

*Foreign Possessions:
Erna Brodber's "Myal,"
the Medium, and her Message*

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ERNA BRODBER'S NOVEL *Myal* is about spirit possession, what Janice Boddy defines as "the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she" (407). The novel is also about cultural imperialism, which might be given exactly the same definition. Both threaten a loss of the self and a hostile takeover of the vacated body by an other. The symmetry between cultural imperialism and spirit possession allows the critic Helen Tiffin to invoke Brodber's Jamaican novel as a model for decolonization applicable even in Australia. Tiffin reads the community of Grove Town as a sign for the local, that which is always and everywhere opposed to the false universalizing of imperialism. But here we have a paradox: the local becomes itself a category coterminous with the global. The capacity for allegorical generalization that Tiffin discovers in *Myal* does not invalidate her reading but does make it tautological.

To read spirit possession as a "controlling concept-metaphor" for cultural imperialism (Puri 101) is to translate from a world where spirit possession is the ground of experience (the particular local) to one where it serves merely as a trope (the global counterculture). Such translation is common critical practice: Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert discusses Haitian Vodou's¹ "metaphorical function as the expression of the people's thirst for freedom" (49). Brodber, however, does something different; she posits a literal spirit possession for which cultural imperialism is a metaphor. Grove Town is not a peripheral site threatened, like all margins, by the imperialist expansion of the

centre, but is a centre that has always defined itself against its enemies.²

Brodber's delight in phantasmagoric polyphony, in anachronism (Mass Cyrus performing an exorcism raises his arm in a gesture that echoes the statue of Bob Marley by Christopher Gonzalez [2]), and in self-conscious hybridity (she alludes to Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and Shakespeare) may appear familiar to readers of Wilson Harris. But the presence of transhistorical spirit voices notwithstanding, *Grove Town* is not a generic postcolonial, black diasporic, or even West Indian setting. We (and by "we" I mean all readers who are not from rural Jamaica) can appreciate the novel's fundamental incommensurability with common notions of cultural imperialism if we ask ourselves why demonic spirit possession in the novel threatens only young virgins or newly married women. The hostile misappropriation of Ella O'Grady's stories of her Jamaican upbringing by her racist American husband is explicitly paralleled with the persecution of a young Grove Town virgin, Anita, by the local obeahman. Notions of cultural imperialism which assume that cultural knowledge is uniformly shared by all members of a community cannot explain the gendered nature of demonic possession because they do not recognize that the community is constituted precisely by the division of its members into categories, each performing a different role according to its capacity. Only research into the history and culture of rural Jamaica — which Brodber, a sociologist herself, had to do in order to write the novel — can help us make sense of a world in which such possession occurs.

I

Myal is set in a carefully delineated historical moment, in a village called Grove Town outside Morant Bay in St. Thomas Parish during the second decade of the twentieth century, before the large influx of Pentecostal churches from the US and the rise of Rastafarianism transformed the Jamaican religious landscape. The established churches, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist, are all present in the region. The first two of these are characterized by what Diane Austin-Broos calls an "ethical

rationalism"; they regard sin as a matter of undisciplined behaviour. The people of Grove Town itself, however, in accordance with a religious feeling African in origin, are more inclined to see sin as a "bio-moral malaise" requiring healing (Austin-Broos 35). Alongside the three established churches can be found an alternative which deploys drum-induced trance possession to allow devotees to "go back" to Africa (7). This is Miss Agatha Paisley's Kumina tabernacle. The Kumina cult is peculiar to St. Thomas, but bears a strong resemblance to Revival and Revival Zion, forms of Christianity reliant on spirit possession found throughout Jamaica. Grove Town is also home to two traditional African healers: Mass Cyrus, a herbalist, and Ole African, a stiltwalker, who both live as hermits apart from the community.

Another form of spirituality cuts across denominations to bring together the Native Baptist minister, the two African healers, and Miss Gatha. This is a communion with ancestral spirits that is related to Kumina but does not involve trance. In Brodber's novel, the spirits Willie, Dan, and Perce have been in conversation for centuries — ever since Africa. They are identified with barnyard animals — Dan is a dog, Willie a pig, Perce a chick — and they form a musical band: Dan sings and plays the cymbals, Willie plays the drums, and Perce blows the trumpet. These myal spirits possess living hosts in each generation. Dan currently resides in the Reverend Musgrave Simpson, the Baptist minister, while Willie and Perce inhabit the bodies of Ole African and Mass Cyrus, respectively. The link between spirit and host is mutually beneficial: the spirits gain bodies through which they can act in the present, and the living acquire memories that extend back centuries. They attain a spiritual force with which to act on the world, and the means of communicating with each other across distances. In Brodber's text the male spirits are joined in the present by a single female spirit simply called Mother Hen, who is not part of the band of musicians but dances to their music. She has not participated in the deliberations of the myal caucus in the past and even now "rarely" speaks (111), but her silence, as we shall see, is a function of her different power. Mother Hen currently possesses the leader of the Kumina tabernacle, Miss Agatha Paisley.³

Richard D. E. Burton is critical of spirit possession in Jamaica and Haiti because, he says, like all power in the West Indies, it “descends” on the powerless from above (223). There is, however, nothing of ownership or control in the ancestral spirit communion depicted by Brodber. Such communion constitutes not a takeover of the self but rather an enhancement of the self and is best called not “possession” but perhaps “transport” (Taussig 54) or “self-possession” (Roach 209). The myal spirits and their human hosts bear different names and can be distinguished, but their relation is a near complete identity. Dan prepares the Reverend Simpson for his sermon, takes his voice higher in song, and warns him of what is going on in the village (36-37), but this heightened consciousness remains Simpson’s own. The Reverend Simpson does not need to consult Dan; he already knows all Dan knows. Simpson is Dan; at every moment he is both a Baptist minister in Grove Town and someone who has made the journey from Africa — the man his neighbours see at the front of the church and part of an invisible team that shadows the community to safeguard its spiritual health.

The myal spirit is an extension of the host’s self into a wider realm, but the converse is also true: the hosts are merely embodiments of the spirits. Simpson’s body echoes Dan’s canine nature; the Baptist minister is described as “black and with a mouth stretching from one side of his face to the other like a bulldog and looking just as stern” (45) and when excited, he behaves “Like a dog scenting a precious find” (98). It is as if, more than the spirit’s host, Simpson were his reincarnation. So too Ole African seems “to like filth” (92), a trait he shares with the spirit he carries — Master Willie, the pig who does “not want to be bathed” (100). It is unlikely that the hosts are reincarnations of direct ancestors (or we would expect this trio of bachelors to be more concerned than they are with reproducing themselves), but the identity between spirit and host is as close as if they were.

The possessed in Brodber’s novel are not peasant farmers nor shopkeepers, but religious leaders and spiritual healers. It is pointless to ask whether possession by a myal spirit gives a

host his spiritual authority or whether the spiritual authority of the host attracts possession by the spirit. To explain the relation between spirit and host, we can perhaps borrow from Robin Horton's analysis of Yoruba devotion to an *orisa*. A host is attracted to a particular spirit precisely because of its closeness to his own personality; being possessed is a means of harnessing the forces that already govern the host's personality. At the same time, the spirit, who is larger than the host himself, commands his love and respect to the point where the host willingly takes on the spirit's personality. Horton says of this mutual identification that

As time passes, his [the devotee's] everyday personality comes more and more to resemble that attributed to his *orisa*, and grows more highly integrated and more decisive. An important result is that his relations with his fellow men gain in intensity and effectiveness. (97)

Kumina possession differs from possession by a Yoruba god in its exclusivity; Dan is so completely identified with the Reverend Simpson that it is impossible to imagine him possessing anyone else.

In Brodber's novel, communication between spirit and host is referred to as "spirit telephone" (37), but this near identity resembles Bell's invention far less than does the long-distance party-line telepathic communication between hosts that the myal spirits make possible. Dan can seem almost a code name that the Reverend Simpson uses on the myalist equivalent of an Internet chatline when he wants to contact Ole African and Cyrus in their physical absence. When Grove Town's Baptist minister has questions he would like to ask of Ole African with whom he otherwise has no social contact, Dan addresses Willie: "Then what's this with you being in the wilderness and not learning their ways . . . And Perce? Why is he stuck in some grove talking to snails and me alone in this Egypt?" (67).

These party-line conversations among the spirits are male-only affairs, and their language echoes the vivid linguistic performances of West Indian males in homosocial settings. However, in the course of the novel, Maydene Brassington, the Edwardian memsahib figure and wife of the Methodist minister,

is able to claim a myal spirit identity of her own. As with the male spirits and their hosts, White Hen is but a realization of the potential implicit in Maydene's personality. The sobriquet "white hen" is suggested by Maydene's "lumpy white figure" (76). The process whereby Miss Gatha interpellates Maydene as White Hen is described at once as a secret christening ("like a man giving his girl her special little name to be used by them only" [77]), as a recognition ("The spirits had finally acknowledged each other" [77]), and as a private "revelation" (88), leaving it deliberately unclear whether Maydene has always carried White Hen, whether White Hen is an invention of the moment to accommodate Maydene's newfound powers, or whether White Hen was a distinct self awaiting a human host to become "incarnate" (77). Maydene's communion with the spirits makes possible a "new personality" (92), one more independent of her husband (89), and a truer communion with those immediately around her. The other spirits remind White Hen of a time she has forgotten, "those long long ago days . . . in Mr Joe's yard where they all lived then" (93), but we may well feel that those memories are implanted by the spirits' powers of suggestion. White Hen, like Mother Hen and unlike the spirits that mount the men, lacks a Christian name. This gendered asymmetry notwithstanding, White Hen becomes a full member of the myal caucus, able to intervene in their deliberations.

Ordinary, unenhanced verbal communication requires the physical presence of interlocutors, and because bodies are marked by race and gender, and speech by class and education, such communication is always disturbed by what Maydene's husband, William, dismisses as "silly linguistic rituals" (21). What is said cannot be separated from the body and the voice of the one who says it. Maydene finds it difficult to meet the people of Grove Town across the lines drawn by race and speech until spirit communion allows her to transcend the body. The parties in the Kumina spirit caucus can transcend language and speech markers altogether: all speak the same enhanced jive eloquence. If, as his name seems to indicate, he was not born in Jamaica but came as an indentured labourer in the period after the abolition of slavery, it is possible that Ole

African cannot speak much English beyond the refrain "the half has never been told" (34). This would account for his seclusion and taciturnity. And yet, through Willie, his spirit alter ego, who came to Jamaica long before he himself did, Ole African is able to converse with his fellow possessed in a hip, creolized English.

The myal caucus, however, is not able to transcend language altogether. White Hen, for instance, remains constituted by gender and by a version of race. Colour rather than species distinguishes White Hen from Perce (the chick) and Dan (the dog). The persistence of colour and gender in the disembodied communication of the spirits means that linguistic ritual is never eliminated. Dan continues to behave with as much suspicion towards White Hen as the Reverend Simpson does with Maydene herself. We cannot escape the conclusion that linguistic ritual continues because it is in such ritual that the self is constituted. As Herbert Mead explains, the "me" is a function of the negotiation between the "I" and its social others (Kapferer 116). To leave race or gender behind would be to negate the self. In the spirit communion depicted by Brodber, men quite decorously host only male spirits and women female spirits; as well, blacks host only African spirits and English-women white spirits.

In other words, long-distance communication by the spirits operates exactly as face-to-face conversation does. Grove Town has two dimensions — a physical and a spiritual, a Jamaican present and an African past. The community never extends beyond the people who have met each other in the flesh. Maydene Brassington from England can join the community, but only after she has met Ole African and Miss Gatha in person. She could not have joined from England; there are no plans to launch a transatlantic satellite service. The community implied by these myal spirits does not extend to the whole of the Caribbean, nor are Dan, Willie, and Perce able to communicate with contemporary Africans. The spirits Dan, Willie, and Perce, who originally accompanied human hosts on the passage from Africa, are now just as much in exile as their current hosts are. Africa is only the site of their memories, and they have no

communication with contemporary Africans. Like their hosts, they long to return but must learn to “root” (67). The community implied by the Kumina spirits does not even extend to the whole of Jamaica. In its resistance to Methodism and Anglicanism, Grove Town is explicitly distinguished from the nearby centre of Morant Bay.

Although their communion is restricted to people who know each other personally and live within a certain radius of each other, the myal hosts assume that the spirit forces they work with and those they fight against in Grove Town are universal. If Maydene can join the myal caucus, it is because she was already aware of the ways of spirits. As she explains to her neighbour Amy Holness: “Somebody is fooling you people that only you know about the occult” (64). The memories the spirits have of their conversations in Africa display no awareness of how the past differs from the present; indeed, they prove that the past was in every significant way identical to the present. In the world of the Myal spirits, it is impossible to distinguish original roots from later grafts. As far back as one cares to look, one can see that the spirits were already Christian; they quoted scripture centuries ago in Africa.⁴ In Grove Town nature itself is Christian: the physic nut bleeds every year on Good Friday in sympathy with the suffering of Christ who was “lynched” on that day (3). There is a culture claiming to be universal, which can do justice to the experience of Grove Town, but that culture is rural Jamaican.

The distinction that matters in the world of the spirits is not, as most notions of cultural imperialism would have it, between Christianity and African spirit possession — these are fully reconcilable — but between the use of spirit forces for communal health and their misuse for selfish purposes. The myal spirits have always had to combat the threat posed by “Conjure men, voodoo men, wizards and priests” (66). Joseph Murphy explains,

Obeah is the art of sorcery, practiced in private, if not secret, and reflecting the disintegrative forces of a society under stress. By contrast *myal* might be seen as a force for social integration, bent on the exposure of *obeah*, and defusing it with the power of communal values expressed in public ceremonies. (120)

The mark of the unnatural character of the obeahman's powers is that they have to be learned. Mass Levi Clarke has acquired his art from books (75), probably the DeLaurence mail-order books published in Chicago (Sobo 272).

The forces of myal and those of obeah struggle for control of the majority, who are unable to tap into their own spiritual strength. Only certain souls are qualified to join the Kumina caucus, and only they know who they are. The deliberations of the spirits take place behind closed doors and are not even suspected by the majority of people in Grove Town. A strong soul like Maydene can insist on her right to join the spirits, and the spirits have little choice but to accept her as a full member. The new initiate then acquires a large clientele — "Most of whom did not even know they were her clients" (91) — for whom she must pray. A division into the strong and the weak, who require the protection of the strong, is characteristic of most notions of cultural imperialism as well. Where myalism differs from these is in its sense that weak souls, to whom possession by ancestral spirits is closed, must learn to defend themselves against all possession. Mrs. Brassington warns Amy Holness against consulting even Ole African: "You would be giving somebody else control over your spirit and good as he might be, that could be dangerous, it is unhealthy" (64).

As Elisa Sobo, a student of rural Jamaican ideas of health, explains in *One Blood: The Jamaican Body*, the health of the community is a function of the proper circulation of energies: spiritual energies but also sexual energies and seminal fluids which, it seems, are all mutually convertible. The Kumina spirits and their hosts are confirmed bachelors with no sexual interest in women and without the appeal for women that Mass Levi displays. Their conversations, however, are high-energy musical performances that further the necessary circulation of spiritual forces. Maydene, who joins them, would look incongruous with a musical instrument, but she can transform the spiritual power of the Kumina caucus into a sexual energy that her somewhat priggish husband cannot but notice and appreciate (44). Obeah, on the other hand, which seeks to siphon off energies for selfish purposes, is self-defeating because energies that do

not circulate inevitably dissipate. The demonic appropriation of spirit forces for selfish purposes always tends to entropy (Sobo 121). Because of his spiritual depletion, manifest in his sexual impotence, Mass Levi needs to appropriate the power of a young virgin.

A mark of the perversion of obeah is the spiritual mixing of genders (and as we shall see, races). Miss Gatha comes to young Anita's rescue by dancing myal. The myal dance involves a temporary takeover of the body by outside spirits; Miss Gatha's old woman's face changes to that of Anita, while some distance away Anita's changes to Miss Gatha's, and, in his privy where he has locked himself, Anita's voice issues from Mass Levi's mouth. In its loss of self, however temporary, the myal dance is closer to the trance possession of obeah, which it is combatting, than it is to the self-enhancement of spirit communion.

Erika Bourguignon makes a distinction between possession in the sense of a covenant between spirit and person, and trance possession where an outside spirit encroaches upon the self in the form of trance and hyperkinesia (3). In the sense of a covenant involving the presence of a spirit but not the loss of self, as in the myal caucus of Perce, Dan, and Willie, possession is generally found in small-scale societies which have no class differentiation and no centralized adjudication. Such possession is inseparable from the conditions of the small, face-to-face community defined by orality. Trance possession, however, is typically found in more complex societies featuring hierarchical social relationships (43-44), such as the colony of Jamaica. I. M. Lewis also distinguishes central possession cults, whose spirits uphold the moral order associated with the ancestors and speak through men, from peripheral ones, where possession by amoral spirits afflicts women. Among the Kamba of East Africa, for instance, he finds

a sharp distinction is made between the local ancestral spirits which uphold morality and represent the ongoing interests of their descendants, and other, capricious spirits. These latter demons are typically spirit representations of neighbouring peoples — Masai, Galla and other tribes — *including Europeans*. These external or "peripheral" spirits of foreign origin are not worshipped directly as

the ancestors are, but regularly plague Kamba women. (71-72; emphasis added)

In his study of how Africans conceive of the foreign, Fritz Kramer finds that a distinction between moral ancestral spirits and immoral foreign spirits is "universal" to the experience of spirit possession (87).

Whether or not spirit possession takes the same forms wherever it occurs, Bourguignon, Lewis, and Kramer provide useful points of comparison for the reader who would understand Brodber's *Grove Town*. In *Myal* the ancestral spirits are carried by male spiritual leaders who live without women. Recently they have been joined by two female spirits, Mother Hen and White Hen, both of whom are beyond child-bearing age. Demonic possession, in the form either of obeah or (as we shall see) of novels and poems, afflicts young virgins and newly married brides. The trance possession necessary to combat obeah is the purview of another woman, Miss Gatha. The ancestral spirits hosted by men provide the continuity through time necessary for collective identity, but it is women who are at the dangerous interface between the community and its enemies. This gendered division of spiritual labour reverses conditions in the economic and social spheres where the prevalent pattern in the West Indies is "a strong association of male activity with the 'outside' and of female activity with the 'inside' or yard" (Burton 93). The chiasmic reversal in the spiritual realm of the gendered relations normal in the social sphere hinges on the parallel between the subordination suffered by the women of the community and the community's own subordination within the colony. Young women who suffer demonic trance possession are performing at once their own alienation from the community and the threat posed to the community by hostile spirit forces.

II

Chapter two of Brodber's novel opens with a Rudyard Kipling poem celebrating England's worldwide commercial empire recited at a school function by a daughter of *Grove Town*. Reading is a particularly dangerous form of spirit possession. Because it allows communication across distances and provides

“memories” of events that predate the reader’s birth, Ella O’Grady’s reading resembles the myalist communion with ancestral spirits; it allows her to travel across distances and communicate with imaginary (but nonetheless real) friends, with Peter Pan, with Wordsworth’s Lucy Gray, and with the boy who put his finger in a hole in the dike to save his town from flooding. Books have nurtured in Ella a rich capacity for imagination: “When they brought the maps and showed Europe, it rose from the paper in three dimensions, grew big, came right down to her seat and allowed her to walk on it, feel its snow, invited her to look down into its fjords and dykes” (11). When reciting Kipling, Ella looks as if she were “flying”:

Totally separated from the platform and from the people around her. Not just by colour but as an angel in those Sunday school cards is separated from the people below. Swimming in the sky, or flying or whatever, in that ethereal fashion over all below. . . . But she is not happy up there in the sky. She wants to be real. (17)

This sounds very much like the experience of a Vodou (voodoo) devotee first possessed by Dambala as recorded by Karen McCarthy Brown:

I was flying. It’s the fly I don’t like! I can’t take that sensation. I have to be able to stand on my foot, to feel my legs. I don’t like that flying. That’s why I’m scared of heights. Like, I’m up there, and my foot cannot touch the ground. (301)

In Ella’s case, however, the potential for an enhanced spirituality is a vulnerability to hostile spirit possession. The mental dissociation she experiences, whereby fictional characters inhabiting a distant land come to seem more real than the people around her, has harmful physiological effects: a sheet of gauze descends to divide her imagination, filled with foreign friends, from her memory, which is of her neighbours and the landscape she shares with them. The disembodied communication made possible by literacy, with its potential for blurring identifications of race and gender, is harmful to the proper constitution of the self. Ella opts out of and is excluded from the mediation of self through others; her teachers “stopped seeing her and she stopped seeing them” (11).

The myal spirits allow for communication across distances, but only as far as their hosts can actually walk and never across the sea. Grove Town is a face-to-face community that does not include strangers (Maydene Brassington is a foreigner but not a stranger). Literacy, however, makes communication possible between people who will never meet in the flesh. Peter Pan, Lucy Gray, and the others are not direct spokespersons for imperialism as Kipling is but part of an international jet-setting class, and even as they feed the child's imagination and offer her private consolation, they take Ella away from the people around her.

While the foreignness of her favourite reading material is precisely what makes it so dangerous, the problem is not just that the novels and poems Ella reads are British. The boy who never grew up and the girl whose spirit haunts the bridge where she was lost in a snowstorm might also put at risk the psychic health of a young reader in England. The unreality of books and the unhealthiness (particularly for women) of reading texts such as *Don Quixote*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Madame Bovary* is a theme as old as the novel. Moreover, Kipling does not threaten to take over all the schoolchildren in Grove Town, only Ella. Her own susceptibility to foreign spirits is a function of an alienation Ella feels before she ever learns to read. Born out of wedlock to a servant girl working in the home of an Irish policeman in Kingston, Ella is of the same class as her rural neighbours, but they believe with good reason that her light colour will carry her farther than they can go, and she is never made to feel she belongs. The consolation Ella finds in the texts of the colonizer displays at once the processes of subordination identified as cultural imperialism — her imagination is shaped by books written elsewhere — *and* the processes of minority resistance to majority culture. She is a “long face, thin lip, pointed nose” soul in a “round face, thick lip, big eye country” (8); she seeks validation in representations of people who look like herself.

Helen Tiffin observes that Ella's “mixed blood” is “itself metonymic of the effects of Anglo-education on black Jamaicans” (“Plato's Cave” 151), and that a colonial education inspires

neurotic desires that lead over generations to miscegenation. However, in Brodber's novel, it is not colonial education that results in whitening but the converse: Ella's white skin makes her susceptible to a colonial education. Ella's body, the product of a union between an Irishman and a woman who is herself the offspring of a North African Moor and another woman of mixed blood,⁵ illustrates the Jamaican myth of origin and fall as described by the anthropologist Jack Alexander. The social divisions in Jamaica are supposed to have arisen "in the nonlegal union of a white male master and a black female slave, which produced an illegitimate brown offspring midway in status between slave and master" (173). Blame for the "division of rank among the slaves" is cast on the black woman's ambition for social mobility (Austin-Broos 189). Ella's body bears witness at once to the supposed frailty of women and to the ever-present threat of the foreign oppressor. The Methodist parson, William Brassington, has similar origins: "An invisible mother. Possibly half-caste. Very like the kept woman of somebody important" (15). Brassington accepts the myth of the black woman's fatal weakness even as he excuses her guilt: "How can a black woman really be Eve when the God of the garden had stacked the cards so that she could not say 'No'?" he asks himself (187). The community of Grove Town is not, as some notions of cultural imperialism might have it, an autonomous collective self suddenly encroached upon by the foreign, but has always defined itself by the struggle against hostile outsiders.

Ella tries to overcome the split in her consciousness fostered by books by travelling in her body to the world she has already flown to in her reading. However, travelling to the world described in books does not bring about healing, which only begins when Ella is able to narrate her experience to her new husband, Selwyn Langley:

Selwyn had indeed propelled himself through the gauze partition and into Ella's carnate past. After a couple months of marriage there was no gauze at all and Ella seemed to be draining perpetually. And the draining brought clarity so that Ella could, after a time, see not only Mammy Mary and them people clearly but she could see the things around them. She could show him the star-apple tree. (81)

In 1918, Ella, the voracious reader, had no indigenous narrative to balance her love of British texts. This lack is remedied when she creates her own narrative. However, telling her story to another opens Ella to manipulation by the one who receives the story. Ella is no longer divided within, but now there exists a version of her self outside herself in Selwyn's racist imagination. Selwyn fashions from Ella's stories a coon show entitled *Caribbean Nights and Days* that grievously misrepresents Grove Town as a tropical heart of darkness against which white America can constitute itself.

Like the doll of Anita into which Mass Levi sticks nails and knives, Selwyn's staging of Ella's stories is a representation of living, named people. Selwyn's theatrical double resembles Ella's experience in essential ways, making the differences between the two all the more harmful. Where reading had been an addictive, voluntary possession that enhanced Ella's self but cut her off from those around her, Selwyn's staging of Grove Town proves a violent and involuntary possession that robs Ella of her self altogether by at once obliterating her experience and replacing it with something with which she cannot identify. The shock of seeing Langley's show produces psychological and somatic effects: Ella is once again divided into several selves, each blaming the other for making Selwyn's theatrical travesty possible; and then, instead of the child that she wants and that Langley is unwilling to give her, Ella's abdomen is filled with a terrible growth.

Both Mass Levi and Selwyn Langley steal power from a young woman who has not yet borne a child in order to restore their own depleted spiritual resources. Mass Levi sought Anita to relieve his impotence. Selwyn, the greater spirit thief, fearing the contamination of the Langley family line, withdraws sexual energy from circulation by masturbating rather than having sex with Ella. As Sobo explains, "Unused, semen symbolizes death and social breakdown as it does not get transformed into a child and does not help reproduce society" (235). Ella, who is as ignorant of prophylactics and "Oonan" (82) as she is of the existence of the myal spirits, wonders if she is infertile because she is "mulatto" (82). A voice in Ella's head taunts her with being a

mule (84): "Like the mule, a person who doesn't reproduce only serves to work. His or her blood disappears from the social circles that individuals, joining together, create and recreate" (Sobo 129).

Selwyn Langley's play depicts Ole African and black Jamaica more generally as a demonic threat to whiteness. The myal spirit hosts recognize that the real threat to Ella comes from Langley himself. What we have here are two cultures with universal pretensions, each identifying the other as demonic. Both fear the takeover of a young woman by the other because of women's central role in the reproduction of the community. Selwyn Langley fears the reproduction of bodies felt to be inappropriate, while the Kumina spirits fear the threat of barrenness. In both cases what is at stake is the loss to the cultural network of potential future generations. Readers have no trouble judging between the rival claims: Langley's racism would selfishly prevent the circulation of sexual and spiritual energies, while the myal caucus, in spite of its suspicion of "in-between colours people" (1), moves to plug the leak in the circuits of spiritual energy by healing Ella and restoring her to the community.

The Kumina spirits realize that the health of the community itself is at stake, which is why the restoration ritual, an exorcism by Mass Cyrus, must be performed even if the accompanying storm wreaks great damage on the natural world and costs the lives of "several humans," presumably strangers (4).⁶ Selwyn's spirit thievery is not something the Kumina spirits have never seen before; indeed the experience of Ella, the "alabaster baby" (4), was prefigured by that of a doll found in the barnyard "in those long long ago days" (93). Ella, who has "tripped out on foreign," is performing a familiar role in the consolidation and reproduction of the community. By incarnating the foreign and allowing it to be exorcized, she allows the community to heal internal differences and restore wholeness.

After Mass Cyrus, the spiritual midwife, exorcizes her "bad, bad water belly" (96), a common symptom in rural Jamaica of an imbalance in the body (Sobo 286), Ella still cannot hope to join the myal caucus as Maydene does. The full participation of

such a weak soul in the circulation of spiritual or sexual energies poses too much of a risk. If sufficiently strengthened, however, the childless Ella can make an ideal school teacher. Jamaican schoolchildren in 1920 were taught from an imperialist text called *Mr. Joe's Farm*,⁷ which, as a wiser Ella has come to appreciate, teaches them to mistrust their own best and brightest. The tale of a strike among the farm animals that fails because of their incapacity for independence is a crippling narrative to teach the colonized. The Reverend Simpson makes Ella see that although she must teach the text, she need not repeat what its author intended:

You have a quarrel with the author. He wrote, you think without an awareness of certain things. But does he force you to teach without this awareness? Need your voice say what he says? (107)

The lesson Ella draws — and it receives particular weight because it is the novel's final lesson — is that one need not read obediently. It does not matter what she reads, as long as the reader maintains her distance. Critical reading involves a kind of linguistic ritual, a gauging of the distance between the reader and the writer, between the self and the other. It is in such interaction with others that a healthy self is constituted. Ella must develop an "I" that is not submerged in what she reads.

What Ella never realizes, but we readers are allowed to see, is that the British school text is more than a dispiriting allegory; it works obeah by invoking the actual names of the myal spirits. Ella remains unaware of the spirits' existence, and never realizes that she herself figures as a doll in their alternative barnyard world (3). She cannot tell her students "the half" that she was unable to tell Selwyn because she still does "not know it" (56). The beneficent guiding spirits are happy to keep it that way. Ella need not know their intentions in order to serve the community.

Shalini Puri has criticized Helen Tiffin for mistakenly seeing Ella as more central to the community than Maydene (113 n 10). I suspect that Tiffin's misreading of the characters' relative importance arises from her own identification with Maydene, the well-intentioned white foreigner, and from her worthy con-

viction that liberation must come from the colonized themselves. However, the essential difference between Maydene and Ella is not their race (they both look white), nor their place of birth (for they both find homes in Grove Town), but their access to the world of the spirits. Very few readers will share Maydene's experience; joining the spirits is not an option for anyone not personally introduced to Kumina initiates, and there are fewer of those in Jamaica than once there were. Readers most everywhere are inevitably closer to Ella, the schoolmistress who teaches literacy while developing her own skills in critical reading, than to Maydene.

Literacy is regarded as a direct threat by the myal spirits, whose response is "inoculation," the absorption of a modicum of a foreign agent in order to resist better the parasite's full onslaught. As Willie tells Dan/Reverend Simpson,

"You are the small pox, teacher. You learn the outers' ways, dish it out in little bits, an antidote man, against total absorption" (68).

Part of this inoculation involves the active creation of a class of literates who know nothing of the spirits. These "new people" (1), like William Brassington and Ella O'Grady, are assigned by the spirits (who remain unknown to them) the mission to "correct images from the inside, destroy what should be destroyed, replace it with what should be replaced and put us back together, give us back ourselves with which to chart our course to go where we want to go" (110). Ella and William are thus positioned at the frontier where the myalist centre, a small community where everyone knows everyone else, meets the threat of literacy, which can strike from a great distance. This frontier position where colonial literacy resists imperial literacy has a name: the nation. Ella and William are the first Jamaicans in Grove Town.

Brodber's novel addresses contemporary Jamaicans in their capacity as readers, most of whom, as Michael G. Cooke notes, will have to go to the library just as I have had to in order "to bone up on what is an ancient African tradition rooted in folk and oral culture" (56). The national community of readers implied by the novel makes sense of the small, face-to-face com-

munity of Grove Town the same way that Ella makes sense of *Mr Joe's Farm*: by reading it allegorically. To read Brodber is inevitably to displace Grove Town from the centre of the universe and translate it to the larger national framework of Jamaica and the international framework of global resistance to imperialism. Tiffin's own allegorical reading is invited by the text.

Jamaica, too, is constituted by its interactions with foreigners. Unlike Grove Town, however, Jamaica is not imagined as the centre of the world but as a nation seeking its rightful place among other nations. National culture, which assumes the co-existence of other nations all different but different in the same way, is figured not in terms of inoculation but in terms of hybridity, a metaphor drawn from genetics rather than from epidemiology. Evelyn O'Callaghan, the West Indian critic, reads Ella's painful racial status, which Grove Town saw as part of an inherited guilt and the sign of a predisposition to fall, as an allegory of the nation's imbrication in a larger international frame: "Ella embodies the Jamaican national motto ('Out of Many, One People')" precisely because "she is mulatto, of Irish/Jamaican parentage and married to an American" (71). Their mission to "correct images from the inside" is inseparable, it seems, from Ella and William's status as "in-between colours people" (Brodber 1).

Brodber's novel, published in London, has found readers from North America to Australia. It is therefore just such a text as the spirits dream Ella may some day write: it has found its way to "the top of files at Whitehall with the under secretaries bowing their heads and saying: 'Yes, yes, yes. We are spirit thieves. We shouldn't have done it'" (109). However, Ella herself is never in a position to write a book like *Myal*; she never does learn about the spirits. The achievement of Brodber's novel is to remind readers of the translation involved in moving from the local (watched over by the spirits) to the national (constituted by writers and readers).

Karen Brown describes how the spirit energies of another local face-to-face community have inevitably been altered by the development of a national consciousness. Mama Lola, a Vodou (voodoo) priestess, is indifferent to the fate of Haitian boat

people and to any appeal to the "Haitian people": "Abstractions do not provoke loyalty in Alourdes. She continues . . . to locate those individuals who can be called her people because she knows them and because they have earned the title" (308). In New York, however, Mama Lola learns to see herself as Haitian. Brown concludes, "Vodou can share its wisdom and its healing techniques with a larger and more varied group; but as the group of potential devotees expands, the spirits will also become more universalizable, the faces of the spirits less transparent to those of the ancestors, and the stories that carry the wisdom of the religion more abstract" (308).

III

Revivalism, or myalized Christianity, has been in decline since the first decades of the century, challenged by two phenomena not portrayed in Brodber's novel: Pentecostalism and Rastafarianism. In 1978 Barry Chevannes found that "the Kumina remnants in St Thomas" were "no longer a force" ("Revivalism" 15). The development of a national Jamaican literature, however, has been an obvious success, as Brodber's novel itself bears out. The sheer energy of Brodber's text does, however, suggest another possibility: that the rise of a national literature is actually part of an inoculation campaign against literacy by local ancestral spirits. Diane Austin-Broos finds that, in contemporary Jamaica, the eudemonic practice of Revivalism continues in the US-inspired Pentecostalism that has largely replaced it. Barry Chevannes eventually judged that Revivalism even survives in Rastafarianism despite the latter's expressed hostility to spirit possession (*Rastafari* 21). Readers of Brodber's novel will inevitably hear in Ole African's refrain "the half has never been told" (34), an allusion before the fact to Bob Marley's anthem "Get Up Stand Up."

Readers cannot but translate from the particular local to the national and the global; however, to avoid replicating an unsavory universalizing, we must try to translate from the global back to the local network of Grove Town and imagine how we ourselves appear from that perspective. What if, rather than translating the realm of the ancestral spirits into familiar func-

tionalist and materialist terms and so domesticating it, we translated literacy as spirit possession? In order to perform such a translation, we must first return to spirit possession its strangeness, a strangeness that paradoxically has less to do with the existence of spirits (spirit forces can always be allegorized) than with unfamiliar ideas of gender, sexuality, and race. If all we do is restore to the world of the spirits its otherness, we risk exoticizing spirit possession. We must not make people living eighty years ago in rural Jamaica the same as us, but we must recognize how we are the same as they are. We are in the position of Ella O'Grady, a weak soul who learns to hold herself aloof from all possession by texts. Brodber does allow us to see more than Ella, to appreciate how our critical distance, like Ella's, will inevitably serve the interests of forces beyond our knowing. Such an insight, however, should only fortify our awareness of the need for critical distance. There is no absolute critical distance, but for the weak of soul, some critical distance is an absolute necessity.

NOTES

- 1 The text's spelling of "voodoo" is retained here.
- 2 I am grateful to Ted Chamberlin for his suggestions. Whatever errors there are here are my own.
- 3 The names Percy and Chickee, apparently two distinct spirits, appear outside Brodber's text on a list that George Simpson has made of sixty-two "earthbound spirits" that "dance myal" in Jamaica (162). I cannot identify Will and Dan as confidently, but Simpson also lists an archangel called Daniel that possesses Revival devotees and two ancestral spirits called William Bailey and William Scott (163). The latter bear English-sounding names because the people in Jamaica with the most recent and most direct connection to Africa were indentured labourers from Sierra Leone who, originally from Kongo, had been rescued from slave ships by the British navy and baptized. These Africans settled in St. Thomas after the abolition of slavery, where they founded the Kumina cult (see Schuler).
- 4 Perhaps, as Jean Price-Mars has suggested, among the Africans carried to the New World as slaves were Christians from the kingdoms of Kongo and Angola which had traded as equals with the Portuguese and been converted to Christianity before the slave trade was established (qtd. in Dayan 245). But attempts to establish causes for perceived effects are not in the spirit of the Kumina caucus, which denies historical difference altogether. The spirits have no memory of a time before they were Christian; there was no such time.
- 5 Ella's maternal grandfather, Baba D, came to Jamaica from Africa not as a slave but as an indentured labourer, and the Africa he came from was likely north of the Sahara; he was from "Tanja" (Tangier?) and called himself a Moor, had straight hair and looked like a 'coolie royal' from India (7). Although he longed

to return to Africa, he "skin-up pon Kumina" (7), that is, looked with contempt upon his black neighbours' spiritual means of returning. Moreover, he convinces Catherine Days, the light-skinned woman he marries, that she, too, is a Moor (7). This unusual genealogy locates the origins of demonic racial hierarchization in Africa.

- 6 I would signal what is almost certainly a misprint in the text. In the first chapter, the Reverend Musgrave Simpson, the Baptist minister, reports to "his headquarters in Britain" (4), but the Native Baptists in Jamaica were independent already in the nineteenth century and had no higher authority to report to than their own congregation (Stewart 9). It is surely his Anglican counterpart, Parson Getfield, whom we are to imagine writing this report.
- 7 According to Evelyn O'Callaghan, the story *Mr Joe's Farm* appeared in the *Caribbean Reader*, "familiar to generations of West Indians" (73).

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