

Beyond Geography, Past Time: Afrofuturism, *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, and Caribbean Studies

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“See you there. In the free.” This is the closing statement in Erna Brodber’s fourth novel, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*.¹ Given the novel’s seeming disregard for the conventional boundaries of, and between, time and space, “the free” can be read as a place (not here), a time (not now), and a condition (not yet). The novel forces us to hold these visions as simultaneously possible. Of course, any reading of Brodber’s work requires that one suspend the need for determinacy, but this text deliberately undoes what we may think of as “known.” Brodber creatively imagines a past for the New World present, taking advantage of the space literary speculation and science fiction offer to create a counterhistory of the present. Reading the novel through the lens of Afrofuturism—despite and because of its roots in African American fiction and visual art—I examine here the novel’s representation of a rapidly changing Caribbean present, existing simultaneously, chronologically and physically, with a developing past and a perplexing future. I propose that an Afrofuturistic aesthetic offers Brodber the freedom, in form, to examine past, present, and future iterations of “the free,” allowing for a delimitation of narrative that enables Brodber to sketch the psychological terrain of an emergent Caribbean cosmology.

I come to the term *cosmology* primarily via Kamau Brathwaite’s theoretical work on Caribbean culture. From a Brathwaitian perspective, a cosmology encompasses a formative cultural

¹ Erna Brodber, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (London: New Beacon, 2007), 150; hereafter cited in text.

system. He posits a Caribbean cosmology built on the following elements: the culture's method of identifying itself (whether by word or sound—*nommo*); forms of worship and celebration (including Vodoun, Santería, Pocomania, carnival, and jouvert); arts of healing and divination (e.g., Myal and obeah); arts of warfare and of defense (*asafo*); rites of passage; the drum vibrations inherent in Caribbean performance, in the broadest sense (*atumpán*); creation and survival of song and story (*ananse*); and the central spirit or “indestructible kernel of the culture” (*nam*).² Though it may be productive in some senses to examine if and how Brodber engages these elements in her novel, I list them here not to check them off as present in my reading of her work but rather to indicate the expansiveness of the Brathwaitian model, which serves here as part of my context for evaluating the world Brodber creates in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. This context is critical not only as a grounding from which I read Brodber's novel as Afrofuturistic but also as a means of understanding what Brodber's use of the Afrofuturistic aesthetic adds to literary and academic models of examining and representing the Caribbean.

My reading of Brodber's novel through Afrofuturism is as much strategic as commonsensical. True, the emphasis of Afrofuturism on chronology, and the disruption thereof, in an Afrocentric scope makes the movement/theory/aesthetic a natural fit for *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. But a discussion of the novel in terms of magical realism (a discussion that has certainly taken place with Brodber's earlier novels) could potentially allow for some of the same conclusions as those I make here about form, process, and cosmology. Additionally, there has been hefty enough debate about the borders of science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism to warrant an examination of the novel through any of these forms, singly or in combination. However, the racial dimensions of Afrofuturism and its potential for connective global power despite its formation in and bias toward North American cultural arts make it, for me, more attractive than these related theoretical lenses. By no means do I seek to exclusively, or permanently, label Brodber's novel as Afrofuturist, and my intent is not to *prove*, per se, its Afrofuturism. Rather, as far as it is possible to do so responsibly in uncharted critical territory, I take much of that for granted. I am more interested in what this aesthetic, labeled Afrofuturist for my purposes here, *does* for Brodber. That is, rather than simply applying a relatively new term to an even newer work of Caribbean fiction, my aim here is to examine via the space opened up by the concept of Afrofuturism what necessitates Brodber's turn to nonrealistic fiction in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* and what this form—or freedom from form—accomplishes.

In truth, given the context of both the Brathwaitian model and the Caribbean studies symposium, my aim is threefold. First, to use Afrofuturism to elucidate some of the tenets of Brodber's novel. Second, given the cosmological context from which I approach this reading, I am also asking what it is that such a reading might do for Afrofuturism. That is, how might our understanding of this movement be inflected and enriched by connections to Brodber's work? Third, I step back to consider what it is that Afrofuturism offers a Caribbean narrative about the African diaspora and some of the implications of using a critical tool such as Afrofuturism in reading a Caribbean text.

2 Kamau Brathwaite, “Note(s) on Caribbean Cosmology,” *River City* 16, no. 2 (1996): 1–17. The italicized words are Brathwaite's terms for the concepts I have tried to gloss here. He defines and (re)uses several of these terms across his oeuvre, and, therefore, the shades of meaning may vary somewhat in other works.

Or, to situate the idea more firmly within the context of this special section, I ask what it is that the novel and my Afrofuturistic reading of it might do for an epistemology of Caribbean aesthetics. My thinking here is prompted not only by the questions of discipline and method raised by the symposium itself but also by Sylvia Wynter's theories of aesthetics and Brathwaite's theories of appropriate models for the study of Caribbean culture and cultural production. Brodber's work challenges not only the categorized boundaries of literary form but also traditional methods of analysis. It asks us, as critics and as readers, to question what texts we read and *how* we read these texts. In this third aim I speak, then, toward the questions raised by the symposium organizers: "*What is Caribbean Studies? What are the contours of its present configuration? What are its prisms, paradigms, and practices? What ought Caribbean studies to be—its objects, its questions, its strategies, and its archives?*"³ The prisms that we choose to utilize in our practice stand to become paradigms, and therefore care and consideration is necessary in selecting and wielding our methodologies.

Caribbean Afrofuturism

In *The Rainmaker's Mistake* Brodber presents not one but three mythical origins for New World African descendants, particularly those in the Caribbean. The last of the three genesis myths is, of course, the one that we are to take as the *real* history of the main characters, but it is just as much of what Brathwaite would deem an *anansesem* (an Anancy story/trickster tale geared toward survival) as the first two creation narratives told in the novel. The process of questioning the stories told, of seeking answers to historical questions, of building societies (and shaping cosmologies) based on these answers, these processes are the "real" of the novel. But how does one represent process? Certainly not within the confines of the realist novel. Thus, Brodber eschews realistic form, embracing instead an aesthetic that represents the challenge of the simultaneities and uncertainties inherent in process. Her chosen approach to representing these processes in the Caribbean exhibits several of the features of Afrofuturism.

The concept of Afrofuturism is perhaps more descriptive than prescriptive. It does not denote a movement that has clearly defined dates of cultural production or one that requires a minimum level of engagement with particular elements. Rather, it is most often classified as an aesthetic that one can find in art of various forms, elucidating the concerns that trouble works in various periods, concerns that may change or remain the same over time and across what may be called black spaces. While its roots are in literary criticism, the concept can now be found in discussions of music, visual art (print and plastic), and film (including television). The term *Afrofuturism*, commonly accepted as coined in the early 1990s by cultural critic Mark Dery, generally refers to science fiction or fantasy embedded with black themes; and many such works focus heavily on imagining a black past and envisioning a black future. Dery introduces it thus: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images

3 Hazel Carby, Kamari Maxine Clarke, and David Scott, *What Is Caribbean Studies? Prisms, Paradigms, and Practices*, program for the international symposium, 1–2 April 2011, Yale University (italics in original).

of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism.”⁴ Though he begins with literary examples such as work by Samuel Delany and Ralph Ellison, Dery soon expands the term as applicable to work by Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Sayles, George Clinton, and Afrika Bambaataa.⁵ Dery also highlights music by Jamaican Lee “Scratch” Perry, crediting the Rastafarian cosmology as the source of Perry’s Afrofuturistic vision. Despite the original definitional emphasis on *African American* rather than *black* works, the inclusion of Perry (and arguably Basquiat) in Dery’s preliminary list creates valid space in this critical genesis for later explorations of Caribbean iterations of the aesthetic. This space, however, still remains to be filled.

Afrofuturism’s sphere of influence was expanded in 1998, when Alondra Nelson chose “Afrofuturism” as the name for a new online community of artists, musicians, writers, and literary critics interested in African American cultural production with “other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.”⁶ The critical utility of Afrofuturism as a term and a concept was further solidified in 2002 when *Social Text* published a special issue, guest edited by Nelson, of scholarship, art, and poetry concerned with Afrofuturism. In his 2003 essay “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun concludes: “Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken.”⁷ Thus Afrofuturism becomes both an aesthetic for creative works and an interventionist “tool” for critical reading of such aesthetics.

My glossing here of the history of the term by no means presents a complete or extensive overview of Afrofuturism; scholars continue to broaden the boundaries of the term, reaching backward to earlier twentieth-century black artists and rereading newly produced art in an Afrofuturist light. One of the areas in which Afrofuturism has been slow in growth is in considering work created outside North America. Despite the opening Dery creates with mention of Perry’s work, few critics looked beyond the “African-American themes [and] concerns” he specified in his early definition. Nelson includes work by Nigerian visual artist Gatima Tuggar and an interview with Jamaican-born writer Nalo Hopkinson in the groundbreaking special issue of *Social Text*, and in recent years, Afrofuturism.net has begun to include more work on and by African and Caribbean artists, but most of the cultural production listed on the site and addressed by critics is African American in origin.⁸ At the end of the interview with Nelson, Hopkinson states that her hope for the genre is that “there will begin to be more diverse expressions of people’s lived experiences of race, culture, class, sexuality, social structures, and gender, and that more of those expressions will begin to come from outside the United States.”⁹ A cursory review of work from Caribbean artists, perhaps even limited to those

4 Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

5 Though Dery, and later critics, alternate between dubbing both the art and the artists themselves Afrofuturist, I prefer to utilize the term only in describing the work itself. This leaves space for the artist to choose Afrofuturism as the aesthetic/approach/method for works to which it may be best suited.

6 Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text*, no. 71 (June 2002): 9.

7 Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” *CF: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 301.

8 The site itself seems to have “paused,” and as of this writing, nothing new has been posted since April 2011. The term *Afrofuturism*, however, continues to gain momentum in academic circles.

9 Alondra Nelson, “Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson,” *Social Text*, no. 71 (June 2002): 113.

contemporary with Hopkinson, would reveal that the cultural and geographic diversity she calls for does exist. As recent additions of work by Kamau Brathwaite, Robert Antoni, and Wilson Harris to lists of Afrofuturist fiction indicate, such expressions already “come from outside the United States,” they simply have to be acknowledged as contributing a Caribbean dimension to the primarily US-centric conception of Afrofuturism.

Brodber’s *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* is easily identifiable as an Afrofuturist text. It incorporates the mix of science fiction and fantasy definitive of Afrofuturism to decode and represent such concepts as blackness, Caribbeanness, and freedom. Brodber creatively imagines a past to explain the present African diaspora, focusing on the historical links between, and the possible futures for, various populations of the African diaspora. But the narrative largely develops from an identifiably Caribbean space. This location in a Caribbean cultural system (recall here Brathwaite’s sketch of a Caribbean cosmology) is conspicuous in a fictive strategy that refuses other forms of fixedness. This specificity, rather than being limiting or contentious, grounds *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, providing it with a fertile space from which to conceive positive visions of a single black past and a cooperative diasporic future. The concreteness of this Caribbean space in the midst of a nebulous fictive world emphasizes the liberties Brodber takes with literary form. The choices that she makes about time and place in *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, and the presence or lack of boundaries between each, indicate that textual representation of the Caribbean requires a loosening, often a complete suspension, of prescribed temporal and spatial boundaries.

Such suspension of time and space is at times confusing for the reader; but in *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, the seamless movement between past and future, here and there, helps to reconcile the text’s distinctive Caribbeanness with its projection of a free black nation that spans time and space, anchored by race but unmarred by geocultural tensions. Afrofuturistic texts, as Ruth Mayer states, “move ceaselessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones.”¹⁰ Free of the limitations of realistic fiction, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* challenges readers to rethink and possibly remap any easy understanding or representation of African diasporic culture, particularly that of the contemporary Caribbean. Readers are immediately disoriented as the novel begins in an unspecified time and place. Mr. Charlie, landowner, looks out on his “patent” and decides he needs labor. He plants his seed in the earth, raises yams from this planting, and cultivates these brown yams into brown people who are “young and old, big and small, male and female, brothers and sisters, children of one father dug from an everlasting underground source” (2). After Mr. Charlie’s planting is revealed as an oft-told tale within a tale, readers are introduced to the Eden-like existence of the people who thoroughly believe they were once brown yams.¹¹

Each time readers feel as though they have grasped the direction of Brodber’s storyline, or deciphered some meaningful historical or contemporary connection, a new voice or idea enters the narrative, unbalancing any appearance of stable metaphorical correlations. For example, early

10 Ruth Mayer, “‘Africa as an Alien Future’: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2000): 557.

11 Portions of this reading of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* first appeared in my review of the novel for *Callaloo*. See Kelly Baker Josephs, “*The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (review),” *Callaloo* 31, no. 3 (2008): 938–41.

in the text Mr. Charlie announces from his verandah, “It is 1834: You are under six years old and you are free” (10). This first concrete evidence of time is comforting and the reference to freedom indicates that the “brown yams” are slaves on Mr. Charlie’s patent of land. The previous mentions of labor, naming, missing women, and new babies begin to fall into place as evidence of life on a plantation. With this clue, readers can now settle in with the extended metaphor, reveling in the conflicts created by impending freedom and the appearance of a yellow yam baby, Sallywater, who has unusually soft and straight hair.

But in the very next paragraph, Mr. Charlie reappears to announce, “It is 1838 . . . you are free” (11). Thus, just as it is offered to the reader, the gift of chronological certainty is revoked. Here Brodber powerfully practices what Eshun terms a “chronopolitical intervention.”¹² Her manipulation of, or blatant disregard for, the four years of “partial slavery” for adults mandated by the Slavery Abolition act of 1833, speaks volumes about the legislation’s lack of initial impact for those living in slavery in these islands. Yes, the reference to these specific years indicates that the story is set in a West Indian British colony and that the relationship between Mr. Charlie and his “children” is one of master and slaves, but what is freedom to those who do not understand the word? With this “chronopolitical intervention,” Brodber interrogates the perplexing aspects of freedom, often negative in their initial formlessness. Despite whatever reservations we may have about the extent of any freedom granted in our Caribbean past (from slavery, from colonialism) the initial emancipation is an unmooring, a setting adrift as much as a setting free, that at the time may have been mind boggling. How to imagine, then, from our perhaps jaded present, how this future that we now inhabit seemed to our ancestors? The main narrator, Queenie, cannot even comprehend Mr. Charlie’s announcement; she wonders, “And what was this he was saying: ‘You are free’ and behaving so strangely because of this thing called ‘free’” (11). However, as Queenie grapples with this idea of freedom, one of her “brothers,” Woodville, laughs Mr. Charlie’s house off its base. Yes, *laughs*. The house disappears into the sky, leaving the former slaves (though this word is never used) to fend for themselves in a changing landscape. And readers are once again left with as much foundation as Mr. Charlie’s house.

The only stable feature of Brodber’s text is blackness, a blackness that at first appears to be unmediated by geography. This changes after Mr. Charlie’s exit, when the rivers overrun and separate the land into three continents: Woodville on one; Sallywater and her “caretaker,” I-Sis, on another; and the remaining members of the clan in the middle. Over time, these continents grow farther apart. These divisions might correspond to different regions in the modern-day African diaspora. Queenie, followed by the rest of the clan, strikes out for Cabarita Island, which seems Caribbean in its fauna and geography. From this location, I-Sis and Sallywater’s location at first resembles North America. But later in the text, when Queenie makes it to their land, the communal organization of dwellings and government she describes more closely resembles the stereotype of a traditional African village than a North American community. Similarly, Woodville’s portion, with its designation as “the Past,” would seem to represent the African angle of the diaspora. But when

12 Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” 292.

Queenie's playmates Essex and Congo manage to return there, they find agricultural and atmospheric conditions that correspond to the American South. Additionally, we later learn that there is the "Future," where one of the Cabarita residents, London, goes via a mysterious seaway to trade produce for manufactured goods. Thus the various spaces that the brown yams encounter cannot be easily mapped onto present-day geographic locations. With these continually shifting settings, Brodber leaves her readers as unsure of place as they are of time.

But Brodber has done this before in works that are experimental but not Afrofuturistic. *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, for example, is narrated by a dissociated Nellie, whose mental instability shapes the form of her story, making it impossible to determine how, or if, her various anecdotes fit into the chronology of her life. In *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, Brodber continues this manipulation of setting and narrative while incorporating clear elements of science fiction to create a counterhistory of the present. For approximately 150 years following Mr. Charlie's disappearance, members of the Cabarita clan do not grow old; they do not reproduce, they are not interested in sex, indeed, they do not know it exists, and they do not die or recognize death. The clan members accept their lack of growth as easily as readers may accept this as metaphorical for economic and political stagnancy in postslavery black communities, but as the narrative progresses Queenie questions their biological alienation—at first only idly, when she encounters "normality" during her first venture off Cabarita Island, but then formally, in extensive academic study abroad in "Sallywater's place" (also called "the Norm"). With the half-answers that Queenie discovers, Brodber tackles the conflict of the slave master in wanting the reproduction of new labor but not wanting to invite the power that reproduction could provide to the enslaved. As the brown yams begin to experience sexual drives, what Queenie calls "naturalness," they also experience mortality. The former, though "nice," is pitted against the perpetual youth that Queenie and her community previously enjoyed in their fantastical past.

Like other texts recovered or read as Afrofuturistic, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* blends practical concerns with sci-fi-like elements to portray the unreality of black existence. Just when a reader may be willing to suspend realism and work with allegory, Brodber includes concerns about incest, puberty, and exact age and date calculations. And despite an overall inexorable forward march of time in the narrative, a march variously sped up or slowed down by Brodber's "chronopolitical interventions," the past is never past. Indeed, in the geography of the narrative, the past, the present, and the future exist simultaneously. And the extent of this past continually increases for characters and readers as the mystery extends beyond the events on Mr. Charlie's patent to those that occurred before the adult members of the clan followed Woodville across the waters to Mr. Charlie. Readers are taken through the mists of a clan member's memory to discover the reason for this journey, only to find that it was based on a miscalculation of power by one of their leaders—hence the title, *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. In the face of such pressing historical, biological, and ethical concerns, what does time and place as understood by Mr. Charlie really matter?

In the end, however, Queenie's goal is to build material connections between the various times and places to support and sustain the cultural connections between "brown yam" peoples. She recognizes that in these connections—also reflected in the freedom the brown yams have discovered

in sex and reproduction—“lies ultimate power. The power to cultivate a nation, power Massa did not want to see us use, could not want us to use” (149). Thus her closing statement—“See you there. In the free”—indicates that freedom cannot be bound to time-sensitive legal decrees or national boundaries, official chronologies or geographies; it exists in the cooperative “in process” space between the past, present, and future of an integrated black diaspora. Brodber’s Afrofuturistic strategies in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* provide the means for not only interrogating, then celebrating the heterogeneity of blackness but also engaging said heterogeneity in service of envisioning a future black world.

“The ‘Shipmates’ Have Made a New World Thing of Their Own”

Properly, Brodber’s vision is not just of the future, but also the present and the past; and it is neither linear nor clearly mapped. The contradictions Brodber employs in the novel, particularly those that rely on Afrofuturistic elements, work against easy allegory. One of the attractions of Afrofuturism as a tool for examining *The Rainmaker's Mistake* is that it allows for the fluidity and opacity that such contradictions demand. For the most part, however, the texts that are generally read as Afrofuturist are noticeably not Caribbean. And the African American inclination of theorists of Afrofuturism can constrain the ways the texts that reflect a Caribbean cosmology, even in diasporic spaces, are read. For example, Lisa Yaszek’s reading of Nalo Hopkinson’s short story “Ganger (Ball Lightning)” does not take—to return to Brathwaite’s terminology—the *ananse* and *nam* of Caribbean culture into consideration. Yaszek reads Hopkinson’s story at the end of her article “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future” as a way into her conclusion about the historical and global implications of Afrofuturism; therefore, a thorough treatment of the text was not one of her goals. Still, what better way to argue that people of color have been more than “mere respondents to the new literary forms of twentieth and twenty-first centuries” and that in “recovering Afrodiasporic future story telling traditions we gain a better understanding of the important intellectual and aesthetic work that these authors have performed on both national and global cultural fronts” than by calling on the storytelling tradition that Hopkinson herself, via her title, insists she is continuing here in her futuristic fashion.¹³ Yaszek’s conclusion about Hopkinson’s work is not incorrect, just incomplete; it is limited by the geographic boundaries of her methodology, Afrofuturism. It is no accident that the other works Yaszek discusses in her essay are by American authors: Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. Du Bois, George S. Schuyler, and Octavia Butler. This context shapes the possibilities of a reading of Hopkinson’s story. My reading of Brodber here aims to demonstrate how, rather than ignore these boundaries and pretend that Afrofuturism has already achieved its potential of addressing “both national and global cultural fronts,” one might directly push against its US partiality. Additionally, to illustrate how this critical tool may provide a useful perspective and language for examining what Caribbean writers are attempting or accomplishing in experimental, nonrealist works. With a more

13 Lisa Yaszek, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 42 (November 2006): 58; sdonline.org/42/afrofuturism-science-fiction-and-the-history-of-the-future.

inclusive understanding of its applications, Afrofuturism becomes more robust in its validity as a methodological prism for those of us in Caribbean studies and in cultural studies more generally.

It is difficult to speak definitively of what *The Rainmaker's Mistake* does for an Afrofuturist canon because Brodber is not the only Caribbean writer to “focus one way or another on the intersecting imageries of pastness and future in black culture.”¹⁴ However, her interdisciplinarity, the breadth of her writing, and her specific focus on connecting the local and the global experiences of blackness makes her exemplary among such writers. Although there are frequent references throughout Brodber's novels to England and the African continent, she focuses primarily on blacks in the New World, where the heterogeneity of blackness is too often characterized as tense and as threatening to the unity and progress of black political and social collectivities, whether globally or in microcosmic metropolitan areas, such as New York City or Toronto. Frequent misrepresentation of various tensions between geocultural and racial affiliations as conflicting and unproductive give rise to the assumption that state-defined nationalisms—including those that immigrants retain in their hostlands—work against, rather than with and within, concepts of blackness. Brodber's vision of an integrated black diaspora, imagined as both historical and futuristic in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, is present in various forms in most, if not all, of her work and writings. But, as with the noticeably Caribbean space in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, this vision often grows from a specific local space. Migration characterizes the lives of the main protagonists in Brodber's four novels, but so does return;¹⁵ all four protagonists—Nellie in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*; Ella in *Myal*; Ella in *Louisiana*; and Queenie in *The Rainmaker's Mistake*—return from their various migrations abroad.¹⁶ By and large, Brodber's vision of integration in her fiction—on both the communal and the individual level—involves these heroines in advanced work in the social sciences. Excepting *Myal's* Ella, who turns to teaching rather than research, Brodber's female protagonists all at some point turn to postgraduate study—social psychology for Nellie and forms of anthropology for *Louisiana's* Ella and for Queenie—in an effort to “work out” their own cultural questions and to work toward a unified black diaspora.

This bridging of disciplinary worlds is key to Brodber's objectives in her fiction. Brodber herself holds a doctorate in history from the University of the West Indies and has done extensive study in sociology, psychology, and psychiatric anthropology in the Caribbean, North America, and the United Kingdom. She turned to writing fiction while teaching sociology at the University of the West Indies because of the dearth of research on Jamaicans available for her students. Thus her first novel began as a fictionalized case history in response to the “limitations of the social sciences in the Caribbean.” In an essay that details her use of fiction in the scientific procedure, Brodber discusses her “twinning of fiction and science” that serves for her as a “heuristic device,” with her

14 Mayer, “Africa as an Alien Future,” 564.

15 For more on Brodber's politics of location, see Alison Donnell, “What It Means to Stay: Reterritorialising the Black Atlantic in Erna Brodber's Writing of the Local,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2005): 479–86.

16 Because of the multiple voices that characterize Brodber's novels, there are often several main characters in each text, but these four may be said to be primary in their respective narratives.

fiction informing her scientific study and vice versa.¹⁷ She also defines the relationship between her academic work and her creative work:

My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it, unlike mainstream sociology, has activist intentions: it is about studying the behavior of and transmitting these findings to the children of the people who were put on ships on the African beaches and woke up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World. It is my hope that this information will be a tool with which the blacks and particularly those of the diaspora will forge a closer unity and, thus fused, be able to face the rest of the world more confidently.¹⁸

With her scholarship, her creative writing and other activism (in her birthplace Woodside, for example, she has founded Blackspace, a “school for the descendants of Africans enslaved in the New World”), Brodber continues to work toward envisioning and creating this diasporic unity.¹⁹

In *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, her “twinning of fiction and science” in the service of African diasporic unity *becomes* science fiction. Her previous novels mix large measures of myth, allegory, religious belief, and other suspensions of reality threaded through with a curiously complementary scientific approach; but this most recent narrative incorporates what one might call “hard science” (as opposed to the social sciences and the spiritual sciences already explored in Brodber’s previous novels). The people of Cabarita Island were prevented from aging and reproducing by a mysterious potion they were made to drink at regular intervals. A sex-specific notch (on the back of the neck for men and the base of the throat for women) also allowed for a “reversal” of this condition, which is how I-Sis came to be impregnated by Mr. Charlie. Even after Mr. Charlie disappears, his “children” still do not grow old for approximately a century and a half. It is not until Woodville arrives, as an old man himself, that the effect of the potion is broken and the aging process begins to affect those on Cabarita Island. In this case, the incorporation of the possible (though improbable) science of preventing aging replicates the generational community that Brodber traditionally creates in her novels via other methods. Unlike in *Jane and Louisa*, *Myal*, and *Louisiana*, there is no mystical chorus of dead ancestors here; instead, those who would be ancestors are still alive to speak to the generations that follow, though they may not remember their own stories. How do we read these choices by Brodber to use what I am calling here an Afrofuturistic aesthetic? What does her use of this aesthetic do in relation to Brodber’s stated objective of “forg[ing] a closer unity” among blacks of the New World?

In order to help answer these questions, and illustrate why it is important to ask them, I turn to Sylvia Wynter’s proposition of a “deciphering practice.” Like Brathwaite and Brodber, Wynter is a Caribbean scholar who works to bridge science and the humanities, though Wynter’s work is animated by research in the physical sciences. In “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a

17 Erna Brodber, “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure,” in Selwyn Cudjoe, ed., *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990), 165, 167.

18 *Ibid.*, 164.

19 For more information on Blackspace and Brodber’s activism, see Angelique V. Nixon, “‘We Have Something to Teach the World’: Erna Brodber’s Blackspace, Building Community, and Educo-tourism,” *MaComère* 11 (2009): 61–79; and Erna Brodber, *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon, 2003).

Deciphering Practice,” Wynter puts forward a theory of aesthetics in film criticism based on rethinking current critical practices. “A deciphering turn,” she writes, “seeks to decipher *what* the process of rhetorical mystification *does*. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*, and it also seeks to evaluate the ‘illocutionary force’ and procedures with which they do what they *do*.”²⁰ Wynter is referring here to evidence from biological and social sciences of the impact a text might have on an individual and in a society, but I would like to look at this on a smaller scale. I am positioning Afrofuturism here both as the “procedure” with which *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* accomplishes some of Brodber’s “activist intentions” and as part of my “deciphering practice” in reading the novel. While Brodber’s fictive construction of the Caribbean might be read in an Afrofuturistic context, contributing to both an understanding of the text and of the theory, there is also the related question—raised now via Wynter’s outline of a “deciphering practice”—of what I believe the Afrofuturistic aesthetic itself *does* in *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*. A return to Brodber’s selective use of science in the novel illustrates why Brodber, no stranger to nonlinear narrative and dense symbolism, might turn to such nonrealism for her fourth novel.

In the final chapter of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, the Cabarita Islanders (and readers) obtain some answers to previous questions about their past and present. The narration is shared between London, now recognized as Abdul, and Queenie. It is split into three sections: the first, a monologue by Abdul captured by Queenie on a tape recorder after he has been shocked (physically and/or mentally) by lightning; the second, one side of a conversation he has with Queenie about the recording; and the third, a direct first-person narration by Queenie about her and her people’s plans for the future. In a section that, in overview, would seem to have answers to the mystery that has been driving the novel, it is the questions that stand out. Even as Abdul answers the “How come we here?” question that has animated Queenie’s investigations for so long, Queenie finds she has a plethora of new questions: about the science of their “neutering”; about the extent of Mr. Charlie’s deception; about his possible collaborators in the Past, the Norm, and the Future; about whether she is sister to Essex, with whom she is now making a child to “grow ourselves into a nation” (149). Abdul can only guess at the answers, and in her closing section, Queenie concludes that she has no choice but to “continue the search” (150).

The question that Queenie does not ask—but one that Brodber indicates as motivating the whole narrative—is “Why did we stay, Lord?”²¹ It is in an effort to answer this question that Brodber finds recourse in the fantastic: a scientifically stunted race of people unable to reproduce future generations or remember any history beyond Mr. Charlie, even as members of their clan can travel to places such as the Past, the Norm, the Future, and even the Pluperfect. There are myriad details Brodber must create to support such a vision, such as why the clan members follow Queenie to Cabarita Island, why they literally build parts of the island with dirt from the Past, how London travels a seaway to the Future, and how Essex builds a plane to return to the Past. Along with the

20 Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” in Mbaye B. Cham, ed., *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 266–67 (italics in original).

21 Erna Brodber, back cover of the 2007 New Beacon edition of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*.

larger concept of the novel, these details constitute what Wynter might call Brodber's "signifying practices." As with other creative choices that rely on an Afrofuturistic aesthetic, Brodber's signifying practices subvert the material world to create space for representation, free of the "rules" of what we believe to be reality. Brodber, quoted on the back cover of the novel, explains: "In *The Rainmaker's Mistake* I explore other explanations for the peopling of the New World by Africans . . . we watch the formerly enslaved as they try to handle freedom and as they arrive at understandings concerning the issues and processes relating to their diaspora, settlement and stunted growth."²² These "other explanations" require a move not only beyond realistic narrative but beyond realism itself. They also compel the reader to move beyond standard given explanations—academic, economic, anthropological—for the "issues and processes" faced by the African diaspora, particularly those in the New World. This is what Brodber's aesthetic *does*, for her and for us.

Given the relationship between her sociological research and her fiction, Brodber's vision of alternative answers to the questions "How come we here?" and "Why did we stay?" may be seen as progress toward more flexible models for academic work in Caribbean studies. This flexibility is at the core of Brathwaite's argument in his seminal article "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," wherein he maintains that Caribbean studies, particularly Caribbean historiography, "is an exercise of enormous difficulty . . . because its success will be limited by the scholar's aboriginal concept and perception of wholes." He follows by demanding a rethinking of traditional models of analysis in favor of a "multi-dimensional model," one via which "Caribbean culture can be seen in terms of a dialectic of development taking place within a seamless guise or continuum of space and time; a model which allows for blood flow, fluctuations, the half-look, the look both/several ways; which allows for and contains the ambiguous, and rounds the sharp edges off the dichotomy."²³ Although primarily concerned here with scholarship, Brathwaite does remark on the need for involving artists in this creation of a multidimensional model, and in later works he turns to cultural production to find such a model. Brodber is one of the writers he offers in later critical texts as producing exemplary artistic models of a Caribbean cosmology. Although Brathwaite focuses on Brodber's *Myal* for his argument (with some reference to *Jane and Louisa*), the Afrofuturistic aesthetic of *The Rainmaker's Mistake* continues the work he recognizes Brodber as performing in these earlier novels. Turning more toward science fiction in her fourth novel, Brodber creates a disruption of the normal order, a disruption Brathwaite posits as necessary to represent the Caribbean (cosmological) imaginary.

I read Brathwaite's call for new models of analyses and Wynter's call for a mindful deciphering practice as, at their root, a demand for methods of study that are conscious of the fantastic nature of 1492 and the encounters that follow. An Afrofuturistic reading of Brodber's novel responds to both Brathwaite's and Wynter's mandates. In its content and its aesthetic form, *The Rainmaker's Mistake* illustrates Brodber's argument that "the 'shipmates' have made a New World thing of their own" in the wake of these encounters.²⁴ Given Brodber's increasing attention to all the "shipmates"—including those (and their descendants) who landed, or who finally now reside, outside the Caribbean—the

22 Ibid. (ellipsis in original).

23 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): 1, 7.

24 Brodber, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," 168.

American origins of Afrofuturism as a “critical tool” make it even more useful in analyzing her work. And her work makes visible the necessity and possibilities of delimiting Afrofuturistic criticism. In *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, an Afrofuturistic aesthetic—a truly “New World thing”—provides the means of representing multiple dimensions of a Caribbean cosmology that is not merely cognizant of, but necessarily engaged with, other spaces in the black diaspora.