attempt to depict Brodber's intellectual background is only partly successful, for her account tends to be repetitive and to lack clarity, not only because of a refusal to simplify the Jamaican writer's complex agenda. In addition, if *Reading Erna Brodber* provides an informative overview of Caribbean literature and of Brodber's place in it, it also contains inaccuracies – for example, when it lists Caryl Phillips among women writers on p. 36 (while describing him as a male writer on p. 50) or when, on p. 52, it says that *Myal* won the "esteemed Booker Prize for literature" (it was the Caribbean and Canadian Regional Winner in the 1989 Commonwealth Writers' Prize).

The second part of the book, comprising eight chapters, provides closer readings of Brodber's fiction, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980),

*Myal* (1988), and *Louisiana* (1994), three nonlinear novels which “attempt to create a new social history of the Caribbean experience” (p. 126). The first one, originally meant as a case study for Jamaican social workers, dramatizes the spiritual healing of Nellie, a young middle-class Jamaican of mixed ancestry suffering from cultural schizophrenia, and celebrates the crucial role played by black vernacular culture, including orality, in the construction of “a healthy diasporan identity” (pp. 100-101). However, *Jane and Louisa* can also be read, Roberts points out, as a political allegory of a nation which needs to overcome its Manichean social system and as an engagement on Brodber’s part with the 1968 Walter Rodney affair. Roberts further surveys Brodber’s methodological choices, which are meant to “achieve communalism” (p. 90), and dwells in particular on the symbol of the *kumbla*, an ambiguous trope, both prison and cocoon, and on Brodber’s allusive prose which refers, as in the title, to a traditional ring game, but also to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and to Zora Neale Hurston, a major influence on Brodber. Reading *Myal* requires a good knowledge of the Afro-based religious system that developed in Jamaica in the wake of slavery. Roberts therefore explains at length the “dialectical tension between good and evil” (p. 144), between Myalism and Obeah, that affects the spiritual awakening in the 1920s of Brodber’s heroine Ella, the victim of colonial and patriarchal “spirit thievery,” who is eventually rescued by a group of black and white Myalists who communicate telepathically. Roberts’s extensive discussion of the novel also includes a focus on its secondary plot, Anita’s story of rape and incest, on the functional role of this novel as an incentive to revise Jamaica’s educational system, and, interestingly if more marginally, on the similarities between Ella’s background and Bob Marley’s. If in *Myal* Brodber already brings the Caribbean and African-American diasporas together through its heroine’s experience of passing, it is in *Louisiana*, however, that she fully develops this fruitful parallelism, focusing this time on another aspect of African religiosity, spirit possession. This third novel focuses on a young anthropologist, first called Ella then Louisiana, who ends up a conduit for two dead Garveyites, Louise and Anna, two “cross-diasporic spirit sisters” (p. 238). Roberts reads *Louisiana* as an “allegorical revision” (p. 223) of the life of Zola Neale Hurston, both a writer and a researcher interested in African diasporic folklore, like Brodber herself, and she devotes many pages to arguing this comparison. She also demonstrates that the novel promotes a “decolonization of anthropology” (p. 264) at the same time as it operates a conciliatory reunification of various currents of diasporic thought, chiefly represented by Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois.

The strong point of this otherwise loosely argued study – which also contains several irritating typos – is the way in which it illuminates the “cultural tapestry” (p. 212) woven by Brodber’s fiction. *Reading Erna Brodber* is also impressively wide-ranging. Yet it is to be regretted that it does not include

Brodber’s 2003 collection of lectures, *The Continent of Black Consciousness*, a book that constitutes an interesting complement to the fiction of a truly remarkable writer.

## REFERENCES

- BRODBER, ERNA, 2003. *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day*. London: New Beacon Books.
- DONNELL, ALISON, 2006. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*. London: Routledge.