

An "Other" Realism: Erna Brodber's "Myal"

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The word in language is half someone else's.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination*

All mimesis presupposes that what is represented is the "only true reality." When it involves two realities of which one is destined to reproduce the other, inevitably those who are part of the process see themselves living in a permanent state of the unreal. That is the case with us.

EDOUARD GLISSANT, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*

IN *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant provides a critique of two kinds of mimesis: the first is social mimesis, the imitation the metropole imposes on the colony; the second is literary mimesis, by which Glissant means literary realism. It is in enforced imitation that Glissant locates the violence of the colonial encounter. He points out the impossibility of the civilizing mission and the aspiration of the colonized to inhabit a European reality. For the colonized society lives a contradiction: on one hand it must be a slave to Europe, exploited to maintain Europe's privilege at its own expense; on the other hand, it is required to identify with Europe, to become Europe. Thus it is asked to be, simultaneously, Prospero and Caliban. Given this grounding contradiction, Glissant argues that the imitative project is bound to fail. In light of the cultural dislocation and economic exploitation colonialism entails, mimicry takes shape as the (neo)colonial cultural and economic dependency with which the Caribbean is so familiar.¹ Against this background, Glissant's assertion that the Caribbean lives in a "permanent state of the unreal" yields several

meanings: suspended in the contradiction between lived experience and official ideology (93), the self-apprehension of the colonized falters. Moreover, the Caribbean subjects see themselves as unreal to the extent that they read the difference between lived experience and official ideology as defect. And, aspiring to become European, they live in a state of the unreal in the sense that they pursue an illusory and impossible future. The colony that imitates Europe is a ghost, unable to attain the reality it seeks.

To the Caribbean writer who shares this unreality falls the task of building a poetics that can make real the colonized subject. Glissant proposes a poetics that departs from literary mimesis, which he understands to be a colonial mode. In relation to literature, he uses "mimesis" to designate what are usually considered to be the formal features of literary realism. These include the "clarity" (73) of a linear narrative, a transparent and harmonious narrative, a preoccupation with the inner self of a transcendental individual subject, and the omniscient authority of "objectivity" (236). Glissant argues that these features have functioned as mechanisms of othering, and that, furthermore, these mechanisms are not confined to literary narratives, but are shared by historical narratives as well: "The surface effects of literary realism," he claims, "are the precise equivalent of the historian's claim to pure objectivity" (74).² What is crucial to my argument about this observation is that it places the critique of a poetics squarely in the context of a critique of historiography, a struggle over poetics in the context of a struggle over history. I understand this struggle and critique as the struggle of a colonized people for subjectification.

How do those who have been "objectified" by the model of a transparent, linear, and "objective" narrative respond to it?³ Glissant claims the right to literary and historical autonomy from that model: "The only source of light ultimately was that of the . . . colonizer or administrator — of his transparency fatally proposed as a model, because of which we have acquired a taste for obscurity, that which is not obvious, to assert for each community the right to a shared obscurity" (161). The alternative Glissant proposes is thus a poetics of opacity. His poetics, then, focusses

on precisely that which the colonizer's narrative obscures or obfuscates—a difference that can be understood as something other than a defective copy.

Yet at the very moment that he rejects realism as *form*, he affirms a commitment to a realist *epistemology*. The following passage reveals a strong cognitive impulse:

An almost elementary statement of our needs, if it is valuable in our daily struggle, can also prevent us from *seeing* the *deeper* structures of oppression which *must nevertheless be brought to light*. This act of *exposure*, paradoxically, is not performed each time in an open and clear way. . . . The production of texts must also produce history, not in its capacity to facilitate something happening, but in its ability to *raise a concealed world to the level of consciousness*. (107; emphasis added)

If Glissant favours an aesthetic of obscurity, does he not also attempt to shed light, as it were, on obscurity? In this passage, he displays a will to knowledge, which he conceives of in terms of a surface/depth, appearance/essence model. Glissant thus aims to illuminate the deep structures of oppression and mechanisms of othering. His critique of the colonizer's "light" is that, unable to explain these structures and those they oppress, it registers them as opaque, obscure, Other; it relegates them to "a permanent state of the unreal" (242). Glissant's interest in an aesthetic of obscurity derives from a desire to engage with precisely that which colonialist narratives render opaque. It is in this sense that he reconciles an aesthetics of obscurity with a desire to "shed light" on obscurity. Against the transparency of a *formally* realist colonial narrative, Glissant sets the opacity of an *epistemologically* realist narrative. If the surface realism of the colonial narrative de-realizes the colonized, a knowledge of the "deeper" reality enables postcolonial subjects to real-ize themselves. By my choice of the verb "realize" or "make real," I wish to emphasize that Glissant links the processes of exposure and production, revelation and construction, illumination and transformation. Epistemological realism is thus directly related to the *political* project of the collective subjectification of the colonized.

And Glissant claims that it is by departing from formal realism that epistemological realism is served. While he rejects one kind of realism, he proposes another; while he refuses one kind of

visibility, he affirms another. His argument thus proceeds by doubling the meanings of opacity, illumination, objectivity, and realism. It is this interplay between obscurity and revelation, opacity and illumination, opacity in the *service* of illumination and transformation in postcolonial Caribbean writing that I wish to consider. I contend that the surface effects of realism—omniscient narrator, linear narrative, transparent language, centered individual subject—are not necessarily features of a realist narrative any more than their “opposites”—fragmented narrative, decentered or unstable individual subject, problematization of representation—are necessarily features of a postmodernist narrative.

This observation about the formal features of realism and postmodernism would perhaps be unnecessary were it not the case that it is in the context of a specifically postmodern celebration of diversity that Caribbean literature has been approached in metropolitan academies. It has thus tended to be appended to postmodernist reading strategies and agendas.⁴ But as Kum Kum Sangari observes in her essay “The Politics of the Possible,” where she distinguishes Gabriel García Márquez’s marvellous realism from postmodernism, “[i]t is useful to maintain a distinction between the realized difficulty of knowing and the preasserted or a priori difficulty of knowing” (220). As Sangari’s argument suggests, the formal similarities between many postcolonial and postmodern texts arise out of a very different set of historical stresses—a fact which postmodernist readings have all too often ignored. Postmodernist readings have tended to privilege the marvellous of “marvellous realism,” the magic of “magical realism.” In doing so they have ignored perhaps the most profound poststructuralist insight: the warning against binarisms that privilege one term at the expense of the other and obscure the internal heterogeneity of each term. It would be fruitful for critics to attend to the realism of “marvellous realism” and to how the friction between “marvellous” and “realism” sparks meaning.

I address this question through a reading of *Myal*, a novel by the Jamaican sociologist and novelist, Erna Brodber. In her essay “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure,” Brodber sees a continuity between her scientific and her literary projects (164). Both Brod-

ber's social science and her fiction attempt to understand the social world as a *system* of relations. However, they differ from that "objective" narrative which Glissant condemns. For whereas the latter narrative erects binarisms, Brodber reveals a commitment to *overcoming* binarisms—notably the self/other, science/art, objectivity/subjectivity dualisms. Thus, she writes of a "twinning of fiction and science" ("Fiction" 167). And her commitment to a realist epistemology also leads her away from formal realism. Like Glissant, then, Brodber doubles the meanings of objectivity, science, and realism.

In her attempt to understand Jamaican society, Brodber grapples with the bitter (post)colonial phenomenon of "prejudice against blacks in a country of blacks. The enemy was a ghost that talked through black faces" ("Fiction" 165). Her novel, *Myal*, is in many ways a literalization of that metaphor. The novel is erected around the mulatto child Ella O'Grady. It spans the years 1913-20, Ella's fourteenth to twenty-first year. As a story of education and coming to consciousness, the novel functions at least partly in the tradition of the Bildungsroman. However, it does not proceed in the linear fashion of the traditional Bildungsroman, but through a complex series of halvings and doublings. At the beginning of her story—though not at the beginning of the novel—we see Ella reciting Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." It is quite literally the colonizer's voice that speaks through her. At the time, she is unaware of the implications of a colonial text that describes her people, a colonized people, as "half devil, half child" (6). She does, however, know the pain of being a half-caste; like her mother, she knows what it is like to be a "long face, thin lip, pointed nose soul in a round face, thick lip, big eye country" (8).⁵ With her racial doubleness born of a forcible colonial coupling, Ella is not-quite-black-enough for most blacks to be comfortable with her; she is just-black-enough to be exotic and exciting to her white American husband; she is not-quite-white-enough to be worthy of carrying his children. We can reconstruct the novel as tracing Ella's development, from unconscious quiescence to the colonialist text, through complicity with the text, and recognition that "the half has not been told," to resistance to the text.

In the novel's first example of a colonialist pre-text, Kipling portrays the colonized as half devil; the "ghost" of the colonizer speaks through the colonized. This image sets the stage for the centrality that possession by spirits will have in *Myal*. Colonialism involves not just the plunder of gold and labour, but cultural theft, "separating people from themselves, man from his labour" (37). The novel refers to this cultural theft as "spirit thievery" or "zombification," which has

taken their knowledge of their original and natural world away from them and left them empty shells—duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone else and carrying them out. . . .

People are separated from the parts of themselves that make them think and they are left as flesh only. Flesh that takes directions from someone. (107-08)

One channel for this spirit thievery is the colonialist church, represented by the Methodist parson, William Brassington, who seeks to educate and recreate his parishioners in the image of Europe. His mission is "to exorcize and replace" (18). Another channel is the colonialist educational system. In fact, the novel images the colonialist book as an extension of the colonial merchant ships and slave ships (67). And the colonialist book comes complete with a denial of African world views, a contorted history, a British literary canon that serves colonialism, and a brand of literature concocted specially for consumption in the colonies. The allegory of "Mr. Joe's Farm," which was actually taught in Jamaican public schools, offers us an instance of the last kind of spirit possession. This allegory, with which *Myal* duels, portrays an impetuous rebellion by the animals at Mr. Joe's farm. Resentful of the rules there, the animals decide they want to be free, but soon "realize" that they cannot fend for themselves and that they were better off with their master. They return submissively to Mr. Joe's farm. Allegories such as this represent "the kind [of studying] that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration" (28).

In Glissant's terms, the colonialist narrative registers the "Other half" as always defective. *Myal* locates the violence of colonial domination in its "halving" of mind and body, its narra-

tive reduction of the Others to half-wits, and its suppression of "half" the story. That is why the novel is haunted by the insistent refrain: "the half has never been told" (34-35). At the heart of *Myal*, then, is a critique of binaristic narratives. If indeed it is by "halving," by suppressing heterogeneity or doubleness, that domination functions, then resistance to domination must involve the recovery of doubleness. That is why not linearity but doubleness becomes the cornerstone of *Myal*'s poetics. It manifests itself in the controlling concept-metaphor of spirit possession or zombification. For while spirit possession functions in the text as a figure for domination, it also "doubles" as a figure for the survival of disallowed African-derived cultural practices. Helen Tiffin notes that "[m]yalism also returns the Jamaicans to their African ancestry, and thus to the source of the original animal fables, which, taken via the Arab slaving routes through North Africa to the Mediterranean, were spread across Europe as Greek, as 'Aesop's fables'—a very early example of spirit thievery" (33).⁶ Spirit possession in the novel thus represents not only domination and theft but also the possibility of connection with the half that has not been told: ancestral beliefs, oral traditions, religions, and healing practices.

These instances of the inexplicable, the "magical," disrupt the claims of Western science and provide an area of unofficial, secret knowledge from which resistance can spring. To the exasperation of the colonial missionary, spirit-healing frustrates the objectivity/subjectivity binarism; it is "no longer science but participation" (87-88); it offers a cure, but no theory of causation (95). Spirit possession exercises its liberatory powers by making itself *opaque* to official knowledges. The controlling image of the novel is thus itself double-valenced: if spirit possession can make the living dead, it can also make the dead live; it can signal both objectification and subjectification, both servitude and liberation. *Myal*'s poetics, then, demands a multiplication of the meanings of spirit possession so as to dramatize the complex relations between possession, dispossession, repossession, and self-possession.⁷

Myal also multiplies the kinds of violence for which spirit possession stands: "Spirit thievery comes in so many forms" (83).

The narrative insists on the multiplicity and *simultaneity* of oppressions. Ella O'Grady is the site where the many forms of spirit thievery converge: she suffers the violence of colonization, the neo-colonial violence of the United States and her American husband Selwyn Langley, the racial and sexual domination of her marriage, and the hostility of black Jamaicans on the grounds that it is her "colour [that] will carry her through" (10). Indeed, the light-skinned mulatto registers the purple bruises of so many kinds of violence that at one point she is actually described as being "a little stone bruise" (3). It is those marks of violence that make her emblematic of Grove Town, Jamaica, which is described as a "colony of stone bruise" (2).

Images of bruising recur throughout *Myal*. Colonial violence is thus doubly imaged as violence to both spirit and body. The colonizers steal both will and labour; Jamaica is a colony of zombies *and* a colony of stone bruise. And just as spirit thievery stands not only for colonial domination but for other forms of domination, so too does stone-bruising. Perhaps the novel's most powerful conjunction of the images of spirit thievery and bruising occurs when someone repeatedly throws stones at the head of the fifteen-year-old Anita. At first, Anita, her mother, and her school teacher attribute the stone-throwing to schoolboys who want to attract Anita's attention. It turns out, however, that the aging Maas Levi is trying to regain his sexual potency by controlling the young girl's spirit. After losing a battle with those who seek to possess Anita's spirit in order to free it from his control, Maas Levi dies. He is found with his pants down and a doll, made in Anita's image, that has been knifed at the crotch. We can now understand Anita's nightly cries of "Let me go" as cries against nightly rape/possession by Maas Levi.⁸ In this powerful instance, sexual possession and spirit possession—domination of body and domination of mind—become inseparable. Since *Myal* conceives of domination as that which halves, that which severs the mind from the body, it becomes doubly important for the novel to be able to think mind and body together. By deploying the concept-metaphors of spirit thievery and stone-bruising simultaneously, *Myal* brilliantly overcomes the spirit/matter, mind/body dichotomy, rendering it impossible to separate bodily and

mental violence. The strategy of doubling concept-metaphors thus signals a desire for wholeness, figured in the novel as bodily and mental health.

The novel's characters include a range of healers: doctors, teachers, religious people. There is Ole African, the herbalist; there are spirit healers like Miss Gatha, who helps cure Anita; there is Maas Cyrus, the myalist, who cures Ella by techniques unknown to Western medicine. Then there is Selwyn Langley, who is "from a long line—long for America—of chemists, manufacturers of herbal medicines and today doctors and travelling medical lecturers. And this was on both sides of the family so there was quite a little empire being built up for Selwyn to inherit" (42). Selwyn's particular brand of drug renders the distinction between disease and cure somewhat ambiguous: he engages in the task of exorcising Ella's hybridity, and appropriates her account of Jamaica to his own ends: "It was Selwyn who explained to her in simple terms that she was coloured, mulatto and what that meant, taking her innocence with her hymen in return for guidance through the confusing fair that was America. Ella was hooked and she liked the drug" (43). Each kind of doctor is engaged, as we have seen, in an exorcism of one or another kind. The same is true of the religious representatives, who cover a range of European, African, and syncretic religions: Miss Gatha represents the Kumina church; Rev. Simpson heads the Baptist church; Rev. Brassington heads the Methodist church.

The characters are grouped according to whether their ministrations and spirit possessions work to free or to dominate. It is in keeping with the novel's insistence on the subtle internal heterogeneities of self and other that the domination/resistance groupings do not break down along black/white or Africa/Europe lines. Indeed, Maas Levi is black, but that does not stop him from using his knowledge of spirit possession for sexual domination. Rev. Brassington, who passes for white, is faithful to the colonial civilizing mission; but his "better half,"⁹ Maydene Brassington, who is white, belongs to the community of resistance, along with Ole African, Miss Gatha, Maas Cyrus, and the Baptist Rev. Simpson.¹⁰ The novel culminates in the induction of

Ella O'Grady into the community of resistance. It also hints at an emergent spiritual solidarity of Miss Iris (the wife of Maas Levi) and Amy Holness (the wife of Teacher Holness) with the community of resistance. Indeed, by the end of the novel, even Rev. Brassington begins to question his mission and tries to learn from Rev. Simpson. *Myal* thus understands the communities of resistance and domination in resolutely anti-essentialist terms. It also sees its communities as shifting and unstable: Maydene Brassington reminds us that all those who now inhabit the community of resistance once lived in Mr. Joe's yard (93).

Myal is interested in the ways its characters' lives double Ella's life and achievement of resistance. Since the novel's project is to recover doubleness, it focusses on characters who, like Ella, have experienced doubleness in their lives. The induction of these characters into the community of resistance depends partly on the extent to which they are able to acknowledge and value doubleness. Such a welcoming of difference may take the form of adopting a child from a different family (as the Brassingtons and Holnesses do with Ella and Anita, respectively); or it may take the form of practising a syncretic religion as Simpson does; or it may involve acknowledging one's racial hybridity, as Ella learns to do but William Brassington fails to do in the course of the novel.

As a novel that seeks to restore the doubleness of the "patchwork children" (49) of the Caribbean, *Myal* is most interested in those moments and spaces where differences meet. Its interest in the hybridization of differences does not stop at racial hybridity. *Myal* seeks out borders of many kinds, and stakes all on rendering them permeable. For instance, it is drawn to the place "midway between sleep and wake" (110), between consciousness and unconsciousness. Appropriately, its favoured times for the spirit communion of white and black in resistance are dusk (76), "gloaming," or twilight. These are the times when Maydene Brassington goes walking in Grove Town:

Nightfall then. The right word. But there was something still missing. For it wasn't just the fall of the night that was hers. It was the "cusp." Her personal word. She said it under her breath. "Cusp." "Cusp" was a word that delighted her from the day they met. "A point where two curves meet," the dictionary had said. That was what she liked

about the time called nightfall. The meeting of two disparate points. Then, she felt that she was at the beginning of a new phase of creation. (13)

In its affirmation of the productive powers of hybridity, *Myal* belongs to that tradition of Caribbean writing that claims a future which neither imitates Europe nor longs for Africa, but draws its energies instead from the historically syncretic reality of the Caribbean. Examples of similar projects may be found in writings throughout the Caribbean, from Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* to José Martí's "Our America" and Derek Walcott's "What the Twilight Says: An Overture." *Myal* functions in this hybridizing tradition of twilight or cusp poetics. As I have shown, its central image of zombification embodies a twilight poetics by blurring the borders that divide the living from the dead, domination from resistance, dispossession from repossession, power from subjugation.

The novel continually frustrates these tidy boundaries. One particularly provocative episode problematizes the distinction between consent and rape. Mary Riley is not absolutely powerless; the extent of her sexual consent is unclear. Of her sexual encounter(s) with her Irish employer, we are told that "she didn't object too strongly to giving O'Grady wife" (8). Yet O'Grady is not absolutely powerful; indeed, his Irishness limits his position in the colonial administration to one of functionary.

The little girl had been born to Mary Riley from Ralston O'Grady, one of those Irish police officers whose presence the authorities must have felt, kept the natives from eating each other. As is usual, this new officer came to town with no wife and needed a housekeeper. As is also usual, the housekeeper was before long in the family way. What was unusual, was for said housekeeper to refuse to move to Kingston's anonymity to be kept by her baby-father. . . .

The belly drew attention to O'Grady. He and it became the sign of misbehaving Irish policemen and O'Grady was transferred to where Mary knew not. (6-8)

These sentences consistently use the passive voice, and offer us events unconnected with agents, suggesting that neither Mary Riley nor Ralston O'Grady are fully the authors of events in their lives; rather, the actions of both are inscribed in a larger text. The passage thus offers one more instance of *Myal's* searching the

borders of power and powerlessness. Is it an instance of a not-quite-rape by a not-quite-colonizer? The question returns in the context of Ella's and Selwyn Langley's relationship.

Ella, having identified all her life with the "pale-skinned people floating" in colonialist texts (46), dazzled by Selwyn's interest in her past, readily acquiesces to Selwyn's "whitening" of her appearance and genealogy. She is "hooked" on America and on marriage to Selwyn. To him, on the other hand, Ella represents an alternative to his family's pharmaceutical empire:

A marvellously sculpted work waiting for the animator. That was what Selwyn Langley saw. It was with this vision before him that he fully realized that movie-making was indeed going to be his line. He looked at Ella long and smiled: here was the future, after all that hide and seek! (46)

It is Ella's story that this chemist wishes to bottle and sell.

However, while Selwyn clearly fetishizes Ella's difference, he also sees it as a dangerous liability. "She had given and was giving all she had but he would want more. In-laws with real pedigree for instance, who could appear in the flesh. . . . Selwyn took thought: he and prophylactics became the best of friends, never to be parted" (80). Selwyn controls Ella's sexuality just as he controls her story; yet again we see the conjunction of physical and mental domination: "When she was telling her stories of back home. [sic] Ella always fell into broken English. It excited Selwyn" (54). These lines reveal not only a sexualization of difference, but the convergence of excitement at sexual and textual domination: "he wanted to be in that room alone with her, to light a fire and have her take him into a tropical December and have her show him its jungle and tell him its strange tales" (46). Selwyn plunders Ella both physically and mentally for novelty.

His efforts result in the coon show *Caribbean Nights and Days*, which he directs and produces. Ella's reactions to the show are pivotal to her story:

They were all there. Anita, Mammy Mary, Teacher, Miss Amy, Miss Gatha, the Baptist Reverend, Ole African. Everyone of them Grove Town people whom Ella had known was there. Like an old army boot, they were polished, wet, polished again and burnished. The black of

their skins shone on stage, relieved only by the white of their eyes and the white of the chalk around their mouths. Everybody's hair was in plaits and stood on end and everybody's clothes were the strips of cloth she had told him Ole African wore. Ella groaned. Where was Mammy Mary's cool tan-tuddy-potato skin? The major character was a white-skinned girl. Ella was the star. He had given her flowing blonde hair. Our heroine was chased by outstretched black hands grabbing at her and sliding, and being forced into somersaults as they missed their target throughout the *Caribbean Nights and Days*. "It didn't go so," she said under breath. And these were the last words that escaped her lips for sometime. (83-84)

Selwyn takes Ella's history, irons out its complexities, and turns it into spectacle. His is the peculiar neo-colonial violence of tourism, which seeks out difference in the form of entertainment, only to force it back into comfortably familiar black/white stereotypes that obscure half the story. His encounter with difference, then, goes through stages of fetishization, domination, appropriation, and neutralization. Selwyn's text is indeed lit by that fatal colonizer's light of which Glissant writes: unable to register the subtle twilights of Ella's experience, Selwyn's narrative clearly divides the world into black villains and blond victims. He exorcizes all doubleness or hybridity from his text, and de-realizes Ella's story. In terms of the controlling metaphor of the novel, Selwyn violates the *spirit* of Ella's story.

But if the novel goes to great lengths to show the twinning of Selwyn's bodily and mental violation of Ella, it also insists that that violation cannot in any *simple* way be considered rape. For Selwyn undoubtedly objectifies Ella, but she is also complicitous in her textual and sexual objectification. As Maydene Brassington remarks: "Is not all the time is somebody do something; sometimes is you do your own self something" (94).¹¹ The novel's twinning of the textual and the sexual should apply to Ella as well. It is thus reasonable to think that she offers Selwyn both her sex and her text. She enjoys telling him about her past just as much as she enjoys touching him and she longs for his sexual attention. But her sexual desire is inseparable from her longing to have a child, and that longing is not a wholly autonomous one; it stems at least partly from Ella's inscription into a historically determined text of gender expectations. Simply put, she "knew

that if you lived with a man, especially if you were married to him, after about a year of marriage, your stomach should be big and you should be about to bear a child" (82).

Ella's complicity in her sexualization/textualization thus occurs at the cusp of power and powerlessness. Perhaps *Myal* focusses on moments of complicity because these are also the moments when the oppressed reveal their agency. And it is on that same agency that the possibility of resistance is predicated. What is crucial and so very impressive about this novel is its ability to reclaim the possibility of resistance and reversal in the very acts of complicity and domination. In the following passage, critical to Ella's achievement of knowledge, *Myal* refigures Selwyn's sexual possession of Ella as a breaking of the barrier that separated her mind from her body:

With her hymen and a couple of months of marriage gone, there was a clean, clear passage from Ella's head through her middle and right down to outside. Poisons drained out of her body. When she flexed her big toe, she could feel the muscles in her head react. Her parts were at one with each other. And even her mind came into the act. It was now struggling for a balance with her body. For years there had been something like gauze in her head where she supposed her mind to be. It stretched flat across her head, separating one section of her mind from the other—the top of the head from the bottom of the head. In there were Peter Pan and Lucy Gray and Dairy Maid and at one time Selwyn—the top section. At the bottom were Mammy Mary and them Grove Town people. She knew they were there but if she ever tried to touch them or to talk to them, the gauze barrier would push back her hand or her thoughts. . . . Selwyn had somehow managed to push his way in to them [the Grove Town people] and it seemed that Peter and Lucy and Dairy Maid had taken some sort of holiday, or perhaps they had gone away for good since Selwyn paid them no mind, asking no questions about them, though he knew very well that they existed.

. . . After a couple of 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. (80-81)

It is Selwyn's neo-colonial interest in her stories that makes Ella value them. His opportunistic sexual/textual possession of Ella thus becomes the means by which she overcomes her alienation

from her past. The breaking of the gauze-like membrane figures a reconnection of mind and body, the breaking of a mental barrier that separated the English people from the Grove Town people, the colonialist text from the text of her life experience. For the first time the two texts occupy the same space in Ella's head. Only then can she interrogate the colonialist text with the Grove Town text. She begins to read the colonialist text without awe or acceptance, and the Grove Town text without alienation; she can finally "touch" (81) their textual subjects. This process of inter-illumination of texts is central to *Myal's* production of knowledge; it is the means by which Ella realizes herself and her community.

Selwyn's production of *Caribbean Nights and Days* breaks through the last of the gauze, and coincides with Ella's realization that "[i]t didn't go so" (84). At the threshold of this painful knowledge, Ella "trip[s] out" (84) and does not utter a word for sometime. To Selwyn's horror, her belly swells with a baby, but we know she has not had sex. Western medicine cannot explain or cure her condition, so Selwyn ships her back to Grove Town, and it is there that the exorcism takes place to "get that grey mass out of that rigid, staring, silent female" (1). The exorcism and its results echo through the human and natural worlds: trees have memories and weep with the wounds of history; Maas Cyrus's spittle becomes lightning; there is a huge and destructive electric storm and much "banging and ringing and splitting and weeping" (3).

Through this fantastic collaboration of Maas Cyrus the herbalist, the plant world, and the community of resistance, Ella is cured. She gives birth to a white, still doll, flesh without will. The image of the doll doubles the description of Ella as an "alabaster baby" (4) and it recalls the doll Maas Levi used to zombify Anita. The stinking doll to which Ella gives birth also embodies the stories that have left her body: "He was busy with *Caribbean Nights and Days*. . . . She would be so pleased to see what had been done with all that had left her body" (82). Ella's giving birth to the doll thus exorcizes from her body a zombie as well as zombifying texts. It is this draining of zombifying texts that brings Ella clarity (81). The exorcism has been the moment of her self-birthing.

In the peculiar doubling of meaning that we now recognize to be characteristic of *Myal*, we see the birth of a dead baby “doubling” as the birth of resistance. *Myal*’s theory of resistance, then, depends on being able to locate the possibility of healing in the very act of violence. To extend Evelyn O’Callaghan’s observation made in another context, if Selwyn Langley’s “break-in” to Ella leads to her “breakdown,” it also results in a “breakthrough.”¹² Thus Ella’s “tripping out” can be understood as incapacitation as well as a refusal to give Selwyn more stories. The metaphor of healing itself must unsettle the distinctions between disease and cure; the lines between being a “doctor,” “doctoring” or falsifying, and “indoctrinating” are thin indeed. As Ole African says to Rev. Simpson: “You are the smallpox, teacher. You learn the outer’s ways, dish it out in little bits, an antidote man, against total absorption” (68). Like a smallpox vaccine, Simpson is both disease and cure. Or, to use the novel’s recurrent images of espionage and coded resistance, he has infiltrated the church. He is a “double agent,” as it were. Simpson says:

My people have been separated from themselves[,] White Hen [Maydene Brassington], by several means, one of them being the printed word and the ideas it carries. Now we have two people who are about to see through that. . . . People who are familiar with the print and the language of the print. Our people are now beginning to see how it and they themselves, have been used against us. Now, White Hen, now, we have people who can and are willing to correct images from the inside, destroy what should be destroyed, replace it with what it 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. (109-10)

This correcting of images from the inside involves doubling meanings, which in turn figures the possibility of reversal. After the exorcism, Ella becomes a double agent; she learns how to dialogize texts and wrest new meanings from them. In learning to manipulate meanings, she inscribes herself in another historical text, that of coded resistance, “polite rebellion,” double entendre.¹³

Ella engages this tradition when she teaches the colonialist allegory “Mr. Joe’s Farm” to the Grove Town school children. Recognizing the similarities between “Mr. Joe’s Farm” and *Caribbean Nights and Days* (the text of that other writer, Selwyn Lang-

ley), Ella realizes that both engage in spirit thievery by robbing their characters of their possibilities (106). Indeed, the first two principles of spirit thievery are: "Let them feel that there is nowhere for them to grow to. Stunt them. . . . Let them see their brightest ones as the dumbest ever. Alienate them" (98). Ella's students will probably be required to continue reciting "Mr. Joe's Farm." However, when they do, it will no longer be only the colonizer's voice that sounds through them, but another, *interruptive*, voice as well, that is, their own.

Resistance in the text thus proceeds through a series of half measures. The word in language is only *half* someone else's. In Bakhtinian terms, Ella and her students learn to dialogize an authoritarian, monologic discourse. Ella teaches the allegory with a knowledge of the "alternatives," the obscured possibilities of the characters in the allegory. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the community of resistance—Maas Cyrus, Ole African, Rev. Simpson, Miss Gatha, Maydene Brassington—communicate with one another using code names—the names of the animals in the allegory. Thus the entire narrative of *Myal* also disrupts the allegory; the novel as a *whole* enacts an alternative ending to the allegory, one in which they do not return to work for Mr. Joe, but go to work for their collective liberation.

Both by authoring new texts and by opening up alternative reading positions in existing texts, *Myal* tries to tell the half that has not been told. The novel is thus deeply attentive to the multiple and complex ways in which our experience is textualized. To make sense of the multi-storied and temporally interrupted novel, the reader of *Myal* has to occupy a position similar to Ella's. Both readers have to weigh competing narratives, dislodge previous knowledges, and slowly piece meaning together. To use a metaphor from the novel, interpreting the text involves "fishing the bits out like a doctor carefully treating a wound" (90). Making sense of the texts thus involves bringing to the surface hidden stories and obfuscated truths. In "Mr. Joe's Farm," "all the animals . . . are ignorant all the time" (106). The novel's task is to bring to light that which the colonialist narratives render opaque: the possibilities of the Other half. Against the colonialist's linear and "transparent" narrative, which sup-

presses half the story, *Myal* sets its narrative of doubling, a narrative that is dense with possibilities.

As I have shown, the narrative strategy of doubling serves several purposes: it evokes the cultural and racial heterogeneity of Jamaica; it figures the reconnection of mind and body, the restoration to wholeness of people who have been split in half; it is the means by which texts are hybridized and appropriated; and it signals the possibility of reversal and renewal. *Myal* thus shares with postmodernism the vocabulary of doubleness, ambivalence, hybridity, and textual proliferation. However, unlike much postmodernist discourse, it retains a commitment to the categories of truth and error, knowledge and ignorance. Thus, while Jean-François Lyotard claims a transhistorical "irremediable opacity at the very core of language,"¹⁴ *Myal's* interest is in the opacities of *particular* historical narratives. *Myal* dramatizes the difficulty of knowing; it does not assert the impossibility of knowing. The novel's suggestion that texts can yield knowledge about the world returns us to the metaphors of light and vision of Glissant's realism: "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" (81). The "truth" (55) towards which Ella moves is that the colonialist narratives offer an inadequate account of reality: "It didn't go so" (84), she realizes.

Myal's proliferation of narratives does not, then, assert the equivalence of all texts.¹⁵ Its multiple narratives are not unconnected and discrete; they are related and conflicting. Indeed, doubling becomes a strategy for resisting and *refusing* colonialist narratives; it permits us to read the colonialist narrative in another light, as it were. The subjectification of the colonized depends on this ability to re-vision their reality, to provide an account of it which brings to light their possibilities. *Myal's* project of re-construction is thus tied to the project of recognition. The novel's faith in a poetics of doubleness, a "twilight poetics" that walks the border between obscurity and illumination, derives from the belief that it is at their borders that texts first fray, and it is there that the fabric of colonial narratives is most liable to be torn.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 Glissant's warnings against cultural mimicry do not, however, originate in nativist cultural purism. On the contrary, he opposes imitation largely because he sees it as the antithesis of the creolization and cultural cross-fertilization that he seeks (Glissant 46).
- 2 See also Glissant 75-76: "In this totalizing equilibrium a hierarchy was established, from Caliban to Prospero. . . . The hierarchical system instituted by Hegel (ahistory, prehistory, History) corresponds clearly with the literary ideology of his time." For other theorizations of the co-implication of Literature and History in colonial legitimation and consolidation, see Said and Viswanathan.
- 3 Much feminist work has been done to expose the collusion between positivist objectivity and objectification. See, for example, Harding.
- 4 One has only to look at the jacket blurbs which hail many minority or postcolonial writers as accomplished postmodernists. See, for instance, the jacket of Helena Maria Viramontes's *The Moths and Other Stories*. I do not at all wish by this observation to suggest that *all* postcolonial novels are realist, although the particular strand of postcolonial writing that I wish to explore in this essay is the postcolonial Caribbean realist novel. Furthermore, it is not only at the metropolitan centers and through metropolitan reading practices that texts are "postmodernized." Neo-colonialism results in the export and hegemony of metropolitan epistemological paradigms to the peripheries as well, where existing configurations of global power exert an imitative pressure. Ironically, Glissant's remark that (formal) realism in the ex-colonies is an essentially imitative enterprise (see 46, 242, 256) may today apply better to postmodernism.
- 5 This particular description is used with reference to Ella's maternal grandparents and mother, who are Africans, but light-skinned and fine-featured. But it applies with equal poignancy to Ella's acute sense of her own racial "strangeness."
- 6 *The Dictionary of Jamaican English* defines myal variously as "sorcerer," "wizard," "intoxication," "return," "formal possession by the spirit of a dead ancestor," and "the dance done under possession." Myalism is almost always curative, and can be used to counter obeah, which can cause sickness or death (qtd. in Cooper 92).
- 7 See Cooper (70) for an account that places *Myal* in a tradition of writing that uses spirit possession as a figure for liberation. Cooper astutely observes that "the accreted negative connotations of the word 'zombie' —in English— thus encode the acculturation or zombification process itself."
- 8 Once again the cry against sexual oppression, "let me go," evokes cries against other historical oppressions when Rev. Simpson sings "Let my people go" (36). The stoning of Anita thus resonates with colonial domination and also sets the tone for the violence of sexual relations between men and women in the novel. Anita's mother, Euphemia, "still choked on the stale hurt that had brought Anita into the world" (40). In a parallel episode to Anita's, Ella O'Grady's mother, Mary Riley (whose motherhood itself testifies to her sexual possession by a white man) fears that Ella will be raped: "It worried her that some little boy's curiosity would one day get the better of him and the next thing she would know is that Ella would come home with her clothes torn off her back and something in her belly" (48). I will return to the "curiosity" of Ella's husband, Selwyn Langley about Ella. For the moment, suffice it to say, in Mary Riley's words: "Marriage have teeth" (52).
- 9 For lack of a better formulation, I use this phrase to underscore the novel's interest in the doubleness of every union.
- 10 Helen Tiffin remarks that "[t]hrough the English character, Maydene Brassington (White Hen), Brodber seems to suggest a possible reading position for the former imperialists which is not one of *absolute exclusion*. . . . Brodber's portrait of

- the Englishwoman indicates to a white audience the *minor role* a genuinely involved local sympathizer might play in the process [of recuperating the Jamaican community from a destructive history of English political and textual control]" (emphasis added; Tiffin 34). I believe, however, not only that Maydene Brassington's role is more than a "minor role" of partial inclusion, but that it is *fundamental* to *Myal's* anti-essentialist politics that Maydene Brassington have a role on par with that of the others in the community of resistance. It is certainly true that her interventions are at first viewed with a historically justifiable suspicion. But, as Amy Holness observes when Maydene offers her reasons for wanting to adopt Ella, "you never know who is going to set the balance right" (26). Later, it is Maydene Brassington whom Miss Gatha chooses to carry "classified information" (77). Maydene Brassington's *crucial* role in setting the balance right is asserted both at the level of plot and at the level of the valorized themes of hybridization and of infiltration as a means of resistance.
- 11 See also *Myal* (84), where Ella struggles to understand the extent of her responsibility in her own subjugation.
 - 12 Drawing on R. D. Laing's conception of madness as a liberation from false values which leads to a rebirth of the "true self," O'Callaghan argues that "[m]adness (schizophrenia), seen in this light, may be 'breakthrough' as well as 'breakdown'" (104).
 - 13 For historical analyses of such resistance, see Scott and Okihiro. For a theorization of a literary tradition based on coded communication, see Gates. For instances in *Myal* of polite linguistic rituals and subterfuge that both conceal and reveal, see the encounters between Amy Holness and Maydene Brassington.
 - 14 Jean-François Lyotard. "Rules and Paradoxes in a Svelte Appendix." *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986-87): 216 (qtd. in Sangari 244).
 - 15 For a far-reaching critique of the relativism implicit in much postmodern theory, see Mohanty.
 - 16 For their immensely helpful criticisms on an earlier version of this paper, I am deeply indebted to Satya Mohanty, Biodun Jeyifo, Debra Castillo, Olakunle George, Rebecca Egger, Laura García-Moreno, Cathy Den Tandt, Laura Murray, and Carlos Cañuelas. I owe them more thanks than I can possibly express here.

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