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Phono(geo)graphy, and the Counter-Archive of Diaspora

Jarvis C. McInnis

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A “REORDER OF THINGS” IN BLACK STUDIES: SACRED  
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*Jarvis C. McInnis*

ABSTRACT

This article examines Erna Brodber’s 1994 novel, *Louisiana*, as a methodological invitation to the field of Black Studies to query how we do the work of black study. A Jamaican social scientist turned novelist, Brodber finds the tools of social science and notions of Western rationality and reason that undergird it insufficient for the unique challenges of recovering a past characterized by violent rupture and irreparable loss. In turn, she takes up fiction to imagine a new method and field of study to fill in the gaps of black diasporic history. Merging anthropology and sociology with literature, she produces a fictionalized ethnography—the novel *Louisiana*—that undermines the tenets of Western Enlightenment thought, its various offspring (social scientific method, History, Christianity, and technology), and their attendant claims to truth, facticity, and progress. Mobilizing the epistemes embedded within black diasporic cultural and political practices such as spirit possession, music, storytelling, and grassroots labor organizing, *Louisiana* constructs a counter-archive of diaspora that is at once sacred, feminist, and communal. Ultimately, the novel sketches the contours of a new interdisciplinary method and field of study—perhaps Brodber’s own version of Black Studies—that foregrounds 1) “sacred praxis” vis-à-vis spirit possession as a legitimate mode of knowledge acquisition, 2) the “global black south” as a nodal point of diasporic relationality, and 3) a dispossessive logic and an ethic of humility and surrender in the research process that serves as an affront to notions of liberal individual personhood and the hierarchization of peoples and knowledges that produced and sustain the Western “order of things.”

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“Black studies require a complete reorganization of the intellectual life and the historical outlook of the U.S., and world civilization as a whole . . . And if the instructors of the universities do not see that, then they will meet more trouble than ever before.”

—C. L. R. James<sup>1</sup>

“The praxis of the Sacred involves the rewiring of the senses.”

—M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*<sup>9</sup>

“I learned that there was a large gap in information on me and my kind. It pulled me into it. My path was clear: I must fill this gap in a way that the findings could be immediately translated into action.”

—Erna Brodber, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure”<sup>19</sup>

This article is an invitation to query how we go about doing the work of black study, of Black Studies. It thus asks and imagines otherwise. What if the scholarly inquiries that preoccupy us require new, unfamiliar forms, methods, skills, or labor? What if our disciplinary training is insufficient for the scholarly tasks we have set out to accomplish? What if doing the work of black study, of Black Studies, requires a different set of critical tools, techniques, or procedures than we have thus far acquired? What else is possible if we reorient our relationship to the scholastic enterprise so that it teaches us, guiding us to the answers we seek, or to new questions altogether, because the queries we originally posed of a text, archive, or group of people are misdirected, or cannot be answered through a single disciplinary line of inquiry? This openness, flexibility, and humility within the research process is necessary in general, but especially when studying the diverse peoples and cultures of the Global Black South, whose histories and modes of knowledge have historically been subordinated to the epistemological conceits of Western modernity.

In her 1994 novel, *Louisiana*, Erna Brodber, a Jamaican social scientist turned novelist, takes up fiction to imagine a new method and “field of study” to fill in the gaps of black diasporic history.<sup>2</sup> Brodber finds the tools of social science and notions of Western rationality and reason that undergird it insufficient for the unique challenges of recovering a past characterized by violent

rupture and irreparable loss. By merging social science with literature, she produces a fictionalized ethnography that undermines the tenets of Western rationality and Enlightenment thought, its various offspring (social scientific method, History, Christianity, and technology), and their attendant claims to truth, facticity, and progress; in doing so, she constructs a counter-archive of diaspora that is at once sacred, feminist, and communal. Though the archive is a Western epistemic modality, Brodber uses the epistemes embedded within black diasporic cultural and political practices such as spirit possession, music, storytelling, and labor organizing to construct a counter-archive that foregrounds marginalized knowledges and subjectivities. What emerges is an interdisciplinary method and field of study—perhaps her own version of Black Studies—that relies on a horizontal and nonhierarchical praxis, blending elements of social science, history, literature, music, and the sacred. For Brodber, these are not discreet domains of knowledge; rather, they are necessarily and inextricably intertwined for the project of recovering fragmented and otherwise lost black histories. Importantly, Brodber's nameless new interdisciplinary method and field of study, and the counter-archive of diaspora it makes possible (the novel *Louisiana*), is held together by a logic of intersubjectivity between the researcher and the researched, and diasporic collectivity that serves as an affront to notions of liberal individual personhood and the hierarchization of peoples and knowledges that undergird the Enlightenment project.

Across her fiction and nonfiction alike, Brodber is preoccupied with the limits and possibilities of the modern academic disciplines, especially the social sciences, and what knowledges and experiences get obscured or foreclosed when traditional disciplinary boundaries are adhered to too rigidly or uncritically. As June E. Roberts rightly contends, Brodber uses *Louisiana's* disorienting "plot structure," for instance, "to suggest . . . that the disciplinary methodologies of ethnography and anthropology necessarily predetermine or constrain the formation of hypothesis, articulation of thesis, and the making of disciplinary knowledge. Disciplinary studies are perforce culturally and psychologically situated";<sup>3</sup> thus, their methods should be alterable and culturally specific as well. Much of the criticism on *Louisiana* illuminates how Brodber's experimental novel reworks the racialized, gendered, and religious economies of Western modernity and Enlightenment thought.<sup>4</sup> As a fictional ethnography that uses spirit possession to recover marginalized histories and alternative geographic and diasporic relations, I argue that *Louisiana* is an investigation into the very nature of epistemology within Black Studies, and what is possible when one fully submits themselves to scholarly pursuit by questioning the limits

of what can be known and how we come to know it. Indeed, as Samantha Pinto observes, “Brodber’s intentional novelistic experiments investigate the metacritical issue of *how* it is we produce and consume knowledge about blackness and the black diaspora in particular” (Pinto 132). I thus examine *Louisiana* through the lens of Brodber’s “search for a methodology” in her own scholastic pursuits and training, and the novel’s proposition that its “mixture” of “social history” and “out of body experiences” is perhaps evidence of a “new field of study.” Given that the novel anticipates several recent trends in the field (the archival turn and its “recovery imperative,” Black Geographies, literature and religion,<sup>5</sup> sound studies, interimperial networks in the Caribbean,<sup>6</sup> Garveyism Studies,<sup>7</sup> and affect studies, among others), I propose that *Louisiana* is in fact a disciplinary and methodological invitation to Black Studies to rethink its ethics, methods, and forms—a “reorder of things,” if you will—in order to foreground those who have been relegated to the underside of modernity.<sup>8</sup> *Louisiana* accomplishes this disciplinary unraveling by reworking literary and ethnographic forms, and employing a nonlinear and fragmented plot structure. However, it is through “sacred praxis,” and specifically spirit possession, that Brodber makes her disciplinary provocation most explicit.

Like Pinto, Roberts, Jenny Sharpe, and numerous other of *Louisiana*’s critics, I take seriously Brodber’s invitation to treat spirit possession literally. In my analysis of how spirit possession operates in the novel, for instance, I draw on and elaborate diaspora studies theorist M. Jacqui Alexander’s account of her literal engagement with African-derived spiritual practices to recover lost knowledges and histories, what she terms “sacred praxis.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, I also read spirit possession metaphorically, as methodological and pedagogical directive to *undiscipline* and subsequently *rediscipline* ourselves by inculcating an ethical reorientation toward scholarly pursuit that prioritizes surrender, intersubjectivity, and collectivity. Spirit possession as disciplinary provocation insists that the acquisition and production of new knowledge for the African diaspora requires embracing disorientation and disorder—a willingness to question, rearrange, and even discard the tools and epistemic conceits of the modern disciplines when necessary. This ethic of humility and surrender to the research process enables one to break with the notion that all legitimate knowledge is data-driven, empirical, or can be calculated, reasoned, rationalized, or proven with material evidence.<sup>10</sup> Spirit possession as an analytical praxis, then, runs counter to the logic of enclosure that characterizes the modern academic disciplines, which emerged by erecting hard and fast boundaries between modes of thought, methods of inquiry, and

genres of writing; to the contrary, it explicitly rejects borders between, say, the living and the dead, nation-states, past and present, and discreet fields of knowledge, and instead turns on intersubjective, collective, and interdisciplinary relations. Crucially, this is not to say that spirit possession as scholarly praxis is without discipline, nor do I wish to undermine the importance of focused disciplinary training. To the contrary, as Pinto and Shirley Toland-Dix maintain, "Possession [in *Louisiana*] . . . is hard work" that "requires discipline."<sup>11</sup> Katherine McKittrick further reminds us that "Black method is . . . not continuously and absolutely undisciplined (invariably without precision, invariably undone). Black method is precise, detailed, coded, long, and forever. The practice of bringing together multiple texts, stories, songs, and places," she continues, "involves the difficult work of thinking and learning across many sites, and thus coming to know, generously, varying and shifting worlds and ideas."<sup>12</sup> *Louisiana*, too, makes clear that fastidious disciplinary training is crucial to black study; however, it may also require *unlearning* and *undisciplining* oneself from the values of individualism and strict empiricism, and in turn embracing grammars and praxes of collectivity, the sacred, and surrender as equally constitutive to the process of knowledge production.

While self-possession is crucial for black diasporic subjects, given their historical and categorical dispossession at the hands of slavery, colonialism, and their afterlives, *Louisiana* uses spirit possession to offer up an otherwise ethos of possession that is not rooted in enclosure, ownership, or liberal individualism. It calls for a more nuanced and symbiotic relationship between self and other, wherein the researcher acknowledges and embraces their own subjectivity within the research process and checks at the proverbial door their preoccupation with complete knowability and ownership. Embedded within spirit possession, then, is a *dispossessive logic* akin to what Edouard Glissant calls "opacity," wherein the researcher respects the limits of what can be known, "the irreducible density of the other," and embraces scholarship as a collective project.<sup>13</sup> Spirit possession, in this formulation, insists on an ethical reorientation toward the scholastic enterprise that is not constrained by universities, nation-states, or other hegemonic institutions. Its charge is sacred, ancestral, and communal. *Louisiana* thus wields spirit possession as the disorganizing force that enables a reordering of knowledge acquisition and production for black study.

*Louisiana's* epistemic and methodological critique necessitates a geographic reordering of the field as well, wherein Brodber unsettles readers' sense of not only *how*, but also *where* knowledge is acquired, produced, and disseminated. On the dedication page, she thanks a list of dedicatees

who “successfully challenged” her “view of geography.” She thus employs “Louisiana” as a heuristic for imagining material, cultural, and affective ties between a state in the U.S. South and a fictional town in Jamaica by the same name, effectively redrawing the map of the diaspora and charting a hemispheric cartography that I call the “global black south.”<sup>14</sup> The “global black south” as a geo-conceptual framework and methodology sits at the intersection of Black Transnational and Diaspora Studies, New Southern Studies, and Global South Studies.<sup>15</sup> In particular, it provides a rubric for including the U.S. South—especially southern African American history and culture—within Global South Studies and tracing both shared origins and ongoing connections of diasporic relationality in the hemisphere.<sup>16</sup> Though the U.S. South is a part of the U.S. nation-state and thus the Global North, it shares with much of the Global South, and especially the Caribbean and Latin America, a history of plantation slavery and racial capitalist exploitation, resource extraction, and underdevelopment.<sup>17</sup> This geographic reorientation that positions the U.S. South as a nodal point of black diasporic relations is a part of *Louisiana’s* broader epistemological intervention and critique.

While I examine *Louisiana* as a disciplinary provocation to Black Studies specifically, it also shares important affinities with contemporary scholarship in Global South Studies, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s “epistemologies of the South” and Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh’s notion of “decoloniality,” among others.<sup>18</sup> By asserting the legitimacy of nonhegemonic modes of knowledge acquisition and production and shifting the geography of our intellectual preoccupations and pursuits—the locus of our queries—so that new kinds of questions, answers, methods, and epistemes can emerge, *Louisiana* models the labor and reward of decolonizing knowledge and elevating marginalized peoples, especially women and the working-class, as agents of history. Importantly, this decolonization does not simply occur through a geographic repositioning alone. After all, the global black south was forged in the crucible of Western modernity and is thus entangled with the same colonial and racial capitalist logics that undergird its presumed epistemic superiority. On the contrary, redrawing the map must be accompanied by an openness to the methodological and disciplinary disorder that, in *Louisiana*, spirit possession sets in motion. Only then can a wholesale “reorder of things” ensue for *global black south study*. Indeed, disorder precedes reorder.

*"In Search of a Methodology": Social Science and Fiction, Ethnography  
and the Novel Form*

Across her scholarly and fictional writings, Erna Brodber has long been preoccupied with questions of discipline and method. In "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure" (1990), she details how she came to use fiction in particular to interrogate theories and methods of knowing in the social sciences: "Boredom with a social science methodology devoted to 'objectivity' and therefore distancing the researcher from the people and spurning the *affective* interaction between the researcher and the researched led me into fiction," she recalls (Brodber, "Fiction" 165, emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> Her dissatisfaction with social scientific methods to adequately render the experiences of black peoples in the Americas led her to experiment across disciplinary forms and genres in search of the most appropriate mode to present her findings. "To defeat my boredom," she continues, "I developed the habit of writing down my feeling before entering the field and of writing my speculations concerning the points of my informant's life that questionnaires, observations, and the like could not penetrate. This experience was like to me vomiting and defecating, and I flushed away the effort" (Brodber, "Fiction" 165). Initially, Brodber disposed of these forays into fiction, as there was no space for them in sociology. In her postgraduate education, she engaged in "a *ghostlike wandering* through disciplines—sociology, social psychology, anthropology, psychiatry, social work . . . *in search of a methodology* by which information about and action with or on behalf of black people could proceed at the same time" (Brodber, "Fiction" 165, emphasis added). Her "ghostlike wandering" is akin to Avery Gordon's theoretical and methodological critique of sociology (and the broader social sciences) in her now classic study, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, wherein she too explores fiction as a container for that which the discipline attempts to excise.<sup>20</sup> Gordon writes:

Not only is the origin of sociology as a unique discipline bound up with its relationship to literature . . . but sociology's dominant disciplinary methods and theoretical assumptions constantly struggle against the fictive. *By the fictive I mean not simply literature but . . . the ensemble of cultural meanings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power's presence.* For sociology, the fictive is our constitutive horizon of error; it is what has been and must be exiled to ordain the authority of the discipline and truthful knowledge sociology can claim to produce. . . . To the extent that



sociology is wedded to facticity as its special truth, it must continually police and expel its margin—the margin of error—which is the fictive. But these facts are always in imminent danger of being contaminated by what is seemingly on the other side of their boundaries, by fictions. (Gordon 25–26; emphasis added)

Brodber, too, wrestled with the utility of fiction and the potential contamination of “the fictive” in her sociological praxis, wondering: “can historical writing portray the emotional reality of the African and Asian past in the Caribbean or must this crucial aspect of the ancestral experience be confined to fiction?”<sup>21</sup> She would eventually find utility for her literary experiments through the publication of her first two novels, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988). Yet, she still primarily identified “as a sociologist [first] and my fiction writing as a part of my sociological method” (Brodber, “Fiction” 164). Fiction, she continues, is “an instrument through which I thought through the cardinal problem[s]” of sociological study (Brodber, “Fiction” 167). For instance, she considered *Myal* as a companion piece and “heuristic device” for her then-forthcoming academic study, *American Connections*, which aimed to “express” her “political concern” that “black initiative is weakened by the misunderstanding between Caribbean and U.S. blacks and both and Africans” (Brodber, “Fiction” 167).<sup>22</sup>

*Louisiana*, her third novel, marks Brodber’s ongoing foray into finding a new method for Black study. Whereas she had previously treated “fiction writing as a *part*” of her “sociological method” (and thus still prioritized sociology), *Louisiana* explicitly takes up fiction to query the limits of social scientific method and form and to capture that which she had previously attempted to flush away (emphasis added). If Zora Neale Hurston, Brodber’s inspiration for the novel’s protagonist, Ella Townsend, pushed ethnography toward the literary, then Brodber pushes the novel form toward social science. *Louisiana* is an experimental novel that masquerades as an ethnographic manuscript and field notes, blurring the lines between “fact” and fiction. It is comprised of eight parts: a prologue with a fictionalized editor’s note; six sections that make up Ella’s ethnography, detailing her fifteen-year journey with her spiritual informants and teachers; and an epilogue, written by her partner, Reuben Kohl. Following the prologue, which serves as an “authenticating device,” is a transcription of Ella’s first recording session with Mammy King, the subject of her study. With minimal context, the reader is thrust into the disorienting experience of puzzling their way through what is essentially a transcription of field notes: a hodgepodge of unfamiliar names, song lyrics, references, and speakers. It is akin to being dropped into the middle

of an intimate conversation or encountering an early, incomplete draft of a monograph. As Roberts astutely observes regarding Brodber's experimentations with literary form, "Brodber constantly disrupts, subverts, exposes, and frustrates conventional readerly expectations. She reaches out of the text and reminds readers that real life and serious sociological and historical problems are being addressed in tandem with the creative act of making fiction with a non-fictional purpose" (Roberts 37). Thus, "the reader must be willing to sacrifice the pleasures of a well-manicured, belletristic novel because Brodber is engaged in the act of *redefining the novel*" (Roberts, xi-xii, emphasis added). Indeed, new knowledges require new forms.

As *Louisiana* unfolds, we learn that we have, in fact, just read a "transcript of possession,"<sup>23</sup> a graphic rendering of Ella's experience of spirit possession, what religious studies scholar Roberto Strongman calls "transcriptuality": "the act of cultural creation . . . in an altered or exalted state of consciousness that mirrors trance possession and prompts or suggests a similar experience in the receiver of such a work of art."<sup>24</sup> In "Fiction," Brodber acknowledges that, "Anthropology has tried very hard to present people and cultures whole" (Brodber, "Fiction" 166). Through the novel form, however, *Louisiana* counters anthropology's pretension of wholeness by reproducing the affective experience of fragmentation that lies at the heart of not only all "people and cultures" generally, but ethnographic research and archival construction for the black diaspora, in particular. Ella's spiritual experience and the manuscript birthed from it, the fictionalized ethnography-cum-novel *Louisiana*, is anything but "whole." It is temporally and spatially disjointed—moving between the late nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries, and from Louisiana to Jamaica, Chicago, and New York. It is formally hybrid and syncretic: oral, aural, and graphic; literary, sacred, and social scientific. This disciplinary, temporal and geographic "mixture" is at the heart of Brodber's search for a methodology for black study. Its disjointedness is a pointed reminder that deriving any new method that reorders hegemonic structures first requires disorder and disorientation.

*Louisiana's* experimental form is reflected in its equally disorienting plot. Townsend is a Jamaican-American anthropology student at Columbia University in the 1930s, hired by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) "to retrieve the history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana using oral sources" (*Louisiana* 3). Her characterization is based on Hurston, a chief architect of the global black south in her own right, whose research on southern African American and Caribbean folk cultures in the 1920s and 1930s sought to legitimize African-derived spiritual practices in the eyes of the Eurocentric academy.<sup>25</sup> Like Hurston,

Ella is an aspiring writer, who published in *Crisis* magazine and *Opportunity* journal, two of the leading periodicals of the New Negro Movement in the United States. Equipped with a recording machine, she is commissioned to interview Mrs. Sue Anne Grant-King, or “Mammy,” a matriarch of a small rural community in St. Mary’s Parish, Louisiana. Mammy unexpectedly passes away two weeks into Ella’s interviews, and during her funeral service, Ella enters a spiritual trance and begins shouting fervently. The community performs a ring shout, a West African religious ritual, to calm her and ultimately facilitate what Ella comes to understand as a “transfer of souls” (*Louisiana* 38). She observes, “Mammy had passed, leaving her soul with me” (*Louisiana* 38). As Ella and her partner, Reuben, replay and transcribe her conversations with Mammy on the recording machine, they realize that though Ella’s voice is on the tape, Mammy’s deceased friend, Lowly, is also speaking through Ella. Eventually, they surmise that Mammy and Lowly, whom Ella affectionately calls the “venerable sisters,” have possessed the recording machine and Ella’s body to communicate with her from the dead to relate Mammy’s family’s travails as labor activists in Louisiana’s sugar industry and their collective work as political organizers in the Garvey Movement. Ella’s Jamaican-American heritage is the composite of Mammy’s and Lowly’s respective African American and Jamaican identities; thus, they select Ella as their “horse,” which in various African-derived religious traditions refers to one who serves as a vessel for the *lwa*, orisha, or ancestral spirits. “I had been officially entered,” Ella observes. “I was going to be, if I was not already, a vessel, a horse, somebody’s talking drum” (*Louisiana* 46). Through spirit possession, Ella’s anthropological training is put in the service of producing an ethnographic manuscript, a black feminist archive, about the life and work of working-class black women activists in the Garvey Movement.

By co-opting the recording machine and social scientific tools and methods—transcription, description, categorization, and file cards—Mammy and Lowly legitimize African-derived religious and spiritual practices over and against Western technologies and epistemologies, leading Ella and Reuben to surmise that, “there are different yet logical systems of knowledge” (*Louisiana* 46). In 1974, long after Ella’s death, Reuben submits her manuscript to an independent “small black woman’s press” in hopes of clearing her name of the rumor that she had abandoned her position with the WPA and fallen into “store-front fortune-telling in receptive New Orleans” (*Louisiana* 3). As a monograph authored by a black woman about black women’s sacred and political practices, Reuben hopes it will contribute to the rich outpouring of black women’s cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s. Through its supernatural plot, *Louisiana* invites readers to engage in

the very epistemological, methodological, and geographic disorientation and reordering depicted in its experimental form. Instead of exiling "the fictive," or flushing it away, as Broder had done in her early academic training, she mobilizes the novel form to explore not only a new methodology, but a new line of scholarly inquiry altogether.

*"A Journey Into Knowing": "Perhaps a New Field of Study"*

In a 1983 essay on what she described as the Caribbean intellectual's "quarrel with history," Broder proposed "social history" as a new method for addressing the quandary that the official "political and military history" of the region does not "mirror his past" (Broder, "Oral Sources" 2). Social history thus combines traditional history (with its emphasis on archival evidence) with oral sources in order to access the emotional experiences of enslaved peoples and their descendants.<sup>26</sup> In *Louisiana*, Broder takes her search for a new social scientific method a step further by imagining a wholly new area of research. In the fictionalized editor's note that opens the novel, one E. R. Anderson, editor of The Black World Press, writes, "Here in *Louisiana* is a mixture of *social history* and out of body experiences, perhaps *a new field of study*. What the world needs now?" (*Louisiana* 4, emphasis added). Like Broder's own search for a methodology, this "new field of study" requires the radical deconstruction of traditional social scientific forms, genres, and procedures. Ella is taken on a journey wherein she must question and ultimately release her attachments to established methods, terminology, and perhaps most importantly, social science's claim to order and objectivity.

Equipped with a recording machine and some anthropological training, Ella sets out to interview Mammy for the WPA. Mammy "they say has important data to give; is important data; she has seen things; had done things; her story is crucial to the history of the struggle of the lower-class negro that they want to write" (*Louisiana* 21). Though Ella intends to follow traditional ethnographic protocols, the venerable sisters thwart her efforts at every turn. Rejecting the WPA's attempts to reduce her to "important data" for the state archive, Mammy and Lowly co-opt the recording machine to establish agency over their narratives and assemble a black diasporic counter-archive instead. When Ella and Reuben replay the reel of her initial recording session with Mammy, Ella is startled to hear herself speaking lines of a Jamaican folk song of which she has no recollection: "[T]he voice that uttered these words was inescapably mine, less recognizable at first

but finally leaving me and Reuben who listened too, with no doubt of my involvement with the exchange . . . What are the qualifiers suitable for what I would admit?—‘Unconscious involvement?’ ‘Subconscious involvement?’. Nothing I had read had prepared me for the notion of thought transplant or whatever name we give to it” (*Louisiana* 31). As Ella and Reuben struggle to name and classify her experience, she often inquires if she is mad. “Do I need a psychiatrist?—I put the question directly to him this time. He was even more sure that this was something we had to keep to ourselves. . . . *there are different yet logical systems of knowledge* and your director knows that, yet I don’t think that he is ready for this” (*Louisiana* 46, emphasis added). Ironically, madness is initially the only way Ella can rationalize her supernatural experience, and though her director recognizes alternative knowledge systems, communicating with ancestral spirits still exceeds the bounds of reason. As Ella comes to understand and accept that she is indeed communicating with the dead, she wonders if “anthropology of the dead” or “celestial ethnography” are more suitable designations for her experience (*Louisiana* 61). Throughout the novel, she is variously identified as a “conjure woman,” “hoodoo woman,” “a horse,” and “a vessel” as further efforts to name and classify her new practice. As Reuben tries to “make a link for me between what was happening to me and the academy,” she observes, he even considers Carl Jung’s notion of “parapsychology,” but finds it insufficient as well (*Louisiana* 89–90). Ella has completed an anthropology fellowship at Columbia University, and Reuben is working toward his doctorate. Thus, her “out of body experiences” are an affront to their respective training as social scientists committed to objectivity and a very specific notion of truth, facts, evidence, and order. Eventually, Ella comes to understand and accept that she “was being taken on a journey into knowing” (*Louisiana* 38). She and Reuben attempt to remain steadfast in their disciplinary training, while also giving themselves over to this new, unfamiliar method of acquiring knowledge. The desire to name, catalogue, record, and especially the belief that all phenomena can be understood, explained, or rationalized are chief conceits of Western modernity. *Louisiana*, however, insists on epistemological and phenomenological “opacity,” that there are certain knowledges and experiences that are irreducible to scientific documentation and explanation, but are still no less legitimate.

As Ella and Reuben reluctantly submit themselves to Mammy’s and Lowly’s guidance, they are initially unsettled by their transition from researchers to “the researched.” Whereas they are trained to be authoritative, objective observers, their experience in St. Mary’s Parish, Louisiana, USA makes them “feel what it is like to have the scales turned on you and the field

interrogate you" (*Louisiana* 72). Ironically, despite his more formal academic background in the German School of Sociology, Reuben is more open to a paranormal explanation for Ella's experiences than she is, and chastises her for "resisting my departure from my scholastic base" (89): "How unfortunate when we realise that we are nothing more than the people!—This was meant to tell me that I was a hypocrite, pretending to take race seriously, pretending to take the field's sense of itself seriously but balking when that explanation was applied to my own behavior; that for all my race consciousness I was making a distinction between myself and the people around me and who was I" (*Louisiana* 41). Ella and her formal education do not make her intellectually superior to her folk interlocutors or any less susceptible to spiritual influence, Reuben intimates. This role reversal and de-hierarchization is a crucial feature of Brodber's reorientation of knowledge production as a collective process between the researcher and the researched. The "native social scientist" must not only be accountable to "fellow academics," she writes in "Fiction," but to "the people researched" as well. "She/he is part of the polity examined, and the conceptual framework within which she/he works as well as the way the data are presented have to take this into consideration . . . [M]y examination of Jamaican society could not be written from the standpoint of the objective outside observer communicating to disinterested scholars. It has to incorporate my 'I'" (Brodber, "Fiction" 166). Embedded within Brodber's repositioning of the researcher's place within the research process, wherein she is cognizant of her "I" and accountable to her interlocutors, is a theory of intersubjectivity that counters the bias toward objectivity in social scientific procedure. Crucially, intersubjectivity moves beyond the participant-observer model that Hurston innovated in the 1930s. Like Hurston, Ella is both scholar and practitioner, insider and outsider, of diasporic religious traditions; yet, whereas Hurston maintains her status as the authoritative intellectual, Ella dispenses with individual literary success and authoritativeness altogether to create a more equitable relation between the researcher and the researched. Sacred praxis vis-à-vis spirit possession is the mechanism by which this intersubjective relation is achieved.

*On "Sacred Praxis" in Black Studies: Spirit Possession as Dispossession Logic*

If fiction and the novel form are the modalities by which Brodber challenges sociology's and ethnography's claims to facticity and wholeness, then the sacred, and spirit possession in particular, is the vehicle of her new



methodology. *Louisiana* establishes spirit possession as both a legitimate mode of knowledge acquisition and production and as a sacred act, especially when put in the service of recovering, preserving, and disseminating black histories and constructing a black diasporic counter-archive. One aim of the archival turn in Black Studies has been preoccupied with how fiction and the imagination can address the gaps and fissures of black diasporic history.<sup>27</sup> Saidiya Hartman, for instance, has devised “critical fabulation” as a method that uses the subjunctive mood to redress historical violence and loss.<sup>28</sup> In her effort to reconstitute an archive of diaspora, Brodber shares with Hartman a desire to “illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, [and] to topple the hierarchy of discourse” (Hartman 12). Whereas Hartman deploys “fabulation,” however, (which stops just short of fiction), in *Louisiana*, Brodber takes up fiction explicitly and couples it with African-derived sacred practices. As she observes in her efforts to unearth the submerged history of Woodside, her “native village” in Jamaica, “Imagination and meditation can do a lot.”<sup>29</sup> Given that Ella’s manuscript opens with a “transcript of possession,” Brodber also exemplifies Gordon’s contention that we must “learn to talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them, as the precondition for establishing our scientific or humanistic knowledge” (Gordon 23). Spirit possession is thus the disorganizing force that initiates the novel’s “reorder of things.”

By reclaiming spirit possession as both a legitimate mode of acquiring knowledge and as a sacred act, *Louisiana* challenges one of the originary violences of Western Enlightenment thought, which rendered non-Christian spiritual practices and traditions illogical and illegitimate. The Enlightenment deemed science and its religious coconspirator, Christianity, as the pinnacles of reason and rationality. All non-Christian religious and sacred traditions such as spirit possession were regarded as primitive and uncivilized, and thus wholly repudiated. More recently, whereas Christianity was once science’s accomplice in the Enlightenment project, science came to dominate it as the pinnacle of rationality. The ephemeral and spiritual, that which could not be empirically proven or reasoned, was subordinated to the visible, the tangible, and the calculable, producing a standoff between faith and reason and subjective and objective modes of inquiry. Thus, *Louisiana*’s depiction of the sacred as a legitimate mode of knowledge acquisition attempts to not only make space for, but outright prioritize, that which exceeds the purportedly rational and logical, that is, what cannot be seen, measured, counted, or reasoned. The novel asks: What if African-derived sacred and spiritual practices are not just objects of study, but rather legitimate methods of knowledge acquisition and production akin to what Alexander calls “sacred praxis”?

Thus, in order to fulfill her WPA assignment, Ella must submit herself to the very African-derived sacred practices that the Enlightenment delegitimized. While her training as a writer and social scientist is what lands her the job with the WPA, ultimately, it is spirit possession that enables her to successfully carry out her assignment. Put differently, spirit possession allows Ella to engage in a mode of knowledge acquisition—communing with the dead—that is not possible with Western tools and logics alone. Ethnography and the tape recorder are useful for recording live subjects, but they are useless when Mammy dies at the outset of Ella's interview sessions. There is simply no other way to acquire her life history. Through spirit possession, however, Mammy and Lowly circumvent death and redirect Ella's work toward the sacred act of constructing a black feminist and diasporic counter-archive.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander theorizes her own experience with spirit-possession-as-knowledge-acquisition as she worked to recover the history of Kitsimba, an enslaved woman in nineteenth-century Trinidad. Like Ella and Gordon, Alexander learns "to talk to and listen to ghosts" and embrace "sacred praxis" as a legitimate mode of acquiring knowledge about the past (Gordon 23). She writes:

What once seemed a legitimate set of questions to understand the plantation figure Thisbe were entirely inadequate to the task of knowing Kitsimba, who was waiting to be discovered. I first had to confront the limits of the methodology I had devised to know her. While legal and missionary documents gave me proximate access to daily life, they were unable to convey the interior of lived experience. . . . Reading against the grain to fill in the spaces of absent biography was simply not sufficient. I couldn't rely on the knowledge derived from books, not even on the analytic compass that I myself had drawn. (Alexander 294)

Alexander's relationship to Kitsimba, similar to Ella's relationship to Mammy and Lowly, is characterized by humility and surrender. She finds that Kitsimba, though deceased for over a century, is an active presence with her own will, who requires Alexander to revise her research questions and methods altogether. "The manner in which Kitsimba emerged to render her own account of her life," Alexander recalls, ". . . was diametrically opposed to my research plan of using her body as the ground for an epistemic struggle" (295). Kitsimba refused to be referred to by her plantation name, Thisbe, "or to be cluttered beneath an array of documents of any kind, whether generated by the state, the plantation owners, or by me" (Alexander 294).



Only when Alexander discovers her African name, Kitsimba, and submits to her instruction through African-derived religious rituals, does Kitsimba disclose more of her life story. “From then I began the tentative writing of a history that was different from the one I had inherited, knowing that I could no longer continue to conduct myself as if Kitsimba’s life were not bound inextricably to my own” (Alexander 294). Alexander thus develops an intersubjective relationship with Kitsimba, which she describes thusly:

Kitsimba’s plan required my engagement with the texture of her living. If texture of living were to be felt and analyzed as not only memory but, importantly, voice and identity, all seeming secular categories in which subjectivity is housed had to be understood as moored to the Sacred since they anchored a consciousness that drew its sustenance from elsewhere: a set of codes derived from the disembodied consciousness of the Divine. (295)

Similarly, in *Louisiana*, the venerable sisters use spirit possession to render the “texture” of their own lives and on their own terms, an act of refusal to being reduced to “important data” for the WPA. Instead, they co-opt the recording machine and Ella’s social scientific training and take her on a fifteen-year “journey into knowing.” Ella comes to understand their bond as both a marriage and a parent–child relationship: “I was theirs. The venerable sisters had married themselves to me—given birth to me—they would say” (*Louisiana* 32). Much like Alexander and Kitsimba, Ella finds that Mammy’s and Lowly’s lives are bound inextricably to her own. The slippage between ownership, marriage, and birth here is indicative of the dynamism of the phenomenological experience of spirit possession, and the necessity of an alternative religio-sacred epistemology to properly parse it.

Spirit possession is a seemingly paradoxical experience for the black diasporic subject, one who has historically been stripped of their agency, will, and personhood, and legally reduced to property and second-class citizenship. It is a metaphysical and phenomenological experience wherein spiritual entities temporarily “descend” upon one’s “head” and control their subjectivity and consciousness. The forceful way the venerable sisters marry themselves to Ella—taking up residence in her head—and subject her to their whims, seems like another instance of the co-optation of personhood engendered by slavery and colonialism. Ella has little say in the matter, as she is their vessel, their “horse.” However, when we understand spirit possession as a sacred act, then Ella’s experience is not reducible to the more familiar notion of possession-as-ownership engendered by slavery. As Nadia Ellis observes in her

conceptualization of spirit possession as a "structure of diasporic belonging," "Possession becomes the sign and the redress for historical dispossession" (Ellis 147, 163).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in her important work on Haitian vodou, Joan Dayan argues, "The dispossession accomplished by slavery, became the model for possession in vodou: for making a man not into a thing but into a spirit," into a "god" (36, 72).<sup>31</sup> Extending Ellis and Dayan, I propose that embedded within Brodber's depiction of spirit possession is a *dispossessive logic* of personhood that further models the importance of intersubjectivity for Black Studies. Unlike the unitary and enclosed conception of selfhood that obtains in the Western philosophical tradition, "The philosophies of African peoples conceive of the body as an open vessel that can be occupied by a variety of hosts," and "Although it is said that the self must leave for the lwa to enter, the self is not erased" (Strongman 4; Dayan 68). Thus, there is an intersubjective relationship between spirit and host wherein "you let yourself be taken over by something inside of you . . . and you get a sense of yourself you did not have before" (Dayan 72). Though counterintuitive, through surrender, spirit possession enhances one's sense of self rather than repressing it. Perhaps most importantly for the black diasporic subject, "the forms of this experience of letting go and opening out do not depend on ownership," Dayan reminds us. "The lwa 'rides' or 'dances' or 'descends,' but does not coerce his/her partner into 'possession.' . . . For the 'possessed,' that dance is not a loss of identity but rather the surest way back to the self, to an identity lost, submerged, and denigrated" (Dayan 74). "The bidirectionality of the process," Sharpe adds, "transforms a state of subjugation, particularly the kind that existed during slavery, into the far more contradictory state of a submission that allows a person to feel the power of a spirit inside her" ("Word Holes" 98).

Ultimately, *Louisiana* figures spirit possession as a metaphor for an intersubjective sensibility that is first and foremost a critique of objectivity in social science consistent with Brodber's desire to dismantle the hierarchy between researcher and researched. Spirit possession redisciplines Ella away from the enclosure of knowledge facilitated by the modern disciplines and Western conceptions of the self, and insists on radical openness and porousness instead. By establishing an intersubjective relation with Ella, the venerable sisters redirect the goal of her research from its secular individualist motivations to sacred, communal ones. Secondly, spirit possession enables Brodber to explore the revaluative potentiality of the sacred, that it can be attached to "things" or actions typically deemed secular or outright profane. As Dayan writes, "In this exchange of spirit and matter, sacred and profane, the alleged disjunction is suspended" (73-74). This is akin to

what Ashon Crawley has more recently called “sacred instrumentality” in “blackpentecostalism,” another African-derived sacred tradition, whereby “*any object can be sacralized, made holy.*”<sup>32</sup> “Sacred instrumentality,” like spirit possession, revises the fraught relationship between blackness and the sacred to redress the epistemic and discursive violences of Christian modernity and racial capitalism, wherein people once regarded as objects or property can in fact perform sacred and holy work or become holy themselves.

To this end, *Louisiana* weaves together a syncretic tapestry composed of Christianity and the remnants of various African-derived religious and spiritual practices. Though Ella’s spiritual transformation is inaugurated by sacred diasporic rituals such as the ring shout and spirit possession, she also takes to reading *the Bible*, comparing herself to Biblical figures such as the prophet Elijah and the Witch of Endor. In doing so, she suggests that the sacred is not only the domain of white, patriarchal Christianity, but exists among non-Christian spiritual traditions as well, particularly African and African-derived ones.<sup>33</sup> This is an explicit rejection of the logics undergirding Christian modernity’s invention of blackness (and nativeness) as the consummate repository for what Sylvia Wynter calls the “Untrue Christian Other.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, *Louisiana* offers up a theory of the sacred that is not exclusively tethered to Christian theology or, for that matter, a distinct religious tradition, institution, or set of beliefs; rather, the sacredness of Ella’s work hinges on reconstituting and mining the archive of diaspora to recover black feminist and working-class histories. In Brodber’s more egalitarian sacred ecology, Mammy’s family’s history of labor activism, for instance, is equally as sacrosanct as Biblical parables. Delineating how this more capacious notion of the sacred operates in *blackpentecostalism*, Crawley writes:

Returning to Brother Steadfast’s testimony. . . him closing by asking for the Saints to pray ‘that I may be used as an instrument in his hand,’ this desire for instrumentality . . . structures the Blackpentecostal imagination such that *any object can be sacralized, made holy.* . . . The Hammond organ is in this tradition, *the utilization of any object for sacred possibility.* (254; emphasis added)

Like spirit possession, instrumentality is profoundly alien to predominant Western conceptions of the self, as it runs counter to a modern anthropocentric worldview wherein Man dominates both nature and the sacred to carry out and justify racial capitalist violence; rather, instrumentality is an intersubjective act of surrendering oneself to an outside force’s will, just as

Alexander submitted herself to Kitsimba's guidance and instruction and as Brother Steadfast sought to be "an instrument in his hand."

In *Louisiana*, Mammy and Lowly utilize Ella as an "instrument" of "sacred possibility" to assemble and preserve the counter-archive of diaspora. When Ella's spiritual transformation is complete, she declares, "I am Louisiana. I give people their history. I serve God and the venerable sisters" (*Louisiana* 124–25), intimating that her charge is both divine and communal, vertical and horizontal. Under the signs and logics of modernity, blackness indexes negation and lack and is the antithesis of the sacred: the consummate other, outsider, barbarian, savage; the always already secular, and the wholly profane. As a spiritual vessel, however, Ella's body is consecrated for the sacred work of historical recovery and preservation. Her instrumentalization ruptures the racial and sexual logics of plantation slavery and colonialism that renders black women's bodies as always already inscribable, available, and profane. In contrast to Christian modernity's insistence on *the Bible* as the basis of its epistemic and theological superiority, Ella produces a black feminist archival manuscript—the novel *Louisiana*—as an equally sacred text. Brodber thus deploys the novel form to counter the racial, gendered, and religious underpinnings of Western modernity and to establish African-derived religious and spiritual practices and the diasporic archive as at once sacred, legitimate, and worthy of preservation. Thus, the diasporic counter-archive comes into clearer focus as a backward-looking and future-oriented assemblage of knowledge that puts the tools and logics of Western modernity—that is, Christianity, technology, and social science—in the service of the very peoples who were systemically exploited and dispossessed in order to produce them. If, as C. L. R. James observes, "Black studies require a complete reorganization of the intellectual life and the historical outlook of the U.S., and world civilization as a whole," then Brodber proposes sacred praxis as the crux of this "reorder of things" in the field. It is a space clearing practice that enables Ella to question, unlearn, and ultimately undiscipline herself from the hegemony of Enlightenment thought.

*Phonographic Praxis: Listening to the Archive of Diaspora*

Alexander maintains that, "the praxis of the Sacred involves the rewiring of the senses" (328). Accordingly, in *Louisiana's* effort to push the limits of social scientific form (ethnography) and methodology (objectivity), it explores a range of sonic modalities—sound recording technology, music, orality, and

aurality—as methods of knowledge acquisition and production over and against Western modernity’s prioritization of the visible and tangible vis-à-vis writing. In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Alexander Weheliye examines the relationship between music, sound technology, literature, and writing in twentieth-century black culture.<sup>35</sup> He argues, “The nexus of black culture and sonic technologies tenders notions of temporality, spatiality, and community unlike those that insist on linearity, progress, and the like, but without renouncing these tout court, thus enabling black subjects to structure and sound their positionalities *within and against Western modernity*” (Weheliye 7–8, emphasis added). As a novel about ethnography and sound recording technology, *Louisiana* exemplifies Weheliye’s theory of the phonographic, that is, “sound writing,” as a key methodological praxis for Black Studies. Brodber combines this Western technology with African-based spiritual practices that centralize possession and communing with the dead, and in doing so, demonstrates another of modernity’s fallacies: the belief that reason, rationality, and technological advancement are necessarily incompatible with the cultural practices of the “Untrue Christian Other.” Furthermore, whereas technology is typically a marker of linear progress and advancement, *Louisiana* uses spirit possession to repurpose the recording machine to recover the past, and particularly black women’s intellectual histories and political activism.<sup>36</sup>

As Weheliye reminds us, there is a long history of depicting black people’s incompatibility with Western technology. Ella, however, is a sophisticate, entrusted with a portable recording machine, which was then a relatively new technology, to document Mammy’s life history: “I from nowhere was one of the firsts to be given this instrument, this precious instrument, first of its kind, donated to the programme by the manufacturers . . . a recording machine, given to me as much for use as for testing” (*Louisiana* 32). By depicting a modern black woman’s facility with a new sound technology, *Louisiana* collapses the perceived incongruence between blackness, technology, and modernity. Furthermore, at every turn, Mammy and Lowly subordinate the recording machine to their will. Ella asks Mammy to feed her memories into the “hungry black box,” a metaphor for the myriad ways modernity and technology consume and cannibalize blackness (*Louisiana* 18). When Mammy unexpectedly dies, she and Lowly co-opt this new sound technology to continue communicating with Ella from the dead, commencing her fifteen-year journey of slowly acquiring their life histories. Moving “within and against Western modernity,” they utilize this putatively premodern spiritual practice to put social science, sound technology, and the WPA project in service of the sacred act of constructing a black diasporic counter-archive.

As Ella's "journey into knowing" proceeds, she must trust what she cannot see and learn to listen instead, a "rewiring of the senses." "I let go and was all ears," she writes. "I listened" (*Louisiana* 51). Like spirit possession, listening is an intersubjective experience that emphasizes the inextricability of the researcher and the researched. As Mammy and Lowly speak through the recording machine, Ella must continuously replay the reel, listening as they relay new details of their histories, and then transcribe, organize, and analyze her notes. Afterwards, Lowly helps her to punctuate the manuscript for clarity. "We do the transcripts over and over again and my eyes widen. With the punctuation marks in the places to which she guides me, I am getting behind the words. . . . If these transcripts make sense to any third person, bless her. It is her work" (*Louisiana* 116). The novel's insistence on disrupting the dichotomy between the researcher and researched presents aurality, typically regarded as a more passive mode of acquiring knowledge, as an alternative way to understand Ella's phonographic praxis, similar to its rendering of spirit possession as a dispossessive logic. Listening becomes an active modality, and instead of the linear progressive narrative often associated with technology, progress becomes cyclical and repetitious; Ella must continuously return to the tape recorder as Mammy and Lowly disclose more about their life histories with each pass through. By embracing the venerable sisters as her teachers, instead of "native informants," Ella performs an ethic of humility and surrender that topples the researcher/researched and oral/aural divides. Their relationship is collaborative and horizontal, rather than hierarchical or vertical.

Ultimately, *Louisiana* is a phonographic text at the nexus of sound and writing, listening and reading. After all, the opening section of Ella's novel-manuscript is a transcription of her initial recording sessions with Mammy, and Ella explicitly instructs readers to listen to the reel, stating, "You have heard it [the reel]," an indication that what we have just read is in fact intended to be heard (*Louisiana* 43). As Ella continues to listen and transcribe, she undergoes a metamorphosis, where she declares her new identity as Louisiana and instructs readers to both speak and listen:

In me Louise and Sue Ann are joined. Say Suzie Anna as Louise calls Mammy. Do you hear Louisiana there? Now say Lowly as Mammy calls Louise and follow that with Anna as Louise sometimes calls Mammy. Lowly-Anna. There's Louisiana again, particularly if you are lisp-tongued as you could well be. Or you could be Spanish and speak of those two venerable sisters as Louise y Anna. I was called in Louisiana, a state in the USA. Sue Ann lived in St Mary, Louisiana,

and Louise in St Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica. . . . I am Louisiana.  
(*Louisiana* 124)

In this passage, Brodber proposes a phonographic praxis that is both oral and aural. The reader is instructed to “say” Mammy’s and Lowly’s names aloud in order to “hear” how they sound together, an incantation of sorts that ushers Ella into her new identity as Louisiana (henceforth, I will refer to Ella as “Ella/Louisiana”). Ella/Louisiana’s metamorphosis and new identity are the culmination of the intersubjective relationship she cultivated through spirit possession and the recording machine. It is also an invitation for readers to forge an intersubjective relationship with the characters in the novel-manuscript ourselves. We are not silent, passive, or objective reader-observers to Ella/Louisiana’s sacred transformation. As speaker-listeners, we become participant-observers, like Ella/Louisiana herself.

By fusing the oral and the aural, “Louise y Anna,” the novel also makes an important geographic intervention within the fields of Black Diasporic and Global South Studies, tying the U.S. South to the Caribbean, and particularly Jamaica to the state of Louisiana. Indeed, Ella observes that Mammy and Lowly “want[ed] to pull the sides of the sea together, want[ed] to sew them little islands together and tack them on to New Orleans” (*Louisiana* 148). Furthermore, on the novel’s dedication page, Brodber thanks a list of dedicatees “who successfully challenged my view of geography. We read you loud and clear.” This pairing of the sonic (“loud and clear”), visual (“view,” “read”), and geographic, is what I call phono-geo-graphy. By reorienting readers’ relationship to sound and writing, Brodber not only “rewires the senses” and prioritizes listening as a valid mode of knowledge production, but remaps black geographies altogether.

*Phono(geo)graphy: Sounding the Global Black South*

As scholars in the field of Black Geographies have argued, excavating alternative geographic arrangements enables new and different kinds of histories to emerge; thus, a novel about challenging hegemonic epistemological modalities and disciplinary procedures also insists on a geographic repositioning.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, *Louisiana* charts an alternative diasporic geography that highlights labor migration networks between the U.S. South and the Caribbean. To be sure, urban northern metropolises are still important contact zones for diasporic activity in the novel: Ella/Louisiana and Reuben come south from



New York, and Mammy, Lowly, and Silas met in Chicago. However, as the title suggests, Brodber prioritizes rural and urban Louisiana as a nodal point of black diasporic activity and relationality. Given its French and Spanish heritages, Louisiana, and particularly New Orleans, has long been regarded as the northernmost point of the circum-Caribbean region with historical and cultural ties to Haiti and Cuba, in particular. In Brodber's remapping, however, it is connected to Jamaica instead, illuminating an often-understudied hemispheric network. As I have argued elsewhere, the global black south is a physical and material space rooted in the history and legacy of slavery and the plantation, black labor migration and activism, and print culture circulation.<sup>38</sup> Though racial capitalist imperialism is responsible for tying these regions together, Brodber, following Hurston, foregrounds West Indians' and southern African Americans' shared folk cultures as the basis of diasporic relationality and collectivity.<sup>39</sup>

When Ella/Louisiana and Reuben relocate to New Orleans to train with Madam Marie—a character based on Marie Laveau, the mythic mother of New Orleans voodoo—Ella/Louisiana discovers another facet of her charge as a medium. New Orleans is a major port city and gateway to the rest of the Americas. West Indian seamen working aboard United Fruit Company steamships routinely dock there, where they encounter southern African Americans. The sailors meet up in Madam Marie's parlor to sing and debate the origins of their common folktales and songs. They wrestle with the residue, gaps, and fissures of diaspora, that is, the various similarities and differences that at once connect and distinguish black peoples across the Americas. Ella/Louisiana writes, "Her West Indian friends, Jamaican, I think, told her about Anancy, the spider. Where we here talk about Brer Rabbit, their talk was about Anancy" (*Louisiana* 78). For Madam Marie and her clientele, diaspora is raucous and contentious, as they debate ownership, minor differences, and the origins of their shared folk heritage. Ella/Louisiana observes:

Madam and them continue to fight. They stole it, she says and insists on singing to their "Nobody business but him own", "Ain't nobody business but my own". I don't know if she or them know how well they sound together. A clash of sounds which is not really a clash — just an almost clash. I describe this for Reuben. "Jazz", he says . . . Do they know they are making jazz? (*Louisiana* 123)

This shift from the "almost clash" to jazz is a metaphor for diasporic relationality and connectivity at the center of Brodber's political project and a



further articulation of a dispossessive logic. As she writes in "Fiction," one of her primary "political concern[s]" was the belief that "black initiative is weakened by the misunderstanding between Caribbean and U.S. blacks and both and Africans" (Brodber, "Fiction" 167). Jazz, a genre characterized by individual improvisation within collectivity or the ensemble, operates as a literal and figural model for diaspora-making, merging the U.S. South and the Caribbean into a global black south geography. Furthermore, Reuben, Ella/Louisiana's husband, hails from the Belgian Congo. He was adopted by a priest (likely his biological father) who took him to Belgium and raised him there.<sup>40</sup> He thus feels disconnected from the diaspora and is in search of roots. Though he had lived in New York City, the epicenter of the diaspora in the United States, it is in St. Mary, Louisiana, that he feels most connected to black culture: "strutting, strumming, learning to jazz and getting acquainted with the blues" (*Louisiana* 53). To be sure, he had encountered these forms in Europe and New York City, but they were "processed," Ella/Louisiana maintains. "In this Louisiana canefield sounds and styles were coming hot out of the oven. He was feeling them in the making, was there at their conception. The man was being made anew" (*Louisiana* 53).

In New Orleans, Reuben experiences an even stronger connection to the diaspora. As he begins frequenting Congo Square, the fabled birthplace of New Orleans jazz, he imagines a connection to his own Congo in Africa: "he had found his family; he had found his tall oak with capillaries doubling back to home" (*Louisiana* 79). According to Freddi Williams Evans's study of the history of Congo Square, between 1770 and 1803, "Kongo represented the largest single African ethnic group in New Orleans" and "by 1820, the overwhelming majority of enslaved Africans in Louisiana were of Kongo-Angolan origin . . . [and] were the largest nation that remained in New Orleans."<sup>41</sup> Despite being born in Congo and thus having a direct link to Africa, Reuben is essentially an orphan, representing the sense of loss, rootlessness, and statelessness of the diasporic condition that Nathaniel Mackey calls "wounded kinship." However, through jazz and the historical link between Congo Square and the Congo in Africa, he can fabricate roots in New Orleans. As Mackey observes, "Music is wounded kinship's last resort."<sup>42</sup> This is certainly the case for Ella/Louisiana's West Indian and African American clientele, who discover a shared history in folk music and storytelling. In this way, Brodber engages in what Ellis describes as Mackey's "suturing poetics," wherein

folk music and jazz unite the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and even Africa (which, ironically, has historically been marginalized in African Diaspora Studies; Ellis 176). She thus foregrounds proximity and commonality as the internal logic of diasporic relationality, evidence of her own Garveyite and pan-African sensibilities.

To this end, when Madam Marie dies and Ella/Louisiana takes charge of her practice, she disrupts the contentious relationship between the West Indian and southern African American seamen. Whereas Madam Marie had entertained and instigated the sailors' arguments about the origins of their folktales and songs, Ella/Louisiana insists on commonalities instead, declaring:

I am not Madam Marie. I don't engage my clients in arguments about the origins of their relationships with the songs they sing. I am Louisiana. After ten or so years with this clientele I know the songs and where each of them learnt them. No need for argument. The songs are equally ours now. We just sing. . . . My clients, though they are as many natives as West Indians, don't argue among themselves about origins either. . . . A common chord. (*Louisiana* 129–30)

As a medium for, and mediator between, her West Indian and southern African American clientele, Ella/Louisiana refuses to engage their debates about origins. Rather, through intersubjectivity, she performs the dispossessive logic at the heart of sacred praxis, jettisoning the imperatives of ownership and enclosure associated with racial capitalist modernity. Insisting on proximity over distance as the crux of diasporic relation, Ella/Louisiana observes, "the singing in my parlour of the U.S.-West Indian men has more than once been the inspiration for a jazz work" (*Louisiana* 130). The dash in "U.S.-West Indian men" demonstrates the novel's prioritization of proximity and connectivity over difference, as their identities have converged into "a common chord." This cartographic intervention that invites readers to consider the U.S. South as a nodal point of diasporic relations is a part of the novel's broader epistemological critique (coincidentally, *Louisiana* is published by the University Press of Mississippi, enacting the very global black south linkages that the novel itself depicts). By reorienting us geographically, Brodber unsettles our sense of how and where knowledge about the diaspora is acquired, produced, and disseminated.

*Constructing the Counter-Archive of Diaspora: Telling a "Community Tale,"  
Singing a "Community Song"*

Through sacred praxis and phono(geo)graphy, the aims of *Louisiana's* "new field of study" come into clearer focus: the recovery and (re)construction of a black diasporic counter-archive, that is at once feminist, communal, and hemispheric. As Michel Foucault and Michel-Rolph Trouillot have taught us, the archive is a crucial site of power and knowledge production. Thus, the construction of a black diasporic counter-archive represents the culmination of Brodber's epistemological intervention and "reorder of things" in Black Studies.<sup>43</sup> In her ongoing search for the precise terminology for her supernatural experience and practice, Ella/Louisiana is transformed from an anthropologist into a "soothsayer" who reconnects West Indian and southern African American men to their pasts and recovers Mammy's, Lowly's, and Mammy's husband Silas's respective and collective histories of labor organizing in the Garvey Movement. She declares, "I am Louisiana. I give people their history" (*Louisiana* 124–25). By documenting the history of black resistance in South West Louisiana and foregrounding black women's labors, Ella/Louisiana produces a fictionalized ethnography and counter-archive that critiques the racial and gendered logics undergirding Western Enlightenment thought. When Reuben publishes the manuscript with a small, independent black women's press following Ella's death, it indicates that, in Brodber's reimagining, the counter-archive of diaspora should be feminist and quotidian as well. If the state or colonial archive is typically the repository of racial capitalist, patriarchal, and hetero-normative History, then the counter-archive of diaspora, as a counter-hegemonic space, should document the lives and experiences of those on the margins.

Just as sacred praxis and phono(geo)graphy co-opt and innovate the epistemological values and principles of social science (ethnography and objectivity) and technology (listening and linear notions of progress), Ella/Louisiana's spiritual transformation adapts the tools, methods, and priorities of the archive. As the West Indian seamen sing their folk tunes in Madam Marie's parlor, Ella/Louisiana enters a trance and undergoes another spiritual awakening that reconnects her to her early childhood in Jamaica. She then begins to prophesy about the seamen and to see spiritual visions of file cards with their personal histories inscribed: names, birthdates, hometowns, and so on. "I looked at the faces of the men sitting around me and I saw stories. I saw long deep stories, stretching back and back on stacked, ruled, six by eight cards" (*Louisiana* 89). Ella/Louisiana takes the file cards, a system of

organization symbolizing the Western "order of things," and recast them as tools for reclaiming and restoring black diasporic histories. She "carries" them in her memory and can recall them at will, essentially embodying this diasporic counter-archive. She reflects, "I know now, that my practice had defined itself and with divine blessing. . . . I am a soothsayer, yes, but one who looks behind, sees and will see the past" (*Louisiana* 106). That Ella sees the past is significant, as soothsayers typically foresee the future. However, for a people relegated to the margins of History and dispossessed of knowledge of their cultural origins, recovering the past is indeed sacred work, helping the seamen to suture the memorial wounds of slavery, colonialism, and their myriad afterlives.

As Ella/Louisiana recovers Mammy's and Lowly's life stories, she further disrupts the racial and gendered logics of the state archive by centering black women's intellectual and political histories. "Archival power," as Trouillot tells us, "is the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research, and therefore, of mention."<sup>44</sup> Together, Ella, Mammy, and Lowly bend archival power to their will. Instead of a linear narrative, Mammy takes Ella on a journey that is at once vertical, horizontal, cyclical, and collective. By the time Mammy has revealed her full story, the WPA project has concluded. Though their time together began in the 1930s, Ella/Louisiana's manuscript is not published until the 1970s, about forty years later. By slowly and meticulously revealing her history across fifteen years, Mammy resists being reduced to an entry in the WPA records and thus co-optation by the state and settler-colonial archive. She actively co-opts and repurposes white hegemonic time, resisting what literary scholar and performance studies theorist Julius B. Fleming, Jr. calls "black patience" by insisting on a temporality that allows her to tell a more capacious and communal story of black resistance.<sup>45</sup>

To that end, Mammy takes Ella/Louisiana on a journey to recover not only her individual story, but her grandfather's and mother's stories as well: a familial and "community tale" of labor activism and resistance on Louisiana's sugar plantations and the violent retribution and death that often followed. Mammy's grandfather had been enslaved in Louisiana and was killed when he attempted to escape to freedom. Her mother, too, was murdered for protesting unfair wages for sharecroppers on Louisiana's sugar plantations following emancipation. Mammy insists that her individual story is inextricably intertwined with theirs. Like her foreparents, she too was a labor activist, involved in a longshoreman's strike and had to flee Louisiana for Chicago, where she met Lowly and Silas in a boarding house. By the novel's end, both the venerable sisters and Silas communicate with Ella/

Louisiana from the dead about their respective experiences as labor activists in the Garvey Movement.

As Ella/Louisiana continues her spiritual metamorphosis, her body weakens and begins to deteriorate, perhaps symbolic of the psychosomatic costs of jettisoning and disassembling the violence of Western Enlightenment thought and creating new, “transgressive knowledge” (Toland-Dix 192). When she can no longer write for herself, Reuben takes charge of the narrative and transcribes for her. He observes:

[T]he conversation between Louisiana and her otherworld people was a private affair between them: they spoke in her head; she wrote what they said. I heard nothing and knew nothing excepting for which she shared with me. New conversation still takes place in her head but it is expressed through her speaking organs. I put it this way to underline the fact that it is not Louisiana’s voice that I, the scribe hear. She is neither reporting speech nor translating. The voices I hear, are as with the recording machine, those of other people. (*Louisiana* 143)

Through spirit possession, Ella/Louisiana’s body comes to function like the recording machine with multiple sounds emanating from a single source. This intersubjectivity enables her to tell a more diasporic and communal story. Delineating her final spiritual transformation, Reuben records, “[T]alk about angel voices! My wife’s voice was there too. Different chords, different tunes, different octaves. Sheer jazz. One sound. From one body. *A community song* . . . Mammy would not tell the president nor his men her tale for it was not hers; she was no hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen” (*Louisiana* 161). Though the WPA had instructed Ella/Louisiana to record Mammy’s story, Mammy insists that her work “was not hers” alone but is inextricably bound to Lowly’s, Silas’s, and her foreparents. This disavowal of individualism for collectivity is integral to the novel’s destabilization of the tenets of Western modernity. By depicting the counter-archive of diaspora as a communal project, Brodber proposes collectivity as a rejection of liberal individualism and the ways it reinforces modes of thought that marginalize black people, and black women’s intellectual histories, in particular.

*Louisiana* further adapts “archival power” by querying whose lives are deemed worthy of preservation, and thus what constitutes truth, facts, and valid evidence. While the WPA viewed Mammy as “important data,” its scope did not include Lowly, a Jamaican immigrant who was already deceased by the time the project commenced. Ella recalls that her relationship with

Lowly was imperative, as Lowly desired to be documented and included in the historical record as well. "If I had had doubts about my service to her, they were at an end. She needed to tell it out. *Mr President's grant did not cover her. What would the poor young woman have done without me*" (*Louisiana* 158; emphasis added). Lowly represents what it means to be excluded from the archive, to fall outside of what is deemed legitimate or worthy of preservation. While her relegation was in part due to her status as a Jamaican immigrant in the United States, *Louisiana* suggests that the borders of the nation-state cannot capture or delimit the dynamism of the black diasporic experience. And though she was already deceased when Ella/Louisiana's WPA assignment commenced and left no written record of her activities, her political activism in the Garvey Movement deserved to be "recorded for posterity" (*Louisiana* 139).

By recovering the stories of the already deceased, those who left little to no record of their existence, *Louisiana* further queries what we consider legitimate modes of evidence and the potential fetishization of the material record. Upon recording Mammy's mother's history of labor organizing, Ella/Louisiana visits the local archive to fill in the gaps of the manuscript and search for historical confirmation of what Mammy has shared. Mammy does not know precise dates and is skeptical that the archive has any useful information either: "As I am writing this Mammy is laughing at me. Information on the Teche strike in the library? News of my mother in the library?" (*Louisiana* 139). Yet when Ella/Louisiana visits a local black university, she finds scattered evidence to substantiate Mammy's accounts (an important validation of historically black college and university archives, which are often woefully underfunded and languish in disrepair). She writes:

I don't know where to find the details. The newspaper reports did not list the names of the participants. It did say though that women as well as men were involved in the leadership roles, so that's the evidence that your mother's action has been recorded for posterity. *What does the search prove? I don't know that it says anything more than you have said*, but it does help that you are not the only person who says what you say, that people to whom you haven't spoken verify what you say, have said. . . . I could ask the old people who were around at that time to give me some leads to the names but you are right, what your granny felt, what your mother felt, what you felt cannot be told any better than you have told it. I do not doubt you Mammy, nor any of the things you have said, and for me, *even if what you relate did not happen to you, it happened to someone's granny, someone's mother. Someone. Some baby was hurt.* (*Louisiana* 139, emphasis added)

Even as she attempts to verify Mammy's oral history in the archive, Ella/Louisiana comes to understand that whether the details of Mammy's memory were historically accurate was not the point, because memory and feeling sometimes contradict the official historical record. "[I]t happened to someone's granny, someone's mother. Someone." Thus, it was necessarily valid and worthy of preservation. As David Scott observes of the importance of "black memory" as a counter-hegemonic modality, "If history commemorates the achievement of dominant powers, the prerogatives and interests of states and empires, for example, memory recalls, often in the minor key of pathos, the stories of those who have been excluded and marginalized by those powers: the dispossessed, the disregarded, the disempowered."<sup>46</sup> Thus, Ella/Louisiana realizes it is more important to document what Hurston calls the "essential truth" rather than "the fact of detail, which is so often misleading."<sup>47</sup> Brodber herself makes a similar observation, noting that oral history "has a place in historical scholarship" not only when it corroborates the archive, but especially when it departs from it, for even if the discrepancy between archival and oral sources "cannot be settled," "it has to be recorded . . . that the oral account raises" alternative possibilities (Brodber, "Oral Sources" 10). As the stories and perspectives of enslaved peoples and their descendants are rarely recorded in the official historical record, they carry these histories around in their memories, passing them down orally, corporeally, and between the living and the dead. Black memory and oral histories are "immaterial archives," but still no less legitimate, as they capture how historically dispossessed peoples understand and make sense of their place in the world.<sup>48</sup>

Brodber also validates black affect and feeling as crucial components of this new method and field of study. By acknowledging that "what your granny felt, what your mother felt, what you felt cannot be told any better than you have told it," Ella/Louisiana comes to understand that "feeling is knowing" (*Louisiana* 139, 116). Delegitimizing black people's feelings was crucial to the denial of their personhood and subjectivity. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for instance, Thomas Jefferson maintained that black people did not feel physical or emotional pain as white people did, and as recent as 1905, Alvin Borgquist, a graduate student at Clark University in Massachusetts conducting research on "crying as an expression of emotions," inquired of black sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois, "Whether the Negro sheds tears, and if so, under what general conditions."<sup>49</sup> To claim feeling as knowing, then, is integral to *Louisiana's* validation of "different yet logical systems of knowledge," especially for people who were denied access to traditional Western epistemic modalities, from the human to the archive. By legitimizing memory, oral history, and feeling, Ella/Louisiana



functions as what Scott calls an "archaeologist of black memory," retrieving the past and preserving it for posterity. Though every detail of her teachers' oral histories may not be materially verifiable, Ella/Louisiana seemingly endorses Hartman's contention that "it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive."<sup>50</sup>

Finally, embedded within *Louisiana's* methodological and geographic charge to Black Studies is an important class critique. Brodber was convinced that "the grass-roots building of [diasporic] understandings so far has been mainly done by the unlettered—the domestic servants, stevedores, cane-cutters, minstrels" (Brodber, "Fiction" 168). She thus depicts Mammy and Lowly as working-class women who cook in a Chicago boardinghouse. And though Lowly had access to some colonial education in Jamaica, where she read voraciously and came to appreciate Greek mythology, as an immigrant, "Mr President's grant did not cover her" (*Louisiana* 158). Thus, *Louisiana* ultimately asks: How do we access the voices of black working-class peoples? What institutions do they use to engage in political activism? What strategies and modes of knowledge do they possess that may not be deemed worthy of preservation, or a legitimate way of seeing the world?

Alongside spirit possession, *Louisiana* validates the worldviews of black working-class peoples through its depiction of the Garvey Movement as a critical diasporic grassroots activist network. While the seamen who visit Ella/Louisiana's parlor are primarily interested in their personal histories of pain and loss, Mammy's and Lowly's narratives mark an early effort to highlight the significance of black women's participation in labor activism and the Garvey Movement, in particular. By the novel's end, we learn that "Mammy was a Garvey organizer and a psychic," who, along with Lowly and Silas, used her telepathic abilities to organize for the movement (*Louisiana* 148). In "The Challenge of Garveyism Studies," Adam Ewing notes that while "Garvey's movement bears the hallmarks of a chauvinistic, misogynistic nationalism, dominated by male voices, male leadership, and male perspectives, organized into gender-segregated roles," "some of the best work on Garveyism has focused on the gender dynamics within the movement."<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, and anticipating another recent trend in Black Studies by more than twenty years, *Louisiana* redirects our attention to the important leadership contributions of black women Garveyites, such as his wives, Amy Ashwood and Amy Jacques Garvey, Lady Henrietta Vinton Davis, Ethel Trew Dunlap, and Queen Mother Audley Moore (Brodber's inspiration for her characterizations of Mammy and Lowly). Indeed, there was an entire section of the *Negro World*, the organ of the Movement, devoted to the activities of Garveyite women,



and they published considerable poetry in the paper's "Poetry for the People" section.<sup>52</sup> Women Garveyites like Mammy and Lowly were thus crucial to the Movement's success; however, their contributions are less evident when the masculinist and patriarchal scripts of black diasporic intellectual and political history are left unchecked.

Ultimately, Mammy's and Lowly's activities in the Garvey Movement embody the spirit of *Louisiana's* proposed new field of study: a diasporic history from below that foregrounds the political, spiritual, and intellectual contributions of black working-class women. As Ella observes:

I don't think for instance that the nature or extent of the influence of black America on the Caribbean and vice versa has been explored as it should. I have no doubt that the acculturating relationship of those three in that Chicago kitchen was duplicated all over the place and certainly that man Garvey who extrapolated these relationships into a movement ought to be looked at by scholars. (*Louisiana* 154)

Brodber understood what Ewing has recently articulated about the Garvey Movement: that it is less about the man himself than what the institution and infrastructure he built enabled for peoples around the globe who were committed to the project of black freedom. As Ella/*Louisiana* comes to understand, "His UNIA gave them a framework within which to do concrete work" (*Louisiana* 153). By decentering Garvey as the focus of the Movement and emphasizing the contributions of its foot soldiers, *Louisiana* proposes reordering Black Studies toward more feminist and egalitarian futures.

### *Black Studies Reordered*

As a novel of and about the global black south, *Louisiana* systemically deconstructs hegemonic modes of knowledge production in order to legitimize alternatives, the margins, the out- and/or underside of modernity, the otherwise. In lieu of social scientific methods and procedures that are circumscribed by the epistemological biases and conceits of the state or colonial archive, *Louisiana* marshals African-derived religious and spiritual practices, what we might call the otherwise sacred, to (re)constitute and suture the myriad gaps, fissures, and silences of the counter-archive of diaspora. For Brodber, doing the work of Black Studies is a sacred act that requires a new set of critical tools and methodologies and ultimately a "reorder of things" that

transgresses and repudiates the codification of disciplinary boundaries. This is a reclamation of sorts of the pre-division of knowledge in West African societies and a corrective to their suppression and evisceration. Indeed, the Western epistemic modes that *Louisiana* disrupts and co-opts—social science, ethnography, sound recording technology, and the archive—are rooted in and share genealogical ties with the dispossession and domination of African peoples carried out by slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. *Louisiana* puts these modes—that emerged by way of the delegitimization of African epistemes and the enslavement and dispossession of African people—in the service of healing the wounds and recovering the very losses to which they contributed. In other words, if these Western epistemic modes were born out of the concomitant suppression of African knowledges and oppression of African peoples, then Brodber reclaims and reanimates the very African epistemic modes they rendered illegitimate to demonstrate the fallacy of Western epistemological supremacy altogether.

*Louisiana* thus turns on a series of reorientations of hegemonic modes, genres, and forms: the novel form masquerades as an ethnographic manuscript, encouraging readers to query the arbitrary boundaries between fiction and History; spirit possession sits freely alongside social science and technology as an equally legitimate mode of knowledge acquisition and production; Jamaica is connected to Louisiana, instead of New York or London, highlighting the global black south as an understudied network of black diasporic relationality; retrieving and preserving black diasporic histories and validating memory and feeling as ways of knowing are presented as sacred acts; and rather than fetishizing a white, patriarchal state or colonial archive, the novel calls for new tools and methods that center working-class black women's intellectual history and political activism within the counter-archive of diaspora. Drawing on black diasporic cultural and political practices such as spirit possession, music and orality, and labor organizing, Brodber resutures the "wounded kinship" of black diasporic belonging and relationality. She derives from these cultural forms a new method that prioritizes intersubjectivity over objectivity, and collectivity over individualism and proprietorship, in order to topple Western hierarchies of knowledge, reason, and personhood. In short, Brodber's efforts to work at the interstices of the sacred, social science, technology, and fiction provides a model for both Black Studies and Global South Studies alike. The novel intimates that one cannot simply study non-Western and/or marginalized peoples and cultures without embracing and incorporating their worldviews and modes of knowledge production as well.

*Louisiana's* insistence on a dispossessive logic that foregrounds intersubjectivity and communalism is its most stringent critique of Western rationality and Enlightenment thought. Instead of liberal individual personhood, Brodber emphasizes collectivity and collaboration. Mammy's story of labor organizing is inextricably intertwined with her ancestors' as well as Lowly's and Silas's work in the Garvey Movement. Instead of entertaining her clientele's pursuit of origins and ownership of folk material, Ella/Louisiana insists that it is shared. Similarly, Ella/Louisiana merges with the recording machine, not in an objectifying or commodifying manner, but in a way that insists on the inextricability of blackness to the Western modern project. These intersubjective cultural modes are purposefully non-(social)scientific, but rather subjective, affective, and performative; they cannot be measured or calculated, which is to say, reduced to social scientific logics.

Finally, while Brodber's "turning right upon its head and calling it wrong" is necessary for the decolonization of hegemonic knowledge acquisition and production, it is just the initial strategy she explores on her way to reordering Black Studies through a fuller and more symbiotic relationship between Western and African epistemes (*Louisiana* 133). The objective of *Louisiana* is not to undermine Western epistemic modalities alone. For instance, Brodber does not simply invert hegemonic structures by establishing Ella/Louisiana's spiritual work as superior to social scientific methods. On the contrary, she suggests that the tools and methods of the modern academic disciplines belong to the peoples of the African diaspora as well, if only because black labor and the category of the black racial other is constitutive to Western knowledge production, financially, ontologically, and epistemologically. Mammy and Lowly thus choose Ella/Louisiana, at least in part, precisely because she is a writer with social science training. It is her ability to listen, transcribe, and analyze data that makes her valuable to them as a "horse" and "archaeologist of black memory." For Brodber, then, Western and African-derived cultural and sacred modalities *can be* compatible, as both are necessary for the work of reconstituting the fragmented histories of the dispersed and dislocated peoples of the African diaspora. However, their relation must be non-hierarchical, and the outcome of their convergence must be communal, diasporic, feminist, and, ultimately, acknowledge the sacredness of black lives, past and present.

JARVIS C. MCINNIS is the Cordelia and William Laverack Family Assistant Professor of English at Duke University. An interdisciplinary scholar of African American and African Diaspora literature and culture, he is currently completing his first book manuscript, tentatively titled, "Afterlives of

the Plantation in the Global Black South." This study aims to reorient the geographic contours of black transnationalism and diaspora by interrogating the hemispheric linkages between southern African American and Caribbean writers, intellectuals, and cultures in the early twentieth century.

### Notes

1. C. L. R. James, "The Black Scholar Interviews: C.L.R. James," *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 1 (1970): 35–43. I am grateful to Shana Redmond for sharing this citation.

2. Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (1994; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

3. June E. Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 41–42.

4. Anne Margaret Castro, "The Hermeneutics of Spirit Possession: Interpreting Mediums in Changó, The Biggest Badass and Louisiana," in *The Sacred Act of Reading: Spirituality, Performance, and Power in Afro-Diasporic Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 64–101; Curdella Forbes, "Redeeming the World: Religious Experience as Liberation in Erna Brodber's Fiction," *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 1 (2007); Samantha Pinto, "Asymmetrical Possessions: Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, and the Gendered Fictions of Modernity" in *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 106–41; June E. Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion* (Westport: Praeger, 2006); Jenny Sharpe, "When Spirits Talk: Reading Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* for Affect," *Small Axe* 16, no. 3 (2012): 90–102; Jenny Sharpe, "Word Holes: Spirit Voices in the Recording Machine" in *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 97–124; Shirley Toland-Dix, "This is the Horse. Will You Ride?: Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, and Rituals of Spirit Possession," in *Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the U.S. South*, eds. Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cécile Accilien (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 191–210.

5. For instance, Religious Studies scholar Josef Sorett claims that "black literature is religious ... [and] is an extension of the practice of Afro-Protestant Christianity" (2). Taking Sorett's claim a step further beyond Afro-Protestantism, this essay invites a consideration of what it would mean to integrate, if not prioritize, African-derived religious practices within Black Studies, both literally and figuratively. See Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

6. According to Reena N. Goldthree, tracing inter-imperial networks is one of the recent trends in Caribbean History. See Reena N. Goldthree, "New Directions in Caribbean History," *The American Historian*, 2019, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2018/may/new-directions-in-caribbean-history/>.

7. See Adam Ewing, "The Challenge of Garveyism Studies," *Modern American History* (2018): 1–20.

8. I borrow this term from Roderick A. Ferguson's study on the rise of the interdisciplines in the university. See *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

9. Pinto, "Asymmetrical Possessions," 127–28; Sharpe, "Word Holes" 100–01; M. Jacqui Alexander, "Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible" in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminisms, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 287–332.

10. Likewise, Forbes describes Ella/Louisiana as displaying an "ethic of surrender," and Castro describes her practice as "engaged surrender."

11. Pinto "Asymmetrical Possessions," 135; Toland-Dix, "This is the Horse," 204.

12. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 5.

13. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) 133; Castro, too, uses opacity in her analysis of *Louisiana*; it is integral to her notion of “engaged surrender” (see *The Sacred Act of Reading*).

14. Louisiana, St. Mary’s Parish, Jamaica, is indeed a fictional town; however, Brodber’s birthplace in Woodside, Jamaica is “the site of a former coffee plantation called Louisiana.” Thus, Brodber used this “hemispheric plantation history” as the basis of her geographic reimagining (Sharpe, “Word Holes,” 98–99).

15. Influenced by the transnational turn in American Studies, scholars in the field of New Southern Studies have done invaluable work to trace the cultural, intellectual, and political linkages between the U.S. South and the broader hemispheric and global souths, especially vis-à-vis shared histories and legacies of the plantation. Shirley Toland-Dix’s essay on *Louisiana*, cited here, is published in *Just Below South*, a 2007 anthology edited by some of the leading scholars in New Southern Studies doing this important work.

16. What I call the “global black south” has variously been called the “Circum-Caribbean,” the plantation Americas, and the hemispheric Americas, among other designations. However, I insist on the “global black south” to clarify my work’s emphasis on the U.S. South as a part of a broader diasporic and hemispheric geography, as the region is often excluded from these discourses because it is a part of the U.S. nation-state, a Global Northern imperial power.

17. The experiences of southern African Americans under slavery and Jim Crow in the U.S. South, though distinct, share affinities with Afro-descended peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America and their experiences of slavery, European colonialism, and U.S. imperialism.

18. This list is by no means exhaustive. See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

19. Erna Brodber, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure,” in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 164–68.

20. Whereas Gordon’s notion of haunting is about the specters of the past that are lodged in systems of domination and exploitation, Brodber depicts actual ghosts or spirits, both sonically and visually, through the characterizations of Mammy, Lowly, and Silas. In particular, for Brodber, haunting and communing with the dead are sacred and spiritual practices. What Brodber and Gordon share in common, however, besides their backgrounds in sociology, is a methodological challenge to the field of sociology and the social sciences more broadly. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

21. Erna Brodber, “Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History of the Caribbean,” *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4 (1983): 7.

22. Brodber has since published this study as *Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782–1996* (Kingston: University Press of the West Indies, 2019).

23. Pinto, “Asymmetrical Possessions,” 123.

24. Alberto Strongman, *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 252.

25. For comparative analyses of *Louisiana* and Hurston, see Roberts, Toland-Dix, Pinto.

26. Brodber, “Oral Sources,” 2–11.

27. See Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 6–13 for a comprehensive overview of the archival turn in Black Studies.

28. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

29. Erna Brodber, “Writing Your Village History—The Case of Woodside” in *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon Books, 2003), 160.

30. Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

31. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

32. Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

33. For instance, the root of the Afro-Cuban practice of Santería, "santa," translates to holy, and the Haitian practice of Vodou means "god" or "spirit."

34. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

35. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

36. In the late nineteenth century, the phonograph, then a new technology, was thought to mediate between the living and the dead. Even Thomas Edison experimented with the idea that recording technologies could communicate with the dead. For more on Spiritism and sound technology in the nineteenth century, see Sharpe, "Word Holes," 110–11.

37. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2007).

38. Jarvis C. McClinnis, "A Corporate Plantation Reading Public: Labor, Literacy, and Diaspora in the Global Black South," *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019): 523–55.

39. Brodber became aware of the gaps and fissures in the black diasporic archive while studying in London and through exposure to the histories and experiences of black peoples in the U.S. South. As a student at the University College of the West Indies in London, she wrote her "special paper" on "the Reconstruction period in the southern United States. This, plus the little bit of Caribbean history, was all the university could give me to know and therefore to face my people sensibly," she recalls. "From this exposure, I learned that there was a large gap in information on me and my kind. It pulled me into it. My path was clear: I must fill this gap in a way that the findings could be immediately translated into action" ("Fiction" 164–65). Brodber's limited education in southern United States and Caribbean histories created a *global black south consciousness* that became integral to her broader political project, as evidenced by *Louisiana*.

40. Likely a reference to the Belgian government's abduction of mixed-race children during the colonial era. See Giulia Paravicini, "Belgium Apologizes for Colonial-Era Abduction of Mixed-Race Children," *Reuters*, April 5, 2019, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belgium-congo-idUSKCN1RG2NF>.

41. Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011), 47–48.

42. Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232.

43. For a discussion of critiques of the "recovery imperative" in Black Studies, see Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*, 8–9.

44. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995; Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 99.

45. Julius B. Fleming, Jr., "Transforming Geographies of Black Time: How the Free Southern Theater Used the Plantation for Civil Rights Activism," *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019): 587–617.

46. David Scott, "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), ix–x.

47. Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York: Amistad, 2018): 3.

48. Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives*

49. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia"; Alvin Borgquist "Letter from Alvin Borgquist to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 3, 1905." *W. E. B. Du Bois Papers* (MS 312). Special

Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. My thinking about feeling and affect as otherwise modalities of knowing in Black Studies has been informed by the work of Julius B. Fleming, Jr. in his essay, "Anticipating Blackness: Nina Simone, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Time of Black Ontology" in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 1 (2022): 131–152. For a more explicit analysis on the role of affect in *Louisiana*, see Jenny Sharpe's "When Spirits Talk."

50. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

51. Ewing, "Garveyism Studies," 20.

52. I am grateful to Duke English graduate students, Nicole Higgins, Jessica Covil, and Kelsey Desir and students in the "Black Mobilities and the Archive" migration lab for making me aware of Ethel Trew Dunlap's and other black women Garveyites' poetic contributions to the *Negro World*.