

“Patterns of Loving: Erna Brodber’s *Nothing’s Mat*”

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Erna Brodber, *Nothing’s Mat* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2014); 128 pages; ISBN 978-9766404949 (paperback)

*Nothing’s Mat* is Erna Brodber’s latest offering in a body of work whose trajectory probes and heals the psychosocial and emotional legacy of slavery and colonialism. The scope of this new short novel is dazzling; it not only includes many of the themes of Brodber’s earlier fiction and nonfiction but also expands her focus to the Jamaican diaspora and to European and African indentureship. Like her previous novels, the structure on first reading is tricky, as it moves about in time, facilitates a multivocal narration, and includes many magical and spiritual elements.

The text follows the quest of British-born Princess to construct her family tree. She takes up this endeavor twice in her life, and both are woven together in the novel. Her journey begins when she is seventeen and, to research her A-level project, visits her father’s relative, Cousin Nothing, in Jamaica. From Cousin Nothing, Princess records stories about her extended family.

One of the main themes in this section, as is the case in Brodber’s earlier novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), is the consequences of female sexuality being taboo. This section is also reminiscent of many of the testimonies by working-class Jamaican women in the Sistren Theatre Collective’s *Lionheart Gal* (1986). In *Nothing’s Mat*, Maud is the guardian, nonbiological mother, and sister of the character Clarise. Maud fails to inform Clarise about sex, owing to the subject being taboo and because Maud herself was raped. Clarise’s naiveté exposes her to abuse from an older man and she becomes pregnant; Clarise’s ignorance also means that she is unaware that she is pregnant until she gives birth to Nothing.

Princess also learns about other nonbiological connections that make up her family. When she returns to England, her teacher informs her that her research might prove that the West Indian family is “fractal” rather than “fractured” (36), as the sociological literature on the Caribbean previously suggested. By this, her teacher means that the complex connections that make up her family, which are also repeated over generations—thereby making each individual merely part of a larger complex pattern—demonstrate that Princess’s family structure defies Western notions of both family and identity.

Princess returns to Jamaica when she is thirty to do further research. Her investigation echoes Brodber’s assertion, in her essay “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure” (1990), that being subjective and having affective interactions with her subjects is necessary in the Caribbean. Indeed, Princess breaks the “law” of the sociological method by having and displaying emotions when doing fieldwork. This is then amplified to imaginative empathy, or we could even interpret it as a spiritual connection with the dead, when she revisits three narratives that she initially heard when she was seventeen. Significantly, these narratives are in the center of novel, emphasizing their importance both in terms of the characters’ stories and the method through which they are produced: an emotionally imaginative process.

The first narrative is Maud’s, set in 1865. This story incorporates indentureship from Africa into the Jamaican family: Maud’s boyfriend, Modibe, and his sister, Clarise, are the children of African indentured servants. This narrative also, somewhat surprisingly, deromantizes the figure of the Maroon, since the Maroons in this novel fight with the British and gang-rape Maud. When Maud and Clarise flee the British and the Maroons, they form a new family unit.

The second narrative, Clarise’s, makes clear that because of the arrival of indentured Africans, African belief systems continued to be incorporated into Jamaican culture after the slave trade was abolished. Clarise believes in the transmigration of souls. Given that Brodber is a renowned “we-thinker” and advocate for a collective “we-self,” her incorporation of the idea of the transmigration of souls, whether interpreted literally or as a metaphor, solidifies connections between the living and dead. This can also be seen in the way Princess constructs her family tree: she makes a mat, and each round circle represents one person’s narrative, all the circles together forming the entire family. The circular pattern of both the individuals’ and the family’s stories reflects the notion that the end is also the beginning: Princess’s family’s stories and experiences form patterns, which repeat themselves in later generations.

The last narrative in this middle section, the only one we know for sure that Princess authors, is about Everard, Cousin Nothing’s first husband. Everard is the son of an English

man. This man may have been an indentured worker and may have been sexually abused by the man he worked for in Jamaica. Princess's imaginative leaps are important: even though she feels conflicted in taking them and does not know exactly how Everard's father came to be in Jamaica, she is compelled to feel sorry in general for white indentured laborers. The ability to connect emotionally with others is a trait that runs through Princess's family, and this empathy extends even to plants, animals, and objects. For example, Cousin Nothing does not eat dasheen because she looks after a child who, the book tells us, was born part dasheen because his parents stole the vegetable from a neighbor. Also, some people in her family do not eat chickens because they are linked to them. (Princess and her daughter inherit this trait and have a sympathetic symbiotic relationship with chickens.) The mat itself assumes the collective personality of Princess's family, since it is loved by her and her children and has magical qualities to protect them.

The last section of the book relates the history of Princess's family in the United States and the relationship between Princess and her American cousin, Joy. This relationship is extremely close and results in Princess having a sympathetic pregnancy while Joy is pregnant; Princess adopts the unexpected twin. Later, however, the women come into conflict because of the mat. Joy wants to own the mat so she can add to it, and she also wishes to write about the family's history. Even though Princess prevents her from taking the mat and adding to it, Joy's family history is contained within the novel, as are the histories of the other people that Princess also does not want to add to the mat. Thus, the novel becomes an extension of the mat, especially since the book also circles back to the beginning. The cousins repeat the close relationship that their family has always experienced, and Princess's two children, her son being Joy's biological child, also share this bond and are named after the siblings Clarise and Modibe. Princess comes to realize that loving beyond biological ties is an African Caribbean trait: "We have a history of loving and being loved" (103). African Caribbeans may have a history of abandonment, but adoption, loving, and being loved are also part of their heritage because the enslaved, having been ripped from their biological families, loved anyone they could find.

In this way, the text contests a Jamaican history that contains merely trauma and argues instead that African Caribbeans in general already have and have always had the ability to heal collective and individual traumas. *Nothing's Mat* helps readers develop a deeper understanding of Brodber's earlier work. Like her previous fiction, this novel contains both an exploration into the difficult legacy of colonialism and slavery and offers suggestions as to how to begin to heal it. *Nothing's Mat* adds to Brodber's project by extending the concept of

the collective Jamaican family, both in terms of diaspora and indentured servants, and, in the case of the latter, it brings to light those histories that are often overlooked in Jamaican historiography.

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