

## **“Qu’est-ce Qu’elle Dit? What she say, what she say?” Translating the Resisting Other in Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Writing**

Suzanne Scafe

Abstract: I focus my discussion of Amryl Johnson’s poem “Qu’est-ce Qu’elle Dit”, Erna Brodber’s second novel *Myal*, and Merle Collins’s *The Colour of Forgetting*, on the texts’ representations of cultural difference and cultural transformation. The poem and the novels, I argue, present a version of Caribbean history that resists colonial discourse and that effects a process of healing and recovery from the epistemic violence of colonial historiography and the continued imposition of its cultural norms. At the same time I suggest that part of the process of resistance involves a radical reconceptualising and transformation of the Other. In these texts, what Nathaniel Mackey defines as “artistic othering”(55) is, as I wish to demonstrate in this article, a mode of resistance, a textual strategy that confronts, resists and refuses a too easy re-appropriation of meaning, and yet insists on possibility. I approach the three texts as examples of counter-discursive praxis, as texts which make “an intervention into postcolonial theoretical discourse” (O’Callaghan “Play It Back” 67). Amryl Johnson’s poem, from which the title of this paper comes, is emblematic of the tensions that arise in seemingly paradoxical processes of othering, reintegration and recovery in a creolized Caribbean context.

### **“What she Say? What She Say?”: Untranslatability as “Resistant Othering”**

Homi Bhabha’s repeated reference, by way of Walter Benjamin, to the “‘foreignness’ of cultural translation” (227) can be used to emphasise the importance of cultural difference to any concept of cultural transfer or cultural identification. He draws our attention to the requirement in postcolonial discourse, for “forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublimate otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychic and social identification” (173). Cultural difference is, however, not a fixed, essentialised, untranslatable Other but a set of practices and processes that constitute identity as provisional, as contingent and, almost paradoxically, as available to acts of cultural translation that recognise, even as they perform a translation in language, that a difference will persist, though in another guise, another form (234). It is this paradox that engages my interest and that can be represented through an emphasis in these literary texts on the tension between cultural translation as social and cultural practices of intercultural transfer, and the incommensurability of cultural difference. Whereas Bhabha’s focus is on cultural difference that, in a colonial or postcolonial metropolitan context, is unsettling because it “cannot be readily referenced” (173), Nathaniel Mackey’s concern is with the artist as the agent of cultural othering. For Mackey, the

production of cultural difference can be read as a form of resistance, one that is always tested by the desire to know and to be translated or simply by the desire to communicate. In his essay, “Other: From Noun to Verb,” Mackey reconceptualises the relationship between the subject and its “othered” object. First, he argues: “we need to make it clear that when we speak of otherness we are not positing static, intrinsic attributes or characteristics. We need instead to highlight the dynamics of agency and attribution by way of which otherness is brought about and maintained, the fact that *other* is something people do” (51). Second, he argues that it is important to make the distinction between social othering and artistic othering. Social othering is the exercise of power by a dominant group: it results in marginalisation and exclusion. Artistic othering “has to do with innovation, invention, change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive” (51). This form of othering should be valued and celebrated. Mackey uses the term “resistant othering” (53) to describe the self-consciously disruptive influence of black artistic expression; it is art that announces its variance: the original work is not closed but rather is the beginning of infinite possibility. He continues: “Such othering practices implicitly react against and reflect critically upon the different sort of othering to which their practitioners, denied agency in a society by which they’re designated other, have been subjected” (53). It is cultural production that actively resists commodification and appropriation by the dominant culture and refuses to be tamed. And as such it represents what Stephen Slemon describes as “a differential, contestory, and genuinely *post-colonial* semiotics...in pursuit of political change” (14).

In her introduction to the sound recording of the poem “Qu’est-ce Qu’elle Dit,” Trinidadian-British poet Amryl Johnson explains that she has changed the figure of the *keskidee*’s song – translated by the French colonists as *Qu’est-ce Qu’il dit* – to *Qu’est-ce Qu’elle dit* (what does *she* say?). The poem begins, not with ‘*keskidee*’ but with her gendered revision of the colonial translation of the birdsong, an acknowledgement of the original’s resistance to being known, even to a cultural insider such as the poet herself. At the same time, even as she acknowledges the song’s resistant othering, in her use of the French translation of the birdsong, Johnson recognises the lasting effects of a colonial desire for appropriation and control and the constant safeguarding, on the part of the colonized, against appropriation and assimilation. The birdsong produces in the listener feelings of fear and discomfort: it seems actively to resist translation, to flaunt its incommensurability. In Johnson’s own reading of the poem, her voice becomes high and strained as she reads the lines that follow. We are aware of a

heightened anxiety that develops as the poem progresses, expressed in the short lines that seem to be sliding down the page, away from the speaker's grasp:

The flock come

The interrogation begins

Where are you going?

What did you say?

How will you get there?

What did you say?

What will you find there?

What did you say?

What did you say?

What did you say? (42)

The speaker desires a connection with the birds and the culture that they signify but is prevented because of her difference, dramatised by her entrapment: "the plastic coated meshing/ designed to keep intruders out/obscures my view" and thus she is further alienated from the bird's enigmatic song. The birds become her "tormentors", and their refusal to communicate adds to the rising tension that the poem's crushed lines effect: she hears their "I told you nothing!" as an "indictment" of her cultural difference. "Qu'est-ce qu'elle dit" expresses an unbridgeable cultural difference made more acute by the urgent desire on the part of the listener to "hear," to connect, to communicate.

### **Listening for What is "Outside the Sentence": Mass Cyrus's Score**

Erna Brodber's short but complex novel *Myal* centres on the ontological fracturing of its subject Ella, who has broken down "choked on foreign" (4) and absorbed so much colonial 'education' that she is both physically "choked" and spiritually empty. She has turned into a zombie: "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" (107). Ella's restoration requires the intervention of a Myalist healer and his followers, members of the native Baptist church, whose origins were in North American African-American communities, and the English Maydene Brassington, wife of a 'white' Jamaican Methodist minister. The Myalists movement is in fact an amalgam of various cultures that are "both African and Christian in scope" as are the

Native Baptists (Maximin 52). In fact Erna Brodber points to the radical significance of the Native Baptist church both to slave rebellions and to the post-Emancipation resistance of “freedmen and freemen”, who used and adapted accepted cultural institutions to their needs (*Continent* 64). The Native Baptist church became an example of the “peculiar history” of the Caribbean that pushed African-Jamaicans towards “developing their own institutions rather than towards contemplating participation in the formal political system” (*Continent* 64). The inclusion of the Native Baptists, as well as “Creolised African rituals” reflects her concerns with the recovery of hidden or abused African cultures and practices, ones which, as June Roberts argues, have retained aspects of Muslim African traditions (143-49). Of Obeah in the post-Emancipation period, Brodber writes:

The notion that there was something called *Obeye*, an unseen power within persons singled out by the Almighty to be given special spiritual gifts, had travelled with the Africans to Jamaica. The gifted could conceivably send his power secretly...to avenge effectively. The obeahman or woman became a part of the justice system. With distrust of, unfamiliarity with, and geographic distance from the courts, this way of getting justice was popular among African-Jamaicans. (*Continent* 65)

Without any form of control, obeah as an avenging strategy created “havoc,” for which the Myalists were called to be the “antidote” or “cleaners” (65). In Brodber’s novel, therefore, Ella’s healing, recovery and transformation requires but also reflects and participates in the collective effort of the overlapping, creolized cultures of early twentieth-century Jamaica.

Both within the space of the narrative, and in the readers’ engagement with the text, these overlapping cultural forms resist easy assimilation. As Catherine John observes, “Brodber’s literary style, heavily modernist in persuasion, is a dense, fragmented quagmire of disjointed cultural references, much like the psyche of the subjects she portrays” (73). While the form of Brodber’s novel *Myal* resists easy engagement, however, the production of its creolized themes and content privileges the transformative effects of creolized cultural forms, as well as its characters’ desire to overcome difference, to listen, to hear and to create convergences. So while we as readers and critics are faced with instances of untranslatability, the necessity to produce meaning from unfamiliar signs involves us in processes of translation. In so doing we extend the creolized spaces that the text constructs. Indeed, whereas most critical responses have focused on translating Brodber, on explicating the text’s cultural differences or, as O’Callaghan puts it in her discussion of *Louisiana*, on “rinsing” the text, and

mapping “rational, scholarly hierarchies on to stubbornly resistant [narratives]” (“Play It Back” 58), fewer critics have engaged with the novel’s self-conscious othering. Where resistance is the focus of critical responses, as in the work of Catherine Nelson-McDermott or Neil ten Kortenaar among others, it is treated thematically rather than as a textual strategy.

*Myal*’s “resistant othering” is signalled and elaborated on in its opening chapter that, like the rest of the narrative, is at once both highly figurative and grounded in the everyday realities of early twentieth-century rural Jamaica. I am suggesting that this chapter is analogous to the space which is “outside the sentence,” a concept first articulated by Roland Barthes and theorised by Homi Bhabha to define “this indeterminate space between theory and practice [that] disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot”(181). Here, Brodber uses a seemingly infinite variety of cultural references: their unexpected juxtaposition is in part what dramatizes their untranslatability. In addition, her reference to cultural forms and practices that are particular to rural Jamaica, further emphasise their difference. Mass Cyrus, whose voice opens the first chapter, is the herbalist, hermit and the Myalist charged with diagnosing and healing Ella’s body as well as her mind. As such, he is one of the most important figures in the Myalist group and is a direct descendant of the African medicine man, or what the plantation community termed the “black Doctor” (Senior 341). He is, however, one of the least developed of the characters who form the group of Myal practitioners, and the veil of mystery within which he is cloaked in the opening chapter is not lifted as the narrative progresses. It is Mass Cyrus who diagnoses Ella’s sickness but who also chastises the “trained-minded” people such as William and Maydene Brassington for the discord they produce, the “clashing symbols” of their anxiety:

He spoke very quietly. If those people had only learnt to deal with quietude and silence, they would have seen the notes on his score if not the dulce melodia – sweetly please -, the pp for soft, the diminuendo poco a poco – turn it down please -, and the curlicues for rest that Mass Cyrus face had become. (1)

Using imagery derived from European musical notation, Brodber reverses normal cultural expectations. In its minstrelsy mask, black musical production is caricatured as loud, raucous and jarring, whereas Mass Cyrus characterises the “music”, the manners, the approach and bearing of the European educated or “trained minded” people as harsh and discordant, music which “could shake a man out of his roots” – “roots” here being suggestive of an African-derived culture. Brodber describes

his face using imagery that derives from the European musical score as a way of connecting, and showing that he can connect, with those, such as the Brassington men, who are defined by a colonial cultural heritage. His words also emphasise the need to read into the silence, the gaps, to focus on what is not *said*. Through his own unspoken words he establishes his authority over the process of healing and demonstrates the lesson his spiritual colleagues teach and Ella later learns, that in order to resist the power of colonial systems of knowledge a person has to: “[g]et in their books and know their truth” (67). Knowing “their truth” is, as Ella’s breakdown attests, not the same as uncritically absorbing oppressive ideologies. Silence too is presented in the narrative as ambivalent. Whereas, as I suggest, Mass Cyrus’s silence is a precondition for the creolized processes of healing that return Ella’s mind to her body, her own silence – as zombification – is of course a sign of her disintegration. As Joan Anim-Addo observes:

If Ella, representative of creolisation, can only be silent or zombified, in the midst of such polyphony, then Myal exposes the difficulty of writing the difference which is more than that of gender. (210)

In a reading that might align Ella’s silence with Mass Cyrus’s, David Winks argues that Ella’s translation, her absorption and regurgitation of British imperial culture, results in her collapse, figured in her articulation of “pure material significance” of that culture in the words “‘MammyMary’smulattomusthavematernitywear’”(72). Silence, he suggests, is a means of resisting a translated identity based on what Brodber terms “spirit thievery,” or the theft of African people’s language, culture and world view, resulting in Ella’s case, in the separation of “body from soul” (*Myal* 17). Although “[t]o conclude that silence must be at the heart of translation may appear a concession to its legacy of concealment” (Winks 73), as Mass Cyrus observes, silence is a precondition for listening, itself a precondition for cultural translation that attends to cultural difference.

Mass Cyrus’ emphasis on “quietude and silence” also connects to the “linguistic rituals” of the Grove Town people, their systems of verbal communication by indirection. He says of the Brassingtons, William and his sons, “Another kind of people would have said: ‘Mass Cyrus we need help.’ Just that and shut up. In two two’s the woman would be better.” (1). Throughout the novel, one of the “trained minded,” William Brassington, expresses his impatience with the villagers’ attention to the spaces between words and their refusal to be explicit whereas Maydene, with her determination to be attuned to the cultural nuances of Grove Town, understands these rituals and indirection perfectly.

She interprets the pauses in Amy Holness' speech and understands that when she blandly mentions that she has heard that Maydene wants to take Ella "into" her house, she is really insinuating that, like her mother, Ella will be seduced by the young white "masters," Maydene's sons, who are soon to return from their schooling in England. Maydene correctly traces this practice back to the days of slavery where all meaning had to be coded, clearly situating the novel's contemporary representations within the context of Caribbean history. In the past, she reasons, "those below must hate those above and must devise some way of communicating this without seeming too obviously rude" (21). It also reflects the proverbial structure of the African roots of Caribbean speech, which relies on highly figurative and ritualistic language as a way of communicating meaning. Although Maydene and Mass Cyrus are representative of two seemingly opposed systems of cultural knowledge, in each case, their ability to "get in the[ir] books" of the other enables them to connect with and transform a potentially hostile situation. In this case, unlike Mass Cyrus who has to establish his authority, Maydene has to relinquish hers, which she does with ease and determination. In the process, she breaks down Amy's resistance and again, although the process is not articulated explicitly, a connection is made between the two women, who begin to understand their still fully unexpressed shared experiences.

In the very early image of the musical score, therefore, Brodber signals the central importance in the narrative of creolization, as a theme, a mode of representation and as a sign of its "resistant othering." Several critics have commented on Brodber's literal and figurative use of the specific cultural reality of Jamaica and its creolized cultural practices. Kevin D. Hutchings, for example, argues that the novel's "non-essentialist approach to cultural politics" reflects Brodber's "philosophical attitude toward the heterogeneous nature of Jamaican cultural reality." He continues:

Brodber takes as her *point of departure* the reality of "creolization": a particular instance of intercultural hybridity which profoundly complicates the notion of "roots"...The reality of a process wherein Self and Other become mutually constitutive, despite the insistence of a coercive colonial hierarchy, makes it possible and indeed necessary for Brodber to conceptualise a programme of decolonization and self apprehension which does not subscribe to an inflexibly oppositional understanding of cultural identity.  
(105)

Here Hutchings demonstrates his interest in Brodber's thematic use of creolization as a means of effecting resistance within a heterogeneous community; her complex and inclusive representation of

cultural resistance both to colonial dominance and essentialising “nativism”<sup>1</sup> in the context of a racially and culturally diverse community such as the Caribbean can be precisely characterised as the “dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, native” within which lived cultures of resistance are produced (Bhabha 152). Her text stretches and extends this dialectic across real and imagined time zones, geographical borders and cultural boundaries in a way that reflects Bhabha’s work but also reveals the limitations of his reliance, even as he seeks to contest it, on an oppositional construct of centre and margins as a way of theorising cultural resistance and transformation.

Brodber uses language to demonstrate and celebrate a heterogeneous, creolized community where, at a linguistic as well as thematic level, “Self and Other become mutually constitutive” (Hutchins 105). The effect of the early image of Mass Cyrus’s reference to a European musical score is reproduced in the narrative’s voicing of other forms of European cultural production, effecting what Bakhtin defines as a “sociological stylistics” or the self-conscious, artistic reworking of the heteroglossia that populates all languages (300). Brodber dialogises the speech of what might be perceived as opposing cultures to expose and exploit the interconnectedness of individual experience and of cultural production and transformation. Apart from the very clear instances of Ella’s citation of Kipling’s verse, the opening chapters display other less obvious references to the culture of these “new people,” embedded in a narrative that seems, on the surface, to prioritise representations of the “othered” culture of the colonised. A line from a 1950s popular song is inserted into a description of the vibrations that accompany the completion of Ella’s cure: Bill Hayley’s “Whole lot of shaking going on” is a reference that points to the continuation of “spirit thievery” in the form of rock and roll and marks an extension of the white recording industry’s commodification and sanitisation of blues and jazz. To see rock and roll as merely “spirit thievery,” however, would be to reduce the complexity of the narrative: as Hebdige argues, Bill Hayley’s invocation of another person’s music is, as a form of musical quotation, inevitably revised and reinterpreted; his version is open to further revision or versioning: “And that’s the beauty, too, of versioning. It’s a democratic principle because it implies that no-one has the final say. Everyone has a chance to make a final contribution” (14). The appearance of this reference to white rock and roll in *Myal*, a narrative that appears to be so grounded in the culture of turn-of-the-century rural Jamaica, is a sign of the narrative’s many layers of meaning, its complex interrogation of processes of cultural borrowing and “othering” and its resistance to monological narrative structures.

In a deliberate reversal of its reference to Hayley’s rock and roll version, the novel ends with a line from one of the best known Jamaica dub tunes of the 1970s, “Wear You To The Ball.” This was one of



the first commercially successful dub recordings which included “toasting” or talk over lines by DJs who had helped to make dub music famous. Hebdige’s description of the music of the 1970s suggests an important link between early dub music and the dominant themes in the novel: “These early talk overs are certainly wild; at times U Roy’s toasts resemble the inspired ravings of a worshipper ‘trumping in the spirit’ at a Pocomania gathering” (84). U Roy’s song dubs over its own lyrics so that “Take a bow, take a bow, take a bow wow wow” becomes, with repetition and the exuberance of performance, “Chick a bow, chick a bow, chick a bow wow wow,” the line used by Brodber to close the narrative and to pay tribute to Mass Cyrus or Percy the Chick and the central role he played in the practice of healing. In its original form the line “Take a bow” serves as a fitting term to close the novel and to signal the performative aspects of the narrative: the Myal ritual, including the performance of creolized identities; the Pocomania ceremony; the jazz performance of the male spirits. Brober uses the dubbed form (“chick a bow”), however, to draw attention to the playfulness of the text’s language and its celebration of a truly hybrid language and culture; the final musical reference reflects back on the narrative’s use of cultural references from Shakespeare, Keats, Kipling and others to more contemporary forms of specifically, as in the case of dub, Jamaican music, itself concerned to experiment with the play of language. These multidirectional translations reflect the provisional or mutable nature of cultural difference as it constitutes identity: it is difference that, as Bhabha has argued, “can always be reinscribed and relocated.” He continues:

the articulations of difference – race, history, gender – are never singular or binary. Claims to identity are nominative or normative, in a preliminary, passing moment...forms of social identity must be capable to turning up in-and-as an-other’s difference and turning the right to signify into an act of cultural translation. (234)

The first chapter closes with a reference to Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “All this sudden destruction because Ella O’Grady-Langley lying still like a Grecian sacrifice upon a pyre had gone too far, had tripped out in foreign” (4). The juxtaposition of opposites: Keats with the Jamaican contemporary colloquial term “in foreign,” meaning abroad, echoes the example cited above, and provides further evidence of Brodber’s use of creolization as a mode of resistance to monologic notions of culture. The reference to Keats’ poem graphically underscores Ella’s own condition of being “choked on foreign,” on colonial culture as well as on the experience of neo-colonial dominance in the form of

Selwyn Langley, her white American husband. It also suggests that the life in her—the vibrant experiences of the village—like the experiences of love and loss the urn portrays, had been transfixed into something aesthetically beautiful but still and dead. Of more significance than these intertextual details, however, is the fact that these words are utterances made by a narrator who is from within the community of Grove Town, one who speaks with easy familiarity of its flora and fauna, its spiritual practices and cultural customs.

While the colonial cultural references such as those in the first chapter pose no difficulty to most readers of *Myal*, the descriptions of rural Jamaica in 1919 provide a quality of surprise which emphasises the text's "resistant othering." The meaning and significance of the Myal ceremony, used to give coherence to the thematic structures of the novel, is not explicated in the narrative, though several critics have undertaken detailed excavations of the ceremony's significance to the text (Cooper 64-87; ten Kotenaar 51-73). Rural Grove Town is defamiliarised with the inclusion of phrases such as "sekkle pekkle," and the repeated references to the "stone bruise," the "bastard cedar, the physic nut and shy shame-mi-lady." This naming of the vegetation concretises both the reality of Grove Town itself and the period in which it is set and contrasts with, but also complements, the chapter's, and indeed the novel's, equally material and concrete representation of the world of the spirits and the contribution they make to healing. Mass Cyrus' heightened sensitivity to the world beyond material limitations is illustrated in the way he connects with and animates the very concrete, named trees, shrubs and insects, as if they were his community; the bastard cedar feels the pain of every touch and the gum it produces is used to "glue together a broken heart or a broken relationship until the organism could manage on its own again" (3). It is evidence of his rootedness. When Dan asks, "Why is he stuck in some grove talking to snails and me alone in this Egypt?", Willie replies: "Some have to root, man" (67). Even as Brodber insists on cultural interconnectedness and what Said calls the "overlapping streams of historical experience" (378), she also makes it clear that such an interconnection must include the recovery of lost practices: her model of cultural resistance is a kind of "nativism," grounded and coloured by specific historical and geographical realities, but shaped and modified by contemporary experience. A plural or hybrid culture must simultaneously attend to and contest the authority of dominant cultural forms which disempower or disregard cultural practices of the dominated Other and which perform, in Brodber's terms, "spirit thievery."

The narrative's use of culturally specific naming prompts a hesitancy in critics, many of whom admit that, in O'Callaghan's words, they "miss some of the finer shades of meaning ... and some of the

delights of register variation” (“Spirit Thievery” 52). It also prompts fruitful speculation of the kind offered in Shalini Puri’s essay, which reveals, even where these concrete images are important for their validation of an othered reality, that Brodber’s work continues to invite focus on the “complex play of light and shadow” (Bakhtin 277) with which the word becomes saturated as it enters into the contest for meaning. Puri re-invests the “stone bruise,” the local name for a common caterpillar, with its literal significance. With reference to Ella she writes: “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’. It is those marks of violence that make her emblematic of Grove Town, Jamaica, which is described as a colony of stone bruise” (102). This provides an interesting imagistic connection to Anita’s bruising by the stones thrown at her during Mass Levi’s attempts to steal her spirit and regain his potency. Puri continues: “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” (102-3).

In another, final example of the way in which the first chapter, like Mackey’s jazz, continues to surprise, extending the “play” in words to *playfulness*, Brodber mocks the historical voice of objectivity in her closing reference to the storms of 1919, of which there is no record. Brodber’s novel does not just signal the importance of cultural pluralism, a pluralism that includes the validation of an ignored, lost or discounted cultural past: her narrative also grounds itself in and speaks to a tradition of Caribbean literary production that it versions or talks over. In its self-conscious collapsing of textual boundaries and its insistence on the connection between cultures and forms of representation, Brodber constructs a novel whose style and form reflects its thematic preoccupations with a female desire for inclusiveness, reconciliation and collective well-being, even as its form insists on cultural difference and on the “‘foreignness’ of cultural translation” (Bhabha 227).

**“Monkey Break he Back on a Rotten Pomerack”:  
Resisting Colonialist Othering  
in *The Colour of Forgetting***

tales of hunting will always  
glorify the hunter  
until the lioness  
is her own

hiss-

-torian (Collins 1992, 60)

Evelyn O’Callaghan describes Erna Brodber’s fictional work as a reimagining of “what the past might have been like, filling in a conceivable context for the myths that still circulate,” as well as listening to what is “outside the sentence,” or as O’Callaghan explains, “being permeable to all kinds of influences...Jamaican folk songs, mentos, and quadrilles...Anancy stories, religious chants and hymns, fairy tales, poems from the colonial educational syllabus” (“Play It Back” 65). Collins’s novel also uses the past but is more concerned with interrogating how the past can be inscribed and with testing the limits of such inscription. As such, her second novel *The Colour of Forgetting*, can be defined as an example of “historical metafiction” or a postmodern re-working of colonial historiography (Hutcheon 68). As with her first novel *Angel*, Creole dialogue is used as a dominant mode of narration, and the narrative’s inclusion of unglossed Creole proverbs and sayings signify the text’s performance of political resistance and artistic, resistant othering. More than offering a revision of the past, her novel interrogates historical authority – its construction of the colonized as Other – and the process by which the past is translated into and in the present. It merges mythic accounts with conventional history, blurring the boundaries between the two, and re-examines not just the island’s past and its history of violence, but processes of reinscription. It explores the role and the limits of language, the “defiant literary utterance,” in re-writing and reordering the past and in representing the enactment of anti-colonial resistance (Zimra 244). Her novel asks whether literary language can ever adequately express either the history of the colonised or a liberated future. Clarisse Zimra reflects on this dilemma, arguing that the need to return to the history of subjugation and resistance is a compulsion that, in the process, creates an immobilising myth of the past and reproduces narratives of failure and betrayal (244). It is important therefore to resist the immobilising tendency of myth, and this requires the vigilant translation and transformation of history for and in the present: as Peter Burke argues, that is the fate of the “losers”:

It is often said that history is written by the victors. It might also be said that history is forgotten by the victors. They can afford to forget, while the losers are unable to accept what happened and are condemned to brood over it, relive it and reflect how different it might have been. (106)

Reinscription or counter-voicing of colonial “hiss/story”, however, necessitates a confrontation and a reconfiguring of its representation by the conquered (Collins *Rotten Pomerack* 60). Collins’s novel suggests that the need to reinscribe or even reinvent the past is not just a condition of loss, it performs the necessary task of restoring dignity to the conquered.

Set on the fictional islands of Paz and Eden, clearly Grenada and Carriacou, Collins’ novel presents an oral history of the islands, told through the genealogy of a particular family, significantly named Malheureuse; as with her first novel, *Angel, The Colour of Forgetting* is narrated almost entirely in the voices of the women characters and focuses on the ways in which their experiences of the mundane, domestic and everyday are defined by larger, historical and political events. The stories of the family’s past are told to Thunder, who grows up in the narrative’s present and who lives in fear of the sound of thunder. His mother, Willive, believes that what he really fears might be “the spirits” of the family’s violent past. The older women in the family, his great-great aunt Mamag, Cassandra, his grandmother and Carib, the shaman figure who haunts the island obsessively reminding its inhabitants about its unatoned-for past, weave together the story of the Malheureuse family as a way of bringing peace of mind to Thunder, and in an attempt to end the cycle of violence and counter-violence that has haunted the island. The language of *The Colour of Forgetting* effects a radical resistance to the authority of Standard English in its use of a Creole “speakerly” voice – one which gives an “illusion of oral narration” – as the dominant mode of narration (Gates 181). In addition, its use of Carib as a dominant voice in the narrative, and its repetition of her ambiguous aphorisms, further amplifies the text’s strategies of “artistic othering,” where relationships between language and meaning are continually problematised. The novel opens with words which are repeated over and again in the narrative: “Blood in the north, blood to come in the south and the blue crying red in between” (3) is spoken by Carib, one of four generations of women all given the same name and all speaking as if they have been given a prophecy. The circular, repetitive character of her discourse is used to oppose the linearity of conventional historiography; Carib’s memory serves as a repository of untold stories, marginalised or hidden in colonial histories. She passes on these stories to those in Paz who are willing to listen, thus bringing to voice and history the unremembered and unaccounted for.

She is positioned “in the middle of the cemetery,” mourning those who have died, “forgotten and drowned” (3). These are not just, as the third person narrator suggests, the original Caribs but also the slaves who jumped from the slave ships and whose blood she sees in the “crying red” of the sea (Searle 5). Her words oppose the romantic quality of “Leaper’s Hill”, the name given to the cliff from which

they jumped to their death, and she reminds tourists and others who “trekked often to this spot on the hill when they visited the island of Paz,” that beneath the “splendour” of the overgrowth and the “green so lustrous it was impossible to see exactly where the drop began” (4), lies a history of bloodshed that only Carib remembers. These ambiguous and repetitive words of blood, loss and mourning signal the narrative’s own resistance to the heuristic impulse of conventional narratives that progress towards discovery or closure.

The Standard English voice that narrates the opening chapter is that of an interested but distant observer, one who tries to interpret events for an audience or reader outside the community. Rational explanations are used to interpret the mystery of Carib’s words and to point to her importance in the narrative as a figure who “kick-starts” the memories of the islanders. While the young people ridicule Carib, this narrator supports the view of the “really old,” who believe that Carib has the gift of prophecy. The narrative’s frequent use of untranslated words of French Creole works both to reinforce the effect of hearing the story from the inside and to distance the reader/audience and inhibit full comprehension. The meaning of phrases such as “big-up” or “to put you mouth” are perhaps obvious but much less obvious is the meaning of the italicised French Creole words such as: “*ou tini bone-u wa!*” (65); “*Mu ka kwie ou. Ou ba ka vini?*” (66) or “*Mwen mette-u la Wete la*” (74). Carib’s words and the dialogue between elements and figures from the natural world further distance the reader through their endless signification. The difficult ambiguities that are both the strength and the limitation of oral discourse and a remembered past are the subject of Collins’s carefully constructed speakerly voice. Her narrative effects the gaps, silences and recursiveness of an oral narrator, where the gaps in the characters’ memories mirror and confront, but do not easily replace the silences in conventional accounts of the colonial past. There is much, the novel suggests, that eludes even the counter-voicing of colonial “hiss/story’s” construction. Collins’s self-reflexive poem “Crick-Crack” focuses on the slipperiness of the formulaic epithets used in storytelling; it is evidence of her concern with the possibilities and limits of language as a means of representation. The words “crick-crack” are a sign that a kind of magic will be performed by words which will tell “tall tall” tales:

come midnight a tall tall cake  
walking through the streets  
all in white icing  
monkey break he back on a rotten pomerack (*Rotten Pomerack* 60)

The rotten pomerack lying on the ground signifies the fictional quality of the story told to impress gullible listeners. But it is not only the listeners who are tricked; the over-confident storytelling monkey is tripped by his own storytelling prowess. As the poem suggests, however, whereas both teller and audience are knowing participants in this ritual performance of the “slippery lie,” history offers no such warning of its slipperiness and falsehoods. The poem ends by arguing that until the history of oppression is told by the oppressed and colonised peoples, its slippery lies will be propagated as facts. Collins’ novel does not simply tell history from the point of view of those resisting domination, but focuses on the problematic nature of its own “artistic othering.” In its revoicing and contestation of colonial authority, the narrative asks: how can the stories of the subjugated be authorised? *The Colour of Forgetting* thus lays bare the power relations that exist between languages – in this case Creole and Standard English – and cultures – Creole and colonial metropolitan. Collins’s chorus of women characters occupy marginal spaces, and though they are given the last word, in the final scene their untranslated mythopoetic “prophecy” proves ineffective against History’s repetitions.

### Conclusion

As a way of reflecting the impossibility of cultural translation and the impotence of the untranslated prophecy, Standard English as the language of narrative commentary becomes more dominant towards the end of Collins’s novel. The power of Creole storytelling recedes and its role in historical and cultural transformation diminishes. All three texts discussed in this article perform acts of “artistic othering”: their use of “black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance, variability” (Mackey 52) can be read as “metonymic of cultural difference” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 52). The creolized community Brodber creates reimagines specific religious and cultural practices that might be defined as the “incommensurable elements...that are the basis of cultural identification” and are thus resistant to appropriation (Bhabha 219). However ambiguous her depiction of silence, it is a necessary precondition for the recognition of cultural difference and the potential for intercultural communication. Both novels intervene in representations of history. In *Myal* Brodber reimagines the consequences of cultural appropriation, the spiritual and psychic lack that results in “spirit thievery” and through the process of healing transforms the effects of the past in the present. On the one hand Collins’s use of several narrators in her polyphonic novel, and the narrative’s cyclical temporal structures oppose concepts of time as, in Kristeva’s words, “project,

teleology, linear” (17). Time in the novel is recursive rather than progressive and rather than foretell the future, Carib's 'prophecies' repeat the past: they urge the islanders to learn from the past. As the novel's tragic ending suggests, however, as only way of reconceiving history, cyclical or “monumental” time does not offer the possibility of freedom (Kristeva 17). Like Johnson's trapped speaker, who hears but does not understand the song of the keskidee, Collins's islanders hear but refuse to heed Carib's warning that they should remember the past.

Recovery from History's hurts, from its constructions of the subjugated as Other, requires, as *Myal* demonstrates, a commitment both to radical, resistant othering and to its potential for transformation.

---

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I'm referring here to Benita Parry's dialogue with Fanon and her more sympathetic use of Fanon's “nativism”: the use of lost or hidden practices is not simply oppositional and does not posit an unproblematic return to a so-called “original state” rather, a recovery of the past as “nativism” involves “an imaginative reworking of the process of metissage”, and an acknowledgement that whatever is recovered is transformed and continually reworked (173).

### Works Cited

- Anim-Addo, Joan. *Touching the Body: History, Language and African-Caribbean Women's Writing*. London: Mango Publishing, 2007.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. C Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P. 1981.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Brodber, Erna. *The Continent of Black Consciousness: on the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day*. London: New Beacon, 2003.
- Brodber, Erna. *Myal*. London: New Beacon, 1988.
- Burke, Peter. “History as Social Memory.” *History, Culture and the Mind*. Ed. Thomas Butler. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 97-110.
- Collins, Merle. *Angel*. London: The Women's Press, 1987.
- .. *Rotten Pomerack*. London: Virago, 1992.



- 
- Cooper, Carolyn. "‘Something Ancestral Recaptured’: Spirit Possession as Trope in Selected Feminist Fictions of the African Diaspora." *Motherlands; Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: The Women’s Press, 1991. 64-87.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jnr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: OUP, 1988.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Cut ‘n’ Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*. London: Routledge, 1987.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Hutchings, Kevin D. "Fighting the Spirit Thieves: Dismantling Cultural Binarisms in Erna Brodber’s *Myal*." *World Literature Written in English* 35.2 (1996): 103-21.
- John, Catherine. "Caribbean Organic Intellectual: the Legacy and Challenge of Erna Brodber’s Life Work." *Small Axe* 39 (2012): 72-88.
- Johnson, Amryl. *Tread Carefully in Paradise*. Coventry: Cofa Press, 1991.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Women’s Time." Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. *Signs* 7.1. (1981):13-35.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Other: From Noun to Verb." *Representations* 39 (1992): 51-70.
- Maximin, Collete. "Distinction and Dialogism in Jamaica: *Myal* by Erna Brodber." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 21.2 (1999): 49-62.
- Nelson-McDermott, Catherine. "Myal-ing Criticism; Beyond Colonizing Dialectics." *ARIEL* 24.4 (1993): 53-67.
- O’Callaghan, Evelyn. "‘Spirit Thievery Comes in So Many Forms’: A Review of *Myal* by Erna Brodber." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 4.1 (1988): 50-9.
- .. "Play it Back a Next Way: Teaching Brodber, *Teaching Us*." *Small Axe* 39 (2012): 59-71.
- Parry, Benita. "Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism." *Colonial Discourse/Post-Colonial Theory*. Eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson. Manchester: Manchester UP. 172-196.
- Puri, Shalini. "An ‘Other’ Realism: Erna Brodber’s *Myal*." *ARIEL* 24.3 (1993): 95-115.
- Roberts, June E. *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2006.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- Searle, Chris. *Grenada: The Struggle Against Destabilization*. London: Writers and Readers, 1984.

Senior, Olive. *An Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*. Jamaica: Twin Guinep, 2003.

Slemon, Stephen. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/CounterDiscourse/Post-Colonial Writing."

*Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 1-16.

ten Kotenaar, Neil. "Foreign Possessions: Erna Brodber's Myal, the Medium, and her Message."

*ARIEL* 30.4 (1999): 51-73.

Tiffin, Helen. "Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body

in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid." *Callaloo* 16.3 (1993): 909-21.

Winks, David. "Forging Post-colonial Identities Through Acts of Translation?" *Journal of African*

*Cultural Studies* 21.1 (2009): 65-74.

Zimra, Clarisse. "W/righting His/Story: Versions of Things Past in Contemporary Caribbean Writers."

*Explorations: Essays in Comparative Literature*. Ed. Ueda Makoto. New York: UP of America, 1986. 227-44.