

1994

Why I Write

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Recommended Citation

Brodber, Erna, Why I Write, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/68>

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Why I Write

Abstract

As long as I can remember being, I have been shy. I am the one in the photograph who holds on to Mama's skirt hanging from the chair on which she sits and whose face is in her armpit. My sister whom I follow in birth order, correctly has her hand on Mama's shoulder, fingers just barely touching that shoulder, her head erect and her eyes front. My sister was the one who took the visiting Parson's white daughter around the church yard. What do you say to someone who looks like that? Blue and with straw hair. This was our first close-up view of a white child and there is my sister walking and talking with her as if she's known her all her life! I admired my conversationally capable sister. I continued through life to admire out-going people, an easy thing what with my ring-side seat, for my best friend was always one of that kind. My shyness did not mean that I didn't do my bit of public-speaking and drama. I was considered quite good at that, so people and I did get a chance to hear my voice but as we know reciting and acting are of set pieces and do not require the mental inventiveness, verbal agility and the ability to outpsyche the other that conversation requires. I lacked these.

ERNA BRODBER



Erna Brodber was born in Jamaica in 1940. She is a respected sociologist and her published works include *Abandonment of Children in Jamaica* (1974), *A Study of Yards in the City of Kingston* (1975) and *Perceptions of Caribbean Women* (1982). She worked at the Institute of Social and Economic Research in Mona, Jamaica, from 1975 to 1983. She is at present a free-lance writer and researcher.

Erna Brodber also writes poetry, short stories and plays, some of which have been awarded prizes in Jamaica. Her first novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (New Beacon Books, 1980) was greeted with critical acclaim. Her most recent novel *Myal* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989.

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As long as I can remember being, I have been shy. I am the one in the photograph who holds on to Mama's skirt hanging from the chair on which she sits and whose face is in her armpit. My sister whom I follow in birth order, correctly has her hand on Mama's shoulder, fingers just barely touching that shoulder, her head erect and her eyes front. My sister was the one who took the visiting Parson's white daughter around the church yard. What do you say to someone who looks like that? Blue and with straw hair. This was our first close-up view of a white child and there is my sister walking and talking with her as if she's known her all her life! I admired my conversationally capable sister. I continued through life to admire out-going people, an easy thing what with my ring-side seat, for my best friend was always one of that kind. My shyness did not mean that I didn't do my bit of public-speaking and drama. I was considered quite good at that, so people and I did get a chance to hear my voice but as we know reciting and acting are of set pieces and do not require the mental inventiveness, verbal agility and the ability to out-psyche the other that conversation requires. I lacked these.

My first job after high school required no ability to converse. I was a government temporary clerk, who, caught reading on the job, was exiled to the registry where I saw files and files. They don't ask you to talk and the people who want files simply scribble a code which you, the file clerk decipher quietly to yourself. I was rescued from this and helped to get a teaching job in Montego Bay, the tourist capital of the island of Jamaica. This is where change began. It moved slowly towards fruition ... Being one of three natives in a boarding house of twenty teachers required little change and this was my private and public life for three months. Then Marie came - my Jamaican Chinese-friend-to-be. Marie was a university graduate but seemed shy to me. She knew my sister, having been an undergraduate with her for two years on the same campus at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. Marie must have thought that I shared my sister's conversational abilities. We hung together and to avoid what seemed to this sister to be unreasonably long minutes of silence, I felt constrained to talk.

It was the habit of young staff of the girl's school and of the boys' school to spend Saturday nights at the night club. I was young staff. It was on one of these occasions that I heard Marie making conversation, the butt of

which was my conversational style, how we had walked for a mile and how I had talked the whole way. Fancy that. Me, a chatterbox. And there is the husband of a friend of mine who until now calls me 'Miss wide open spaces'. I had talked, he says, from Montego Bay to Kingston – three hours – about my love for 'wide open space'. Chatterbox, me. Conversing but without the mental inventiveness, verbal agility, etc. of good conversation. All that effort for nothing. I went back to conversational silence, and so totally, that on my first job after University – this was in Trinidad – a fellow paused in a conversation to say hello to me. I painfully opened my mouth and responded. 'Good,' he said, 'I just wanted to be sure you weren't dumb.'

I was so dumb in my three undergraduate years that even I believed I was dumb. I listened with awe as the out-going argued with this professor and that. Once more I was the friend of the most out-going and was totally amazed to see that without entering into the conversational frays, without being able to splice my speech with such beauties as 'ipso continuum', without being able to verbally tear apart a mate's presentation, I graduated close to the top of the class. That taught me a lesson. I could make my point without speaking. That was 1964.

I could make my point through writing but I still felt socially inept. Thank God the loquacious still sought my friendship and kindly filled all the spaces in any conversation at which I was as usual, the silent participant. How this that I am going to say, happened I can't remember but it is the fact that a couple of these bright persons whom I admired, started seeing in one to one settings and asking me questions. I heard my answers to them presented in new conversations and said to myself, 'If you have daag fi bark fi you, why should you bark for yourself.' I was conversationally lazy but no one need lose anything. Someone else will carry the message. Someone will find a way to me. And the message not the medium is the thing. But I was a university teacher by now. How do you sit quietly in a learned seminar or in a faculty meeting? I tried, felt odd, dropped out and was finally dropped out of the university scene.

So now my pen definitely is my tongue, for I am constitutionally poor at conversation and have accepted my lot. That's why I write.