

THOSE WHO INSIST ON BE(COME)ING:  
CARIBBEAN SUBJECTS AND THE TASK OF TRANSLATING IDENTITY

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If we take note of and question the historical and geographic differentiation of the subject as such, there is no possibility of that second step. The possibility of the production of a native informant by way of the colonial/postcolonial route and thus, ultimately, books such as this one is lodged in the fact that, for the real needs of imperialism, the in-choate in-fans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorized as functionally *completely* frozen in a world where teleology is schematized into geo-graphy (writing the world). This limited being-human is the itinerary of the native informant into the post-colonial, which remains unrecognized through various transformations of the discussion of both ethics and ethnicity. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Critique of Postcolonial Reason 30)

Imagining the Impossible: Being and Caribbean Epistemology

Spivak's emphasis on the "historical and geographic differentiation of the subject" (30) takes us to the heart of the 'Quarrel with History.' The obsessive effort to demarcate (cultural, phenotypical, and geographical / regional) differences between subjects formed the bases for writing the world by classifying subjects into races of men. The disagreement with history writ large lies in the impossibility of entrance for black subjects into this system of signs that determines who and what will be recorded and recognized as present (and, therefore, relevant) in the formation of discourses on History. If, as Spivak asserts, "the project of initiation into humanity is rather the project of culture, civil legislation, and faith" (30), then rethinking how we understand culture will be a crucial step in this process of be(come)ing. The importance of revising not only *how* we read history but to what ends history is read becomes the baggage that will accompany the 'native informant' on her trip into being-human, without limitations. Although civil societies depend largely on these limitations in order to concretize themselves as the alternative to the Other (uncivilised) societies, the legislative terms of negotiation for admittance seem relatively inflexible.

The idea of 're-thinking' how we understand culture places a challenging, but very necessary, intellectual project before Caribbean writers. If nothing else, the reality of post-Prospero existence has created an opening for colonial subjects to begin to re-imagine their relationship to an 'Elsewhere' (England, and recently, the United States of America) that dominated their imaginations and realities. In order to 'rethink' their epistemic relationship to Caribbean culture, writers needed to re-invent and (dis)form their ways of knowing and their interpretative tools for reading and representing themselves in relationship to this culture. I am appropriating Ronald Judy's term '(dis)forming' in order to construct a paradigm for re-thinking cultural identity in a Caribbean context.<sup>1</sup> In his book, (Dis)forming the American Canon, Judy deploys this term in an effort to situate an intellectual project aimed at thinking about culture differently, as something other than what he refers to as the "unilinear transmission of Reason from Europe to the Americas" (1). For Judy, '(dis)forming' is an intellectual project aimed at disrupting the "integrity of the dominant discourse of American cultural history" (1) by "articulating the multifarious possibilities of expression that constitute the legacy of the New World" (1).

My engagement with this term, while very similar to Judy's, focuses on another aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Judy uses this term within the context of his discussion of African-Arab slave narratives, a discussion aimed at rethinking "materiality as well as the historical" (29) in African and African American cultural production.

'(dis)forming,' one aimed at examining the implications of canonized epistemes and their impact on the nature of Being for peoples in the New World. This concept, therefore, offers two significant critical interventions into contemporary debates about Caribbean culture. Firstly, '(dis)formation' offers interpretative strategies for unpacking the processes through which discursive formations have historically served as a means of inhibiting critical considerations about the nature of Being for colonial subjects in the New World. This essay examines how the processes of (dis)forming provide another lens for reading colonial discourses that have informed constructions of Caribbean identity and also worked to simultaneously foreclose the possibility of *Becoming* for colonial subjects. This foreclosure has created what Spivak refers to as "limited access to being human" (30).

Secondly, my engagement with the concept of (dis)forming is an effort to map and translate the imaginative terrain in which contemporary narratives of transmigratory identities are situated. More specifically, I want to consider the function of the imagination for black subjects attempting to make their being-in-the-world intelligible in the face of hundreds of years of scientific research that categorized blacks as 'non-human' beings. These scientific and cultural claims were founded on tenets which included the (in)ability to create art, to reason, and last, but not least, an (in)ability to appreciate beauty, to exercise aesthetic judgment. A cursory glance at some of the ideological underpinnings of the Enlightenment period is necessary here in order to situate the political, cultural, and philosophical stakes involved in contemporary debates about representing identity in the Black Diaspora. The authoritative discourses that emerged during the Enlightenment made any ontological existence beyond the 'first encounter' of 1492 impossible for colonial subjects. In other words, the possibility of becoming (a Being) depended on inhabiting a new epistemic *vrai*, one not limited by the historical events of Columbus' invasion, but open to the expansiveness of the imagination.<sup>2</sup>

The need for such a consideration, as I suggested earlier, arises not simply out of a need for something 'new' but from the emergence of socio-historical circumstances that demand more expansive interpretations. These new forms of knowing, as Cornelius Castoriadis asserts in The Imaginary Institution of Society, need to be explored as realistic alternatives to inherited ways of thinking and knowing. In an effort to engage the problematic of the question of society and that of history, Castoriadis asserts that the two need to be taken into consideration as one and the same: the question of the social-historical. "Inherited ways of thinking," he writes,

can make only fragmentary contributions to this elucidation of the question of society and that of history. Perhaps this contribution is mostly negative, marking out the limits of a mode of thought and exposing its impossibilities. . . . *On the one hand, the inherited way of thinking has never been able to separate out the true object of this question and to consider it for itself.* This object has almost always been split into a society, related to something other than itself and, generally, to a norm, end or *telos* grounded in something else, and a history, considered as something that happens to this society, as a disturbance in relation to a given norm or as an organic or dialectical

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Wynter cites Foucault's use of the term 'vrai' in his discussion of the discursive limitations in various disciplines. In a lecture entitled "The Order of Discourse," delivered in December 1970 and published as an Appendix to the Archeology of Knowledge, Foucault notes that Mendel's findings about genetic heredity were not "hearable at first because they were not within the 'vrai' of the discipline at the time" (qtd. in Wynter 369). Like Foucault, Wynter uses this term to highlight the extent to which forms of knowledge are not recognizable when considered within the limited discourses that are available to a given field of knowledge at a particular historical moment.

development towards this norm or *telos*. In this way the object in question, the being proper to the social-historical, is constantly shifted towards something other than itself and absorbed in it. (167; emphasis mine)

The problematic outlined here is of singular importance for the body of women's writing that will be critiqued in this essay. Firstly, and most importantly, the centrality and simultaneous disjuncture between Caribbean women's writing and the 'Quarrel with History' is indicative of an epistemological crisis in Caribbean literary culture. The crisis is the result of the strangle-hold which inherited thinking and modes of knowing have on our ability and desire to venture into untested waters, to experiment with new modes of knowledge and new modalities of being.

To fully consider the significance of the epistemological quandary outlined above, we need only look out toward the 'field of play' that defines contemporary criticism of Caribbean literature and philosophical thought. In spite of the recent 'boom' in Caribbean literature, the conspicuous absence of a body of criticism that engages the questions raised in Caribbean women's writing speaks to the 'split' Castoriadis refers to here. Once more, the effort to contextualize women's writing in the Caribbean has been plagued by the long-standing 'Quarrel with History' and institutionalized discourses on identity and Being. The critical practice of reading Caribbean women's literature through traditional notions of history and identity, or put differently, through the 'Quarrel with History' has meant that the experiences of black historical subjects have been constructed as silent or disciplined into absence. Any possibility of be(come)ing is filtered through institutionalized discourses which leave little room for translating experiences and perspectives that present themselves beyond the scope of our current modes of knowing.

Rather than seeking to define or give voice to this constructed absence, we need to understand these absences as historical and cultural spaces that have been disciplined into silence. In other words, we have not been able to translate these spaces through our current modes of interpretation. In one of the few critical studies dedicated solely to West Indian women's writing, Woman Version: Critical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women, Evelyn O'Callaghan describes the need to create new interpretative tools for reading this new body of writing. Drawing from African American blues musical traditions, West Indian musical forms such as 'dub,' and a long tradition of 'master narratives' in Caribbean literature, O'Callaghan argues that the new body of West Indian women's writing is concerned with (re)producing, re-mixing, writing over, and thus creating their own versions of historical narratives which have constructed them as a silent/absent subject. O'Callaghan suggests that a useful approach would be to:

approach this writing, in light of the above, as a kind of remix or dub version, which utilizes elements from the 'master tape' of Caribbean literary discourse (combining, stretching, modifying them in new ways); announces a gendered perspective; adds individual styles of 'talk over'; enhances or omits tracks depending on desired effect; and generally alters by recontextualization to create a *unique* literary entity. (11)

O'Callaghan's observations here are similar to the set of concerns I address through philosophical debates about the *nature* of being for colonial subjects. Her formulation of the 'dub version' in West Indian women's writing foregrounds continuities, thematic approaches, and stylistic features in this body of literature while simultaneously engaging the underlying problematic of revising and (dis)forming institutional discourses that have constructed women as silent subjects. In other words, by employing the philosophical discourses of Man that dominate the dialectics of the Enlightenment and imperial expansion, women writers are challenging the constructed silence of black subjects.

What is most useful about this intervention is the insistence on the part of Caribbean writers on engaging these acts of (dis)forming and translating within the institutions and disciplines from which they emerged in a colonial context. By engaging Enlightenment discourses we

can begin to translate the cultural and philosophical points of reference which Caribbean writers deploy to (re)present the processes of be(come)ing for post-colonial subjects. The impulse toward centering alterity (or Othering) as the predominant mode for consolidating identity has prevailed during the Enlightenment and continues to impact on contemporary discourses on cultural identity. According to Emmanuel Eze, two texts in particular offer a fruitful occasion to examine the impulse and its impact on discourses and disciplines concerned with defining cultural difference: Immanuel Kant's 1775 essay "On the Different Races of Man" and his later book *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). These were seminal texts for institutionalizing philosophical (and scientific) debates about the classification of Man. Kant's pontifications on the various classes of human beings were particularly insistent on relegating Negroes to the lowest rung of humanity. Kant's logic regarding the disparate affiliation of Europeans and Africans is best illustrated by his assertion in "On National Characteristics" that "so fundamental the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color (55).

The rampant imperial expansionism underway during the Enlightenment foregrounds the way 'race' was socially imagined and converted into immutable 'scientific truths.' As Paul Gilroy notes, if we follow the ideological trajectory of Enlightenment discourse we can see that

it is a short step from appreciating the ways that particular 'races' have been historically invented and socially imagined to seeing how modernity catalyzed the distinctive regime of truths, the world of discourse that I call 'raciology.' In other words, the modern human sciences, particularly anthropology, geography, and philosophy, undertook elaborate work in order to make the idea of race epistemologically correct. This required novel ways of understanding embodied alterity, hierarchy, and temporality. It made human bodies communicate the truths of an irrevocable otherness that were being confirmed by a new science and a new semiotics. . . . (57-58)

The discursive interconnectedness between enlightenment, science and myth emerge most poignantly in travelogues, tales of discovery and conquest and narratives of 'origins' which present 'race' as a "philosophical object rather than merely a matter of typology" (Gilroy 60). We cannot, however, lose sight of an integral aspect of Gilroy's commentary on the construction of otherness: that these constructions take root, first, within the national imagination and then proceed toward a corresponding reality, whether this reality is in fact 'present' or not (as was the case in Columbus' 'discovery' of India in the Caribbean). The epistemological force of imperial reason has troubled the waters for Caribbean writers for well over 500 years since Columbus' arrival.

With the terms and conditions of Otherness so firmly rooted in the discourses of social and physical science, the project of constructing a post-colonial subjectivity not limited by the events of 1492 had to be waged at the same point of contact from which these discourses of alterity emerged. Because British national identity depended largely on constructing a reality to correspond to the fiction produced within the imaginations of the nation's citizens, post-colonial subjects had to revise the nature of the 'real' and what constitutes ontological existence in this realm. Despite Kant's racist ideologies, his insights into the significance of the imagination as a primary site for subjects to exercise their agency through 'care' and 'concern' clearly demarcated the parameters of the battle for selfhood.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on

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<sup>3</sup> My use of the terms 'care' and 'concern' is intended to evoke Heidegger's deployment of these words in relation to the subject's being-in-the-world. According to Heidegger in *Being in Time*, being 'concerned' involves "having to do with something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining. All of these ways of Being-in

Kant's thoughts on the role of the imagination for the emergence of beings-in-the world, Martin Heidegger notes in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics that Kant's conceptualization of the imagination lies in his description of this faculty as an "indispensable function of the soul" (90). It is, therefore, endowed with powers afforded the highest senses:

the power of the imagination can hence be called a faculty of *forming* in a peculiar double sense. As a faculty of intuiting, it is formative in the sense of providing the image (or look). As a faculty which is not dependent upon the presence of the intuitable, it fulfills itself, i.e., it creates and forms the image (91; emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

It is this peculiar double sense of formation that I want to expand on here with regard to the *nature of existence* for post-colonial subjects. If, as Gilroy asserts earlier, the formation of the Other in imperial discourses depends on the construction of an 'embodied alterity' without its actual 'presence,' it would be useful to consider how a (dis)formation of Kant's faculty of intuiting might serve colonized subjects in imagining another 'look' for (or image of) their ontological existence. This consideration is of singular importance if we are to wrestle images of imperialism's Other out of its ontological sphere of abject otherness. In other words, by translating Kant's 'faculty of forming' into a faculty of '(dis)forming,' black subjects can engage in creating and destroying (simultaneously) the 'form' or the image of the Other.

The on-going battle for the control of images is a battle of singular importance for post-colonial subjects trying to construct images of their Selves, from within themselves, reflecting *their* lived experiences. Images become the means or signs through which subjects make their worlds and, ultimately, their existence intelligible. The performative aspects of the imagination in Caribbean literary traditions provide significant pathways for experimenting with artistic 'form' as well as discursive formations as mediums for epistemological and ontological agency. As a faculty, the imagination is endowed with the power to effect change and ultimately to make possible the terms (or images) for being-in-the-world. What makes this site a political location is its function as a 'faculty' or agent for ontological mobilization. The 'possibility' represented through images is the framework of the process of be(come)ing.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the struggle to create an imaginative alter/native mode of being in light of the instituted 'non-being' of New World peoples initiates the processes that make be(come)ing a possibility.

#### Disciplining Discourse, Re(in)forming Fiction: Erna Brodber's Louisiana and the Critique of Anthropology

In her third novel Louisiana, the Jamaican novelist and sociologist, Erna Brodber, features a protagonist who is forced to mobilize her 'faculties' when she embarks (unconsciously) on a journey into 'knowing.' This journey challenges her to consider an alter/native epistemological model for her ontological existence. Brodber's protagonist, Ella Townsend, is charged with the ontological project of putting selves back together through interior historical research. A student of anthropology, she is sent to Louisiana to record the history of the blacks of South West Louisiana. She is selected to conduct interviews for inclusion in

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have *concern* as their kind of Being" (82).

<sup>4</sup> Later, in his discussion of the formative powers of the imagination, Heidegger elaborates on this 'creative' capacity in relation to experience. He defines this creation as not 'ontically' creative because it is always of the experience of the being.

<sup>5</sup> I am drawing here on Heidegger's definition in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics of the term 'faculty' as "what such a thing 'is able to do' in the sense of the making-possible of the essential structure of ontological transcendence" (94).

the Works Project Administration narratives of the Federal Writer's Project begun by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s to employ artists during the Great Depression. The historical aim of the project was to institutionalize knowledge about former slaves in the southern United States. The revolutionary aspect of the WPA narratives lay in its efforts to gather 'data' directly from the 'source' of the experience of slavery.

Ella is offered a job at Columbia University to gather 'firsthand' information from blacks in Southwest Louisiana for the Federal Writer's Project. Prior to landing this job, Ella's relationship to words and word crafting was already well established from her published writing, much to the dismay of her Jamaican parents:

I, their offspring, had fallen in love with words and chose to be a word smith. Can a poem take the place of a stethoscope cum office with a brass name plate? That my works and my name – their name – got into Crisis and Opportunity meant nothing. "'Crisis?' What crisis? These American Negroes expect goodies to be put in their laps." "'Opportunity'? One of them burial schemes nuh. How you get mixed up in that? (40)

Her mother and father fear their social demise once Ella drops out of medical school, expecting the usual refrain under such circumstances: "You can never put your money on a girl child" (39). The new job at Columbia, however, provides Ella with an opportunity to make her mark as a writer and anthropologist. She sets off for Louisiana with her tape recorder, ready to tackle her field-work in the interest of science.

If the circumstances and historical trajectory of Brodber's seem similar to those of another notable scholar and researcher coming of age during this period, Zora Neale Hurston, it is no coincidence. As a graduate student in anthropology at Barnard College (the sister campus to Columbia University) and a student of the famed anthropologist Franz Boaz, Hurston was given a six month grant to travel to the south to collect black folklore. Like Brodber's protagonist, Hurston's work appears in Opportunity, a magazine edited by Charles Johnson and dedicated to giving voice to black culture in America. Hurston's short story "Spunk" appeared in Opportunity in 1925 as did several pieces in another monthly magazine focusing on Black culture, Crisis, which was founded and edited by W. E. B. DuBois until 1935.

The most significant connection, however, between Brodber's protagonist and Zora Neal Hurston is their connection to St. Mary, Jamaica and St. Mary, Louisiana. Both places share a history of creolization which stands as a testament to the cultural, geographic, and metaphysical ruptures produced as part of the institution of slavery. After receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935 to collect folklore from the West Indies, Hurston traveled to Haiti and then to Jamaica where she observed the practices and traditions from the Balm Yards to Pocomania. Her experiences while in the Caribbean were published in a collection of travelogues entitled Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica. Hurston's descriptions of St. Mary's, Jamaica reappear in a cross-cultural narrativization in Brodber's novel.

These 'doublings,' beyond functioning as a narrative strategy, raise the question of scientific methodology which plague both of these literary/scientific scholars. Hurston, like Ella Townsend, comes of age as an anthropologist at a period when social sciences (specifically sociology and anthropology) in American institutions of higher learning were under a great deal of scrutiny and hotly contested in academic institutions. The ideological battles about the scientific credibility of the methodology deployed in the social sciences emerge in all their contradictions in Brodber's novel as Ella is faced with the prospect of associating herself as a participant observer as she records the lives of blacks in the South. Once more, the authority of 'science,' its uses, aims, and methodology are all called into question when they collide with the 'higher science' of New Orleans and Jamaica. When the object of Ella's study dies suddenly, she begins to hear the voice of the 'dearly departed.' Suddenly, she is faced with the prospect of developing a new scientific methodology capable of representing,

or rather, translating her experience as something other than insanity. The struggle takes the form of a constant effort to try to arrive at a 'scientific' explanation and accepting the events as part of an/other epistemological order.

In order to fully appreciate the complexity of Brodber's narrative we need to consider the relationship between 'science' and anthropology. The notion of 'objective' representation was placed squarely on the table, and challenged, in American academic institutions when social scientists faced the new 'problem' of representing black subjects who were constructed *by science and scientific discourses*, as non-human beings. The WPA narratives involved the most dependable sources for empirical research: scientific methodology, recording equipment, first-hand accounts. Ella is one of the first researchers to be given a tape recorder, the primary tool for ensuring the 'authenticity' of the Other. Mammy King's autobiography includes first person accounts of 'friends on the other side' who insist on contributing to the 'translation' that is underway.

One of the narrators/intruders is Mammy's longtime friend, Lowly, who appears in her unconscious at the same time that Ella arrives to interview her. The simultaneous arrivals prove to be as confusing for the reader as they are for Mammy King, who seems to be delusional in her old age. By the time we leave the first chapter, entitled "I heard the Voice from Heaven Say," it is clearer to the reader that the 'voice' from heaven is, in fact, Lowly describing to her friend what her 'translation' (or death) was like with the hope that Mammy will give up her fight to remain in the land of the living. There are, therefore, two translations underway at the beginning of the novel, though both are notably different in their aims and intentions. Lowly, who misses her friend deeply, shares her experience with Mammy:

Anna, I was seeing every corner of the scene. Being translated is like that. You can see from every angle. Then only the voice, Suzie Ana, carrying you now in the chute, keeping you company through the waters, over the rainbow's mist, into seventh heaven and back to fete through the days of dinkie minie, to see this thanksgiving and the nine-night to come and without a tired muscle. Back with every faculty – all hands, feet, eyes, ears a body could need for higher service. (10-11)

The closing reference to the significance of full 'faculties' needs to be understood in light of our earlier definition of the term faculty as 'what such a thing is able to do.' Rather than naming the faculties themselves, Brodber names the physical parts of the body through which these faculties are made possible. Moreover, the all seeing-eye/I in this passage is represented as the power of the faculties (or inherent mental capacity) once on the 'other side.'

Hurston's accounts of her travels to St. Mary's parish, Jamaica in Tell My Horse include a rather detailed narrative about the 'nine night' Lowly refers to in the quote above. This ritual, as Ella learns later, is a significant part of her shifting epistemic location. In Hurston's "Night Song After Death," she describes the ceremony one of the cross-cultural links between Blacks in the Diaspora:

in reality it is old African ancestor worship in fragmentary form. The West African tradition of appeasing the spirit of the dead lest they do the living a mischief. I made bold to ask the reason for the nine night. With everybody helping out with Detail they told me. It all stems from the belief in the survival after death. Or rather, that *there is no* death. Activities are merely changed from one condition to the other. "Why is it that he [the dead] cannot do what the living do? It is because the thing that gave power to these parts is no longer there. That is the duppy, and that is the most powerful part of any man. Everybody has evil in him, and when he is alive, the heart and the brain controls him and he will not abandon himself to many evil things. But when the duppy leaves the body, it no longer has anything to restrain it and it

will do more terrible things than any man ever dream of. It is not good for a duppy to stay among living folk. So, we make nine night to force the duppy to stay in his grave." (Tell My Horse 43-44).

If we consider the explanation given to Hurston here by an elderly Jamaican, the trajectory of Ella's new critical perspective becomes clearer. Through Mammy King's passing, Ella has acquired the ability to hear and speak with the dead. Seemingly, in spite of her 'nine night,' Lowly's 'duppy' (or spirit) has arisen from the grave to bring her closest friend across to the other side. Mammy, however, has a project to complete before she leaves, one that she will continue from the other side, if Ella is willing to do the work of translating her experiences out of her current mode of being into an/other transmigratory state of being.

As the narrative progresses, dialogues shift beyond the temporal into the spiritual world. This movement, however, is not distinguished in the narrative form nor verb tense. The slippage in tense and the fusion of narrative voices throughout the novel make it difficult for readers to orient themselves with regard to the narrator and, ultimately, the narrative itself. The moments in the narrative where the thoughts of one protagonist migrate into the verbal signification of another reproduces the processes through which discursive formations take on meanings based on the aims of researchers and those of their objects of studies. While sitting out in the sun, Mammy King wonders to herself whether the 'real' life appearance of Ella Townsend is, in fact, her dearly departed friend Lowly summoning her into the 'other world':

Am sitting here rocking and thinking, this old red rag barely keeping these scattered brains from turning to raisins and I am thinking this young woman, is it you Lowly girl, come to usher me home for I'm tired and want to come home. (12)

The physical resemblance between Ella and Lowly produces psychological confusion for Mammy King since, as it appears, she is on the brink of death and thus is not in full control of her 'faculties.' However, she is holding on to the world of the living until she can be certain that Ella is willing to be "a vessel, a horse, somebody's talking drum," sent to "translate" her Selves (46).<sup>6</sup> Shortly after this narrative reflection which, we must remember, takes place entirely within Mammy's mind, Ella verbalizes a similar train of thought which suggests to the reader that there is an unconscious connection between these two women:

Mammy King, you over there? You think you should be sitting in the sun with just that thin handkerchief on your head? Sun will dry out your brains Mammy King and I need them. Hold on to me. I'm going to move you and your chair to the shade and then we are going to sift through those brains. (12)

Ella's desire to "sift through Mammy's brains" (17) implies a disconnection of the subject from their thoughts, experiences and cultural contexts. The distinction here, between Mammy King as a subject in history and the object of history is a central point of tension

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<sup>6</sup> The 'horse' in this context is an important signifier for Brodber's historical contextualization of the events in the narrative. The horse in this instance represents the Haitian deity Guedé who, according to Zora Neale Hurston, "manifests himself by 'mounting' a subject as a rider mounts a horse, then speaks and acts through his mount. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. 'Parlay Cheval Ou' (Tell My Horse), the loa begins to dictate through the lips of his mount and goes on an on" (220-221). It is important to note here that Brodber evokes this Haitian loa in a transnational context, bringing together the spiritual traditions of Haiti, Africa and the Americas (the horse, the talking drum and the vessel). What is most important in this New World collective summons, however, is that Guedé is the *one* loa that was created anew in Haiti, having no European or African background. According to Hurston, Haitians created Guedé because they needed a god of derision, a god who would ridicule the class of people who despised Haitian peasants.

between Mammy King (as an object of study) and Ella's training and what she experiences once in the (anthropological and ontological) 'field' of possibilities. Her colour is considered to be an enabling factor by her advisors because it marks her as 'native' and, thus, closer to the source of information. Her colour, however, seems completely detached from herself as part of the population (human and black) being studied, examined and chronicled.

Mammy King proves to be a very unwilling 'informant,' and compromises the integrity of Ella's project by insisting that Ella tell her about her background. Ella, knowing that this goes against everything she has been taught as a social scientist, tries to hide behind card games hoping to outwit her informant. However, in the end, Ella fails miserably and Mammy King plies her with questions: "Child who you be? What you studying at? What you wanna be" (18)? In the end, Mammy has all the answers she desires while Ella gets only a few sighs, two laughs and general silence. Ella is forced to mark the various silences and expressions that register on Mammy King's face, not as moments of inaudibility, but as acts of strategic withholding:

The child wrote down Anna's silence in her head as 'full thick and deep.' Recording machine, she said to herself, I need braille to access these thoughts. Anna sighed another sigh that leaked out of our history and the girl made a note to be sure to find some way of transposing those sighs and those laughs and other non-verbal expressions of emotions into the transcript she would submit to her masters. (14)

Ella's recognition of 'silences' that hold meanings marks a significant shift in Ella's perception of her role as a social scientist because though her training tells her to write *only* what she is told. She recognizes that these unspoken, silenced spaces in Mammy's experiences are histories in themselves, silences which include 'unsaid' and 'untold' stories, laughs and gestures which express ideas and emotions, voids, which, on first appearance, seem to be empty spaces or articulations which render themselves in valences beyond the ken of Ella's interpretive strategies. The possibility for interpreting these 'silences' depends largely on Ella's willingness to 'translate' these instances something other than what her training advises her to do, as something other than empty, inaudible corners of history.

Ella's task as scientist, subject, and ultimately, 'translator' is to make this project significant at an experiential level. She begins to piece together the information on the reel based on the relationship between her life as a subject/object of study and the voices from the other side (of history, her Self and the Other world). When Ella begins her research, her understanding is limited by her perception of these former slaves as a group of people to whom history happens, not people who participate in the forming and (dis)forming of historical discourses on black identity. Boundaries that are supposedly fixed, and thus preserved for her study, turn out to be more permeable than anticipated. The world of the dead suddenly intervenes in that of the living, 'science' and technology (represented by the tape recorder) encounter 'higher science' (as represented by the voices from the 'other side'). The 'fact' of death as an immutable end is turned into a fiction, one that Ella has to accept if she is to make sense of what she is experiencing. When Ella realizes she has been possessed by Mammy's spirit, she has to accept the limitations of her knowledge and surrender her faculties to 'higher science' to fill in the epistemological gaps. The 'truth' of national space, once preserved by discourses of citizenry that excluded blacks is also exposed as a 'fiction' when migratory links between Africa, the Caribbean Europe and North America are revealed. The 'contamination' of Ella's basis for 'reality,' knowledge, methodology and historical scope opens a space for considering the transmigratory nature of black identity in the Americas.

Throughout the novel, songs, folktales and dances provide cultural, historical and textual markers for the reader, mapping historical and political links between blacks in the Diaspora:

There were times when there was a great dispute. "But Madam that's our

song" or "Fellows where'd you hear that. That's ours" and the battle royal went back and forth with madam telling how far in her distant past she had heard it and it couldn't possibly be West Indian, "Who carried it to you" (85)? Madam said that her folks told her that the civil war soldiers passing by could be heard singing that song like they knew they were marching to their death. The crew didn't argue: they apparently had no past for that song as publicly sad and therefore as large as hers. I couldn't get the shared experience of those two sets of negroes from two different parts of the world out of my head. I couldn't get it out of my head how Lowly and Mammy had been buried to the strains of the same song. Upon the hill, the rising sun. It is the voice that calls me home. (86-87)

Though Ella knows a little about American history and blacks in the Civil War, the focus of this historical event as a North American phenomenon is disrupted by competing accounts which suggests that the soldiers who fought were West Indian or first generation Americans whose parents were from the Caribbean. That this song crossed the sea and re-appears in a similar socio-political context suggests that these songs spoke to a shared historical and political past for blacks in the Diaspora. Mammy's death, and subsequent transmigration to the 'other-side,' the songs sung by the soldiers in the Civil War and Ella's own arrival in Louisiana all represent a return, not toward a history based on origins, but a history of disparate memories, journey's, worlds and discourses.

Though, in Ella's mind, these soldiers may have "had no past for that song," the lyrics represent a continuum between the struggles between Blacks in the United States and Black (West Indian) soldiers fighting for the Union Jack of Great Britain. Their struggle for freedom, while situated in different parts of the world, emerging from different political ideologies and deploying different strategies and narratives of independence, yoked Africans in the Diaspora to this 'past.' Ella begins to reconsider the shape of her field as she attempts to re-member disparate cultural traditions, signs and experiences that were fragmented by the trauma of slavery and then reinvented, anew, in the Americas and the New World. As Mammy King's translation progresses, so too does Ella's journey towards recuperating the soul of her dearly departed Jamaican Self and, ultimately, her Being as such. In the process, Ella is forced to acknowledge the relationship between memory, repression, and trauma that work to provide a protective shroud around the subconscious:

They didn't want to talk of it. People's memories of events close in time to them, is poor. Poorer still if it is a painful memory. They don't want to remember. The failure as it apparently was in this case, is just so painful and difficult to handle. It inhibits analysis. And putting word on things means analysis. People share post analysis. (148-149)

Ella's inability to understand her (historical) arrival in St. Louisiana beyond the WPA narratives has progressed to an understanding of repression and oppression and its impact on memory and the unconscious. She realizes that historical recollection, the literal and figurative pulling together of memories, bodies, rag-tag tales of violence, pain, and separation, depends largely on the community's willingness to construct an institutional space sufficient to contain and protect the pain of history. As Ella recognizes, "putting words on things means analysis," and analysis means unpacking things, places, and people which have been put away, sometimes, purposefully, until those who want to reach this space "feel their way to it" (149).

What becomes more apparent with the progression of Brodber's narrative is that the transcript we are reading is an account of Ella's 'feeling her way to' her Self. With each turn Ella, like the reader, begins to piece together and fill in the gaps in the narrative that is her life. When Ella discovers a picture from Mammy's funeral, it triggers a remembrance in her unconscious that draws of two strands of history and experience of together:

*"Ah who sey Sammy dead,"* I heard myself say just about the same time as my very weak voice on reel whispered it. So, this was somehow about the

dead. Two different women. Two different places. Two different times. Buried in similar rites. Was that it? So why was I there? Why was I in their conversation and how and why was I moved in this my other self – I obviously had two – to say this, "*Ah who sey Sammy dead?*" No answer came. Only another seepage from an experience I hadn't realized had had such an impact on me. . . . (51)

Ella's own remembering begins when her subconscious triggers a rememory of her grandmother's death as a child in Jamaica. This event occurs when Ella is four years old, a period when her faculties are more in tune to the 'higher science' which surrounds her in Jamaica. She recalls hearing the song "Sammy dead, Sammy dead, Sammy dead oh" during her grandmothers burial, the same song she hears at Mammy King's burial. Her subconscious response, as a child who is unable to articulate what she is experiencing, is to think to herself "Ah who sey Sammy dead? Sammy no dead yah" (92). This response, then, as now, frees Ella repressed memory of the trauma, loss and grief over her grandmother's death. This repressed memory, or as Ella terms it, a "hegemony of the spirit" (98) that has blocked Ella's path as she attempts to 'feel her way' to translating the information on the tape, dreams and other signs left her by Mammy King. This remembering is a significant turning point in Ella's emergence as a subject in the process of be(come)ing.

This process of 'feeling' has been a rather circuitous journey, one very similar to that of the reader of Brodber's text. The doubling, back-tracking, repetition and disruption of temporal and spatial boundaries functions as an elaborately constructed psychoanalytic mapping of Ella's unconscious such that the 'gaps' and impediments begin to show themselves in a strange temporality. From her unconscious emerges a re/memory of her Self and her relationship to the scientific study in which she is engaged. In spite of the presence of this experience in her past, Ella has no access to it as part of her consciousness; this recollection gives Ella a glimpse of an area of her unconscious that remained beyond her reach for so long. This new insight into herself manifests itself in her construction of a methodology for re-remembering the life of Sue Ann Grant King:

Week 6. I felt I had all the words down. Analysis, I had got no further with Mammy's history. Let me scour the reel again for any escaped gem. On separate pieces of paper list names of people mentioned, list names of places mentioned, list cultural items, then add data as found. This was my analytical frame, so I had sheets of paper headed Lowly, Ezekiel, Silas, Donna Claire, the mistress, Ramrod Grant and of course Sue Ann Grant King. This was file 1. File 2 had of course Louisiana, St Mary (Jamaica), St. Mary, Louisiana (USA), Chicago. Chicago Southside. In file 3 were sheets headed Dinkie mini, john-crow-blow-nose, the bannered groups by name, shepherd, rag-songs, victrola, units – 'units set up,' she had said – Arkansas devilment, coon can, longshoreman's strike. The only date given me was the earthquake (Jamaica) 1907. I would rinse and rinse until everything was down, then with my one little date I would try the historical reconstruction of the life of Mrs. Sue Ann Grant-King. (64)

Ella's research methodology expresses the contradictory discourses at work in her efforts to construct this history. First, she makes a "list of places mentioned, list of cultural items, then add data found" (64). Far from sounding like a description of analytical methodology, Ella's approach is extremely eclectic with respect to her cultural and scientific interests. Her methodology, therefore, contains those things that appear in the 'gaps' of her memory and in the disjointed conversations with the 'venerable sisters.' Hers is not a science of certainty, nor is it one of doubt, as she is determined to put down the "facts" though she "can't prove them to be so" (102).

Brodber's narrative draws our attention to the simultaneity of geographic, discursive, psychic, and physical 'dismemberment' and recollection that is part of history. At one level,

Ella's re-membering involves piecing together the stories, songs, dances and histories from her own past which, according to her training, have no place in her research methodology. The translation process underway in the novel involves an epistemological shift in which Ella's scientific and social perspectives moves her from being an object of scientific research, to a subject consciously involved in the construction of the Self that is in the process of coming into Being:

I [Ella] looked at Louisiana. She was smiling. That was Mammy and how she came to be of interest to those looking for the history of the black people of South West Louisiana. Not even fifteen minutes. Mammy was a Garvey organizer and a physic. We had long known about the latter. A black nationalist. Well, well, well. "The units," Louisiana mumbled. "What units did she set up?" Why couldn't the answer have surfaced before? Why couldn't someone in St. Mary have mentioned it? (148)

The response to this question is Ella's methodology and the epistemic contextualization of the project itself. The revelation of Mrs. Sue Ann Grant-King's involvement with the Garvey Movement brings her research full circle, reaching from the Northern United States to the Southern Americas and the African continent. Though Garvey's Black Star Line is an 'unrealized' possibility for bridging Africans in the Diaspora to their historical pasts, Ella realizes her role in the historical process as part of this initiative.

Brodber brings competing scientific and historical discourses into contact with one another in a field of 'free-play' (the unconscious), allowing the productive capacities of the imagination to realize their potential. Her use of fiction (both as a genre and in Kant's definition of the term) constructs a theory of history that is at once 'free' and 'lawful' to the Self being constructed in Louisiana.<sup>7</sup> The figurative and literal consumption of Ella's mind and body by the venerable sisters (and the historical project) is a necessary step, an epistemological shift which opens a space for Ella to conceive an/other Self, one that is not confined to the laws of association outlined by her training as a scientist. The transmigrations and transmutations that bring Mammy King, Louise, Anna, Ella, Marcus Garvey, Franklin Roosevelt, Silas and all the other contributors to this multi-vocal narrative into the same social-historical context speak to the impossibility of an empirical investigation of human subjects in the process of becoming.

Brodber's representation of history assumes that the possibility of be(come)ing depends on the limits of the imagination, not of history, science or other institutional modes of knowing. The unquestioned continuities produced in the WPA narratives emerge as symptoms of un-represented historicities that are repressed or forced into inaudible registers within the 'field of study' or, in this case, black subjectivity. Brodber's narrative exposes the extent to which discourses of cultural identity and political action are 'covered over,' constructed as silent, insignificant utterances within larger historical and national projects which attempt to construct identities which 'fit' into the overarching inclusivity of nationalist projects. Brodber's engagement with the field of anthropology provides a useful critique of Kant's Anthropology and its representation of blacks and black identity. Brodber's examination of the anthropological eye/I highlights the shift in the positioning of Blacks as objects of scientific knowledge to be measured and categorized first as scientific objects, then as anthropological subjects, whose experiences could be captured through empirical methodology. Such an approach, as Heidegger would note later in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, did not address the question of transcendence which is of singular importance for comprehending the *nature* (or processes) of be(come)ing-in-the-world:

Anthropology does not pose the question of transcendence at all. All the

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, in The Critique of Judgement, defines fiction as the "actual fantasies with which the mind entertains itself as it is continually being aroused by the diversity that strikes the eye" (94).

same, the abortive attempt to want to interpret the power of the imagination in a more original way in light of Anthropology proved that a reference to transcendental structures always already lies in the empirical interpretation of the faculties of the soul, which, properly speaking, can never simply be empirical themselves. But these can neither be grounded in Anthropology nor in general can they come to be created from it by means of mere assumptions. (94)

The problematic of anthropology as a 'science' of immutable 'truths' emerges more clearly when we consider the relationship between the empirical evidence Ella gathers about Mammy King, the subject under construction, which is not 'technically' part of her research. The problem, however, of how to translate this information into a meaningful narrative of experience proves to be far more complex than initially anticipated. Brodber's narrative creates a space for her readers to consider the question of transcendence as part of the scientific inquiry taking place between Ella and her 'subject' matter. Ella's efforts to 'know' herself in relation to her 'field of study' are not directed at a particular ending but at the possibility of a change in her current mode of being. This distinction is significant for the connections between thinking and being in Brodber's narrative. Her narrative suggests that the possibility of coming into being lies in the subject's understanding of what thought makes possible in a metaphysical context.

The task of the 'translator' (both Ella and the reader) both of whom are (de/re)constructing meaning through their engagement with a set of textual representations, is to negotiate the authoritative discourses of anthropology, sociology, theology and the 'higher sciences.' Brodber's narrative is a concerted effort to demystify the processes of creation (or production) through which subjects institute their existence. In so doing, the sphere of 'reality' is exposed as a field of play constructed through social-historical institutions much in the same manner as scientific and social discourses that generate knowledges about objects of study.

My reading of Brodber's text as a critical intervention into contemporary debates about Caribbean identity argues for an understanding of metaphysical debates as having political implications for how black identity is constructed. Rather than engaging metaphysics on the level of abstract philosophy, Brodber takes up the political aspects of the tradition of *physis*,<sup>8</sup> or the emergence of what several Caribbean critics have referred to as 'transmigratory subjectivity'.<sup>9</sup> While recent uses of this term have referred more specifically to the movement of black subjects through the diaspora, I want to suggest that this term has particular significance for our thinking and, indeed, our 're-thinking' of Caribbean identity and ontology.

This 'transmigratory subjectivity' is the result of constant movement between and through cultural, existential, temporal and spatial boundaries and draws its political agency from the contestatory condition of enduring and emerging (or of Being) for colonial subjects. Moreover, through its narrative structure, Brodber's novel performs the, at times erratic, non-linear, a-temporal, trajectories of this migratory subjectivity as it emerges within the imagination. By situating the majority of the novel within the realm of the imagination, Brodber assertively challenges her readership to 'unlearn' or '(dis)form' current systems of knowing in order to create a space for the subject to begin to translate the significations

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<sup>8</sup> The Greek term *meta* means beyond; *physis* (which is the root from which the term 'physics' eventually emerged) means a rising, emergence and enduring.

<sup>9</sup> Carole Boyce Davies and Carolyn Cooper in particular have used the term 'transmigratory subjectivity' as a means of representing the movement across and between various systems of knowledge and modes of being for Caribbean people in the Diaspora.

within these systems into intelligible referents that make be(come)ing possible. Brodber's novel suggests that the very nature of being depends on the contestations and translations of meanings between and within the temporal and spatial planes of the unconscious, all of which threaten the disappearance of the subject. These movements and ruptures (in time, space, cultures, and discourses) produce the possibilities for self-recognition through the subject's critical relations with its surroundings.

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