

3-20-2020

Colonial Possessions: Producing the Zombie in Erna Brodber's Myal

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

COLONIAL POSSESSIONS:
PRODUCING THE ZOMBIE IN ERNA BRODBER'S MYAL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Joanna L. Valdes

2020

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This dissertation, written by Joanna L. Valdes, and entitled Colonial Possessions: Producing the Zombie in Erna Brodber's Myal, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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The dissertation of Joanna L. Valdes is approved.

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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2020

DEDICATION

For my mom, dad and sister, Jamie. Thank you for always believing in me.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

COLONIAL POSSESSIONS: PRODUCING THE ZOMBIE IN ERNA BRODBER'S

MYAL

by

Joanna L. Valdes

Florida International University, 2020

Miami, Florida

Professor Anne M. Castro, Major Professor

Erna Brodber's 1988 novel *Myal* reveals the fatal injuries performed on the spirit by the colonizing efforts of others. In the novel, biracial Jamaican protagonist, Ella, experiences a profound devastation when her husband, Selwyn, creates a white persona for her in his production *Caribbean Nights and Days*. In my thesis, I argue that Selwyn's aggressions upon Ella's spirit are only a fraction of the many conducted by those around her. Granted, while Selwyn's play brings Ella's zombified spirit into fruition with his distortion of her childhood—the Grovetown community, the Brassington's and Mrs. Burns also aid in the process of zombifying Ella. The processes of zombification demonstrated through Ella's steadily emptied biracial identity, independence and spirit occur through a gradual assimilation. Thus, by using the theoretical framework of exoticism and identity referenced in the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Stuart Hall and others, the development and consequences surrounding zombification are examined.

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Introduction

In Erna Brodber's 1988 novel *Myal*, biracial Jamaican protagonist, Ella, experiences a profound devastation when she views her American husband's production *Caribbean Nights & Days*. With this minstrel performance derived from her childhood stories, Ella's husband, Selwyn, creates a 'white' persona for her as a stage character in his play. The behaviors Ella exhibits upon viewing the theatrical production demonstrate how her previous compliance with the whims of those around her have allowed others to steadily empty her of her biracial identity, independence and spirit. Therefore, while Ella does experience despondency, physical swelling and faltering bodily functions after watching the play, I argue that this fatal injury to her spirit is only one of many. Erna Brodber's *Myal* illustrates the spiritual and bodily injuries that colonialism and white supremacy inflict on biracial women, captured through Ella's process of zombification. In the text, zombification is the weaning away of autonomy and spirit through white assimilation to create a pliant, subservient individual. In my thesis, I trace motifs of discrimination, ownership and zombification throughout Brodber's novel to analyze the gradual loss of spirit. Ultimately, the novel *Myal* displays the damage inflicted on Ella's spirit and the zombification that results.

Using identity and the effects of zombification, Brodber engages in an alternating dialogue that takes place between Ella's past and present. Ella's assimilation into white hegemony incites the question of who truly owns the spirit when the body is not one's own. Hence, throughout the novel, ownership is a conquering over an individual's beliefs and behaviors, "doing what the master has in store for them" (Brodber 106). The gradual

draining of Ella's spirit becomes synonymous with the creation of the 'zombie' that according to Niame in his article "Haitian Voudou Possession and Zombification: Desire and Return of the Repressed" becomes an act of social control that seizes power and autonomy away from the person dominated. Zombification ensues as "a crude form of servitude...[isolating] the individual from community and obliterates his functioning will" (Niame 11). The estrangement from community and loss of will is explicitly shown in the text when the ancestral spirits Willie and Dan discuss the forming of the 'Zombie' (Brodber 66). The spirits exchanging banter, claim that the people gave their independences to the 'outers' - the white outsiders. At the cost of free will, the collective zombie "gave them our sound, then sold their own souls/ Easier to rule? Ha! Easier to follow. Easier to be a zombie... They split man from his self" (Brodber 66-67). The 'zombie' throughout the text displays a 'split' from choice and an inability to freely act. In which, the relinquishing of agency and incapacity to function outside of external influences, renounces the spirit that generates individual thought, one's own voice. In the context of the novel and throughout the thesis, spirit refers to the knowledge and core beliefs on which individual identity is built upon.

Hence, when Willie and Dan state that the zombified gave away 'our sound,' social and spiritual independence are surrendered for the colonizer's dominating voice. Anne Castro's "Sounding Out Spirit Thievery in Erna Brodber's *Myal*" argues that sound, and more specifically orality serves as a channel by which colonial ideologies exert power over the Jamaican characters' minds, conveying a "metaphysical dispossession" (113). Similarly, the paradigms considered in Castro's article also correlate with the processes of zombification. The imperialist influence that produces the

zombie bares “a sensory medium that communicates ideological messages in addition to a spiritual power that can be stolen, retrieved, or maintained” (Castro 108). I assert that Ella’s spirit (exclusively connected to her biracial identity) during the repeated aggressions of multiple systematic behaviors and beliefs is also “stolen, retrieved or maintained,” by a gradual struggle under white powers (108). Thus, when Ella O’Grady-Langley had “gone too far, had tripped out in foreign,” Brodber associates that which is distant and ‘foreign’ to a spiritual and physical strain (Brodber 4). By ‘go[ing] out too far’, the element of isolation from individual well-being, creates the ‘easier to rule’ individual that was previously discussed by the ancestral spirits (66). The zombie pliant to the preaching of invading powers is manipulated and invalidated. An element specified by Willie and Dan again when they say that “the first two principles of spirit thievery— [is] let them feel that there is nowhere for them to grow to. Stunt them...alienate them” (Brodber 98). Thus, the ‘foreign’ and ‘alienat[ing]’ environments Ella confronts, continually develops zombification as the dire repercussion that results when offering oneself to gain acceptance (98). The creation of a zombie, encountered in the use of Ella by others are seen repeatedly in the actions and choices taken by Miss Amy Holness, the Brassington’s, Mrs. Burns and Selwyn. By isolating Ella because of her physical characteristics described as “fine skin, straight nose, thin lips and growing hair... [O’Grady] could only give her the colour and a little straightening on the hair to make her look white and that is what he gave her,” their opinions divorce Ella from her communities because of judgement. (Brodber 9). Thus, as Ella feels accepted by the Brassington’s, the Burns and Selwyn, they make her partial to their beliefs, acting in accordance to white supremacy in their requests and demands. These characters ask from

Ella compliance and enjoying their attentions, she finds that it becomes “easier to follow” than to deny (66). In the very same breath, these characters take from Ella her voice, her stories, her choice so that through their actions she is then made “easier to rule” (66). An ease echoed in the ‘colonial culture’ mentioned by Nathaniel Samuel Murrell in his book, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*. Although, Murrell’s book focuses on the role religions played in protecting the cultures of natives, the culture of concentrated imperialist power encouraged “bodies to be enslaved while seeking to save their souls” (Murrell 249). The zombie in Myal, who while living suffers from the consequences of having their spirit wounded and taken, renders the body complicit to the wishes of the perpetrator. Thus, zombification is enacted by no singular action that steals the spirit, but multiple aggressions that while acting as savior harm the individual. The intrusion of colonial influences around Ella seek to shape her, inadvertently attempting the same to all like her.

Fixed Binaries, Set Perceptions

Throughout the novel, the disparity and prejudice Ella experiences because of her physical difference make her vulnerable to her eventual zombification. Ella, who during her adult, zombified state is “choked on foreign, this alabaster baby shipped on a banana boat and here to short circuit the whole of creation” confronts the potential and initial stages of a zombified spirit even as a child (Brodber 4). Consequently, Ella viewed as a racialized other within Grovetown, Jamaica because of her white features is regarded as a calamity. By going against the norms and beliefs on which Grovetown is founded upon, Ella is referred to as ‘short circuit[ing]’ the community itself (4). Her identity defined in Grovetown by her white ‘alabaster baby state’ are questioned throughout the community and Reverend Simpson when he states “and whose burden is this half black, half white

child? These people certainly know how to make trouble” (Brodber 6). When presenting Ella’s biracial body as both ‘burden’ and ‘trouble,’ the implications made separate Ella by her visual difference (6). Moreover, the connotation of Ella as a ‘burden’ upon the community suggests that she is not completely welcomed by Grovetown, resulting in an estrangement from her society and her spirit. Ella’s discrimination based on color is also mentioned in Shalini Puri’s article “An ‘Other’ Realism: Erna Brodber’s Myal,” as a source of “the violence of colonial domination in its ‘halving’ of mind and body” (Puri 100). Her existence spoken of as the “half black, half white” child becomes the constant physical reminder of colonization and difference that repeated by Grovetown keep Ella excluded from ever developing firm bonds within her society (6). Instead, Ella’s isolation exposes her to the whims of the colonizer that while exoticize her differences, in time condemn her mixed state. Hence, when her community considers her as the ‘burden’ who is ‘half black, half white’ on page 6, Ella’s difference remains in the ‘split’ state mentioned by Puri, as neither being recognized nor accepted. Ella’s differences as a member in her society, as described by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, are not “traditional enough to have become the commonplaces of criticism, making them, therefore open to reflection and suspicion” (Derrida 6). In this context, Ella as the body of alterity, acts against expectation and convention in her physical appearance.

Isolated, the ‘alabaster’ Ella is perceived as too white for her Jamaican community but “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” (Puri 99). In other words, Ella displaced from her Jamaican society (the only place she has ever called home) is made to

believe that she can only belong to one community at a time. Strange and othered, Ella's racialized body acts as a social marker that is categorized by those around her, serving as a reminder that she remains a variant amongst each of her separate and biased societies. Moreover, because Ella's physical differences are so unwelcome in Grovetown, her adoption and separation are aided by Miss Amy Holness. The wife of a schoolteacher and a prominent member of the Grovetown community, Miss Amy believes that with Ella's "hair and colour she could get far...if Mrs. Brassington wanted to do what O'Grady didn't do, then that too was just life" (Brodber 26). Miss Amy's mention of Ella's biological father, O'Grady, connects the absent father to Mrs. Brassington because they are both white bodies.

Although Ella was born out of wedlock, Miss Amy's assumptions unconsciously link the characteristics of power and autonomy to the presence of whiteness inherited from the father. Her mention of Ella's absent father as a source of social influence rather than Ella's mother Mary Riley, inherently tasks the white body as the deciding factor and guarantor of success. Miss Amy supposes that because Mrs. Brassington and Ella are physically alike, Ella would be prescribed higher social flexibility due to her skin color and association to white bodies. In "*Toubab La!*" *Literary Representations of Mixed-Race Characters in the African Diaspora*, Ginette Curry uses the character of Lestrade in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* to explain how biracial characters often take on white supremacists' beliefs in order to assimilate into the power structures accessible by lighter skin tones. In the case of *Myal*, although Ella resides in her native island of Grovetown, Jamaica, both her and those in Grovetown reinforce "the superiority of the colonizer's culture [that] has been instilled in the mind of the colonized" (Curry

203). Similarly, Curry's analysis of racialized power structures on a biracial character from Walcott's play echoes Grovetown's internalized beliefs that difference must be repudiated, and white supremacy followed. Hence, these connections that place colonizing forces as superior allow Maydene Brassington, the white wife of the church minister, to take control over Ella. In the novel, Miss Amy, the first to prescribe Ella a role attached to white power, muses that Ella 'could get far' with her white passing features (26). However, on the basis of Miss Amy's casual remark, the racial bias and imperialist hierarchy that is ingrained in the daily lives of Grovetown become ever more evident in their discrimination towards Ella. Amy Holness's mention of Ella's absent biological father and Mrs. Brassington's sudden desire to adopt Ella as 'just life' makes light of the methods colonizers use to collect the exoticized body (26). Therefore, when Miss Amy mentally asserts Ella's social position, her choice to tell Mrs. Brassington about Ella allows Maydene to stake her own firm claim on the child's body.

Moreover, the connotations made between Ella and white bodies are also seen in Miss Amy's conversation with Reverend Simpson. The exchange between them allows Miss Amy to quickly dispel the notion that Maydene Brassington harbors any partiality towards her. Instead, she focuses on Ella when she states that Mrs. Brassington "smells blood Parson and it is not mine. Haha--/ Oh? Then whose?--/ Ella./ Ella?...So you brought them together! Ha ha" (Brodber 60). The discussion between the reverend and Amy in which they joke about the smelling of Ella's 'blood,' insinuates that Mrs. Amy was aware that one of the reasons Ella was chosen by Mrs. Brassington was due in part to her white ancestry. Furthermore, it implies that both the Reverend and Amy—powerful influences in Grovetown understand that it is Amy who gave command and authority

over Ella to the Brassington's. A point especially inferred when Reverend Simpson states that she 'brought them together' despite Amy believing from the start that the white people she associates with Maydene deal with bodily manipulation. A suggestion that even Maydene realizes during their first exchange when she observes that "Amy had accused her of stealing her people and exploiting their bodies" (Brodber 22). Granted, though Maydene profusely denies this accusation, she remains culpable when she uses Ella for her objectives.

The Brassington's: A Silenced Daughter

Consequently, Ella's 'blood' does in a way capture the attention of Maydene Brassington, the white, European wife of the Methodist minister William Brassington. In Ella, Maydene notices what she contends as Ella's spirituality but mainly Ella's biological features. As a result, Maydene distinguishes Ella by her physical difference first, when she states "that little girl (Ella) looked as if she was flying. Totally separated by the platform and from the people around her. Not just by colour but as an angel...in that ethereal fashion" (Brodber 17). Granted, while Maydene's mental isolation of Ella on the platform as 'separated' praises Ella in a religious fashion, it also exoticizes her physical appearance as unusual. She mentally separates Ella from her classmates and Grovetown.

Hence, while Brodber refers to the zombified and the draining of the spirit as an injury, Maydene's further isolation of Ella from those around her is equally responsible. Notably, while Ella's complete erasure of self occurs in its final stages through Selwyn's treatment of her biracial identity, her zombification also occurs in the ways white women such as Maydene in Anne McClintock's book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and*

Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest, “were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (McClintock 6). In deriving ownership of Ella’s body as the considered subject, *Myal* develops a commentary on the imbalances of power. The inequality and discrimination presented within the community exhibited in the divisions culled between women are taken advantage of by women of privilege like Maydene.

Additionally, Ella catches Maydene’s eye because like her husband, William, Ella is biracial. Maydene fixated on Ella’s difference states that “in the middle of that child’s recitation, she ceased to see her and saw William instead. There was good reason William was of the same kind of mixture as this girl” (Brodber 15). Yet, when Maydene ‘ceased’ to see Ella as an individual, the act of separation from community is enacted visually on only physical features (15). Ella adopted, serves Maydene’s purpose of aiding her husband’s growth when she expresses that “William is crippled by the fear of going back to the Grovetown of his past...the little girl was going to help her, Maydene resolved” (Brodber 19). Therefore, when Ella ‘cease[s]’ to exist, her gradual zombification begins through the paths Maydene and William have forged for her. It is through Maydene’s persistence that Ella is adopted to “help her,” a white woman who has the privilege and power to request that Ella do so (19). As the ‘help,’ Ella, who gradually becomes zombified, is sought out for a designated purpose by the Brassington’s when she is adopted. In attempting to utilize her, Ella’s voice and body are handed to white powers that promise guidance in exchange for social mobility but silence her own agency.

Moreover, Ella’s exchange of autonomy for white direction come at the cost of relinquishing her ties to Jamaica and childhood. An action that even William Brassington

admits later in the novel played a part in her zombification, when he discloses that “whatever happened to [Ella] was his fault. He it was who had engineered her migration from the family, from Grove Town, from Morant Bay and from Jamaica into Baltimore, USA” (Brodber 45). Ella is figuratively and literally ‘shipped’ to the U.S for her education by the Brassington’s but is only permitted entrance into western society through the arrangements and actions of white will. Therefore, while William is biracial like Ella, he has been so deeply assimilated into white society that he acts based off their interests as well. William’s assimilation becomes explicit when Maydene comments on her own white father’s treatment of him, implying the deep fractures that occur when individuals are exoticized and absorbed into a colonial society. The treatment towards William’s exoticized body is expressed when Maydene’s father’s unsaid sentiments regarding him were similar to praising a prize, conveyed when “Father was delighted...though he did not actually say them, the words were in his eyes: ‘Ah, I’ve caught a fish alive” (Brodber 16). Comparable to Ella, William’s exoticism seen in Charles Forsdick’s article “Traveling Concepts: Post-Colonial Approaches to Exoticism,” becomes a system of domesticating a body of difference. Forsdick explains that rather than referring to an other as merely exotic “the potential narcissism associated with stage-management of otherness, describ[es] contemporary exoticism as a self-generating tendency” (Forsdick 17). Forsdick’s analysis of the colonial tendency to exotify, reasserts the body of difference—seen in the text as the biracial body—as managed and defined by the classifications of white supremacy.

Therefore, as the converted hybrid appraised for his exoticism, William ushers’ others into the same imperialist fray of white indoctrination when he conveys that with

the Grovetown citizens “he was any less aware of them as souls to be converted” (Brodber 86). While this response deals with William’s religious practice, his negative view of Grovetown is consistently viewed as a place he must escape, taking Ella along with him. Although, he performs his acts as Reverend, William ultimately finds it taxing that “Maydene should be trying to get herself involved in watching the exotic and keeping their child [Ella] exposed to what he was sure they were trying to get themselves and her away from” (Brodber 87). Hence, William who sees Grovetown with resentment and reproach for the town he is actively trying to escape, also sees himself as Ella’s benefactor, providing aid towards her release from Grovetown. By adopting Ella and acting on his beliefs, William sequesters her to his own reality- a colonial reality. The way William has been assimilated so thoroughly further aids in Ella’s zombification because her own thoughts that remain whole by encountering her Jamaican heritage is pieced apart as an exoticism that with William’s treatment is also regarded as outlandish. William’s observation of his wife’s adoption of Ella and behavior involving Grovetown is simply dealt with as ‘watching the exotic’ (87). The level of scrutiny William shows towards those he scornfully views as ‘exotic’ are as if he were a detached and white observer.

Assembling the Doll

Accordingly, when William effectively decides to get Ella out of Grovetown, he delivers her into the hands of Mrs. Johnny Burns, the sister of a family friend. In the novel, Mrs. Burns, a white American woman, lives in Baltimore and handles Ella like her very own doll. Silent and docile, Ella “went to this social and that...quietly waiting on Mrs. Burns” (Brodber 46). The text’s description of Ella as ‘quietly waiting’ suppresses

Ella's voice as she navigates western society with Mrs. Burns guidance and instruction. Attentive to Mrs. Burns needs, Ella portrayed as "Mrs. Burns sidekick, her little dolly baby" is acknowledged only shallowly in Mrs. Burns peripheral sights (Brodber 46). The 'dolly baby' contrary to Suzanne Bost's article "Fluidity without Postmodernism: Michelle Cliff and the 'Tragic Mulatta' Tradition," while presents Ella as "a bicultural subject," does not allow her to "strategically invoke different cultural idioms to suit varying political needs" (Bost 674). Mrs. Burns' conditioning of Ella as a 'dolly baby' without agency over her actions is not a placement made by Ella's own volition (46). Instead, rather than being aided by the blurring racial divisions mentioned by Bost, Ella is repeatedly wounded because of the labels that characterize her solely as white. Unlike Bost's analysis of Michelle Cliff's biracial heroines, Ella in her racial duality is unable to act through her own agency when she behaves in accordance to Mrs. Burns' will.

Yet, while Ella is socially assisted by Mrs. Burns when she dresses her in "warm finery," Ella realizes that her distance from Grovetown is both a physical and symbolic injury (Brodber 46). Her departure from Jamaica indicates bereavement when "she got a fleeting sensation of something lost- the yellow fire of the sun in St. Thomas, Jamaica" as a signified physical and spiritual separation (Brodber 46). The geographic distance Ella remarks as the warmth and "fire" of Jamaica connotes the rifts between Ella's assimilated spirit and identity (46). Furthermore, the less aware Ella becomes of the impression that she is missing 'something' that is related to her ties to Jamaica are amplified. The sensations garnered from a lacking connection is emphasized by Bost when she states that "biracial figures have always possessed decentered identities forced upon them by the historical circumstances, politics, and racial dynamics of their times" (Bost 675). In

the stages of a progressing zombification, Ella is required to possess only one identity. The negation of her biracial self coupled with her sense of loss are concealed by the superfluous comforts offered to her, producing clear fissures in her spirit.

In *Myal* and Judith Butler's book *Undoing Gender*, the body emphasizes the struggle to achieve individual agency as it is snared in the gaze of the ruling force. By "bearing their imprint"- the mark of the colonizer, Ella taken in by Mrs. Burns and into western, racist ideals, becomes muted as she assimilates (Butler 21). Ella zombified and continuously split from her spirit through the actions of Mrs. Burns and those around her, has her biracial identity deemed as lesser when she is treated as a subservient doll. Although, Ella's conditioned response of passivity surrounds her with the comforts of western society, those same securities restrict her within an institutionalized white experience. Ella perceived as "a silent Alice waiting on the Duchess. Very quiet" relates the children's book protagonist to a silent character that exists only in the mind and background of a colonizer's reality (Brodber 46). At the cost of losing her sense of self, the text's usage of 'quiet' indicates that Ella's compliance and silence are the only methods of alleged betterment for Ella as a biracial woman within Mrs. Burns' society.

Moreover, Ella's obedience to Mrs. Burns amplifies the social jurisdiction of a white supremacy. Silenced, Ella's adherence of Mrs. Burns' decisions demonstrates a mastery over her spirit, that while behaves as a benign governance constricts Ella's autonomy. In Butler's analysis of agency and autonomy, while she describes the independence of an individual as a body shepherded into the dominating norms of ruling social forces, the same can be ascribed to *Myal*'s post-colonial narrative. Likewise, as an individual characterized only by recognizable features and assimilated in accordance to

controlling norms and beliefs, the body is steered into a series of regulations that assemble the doll. Ella's marginalized biracial identity given over to western standards thereafter "becomes exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings...to be a body is to be given over to others even as the body is, emphatically 'one's own'" (Butler 20). Yet, as Ella is continuously "exposed to others," her new experiences coupled with the separations she encounters from Mrs. Burns' western society disregard her biracial identity completely (20). Ella's complete assimilation into colonial standards is founded upon white control and enjoyment, in which Mrs. Burns "enjoying the drama... was both actor and director" (Brodber 47). As 'director,' Mrs. Burns perceives Ella as her marionette, gaining a sense of gratification from acting as the governing social influence that puppeteers Ella's will. Mrs. Burns' acting role illustrates the operating manipulation that is enacted by privilege. Ella's spirit while adorned and decorated as Mrs. Burns 'doll' is also exposed to the whims and beliefs of others, leaving her voiceless.

Disconnected from her spirit, Ella's integration into white society cannot claim connection to past nor her biracial identity when she is perceived only by the white presence. As Mrs. Burns believes "she done well. Ella was getting on—nearly eighteen now. What better was there for her?" in arranging for Ella's hand in marriage, she carelessly relinquishes Ella's spirit to Selwyn (47). Mrs. Burns aiding of Selwyn in his desire for marriage provides her doll a marriage match, but also provides her convenient entertainment. As she acts as oppressor, Mrs. Burns excuses her actions and bias by stating that she could garner no better for Ella in terms of marriage when she says, 'what better was there for her?' effectively passing her doll onto another white body (47). In

assuaging her own beliefs and white supremacy, Mrs. Burns hands Ella's body to Selwyn even though she "knew no more of the fellow's background, she told him, than what the young man had told her" (Brodber 47). Claiming ignorance, Mrs. Burns allows herself to be free from the fault of Ella's zombification, since she had already had Ella kept as a doll, Mrs. Burns passes her on to matrimony without pause.

The Thief

However, while Ella's gradual zombification is led into finality through Selwyn's direction, a white American man with aspirations to be a writer and playwright, she is treated as both producing subject and character. As architect, Selwyn constructs Ella's narrative when he "occupied himself with one production: the making of Ella O'Grady" (Brodber 43). Guided by Selwyn's efforts to reinvent her into the image of a white woman, Ella is reared towards compliance, benefiting only Selwyn in his purposeful reconstruction of her biracial identity through his fixed image. Accordingly, when referencing Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Selwyn's awareness of Ella's racial difference manufactures her white persona around the removal of her biracial identity. The 'making of Ella O'Grady' connotes Selwyn's grooming of Ella to the acceptable standards of the Americanized European figure. His stance as a white man in power, positions "the dominating European presence [as] the site or 'scene' of integration where those other presences which it had actively disaggregated were recomposed-reframed... as the site of a profound splitting and doubling" (Hall 233). The 'dominating European presence' attached to western white standard, forcibly assimilates that which is considered different into an expression of white power. Selwyn's display of white supremacy produces a fixed image of her as "a white-skinned girl. Ella was the star. He

had given her flowing blonde hair” (Brodber 83). Thus, Ella as ‘the star,’ is passively conveyed in a singular whiteness, enacting the “recomposed-reframed” image referenced in Hall’s analysis of a colonizer’s assimilation (233). The negation of Ella’s biracial identity as ‘disaggregated’ and alienated by difference, only becomes acknowledged by Selwyn in the reflection of his own white body. Therefore, the ‘splitting and doubling’ as remarked by Stuart Hall identifies the ‘doubling’ of a white persona while maintaining a rejection of the other as an enacted split in identity. In Selwyn’s control over Ella, she becomes the rectified other— Selwyn’s likeness mirrored by his imperialist jurisdiction.

Hence, under Selwyn’s ministrations Ella is ‘cleansed’ of her autonomy under the watchful eye of her husband. Selwyn prepares Ella for white society, when he teaches her “the powdering and the plucking of eyebrows, the straightening of the hair...he taught her the habit of shaving her armpits” to achieve the white characteristics that allow her to exist solely for his use (Brodber 43). In Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, while her analysis of a Victorian advertisement emphasizes the ways commodity and fetishism (the obsessive use of an object) generates prejudiced and racist mindsets, her clarification demonstrates the negation of the mixed state. The advertisement while demanding cleanliness with soaps also implies that purity and hygiene is only represented by a white body. In “the Victorian mirror, [as] the black child witnesses his predetermined destiny of imperial metamorphosis but remains a passive racial hybrid, part black, part white, brought to the brink of civilization by the twin commodity fetishes of soap and mirror,” the mixed state is halved in order to achieve a complete whiteness (McClintock 214). By presenting the racialized advertisement as a true way to achieve cleanliness, the coded and racialized message invalidates any difference that resides outside the white socially

accepted state. Similarly, Ella and the mixed child depicted in the advertisement remain socially differentiated by their duality. The very conditions that make Ella like the “Peter Pans, Dairy Maids and Lucy Grays” she perceives as white, also present her at odds with her biracial identity when she negates those who look like “Mammy Mary with skin dark cream like the sweet potato” (Brodber 46). As Selwyn chooses for Ella the characteristics that define her, her racial duality is silenced. Ella’s biracial identity distinguished by her birthplace and race are negated by white supremacy when Selwyn teaches her “the straightening of hair” and “shaving [of] her armpits”— acts of ritualistic cleanliness, are also what Selwyn uses to zombify her (Brodber 43). The similarity shared by Ella and the boy in Anne McClintock’s example in relation to their white counterparts, remain alienated by their difference unable to actively recognize their duality.

Thus, as Ella’s difference is negated by that same whiteness Selwyn conditions in her, he sequesters her in a spiritual and physical state of exile. Selwyn who believes himself to be master, presides over Ella when he visualizes himself to be “the creator [that] loved his creature... there was no harm in it. Just one teeny little lie: her parents had come from Ireland, had succumbed to a tropical disease and she had been left by them to be brought up by a Methodist parson and his wife. The truth could hardly make an appearance and embarrass anyone” (Brodber 43). Selwyn’s actions demonstrate his zombification of Ella, when he uses her body for his own purposes. By creating a story in which Ella is presented as fully white, he seizes knowledge about her identity and staunches her connections with those who are like her. In a stunted state, Ella dehumanized by Selwyn’s depiction of her as a ‘creature’ satisfies his whims yet signifies that she is not considered human to him. His attempts to conceal Ella’s origin when he

asks her to lie and say that her biological parents “had come from Ireland” invalidate any connections she has to Grovetown (43). Moreover, Selwyn’s control as “creator” over Ella, shapes her body and spirit for his own purposes (43). The phrase ‘creature’ used to denote Ella’s body, asserts Selwyn’s dominance as ‘creator’ that mortified, composes Ella’s origins in his image to make her unrecognizable to anyone, even to herself.

Thus, Selwyn’s fabrications and creation of his own narrative captures Ella’s spirit for his own. In an article on Edwidge Danticat’s *Farming on Bones*, Nadege Clitandre’s article “Body and Voice as Sites of Oppression” similarly writes on the processes of zombification when she states that by “post[ing] the inferiority of the native as metaphysical fact- [it] mask[s] the pleasure the colonizer derives from the authority” (Clitandre 28). As colonizer, Selwyn defines Ella by her distinctions and relishes in her obedience to his commands, her agency overtaken by the masculine authority of the colonizer. The concealment of Ella’s heritage commits an erasure of her identity when Selwyn “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” (Brodber 43).

Selwyn’s ‘guidance’ and labeling starkly presents Ella’s difference in negative connotations, defining the female body under the colonizer’s terms. Furthermore, her virginal, physical state directs attention to Selwyn’s patriarchal dominance over Ella’s body, one that is wrought in a reinvention of beliefs and behavior when recognizing race and gender. Selwyn’s power over Ella’s identity defined by his interpretations alters her body and beliefs in adherence to the dictations of his white society. By silencing Ella’s narrative and recreating it under the gaze of the western colonizer, the erasure of spirit

and voice continues. The colonizer who zombifies an individual takes pleasure in modifying the body and exacting his control.

Consequently, white power is handed over in a hierarchical fashion, the mantle that is was given to the Brassington's and Mrs. Burns is also given to Selwyn Langley through his marriage to Ella. The colonizing powers of the adopted parent and the authoritative male power of the husband converge in turn to develop a partnership on their dominion over the biracial, female body. As Selwyn watches Ella, he states that she was "a marvelously 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 going to be his line" (Brodber 46). Selwyn acting as 'animator,' shapes Ella's body into his image of her, his beliefs robbing her of her spirit (46). Moreover, Selwyn's manipulation of Ella's biracial identity when assimilating her into white society produces a caricature of her in his play, *Caribbean Nights and Days*. In the minstrel show Selwyn uses Ella's stories of her childhood in order to produce the "Grovetown in which Selwyn set his play, [that] had to be the most fruitful place in the world and one which respected no seasons...it was unnatural and it shook Ella" (Brodber 83). However, the infringement that 'shook' Ella when seeing *Caribbean Nights and Days* focus on what Selwyn's distortion of her stories represented. In presenting Grovetown as an exaggerated and exoticized version rendered only through Selwyn's racist mindset, the white main heroine that Ella represents steals from her spirit when he "made what he wanted of it and gave [her] back nothing" (Brodber 84). Selwyn 'making' of Grovetown in his vision distinguishes Ella in singular whiteness, causing a fierce shattering of self.

The disparities of power catered in Myal present the colonizer as purging spirit from the passive body. A response that is similarly seen in Chandra Mohanty's article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" and her depiction of the 'third world woman'. In her article, while Mohanty acknowledges 'third-world' as a problematic term, she relates it to the known inequalities within cultural and economic systems. Mohanty dignifies the statuses of women as wives, dependent on their husbands as possessing no status in the eyes of men. Similarly, Ella, who zombified has no spirit nor autonomy under Selwyn's control during their marriage, becomes involved in a "political struggle against class, race, gender and imperialist hierarchies that may constitute third world women as a strategic group" (Mohanty 339). The 'strategic group' as explained by Mohanty is a forced binary that categorizes women like Ella as bodies of difference. Problematic and ignored by men, women are portrayed as vulnerable by the same hierarchies that deem them voiceless. Consequently, as Ella's childhood is reformatted by Selwyn when he produces his play *Caribbean Nights and Days*, the stories of her childhood are made into a mockery of her experience. Selwyn effectively silences "Ella's spirit and with it that of Grovetown...locked into celluloid for the world to see for ages on end," an erasure of Ella's voice as Selwyn's wife and as an individual are made into a joke for white entertainment (Brodber 92). The performance rendering Ella's childhood into a produced reality 'locked' Ella in Selwyn's production—viewing Ella as a performance for his own pleasure and a product for the imperialist hierarchy mentioned by Mohanty.

Therefore, when Selwyn owns Ella's story by making it into his own performance, he possesses all of Ella's opportunities— history, present and future are

taken when Ella as Selwyn's character "has [been] robbed...of their possibilities/ dismissed the existence within them of that in-born guiding light" (Brodber 106) . In the text "Foreign Possessions: Erna Brodber's 'Myal,' the Medium, and her Message," Neil Ten Kortenaar also expands on Brodber's use of spiritual possession to examine the concept of colonial control. The article notes that spiritual proprietorship in the text is not one that seeks to enhance the self, but rather seeks to dominate. As noted throughout *Myal*, when the colonizer possesses the history and ancestry of the native, the original community is left without their own agency. The immersion of the colonizer's fabricated norms "threaten[s] a loss of the self" (Kortenaar 51). Consequently, Ella's lack of control in her marriage and assimilation into American society as a white woman alludes to the fabrication of an artificial identity unrecognizable even to herself. While no one in America questions Ella about her past, when Selwyn wanted her "to be full Irish girl" she complies (Brodber 43). However, when seeing Selwyn's production, Ella recognizes that what occurred violates her very identity as "he took everything [she] had away. Made what he wanted of it and gave [her] back nothing" (Brodber 84). As a result, Ella is twisted into something unknown from herself.

Evidently in the text, the distinctive characteristics surrounding the processes of zombification are steeped in the dispossession of identity. The zombified figure in *Myal*, no longer belongs wholly to oneself—as Ella watches Selwyn's production she "stopped doing anything. Even stopped going to the lavatory" (Brodber 83). Accordingly, Ella's bodily reaction that resists the use of basic bodily function is stunted by her traumatic pause. Moreover, her experience of assimilation and repeated negation remove from her an ability to emotionally react to anything at all, even bodily need. The effect of

zombification and the possession over the spiritual body aggravate Ella's 'ill' condition and negate Ella's own means of agency and production. Selwyn's stealing of Ella's spirit completes the erasure of her as an individual, in which zombification does not become a question of curing Ella's body of ailments that accompany her swollen belly but of mending the fracturing split that has been repeatedly committed on her body by others.

Conclusion: Spirit & Gauze

Hence, Selwyn's production *Caribbean Nights and Days* realizes the zombie with almost no autonomy. Ella's metaphorical role of a white girl in the play brings to fruition the creation of the zombified spirit. In this context, the series of aggressions and prejudice Ella faces enact the final performance that empties her spirit completely. Selwyn's racist and distorted rendition of Ella's life further asserts his ownership upon Ella's body and spirit, in which her mind emptied is replaced by a "gauze partition" (Brodber 81). Ella ushered into a physical and emotional colonial assimilation, reiterates her negation of identity and illustrates the complete draining that cleaves spirit from the body. The passive zombie following the desires of the colonizer, enters a realm in which agency and voice are muted by a symbolic 'gauze' that conceals from Ella her awareness and her racial duality. Thus, Brodber's use of Ella's stolen spirit depicted as covered when she states that "for years there had been something like gauze in [Ella's] head where she supposed her mind to be" symbolizes the steady draining of agency that results in the zombie (Brodber 80). The usage of 'gauze' in the text, discerns the wounded spirit filled by beliefs that have buried Ella's own thoughts and opinions. Unable to overlook the 'gauze' that clouds her judgement, Ella "even [has] her mind come into the act" of performing for everyone around her (80). Accordingly, as noted in *Afro-Caribbean*

Religions, Ella's agency struggles under "a culture of negation and oppression in every aspect of life" made more apparent by the efforts made by others to groom her (Murrell 250). Selwyn's harvest of Ella's soul in his possession becomes a caricature for the enjoyment of white viewers.

In addition, Selwyn's ownership over Ella's body in the article by Marika Preziuso "Do I Belong Here?: Images of Female Belonging and Cultural Hybridity in Erna Brodber's *Myal*, Velma Pollard's *Homestretch*, and Caryl Phillip's *Cambridge*," form her into a possession to be used. Ella's naive sharing of stories to assuage Selwyn's curiosity are the purposeful stealing of her narrative, reshaping her identity to his own liking. Selwyn's denial regarding Ella's voice consumes her "spirit, voice, and understanding of life replaced... with new sets of ideas validated as truths" (Preziuso 86). By Selwyn formatting Ella to his own image, only his 'validated' account remains as witness to Ella's biracial identity. Selwyn's ideas of Ella adhere her spirit to a produced reality, allowing her as zombie to only exist within his world. It is through the replacement of spirit with the depictions reiterated by the colonizer that a drainage of agency and violence are implemented on the spiritual self.

Although, Ella may be coveted for her exoticism as her likeness and dissimilarity converge; it is amongst her predominantly white society that she is ultimately deemed a pariah because of the threat that lays in her duality. For Ella, her inability to be accepted and retain ownership of herself becomes a wound that festers within her until it saps at her own ability to react, her ability to physically use her voice. Ella's division throughout the novel remains unspoken yet ever present, buried within the fantasy Selwyn and her society have spun. Zombified and deprived of autonomy, she is described as "able to see

what is behind that apparent innocent story: its author has deprived the characters of their possibilities, inferring that their natural condition is to belong to someone else, justifying in this way their captivity and co-opting them into silence” (Preziuso 87). Ella’s identity when focused on singularity throughout her loss of will as doll and daughter repeatedly signify colonizing efforts. In separating the past and cleaving the hybrid identity apart, the self becomes uprooted. The processes of zombifying the spirit and negating the biracial identity are encountered through the recognition of only one aspect of the split self.

The zombie as the realized possession and commodity of imperialism loses the ability to speak about origins, their known world- when Ella states that “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 talk to them, the gauze barrier would push back her hand or her thoughts,” a rigid divide (Brodber 80). In the text, the symbolic element of ‘gauze’ reveals a concealment and barricade of the self from others. The word gauze, relating to an obscuring of a wound, emphasizes the border of dissociation between Ella’s “Mammy Mary and them Grove Town people” and the symbolic “Peter Pan and Lucy Gray and Dairy Maid” that represents Ella’s biracial identity (80). Her spiritual and physical attributes are disjointed by the defined identity constructed by western society. Ella loses her agency when she no longer is her own creator because she has lost her sense of self under the gauze that Selwyn has exposed—a gauze that has accumulated after years of a forced assimilation. Rather, than dressing her wounds of the spirit, Selwyn focuses on his own desires of taking all that Ella is onto himself.

Nevertheless, when Selwyn deems Ella's heritage as a type of humiliation that would befall upon him, the shift in the considered 'benign' perceptions elude the racist undertones Selwyn, Mrs. Burns, and the Brassington's share—deaf to the small cruelties they conduct on Ella's spirit. Likewise, Ella acknowledges the ignorance others relate to her zombified condition when she sees Selwyn distancing himself from her once he has acquired her narrative. Ella, confronted with an emptied, fabricated self looks at Selwyn with questions about the persona he has engineered for her that "if he would not show her how to fill the spaces he had created and give her too, a chance to create, then what was the point of all this draining" (Brodber 82). The 'draining' referenced in the text, illustrates the culmination of Ella's spiritual wounds- that rather than provide a wholeness she searches for, the changes she has undergone to assimilate only deplete her spirit. Selwyn's sentiments regarding Ella's racial duality as a humiliation characterizes a draining that is only beneficial to him and his needs. A similar quality that is also analyzed in Trinh T. Minh-ha's chapter "The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man" from her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-Coloniality and Feminism*, when binaries and standards act to further aid the agenda of the colonizer. According to Minh-ha, the same colonial hegemonies and systems that set certain standards and biases dictate the ways the other is defined and marginalized. Minh-ha states that "naming is part of the human rituals of incorporation, and the unnamed remains less human than the inhumane or sub-human. The threatening otherness must, therefore, be transformed into figures that belong to a definite image-repertoire" (Minh-ha 54). In regards towards Minh-ha's analysis on naming and white

incorporation, Ella defined by Selwyn is dehumanized under the system of Selwyn's white American standard.

Accordingly, Ella's saying of "Eye no see, heart no leap" indicates the shift in which her spirit is completely stolen by her assimilation (Brodber 79). The body that contains no beating heart with the phrase 'heart no leap' refers to the heart that no longer is set in a natural course, that linked to eyesight with the word 'eyes' are blinded by societal belief (79). Ella's means of identification are no longer viable because she has no means to connect with her previous communities or those around her. Consequently, no longer able to bond with her husband—who sees their marriage as a stain on his "real pedigree," her body refuses to operate (Brodber 80). Ella disconnected from her past and present identity results in a metaphorical confinement of the psyche. As Selwyn withdraws from Ella's body and their marriage once he has taken her stories, he also overtakes her spirit. Ironically, while Ella's body swells with the impression of pregnancy, her spirit has been withdrawn. Ella "feel[ing] dry. Over-drained. [Selwyn] was preoccupied, he said. He was casting" (Brodber 82). With a spirit that no longer responds to one's command, Ella's bodily movement and voice stagnate. In the final stage of zombification, Ella's autonomy captive under the role play of being the aware possession remains a product of colonialism.

Ultimately, while Ella does gain a claim towards agency towards the final moments in the novel, the processes of zombification are a frightening and ravaging spiritual experience. Although, the novel maintains that there is hope in defending the spirit after oppression, *Myal* explores the damaging effects of colonization. Ella's journey

to claim her disembodied voice lost from years of discrimination and injustice symbolize a path to regain possession of the spiritual body.

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