

Erna Brodber's *Myal*: THEORIZING THROUGH NARRATIVE

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SUMARIO

A pesar de décadas de estudios y debates poscoloniales, nuestros currículos subgraduados de inglés continúan siendo anglocéntricos debido, en parte, a la desconexión que existe entre la investigación y la docencia. Según Christian (1995), Docker (1995) y Mukherjee (1995), hay que integrar los productos de la investigación al salón de clases, especialmente la teorización a través de la narrativa. Este trabajo ilustra cómo hacerlo usando la novela *Myal*, de Erna Brodber. Esta novela cuestiona la idea de una autonomía individual mostrando cómo la identidad y el conocimiento son construidos por fuerzas socioculturales. También señala cómo el reconocimiento y el cuestionamiento de estas fuerzas y fuentes fomentan la creatividad y el cambio. La discusión de *Myal* en el salón de clases es un ejemplo de cómo iniciar a los estudiantes en el examen de sus propias identidades, creencias y suposiciones. Al hacer teoría a través de la narrativa, éstos aprenderán a disputar con los textos, no sólo a consumirlos. Además, sugiere un papel más prominente para la docencia en el quehacer poscolonial.

Palabras clave: currículo anglocéntrico, Erna Brodber, *Myal*, crítica literaria, teoría literaria, ficción caribeña

ABSTRACT

Despite decades of post-colonial research and debate, our undergraduate English curriculums remain anglocentric partly due to a disconnection between research and teaching. Following Christian (1995),

Docker (1995) and Mukherjee's (1995) suggestion to bring the products of our research into the classroom, especially theorizing through narrative, this paper illustrates how to do this using Erna Brodber's novel, *Myal*. This novel questions notions of individual autonomy by showing how identity and knowledge are constructed, and how recognition and interrogation of the social forces and sources involved in this construction foster creativity and agency. The discussion of *Myal* in the classroom is one example of how to initiate students in the examination of their own identities, ideological beliefs and assumptions. Theorizing through narrative will teach students to quarrel with their texts, not simply to consume them. Furthermore, it suggests a more prominent role for teaching in the post-colonial endeavor.

Key words: anglocentric English curriculum, Erna Brodber, *Myal*, literary criticism, literary theory, Caribbean fiction

■ The Problem

Despite decades of post-colonial research and debate, many undergraduate English curriculums remain anglocentric partly due to the disconnection between research and teaching. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995), Part III, this issue is discussed at length in essays dating from the 1970s and '80s. These essays argue for change in the anglocentric curriculums that perpetuate the master narratives contested by post-colonial literary production. Docker (1995) underscores the fact that despite much post-colonial research and criticism, actual teaching remains anglocentric. Although academics are researching, debating and deconstructing the master narratives, the undergraduate curriculum remains virtually unchanged. He challenges post-colonial researchers to go beyond textual analysis and use their research as a tool to question the English curriculum. Mukherjee (1995) broadens the discussion of the disconnection between research and teaching to include the problem of how analyses are emptied of their subversive content by students falling back into the universalizing generalizations of their comfort zones. I read this as a form

of what Festinger (1957) has called cognitive dissonance; i.e. when something does not fit with what we know and believe it creates dissonance, which is evaded by avoiding the uncomfortable information or forcing it to fit. Christian's (1995) view on literature as a way of doing theory, which integrates affect and intellect, would, I suspect, reduce dissonance. She explains how people of color have always theorized through narrative forms, a mode patently distinct from the abstract Western way of theorizing. She ends with an important question that is still on the table five years into the twenty first century: "For whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?" (p. 460).

This paper is an attempt to respond to these important concerns and articulate an answer to this question by first arguing for the elevating of teaching to a central role in the post-colonial endeavor as an effort to begin transforming our curriculums. The focus of the recommended curricular change will be on opening students to the debates (not the answers) of post-colonial studies through the study of narratives that theorize. Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988) will be used to illustrate how the constructs of post-colonial research can be used for and by our students to better read their world. *Myal* questions notions of individual autonomy by showing how identity and knowledge are constructed, and how recognition and interrogation of the social forces and sources implicated in this construction foster creativity and agency. The discussion of *Myal* in the classroom is one example of how to initiate students in the examination of their own identities, ideological beliefs and assumptions. Theorizing through narrative will teach students to quarrel with their texts, not simply to consume them. Furthermore, it suggests a more prominent role for teaching in the post-colonial endeavor.

■ The Context

Schumacher (1973) says that education should not be the mere transmission of facts, but should offer a toolbox of ideas with which to understand the world, i.e. ideas to think through. In this light, education should be a process of strengthening one's ability to interpret the world. Therein lies the virtue of theory

in undergraduate education; it helps students read their world better because it uncovers new questions. Theorizing gives a fresh look at old things and makes visible the invisible. Education without this component is only half the story. What is present in our curriculum is many times merely ideology-fixed ideas that respond to the perpetuation of specific socio-political positioning. Theory, as used here, is not fixed;¹ it is the engagement of the imagination in contemplation and questioning of received ideas. This essay will specifically explore how *Myal* offers a post-colonial perspective that can inform our teaching.

At the University of Puerto Rico, the site from which I will respond to the issues raised by Docker (1995), Mukherjee (1995) and Christian (1995), the limitations of an anglocentric literary tradition are compounded by a focus on skills development. In the lower level,² both in the College of General Studies as well as in the College of Humanities, the educational objective is too narrowly construed on preparing students in English language skills that will allow them to compete favorably in the marketplace. Students' eyes are centered on the economic prize. We, the teachers, perhaps, are inadvertently complicit with the capitalist and colonialist project that underlies this focus, and also with the classism which tracking students entails, when we allow this state of affairs to persist. Theorizing through fiction —Christian's narrative approach to theory, not the Western abstract "objective" view— would put us and our research at the service of our students, and, hopefully, the students at the service of our country. Theory would allow us to give them new eyes with which to decide whom and how they wish to serve, because they are always serving some ideas. Taking my cue from Christian, students should be confronted with the problem of the production and legitimization of knowledge, as espoused by the new General Studies Mission and problematized in *Myal*, but as yet to trickle down in any significant way into our English curriculum.

Puerto Rico inhabits a very Bhabhian interstitial space,³ which is *almost the same* as the neo-colonial space occupied by independent ex-colonies, *but not quite* for our 21st Century U.S.

colony. Post-colonial theory seems to be that site immediately beyond our current state, which will open a door to contemporary debates and possibilities for new ways of seeing, that are directly needed by our students if they are to become agents for positive sociopolitical change. Post-colonial theorizing through literature would help our students to begin to think about important questions on the production of knowledge:

- How is it that certain claims to knowledge are able to secure epistemic authority at particular times, in particular ways, and for particular purposes?
- What are the processes by which old knowledge claims are rejected and new ones gain legitimacy?
- How do elements of the old persist in the new? (Miller, 2001).

The lower level students at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) are positioned to understand and profit by these debates because they are the marginalized within this marginal society, and the discourses they have been exposed to through education have been used to keep them in their place.⁴ Their very placement in the skills-based English courses at the university perpetuates this marginalization.

UPR English level placement is determined by test scores, which unsurprisingly correlate with class provenance. Private school graduates average 87 points higher on the ESLAT than public school graduates (Maldonado, 2001). These public school graduates, who account for two thirds of the student body (Maldonado, 2001) populate the lower level courses in our system of tracking. They are the product of a school system analogous to Nekhwevha's (1999) description of education in post-colonial Namibia and South Africa, one where:

external, global, market-related influences are prime considerations which a country ignores at its peril. A country's future, the argument goes, is to integrate its polity, economy, and critically, its education system into the standardised structure of the world system. The effect of this is to universalize as common currency the hegemonic

knowledge system of the Western world. In pursuit of this, not unexpectedly, local considerations, local knowledges and local understandings of the world are cast aside (p. 498).

Post-colonial theorizing through literature is a way to address this educational deficiency, a way of rethinking the world. Tikly (1999) adopts this approach using the word post-colonial to mean:

a general ‘process of disengagement with the whole colonial syndrome which takes many forms’ (Hulme, 1995) and ‘the contestation of colonial domination and of the legacies of colonialism’ (Loomba, 1998). If the term is understood at this level of abstraction it is possible to keep in mind the global experience of European colonialism as a general referent whilst leaving room for the careful study of the effects of colonialism in specific contexts (p. 605).

This approach will enable students to place their Puerto Rican experience within a global context and thereby make connections that will allow them to better understand how they are positioned in and by the world. Theory will serve as a means to “alter and reconstruct Western conceptions of knowledge, value, language and the subject” (Ahmed, 1996) giving them that post-colonial gaze that goes beyond changing the “*narratives* of our histories” to “transform[ing] our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical” (Bhabha, 1994). Following Coles (1989), I propose that the call of fiction can make post-colonial debates part of our students’ mind’s life. To illustrate this, I will use *Myal* as an example of theorizing through literature to present how post-colonial constructs can be made accessible to our students as a tool to better read the world.

Myal is the story of a community coming together in its own best interest to know and strengthen itself through the integration of knowledges. Set in early twentieth century Jamaica, it explores half truths, denied knowledges, and misrepresentation as instruments of colonial control and subordination. Brodber embeds the story of two young girls, Ella and Anita, in a hybrid

text that intricately weaves diverse voices and times in a non-linear narrative that reveals cracks in the colonial edifice. Ella and Anita's spirits are stolen and the Myalist team is engaged to restore them through spiritual knowledge. It is not a back to primal knowledge story or one of nationalist insularism, but one in which all knowledges have a role and come together in a transforming interaction which questions who and for what purposes knowledges are advanced or suppressed. *Myal* disrupts common binaries to show a world of flux and negotiation.

■ Maydene: The Cusp

In phonetics we learn that sounds, although perceived as discrete, are continuous and overlapping. Acoustic phonetics has shown this to be so. Technology has allowed this field to record and map sound waves, zoom in on the boundaries and actually see the overlap, see these dynamic processes at work. Despite this reality, our minds parse the sound stream into distinct segments; we hear a word and can spell it out as if it were made up of discrete units. The continuity and overlap of sounds in spoken language is what makes a language we do not master so difficult to understand even when we have a reading knowledge of it. We are unable to parse it, break it up into those units that make it intelligible; this inability correlates with the acoustic data. The point is that things are not what they seem. What appears to be separately apprehensible is really a very fluid and dynamic process. Different articulations enter into negotiation at these borderlines, in this third space, a space of ongoing construction—almost the next sound, but not quite.

In *Myal* this same type of dynamism is subsumed under the word “cusp”. The narrative introduces the concept very early on and it offers a handle on this non-binary way of seeing. While students have been schooled to separate and fragment the world in order to understand it, the notion of “cusp” takes them into a new space that shows the world as a place of negotiation.

From the moment we meet Maydene Brassington, the white British wife of the Methodist minister, we are introduced to the

idea of knowing as a dynamic process of approximations and ambivalence:

This was the time of day that Maydene liked. The gloaming. No. Twilight. Not that. The dusk. No. Nightfall. Yes. The right word at last. That was Maydene. The effort to be true to any place or situation that she found herself in. If she were in the British Isles, the time of day that meant so much to her would have been called the “gloaming” but she was in St. Thomas, Jamaica. 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 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 (p. 13).

Her knowledge is slowly constructed through observation, contemplation and an openness to change. “No,” “not,” “no,” “still missing,” “cusp,” “creation” mark her ambivalent progression. Part of this ambivalence is tied to the context dependency of words. Words mean as a function of their social use not by a mere referent that can be looked up in the dictionary or pointed to in “reality.” (A similar approximation occurs with the naming of the drums). Complicating the issue further is the notion that, not only is there no direct link between signifier and signified, the more abstract the concept, the more indeterminate the meaning. It is a very anti-essentialist, non-binary world that is found at the cusp, and Maydene greets this space with delight because she recognizes it as a space of creativity.

It is interesting to note that colonial discourse is disturbed and its authority questioned in *Myal* by a British national. Maydene appropriates a new term that subverts the precedence of “gloaming”—the proper English denomination. The British Maydene is located at the periphery of the Jamaican community that is centered in the novel. Her superiority and authority are compromised both at the personal and social level, and thus

begins her hybridization, i.e. her movement towards a subjectivity constructed through interaction with her new environment and community.

In contradistinction, we are told that most people in the district are unlike Maydene. They dismiss difference as strange, therefore, shy away from her. They are the ones that would insist that the word “cusp” is produced with four discrete sounds, they are the ones unaware that perception is a process of interpretation; it is not direct and unmediated.

Maydene’s cusp resonates with Bordo’s (1992) characterizing of the “world travelling thinker” as she who truly goes beyond mouthing jargon on multiplicity and difference garnered only from texts, not practice, because Maydene goes beyond appreciation of difference to really “nurture those places where worlds meet”. Maydene is not quick to impose her pre-given interpretive frame on her new environment. Through Maydene’s adoption of “nightfall” she decenters herself and accepts another worldview. Her suspension of her own construct, gloaming, demonstrates an openness to see things afresh. She challenges herself to think differently, and meeting her should challenge our students to do the same.

This does not mean that she sheds all her previous assumptions, it only means an awareness and respect for difference. She wants to help her husband, William, a mixed blood Jamaican Baptist minister schooled in England whose reticence about serving the poor Grove Town community worries her. With great difficulty she chews on the problem and, as she struggles to make sense of it, she realizes any Jamaican woman would have figured it out already. This revelation undermines her belief in the joining of cultures instilled in her by her father. Here she questions the cusp she so delightfully embraced a few paragraphs before. This shows that in the acquisition of knowledge there is no smooth, progressive movement but a tension between old and new ways of seeing.

Maydene’s character challenges the idea that, as a white person, inherent ethnocentric bias will not allow her to integrate into her new community. In De Turk’s (2001) exploration of inter-

cultural empathy as a site for alliance building, she postulates a dialogic view of empathy, which resonates with the post-colonial view depicted in *Myal*, that knowledge comes into being in the between spaces, co-constructed in the social act. Maydene's empathy is of this kind. She decenters her perception and moves into the cusp. *Myal*, through the concept of cusp and the integration of Maydene into the Myalist team, depicts how intercultural negotiation can lead to transformation by giving precedence to intention over provenance or race.

William, Maydene's husband, although Jamaican, is less integrated into the community than she is. This forces the reader to consider how subjectivity is constructed and how simple binary analyses are inadequate. The text allows no simple insider vs. outsider, British vs. Jamaican, man vs. woman dichotomy to persist. Nor does the narrative's underscoring of the complexity of social interactions allow any oversimplification of the issues associated with subject formation. The narrative introduces the question of whether identity is autonomous or if it is a dynamic construction contingent upon the roles assumed (or thrust upon us) in society. One can be a subject, like Maydene, who is actively and consciously making her way in life, or one like William (also, Ella and Anita) who has been emptied of himself and, zombie-like, follows the order of others.

Myal further problematizes social positioning by questioning who is an outsider and who is an insider. Maydene may not be inside at the beginning of the novel; more properly she is entering. Empathy, of the dialogic kind discussed above, not the common idea of an internal, individual, psychological process which gives a person heightened sensitivity towards other individuals, makes her an agent of her own positioning. Despite being an upper class, white woman from England, she is able to shed the socially constructed elements of this identity (she can't change her birthplace or color) and become a Myalist, symbolic of the root concerns of community. William, on the other hand, is an insider on the outside, totally estranged by his education, out-of-touch with his community and, moreover, working against its best interests.

Oczkowicz's (1998) triadic analysis of characterization and identity formation in *Myal* illustrates the complexity and significance of participation in social networks. She shows the overlaps, intersections and embeddedness of relationships. As in grammatical analysis, the underlying structure reveals how positioning favors, limits, traces, governs and binds the number and type of constituents that appear at the surface. Constituents are interdependent, and their value depends on their relation to other terms within the system.

Puri (1993) makes an analogous distinction between Western formal realism, wherein the omniscient narrator and linear narrative serve to erect binarisms, and Glissant's epistemological realism, which is a deep structure account revealing the underlying meaning in the political project of collective subjectification of the colonized. Puri concludes that "*Myal* functions in this hybridizing tradition of twilight or cusp poetics... by blurring the borders that divide the living from the dead, domination from resistance, dispossession from repossession, power from subjugation". All these issues can be brought to bear through the novel to heighten students' awareness of their own subjectivities as socially, multiply and continuously constructed in order for them to begin to uncover how and who they are.

Myal also raises the question of how William, the outside insider, arrived at such a sorry state. As the novel pursues this question, the reader is confronted with the issue of educational and religious complicity in domination through a false epistemic authority based on Eurocentric master narratives. This issue is indelibly tied to the novel's play on insiders and outsiders. Maydene, an outsider, has ventured into the dialogic process of the cusp. William, an insider, remains outside, in the world of binaries that requires a hat at church, not a headtie. His spirit has been stolen and he in turn steals the spirits of others. Spirit thieves, as we shall see, are both insiders and outsiders. The need to reevaluate what it means to be an insider again shows the indeterminacy and contingency of meaning and subjectivity. One criterion for teasing apart these notions is complicity.

■ Spirit Thievery

Our students are a product of the type of education described in *Myal*, an education that splits the self through the imposition of hegemonic discourse and the seeding of dependency. *Myal* raises the question of how, through misrepresentation, texts (oral, performed, written) legitimate colonialist interests and produce stereotypes that lead to feelings of inferiority, helplessness and dependency. The novel also proves who is complicit in these processes of domination. Education, religion, lovers, outsiders, and insiders all participate. They aid and abet the power structure by telling only half the story. This is called spirit thievery in the novel. The antidote to this state of affairs is an inoculation of knowledge.

The metaphor of inoculation is very apt. Just like a small pox vaccine exposes the immune system to a little live virus, and the body thereby learns the structure of the disease and produces antibodies to fight it, *Myal* proposes that the teachers and ministers “learn the other’s ways, dish it out in little bits, an antidote man, against total absorption. You see their plans clearly, can follow more closely. You see where to put what, to change what. You change those books...” The questions *Myal* raises about how knowledge is constructed and for what purposes are essential ones for our students to begin suspecting their own social practices. *Myal* goes beyond mere deconstruction, for an understanding of the processes and assumptions underlying texts, to reconstruction and the changing of the books. It does not end in post-modernist angst, but opens up to the possibilities of the full story that undermines the epistemic authority of the colonizer creating a space for negotiation and rewriting.

When we first meet Ella O’Grady, she is portrayed as the “little lady executionist” giving a public recital of Kipling on the glories and love of Empire. She gives voice to the dominant discourse which “splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration”, i.e. spirit thievery. Ella is such a person, split from herself and living in Never Never Land. A sojourn in the United States initiates her reintegration.

Ella's migratory experience and marriage to American Selwyn Langley marks the second stage in her development. This relationship initially creates greater alienation, but eventually makes her aware of the process by which the texts she was schooled on, and so loved, misrepresented her people and her world. Selwyn was the unconscious agent of her awakening.

Intrigued by her "exotic" tales of Jamaica and seeing the commercial potential of such stories, Selwyn decides to use them in his work. After draining her of her stories, he writes and produces *Caribbean Nights and Days*, a stereotyping coon show that misrepresents Jamaica. Selwyn, as spirit thief par excellence, takes Ella's history, remakes her into the lie of "the happiest little married lady on earth" and creates his grand distorting opus. Driven by self-interest, all his creations are misrepresentations predicated upon how he will be served by them, not by any criteria of truth or objectivity. Her shock at the distortion in the play and, moreover, her complicity in giving him the stories is painfully revealing to her and initiates her growth towards awareness, which culminates in the questioning, critical educator she later becomes once back in Grove Town.

The third stage of Ella's development is as a schoolteacher. Her experience in the United States has given her insight into how knowledge can be distorted and manipulated for personal gain. Ella is more aware, deconstructing the paternalistic underpinnings of the textbook farmyard story she must teach her seven-year-old students. This is a story from the *Caribbean Reader* used in Jamaican Schools (O'Callaghan, 1990; Walker, 1992; Kortenaar, 1999), in which the farm animals stage a walk out and discover they cannot survive on their own. The characters are robbed of possibility, denaturalized. The story had "taken the knowledge of their original and natural world away from them and left empty shells – duppies, zombies, living deads, capable only of receiving orders from someone else and carrying them out." She will not teach this to the children.

Ella constitutes herself as an agent of her own and her community's development, distinct from the Ella of the opening passages, who was submerged in the master discourse, or the Ella

emptied by Selwyn for the construction of his text. The new Ella is actively positioning herself and articulating her identity in relation to her community. She is no longer complicit in her own marginalization and will not be complicit in the marginalization of others. Ella learns from Rev. Simpson that the fact that books may be written without awareness cannot be an excuse to teach without it. Books must be read critically, and their messages deciphered and turned around as an antidote to the colonizing view they may contain. As Gee (1990) puts it,

the English teacher can cooperate in her own marginalization by seeing herself as “a language teacher” with no connection to such social and political issues or she can accept the paradox of literacy as a form of interethnic communication which often involves conflicts of values and identities, and accept her role as one who socializes students into a world view that, given its power here and abroad, must be viewed critically, comparatively, and with a constant sense of the possibilities for change. Like it or not, the English teacher stands at the very heart of the most critical educational, cultural and political issues of our time.

Ella no longer cooperates in her own marginalization. She has finally seen the socio-political connections between representation and domination. This awareness will allow her to “short circuit the whole of creation”.

In short, all texts must be read critically and their messages deciphered and turned around as an antidote to the colonizing view they may contain. In *Myal*, Brodber uses the metaphor of inoculation to drive home the need for critical reading, and by extension, a critical pedagogy. In the same vein, De Turk (2001), quoting Swigonski, says,

To survive, subordinate people must be attentive to the perspective of the dominant class as well as their own. As a result they have the potential for “double vision” or double consciousness—a knowledge of, awareness of, a sensitivity to both the dominant world view of society and their own perspective (p. 7).

Ella develops this double consciousness that inoculates her against being infected and consumed by the dominant, paternalistic and stereotypical view perpetuated through widely disseminated texts. A discussion of Ella's characterization and changing subject positions should serve to problematize students' own ideological positions and assumptions, and to foster an examination of their own beliefs to determine how and by whom they have been constituted, what ideologies and discourses they are a product of.

This is not to say that the novel oversimplifies and didactically sermonizes on these issues. Selwyn is not drawn as an evil spirited, mean man. He just lives his life unaware. He is a product of his world, an ordinary, everyday guy that enters a relationship expecting to dominate his spouse and create her in his own image, a common expectation in a patriarchal and consumerist society where the wife is often a complement to advancement. In fact, Selwyn honestly thought that Ella would be honored by his work when she saw it. He had bought her a nice new outfit and she sat among the highest; not only was she the playwright/director's wife, she was also the woman "without whom none of this would have been possible". So he told her.

Selwyn is also a victim of dominant values and representations. Caught up in this web, he is clueless, an unthinking product of his education and social formation. Maydene is his counterpoint. Yet, both Ella and Selwyn gain in their relationship. This wake-up call gives Ella what she needs to become an agent of her own life: awareness. Selwyn gains money and fame, which are his objectives. The hard question for our students is which one do they want? At what cost do they achieve their goals?

Unlike the spirit thief Selwyn, in William Brassington we find a spirit thief that learns Ella's lesson and reforges himself. In his function as minister for the Methodist Church, he only wants to empty the people and refill them with the new (i.e. Eurocentric, "civilizing" mission). Maydene tells him, "William you are a spirit thief." To which he replies, "That is the nature of this kind of ministry—to exorcise and replace." But in Grove Town, the people "resist efforts to separate them from their understanding of life." And, by the end of the novel, William, like Ella, has

awareness and understanding. They are both turned around and become integrated into the Myalist group that is inoculating the community.

Ministers, teachers, and individuals participate in separation, in taking away the knowledge of the self and replacing it with the knowledge that will make them amenable to domination. This is seen in William Brassington's aim to drain people of their old ideas and fill them with the new. It is seen in Selwyn's draining of Ella's stories and then representing Grove Town in stereotypical form. The idea of complicity is driven home in the confrontation between Myal and Obeah. It shows how the brethren, conjure men, voodoo men, wizards and priests, have sold out. These insiders make the people easier to rule through the misuse of native knowledge for personal interest. Like Selwyn's, these brothers' actions are informed by self-interest, not the collective good. They turn their intelligence into a weapon against the community. There is no easy white vs. black in this novel where intention and action take precedence over color.

■ Myal vs. Obeah

The novel sets up an important distinction between Myal and Obeah, i.e. the use of spiritual knowledge for communal health or its misuse for selfish ends, respectively (Schuler, 1979; Maximin, 1999; Walker-Johnson, 1992). This distinction is epitomized by the contrast between the Myal team and Levi. A citizen above suspicion, Levi uses Obeah to cure his impotence by draining the young, bright Anita's energy through possession of her spirit. He does his work in the solitary confinement of the privy, so no one would be privy to his actions.⁵ The Myalists, on the other hand, come together as a community to heal. Maximin attributes this difference between Myal and Obeah to:

a legacy from the Akan, the basic opposition between healer and Obeahman characterizing Myalism matched the Christian antinomy between good and evil. Thus Myalists blended various cultures to uproot wickedness from the community. Their mission involved the whole society and was both African and Christian in scope.

Witchcraft was the target of the cultists' efforts and was identified as the main source of social disorder. It was necessary to fight against it with the help of songs, drums and dancing. While the method is obviously reminiscent of African performances, so are the conceptions that underlie the Myalist practices. According to worshippers, evil could only result from the stealing of one's spirit by a malevolent person.

These religious conceptions of community also inform the analysis of education and personal relationships above. The culprits are both within and external to the community, within and outside the private domains of interaction. In *Myal* these two ethical systems are juxtaposed in the Myalists' communal ceremony and Levi's anti-social behavior (Maximin, 1999). This distinction between Myal and Obeah emphasizes that nothing is exempt from the critical gaze by showing that not everything African is empowering.

Myalism engages the social network in combat, it transcends binaries by integrating men and women in the team as well as persons of different ethnic backgrounds and religious persuasions. Levi's spirit thievery is analogous to the one perpetrated by cultural imperialism in mainstream schools, churches, and homes discussed above. The confrontation between Myalism and Obeah brings another level of complexity to the analysis. Here, a sphere that is many times conceived as outside the mainstream and thereby in some sense pure is shown to be tightly woven into the socio-cultural matrix and, like everything else, must be read critically, because even ancestral knowledges can be misused. *Myal* ends with African knowledge and European trained minds integrated to chart a new course for the nation.

■ Conclusion

The lesson of *Myal* is "to be suspicious of claims of an objective perspective or assertions of disinterested conduct. All viewpoints must be decentered and all actions problematized" (Miller, 2001). In light of this, students must be taught to rule over their education through critical reading and positioning. Unawareness

leaves the spirit vulnerable to thieves. As this analysis has shown, literature is an instrument for bringing into focus many of the sociopolitical and discourse issues raised in post-colonial theory. *Myal* has been used to illustrate how this can be done. It not only “interrupts the English [and American] literary monologue” (Slemon, 1993) that informs our curriculum, but also opens up a space within mainstream literary study for oppositional readings. Just as Ella discovered, the untranscendable urgency of a post-colonial project is a redress of power at the level of its local oppressions, and for this its pedagogy needs to sustain its front-line interventionary work of “correct[ing] images from the inside” (Slemon, 1993), educators should engage our students in critically examining the texts that surround them. Moreover it is a narrative that “might in itself encode a theory of post-colonial or counter-hegemonic teaching within the compromised apparatus of an imperialist English studies” by showing how local and imperial knowledges combine to create new productive possibilities for action through a real critical pedagogy (Slemon, 1993). The twinning of post-colonial theoretical insights and the teaching of English will train our students to *quarrel* with their texts.

Myal breaks down racial dichotomies invented to divide and conquer. The issue of race is not ignored in this novel, but neither is it centered because it does not explain the half of it. Whites and blacks have and share knowledges accessed from outside the official Western sources. Spirit thieves come in all colors. Healers do too. Long face, thin lips, pointed nose, white skin are not the monopoly of whites. Obeah is oppressive even if it comes from Africa. Contradictions abound making it a text of questions more than answers.

Myal opens a virtual post-colonial Pandora’s Box containing many questions to plague colonialism. The novel crosses lines that traditionally divide: colonizer vs. colonized, man vs. woman, white vs. black, insider vs. outsider, traditional knowledge vs. formal schooling, standard language vs. dialect, oral tradition vs. established literary genres, connotation vs. denotation... By magnifying the intersection, the cusp, Brodber makes visible the covert tensions and multiple possibilities for change.

A better understanding of the dynamics embedded within and connecting these categories is an antidote against ideological oversimplifications and rationalizations.

This essay tells less than half the story. Many issues have remained unexplored: the issues of language and translation, called “language rituals” in the novel and which illuminate how we communicate around and between the words we use⁶; the gender issues explored through the many women’s positionings (or refusal) as traditional wife and the move towards autonomy for some; the narrative structure, which gives an interactive voice to the community by representing different perspectives, time frames and spaces; the music metaphor that underlines the importance of acquiring an education while maintaining community resonance and harmony; among others. In fact, it is a Pandora’s Box to plague all oppressions. It should serve our students to raise questions, not find pat answers. They will then begin to be educated in the practice of theorizing not consuming knowledge. The use of *Myal* as a medium for theorizing is just one way we can use our research to serve our students. It will be a step towards helping them to walk away with a toolbox of post-colonial ideas to think through.

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NOTES

- ¹ For those who consider post-colonial theory a new orthodoxy, of course, it is fixed and has become PC (politically correct), as opposed to pc (post-colonial).
- ² Populated by students scoring less than 450 out of 800 on the English part of the College Entrance Examination.
- ³ A fluid, transcultural space marked by change; liminal.

- ⁴ See Finn, 1999 and Willis, 1997 on class stratification and maintenance in schools.
- ⁵ That Anita is the community's brightest, most promising child has its own allegorical content which is beyond the scope of this discussion.
- ⁶ Which forces me to go back to Marshall Morris's *Saying and Meaning* (1981), which angered me on first reading, and reread it with the tools in *Myal*.