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# When Spirits Talk: Reading Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* for Affect

**Jenny Sharpe**

Slavery is a specter that haunts the circum-Caribbean region.[1] In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot likens the invisible yet felt presence of slavery long after the institution has ended to a ghost. "Slavery here is a ghost," he writes, "both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not."[2] The idea of slavery as a ghostly presence was popularized with the publication of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. The spiteful spirit haunting house 124 belongs to a baby girl who was killed by her runaway slave mother to prevent her from being returned to slavery. Ella, a minor character who is versed in folk healing, leads the community in an exorcism of the house.[3] When she says of the ghost, "people who die bad don't stay in the ground," she is alluding to an African-derived belief that the spirits of those who die an unnatural death or do not receive proper burial rites remain on earth to do mischief.[4] In the Americas, restless spirits often manifest the violent deaths so many people of African descent suffered. Yet, as

1 Including the slave-holding states of the United States as part of the Caribbean region, Joseph Roach characterizes New Orleans as a "circum-Caribbean cosmopolis" and a circum-Atlantic memory as addressing "the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity." Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 179.
2 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 147.
3 Ella is described as a "practical woman who believed there was a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment." Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 295.
4 Ibid., 217. Christopher Okonkwo explains Beloved as an Igbo spirit child. See Christopher N. Okonkwo, *A Spirit of Dialogue: Incarnations of O'gbañje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008).

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Colin Dayan reminds us in her reading of *Beloved*, its tale of the traumatic afterlife of slavery is also the story of an undying love. “The narrative rituals that recall a history of possession and servitude,” she writes, “are shot through with a love that will not quit.”[5] Morrison incorporates black religious practices and knowledge systems into her fiction in order to overturn the idea of haunting as simply the enduring trauma of slavery.

Erna Brodber joins in this diasporic act of reclamation with her 1994 novel *Louisiana*, which is about the joint struggles of African American and Caribbean people.[6] The physical body of its Jamaican-born narrator, Ella Townsend, who shares a familiar name with *Beloved*’s exorcist, becomes “a vessel, a horse” (46) for the spirits of two clandestine female organizers for Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The spirits tell Ella stories that she was unable to derive from her interviews with one of them when she was alive. By assisting the living in remembering black struggles for self-determination, the spirits impart to Ella the power to give her race its collective history. In doing so, the novel reminds us that myalism, which involves African-derived religious practices of spirit-healing through possession rites, was central to a counter-culture of black resistance. Arguably, Brodber is instructing us to listen carefully to the past for an agency that exists in the silent spaces of history, and this indeed is how the novel has been read.[7] In this essay, however, I would like to suggest we also read the novel’s depiction of spirit possession as a critical engagement with the materiality of sociological data and official archives.

In her nonfictional writing, Brodber makes a case for the ability of oral histories to convey the “emotions” and “feeling tones” about slavery and emancipation that cannot be derived from written records.[8] And she also explains how she started writing fiction out of a frustration with the demands for objectivity in a social science methodology that ignored “the affective interaction between the researcher and the researched.”[9] She proceeds to explain that her fiction writing grew out of an effort not only to convey the emotional quality of that relationship but also to provide her students with case studies that did not exist. Although Brodber characterizes her literary writing as an extension of her sociological work, it is important that we, as literary critics, not treat her experimental fiction simply as a doubling of her nonfictional writing. Ella’s psychic abilities interject supernatural signification into the term *medium*, which alludes to the material used for recording data as well as a person who can communicate with

5 Joan [Colin] Dayan, “Erzulie: A Women’s History of Haiti,” *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 2 (1994): 13.

6 Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); hereafter cited in text. As Carolyn Cooper explains, the incorporation of spirit possession into feminist fiction of the African diaspora constitutes a literary act of reappropriating what Morrison characterizes as discredited forms of knowledge. See Carolyn Cooper, “‘Something Ancestral Recaptured’: Spirit Possession as Trope in Selected Feminist Fictions of the African Diaspora,” in Susheila Nastra, ed., *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 64–87.

7 See June Roberts, “Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*: An Alternative Aesthetic, or Oral Authority in the Written Text,” *Literary Griot* 14, nos. 1–2 (2002): 75–93; and Angeletta K. M. Gourdine, “Carnival-Conjure, *Louisiana*, History and the Power of Women’s Ethnographic Narrative,” *Ariel* 35, nos. 3–4 (2004): 139–58.

8 Erna Brodber, “Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History of the Caribbean,” *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4 (1983): 7, 9.

9 Erna Brodber, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure,” in Selwyn R. Cudjoe, ed., *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (Wellesley: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 165.

the dead. As a result, the novel's supernatural interpretation of *medium* pushes further on the boundaries of the materiality of the archives than even an inclusion of formerly discredited oral sources.

The Ella of *Louisiana* is a Zora Neale Hurston-inspired character, a literary move by Brodber signaling the novel's exploration of the fact/fiction interface, since Hurston is known for transforming folklore through a writing style that blends the creative function of fiction with the scientific one of ethnography.[10] Like Hurston, who was hired by the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s to collect the oral histories of former slaves, Brodber's protagonist is a doctoral student in anthropology who is charged with collecting oral histories of Southern blacks. And like Hurston, who was given a bulky sound recorder for collecting folk songs on acetate disks, Ella is entrusted with an early prototype of the recording machine. Unlike Hurston, however, Ella does not return the machine or recordings to her university masters, and it is reported that she ran away to become a "conjure-woman" (4). Ella takes over the business of psychic Madam Marie in New Orleans, where she practices what she calls "the anthropology of the dead" (61).[11] Brodber's historical interest in oral accounts as a source of emotional realities and social-psychological responses is thus expanded in her fiction, in *Louisiana* especially, to include supernatural and extra-ordinary phenomena. For this reason, I want to suggest that silences in the written records are not only absences to be filled with new historical data but also spaces of *affect*, which does not designate "feeling" so much as a visceral response that cuts across thought and feeling, mind and body, spirit and matter, the physical and intuitive senses.

Affect studies emerged as an effort to dislodge the epistemological primacy of thought, reason, and the individual in theories of "the social."[12] Affect is understood as bodily impulses that exceed conscious thought perception as well as emotional responses within the individual. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan observes that "the taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking."[13] In like manner, the affective structure of Brodber's novel questions the ability of a Western philosophical and psychological tradition to address the social realities of black people in the circum-Caribbean region. While Brennan counters Eurocentric thinking with the idea of affect

10 For comparison of Hurston to Ella, and indeed to Brodber herself, see June E. Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion* (Westpoint, CT: Preager, 2006), 215–68. In his chapter on Hurston, Houston A. Baker calls the propensity of Afro-Americans to embellish their storytelling "spirit work," since he identifies a resemblance between the performative nature of black storytelling and a person being ridden by a god or spirit. Houston A. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 69–101.

11 Hurston wrote about the psychic Marie Leveau in the second part of *Mules and Men* (1935), which documents the stories she collected in New Orleans. Marie Leveau was the daughter of a free mixed-race Creole woman of the same name. The senior Marie was married to a Haitian *gens de couleur*, Jacques Paris, who mysteriously disappeared a year after their marriage. A New Orleans-style Vodou or hoodoo can be traced to the large migration of Haitians in 1809 following the San Domingo revolution. I consider Brodber's locating of her supernatural story in New Orleans as signaling its circum-Caribbean cosmopolitan identity. Ella's spiritualism, however, resembles more closely the Jamaican revival religion of pukkumina rather than Louisianan hoodoo.

12 Patricia Ticineto Clough, introduction to Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

13 Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.

as emotions and energies that are transmitted from society to the individual and vice versa,[14] Brodber locates "the social" in the relationship of the individual to the spirit world by grounding her fiction in popular black religious practices. "If all of these religions can be said to coincide perfectly in one area," remark Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisin-Gebert about black diasporan religions, "it is in their promotion of a ritualized union of the people with the spirit world, in the reciprocity of the link between the spirits and the community."[15]

Brodber's character Ella likens the precise moment of spirit possession to the feeling of a silver spear piercing through one side her head to the other. She goes on to explain that the spear leaves a trail of silver dust and "these particles of dust are absorbed into the brain and your whole mind becomes suffused with understanding" (106). The rules of reason cannot account for the process of understanding that she is describing, for Ella is able to access a knowledge that exceeds her own individual mind. The particles of dust that the silver spear leaves behind are less pieces of information than the ability to see the world differently—a clairvoyance or clear vision. Brodber's incorporation of spirit possession into the life experiences of her character thus demands from the reader a fundamental rethinking of the psyche, historical evidence, and the temporal relationship of the present to the past.

One of the outcomes of *Louisiana*'s "anthropology of the dead" is to provincialize Europe, which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty explains, is not to reject the secularism and scientific knowledge so much as "to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it."[16] Since the role of the historian is to create human history through the universalization of "a natural, homogeneous, secular, calendrical time," Chakrabarty characterizes the temporality of historicism as disenchanted in the sense that the agency of gods and spirits is incommensurable with its narrative.[17] To translate the gods and spirits of popular religions into the secular code of human time involves viewing them through the lens of anachronism: as a persistence of premodern beliefs into the present. This translation accounts for the coding of black diasporan religions such as Vodou, Santería, and pukkumina as the superstitious beliefs of uneducated people.

Due to the incompatibility of the two discourses of science and superstition, the idea that spirits actually speak through the social scientist can only be presented as fictional rather than empirical evidence. One can read Brodber's novel metaphorically, as indeed critics do, by considering the voices Ella hears as suppressed oral histories. However, I want to suggest that we read spirit possession literally in order to consider the effect her out-of-body experience has on an understanding of the materiality of the archives, whether they be textual, visual, or

14 Ibid., 24.

15 Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisin-Gebert, introduction to Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisin-Gebert, eds., *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 3.

16 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 43.

17 Ibid., 74. As Johannes Fabian explains, this secular code was based on the linear temporality of Judeo-Christianity. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 2–11.

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sound recordings. The objective of a literary engagement with the past is thus different from a historical one, although the two projects have points of intersection. A second outcome of the novel's "anthropology of the dead," then, is to elicit a more intuitive, rather than rational, response to a misrepresented or hidden past in order to break an archival violence enacted against the dead.

The narrative form of *Louisiana* mimics the material evidence belonging to the written records inasmuch as its story is presented as a manuscript consisting of an anthropologist's journal and diary written between 1936 and 1954, the transcript of interviews with her informant, a cover letter by the sender presumed to be her husband, and a note from the editor of an independent black press as recipient of the manuscript. Despite its careful attention to dates within the diary and at the moment of its discovery, time does not unfold chronologically within the novel. Its story is presented episodically through shifting voices and repetitious time sequences in which the same evidence is presented in multiple and various forms. The editor, who receives the manuscript in 1974, acknowledges that Ella's study was ahead of its time. "Today," she or he notes, "the intellectual world understands that there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses" (4).[18] The extra sense to which the editor alludes is one that exceeds the usual senses for working with archival materials, because it involves communication with the dead. She or he nonetheless attempts to understand the manuscript's significance in terms of traditional historiography, by placing each chapter title within a sequence of cause and effect:

> The text came to us divided into six parts—1) I heard the voice from heaven say 2) First the goat must be killed 3) Out of Eden 4) I got over 5) Louisiana and 6) Ah who sey Sammy dead. Is there a message in these titles, we asked—I heard the voice from Heaven say, "first the goat must be killed (and you get) out of Eden and get over (to be) Louisiana." Den a who sey Sammy dead, (if this can happen). A hypothesis. (5)

The editor fills in the semantic gaps with words to form grammatical sentences. Although there is a logic to the sentences constructed from the chapter headings, it does not deliver the full meaning of a story that does not unfold chronologically, which interrogates the grammar of the master's language, and is suspicious of institutionalized methods of inquiry.[19]

As a doctoral student in anthropology, Ella is trained in traditional social science methodologies for collecting oral histories. Patricia Saunders explains these methodologies as the basis for an empirical research in which the tape recorder is "the primary tool for ensuring the 'authenticity' of the Other."[20] However, inasmuch as Ella is given a prototype for the recording

18 The editor, known only as E. R. Anderson, is not gender-identified, and could potentially be either male or female since Pan-Africanism promoted a racial solidarity that cut across gender divisions.

19 Anderson does, however, recognize the collective authorship of the manuscript and adds a title, "Coon can," to the appended note, thus "entering by this act into the community of the production" (5). One of the spirits shows Ella how the placement of a comma between the two words in the name of the card game "Coon can" transforms a racist caricature into an assertion of black agency.

20 Patricia Saunders, "Those Who Insist on Be(Coming): Caribbean Subjects and the Task of Translating Identity," *Shibboleths: A Journal of Comparative Theory* 2, no. 1 (2007): 49.

machine (called a "black box," in allusion perhaps to the black voices it contains), she is able to work with sound as a new media whose usage has not yet been systematized. Since the recording machine does not filter out sounds that are extraneous to words, it allows her to capture emotional expressions that would be excluded, because they are immaterial, from a written text. As a *black female* anthropologist, Ella ascribes value to the emotive quality of the words and sounds that might otherwise be treated as irrelevant to the interview. In the first chapter, "I Heard the Voice from Heaven Say," the reader is informed that "Anna sighed another sigh that leaked from our history and the girl [Ella] made a note to be sure to find some way of transposing those sighs and those laughs and other non-verbal expressions of emotions into the transcript she would submit to her masters" (14). What the reader has not yet learned is that the chapter is "as true and exact a transcription" (31) of a conversation between Ella's primary informant, Suzie Anna (or Mammy King), an elderly black woman who dies two weeks into the project, and her already deceased best friend, Louise Anna (or Lowly), who is accompanying her to the afterlife.[21] Anna's emotive response is a disembodied sigh, existing as an effect with no discernible origin or cause, which is why it is characterized as "leaking" from a different time and history. The reader is consequently plunged into a parallel spirit world that does not adhere to the temporal logic of human time. In addition, the words are communicated to Ella telepathically, which is an activity that suggests a language even beyond the emotive sounds of laughter and sighs: a language in silence.

Since Ella is in the habit of turning the recording machine on before each interview session, it not only records sound but also silence. At least that is the explanation Ella gives to her husband, Reuben, when he inquires: "How come so much of the spool is used if there was so little conversation?" (43). On playing back the tape recording, she hears voices even in the silent parts and realizes that she is hearing the same voices that were inside her head during the times when Mammy King was mostly quiet.[22] To the reader who has not yet learned the full story, the transcript of these voices appears as a series of disconnected snippets of songs and fragments of conversations, all of which add up to an incomprehensible babble. It is the raw text, an unedited document of beyond-the-grave conversations, against which the anthropologist's questions appear as background noise. To the uninitiated reader the first chapter looks like, to quote a nineteenth-century British characterization of Anancy stories, "pointless, disjointed, mutilated fragments."[23] From the very beginning, the novel draws

21 Although orthographically different, Suzie Anna's, Louise Anna's, and Ella/Louisiana's names sound the same. Brodber's sister and fellow-writer and poet Velma Pollard explains how "something one HEARS is key to this novel in which connections are made between this world and the other." Velma Pollard, "Writing Bridges of Sound: *Praise Song for the Widow* and *Louisiana*," *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2009): 37.

22 Recording machines used acetate discs rather than magnetic tape, a medium that was not invented until twelve years after the year during which Ella's interviews take place. On the one hand, in "The Ghost Machine: Spiritualism, Anachronism, and Alterior Acoustics in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*" Eric D. Smith explains Brodber's historical identification of the magnetic tape prior to its invention as an instance of a "creative anachronism" that anticipates the future (*Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 12 [2005]: 88). I, on the other hand, consider the linearity of tape as central to the novel's questioning of the linearity of chronological time belonging to historiography.

23 Charles Joseph Galliari Rampini, *Letters from Jamaica: "The Land of Streams and Woods"* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1873), 117. Anancy or Anansi stories involve a greedy trickster spider who exposes human weaknesses. He is

attention to the limitations of codified systems for accessing black vernacular culture. But it also provides the reader with the tools for understanding its alternative text.

Having been introduced to the transcript before the description of the event in Ella's diary, the reader is privy to the knowledge that Mammy's silences, recorded by Ella as "full thick and deep," are filled with her conversations with Lowly. Ella notes that she "need[s] braille to access those thoughts," which suggests the inadequacy of the usual senses for doing fieldwork, since braille involves the use of a tactile device for those who have a diminished sense of sight (14).[24] The trigger for opening up a sixth and psychic sense in Ella is the hymn "Ah Who Sey Sammy Dead," which was sung at the funeral of her grandmother, who died when Ella was nine months old and of whom Ella has no conscious memory. The hymn's title is an allusion to the popular Jamaican mento song "Sammy Dead Oh," which tells the story of how "grudgeful" neighbors, envious of Sammy's successful crop, use obeah to kill him. Brodber transforms a song about an unnatural death that produces a restless spirit (due to his death by obeah, "Sammy gone dung a hell") into a spiritual, "Ah Who Sey Sammy Dead," which proclaims that Sammy's spirit is at peace: "Upon the hill, the rising sun. It is the voice that calls me home" (51). The hymn, which speaks of death not as an end but a journey to an afterlife, was also sung at Lowly's and Mammy's funerals and serves as a pathway for their spirits to communicate with Ella via the recording machine.

The idea of a machine that can record the voices of both the living and the dead suggests a splitting in the archives between what is remembered and what is forgotten, a history that is preserved for posterity and the one that gets left behind. One of the stories that Ella uncovers is that Mammy was a UNIA organizer in Chicago, and the reader is reminded that, like Ella, Garvey also emigrated to the United States from Jamaica. Since Garveyism was a black self-improvement movement that established the interlocking influence and activism of people of African descent in the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, the novel returns to a past moment in time when the utopian vision of Pan-Africanism was still in its infancy and Garvey's dream was alive. "I don't think for instance," records Ella, "that the nature or extent of the influence of black America on the Caribbean and vice versa has been explored as it should" (154). The novel's reference to this particular forgotten history shows its indebtedness to Robert A. Hill's lifetime work of collecting and assembling the Marcus Garvey's papers, which as an alternative archive are indispensable to recovering the widespread influence of the UNIA, the largest black movement in history. However, when it comes to rural black women's history, the existing gaps in the archives are considerably more difficult to fill in.

related to the Anansi of Ashanti folk tales, although many of the lessons to be derived from Caribbean Anancy stories pertain to the experience of slavery.

24 The braille reference also potentially alludes to the stroking of hands through which a soul is transferred from one body to another. "One person puts the palm of their hand on the other's upturned forearm," Brodber explains, "and strokes down to the fingertips." Quoted in Keshia Abraham, "Erna Brodber," *Bomb* 86 (2003–4): 31.

A second story that Mammy's spirit recounts to Ella concerns her mother, who around the age of fourteen led a cane workers' strike on the Teche plantation in Louisiana.[25] She disappeared shortly afterward, but there is no record of her death. Although Ella learns from Mammy King that her mother was one of the forgotten leaders of the Teche plantation cane workers' strike, the mystery of her death remains unsolved. Ten years after she first heard the story, Ella researches the Teche Strike in the library. All she is able to determine from her research is the year the reported "Disturbance in the canefield" (139) took place, 1878, and that it was led by both men and women. Alluding to Mammy's mother, Ella reports that "it is the general assumption that she was disposed of by the planters because of her political activities" (151), but she is unable to discover how. Was she the female cane worker spotted hanging from a tree, lynched like her father and stepfather before her? Or the one found drowned in the river, presumed to be death by suicide? Inasmuch as the dead who speak do so only to signal the incompleteness of the records, the novel is as much about the impossibility of creating seamless stories out of the fragments of the past. "Did the new data help to flesh out these themes?" Ella asks herself after recording the information she gets from Mammy. "They did not," she concludes (108).

*Louisiana* points to gaps even within oral histories, the morsels of which its narrative form makes difficult for the reader to fit together like so many pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. At the same time, the value of Mammy's stories lies not only in new factual evidence but also in something written archives simply cannot convey—namely, a lived experience passed on from one generation of women to the next. "What your granny felt," Ella tells Mammy, "what your mother felt, what you felt cannot be told any better than you have told it" (139). The novel's integration of black vernacular culture into its narrative offers a glimpse into a racial sentiment passed on from one generation to the next and, in doing so, exposes the debris that the forward march of Western modernity leaves behind.

By enlisting the aid of a sound recorder for expressing the idea of communication with the dead, the novel's presentation of spirit possession undermines the science/superstition dichotomy of modernity. Ella is unable to hear the voices of the spirits that communicate with her telepathically until they materialize on the tape. Although the appearance of the voices on the tape is generally interpreted as Brodber's privileging of oral histories over written records, what interests me is that the orality is mediated by a modern technological device. What are the implications of the novel's allusion to the double meaning of the term *medium*, recording tape as a physical material that can capture voices in the absence of their speakers and a person who has the special power to transmit the voices of the dead? Communication is implied in both, except that the former is scientific and technological and the latter, spiritual and supernatural. Yet, historically, the two discourses were intertwined. As Jonathan Sterne explains in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Victorians understood

25 The Bayou Teche was a sugar-growing region whose stately plantation homes have been preserved as historic sites.

the incipient technology of sound reproduction through the conceptual apparatus of spiritualism. How else could the mystery of a disembodied voice be comprehended? "Death and the invocations of 'the voices of the dead,'" writes Sterne, "were everywhere in writings about sound recording in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[26] Brodber's novel makes evident a relationship that once existed but was left behind as the language of technology became increasingly codified through a separation of science, as forward and future-looking, from superstition, as a residual of the past.

An early anthropological use of sound recorders was in the interest of saving a vanishing past that included folk songs and oral storytelling. "The time has come," reports a spokesperson for the Library of Congress about its folk music project, "when the preservation of this valuable old material is threatened by the spread of the popular music of the hour."[27] The effect of its preservation act, however, was to place the vanishing past in a temporality outside of the present. Where popular music is timely, existing in the "hour" of the immediate present, folk music expresses a past way of life that is under threat of disappearance. Sound archives authenticate a dead past whose "pastness" is made evident by the quaintness of accents and ghostly presence of voices from beyond the grave. It adheres to the temporality of a historicism that makes a clean break between past and present, the time of the event and that of the social scientist. In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau makes a case for the rupture between past and present as a uniquely Western form for organizing time. "Modern Western history," he explains, "essentially begins with differentiation between the *present* and the *past*," a differentiation he notes that is not universal.[28]

One of the temporalities that appears as dysfunctional within the logic of a historicism that places past, present, and future consecutively along a stream of time, belongs to the Jamaican revival religion of pukkumina, which is referenced in the novel by its popular Jamaican nomenclature of "high science" (20). When Mammy characterizes Lowly's sigh as one that "leaked from our history" (14) and Ella records that her "other self entered their space" (33), they are talking (from both sides) about the simultaneity of two temporalities characterized in the novel as "human time and other world time" (115). The word Ella uses for explaining the appearance of Lowly's voice on the tape is *recall*, which suggests a different form of memory than calling up events from the past:

> Mammy on her way to the other world recalled that event and so powerfully that it was recorded on the machine. Or did the machine pull it from her, from her friend and from me?

26 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 289. Also see Steven Connor, "The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology, and the 'Direct Voice,'" in Peter Buse and Andrew Scott, eds., *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 203–25.

27 "Library of Congress Plans to Preserve American Folksongs in National Collection," *US Daily* (Washington DC), 21 April 1928, C2; cited in Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 409 n. 108.

28 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2 (italics in original). For alternative organizations of time, de Certeau cites anthropological studies of India, where new forms that coexist with older ones are characterized as "stratified stockpiling," and of the Fon people of Dahomy (present-day Benin), where history is called *remuho*, "the speech of these past times" (4).

> That meditation later. Mammy's recall was not the end of Lowly. She was there continually after and in the present. So was I. (60–61)

To recall, in this sense, is not to revive a dead past as living memory but to find the pathway to spirits that are already present. In other words, Lowly does not come to Ella from the past; she already exists in the present but can only be heard once she has been "recalled." *Louisiana* presents a temporal logic in which historicism's clean break between past and present is muddied or "confounded."

Ella explains that words belonging to the language of revivalism—words like *dread*, *aweful*, and *confounded*—"control large spaces" and "sit over large holes" (43). She characterizes the experience of hearing words in the silent portion of the tape as falling "off the end of that reel right through those word holes" (44). "Do I need a psychiatrist?" she asks Reuben, who responds that "actuality does not always accord with the literature" and that "there are different yet logical systems of knowledge" (46). Reuben has undertaken a journey that reverses Garvey's back-to-Africa movement, traveling from the Belgian Congo to Europe and then to the United States, following the pathway he learns in the teachings of W. E. B. Du Bois. But it is only while living among Southern blacks in Congo Square, New Orleans, that he finds the true meaning of his race. Reuben, the half-European, half-Congolese talented tenth who, due to his German university training, Ella considers a more "authentic" (34) anthropologist than herself, serves as her interlocutor for understanding the conversations on the reel. It is he who first draws her attention to the extra used tape on the recorder's spool. When he says that "actuality does not always accord with the literature," he is indicating the beginning of a questioning of the presumed superiority of his elite university training.

Ella and Reuben begin to unravel the limitations of Western analytical sciences like psychiatry and anthropology for understanding the black psyche, and of English grammar for explaining the language of revivalism. According to its grammatical rules, words do not sit on top of spaces, but the spaces between letters create words and the spaces between words create meaning. The existence of "word holes" is at odds with a grammatical system in which holes are the antithesis of words. Ella's description of "word holes" and empty spaces as channels or pathways to a spirit world that coexists with the human one forces a rethinking of historical time and silences in language.[29] This might explain why the novel provides the reader with more than one conceptual metaphor for understanding its alternative knowledge system, the first of them from a Jamaican folk tale.

Ella derives a lesson about her fieldwork from a story Madam Marie recounts about the spider Anancy's possession of a pot that would cook him a meal whenever he said, "Cook mek mi see" (78). Mrs. Anancy, wondering why her husband looked so well fed when she and her eleven children were starving, spies on him and discovers the magic pot. She gets the

29 In a companion piece to this essay, "Poetics of a Middle Passage Archive: M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*," forthcoming in *Interventions*, I read Philip's *Zong!* poems for their interrogation of the materiality of the archives and the logic of language.

pot to cook enough food to feed her children but, "in her tidiness" (79), cleans and rinses its magic away. On hearing the story, Ella realizes that she has spent so much time "scouring and rinsing that tape" (ibid.), it has lost its magic. If instead she allows herself to "suspend [her] own sense of right behavior" (80), the recording machine, like Anancy's magic pot, will provide what she needs. The more obvious meaning to be derived from the Anancy story is that the social scientist should transmit oral histories rather than interpret them by scouring them for meaning.

But Ella's understanding of the recording machine as a magic pot is based on her social scientist faith in the recorder as an instrument for collecting oral histories and the tape as material evidence. Moreover, the story is male-gendered, since the pot loses its magic only when a woman, out of domestic habit, scrubs it clean. Madam Marie breaks off in the middle of the story, so that Ella does not hear its ending. In the Jamaican folktale, Anancy acquires a magic whip that beats his wife when she tells the whip, "Do mek me see." The beating suggests that Anancy's wife is punished for destroying his magic pot. The whip also alludes to the form of punishment used on plantations, because the West African version of the tale ends with Anansi being severely beaten by a magic stick (rather than a whip) as punishment for his greed and selfishness.[30] There is a second lesson to be learned from the Anancy story, and it is that women should stay away from devices they are incapable of using.

The analogy between the magic pot and the tape recorder is an imperfect one, because the magic of the tape recording machine issues from not only its technological marvel but also the spiritual wonder of a soul passing between the bodies of two women. The latter concept requires a different kind of device and metaphor. Five years after Mammy's death, Ella abandons the recorder in favor of a solid pendant pierced with a hole for communicating with the spirit world. Unlike a recording machine or even a cooking pot, a pendant has no apparent utility. Yet it ends up being a superior tool, since looking through its hole allows Ella both to hear and see things. Since Reuben purchased it for her in commemoration of their fifth wedding anniversary, the pendant also represents a joint agency of black men and women, which is not evident in an Anancy tale that bears the scars of slavery.

The pendant is a direct allusion to Hurston's reference to the ethnographic demand for objectivity as "the spy-glass of Anthropology," which is a requirement that the participant-observer maintain a critical distance from the native informant.[31] Unlike the metaphor of a spy-glass, which privileges sight and distance, the pendant supplements the sense of sight with that of sound and replaces distance with intimacy. When Ella embraces a black perspective, the language of magic shifts from the "thingness" of recorder or cooking pot to the presumed "nothingness" of a hole, which she asks her reader to reimagine in this way:

30 William H. Barker and Cecilia Sinclair, *West African Folk-Tales* (London: Sheldon, 1928), 14.

31 Hurston writes that the "spy-glass of Anthropology" allowed her to see her own culture that she could not previously see because "it was fitting [her] like a tight chemise." Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 1.

> Now put the tips of your index fingers and the tips of your thumbs together. Your extremities now form a diamond. Imagine the diamond to be solid, three dimensional. Now pierce a hole through the center of this. That hole, that passage is me. I am the link between the shores washed by the Caribbean sea, a hole, yet I am what joins your left hand to your right. I join the world of the living and the world of the spirits. I join the past with the present. (124)

Ella's words transform the absent space of a hole into something: a pathway or passage to diaspora, ancestors, and history, which are intertwined. She abandons the recorder as a conceptual apparatus because it depends on archival material that necessitates filling an epistemological absence—emptiness and silence—with something, a voice recording that can be heard, seen, and measured on the tape. As the novel develops, it invites the reader through the idea of an extra-ordinary sense, to think beyond an association of silence and holes with absence, loss, and negation.

The new instrument also triangulates the relationship between Ella and the spirit world through Reuben, who transcribes the voices speaking through her. As transcriber, Reuben adheres to an anthropological demand for objectivity, but he records that he is unable to "remain emotionally detached" (143) for very long. The final entries of Ella's journal, written in Reuben's hand after her death, state his intent to return to his birthplace to join the Congolese struggle for independence. His own life story has become collectively intertwined with the stories of black people that they are collecting and recording. Ella, too, undergoes a change.

Through Mammy and Lowly (called "the venerable sisters" [32]), Ella is able to reconnect with a Jamaican past of which she has no conscious memory or even a reconstructed one from her community. She notes the difficulty in getting the West Indian immigrants of her mother's Episcopalian church to speak of life back home. "Each was a history book, separate, zippered and padlocked," (58) she records at a time when she still had faith in the power of written history. Her reference to private memory as a padlocked history book indicates both the West Indian immigrant's discomfort with remembering a past that connects him or her to slavery back home and the limits of the social sciences for conveying those memories. How to recall the small moments of pleasure from a painful past without reliving its trauma? The traumatic event in Ella's personal history was witnessing her grandmother's death. During one of her out-of-body experiences, when she sees herself as a baby looking at her grandmother collapse to the ground, images of her rural Jamaican home—its yam vines, brick oven, tangerine tree, and rabbit hutch—flash by her, but the pieces do not coalesce into a complete picture.

Yet, sight and sound are not the only sense available for accessing the past. Once she starts talking to Lowly, Ella is able to recognize the smell of plants and herbs that she presumes must have grown in her grandmother's garden. This act of remembering is not the same as the involuntary memory of high modernism, since the scent does not cause her home to emerge in its entirety as it does for the narrator of Marcel Proust's novel *Swann's Way*, when he tastes a madeleine soaked in lime-blossom tea. "The whole of Combray and its surroundings," he declares, "taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup

of tea."[32] Due to the psychological and cultural trauma of slavery and its post-slavery legacy, Ella's parents' zippered and padlocked history books remain locked, and her birthplace is but a ghostly shadow. The memories Lowly provide Ella are less representational and more embodied. Although they lack the solid shape and form of a Proustian memory, their sensations are no less intense:

> Talking to Lowly didn't do very much for the gaps in my information but I felt her country, my country, Mammy's country, our country. I felt her anguish in the Chicago cloud; I knew the joy of being separated from the dead weight of the body; I went way past fainting. I grew to hunger for the jab of the silver spear. Feeling is knowing. (116)

While combing the tape for information, Ella places all of the pieces of data within an "analytical frame" in the interest of a "historical reconstruction of the life of Mrs Sue Ann Grant-King" (64), the project with which her university professors entrusted her. Now that she has become Louisiana, she expresses that "feeling is knowing," words alluding to a Jamaican proverb, "He who feels it knows it," which is uttered by Madam Marie at a time when she did not understand its meaning (148).[33] Ella thus identifies a more visceral response to the past—one that cuts across the mind/body split—than a reconstruction of data scoured from oral histories through fieldwork, with which to fill out gaps in the written records of the archives.

The relationship of affect to historical materials can be likened to the natural light Ella observes shining through a stained glass window at her mother's church. "The picture," she notes, "was a mosaic, like a jigsaw puzzle." Yet the colorful glass pieces soldered together with lead form a dull and broken image until the sun streams through them during the long summer days. As a source of energy that is not part of the picture yet necessary for it to be seen, sunlight makes the image almost magically come to life. "The whole picture was there," Ella declares, "and for a considerable time" (57). A picture of the past requires not only the pieces of information assembled like a jigsaw puzzle from oral and written sources. It also needs the trail of silver dust that infuses the brain with a different kind of logic that allows one to see, hear, and feel things one did not before.

32 Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way (Remembrance of Things Past, Volume One)*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), 51.

33 "Who Feels It Knows It" is also the title of a song written by Bunny Livingston and recorded in 1966 by the Wailers, Bob Marley's early ska band.