Caribbean Organic Intellectual: The Legacy and Challenge of Erna Brodber's Life Work

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At the heart of novelist and historian Erna Brodber's work is an examination of the slavery experience, its aftereffects, and a comparison of the history of enslavement and freedom in Jamaica with other parts of the African diaspora. In her talk "Re-engineering Blackspace," Brodber stated, "Caribbean intellectuals have a responsibility to complete the task of emancipation by giving Black people and Black youth more than the legacy of slavery to carve out a Black space in this white world."[1] Despite the truth in her utterances, her scholarship emerged at a moment when hegemonic discourse around race and culture had shifted away from the privileging of terms like *Ethiopianism*, *race consciousness*, *Pan-Africanism*, and *race pride*, and toward *creolization*, *hybridity*, *postcoloniality*, and *globalization*. This shift privileged syncretic *mixtures* among the various peoples that settled throughout the Americas rather than paradigms exclusively highlighting the common culture and collective destiny of the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. This latter shift reflected the national and international political landscape that took shape after the 1980s. The earlier rhetoric made popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was revived during the civil rights and black power

1 Erna Brodber, "Re-engineering Blackspace" (plenary presentation at conference in honor of Rex Nettleford, University of the West Indies, Mona, March 1996); published in *Caribbean Quarterly* 43, nos. 1–2 (1997): 70–81; reprinted in *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 2, no. 3 (2000): 153–70.

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movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as during the national independence struggles in the Caribbean and continental Africa. The "rebel music" of that era, coming from Jamaica, the larger Caribbean, the United States, and parts of Africa, also documented the struggle for both social consciousness and political, cultural, and spiritual identity.

Erna Brodber's oeuvre has contributed to the construction of a written and literary history—one that is aimed at assisting the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans to reach the proverbial "full free." This means achieving the cultural, spiritual, economic, and psychosocial enfranchisement that has been historically elusive. Her scholarship is multifaceted—including sociological studies, collections of oral histories, and novels, as well as originally researched historical texts. Furthermore, an organic and unique aspect of her intellectual approach to the field has been her attempt to apply the theoretical principles she acquired and unearthed to the rural village community of Woodside where she was born and continues to reside.

Brodber's literary novels have been the arena in which she has been able to play with the ideas she has encountered, and theorize, imagine, and symbolically problem-solve while reaching a larger transnational intellectual community. Her modernist "form-bending" has made her fiction popular in European intellectual circles, while the content and significance of her stories are roadmaps and symbolic guides for Caribbean intellectuals who are students of the history she draws on for inspiration. She has often stated that her novels were written in response to the theoretical problems she encountered in her research. Collectively they attempt to theorize gaps in the historical data that are a result of slavery and the limits of archival records. Brodber's literary style, heavily modernist in persuasion, is a dense, fragmented quagmire of disjointed cultural references, much like the psyches of the subjects she portrays. Her first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), imagines the effects of colonial education on the psyche of the culturally removed black and rural schoolchild. *Myal* (1988), the second novel, is a fictional attempt to imagine the real historical phenomenon of myal—an Afro-Christian post-slavery practice that worked to counter and realign Jamaican society from the negative effects of colonialism and obeah. Her third novel, *Louisiana* (1994), heralded as a postmodern text par excellence, critiques Western anthropology and resituates folk consciousness as both discursively sophisticated and operating with a "worldsense" that eludes the narrow comprehension of the Western mind. Her most recent novel, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007), borders on a kind of historical science fiction that addresses the stunted nature of our collective progress as the descendants of enslaved Africans since emancipation from slavery.

The conversation with Erna Brodber that follows, in conjunction with the magnitude of her scholarly work, suggests a new kind of model for a Caribbean organic intellectual. Her sociological and historical research isolated from her other achievements would on their own have made an outstanding contribution to the body of work on the Afro-Caribbean experience. Yet it has been her attempts to apply this research to the needs of the rural community from which she originates that is unique, radical, challenging, and transformative.

An incident that occurred in 1985 in Kilancholy, a rural community near Woodside, where Brodber lives, was as she describes it in our conversation, both instructive and ultimately paradigmatic. As Erna sat in her brown house on the hill, her rural "ivory tower," the shouts and cries of the man being beaten were simply a distraction from her academic research and writing. His violent death reported the next day functioned as a personal transition point, one that motivated her to use what was "in [her] head" as a foundation for working with the community's youth to develop their collective cultural self-esteem. This paved the way for both an informal summer program devoted to educating the younger children in the community as well as the writing of the book *The People of My Jamaican Village, 1817–1948* (1999), which eventually became the more detailed *Woodside, Pear Tree Grove P.O.* (2004). The work with other Caribbean scholars who assisted her in conducting the initial community-oriented conversations laid the foundation for her Blackspace seminars, still held each summer before Emancipation Day in Woodside. She calls these sessions "Blackspace reasonings," and the workshops have at times instigated controversy due to the purposeful exclusion of people who are not black identified. It has been difficult for many in predominantly black Jamaica to understand why nonblack peoples should be specifically excluded from any conversation. The prevalence of black people makes it seem unnecessary, and in a country deeply embedded in tourism this type of exclusion is seen by some as inhospitable if not mean-spirited. Yet Brodber has steadfastly maintained that after the trauma of slavery—the effects of which are still with us—black people need a private space to work out their differences. Because of our history, particularly in Caribbean circles, she argues that when outsiders are included, the desire to accommodate their needs can shift the focus away from honest self-examination of the residual pain and trauma experienced by the black self.

Her sociological research and interviews in the 1970s with elderly Jamaicans who had heard stories about enslavement directly from their forbears functioned as another transformative and defining moment in both her life and research. These interviews brought to life stories, memories, and feelings about the slavery experience and its aftermath in the descendants of these formerly enslaved Jamaicans. Much of what they internalized and bore emotionally has gone undocumented. Brodber describes these elders as giving her an order not to forget what "our people" went through. She states, "From that, I get an order. . . . Their grandparents gave them an order that they told me to tell you."[2] Almost all of her historical texts—*The People of My Jamaican Village*; *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (2003); *Standing Tall: Affirmations of the Jamaican Male* (2003); *The Second Generation of Freemen in Jamaica, 1907–1944* (2004); and *Woodside, Pear Tree Grove P.O.*—have responded to the "order" that those elders gave her. This also resulted in the reinstitutionalizing of Emancipation Day as a national Jamaican holiday as well as in the creation of a two-day celebration in Woodside based on her historical research into how villagers there had celebrated the transition from slavery to freedom. This celebration has become an annual ritual that includes a reenactment play, a march around the former coffee estate, and a vigil with drumming and dancing in which there is widespread participation from community members and visitors. The celebration has laid the foundation for village pride and a real awareness about local history that is almost nonexistent at a collective level in rural communities generally.

2 Excerpt from the documentary *Bury Mi Foot Chain*, new media master's thesis, dir. Julia E. John, Emerson College, 2006.

After Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, Brodber was one of the founding members of the Woodside Community Development Action Group, and this was the vehicle for an educational-tourism program that was largely her brainchild. This community program did two things: first, it established the significance of the historical relics in the village. These relics include the former plantation house, now the Anglican Church; some "natural steps" made by the Taino Indians, the first inhabitants of Jamaica; "One Bubby Susan," a Taino rock carving dating back to the 1500s; and "Daddy Rock," a place where the enslaved Africans met in secret. Second, a connection was made between the Woodside community and university students from the United States. These students came and stayed with residents for two to three weeks, learned about the historical relics, visited the rivers and caves in the area, worked on collecting oral histories and other community projects, and shared with village residents something about their own cultural experiences. The educo-tourism product and the student program not only contributed to a degree of economic self-sufficiency within the community but was ultimately part of the larger effort aimed at restoring cultural pride and honor to those whose ancestors were historically dishonored.

The activities in Woodside have also opened the door for the examination of other indigenous spiritual practices that the enslaved Africans brought with them. These are elements of the cultural experience throughout the Caribbean and the African diaspora that have generally not been incorporated in any easy way into an understanding of the "collective cultural self" that emerged. In the conversation with Brodber, there are references to things that may seem esoteric or fantastic to a reader not familiar with rural black space—things such as river spirits, mermaids, little men, obeah, and Convince. The consultation of obeah men, particularly in rural environments, is a well-known secret. It coexists uneasily with both Christian doctrine and Rastafari. African fusion faiths that historically mixed indigenous spiritual knowledge with a Christian worldview (myal, Convince, Zion Revival, and Pocomania) have either died out or been significantly marginalized by the dominant Christian sects and the increasing influence of missionaries and televangelists. Still, the concept of the obeah man is very much alive and appears to function as a residual practice that serves a psychic purpose everyday New World Africans are hard pressed to relinquish. Rastafari, in contrast, although influenced by elements of Zion Revival, has distanced itself from obeah, on the one hand, and Western fundamentalist Christianity, on the other. Brodber's statements that Woodside was a Convince area and the community's belief in river spirits (referred to locally as *Mayamaids*), as well as the phenomenon of "little men," speak to fragmented "Afro-Indigenous" systems that are no

longer intact but whose remnants continue to shape the living consciousness of residents of places like Woodside.

The conversation draws to a close with some of Brodber's statements about her disillusionment with the current state of community unity and progress. This is also part of the organic intellectual model that she is bequeathing to us. Those of us who wish to work in communities like hers are encouraged to go forth but to also be aware of the pitfalls presented by the negativity of "bad mind" or the spiritual ambassadors of communal self-doubt. In other words, the challenges that Brodber encountered are part of the model that she now offers us for intellectual activism. This model can give us new ways of overcoming the roadblocks to the long awaited "full free."

Within our conversation, the term *black* is neither a static nor an empty signifier; rather, it is a richly textured tapestry with gifts, secrets, pains, and mysteries—all of which are still necessary for our survival. Erna Brodber's singular focus on the business of claiming one's blackness and transforming self-despisement and shame into cultural self-esteem is a striking part of the conversation. She defies others who would conceal or mystify these fundamental truths not by reminding us of exciting new ways to view old predicaments but rather by forcing us to acknowledge that certain aspects of our cultural landscape have not changed as much as we would like to believe. There may be other ways to approach our problems. Yet, Woodside village in which she lives has a population whose self-perception, worldview, and economic circumstances bespeak the unfulfillment of the dream of "full free." There is something in this about the dire importance of sincerely reconnecting with neglected aspects of ourselves. There is something in this that suggests that we who have left without a backward glance should look at rural and urban neglected black spaces with new eyes.

The Personal Journey and the Hopes and Dreams

CJ: How would you describe your work and what has driven you and still drives you to produce the scholarship that you have?[3]

EB: Well, I suppose my parents . . . I came to life in the early 1940s, when a lot of ordinary people were noting that we were colonial and we should change and so on. My father took this . . . very seriously. He was very, very angry at the colonial state. Not only was he personally angry, but his generation was establishing groups . . . , and this was also during the early People's National Party era. They were establishing groups . . . and there were songs that they were singing, so I was socialized into this.

CJ: What took you from there to doing the work you have produced?

3 My conversation with Erna Brodber took place on 27 September 2011. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

EB: Well, I went to Excelsior High School, which at the time was a school for lower-middle-class country people . . . We saw people there who went out of their way to effect change and who tried to make us into change agents. You had teachers like Armond Munoz-Bennett. These were teachers who had more or less gone and done their degrees; they had worked very hard to get their degrees and to get the money to do degrees. But when they returned, they were probably not going to be chosen to teach at St. Andrew High School or St. Hughes' High School [elite high schools in Kingston] and so they themselves knew what it meant to be black and what it meant to be trying black people. There was a children's home in Kingston that was built for "whitish" children, abandoned "whitish" children, and I remember I was in third form (ninth grade) when they were selling tickets for a benefit for this children's home, and Mr. Bennett said, "You think if your parents abandoned you, you could get into that home?" Statements like that made me see that there is me, and there is another set of people, and it suggested where my energies should be; that is what he was telling us: where our energies should be. And he was not the only one.

CJ: What kind of children's home did you say it was?

EB: It was a children's home for "high brown" [lighter skinned] children with long hair. It was a children's home for the children of soldiers who *mek these children and runaway leave them*; children abandoned by white parents. I think it was a children's home in Constant Spring.

CJ: What still drives you to produce the scholarship that you produce?

EB: We were doing a lot of English literature at the time; we were doing the romantics . . . Keats. What our teachers did for me in sixth form, and that was very important to me, was expose me to the modernists. We did *The Nigger of Narcissus*, by Joseph Conrad, and we did *Time and the Conways*, by J. B. Priestly. I also remember lines like, "Bring me my bow of burning gold! / Bring me my arrows of desire! / [. . .] // I will not cease from mental fight." Those things resonated so much with me. I have to say that course in English literature continued me on my path that had begun before.

CJ: What was the significance to you of those lines from William Blake's poem "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time"?

EB: Madge [the socialist character in J. B. Priestley's 1937 play *Time and the Conways*] was quoting these lines; here was somebody else with a burning desire to change her society, why wasn't that me? That was me! I found a character like me in a piece of fiction, one who . . . told me that I was not alone in the world.

CJ: From a scholarly perspective, where do you think we are collectively in terms of the relationship between the work we produce in the academy and the concrete needs of our people in society at large?

EB: Well, Cathy, I can't speak for other people but I made every effort when I was in the academy to make my work relevant to the outside. For instance when I went to teach in sociology, I told them that I would teach social workers. And the reason I wanted to teach them was because I knew social workers were going to be going outside; they were change agents and I wanted to be involved in the creating of change agents. When I designed the course Thought and Action of Africa in the Diaspora, that course again was meant to expose students to the thought and action of black people who had gone on before them.

CJ: You said that you wanted to teach social workers. Was it not usual to do that?

EB: No. I wasn't a social worker. I was trained in sociology. I was not trained in social work, but I had been exposed to psychiatry, and I felt that I had enough to bring to the table and they allowed me to do that. I thought teaching those students who came in just so that they could get a degree, any degree, was not up my street at all.

CJ: Do you have any sense of your impact?

EB: I don't have any sense of that. But I know that *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* was made into a play that was performed.[4] And I will never forget—I was at one performance and the people obviously did not know that I was sitting near them. I heard two young women talking. One of them was speaking [about the predicament of one of the characters in the play]. She said, "What we are doing is really foolishness. I am really upset at our level of development. Look what Nelly has done with herself and look what I have done with myself—nothing!" And I thought, Oh, my God, someone has really taken my point!

CJ: Do you want to say anything else about the relationship between academic research and our people's needs?

EB: Well, there has been quite a bit of work done on retrieving the African past. I do not know the extent to which it is taught in such a way that it resonates with the students, that is, with the students then defining themselves as African and so on. I think that that connection is not made. Or else the students could not be so uninvolved. I had a great sense when I was teaching, particularly last year, of very uninvolved students. I tried again when I was teaching in English. I said my course is about helping us to use our experience to write; it is about writing out of our experience. And of course to write out of your experience you have to examine your own experience. I have seen work coming out that looked like it understood where we were.

CJ: When I first met you, you wanted to set up a school for the descendants of enslaved Africans in Woodside. What age group would have attended and how would this school have been organized and structured?

4 Performed at the Creative Arts Center at the University of the West Indies.

EB: I had wanted to have students for a summer who were in that stage between finishing sixth form [grade 13] and going to university. Many of them would be going to universities abroad where their programs of study would tell them nothing at all about themselves. So I was hoping that this summer school program could socialize them into a history and understanding of themselves and their people before they went on to university.

CJ: Would this have targeted students from Jamaica exclusively or from the Caribbean generally?

EB: Whoever wanted to come, but I imagined it would have been black students, and my book *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* had already been written. It was supposed to be the textbook we used, and I would have taken them even further.

Woodside Village as Sacred Space

CJ: In your village community of Woodside, what work have you tried to do over the years and why?

EB: Well, the work that I have tried to do is to make people aware of the history of kinship. And to make them aware that their history is the history of the one beside them and the one around them and so on, in the hopes that people will see each other as blood relations to be loved rather than disregarded or despised. Before the beginning of my work in this village . . . someone was actually being murdered—beaten up by a truckload of people from a neighboring village. They had accused this man of coming to their village and stealing. And the rest of us here just kind of listened while the shouts and screaming was going on. And I myself . . . I just simply closed my doors and my windows and took my typewriter to another room. And when I realized the next day that the fellow had died and was beaten to death—he was finally taken from here to the other village and beaten to death, I just said, No, this *cyaan* [cannot] happen! We cannot live in a community where somebody comes in and takes somebody from the village and it's just another day at work. So I got together with the youth in the village, and I hoped that looking at their history would build some sort of self-esteem.

CJ: Wow. That is a profound story. What year was that, do you remember?

EB: It was probably, like, 1985.

CJ: And what was the village that the people came from?

EB: It was two miles up the road. It was . . . Kilancholy.

CJ: What work did you do in your own community in response?

EB: Oh, well, there was a youth group at the time, and I called them and said, I would like to work with you but I don't have anything to give you except what is in my head. They were willing to accept that, so they would come to my house and we would read books which had to do with us and our history. And the writers of those books, people like [Jamaican scholar] George Beckford, would come down to my house and sit with about fifteen youth and explain what they were trying to do in their books. Very often we could not reach any further than the preface of the book because we in the village were not readers, really. Some of us could not read at all. So G. Beck came down and [historian] Swithin Wilmot came down. When Swithin came down, he had done some work on the history of St. Mary, and by this time the group of fifteen had widened greatly and old people were coming as well. And I remember an old lady saying, "Why haven't we been taught this?" And another old lady I was getting ready to take home said, "When my history is being discussed, I don't move!" People who were going to the spring to get water would leave their buckets at the gate and come up to the house to listen to what was going on. So it caught on. People wanted to know about their history and so that is what led me to write the book *The People of My Jamaican Village*.

CJ: Can you say a little more about what motivated you to write that text specifically?

EB: Well, the villagers were listening to the history of St. Mary, and they were listening to the history of other places that people had written about and the history of Jamaica generally. And so the question came up of why not listen to your own history; your own history will tell you a lot about yourself. In any case, they were participants, because the history I wrote came from the heads of their grandparents.

CJ: That's wonderful. As much as I've already heard some of those stories, they are always still moving. Every time you speak about it, I get a larger understanding of the context within which the work was produced. What else happened from there?

EB: So I started there, and as it turns out, I was also working as a researcher, and one of the things that I did was to audit the cultural development programs. And, when I was doing that, I realized that they had blocked out the Emancipation Day celebration from the public holidays. I had previously done interviews all over the island, interviewing people who were born in the early twentieth century, and they were very passionate about emancipation as signaling the end of slavery and they wanted that celebration day back. So I got the opportunity, in doing this audit for the cultural development committee, to suggest that they go back to the Emancipation Day celebration . . . At the same time, I started doing an Emancipation Day celebration in my village in a way that I hoped would catch on. It was not just a holiday in which people had a sound system and a street dance; it was a holiday in which people remembered.

CJ: Are there any other things that you tried to do in your community?

EB: We have resuscitated our historical relics and built up an educational-tourism product around them.

CJ: What historical relics are you referring to?

EB: Historical relics, like the fact that the [Anglican] church in Woodside was the old plantation great house [from the days when the community was a coffee estate]. The steps beside the great house date back to and were made by the Taino. There are places where the enslaved African people on the plantation met to talk to each other in secret [like the cave area called "Daddy Rock"]. There are also Taino sacred places like "One Bubby Susan," and a [lesser known] place called "Sacred Ground," where village people used to have their meetings. The village was a Convince area. [*Convince* was another early Afro-Christian practice like myal that was part of the post-slavery Jamaican landscape.] [Anthropologist] Martha Beckwith tells the story of a myal man who used to live in Woodside.

CJ: This reminds me of the first summer that I spent there. The two elder residents that I was living with, Mas' Roy and Miss Pearl, were talking about a man whom they said the mermaids in the community had given the power to heal. They referred to him by name and said he lived during the 1940s and he healed using water. Now, I know that is different than a myal man . . .

EB: Well, all of these things speak to the existence of a mermaid cult around the place.

CJ: Right. I was shocked at the time to discover that people in the community actually believed in mermaids, which were more than folklore to them. Some of the elders actually referred to various mermaids in the community by name. I remember Miss Pearl telling me that people believe the mermaids lived in the caves in the community, and Woodside has a lot of caves. But in the African Yoruba system, this would be connected to the divinity known as Osun, often associated with rivers.

EB: Well, I suppose the people in the community could honor the river spirit because they already knew of Osun . . .

CJ: Are you saying that it may have been part of their ancestral memory?

EB: Yes, it would have been part of their ancestral memory.

CJ: The stories about mermaids in Woodside made me wonder what other communities that have rivers in Jamaica and the Caribbean have stories like that. One other thing—what for you is the significance of the historical relic One Bubby Susan, beyond it being a female carving in the rock by the Taino?

EB: Well, One Bubby Susan has affected so many . . . people, that I am now seeing it through their eyes. People are now calling it a shrine, and you have Yoruba people who come to see it

as well as people from other African spiritual practices. I must tell you this: some Americans came with their movie cameras, and they went down one night to One Bubby Susan. And some man who was an occultist carried his tape recorder. Gavin [a young man from Woodside] took them down there. And the man with the tape recorder greeted the spirits, and they apparently responded saying, "Chris, get out of here!" They chased him out. He didn't leave right away and the spirits said, "Leave!" Gavin said he heard when the spirits told them to leave. I have also told you about my friend from England, Leroy, who was trained by Malidoma Somé [author of *Of Water and the Spirit*]. When he reported to him what was going on [down at One Bubby Susan], Malidoma told him that this was a place to go and live . . . And of course One Bubby Susan has also been associated with sightings of little men. You know little people [folkloric] beings that have been here since the beginning of time? Beings who are rumored to be very intelligent. I have seen them at times and I am frightened of them, my friend Leroy from England tells me, "You know that they are trying to communicate with you, and that is why when you have coffee or some stimulant, they manifest more aggressively. They are around you begging for you to talk to them." Well, Cathy, I am telling you that they will have to stay there and beg.

CJ: What are you afraid of?

EB: I'm afraid I would jump out of my skin.

CJ: Meaning?

EB: I would be so frightened I would probably have a heart attack. It brings up a lot of fear. As a matter of fact, I have even said that I would not go back down to One Bubby Susan again.

CJ: Once when I was in Woodside, Miss Lorna [a local school teacher and village resident] told me that she had had a dream about little men down at One Bubby Susan. This was fascinating because it means that . . . different people are having *similar* experiences of the same phenomenon, with regard to that communal sacred space.

"You Too Bad Mind!" The Breakdown of the Community

CJ: What has proven harder than you expected, when you look back at the work that you have done or tried to do?

EB: What has proven harder than I expected is unity; right now I am very depressed about the lack of unity. When we used to have community meetings, the room would be full and there would be lots of community men there. Now you can't get a quorum; you can't get seven or nine people in the room.

CJ: What do you think has happened?

EB: That is a good question. I am still trying to figure out what has happened, but I cannot figure it out. I think it goes back to whole business of the individual and the personal, and "bad mind." And I don't know if you know the term *gravaliciousness*, which means, "Mi never get any an' sumpn a gi out and mi nuh get none" ["Something is being given out but I didn't get any"].

CJ: How would you explain "bad mind"?

EB: From my point of view, "bad mind" is looking at somebody else and not being able to see the good in them, looking at them and seeing the bad. And it calls forth the bad in you. It is the primacy of the negative spirits.

CJ: That is a wonderful description. Where do you think it comes from?

EB: All of us have it in us.

CJ: All of us have it but not all of us are overdetermined by "bad mind," so what do you think shapes that becoming—

EB: You mean what has pulled it forth? On the one hand, I think it's from a political system that depends so much on handouts, that people have in their head, "I must get something!" If anything is happening, people are thinking, "What is in it for me? What am I going to get? What will I *personally* get?" They are not looking at the bigger picture of the cost to the community and thinking, "I belong to a community." Or, on the other hand, there is no investment in simply enjoying the beauty of somebody else's success.

CJ: I am always looking at how we have been affected by our past. We have seen more of the bad than we've seen of the good.

EB: We have experienced good too, but we haven't been reflecting on the good.

CJ: But we seem to have less ability to sustain contact with the aspects of our group identity that were useful collectively. You know what I'm saying?

EB: Right. I am going to give you an example. You know more about Yoruba and African spirituality than I do, but look at what people have used African spirituality for, which is the so-called obeah man. And people associate the obeah man with bad deeds. There was a time in our history when African spirituality was used to move you toward a higher consciousness of your environment and the relationship between you and your environment . . . But now, in fact, people are using it to take up something to throw against their neighbor. (Meaning: to hurt someone who they feel has hurt or taken advantage of them in some way).

CJ: My view of that is that we have never had an opportunity to come out of the collective miseducation that has been created about our spiritual past. In Western Christianity African spirituality was always depicted as savage, demonic, and evil.

EB: I sincerely hope that something like this can be discussed at next year's Blackspace. My desire for next year's Blackspace session, which I consider to be my last, is to have the diaspora face Africa.

CJ: What would you have done differently in your community work if you could do it again?

EB: What I would have done . . . Instead of giving my ideas over to the Woodside Community Development Action Group [an organization formed to promote community development after Hurricane Gilbert], I would have worked them myself.

CJ: What difference do you think that would have made?

EB: I would have worked them through my Blackspace organization. I would have had more control and say about the direction that some things went in. I have added some things to the emancipation play [which is typically a reenactment of the newly freed peoples' reaction to the reading of the emancipation proclamation]. I have added a second part where I work on the death of this girl, the young girl who was murdered by some young boys in the community in 2010. And in it I am asking the community, "What did you do? You must have known that there was this back-up of 'bad mind'? When the children . . . talked about her, what did you say?" In the play these questions are asked by an obeah man. He was a real resident of Woodside and he was someone [anthropologist] Martha Beckwith interviewed. So it is that kind of thing.

CJ: Are you giving him the power of positive sentiment?

EB: Right. Yes-yes.

CJ: What have been the greatest rewards and the greatest disappointments of this journey?

EB: Well, the greatest rewards, really, have been to have people who are now outside the village say, "Thank you. I now tell people I come from *that* village." So I think I have managed to do something with regard to the business of self-esteem. But if they continue to tear up each other . . . as they have been doing recently, if they continue to be *gravalicious and bad mind*, then that whole self-esteem business will have died. But the greatest rewards really are when people from Woodside, whether they are abroad or at home, take pride now in Woodside as their place of origin.

CJ: Do you have any sense of what would shift that negative energy to create space for more growth and development again?

EB: It would have to do with truth. Someone being willing to tell them [village residents and community members] (and I am wondering if that job is mine), what they are doing that is a hindrance to community unity.

CJ: Does truth-telling need to be a larger feature of community life and something that is addressed regularly?

EB: Addressed, yes. Not every day, but addressed from time to time.

CJ: Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give someone who wanted to develop activities in their village in a grassroots way?

EB: Go on and do what you need to do. I am not regretting the things I did, so go on and do what you need to do but just be aware that there are these negative spirits, and see if you can find a way of working [around] them.

Claiming the Identity They Taught Us to Despise

CJ: You have something called Blackspace. What is Blackspace and where did it come from?

EB: Well, Blackspace. The notion is that we have all been educated and are living in this world, but what we seem not to realize is that we are getting a *little cotch* in white space and that if we are to be really and truly comfortable, we have to create a black space—our space. So the notion of Blackspace is an encouragement for us to have a place. And the other thing I've noticed, and I am of course speaking in extremes here, is that it is not possible to have a black film without having some white people come in. You have white films without black people in them. But whenever you have a black film, someone always believes you have to have a white person.

CJ: Please say more about that. Are you just talking about the cast? Or are you talking about the whole production from the standpoint of funding?

EB: Well, yes, the production and all of that, but also the cast and the whole storyline—which is often a reaction to a white something or the other.

CJ: How would you categorize a film like Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* [1993]?

EB: Well, *Sankofa*, yes, but even *Sankofa*, begins with the business of slavery. Then there is something like *The Book of the Negroes*—do you know that novel? A few years ago it won the Commonwealth Prize; it was written by a black Canadian [Lawrence Hill, 2007]. It talked about the slavery experience, but I was taken with it because it seemed to make the slavery experience about the relationship *between* black people.

CJ: What about something like Julie Dash's [1991 film] *Daughters of the Dust*?

EB: Well, of course that is totally black.

CJ: The struggle of that film is for the elders in the family to remind the younger generation that they have something that doesn't have anything to do with whiteness at all. And that's the thing that will save them when they go to the new world and migrate to the North.

EB: It is that kind of thing that I mean. Of course, I don't know the areas of literature and film as well as I should to make that statement, but the things that I have seen and been exposed to leave me with that notion.

CJ: As you look at our social landscape, what work is still to be done, and what things do you think have the most urgency?

EB: What work is still to be done, and this was started in Blackspace, is for people to realize that they are black and that this means something significant; there is some significance to this. The Sunday *Gleaner* of about two weeks ago had a headline that read, "Brownings Please." There is a trade school named HEART [Human Employment and Resource Training] that trains young people, and employers can apply to HEART to get trained workers. But according to HEART, these potential employers were saying to them, "Could you send us your browner [lighter complexioned] people." HEART said that these potential employers were not asking, "What level of accomplishment has this person achieved?" Or "Would he or she make a good employee?" But rather, "What color is this person?" Yes. So it took up a whole week of discussion everywhere.

CJ: So you are saying that rather than receding, as many people would like to believe, this issue of color is becoming more pernicious?

EB: Yes, and in a late day like this. And it would not be like this, I believe, if black people were standing up and saying, "I am black and this means x, y, and z. I am black and I am beautiful."

CJ: What does being black mean to *you*?

EB: Well, what black means to me is a particular kind of beauty and a particular kind of strength and a history of which I tend to be proud.

CJ: It is simple but true. My original question was about the work to be done that is the most urgent. Is there anything else that you would want to add?

EB: No, I don't want to add anything else because this business of claiming our blackness means that you can't exactly see a black child down the road with a snotty nose and know that that child has sinus problems and not do something about it.

CJ: Okay, yes. Wow. So it means responsibility; claiming one's blackness, in your view, means taking responsibility for improving the conditions of the community. What of anger and what of rage? What do you see?

EB: Anger and rage, I think they are outmoded. We can't afford anger and rage any longer. What we have to take on is responsibility.

CJ: Interesting. If I may push a little bit more on that subject, do you feel that we are still an angry people? What do we do with it if we are?

EB: Well, there is anger, but I suspect that, well, to be very classist, I don't think the anger is coming from the right people. Anger is not coming from the people who can do something about it. And that anger turns into violence because the massive, the struggling class feel that they can't do anything about their situations. If the right people, the people who had an "in" into the system were angry, it *might* make a difference. But as I said—anger is not what we need. What we need is a sense of responsibility.

CJ: To effectively channel the anger. Because I think when I look around I am very angry, but it is not the only emotion that shapes my consciousness.

EB: But you can move anger into responsibility.

CJ: Yes. But when I look at some of the educated middle class, I see people who have denied their anger and who have turned it into something else. As a matter of fact, if they were to express it like the working class, it would be a step forward. I don't know if I am fair. I feel like a lot of their anger has become shame, resentment, and self-loathing, and it has been taken out on those beneath them as the source of the problem. They rechannel their anger into attempts to gain status and overcompensate for the feelings of insecurity and inadequacy that go back to the same issues of not claiming one's blackness that have never been addressed. What of our spirituality? What does that landscape look like now to you?

EB: Well, I don't see enough understanding, I believe, of African systems, which are, as far as I know, involved in the business of taking responsibility. From the little I have seen or understand, the individual is seen as a responsible person and the point is to make you even more responsible [for the community's well-being as you acquire status]. So I don't see enough of that. That I can talk about it means that there is a little head that is pushing up. But I would really like to see more of that. The notion of "He is my provider," and "He will never let me down," I don't think takes us very far.

CJ: That's a very interesting response . . . What of racism and race consciousness, where are we now?

EB: Where are we now? Well, certainly from the point of view of Jamaica and of other ["racial groups"] in Jamaica there might be racism. From the point of view of black people, though, I think what we are dealing with is shade-ism. Racism also makes sense and probably exists in Trinidad and Guyana because of the [larger populations] of people of different cultures there. But over here in Jamaica, where we don't have large populations that are perceived of as distinct "races," we are not as aware.

CJ: What of the relationships between our men and our women?

EB: Between our men and our women, now, that is big. I can't touch that. That worries me in general, but I don't know how to touch that. As we have discussed in the 1970s, the men were problematic. The men were sick; the men needed therapy. But I see more men now who seem to be healthy. I see more men with their children and I see more men carrying babies. I think that our men have grown, and I think that bodes well for male-female relations.

CJ: An unpopular view but a pleasant one for us to ponder . . . Anything else?

EB: Nothing else.

CJ: What gives you hope?

EB: Oh, my dear. I am in a depressed phase. But what gives me hope is that there are younger people who I have influenced and who can probably carry the struggle. And if I can influence some, then probably I will be able to influence some more. That is the hope that I have.