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Go Eena Kumbla: A Comparison of Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*

Daryl Cumber Dance

University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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Go Eena Kumbla: A
Comparison of Erna Brodber's
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Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*

DARYL CUMBER DANCE

When I talked with Edward Brathwaite at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Kingston, on November 23, 1978, about the striking similarities in tone, language, subject matter, theme, structure, and symbolism that I noted between his work and that of the contemporary black poets in the United States, he observed, as he heard for the first time many of the comparable pieces I cited, "That's amazing, . . . [but] they're not just coincidental. I think that they are part of a general cultural pattern which we ought to be aware of because I don't think it's an accident, you know, that these similarities are there. I think we have, as you said, the same experiences; it means that you would expect a similar kind of expression." When I returned to Jamaica in July 1982, I took as gifts for friends some recent novels by black American writers, including Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. Upon my arrival, Erna Brodber gave me a copy of her new book, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. As I read it, I was struck by another instance of how similar experiences (in this case, being black and female in the Americas of the civil rights, black awareness, Rastafarian, and feminist movements) had inspired such strikingly similar

I wish to acknowledge Erna Brodber for kindly allowing me to read the manuscript of *Myal* (which was not published when this essay was being prepared) and sharing with me other helpful materials; Velma Pollard for providing papers and essays that assisted me in this study; Evelyn O'Callaghan for her fine pioneering studies of J&L; and Rhonda Cobham for her critical reading of this paper.

expressions in books published the same year (1980) by an American and a Jamaican born one year apart, who knew nothing of each other.¹

Erna Brodber did not set out to write a novel but rather to present a case study to teach the dissociative personality to her class in human growth and development. The case study incorporated some of the issues that concerned her and her students such as male-female relations, black liberation, and the women's movement. The decision to publish this material was made by her sister, teacher-poet-critic Velma Pollard.

Toni Cade Bambara's novel began in much the same fortuitous way. Concerned about the alienation between different segments of the black community, Bambara started writing in her journal as a means of clarifying issues for herself: "The novel, then, came out of a problem-solving impulse—what would it take to bridge the gap, to merge those frames of reference, to fuse those camps? I thought I was just making notes for organizing; I thought I was just exploring my feelings, insights. Next thing I knew, the thing took off" (Interview, 16).

Nellie Richmond, the protagonist of *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, is born into a virtual Garden of Eden, where "mountains ring us round and cover us, banana leaves shelter us and sustain us."² Nellie's world is protected from everything; not even the sun can get in: "Outside infiltrated our nest only as its weave allowed" (*J&L*, 10). But this Edenic existence is short-lived for growth brings with it a series of exposures and revelations that shatter Nellie's sense of herself. She becomes aware of color and class divisions in her family and in her community, recognizes the "shame" and "filth" and precariousness of being a female; has to face "it" (alternately menses, female sexuality, everything associated with being a woman), which sets her apart from everybody, including her favorite neighbor, Mass Stanley, and all the boys who had been her playmates; has to face physical development ("Have you ever seen a new sucker trying to grow out of a rotten banana root? My whole chest was that rotten banana root and there were two suckers" [119]); has to submit to sex (recalled with shame and disgust in images of a "long nasty snail" [28], a "mekke mekke thing" [28]),³ simply because "you want to be a woman; now you have a man. . . . Vomit and bear it" (28); has to

1. Toni Morrison observes a similar situation in her own case, noting that the fact that she wrote her first two novels before she read the work of Zora Neale Hurston proves the existence of a tradition of black women writers "because it means that the world as perceived by black women at certain times does exist, however they treat it and whatever they select out of it to record" (Naylor and Morrison, p. 590).

2. Erna Brodber, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (London: New Beacon, 1980), 9; hereafter cited in the text as *J&L*.

3. *Mekke* is defined by Carolyn Cooper as a "Jamaica Creole word meaning 'mucous'; decidedly negative connotations; usually used to describe the consistency of unpalatable food" (p. 147, n.8).

accept that as a woman "the world is waiting to drag you down: Woman luck de a dungle heap" (17); and has to acknowledge that "the black womb is . . . an abominable scrap heap thing" (143). Nellie's comment about the frightening, confusing realities of maturity summarizes her dilemma:

What a weight!
Slowly it adds up. (24)

It adds up to more than our heroine can bear, and she suffers total psychic collapse. Her condition is sometimes described as a loss or lack of balance. Nellie's Aunt Becca warns her of the precarious position of women in the world, concluding, "Learn that lest you be weighed in the balance and found wanting" (17). Nellie's fear of losing the balance, of being found wanting, is a critical part of her dilemma and is reinforced in the many descriptions of her sensing herself spinning wildly; like Anancy caught in his own trap and convicted by his own words, "spinning around in the woods," she is "twirling madly in a still life" (38). The importance of maintaining the balance is demonstrated in the experience of her neighbors: Mass Stanley's son David had to be cast out of his home because he disrupted the balance when he wanted to be a bull (man) in the same pen with his father (109). Mass Stanley's grandson Baba, on the other hand, "never disturbed their balance" (110).

Nellie's ailment is frequently described as a cold, often icy, lump. This contrasts with the warmth of her original Eden: "Ever see a fowl sitting on eggs in cold December rain. We knew the warmth and security of those eggs in the dark of her bottom" (9). When, because of the onset of puberty, the boys in her neighborhood no longer tussle with her, she laments, "What kind of coldness in this hot sun" (22). After her first sexual experience she speaks of having to live in "an ice cage" and of the "dry ice [that] works my body to a bloodless incision" (29). She learns that displays of anger must be "frozen with a compress of ice" (31); she characterizes her life as having "passed through a seasoning of ice" (63). Often she simply speaks of the lump in her throat.

This coldness contrasts with the warmth or the natural coolness of the kumbula that has been her fortress and protection and now threatens to destroy her. The image of the kumbula derives in this novel from a popular Anancy story in which Anancy dupes Dryhead into believing that he is surrendering all of his sons to him by telling his son Tucuma, "Go eena kumbula," which Dryhead interprets as a bad word uttered by a grief-stricken father as he gives over all of his children; conversely, to Tucuma it means to find himself a camouflage as he poses as first one and then another of his brothers, goes into Dryhead's cellar, and then sneaks out

again.⁴ Anancy's whole career has been one of spinning "fine white cocoons" (124), creating kumbas "designed to protect for generations" (130). The narrator explains that a kumbla is like a beach ball that never goes down, like an egg shell that does not crack, like a parachute, like a spaceship, like a womb, a safe, protective cocoon that protects one from the outside world.⁵ The comfortable, protected world of Nellie's childhood was her first kumbla. Everybody seeks a kumbla when threatened with pain or danger: Nellie's great-grandmother Tia Maria "did everything to annihilate herself" (that is, rejecting everything black, p. 139) and "built a fine and effective kumbla out of [her white mate] William's skin" (142). Prayer was apparently her Granny Tucker's kumbla. Nellie's "hoity-toity" fair-skinned Aunt Becca built a kumbla of respectability and "showed [Nellie] where to find and how to wear [her] kumbla" (142). Indeed, it was a given that "black tinged women" had to build a kumbla to protect themselves as they waited for that unlikely miracle of finding the right man (142-43).

As comforting and important as kumbas are, however, one cannot remain indefinitely in one. Nellie observes, "But the trouble with the kumbla is the getting out of the kumbla. It is a protective device. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate" (130). Aunt Becca's kumbla had separated her head from her heart (133) and left her trying to put the parts together "without risking complete annihilation" (144). Nellie, who tells us she has been in a kumbla for nearly one-quarter of a century, knows that she is choking, recognizes her need "to know myself in my world," but procrastinates, believing "someone had to help me test my feet outside the kumbla" (70).

When we meet Velma Henry of Toni Cade Bambara's *Salt Eaters*, she is in a condition similar to Nellie's: "Everything was off, out of whack,"⁶ "uncentered." Like Nellie, she is often pictured as spinning; at one point, the statement "Velma was spinning in the music" introduces a refrain that describes her "spinning" and losing her balance scores of times (*Salt*, 114-18). The word *spinning* is repeated over and over, sometimes as a complete sentence. The quest for balance in *Jane and Louisa* is repeated in *Salt*: "The hunt for balance and kinship was the thing" (267). More frequently in this novel Bambara uses the term *centering*. In several instances various other characters seek to find or restore their center, but the focus is for the most part on the numerous efforts by many people, most notably

4. Four variants of this tale appear in Dance, *Folklore*, 14-18.

5. F. G. Cassidy and R. B. LePage note that *coobla* is used to mean a "small calabasha" (dialect for *calabash*) (Dictionary, 89).

6. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980), 5, hereafter cited in the text as *Salt*.

the faith healer Minnie Ransom, to try to center Velma, or on Velma's attempts to center herself. Recognizing, even before her breakdown, that "the truth was in one's own people," Velma knew that "the key was to be centered in the best of one's own traditions" (169). She had "thought she knew how to . . . stay poised and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people's traditions and not be available to madness" (258), but she was wrong.

The novel opens with Velma in a catatonic state, seated on a round stool in the Southwest Community Infirmary, where she has been brought following an attempt to commit suicide by slitting her wrists and putting her head in the gas oven (having, like Sethe of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, realized that living is harder than dying: "Being alive was the hard part" [*Beloved*, 7]). Like Nellie, Velma has found it necessary (to borrow Brodber's phraseology) to "go eena kumbla," to shield her black female self against problems similar to those faced by Nellie: "She tried to withdraw the self to a safe place where . . . no one could follow, probe" (5). An hourglass seems the perfect kumbla to her: "To be that sealed—sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in. To be that unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out" (19).

Though puberty is not presented as so traumatic an event for Velma as for Nellie, the menses recur time after time as a symbol of something if not shameful and filthy, at least disgustingly inconvenient. There are frequent instances when she is without sanitary products. She tries to sit through a meeting protected only by rally flyers that she has stuffed into her panties because she was unable to find any napkins or tampons. During a civil rights march in a nasty bathroom with no stall doors, she inserted a ragged tampon that was unraveling: "She'd been reeking of wasted blood and rage" (34). Recollections of discomfort and fear of bloody spots occur time after time. But it is not just the problem of stemming the menstrual flow but also the blood that streams from her body because of injuries that sometimes threaten to kill her. In a dream she is clitoridectomized and unable to stop the "bleeding from everywhere" (276). There is a flashback to the time when her head had been slammed against the concrete floor of the jail in which she was imprisoned for participating in civil rights demonstrations and she was refused admission to a white hospital even though she was "trailing blood through the ambulance yard" (272). There is also the time when "the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out" (94). Vivid images and sometimes detailed accounts of Velma's swollen, bruised, and bleeding feet after long marches occur several times, both in her recollections and those of a friend who bathed her feet. Similar references to other women appear throughout the novel. Her sister Palma

experiences a sudden stopping and an early arrival of her period. There is a poignant account of a rape victim scrubbing her own blood up from the floor.

Velma recalls early sexual overtures with "nothing romantic and nice" about them (263). Although relations with her husband are sometimes gratifying, some of her recollections suggest her need to escape from him, "to get out and away from the sour-sweet taste of sex coating her tongue" (102), a response reminiscent of Nellie's repugnance at the recollection of cunnilingus ("one long nasty snail, curling up, straightening out. . . . Popped it out of its roots, stripped off its clothes and jammed my teeth into it sucking. . . . It feels good but it doesn't taste good. Premature but this is your effort so you eat it like it is sweet. . . . Vomit and bear it" (28). Velma is repulsed by and anxious for sex to be over with the strange (and threatening) man who during cunnilingus lifts his head occasionally to sicken her with his reeking breath (271).

Nellie often attributes her breakdown to the death of her sweetheart: "The night my young man got caught up in the spirit and burnt to grease like beef suet caught in a dutchie pot, I wept so hard, my tears no longer held salt" (52). But the tone of this account of his death, her earlier sarcastic description of his radicalism (46), the impact of his life ("he had become a dried up bird and could only crumble into dust"[53]), and her frequent uses of his death to rationalize her problems suggest that perhaps Robin is a figment of her imagination. He clearly serves the same function for her that Mr. D serves for Miss D, the cold-hearted toll collector who explains that she cannot allow anyone to pass without the full fee because Mr D will kill her (50). Nellie notes, "We suspect that she is also Mr D" (50); we may suspect that Nellie is also Cock Robin, for Robin clearly represents the dead part of herself. Images of her "death" (disintegrating into dust and being put in an urn) are consistent with the descriptions of his presumed death by fire. The only reason given for the fire that caused his death is his enthusiasm for his cause—and it is precisely this mockery of a cause that is, she will soon learn, burning her out. Even though others presumably respond to Robin's death, even their "responses" may be creations of Nellie's imagination. For example, Errol's efforts to "pretend that nothing had happened" (52) may result from the fact that indeed, to him, nothing perceivable *has* happened. Finally, Nellie tells us that if *she* is resurrected, "Cock Robin could stand up and sing again" (147). It would appear then that one must look elsewhere for the real causes of her breakdown: "How did it begin?" (21).

With this question that begins Part 2 of "The Tale of the Snail in the Kumbula" and takes us back again to that Eden presented in Part 2 of "Voices," we recognize that a lengthy series of events in her life and the life of her family and community created the malaise that affects her. We

trace a series of efforts to define herself, escape herself, and give meaning to her life through sexual repression and sexual capitulation, through education (she is a doctor), through involvement in idealistic programs designed to uplift the people. Nellie might be described as a new black woman—educated, sophisticated, worldly, politically active, career-oriented, but the truth is that she is vulnerable in her relationships with men and in her work in “the Brotherhood,” where she is relegated to taking the minutes, performing the thankless labor, and supporting the men, who make the decisions and enjoy the spotlight.

As with Nellie, no single incident seems to have provoked Velma’s breakdown. Like Nellie, she is educated, sophisticated, worldly, politically active, and career-oriented. In addition, she has a husband and an adopted son. Her husband, James Lee Henry (variously called Obie, Obeah, and Obo), thinks her problem may have begun when she lost her baby. After that Velma started complaining that her husband and son were driving her nuts, about sexual harassment on the job, and about the problems of balancing working and running a home. Her husband’s infidelity and her own vengeful adultery are also contributing factors. She is active in a number of uplift organizations, similar to Nellie’s “Brotherhood.” She works so hard at the Academy of the Seven Arts (founded by Obie) that it takes seven people to replace her. In working in the academy, the civil rights movement, and similar ventures, she and the women typed, filed, printed posters, catered receptions, fried chickens, solicited contributions, raffled, and did many other tasks while the men “smoked and drummed their fingers on the tabletop” (27). During civil rights marches, she trudged for miles, arriving with swollen, bruised feet and dusty, split shoes, to see the male leader get out of his air-conditioned limousine in shiny boots. Clearly “break[ing] her hump pulling off what the men had decided was crucial for the community good” (25) made her frustrated and angry.

Nellie’s journey toward health begins with Baba, a childhood friend, who appears, unseen and unrecognized, when a thirty-six-year-old Nellie is at the point of collapse, crying uncontrollably about everything (herself and others—the world). He mysteriously approaches from behind and kisses her, leaving with her the unforgettable smell of sweet lime⁷ and the possibility that she may be able to carry on. He materializes again, presumably unrecognized either by Nellie or by the other neighborhood boys with whom he had played as a child, at a “think in” of their pseudo-intellectual organization that plays at uplifting the community. At a series of meetings for which Nellie records the minutes, he observes and carves

7. Carolyn Cooper notes lime’s “capacity to ‘run duppy,’ and its folkloristic associations with asceticism” (146).

a pear seed baby doll that he ultimately presents to her. Predictably, it crumbles in her lap (reminding us of Robin, who had become a dried-up bird crumbling into dust). Baba is clearly warning her that she is a vulnerable, cracked-up doll, being shaped by others, hiding from herself in meaningless activities, being, as she had recognized, "ticked . . . into urns" (53). Angry at his audacity, she later goes to his room to confront him—and he begins the process of leading her on the journey to save herself.

"Straight and tall in a long white gown [and] wearing Jesus sandals," (63) holding his hand out to her "shepherd-like" (63) as she enters his room, Baba is clearly a Christ figure. The Christian imagery is reinforced by his uncertain birth origins and the revelation that he was "sent here for a purpose" (143) and that he has "saving power" (115). From early childhood he has been a self-confident leader. He knows what she is thinking before she speaks. He is always calm, peaceful, at ease, self-assured. His room is "sanctified" and "immaculate," his life absolutely clean and uncluttered. He can effect cures through a laying on of hands: "With just his index finger he had probed the base of my skull that day, had made me sweat and broken my fever. He could draw water from the brain" (68). The imagery associating this Rasta man with divinity is not merely Christian: he is described as "an obeah man of an anancy" (69) and as a "Haitian obeah man" (60); he disappears into an electric bulb, offering "a fleeting glimpse of Nancy's transfiguration" (76). But most important, he performs the miracles that lead to Nellie's resurrection, assuring her "you *too* know what the resurrection is like. You have a clean slate, you can start all over again" (67; italics added).

It is important to note that Baba, like some other men in the novel, is associated with a snail, but he is no "mekke mekke" snail. Nellie notes, "And like a snail, he would curl up into himself. A little bit of sweat but no tears" (69), suggesting his water (sweat and tears) that was necessary to restore life to her dry crumbling self. This is clearly not the appalling snail imagery recalled in her first sexual experience ("long nasty snail"[28]) or even that of the "Mr Anancy," who slips crushed snail in her milk, "the straw dripping slime" (34), or the comparable scene when to appease her father she pretends she is a baby being fed by him as "he lifts the spoon dripping slime to my mouth" (36). This different snail imagery may be seen as evidence of the possibility of a transformation of the heroine's perception of men and sex, comparable to Celie's changing attitude toward men as frogs in *The Color Purple*.⁸

8. Celie notes disdainfully that naked men remind her of frogs. Later the possibility of her acceptance of her estranged husband (and sex) is suggested when she puts a frog that he carved for her on the mantelpiece in her bedroom.

Baba begins his task by refusing to allow Nellie to find the easy comfort of tears and insisting that she find herself. He refuses her offer of sex: "That will come later. After I have met you" (69); "I fear you offer yourself because you don't want you. That's no gift love. . . . That's something you throw on a scrap-heap" (71). With his guidance, she renounces the "Brotherhood" and seeks to discover the folk among whom she had been living. It is clear that up to this point Nellie had internalized Aunt Becca's teachings about those "others" who were "different from us," those "others" who "will drag you down" (16), and she had thus, even while living in the government yard with "the folk," believed that "we have unfortunately to make a distinction between them and us" (51). It is clear also that she had felt herself an appointed leader to instruct and save those "others." But with Baba's guidance, she realizes, "My path lay now through the aliens who surrounded me. It is one thing to wander into their quarters, to put on a show for them and quite another to live from day to day with them" (70). Baba also teaches her that she is more than a cracked-up doll; he encourages her to find her own way, to find her own language; he prepares her to move into the spirit world of her ancestors (for after all, he is a "man [who] was dabbling in a higher science"[67]).

Velma's journey toward wholeness begins in the Southwest Community Infirmary, which combines scientific and spiritual modes of healing. Thus, after the doctors have tended her body, twelve spiritual healers (soon reduced to eleven with the departure of Velma's godmother Sophie) called "The Master's Mind" sit in a circle around Velma and Minnie Ransom, "the fabled healer of the district" (3), who tries to coax her back into life's flow, to "ransom" her. Minnie Ransom may not be as much a deity as Baba, but she has a "gift" and a "spirit guide" (63) that have allowed her to "build the chapel in The Mind" (53). She has the power to enter the minds of others, to heal, and to commune with the dead. But Velma resists Minnie, continually wrapping herself in a shawl and retreating into it, insisting, in effect, upon staying *eena kumbla*.

Like Nellie, Velma waits to be assisted out of her *kumbla*: "The divinely healthy whole Velma waited to be called out of its chamber, embraced and directed down the hall to claim her life from the split imposter" (148). But as Minnie insists, Velma must seek her own healing. The novel begins with Minnie asking her, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3) And just as Baba realizes that Nellie is not yet ready to take the steps that will lead to her resurrection, Minnie tells Velma, "I can feel, sweetheart, that you're not quite ready to dump the shit" (16). Nonetheless, like Baba, Minnie is patient with her charge: "I can wait" (16). She is so attuned to Velma that she knows what is going on in her subconscious and unconscious mind. She too has the power of curing

through a laying on of hands: "She simply placed her left hand on the patient's spine and her right on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet . . . captured in a name" (47). Velma's healing began with the laying on of hands: "Velma would remember it as the moment she started back toward life, the moment when the healer's hand had touched some vital spot" (278).

Velma's need for self-knowledge is comparable to Nellie's. She recognizes that "the thing to do was invite the self by for coffee and a chat" (259). Again she thinks, "The hunt for balance and kinship was the thing. A mutual courtesy. She would run to the park and hunt for self" (267).

Like Nellie, Velma feels superior to certain of those "others" with whom she came in contact in her efforts to "lift" them, people like that "ole swampbag" Minnie Ransom (4). The organizations in which Velma has been involved are like the "Brotherhood" in *J&L*, uplift groups in which people spend time in abstract theorizing and intellectualizing, activities that may, Velma realizes, "neutralize the venom" but don't "neutralize the serpent" (258). She thus seeks other answers: "The answer had almost come tumbling out of the mirror naked and tattooed with serrated teeth and hair alive, birds and insects peeping out at her from the mud-heavy hanks of the ancient mothers' hair. And she had fled feverish and agitated from the room" (259), not yet ready for the ancient wisdom born into her unconscious mind from the experiences of her foremothers, those mud mothers whose many earlier calls to her she had never heeded.⁹ It was only later, after the "ole swampbag" Minnie "opened her up," that "Velma would begin to see what she'd been blind to" (294), that gift that her godmother had always known she had and feared/rejected. Then at last, she would be ready for training—though she might still resist "what could not be explained in terms of words, notes, numbers or those other systems whose roots had been driven far underground" (294), thus implying that she might still need the help of the ancient mothers.

Baba, with all of his spiritual powers, can lead Nellie only to a certain point. One night, she lets herself into a new world, where she travels with her dead Aunt Alice. Through her dead ancestor she is introduced to her people, but she acknowledges that it was "Baba [who] had settled me in with my people" (77). In this new realm she is at first confused: "I wasn't in touch. I couldn't see well enough yet" (79).

9. The use of the mud here to suggest entrapment which one must evade as well as salvation that offers the means to escape and the site of metamorphosis reminds us of the symbolic use of mud in the Anancy tale in *J&L*. In both novels there are other images with such paradoxically symbolic significance: salt as a representation of salvation and destruction (the story of Lot's wife is alluded to in both novels); the circle suggesting entrapment which one must escape as well as community where one finds place and identity.

Significantly, music, especially drums, begins to bring it all together for her; then "it all fitted in" (80). She recognizes the truth that "if I knew all my kin . . . I could no longer roam as a stranger; that I had to know them to know what I was about" (80).

Nellie's Aunt Alice, in contrast to her Aunt Becca, had never been burdened by "it," nor had she been concerned about class and color distinctions. She "never could settle down to housewifing but spent her earthly days visiting with and washing for the fading ones" (75-76); she believed in the curative power of roots (76). Thus she had been regarded as "not quite right in the head" (140). Now even as the spirit/ancestor, she is not regarded by Nellie as a divine or omnipotent being whose words are to be heeded with reverence. Rather, she is an individual with whom Nellie matter-of-factly converses and even challenges. Nellie warns Aunt Alice, "Remember I too can see clearly now," and when Aunt Alice questions her, she retorts, "So what? Who's asking the questions around here?" (131) Aunt Alice reprimands Nellie, "Nellie, I can't stand tears. Self pity wastes time especially when it parades as feelings for others" (132). Her job over, she leaves with the command, "Wake up Nellie. . . . Its [sic] your time now and I can take you no further" (133).

Possessing now the knowledge of her ancestors that will free her from the kumbla and restore her to balance, Nellie is prepared for her resurrection, sure that soon she will exit the kumbla and "be able to sit too, to hold up my head high and to use my two hands" (146). She realizes that "no paths lay before us. We would have to make them." (146) We flash back to all the womblike kumblas that her unresurrected self has dwelt in or known—the mossy covert of her youth, the eggs under the bottom of the fowl.¹⁰ We now see her fetuslike, without developed feet on which to stand, though she does have a belly; here not the scrap heap "that sucks grief and anger" (143) (and thus represents the greatest vulnerability of the female—the fear of unwanted pregnancy), but "that organ which sheaths and protects but gives forth fruit" (147). Then she dreams she is carrying a fish in her belly, but though the nurse has prepared her, she cannot give birth to the fish. The novel ends:

It will come.

Goodbye great grandfather Will, Tia, Granny
Tucker, Corpie, aunts and uncles and cousins.

Goodbye Aunt Becca.

We are getting ready. (147)

10. "We knew the warmth and security of those eggs in the dark of her bottom" (9 and 146).

Thus the possibility of birth, rebirth, and resurrection is the optimistic note on which we take our leave of Nellie, a birth made possible by that journey with her ancestor to her ancestors and thus to herself.

Minnie, like Baba, is unable to save her subject without the help of the spirit world. It is Old Wife who comes to assist Minnie, arguing with her and guiding her:

"Seems to me, Old Wife, that by now you should so well know all these things. . . . You been dead long enough?"

"There is no age nor death in spirit, Min. Besides, I do tell you things soon's they come to me."

"Where from? I've been asking you that for years. You don't explain things clearly, Old Wife."

"You don't listen good, Min. Or maybe it's me. I never was too bright."

"When I was a young girl I thought you were the wisest."

"You thought I was crazy as a loon." (56)

Like Aunt Alice, Old Wife was regarded during her lifetime as peculiar, wearing men's shoes, talking to snakes, smelling of dirt and salves and wintergreen, talking of the old days.

Music is important in Velma's cure as well as in Nellie's. At one point the music produced by Pan Man, who has been seven years in the United States trying to teach people the meaning and the wisdom of the pan, and who now "played like a man possessed" (168), drifts toward the infirmary and breaks through Velma's kumbula: "The music pressing against the shawl draped round Velma, pressing through it against her skin, and Velma trying to break free of her skin to flow with it, trying to lift, to sing with it" (168). It is not unusual that Velma would respond to this stimulus when she has been unaware of all else around her, for she had always loved drums and would go to them whenever she heard them: "No matter where Velma was, she'd hear the drums and come to the park" (284). Indeed, "eventually everyone came to the drums" (284).

As she senses Velma starting "to come through," Minnie decides to play some music. The effect is instantaneous: "Y'Bird so bold and urgent and the Hawk doing something to the soles of her feet, she all but pushed off from the floor to fling herself out of the window, out of the window and into the dark socket of the tree knocking on the inside as if eager to be a drum or join the chorus of voices speaking to her" (263). The music takes her so far into her collective unconscious that she calls Min's bowl and jug by their correct names, "govi and zin," names she did not know (263), and she is ready to dance on through the streets "in the direction of resurrection" (264). Old Wife advises, "Let her go, Min. Dancing is her way to learn now. Let her go" (264). But like Nellie's, Velma's legs are not yet strong enough to support her entrance into the world. Min

tells Old wife to give her legs, and Velma feels her legs falling away, and, as with Nellie, we flash back to a womblike kumbla that her unresurrected self has dwelt in—"under the quilts in M'Dear's bed" (265). She relives all the times she nearly died but was nudged back to life and ends again in the reality of the situation, pushed "back into the cocoon of the shawl where she died again" (273).

Then in an apocalyptic scene in which the earth echoes with thunder, the ground moves, and rain pours from the heavens as if the world is being destroyed, Velma responds to "the healer's hand," hears the thunderbolt ("the kind . . . that knocked Saul off his steed and turned him into Paul" [278]), and "start[s] back toward life" (278). Bambara writes, "The Lady in the Chair is rising damp but replenished like the Lady Rising from the Sea" (292), and asks, "Would Velma find an old snakeskin on the stool?" (293) Like Nellie, Velma bursts forth from the womb/kumbla/cocoon with the promise of the power to walk in the world: "The patient turned smoothly on the stool, head thrown back about to shout, to laugh, to sing. No need of Minnie's hands now. . . . Velma's . . . eyes . . . examining her own hands, fingers stretched out and radiant. No need of Minnie's hands now so the healer withdraws them, drops them in her lap just as Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon" (295).

Brodber and Bambara present their heroines' journeys from madness to sanity, from fragmentation to wholeness, from death to life in novels that are remarkably similar in structure, both of them built around a series of flashbacks into the lives of their respective heroines and concurrently into the lives of those directly and indirectly connected with them in their individual communities. (In the case of Bambara there are also flashforwards.) The two novelists categorically reject any linear development. Time is fluid in both works. Their novels are complex, convoluted structures, making use of constant switchings of time, place, and narrative voices with subtle and easily missed transitions. Seemingly widely divergent scenes may be evoked and tied together by a word, a tone, a mood, an individual, or the coincidence of time, as in the dramatic conclusion of *Salt* when most of the principals respond to the thunder. In both works, words, phrases, snippets of conversations, bits of scenes are introduced and dropped, only to be echoed and expanded at varied subsequent points throughout the novels; repetitions of certain phrases that begin paragraphs and sections build and build and build to a resounding crescendo.¹¹ Indeed, the

11. A few examples from each novel include Brodber's incremental repetition of "Granny Tucker prays" and variations of that to introduce each new idea in the passage on pp. 86–90; "I came home" to introduce each of the first four sections of the "Miniatures" section (140–44); Anancy's order, "go eena kumbla" (128–30); Bambara's having her dance instructor

works are so rhythmical, lyrical, and eloquent that it seems imperative to characterize them as musical.¹² The novelists move us at will through the worlds of the living, the dead, the actual, and the dream/fantasy/rumor. Indeed, both reject the divisions between these worlds. The dead walk among and commune with the living, for "there is no death in the spirit" (*Salt* 62); "our dead and living are shrouded together" (*J&L* 12). The ultimate effect is works (to appropriate Gloria T. Hull's characterization of *Salt*) "of extraordinary brilliance and density which [swirl] the reader through multiple layers of sound and sense" (138).

These two novels are not unique in their focus on matters considered here. One is reminded in varying degrees of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*, Alice Walker's *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, and Brodber's *Myal*, all of which have numerous similarities in their treatment of female characters (and an occasional male) who experience an emotional, mental, and/or physical illness, who display similar symptoms, and who tend at some point to "go eena kumbula." They share also their exploration of the process of psychic healing that grows out of a community, is usually mediated through a female and/or an ancestor figure, and moves each character toward a cleansing transcendence, a spiritual rebirth, a psychic wholeness, a revelatory discovery, a reclaiming of self within the black community, and a personal liberation. (Indeed, Marshall's *Praisesong* offers as many, if not more, points of comparison to *J&L* as *Salt*.) To emphasize these simi-

whispering into the ears of her elderly students, "Remember" (166–67); her repetition of "She might have died" as Velma recalls the numerous instances when she had a brush with death (7–8 and 269–74); and her repetition of "And she'd never been more cared for" as Velma catalogs the attention she got from family members after she ran away as a child (225–26).

12. In the essay "Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara," Eleanor W. Traylor explicates *Salt* as "a modern myth of creation told in a jazz mode" (59). A comparable approach might be taken to *J&L*, in which Brodber introduces themes early in her work that are improvised and expanded in passages through which the same refrains echo. Each section of her work uses parts of a line of the lyrics of a popular Jamaican ring game of European origins (the order of the lines slightly altered for her purposes in the novel): MY DEAR WILL YOU ALLOW ME/ TO WALTZ WITH YOU/ INTO THIS BEAUTIFUL GARDEN/ JANE AND LOUISA WILL SOON COME HOME. Brodber herself has called *J&L* "a concerto in four movements" (reading, Abington Friends, Philadelphia, May 6, 1988). And Bambara has referred to *Salt* as a "kind of jazz suite" ("Searching," 50), though she has also suggested that "sections of *The Salt Eaters* are closer to gospel than to jazz" (Interview, 29).

larities is not to deny that each of these works is important, unique, and exceptional with its own individual and distinctive concerns and style; none is a carbon copy of the other. Yet the many similarities they share are significant and are not, as Brathwaite reminded us, merely coincidental. They are indeed "part of a general cultural pattern" that demands the attention of us all.

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