

[Iverson on Brodber, 'Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782-1996'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, April 15, 2020

Erna Brodber. *Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782-1996*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2019. xv + 184 pp. \$50.00 (paper), ISBN 978-976-640-708-7.

Reviewed by Justin Iverson (Northern Illinois University) **Published on** H-Slavery (April, 2020)
Commissioned by Andrew J. Kettler (University of California, Los Angeles)



Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55119>

Driven to make members of the African diaspora “face Africa” together, *Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782-1996* uncovers the “American Connection,” or the relationship between African Jamaicans and African Americans as members of the African diaspora in the Atlantic World (pp. vii, xiii). *Moments of Cooperation*, a scholarly endeavor from the renowned novelist Erna Brodber, developed from her childhood as she saw herself as a descendant of enslaved Africans in the New World and grew up in Jamaica consuming African American culture. Though she felt connected to African Americans as members of the diaspora, it became clear to her later in life that Jamaican workers in the United States viewed themselves differently from African Americans, while African Americans too recognized her not “as a sister but as a stranger” (p. xiii). Nevertheless, Brodber wants the diaspora to work together, and thus *Moments of Cooperation* serves to meld histories of African Americans and African Jamaicans. More broadly, it also shows flashes of cooperation between the two groups and moments when they brought each other into their respective spaces.

In six separate essays that constitute the book, Brodber builds on Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and assesses the interactions between African Americans and African Jamaicans over nearly two centuries. Trained as a historian and sociologist, Brodber employs both disciplinary approaches and draws on data from parliamentary debates, slave registers, black newspapers, and legislative reports from archives scattered throughout Jamaica, Great Britain, and the United States, as well as oral interviews with Jamaican workers and a spiritual leader. While she argues that her work further buttresses the notions of a “black Atlantic,” she questions whether conscious sentiment within this abstract entity was strong enough to support a working structure that could protect the interests of all descendants of enslaved Africans in the New World. Ultimately, she concludes that by the twentieth century, there was no longer a clear connection between the two groups other than in the supernatural sphere. In recent decades, African Jamaicans have privileged nation over race and show relatively little affiliation with African Americans. Only the transport of the Church of God and Saints of Christ from the United States to Jamaica, the religious education available to Jamaican spiritual leaders in the United States, and the comfort that Jamaican migrant workers took in worship with African Americans seemingly linked the two groups together as the

Citation: H-Net Reviews. Iverson on Brodber, 'Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782-1996'. H-Slavery. 04-15-2020.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/11465/reviews/6115231/iverson-brodber-moments-cooperation-and-incorporation-african>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

twentieth century came to an end.

The scope of *Moments of Cooperation* is broad. In chapter 1, Brodber tracks slaves belonging to Loyalists in South Carolina who were transported to Jamaica after the American Revolution. Their migration was a moment of incorporation of one group into another's space in the larger diaspora, and she speculates how the enslaved Carolinians influenced slave culture in St. Mary Parish, Jamaica. Importantly, Brodber provides the names of the descendants of these enslaved people and shows where they still live in Jamaica, which refreshingly breaks down the anonymity that is so often a problem in slavery studies. She also suggests that basket weaving near the plantations where the transportees' descendants now live resembles Lowcountry basket weaving practices in the United States, which could be more evidence of how African American and African Jamaicans reinforced their African cultural practices.

In chapter 2 Brodber examines the labor shortage in post-emancipation Jamaican society, and African Jamaican efforts to recruit free blacks from the United States to fill the void. In April 1846, Jamaicans created the Jamaican Hamic Association to develop more commerce with African Americans in the hopes that it would also promote racial equality and dispel racist notions of black inferiority. But African Americans were reluctant to enter apprenticeship contracts in Jamaica and resented working in sugar cane fields with African Jamaicans. Instead, they admired middle-class professionals like lawyers, journalists, and assemblymen. Thus, this early twinkle of pan-Africanism could only be achieved through the development of a black middle class.

Brodber shows in chapter 3 how black newspapers in the United States attacked racism after the end of Reconstruction, and how leaders in the United States and Jamaican Marcus Garvey responded to the attacks. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Brodber argues, African Americans were not invested in world politics and showed more interest in local issues of race rather than the diaspora. African American leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois met in smaller circles and articulated ideas of pan-African cooperation, but it was Garvey's move to the United States in 1916 and his leadership that brought pan-Africanism to the masses.

Chapter 4 assesses the development of Ethiopianism, or, more narrowly, the belief among members of the diaspora that they were a divinely supported supernatural people. Brodber uses the transportation of the Church of God and Saints of Christ from Oklahoma to Jamaica to determine if diasporic interaction accounted for the spread of this "Ethiopian view" (p. 81). The church utilized the Old Testament as Holy Scripture, and congregants also viewed themselves as God's servants. The transmission of these ideas from the United States to Jamaica by the 1930s, Brodber suggests, may have also been the roots of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Ultimately, the church "might be the clearest evidence" of diasporic cooperation to develop institutions that helped deal with shared pain and foster the idea of being a member of a "supernational entity" (p. 98).

Chapters 5 and 6 rely on oral interviews as Brodber analyzes how Jamaican migrant workers interacted with African Americans in Florida's sugar cane fields, and how Jamaican spiritual leader Moshe ben Kohath traveled to the United States for a greater religious education. Jamaican workers helped farm sugar cane in Florida as part of a work program after World War II, and they worked side by side with African Americans for nearly five decades. During the period, Jamaicans learned

how different their culture was from African Americans' as they navigated a deeply segregated society in the United States. Ultimately, white Americans treated Jamaicans as "honorary whites" because of their temporary work status, and Jamaicans withdrew from discussions about racism and segregation that were central to African Americans. Because of their higher status among whites, and their contempt for how some impoverished African Americans lived, Jamaican workers elevated nationality over race (p. 123).

The final chapter includes a verbatim interview with Moshe ben Kohath, formerly named Bishop Muir, from Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica. The spiritual leader traveled to the United States and attended a rabbinical school in Harlem. Opportunity for religious education was better in the United States than in rural Jamaica, and African Americans in Jamaica invited Kohath to visit the United States and learn. Brodber contends that Kohath needed the interaction with and exposure to African Americans to "better understand the links between his healing practice, his Africanist interests, and a mysticism which called him" (p. 146). The experience also transformed Bishop Muir into Moshe ben Kohath. In short, the spiritual sphere is the clear lasting connection between African Jamaicans and African Americans in the diaspora.

Overall, and despite Brodber's lucid writing, the broad approach of *Moments of Cooperation* is also its greatest weakness. Importantly, Brodber does not engage with much of the substantial secondary literature that already addresses the various themes of black Atlantic history that are her focus. Missing from her citations and bibliography are major works on enslaved resistance, black Loyalists, adjustments to emancipation, the development of religious practices in the African diaspora, and works assessing the interplay between the Caribbean and United States in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.[1] *Moments of Cooperation* would be stronger with more depth and interaction with the extant research on these topics, which would also help show the work's scholarly contributions. In the end, Brodber's discussion of Jamaican workers in Florida is the strongest part of her work and would serve well as a reading in undergraduate courses on post-emancipation societies, civil rights, race and racism, and the black Atlantic more broadly. Brodber's candor in the work and her personal experiences and motive for writing *Moments of Cooperation* are also valuable for introducing students to ideas of the African diaspora and black Atlantic.

Note

[1]. Notable works missing include Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); J. R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Mimi Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); and Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Citation: Justin Iverson. Review of Brodber, Erna, *Moments of Cooperation and Incorporation: African American and African Jamaican Connections, 1782-1996*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55119>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).