Colonial discourse, as a circulation of knowledge during the colonial period, produced texts that were invariably “colonialist” in their endorsement and normalisation of the prevailing and dominant Western discourse and its ideologies. These texts represented the social existence of colonial relations, which were shaped by the dominant ideologies, primarily colonialism, imperialism, and racism, and had the primary goal of consolidating the unity of the Imperial Centre. As a result, whether in literary fiction or in anthropological/ethnographic fictions masquerading as fact, colonial discourse constituted the colonised ‘Other’ primarily as a means of defining the colonised ‘Self’.

Objects of knowledge were created within a closed system whereby the European mind, the European imagination, was projected onto the colonised as a means of understanding the cultures they came into contact with. This formed “dominating, coercive systems of knowledge” in which the colonised was virtually effaced, his or her discourse effectively silenced. Yet, the question remains, is it possible to see in colonial discourse (by this I am referring to early narratives of the West Indies) a position from which the subaltern (and by the term “subaltern” I am referring to Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the doubly marginalised non-white, female) can resist?

This desire to locate a site of resistance is bound up with the defining characteristic of anti-colonial discourse, be it literature or theory, that is, its determination to forge an identity for itself in opposition to the ethnocentrism of the Western canon and discourse. This attempt at anti-colonial identity formation has led to new approaches to colonial discourse, in which case the hegemony of the West has been challenged, either by reclaiming the marginalised subaltern from the periphery and re-placeing his/her discourse at the centre or, by showing how the borders between the colonising subject and the subaltern can be blurred.

However, while I am stressing the possibility for the subaltern culture to resist total domination by the colonising subject, I am not framing this resistance within the “Manichean” concept of colonialism, which Frantz Fanon and Abdul JanMohammed have articulated. Rather, I am interested in an anti-colonial strategy that appropriates Western modes of thought, theory, literature, discourse on a whole, in its process of abrogation. This leads to a catachrestic (mis)reading of a number of Western modernist and post-modernist theoretical models in ways that their originators could not have foreseen. Post-colonial theorists have utilised/adapted Structuralist, post-Structuralist, Marxist, Feminist, psychoanalytic models, and applied them to non-Western (con)texts to “provide insightful re-readings of the ‘colonizing subject’ and the ‘subaltern’”. Indeed, Bill Ashcroft et al posit that the “major project of post-modernism – the deconstruction of the centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture, is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse” (117).

Thus in my evaluation of Spivak’s consensus that “[t]he subaltern cannot speak”, (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 105) I also utilise post-Structuralist and psychoanalytic models
to support my position that no discourse can be truly silenced or agency negated. I prefer Bhabha’s notion that resistance in a text is not necessarily an overt act of confrontation, but one that can be retrieved and accessed through attention to narrative ambivalence. Hence, this essay investigates the ways in which the authorship/authority of the colonising subject is challenged by the subaltern in the “imperial outpost literature” (Okonkwo 6) of *One Jamaica Gal*, written by Alice Durie, an American-born Jamaican resident married to a propertied white Jamaican and its even more colonialist predecessor *A Study in Colour* by Englishwoman Alice Spinner, wife of an expatriate landowner. For these acts of resistance I am relying on two post-modern theories, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia and the Lacanian notion of the objectifying gaze.

According to Moore-Gilbert (85), Spivak criticises the recourse by some post-colonialists to reverse hegemony in their adoption of an essentialist stance by which the non-West is homogenised and valorised in opposition to the dominant Western discourse. I believe that the concept of the ‘text’ itself, that is, the weaving together of different strands, deconstructs this reliance on a framework of oppositions for critiquing literature. As such, colonial texts, no matter what their authors’ intent, cannot be seen to express the dominant ideology alone because they are a tapestry of various heterogeneous cultures and discourses. This polyphonic concept of the text is one of the postmodern challenges to the authority of the author best articulated by theorists such as Bakhtin and Sartre. I intend to show that, in the two texts under consideration, this heteroglossia allows room for resistance and subversion because as each character brings his/her voice to the novel they also bring their own unique ideological discourse and perspective on the world.

Post-modernism’s challenge to the logocentricity of the Western world came in the form of the dismantling of the myth that there could be any intrinsic truth found in the “word”. As Saussure argued, no word (and by extension, class, race, or culture) has any more inherent value than another. Rather, Saussure went on to state that any meaning of a word is a product of socialisation and differentiation. Bakhtin elaborates on this concept from a Marxist perspective. Bakhtin agrees that language was a product of socialisation in as much that it is a product of ideologies. He stresses “ideologies” because he argues that words are informed by, and thus express, not only the dominant ideology, but also the various ideologies of the different classes that make up the social structure. These different ideological perspectives are granted a certain amount of autonomy and thus each class brings to the same word a different ideological perspective. As a result, Bakhtin states that each language is heteroglot, containing a dialogue of voices within each utterance.

Bakhtin views the novel also as heteroglot and, just like any other language system, it contains a medley of different voices and perspectives competing for ascendency. As he puts it, “the novelistic hybrid is not only double-voiced and double accented (as in rhetoric) but is also double-lingualled for in it …there are two socio-linguistic consciousnesses, two epochs, …that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance” (116). And, because each word/sign is “double-voiced” or “dialogized”, it becomes a site of conflict between the dominant ideology and the ideology of the sub-classes. Therein lies the space for resistance and subversion because the hegemony of the dominant discourse is constantly being challenged by the discourses of the other social/racial/cultural groups.
Furthermore, Bakhtin argues, the entrance into the text of particular world-views, social speech diversity and language-diversity (dialects) negates the authority of the author. He states that in such instances those words “are completely denied any authorial intentions: the author does not express himself in them (as the author of the word) – rather, he exhibits them as a unique speech-thing” (Bakhtin 115). Therefore, the author’s perspective can never be the sole point of view within a text because it is always interwoven with the perspectives of the characters, which (re)present varying degrees of ideological autonomy.

Hence, it can be argued that, although the white female authors—who would, to a certain extent, reflect the dominant ideology—mediate the voices of the black and mulatto female subalterns in the two texts under consideration, the texts still represent interstices from which the subaltern can resist. One of the most evident ways in which the subalterns articulate their position in the text is through their dialogues in dialect. Both authors pay much attention to recreating the vernacular of their characters as faithfully as possible and the title of Durie’s novel is even articulated in dialect. Spinner admits in her preface that she often consulted her servants to make sure that she was being authentic in her representations (8–9). Spinner also admits that Elita’s story is a transplanted narrative (8). Hence, it can be reasoned that, in their attempts at verisimilitude, the authors have left a space for the subaltern to articulate their presence.

Another striking way in which resistance is exhibited is in the ambivalent attitude that both texts exhibit towards alternative epistemologies. Both writers pay great attention to citing instances of superstition and obeah amongst the colonised population within the texts as a means of showing the irrational heathenism of the blacks. However, it is interesting that Spinner’s narration of the obeah practices in her text and Durie’s descriptions of the “balm yard” and its activities are narrated without much authorial castigation and an almost idealistic air. There is definitely an ambivalence towards the cultural practices of the blacks within the texts.

In *A Study in Colour* Spinner pays close attention to the superstitions, folk tales, alternative medicines, and obeah practices of the blacks. She notes that: “[t]he air at sunrise was good for fever, or at least so the black people affirmed, and the Missus was rather subject to fever” (55). She recounts the “Nancy”/“A’nansi” stories, legends of the “Rolling Calf”, “duppy” tales, and the list of folk remedies (80–82). And she reveals the confidences the servant women shared with the “Missus” (90–97), as well as detailing Elita’s clash with obeah (186–192), and Justina’s fear of the return of Malcolm’s duppy (209).

In an act of censorship Spinner writes, “[i]t was plain that the layer of English ideas that had been superadded was but a thin one when all was said and done” (93) since, as a good Christian/Englishwoman she could not be seen to support these practices or these “pagan” attitudes. Yet her inclusion of them in the text is a challenge to Western epistemologies. Indeed, Elita’s downfall and subsequent death at the hands of obeah is recounted without a definitive demystification of the incident as a way of exposing the ‘sham’ of the blacks’ superstitions for the benefit of her Western audiences.

In *One Jamaica Gal*, Durie contrasts the spiritual poverty of the church: “If they dozed during the sermon, who could blame them, for the parson was given to enlarging upon things doctrinal and scarcely touching the problems of their daily lives” (13) against the spirituality of the “balm yard”, identifying it as a place “for spiritual comfort” which
Icilda “could no longer meet with in the church”. Citing “the more emotional religion of the ‘balm yard’” (59) Durie even begs the question, “[w]hat was there in the cold church service to equal the exhilaration of the ‘balm yard’?” (60). And, although she resorts to stereotypes in her description of the “balm yard” celebrations, describing it as a place “where those of more primitive instincts could find emotional relief” as the worshippers swayed and gyrated, becoming “lost in the delirium of their religious ecstasy” (59 – 60), and conjures up images of the jungle when she states that “the drums called out, ‘a-boom-a-tee-boom, a-boom-a-tee-boom,’ with a wild, impelling beat that breathed of the jungle” (64), conversely, at Mother Divine Naomi’s funeral, her description of the actual procession with its “sacred wooden emblems and croziers borne by white robed priestesses” (64) leaves its dignity intact.

Furthermore, Durie’s descriptions of the political agitators contain an even more subversive element in their articulation of black nationalism. The decidedly militant stance of their cries of “Jamaica for Jamaicans” (46, 50), or calls to “[b]e ready to kill. Drive the white man from this land” (61) could hardly have been supported by Durie who was married to a propertied white Jamaican, yet it is included in the text. Although the strike ends unsuccessfully in violence and death for the female protagonist, it is testimony to the inability to silence the colonised subject that their cries for justice were heard, even if only within the pages of the text.

In these instances we see the dialogue between the ideologies and the ambivalence that Bhabha argues colonial discourse cannot escape. On the one hand we know that the authors have a complicit understanding with their European readership that the ‘exotic’ practices that they are reporting are ‘uncivilised’ yet, the authority of the Western ‘civilisation’ and practices are undermined by the regard with which these belief systems are held by the subaltern subjects in a hierarchy that places their acceptance over that of the Western culture. The authors’ emphasis on these different subaltern cultural practices are meant to assert their own cultural superiority but, this constant repetition of difference undermines this goal because, as Bhabha notes, “the too visible presence of the other underwrites the authentic national subject but can never guarantee its visibility or truth” (“Culture’s In-Between” 156).

Furthermore, the location of the “gaze” can equally be viewed as a site of resistance in the two texts. As Laura Mulvey elaborates in an essay, “Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (114). I argue that this desire for omniscience is manifested in the omnipotence of the exercise of authorship. However, there is another aspect of the “gaze” which Lacan considers in a number of his essays, that of the “gaze” as an agonistic affair in which the subject is faced not only with the prospect of seeing the object, but also of “being seen” and thus objectified. Hence, when the characters return the gaze by offering implicit or explicit commentary on the colonising subjects; or side-steps the gaze completely by acting out of accord with stereotypical models, I see this as an act of resistance within the text. And, as Lacan notes, the instance “in which the consciousness may turn back upon itself – grasp itself, like Valéry’s Young Parque, as seeing oneself seeing oneself – represents mere slight of hand. An avoidance of the function of the gaze is at work here” (74).
As I stated in the early stages of this essay, the European mind/imagery projected an image of itself onto the non-Western world in order to understand/identify the alien cultures it came into contact with. The identification occurs at the point where the colonising subject recognises a “mimicry” or “doubling” in the image of the subaltern that is projected back at it. However, the mirror image received is not simply a “doubling” but also a reflection in which the symmetry is inverted and hence oppositional. This sight of difference is one that cannot be reconciled and is thus menacing. Furthermore, the gaze is returned and the subject is not only seeing but being seen.

Thus, the subaltern’s ability to resist the “dominating coercive systems of knowledge” can pivot on, as Bhabha puts it, the “process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (Location 89). I argue that the two texts under consideration operate in a voyeuristic nature to objectify and exoticise the foreign in a process of commodification. However, the observer is conversely observed thus challenging the gaze. When I speak of the observer, I am not only talking of the authors per se but, of the whole colonising presence that operates to establish its authority through the objectification of the ‘other’.

In the texts, it is the authorial presence of the omniscient narrators that disseminate the information and comment on the action of their female protagonists. Like the action of stereotypification, the objectifying gaze holds its object in stasis. However, the threat to the omniscience and omnipotence of the voyeur comes when the gaze is returned and the observer becomes objectified as the observed. For example, in One Jamaica Gal, the white colonising subjects do not escape censorship within the text. ‘Busha Nelson’ is certainly not idealised by Icilda who describes him as having “tobacco stained teeth” and “hairy, freckled skin” (9). When Mrs. Ryan and Icilda speak of Mr. Hilary it is with mild derision – “Massa him jes a chile” (22) says Mrs Ryan.

The subaltern as mirror image undermines its resemblance to the colonising subject when it defies the normative values of the occupying power. The difference is articulated in terms of the refusal to mirror the coloniser’s culture. In One Jamaica Gal the subaltern subjects constantly defy the European ‘civilising’ tenets of chastity, monogamy, Christianity, and honesty. While this portrayal of the blacks could be (and is) seen as repetition of the conventional stereotypes of the lascivious, deceitful, immoral black, it could be (and is) also viewed as a refusal to conform to the dominating, coercive systems of Western society. This rejection of Western normative values is a reflection of the irreconcilable differences that threaten the authority of the Europeans. Indeed, it drives poor Mrs. Hilary to tears when, despite the “talks on morals and deportment” (24) she gave her butleress Phoebe, she still winds up pregnant for the butcher, Harrison.

Although A Study in Colour does not articulate a challenge to the coloniser in the same way that One Jamaica Gal does by reversing the objectifying gaze, there the challenge to the gaze comes in Justina’s ability to side-step or displace it. As Spivak has noted in her “Three Women’s Texts”, the individualism of the Western female protagonist usually comes at the expense of her non-white counterparts yet, in Spinner’s novel, it is the white narrator who steps out of the picture halfway through the text, thus establishing Justina as the undisputed female protagonist. Thus, the reader remains aware of tension as the writers’ authority to have their subaltern protagonists conform to the preconceived, pre-inscribed notions, which govern the function of the dominant discourse, is constantly
challenged by the subaltern whose voice challenges the authorial presence of the narrative voice.

*A Study in Colour* exhibits a certain amount of ambivalence towards Justina thus undermining its ability to fix her within its gaze. The text commodifies the blacks in a perpetual state of childhood and moral inferiority, yet Justina defies these stereotypes. She resists objectification as the promiscuous coloured woman and remains chaste until marriage; she is hard working rather than thieving; yet she is superstitious and lacks emotional restraint; and her fidelity towards Malcolm even after his arrest is said to be instinctual (despite the supposed lascivity of her race). In this way the objectifying power of the gaze to arrest character is constantly displaced.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that, in both texts, the female protagonists’ ascent to the ideals of Western feminism: marriage, fidelity, (and motherhood in Justina’s case), is followed by a swift descent into the subaltern depths of poverty and alienation. I think this ambivalence speaks volumes to the fears of the colonial authority that the colonised ‘Other’ might, one day, step through the mirror, achieve the symbolic, and become the original. By constantly endeavouring to suppress the ‘voice’ of the subaltern, the authors of these texts are attempting to ensure that the subaltern does not succeed where the colonising subject has failed. To successfully resist objectification would mean that the subaltern would be a fulfilled presence able to stand as Self, the Ideal-I of which the coloniser would become its alterity. This would be the ultimate threat to Western ethnocentrism.

In evaluating the successes of the subalters’ capabilities for resistance within these texts, I have argued that there is space for subaltern resistance within colonialist discourse, if it is read catachrestically. As Bhabha notes, by recognising the ambivalence within colonial discourse, its authority becomes disrupted (*Location 88*). Although the purpose of this discourse is to consolidate the authority and the normative presence of the colonising subject, one can note that in their exercise of authorial presence, the colonising subject is “at all times shadowed by what it would resist and seek to defer” (Griffith, 6). The presence of the subaltern is always a deferred, partial presence discursively constructed in terms of inferiority and difference by the colonising subject, yet, as Bhabha notes, colonialisist authority depends on its discourse being “non-dialogic, its enunciation unitary, unmarked by the trace of difference” (*Location 115*). Thus, colonialist discourse lacks priority by its need for the subaltern as its ‘unary signifier’, against which its meaning and authority are constituted.

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WORKS CITED


