



2012

# Writing states of independence: Erna Brodber and Kei Miller

Evelyn OCallaghan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

## Recommended Citation

OCallaghan, Evelyn, Writing states of independence: Erna Brodber and Kei Miller, *Kunapipi*, 34(2), 2012.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/7>

---

## Writing states of independence: Erna Brodber and Kei Miller

### **Abstract**

Caribbean literature records the disillusionment with the reality of political independence that followed the failure of the West Indies Federation, and indicts the confederacy of dunces largely responsible. Peter Abraham's *This Island Now*, V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Oonya Kempadoo's *Buxton Spice* and Caryl Phillips's *A State of Independence*, among others, have excoriated both colonial and national political machinations that divide states and the region on the grounds of race, class and ideological differences. I want to attend, however, to a more positive vision which cautiously raises hopes for the prospects of Caribbean citizens to actually achieve a state of independence, or as Erna Brodber puts it in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, entry into 'the Free' (2007 150). This process, however, takes place far outside the realm of organised politics: specifically, the realm of Spirit. The writing of Erna Brodber and Kei Miller envisions Caribbean people accessing epistemological resources of their own cultural fashioning, resources which properly harnessed admit the possibility of growth, transcendence and fulfilment beyond the strictly material realm. In both, the liberation of the individual is linked with that of the community and imagines achievement of a real confederation.

EVELYN O'CALLAGHAN

## Writing States of Independence: Erna Brodber and Kei Miller

...until you too have lost the day and the day has lost you and it dawns on you how foolish it was to have come willingly to where the dead are put — until then do not scoff at what has become our common language for tomorrow and hope, this bright opening, this end of dark, this light at the end of the tunnel.

(Kei Miller, *A Light Song of Light* 19)

Caribbean literature records the disillusionment with the reality of political independence that followed the failure of the West Indies Federation, and indicts the confederacy of dunces largely responsible. Peter Abraham's *This Island Now*, V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Oonya Kempadoo's *Buxton Spice* and Caryl Philips's *A State of Independence*, among others, have excoriated both colonial and national political machinations that divide states and the region on the grounds of race, class and ideological differences. I want to attend, however, to a more positive vision which cautiously raises hopes for the prospects of Caribbean citizens to actually achieve a state of independence, or as Erna Brodber puts it in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, entry into 'the Free' (2007 150). This process, however, takes place far outside the realm of organised politics: specifically, the realm of Spirit. The writing of Erna Brodber and Kei Miller envisions Caribbean people accessing epistemological resources of their own cultural fashioning, resources which properly harnessed admit the possibility of growth, transcendence and fulfilment beyond the strictly material realm. In both, the liberation of the individual is linked with that of the community and imagines achievement of a real confederation.

Miller's poetry, like that of Edward Baugh, Olive Senior and Mark McWatt, is infused with love for his difficult place and people. His clear-eyed yet sacramental songs and testimonies are as moving as the verses of Lorna Goodison and Derek Walcott. Anger at injustice and deep concern for social reform are tempered by compassion for the humble and the wounded, and the possibility of renewal also informs his lyrical prose. What reviewers consistently note in his writing is the influence (in language, tone and subject) of religion: for example, '*A Light Song of Light* (2010) contains praise songs set in a biblical landscape divided by darkness and light' (Proctor online). Miller explains the genesis of this collection: 'I wondered how in the midst of so much darkness could we possibly sing. And I wondered what it would sound like — this song of light, and how could you right [sic] an intelligent, rigorous poetry like that, that dared to be hopeful' (Choi online).

Daring to hope is difficult for many Caribbean writers, given a history of catastrophe and the economic degradation and social violence faced by so many in the region. Yet Miller, like Goodison, evokes the possibility of happy endings, no matter how qualified, and despite the record of brutality, still imagines the reclamation of community. Critics remark on his troubling stories which probe painful subjects ‘in a way that is strangely uplifting’ (*The Scotsman* online). Long accustomed to writing that highlights inequities and injustice in Caribbean postcolonial contexts, critics sometimes struggle to frame the ‘gentler’, brighter vision which might be plotted from Samuel Selvon through Erna Brodber and Olive Senior to Mark McWatt, and of course to Earl Lovelace with his unwavering faith in the redemptive potential of Caribbean culture. And here is my problem: how to talk about terms like faith and redemption in contemporary, socially engaged, postmodernist Caribbean fiction without coming across as an unrealistic romantic or a born-again proselyte? How to admit the realm of Spirit into literary analysis?

Certainly, the deployment of African-Caribbean religious faith in resistance struggles has been recognised in popular as well as historical and literary discourse. Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984) and Erna Brodber’s *Myal* (1988) are but two instances of many; and there are countless examples from blues, gospel and reggae music. On the other hand, the complicity of religious practices with intolerance, self-righteous marginalisation/persecution of others, and reactionary conservative politics is a constant in Caribbean literature. Miller recognises this:

religion — at least in Jamaica and in particular Christianity — can be a pretty goddamned dangerous thing. It teaches people how to hate other people. It supplies every bigot with the right rhetoric to defend his hatreds, his intolerances, and his superiority- — and then calls all of these things ‘righteousness’. I write against that.

(Laughlin online)

Still, analysis of Miller’s narratives is often couched in religious terminology. Evil manifests in his literary worlds (cruelty, brutality and callousness) but so do epiphanies of enlightenment, compassion, faith in human goodness and simple joy in the world. That said, as a writer who also functions within the academy, he admits that the concept of Spirit embarrasses many who teach and write about Caribbean literature. The difficulty lies in how to render this epistemology in the language of literary criticism: in ‘academic discussion of metaphysical things, we are often tempted to tuck “the Spirit” within quotation marks’, he notes, ‘a way to insert scepticism into the discourse’ (Miller 2011a 450). Discussing religious experience in Erna Brodber’s fiction, Curdella Forbes also observes that spiritual concerns are out of place in the rationalist, intellectual tradition within which literary and critical analysis belongs. Brodber’s achievement, she argues, is the insertion of ‘an alternative vocabulary, rooted in Caribbean religious tradition, into Caribbean literary discourse’ (2007 17).

The twenty-first century began with catastrophe and fear of catastrophe. An apocalyptic feel to the millennium and obsessive media coverage of natural and terrorist disasters since then have contributed, undoubtedly, to a resurgence of evangelical fundamentalism in the Caribbean. This kind of reactionary religious resurgence is worrying, accompanied as it is with the exploitative capitalist ethos of some new religious leaders and lay preachers who feel impelled to denounce 'sinfulness' in the media as the cause of social and economic problems. Again, Miller's fiction registers this unease:

In Jamaica, church was a part of everything... People waited for the latest preacher in the way that another might wait for the next big song... On almost every corner there was a pulpit and every preacherman preaches like he was trying to win votes... And so, on the island, it became easy to preach hate and call it love. Easy to tell people who they should spit on. Who they should turn their eyes away from. Who was not their neighbour instead of who was. (Miller 2008 202)

Interestingly, the link between politician and preacher here underscores their common roles in fragmenting communities for their own ends. Against this travesty of religion, I posit something more elusive, which I have been calling Spirit. It surfaces in Miller's stories which foreground the power of vulnerable, frightened people to take a leap of faith in love as redemptive, compassion as transcendence, even in the face of dread societies. Crucially, he does this — as do Brodber, Lovelace, Senior and Goodison — by extending the spiritual realm to spaces outside the Church. This apprehension of Spirit, often eluding the parameters of organised religion, informs Toni Morrison's 'discredited knowledges', or epistemologies which eschew rationalist discourse (342). Their value is rarely recognised. So Adamine in *The Last Warner Woman* is aware that:

Whatever white man believe in with all his heart — that thing name religion; whatever black woman believe in, that name superstition. What white man go to on Sunday, that thing name church; but what black woman go to name cult. (Miller 2010a, 95)

Brodber's *Louisiana* also asserts that 'there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses' (1994 4). For both writers, fiction engages with injustice and the desperate situations in which many Caribbean people live, yet imaginatively transcends this social reality through faith that their lives, individual and together, are worthy of celebration.

Miller's balancing act is evident from his first collection, *Fear of Stones*. For example, 'Sound Like a Gunshot' and 'The Fear of Stones' starkly depict forcible subordination (especially of children and women) as perverting emotional growth and perpetuating a legacy of cruelty and violence. Yet in these tales, faith and love trump intolerance and brutality. So spirit and social justice are intimately connected in Miller's discourse. He suggests why prophets and seers and Warner Women figure in his writing: because there is a link between writer and prophet. 'That's what I believe prophets do. They extend genuine love towards those amongst us who catch hell. What Cornel West calls for is a kind of radical and

ever-expanding empathy. It's something I feel called to as well' (Miller 2011b online). Occasionally anger surfaces: using Scripture to justify discrimination against men (and women) of one's own people who choose to perform gender roles differently, he feels, violates the Second Commandment: 'a genuine love and a willingness to celebrate his being and his right to that being' (2011b online). In his work Old Testament retribution is redeemed by New Testament faith, hope and charity.

Forbes claims that 'Spirit' in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* 'indicates both a fundamentally spiritualist worldview, and the groundedness of that spiritualism in a specifically religious interpretation' (2007 8). I want to move away from a specifically 'religious' context, however, and attempt to yoke together concepts of immanence, and spiritualism/spirituality — what Forbes names 'Caribbean metaphysics' (2007 6) and Walcott calls 'the numinous' (40). A useful catchall term occurs in Dianne Stewart's *Three Eyes for the Journey*: 'Jamaican sociologist of religion Leonard Barrett describes this African sensibility most cogently with the term "soul force"' (18). I want to appropriate 'soul force' (recognition of forces beyond the rational and material world which have the power to transform human emotions) for literary practice, the kind of redemption through words that Brathwaite refers to as 'liberation of the voice' (49). Just as art has the power to move, I argue that Brodber's and Miller's writing functions as a kind of 'working in the Spirit', albeit a most definitely embodied spirit. Mr Writer Man in *The Last Warner Woman* makes this explicit: 'The Warner People is still here, Mama. We is still here. Seers. Prophets... But things is different now. We take the pencils down from behind our ears and now we is writing. We been writing one whole heap of books' (2010a 243). And for both, I suggest, the goal of this writing is not only to give people back their forgotten (hi)stories (which is what Mr Writer Man does for Adamine, and Ella/ Louisiana does for the seamen in New Orleans), but to bear testament to the potential of Caribbean people to overcome individual challenges and through empathy to build a sustainable society.

Brodber's *Louisiana* closes with the amanuensis claiming the story as 'a community tale. We made it happen' (161). This is true of all Brodber's novels. Her narrative strategies, like Miller's, insist on the affirmation of connections, of interrelatedness. Hence textual structure models her ideal social structure, in that all the players of the cultural mosaic have a role to play and voices to contribute. 'The centering of community is a very noticeable aspect of Brodber's paradigm' observes Forbes; Spirit serves 'as a cohesive, *relational* force' (2007 16). Jacqui Alexander might have been in conversation with Brodber and Miller when she argues for the urgent need to recognise 'the deep knowing that we are interdependent — neither separate nor autonomous. As human beings, we have a sacred connection to one another, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc on our Souls. There is great danger, then, in living lives of segregation' (282).

Brodber plots emancipation in spiritual terms: in *Louisiana*, Ella is told that '[e]nough of her line had been wasted in battle... [and] she should take a new approach to fighting' (1994 155). This new approach involves drawing on 'soul force' as a liberating Caribbean diaspora epistemology in the service of healing. For as Stewart discovers, 'Obeah, Myal, Revival Zion, Kumina, Rastafari, and other African diasporic religions share common religious foci that appear to be African-derived and that emphasise healing, well-being, and the integration and affirmation of purposeful life experience' (12). With Miller, Brodber's writing takes for granted 'alternative' belief systems such as spirit possession, Obeah, Myal and other forms of Caribbean 'higher science'/healing practices. As Helen Tiffin argues, Brodber's work refuses acceptance of all closed narratives (racial, economic, religious or political). Postcolonial reconstitution takes many forms, including a revolutionary metaphysics articulated in her fiction. The 'traffic between the spiritual and the material, the dead and the living' in Brodber's writing, notes Forbes, 'is neither metaphor nor belief system but commonsensical, everyday fact ... [and is] the basis for social transformation' (2009 1). Hence *Myal's* espousal of a community of healers who draw on knowledge and rituals outside of conventional Western cosmology as a way of reading the world. They practice and promote their own cultural truth claims in the project of healing both individual and group. There is no mystical obfuscation of alternative epistemologies in Brodber's fantastical narratives, or Miller's either. For Brodber, Forbes points out, the spiritual is localised and 'grounded in material specifics' (2007 11); 'the spiritual legacy is right here at our fingertips, within reach — it does not have to be excavated from a distant past — it is even now in the making' (14). In other words, it is being written. The emphasis on the literal rather than metaphorical nature of Brodber's spirit world is well taken. But I prefer to read the account of redemption as Ella/Louisiana tapping into a culturally specific, historicised, shared cosmology that perceives immanence along the lines of Glissant's 'relentless striving to create a "We" from the disjointed "I's"' (Dash 134). I grope toward articulating Spirit in the work of both writers, but in humanist rather than religious terminology.

Brodber and Miller, I suggest, insist on recognising the power of Caribbean people to transcend dehumanising contexts and to manifest the sacred in multiple forms of creative expression: the pan-man in Port of Spain or dance hall diva in Kingston who are transformed during their performance no less than the women with upraised arms and closed eyes swaying in a wooden church in Bridgetown. Materialist concerns matter to their characters, but so do spiritual epiphanies which inspire compassion and empathy, inclusiveness and community. In closing, I revisit Walcott's reference to the Caribbean poet's 'awe of the numinous' (40). Caribbean literary employment of spirit work/ 'soul force' seems to me to fulfil multiple meanings of the numinous: textuality in the service of liberation and healing; evoking immanence in the everyday; constructing ethical concerns that

drive community connectedness. The work of Brodber and Miller testifies to these interconnected aspects of the numinous. Brodber has made it clear that her writing has activist intentions, and Miller believes in ‘the ability of art to, at once, be politically engaged, sound a lament for the desperate situation that Caribbean subjects often live in, and transcend this secular reality to move toward a spiritual place of celebration’ (2011a 455). Their writings appropriate ‘soul force’ in the service of crucial Caribbean projects: healing trauma and building viable communities. Surely, in dark times like these, we need such illumination:

A light song of light is not sung  
 in the light; what would be the point?  
 A light song of light swells up in dark  
 times, in wolf time and night time,  
 in knuckle and blood times; it hums  
 a small tune in daytime, but saves  
 its full voice for the midnight

(Miller 2010b 11)

Still healthily suspicious of proselytising evangelists, I welcome a literary vision that transcends cynical despair and finds the sacred in the mundane. Such sentiments inform Brodber’s fiction and the poetry of Walcott and Goodison. And now the work of Kei Miller, who is also, I think, engaged in the literary project of ‘importing “light” to people who were trapped in darkness’ (Miller 2011a 451).

#### WORKS CITED

- Alexander, M. Jacqui 2005, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Duke UP, Durham.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau 1993, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, U of Michigan P, Ann Arbor.
- Brodber, Erna 1988, *Myal*, New Beacon, London.
- 1994, *Louisiana*, New Beacon, London.
- 2007, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, New Beacon, London.
- Choi, Joanne 2012, ‘Catching up with Kei Miller’, *Color Magazine*, online, [http://www.colormagazineusa.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=326](http://www.colormagazineusa.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=326), accessed September 16, 2012.
- Dash, J. Michael 1995, *Edouard Glissant*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Forbes, Curdella 2007, ‘Redeeming the Word’ *Postcolonial Text*, 3.1, pp. 1–19, online, <http://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/528/378>.
- 2009, Review of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, *Postcolonial Text*, 5.3, pp. 1–4, online, <http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1149/984>.
- Laughlin, Nicholas 2007, ‘Talking to Kei Miller’, *Antilles: The Weblog of The Caribbean Review of Books*, online, <http://antilles.blogspot.com/2007/05/talking-to-kei-miller-kei-miller.html>, accessed July 3, 2010.



- Marshall, Paule 1984, *Praisesong for the Widow*, Plume, New York.
- Miller, Kei 2006, *Fear of Stones and Other Stories*, Macmillan Caribbean, Oxford.
- 2008, *The Same Earth*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.
- 2010a, *The Last Warner Woman*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.
- 2010b, *A Light Song of Light*, Carcanet, Manchester.
- 2011a, 'Recognizing the Spirit: Indigenous Spirituality and Caribbean Literature', *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell, Routledge, London, pp. 450–59.
- 2011b, August 11, 'On Effeminacy', online, <http://keimiller.com/2011/08/11/on-effeminacy/>, Keimiller.com, accessed September 16, 2011.
- Morrison, Toni 1985, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation' *Black Women Writers*, ed. Mari Evans, Pluto, London.
- Proctor, James 2010, 'Kei Miller', *British Council Literature*, online, <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/kei-miller>, accessed September 12, 2011.
- Stewart, Dianne 2005, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*, Oxford UP, Oxford.
- The Scotsman* n.d. review extract, Amazon.com, online, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Last-Warner-Woman-Kei-Miller/dp/0297860798>, accessed September, 2012.
- Tiffin, Helen 2011, Small Islands, Strong Currents: The Significance of West Indian Literature, *Fourth Edward Baugh Distinguished Lecture*, Department of Literatures in English, June 5, University of the West Indies, Kingston.
- Walcott, Derek 1998, 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, Derek Walcott, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, pp. 36–64.