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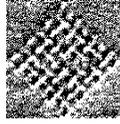
*I Dream to Change the World
Literature and Social Transformation*

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Dreaming to Change the World: The Erna Brodber Experience



Erna Brodber

“We are out to build a new Jamaica”, my parents and the citizen's group which they had helped to form in the village, sang. At basic school age when I was with them in the nights at these meetings, I took them seriously, indoctrinated into the notion that it is possible for people to come together to change the society in which they live, to build a new kind of relationship between themselves. The possibility came back to me forcefully when I was in sixth form, about to leave the secondary school system. It came through J. B Priestley's *Time and the Conways*. Mr. Priestley had a point to make about time. I doubt whether I saw his point then, so taken up was I with his character, Madge of the socialist dream. It didn't matter to me that by Act 2, Madge has lost her dream, and I paid scant attention to my best friend and class mate who pointed out to me that Madge was by the end of the play, a dried up old maid. I was not put off by my class mate's expressed hope that I would not turn myself into a Madge. I stood by the Madge; she was my model. I saw myself created when she recited the lyrics of the hymn, “Jerusalem” and particularly the last verse:

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrow of desire!
Bring me my spear! Oh clouds unfold
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

Substitute Jamaica or black Jamaica for England and I could have written that at eighteen. J.B Priestley, the literary artist had defined my path for me. The year after, when I went to be interviewed for a scholarship to our university, the University College of the West Indies (London), I shared with the panel my desire to give my life to the changing of the condition of my people and asked what course I could pursue to fit me for this task, the answer that came was Honours History. And when the time came, I duly registered for Honours History. After three years of very engaging work, I graduated with a good degree and sought to get my hands dirty with building my society right away. I thought I would begin with children--me and the Caribbean poet who, in his poem “Prophecy”, prophesied:

And there shall come a time
When these children in rags
Who litter the streets
Who know the crushing
Mastery of poverty and the curses
Of dirt and slovenliness
Shall walk with head erect
Proud owners of a new world
Masters of themselves
Admitting no inequality
Feeling no inferiority
Only a great humility and wonder
For the destiny that shall be theirs

I would be the one to take these children out of rags and help them “to walk with heads erect.” But the civil service, and where else could I with my colour seek a job in Jamaica in 1964, offered me, despite my request to be placed in the Child Care Department of the Ministry of Development and Welfare, a job in the division of Archives which I refused. I got a post graduate scholarship to continue studying at what was now the University of the West Indies and asked to be allowed into the Social Work department but no—with that scholarship I couldn’t do something as lowly as social work. I was allowed to register for a Masters in Sociology. On my own, I audited the Social Work lectures. Social Science, I thought, would get me a better understanding of human behavior and give me the skills with which to push my hands in and help this baby of a society into the world.

I thank this programme for exposing me to Max Weber who made me note the synergy between man, his ideas, his culture and the resulting possibility for social action. Social change and the direction of this change are, I learnt, contingent on the ideas that the culture celebrates. A year in Psychiatric Anthropology in a medical school in the USA and especially the study of that area called Social and Community Psychiatry, supported me in my new knowledge about ideas and culture as change agents. This was the age of Martin Luther King, of Women's Lib, of black power and of Michael Manley. Every man and his dog felt that he had the power to effect social change—“Better must come, better must come one day” Delroy Wilson trumpeted and we believed. It was easy for me in this climate to analyze myself and my people, to note the power of self-esteem, its relationship to social power and social action, to note what my culture was telling us about ourselves and about our capacity to change ourselves. It came time for me to see the need for the kind of change in our culture that could raise self-esteem and with it the possibility of producing agents who can effect social change.

I came back to a Jamaica/Caribbean in which ideas and culture were busily provoking social change, giving some credence to the Weberian thesis. The lyricists were the not-so-hidden hand.

The literati were quoting the Surinamese poet Dobru who wrote in his poem "I want to hate someone today, popular at CARIFESTA 1972, "Flowers must not bloom today."

The lower orders such as one calling himself Culture were singing:

Too long in our little Ghetto
 Wrongs been going on
 Let's protest
 Children of Israel
 Who really love rights
 for Jah set I and I as a watchman
 around Babylonian walls
 Oh children of Zion.
 I and I could never hold I peace
 While wrong is going on Day or night
 Man bus down Babylon walls
 Prepare ye the way for
 Jah people

Literary works -prose and poetry- had sent me dreaming of changing my world. But is this a one-woman thing? Could I with my production of literature inspire others, into a critical mass?

I came back to a job in the Department of Sociology in the Faculty of Social Science in an environment in which my people were already conscious of the need for change and the need to convert others. I had found in the arts a tool, and was using it. This time I asked to be allowed to help to train the social workers, people whom I saw to be the potential change agents. My job was to guide them into understanding human growth and development. I interpreted that as helping them to note how our culture affects the socialization process in our society; the kinds of beings that this process has produced and will produce. My hope was that my students would want to reflect on their personal histories against the background of the wider culture, analyze them and change themselves before going into the field as graduates to fix others.

This self-analysis is the standard Karen Horney approach to entering the field of psychotherapy and as my exposure in the US taught, even entering the field on an Anthropology project. Whether the goal of my interaction with my students was mere academic understanding, or it was presenting a mirror before students so that they can understand themselves as part of the culture - such understanding leading to personal therapy - teaching a course like this required the use of case studies. Enough of these existed and I had brought back enough from my stay in North America but the problem was that none dealt with the human growth and development of the Caribbean person, with the socialisation process and its effect on personality here. The only people I knew who had attempted such qualitative profiles of Caribbean peoples were the Caribbean writers of fiction.

What social psychological profile can better Roger Mais' delicate portrayal of Tansy's emotional needs, the neighbour, Rema's understanding of this need and responding to it as in his *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (Jonathan Cape 1953). Tansy is a thirteen-year-old girl whose mother like so many Jamaican mothers then and now, is busy making a living for the family by 'higglering' on the street. Someone must stay home and do the household chores. It has to be Tansy, the young girl, who therefore cannot go to school, though she would love to, and whose normal need for affection her mother, the only adult in her life, has no time to meet. Tansy is therefore unaccustomed to expressing her emotions, unaccustomed to loving and being loved. Listen to this, Mais' case study of interaction at a gathering in the yard in which Tansy and Rema live:

Tansy said to Rema, shyly, 'Let me rest me head in yuh lap?' 'Go ahead, honey, you feelin sleepy, no?'

She let her arm rest across the girl's shoulder and stroked her cheek lightly, scarcely thinking about it, with her fingers, and Tansy's heart glowed with the warmth of love under that touch. Nobody had ever made her feel like that before. She was shy of Rema on that account. She had come to regard such a thing as warmth between people as something suspect. In her home the meaning of love was never apparent. She knew such things as the need for security in terms of a bed to sleep on, a roof over your head, a full belly, and knew that you had to do what you were told in order to secure these things, but there was always that underlying fear that at any time these things may be withdrawn, almost without notice. And with it came the meaning and knowledge of fear. (p 45)

My class needed to observe and to understand Tansy and the fact of lovelessness as the lot of some Jamaican children. They were sure to meet her in their practice.

A less positive but equally true image came from the pen of Orlando Patterson in *Children of Sisyphus*. I found myself taking these writers' works into my classes. Case studies like these for Jamaica and Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* for Trinidad, I reckoned to be valuable not only because they are set in the Caribbean but because coming as they do with dialogue and this in the Caribbean voice and with descriptions of the landscape, students can easily project themselves into the world of the subject.

It was the time of Woman's Liberation. That women had a point of view was now as loudly touted as cultural relativity had in the decade before and I thought: "These novels, these ideas about their culture and its effects on the personality development that you are taking in to students, is probably a male perspective". I had proven to myself by the response to a piece of short prose fiction submitted to a national literary competition that I could communicate like these men, so the question posed itself to me, 'Why don't you write the female perspective?'. Jane and Louisa

will soon come home was born. I intended it to be a vehicle for personal and social transformation and tried to write it as such.

It was a time when we realized that the distinctions in class, colour, rural/urban existence were making the unity needed for national development difficult. The word was love but the question was: What is stymieing the making of this word into fact. I set out through writing *Jane and Louisa will Soon Come Home* to interrogate this. My examination begins with the persons who are trying to get together to make Nellie, the work's protagonist. Denominational distinctions and prejudices attack this. Then there is the cultural fault -the culture's inability to devise an amicable way of beginning a family. In some other cultures, potential people creators are paired at birth; in some others, there are marriage brokers to do this selection later in life. In Nellie's case, marriage and child-production are left to an unplanned pregnancy which very often means thwarting the ambitions usually of the female and her family.

Another issue undermining unity was migration. It is the rite of passage for those interested in social and vertical mobility but unlike rites of passage in other societies this cannot be a public one for neighbours with like interest for their children are frightened of that evil resident in each other's heart that could manifest itself to thwart a child and a family's mobility so I wrote:

Go eena kumbla
 Go eena kumbla, Nancy begged his son Tucuma
 Go eena kumbla, Polonius advised
 Go eena kumbla lest Dryhead eat you
 Mr. and Mrs. Anancy for all their cunning can spare nothing more towards my migration than "Go eena kumbla". (p 15)

This fear of each other and the paucity of designated routes for social mobility and for moving towards child making, the end of the line in the developmental process, I felt to be likely to produce mental instability especially among females and so it does with Nellie who muses:

God slackens the weave. Separates us chickens from birds. Sends us to pick our way through crowded buses, electric wires and asphalt streets yet gives us no street map towards each other. No compass, no scale either. Leaves us no path, no through way, no gap in our circle. (p 17)

This migration and the way it is constructed, Nellie is saying, carries psychogenic seeds.

The problem for her generation Nellie realizes is to find the path to each other. This has to happen if love is to move beyond the word, and this must come through honest evaluation of the personal and social past. This evaluation Nellie is doing and eventually meets some success as she finds and gets a chance to relate to the fellow whom her aunt had discouraged her from dating because "his uncle spoil" her aunt B's life and he comes from "people who will drag you down". She learns from him about love, learns how to love a place; gets a glimpse of a role she could sensibly play

in the development of her community. From him and the spirit of her dead grand aunt, she learns that this is to respect the work of the ancestors and to carry on from where they left off, but in a style appropriate to the problems of her time. We watch her as she enters the Beautiful Garden cultivated by her ancestors, notes the pretty as well as the ugly--colour prejudice in the female ancestor for instance and financial carelessness of the male. In the section "Jane and Louisa will soon come home", she has grown enough to look at her situation, to try to define her path, selecting defense mechanisms to carry her through--the pill, the kumbula for instance.

This book is a woman's struggle to make a change agent of herself. I focus on the woman because I know her more intimately than I know the male. In any case, I believed then as I do now, that social change in the world of the descendants of Africans enslaved in the New World, comes when women find themselves. Only then, "could [will] Baba come out of the light bulb, Cock Robin could [can] stand up and sing again and the man on the lonely donkey needn't dissipate into smoke"(p 147). We watch Nellie's struggle to change herself and leave her there with our good wishes.

It was my hope that my students - trainee change agents - would identify with Nellie, do their self-analyses and look at the barriers to unity such as colour prejudice, fear of each other and therefore lack of love for each other, absence of family building norms, - and find ways of correcting these; that they would find their places in this mix and seek to change those places from within those spaces.

How do I make my point that this is not just a story, a badly written 'mills and boon' that you read through once and then throwaway? I had to think hard about this matter. The idea of echoes of a pleasant past, subliminal messages, I think it is called, came to me, translated into the device of giving the book the name of a ring game which all Jamaicans are likely to have experienced, a game in which people have to find their place in the beautiful garden. Another was the form which the words on the page took, laying out the social psychological problems in a staccato fashion characterized by short sentences, short paragraphs and short subsections, what some reviewers have called collage. This I applied to the first section, "My dear will you allow me". I intended for it to look unusual and seem difficult. I felt this would make people think rather than sit back and enjoy. This I gather is also the point at which people opt out of reading the work. This was not designed to be so. The enjoyable narrative did not/would not come until "To Waltz with me" and later "Into this beautiful garden" which in European classical music form, would be the allegro. It is in the last segment that we watch Nellie marshalling her personal memories, critiquing her past, to learn from it. It is at this point that she is a positive role model, not due to her success, but to the fact that she is trying. In this final segment, "Jane and Louisa will Soon Come Home" I take the student back to short pieces and sections to stimulate mental activity. I hear that my mission has some measure of success with those who have managed to get this far.

I was not trying to write a novel. How could I dare? I was trying to forge a therapeutic tool. Constructing this was as difficult for me as reading it has been for students. *Myal* was easier, though it too had therapeutic intentions. I was trying to do here what Lloyd Best did in his "Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom" (*New World Quarterly* 1967) to get the academic community to do the work that only it can do. I quote from *Myal*:

- Now the half has been told brother -said Dan reining in his anger.
- Where is the other?-
- Planning a strategy mate-
- Yeah. Planning a strategy. To beat back those spirit thieves and make our way home-
- To beat back those spirit thieves and make our way home?-
- Those tacky ships have dropped their sails and turned to steam; have dropped their ships and turned to books.....
- Get in their books and know their truth....you change those books, you take those ships and away we go. (p 67)

Here again I hoped to pull people in, to get their attention by casting the work in something with which they are already familiar and from childhood. This is the Mr. Joe stories which most Caribbean people read at about age six, when they were in elementary school. I also used the way in which the words are displayed upon the page. The discussions between Dan and Willie, between the Rev. Simpson and Ole African, are for me, the MOST important words in the novel. I emphasize this by using a distinctive type face and by blocks of sentences--there are no paragraphs in these discussions.

Louisiana was very, very difficult to write. It was intended to draw attention of people of African descent to their social and psychological similarities and the consequent wisdom of uniting for social change, the methods and the direction being the same given their other similarities. My message here is contained in a slight narrative. How to get the reader to select the message button? I underline the message with something I think my readers, given our culture, would find not just strange but so disturbing that it would make them stop and focus. That is dead people talking to each other--a jumbi jamboree, such as early described by Lord Kitchener in a calypso of that name--through a piece of technology that we are given to using often these days. Suppose you are driving to the country and choose to stick a cassette in the deck and instead of hearing Sparrow, you hear your long dead grandfather talking to you, I think you would stop and give that time event all of your attention. I hoped so to get the readers' attention to my message.

By the time I was through with *Louisiana* I had to face the fact that literature was a very limited tool for social change in an environment in which people do not read and, books compared to the basic necessities of life, so very expensive. I had not given up the hope for the new Jerusalem nor that the children in rags would walk one day with heads erect, nor that my Caribbean space would be the new Jerusalem. I turned to community theatre, the script, the literature being subordinate

to the actions of the players. My novels, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* and *Nothing's Mat* are my own meditations though these are still mediations on the black Caribbean/Jamaican experience. I am no longer screaming at Caribbean people, at black people and designing routes to social change through books, though I still hope that my readers will empathise with my journey and benefit from whatever findings I might realize.

It is Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* that forced me to write *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. I have for a long time thought that understanding the slavery experience is key to the development of the ex-slave societies of the Americas and thought highly of Patterson's five-hundred-page tome in which he describes slavery as social death, but knew that his points, though they were important were not likely to be noted by the very many of us who need to be familiar with them. I wrote to create a bridge between that work and the many minds that should be exposed to it. Patterson begins with a definition of slavery: "[It] is one of the most extreme forms of relations of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the view point of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave." (p 1) He quotes Henri Wallen's study of slavery in ancient Greece to support his thesis concerning the extremity of powerlessness of the slave, any slave. It is worth quoting here:

The slave was a dominated thing, an animated instrument, a body with natural movements, but without its own reason, an existence entirely absorbed in another. The proprietor of this thing, the mover of this instrument, the soul and reason of this body, the source of this life, was the master. The master was everything for him, his father and his god... his authority and his duty. (p 4)

Says Patterson, "because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of the master, he became a social non-person"(p 5). In this process according to Patterson, he experiences natal alienation which means that "not only is the slave denied all claims on and obligations to his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants" (p 5). *The Rainmaker's Mistake* animates Patterson's community of socially dead and natively-alienated people for whom the master is everything, and is, as the people in my work salute him: 'Our Father, Preserver and Maker', a community in which people don't know that they have the power to create other human beings and think that they are all siblings, the children whom Mr. Charlie had made by planting his seed in the earth.

Patterson's research into slavery in a wide cross-section of societies and throughout time, established that masters renamed slaves according to their fancy and very often to amuse themselves. Thus, many slaves who given their phenotype and their powerlessness could not have much in common with Juno are thus named. This affinity for giving slaves the names of Greek deities and of cities in England is something I have found in my own historical research in Jamaica. In my historical research several slaves on one estate are given the same name differentiated only by a descriptor such as 'big J' or 'little J'. The characters in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* reflect this practice. Thus, the protagonist's friends are Little Congo, Phoebe, Essex, Jupiter, Juba, and the

twins, Castor and Pollox. The master, Patterson's work tells us, has total authority over the slave, which authority "(p 2) rests on the control of the private and public symbols and ritual processes that induce (seduce) people to obey because they feel satisfied and dutiful when they do". The founder's day in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* with its naming ceremony, its distribution of cloth, its large banquet for the slaves, Mr. Charlie's repeating of the myth of their unearthing which they must tell all new comers forever, is my attempt to draw attention to the notion of control through symbols and rituals.

The issue of social transformation which this work underlines, is how to get people so socially dead, so accepting of Mr. Charlie's omnipotence, of the myth of their founding and therefore their sexual impotence, to become socially alive. *The Rainmaker's Mistake* is me laying out the facts for myself to see what answers they carry. The answers, I, still involved with process of transformation, suggest is (a) puncturing the myth of origin and replacing it ultimately with the truth although this truth has unpleasantness such as matricide and collaboration with the enemy in it. (b) The above requires a move towards freedom but as I am at pains to show, freedom comes with responsibility and as I have shown, few really want to leave dependence on the master for their natural development which will involve making their own children and accepting responsibility for their own growth and development; few want to accept the fact that it is natural and human to grow old and weak, to cease to breathe and be put into a hole in the ground and buried. They prefer to wait for the return of the master even though they quite understand that they are capable of ruling themselves.

It is the unruly children who, willing to test boundaries and even be lost in sin, who discover and accept the fact that Mr. Charlie was a knave and the sense of themselves that he gave them was merely an unfounded myth supported by surgical invasions of their body such that they were kept from old age and death. There is less preaching in this work than in the others and I am not as out of breath from dragging people into the understanding that they must get on the social transformation train.

I am truly free in *Nothing's Mat* from the urge to transform my society. This is me allowing myself to simply play with geometry, to draw lines as see what shape these lines take. This is something I find myself doing as I conceptualize. With *Jane and Louisa will Soon Come Home* I found myself drawing circles within circles; with *Myal* it was string upon wood, with Louisiana it was shapeless chunks of wood or stone, waiting for the sculptor's hand; with *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, it was the tear- stained half face on the Frank Sinatra album 'Only the Lonely.' The notion of fractals, hypnotic geometrical designs with human properties would not leave my head. *Nothing's Mat* which does not yet have a committed publisher was my way of putting this notion to rest. I apply the notion to the history of a segment of the Jamaican society.

I want close with my new way of employing literature into my transformation efforts. This video of the emancipation ritual enacted at Blackspace shows my community in action as we pretend

to be in 1838 and on the coffee estate of Dr. Neilson who was the master of the ancestors of several of the peoples still alive in my village. These ancestors in this video, this emancipation ritual, comment upon their life as slaves and their reaction to being told that they are free. These ancestors are brought back and every effort is made to have their descendants represent them and speak the words my research tells me they would have spoken. The script has several places where the crowd intervenes as it wishes, the audience being thus allowed to comment spontaneously on their history and so claiming it. This kind of theatre, requiring no literacy, transmits the history and sociology of Jamaica and opens the discussion about slavery and emancipation more effectively and of course to a wider cross section, I think, than the printed page does. I dream to continue to use this form effectively in my ongoing effort to change the world and more subtly than my attempts in my first four novels.

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