Towards a Critical Theory of Spirit:  
The Insistent Demands of Erna Brodber’s Myal

By Melvin B. Rahming

Balancing the scales  
Restoring spirit to matter  
The Whole completed  
Made cosmic again.

(from “Incantation”—Marimba Ani)

When one examines the language, method or intent of current theoretical approaches to literature—be they deconstructionist, poststructuralist, realistic, postmodernist, phenomenological, hermeneutical, etc.—it becomes clear that these theoretical paradigms do not place spiritual considerations at the center of critical discourse. It also becomes clear that they make no overt attempt to articulate their relationship to human, cosmic or environmental spirit. Indeed, they give little or no explicit attention to issues of spirit and, by extension, to issues of spirituality. Although there are innumerable occasions when writers of fiction (especially writers influenced by non-Western perceptions of reality) incorporate issues of spirit and spirituality into their artistic visions, those occasions have not generated a corresponding critical theory that allows the reader/ critic to traverse the spiritual terrain of these texts. Although, moreover, there are critical terms (currently in vogue) that do imply the writer’s concern with issues of spirit—in the general vocabulary of literary criticism, “surrealism,” “neo-realism” and “magic realism” are such terms—the critical uses of these terms have not inspired a corresponding methodology for the critical demonstration of this concern. In any case—and as far as I have been able to establish—there is presently no clearly articulated literary theory expressly for the critical examination of spirit or spirituality in creative texts. In fact, one needs to venture outside the halls of literary criticism if one hopes to find any formulated theories about spirit itself. The failure of literary theorists to address, even in the most rudimentary terms, the nature of spirit and its relationship to literary theory has led to a critical practice that is, much more often than not, spiritually disengaged. Because literature is almost universally valued for its ability to mirror the concerns of the human spirit, I find this disengagement as intriguing as it is ironic.

In stark contrast, much of the fiction that critics explore from various theoretical perspectives seems motivated by concerns that are not only ideological and aesthetic but also spiritual. The spiritual dimensions of such works render them virtually impervious to the epistemological thrusts of critics whose conceptual flourishes do not take them beyond the boundaries of existing theoretical constructs. How, for example, can any non-spirit-centered approach ever allow the critic to negotiate the spiritual terrain of a work like Toni Morrison’s Beloved, where a baby, killed at the age of two, reassumes corporeal form as a
woman eighteen years later and where these events are narrationally linked to a historical setting? Or a work like Kwadwo Agymah Kamau’s *Flickering Shadows*, where ancestors not only observe and comment on the course of events but also participate by influencing the thought of the characters, in the process, empowering them to resist modernity’s call to political and spiritual impotence? Or Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacocks*, where the operations of deceased characters allow for the delimitation of time, space, and history, delimitation that Harris sees as crucial to the artistic presentation of Caribbean consciousness? Or Ayi Kwei Armah *Osiris Rising*, where human beings are the avatars of an ancient Egyptian godhead whose mission is to infuse modern academic systems with a sense of cosmic purpose? Or Nuruddin Farah’s *Secrets*, where individuals in a realistic setting have the power to assume the physical shape and perspective of animals? Or Elizabeth Nunez’s *When Rocks Dance*, where a man is ritualistically empowered to leave his body in an open grave for several days as his spirit travels through time and space to search for information that leads to the solution of individual and communal problems? Or—and this is the novel that will serve as the main reference point for this discussion—a work like Erna Brodber’s *Myal*, where ancient human entities, allied to the consciousness of animals, inspire changes in a Jamaican village, changes designed to awaken the people from the zombification caused by their capitulation to colonial ideologies—the zombification that results, in other words, from the colonization of their consciousness, the theft of spirit on individual and communal levels.

Like the other novels mentioned above, the thematic and aesthetic features of *Myal* combine to excavate a cosmology whose coherence is discernible only through a spiritually focused lens. Like the novels of Edouard Glissant, which “focus on the intersection of the known and unknown,” (Dash xxviii), *Myal* pre-supposes the existence of a timeless and all-pervasive presence that operates on individual, communal and cross-cultural levels to release human beings (and, by extension, human institutions) from the spiritual paralysis of essentialist and materialist ideologies. Like Carpentier’s *The Kingdoms of This World*, *Myal* assumes the human participation in a pre-existing spiritual order that is the matrix of consciousness, an order that is simultaneously inside and outside of time; and, like Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, *Myal* affirms the imaginative process by which history can be probed beyond its materialist, and into its cosmospiritual, dimensions. Without a methodologically appropriate approach to such a work and without the utility of a theoretic paradigm that centers spiritual discourse, the critical attempt to explicate the authorial concerns of *Myal* inevitably reaches an ontological impasse. Thus, by confronting and probing some of the indicators of Brodber’s spiritual intent, this essay seeks to expose and rationalize the need for such a paradigm. I call this paradigm a critical theory of spirit.

II

Spirit is *Myal*’s epicenter. From its opening episode, which recalls a human-generated lightening storm that had devastated the rural community of Grove Town, Jamaica, in 1919, to its final telepathic exchange between two men who are thousand of years old, *Myal* contrives a world governed by the unbounded possibilities of spirit, a world where the spectrum of human consciousness expands through its syncretic relationship with other forms of consciousness—animal, floral and elemental. In that
world, landscape is rendered not as a passive backdrop for human action but as a self-consciousness agent in a collaborative ambience, and human characters are conceived as beings participating in an evolutionary dialectic between modern and ancient parts of themselves and between human effort and cosmic intent. Consequently, for the duration of the novel the line of distinction between being and knowing dissolves, and the self roams far beyond the social, political and cultural mores that seek to shape and contain it. Clearly, then, the world of Myal does not revolve, as Western culture does, around the twin axes of scientific rationality and the politicized ideology of power and control. It revolves, instead, around the exigencies of spirit—the demands of a consciousness inclining towards the full manifestation of its cosmic interrelatedness. When the reader is caught up in the flow of spirit in this novel, the center of Western cosmology cannot hold its grip on consciousness, and he or she is free to expatiate the psychical terrain of spirit, guided only by the fictive signposts and by the responses of his or her own spirit.

In Myal, elements of plot function as the most obvious signifier of Brodber’s spiritual intent. The mulatto Ella O’Grady, who is “tripped out on foreign,” undergoes a severe and prolonged form of psychical rape by her American husband Selwyn Langley who “takes her memories of Grove Town and crafts them into an extremely racist and very profitable coon show” (Nelson-McDermott 54); Mass Cyprus, herbalist and spiritual midwife, exorcises from Ella’s stomach a massive, poisonous, and putrid growth, the literal and figurative surrogate for the physical, emotional and spiritual fecundity that she had vainly sought in her relationship to her husband; the sexually impotent Mass Levi, voodoo practitioner, uses his powers telepathically to effect a literal raping of the virginal Anita in an extended act of spirit possession; Miss Gatha, the leader of the Kumina tabernacle in Grove Town, summons spiritual and elemental forces to wrest Anita’s spirit from its subjugation by Mass Levi.

These extraordinary and spiritually provocative events, taking place against a backdrop of the day-to-day activities of the Grove Town Folk, are presented as the logical consequence of these activities, an achievement that translates into a stinging indictment of colonial and indigenous forces that combine to steal the people’s spirit. The mental, emotional and psychological problems experienced by the Ella’s of the Caribbean are linked explicitly to the systemic operations of colonial formal education—its linguistic, aesthetic and ideological structures—as it daily informs the people’s consciousness and induces their complicity in their own spiritual deracination. The result, according to the Baptist leader, Reverend Simpson, is a zombification whose undoing necessitates the convergence of spirit energies on individual, institutional and elemental levels. A more concretized form of zombification is practiced by local “conjure men, voodoo men, wizards and priests,” (66) who ritualistically appropriate the people’s spiritual energies for selfish and destructive ends. Moreover, many of the residents become unwitting participants in the spirit-stealing operations of the colonial church, represented by Rev. William Brassington, whose ministry makes him, in the words of his increasingly intuitive wife Maydene, a “spirit thief...taking away these people’s spirit” (18) and who consciously seeks to implement the colonial mission—“to exorcise and replace” (18). The narrative presentation of his interior world, mediated by Maydene, reveals that he perceives reality to be knowable only by way of an objectified rationalism.

Since these plot lines function, as Shalini Puri explains, as “concept metaphors of spirit thievery,” their development becomes the means by which “Myal brilliantly
overcomes the spirit / matter, mind / body dichotomy, rendering it impossible to separate bodily and mental violence” (102). Puri’s observation is useful in its implication that Myal engages the site of intersection between binaries. When one perceives, however, that these events are rendered as literal, unquestioned facts (in the community’s collective consciousness), one justifiably wishes that Puri had explored some of the epistemological and ontological—ultimately spiritual—implications that this observation holds for our understanding of Grove Town’s apprehension of reality. The fact that Ella gradually deteriorates both mentally and physically as Selwyn drains her spirit suggests not only the intersection of matter and spirit but also the suffusion of mind and matter by spirit, not only the intersection of mind and body but also the symbiosis of mind, body and spirit. The attempt to explore the cultural implications of this symbiosis necessarily prefigures a critical approach that apprehends a reality predicated upon such a symbiosis, not merely upon intersecting dichotomies. It calls for a methodology that presumes, ultimately, the fusion of science and spirit, a view of the human in which “the emotional-spiritual and the rational-material are inextricably bound together’ (Ani 203).

Unlike critics, the artist—in this case, Brobder—is able to suggest this fusion through a narrative technique of polyphonic and polyvalent associations. One of the indicators of this textured interrelatedness is the technique of doubling. Reverend Simpson, Mass Cyrus, and Ole African are both separate and inseparable from their alter egos, their more ancient selves—respectively, Dan, Percy, and Willie, each of whom is more than five hundred years old. In each case the relationship of the two (as opposed to “between” the two) resists succinct definition. Neil Ten Kortenaar’s careful analysis of the two-tiered union is informative but only adds to the mystery of the combined entity (as opposed to “dual” entity): “Dan prepares the Reverend Simpson for his sermon, takes his voice higher in song, and warns him of what is going on in the village (36-37), but this heightened consciousness remains Simpson’s own. The Reverend Simpson does not need to consult Dan; he already knows all Dan knows. Simpson is Dan. At every moment he is both a Baptist minister in Grove Town and someone who has made the journey from Africa—the man his neighbors see at the front of the church and part of an invisible team that shadows the community to safeguard its spiritual health” (54).

Although Kortenaar’s insights assist our understanding of the relationship between Simpson and Dan, they do not allow us to distil the oneness of their artistic conceptualization—an epistemological undertaking necessary for our considered acceptance of Dan and Simpson’s ontological oneness. Whether we refer to them as “doubles,” “combined entities,” “two levels of consciousness” (one much more heightened than the other), “alter egos,” or “ancestral spirits and hosts,” their combined persona resists explanation because their very conceptions challenge linguistic definitions. Kortenaar’s further explanation of the Simpson-Dan entity as analogous to the reality of the other doubles is again symptomatic of the conceptual elusiveness of all of the combined entities: “The myal spirit is an extension of the host’s self into a wider realm, but the converse is also true: the hosts are merely embodiments of the spirits. Simpson’s body echoes Dan’s canine nature; the Baptist minister is described as ‘black and with a mouth stretching from one side of his face like a bulldog and looking just as stern….’ It is as if, more than the spirit’s host, Simpson were his reincarnation” (54).

Whatever verbal accommodation these dual entities inspire in the reader, it is clear that the critic may have to go outside of the English language—or creatively extend the English
vocabulary—to find words to frame the reality manifested in the conceptualization of these “beings.” It is also clear that their mediation of the text functions as the means by which Brodber is able to “replace traditional history with spiritual historicity,” an achievement that Karla Holloway locates in the “insistent spirituality that characterizes [black women’s texts]”\(^1\)

As Holloway also points out, the mediation of ancestral forces in a text allows for the acknowledgement of cultural mythologies that were once “sublimated and/or unacknowledged by traditional methods of reporting the past” (134). In Brodber’s text these ancestral voices do not in any way reveal a nostalgic lament for, or hankering after, a version of their African past, realistic or romanticized. Nor do their recollections of Africa betray what Michael Dash calls “the longing for the ideal of history,” which he associates with the contemporary literary preoccupation with the search for a primordial source that both discloses and obscures the nature of lived experience (79). Rather, the ancestral voices reveal Brodber’s interest in the potential of consciousness for confronting the presence of the past. That this “rememory” yields cultural and historical—in this case, African—specificities speaks to an archetypal dimension of consciousness that is universally accessible. As Maydene’s eventual initiation into the myal spirit group attests, this awakening of Caribbean people to pre-Caribbean dimensions of consciousness can inform the nature and direction of Caribbean cross-culturality.

Further attesting to the novel’s polyphonic and polyvalent structures is the fact, intimated earlier, that these characters embody individuated animal aspects, a conceptual act that blurs the line between human and animal consciousness and challenges, consequently, Western ontological paradigms. This human-animal overlay, indicated by another layer of doubling—Reverend Simpson (Dan the mongrel), Mass Cyrus (Percy the Chick), and Ole African (Willie, the pig)—evinces the spirits’ conceptual association with an African totemic tradition that, according to Nelson-McDermott, allows Myal to “enact a preemptive strike against the colonial conception of oppressed West Indians as animals, while at the same time refusing to give away the importance of an African totemic tradition” (64). In any case, the critical reach for a word to frame the simultaneity of this triadic experience may well fall short of the critical grasp: because this triadic experience has no referent in Western cosmologies, it cannot be critically apprehended within related Western theoretical constructs. Consequently, the critic’s already imperfect understanding of the triadic experience cannot benefit from the ontological centrality inherent in the momentary act of framing a word.

Myal’s transhistorical voices should be seen as yet another level of spiritual interrelatedness. Since these voices belong also to Dan, Percy, and Willie; since on one level they can be read as mnemonic faculties submerged in the consciousness of their alter egos; since, furthermore, they are depicted as individuated spirits who are conscious of their human mission; the reader has little choice but to accept, at least for the duration of the novel, the transhistorical nature of a human spirit and its inherent link to an underlying cosmic circumstance. The fact that the spirits recall their earlier African incarnations, are cognizant of their alliance with spirits operating historically in other cultures, and exert healing influences on the lives of specific characters is also reflective of the novel’s concern with the re-alignment of human strivings to a pre-existent cosmic order, a process that requires spiritual monitoring. According to the terms of the novel, this psychical re-engineering is a prerequisite for the kind of cross-cultural fertilization that obviates the
need for spirit theft. Indeed, the operations of the myal spirits imply that the process of cultural hybridity also requires spiritual monitoring. Obviously, the acceptance of such a cosmically aligned worldview on individual, communal, and national levels potentiates the emergence of new ways of presenting what Wilson Harris calls the “very old or eclipsed or buried material of [Caribbean] consciousness which cries out for relief” (9) and the formulation of new methodological approaches to the production and criticism of literary art.

The centrality of Brodber’s spiritual intent to an understanding of Myal is also suggested by the fact that she links most of the events of the novel to her carefully differentiated portrayal of the religious institutions that seek to influence the communal consciousness of Grove Town: the Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches and Miss Gatha’s Kumina tabernacle. Although there are decided differences in the official beliefs and rituals of each of these syncretic sects, the movement of the novel is toward the excavation of spiritual substrata that can attest to a commonality of feeling and purpose that transcends religious differences. Apropos of the residents’ African ancestry, the drum-induced trance possessions of the Kumina rituals, coupled with the myalizing (healing) function of the Kumina ancestral spirits (in the personae of Dan, Willie, and Pierce), who are quite vocal about their African past even as they embrace a Caribbean present, constitutes proof that Myal takes an unflinching position with regard to the ongoing debate concerning the role of African ancestry in Caribbean cross-culturality. Although these myal spirits are cognizant of their allegiance to a higher cosmic order—their common mission is, like the mission of the regenerated Ella, to “short circuit the whole of creation...break it up and build it back again” (110)—the novel contains no indication of a conflict between the myal spirits’ African-related rituals and their ties to cosmic purpose. Nor does the novel contain any suggestion that the cosmic order, the “whole of creation,” is in any way static. What the concerted behavior of the myal spirits does suggest is that human beings who are not in a zombified state of consciousness may participate in an infinitude of dynamic possibilities, telepathy being one indicator of the range of possibilities. Since the myal spirits are themselves human, their behavior posits that it is the individual and communal alignment with cosmic order—with spirit—that potentiates and orchestrates the movement toward the realization of the full spectrum of human possibilities, even as the telepathic music that the myal spirits play is inspired and orchestrated by their attunement to cosmic sound.

Like Paul Marshall’s presentation of the Bournehills residents in The Chosen Place, the Timeless People, Myal imbibes the ancient African (Kemetic) concept of human beings as spirits who are intrinsically a part of a cosmic spirit and demonstrates that this cosmological tenet is also held by other non-European cultures. Although, as Marimba Ani reminds us, “the African apprehension of the universe as cosmic harmony simply represents a philosophic approach that defies the European worldview” (118), Myal posits that because of a pre-existing and transhistorical order, there are European individuals who can still hear and heed the call of their spirits to a spirit-centered existence. So it is that the English woman Maydene Brassington, communicates to her black neighbor Amy Holness her awareness of spiritual forces in the world: “Somebody is fooling you people that only you know about the occult” (64). Before the novel ends, Maydene is recognized by the myal spirits as belonging to their circle and as having an important role in the anticipated realignment of Grove Town—not to Africa but to the “whole of creation.” This
recognition makes clear an important aspect of the novel’s contribution to the discourse on Caribbean hybridity: the world of cross-cultural fertilization turns on the axis of cosmic integrity.

Without my attempt to explore other features of Myal’s spiritual interrelatedness—for example, the many biblical correspondences, motifs and allusions; the elemental, floral, and human collaboration that engenders the lightening storm at the beginning of the novel; and the healing of Ella, which results form a similar collaboration—the point is made that Myal is conceptually linked to a cosmology in which the universe is spiritually interfused. From a critical standpoint, this notion that the infrastructure of a work of fiction can simultaneously rest upon and issue from a cosmospiritual foundation is, admittedly, a problematic one: it implies not only that the features of a novel are spiritually interfused—a proposition that eludes the attempt to explain it—but also that the writer’s construction of the world of the novel and the readers “insperience” of that world are essentially spiritual experiences and, as such, are inherently resistant to the monological discourse that is literary criticism. Furthermore, it is problematic in that it necessitates that the critic negotiate an area of experience—namely, spirituality—for which there has been no adequate critical terminology or methodology in the history of literary theory. Indeed, not only is the word ‘spirit’ not steeped in academic respect, but, despite its denotative ubiquity, it is problematic in critical discourse in that the attempt to define and apprehend it undermines its autotelic essence.

Understandably, then, the ventures of literary characters into the world of spirit, either as distinct from, or inseparably linked to, the world of physical reality; these characters’ unselfconscious ability to experience reality through its spiritual essence; and their equally unselfconscious ability to interpret lived experience according to its relationship to what they understand as cosmic design—each of these signifiers of authorial intent are usually approached by critics through such theoretic and philosophical avenues as magical realism, marvelous realism or surrealism or through philosophy-based postmodernist or post structuralist paradigms. While such modalities are obviously useful for the exploration of consciousness and while they are capable of denoting distinct features of spirituality, none of them encourages the perception of spirit as an ontological sphere of influence in its own right—that is, as a zone of experience, so influential and so potentially pervasive that it may well obliterate, as Myal does, the line between the physical and the non-physical, between the secular and the sacred, between the present and the past, even between logic and intuition. Thus the need for a paradigm conceptualized for the specific purpose of facilitating spiritual discourse gathers momentum and urgency.

III

Generally speaking, the critical response to Myal has evinced the failure of postcolonial theory to fathom the spiritual depths of a work that not only dismantles colonial linguistic and psychical structures but also begins “to build a non-colonized and non-colonizable, social space” (Nelson-McDermott 54). That Myal is a re-engineering of social space is an unchallengeable assertion. That it is a re-creation of spiritual space is, it seems to me, a much more apt description of Brodber’s achievement. Indeed, as we have seen, it is the spiritual architectonics of the novel that pose a seemingly insurmountable problem for critics who apply a “post-colonial” dialectic to a text that is less concerned
with de-centering colonial structures than it is with the process by which a spiritually besieged community can assert the power and primacy of its spirit. That such dismantling must precede spiritual restoration is a “given,” and Myal has even been read as a model for decolonization beyond the Caribbean. However, to see this novel in “post-colonial” terms is both to illumine and to obscure the need for a critical paradigm that can bear the weight of a text that fosters the creation of an indigenous communal space which ultimately has nothing to do with colonialism, a space whose conceptual shape and integrity are undermined by any attempt to frame it by reference to colonialism. To describe such a space as “post-colonial” or to negotiate it in terms of a discourse described as “postcolonial” is to acknowledge colonialism as the only valid point of historical departure and psychical reference for Caribbean people. To accept colonialism as the axiomatic foundation of Caribbean lived experience is to limit history to its materialist indices, to be closed to the decentering possibilities inherent in Derrick Walcott’s observation that “History is Sea,” and to disallow the mythic dimensions (of Caribbean consciousness) that help to foreground the Caribbean present. Furthermore, by invoking the colonial ethos as point of linguistic and historical departure in the attempt to rationalize Caribbean reality, the term “postcolonial” ironically continues to imprison the critic in the vocabulary of other.

To explain Myal’s alternate reality, which Nelson-McDermot goes on to describe as “based on a community which exists in and of itself, not solely as a strategy for working against cultural hegemony,” the critic needs an alternate dialectic, one which, like the novel’s alternate reality, exists on its own conceptual terms and in its own dialectal space. The description of Myal’s emergent community as “non-colonized and non-colonizable” exposes the need for a critical vocabulary capable of suggesting the nature of a communal consciousness that is freed from ontological ties to colonialism and, correspondingly, the need for a critical model suitable for the exploration of human consciousness as it resonates with intimations of its cosmic interrelatedness.

Whereas neither Puri nor Kortenaar demonstrate an awareness of this need, Nelson-McDermott calls attention to Stephen Slemon’s suggestion that “a comprehensive theory of ‘possibilities’ of existence beyond the colonial dialectic might profitably base itself on work being done in the area of postcolonial or Commonwealth fiction” (53), a suggestion that, conceivably, approximates my call for a critical theory of spirit. While all three of the critics convincingly explore some of the aesthetic, philosophical, and spiritual complexities of Brodber’s novel; while they construe the nature of spirit thievery and spirit possession as “concept metaphors” for cultural imperialism; while, furthermore, they deal convincingly with the nature and role of the spirits in Myal, none of them attempts to probe the spiritual matrix that spawns a reality in which spirit thievery and spirit possession are accepted not only as “possible” but as real. Such a probing would, understandably, necessitate the formulation of a critical model that not only centers spirit but also assumes a universe that is based on spirit.

It is understanding, then, that, in the absence of such a model, the critical attempt to negotiate some of the events and situations in Myal gives rise to a complex of issues regarding the nature of human spiritual endowment. From a spirit-centered perspective, for example, what Kortennar sees as Brodber’s delight in anachronism—“Mass Cyrus performing an exorcism [in 1919] raises his arm in a gesture that echoes the statue of Bob Marley by Christopher Gonzales” (52)—may be understood as a literal way of exposing
the future that is inherent in the present, an explanation that is more in keeping with Brodber’s revisionist approach to Caribbean history. Another more weighty spirit-related problem is reflected in the critics’ use of the phrase “spirit possession” to refer to the relationship between the myal spirits and their “hosts.” If on one level the human character is seen as the reincarnation of an ancestral spirit or even if “being possessed is a means of harnessing the forces that already govern the host’s personality” (Horton 97), then, rather than refer to the myal spirit / host relationship as a case of “spirit possession,” we can more accurately use the term “self-possession.” Again, this term would more efficiently accommodate the vision of the self dramatized in *Myal*: healthy self-actualization necessitates the restoration of the self to a consciousness of its cosmically-related mission. Seen in this light, the relationship between myal spirit and host contradicts the “spirit possession” that encapsulates the effect of colonialism on the colonized. Also, unlike the spirit possession associated with the voodoo practices of Mass Levi, the presence of the myal spirit is not a response to a ritualistic invitation or evocation.

Another issue that cries out for critical understanding regards the degree of importance the critic should give to “spirit telephone” communication between spirit and host and the telepathic conversations between the hosts. Because such forms of telepathy play an important role in monitoring and explaining the stages of Grove Town’s journey to and from zombification, the critic infers a reality where telepathy is more than “concept metaphor” for spiritual communication, a reality where, instead, it becomes a realistic manifestation of spiritual endowment. Thus the critical attempt to theorize about the nature of spirit and spirituality must presume abilities like telepathy to be an inhered actuality, not imaginative or creative fancy. Nor can abilities like telepathy be dismissed by such labels as “magical realism” or “marvelous realism.” These labels are too closely allied to exoticism to suggest Brodber’s concern with spirit as a very real zone of ontological experience. Both labels also obscure the notion that what is being dramatized by Brodber—and by those writers, mentioned earlier, in whose spirit-centered tradition I locate *Myal*—may have little or nothing to do with the magical and the marvelous and everything to do with the very real power of human and cosmic spirit. When associated with the certain characters in these novels, the phrase “magical realism” and “marvelous realism” do not invite the reader to see the characters’ unusual activities and abilities as the natural manifestation of their deep and deepening connection to spirit.

As the preceding discussion indicates, even a cursory exploration of issues exposed by the critical attempt to negotiate *Myal*’s spiritual terrain must necessarily be discursive in nature. And, the framing of a theory where issues of spirit and spirituality lose all vestiges of marginality and liminality will necessarily involve fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality and the nature of human experience. Undoubtedly, the articulation of such a paradigm would be facilitated by a theoretic definition of “spirit—and, by extension, “spirituality”—that allows for the interpolation of cosmologies like that of *Myal*. The need for such a definition is implicit in the call for a critical theory of spirit; and the attempt to answer this call may necessitate the coining of new terms, the conceptualization of new epistemologies and new ontologies, and the framing of new methodologies—in short the clearing of a critical space for the attempt to rationalize works that imbibe a poetics of spirit.

Apart from Stephen Slemon’s direct call for a theory of possibilities, this need for a critical theory of spirit may be inferred from and informed by the observations of several
Caribbean writers—most notably, Wilson Harris, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Edouard Glissant, and Alejo Carpentier. I have already referred to Harris’ call to writers, in the preface of his novel *The Whole Armour*, for a way of presenting “the buried material of Caribbean consciousness.” Similarly, Glissant recognizes the need for writers to give “a distinct spiritual ‘itinerary’ and form” to Caribbean consciousness (Knight and Palmer 326). As early as 1956, the Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis voiced his theory of “marvelous realism.” And, as also noted earlier, Carpentier, in his preface to *The Kingdom of this World* proposes “magic[al] realism” as a way for novelists to portray aspects of human make-up that are “outside of time.” Spirit-centered works like *Myal* are indications these calls are being answered.

**IV**

Meanwhile, in the absence of a critical theory of spirit, *Myal* invites any and all approaches that can contribute to, if not center, readers’ understanding of issues of spirit. There is, of course, no ignoring the fact that *Myal* critiques the colonial enterprise in the Caribbean (and, by paradigmatic extension, elsewhere) to exposes spirit theft—the process by which people, having been forcibly induced into deep states of somnolence, become zombies—as colonialism’s most pernicious and deracinating accomplishment. However, the critic can ill refuse to recognize that the aesthetic and linguistic terms of that critique frames—and are framed by—a cosmology of spirit. It is also significant that the novel’s definition of “spirit theft,” while coming from a resident of Grove Town (Reverend Simpson) in his attempt to encapsulate the effects of colonialism on the community, subsumes the ancient Kemetic (African) tenet that “spirit” is the essence of the self and of all things in the universe, a fundamental assumption about the nature of reality assumed in the narrative and aesthetic clusters of Brodber’s novel. Still, Brodber’s simultaneous portraying and dismantling of the institutional and psychic structures of cultural imperialism necessarily applies a spiritual methodology that, while allied to an ancestral past, proceeds from the lived experience of Grove Town’s residents. Nor is this spiritual methodology limited to its African ancestral referent; as I have already pointed out, it excavates a cosmic principle—reality is spiritually energized and constituted—that is the basis of other cultural traditions and the cohering principle for cultural cross-fertilization in the Caribbean.

The definition of “spirit” subsumed and actualized in *Myal* at once affirms and transcends the particularity of an African ancestral nexus. In its final insistence that the individual and communal spirit can participate in an evolutionary movement toward cosmic alignment, *Myal*’s subsumed definition of “spirit” echoes elements of the perennial philosophy of some great wisdom traditions of the world—Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Taoism. Although the religions practiced in Grove Town are variants of Christianity and although *Myal*’s narrative structures are replete with tropes resonant in a conventionally Christian discourse, the events and tone of the novel are driven by a spiritual concern that transcends the religious and social institutions that seek to imprison, liberate, or otherwise engage individual and communal spirit. This concern is for the collective recovery of spirit and the culture’s consequent ascension to waking consciousness. These are rendered in *Myal* as complex and coterminous processes involving (1) a tapping into forms of cultural memory, recent as well as ancient; (2) a
recognition and acceptance of a pre-existing order, pre-existing not necessarily in a
temporal sense but, as Ani explains, “in the sense that its existence is more comprehensive
than that which we can rationally consume or generate” (562)—an order that,
paradoxically, relies on and generates societal transformation; and (3) a re-contextualized
reading of the people’s historical and contemporary circumstance.

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Bermuda, Puerto Rico, and Martinique.

NOTES

1For an extended discussion of spirituality in texts by Black women, see Chs. 6 and 7 in

2Neil Ten Kortenaar details the limitations of the myal spirits: “…their communion is
restricted to people who know each other personally and live within a certain radius of each
other….. The memories the spirits have of their conversations in Africa display no awareness of
how the past differs from the present…. The myal spirits allow for communication across
distances, but only as far as their hosts can actually walk and never across the sea” (58 – 63).

3See Tiffin, Helen. “Decolonization and Audience: Erna Brodber’s Myal and Jamaica

4For a discussion of the spirit-based nature of the Kemetic worldview, see Wade W. Noble’s
“Ancient Egyptian Thought and the Development of Ancient (Black) Psychology.” In Kemet and
the African Worldview. Ed. Maulana Karenga and Jacob Carruthers, Los Angeles: University of
Sankore Press, 1986. 100-118.

5In “The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad (Boston:
Shambhala Publications, 1997) 38-51, Ken Wilbur undertakes a detailed discussion of perennial
philosophy and its subsumed definition of spirit.

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