

Narratives of Obeah in Twentieth-century Anglophone West Indian Literature

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of Obeah, the name given to a range of African-inspired, syncretic Caribbean religious practices, in novels and short stories written by authors born in the former British West Indies. Ranging from the late 1920s to the late 1980s, these texts' plots all systematically engage with these practices in their narrations of West Indian nation and national identity. My study focuses on how each of these texts narrates Obeah vis-à-vis the wider concerns of modernity, cultural identity, nationhood and colonial alienation, and realigns the discussion of Obeah aesthetics with debates around what has been designated 'the folk' in Caribbean literary criticism. Through detailed, comparative readings of the works of several authors, this study not only recovers the neglected trope of Obeah in West Indian fiction, but also argues Obeah's integrity to the elaboration of a uniquely regional literary and cultural aesthetic.

Chapter One examines the use of Obeah in barrack-yard fiction, and its implications for the myth of a unified, homogenous nation. Chapter Two explores the representation of Obeah in short stories of the late 1930s into the 1950s, and their concerns with Obeah's place in the new nations they imagine. Chapter Three reads Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1934) as critiques of the primitive/modern aesthetic and cultural binary; I argue that Obeah is narrated, in these novels, from the threshold of these extremes. Chapter Four examines three novels written around Independence, featuring single male protagonists whose negotiations of Obeah are analogous for national negotiations of selfhood. Chapter Five focuses on Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), which manipulates 'African' spirituality in its 'quarrel with history.' These novels all, in addressing Obeah, reimagine these practices as integral to, while also challenging, the idea of West Indian nationhood and identity.

Dedication

To my parents, for their unwavering support, defence and belief.

*'I do come from this tradition of possessing and claiming yourself, because if you don't possess and claim yourself, someone else will.'*¹

¹ Moira Ferguson and Jamaica Kincaid, 'A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid,' *The Kenyon Review*, 16 (1994), 163-188 (p.184).

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Introduction: Obeah as cultural signifier

In this thesis, I argue that the incorporation of Obeah, a group of associated syncretic, African-inspired religious and cultural beliefs and practices still popular throughout the Anglophone Caribbean, into the region's literature, has played an important role in the articulation of West Indian literary and cultural identity. Given its provenance, Obeah has naturally resonated with the West Indies' majority black populations and, given its association with rebellion, was ideally suited to a culture that would define itself against colonial rule. Obeah functions, in the texts here analysed, as a symbol of resistance to colonial ideology, and as a marker of the black 'folk' aesthetics that are now constitutive of West Indian literary and cultural production. These texts, written and published at key moments of West Indian cultural literacy, foreground Obeah as not only 'local colour' but as social and cultural logic, integral to the creation of such a thing as 'West Indian literature' and, by extension, West Indian culture.

While the term 'Anglophone Caribbean' is now more frequently used in academic discourse, 'West Indian' continues to be used by English-speaking Caribbean people, and their descendants and relatives across the diaspora, as a term of recognition and shared identity. As a Jamaican myself, the term 'West Indian' is more familiar to me, and although I am aware of its colonial origins I attach no stigma to it. I use both 'West Indian' and 'Caribbean' throughout this thesis as, though the two may seem interchangeable they are not necessarily commensurate. In this thesis I use the term 'Caribbean' as designating a region that encompasses all territories whose coastlines border the Caribbean Sea, including South, Central and North American states, whose official languages include French, Spanish, English and Dutch. I use the term 'West Indian' to refer to people, places, cultures, languages and texts originating from the former British West Indian islands (and Guyana), which were incorporated into the West Indies Federation, a political union of these then-colonies that lasted from 1958 to 1962.¹ While this political union is no more, the cultural identity which sponsored it and which it sponsored remains – put simply, while all West

¹ The original member territories of the West Indies Federation were Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. Anguilla, Montserrat, the Cayman Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands became British overseas territories. British Guiana, which became Guyana after its independence, and British Honduras, which became Belize, were official observers.

Indian states are Caribbean, not all Caribbean states are West Indian. I also refer to the literature under review here as 'ours,' chiefly to delineate this literature's position vis-à-vis the dominant tradition of 'English Literature' more broadly. West Indian Literature, while it may be written in English, is not English Literature; my use of the pronoun 'our' makes this more immediately apparent.

I begin my investigation in 1929, with the establishment of *Trinidad* magazine, which launched the career of C. L. R. James, along with other pioneering writers who became known as the *Beacon* generation, given their association with *The Beacon* magazine, into which *Trinidad* was subsumed.² The inter- and postwar years remain significant for West Indian literature and culture, not least because of the literary 'boom' of the 1950s. This period saw the granting of universal suffrage to Jamaica and Trinidad (in 1944 and 1945 respectively), which was followed by political Independence (in 1962).³ Before that, though, one of the most sobering events for the region was World War I and its aftermath. While the onset of war may have 'helped to stir up latent Empire loyalties,' as Hyacinth Simpson has argued, by its end these loyalties were exhausted.⁴ Wounded veterans (overwhelmingly from the working classes) began to return in 1916 bearing not only physical scars, but with wavering allegiance to the 'Mother Country,' having experienced Britain's bitter racial prejudice and discrimination first-hand. Moreover, they found themselves ill-provided for by local governments. Alfred Mendes, who served in the British West India Regiment and whose work is featured in Chapter One of this thesis, recalled in his autobiography that

those of us who fought in the War were so changed in outlook and attitude that our memories of our past selves were dead and buried [...]. Church, Royalty, Nobility,

² Norval Edwards argues that these *Beacon* writers 'articulated certain critical claims and intentions [that] shaped the basic template of Caribbean criticism for nearly half a century,' in 'The Foundational Generation: From *The Beacon* to *Savacou*,' in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.111-123 (pp.112-113).

³ Other British Caribbean territories gained independence between 1966 and 1981. Anguilla, Montserrat, the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands remain British Overseas Territories.

⁴ Hyacinth M. Simpson, 'Patterns and Periods: Oral Aesthetics and a Century of Jamaican Short Story Writing', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 12 (2004), 1-30 (p.9). Despite opposition (many took the outbreak of war to agitate for self-government), several thousands pounds in gifts, and approximately £2 million in cash was raised for the war effort in the West Indies, despite the effects of an increasing cost of living, indicating overwhelming support and loyalty to the Crown. Recruiting officers used moral persuasion and promises of reward for duty to the Mother Country to entice volunteers, but their job was made easy by depressed wages and chronic unemployment. See Glenford Howe, *Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002).

Government, Empire, Law, all of these sacred cows found themselves in grave danger of either extinction or change so drastic as to alchemise them into new and strange substances.⁵

Yet the symptoms of social disease, such as unchecked population increase and abundant unskilled labour, were evident even before the war, as were calls for more equal representation and franchise. The Trinidad Working Men's Association (TWA) was founded in 1887, with an express mandate to advocate for the interests of (black) working-class Trinidadians, one of which was self-government. In 1901 Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian barrister, established a branch of the Pan-African Association in Trinidad, a year after he convened the First Pan-African Conference in London. In his inaugural address, Williams declared that 'the time has come when the voice of Black men should be heard independently in their own affairs.'⁶ The 'Water Riots' of 1903, incited largely by the 'coloured' businessmen of the Rate Payers Association, 'marked a turning point in Trinidad's social and political history,' argues Anthony Bogues, as 'the participation of black working-class activists indicated political stirring by wider social forces.'⁷ Black/creole writers began to respond to their compatriots' political activism, subscribing to the belief that 'the people of the West Indies must develop a literature and philosophy of their own and make a suitable contribution to the sum total of the world's progress.'⁸ They reflected these demands in their stories, which became characterised by the presentation of this previously silenced majority. This drive to create something of 'our own,' to produce a distinctive, identifiable national(istic) culture, defined the now archetypical artistic production of this period.

⁵ Alfred H. Mendes, *The Autobiography of Alfred H. Mendes, 1897-1991*. ed. by Michèle Levy (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), pp.73-74. Many soldiers, most notably Trinidad's Arthur Andrew Cipriani, formed trade unions upon their return. These were illegal until 1919, after which they were still banned from staging peaceful protest, and liable for any damages incurred during strike action. Capt. Cipriani formed the Trinidad Workingmen's Association in 1923, which became the Trinidad Labour Party in 1924. See Jesse Harris Proctor, Jr., 'British West Indian Society and Government in Transition 1920-1960', *Social and Economic Studies*, 11 (1962), 273-304.

⁶ Qtd. in Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe and Africa* (London: Methuen, 1974), p.177.

⁷ Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C. L. R. James* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p.11.

⁸ Ralph Mentor, 'A Study of Mr. James' Political Biography,' in *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing*, ed. by Reinhard Sander (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp.292-298 (p.292).

The apex of political and social discontent came in the form of region-wide labour riots in the late 1930s, which constituted Crown Colony rule's greatest challenge since Emancipation. In George Lamming's words,

the major thrust of Caribbean literature in English rose from the soil of labour resistance in the 1930s [...] the expansion of social justice initiated by the labour struggle had a direct effect on liberating the imagination and restoring the confidence of men and women in the essential humanity of their simple lives.⁹

The most notorious of these rebellions occurred on the Frome Sugar Estate in Westmoreland, Jamaica, in 1938. Some 1000 labourers went on strike in May, and the official response to their demands resulted in four deaths.¹⁰ The protests spread to city and dock workers in Kingston, and as a result of these disturbances the British government sent a royal commission, chaired by Walter Guinness, 1st Baron Moyne, to investigate social conditions in the region. The Moyne Report, as it is now known, was not published until 1945 but declared that for the labouring classes, 'mere subsistence was increasingly problematic,' which was largely the fault of systematised colonial neglect, resulting in economic stagnation since Emancipation.¹¹ Despite the major social welfare changes resulting from the Report, including the passage, in 1940, of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act to fund long-term regional development and construction, and the granting of universal adult suffrage in Jamaica and Trinidad, many activists were dissatisfied with the results of the Report.¹² With the onset of the Second World War, many of the recommendations of the Commission were either tabled or curtailed. Writers and other intellectuals, increasingly disappointed and frustrated with the lack of social, political and economic progress, began to more vociferously articulate and agitate for an independent West Indies. Concurrently, however, there was a distinctive lack of domestic audience and

⁹ George Lamming, 'Caribbean Labour, Culture and Identity', *Bucknell Review* 40 (2001), 22-23 (pp.22-23).

¹⁰ In June of that year, William Alexander Bustamante formed the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU), which spawned the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1943. Three months later his cousin Norman Manley founded the People's National Party (PNP), which is the Anglophone Caribbean's oldest political party. See Abigail Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica: The Politics of Rebellion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). For a comparative analysis of strikes throughout the region, see O. Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934-39* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1995).

¹¹ O. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), p.42.

¹² Kelvin Singh, *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917-1945* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994), p.190.

market for their work, which is one of the factors that triggered the mass exodus of writers from the region during this time. These émigré writers have forever shaped Caribbean letters but, as I will demonstrate and as Alison Donnell has already argued, a literary tradition, often addressing feelings of alienation, was already alive before this.¹³

The 1960s saw independence for Jamaica and Trinidad, at the cost of the short-lived West Indian Federation and attendant crises of national confidence. The 1970s was a decade of disillusionment in the region, as many dreams of independence were deferred, as the region's fragile economies became more dependent on foreign aid and subsidies, chiefly from the United States of America, as a war-weakened Britain lost its hold on its former colonies. It is still debatable whether our experiment with socialism ended with Jamaica's signing of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund in 1977, but the region's relationship with Britain shifted dramatically as goods, services and people began to look to the United States as a sphere of power and influence. One way in which the United States directly exercised this power was the invasion of Grenada in 1983. This was reinforced by the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which went into effect on January 1, 1984 and became permanent in 1990. As Abigail Bakan, David Cox and Colin Leys argue, the United States 'shifted towards a more overt use of its immense economic and military power' during this period. The CBI, initially presented as economic recovery, 'forcefully press[ed] the small Caribbean island states to reorient their trade towards the United States.'¹⁴ Writers responded by producing narratives that foregrounded the experiences of migrants to the United States, and their relatives at home. The 1980s also saw increased visibility for women writers; this may be resultant of greater freedoms for women in the region, not least increased opportunities to migrate.¹⁵ My investigation ends in 1988, when Erna

¹³ See Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London: Routledge, 2006). Alfred Mendes wrote that 'the factor that drove us all into self-exile not only from Trinidad but from other West Indian islands, was the utter inhospitability of the whole region to writers.' He moved to New York in 1933. See Mendes, *Autobiography*, p.83.

¹⁴ Abigail B. Bakan, David Cox and Colin Leys, 'The CBI: An Overview', in *Imperial Power and Regional Trade: The Caribbean Basin Initiative*, ed. by Abigail B. Bakan, David Cox and Colin Leys (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993), pp.1-10 (p.1).

¹⁵ Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson argue that women being underrepresented in West Indian fiction 'may well have to do with inadequate storage and retrieval systems,' and go on to question whether women had been writing in large numbers before 1980, 'and therefore whether what appears to be a sudden literary blossoming may not, at least in part, be a flowering of publishing interest consequent on the Women's Movement and the improved economic status of women, making them a market to be reckoned with.' See

Brodber published *Myal: A Novel*, which marks a significant aesthetic and formalistic change in Caribbean literature, and remains unique in its treatment of Obeah as an integral element of Caribbean spirituality.

Mine is the first literary critical history to focus on representations of Obeah across such a range of prose fictions, which is particularly relevant for Caribbean literary studies as Obeah has long been central to Caribbean culture(s), yet understudied as a literary trope. I have chosen to focus on fictions from the twentieth century, as the concept of 'national' and/or 'West Indian' identity was most popularly debated during this time, and given unique expression in the region's letters. During this period, typically 'West Indian' aesthetic conventions, such as use of 'dialect,' 'local colour' and a focus on the lives and manners of our labouring or 'folk' classes were delineated, as were social concerns with inequality, race consciousness and self-definition, in order to distinguish 'our' literature from English literature more generally.¹⁶ This image of West Indian letters is enduring, and is only now being readdressed.¹⁷ The literature under review in this thesis is influenced by, and provides insight into, these key historical moments and movements, and reflects the historical dimension of Caribbean literary nationalism.

Finding Obeah

Obeah was developed across Caribbean plantations as part of enslaved Africans' responses to their capture, bondage and exile. These beliefs and practices became not only

Pam Mordecai and Betty Wilson, 'Introduction', in *Her True-True Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing from the Caribbean*, ed. by Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), pp.ix-xx (pp.x-xi).

¹⁶ I use the term 'dialect' here because it was the term used most commonly in the period under discussion. I agree with Edward Kamau Brathwaite, however, that the term 'dialect' 'carries very pejorative overtones,' as it 'has a long history coming from the plantation where people's dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them.' I will henceforth use Brathwaite's term 'nation language,' or creole(s), when referring to the various languages of the Caribbean. See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1995), p.13.

¹⁷ Jamaican author Kei Miller, in response to compatriot Marlon James' 2015 Booker Prize win, argued that we are entering a 'new period' of Caribbean literature, courtesy of 'a new generation of writers who had all the resources of creolised Englishes and the uncanny stories that they witnessed first-hand growing up on the islands' but who, through 'forming a community with other writers,' are moving away from 'easy and suspicious binaries of "the sacred" and "satire."' Miller's comments allude to the enduring influence of 'the local' on Caribbean literature, as well as prevailing attitudes of reverence and/or irreverence towards the region's history. See Kei Miller, 'Marlon James' Man Booker prize heralds a new Caribbean era,' *The Guardian*, October 14, 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/14/marlon-james-vanguard-caribbean-literary-style>> [Accessed December 1, 2015].

repositories of lost African cultures, but also the seeds of new Caribbean ones. While it is largely ridiculed today, and remains illegal in most Caribbean states, Obeah functioned, on these plantations, as an alternative social, legal and scientific framework for knowledge.¹⁸ This thesis focuses on literary fiction, but much Caribbean artistic and cultural expression originated in what Lawrence Levine called 'slave magic,' and what I am calling Obeah, the primary message of which was that 'there are many things that white folks did not know, and because of this their power, great as it was, was limited.' Obeah allowed the enslaved to 'act with more knowledge and authority than their masters,' and was a '[way] in which the powers of the whites could be muted if not thwarted entirely.'¹⁹ As such, it has always had an oppositional status to dominant colonial culture and discourse; the literature I have chosen will demonstrate that these practices have long signified a sustained resistance to the dominant machine of the plantation, and 'the roots of culture' in the Caribbean.²⁰

The term 'Obeah' first entered the English literary and discursive imagination at the height of the Gothic era, in response to Tacky's Rebellion in St Mary parish, Jamaica, which lasted several months in 1760. This was the Caribbean's largest insurrection at that time, (superseded only by the Haitian Revolution), and Obeah played a crucial role in inspiring slaves to rebel.²¹ While Tacky, its leader, may not have been an Obeahman himself, scholars agree that he was at least advised by one, if not many.²² Vincent Brown draws attention to

¹⁸ At time of writing, Obeah has been decriminalised in Anguilla (1980), Barbados (1998), Trinidad and Tobago (2000) and St Lucia (2004). See Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby, *Enacting Power: The Criminalisation of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760-2011* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. 30th Anniversary Edition edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.73-74.

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou*, 5 (1971), 95-102 (p.100).

²¹ See C. Roy Reynolds, 'Tacky, and the Great Slave Rebellion of 1760', *Jamaica Journal*, 6 (1972), 5-8. Carolyn Cooper argued that 'it was a Jamaican, Boukman Dutty,' who 'conducted a religious ceremony at Bois Caiman [Haiti] in which a freedom covenant was affirmed,' similarly to the freedom covenant that was likely affirmed at the beginning of Tacky's rebellion, thereby 'spearhead[ing] the Haitian Revolution.' Boukman would likely have been labelled an 'Obeahman' in his native country. See Carolyn Cooper, 'Haiti – the Price of Freedom', *The Gleaner*, January 17, 2010, < <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100117/cleisure/cleisure3.html>> [Accessed December 4, 2015].

²² See Monica Schuler, 'Ethnic Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean and the Guianas', *Journal of Social History*, 3 (1970), 374-385; Randy M. Browne, 'The "Bad Business" of Obeah: Power, Authority, and the British Caribbean', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 68 (2011), 451-480; and Sasha Turner Bryson, 'The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society', *Caribbean Studies*, 41 (2013), 61-90. Srinivas Aravamudan argued in 2005 that Tacky 'was widely thought of as an obeah practitioner,' in 'Timeline of Historical and Literary Events Surrounding New World Slavery, Abolitionism, and Obeah, 1492-1838', in *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack*, by William Earle, Jr., ed. by Srinivas Aravamudan (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005), pp.53-64 (p.56).

Obeah's centrality to African-Caribbean self-expression, and resistance to colonial domination, in his observation that Tacky's Rebellion

threw the direct competition among different forms of sacred authority into stark relief. Tacky had planned and instigated the uprising with obeah practitioners as his closest counsellors. He and his co-conspirators called on the shamans to use their charms to protect the rebels from bullets and to administer binding loyalty oaths, which required the plotters to consume a concoction made up of blood, rum, and grave dirt, which they believed to have sacred significance. In the waves of executions that followed the rebellion, none were more impressive than those of the shamans. Revealingly, colonial authorities felt that they needed to resort to more awesome displays than they normally projected.²³

I quote at length from Brown to demonstrate Obeah's historic significance as an agent of rebellion and credible threat to colonial order. This passage also illustrates how Obeah was popularly undertaken and administered – or, at least, how it was believed to be. A similar oath-taking ceremony is detailed in Cynric Williams' *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (1827), which describes enslaved conspirators – and a reluctant English missionary – drinking a 'filthy-looking mixture' of blood, gunpowder and grave dirt, from a skull, followed by rum.²⁴ Obeah practitioners and their followers invested quotidian products of the plantation – death (blood, graves) and sugar (rum) – with spiritual significance and power, and thus armed themselves against their domestic, yet alien oppressors with the tools most readily at their disposal. When looking for an anticolonial aesthetics with which to mount their own opposition to colonial domination, West Indian authors returned to the plantation, to the armed and unarmed resistance of the enslaved, and to Obeah as an alternative social and cultural authority.²⁵

²³ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p.149.

²⁴ Cynric R. Williams, *Hamel, the Obeah Man*. ed. by Candace Ward and Tim Watson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2010), p.126.

²⁵ Despite the plantocracy's brutal response to Tacky's Rebellion, and subsequent criminalisation of Obeah, English planter Bryan Edwards, writing some 30 years after the rebellion, noted that 'neither the terror of this law, the strict investigation which has ever since been made of the professors of Obi, nor the many examples of those who from time to time have been hanged or transported, have hitherto produced the desired effect. We conclude, therefore, that either this sect, like others in the world, has flourished under persecution; or that

It is important to note, however, that Obeah was more than slave oaths and armed resistance. It was also an alternative form of social, medical and legal care among the enslaved, and retains these functions today. In the form of ‘fetishes,’ such as glass bottles filled with salt, feathers, teeth, etc., or charms made to be worn on one’s person, Obeah is used to ward off thieves or protect against evil; in the form of various ‘bush baths’ and poultices, Obeah is a form of medicine. Various oils and powders, too, can cure or cause disease, or attract or repel the attentions of a lover.²⁶ These methods can also be used to inflict psychological harm, or visit bad fortune, upon one’s enemies.²⁷ In addition, Obeah practitioners are skilled in the ‘catching’ of duppies, or unrested souls, which may be used for nefarious purposes. Likewise, an Obeahman may be employed to release one of these duppies, so that it may achieve final rest and cease interfering with the living.²⁸ The chief purpose of Myal ceremonies, to which I will return later in this introduction, is to achieve communion with, and therefore receive guidance and protection from, the eternal spirits of deceased ancestors. A Myal dance forms the climax of Orlando Patterson’s *Die the Long Day* (1972), and is a significant scene in Herbert de Lisser’s *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1929). In both instances, groups of initiates gather, at night, to seek communal physical and psychological healing.²⁹

More commonly in the pre-Emancipation period, Obeah rites were considered vital at funerals, as without them one’s soul was susceptible to capture, and could never return

fresh supplies are annually introduced from the African seminaries.’ Qtd. in May Robinson, ‘Obeah Worship in East and West Indies’, *Folklore*, 4 (1893), 207-218 (p.210).

²⁶ Guyanese author John Campbell noted in 1976 that ‘it is known that in Africa, in the past, traditional witch doctors were noted for their cures for illnesses. [...] In Guyana today [the] main practice of obeah is to do, or ward off evil, cure illness, seek prosperity or to correct some social injustice [...] There is in fact no limits [*sic.*] to the beliefs of clients and the demands they make on practitioners.’ Campbell’s description intimates that Obeah has many, seemingly contradictory functions, and hints at a common Caribbean proverb, ‘Obeah can kill an cure.’ See John Campbell, ‘Obeah: Yes or No? A Study of Obeah and Spiritualism in Guyana’, (1976), p.3. ‘Obeah’ was produced as a pamphlet, which contains no further publication information.

²⁷ It was reported in Jamaica, in 2015, that ‘a prisoner accused of killing his cellmate was remanded in custody after he told the magistrate that his obeah is strong and that she cannot stop him.’ See Racquel Porter, ‘Prisoner with Strong Obeah, Remanded’, *Jamaica Observer*, October 5, 2015, <<http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Prisoner-with-strong-obeah--remanded>> [Accessed December 2, 2015].

²⁸ Brown explains that ‘haunting and spiritual cure were central to Jamaican shamanism. [...] One critical skill possessed by obeah practitioners was “shadow catching,” the ability to capture souls,’ in *Reaper’s Garden*, p.146.

²⁹ See Orlando Patterson, *Die the Long Day* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1972); and Herbert G. de Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2007). These novels will not be analysed in detail, here.

to one's ancestral home. Long Day's central drama is the burial of runaway slave Quasheba, who had been brutally murdered by Maroons. As Brown outlines, both Obeah and Myal were

most authoritative when engaging with the problems presented by the presence of the dead. Such practices offered people power over the most fraught and perilous feature of life in slave society: the permeable frontier between life and death [...] the political significance of necromancy acquired paramount importance for the enslaved.³⁰

Obeah, therefore, had multiple functions in slave society, and in the formation of the culture we now understand as 'West Indian.' As Dianne Stewart argues, Obeah

could be accessed and asserted to achieve communitarian and life-affirming aims, such as political and social solidarity (Obeah oath); divination/revelation (connecting with Ancestors at grave sites, detecting agents of social and cosmic disruption); healing (shadow catching/restoration, removing spells and curses); and protection (charms, medicine bags, spiritually "charged" religious objects/mystical technology).

Put simply, Stewart continues, 'Obeah is capacity and encompasses unlimited operative meanings.'³¹ What links these meanings, however, is access to, and enactment of, spiritual power. In an echo of Levine, Stewart outlines that

Obeah permitted powerless enslaved Africans access to forces that could and often did help them regain control over other people and invisible forces, functioning thus as a form of social control and as a system for checking and balancing power and authority [...]. Obeah, then, served as a mask behind which enslaved Africans could unleash vengeance or retribution against each other [and] against anyone in the larger society.³²

Writing Obeah

³⁰ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, p.147.

³¹ Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.43.

³² *Ibid.*, p.42.

As is evidenced by these descriptions Obeah means, and has meant, different things to different people at different times, and even simultaneously. Yet, as Jerome Handler and Kenneth Bilby have argued, colonial legislation against the practice, in particular, has ‘played a central role in creating public (mis)understandings of obeah across the Caribbean region.’³³ The many nuanced functions of Obeah were lost, discursively, in the anti-Obeah clause in the ‘Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760,’ which is reproduced below:

And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil spirits, whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a Belief of their having full Power to exempt them whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen Be it therefore enacted [that] any Negro or other Slave who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power, and be detected in making use of any Blood, Feathers, Parrots Beaks, Dogs Teeth, Alligators Teeth, Broken Bottles, Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-shells or any other Materials relative to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft in order to delude and impose on the Minds of others shall upon Conviction thereof [...] suffer death or Transportation...³⁴

This legislation created an identifiable, unified phenomenon where one did not exist, and vilified it as the universally ‘wicked Art of Negroes,’ thus equating Obeah with blackness, and blackness with ‘wickedness.’ Moreover, in the phrase ‘*pretending* to have Communication with the Devil,’ it denied the validity and religiosity of these beliefs, not to mention fundamental African understandings of spirituality within the material, and of communion between the living and the dead. As Jane Soothill argues,

religion in Africa is primarily about power. African “traditional” religions [are] informed by a world-view that holds that events in the material world are influenced by the activities of a spirit world with which human beings interact. [...] spiritual

³³ Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, p.2.

³⁴ Qtd. in Diana Paton, ‘An Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760 – Introduction’, *Obeah Histories: Researching Prosecution for Religious Practice in the Caribbean*, <<http://obeahhistories.org/1760-jamaica-law/>> [Accessed May 11, 2015].

power is morally neutral and can be used for either benevolent or malevolent ends. Those in possession of spiritual power, therefore, are both revered and feared.³⁵

Obeah, as several manifestations of neutral spiritual energy, is pure potential. It is not manifestly evil, as many believe it to be, but liminal by character – it inhabits the boundaries between the earthly and spiritual worlds and is an amalgamation and reconstitution of several African religious traditions. We see this ambivalence towards Obeah and its practitioners throughout the fiction examined in this thesis – Obeah’s liminality and boundlessness renders it ‘tricky’ to narrate, as its ambivalence runs counter to the discursive framework that would ‘rationalise’ these practices as ‘superstition’ or ‘witchcraft.’

Kelly Wisecup notes, in her 2013 article ‘Knowing Obeah,’ that Obeah ‘evaded’ colonial systems of knowledge, thereby exposing ‘the inadequacies of colonial epistemologies.’ While her remarks refer to the pre-Emancipation period it remains true today that ‘the literatures of obeah reflect both [attempts] to identify obeah’s natural causes as well as [struggles] to account for the supernatural and non-human entities on which obeah practitioners drew.’³⁶ Obeah disrupts colonial epistemological and ontological categories, including the realist novel form, which are predicated on the separation between the natural and supernatural worlds, between life and death, and between ‘truth’ and ‘myth.’ Representing Obeah, therefore, produces ‘generic hybrids and a blurring of generic differences, textual slippages that manifest the ways in which colonists responded to encounters with alternate systems of knowledge,’ as I will demonstrate in the body of this thesis.³⁷ Even as Caribbean creole texts are already hybridised forms, Obeah ‘trickifies’ them further by distorting the boundaries they attempt to impose on it in their representations.³⁸

For the purposes of this thesis I consider ‘Obeah’ to be an umbrella term for a range of African-inspired, syncretic Anglo-Caribbean spiritual and faith practices developed by enslaved Africans in response to their displacement and enslavement, and inherited by their

³⁵ Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2007), pp.10-11.

³⁶ Kelly Wisecup, ‘Knowing Obeah’, *Atlantic Studies*, 10 (2013), 406-425 (p.406).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.408.

³⁸ In Jamaican patois, to be ‘trickified’ is to be cunning and deceptive, like Anancy, the trickster folk hero. Anancy, as well as being a trickster, is responsible for having brought knowledge into the world, and is a master manipulator of language. I will return to this concept throughout this thesis.

descendants. It is a system of expressions of various religious, social, political and scientific knowledges.³⁹ In this sense it is similar to the Vodun and Santería traditions practised in Haiti and Cuba, among other places, but these latter have pantheons of deities, whereas Obeah does not. It is also similar to Quimbois, which is practised mainly in Martinique and Guadeloupe.⁴⁰ All of these religious traditions reject the separation between the physical and spiritual worlds that characterises European Enlightenment thought. They are, as Maarit Forde and Diana Paton have argued, 'plural, fluid formation[s], intimately linked with other areas of social life, and always relational,' so reject easy definition.⁴¹ Today Obeah has lost much of its terror, and is ridiculed more than it is feared by the majority of the region's inhabitants, given its association with the 'occult,' with 'superstition' and with African-ness, which is widely viewed as 'backward.' Closely related to Obeah is Myal, which is a specifically Jamaican term for supposedly 'good' or 'counter-' Obeah. Scholars continue to argue over the validity of this distinction, but I contend that Obeah and Myal are not antagonistic religious traditions, but instead significantly overlap.⁴²

Myal came to prominence in the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. According to Monica Schuler, it 'emerged in the 1760s [the same decade in which Obeah was made illegal] as a pan-African religious society to protect slaves against European sorcery.'⁴³ This, as I have demonstrated above, was largely the purpose of Obeah, too. Myal gradually adopted Christian elements, and with the Great Revival of 1860-1861 Myalists felt tasked with 'clearing the land for Jesus Christ' through special public ceremonies to 'root out' Obeah (often physically buried in the ground).⁴⁴ Jean Besson describes the Great Revival as 'an intense evangelical revival' that started in Ireland, 'swept through the anglophone [*sic.*] world, and arrived in Jamaica, where it began in the Moravian Church.'

³⁹ See Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*.

⁴⁰ See Margarite Fernández- Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. Second edn (New York: New York University Press, 2003)

⁴¹ Forde and Paton, 'Introduction,' p.7.

⁴² For other scholars who agree with my position, see Tabish Khair, "'Correct(ing) Images from the Inside: Reading the Limits of Erna Brodber's *Myal*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37 (2002), 121-131; Stewart, *Three Eyes*; Ennis B. Edmonds and Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*.

⁴³ Monica Schuler, 'Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica', in *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, ed. by Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp.65-79 (p.66).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72. Even so, Schuler maintains that 'most accounts of Myal antiobeah activity fail to provide detailed information about either the persons involved or the diagnoses of Myal doctors.' Schuler, 'Myalism,' p.73.

The Euro-Christian revival spread rapidly, and combined with 'the Myalist Revival' to generate 'a new Afro-Protestant religion, called "Revival,"' which 'incorporated more elements of Baptist Christianity in opposition to Obeah as sorcery.' In 1861, Besson continues, 'the Great Revival "turned African" [and] was appropriated by the original Obeah-Myal ideology,' resulting in the surviving traditions of Revival Zion 'seen as nearer to Baptist Christianity and opposing Obeah' and Pukumina 'closer to the original Obeah-Myal complex and regarded as practising Obeah.'⁴⁵ Myal, it would seem, quickly rejected much of the Christian ideology that sponsored it, and returned to Obeah, its source.⁴⁶ Margarite Fernández-Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini Gebert define Myal as 'a version of Obeah practised only in Jamaica,' and even though Handler and Bilby argue that Myal is associated with 'gatherings and practices that blended elements of Christian belief with African-derived religious practices, some of which were used to combat allegedly negative forms of obeah,' they still 'reject the dichotomisation of obeah and myal.'⁴⁷ Myal may chiefly be distinguished by a group dance in which initiates are possessed by ancestral spirits, but knowledge of Obeah is integral to the practice of Myal. They are both, as Joseph Murphy argues, 'concerned not only with social control, but also with the development of a spiritual sensitivity and empowerment.'⁴⁸

Myal/Obeah's co-dependency is borne out in fictions of Obeah, too: in *White Witch* Myal is not named as such, and is performed by the powerful *Obeahman*, Takoo (*White Witch*, pp.206-215).⁴⁹ *Long Day's Africanus* is referred to as a 'healer,' and as leader of 'the village's myal cult,' but is also known among the slave community as an adept at Obeah, which he refuses to practise (*Long Day*, p.33). The novel's protagonist, Quasheba, is not sanctioned for her active practice of both. Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance* (1986) features several spirit possessions, all of which are referred to as 'Obeah' yet

⁴⁵ Jean Besson, *Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture-building in Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p.243.

⁴⁶ For more on Revival and Kumina, See Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*; and Stewart, *Three Eyes*.

⁴⁷ Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, p.171; Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, p.10; p.11.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, p.121.

⁴⁹ This ceremony is subtitled an 'exorcism,' and the narrator refers to it as an 'orgy' (p.206) and the 'magic of Old Africa' (p.207).

considered by the narrator as positive and beneficial to the community.⁵⁰ Outside of fiction, the Jamaican Obeah Act of 1898 (which remains in place today) dictates that “‘obeah” shall be deemed to be of one and the same meaning as “myalism.””⁵¹ Both practices remain condemned in this legislation, which does not distinguish between them in terms of punishment. This supports my argument that the retrospective distinction between the two practices is false. All of these practices developed out of Caribbean ‘slave magic,’ out of clandestine defiance of colonial order.

Obeah and ‘the folk’

I pause here to consider Obeah’s relationship to a developing Caribbean cultural aesthetic. From the sixteenth century, during which its indigenous populations were exterminated in the name of Spanish imperialism, the majority of the Caribbean’s inhabitants were enslaved Africans who brought with them their own multiple religious and cultural practices and understandings, from which Obeah developed. Edward Kamau Brathwaite defined Caribbean (folk) culture as ‘the culture of the mass of ex-Africans who found themselves in a new environment [the Caribbean slave plantation], and who were successfully adapting to it.’ This folk culture ‘was to have a profound effect upon the very constitution of Jamaican [and, by extension, Caribbean] society,’ effectively defining it for subsequent generations, despite the islands’ racial, ethnic, national and cultural diversity. White creoles, still oriented towards England, Brathwaite argued, ‘contributed very little to the texture of local customary and spiritual life beyond the framework of the Great House and the plantation.’ Enslaved Africans and black creoles, on the other hand, ‘began from their first landings to adapt their African heritage to the new and changed conditions.’⁵² Of course, these enslaved Africans and their descendants did not exist in a cultural bubble devoid of contact with their European masters and, with the arrival of indentured labourers from India and China the tapestry of Caribbean culture changed again. Nevertheless, this ‘folk’ culture, as we now identify it, is lastingly determined by various West African

⁵⁰ See Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell, *When Rocks Dance* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992). The absence of the term ‘Myal’ could be a result of this novel being set in Trinidad.

⁵¹ See ‘The Obeah Act’ (Kingston: Ministry of Justice, 1898)

<<http://moj.gov.jm/sites/default/files/laws/Obeah%20Act.pdf>> [Accessed December 31, 2014].

⁵² Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* (London: New Beacon Books, 1981), pp.5-6.

cultures.⁵³ During the period of enslavement, Brathwaite continues, Africans established themselves in their new environments by ‘using the available tools and memories of [their] traditional heritage to set going something new, something Caribbean, but something nevertheless recognisably African.’⁵⁴ Obeah is such a thing, and in the narratives here analysed it emerges as a signifier of this very ‘Africanness’ of the Caribbean, a marker of this ‘folk’ identity.

Sylvia Wynter built on Brathwaite’s assertions to distinguish the superstructure of the plantation from the substructure of the ‘plot’ in her elaboration of the beginnings of West Indian society. The plot was the small piece of land allocated to an enslaved labourer on which to grow food, for sustenance as well as for profit; it was not directly regulated by his or her master. Wynter suggests that this plot was ‘the focus of resistance to the market system and market values,’ represented by the plantation.⁵⁵ The plot existed simultaneously, ambiguously, both within the plantation and in opposition to it. Obeah was developed on these plots, away from the scrutiny of overseers, and while the plantation was ‘the superstructure of civilisation,’ the plot was the roots of a folk culture that ‘became a source of cultural guerrilla resistance to the plantation system.’ In the fiction under consideration in this thesis, we see how Obeah operates to undermine narrative assumptions, even as it is contained within them. Wynter takes folk culture, in the present, to be ‘a point outside the system where the traditional values can give us a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed.’⁵⁶ ‘Folk’ culture, therefore, was and is always resistant – Obeah was a way for the enslaved to make sense of their enslavement, a repository of their old and new (shared) cultures, and as such is necessarily rebellious – an ‘unruly’ presence in dominant (post)plantation society.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define ‘folk’ as pertaining to customs and manners of the labouring classes of the West Indies, which have roots in the culture created on plantations (plots) by the formerly enslaved and indentured, the majority of whom were

⁵³ Carolyn Cooper argued, in the year of Jamaica’s fiftieth anniversary of political independence, that ‘we need to question our national motto [‘Out of Many, One People’]. Is Jamaica really a multiracial society? Obviously, not! We are a black-majority nation with a small minority of other racial groups. Our national motto is clearly delusional,’ in ‘Dying to Be Beautiful?’, *The Sunday Gleaner*, January 8, 2012, < <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20120108/cleisure/cleisure3.html> > [Accessed January 8, 2016].

⁵⁴ Brathwaite, *Folk Culture*, p.7.

⁵⁵ Wynter, ‘Plot and Plantation,’ p.99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.100.

black West Africans. Popularly, Obeah has always been most closely associated with this demographic. 'Folk,' in many ways, has replaced 'indigenous' in Caribbean literary and cultural discourse, and has become synonymous with 'African,' even though the process of creolisation that engendered this folk identity was itself an inclusive, constantly contested, collective process. While of course I include the traditions of Chinese- and Indian-descended West Indians in this definition, Obeah in particular, with few exceptions, is popularly considered to be an 'African' affair.⁵⁷ Diana Paton observes that, during the period 1890-1939, 'representations of obeah continued to tie it tightly to Africa.' Although prosecution for Obeah was not limited to those of African descent, she found that relatively few 'East Indians' were charged with practising Obeah during this time. In Trinidad, 16 of the 120 defendants she identified were described as Indian or Indian-descended (13 percent), while people of Indian origin constituted just over a third of the population. In Jamaica the Indian population never exceeded two percent, yet four percent of Obeah prosecutions featured Indian defendants.⁵⁸ Paton did not identify any accused Chinese Obeah practitioners, and I have not come across any such figure in fiction. In any case Obeah is a marker of subalterity, of resistant 'folk' identity which, in the Caribbean, is heavily associated with 'African' heritage.

Literary studies of Obeah tend to be subsumed into studies of 'the folk,' and in any discussion of the folk in West Indian literature, Lamming's remarks in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) bear repeating. He claimed that it was his generation of authors that began to look 'in and down at what had traditionally been ignored' – the rural labouring classes. 'For the first time,' he argued,

the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source of labour. He became, through the novelist's eye, a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear,

⁵⁷ In two of the short stories here analysed, however (Seepersad Naipaul's 'Obeah' [1951] and Sm Selvon's 'Obeah Man' [1948]), the practitioners are of Indian descent.

⁵⁸ Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.168-169. Paton also notes that Hindu religious ceremonies, such as the Kali Mai Puja, were often mistaken for Obeah. Frederick Ivor Case notes that both Obeah and the Kali Mai Puja, 'grounded as they both are in an ethos of the dispossessed, [have] come to create a common axiology,' in 'The Intersemiotics of Obeah and Kali Mai in Guyana', in *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, ed. by Patrick Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp.40-53 (p.50).

involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality.⁵⁹

Lamming's idealism is sincere, but this passage implies that 'the West Indian peasant' was not a legitimate entity before the attentions of 'the West Indian novelist.' Christian Campbell has recently critiqued the 'meta-narrative' of the folk in Caribbean literature, what he calls an 'over-determined yet under-theorised concept' deployed in cultural nationalist, anticolonial, creole and 'authenticity' discourses.⁶⁰ Lamming's concept, Campbell continues, 'sounds less like a recognition of power relations in Caribbean society and more like a hierarchy of relations according to literacy, education and nationalism.'⁶¹ I concur with Campbell that Lamming's elitism is condescending, and that it upholds colonial values as much as it may 'celebrate' those traditionally placed in opposition to them. Moreover, the former's constitution of 'the folk' is not self-reflexively aware of its own constructedness. It visualises this 'folk' as a discrete, static entity, instead of a dynamic, complex and heterogeneous groups of individuals, with desires that may not necessarily be those of the seeing/narrating intellectual. Nevertheless, Lamming's suggestion that the folk was *written* into being speaks volumes to the connection of the literary imagination to the creation of national consciousness. Lamming understood, as Campbell argues, 'the possibilities of literature in constructing sites of collectivity that could transcend geographical fragmentation' – how the literatures of separate islands could become 'national' – even though he crystallises this folk in the past.⁶² Critical conceptions of the folk, in David Nicholls' words, tend to treat the folk 'as an assumed category of person rather than as a contested vision of collectivity.'⁶³ Obeah, when included in these visions, exposes folk plurality, their contestation of the concept of narrative unity.

Yet there is a longer tradition of 'looking in and down' than Lamming indicates. From the late nineteenth century, attempts to rehabilitate so-called 'indigenous folk forms' were

⁵⁹ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), p.39.

⁶⁰ Christian Campbell, "'Folking up the Criticism: The Politics of "the Folk" in Caribbean Discourse', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.383-392 (p.383).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.387.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.386.

⁶³ David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.4.

key to strategies of re-creating a 'West Indian culture.' In 1899 the editor of the *Jamaica Times* newspaper advised would-be entrants in its new weekly short story competition that the winning entry 'must treat of Jamaican subjects or its scenes must be in Jamaica.'⁶⁴ The *Daily Gleaner's* Anancy story competition of the same year required 'one of those semi fabulous, humorous, half-jesting, half-didactic stories, that are set amid local surroundings, and have local atmosphere and colour.'⁶⁵ This, argues Belinda Edmondson, is early evidence of Jamaica's elite demanding its own stories, and its investment in promoting distinctly domestic literature. Those Anancy stories, while not representative of mid-century anticolonial nationalist literature, were still 'evidence of a kind of proto-nationalist cultural consciousness [...] contained within a pro-imperialist imperative,' which significantly predates the work of Lamming's generation of authors.⁶⁶ Moreover, while they are not Obeah stories, Anancy stories remain the most easily recognisable (and acceptable) forms of Jamaican/Caribbean folk culture among the middle classes. Although many writers of this period may have used local scenes and settings merely as backdrop for 'what were little more than traditional English romances,' the generation that followed used these same scenes and settings to experiment with form and express their disillusionment with London's imperial rule.⁶⁷ They also demonstrate that 'culture' and 'authenticity' were to be found in, and with, 'the folk.' The works analysed in this thesis feed into this association of the folk with authenticity, and of Obeah with the folk. While they may have considered Obeah to be our most extreme and contentious cultural element, they also considered it our most authentic.

A lasting problem with this return to the folk, however, is the attendant authorial condescension, even hostility, towards the black peasantry. West Indian literature has always been plagued by 'the gap between the language of narration and that of the black [characters],' despite the inclusivist rhetoric of many West Indian intellectuals.⁶⁸ Particularly in relation to Obeah these narratives repudiate the 'ordinary man' as much as they champion him, decrying imperial authority and ideology while simultaneously dismissing

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Simpson, 'Patterns and Periods,' p.4.

⁶⁵ 'Nancy Story Competition', *Daily Gleaner*, December 23, 1899, p.11.

⁶⁶ Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p.27.

⁶⁷ Simpson, 'Patterns and Periods', p.4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10.

and bemoaning peasant ‘superstition.’ In much of the fiction under consideration in this thesis, Obeah exposes what Suzanne Scafe describes as the ‘colonial anthropologist’ tone in narrative, and what Gillian Whitlock called ‘colonial realism,’ which she defined as an ‘elementary determination to write about life as it was observed in the local sphere’ – in other words, local colour, observed and imagined from a distance.⁶⁹ Representations of ‘African derived religious practices’ in particular, Scafe continues, often ‘raised the spectre of barbarism and was evidence of the nation’s potentially ungovernable elements.’⁷⁰ Early twentieth-century West Indian writers, while they may have been keen to embrace the more ‘respectable’ aspects of folk culture (and to romanticise it in their art), were engaged more in a process of idealistic reimagination than of accurate reflection. Obeah, in particular, represented a limit case in terms of the integration of the folk into nascent nationalist literary ideals.

We see this most clearly in debates surrounding ‘local colour’ and the legitimacy of co-opting constructions of the folk into the West Indian literary imagination. For a few weeks between 1943 and 1944 – before Lamming began writing – contributors to Jamaica’s *Public Opinion* newspaper fiercely debated the question of local colour in literature. Vincent Coke started the argument by complaining that, while editors who demanded local colour may ‘want to create what is known as a Jamaican culture, to foster within the country a spirit of nationalism, to preserve things Jamaican,’ this encouraged writers ‘to picture the Jamaican as a distinctive and easily recognisable being,’ which s/he is not. ‘Overwhelmed with the idea of creating an impression,’ Coke continues, writers resort ‘to the depiction of the grossest scenes or the recital of the grossest conversations, and this passes off as typical of Jamaica.’⁷¹ Roger Mais was chosen as Coke’s respondent, as he was considered ‘a leading exponent of local colour in literature.’⁷² In his letter, Mais insisted that editors asked for local colour because left to their own devices, writers did *not* write about familiar things, but mimicked the English tradition – things Jamaican did not emerge naturally. He preferred

⁶⁹ Suzanne Scafe, “‘Gruesome and Yet Fascinating:’ Hidden, Disgraced and Disregarded Cultural Forms in Jamaican Short Fiction 1938-50,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 6, 2011, 67-79 (p.70); Gillian Whitlock, ‘The Bush, the Barrack-Yard and the Clearing: “Colonial Realism” in the Sketches and Stories of Susanna Moodie, C. L. R. James and Henry Lawson,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 20 (1985), 36-48 (p.17).

⁷⁰ Scafe, ‘Gruesome and Yet Fascinating,’ p.72.

⁷¹ Vincent A. Coke, ‘Why Local Colour?’, *Public Opinion*, December 31, 1943, p.2.

⁷² Qtd. in Roger Mais, ‘Why Local Colour?’, *Public Opinion*, January 8, 1944, pp.3-4 (p.3).

the term 'realism' to Coke's 'grossness,' arguing that 'the chief concern of literature is the study of mankind,' which is naturally 'gross.'⁷³ Yet Mais' defence of the term 'gross' is not only a misunderstanding of Coke's criticism but a defence of the same elitist ideals espoused by Lamming. His argument with Coke (which continued beyond these two letters) demonstrates that the 'realism' of early twentieth-century West Indian writing was always contested, particularly in relation to capturing and expounding 'the folk.'⁷⁴ Moreover, it illustrates Campbell's argument that the 'folk' is necessarily a fictional construct.

The *Public Opinion* argument is an echo of debates in *The Beacon*, some fifteen years earlier. Alfred Mendes argued in 1930 that 'he who is sincere about his literary work [...] cannot stop to consider how much ugliness there is in the matter that comes his way.'⁷⁵ Editor Albert Gomes lamented in 1932 that 'the majority of local fiction-writers obviously believe that gross exaggerations contribute to the artistic value of their stories,' and that their fellow-countrymen are their inferiors, 'an uninteresting people who are not worth [their] while.'⁷⁶ Contained within these statements is the chief conflict between many of these early writers, between a constructed appreciation for, and simultaneous refutation, of 'the folk,' a desire to be 'local' but also 'modern.' These debates, with their focus on 'realism,' exaggeration, grossness and authenticity, expose the inherent tensions of creating national literature(s) and the importance of this literature to the creation of a West Indian identity. The conflation of 'realism' with 'grossness' is pertinent for discussions of narrating the folk and, as I will demonstrate in the body of this thesis, Obeah, specifically, challenges the cohesion of these concepts. Moreover, through these texts we see that, while 'the folk' may be integral to these visions, the elaboration of this narrative device has always been contested. The texts I have chosen are aware of this anxiety, and in many cases use Obeah

⁷³ Mais, 'Local Colour,' p.3.

⁷⁴ Other letters include Edna Manley, 'Why Local Colour?', *Public Opinion*, January 15, 1944, p.3; Vincent Coke, 'Why Local Colour', *Public Opinion*, January 22, 1944, p.4; E. H. J. King, 'Local Colour', *Public Opinion*, January 29, 1944, p.2; and V. A. Coke, 'Local Colour in Art Explained', *Public Opinion*, February 12, 1944, p.3. King and Manley were members of *Public Opinion's* editorial board from September 1939 to April 1941, appointments that Raphael Dalleo refers to as 'part of the major changes [...] that initiated the golden age of literary publication in *Public Opinion*.' See Raphael Dalleo, *The Public Sphere and Jamaican Anticolonial Politics: Public Opinion, Focus, and the Place of the Literary*, *Small Axe*, 14 (2010), 56-82 (p.63; p.66). I have not located any further discussion on the subject from these contributors.

⁷⁵ Alfred H. Mendes, 'A Commentary', in *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing*, ed. by Reinhard Sander (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp.21-26 (p.22).

⁷⁶ Albert Gomes, 'Local Fiction', in *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing*, ed. by Reinhard W. Sander (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp.26-28 (p.27).

to signify it. Obeah functions in them as a disruptive machine, like a trickster, to challenge false homogeneity and hollow coherence. It disrupts not only the diegetic world(s) of the text, but the very culture surrounding them – and mocks their respectability politics. Obeah emphasises the fault lines of the purported ideals of the nation(s)-in-waiting of the West Indies, suggesting that there is much about this ‘original status of personality’ that remains unrestored. All of these narratives struggle with their incorporation of Obeah into this folk personality, ranging from authorial disregard for what was considered an ‘irrational’ (and dangerous) hangover from dark, prehistoric times, to an engagement with Obeah as an ‘alternative epistemology,’ a way of reading ourselves out of imperialist texts, and out of colonial domination.⁷⁷

The texts discussed in this thesis all, to varying degrees, show Obeah as an alternative and parallel to dominant discourses of propriety and ‘civilisation’ – purposefully or otherwise. While it may be maligned in some of these texts, Obeah allows characters who have yet to be accepted or fully integrated into ‘respectable’ society to negotiate the antagonistic and alien worlds into which they were born, but to which they do not necessarily belong. The ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds are in constant dialogue in these narratives, some of which are the first expressions of the anxiety and ambivalence engendered by the interwar reassessment of the West Indies’ relationship with Britain and its empire. All explore the practice of Obeah in their various articulations of these new West Indian societies, not only as an ‘African survival’ but as an integral part of everyday, modern Caribbean life. This study showcases the changing views of Obeah in Caribbean society, as reflected in its literature, by analysing how Obeah complicates and challenges these narratives’ wider social concerns, and understandings of ‘West Indianness.’ Carolyn Cooper has argued that acknowledging Caribbean literature itself as ‘art’ forces one to adopt ‘a transgressive ideological position that redefines the boundaries of the permissible, legitimising vagrant texts that both restructure the canon and challenge the very notion of

⁷⁷ Janette Martin defines ‘alternative epistemology’ as ‘a way of knowing that lies beyond Eurocentric epistemology.’ She bases her argument on Patricia Hill Collins’ assertion that subordinate groups, black women in particular, share a ‘distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups.’ Subordinate groups, Hill Collins continues, not only experience different realities to dominant groups, but also interpret these realities differently. See Janette Martin, ‘Jableses, Sourcrians, Loups-Garous: Obeah as an Alternative Epistemology in the Writing of Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 36 (1997), 3-29 (p.3); and Patricia Hill Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought’, *Signs* 14, (1989), 745-773, (pp.747-748).

canonicity.⁷⁸ Acknowledging Obeah as a facet of this art is even more transgressive, as Obeah redefines these redefinitions, repeatedly. In both life and literature, Obeah exists in the shadows, on the edges of discourse.

Studying Obeah

Historical antipathy towards Obeah – a result of colonial strategy to devalue all things ‘African’ – has impeded comprehensive scholarship into the phenomenon. Moreover, Obeah has long been a secretive practice, whose practitioners have actively avoided detection and observation. Nevertheless, Obeah has long been a popular interest among visitors to the Caribbean. Most colonial accounts of the West Indies have contained passages or even passing reflections on Obeah, including Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774); Matthew Lewis’ *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1833); James Phillippo’s *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State* (1843); and W. J. Gardner’s *A History of Jamaica* (1873).⁷⁹ Yet folklorist May Robinson’s lament, in 1893, of the difficulty of collecting data, given ‘the mystery with which the professors of “Obeah” have always surrounded themselves, and the dread negroes have always had, and still have, of their power’ indicates that Obeah was not a straightforwardly easy phenomenon to observe and/or understand.⁸⁰ Moving into the twentieth century, Jamaican (English) magistrate Leslie Thornton reflected in 1904 that ‘the age of the obeahman, like that of chivalry, has passed,’ but also noted that ‘legislation has been ineffective [to some extent], because even now obeahmen abound.’⁸¹ In 1915 J. S. Udal, former Chief Justice of the Leeward Islands, urged against ‘what terrible lengths any indulgence towards or weakening in the repressive enactments against this widespread plague of obeah may lead,’ suggesting that Obeah, though much subdued since Tacky’s Rebellion, still held subversive potential vis-à-vis the colonial state.⁸² These

⁷⁸ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p.15.

⁷⁹ See Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica. Or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State*. 3 vols (London: T. Lowndes, 1774); Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor, Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1834]); James M. Phillippo, *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State* (London: John Snow, 1843); and W. J. Gardner, *A History of Jamaica, from Its Discovery by Christopher Columbus to the Year 1872* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971 [1873]).

⁸⁰ Robinson, ‘Obeah Worship,’ p.207.

⁸¹ S. Leslie Thornton, ‘“Obeah” in Jamaica’, *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, 5 (1904), 262-270 (p.262).

⁸² J. S. Udal, ‘Obeah in the West Indies’, *Folklore*, 26 (1915), 255-295 (p.295).

observations betray the failure of the colonial state to eradicate Obeah, as well as Obeah's significance and ubiquity to Caribbean life.

Even after Independence, much writing on Obeah associated it with 'witchcraft' and 'black magic,' thus reinforcing old colonial stereotypes. This attitude is exemplified in Mary Manning Carley's remarks, in 1963, that Obeah,

in word and deed comes from the dark world of African black magic, and wields the power of blackmail, mental torture and death [...]. The *obeah* man is the direct descendant of the evil witch doctor. For money he will weave "spells" over some unfortunate human being who has earned the vengeance of another, and by his cunning persistence in drawing a net of fear and persecution round the victim can bring him to terror and even death.⁸³

Manning Carley's somewhat exaggerated remarks reflect the attitudes of many twentieth-century commentators on Obeah, and is demonstrable in many of the narratives analysed in this thesis. They can be tempered, however, by *Gleaner* editor Herbert de Lisser's claims, in 1913, that Obeah was 'progressing from the tragic and dangerous to the merely ridiculous.'⁸⁴ Other anthropological studies of Obeah and related practices include Martha Warren Beckwith's *Black Roadways* (1929); Joseph J. Williams' *Voodooos and Obeahs* (1932) and *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (1934); and Ivor Morrish's *Obeah, Christ and Rastaman* (1982).⁸⁵ Domestic works, such as Leonard Barrett's *The Sun and the Drum* (1976) and John Campbell's 'Obeah: Yes or No?' (1976) demonstrate the fascination Obeah holds for Caribbean natives, too, and moreover elaborate on its curative, as well as harmful functions.⁸⁶ The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (ACIJ)'s 'Guzzum Power: Obeah in Jamaica' exhibit, staged in 2010, is a further re-evaluation of Obeah as a valuable aspect of our cultural heritage, worthy of preservation.⁸⁷

⁸³ Mary Manning Carley, *Jamaica: The Old and the New* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), p.136, original emphasis.

⁸⁴ de Lisser, H. G., *Twentieth Century Jamaica* (Kingston: Jamaica Times Limited, 1913), p.108.

⁸⁵ See Martha Warren Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929); Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooos and Obeahs: Phases of West India Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932); *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (New York: Dial Press, 1934); and Ivor Morrish, *Obeah, Christ and Rastaman: Jamaica and Its Religions* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1982).

⁸⁶ See Leonard E. Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum: African Roots in Jamaican Folk Tradition* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976); and Campbell, 'Obeah.'

⁸⁷ See 'Guzzum Power: Obeah in Jamaica', Institute of Jamaica, <<http://instituteofjamaica.org.jm/guzzum-power-obeah-in-jamaica>> [Accessed April 28, 2015].

The ACIJ's exhibition is an example of 'official' reclamation (even institutionalisation) of Obeah. Director Bernard Jankee outlined the exhibition's purpose, to demonstrate that Obeah 'remains one of the stronger cultural practices evident in Jamaican society [...] one of the aspects of [our] spirituality that is grounded in African retention,' and that 'a lot of the cultural practices that are still evident in Jamaican society had some kind of grounding [...] some kind of philosophy behind them.' Obeah, he concluded, is 'not merely witchcraft, but there is a deeper significance to Obeah as a cultural practice.'⁸⁸ 'Guzzum Power' seeks to reclaim much of Obeah's social and cultural meanings, and complicate the colonial assumption of Obeah as 'a general or catch-all term for the body of supernatural beliefs and related practices that was considered non-European in origin, not properly religious.'⁸⁹ More recent scholarly work has begun to redress this skewed view of Obeah and other African-inspired Caribbean religious practices, most notably Joseph Murphy's *Working the Spirit* (1994); Dianne Stewart's *Three Eyes for the Journey* (2005) and Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert's *Creole Religions* (2011). Handler and Bilby's *Enacting Power* (2012) is a timely intervention, but is strictly a study of legislation. Diana Paton's research of Obeah is significant and extensive, but it, too, largely focuses on the changing ways in which the meaning of Obeah had been produced and reproduced, from the eighteenth century into the post-Emancipation period, particularly through the practices and discourse of colonial courts.⁹⁰ Yet her co-edited collection with Maarit Forde, *Obeah and Other Powers* (2012), re-engages with the study of Obeah and other African-Caribbean religious practices in relation to power, rejecting the separation between religion and the rest of an individual's and society's life, and the separation between religion and 'magic' or 'witchcraft.' In it, contributors examine

the place of religious practice and belief in a wider context of power relations:
relations of class, race, gender, and empire, but also the power of colonial and

⁸⁸ Qtd. in ACIJMB, 'Walkthrough of Guzzum Power: Obeah in Jamaica,' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYpgZ0hTx4k>>t[Accessed January 13, 2016].

⁸⁹ J. Handler, 'Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, Circa 1650 to 1834', *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 74 (2000), 57-90 (p.65).

⁹⁰ See Diana Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica', *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2001), 923-954; *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); 'Obeah Acts: Producing and Policing the Boundaries of Religion in the Caribbean', *Small Axe*, 28 (2009), 1-18; and 'Witchcraft, Poison, Law and Atlantic Slavery', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 69 (2012), 235-264.

invading states, scholarship, and print and broadcast media, which have contributed to the very establishment and maintenance of these objects of study.⁹¹

Forde and Paton have identified three major paradigms in writing about Obeah. The first, inaugurated with slavery and colonialism, was hostile towards Obeah, which it saw as backward and barbaric. The second, from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, saw a reclamation of Obeah as 'tradition,' to be integrated into conceptions of nationhood and cultural identity. The last and most recent paradigm has seen efforts to 'situate Caribbean religions within historicised understandings of Caribbean societies, and to rethink the terms within which we understand religion, in order to present analyses less focused on questions of origins and more concerned with issues of power.'⁹² My concern, in this thesis, is to demonstrate Obeah's subversive, yet constitutive value as a literary trope, and thus evaluate its contribution to West Indian literary and cultural aesthetics and identity. Much of this value lies in the challenges Obeah presents to narrative cohesion.

While the studies mentioned above have all significantly contributed to a recalibration of our understanding of Obeah, none of them is explicitly a study of fiction; moreover, they concern themselves with Obeah's relationship to the colonial state.⁹³ The fiction under consideration in this thesis is inward looking, and demonstrates how Obeah occupies a complex cultural space – both integral to understanding of self and community, yet regarded as illegitimate, suspicious and threatening. Literary works are valuable to the study of Obeah in that they allow for a more nuanced appreciation of the role Obeah plays in the literary imaginary, and the influence of that imaginary in culture more widely – particularly in resonance with anxieties surrounding race, class and politics. In many ways, my study examines how texts' reclamations of Obeah as tradition indeed address power, but not necessarily by confronting it head-on; instead many of my chosen texts mount their challenges to power by not speaking (truth) to it. In many of the narratives examined in this thesis Obeah is represented as that-which-cannot-be-spoken, or at least that which is

⁹¹ Maarit Forde and Diana Paton, 'Introduction', in *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, ed. by Diana Paton and Maarit Forde (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp.1-42 (p.7).

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁹³ Fernández-Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert's edited collection *Sacred Possessions* (1997) includes literary essays, but does not limit itself to Obeah, as does my study; neither does it focus solely on literature. See Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

'irrational' in the 'official' discourses of state and text. Its relationship to power is what makes it difficult to define, and what qualifies it as an 'unruly' narrative subject.

Studies of Obeah have also tended to focus on the early Caribbean, most recently Kelly Wisecup and Toni Jaudon's 'On Knowing and not Knowing about Obeah' (2015), part of a special edition of *Atlantic Studies*, addressing Obeah and its literatures.⁹⁴ They too place Obeah within an 'interdisciplinary conversation about forms of power and knowledge in the Caribbean,' but none of the articles in this special edition is concerned with the twentieth century.⁹⁵ Tim Watson's *Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870* (2008) not only ignores the twentieth century, it also focuses on the literary works of English writers, not on fiction written by Afro-, Indo- or Sino-creole West Indians.⁹⁶ Randy Browne identified 'a Romantic fascination and even sympathy with the figure of the mysterious obeahman, depicted as a sort of African noble savage or rebellious martyr' in such fiction.⁹⁷ In this he is supported by Watson, who argued that 'realism and romance in the Caribbean context cannot be easily disentangled, just as in the nineteenth century Britain and the West Indies were mutually constitutive rather than discrete entities.'⁹⁸ The most enduring examples of this Romantic fascination, in fiction, are William Earle's 1800 novel *Obi; or, the History of Three-Fingered Jack*, and in Williams' *Hamel*. *Obi* recounts and fictionalises the exploits of real-life runaway Jack Mansong, or Three Finger Jack who, while he may not have been an Obeahman either, was feared as much for his Obeah (which he carried in a goat's horn) as for his musket.⁹⁹ *Hamel*, while he may conform to Browne's noble savage/rebellious martyr paradigm, is the first Obeahman-protagonist of literature of

⁹⁴ Kelly Wisecup and Toni Wall Jaudon, 'On Knowing and not Knowing about Obeah', *Atlantic Studies*, 12 (2015), 129-143. See also Toni Wall Jaudon, 'Obeah's Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn', *American Literature*, 84 (2012), 715-741; and Wisecup, 'Knowing Obeah.'

⁹⁵ Wisecup and Wall Jaudon, 'Knowing and not Knowing,' p.130.

⁹⁶ See Tim Watson, *Caribbean Culture and British Fiction in the Atlantic World, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹⁷ Browne, 'Bad Business,' p.455.

⁹⁸ Watson, *Caribbean Culture*, p.6. Alan Richardson links the British early Romantic exoticism of Obeah and the West Indies to colonial expansion, and political and economic development, in 'Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797-1807', *Studies in Romanticism*, 32 (1993), 3-28.

⁹⁹ See William Earle, Jr., *Obi; or, the History of Three-Fingered Jack*. ed. by Srinivas Aravamudan (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005). See also L. Alan Eyre, 'Jack Mansong: Brotherhood or Bloodshed', *Jamaica Journal*, 7 (1973), 9-14. Earle's novel was shortly followed by a pantomime, written by John Fawcett in the same year, and performed in London. See Diana Paton, 'The Afterlives of Three-Fingered Jack', in *Slavery and the Culture of Abolition: Essays Marking the British Abolition Act of 1807*, ed. by Peter J. Kitson and Brycchan Carey (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), pp.42-63.

the Caribbean. Hamel speaks at length about himself and his beliefs, and was identified by Edward Brathwaite as having delivered ‘probably the first Black Power speech in our literature.’¹⁰⁰ There is a substantial body of work on *Hamel*, including my own, in which I read Williams’ protagonist as at once Obeahman and trickster.¹⁰¹ *Hamel* and *Obi* fall out of the historical purview of this study, but their protagonists’ claims to black subjecthood, as well as Hamel’s particularly fluid relationship to power, are pertinent to discussions of Obeah’s subversive literary and cultural potential.

Until now, there has been no literary study of Caribbean Obeah fictions across the twentieth century. My study extends beyond Kenneth Ramchand’s ‘Obeah and the Supernatural’ (1969) which limits itself to six novels, and Joyce Johnson’s ‘Shamans, Shepherds, Scientists’ (1993) which limits itself to Jamaican fiction.¹⁰² A handful of articles address Obeah in isolated works by specific authors, such as Jamaica Kincaid, Jean Rhys and Erna Brodber, and Maritza Adriana Paul’s 2000 doctoral thesis, ‘Bad name worse Dan Obeah,’ makes inroads into discussions of portrayals of Obeahwomen in novels by French Caribbean authors, and in calypso music.¹⁰³ My study, however, is the first to consider fictional prose texts across the English-speaking Caribbean (excluding fairy or folk tales), regardless of the gender of either the practitioner or the writer. Furthermore, the texts selected for this thesis span a longer period of time than previous studies, which allows me

¹⁰⁰ Edward Brathwaite, ‘Creative Literature of the British West Indies During the Period of Slavery’, *Savacou: A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement*, 1 (1970), 46-73 (p.71).

¹⁰¹ See Janina Nordius, ‘Racism and Radicalism in Jamaican Gothic: Cynric R. Williams’ *Hamel, the Obeah Man*’, *ELH*, 73 (2006), 673-693; Candace Ward, ‘“What Time Has Proved:” History, Rebellion, and Revolution in *Hamel, the Obeah Man*’, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 38 (2007), 49-73; and Watson, *Caribbean Culture*. See also Janelle Rodrigues, ‘Obeah(Man) as Trickster in Cynric Williams’ *Hamel, the Obeah Man*’, *Atlantic Studies*, 12 (2015), 219-234.

¹⁰² See Kenneth Ramchand, ‘Obeah and the Supernatural in West Indian Literature’, *Jamaica Journal*, 3 (1969), 52-54; and Joyce Johnson, ‘Shamans, Shepherds, Scientists, and Others in Jamaican Fiction’, *New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 67 (1993), 221-238. Much of Ramchand’s article was subsumed into *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (1970).

¹⁰³ See Martin, ‘Jablesses;’ and Elaine Savory, ‘“Another Poor Devil of a Human Being...” Jean Rhys and the Novel as Obeah’, in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*, ed. by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp.216-230. I will address the body of critical work on Erna Brodber in Chapter Five of this thesis. See also Maritza Adriana Paul, ‘“Bad Name Worse Dan Obeah:” The Representation of Women and *Obeah* in Caribbean Oral and Written Literatures’ (PhD thesis, University of Colorado, 2000). Paul claims that there is ‘a resurgence of the figure of the obeah woman in Caribbean written texts,’ which ‘attests to the survivability of *obeah* as an African-derived spiritual practice within the region’ (p.5, original emphasis). Yet her evidence for this resurgence is only two novels, written in French, one of which specifically refers to Quimbois. While I have already argued Obeah’s indefinability, it seems unwise to refer to something as Obeah, when its practitioners (and writers) themselves do not use that term.

more opportunity to track the evolution of the trope's use. Mine is also the first study to explore the relationship between, and argue the significance of, representations of Obeah and West Indian cultural self-identification. As a postcolonial Caribbean reader of Caribbean fiction, I do not approach Obeah in these stories as simply 'local colour' or as 'superstition,' but as fictional allegories of key moments in our cultural literacy. While Ramchand may be credited with being among the first to concede Obeah's 'frequent occurrence' in West Indian prose, I do not conclude, as he did, that Obeah was nothing more than 'the incoherent remains of African religions and magic;' neither is it true that 'in all cases, obeah and cult manifestations are associated with socially depressed characters.'¹⁰⁴ As I will demonstrate in my close reading, Ramchand's dismissal and summary judgement of Obeah is premature. The 'incoherence' of the portrayals of Obeah in these texts is not necessarily a flaw: by destabilising their narratives, the Obeah trope not only exposes the limitations of these various imaginings of West Indian nationhood, but also allows room for regeneration after the chaos its introduction may instigate.

Johnson's 'Shamans' has been an invaluable starting point. Beginning with the premise that West Indian history is itself a fiction, and that 'the mythic dimension of history' is reflected in West Indian fiction's preoccupation with the past, she maps changes in historical perspectives vis-à-vis Obeah to changes in its fictional representation.¹⁰⁵ Johnson argues that suspicion of Obeah practitioners who, in early colonial accounts, were 'depicted primarily as sorcerers who use their influence to recruit spies in the Great House and to create disaffection within the slave community,' persists into twentieth-century fiction, despite this fiction often being 'engaged in a type of historical revisionism.'¹⁰⁶ What is most significant about this paradox is that, though the practitioner may be regarded with suspicion by the narrator(s), and though s/he may cause community strife, this practitioner still represents a community's resistance to the contemporary, symbolic greathouse of dominant, 'official,' colonial society. The depictions in this thesis reveal the ambivalence of Obeah's position in a community, one of both apprehension and authority. The post-Independence texts, in particular, move away from mistrust and dismissal of the Obeah

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. Second edn (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.123.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, 'Shamans,' p.221.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.222-223.

practitioner towards appreciation of this figure as a healer. I am interested in the implications of the aesthetic treatment afforded to Obeah's peripheral, yet integral presence, which has been reduced, in contemporary discourse, to 'myth,' a false belief – knowledge we are not supposed to know, stories we are not supposed to tell. Obeah is an element of narration that is hard to capture, and these instances in which narratives attempt, but do not quite grasp a definition of that which is fundamentally unknowable, is the focus of my thesis. At these moments the narrative slips and frays, and the dispossessed and undocumented can potentially be reimagined as subjects outside of established categories of personhood.

Frantz Fanon argued that 'the crystallisation of the national consciousness will both disrupt literary styles and themes, and also create a completely new public.' This is what these representations of Obeah do. These fictions, while many of them may have been disseminated abroad, represent native intellectuals, in Fanon's words, progressively taking on the habit of addressing their own people. Obeah disrupts the social, linguistic and aesthetic conventions of 'English' literature, to take up and clarify themes which are typically nationalist – themes of the plot, which are resistant to the plantation. This nationalist literature is a 'literature of combat,' Fanon continued, 'because it moulds the national consciousness [...] because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty.'¹⁰⁷ The phenomenon of Obeah originated in conflict; its literature 'tend[s] to speak of incoherence, fracture, dislocation and marginality, even as [it is] pressed into the service of various nationalist efforts.'¹⁰⁸ As will become apparent, Obeah functions in these texts as an agent of conflict, simultaneously constituting and complicating the concept of a national culture and literature.

Thesis Structure

I have chosen short stories, sketches and novels that feature Obeah as a significant plot device; in many cases Obeah is personified in the narrative's chief protagonist. All these fictions, moreover, employ Obeah in their contributions to the definition of such a person,

¹⁰⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.193.

¹⁰⁸ Glyne Griffith, 'Deconstructing Nationalisms: Henry Swanzy, *Caribbean Voices* and the Development of West Indian Literature', *Small Axe*, 10 (2001), 1-20 (p.3).

character, culture or nation as 'West Indian.' The historical period under review saw the most sustained critiques, and eventual overthrow, of crown colony rule, as well as the decline of Great Britain as a 'mother country.' As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o argued, 'language is a carrier of people's culture. Culture is a carrier of people's values. Values are a carrier of people's outlook or consciousness and sense of identity.'¹⁰⁹ The reoccurrence of Obeah in these articulations of national values and consciousness suggests that these religious and social practices are integral to the self-characterisation, and expression, of the descendants of the enslaved, who continue to create West Indian culture. When looking for 'authentic,' distinguishable sources for 'our' literature, authors invariably turned to those most closely associated with the plantation, the poor, black, labouring classes – 'the folk.'

The Obeah acts in these texts take the forms of public ceremonies, private consultations or, in some cases, merely suspicious talk or 'harmless' fraud. They involve both individuals and communities – individuals within communities – and serve different purposes in their respective narratives, be it horror or comedy, moralism, sensationalism or polemic. What is common to all these representations, however, is Obeah's resistance to 'rationalisation,' despite narrative scepticism – its disruptive potential vis-à-vis cultural paradigms of behaviour and/or class. Obeah challenges whatever role it is assigned in a text and exposes that text's artifice, regardless of genre. It is archetypal in the Jungian sense, as it is a 'hypothetical and irrepresentable model,' and by nature unstable.¹¹⁰ It also emerges, in the texts under consideration in this thesis, as a foundational element of West Indian (literary) culture.

I have grouped my texts together by genre and thematic concerns, in loosely chronological order. The first chapter addresses the 'barrack-yard' novels *Minty Alley* (C. L. R. James, 1936) and *Black Fauns* (Alfred Mendes, 1935), pioneers of West Indian 'social realism' that employ the sights and sounds (particularly the Creole speech patterns) of Port of Spain's urban poor to uncover the 'other' side of Trinidadian life for local elites and scandalise them into social responsibility. The most enduring critique of these novels is that, while they were innovative in their use of nation language and their critique of colonial Caribbean society, they are limited by their own elitism and condescension towards their

¹⁰⁹ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, 'The Tension between National and Imperialist Culture', *World Literature Written in English*, 24 (1984), 3-9 (p.4).

¹¹⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p.4n8.

subjects. My readings of them, however, move beyond this to focus on Obeah as the chief agent of heteroglossia in the text, which simultaneously holds it together and tears it apart, thus reflecting the inherent instability of such a thing as West Indian nation.

Then come the 'little magazine' short stories, published between 1939 and 1955, a period during which not many novels were published, and to which Hyacinth Simpson referred as the 'Golden Age of the West Indian short story.'¹¹¹ The stories experiment with various genres, such as romance, pastoral ode, Anancy story or Gothic melodrama, and incorporate various oral elements of storytelling, such as the tall tale, calypso, or proverbs. In addition these stories, in their elaborations of West Indian identity, parody existing modes of discourse surrounding Obeah and 'the folk' more generally, such as that of the pastoral idyll, the tourist brochure, or the language of the courts and respectability politics. These stories are economical with their language, and play on what readers 'ought' and ought not to know about Obeah. These vignettes of West Indian life, manners and social concerns demonstrate, while providing entertainment, the fragmentation, within familiarity, of the emerging modern West Indies.

My third chapter examines Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which use Obeah as a marker between that which is considered 'modern' and that which is considered 'primitive.' Both novels feature a creole heroine (one black, one 'white') who is interpolated between the extremes of European 'modernity' and West Indian/African 'primitivism,' and the inclusion of Obeah in these texts exposes the ambivalence of these terms, as well as their interdependence. In Chapter four, I explore representations of Obeah in what I have called 'novels of Independence,' as Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* (1958), Ismith Khan's *The Obeah Man* (1964) and Sam Selvon's *Those Who Eat the Casadura* (1972) were all either written or set near Jamaica and Trinidad's respective political independence. All three of these novels centre on male Obeah practitioners who function as leaders (or antileaders) in their respective communities. All of these narratives are explicitly concerned with leadership, nation and national consciousness

¹¹¹ Simpson, 'Patterns and Periods,' p.2. An exception to the 'little magazine' criterion is Ethel Rovere's 'The Mongoose' (1950), which first appeared in the region's first anthology of short stories. I have also included 'Pennib's 'A Case in Court' (1939), which first appeared in Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* newspaper, and Seepersad Naipaul's 'Obeah,' which was first read on 'Caribbean Voices' in 1951 and only posthumously included in an edited collection of his work.

but *Quality* aligns its discussion of Obeah with questions of 'African survivals,' while the latter two move towards considering Obeah as an agent of creolisation and integration for the Caribbean future, and away from debates about an essentialised Africa. Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), the last text studied in this thesis, configures Obeah as a means of self and community realisation, particularly in light of the sustained epistemic violence of the Columbian encounter.

My study is the first comprehensive examination of Obeah in Anglophone Caribbean literature across the short twentieth century. The wealth of these narratives demonstrates Obeah's potential as a constitutive feature of West Indian aesthetics and identity, if a sometimes contradictory one. In my chosen texts, Obeah is integral to these imagined communities, which authors created to present the West Indies to itself. Yet this is not to say that all these texts are universally and uncritically embracing of Obeah; the earlier texts all seem to conclude – or not – that Obeah cannot come with us into the future, if we wish to become 'modern' – yet they do not, perhaps cannot, afford strategies to rid us of it. The later novels, however, attempt to consider Obeah as a way out of the impasse of 'the colonial condition,' as it were – as a valid part of our spirituality and culture that *must* be taken with us into the future, if we are to realise ourselves as independent people. Nevertheless, what does endure is Obeah's subversive potential as a literary trope, its alignment with the folk, and therefore with a resistance to metropolitan discursive domination.

Chapter 1. 'Too much row an contention is in this yard:' Contemplating cacophony in *Minty Alley* and *Black Fauns*¹¹²

When Alfred Mendes founded *Trinidad* magazine in 1929, which later became the *Beacon*, his inclusion of C. L. R. James' 'Triumph,' among other short fiction, drew significant indignation from the press and public for its supposed 'obscenity.'¹¹³ 'Triumph' tells the story of Mamitz, a poor black woman who finds herself in financial trouble after having fallen out of favour with her keeper/lover. After taking a ritual bath (at the advice of a neighbour) she eventually finds favour with her lover again, and 'triumphs' over another neighbour, who is suspected of having set a 'black spirit' on her.¹¹⁴ As the archetypal 'barrack-yard' story, the kind of fiction in which, in Ramchand's words, 'we can see the decisive establishment of social realism in the West Indian novel,' it is significant that 'Triumph' features an Obeah act as its central plot device.¹¹⁵ As James explained on the first page of 'Triumph,' this fiction focused on the cheap, overcrowded barrack-yards that housed the 'porters, the prostitutes, cartermen, washerwomen, and domestic servants' of Port of Spain, in a deliberate effort to scandalise and provoke Trinidad's middle classes into seeing the 'real' Trinidad, and thus into demanding social change.¹¹⁶ The yard fiction of Trinidad's *Beacon* group, of which James and Mendes were leading members, represents a foundational movement in the development of West Indian literary and cultural aesthetics, and demonstrates an investment in the creation of a local literature that would express a culture that ran parallel and counter to dominant, colonial discourses of 'respectability' and 'propriety.' Like 'Triumph,' the novels that will be analysed in this chapter, James' *Minty Alley* (1936) and Mendes' *Black Fauns* (1935), also foreground Obeah in their seminal treatments of yard life, and present an aesthetic which, in Mendes' words, was predicated on 'dialect, way of life, racial types, barrack-yards, West Indian character and poverty.'¹¹⁷

¹¹² Alfred Mendes, *Black Fauns* (London: New Beacon Books, 1985), p.194.

¹¹³ *Trinidad* only had two issues, Christmas 1929 and Easter 1930. The first issue contained eight short stories, six poems and an article on music. The *Beacon* had 28 issues, and ran from March 1931 to November 1933, under the editorship of Albert Gomes. See Reinhard W. Sander, *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp.3-4.

¹¹⁴ C. L. R. James, 'Triumph', in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories*, ed. by Stewart Brown and John Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.35-49.

¹¹⁵ Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, p.65. Leah Reade Rosenberg referred to 'Triumph' as 'a blueprint for yard fiction' in *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.136.

¹¹⁶ James, 'Triumph', p.35.

¹¹⁷ Mendes, *Autobiography*, p.75.

Barrack-yard aesthetics became West Indian aesthetics and Obeah, in particular, became a by-word for the scandal that these writers intentionally courted.

Reinhard Sander, in his analysis of *Beacon* writing, concludes that the literary scene in Trinidad before this period was 'nothing very remarkable.'¹¹⁸ *Beacon* writers saw themselves as chroniclers of social inequality, and advocates for social and literary change. In defence of 'Triumph,' Mendes argued in 1930 that 'fiction brings to the doors of people who otherwise would have known little or nothing of these things, the burden of this truth: our social organisation is not what it ought to be: it is diseased.' He declared, defiantly, that 'the *Zeit Geist* is one of revolt against established customs and organic loyalties,' such as those of colonial subjects to the Crown.¹¹⁹ *Beacon* aesthetics concerned themselves with the norms of the poor, black working classes, groups who were often sidelined in dominant discourses of regional development. West Indian literature, therefore, came into being as an expression of populist subaltern consciousness (at the hands of middle-class intellectuals), in an uneasy dialogue with the demands of the metropole. *Beacon* fiction brought these voices into the consciousness of the reading classes, and in so doing mounted a lasting challenge to colonial cultural hegemony, binding literary consciousness to national (political, social) identity.

Beacon writers turned the physical and discursive space of the yard into a platform for exposing social colour/class inequality, employing the techniques of scathing irony, omniscient narration, and what Robert Louis Stevenson called 'photographic exactitude in dialogue' to pass commentary on colonial society and critique the structures that upheld it.¹²⁰ These writers established social realism, what G. R. Coulthard called 'a type of literature in which the author feels he has a duty to his society, in a particular socio-economic situation in its historical development,' as the region's dominant mode of literary fiction.¹²¹ They prided themselves on presenting social taboos – filth, sex, and of course Obeah – in creole speech patterns, and with providing readers with 'the other side of the

¹¹⁸ Reinhard W. Sander, *The Trinidad Awakening: West Indian Literature of the Nineteen-Thirties* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p.7.

¹¹⁹ Mendes, 'A Commentary', p.23; p.21, original emphasis.

¹²⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Note on Realism', in *Essays in the Art of Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), pp.91-107 (p.96).

¹²¹ G. R. Coulthard, 'The Children of Sisyphus by H. Orlando Patterson', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 10 (1964), 69-71 (p.69).

Coin of Life in all its stark realism,' in short exposing all that they saw as 'wrong' with colonial Trinidadian/West Indian society.¹²² Yard fiction is characterised by its unadorned narration, detailed verisimilitude, plentiful dialogue, and frankness regarding sexual relationships. In these narratives the majority of the action takes place on the central 'stage' of the yard; *dramatis personae* are introduced abruptly and dialogue is quickly exchanged. The stories are often sensational, but with sensationalism comes sentimentality. With this sentimentality, too, comes authorial condescension towards the working class characters who form these narratives' backbones. Yard fiction often records a way of life that is disappearing as it is written; it portrays the now, but also laments the passage of the then. Its proliferation of voices and perspectives often makes it 'unstable,' but also confirms these texts as dialogic, complex and perpetually contested. In my reading of these novels I will establish Obeah as the chief agent of what Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualised as *heteroglossia*, or dialogism in the novel.¹²³ The multiplicity of perspectives within these narratives is crucial to their portrayals of West Indian cultural identity as far from uniform, inherently chaotic, and carved from several, diverse traditions. Even as Obeah may appear at moments of impasse in these texts, when communication breaks down, it is also Obeah that brings them – their characters – together. These novels may ultimately condemn Obeah, but they do not solve the problems they suggest it creates; their incorporation of Obeah therefore challenges their own notions of narrative cohesion, and in so doing establish Obeah as a tricky, yet definitive feature of West Indian narrative.

Minty Alley is James' only novel, completed in Port of Spain but published in London eight years after James had migrated to England. *Black Fauns* is Mendes' second and final novel, written in New York and published in London.¹²⁴ *Minty Alley* tells the story of Haynes, a young, middle-class black man forced into yard life (at No. 2 Minty Alley) by the death of his mother and his subsequent financial hardship. He is exposed to working-class Trinidadian life at close quarters, and reluctantly drawn into the 'terrific human drama' of his neighbours' loves and losses.¹²⁵ The novel ends with his eventual flight from the yard

¹²² Mendes, 'Commentary,' p.23.

¹²³ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp.259-422.

¹²⁴ Mendes lived in New York between 1933 and 1940. Before his return to Trinidad in 1940, he burned seven novel manuscripts. See Mendes, *Autobiography*, p.xvii.

¹²⁵ C. L. R. James, *Minty Alley* (London: New Beacon Books, 1994), p.38.

and return to the middle class. *Black Fauns* narrates a few weeks in the lives of several washerwomen in an unnamed yard in Port of Spain (including the visit, from New York, of the yard matriarch's son), which begin with sexual intrigue and end with tragedy. Both novels are prime examples of social realist fiction in that they feature omniscient narrators and use the confines of the yard to organise their plots. Their narration is distinguishable not only by their subject matter and inclusion of creole speech, but by their forensic attention to detail – in short, by their 'reality.' The chief bone of contention in both of these novels is Obeah, which is at once integral to the characters' understanding of themselves and/in their society, and the most 'troublesome' element of this culture for the middle-class narrative perspective to accept. It decentres any one ideological perspective, and defies any one interpretation – in these texts, it is an agent of subversion.

Scoping the yard

Scholarship on the *Beacon* group is plentiful, from Sander's pioneering work in cataloguing and critiquing this early fiction (and its accompanying anticolonial ideology); to Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh's consideration of the *Beacon* writers' places at the forefront of West Indian writing; to Leah Reade Rosenberg's critique of the group's nationalist ideology.¹²⁶ Scholarship on these novels though, especially *Black Fauns*, is comparatively sparse. Mendes' novel is the subject of one scholarly article, a chapter of an unpublished thesis, and two review articles, one written some fifty years after the novel was first published.¹²⁷ *Minty Alley* is largely included as part of considerations of James' entire opus. It is also cited as part of wider conceptual studies, such as Rashmi Varma's consideration of the postcolonial city, Leota Lawrence's consideration of the presence of women in West Indian literature, Nicole King's study of James vis-à-vis creolisation, and Mary Lou Emery's study of modernism and the visual in Caribbean literature.¹²⁸ Both novels

¹²⁶ See Reinhard W. Sander, ed. *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978); Sander, *Trinidad Awakening*; Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.112-113; pp.163-174; and Reade Rosenberg, *Nationalism*, pp.123-157.

¹²⁷ See Jennifer Rahim, 'The Operations of the Closet and the Discourse of Unspeakable Contents in *Black Fauns* and *My Brother*', *Small Axe*, 20 (2006), 1-18; Aaron M. Love, 'The Caribbean Novel and the Realisation of History in the Era of Decolonisation', (PhD thesis, New York University, 2011); Esther Chapman, 'Review of *Black Fauns*', *West Indian Review*, 2 (1936), 5; and Gloria Lyn, 'Review, *Black Fauns*', *Jamaica Journal*, 18 (1985), 62-63.

¹²⁸ See Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and Its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.36-75; Leota S. Lawrence, 'Women in Caribbean Literature: The African Presence', *Phylon: The*

feature in wider discussions about *Beacon* fiction more generally, although focus in these studies is largely on the short stories. In all of these studies however, Obeah is overlooked, despite the fact that in both these novels, Obeah is more than simply 'local colour.' Helen Pyne-Timothy mentions James' 'interweaving of song and story, ritual, language, and behaviour' in his stories, but does not refer to Obeah as such.¹²⁹ Neither does Barbara Paul-Emile in her analysis of Benoit, the character that introduces Obeah into James' plot.¹³⁰ In *Minty Alley*, the practice of Obeah is intrinsic to a key figure's characterisation, and in *Black Fauns*, Obeah is an organising plot device. For these reasons, the employment of Obeah in these novels deserves closer critical attention.¹³¹ My analysis of these narratives, therefore, provides key insight not only into the role of Obeah in West Indian life, but also its central-but-marginal position in West Indian literature.

Obeah in 1920s Trinidad was, as Emery puts it, 'something in which the educated reader ought not to believe;' like sex, it was a taboo subject.¹³² *Beacon* writers intentionally seized on these taboos, and enjoyed exposing them in their fiction. Mendes claimed that 'both Life and Art are very much less pretty than the Victorian novelists would have us believe. Vermin and vice will come creeping in.' Committed to readjusting 'the disordered condition of present-day society,' Mendes insisted that

most of the literary artists, instead of acquiescing to the taken-for-granted expediency of a divinely revealed decalogue, are endeavouring to discover a more apt decalogue from the experience of human life, in short, they are looking within themselves for salvation instead of waiting for it to fall from heaven. [...] The divorce

Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture, 44 (1983), 1-11; Nicole King, *C. L. R. James and Creolisation: Circles of Influence* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), pp.52-77; and Mary Lou Emery, *Modernism, the Visual and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.100-112.

¹²⁹ Helen Pyne-Timothy, 'Identity, Society and Meaning: A Study of the Early Stories of C.L.R. James', in *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, ed. by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp.51-60 (p.58).

¹³⁰ See Barbara Paul-Emile, 'Gender Dynamics in James' *Minty Alley*', in *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, ed. by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp.72-78.

¹³¹ *Beacon* short stories, too, link Obeah to key characters. In addition to 'Triumph,' see Ernest A. Carr, 'Black Mother' and Alfred H. Mendes, 'Her Chinaman's Way' in Sander, ed., *From Trinidad*, pp.60-72; pp.103-118. See also C. L. R. James, 'La Divina Pastora', in *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980), pp.5-8; and 'La Diabliesse', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 9 (2001), 4-7.

¹³² Emery, *Modernism*, p.107.

law, companionate marriage, birth control and the gradual closing of the tentacles of Socialism are unequivocal signs of this.¹³³

For him, and for the rest of the *Beacon* group, the literary, the historical, the social and the political were not distinct categories of Trinidadian life. Neither was Trinidadian life isolated from that in the rest of the world. Yet despite this preoccupation with new aesthetics and anti-Victorian portrayals of 'real' life, these authors' treatment of Obeah belies concerns that the labouring classes may be incapable of sustaining 'healthy' familial relationships. Obeah is associated, in these novels, with what would have been considered 'deviant' sexuality at this time. While most of the characters are heterosexual they do not always perform their sexuality in 'socially acceptable' ways, even though they may still aspire to this 'respectability.' Rosenberg argues that in Jamaican romances of this period and beyond 'the marriage of a man and woman serves as a figure for uniting the different constituencies within nations.' Aping American and British romances, Jamaican romances 'linked the strength of the nation to the ability of its citizens to perform normative heterosexual gender roles.'¹³⁴ Even within the comparatively 'liberal' discourse of barrack-yard novels, heteronormative respectability politics still held. The fact that it is the characters who resort to Obeah (in search of this normativity), whose relationships fail most tragically, suggests that these narratives do not celebrate this 'other side' of Trinidadian life as much as their authors may have claimed to.

While James and Mendes may expose the ideology that would condemn both Obeah and non-normative sexualities as restrictive, instead of progressive, they too portray their characters as helpless victims of their inescapable destinies.¹³⁵ Seeing is a privilege these characters do not have, and they (and Obeah) are narrated voyeuristically. Obeah is even more obscure than the characters that use it as, while they are seen, Obeah is often not; much of the Obeah in these narratives occurs 'off stage,' as it were, away from prying eyes and behind closed doors. The narration of Obeah, therefore, is at times incomplete and at

¹³³ Mendes, 'Commentary,' pp.22-23.

¹³⁴ Leah Rosenberg, 'Modern Romances: The Short Stories in Una Marson's' *The Cosmopolitan* (1928-1931)', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 12 (2004), 170-183 (p.172).

¹³⁵ *Minty Alley's* Haynes, Maisie and Philomen, and *Black Fauns'* Miriam provide exceptions to this rule, and none of them believes in Obeah. While we do not see Miriam escape the yard, she is the only one of Mendes' characters allowed to express rationale for her romantic choices in her own words.

other times non-existent; it is the one bridge in understanding that the narrating/seeing intellectual cannot cross, and exists in a discursive space that the reader cannot fully inhabit. These microscopic examinations of the 'secret' worlds of the majority of Port of Spain's inhabitants do not reveal unity but disc(h)ord – particularly along colour and class lines – and they do so with Obeah.

Obeah is a crucial aspect of yard life in these texts, and cannot be ignored; yet it is also beyond these texts in the sense that they struggle to rationalise it within their respective ideologies. Obeah (and, to a lesser extent, sex) is always partially, noticeably hidden; its shadowy presence 'precisely contradicts the project of explicitness, transgresses the values of the texts,' and in so doing throws into relief the poverty of the concept of a 'real' Trinidad.¹³⁶ By pushing to the margins (hiding behind doors) that which they cannot explain or understand, these texts critique their own verisimilitude and expose their own artifice. Obeah exposes the 'internal stratification' of these national narratives, a chaos that is particularly West Indian, as evidenced in the varieties of creole speech.¹³⁷ This discord, I contend, is ultimately fruitful, as it demonstrates the 'openendedness,' not only of the novel, but also of West Indian cultural identity itself.¹³⁸ These yards are artistic elaborations of novelistic heteroglossia; while they may be combined in the structure of the nationalist narrative, they present and preserve autonomy and oppose unification. These rows demonstrate Bakhtin's argument that the overarching authorial discourse of the novel must contend with the everyday language of different characters – characters who are stylistically different – as well as its own language. These characters' voices may be 'subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole,' but this unity 'cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it.'¹³⁹ These 'socially depressed' characters are part of colonial society, but challenge this society's dominance with their various speeches, even as these speeches are appropriated into literary language. As their languages are 'deformed and in fact cease to be that which they had been,' so too is literary language deformed, and is no longer a 'closed socio-linguistic system.' Literary language becomes, instead, a

¹³⁶ Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Second edn (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp.657-673 (p.672).

¹³⁷ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.262.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.361.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.262.

‘diversity of language [...] a dialogue of languages,’ much like West Indian cultural identity is a dialogue of cultures.¹⁴⁰ Obeah highlights diversity in these texts, in language as well as culture, and strengthens them as much as it undermines them.

The yard, already othered in colonial Trinidadian society, is doubly othered by James’ and Mendes’ narrators.¹⁴¹ Rhonda Cobham contends that the yard’s ‘closed set’ allows the author to ‘present his characters in a protected environment, where the standards by which they are judged in the outside world become irrelevant,’ but on the contrary these characters, while they may not have much to do with the outside world, are greatly affected by this world’s standards.¹⁴² They are all (except perhaps *Minty Alley*’s Maisie) concerned with ‘respectability’, and police each other’s language and sexual behaviour.¹⁴³ In *Black Fauns* characters are always discussing current affairs; Miriam in particular compares the ‘pandemonium’ in the yard to how ‘Eurap was in nineteen-fourteen,’ and blames Obeah (*Black Fauns*, p.184). While the yard is excluded from official ‘public’ discourse it is not necessarily private, and public discourse is not excluded from it. Yards are constantly competing for privacy, and their personal spaces =(their bodies as well as their rooms), are repeatedly invaded, particularly by voyeuristic narrators and touring visitors. Moreover, they constantly interrupt each other, and the narrators, in competition for discursive space. In *Black Fauns* in particular, the women argue constantly – about marriage, family, religion (Obeah), politics, colour and sex – and rarely reach consensus. Their differing opinions constantly challenge Mendes’ narrative’s representative authority, despite several narratory interjections throughout the novel that would undermine their subjectivity. This discursive competition is a feature of the (comic) novel, Bakhtin argues, in which ‘the primary source of language usage [is] a highly specific treatment of “common language.”’ This common language is taken as the ‘*common view*,’ from which an author may distance himself, but through which his own intentions are refracted and diffused. The author’s relationship with

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.294.

¹⁴¹ The designation ‘black fauns’ is itself dehumanising, despite the novel’s proliferation of female voices.

¹⁴² Rhonda Cobham, ‘Introduction,’ in *Black Fauns*, by Alfred Mendes (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), pp.i-xvi (p.ix).

¹⁴³ Maisie is the niece of Mrs Rouse, Haynes’ landlady. She eventually becomes Haynes’ lover.

the common view, however, 'is not static – it is always found in a state of movement or oscillation' – in a state of row an contention.¹⁴⁴

(Social) realism and Obeah

Beacon realism was always particularly cognisant of the injurious effects on social behaviour of an oppressive colonial system, and so busied itself with overturning contemporary complacency. Its detached narrative style subscribes to the belief that reality, while independent of an artist, is objectively knowable to that artist, who can communicate this reality truthfully and faithfully, even though it exists beyond the page. West Indian cultural identity's multiple perspectives, however, as these novels demonstrate, does not fit neatly into any singular cultural paradigm. Moreover, the narrators' detached irony emphasises the distance between them and their subjects – it highlights social inequality in form as well as content. We see this gap personified in Haynes, whose physical proximity to his neighbours exacerbates his social and cultural separate-ness from them. Even in *Black Fauns* we see that the women's proximity to each other is not synonymous with unity, as, in addition to their constant disagreements, they hold several secrets from each other. Realism, in these novels, is contingent on (feigned) ignorance. As Sander argues, narrators resemble eavesdroppers, lending piquancy to the stories by adopting the 'calypsonian pose' of 'a disinterested listener, or of a newspaper reporter who is always on the spot, or of one who had been told hot news by a reliable source or a barrack-room dweller who cannot help but overhear what is going on in bed next door.'¹⁴⁵ The knowledge these stories transmit may be second-hand, but it is knowledge nonetheless; this contingency distinguishes West Indian social realism from its European generic predecessors in that it acknowledges its own diminished authority, and that absolute representational authority is impossible. *Beacon* writers indeed charged themselves to 'make it new' and their work, as Emery argues, 'intervened in the double-bind of colonial mimicry by transforming the narrative conventions of English and European fiction' with 'unofficial' discursive tools, such as constant contestation in creole.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, while these novels may appear 'conventional' in their realism, their incorporation of competing voices – in other words,

¹⁴⁴ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' pp.301-302, original emphasis.

¹⁴⁵ Sander, *Trinidad Awakening*, p.10.

¹⁴⁶ Emery, *Modernism*, p.103.

their fragmentation within narrative unity – reveals a hybridised literary form, unique to and reflective of the societies they describe. Barrack-yard literature works within, distorts and creates out of romance and realism. Its incorporation of Obeah works on the assumption that readers and narrators know more than they are supposed to know, and secretly want to know more. The ‘realism’ of the text, therefore, is always being negotiated; neither the narrator, nor his informant, is as disinterested as he claims to be, nor as knowledgeable.¹⁴⁷

Yet by demystifying Obeah, these narratives paradoxically undermine its reality for these characters, many of whom see it as a survival strategy within and beneath colonialism’s restrictions. Literary social realism and the cultural creole nationalism that fostered it have been criticised for their betrayals of their own ideals of equality, and for their fetishisation of their subjects. In particular they have been critiqued for their inability to reconcile ‘progressive’ ideology with the ‘primitivism’ of folk practices, most significantly Obeah.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, while Obeah is presented in *Minty Alley* as something about which Haynes is ‘rightfully’ ignorant, and while he is never ‘converted,’ James’ protagonist is still forced to acknowledge Obeah’s role in his fellow Trinidadians’ lives. As realist works, both these novels offer the reader ‘a position of knowingness which is also a position of identification with the narrative voice.’ Their stories construct, and then depend, on ‘a set of assumptions shared between narrator and reader,’ confirming ‘both the transcendent knowingness of the reader-as-subject and the “obviousness” of the shared truths in question.’¹⁴⁹ They thus present Obeah as at once pedestrian and exotic, suspending their (and our) disbelief in our ignorance. The worlds these novels describe are supposedly unfamiliar to the readership, but wholly normal to all the characters except Haynes. Like Haynes, readers are encouraged to see these characters as entertainment, not necessarily a threat – and not necessarily real, despite Mendes’ claim to be presenting ‘the other side of the Coin of Life in all its stark realism.’

¹⁴⁷ We see this predicament repeated in R. L. C. Aarons’ ‘The Cow That Laughed’ (1939) and Rupert Mickle’s ‘Shadow’ (1940), which will be analysed in Chapter Two of this thesis.

¹⁴⁸ Deborah Thomas argues that throughout the nationalist period in the Anglophone Caribbean (which begins, for her, slightly after *Minty Alley* was published), ‘revaluating rural Afro-Jamaican cultural practices either tended to appreciably alter the structural position of rural Afro-Jamaicans, or to significantly reinvent the ideological systems through which modern “progress” had been measured and “development” evaluated,’ in Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalisation, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.5.

¹⁴⁹ Belsey, ‘Constructing,’ p.664.

Minty Alley and *Black Fauns* differ distinctly in that James' novel features a single protagonist who functions as the narrative's unifying consciousness. The narrator only has access to Haynes' mind, which filters – and limits – our access to the other characters. Social realism's inherent voyeurism is exaggerated by Haynes' position, as he regularly spies on his neighbours, unknown to them, through a secret peephole in his wall. Haynes sees himself as audience and his neighbours as actors, and we are thus initiated into the yard if not from the back door, then through a rear window. As in *Black Fauns*, the yard is an object of illicit male gaze, an object which is seen, but does not itself see. The narration depends heavily on Haynes for information about and access to the yard, which we know to be limited not least by the closed doors of the other rooms, but by Haynes' position of privilege (and privacy). In addition, a lot of Haynes' information is second-hand gossip, either from his neighbours or from Ella, his servant. The contingency and unreliability of these stories expose the yard's petty jealousies and prejudices, but also hint at the multiplicity of urban Trinidadian voices and perspectives, even as they are subsumed into the 'rational,' if fragile, frame of the text.

Ramchand argued that, as Haynes cannot know his neighbours' thoughts, James' narration of them is more 'vivid,' and that characters 'retain autonomy as familiar but not fully known beings.' Haynes' limited perspective 'gives an impression of depth to the presented life in the novel,' Ramchand continues, and because Haynes 'registers, without being able to explain [...] we are made to feel that there are hidden resources even in the hedged-in people of the yard.'¹⁵⁰ Yet we never discover these resources, and we never plumb these depths; Haynes' is only a brief sojourn into poverty. His neighbours, purportedly the subjects of this fiction (and of these West Indian nations), are mediated by an interloper and only presented to us in fragments.¹⁵¹ Hazel Carby extends this critique to argue that, with the advent of *Beacon* writing, 'the subject of Trinidadian fiction' became 'the problem of becoming an involved writer and the question of the extent to which the class barrier could be successfully bridged.'¹⁵² The subject of West Indian fiction, therefore, became the problem of class consciousness. Emery also advances this argument, contending that 'perhaps because of [...] the class background of the *Beacon* members, the relationship

¹⁵⁰ Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, p.70.

¹⁵¹ Moreover the versions of themselves they present to Haynes are conscious performances. Their 'reality,' therefore, is in fact a performance.

¹⁵² Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), p.141.

between the educated middle classes and those of the working and lower classes became one of the group's chief concerns.¹⁵³ Both James and Mendes briefly lived in barrack-yards; James claimed that 'the people fascinated me, and I wrote about them from the point of view of an educated youthful member of the black middle class.'¹⁵⁴ He also claimed in 1972 to have written 'Triumph' to prove that 'there are certain aspects of Trinidad life which I knew and know as much as they do.'¹⁵⁵ *Minty Alley* was 'purely to amuse myself one summer,' he claimed, and he was apparently unaware of the political implications of detailing yarders' 'very dramatic' lifestyles.¹⁵⁶ *Minty Alley* can thus be read as a commentary on barrack-yard writing itself, which involved observing, but not necessarily living the lives of the characters it described. It is a commentary on the distance between the rhetoric of middle-class intellectuals and the people on whom they based their claims of a national identity. Haynes represents the observing intellectual, who sees his fellow Trinidadians as 'grist to his mill,' from whom he can develop himself but who do not necessarily develop alongside him.¹⁵⁷ Haynes personifies Fanon's national middle class, 'bereft of ideas,' cut off from the rest of its society, and 'undermined by its hereditary incapacity to think in terms of all the problems of the nation as seen from the point of view of the whole of that nation.'¹⁵⁸ James' text, therefore, more than Mendes', acknowledges the shortcomings of creole nationalism. Perhaps it also acknowledges Edmondson's observation that 'the folk novel is essentially an intellectual invention, *about* the folk but not *of* them.'¹⁵⁹ These novels demonstrate not only wilful experimentation with and defiance of literary and social conventions, but they also reflect the precarious position of the native intellectual observer.

Black Fauns does not have a unifying consciousness, and most of the novel is comprised of fierce exchanges among the washerwomen, who share the physical and discursive 'stage' of the yard, and the frame of the narrative. The interlopers in Mendes' novel are all men, and all minor characters – the rent agent, the visiting son, an escaped

¹⁵³ Emery, *Modernism*, p.103, original emphasis.

¹⁵⁴ See Mendes, *Autobiography*, p.81. James is qtd. in Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, *Kas-Kas: Interviews with 3 Caribbean Writers in Texas. George Lamming, C. L. R. James, Wilson Harris* (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas at Austin, 1972), p.33.

¹⁵⁵ *Kas-Kas*, p.35. The 'they' to whom James refers are his working-class subjects.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹⁵⁷ Mendes, 'Commentary,' p.22.

¹⁵⁸ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p.123.

¹⁵⁹ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, p.33, original emphasis.

convict – and so *Black Fauns* more closely adheres to yard fiction’s conventional focus on poor, working-class women. Mendes makes a lot more use of reported speech than James does, too, and his narrator explores most of the characters’ minds, not only that of a single ‘leading man’ (*Minty Alley*, p.75). It is partly because of this constant contestation that Mendes’ novel goes further than James’ in at least acknowledging, if not validating, the importance of Obeah (and other ‘folk’ beliefs such as Shango and Spiritual Baptism) in modern West Indian life. *Black Fauns* goes further than *Minty Alley*, therefore, in its articulation of urban working-class social identity, but further, too, in its exploitation of it. Mendes’ narrator replaces Haynes as the voyeur; his unmediated access to the protagonists’ private thoughts leads us to believe that he is not as concerned as James is with middle-class intellectualism, and instead Mendes articulates race as *the* most essential marker of economic and political capital, and principal determinant of social identity.¹⁶⁰ Haynes shares his neighbours’ colour, but not their class, and therefore not their culture. *Black Fauns’* washerwomen share *both* colour and class, as well as occupation and space. They, more than Haynes and his neighbours, are forced together (and doomed together) by the enclosed space of the barrack-yard.

Significantly, Haynes does not see Obeah at all from his spy-hole; his neighbours attempt to educate him about the practice, but even so are reticent in discussing the subject with him. Obeah is the only ‘secret’ they (knowingly and unknowingly) have from Haynes, and while of course this may be explained by a reluctance among users of Obeah to discuss what remains an illegal activity, it draws attention to Obeah’s ‘unknowability,’ its position outside discourses of representation. In *Black Fauns*, though our access to Obeah is much less restricted, it is still shrouded in mystery. The novel’s central Obeah act takes place behind closed doors and is incomplete in both plot and representation. Both these novels’ treatment of Obeah, to different extents, demonstrate what Catherine Belsey describes as literary realism’s struggle with that which cannot be ‘rationally’ explained, that which cannot be made ‘explicit, accountable [and] subject to scientific analysis.’¹⁶¹ Obeah is a trick

¹⁶⁰ Mendes reflected that James, ‘for reasons which he refused to express [did not] like my novel and I am quite certain why he did not like it: the race theme was too brutally articulated.’ See Mendes, *Autobiography*, p.81. While James was an Afro-creole Mendes, by dint of his Portuguese ancestry, was considered ‘white’ in Trinidad, and naturally afforded greater privileges.

¹⁶¹ Belsey, ‘Constructing,’ p.669.

that cannot be explained, and therefore cannot be signified by the text 'except in a metaphoric or symbolic mode whose presence disrupts the realist surface.'¹⁶² In these novels, therefore, Obeah functions to disrupt family, community and narrative ideals.

Both novels struggle (*Minty Alley* more than *Black Fauns*) to refigure Obeah as a valid 'alternative epistemology,' what Janette Martin describes as 'a way of knowing that lies beyond Eurocentric epistemology.'¹⁶³ Although we are forced to accept that Obeah is real to these 'folk' characters, we are not encouraged to see it as valid to our general cultural identity and development. As I will demonstrate with my readings of these novels, it is with regards to Obeah that the narration is most monologic, and at which there is the least communication and understanding, even as Obeah also functions as the text's agent of heteroglossia. Despite authorial claims to be normalising these characters, these narratives further other them because of their use of and faith in Obeah. As in *Black Fauns*, Obeah is resorted to in *Minty Alley* by the already disenfranchised, as a function of their ignorance, and acts as a catalyst to their continued marginalisation and decline. Narrators' struggles to 'realistically' portray a phenomenon that resists their discursive frames provide the cognitive dissonance within these texts which has led critics such as Emery and Eric Keenaghan to describe James' work, at least, as 'modernist.' Emery's observation that 'James' ambivalence toward folk cultures [provides] a critical lens through which to reposition the hierarchies of "modern" and "pre-modern" as competing systems of knowledge,' while it does not go as far as to argue that *Minty Alley* determines Obeah as 'pre-modern' or 'uncivilised,' does allow us to consider that these categories are not fixed in the novel.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, though she does not name Obeah specifically, Emery does recognise it as one of the deciding factors in these characters' relative 'unmodernity.' Keenaghan avoids repeating established criticism of authorial condescension and alienation, but calls James' novel 'social realism with a modernist twist.'¹⁶⁵ *Minty Alley's* hybridity

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.671-672.

¹⁶³ Martin, 'Jablesses,' p.3.

¹⁶⁴ Emery, *Modernism*, p.104.

¹⁶⁵ Eric Keenaghan, "'His Eyes Almost Fell through the Crease:" Using Voyeurism and Sexuality to Ascertain the Modernist Attributes of C.L.R. James' *Minty Alley*', *Schuylkill: graduate journal for the humanities and humanistic social science*, 2 1 (1998) <http://www.temple.edu.gradmag/volume2/keenagh1.htm> [Accessed February 21, 2014]. Both Brathwaite and Eugenia Collier have also levelled accusations of elitism at James, in Edward Brathwaite, 'Timehri', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), 35-44; and Eugenia Collier, 'C. L. R. James', in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Daryl Cumber Dance (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.229-238. Brathwaite's article does not cover *Minty Alley* in any detail.

makes it experimental; it is a realist text but never, as has been argued of realism, 'disavows its own culturally conditioned processes and ideological stylistic assumptions.'¹⁶⁶ Neither does it employ 'excessive formal disruptions, meta-fictional strategies and complex language games,' as has been argued of modernism.¹⁶⁷ Despite their different class positions, all of these characters are aware of their respective place(s) in the colonial hierarchy. While social realist writing did '[present] itself as transparently representative of the author's society,' both *Black Fauns* and *Minty Alley* acknowledge that same society's historical stratification and colonial conditioning.¹⁶⁸ Mendes does this primarily through the constant 'row an' contention' among the women in his yard, while James exemplifies this through the cultural interpellation of his single protagonist and narrative informant, Haynes.

Living like common people in Minty Alley

While *Minty Alley* does narrate a coming-of-age of sorts, it presents an exception to the rule of the West Indian *Bildungsroman*, in which George Lamming argued that 'we are rarely concerned [...] with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village itself which commands our attention.'¹⁶⁹ James' narrative is very much concerned with Haynes' individual consciousness, which is the only one to which we have access. Yet Haynes is not a hero – he is not even given a first name. Instead, he is a symbolic, interchangeable cypher, with no physical description except for his race. We know he is young and sheltered, and suspect that the barrack-yard experience is to be the making of him, but we do not know who he is. Haynes, representative of the black colonial middle class, lacks any distinguishing features or characteristics. The conventions of the *Bildungsroman* are further skewed because, as we will see, Haynes' brief visit to this other world does not teach him anything: at the end of the novel he all but forgets about the people he met at No. 2. *Minty Alley* presents itself as an historical recording, yet by concerning itself with the relationship between the educated middle classes and the uneducated labouring classes it does not necessarily 'break the fourth wall' of social

¹⁶⁶ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.3.

¹⁶⁷ Eli Park Sorensen, *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.x.

¹⁶⁸ Childs, *Modernism*, p.3.

¹⁶⁹ See George Lamming's introduction to the 1983 edition of *In the Castle of My Skin* (1956), qtd. in Lee Erwin, 'The Revision of History in the West Indian Bildungsroman', *World Literature Written in English*, 33 (1993), 90-102 (p.91).

commentary. Instead it highlights the power dynamic implicit in the act of observing from a distance. This dynamic is further complicated when the observer is himself also colonised, and exposes what David Winks calls 'the pedagogical interpellation of the colonial subject,' the 'indoctrination, or translation, of the colonial subject into a European comprehension of the world and history.'¹⁷⁰ The novel's tight prose reflects the yard's close(d) atmosphere and the limited scope and opportunities of its characters – including Haynes, whose trajectory to leave the island has been curtailed by the death of his mother. Once in the yard Haynes takes his 'rightful place' in the hierarchy of Trinidadian colonial society, but he does not have dominion over Obeah, of which he hears, but does not see. No wider society is imagined outside the yard (although characters leave No. 2 often), and this airless atmosphere is less a microcosm than a fishbowl. The only direct speech we read is that which Haynes hears, and most of it is directed towards him.¹⁷¹ Haynes can (and does) escape at any time, but the fact that this protagonist's education (if not integration) into the folk is not considered complete without at least a passing reference to Obeah speaks to Obeah's importance as a cultural artefact and to its presence, if not necessarily its visibility, in all arenas of 'real' West Indian life.

Obeah is introduced into James' novel through McCarthy Benoit, common-law husband of Mrs Rouse, Haynes' landlady. Benoit is the cynosure of yard life, and only other speaking male character in the novel. I will be reading Benoit as an example of the Bakhtinian fool: his profligacy ultimately results in the yard's disintegration, and in him James combines both taboos of sex and Obeah. In many ways Haynes' development appears contingent on Benoit's decline, as as the novel progresses, Haynes garners more respect and admiration from the other residents of No. 2 (all female), and eventually takes Benoit's place as head of the household.¹⁷² As Benoit used to do, Haynes oversees his landlady's accounts; she even consults him on her romantic decisions. He does not repeat Benoit's licentiousness but he does succeed with Maisie, the only woman in the house on whom Benoit's charms had failed, and a thorn in the side of Mrs Rouse, her aunt. Both men

¹⁷⁰ David Winks, 'Forging Post-Colonial Identities through Acts of Translation?', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 21 (2009), 65-74 (p.65; p.69).

¹⁷¹ The lack of interactions between the other characters reinforces colonial hierarchy in that they speak to the 'centre' (Haynes) and not each other.

¹⁷² Towards the end of his stay Haynes reflects that Miss Atwell, one of the residents, is his 'abject slave' (*Minty Alley*, p.154).

depend upon and exploit the women in their lives, yet Haynes is not depicted as harmful, while Benoit is almost immediately configured as a dangerous predator.¹⁷³ In their first meeting he warns Haynes to 'guard [his] property,' Ella, as he Benoit is a 'man girls like' (*Minty Alley*, p.31). Haynes is clearly uncomfortable around Benoit, whose hyper-masculinity threatens his own fledgling manhood.

Benoit depends on the women in the yard for money, upkeep and sex. He is not legally married to Mrs Rouse although he lives with her, and conducts affairs with at least two other women in the yard, if not more women elsewhere.¹⁷⁴ Benoit does not appear to have any formal employment, although he 'helps' Mrs Rouse with her baking business. He is always portrayed eating or drinking and talking about women, and seems to have no limit to his libido. While Haynes is restrained, Benoit is all appetite. Haynes is diffident, but Benoit has a 'good deep voice' and is 'very much at his ease at once' (*Minty Alley*, pp.29-30). He forms an instant friendship with the reluctant Haynes, who in comparison to him is inadequate: Haynes is bookish, sexually inexperienced, and lacks confidence. The younger man's advantage is somewhat restored, however, by Benoit's implied stupidity and lack of self-awareness. When Haynes, desperate to find common ground, asks Benoit if he likes books, Benoit responds 'No time for that, man. Since I leave school I ain't open a book.' He then changes the subject 'suddenly' to food (*Minty Alley*, p.30). In this and all their contrasts, we are encouraged to sympathise with Haynes, not Benoit; with the 'intellectual,' not the 'brute.' Expecting the reader to identify with the narrator (or, in this case, the narrator's informant) is common in realist narratives, but the threat Benoit poses to Haynes and his ideology is immediately evident, and does not disappear until the former dies.

In another contrast to Haynes, the narrator lingers in describing Benoit, but this racially determined description is itself ambiguous. Benoit is referred to as a 'black man with curly hair' and as 'the black man' before Haynes makes his acquaintance (*Minty Alley*, pp.29-30). His 'very black face,' the narrator continues, is 'undistinguished-looking, neither

¹⁷³ Haynes relies on his servant Ella to find his lodgings, and he pays her too see to most aspects of his upkeep. Ella had been with his family for as long as Haynes can remember, and she replaces his deceased mother. She is temporarily replaced in turn by Mrs Rouse and the other (poor, black) women in the yard. Despite their closeness, Ella does not live with Haynes, and only ever calls him 'Sir.' The ease with which she is replaced, and reinstated, suggests that she is interchangeable with the other women of her race/class.

¹⁷⁴ Benoit is rarely home, and his movements are mysterious. His absences and outings are fraught with possibility, but because Haynes does not see them, neither do we. To our knowledge Mrs Rouse only discovers one of these affairs.

handsome nor ugly.' Benoit's age is 'anything between thirty-five and fifty,' and his only distinguishing feature is his 'rather cruel mouth' (*Minty Alley*, p.30). If James' then-contemporary audience gave credence to theories of physiognomy, they would have been inclined to believe that Benoit's lasciviousness and Obeah use were not only linked, but also readable in his facial features, which James' narrator appears keen to portray as grotesque. Benoit's depiction is untrustworthy, and the narrator makes a point of highlighting Benoit's 'traces of Indian blood,' which is significant to a West Indian readership (*Minty Alley*, p.30). 'East Indians' in the Caribbean continue to be thought untrustworthy and, because of their 'white livers,' sexually depraved.¹⁷⁵ Readers are thus predisposed to dislike Benoit from his very phenotype.

James' description marks Benoit as a 'dougla,' which is a pejorative term for a person of both African and Indian/South Asian heritage. 'The dougla figure,' argues Kaneesha Parsard, 'threatens the distinct black and Indian pluralities in Trinidad and Tobago, even where nationalism is predicated on the celebration of syncretic cultural practices.'¹⁷⁶ Unions between African and Indian labourers in the post-Emancipation period were taboo, and the children of these unions represented a betrayal of both the recently emancipated Afro-peasant community, and of the newly arrived indentured Indian labourers. This is another way in which Benoit signifies disharmony, by posing a threat to the imagined unity of the nationalist romance plot. His very existence is problematic, and we expect him to be a confidence trickster even before his use of Obeah is disclosed. Benoit is isolated and has no roots; Mrs Rouse explains his lack of friends and family by claiming that they abandoned him after 'he take up with me' (*Minty Alley*, p.236). In Benoit are consolidated sex, treachery, miscegenation and Obeah, making him a degenerate, almost *ad hominem*. Benoit's Obeah, therefore, can only be a further manifestation of his depravity, and of both his and Obeah's destabilising potential. It is Benoit's Obeah, inextricably linked to his unbridled sexuality, which leads to the disintegration of the yard, to Haynes' departure, and to the end of James' narrative.

¹⁷⁵ For other examples of the sensationalisation of Indians in Caribbean fiction, see *Banana Bottom*, and Olive Senior, 'Arrival of the Snake-Woman', in *Arrival of the Snake-Woman and Other Stories* (Harlow: Longman, 1994), pp.1-45.

¹⁷⁶ Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, "'Douglarise De Nation:': Politicised Intimacies and the Literary Dougla', *2010-2011 Penn Humanities Forum on Virtuality* (2011), 1-31 (p.2).

As a fool, Benoit may be the object of the author/narrator's scorn, but by mocking the fool's stupidity, the conventions of the world of the author are themselves called into question. 'The author needs the fool,' argues Bakhtin: 'by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality. By representing stupidity, the novel teaches prose intelligence.'¹⁷⁷ Such a figure is connected with 'the common people, and cannot be read literally, 'because they are not what they seem [...] their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being – and even then not a direct reflection;' Benoit is an inverted reflection of Haynes, very much the hero's 'other.'¹⁷⁸ Haynes' inability to comprehend Benoit exposes Haynes' own social and cultural biases, his own cultural insensitivity if not stupidity, as much as the narrative is invested in making a caricature of Benoit. Benoit's apparent simplicity is 'opposed to [the] greedy falsehood and hypocrisy' of the black middle classes represented in Haynes.¹⁷⁹ By nature the fool, like the trickster, is unaware of his own 'foolishness,' and Benoit's assumed familiarity with Haynes is evidence of this. When the news breaks about his affair with Nurse Jackson (another resident of No. 2), Benoit meets with Haynes to discuss it before making any effort to reconcile with Mrs Rouse.¹⁸⁰ Benoit is again lengthily described (another contrast to Haynes), but his 'appearance and manner made [Haynes] nervous' (*Minty Alley*, p.62). Benoit is shabby in both appearance and demeanour – as we expect a 'fool' to be – and there is much silence before he repeatedly blames Mrs Rouse for his behaviour, speaking in short, transient 'spurts of wrath' while looking at Haynes, seemingly 'talking chiefly to relieve himself' (*Minty Alley*, p.63).¹⁸¹ While it is true that Benoit 'remains trapped in his own narcissism,' as Paul-Emile argues, it is not fair to say that he is 'untouched' by the consequences of his actions.¹⁸² His discussion with Haynes does show some tacit

¹⁷⁷ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.404.

¹⁷⁸ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotype in the Novel,' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist. trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp.84-258 (p.159).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

¹⁸⁰ His opinions on the matter are thus filtered through Haynes, who is both incredulous and inexperienced, but nonetheless regarded as an authority. Haynes had witnessed both the affair, and the ensuing argument between Mrs Rouse and the nurse, from the safety of his spyhole, but feigns ignorance. His apparent (not real) absence from the drama leads to his becoming the yard confessor, and all his neighbours visit him that night to retell the story – except the nurse, whom Mrs Rouse has ejected from the property.

¹⁸¹ In his first meeting with Haynes, Benoit is described as chewing with 'short quick bites' (*Minty Alley*, p.30). Although we do not see such behaviour, we expect Benoit to be prone to outbursts of rage.

¹⁸² Paul-Emile, 'Gender Dynamics,' pp.73-74.

acknowledgement of his selfishness, if not remorse, and some desire for absolution. As E. A. Williams argues, the fool 'hopes for mainstream culture's endorsement, but invariably fails to understand why he cannot earn it. His naiveté about what society expects from people is entirely sustained.'¹⁸³ Benoit may want Haynes' approval but seems distracted, and it is in this agitated mental state that he discloses his knowledge of 'science,' before falling silent and looking in several directions, 'always with the same expression of abstraction tempered by uncertainty' (*Minty Alley*, p.64).¹⁸⁴ Given Benoit's erratic behaviour, we are encouraged to take his disclosure of belief in Obeah as a sign of mental illness, and this disclosure comes at a time when communication in the yard has broken down. The text's rationalist ideology cannot or will not accept a discussion of Obeah on its own terms, however, so frames it in language of 'insanity.'

Benoit boasts of the ritual bath he and Mrs Rouse had given the nurse, to which he attributes the latter woman's professional success. He claims that 'I's I who fixed her up. If it wasn't for me she would have been still down to the ground,' but we are not convinced that these 'baths' are anything more than a means of realising his perverse sexual fantasies (*Minty Alley*, p.64). We do not, therefore, believe this Obeah act to have any spiritual merit or value. Haynes, unable to take Benoit's crisis seriously, stifles laughter as he visualises the nurse naked – Benoit's 'stupidity' exposes Haynes' immaturity. Nevertheless, Obeah is strongly associated here with not only madness (which is ridiculed) but also with sexual transgression.¹⁸⁵ Benoit uses Obeah to take advantage of the nurse's body, which is taken advantage of again in the retelling of the story, and in Haynes' (and our) imagination.¹⁸⁶ Benoit's sexual perversion, therefore, is also ours. Nevertheless Benoit uses Obeah not as a religion or an assertion of his 'African identity,' but as a seduction technique; lacking any skill or industry of his own, he uses his 'science' to exploit these women and frustrate their attempts at independence.¹⁸⁷ Haynes, despite his own discomfort and incomprehension, admires Benoit, foolish the older man may be. Unable to dismiss Benoit and Obeah

¹⁸³ E. A. Williams, 'Bakhtin and *Borat*: the Rogue, the Clown, and the Fool in Carnival Film', *Philament*, 20 (2015), 105-128 (p.113).

¹⁸⁴ 'Science' is another term for Obeah.

¹⁸⁵ Obeah is also associated with madness and sexual transgression in *Black Fauns* and later in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which will be discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

¹⁸⁶ *Black Fauns* also features a sexualised ritual bath, which is described in greater detail but which serves little purpose other than voyeuristic titillation.

¹⁸⁷ Benoit does not appear to have any clients other than Mrs Rouse and Nurse Jackson.

completely, Haynes gazes at his interlocutor 'fascinated,' if helplessly amused (*Minty Alley*, p.64).

It is significant that this moment of impasse comes at the same time as the novel's first discussion of Obeah, the facet of Caribbean life with which the narrating/seeing intellectual is least familiar, and of which he is least tolerant. Benoit is a figure of ridicule here, but his 'stupidity' is telling. As Bakhtin argues, 'stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) [...] whose mask it tears away.'¹⁸⁸ It is not necessarily that Benoit is simply 'stupid,' here, but that Haynes refuses to understand, refuses to engage Benoit on *his* own terms. Both Haynes and James' readership are forced, in this moment, to re-evaluate our cultural and discursive 'truths.' Even as he is disparaged by this narrator, Benoit's inability to grasp his own 'stupidity' forces us to consider that he is as convinced of his beliefs as we are of ours, and to question, therefore, if these beliefs are unassailable. Through Benoit, who is *both* the fool and the agent of Obeah in this text, Obeah functions here to undermine the dominant ideology, even as it is subsumed and condemned in the text. Benoit's 'confident almost contemptuous smile' makes us even more uncomfortable, as we are uncertain if it is Benoit who is full of contempt for Mrs Rouse, or the narrator (or Haynes) who is contemptuous of Benoit. When Haynes asks Benoit if he will work his science to reconcile with Mrs Rouse, Benoit advises the younger man that he does not need science. 'When you see me loving a woman,' he says, 'she never want to give me up' (*Minty Alley*, p.65). Haynes, 'in his *simplicity*,' had thought the affair over, but is shocked and disappointed when, the next day, everything has returned to normal (*Minty Alley*, p. 64, emphasis added). It is not Benoit who is foolish, now, but Haynes. These characters are not as simple as he imagined them; the actors will not follow his script. The cultural system(s) to which they belong, and which they represent, are different to his. Benoit unconsciously ridicules a middle-class concept of national language and culture, exposing it, too, as an inauthentic, contestable 'mask.'

After his exposure to Obeah Haynes is forced to face a 'reality' that is not his own, and we are forced to consider that 'actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of

¹⁸⁸ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.403.

bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems.’¹⁸⁹ Yet he ignores Ella’s warning, ‘These people, sir, don’t bother with them, sir,’ as he, ‘student of human nature,’ is determined to rationalise his subjects, and in so doing become an authority on and over them (*Minty Alley*, p.66; p.80). This ‘authority’ comes at a price, however. Benoit encroaches on Haynes’ space even more, not only with sordid details of his affair – unsolicited by Haynes but relished by the readers – but with the distress he is causing Mrs Rouse, which in turn distresses Haynes. After the introduction of Obeah, Haynes can no longer maintain his position as ‘detached’ observer. Benoit physically enters Haynes’ room (uninvited), and attempts to challenge him by remarking that it is ‘these books you always reading’ that are the cause of Haynes’ lack of female companionship (*Minty Alley*, p.79). The would-be Obeahman’s challenge is undermined, however, by his mistaking Haynes’ science books for ‘science’ books, such as those published by Lauron de Laurence. For the benefit of the supposedly ignorant audience (at home and abroad), de Laurence is described as ‘an American writer on magic and psychic science, whose books had some vogue in the islands’ (*Minty Alley*, p.79).¹⁹⁰ Haynes may not know about Obeah, but he knows who de Laurence is, and corrects Benoit’s assumption – perhaps he is not as ignorant as James has led us to believe.¹⁹¹ Yet when Benoit tells him that ‘a man with your intelligence, if you read books on science you would do well’ and that he, Benoit, can control spirits, Haynes can only stare at him. ‘Was the man mad?’ he wonders (*Minty Alley*, p.79). The rhetorical question carries the implicit assumption that Benoit is indeed ‘mad,’ but Haynes’ opinion is not completely reliable, as the narrative has already foregrounded his inability to ‘read’ his neighbours, and

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.288.

¹⁹⁰ Lauron William de Laurence (1868-1936) was an American writer and publisher on ‘the occult,’ who pioneered the supply of spiritual goods by mail order. His works, much of which were plagiarised, are still banned in Jamaica. See ‘Prohibited,’ Jamaica Customs Agency, http://www.jacustoms.gov.jm/home_template.php?page=prohibited&group_id=1 [Accessed December 4, 2014]. Despite this, Reggae artist (and Rasta) Jah9 recently appeared on Jamaican television with a copy of de Laurence’s *The Master Key* (1915), which she described as a ‘powerful tool’ in the study of composure and self-possession. See Onstage TV, First Lady of Neo Roots Reggae- Jah 9 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdVwLVO-W8E>> [Accessed December 22, 2014]. At time of writing, there have been no repercussions of Jah9’s actions. W. F. Elkins describes de Laurence as an ‘American publisher of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* and other occult treatises,’ which ‘significantly influenced the development of the new type of obeah in Jamaica. Methods of magic gleaned from his publications were to supplant traditional procedures, especially in urban areas, where they became known as “Science,”’ in W. F. Elkins, ‘William Lauron DeLaurence and Jamaican Folk Religion’, *Folklore*, 97 (1986), 215-218 (p.215).

¹⁹¹ It is possible that de Laurence’s works fare better than Obeah does in this narrative because they are written, use more modern methods (such as oils and powders, as opposed to feathers and grave dirt) and are therefore less ‘African.’ See Elkins, ‘DeLaurence.’

the distance between his value system and theirs. Haynes, who does not even see his situation(s) as 'real,' cannot help but interpret Benoit as 'mad,' as he cannot fit Benoit's beliefs into his frame of understanding. The realist narrative thus dismisses Obeah as 'madness' yet again, but this is an anxious dismissal. Obeah threatens the integrity of the epistemology that would deny its validity.

After Benoit's wedding to the nurse (which Haynes conveniently does not attend, so only learns of through gossip) Miss Atwell, another neighbour, insists that Benoit has clearly been 'fixed up,' and is surprised that Haynes, 'a Creole,' 'don't know these things' (*Minty Alley*, p.108).¹⁹² Haynes is our only source of information in this narrative, but the re-emergence of Obeah once again exposes the fallacy of this supposed authority. This affords an opportunity to explain 'these things' to us, such as the practice of influencing a partner towards marriage by 'put[ting] a little thing in you' food' (*Minty Alley*, p.108). Miss Atwell's outburst implies that, although they may be financially better off, the black middle-classes are culturally impoverished; just as James' declining to describe his protagonist implies that Haynes has no identity, so does Miss Atwell imply that Haynes has no culture. Haynes' knowledge of de Laurence is insufficient, and Obeah poses the most direct challenge to his (and therefore the text's) dominance. Benoit challenges Haynes' masculinity, while Miss Atwell challenges his 'Creole-ness.' It is in these two areas that Haynes is most lacking, and Obeah highlights this lack. Despite this, the other characters do not register Haynes' ignorance as lack; instead, they defer to him further. They thus shore up not only Haynes' authority, but the cultural and social hierarchy of Trinidad's colonial system, which rewards ignorance of 'these things.' Obeah does not, therefore, upset the *status quo*.

When Mrs Rouse claims that the nurse and Benoit cannot harm her because she is 'protected,' she does not immediately say that either she or her enemies are using Obeah, specifically (*Minty Alley*, p.119). Her mysterious language is likely out of obeisance to Haynes, whom she regards as her superior, and whose sensibilities she does not wish to offend. She demonstrates, with this deference, that she is somewhat ashamed of herself and her faith, and looks to Haynes to absolve her of her 'foolishness,' as did Benoit. As she concludes her explanation, she withdraws from Haynes' gaze 'and looked for some seconds out of the window, so that it seemed as if she had quite forgotten he was there' (*Minty*

¹⁹² Miss Atwell suggests that the term 'Creole' applies specifically to black Trinidadians/West Indians.

Alley, p.120). She no longer registers Haynes' presence and the narrator, as with Benoit, again suggests mental distraction, if not degeneracy.¹⁹³ Both Mrs Rouse and Benoit seem unable to make Haynes understand what their faith means to them, and in explaining themselves to him only make themselves even more unintelligible. Yet it is *Haynes* that cannot communicate; despite his respect for Mrs Rouse, he can only '[shake] his head in disapproval' (*Minty Alley*, p.121). Obeah may be this text's chief agent of heteroglossia but once again, communication breaks down when it is the topic of conversation. The text may be suggesting that dialogue about Obeah may not be possible – or that a truly heteroglot national discourse can only be achieved once all parties can encounter and interact with Obeah on its own terms. The employment of Obeah in James' text is contradictory – it suggests, at once, constant dialogue *and* a breakdown of communication. It functions in the text as the fool or the clown (through the figure of Benoit), 'the one who has the right to speak in otherwise unacceptable languages and the right to maliciously distort languages that *are* acceptable.'¹⁹⁴ No one worldview has dominance, where Obeah is concerned. Benoit's and Mrs Rouse's belief system is in competition with Haynes', but not in dialogue. Even though the text suggests that Obeah will not come out of the darkness of 'superstition' into the light of 'modernity,' it acknowledges that this modernity is itself impoverished by a lack of understanding and foresight.

Haynes is relieved of his perceived duty to stay in the yard, and James' narrative draws to a close, after Benoit suffers a fatal stroke. Exhausted and no longer sympathetic towards Mrs Rouse, Haynes disregards his better judgement and demands an explanation for her dismissal of Philomen, her most loyal servant. At the root of this final conversation is Obeah – a conversation that results in communication breakdown. Mrs Rouse hesitates before answering Haynes, even though she claims to have 'no secrets' from him (*Minty Alley*, p.239). She has to be prodded into revealing that this non-secret relates to Obeah, and is again ashamed of her knowledge in the face of Haynes' ignorance. Miss Atwell, in her encouragement – '[Haynes] is an intelligent man. He knows about these things' – seems to have forgot her contradictory outburst some months before (*Minty Alley*, p.240). Perhaps

¹⁹³ In the same conversation Mrs Rouse accuses the nurse and Benoit of having tried to have her committed to an asylum, as after the birth of her first child (who is absent from the narrative), 'I lose my nerves and I talk a little wild' (*Minty Alley*, p.119).

¹⁹⁴ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.405, original emphasis.

she believes Haynes to have benefitted from her tutelage, but she does not appreciate that his same 'intelligence' is the cause of his ignorance – once again, Obeah exposes the fallacy of 'intelligence' versus 'stupidity.' Mrs Rouse is still reticent when she begins: 'You see, Mr. Haynes, I have someone who guides me in my life. He is a man who can do things and I can tell you he has helped me a lot' (*Minty Alley*, p.240). Again, she does not refer to Obeah directly, and this time her embarrassment is obvious. She is aware of how much she has fallen in Haynes' estimation, and addresses him not as his landlady, but as a supplicant, or a defendant before a judge. Mrs Rouse explains that her advisor had informed her that 'my blood and coolie blood don't take,' and instructed her to treat Philomen cruelly, so that the young woman would leave of her own accord.¹⁹⁵ Mrs Rouse pauses again and, by way of excuse adds '(He works by God you know, Mr. Haynes. Some work by the Devil, but some by God, and he work by God.)'¹⁹⁶ She asks Haynes 'anxiously' if he sees 'how it is,' but he can only wearily respond: 'Quite.' He of course does not understand, but 'What was the use of arguing?' asks the narrator (*Minty Alley*, p.240).

As narrated in this exchange, Obeah has become a cause for shame, no longer a reason for celebration. Yet what is also immediately clear is that the world that incorporates Obeah into its belief system is not Haynes' world, and that he does not belong there – it is Obeah that exposes the fallacy of a united Trinidad. This final discussion of Obeah implies that the culturally impoverished middle classes are impoverished precisely because they cannot or will not communicate with the black working classes. Dialogue breaks down in this novel because of middle-class refusal to accept its own ignorance, not because of Obeah's inherent 'stupidity' or lack of cultural merit. The text insists that Obeah is divisive, but Haynes, who is now the *de facto* head of household, is again made ineffectual by the Obeah's extreme alterity, in the presence of another subservient black woman. Although his authority in the yard is now unassailable, his departure is guaranteed. As he refuses to negotiate with Obeah, there is no need for this novelistic dialogue to continue. When he challenges (read condemns) Mrs Rouse's decision, she immediately agrees with him, perhaps because she too sees no value in continuing to explain her perspective to him. This passage is replete with implicit mockery, and depicts Mrs Rouse as a desperate idiot, instead

¹⁹⁵ Philomen is 'East Indian.'

¹⁹⁶ These words appear in parentheses on the page. They hint at popular belief in the difference between 'good' and 'bad' Obeah which, coming from Mrs Rouse, sounds ridiculous.

of a driven, intelligent and hard-working woman.¹⁹⁷ Obeah would appear to upset the yard fiction convention of celebrating black working-class women, here; Miss Atwell would have to work two weeks to earn the \$5 that each visit to the Obeahman costs, and even she cannot reconcile with Mrs Rouse's behaviour. She is Mrs Rouse's chief support in the yard, and her attitude leaves her friend even further isolated. Obeah exposes the fragility of their relationship based on enforced intimacy, and the fragility of the imagined unity and coherence of the social realist format. Even Haynes' sanctimonious response, 'to tell you the truth, I believe they are a set of imposters,' is a feeble rebuttal, and offers no real prospect of continued dialogue and understanding (*Minty Alley*, p.241). He finally has his excuse to leave No. 2 for good and revert to his simultaneously past and future middle-class respectability. Now that Obeah has been 'explained' to him he no longer has to cater for it; Mrs Rouse's words only served to 'prove' to him that Obeah is irrational, and to push both she and it further into the margins. Instead of bringing them closer together, Obeah has driven a wedge between Haynes and his fellow Trinidadians.

Paradoxically, however, Obeah also appears to have been keeping the yard together. The novel's last chapter begins: 'As Benoit's spirit had dominated the life at No. 2 even when he was not actually present, so with his death, the life at No. 2 came to an end' (*Minty Alley*, p.242). Without Obeah – without Benoit – there is no reason for Haynes to stay, and for us to maintain our interest in these characters. Without Obeah there is no more contention, but neither is there dialogue, the very fabric of national/novelistic discourse. Benoit was not only Haynes' other and opposite, he was James' texts' discursive shadow, the other side of its coin. Benoit and Obeah demonstrate that the nation is not united, but also that the nation that does exist is one that is multivoiced, cacophonous. Cacophony is intrinsic to James' narrative – and to Mendes' – as it is in the absence of these competing voices – when Haynes no longer engages – that things fall apart. Haynes' break from No. 2 (and the sector(s) of society it represents) is easy; Ella quickly finds him new rooms and soon after the move, Haynes' once regular visits to Miss Atwell and Mrs Rouse 'became rather remiss' (*Minty Alley*, p.243).¹⁹⁸ Life returns to normal for all those who were not ejected from the yard before it disintegrated, though – not much change has been effected, and

¹⁹⁷ We see this repeated in *Black Fauns*.

¹⁹⁸ Haynes literally no longer looks in the direction of the yard on his journeys to and from work.

they fade from Haynes' (narrative) view into further decline. Mrs Rouse has even been forced to sell her house.

The only people who have managed to 'escape' the yard and still live in Trinidad are Haynes and Philomen, a black middle-class man and an 'East Indian' working-class woman.¹⁹⁹ This is the only suggestion we have of future social cohesion (although Haynes has only managed to return to where he started), but this future appears to be the sole reserve of two sectors of Trinidadian society that are *not* the traditional focus of barrack-yard fiction. The fact that the carters, prostitutes and washer-women are not allowed this social mobility could be James' commentary on contemporary ideas of 'progress' on the island. Not only are the most populous groups in this society, the groups most at risk, left out of this new vision, but Haynes has not developed at all, except sexually. While he may occasionally reminisce about 'old times,' he has not been fundamentally changed by his experience in the barrack-yard. He has returned to his conventional, comfortable life, as the others have to their poverty, and has been of no help to those who 'brought him up,' as it were – the old dynamic of dependence and exploitation remains intact. *Minty Alley's* conclusion thus does not seem to embrace yard life or appreciate any potential the yard might have for positive social change or cultural creation, but neither does Haynes have any potential. James' brief suggestion of a future is, in reality, a return to the same 'diseased' present-past.

Obeah is clearly mistrusted by the text, as Mrs Rouse and Benoit are punished for their belief in it, but Haynes is not necessarily rewarded for his disbelief. The yard falls apart because of *his* refusal to countenance Obeah, not because of Obeah itself. Haynes has not divested Mrs Rouse of her belief, neither has he been required to incorporate any of this belief into his future, and nor will we into ours. This is not a straightforward cause for celebration, though, as while Obeah may be viewed by Haynes and the narrator as a hindrance to progress, Haynes' return to the 'normal' is not progress either. I conclude that Obeah, as agent of heteroglossia *and* of discursive impasse, exposes Knowledge's hypocrisy, and the poverty of the concept of a cohesive narrative whole. Obeah disrupts the 'social experiment' of looking into the barrack-yard, and frustrates Haynes' (and James') efforts to

¹⁹⁹ The narrative's tense changes for the first time when the narrator tells us that Haynes 'sees' Philomen often, and that she 'pays him visits' through the *front door* of his new lodgings (*Minty Alley*, p.243, emphasis added).

envision a significantly revolutionary future for the yard and its discursive 'folk' subjects. We see a similarly pessimistic attitude in *Black Fauns*, in which Obeah once again silences the yard's pandemonium, but also frustrates its potential.

Secrets and lies in Black Fauns

Stylistically, *Black Fauns* has a more 'classic' barrack-yard format than *Minty Alley*.²⁰⁰ It begins on a day like any other, and ostensibly narrates the 'episode' of the visit of Snakey, Ma Christine's son, from New York. The novel form allows for more detailed characterisation (including some back stories) and for some sub-plots, the most crucial of which is Martha's quest for a man, in which she resorts to Obeah. Martha's story connects the various interconnected but distinct subplots, and connects these in turn to the novel's sustained treatment of Obeah. In contrast to *Minty Alley*, Mendes' novel does not have a Haynes figure to mediate its action and narration, which allows for greater proliferation of multiple voices and perspectives. Moreover, Obeah is more explicitly shown to affect the lives of all of Mendes' characters, as Martha's actions have direct repercussions for all members of her community. This more intimate, if less focused, portrait of yard life acknowledges, more than James', the novel's demand for 'a broadening and deepening of the language horizon, a sharpening in our perception of socio-linguistic differentiations.'²⁰¹ *Black Fauns'* heteroglossia is more pronounced, as while the narrator is aware of his intrusion the 'fauns' are not, and so behave more 'realistically,' we are led to believe, than Haynes' neighbours, who modify their behaviour in his presence. Like Haynes, the narrator assumes the position of a disinterested listener and voyeur, but unlike Haynes he has unfettered access to a range of characters' minds, and is not personally drawn into their 'terrific human drama.' The narrator maintains his distance, and thus 'make[s] use of language without wholly giving himself up to it.' Without an informant, and without interacting with his subject, this narrator's configuration of the yard as a discursive stage is

²⁰⁰ In addition to his novel, Mendes published two versions of the same short story (in Penguin's *New Writing* journal, edited by John Lehmann), featuring yard women. The 1936 version is listed as 'Afternoon of the Black Fauns' in the table of contents, but titled 'Afternoon in Trinidad' on the first page. The 1941 version is listed as 'Afternoon in Trinidad,' and titled the same. Both stories feature women called Queenie, Georgie, Corinne, Miriam and Ma Nenine, and men called Napoleon and Dodo. The plot of both versions is remarkably similar to James' 'Triumph' in that Corinne, a fat, quiet, lazy black woman has recently lost her keeper. Only the 1936 version makes mention of a ritual bath however. See Alfred Mendes, 'Afternoon of the Black Fauns', *New Writing*, 2 (1936), 97-107; and Alfred H. Mendes, 'Afternoon in Trinidad', *New Writing*, 6 (1941), 69-82.

²⁰¹ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.366.

more explicit, as is his treatment of these women's languages as 'semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions.'²⁰² This stage and its discourse are constantly interrupted by the multitude of distinct voices with which it has to contend – these women's frequent interruptions of each other undermine as much as support their claims to selfhood, and whatever claims this narrative may make to representing a cohesive nation (or not). These women construct *themselves* as 'unruly' subjects, operating against the grain of the text's, and its society's, dominant reading of their 'irrational' discourse.

Obeah occasions most of the opportunities for dialogue and disagreement in this yard, along with sex. As in *Minty Alley*, it also drives the actions of the central characters. Those most closely involved with Obeah (Ma Christine, Martha and Miriam) are given the most narrative attention and Obeah is central to Mendes' plot, even though it arguably tears this yard, and Mendes' narrative, apart. Ma Christine, the yard's oldest resident, is Obeah's staunchest champion. She is early identified as an Obeahwoman, but unlike Benoit she is a protective, not predatory, force in the yard. As such, her word is law for all except Miriam, the yard's only non-believer.²⁰³ Yet though they often argue about Obeah, Miriam is not the target of any wrath from Ma Christine, and the two women are good friends. Their dialogue is fruitful, and they understand and appreciate each other well. Ma Christine attracts most of the narrator's scorn, however, while Miriam, the yard's only literate (and therefore 'educated') resident and only Obeah sceptic, attracts most of his admiration. Miriam's quiet confidence is emphasised when juxtaposed with the flashing tempers of most of her peers: 'even in the hottest argument,' Mendes writes, Miriam 'always spoke with such restraint and decorum that it was possible only for the quick-tempered to resent anything she said' (*Black Fauns*, p.178). The clear preference the narrator has for Miriam is unsettling however, when we consider that she repeatedly argues for the intellectual superiority of white people over black.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.299.

²⁰³ Mamitz, the yard outsider, is believed to be immune to Obeah because of her Catholicism. We never see this character discuss her beliefs, however. Mamitz often interrupts sections of dialogue in the novel by 'sauntering' in and out of the yard repeatedly, thus breaking up Mendes' narrative as would stage directions. Her light skin, beauty and suspected prostitution put her in opposition to the other women, as does her affected Catholicism, which aligns her with the colonial state, to which Ma Christine, especially, is consciously opposed.

It is Miriam who surmises that ‘nigger people have a cuss upon them, an’ that cuss is obeah’ (*Black Fauns*, p.72).²⁰⁴ The text glosses Obeah as ‘black magic,’ and Miriam’s attitude suggests that Obeah is synonymous with blackness, ‘superstition’ and backwardness (*Black Fauns*, p.49).²⁰⁵ Miriam sees nothing affirmative in this ‘black’ Obeah, which she interprets as a ‘cuss,’ an almost pathological, perhaps insurmountable barrier to progress.²⁰⁶ Miriam is the closest Mendes’ narrative gets to an intellectual character, but unlike Haynes she is certainly not an interloper. She does not refuse to engage with her neighbours because they disagree with her about Obeah, and is indeed knowledgeable about the practice. It is *she* who counsels Martha, unsolicited, about Obeah, warning the younger woman that ‘I hear a lot of things about this business they does call obeah and I hear it got power.’ ‘I see a lot of people get what they ask for from obeah,’ she continues, ‘an’ I see a lot of them ask God afterwards to take it back.’ Yet while Miriam may believe that Obeah ‘comes straight from the devil’ she does not deny its power (*Black Fauns*, pp.71-72), and despite her opinions Miriam is still regarded by both Martha and the narrator as an authority on ‘these things,’ unlike Haynes. Miriam is never condescending in her arguments with Christine, and even agrees to read the prayers the old woman gives Martha as part of her treatment – a function we presume she has performed before, although we never see her do it.²⁰⁷ Miriam may denounce Obeah, but even through her Mendes’ narrative refuses to dismiss Obeah completely. She may reinforce the narrative’s disparagement of this ‘cuss,’ but her position in the yard also reinforces the ideals of a cultural aesthetic that not only welcomes, but thrives on apparently chaotic disagreement.

Despite Miriam’s scepticism, Obeah is used early in the narrative to locate these and other black people, regardless of class, in relation to – in opposition to – the alien colonial state. ‘White people say that nigger people got jumby-business,’ Christine tells the group. ‘They put the police, an’ black police like ourself, to bring us up before the magistrate if we go to Shouter Meetin’, if we tell fortune, if we practise our African obeah rite. Huh. They got

²⁰⁴ She also surmises that Obeah ‘is power that comes straight from the devil, an’ it ain’ got no more good in it than anything else what comes from the enemy of God an’ man’ (*Black Fauns*, p.71).

²⁰⁵ The translation ‘black magic’ appears at the bottom of the page, outside of the narrative itself. It is unclear if its inclusion was Mendes’ decision, or his publisher’s.

²⁰⁶ She does not pause to consider, however, who may have cursed us in the first place.

²⁰⁷ This is one way in which Mendes’ realist narrative pushes elements of Obeah to its margins, away from representation.

more jumby-business than us' (*Black Fauns*, pp.9-10). Obeah for Christine is not a 'cuss;' it is both a rite and a right, which she will defend to her death. She openly and proudly practises Obeah because she *knows* it to work – for her, and people like her. Indeed, for her it is a tool of resistance against exploitation; Christine continued to practise Obeah throughout her marriage, against the wishes of her husband, because 'the magic had already got into her bloodstream and no husband on earth could ever hope to drain it out' (*Black Fauns*, p.53).²⁰⁸ If her late husband could not rid her of her 'superstition,' the efforts of the colonial state are futile. In her conceptualisation of colonial Trinidad, white and near-white civil society suppresses black religious and cultural expression not because it is inherently evil, but because of its association with blackness – she thus agrees with Miriam that Obeah is an inherently 'black' phenomenon. We see the injurious effects of this racial/cultural suppression in Haynes' relationship with his neighbours, from whom he is divided by class and, to a great extent, by culture. Haynes' return to middle-class apathy and insulation is detrimental, James' narrative suggests, to black, Trinidadian and human selfhood and community. Despite her lack of education, Ma Christine's commentary on the lack of racial solidarity and consciousness in early twentieth-century Trinidad is insightful; as Obeahwoman, she can see what Haynes (and Miriam) cannot – that Obeah is a communal expression of African-Caribbean black resistance to the adverse (neo)plantation state. Its general scorn for her notwithstanding, Christine's position regarding Obeah forces the narrative's views on race consciousness to align with hers. Her ideology exists in dialogue with that of Miriam and of the narrative, and her eloquence makes it difficult for us to reach easy conclusions – her knowledge is our ignorance.

Nevertheless the narrative still struggles to accept Obeah as valid for *all* Trinidadians. Although Christine claims that 'God is God' and that all forms of worship are equally valid, she has a clear distinction in her mind between how white and black people do and should pray. 'African religion' is for black people – segregated, in Christine's mind, from the domain of white people. In particular, she feels that the Church has no place in man-woman affairs, whereas Obeah does. She is proud to assist Martha and others in finding male keeper-companions with Obeah, but sees 'white girls who go to church to pray for a husband' as

²⁰⁸ Significantly, she inherited her powers from her mother. Her father is another side-lined male presence in a narrative replete with dominant female characters who resist male attempts to 'rationalise' or contain their activities.

'blaspheming God's edifice' (*Black Fauns*, p.51). Obeah is thus placed in direct opposition to the official discourse of the state (and Church), and is not even considered 'Trinidadian.'²⁰⁹ These washerwomen do not regularly attend church (and, as poor black barrack-yarders, would have often been shunned from it), but most of them fervently believe in the Christian God as much as they do in Obeah.²¹⁰ Their inability to read, as well as their fear and mistrust of the police, suggest further exclusion from the colonial state. Nevertheless, while Obeah may not be part of Trinidad's official narrative of itself, Ma Christine suggests that it is still very much a part of the cultural identity of the majority of the country's inhabitants. Obeah, as expressed by her, is at once constitutive of West Indian society, and contemptuous of it.

Furthermore, *Black Fauns* suggests that belief in Obeah is not contingent on disbelief in Christianity (or *vice versa*). Christine, who regularly admonishes her neighbours for 'blaspheming,' even contends that

it have plenty [Obeah] in de Bible, only the parson and them call it the religion of Jesus Christ. It is all same t'ing. Jesus cure the leper; Jesus make the blind to see; Jesus raise up Lazarus from de grave. Wit' obeah. Don' let nobody fool you about dat (*Black Fauns*, pp.69-70).

It is clear from this passage that enslaved Africans, and their descendants, developed and used Obeah as a fluid signifier – to explain and reconcile several apparently disparate traditions and belief systems. They used, and continue to use Obeah to negotiate and understand their material and metaphysical world(s), as dominant explanations do not provide for these 'alternative' ways of seeing and knowing. These women do not lack religion, but established Church dogma does not meet their spiritual, cultural and emotional needs. Despite the narrator's disregard, Christine and her fellow believers articulate Obeah as a cultural recourse operating outside of and in opposition to colonial authority – a

²⁰⁹ While these women consider themselves 'black' and 'African,' at no time do they refer to themselves as 'Trinidadian.'

²¹⁰ Christine says: 'I see the white people's church got a lot of good in it, an' I see obeah got a lot of good in it too' (*Black Fauns*, p.51). Her neighbour Ethelrida challenges her, however, by claiming that 'I see all the white people in civilised lands behaving worse than savage an' heathen. [...] It look to me they got more than enough people in their own land to teach about Christ an' God. It look to me like niggers in Africa happy when white people leave them alone. As soon as white people, with Bible an' chaplet in hand [go] to our own people in Africa they does bring trouble and unhappiness an' misery' (*Black Fauns*, p.194).

survival strategy in a domestic, yet alien world.²¹¹ This religious syncretism is mirrored in the syncretism of the text, whose realist, 'rational' assumptions are constantly challenged and negotiated vis-à-vis its representation of Obeah. Mendes welcomes heteroglossia into his novel, which does not weaken, but intensifies it. It is out of this stratification of language, argues Bakhtin, that a novelistic narrator constructs his style.²¹² Despite Mendes' manipulation of the trope of Obeah into that which ultimately condemns these women instead of liberating them, Obeah's cultural power is not diminished. The tensions between these women's various and varying positions, and the narrator's, and their shared wider society's, remain unsolved in the novel, which is constantly in, and constituted by, dialogue.

Ramchand lamented Mendes' 'loss of concentration in the highly exotic *Black Fauns*,' arguing that 'the colonial author plays the local colour for more than it is worth.' This accusation reflects his personal prejudice against Obeah, as well as an elitism evident in his use of the phrases 'low class' and 'highly exotic,' and his reference to the women's heated discussions about race and class as 'artless polemics or social advertisement.'²¹³ While it is true that Mendes' novel tends towards topical propaganda, its most arresting feature is that this propaganda is put in the mouths – and language – of its black, labouring-class female protagonists. Their 'artlessness' is, in effect, their challenge to the very artistic and cultural hegemony endorsed by critics such as Ramchand. In fact, this artlessness is a feature of Mendes' style, an enactment of Bakhtin's observation that 'the unity of a literary language is not a unity of a single, closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several "languages" that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other.'²¹⁴ It is a reminder, too, that not all claims to identity and selfhood are 'nationalist,' that such self-styled nationalist literature was not necessarily the 'all-embracing crystallisation of the innermost hopes of the whole people.'²¹⁵ Mendes may stop short of making Obeah and other beliefs and practices coherent for *us*, but Ma Christine herself articulates Obeah's significance as a religion, a birthright, a form of self-definition and a tool of resistance. *Her* nationalism, if she can be said to have one, is indeed 'artless,' in that it is not literary, not

²¹¹ Perhaps it is this same subversive potential that causes the narrator's disregard.

²¹² Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.298.

²¹³ Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, p.68.

²¹⁴ Bakhtin, 'Discourse,' p.296.

²¹⁵ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p.67

'official,' and not monologic. These women are excluded from official discourse, but that exclusion works both ways. In the same way that they cannot access 'Standard English' or 'proper society,' neither can Standard English be relied upon to express their realities. In this sense their artless gossip is particularly suited to express their faith in Obeah, which is also outside of official discourse, but integral to their self-fashioned subjecthood. They use Obeah to articulate themselves and their place(s) in modern Trinidad, and to challenge the authority of 'standard' texts, such as the realist novel, to represent them.

Much like Haynes' neighbours, these washer women are brought into being by their own recorded speech. Talking is all they seem to do, and in so doing they sustain their community. Carol Bailey highlights gossip's ambiguous narrative function by arguing that yard women may 'use gossip as a means of foregrounding the self,' but 'in so doing call into question their own investment in the systems they interrogate.' Gossip may be a means of 'maintaining control and exposing social codes,' but it simultaneously 'reveals a subject's own insecurities and investment in the system she critiques.'²¹⁶ Gossip is therefore unstable, and functions in this text to simultaneously construct and deconstruct narrative frame and authority. This instability, however, reinforces the text's heteroglossia, and presents 'modern,' urban Trinidad (and the wider West Indies) as a tapestry of multiple cultures/discourses in dialogue. The women's words are manipulated by Mendes, but in turn they challenge his authority, and realism's 'confident sense that understanding of the world can be truthfully reproduced and communicated in verbal form.'²¹⁷ The defamiliarisation of performance spaces (such as yards) through gossip, Bailey continues, invites readers to 'rethink some views of these traditionally private spaces, and understand the discussions that occur within them as central to postcolonial critical discourses.' *Black Fauns*, although it may not strictly be 'postcolonial,' definitely anticipates this reflection. Bailey calls this an 'inward turn,' whereby 'fictive characters contest and examine questions about Caribbean social relations that are part of the nation, region and postcolonial diaspora.'²¹⁸ The women in *Black Fauns* argue and contest all facets of these social

²¹⁶ Carol Bailey, 'Performing "Difference:" Gossip in Olive Senior's Short Stories', in *Constructing Vernacular Culture in the Trans-Caribbean*, ed. by Holger Henke and Karl-Heinz Magister (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), pp.123-138 (p.124).

²¹⁷ Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.12.

²¹⁸ Bailey, 'Gossip,' p.123.

relations, from race to courtship, love and marriage; from work to migration; to Obeah. Through these contestations, 'West Indian identity' emerges as an always-contested discursive category, one whose 'instability' is its strength. Gossip may be considered the lowest form of discourse but it is the one that works, and the one in which the characters, not the narrator, choose to express themselves. The women's 'fierce rivalry' is ultimately a performance of their companionship and a demonstration of the diversity of Trinidadian selfhood.²¹⁹ Their rapid-fire dialogue, although tempered with narrative irony, takes many forms – sometimes political tirade, sometimes moralistic sermon, sometimes boisterous argument – but establishes the yard as a dialogic space, and its inhabitants as dialogic subjects. These subjects may be relegated to the category of 'unofficial,' and the space of the yard may be hidden between the 'private' and 'public' spheres, but these indistinct positions make them creative in their chaos.

Crucially, it is Martha's *refusal* to talk – about anything, generally, and about Obeah, particularly – that is her ultimate downfall. Martha is the focus of Mendes' novel, if it can be said to have one, and her psyche is most closely examined. She is the protagonist of a subplot but is afforded the most private time – she is unexceptional in every way except for her *silence*, which clearly distinguishes her from the other women and makes her incongruous in Mendes' yard. The narrator claims that Martha, the yard's youngest resident, is 'the quietest woman in the yard, the hardest working, and always put her thoughts into the form of questions for fear of incriminating herself' (*Black Fauns*, p.21). Like Haynes, she seems to have little in the way of character or identity. Martha is the most vulnerable of these women, despite being central to the narrative, and is always spoken over, spoken for or ignored. She fails to claim selfhood because she refuses to speak herself into existence – she cannot enter into the dialogue that would create her identity. Martha is consistently depicted as void of either willpower or strength of character. She does not belong, or cannot survive, in a barrack-yard, despite being the character that threads Mendes' barrack-yard narrative(s) together. Her association with Obeah forms the narrative's central contradiction in that Obeah, the text's chief agent of heteroglossia, is silenced most in relation to her.

²¹⁹ Cobham, 'Introduction,' p.ix.

When Martha asks Miriam to read the prayers Christine has given her – and appeals for secrecy – Miriam responds with ‘a pitiful look of scorn’ not because she herself disbelieves, but because of Martha’s own lack of conviction and refusal to take responsibility for, indeed to have faith in, herself and her actions. In the same conversation in which she pronounces Obeah a ‘cuss’ Miriam tells Martha that ‘if you do somet’ing, show your strength an’ stand by it’ (*Black Fauns*, p.72). Martha is inexplicably unable to claim herself when, in Mendes’/Christine’s formulation, practising Obeah is her ‘African right’ – it is arguably for this reason that Martha does not profit from Obeah, in that she does not use it to ‘reclaim’ any kind of imagined lost identity. We do not ever see Martha recite these prayers, and she leaves her exchange with Miriam unnecessarily troubled, apparently unaware, again for no plausible reason, that ‘most of the women believed with a zealot’s fervour in obeah and black magic’ – once again, *Black Fauns’* condemnation of Obeah is not universal (*Black Fauns*, p.72). Martha’s ‘crime’ is not her belief in Obeah but rather her lack of belief – she is dishonest with *herself*, particularly about her desires, and so Obeah cannot help her. Like Haynes she seems to know little about ‘these things,’ but unlike Haynes, Martha has no power.²²⁰

Martha’s ritual bath, the novel’s most explicit Obeah act, is one of the most private scenes in the narrative. It takes place during a storm which ‘imprisons’ the women in their respective rooms, enclosing them into fixed positions, against their nature, and making it difficult to speak to each other (*Black Fauns*, p.48).²²¹ It takes Ma Christine five hours to prepare the bath, during which time she rehearses her ode to Obeah and admonishes Martha for her shyness. Martha’s insistence on the strictest secrecy, which is virtually impossible in a barrack-yard, is the first indication that her (unarticulated) wishes may not be granted. She locks Ma Christine’s door ‘carefully behind her’ as she enters, and has to remind the older woman of the purpose of her visit. This is the first time we hear of it, too, and Martha does not explain herself in her own words – instead, the narrator fills us in with

²²⁰ *Black Fauns* details several instances of Martha spying on her neighbours through the boards in her room. Unlike in Haynes’ case, however, she is not empowered by her voyeurism. On seeing Snakey for the first time, she ‘could not face him in the light of the sun.’ Martha remains imprisoned in her room, dressed in her Sunday best with the window and door both locked, preferring to suffocate than to engage with and be seen by him (*Black Fauns*, p.222).

²²¹ Mendes’ turn of phrase emphasises these women’s isolation, and recalls the military origins of the barrack-yard. In addition, the meteorological storm mirrors the other ‘storm’ in the yard, Mamitz’s filing of assault charges against Ethelrida, and foreshadows Martha’s final act of violence.

a retrospective aside. Christine observes three times that ‘you’re too quiet, my child. You look like you’re afraid of people.’ The young woman is reluctant to proclaim her faith, and when she again asks for secrecy Christine exclaims: ‘If you’re ashamed of obeah I can’t do nothing for you’ (*Black Fauns*, p.50). The word ‘shame’ appears seven times in this passage, alongside Christine’s repeated warnings against Martha not speaking (for) herself. Martha’s silent, hanging head is no match for Christine’s bluster, and the young woman offers no defence. Instead, the narrator undercuts the old woman’s exaggerated pride at her past successes with Obeah with his own sarcastic interjection that ‘Martha knew better; she knew that Aggie was wanting to get rid of her man and couldn’t, but she said nothing’ (*Black Fauns*, p.52).²²² Martha’s previous declarations of faith thus seem disingenuous, and this revelation makes this whole episode appear ultimately futile – not least because there is no dialogue. The narrator cannot explain Martha’s motives, particularly as she ‘knows’ Obeah to be less than fool proof. Instead, he enters Martha’s mind for the first time not to determine Martha’s rationale or emotional state, but simply to mock Christine. There are some things that the supposedly omniscient realist narrator cannot know, and one of those is *why* people believe in and seek out Obeah, and its significance in West Indian life.

After Martha repeats again that she is not ashamed, the narrator diverts us from the scene with a history of Ma Christine’s practice of Obeah. His use of phrases like ‘the negroes,’ ‘dark ceremony,’ ‘black magic’ and ‘sinister instructions,’ however, reveals his contempt not only for Ma Christine in particular, but also for Obeah in general (*Black Fauns*, p.53). While Christine is proud of Obeah the narrator is not, and his tone mirrors that of her husband, who forbade her to practise but whom she almost deifies for his eloquence and education.²²³ With hyperbolic flourish the narrator continues:

The old woman was not sleepy. Was not another chance at hand to prove further the efficacy of her powers? And, in spite of Martha’s timidity against anyone’s hearing of her excursion into the land of magic, the land of her forefathers where the jungle with its queer silences and sounds, its sinister solitudes, its twilights and darkneses, could do nothing but foster strange and dark beliefs [...] Ma Christine

²²² Aggie is another neighbour, and another one of Christine’s supposedly satisfied clients.

²²³ ‘Mister Jordan Wellington,’ as Christine refers to her late husband, was a schoolteacher.

knew that the news of her midnight rites would get abroad sooner or later (*Black Fauns*, pp.53-54).

Disregarding, momentarily, the narrator's sensationalism, this 'private viewing' mirrors Haynes' voyeurism of Benoit's infidelity. The readership in both of these instances 'discovers' a supposedly hidden part of Trinidadian life and, upon seeing it, we are all 'no longer sleepy [but] very much alive' (*Minty Alley*, p.37). Yet in both of these instances our awakening is unintended, and exploitative – we intrude on the yarders' private worlds, and our gratification is illicit. Moreover, this 'private' passage ends with the assurance that it will not remain private for long. The boundaries between public and private, therefore, just like the boundaries between supposedly oppositional ideologies, are shown to be porous and unreliable, when narrated through a discussion of Obeah.

The narrator's voyeurism – and exoticisation of his subjects – is most explicit in this scene, as is our own implication in these processes; none of us is a detached observer anymore. He describes Martha shrinking from her own 'stark nakedness,' and notes that her 'small black body shone like ebony, the two small breasts stood up with their protruding nipples, the rhythm of the hips flowed down into the thighs and legs. She was beautiful' (*Black Fauns*, p.55). This scene is described in lurid detail for us, in contrast to Benoit's allusions to Haynes in *Minty Alley*. The lecherous gaze in Mendes' novel is the narrator's, not the 'practitioner's, and we are expected to share this perspective. Martha is described as a 'victim of the sacrifice' – we consume her though, not Christine or any ancestral deity (*Black Fauns*, p.54). While Martha's own beauty appears to shock her (her quietness is part of her allure) Christine is vulgar, grotesque and unintelligible, mumbling 'words from a lost language' which is not reproduced (*Black Fauns*, p.55).²²⁴ Yet despite their differences, in this scene both of these women are to be seen and not heard, not understood. They are doubly unintelligible, both as women and as Obeah users. At this most crucial articulation of Obeah it is still the text's most obscure element, but even in this silence Obeah reveals the narrator's privileged, but precariousness position. He is *outside* of and excluded from (as are we) the very scenes over which he professes to have complete control. This moment of

²²⁴ James' narrator described Mrs Rouse's words, in her dismay at losing Benoit to the nurse, as 'stream of confused obscenity' (*Minty Alley*, p.56). Both of these narratives limit and disregard the speech of their poor, mature, black female protagonists.

seeing is fleeting, and disappears almost as soon as we read/see it. While we may consider ourselves modern subjects-who-see, what we see is not all there is to see, so the text undermines its own claims of 'realistic' authority. Obeah exposes this paradox, and the fallacy of a complete, unified narrative and culture.

Rhonda Cobham argues that Mendes, like many 'sympathetic' West Indian intellectuals of this period and beyond, struggled to deal with 'aspects of [folk culture] which he considers primitive or irrational.' For writers of social realist fiction, she continues, 'the temptation remains to sublimate the orgiastic and/or violent aspects of the folk culture [by] presenting lower-class characters as victims of economic forces beyond their control and therefore not accountable for their actions.'²²⁵ Like Haynes does with Benoit, Mendes' narrator repeatedly suggests that Ma Christine is 'mad.' Even Martha, her 'victim,' is suffering from not only financial hardship (which is the reason for her seeking out Obeah to secure a new keeper), but from the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, which continues into her adult life.²²⁶ This narrator cannot rationalise Obeah and therefore, like Haynes, pushes it to the edges of reason, and thus to the edges of the text. His tone shifts from 'factual' recollection to melodramatic hyperbole, but this parodies his (and our) own 'shock' at this supposedly unknown phenomenon; Obeah consistently interrupts dominant logic and ideology to claim epistemic validity and authority.²²⁷

Although the narrator goes to considerable lengths to show Martha's lack of faith, when the bath is ready her eyes are 'wide open,' and 'her heart was fluttering with excitement.' Even the implicit sarcasm of his remark that 'when she had professed faith in the dark science she had never been more sincere in her life' does not diminish her wonder and hopefulness (*Black Fauns*, p.53). The narrator cannot provide a 'rational explanation' for this Obeah act, nor Martha's faith in it, and so resorts to suggesting that Christine may be senile (and savage), declaring that 'in the fire-light the old woman took on the proportions and semblance of a jungle priestess,' in comparison to Martha's 'cowering there on the

²²⁵ Cobham, 'Introduction,' pp.xv-xvi.

²²⁶ Martha was raped by her pastor at fourteen, and delivered his stillborn child. The narrator details two other relationships, both abusive.

²²⁷ Tim Watson argued that the 'attempt to narrate the Caribbean from the point of view of plausibility, verifiability, and reason – realism, in other words – turns into the forms it seeks to avoid: romantic narrative and its cognates, the gothic, the sentimental, and the melodrama' in *Caribbean Culture*, p.6.

soap-box' (*Black Fauns*, p.54). While both the narrator and Christine may configure Obeah as an explicitly 'African' practice, this Africa for Christine is affirmative, while for the narrator it is regressive. Nevertheless, Christine sees Obeah as part of her mission of re-education, a prism through which to see her world, and to recover (a) truth that has been obscured by colonialism. 'When nigger people get education they forget that obeah have truth in it,' she tells Martha, 'that it ain't what the white people say it is' (*Black Fauns*, p.49). Obeah's powers and meaning exist outside of dominant discourses of power, and despite the narrator's disparaging language Obeah is as valid for Christine as any 'scientific' medicine – 'a thing as strong and sure as the wishes of God' (*Black Fauns*, p.54). Although readers are left with very little ambiguity about which conclusions the narrator has drawn, there is sufficient ambiguity for some of us to read against the grain and conclude that Obeah can be and is used as a tool of resistance and a means of reclaiming selfhood, if not for us, then for the people of barrack-yards across the West Indies.

As in *Minty Alley*, in *Black Fauns* Obeah comes with sex. It is only during and after the bath that Martha's sexuality is brought under scrutiny (after the narrator sexualises her), and only for us the readers, not for her or her neighbours. Again with little explanation, and seemingly as a surprise to Martha herself, she goes to bed and dreams that Snakey is making love to her, even though she has never seen him. In her dream, however, 'he looked like Estelle' (*Black Fauns*, p.58). This is the first we hear of Estelle, and the last until that woman unexpectedly moves into the yard. We learn that Estelle is Martha's former lover – one of only two people Martha has ever loved. Both of these lovers had been cruel to her however, and seem to have contributed to her apparently pathological timidity. Both of these lovers are Afro-Indian, too, reinforcing the dougla stereotype embodied in *Minty Alley*'s Benoit. This is the first, and rather abrupt, indication we get that Martha had been necessarily looking for *love*. Before the bath the narrator claims that Martha had complained to Ma Christine about how little money she had – *not* about wanting to be in love. 'Love' is what is unusual in the yard – a direct contradiction to the then-popular literary and social tropes of 'respectable' romance.²²⁸ Even Ma Christine, a proud widow and

²²⁸ See Rosenberg, 'Modern Romances.' Jeffrey Robinson argued in 1973 that 'the ideal of happiness grounded on successful romantic love is an important part of the culture of Western bourgeois groups,' but is 'alien to the culture of the West Indies,' particularly among the working classes. While I am not suggesting that West Indians do not experience 'love,' these characters' attitudes towards the concept, as elaborated in popular

advocate of respectability, sees male/female relationships as economic arrangements, not romantic affairs.²²⁹ Yet Martha falls in *love* with Snakey, for no 'rational' reason, immediately after the bush bath, without ever having seen him. Arguably, here, Obeah ridicules both the aesthetic and social conventions of social realist nationalist literature. Mendes uses Obeah to lampoon the concept of ('westernised') romantic love, suggesting it has no place in a barrack-yard, and an questionable place in West Indian cultural identity. His juxtaposition of Obeah and romance verges on the absurd as Martha, 'victim' of both, is apparently incapable of rational or critical thought. Martha's understanding of 'love,' like her understanding of Obeah, threatens the text's integrity. Her failure to navigate either of these concepts is inextricable from her inability to articulate herself, and so she must be ejected from the barrack-yard.

The narrative makes clear that Martha misuses Obeah. She does not follow Christine's instructions, and is struck ill immediately after the bath. The old woman takes this as a sign that the Obeah is working, but we are encouraged to see this as the beginning of Martha's decline. What is most troublesome is that Martha lies to Christine about her intentions towards Snakey, and to herself about her own desires. Within the confines of the yard, Martha's bisexuality is unfathomable – it is the yard's only true secret, and it is never 'rationally' discussed by the narrator, nor even considered by the other characters.²³⁰ With the arrival of *both* of her objects of desire Martha's behaviour steadily deteriorates. Despite being initially excited she spurns a genuine marriage proposal from the estate agent – and the financial security that comes with it – in favour of further emotional turmoil and economic instability, as neither Snakey nor Estelle has the means to support her, much less any genuine affection for her. It is *this* behaviour that is 'deviant' in the fictional universe of the barrack-yard, and it seems to be the result of Christine's Obeah.²³¹ The pattern of abuse is repeated: Estelle manipulates Martha into stealing a large sum of money from Ethelrida

fiction, clearly do not align with these Eurocentric, heteronormative assumptions. See Jeffrey Robinson, 'Native Traditions in the West Indian Novel' (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1973), p.55; p.52.

²²⁹ Jennifer Rahim argues that such unions 'serve as a necessary shield against discriminatory exclusion and poverty.' See Rahim, 'Operations,' p.5.

²³⁰ An exception to this is Christophine, Martha's confidante, and Estelle, her former lover. In a conversation with both of these women, Mamitz claims that 'people like that,' i.e. lesbians, 'does turn my belly sick,' to which Estelle agrees. In response, 'a look of contempt came into Christophine's eyes' (*Black Fauns*, p.249). It is possible that Christophine herself holds romantic feelings for Martha.

²³¹ After Martha stabs Estelle, Miriam challenges Christine: 'Well, talk [...] Let us hear what your obeah have to say about it [...] it look like as if your obeah do a lot of damage in this yard' (*Black Fauns*, p.184).

(another neighbour), which Snakey in turn manipulates her into stealing back from Estelle. Estelle spends the money on herself, while Snakey spends it on Mamitz, a suspected prostitute and the yard outsider. Martha is consumed with guilt, in addition to the anxiety she feels regarding her 'unhealthy' sexual desires. When she discovers Snakey's affair with Mamitz (through an act of voyeurism which, unlike Haynes', is not empowering), Martha stabs Mamitz, as she had stabbed Estelle some days earlier, in a fit of jealous rage. We are denied a breakdown of events after the 'pandemonium;' Martha's first act of self-assertion sees her removed from the narrative, which subsequently disintegrates (*Black Fauns*, p.323).²³²

Martha's sudden violence, although it surfaces after her invocation of Obeah, appears to be connected not only to her wavering faith, but to her 'abnormal' sexuality. Jennifer Rahim claims that Martha's behaviour arises from her 'sexually irresolute condition,' and fear of being outed.²³³ This assumes, however, that 'sexual irresolution' is in itself a character flaw, and Rahim's repeated referral to Martha as 'pathological' problematically suggests that this 'condition' may also be a dangerous disease. I contend that it is less that Martha is innately pathological than it is that Mendes' narrative is invested in associating Obeah not only with youthful naïveté, but with extremely (for this place and period) abnormal sexuality. Both sex and Obeah are considered 'extreme' in this framework, and are brought together in Martha, who does not appear capable of articulating and controlling either. Martha's sexuality is inferred, not consciously exercised, and she is 'queered' not simply as a result of her same-sex desire, but because all her desire is quiet, passionate, fervid and secret. Martha is persistently underestimated by her neighbours, but is the greatest threat to their wellbeing because she cannot control her passions.²³⁴ The narrative strongly implies that were it not for her visit to Ma Christine Martha would not have fallen in love with Snakey, and there would have been no tragedy, but it does not seem plausible that even a woman as timid as Martha would not be able to identify her own psychological and emotional triggers. Furthermore, Martha's tragedy is not Obeah's fault, necessarily, but Martha's – Obeah does not work for her because she does not believe in it,

²³² After Martha is arrested, the next page of Mendes' novel is not another chapter, but an 'Au Revoir,' which begins simply: 'One week had passed' (*Black Fauns*, p.325). It is less than four pages long.

²³³ Rahim, 'Operations,' p.5.

²³⁴ Ethelrida immediately dismisses Martha as the thief, as 'Martha didn't count' (*Black Fauns*, p.154).

and does not use it properly. Martha, infantilised by the narrator, seems doomed to fall into unhealthy relationships because she refuses to make or speak her choices – including her faith in Obeah. She is the only one of these women offered an opportunity at social mobility but she spurns it, and in so doing brings down her entire community along with herself.

Obeah in this narrative functions as a fluid signifier of identity, but one that must, like heteroglossia, be spoken into existence. When this heteroglossic agent is silenced, the text loses its dialogism, and therefore its signifying potential. Martha and her narrator's tendency to silence Obeah reveals their 'nervous conditions,' their inability to cross the bridge in understanding into not necessarily what Obeah may be, but its significance for the people who believe in it, and for their wider, mutual society. As a result of this refusal to communicate Obeah, the text's chief agent of heteroglossia, Mendes' narrative falls apart, as does the artificial unity of this barrack-yard.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have compared C. L. R. James' *Minty Alley* and Alfred Mendes' *Black Fauns* as foundational texts in the creation of an anticolonial West Indian literary aesthetic, focused on the 'taboo' subjects of sex and Obeah, and centred on the barrack-yards of Port of Spain. I have argued that, in both of these texts, Obeah is the chief agent of novelistic heteroglossia, which challenges many of the dominant culture's ideological assumptions of 'propriety,' 'intelligence,' and 'knowledge,' and dominant novelistic notions of (nationalist) romance. The multiplicity of voices in these texts is disruptive, but this row an' contention is what constitutes these Caribbean communities, as much as it may destabilise them. These narratives' struggles with explaining Obeah and sexuality belie concerns with the fragility of the imagined unity and coherence of a 'nation,' and expose the fissures in these and other claims of narrative authority. In both of these narratives, Obeah is an unruly and ambivalent subject. On the page it is a marginal presence, but in the lives of these characters it is central. In the figures of Benoit, Christine and Martha, it simultaneously holds the yard together and tears it apart.

While Mendes' and James' accounts of the barrack-yard may not be wholly sympathetic, they do draw attention to the spaces and people that were repeatedly hidden from cultural discourses of the Caribbean, and to the 'blindness' of the black middle classes

to their urban reality. It is precisely in the presence of Obeah that communication breaks down, but Obeah is also the chief topic of conversation in these yards, the subject on which these narratives are based. Obeah signifies that language, like culture, is stratified and heteroglot; it is ultimately a tapestry of several other, 'hidden,' languages and cultures. Despite authorial condescension, it is on the slippery significance of Obeah that these social realist writers base their investigations of the 'other side of life,' and on which they mount their challenges to colonial cultural hegemony. Obeah is the literary device that disintegrates confessed ideals of 'exact,' 'rational' and 'realist' authority. Its inclusion, therefore, marks these texts, and the Caribbean they represent, as stylistic and cultural hybrids, resistant to a cultural politics that would speak of benevolent, progressive, colonial unity.

Chapter 2. 'It is the reader who constructs a story:' Obeah and cultural identity in the mid-century West Indian short story¹

The stories I have chosen for this chapter were published during a period which saw relatively few novels published – one reason being the onset and aftermath of World War II. They come from a range of sources, from Jamaica's and Trinidad's leading newspapers, the *Daily/Sunday Gleaner* and the *Trinidad Guardian*, respectively; to the explicitly nationalist weekly *Public Opinion* (which placed itself in direct political and ideological opposition to the *Gleaner*); to 'Caribbean Voices' (broadcast via radio from London); to *BIM*, a literary magazine edited by the virulently apolitical Frank Collymore in Barbados.² One story also comes from the region's first published collection of short stories, that of Jamaica's Pioneer Press – itself an offshoot of the *Gleaner*.³ In each of these stories Obeah is a central plot device, strongly associated with rural, 'folk' characters whose customs and manners are opposed to those of the white colonial superstructure in which they find themselves. Obeah, in these cases, represents alternative modes of negotiating the colonial space, particularly for those who are marginalised within it.⁴ These marginalised characters, despite their different treatments by their respective narrators, are representative of an imagined national culture and community, one for which Obeah is socially beneficial. In some cases these characters use Obeah as a tool of resistance against domination; in others as a means of preserving their communities; in others still as momentarily reversing colonial hierarchy. In each of these cases, however, Obeah's power is ambiguous – characters and narrators trade on this ambiguity to present a cultural practice that is more than that which can be observed.

The short story tradition has a long history in the West Indies, and was fostered by various literary magazines and journals, in addition to the radio programme 'Caribbean

¹ Kenneth Ramchand, 'The Short Story – An Introduction', in *Best West Indian Stories*, ed. by Kenneth Ramchand (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1984), pp.1-5 (p.3).

² Jamaica's *Gleaner* commenced publication in 1834, and is still publishing. The *Trinidad Guardian* was founded in 1917 in Port of Spain, and is now called the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*.

³ The Pioneer Press was the region's first publishing company, and was founded by Una Marson in 1950. It published 25 books before it collapsed. See Honor Ford-Smith, 'Una's Achievement – Her Life', *The Gleaner*, February 18, 1994, p.11.

⁴ Two of these stories however, feature white clients. They are Sam Selvon's 'Obeah Man' (1948) and Yvonne Padmore's 'Come Into My Parlour' (1955). Selvon's is set in Port of Spain.

Voices,' before, during and after the 1950s 'boom.' Jamaica's *Public Opinion* ran from 1937-1979, first as a weekly, then a daily news magazine.⁵ The literary anthology *Focus* was an offshoot of *Public Opinion*, and had only four issues (1943, 1948, 1956 and 1960). It was published at the University College of the West Indies, Mona, under the editorship of Edna Manley, wife of the then-leader of Jamaica's People's National Party, Norman. Edna had also served on *Public Opinion's* editorial board between 1939 and 1941, responsible chiefly for its literature.⁶ 'Caribbean Voices' aired from 1943-1958, first under the direction of Jamaican Una Marson, then Irish Henry Swanzy.⁷ *BIM* was established in 1942, and has had a patchy publishing output since then. It was an exclusively literary publication, and Swanzy remarked in 1951 that this magazine 'has also the advantage of a very disinterested editor [...] who has no political or racial axe to grind, but only the advancement of letters.'⁸ Guyana's *Kyk-Over-Al*, established in 1945 by the British Guiana Writers' Association, came slightly later.⁹ It was edited by A. J. Seymour, and Reinhard Sander notes that '*Kyk's* significance lies in its pioneering efforts to stimulate a West Indian theory and practice of literary and cultural criticism.'¹⁰

All of these publications, regardless of their political affiliations, were united in their ambition to produce and foster such a thing as 'West Indian Literature.' These short stories are responsible for many of the linguistic and aesthetic characteristics of our popular novels. Kenneth Ramchand famously argued that there are 'no West Indian novelists, only short story writers in disguise; no West Indian novels, only fabrications taking their shape and structure from the transfigured short stories they contain.'¹¹ While prevalent understandings of what constitutes 'West Indian Literature' are often based on post-1950 novels, primarily of exile, Alison Donnell has demonstrated in her work on twentieth-

⁵ Donnell refers to *Public Opinion* as 'the weekly paper of the People's National Party,' in *Twentieth-Century*, p.47.

⁶ Dalleo, 'Public Sphere,' p.63; p.66.

⁷ George Lamming reflects on Swanzy's contributions with his remarks that 'no comprehensive account of writing in the British Caribbean during the last decade [the 1950s] could be written without considering [Swanzy's] role in the emergence of West Indian literature' in *Pleasures*, p.67.

⁸ Henry Swanzy, 'Writing in the British Caribbean: A Study in Cultural Devolution,' *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 32, (1951), 217-40 (p.223).

⁹ *Kyk's* original run lasted until 1961, and was revived in 1984. Its publication output, since then, has not been consistent.

¹⁰ Reinhard W. Sander, 'The Thirties and Forties', in *West Indian Literature*, ed. by Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.38-50 (p.40).

¹¹ Kenneth Ramchand, 'The West Indian Short Story', *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 1 (1997), 21-33 (p.21).

century Caribbean literature that ‘the idea of a West Indian or Caribbean aesthetic [...] gained its currency on a wider scale during the 1930s and 1940s.’¹² Without either a substantial reading public or publishing infrastructure at this time magazines, newspapers and journals were the only outlets for the region’s writers, and the only fora for critical literary debate. Their editors were all determined to establish and contribute to the maintenance of a ‘national’ cultural aesthetic, a cue they took, as has been argued in the introduction of this thesis, from short story competitions in nineteenth-century newspapers. Many writers published in multiple publications, too: Una Marson wrote for the *Gleaner* as well as *Public Opinion*, before founding the Pioneer Press; Inez Knibb Sibley, whose work features in this chapter, published in both the *Gleaner* and in *Focus*. Many of the stories featured on ‘Caribbean Voices’ had first been published in regional magazines, such as *BIM*. Collymore and Swanzy, in particular, were keen on fostering West Indian *regionalism*, regardless of national affiliation.

West Indian regional and/or national identity, in this part of the twentieth century was, in the eyes of its intellectuals, a *literary* undertaking. In *Kyk*’s first issue H. R. Harewood, president of the British Guiana Writers’ Association, declared that ‘it is upon critical reading that a democracy ultimately stands,’ and expressed his hope that *Kyk* would ‘contribute towards the efforts of all out people to achieve full representation in personal and community decisions.’¹³ In 1939 Norman Washington Manley, co-founder of the region’s first political party, argued that

[I]t is for our artists and writers to discover and set the standards for [the] national gift of thought and expression. We can take everything that English education has to offer us, but ultimately we must reject the domination of her influence, because we are not English and nor should we ever want to be. Instead, we must dig deep into our own consciousness and accept and reject only those things which we, from our

¹² Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, p.13.

¹³ H. R. Harewood, ‘A Message,’ *Kyk-Over-AI*, 1 (2013 [1945]), 32-33. Reprint (Georgetown: The Caribbean Press), p.33.

own superior knowledge of our own needs, must be the best judges. [...] This political awakening must and always goes hand in hand with cultural growth [...].¹⁴

Manley encouraged these artists not to look for appreciation from an overseas audience, but instead consider their 'ever-growing sense of responsibility to the audience that is here, our own audience, our own people.' He was hopeful that 'around us and before our very eyes are stirrings of the first shoots of a deeply felt "national" artistic and intellectual life' that, instead of looking outwards for inspiration and validation, would look inwards, and create from within.¹⁵

Manley's sentiments, however, are an echo of those of the *Beacon* writers whose literary ideology preceded his. In 1933 Albert Gomes argued that

it is important [that] we break away as far as possible from the English tradition; and the fact that some of us are still slaves to Scott and Dickens is merely because we lack the necessary artistic individuality and sensibility in order to see how incongruous that tradition is with the West Indian scene and spirit. [...] A love for the fine word or sentence is nothing to be ashamed of, but the fact remains that the sooner we throw off the veneer of culture that our colonisation has brought us the better for our artistic aims.¹⁶

These sentiments were echoed in turn by Roger Mais' admonition in 1942 that Jamaican writers 'have fed ourselves upon the pap of inferiority, until now we have not got any real bones left.' The adjective 'Jamaican,' he argued, had become 'an implied slur [of] mediocrity.'¹⁷ A few years later, the editors of *BIM* gave as their rationale for rejecting many entries for their ghost story competition the fact that 'many competitors submitted experiences *which were not their own* and were thus disqualified.'¹⁸ Editors were looking for ways to distinguish Caribbean culture from that of the metropole, and the 1930s and 1940s was a period of both political and aesthetic upheaval in the region. With the worst effects of

¹⁴ N.W. Manley, 'National Culture and the Artist,' in *Caribbean Essays: An Anthology*, ed. by Andrew Salkey (London: Evans Brothers, 1973), pp.72-73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁶ Albert Gomes, 'A West Indian Literature', in *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing*, ed. by Reinhard W. Sander (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp.30-31 (p.31).

¹⁷ Roger Mais, 'Where the Roots Lie', *Public Opinion*, March 9, 1940, p.12.

¹⁸ 'Editors' Preamble', *BIM*, 2 (1945), p.1, original emphasis.

post-Emancipation economic neglect being felt after the First World War, to the Russian Revolution, to the Great Depression and the labour protests across the Caribbean immediately preceding this period, Donnell and Lawson Welsh argue that the 1930s and 1940s 'seems to represent a moment of changed (national) consciousness in which the mentality and security of colonial domination was permanently fractured.'¹⁹ Sander concludes that 'the origins of the literary movement in the 1930s and 1940s are essentially the same as those of the labour movement and of the nationalist political parties.'²⁰ It is certainly the case that both the literary and political movements advocated for social engagement and expressed profound disappointment with crown colony rule. 'The issue central to most acts of protest,' Donnell and Lawson Welsh continue, 'was cultural validity. The basic criteria [*sic.*] for cultural reorientation was to leave behind any stylistic or content-based striving towards pseudo-Britishness.'²¹ The authors of the short stories I have chosen for this chapter were all concerned with contributing to such a thing as a 'West Indian literary identity.' Their use of Obeah is at once a demonstration of 'authenticity' (in that Obeah is presented in them as the most 'extreme,' yet 'credible' element of folk culture) and a challenge to the notion of authenticity, in that Obeah quite often shatters the illusion of the pastoral idyll, on which the idea of 'authentic' West Indian literature was thought to be based.

In *Kyk's* second issue, Seymour declared that 'all [West Indian literary magazines] are out to produce the development of regional and area cultures and to build a public attitude where our local traditions are woven into the pattern of daily living.'²² With this in mind, writers experimented with the short story form, incorporating indigenous forms of oral storytelling such as songs, dances, Anancy stories, tall tales, proverbs, anecdotes and calypso, modifying them on the page to fashion their own articulations of West Indian experiences. They also incorporated indigenous religious and spiritual beliefs, such as Obeah. Obeah was, and continues to be, a chief component of 'local colour' which, as Lucy

¹⁹ Donnell and Lawson Welsh, *Routledge Reader*, p.108.

²⁰ Sander, 'The Thirties and Forties,' p.38.

²¹ Donnell and Lawson Welsh, *Routledge Reader*, p.113.

²² A. J. Seymour, 'From the Tower,' *Kyk-Over Al*, 1 (2013 [1946]), 141-1443. Reprint (Georgetown: The Caribbean Press,p.141.

Evans argues, 'actively intervened in the shaping of a regional Caribbean aesthetic.'²³ As Suzanne Scafe has observed, Obeah was 'one of the most common topics for fiction writing and news reporting' during the 1930s and 1940s, given 'its capacity for meaning and its potential to evoke a range of emotionally intense responses.'²⁴ Obeah's enduring popularity speaks to its prevalence in Caribbean life and its versatility as a literary trope, not to mention the fascination with which Caribbean people continue to regard the practice. These stories, with their emphasis on 'local colour,' constitute a literature that is

experimental, innovative and for the most part representative of not only a West Indian nationalist aesthetic but of a poetics of liberation: it is literary production that does not merely serve the nation but offers a critique of nationhood, even in its process of becoming.²⁵

As I will demonstrate with my readings of these stories, and as I have argued in the previous chapter, Obeah has long been constitutive of West Indian literary cultural aesthetics, as much as it has been used to critique this concept. Despite their varied premises these stories all trade on the readership's feigned ignorance of Obeah (as does barrack-yard fiction), as well as on their 'gruesome fascination' with it.²⁶ They operate in the space between denotation and connotation, playing on repeated, multiple meanings of words and phrases. We can never be sure that what is narrated is what has happened and thus meaning is left to the reader to interpret. These narratives assume and complicate this ignorance/fascination paradox more freely than do the novels, as they are shorter by nature and usually lack an overbearing narrative voice. Their authors, as Ramchand has argued, were more 'comfortable and cavalier' in their experimentation, given to their more varied audiences, and the ephemeral nature of magazines and journals, compared to novels.²⁷ Newspapers appealed not only to the middle classes who could afford books, but also the

²³ Lucy Evans, 'Introduction', in *The Caribbean Short Story: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Lucy Evans, Mark McWatt and Emma Smith (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011), p.16.

²⁴ Scafe, 'Gruesome and Yet Fascinating,' p.74.

²⁵ Suzanne Scafe, "'The Lesser Names beneath the Peaks: Jamaican Short Fiction and Its Contexts, 1938-1950', in *The Caribbean Short Story: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Lucy Evans, Mark McWatt and Emma Smith (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011), pp.44-58 (p.56).

²⁶ Archie Lindo's first-person narrator described a Kumina ceremony he witnessed as 'gruesome and yet fascinating.' See Archie Lindo, 'Pocomania', *Public Opinion*, October 25, 1941, p.6.

²⁷ Ramchand, 'West Indian Short Story,' p.28.

literate lower classes. Obeah, as a particularly slippery subset of 'local colour,' highlights this process of making, while unmaking, ideal Caribbean communities.

The short stories in this chapter offer quick snapshots into mostly rural life – where 'the folk' and therefore 'culture' is believed to reside – but are mindful of the world outside. This 'backward glance' to tradition(s), therefore, challenges colonial aesthetic allegiances as much as it anticipates West Indian literature's dissemination into a global literary economy. The stories are aware of how the West Indies is perceived – in the discourses of tourism, law courts and 'official' media – and engage with these perceptions to create their own hybrid discourses. Simpson argues that West Indian short fiction 'absorbs and transmutes other forms of writing;' the polymorphous character of the West Indian story tradition, therefore, is best considered as a reflection of the polymorphous character of West Indian cultural expression.²⁸ This apparently 'chaotic' form, while it may be (as Evans argues) particularly apt for articulating the modern experience of West Indian community, also, in these stories, interrogates this celebration of community across difference.²⁹ These stories present Obeah as the limit case for these imagined communities; Obeah's presence indicates that, while there may be such a thing as 'national' culture, this culture is not 'normal' or unified, and is constantly being unmade in its making. I have arranged these stories in loosely chronological order, with the exception of Selvon's 'Obeah Man' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 1948) and Seepersad Naipaul's 'Obeah' ('Caribbean Voices,' 1951). These are the only stories I have been able to find that feature 'Indian' Obeahmen. They both avoid florid ethnographic detail and approach the subject of Obeah with ironic humour, not suppressed anxiety and condescension. They, more than the other stories in this chapter, move away from an essentialised view of Obeah as an 'African' practice and instead showcase its Caribbean syncretism. In so doing they also gesture towards a literary exploration of the processes of creolisation through religious folk beliefs. So too does Yvonne Padmore's 'Come Into My Parlour' (*BIM*, 1955) as it, like 'Obeah Man,' features a white client. These are purely comic stories with no real victims, which incorporate elements of the anecdote, ballad, tall tale and Anancy story.

²⁸ Simpson, 'Patterns and Periods,' p.4.

²⁹ Evans, 'Introduction,' pp.11-25.

'Pennib's 'A Case in Court' (*The Gleaner*, 1939) and Ethel Rovere's 'Coolie Bangle' (*Public Opinion*, 1939) are also humorous stories.³⁰ They both feature a suspected Obeahman in dialogue with a member of the white ruling class, whom he outsmarts. These black men are directly quoted, in patois, and while they are deceptive they are not portrayed as dangerous. The premises of both of these stories recall the history of slavery and indenture, albeit in different ways, and rely on Nancy-like linguistic trickery. Duplicity is key to discussions of Caribbean folk stories, and we see this played out frequently, either between characters, or between narrator(s) and reader. Yet this duplicity serves a purpose other than entertainment: it exposes the limitations of the Enlightenment ideal of encyclopaedic knowledge. Characters like 'Case's 'Quashie' and 'Bangle's implied and unnamed Obeahman reveal, through their 'trickery' and intellectual/linguistic dexterity, an area of knowledge unknown to and outside of the apparatuses of courtroom and plantation which dominate them, respectively.

Rupert Mickle's 'Shadow' (*Public Opinion*, 1940) and Rovere's 'The Mongoose' (*14 Jamaican Short Stories*, 1950) are both tragedies that implicate faith in Obeah in the dissolution of the already disadvantaged Jamaican peasant family. Although their depictions of characters' refusal to consult European doctors are demonstrable of resistance to colonial – which these stories configure as 'modern' – medicinal methods and moral standards, they are not celebrated, but ultimately portrayed as the fatal results of 'backward' ignorance. R. L. C. Aarons' 'The Cow That Laughed' (*Public Opinion*, 1939) returns to humour, and features an Obeahman as protagonist. Unlike 'Case,' however, 'Cow' experiments with Gothic sensationalism to portray its Obeahman as a predator and fraud. This reinforces the 'gruesome fascination' trope, although there are no serious consequences for the Obeahman's actions. What all these stories have in common is that none of their narrators defines Obeah, yet we are expected to know it when we see it.³¹

³⁰ 'Pennib' was the pseudonym of Inez Knibb Sibley. She published regularly in *The Gleaner*, and had one short story, 'The Terror Bull and the Taunt Song' published in the 1956 edition of *Focus*. Simpson notes that Sibley also had her work read on 'Caribbean Voices.' See Hyacinth M. Simpson, 'The BBC's *Caribbean Voices* and the Making of an Oral Aesthetic in the West Indian Short Story', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 57 (2011), 81-96.

³¹ A notable exception is W. J. Penberthy White's 'Rebecca's Vengeance' (*The Gleaner*, December 3, 1927, p.4), which defines Obeah as 'an African word imported into the West Indies by the original slave population [that] describes a system of sorcery akin to the old African fetishism.' In this story, which has not been included for analysis in this thesis, the narrator and audience are clearly at a much further remove from folk practices than

These narratives trade on the interplay of knowledge and ignorance, and on words' multivalence. They reveal, linguistically, the unease surrounding the creation of a 'modern' West Indies.

(Not) speaking truth to power

'A Case in Court' first appeared in 1939 as part of a regular *Gleaner* column by Inez Sibley, for which she used the pseudonym 'Pennib.'³² While it may have been dismissed as a humorous 'sketch' by the editor, 'Case' is unusual for being narrated entirely in patois, in addition to having the alleged Obeahman as not only protagonist, but also narrator.³³ Sibley's story is subtitled 'Quashie's Version,' and written and narrated to us in this generic voice, although her protagonist does not use this term to identify himself.³⁴ 'Quashie' is the creolised version of the Akan day-name Kwesi (meaning 'boy born on a Sunday'), and came to be used in the Caribbean to signify any black male. The derogatory connotations of this signifier would not have been lost on readers – Quashie is an everyman, likely poor and illiterate – yet Sibley's protagonist plays on and subverts assumptions his 'betters' make about his ignorance with wit, intelligence and eloquence. In short, he 'play fool fi ketch wise.'³⁵ 'Quashie' is an ambivalent signifier, and can at once be a term of endearment and recognition, and of abuse. Told in the tradition of the tall tale, 'Case' demonstrates the West Indian short story tradition's dependence on words having multiple meanings. By recalling the threat Obeah was believed to have posed to plantation rule centuries before – and Obeah's coming into being through colonial legislation – Sibley shows the 'modern' colonial court system to be unfit for the purpose of governing a new, soon-to-be-independent, creole Jamaica. In addition, the story questions how much colonial attitudes towards the practice may have changed (or not) since Emancipation.

the authors and narrators here represented, and the tone of the story is more akin to that of the colonial Gothic romance and melodrama.

³² These stories were eventually collected in 1939, by Kingston's Bolivar Press. The text of the original *Gleaner* story differs to that of the edited collection. See Inez K. Sibley, 'A Case in Court', in *Quashie's Reflections, in Jamaican Creole*. Second edn (Kingston: Bolivar Press, [1939] 1968), pp.17-19.

³³ The use of protagonist as narrator is repeated in 'Coolie Bangle' and 'Obeah.'

³⁴ 'Quashie' is called Hezekiah by another character in the story 'The New Year.' The Old Testament name 'Hezekiah' is another signifier of the narrator's class and colour. See Inez K. Sibley, 'The New Year', in *Quashie's Reflections, in Jamaican Creole*. Second edn (Kingston: Bolivar Press, [1939] 1968), pp.56-58 (p.57).

³⁵ 'Play fool fi ketch wise' is a Jamaican proverb which advises feigning stupidity in order to outsmart those who believe themselves wise. This is one of Anancy's chief strategies.

The story is told in the past tense, presumably to one of Quashie's peers and confidants who, like him, is understood to be on the 'wrong' side of the colonial legal system. The narrator does not volunteer his name, and does not have to. His implied listener knows who he is, and the sign/name 'Quashie' is sufficient characterisation. We designate our speaker as poor, black and typical; we determine that his 'version' is not to be taken seriously, as it is not 'the truth.' This designation is problematised however, by the narrator's insistence that he can speak for himself in, of all places, His Majesty's court. Quashie's speaking himself recalls another Jamaican saying, 'if it nuh go suh, it guh near suh,' which suggests that, although Quashie may be exaggerating the 'truth,' he is not necessarily being deceptive. Moreover, it demonstrates that his 'everyness' is predicated on being excluded from normative discourses of law and order, a system that claimed, but often failed, to protect all Jamaicans. Nevertheless this particular everyness not only makes the defendant an entertaining orator, but also an authority where the judge is not.³⁶ Sibley manipulates the signifier of 'Quashie' into 'a mask of ignorance and stupidity behind which the black social commentator [subverts] and opposes the ideologies that dominate the pages from which he speaks.'³⁷ Quashie's genericism, juxtaposed with his eloquence, argues for the inclusion of the majority of Jamaica's population into its everyday affairs (by highlighting their *de facto* exclusion) and challenges prevailing wisdom that said majority are incapable of democratic participation in political processes. Scafe argues that Sibley's use of patois narration in her columns

constituted a startling disruption of the values and assumptions reflected in the social gossip columns and beauty pages [...] the Creole speaker is both subject and agent of his own narrative, positioned and ready to participate in a newly emerging narrative of nationhood.³⁸

³⁶ The narrator repeatedly refers to the court official as 'de Jedge' although Obeah cases were tried by magistrates at this time, who usually were not legally trained. Paton observes that, after 1838, anti-Obeah laws were revised throughout the region, reducing Obeah from a capital to a minor offence. 'While punishments were substantial,' Paton argues, 'and in many places included flogging as well as imprisonment, the crime's status as routine was marked by the fact that it was tried by magistrates rather than by judges and juries.' See Paton, 'Obeah Acts,' p.6.

³⁷ Scafe, 'Lesser Names,' p.47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

This new narrative of nationhood is one whose distinct voice will be heard in all arenas of public life, and which will claim discursive and political power for itself. 'Quashie' operates like Anancy, deceiving power through manipulating its language, inside its own house.³⁹

This story, like those of the *Beacon* group, was written for domestic audiences. Sibley does not, however, assume the same level of readership ignorance of the affairs of the folk. Quashie does not explain himself to his interlocutor and implied reader; we are simply to know what he is talking about, and can guess the outcome of the story from the opening paragraph. Given the limited amount of space Sibley had to write her column (similarly to many other writers) there is no room for expository detail. Instead she leaves a series of linguistic clues which can only work if her readers are 'in on the joke.' There is just enough ignorance of Obeah and ambivalence of language, however, for Quashie to perhaps deceive us, too. 'Case' can be read as an example of 'native trickery,' but this trickery is not only confined to the courthouse – it extends to the narrative and to its reading. Sibley uses the discourse of the courts, with the discourse of the tall tale, to subvert both. Quashie knows he was lying to the judge and does not deny it in the retelling of events, even if he does not confirm his deception, either. Yet he lies only to his oppressor, not to his equal – and not to us readers. We have been brought in on his deception, and are encouraged to root for him, even though we cannot have full confidence in our narrator as there can be no corroboration of his tall tale – either to us or to the judge.⁴⁰

The defendant had been brought to court because 'one facey man cum tek me up, sey me ah practise Obeah.'⁴¹ He is indignant, but in order to defend these charges he self-consciously puts on 'de innocentes' face you could a eber waan fe see' in hopes of impressing (read fooling) the new judge and having his case dismissed. The defendant waives his right to counsel, too, as he is 'mo' dan able fe defend meself.' It is possible that he feels that a lawyer, an educated member of the middle classes, would be not only ignorant in matters of Obeah but also unsympathetic to his cause.⁴² While the law may not have been made for him, the courtroom is one of the few arenas in which 'Quashie' is able

³⁹ This strategy is repeated in 'Obeah Man' and in 'Come Into My Parlour.'

⁴⁰ As Diana Paton observes in *Cultural Politics of Obeah*, most Obeah trials were not officially recorded by the Crown.

⁴¹ 'Pennib,' 'A Case in Court', *The Gleaner*, February 25, 1939, p.35. All quotations are taken from this page.

⁴² It is also possible that he could not afford a lawyer.

to publicly speak himself – or not, as he delights in subverting the very language of ‘justice’ in order to continue his illegal practice uninterrupted. Here, in the courtroom, he can speak to power, using the discourse of power, to upend power.

Our narrator tells us that, at trial, he calmly proclaimed that no one in his family has or had ever had any knowledge of Obeah, and that he gave rational explanations for the fowl feathers found in his possession. It is common in narratives of Obeah to provide ‘rational explanations’ for supernatural phenomena and/or spiritual belief, and the defendant subverts *these* narratives too in his defence. After explaining away a tooth and a bag of ‘salt,’ he claims he told the judge that ‘me no tink me need fe show you any mo’ ob dem nansense someting.’⁴³ There is no need for any more explanation, not only because the defendant may not have any, but also because he feels he should not be on trial in the first place. His feigned indignation reflects the scandal and shame associated with being accused of Obeah, and the damage such an accusation could have on one’s character. Moreover, there is no need (or space) for Sibley to give detailed explanations here as most readers, while they may not themselves practise or avail themselves of Obeah, would have been able to recognise Obeah if and when they saw it. On a deeper level, however, Quashie’s claim that these are ‘nansense something,’ not worth his or the judge’s – or our – time, demonstrates his manipulation of colonial discourse surrounding Obeah. Readers with a passing knowledge of Obeah understand that these items are not nonsense to those who believe, even if we may not, in the power of these pedestrian material objects to be more than the sum of their parts. The defendant takes advantage of the relatively relaxed attitudes towards and continued ignorance of Obeah at this time to downplay its significance to either him or his clients (thus saving himself from imprisonment) by framing it in terms the judge is likely to understand – the word ‘nansense,’ here, has several meanings, only one of which the judge understands.⁴⁴ Quashie understands that the judge cannot comprehend Obeah’s significance, much less its workings, and so gives him just

⁴³ We will recall from the introduction to this thesis that colonial narratives insisted that Obeah was ‘decipherable in terms of natural causes and an enumeration of material objects with ostensibly natural properties,’ and that these narratives invariably contained ‘a description of those objects as obtaining power as a combination or mixture.’ See Wisecup and Wall Jaudon, ‘Knowing and not Knowing,’ p.133.

⁴⁴ While Obeah was no longer a capital offence by 1939, and while it was rarer to be accused of practising Obeah than it was to be accused of fraud or larceny, Jamaican officials were particularly keen to prosecute and punish alleged offenders, and conviction carried sentences of up to one year’s imprisonment, with hard labour. See Paton, *Cultural Politics of Obeah*.

enough information to protect himself from the white man's ignorance. On the surface the narrator dismisses his own epistemology, and temporarily undoes his authority, so that he can live to reclaim them both in his 'version' of events.

The defendant critiques the court system from its margins – as an accused, persecuted member of the poor black majority that the system was built to exploit, but claimed to protect. The judge is compelled by the defendant's 'point ob argumentation' and accepts his logic – without Quashie having to perform any actual Obeah on the judge, as was rumoured to be common in such cases.⁴⁵ The defendant may have been guilty under the law, but justice, in this case, is indeed blind. 'Larned as 'im is,' Quashie reflects, the judge 'no noa eberyting.' There are some arenas of life, this story suggests, in which the courts have no business. The last line of the story, 'ef 'im tay yah lang nuff maybe 'im fine out,' is a riddle, a tool of oral storytelling designed to carry greater significance than its literal meaning. It is a critique of the practice of importing judges into Jamaica, men who were not of the colony, and knew very little of it and its people – men who were only passing through the process of creolisation.⁴⁶ They were trained to apply English law to Jamaican cases, and in the narrator's opinion deserved to be defrauded. The defendant's last words to the judge are also a riddle. He says: 'wha really wrong is de smady MIND, dem got bad mind fe true [...] ef dem tink ebil no sarbe dem right if dem get it.'⁴⁷ On the surface this is another version of the proverb 'belief kill an cure,' yet the narrator is arguing that the trying of individuals for the practice of Obeah is not only a waste of time, but a symptom of colonial *mentality* – the same mentality that would agree with him, it would seem, that those who may be the victims, or beneficiaries, of Obeah, are in fact victims or beneficiaries of their own minds. No one's language is reliable here – neither the language of the defendant, nor the language of the court – and whatever conclusions we may draw are

⁴⁵ See 'Thompson', 'Obeah in Jamaica', *Public Opinion*, October 23, 1937, p.5. 'Thompson' argued that when a judge 'is not struck dead or in any way harmed by the alleged powers of the defendant, faith in obeah in the particular district from which he originates suffers some sort of set-back, but these cases are not sufficiently frequent to assist in killing the people's belief.' This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that Sibley's Quashie may have indeed worked some Obeah on this particular judge.

⁴⁶ Aldous Huxley, in his introduction to Mendes', *Pitch Lake* (1934), similarly observed that 'books about the tropics are generally written by people who do not live in the countries they describe – by literary sailors, by exiled subalterns with unavowable yearnings for the high life.' See Aldous Huxley, 'Introduction to the 1934 Edition,' in *Pitch Lake: A Story from Trinidad*, by Alfred Hubert Mendes (London: New Beacon Books, 1980), pp.7-8 (p.7).

⁴⁷ Original capitalisation.

moot. The story is set in a house of judgement, but we cannot come to one of our own. This story demonstrates that there does not have to be a conclusion, that Obeah does not have to be 'scientifically' identifiable to its last detail. Whereas colonial accounts of Obeah were frustrated by its ambiguity this story, like those that follow, celebrates this openness.

Ambiguity characterises the second story in this section, too. Ethel Rovere's 'Coolie Bangle' (1939) also features an exchange between a poor, black, alleged Obeahman who uses double meanings to (potentially) outsmart his presumed 'better.' It was subtitled 'A Sketch' by *Public Opinion's* editors, presumably due to its length, but a sketch's length is not its only determinant. Ramchand argued that a sketch focuses not on a recollection of events or a history, but is 'usually concerned to describe people, places and things, with a certain element of nostalgia since the things described are caught at the moment of arrest or decay, and with a vein of humour or irony in the author's voice.'⁴⁸ We see this in both 'Bangle' and 'Shadow,' which look back at moments in the not-so-distant past, perhaps even the present, that are threatened with extinction by modernity, even as this modernity may be welcomed by their characters. Similarly to the *Beacon* group's yard fiction these stories may mourn the passing of 'the old way of life,' but perhaps they also welcome the passing, with it, of Obeah as a social determinant. In contrast to 'Case,' 'Bangle' offers a complementary voice to the poor black folk voice, that of the white middle/upper class native landowner, thus more obviously foregrounding the dynamics of West Indian colour/class hierarchy. Yet this landowner, while he may share skin colour with the judge in 'Case,' was born and raised in Jamaica – he is creole, not English, and has a stake in this evolving culture. He, the story's unnamed narrator, shares in the humour and irony of his interlocutor, 'the old fellow.'⁴⁹ He cannot be fooled like Quashie's judge, but does not seek to punish this alleged Obeahman, either. Underneath the guise of friendly, 'simple' conversation, though, each man is humouring the other, and neither trusts the other's words.

The story begins in patois with 'de ole man tank you kindly, massa,' but these are not the narrator's words. The narrator is quoting this old man, whom he notes 'scraping his foot in the loose dirt on the road, after the old custom of his African forefathers.' Here Rovere

⁴⁸ Ramchand, 'The Short Story,' p.2.

⁴⁹ Ethel Rovere, 'Coolie Bangle,' *Public Opinion*, June 10, 1939, p.6. All quotations are taken from this page.

uses very few words to locate us on a post-Emancipation plantation, thus evoking the memory (and the wounds) of slavery and establishing the 'modern' space as haunted by ancient ghosts. She also presents (Afro-)Caribbean spiritual belief and culture as a dilution, or degeneration, of African spiritual beliefs. This one sentence, with its clear contrast of speech patterns, establishes the dynamic between these two men – one is white and powerful, the other poor and black. Moreover, it establishes the imperial male gaze directly, which we are encouraged to adopt. This convention of realism primes us to take this 'version' of events more seriously than we take Quashie's, even though this story is almost entirely a retelling of a story in which our narrator had no involvement. We are expected to mirror this narrator's detachment, irony and sarcasm, and to read this scene from a distance just as he does, but in so doing we realise that our 'version' of events is not reliable, either.

The language in 'Bangle,' as in 'Case,' is subversive. The narrator continues: "'De Lord will bless you," he added sanctimoniously, and I smiled because I had known him all my life and was quite aware that the old rascal was an obeahman.' The 'old rascal's sanctimony is matched only by the narrator's, whose whiteness will forever place him at a remove from the language, culture and understanding of the old man, and from the story he is (re)telling. As amusedly detached as he may be, he can never be sure of what the old man, and presumably other black people with whom he interacts, tell him. He is imperious, but his authority here is contingent; his language betrays his anxiety at being part of a dwindling minority, and of a power structure that is crumbling. The majority of the language we see on the page is the suspected Obeahman's, not the narrator's, and the black man's perspective overpowers that of the white man, even in this white man's own story. Although 'the old rascal' is quoted, and thus bound by the narrative, he still usurps authority from the narrator. The old man claims to be retired, therefore no longer a threat, but the narrator asserts that 'only extreme old age and the infirmities which accompany it had caused him to stop the practice of the "black magic."' Obeah has not (yet) been completely obliterated from the literary and geographical landscape; the old man has not been converted, and his heart and mind still believe, even if his body is incapable of action. There is, too, the likelihood that he has transferred his knowledge to a younger apprentice. The narrator belittles Obeah by putting 'black magic' in quotation marks and calling this man an 'old

rascal,' but this speaks to his ignorance, maybe even his fear – his 'terrified consciousness.'⁵⁰ 'Bangle' demonstrates, even with this detached anxiety, an acknowledgement of co-dependence between the two races and classes represented by these men, despite an implied latent hostility towards each other.

The rest of the sketch is taken up by the old man telling the younger an unsolicited story about Liza, a member of their community, who died the night before. Prefacing the story with the saying 'dead is a ting dat come quick,' he tells him about Liza's unhappy yet brief marriage, which ended with the death of her husband, which may or may not have involved Obeah. The story's plot is inconsequential, but its telling utilises Obeah as a tool of resistance and emancipation, particularly for women in abusive relationships, especially those artificially enforced by colonial notions of 'respectability.' Moreover, as 'Case' subverts the discourse and authority of the courts, so does 'Bangle' critique and subvert the discourse of the pastoral idyll – as much as it may reinforce it. Liza, whom the narrator reasons in an aside 'had always been a little mad,' was a 'light yellow gal,' according to the retired Obeahman. Her colour would have made her desirable and enviable in turn, yet also vulnerable to exploitation from men on both extremes of the plantation colour/class spectrum. Her mother worked in the greathouse and her father, unknown, is reckoned to have been one of the narrator's father's many visitors – of course, the Obeahman's suspicion never fell on the massa himself. Rovere's feminist critique of colour relations in the Caribbean, which is repeated in 'The Mongoose' (1950) – which I will analyse later in this chapter – focuses on the insidious effects of white male desire on black female bodies, and the damage this desire does to Afro-creole West Indian families.

Conveniently, though, this probable rape took place before the young massa was born – firmly placing it in the 'bad old days' before reform, before 'modernity.' The suggestion – by the white man, not the black – of Liza's madness, however, reinforces the paternalistic, misogynistic stereotype of 'the spirited creole woman,' which is again linked to her skin colour. Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also believed to be insane because of her 'mixed blood,' as was her mother before her. In another parallel to Rhys' novel, Obeah is

⁵⁰ Ramchand employed this term in reference to works written by white West Indians, which betray anxiety surrounding reprisals against them from the black West Indians they continue to dominate. See Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, p.223.

linked in 'Bangle' to perceived sexual transgression.⁵¹ *White Witch's* Annie Palmer, too, is believed to be not only mad but sexually depraved, on top of being an Obeahwoman. Rovere's narrator's designation of Liza as 'mad' suggests displeasure and unease with her refusal to conform to the roles designated to her by society based on her colour, class and gender. Moreover, it reflects broader cultural discomfort with mixed-race individuals in the Caribbean, who indelibly signify some of the harshest excesses and betrayals of slavery.⁵²

Liza had been uninterested in her many suitors (both black and white), and when she became pregnant refused to divulge the identity of the would-be father. She was happy to raise her child herself but the interfering 'missus,' more concerned with respectability than with Liza's happiness, forced her to marry the plantation headman, which she felt was better than Liza having no husband at all.⁵³ Liza might not have been thus exploited were she darker. She does not have the freedom, in terms of access to her own body, that the washerwomen have in *Black Fauns*, for example.⁵⁴ Instead, because she is associated with the greathouse, whose influence extends to the private lives of its staff, she is forced into an alien family ideal that leaves her even more vulnerable and dependent. Liza's marriage may ostensibly reverse the negative (for some) trope of the feckless, workshy black man and enterprising, even 'mannish' black woman, but it is neither healthy nor progressive. 'Bangle' thus places itself in direct opposition to normative discourses of the nuclear family and the rhetoric of 'maternalist social reform' popularised by women such as Una Marson and Amy Bailey who testified before the Moyne Commission, which was conducting its research into welfare and social reform around the time 'Bangle' was written and published. These elites, argues Lara Putnam, did not acknowledge, and therefore did not renounce 'white racist ideas about black people and sex.' Marson drew sharp distinction between 'stable consensual unions and more fleeting alliances,' and argued that 'common law marriage was

⁵¹ This is also the case in the barrack-yard novels discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

⁵² *Banana Bottom's* 'Crazy Bow' Adair is also light-skinned, and is also 'mad.' His rape of the protagonist Bitia precipitates her departure from the pastoral idyll.

⁵³ The 'ole massa' had wanted to leave Liza to raise her child in peace, but was browbeaten by his wife after she asked him 'what you know about it.' This again would suggest that he knew more about Liza's pregnancy than he was willing to admit, and alludes to Liza's (and her mother's) vulnerability as an attractive, black, female member of his household.

⁵⁴ In another contrast to *Black Fauns*, Liza is rewarded for her use of Obeah to claim sexual freedom. Martha, in Mendes' novel, is punished for it, as is Mrs Rouse in *Minty Alley*. It is worth noting, however, that the washerwomen themselves are constricted by racial and gender inequalities that necessitate their reliance on men for financial support.

needed to end children's stigmatisation.⁵⁵ 'Bangle' critiques these discourses, and carries this critique further by making Liza's exploiters the colonising *woman*, a figure often absent from narratives of the 'civilising mission,' and the slavedriver, a figure often absent from narratives of liberation.⁵⁶

Liza's baby was born with straight hair (another indication of the 'bad old days') but died within a week, leaving Liza miserable. As a result of her loss she became quiet, withdrawn and submissive – again, Rovere suggests that forced, anonymous sexual unions between white men and black women are not 'healthy' options for the future.⁵⁷ Three years later, her husband came to this Obeahman to say that his wife was 'a bad wutless woman.' Liza had been seen wearing a 'coolie man bangle' on her arm, and we are supposed to know that 'dem coolie man nebber give silver bangle to no naygur gal fe nuttin.'⁵⁸ She was happy again, though, and claimed to have found the bangle on the roadside. The husband, incensed by Liza's suspected infidelity – evidenced by her newfound happiness and 'unrespectable behaviour' – asked the Obeahman to 'do something to mek Liza change,' and even though he 'doan know nuttin bout Obeah, Massa,' the Obeahman agreed to see what he could do.⁵⁹ He claims that his 'ole granmooma did show me how to mix a bush tea dat can cure all kind of sickness' but both the narrator(s) and the readership know that Liza was not 'sick.' The Obeahman, mindful of a change in Liza that he considered positive, claims to have given the driver 'a bottle of water, wit some bitter aloes in it. Dat cyan hurt nobody,' he reasons, 'an I tink it is better to see de girl happy.' He thus undermines the authority not only of a husband over his wife, but of a driver over a plantation; he also undermines the authority of the 'ole missus,' and enables Liza's agency. Liza had been manipulated into marriage (a colonial institution) to a man unsuited to and violent towards her. Obeah is used in this narrative to overturn that domination, and return

⁵⁵ Lara Putnam, 'Global Child-Saving, Transatlantic Maternalism, and the Pathologisation of Caribbean Childhood, 1930s-1940s,' *Atlantic Studies*, 11 (2014), 491-514 (p.550; p.501; p.503).

⁵⁶ The slavedriver, at once exploited and exploiter, was immediately responsible for some of the harshest punishments enacted on slave bodies and minds.

⁵⁷ This suggestion is repeated in 'Mongoose.'

⁵⁸ Liza's husband may be particularly incensed by the fact that her new lover appears to be 'Indian,' thus highlighting 'Indian-African' prejudices.

⁵⁹ This Obeahman's denial mirrors Sibley's Quashie's.

Liza's body to its rightful owner. Indeed, it is the sight of Liza's naked body that begins her husband's undoing.

A month after his consultation with the Obeahman the headman spied Liza naked, without her knowledge or consent, through the window of their home. Unlike Haynes in *Minty Alley*, this man's voyeurism has tragic consequences. As he went to beat her (to punish her, it would seem, for her wilful, private display of her own body), he heard and saw a white owl. Rovere's readership may or may not have known that 'when white owl follow you to you house dat mean death' – or perhaps the unnamed narrator did not.⁶⁰ Liza's husband decided against the beating, ate his dinner, and was dead before morning. We do not know why and how the Obeahman gained access to so much detail about Liza's husband's last night (down to what the driver saw and felt before he died); this would have been impossible for one who was not there but the narrator does not question him. The narrative, in describing Obeah, trips up, and the old rascal becomes not only the narrator of the tale he is telling his benefactor, but of the tale we are reading. The slip is brief, however, as the landowner-narrator returns to snap the Obeahman out of his reverie, by asking him if Liza had also been to him for 'medicine' for her husband.⁶¹ The Obeahman answers 'solemnly' that the driver had always suffered from stomach pains so he had given him the same bitter aloes – apparently he, unlike Liza, was actually sick. When asked about the 'coolie man' he replies, 'vaguely,' that he 'doan know nuttin bout no coolie man,' much in the way that he doan know nuttin bout no Obeah. His response, 'Liza fine de bangle on de roadside,' is formulaic and rehearsed. It is possible that this Obeahman has just confessed to murder but his patron is not appalled, and neither are we; instead, we are happy for Liza and encouraged to feel, like Quashie, that if a person thinks evil, he deserves to have evil happen to him. We can never know the 'truth,' and Rovere's story ends by coming full circle – the Obeahman repeats 'dead is a ting can come quick,' a familiar parable with a range of meanings.⁶²

⁶⁰ Rovere's incorporation of popular folk belief preserves this 'oral element' of West Indian storytelling on the page.

⁶¹ The text is interrupted on the page, above this question, by three asterisks.

⁶² This parable also mimics the call and response refrains at the beginning and end of children's stories. It recalls the end of Anancy stories too, 'Jack Mandora, me nuh choose none,' which absolves the narrator of guilt or responsibility for the story s/he has just told.

This story is dark but funny – it is tricky and unreliable, like its narrator(s). Although the narrator of this story is its protagonist he is hardly in it; his asides are few, especially considered against *Black Fauns*. ‘Truth’ is not the aim of this story; like ‘Case,’ ‘Bangle’ uses Obeah as a way of subverting discursive strategies and social norms, thus allowing the folk to speak for themselves – albeit under the not-so-watchful eyes of their colonial masters. ‘Bangle’ disrupts the discourse of the plantation and ‘Case’ the discourse of the court; both see poor black people outsmart the systems put in place to subjugate and dehumanise them. They may both be set in the past, but suggest a future in which the poor black majority will speak for itself, and take power if not by violent means, then at least through taking ownership of their speech and discourse. This is not to say, however, that these were the only ways in which authors and other intellectuals viewed Obeah. In the stories addressed in the next section, ‘The Cow That Laughed’ (*Public Opinion*, 1939), ‘Shadow’ (*Public Opinion*, 1940) and ‘The Mongoose’ (Pioneer Press, 1950), Obeah is presented as limiting, not liberatory. The Obeahmen in these stories are selfish predators who, from the points of view of their respective narrators, weaken their communities’ values and stifle attempts at what may be considered ‘progress.’

Demonising the Obeahman

R. L. C. Aarons’ ‘The Cow that Laughed’ won second prize in *Public Opinion*’s short story competition, and is significantly longer than ‘Bangle.’⁶³ It tells the story of a spectacular working of Obeah by down-at-heel Obeahman Buddyjoe, involving a sick cow whose cough sounds like ‘sinister inhuman’ laughter.⁶⁴ It illustrates Ramchand’s argument that the short story focuses on

one character in an isolated state at a particular point in his life [...] or in the grip of a particular mood or emotion; what it says about a society comes not from an attempt to portray a society, but from its penetration of an event or character or situation.⁶⁵

Unlike ‘Bangle’ and ‘Case,’ ‘Cow’s narrator is omniscient; his voice and perspective dominate, and often conflict with his protagonist’s. The story opens with Buddyjoe

⁶³ Rovere’s ‘The Curse of God’ was the winner, and published in *Public Opinion* on April 22, 1939.

⁶⁴ R.L.C. Aarons, ‘The Cow That Laughed,’ *Public Opinion*, April 29, 1939, pp.6-7 (p.6). Until otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from p.6.

⁶⁵ Ramchand, ‘The Short Story,’ p.3.

'plodding' home from a "'ninth night" meeting.' The narrator's quotation and (re)Anglicisation of 'nine night' is an early indication of his artistic remove, and jars with the 'folk' setting of his story.⁶⁶ It also signals that this story, unlike the previous ones, will spend time 'explaining' Obeah to its readership. Buddyjoe is depressed because a new Obeahman's arrival in the district is threatening his livelihood. This 'stranger' represents the 'modernisation' of Obeah, which now involves the administration of oils and powders, and signals that Obeah is a competitive industry far from extinction.⁶⁷ Buddyjoe, unlike 'Bangle's 'old rascal,' is unambiguously an Obeahman. He is also unambiguously a figure of ridicule – the narrator has not even bothered to give him a plausible name. This genericism signifies that this protagonist is not to be taken seriously, and while there is no master/slave dynamic between any of the characters in this story, the narrator's mastery is never challenged. 'Cow' preoccupies itself with defanging Obeah – with discursively ridiculing the practice, as it cannot guarantee its natural disappearance.

The narrator interrupts Buddyjoe's 'melancholy reflections' to describe 'a queer sort of laugh' coming from a nearby pasture. We are told that 'terror, stark terror, took possession of [Buddyjoe] and held him rooted to the spot' until he realised that the 'whitish object' was a cow. After the narrator offers us the 'rational explanation' that the cow had a bad cold, understanding comes to Buddyjoe 'in a rush.' By denying Buddyjoe the opportunity to come to this understanding on his own, the narrator once again denies the Obeahman, the folk protagonist, agency. Whatever intelligence Buddyjoe may have is translated into 'the swift low cunning of his kind' – not the narrator's, or our, 'high' kind – with which the Obeahman figures that if the cow could fool him, it could fool others.

⁶⁶ A 'nine-night' is a ceremony very similar to a wake, that takes place nine nights after a person has died. The primary objective of the nine night is to ensure that the deceased's spirit is given a proper send off. As Huon Wardle observed, 'each event is different, but there is always singing and drinking and dancing which, alongside the specific activities in relation to the ghost, are the principal markers of a Jamaican wake proper.' See Huon Wardle, 'A Bakhtinian Approach to the Jamaican *Nine Night*', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 45 (1999), 51-69 (p.54).

⁶⁷ This reflects the changing face of Obeah at this time. Elkins argues that DeLaurence's books, particularly *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (1910), 'significantly influenced the development of the new type of obeah in Jamaica. Methods of magic gleaned from his publications were to supplant traditional procedures, especially in urban areas, where they became known as "Science." This kind of magic utilises crystal balls, fortune-telling cards and synthetic substances with suggestive names such as "oil of turn-back," "compelling powder," "sweet essence of seven spirits," "Saturn blood," "destruction powder" and so on. In rural parts of Jamaica the older type of obeah, which employs mainly indigenous materials, remained dominant.' See Elkins, 'DeLaurence,' p.215.

Buddyjoe is 'carried away with excitement' at the thought of regaining his customers. He decides that he will use the cow on Dan Smearbow, who had offered him £10 if he could work it so that Zekie Grantham, the district's most eligible bachelor, would fall in love with his own 'brown skin' daughter, Mary. 'Cow' reinforces colonial marriage and racial norms by asserting that a woman need merely be 'brown' to attract a husband like Zekie, who is an ideal peasant farmer, wealthy and industrious. It also references (if not necessarily critiques) popular literary romance tropes of the ideal 'brown' woman who, while she may be prized, is also constrained by her gender and colour.⁶⁸

'Of course,' continues the narrator, Buddyjoe 'could have retailed [...] to the parties concerned' that Zekie had already expressed his interest in Mary to him, but the Obeahman 'had no difficulty however in resisting the temptation. Ten pounds was ten pounds no matter how you looked at it. Besides, Dan Smearbow was an old fool. Fancy a man of that age believing in obeah. And he a church member too!' Not even Buddyjoe believes in his own Obeah, so there is no reason for Aarons' readership to, either.⁶⁹ Despite Aarons' employment of free indirect discourse, 'Cow' is less subtle in its narration than other stories in this chapter; it is clear which conclusions we are to draw about the 'effectiveness' or 'value' of Obeah. Although we are encouraged to believe that the narrator has slipped into the Obeahman's mind, these are not actually Buddyjoe's words, and the narrator and protagonist are very separate characters. The description of Buddyjoe's 'shaggy face with its pair of thick overhanging lips broadened out into a wide grin of satisfaction' is unnecessarily cruel and unsympathetic; moreover it is humourless. Buddyjoe may be dishonest but he is not malicious, and the narrator's disparagement of him is unattractively heavy-handed in its primitivism.

The Obeahman buys the cow cheaply, but it is sicker than he thought and time is of the essence. He gags it and festoons it with leaves and green and red cloth, 'to heighten the general effect of frightfulness.' He then installs his nephew and the sick cow under the Smearbows' window to await a signal. In his clients' living room, Buddyjoe

⁶⁸ She is similar, in this sense, to 'Bangle's Liza.

⁶⁹ 'Thompson,' writing around the same time and in the same publication as Aarons, argued that 'all obeahmen – without one exception – are scamps of the first order,' but even as he questioned whether 'one in all the obeahman in Jamaica has any belief whatever in his vaunted power' he despaired of a solution. See 'Thompson', 'Obeah in Jamaica.'

seemed the perfect embodiment of all the powers of low cunning and trickery.⁷⁰ His black face [...] shone with a ghastly frightfulness that was increased ten fold [*sic.*] by the unearthly reddish glow imparted to his big uneven yellow teeth. And as though to complete this nightmare figure of horror, he had discarded his coat in favour of an old black waistcoat [...] decorated above the pockets with the immemorial symbols of the wonder worker, the cross bones and skull ('Cow,' pp.6-7).⁷¹

'Cow' is the first of the stories in this chapter to give so much detail of an Obeah ceremony.⁷² By positioning Buddyjoe as the frightful predator and Mary as the helpless prey, it becomes a parody of Gothic melodramatic horror. Buddyjoe's yellow teeth are unhealthy, his aspect is terrifying, and the allusion to piracy suggests the Obeahman's insatiable appetites.⁷³ Aaron's grotesque detailing is reminiscent of Archie Lindo's 'Pocomania' (*Public Opinion*, 1941), which blurs the line between fiction and reportage in its partial description of a Kumina ceremony. Lindo's narrator describes the dancing as 'a mass of spinning flesh and bone,' and claims to have heard 'such grotesque speech and shouting and chanting. Such weird sounds [and] such strange ideas;' in both of these stories, though, the peril is exaggerated.⁷⁴ Aarons' sensationalism is not to be taken as seriously as Lindo's, but our laughter is still uncomfortable. Once again the spectre of the 'evil Obeahman' needs to be exorcised, and the narrator's anxiety is not completely dispersed by his mockery. It is not so much that the idyll is haunted by old ghosts here, but that the narrator, like the narrator in 'Bangle,' is projecting, and haunted by, his own terrified consciousness.

Buddyjoe summons Mary into the living room and orders her to strip naked. She is reluctant, giggles nervously throughout, and has to be physically supported by her parents. Mary's appeals to her mother fail – the older woman sanctions the violation of her daughter in the name of Obeah, and of narratory voyeuristic pleasure. Like Liza, Mary's sexuality is fraught with anxiety due to her colour, and the narrative sexualises her as a form of control. As Edmondson argues,

⁷⁰ This is the second time the narrator has used the term 'low cunning.'

⁷¹ All subsequent quotations will be taken from p.7.

⁷² 'Obeah Man' gives a partial description, as does 'Mongoose.' 'Obeah' is the only story that matches 'Cow' for detail of an Obeah performance and its outcome.

⁷³ This allusion is inaccurate, moreover, as Obeah is not associated with piracy.

⁷⁴ Lindo, 'Pocomania', p.6.

caught in a nexus of contradictory visions of black and white women [...] brown women's subjectivity was a hall of mirrors, reflecting and refracting the gaze of whatever constituency was watching. [...] Brown women's ambiguous sexual status can be read as a metaphor for the unstable, ever-shifting possibilities of an emerging black and brown middle class, whose bid for legitimacy depended so heavily on the status of its women.⁷⁵

Liza's sexuality had been curtailed by marriage to a black, industrious man, and so will Mary's be, ostensibly in the name of 'respectability' and familial 'stability.' Yet while Liza used Obeah to free herself from this destiny, Mary is subjected to Obeah in order to fulfil it. We do not know if Mary is even interested in Zekie – she does not speak at all throughout this narrative. The Obeahman in this story is the agent of subjugation, not liberation; he is impatient with Mary's demurrals, with her desire to keep her body to herself. The narrator in turn pours more scorn on Buddyjoe by describing his face as 'a sickly yellow under his black skin,' suggesting cowardice as well as treachery – and ill health. After rubbing Mary with various oils and other 'foul-smelling' liquids – standard tropes in British Obeah literature – Buddyjoe directs the family to the window, under which is the sick cow. When the cow 'laughs,' to signify Mary's having won Zekie, the narrator is almost enraptured: 'then suddenly out of the night it came,' Aarons writes. 'Like a flood. Not merely once or twice or three times, but over and over again. Short and deep staccato notes which even at that distance sounded exactly like some sinister inhuman laughter.' The relief is ecstatic, and the repetition of 'inhuman laughter' brings the narrative full circle. Buddyjoe leaves the Smearbows trembling 'with a terror they made no attempt to control' as, 'deep in thought [he plods] his way homewards.'

'Cow' is a semi-humorous, fictional snapshot into a particular (yet universal, as it is unnamed and configured as 'typical') rural, early twentieth-century Jamaican village. The story is not of much consequence and no real change has been effected, nor has any real harm been wrought. Buddyjoe and his clients are left in the same position ('plodding') as they were before, though, and their belief in Obeah appears to have no redemptive value or potential. Obeah functions in this story as a superstition to be mocked, a marker of poverty

⁷⁵ Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, p.60.

and ignorance, but not as a serious threat to middle-class sensibilities. We see this comedy turn to tragedy, however, in the next set of stories chosen for this thesis, Mickle's 'Shadow' and Rovere's 'The Mongoose.'⁷⁶ They too feature omniscient narrators and poor, 'socially depressed' protagonists who visit an Obeahman instead of a doctor and pay extortionate amounts of money for no eventual cure, but in these cases the 'patients' are indeed gravely ill. The diseases these Obeahmen are presented with are 'real,' in the worlds of these texts – they are 'science,' for which the Obeahman's 'superstition' is no match. Moreover, it is not only the protagonists who suffer but also their loved ones: entire families are destroyed, these stories suggest, because of 'foolish' faith.

'Shadow' is fairly short, and narrates a series of conversations between 'tall, lanky, naseberry-coloured Jerrold Grey' and 'old Jonathan, half-labourer, half-peasant-proprietor.'⁷⁷ Jerrold is not given an occupation and Jonathan is not given a physical description, but the contrast – and dynamic – between the two men is clear. We assume that Jerrold is a wealthy landowner, and that Jonathan is poor and black. The pleasant, easy description of the idyllic landscape with which Mickle begins his story contrasts to (and is threatened by) the 'serious' subject of the two men's discussion. Jonathan is asking Jerrold for a loan to take his son to see 'wan man a Linstead.' Jonathan does not call this man an Obeahman, but for Mickle's readers there is little doubt as to what this man does. Despite never having consulted with this man, Jonathan is confident that he will cure his son, whom Jerrold suspects is suffering from epilepsy, which is configured in this narrative as a 'modern' disease, for which there is neither treatment nor cure.⁷⁸ Jerrold does not have any medical training, so there is no explanation for this conclusion, but his diagnosis holds more value in the narrative than does Jonathan's. While Mickle's narrator is almost absent, he operates similarly to Aarons' narrator in 'Cow,' to rob Jonathan of his agency by denying him

⁷⁶ Michele Edwards' 'Hurricane,' Fitzroy Fraser's 'The Skull of Doom,' and Timothy Callender's 'Obeah for the Obeah Man' are similarly tragic, although 'Skull' is darkly comic. These stories have not been included in this thesis, but see Michele Edwards, 'Hurricane', in *Focus: An Anthology of Contemporary Jamaican Writing*, ed. by Edna Manley (Mona: University of the West Indies, 1956), pp.68-77; Fitzroy Fraser, 'The Skull of Doom', *The Sunday Gleaner*, January 27 1957, p.10; and Timothy Callender, 'Obeah for the Obeah Man', *Bim*, 12 (1969), 224-229.

⁷⁷ Rupert Mickle, 'Shadow,' *Public Opinion*, June 8, 1940, p.9. All quotations are taken from this page.

⁷⁸ While epilepsy had been treatable, in Europe, from 1856, only in 1929 did Hans Berger report the discovery of the human electroencephalogram (EEG). While many drugs have since been developed to treat epilepsy, there remains no definitive cure. See Edward H. Reynolds, 'Epilepsy: the Disorder,' *Epilepsy Atlas*, *World Health Organisation (WHO)* <http://www.who.int/mental_health/neurology/Epilepsy_disorder_rev1.pdf> [Accessed October 19, 2015].

the ability to come to 'rational' explanations by himself. The absence of free indirect discourse further reinforces the effect of communication breakdown not only between these two men (and by extension their respective sectors of society), but between this scenario and us.⁷⁹ The narrative is as isolated as the setting and the characters in it.

Jerrold offers to pay 6d for the boy to visit a medical doctor, even though he knows that a cure is unlikely. Jonathan reluctantly agrees, even though he is 'tired' of taking his son to doctors – he too knows that 'science' can effect no cure.⁸⁰ A doctor diagnoses epilepsy a few days later but Jonathan has still consulted the man from Linstead, who is now asking for £5 to cure his son. Jonathan believes 'ah do dem do him so;' we can only assume that 'dem' are jealous members of his community who, the narrator implies, out of resentment of Jonathan's relative prosperity have accelerated their own decline in the face of modernity by resorting to Obeah in order to harm Jonathan.⁸¹ Jonathan is not necessarily pitied for his own refusal to modernise either – he is depicted as stubbornly refusing 'rational, scientific fact,' even in the face of his great tragedy. Like 'Bangle's 'old rascal' he adheres to the customs of his forefathers, but 'Shadow' does not celebrate these old ways as curative; instead, it sees them as keeping the already vulnerable African/Jamaican peasantry in 'darkness.' When Jonathan asks for this substantially larger loan Jerrold tells him not to be a 'fool.' Instead he offers the Obeahman, through Jonathan, twice the required fee, provided he lodge the money in a bank – a 'modern' colonial institution – and does not withdraw it for a year, during which the boy is not to have any attacks. Despite the fact that Jerrold knows there is no cure for epilepsy he is considered wise in this scenario, not cruel. Jonathan is a fool however, because of his belief in Obeah – despite his love and grief for his son. It is worth noting that there are no sarcastic narratory asides in this story, unlike those in 'Cow' or in *Beacon* yard fiction. We are to condemn Jonathan, even if we pity him,

⁷⁹ Moreover, Mickle spares us a hackneyed performance scene, and there is no humour or sensationalism in his story.

⁸⁰ The text is interrupted on the page here, by 'The Wind,' a poem by Roger Mais which recalls the wind throughout Mickle's story. Also included on this page is a quiz, set by Archie Lindo, entitled 'How Much do you Know About Jamaica?' and an advertisement for 'Daisy Butterine.'

⁸¹ *Banana Bottom's* narrator also suggests that villagers have repeatedly set Obeah for the Plant family, of whom they are envious. The Obeahman in 'Hurricane' also implicates mal-intentioned neighbours in the central family's misfortune.

because we share Jerrold's 'rationality.' We are not brought into the action, and not expected to be shocked by the resultant tragedy.

The landscape returns, breaking up the action like moving scenery, and propels us a few days forward in time. Jonathan's 'man' will not agree to Jerrold's terms, 'because the duppy a strong duppy and him can only do good work if him get the Five Pound now,' Jonathan claims. The narrator does not provide an aside about Jerry's irritation or impatience, but simply quotes him as refusing to give his money 'to a damned crook.' It is Jerrold who calls Obeah by its name when he tells Jonathan, again, that he is 'really a fool to believe in this obeah business;' Jerry refuses to be a 'fool' by pretending that he does not know what Obeah is.⁸² The narrator refuses to be fooled too: what follows is the longest section of uninterrupted third-person narration, in which the narrator explains that Jonathan has sold his pig and donkey for 'the cure than was not a cure' and is now desperate. We are not told what this non-cure is. The narrator condemns Jonathan for the first time but still relies on metaphor and insinuation to do so. He may deliberately be avoiding specific references or details (as he avoids naming Obeah) in order to deny folk religious practices cultural value, or simply be relying on the readership to fill in the blanks.

Jonathan continues to fight the inevitable, but answers Jerry's summons to his (great)house to speak to him one last time 'about the foolishness of his faith in obeah,' despite his grief. These, the narrator's words, are almost an exact copy of Jerry's earlier words, and implicitly reward the latter for his 'sagacity.' Faced with the 'blatant proof' that 'this man of [his] is a damned fake' Jonathan still insists that it is not the Obeahman's fault that his son is dying, but that 'di duppy too strang, him too trang...' His son would still be dying had he not consulted an Obeahman, but we are not to respect this father's determination. Neither are we to entertain 'traditional' African understandings of illness as both spiritual and physical. Instead, we are to pity Jonathan for his 'stupidity.' As Jonathan weeps, 'the wind [blows] up from the valley' and the sun '[goes] down in the west, making the land bright.' The landscape punctuates Mickle's story again, this time closing it. It began on a 'beautiful sun-kissed afternoon with the wind blowing up from the valley' and, as is common in these stories, a version of this opening sentence is repeated at the end. This

⁸² Like William Brassington in *Myal*, he refuses to participate in 'silly linguistic rituals.' See Erna Brodber, *Myal: A Novel* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988), p.21.

time, though, the day is not starting, but ending. There will be no new day for Jonathan; Jerrold, his efforts finally frustrated, 'turned on his radio,' retreating into modernity and leaving Jonathan alone, wrecked and weeping in the past. Colonial hierarchy has been restored at the end of Mickle's story, but on reflection this is not to be celebrated; both extremes of this spectrum have reached impasse instead of integration, and Mickle suggests that Obeah is to blame.

Yet despite this story's condemnation of Obeah, it demonstrates that 'progress,' in the form of medical advances or religious education, has not been a deterrent to belief in Obeah. We see this motif repeated in 'The Mongoose,' which takes place in a(n assumed) rural Jamaica that is even more isolated than Mickle's. Rovere's protagonist, Aunty Martha, is not portrayed in dialogue with anyone except the Obeahman, and her worldview is scarcely challenged. She visits an Obeahman for what we understand (but she does not know) to be breast cancer, and the story ends in tragedy, with Martha leaving behind her vulnerable son. 'Mongoose' must have beat significant competition to be included in the region's first locally-produced collection of short stories, and Rovere has significantly more space here than in 'Bangle' for character development.⁸³ 'Mongoose' is the only story in this chapter to feature a poor black female protagonist; such a focus defies the 1950s turn towards male-centred narratives and demonstrates Rovere's preoccupation with the depiction of women as agents of cultural identity production in the new West Indies.⁸⁴

The story begins *in medias res*, with Aunty Martha experiencing pain in her right breast. When her herbal remedies no longer work she decides that her condition must be the result of Obeah. The narrator interrupts and undermines Martha's own diagnosis and prescription by claiming that 'she did not know [that] the leaves contained a mild opiate so

⁸³ Other short story collections had been published before *14 Jamaican Short Stories*, including Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* (New York, 1926), Inez Sibley's *Quashie's Reflections* (Kingston, 1939), Roger Mais' *And Most of All Man* (Kingston, 1942) and *Face and Other Stories* (Kingston, 1942), Seepersad Naipaul's *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* (Port of Spain, 1943), R. L. C. Aaron's *The Cow that Laughed and Other Stories* (Kingston, 1944), and Archie Lindo's *Bronze* (Mandeville, 1944). These, however, are all single-author collections.

⁸⁴ After 1950, argues Rhonda Cobham, West Indian writing was 'characteristically centred around single male protagonists with female characters appearing in supporting roles and often being used as symbolic extensions of male characters.' This sharply contrasts earlier literature, in which female characters were the centre of narrative attention. See Rhonda Cobham-Sander, 'The Creative Writer and West Indian Society: Jamaica, 1900-1950', (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1981), p.6.

that, while they did not get at the seat of the trouble, they served to ease the pain.’⁸⁵ With increased space the narrator dominates this story, using free indirect discourse to provide ‘rational explanations’ and snide asides that are mostly absent in the magazine and newspaper stories previously discussed. Ramchand insists on the ‘notable absence of the direct authorial voice’ in the West Indian short story, a convention that is overturned here and that suggests that ‘Mongoose,’ while it keeps its ‘episodic’ format, may be an example of Rovere experimenting with the novel form.⁸⁶ Yet narrative intervention notwithstanding, Martha’s decision to consult an Obeahman is an exercise of control, the best choice for her and for people like her.

From the narrative’s first page, Martha emphatically decides that ‘she didn’t want to go to the white doctor,’ despite the lump being ‘as big as an orange.’ ‘What did he care about a poor black woman like her?’ she reasons (‘Mongoose,’ pp.111-112). Martha fears expensive medication (which would not be superior to her own) or worse, surgery. Like epilepsy, cancer had no cure; consulting an Obeahman is Martha’s exercise of her own agency, and a creole solution to her problems. The Obeahman may be a swindler, but the white doctor is not to be trusted either – social welfare in the West Indies at this time was still in decline and, coupled with strained race relations, visiting a doctor would not guarantee Martha fair treatment.⁸⁷ Martha reasons that people like her have restricted choices; she will die regardless of her choice yet *she* chooses. She first treats herself ‘scientifically’ with herbs, then diagnoses herself spiritually, with the conclusion that someone has obeahed her. The omniscient narrator’s critique of her is obvious, but at least she gives Martha’s perspective, and shows her logic. The free indirect discourse, in this case, weakens what may be perceived as the narrator’s dismissal of Martha’s intellectual capacity; its uncertainty allows for Martha’s autonomy and encourages us readers to be more actively involved in the production of this text’s meaning.

⁸⁵ Ethel Rovere, ‘The Mongoose’, in *14 Jamaican Short Stories* (Kingston: The Pioneer Press, 1950), pp.111-121 (p.111).

⁸⁶ Ramchand, ‘The Short Story,’ p.3. Ramchand tends to conflate narrator and author in his literary criticism. Despite her success with the short story form (perhaps because of it), Rovere did not publish any novels.

⁸⁷ The Moyne Commission recommended a West Indian Welfare fund, which was to provide the colonies with £1 million over twenty years. Yet Britain had spent £6 million per day on the war effort alone. No recommendations were made to address economic stagnation, or to improve local production or promotion of industry. See Singh, *Race and Class Struggles*.

All of these stories contain more or less implicit critiques of colonial mentality, including the supposed 'failure' of African/Caribbean people to sustain 'healthy' heterosexual marriages. Organisations such as the Jamaica Federation of Women, founded in 1944 by the wife of Jamaica's then-governor, aligned themselves with a conservative British feminism that celebrated the image of woman as housewife, and advocated for women to leave the workforce in order to 'free up' work for men. These organisations viewed spinsters as 'leading an unhealthy existence, though it was accepted that spinsters could re-channel the sex instinct into creative vocations.'⁸⁸ Martha is one of the many women who populate Caribbean writing (and history), who are their families' heads and chief/sole breadwinners, and whose lifestyles did not fit harmoniously with these conservative views of womanhood. Rovere choosing such a woman as her protagonist shows clear opposition to these dominant discourses of womanhood but, as Cobham argues, ultimately does not achieve 'the artistic balance between empathy and optimism.' What is more, Cobham continues,

women writers as a group seem ultimately to reject confrontation with the society or with men as a way of dealing with the problems of working-class women and concentrate instead on voicing the women's complaints or extending religious comfort to the women whose hardship they describe. Their tendency to withdraw the women they present from active participation in the fight for social reform anticipates the subordination of female and working-class figures in the nationalist literature written by men.⁸⁹

This is the trap into which 'Mongoose' falls, as while Rovere may respect Martha's ability to choose, this choice is neither empowering nor productive. Moreover, this protagonist is isolated *by women, because of her motherhood*, and has no female companionship. There is no mention of any male neighbours, and it is the *women* in her community who Martha reasons have shunned her because of Willie's light skin and disability. Breast cancer is a particularly female complaint, and the narrative's chief concerns – marriage, philandering men, abandonment by children, jealousy and having 'pretty' babies – are also considered traditionally 'female,' yet there is no female community. Martha interacts with no one

⁸⁸ Joan French, 'Colonial Policy towards Women after the 1938 Uprising: The Case of Jamaica,' *Caribbean Quarterly*, 34 (1988), 38-61 (p.51).

⁸⁹ Cobham-Sander, 'The Creative Writer,' pp.238-239.

except Willie and the Obeahman, and even so there is no dialogue for the first five of eleven pages. The isolation of the moment, typical of the short story form, is carried through to Martha's entire life, which jars with the traditional West Indian literary focus on community and suggests, perhaps, the marginalisation of women in discourses of imagined West Indian nationhood.

Martha's isolation critiques the lack of cohesion among existing women's groups, though, such as community advocates, mothers' groups, teachers, nurses, postmistresses, clergy's wives, etc., which more often than not excluded women like Martha (the backbone of the peasant classes) from their various visions of West Indian womanhood. We have greater access to Martha's mind and perspective than we do Liza's, and there is less humour in this story than in 'Bangle,' but it is still difficult for Martha to escape the respectability politics prevalent in discourses of womanhood, family and nation at this time. Her errant husband, whom she had 'married properly' ('Mongoose,' p.112) but who is not her son Willie's father, represents in this narrative the black Caribbean male 'in crisis,' who would never be fit for leadership.⁹⁰ Martha's other children have abandoned her and Willie is the only man in her life; he has severe learning difficulties however, which his mother also attributes to Obeah, and he is a physical, emotional and financial drain on her.⁹¹ Martha is inordinately proud of Willie, because of his light skin and straight hair, but her son represents the 'bad old days' and the shameful legacy of the colonial encounter, as is implied by his disability and the burden he continues to be to his mother. Here Rovere repeats her suggestion, as she did in 'Bangle,' that exploitative unions between white men and black women do not produce 'healthy' offspring. Martha has not built a family with Willie's father, a white man; the narrative implies that her misplaced pride is a result of colonial conditioning. Her fetishisation of whiteness notwithstanding, Martha blames (missionary) evangelical pressure to marry for her husband's 'yellow girl' setting Obeah on her, in a bid to eliminate the obstacle she (Martha) poses to this younger woman's future

⁹⁰ He is also a violent drunk.

⁹¹ The narrator, from Martha's perspective, refers to Willie as an 'idiot' ('Mongoose,' p.112). Willie can only mutter 'strange unintelligible things,' and 'was a man now, but his mind was still that of a little child' ('Mongoose,' p.113). This characterisation is very similar to that of Crazy Bow, who is also unintelligible, but an excellent musician (Willie plays the flute, Bow the piano). In *Banana Bottom*, furthermore, the son of the interfering missionaries also has severe learning difficulties very similar to Willie's (but without the musical aptitude). Because of this, locals call him 'Pato' (screeching owl). In another parallel between the two narratives, 'Mongoose's' Obeahman lives in a village called Breadnut Bottom.

'respectability.' It would seem that Martha's hostility towards those of mixed race or lighter complexion only extends to women, further emphasising a lack of female cohesion. In both 'Bangle' and 'Mongoose' Rovere critiques discourses of female respectability and marriage politics, but she also critiques female-female relationships – or lack thereof. Perhaps it is because of this lack of community and (female) companionship that Martha resorts so quickly to – and is so easily duped by – the Obeahman.

It takes Martha half a day to reach the Brother Peters. When she finds him he, unlike her, is very much part of his community. This Obeahman is not hiding: 'he was an elder at the Methodist chapel,' the narrator tells us, and 'most of the people knew what [his] business was, but no one made any allusions to it. Not only the church, but the law, was apt to regard obeah with disfavour' ('Mongoose,' p.116). Brother Peters may be unusual in his industriousness, but is typically deceptive.⁹² We learn that Obeah is a 'side line' with Brother Peters; 'white people did not suspect a hard worker in the same way that they would have suspected a man who did no work' ('Mongoose,' p.116). Rovere spends her extra pages on social observation and commentary, and on acknowledging colonial stereotypes, and it is difficult to determine whether these are Martha's observations, or the omniscient narrator's. While he may not be hiding from his peers and neighbours, Brother Peters is still on the 'wrong' side of colonial order, and so must remain under its radar. He is obviously suspicious to us but Martha, just as she was wrong in her diagnosis of the lump in her breast, is wrong about the man she entrusts to 'cure' her complaint.

Martha's exchange with Brother Peters is this narrative's only dialogue and only use of patois. The narrator shifts focus to the Obeahman, but summarily condemns him instead of offering his perspective. Brother Peters is described as 'a small, yellowish man with very bad teeth' – similarly to Buddyjoe, this Obeahman's 'yellow' skin denotes not only a light complexion, but also cowardice and dishonesty ('Mongoose,' p.116). Brother Peters lies to Martha about knowing her rival – a 'yellow' person like him – very well, as he 'knew that Aunty Martha would be a better paying customer if she had to compete' ('Mongoose,' p.117). He is not interested in her negotiations, excuses and presents, but 'his eyes gleamed and his lips parted greedily, showing his jagged, discoloured teeth' as he weighs up Martha's

⁹² This aside explaining Obeah's reception (if not definition) suggests that the stories in this anthology may have been intended for overseas circulation.

cockerels ('Mongoose,' p.117). The narration is now completely detached, and the narrator's perspective dominates both Martha's and the Obeahman's; Rovere's narrative style changes in the presence of Obeah. Brother Peters reminds Martha of something she cannot place, hinting not only at danger but also at something to which the narrative will return at the close of the story – a strategy that many of these stories have in common. Martha ignores her instinct though, because of her faith in the curative power of Obeah. Similarly to Buddyjoe, this Obeahman exploits women who should know better, and who do not have the support of other women.

Martha agrees to the Obeahman's price but she does not know, again, that he will soon be leaving the district and that she will be unable to find him when his 'cure' fails. We are not given much detail of any ceremony, but he gives her lizard teeth, goat dung and chicken feathers and sends her on her way.⁹³ Night falls, and she and Willie are forced to sleep on the roadside, as strangers would shun him. Although she feels better her condition is worsening, and in the darkness she accidentally seeks shelter under a cotton tree.⁹⁴ In her fitful, interrupted sleep she sees strange images of her husband, her rival, a mongoose and the Obeahman. The cockerels she gave Brother Peters were the last in a brood that had been decimated by a mongoose and, significantly, she 'couldn't tell which was the mongoose and which was the obeah man' ('Mongoose,' p.120). The recurrent motif in these stories is often a parable or a saying, but here it is the figure of a mongoose. The Obeahman is a metaphorical mongoose, a sly predator, thief and parasite – we see these parallels in Brother Peters' greedy eyes, jagged teeth and yellow skin, but Martha ignores her instincts and does not recognise these parallels in time. Mongoose abound in the woodland around the cotton tree, literally surrounding Martha, and isolating her further. The figurative mongoose, Brother Peters, has taken her money and, it is implied, decimated her family, such as it was.

When Martha awakes she feels no pain, but cannot move. She believes the Obeah to be working at first but then 'everything was becoming very confused.' For a moment her mind clears, and she finally realises that Brother Peters reminds her of a mongoose. At

⁹³ It is unclear whether Martha is aware of what these items are.

⁹⁴ The explanation that 'duppies live in cottonwood trees, and are usually evil, malignant spirits' is superfluous for a domestic readership ('Mongoose,' p.119).

daybreak the narrative shifts to Willie who, upon being unable to wake his mother, begins to play his flute. In the last paragraph an 'evil-looking' johncrow (which Rovere's narrator calls a 'black buzzard' by way of translation) swoops down, while an old red mongoose 'sat up on his hind legs and began to clean his whiskers' ('Mongoose,' p.121). These images of unscrupulous predators serve to warn readers against the tricks of evil Obeahmen, perhaps better than would or could a frank polemic. Martha and Willie, already victims of poverty and ignorance, are victimised again; even their corpses are likely to be consumed by scavengers. There seems to be no hope for this family, similarly to the father and son in 'Shadow:' Obeah provides no relief from this 'modern' disease, and no alternative for the Jamaican folk family.

Yet notwithstanding its maligning of Obeah as corrosive, Rovere's story is significant for the sympathy and respect with which it treats its Obeah-using protagonist (if not the practitioner), despite its critique of her. Martha dies and would have died anyway, but she does so having taken responsibility for her own health and wellbeing, even though she makes no arrangements for her son. 'Mongoose' examines and decries colonial attitudes towards women and family by focusing on these very aspects of Jamaican life, without becoming overtly polemical. Rovere highlights Martha's motherhood, not her sexuality. She regards Obeah with sadness, not anxiety, and even though she is not hopeful for the future of the Jamaican family, she is not ashamed of it. 'Mongoose' provides an example of the short story transitioning into the novel at the cusp of the 1950s boom, as well as an example of an alternative voice to masculinist conceptions of Jamaican/West Indian cultural nationalism. The stories that follow offer other alternatives too, this time along ethnic lines: they return to the comic mode to suggest Obeah's potential as a vehicle of syncretism and integration, not of condemnation.

Creolising Obeah

The final three stories I will discuss in this chapter, Yvonne Padmore's 'Come Into My Parlour' (*BIM*, 1955), Sam Selvon's 'Obeah Man' (*Trinidad Guardian*, 1948) and Seepersad Naipaul's 'Obeah' ('Caribbean Voices,' 1951), are all comedies that, while they do provide social insights, do not explicitly concern themselves with 'the world at large.' 'Parlour' is similar to 'Obeah Man' in that its plot centres on an Obeahman being summoned to the

house of a wealthy white patron to perform services for someone who supposedly should know better. 'Obeah' shares the others' humour, but is unique in that the Obeah act it describes is a solely Indian affair. The first two stories are both narrated in the third person and in Standard English, but directly quote their respective Obeahmen in their own nation language(s). Padmore's is shorter, and Selvon's narrator gives us more of the Obeahman's impressions and perspectives. All three stories encourage us to join in their mirth as, while we know these Obeahmen to be deceptive we do not consider them harmful, and so we do not condemn them. Those they deceive are implied to deserve it and, in the first two cases, can clearly afford the charges. While the majority of texts chosen for this thesis feature Obeah as practised by black or 'African' characters, these stories, particularly Naipaul's, demonstrate that Obeah is definitely a *Caribbean* practice, one that is not necessarily the domain of any particular racial/ethnic group. These stories suggest that Obeah is no longer 'African,' i.e. foreign, but indigenous – an aspect of culture that *all* West Indians share. All three of these stories ridicule belief in Obeah, but none of them is anxious about the practice's eradication, or even preoccupied with its demystification – they accept Obeah's obscurity, and reject the early colonial obsession with deciphering material cause and effect.

'Parlour' begins with 'Old Joe Jordan' having been 'installed at the Humphrey's home for nearly a fortnight.'⁹⁵ The narrative then moves back in time to tell how this came to pass. Similarly to 'Shadow,' we guess immediately that Jordan is poor and black, and that the Humphreys are white and rich and white. Jordan was brought into the (great)house to 'tell fortunes' – not practise Obeah – and reveal the sex of Mrs Humphrey's unborn foetus ('Parlour,' p.76).⁹⁶ Mr Humphrey repeatedly interrupts Jordan, particularly when the older man goes to tell his employer what he is called, which is not his name. The impatient Humphrey is

not interested in what people call you. I've been told you're a fortune-teller. And I may as well tell you, I don't believe in fortune-tellers. All fortune-tellers are frauds.

⁹⁵ Yvonne Padmore, 'Come Into My Parlour', *BIM*, 6 (1955), 76-78 (p.76).

⁹⁶ Paton observes, in *Cultural Politics of Obeah*, that 'telling fortunes' was often used as code for practising Obeah in the early twentieth century – and that both offences were prosecuted under the same anti-fraud legislation.

But my wife is credulous enough to pay heed to the servants' obeah talk' ('Parlour,' p.76).

Once again, the terror of Obeah in these stories is much diminished some 200 years after the passage of the Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, but it is still feared and misunderstood by the white planter class, which exercises its power to (mis)name this practice as it pleases. *Humphrey* is the one who calls Jordan's services Obeah; like Jerry in 'Shadow,' he says the word aloud to show that he will not be duped – and possibly to dispel any power Obeah may have. Yet his bluster exposes his embarrassment, which he displaces onto his wife, the 'weaker' of them – it is a very thin mask of his own anxiety. Obeah went by many names at this time, similarly to how Jordan does; the importance of names, and Humphrey's denial of Jordan's speech, will soon become significant.

In this initial meeting, Jordan is configured as a spy in the greathouse, an interloper. He has to think quickly during Humphrey's speech, not only because he struggles to understand his patron, but also because he knows himself to have no real 'ability.' It is significant that we do not see Jordan ask for money, and that there is no negotiation scene, as in 'Mongoose.' Instead, Jordan asks for social promotion; he asks for a completely furnished private room and three freshly cooked meals, daily, which speaks to the gap between his poverty and the Humphreys' wealth. These, for Jordan, are luxuries, while for the Humphreys they are trifles – indeed, when Humphrey tells Jordan that he is not concerned with expense, Jordan 'knew by now that he had won, but he didn't want to appear too eager' ('Parlour,' p.76). The 'Obeahman' chooses to enjoy a brief sojourn into his masters' world, and does not quarrel when he is asked to leave on the thirteenth day, having failed to furnish the Humphreys with an answer. When Mrs Humphrey gives birth to twins (one boy, one girl) a few days after Jordan's departure, however, she orders her husband to pay him (we do not know how much) and engages Jordan's services again, this time to locate a missing ring. Jordan convinces her that the ring had been swallowed by a turkey, when in reality it had been stolen by a servant; he and the servant have privately arranged for the ring's safe return. We do not condemn either of them for their deception, however – we know that this minor victory is only a brief respite from their condition of servitude, and that the Humphreys can stand the loss of money and property.

Mr Humphrey, still doubtful, devises 'a final test of the Obeah-man's capabilities' ('Parlour,' p.78). This is the first time that Jordan has been referred to as an Obeahman by the narrator, and he never uses this title himself.⁹⁷ Humphrey offers the 'furtively apprehensive' Jordan \$20 if he can guess which animal is inside a sealed tin on the dining room table. Once again Jordan hesitates, but this time he is not interrupted. He involuntarily ejaculates 'Oh Lord, they got Spider this time!' and there is indeed a spider in the box ('Parlour,' p. 78). This is the name Jordan had been trying to give Humphrey for weeks, but had always been interrupted; finally being allowed to speak his own name functions as a kind of magic spell. It also signifies Jonathan as a modern Anancy and 'Parlour' as an Anancy story, part of a West Indian oral story tradition that celebrates the cunning of the weak with regards to the powerful. We are primed to expect this from the very title of the story, which paraphrases Mary Howitt's poem, 'The Spider and the Fly' (1829). The positions of spider and fly are repeatedly subverted, however, as while Jordan may be the spider, *he* is invited into the Humphreys' (fly's) home/parlour. Part of his 'treatment,' however, involved daily summoning Mrs Humphrey to 'his' room/parlour for examination. 'Parlour' is a light-hearted story, but the Spider/Anancy analogy is of particular import when we consider that Caribbean speech patterns, and the cultural products of the region's linguistic tradition, are always-already something else. The West Indian short story tradition is an Anancy tradition, in which language says one thing but means several other things, too. Jordan, like Anancy, is a slippery folk hero who momentarily subverts colonial class and colour hierarchies with his form of supposedly 'low cunning.' We see this repeated in 'Obeah Man,' but this protagonist appears less concerned with social promotion. 'Obeah Man's 'Old Ramlal' is more conscious of his fraudulence, and more relaxed about it.

Ramlal is another tricky character, and Selvon's story is another illustration of miscommunication (and subversive manipulation) between master and servant. Ramlal is summoned to a house in Port of Spain by a Mrs Bellflent, who feels unwell although her physician cannot find anything wrong with her.⁹⁸ The detached, sarcastic narrator does not take the Obeahman seriously and neither do we. He does not take Mrs Bellflent seriously either – she is not given 'authority,' in the way that 'Shadow's Jerry or 'Parlour's Humphrey

⁹⁷ This is also the first time in any of these stories that 'Obeah' has been capitalised.

⁹⁸ Her husband, unlike Mr Humphrey, is completely absent from this story. Perhaps he does not heed 'Obeah talk' either.

is, and Selvon's story is not told from this white perspective, as is 'Bangle.' Ramlal is a fairly roguish character, who is described as 'slouching' up to the house; his first impression is that it is difficult to burgle.⁹⁹ His assignment is a mystery to him and to us so far, but we are primed to expect mischief. Ramlal is forced, by the maid who recommended him, to enter from the rear entrance and, on his way into the house notices an 'old gnarled mango tree,' which shades a bench on which the madam 'does cool off' ('Obeah Man,' p.91).¹⁰⁰ Once again, this seemingly useless detail is a clue to the final reveal. Ramlal is uneasy with all the luxury by which he is surrounded and decides, like Jordan, to charge Mrs Bellfent plenty, but not too much – neither is malicious, like Brother Peters, and neither man's client, in these cases, is poor.

The initial meeting between Ramlal and Mrs Bellfent is intentionally comical, and speaks to many real-life communication breakdowns between colours and classes across the West Indies. It is clear that the Obeahman and the 'grey lady in the bed' cannot understand each other. When asked if he can 'effect a cure,' Ramlal asks 'Wat is dat?' When asked 'What's wrong with me,' Ramlal replies, 'Yuh all is sick' ('Obeah Man,' p.92). Ramlal has to translate the term 'malju' for Mrs Bellfent, but the term is not in italics or quotation marks on the page. Having initially been published in a newspaper, this detail may not have been necessary for Selvon's readership, and he does not attempt to augment Ramlal's creole, despite Mrs Bellfent's ignorance. This is domestic humour for a domestic audience, but it still betrays the unreliability of language when it comes to Obeah. Ramlal knows that Mrs Bellfent must already be desperate 'to resort to his kind of cure,' despite her bluster that she does not believe in 'all that foolishness' ('Obeah Man,' p.93). He knows that she will have to trust him, but that asking for his expensive fee at once might make her suspicious, so he asks for \$10 now, and \$20 later. He knows, too, that Mrs Bellfent protests too much. We are not privy to their conversation, but having spoken with the maid Ramlal leaves Port of Spain 'with a light heart' ('Obeah Man,' p.93). In another parallel to 'Parlour,' these members of the serving classes work together to manipulate a member of the ruling class and overturn social-racial hierarchies, if only temporarily – Obeah even brings the 'African' and the 'Indian' together. Although she had initially chased him away, the Obeahman and

⁹⁹ Samuel Selvon, 'Obeah Man', in *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986*, ed. by Kenneth Ramchand and Susheila Nasta (Harlow: Longman, 1989), pp.91-95 (p.91).

¹⁰⁰ She had previously attempted to chase the 'coolie' away from 'wite people house' ('Obeah Man,' p.91).

the servant recognise each other as mutually exploited by the white presence on the island, personified by the imperious, yet ridiculous, Mrs Bellfent.

Once home Ramlal selects 'here and there some weird article.' He then soaks a piece of Mrs Bellfent's dress, which he had stolen from her room, unseen, into a 'pot of evil-smelling liquid,' and waits until morning ('Obeah Man,' p.93). Selvon's description of the working of Obeah is brief and relaxed. He is not a sensationalist, and does not exoticise these creole folk practices in the manner of 'Cow,' for example, or older stories, such as W. J. Penberthy White's 'Rebecca's Vengeance' (The *Gleaner*, 1927) and de Lisser's *White Witch*.¹⁰¹ Neither does he repeat the colonial convention of Obeah taxonomy. Obeah is depicted as quite an easy affair, and poses no threat to colonial order: Ramlal does not have to exert himself, and there is no depiction of Mrs Bellfent having to endure a humiliating ordeal; her body – the white female colonising body – remains inviolate. As part of this relaxed approach the narrator makes very little effort to explain the Obeah away – 'understanding' Obeah, or getting to the 'truth,' is not the objective of this story.

The next morning Mrs Bellfent is feeling better, and is colder towards Ramlal. Her mood changes, however, when Ramlal tells her that the root of all her troubles is at the root of the mango tree, under her favourite bench. Ramlal knows just where to dig and, after five minutes, orders her not to look until he has lit a small fire over the hole. He chants some words in creole (which are not translated, even in the re-edition), and in a manner translates for Mrs Bellfent, again, that he is 'sending back de bad spirits way de come from' ('Obeah Man,' p.94). He draws out a box of what he calls 'bad, bad obeah,' shaking his head and clucking, then holds up the same 'weird articles' that he had assembled in his hut the night before. As Ramlal explains them to Mrs Bellfent, the narrator describes them – thus 'translating' and simplifying for us, not directly quoting Ramlal – as 'all the horrors of black magic,' to which Mrs Bellfent 'listened spellbound.' No description or explanation of these articles is necessary, and this section pokes fun at Mrs Bellfent's incredulity and ridiculous position, satirising middle class sensationalism towards Obeah rather than pandering to it. Ramlal teases Mrs Bellfent when he asks for his money, adding 'if yuh want to fine out who do it, dat is anoder deal.' Mrs Bellfent, regaining her composure, insists that she wants the

¹⁰¹ See p88n48 of this thesis.

'scoundrel' brought to justice ('Obeah Man,' p.94). The irony appears lost on her that, in commissioning Obeah, she too is a scoundrel.¹⁰² Here, Selvon lampoons middle-class conservatives who would decry the 'pernicious effects of African sorcery' in public, but still fear the Obeahman's power in private.

This time Ramlal asks for \$20 in advance, as the 'scoundrel' lives far away. This, apparently, is 'just what [Mrs Bellfent] had expected' ('Obeah Man,' p.95), which implies that she deserves everything she gets, and recalls Quashie's argument that a person's real problem is (in) his or her mind. Mrs Bellfent surrenders the money without question and Ramlal, who cannot believe his luck, thinks to himself: 'people stupid all about, even if dey have money' ('Obeah Man,' p.95). This is essentially the moral of the story, and Obeah seems to be the great leveller. Irony may have been lost on Mrs Bellfent but it is Selvon's narrator's chief tool. With its gentle ridicule and light moralistic message, 'Obeah Man' recalls the calypso, a uniquely Caribbean cultural product which that again relies on double entendre and linguistic trickery to reveal a general social truth. 'Obeah Man' is also a type of Anancy story, as both Ramlal and the maid have profited from Mrs Bellfent's stupidity, just as Jordan did. As in 'Parlour' no real harm has been done, and the 'grey lady' feels much better, even after being defrauded. The inevitable 'surprise' ending sees Ramlal disappear that same night to Rio Claro without a trace, but with Mrs Bellfent's \$20. He absconds like Brother Peters, but does not leave anyone dying, and 'Obeah Man's ending is neither tragic nor despondent, as is 'Mongoose's. Selvon's is a tall tale of a tall tale – that told by Ramlal to Mrs Bellfent – yet the narrator does not offer us any rational explanations. Although we are not sure how he did it and we know that he is dishonest, we are encouraged to root for Ramlal and do not require him to explain himself. Whether or not Obeah 'works' is moot in these stories – these clients have simply got what they paid for. Power may not have been usurped, but it has been momentarily duped, from within the greathouse itself. The last story in this chapter moves away from the greathouse and onto the (level) plains of the post-Emancipation sugar plantation.¹⁰³ It figures Obeah as an 'East Indian' practice which, in this case, borrows heavily from Hindu religious tradition, and features no 'African' characters at all. Naipaul's story, as does Selvon's, suggests that Hindu religious practices

¹⁰² It is possible that she distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' Obeah, but it is more likely that she only allows herself to use Obeah when it suits her, and condemns it otherwise.

¹⁰³ With the plantation setting, however, the spectre of the greathouse still lingers.

had, by this time, adapted to the new Caribbean environment, and had in turn been interpenetrated by African religious and cultural practices in true creolisation. It would appear that the *term* 'Obeah,' at least, had become synonymous with any non-Christian, Caribbean, mystical-religious practice. The specifics of the practice(s) here employed are moot; what is of greater significance is the fact that they are neither 'official' nor 'scientific,' and that the client, in this story, wishes to bring supernatural forces to bear on his material existence – this is essentially the aim of all Obeah practice, whether African or otherwise.

'Obeah' was first aired on 'Caribbean Voices' on July 15, 1951. In this story, the only characters we encounter are Hindu/Indian-descended, and we do not see them interact with anyone outside their own ethnic-religious group. The story was not otherwise published until after Naipaul's death and, while it is included in the second published collection of his stories, it is not included in the third and latest.¹⁰⁴ 'Obeah' offers a microscopic view into the relatively unknown world of rural Trinidadian sugar plantations and the 'East Indians' who worked on them. This Trinidad may seem removed from the rest of the island, region and globe, but Seepersad shows that it does have some knowledge of world affairs, if only in the very local instance of Dinnoo, the protagonist, naming cattle Hitler, Mussolini, Haile Selassie and Mahatma Gandhi.¹⁰⁵ This story, written two years before its author's death, is narrated by Gobin, Dinnoo's friend, who relates a tale of adventure to an unnamed, unheard interlocutor, in a similar style to Sibley's 'Quashie.'¹⁰⁶ As such, it too is narrated in nation language, informally. In his critique of the Indo-Caribbean short story, Frank Birbalsingh refers to Seepersad Naipaul as 'the first major figure in Indo-Caribbean short story writing.'¹⁰⁷ Fiction about East Indian West Indians before this time was largely stereotypical and clumsy in its representation of Indians, Birbalsingh argues, who were depicted as 'a slightly strange minority not yet fully integrated into creole culture

¹⁰⁴ The 1976 Andre Deutsch collection includes 'Obeah,' while the 1995 Heinemann collection does not. See Seepersad Naipaul, *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976); and Seepersad Naipaul, *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ I refer to Naipaul, Sr as Seepersad, in order to avoid confusion with his son.

¹⁰⁶ This technique is also employed by Ismith Khan in 'Shadows Move in the Britannia Bar,' which has not been included in this thesis. Khan's story, significantly, ends with the narrator/protagonist dying in the bar, with physical evidence of his encounter with the supernatural (a diablesse) found on his body. See Ismith Khan, 'Shadows Move in the Britannia Bar', in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories*, ed. by Stewart Brown and John Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.110-118.

¹⁰⁷ Frank Birbalsingh, 'The Indo-Caribbean Short Story', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 12 (2004), 118-134 (p.132).

and society.¹⁰⁸ Seepersad's fiction marked a crucial turning point, particularly in its merging of African Caribbean trickster and oral traditions with Indian oral traditions, which he transformed in his retelling of them. His characters, Birbalsingh continues, 'appear as a discrete, self-enclosed community whose members rarely encounter individuals from other ethnic groups,' but whose 'cultural practices have clearly been infiltrated by Western or creole habits.'¹⁰⁹ In 'Obeah,' Seepersad depicts the particular process of religious creolisation, or perhaps depicts creolisation as a religious-cultural process. Moreover he shows that the Indian Trinidadian community, though it may have been physically isolated from the rest of the country, was not unaware of its surroundings, and was indeed moving with them.

Gobin's first words are 'I never did know whether to believe or not to believe in obeah; and even after this thing happened to me friend Dinnoo, I still don't know what to say.'¹¹⁰ Gobin is narrator of this story, but allows his authority to be challenged with this first statement, giving Obeah a slim niche of his religious and cultural worldview. He may be sceptical about Obeah, but is not necessarily ignorant of it; he even invites his reader/listener to discredit him and add to the story. Seepersad, like Selvon, is not concerned with getting to 'the truth.' We can never be sure if this 'friend' of Gobin's is real, moreover; his language implies that he and his listener are not closely acquainted, so Gobin could be talking about himself, displacing any embarrassment he may feel about his non-belief in Obeah. In any case, Gobin begins his story with 'You see, it was like this –' but meanders for almost all of the page into an enraptured description of Dinnoo's agricultural, peasant, skills, then wanders back with 'But that is not the story...' ('Obeah,' p.162). In the oral tradition of the tall tale there are various digressions, which Naipaul uses to give picturesque descriptions of pastoral life – a life that, even as it is described, is changing. This narrative digression approximates to the Hindu epic tradition, too, which recalls great feats and events that become part of listeners' memories and (new) traditions.

The story is that Dinnoo had been absent from work for three days because he had fallen in love with a married woman, with whom he had only exchanged smiles. Dinnoo, a

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

¹¹⁰ Seepersad Naipaul, 'Obeah', in *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), pp.162-171 (p.162).

skilled farmer, had become an effeminate 'sweet-man,' as evidenced by his sudden penchant for shoes, a handkerchief, and hair-parting. When Gobin finds him he is looking 'doleful [...] as though all his family is dead and he left an orphan' ('Obeah,' p.163). Gobin, who sees this new love interest as a threat to his own relationship with Dinnoo, presents the 'affair' as harmful not only to Dinnoo's health and livelihood, but to that of the entire community, which would be adversely affected by Dinnoo's lack of income. Implicitly, too, Gobin suggests that this kind of ('modern') extramarital affair threatens the very fabric of the peasant way of life Naipaul so carefully recorded in his fiction, as it flouts very strict codes surrounding marriage, courtship and reproduction. Dinnoo's individualistic disregard for agricultural industry and the 'proper' social mores – particularly when a woman is married – cannot be tolerated. When Dinnoo decides that Obeah is the best recourse, Gobin tells his listener: 'Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather, as they say. I never knew Dinnoo believed in obeah' ('Obeah,' p.66). Here, Gobin acknowledges his position as narrator, and therefore (insider-)outsider, but he does not condemn Dinnoo in doing so. He is surprised by Dinnoo's belief – it would appear that Obeah is still a taboo – but sees from Dinnoo's perspective that, in not knowing Mohungoo, the Obeahman, he Gobin 'must have looked as a man who doesn't know anything' ('Obeah,' p.166). It is this ability to see as his subject sees – and to relinquish authority over his narrative – that distinguishes Gobin as a narrator, even from 'Quashie;' Quashie narrates his encounter with an alien yet domestic threat, while Gobin narrates himself.

Seepersad's fiction, as James Procter argues, allows 'privileged access to a self-contained culture, translating it for the eyes of an external audience without losing the integrity of the village, or abandoning it for elsewhere.'¹¹¹ This is uniquely reinforced by a narrator who is also of the place and time he narrates. Gobin knows that nothing good will come of Dinnoo's infatuation, and does not place much import on Obeah, but nonetheless goes with his friend to see an Obeahman, and tells his story, because he *knows what it is to feel as Dinnoo does*. Gobin's narratory asides are not actually asides, as he is also part of the action, and he does not dissociate himself from Gobin in order to offer any patronising or sarcastic remarks. He enters the story because he is concerned by Dinnoo's behaviour, and

¹¹¹ James Procter, "'To See Ourselves as Others See Us!'" Seepersad Naipaul, *Modernity and the Rise of the Trinidadian Short Story*, in *The Caribbean Short Story: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Lucy Evans, Mark McWatt and Emma Smith (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011), pp.155-168 (p.162).

reluctantly agrees to accompany his friend so that Dinnoo may secure the affections of his beloved, and that Gobin may secure the sanity of his. Gobin wants Dinnoo to succeed and, even though he warns him of the likelihood of violence to his person, he does not try to dissuade Dinnoo from his chosen course of action.¹¹²

Gobin describes Mohungoo as 'like a spirit, but he seems brisk all the same, with smart, shining eyes' ('Obeah,' pp.166-167). The Obeahman's appearance is impressive, but suspicious; he may be 'brisk as a game cock' and may smile at them welcomingly, but his habit of rubbing his thin palms together gives Gobin the unsettling impression that they are permanently cold ('Obeah,' p.167). Dinnoo does not share Gobin's caution and gets to the point of his visit without delay. He cuts Mohungoo's boasts short, and does not allow himself, or us, the familiar negotiation ritual, as in 'Mongoose.' Although he finds the scene ridiculous, Gobin does not intervene. Mohungoo is not deterred by Dinnoo never having spoken to this woman, nor his ignorance of her father's name – this is another clue that will become significant later. Mohungoo's wife is also to participate in the ceremony, as a conduit for his devi.¹¹³ Gobin describes the ceremony in great detail: the Obeahman's wife is possessed by this devi, who asks for sacrifices in return for her favours. The devi speaks through the wife, who assumes 'a new voice' and speaks in Hindi while Gobin narrates in 'English,' thus serving as interpreter as well as narrator ('Obeah,' p.169). Naipaul, who was writing at the same time as Selvon, still uses his narrator's nation language, which in this case includes untranslated terms such as 'chookoo-mookoo,' 'devi,' and 'dilhahar,' even though he tells us, in Creole, that the characters are speaking Hindi ('Obeah,' p.168; p.170). This scene's repeated code-switching highlights the syncretism of West Indian cultural practice, which is of course multilingual, and never static. Obeah permeates all these barriers, and functions in all these languages.

The ceremony is abruptly disrupted when Dinnoo supplies his beloved's name. Mohungoo's wife takes 'a quick, deep breath, like she got a blow in her belly,' and 'grinds

¹¹² This recalls the prevalent stereotype of East Indian West Indian men being violent drunks, particularly towards or in relation to women. In the other stories in the *Gurudeva* collection, Guru believes that he can become a man by repeatedly, savagely, beating his wife.

¹¹³ In Hinduism, the devi is the feminine aspect of the divine, which complements the masculine. Without her, the masculine divine, or deva, is rendered impotent. See Devdutt Pattanaik, *Devi, the Mother-Goddess: An Introduction* (Mumbai: Vakils, Feffer, and Simons, 2002).

her teeth and gives Dinnoo such a look, that I think if looks could kill, Dinnoo would be a dead man,' claims Gobin. Mohungoo then switches to 'the English language' (which is actually Creole) to ask Dinnoo if 'dis giol a married person' ('Obeah,' p.170). This last code-switch signifies that the spell is broken, and it transpires that Dinnoo's beloved is Mohungoo's daughter. We do not know what became of Dinnoo after Mohungoo's wife fell upon him 'wild as a wild cat [...] hissing like a snake,' and Mohungoo himself grabbed Dinnoo's throat with 'eyes red with rage,' but the revelation is the punchline, and the end of the story ('Obeah,' pp.170-171). Gobin, at least, has escaped to tell the tale, but Dinnoo is nowhere to be seen and can neither verify Gobin's story, nor defend himself. We, the readers, are left to come up with any number of conclusions. All the stories in this section poke fun at those who 'should know better,' but only Naipaul's has both the Obeahman and his client as victims of misplaced belief. A sense of community looms large here, too, as both Dinnoo and his beloved face not only physical injury but also excommunication from their community. The truth of the matter is not important, but the moral, couched in humour, that a community can only stay together if its traditions are respected, is. It is not so much that Obeah is a dangerous 'foreign' import, but that Dinnoo tries to use Obeah to circumvent his community's codes of conduct. Gobin may play the role of a scandalised calypsonian, who feigns shock or outrage to conceal his own delight in telling his story, but his story has a darker message. 'Obeah' hints at the painful aspects of syncretism and creolisation, and the violence implicit in creating a new nation.

Conclusion

Simpson, Ramchand, Scafe, Cobham, Donnell and others all agree that West Indian fiction as we know it owes its existence to the pre-1950s short story tradition. These short stories, in turn, were made culturally transferable by the oral traditions that fostered and sustained them. They may not always have been considered 'serious' material, but authors and editors returned to them repeatedly as they experimented with a constantly negotiated and contested national/regional style and culture. The stories I have chosen for this chapter all reflect concerns with the new nation(s) coming into being, and reflect political and social self-realisation, reflected in the labour unrest of the 1930s, through to the anticipation of West Indian federation in the 1950s. They accept that 'business as usual' is a thing of the past and suggest new agendas for the articulation of a modern West Indies. They at once

celebrate and interrogate notions of community across difference, and the very 'folk' aesthetic that brought them into being. They employ Obeah as more than simply 'local colour,' using it instead to critique wider discourses such as those of romance, the family and 'respectability,' of sexuality and creolisation to provide subversive alternative voices and perspectives on West Indian identity. Obeah may be a regrettable relic of the past, a humorous leveller of power relations, a tool of emancipation or a catalyst to integration. It may be regarded with anxiety, disdain, fear, pity or humour, but it remains an emotive, if chaotic, form of self-expression. What is significant in all of the stories here discussed is Obeah's flexibility, its ability to mean different things to different people, even at the same time. Obeah in the West Indian short story is the element of West Indian culture that grounds and binds all others, while at the same time unravelling any paradigm that may be set for it, and deconstructing any discourse which may attempt to define itself against it. Its contradictory nature allows it to enrich, as well as deconstruct, the national myth of a united West Indian nation.

Chapter 3. 'Part of the narrative of modern art yet not central enough to be considered constitutive:' 'Primitive Modern' in *Banana Bottom* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*¹

In this chapter, I will be focusing on the representations of Obeah in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). McKay and Rhys were both exemplary colonial exiles; born towards the end of the nineteenth century – McKay in 1889, Rhys in 1890 – they left their respective Caribbean homes early in their lives – Rhys left Dominica at sixteen, McKay left Jamaica at twenty-three – and never returned.² Their works address profound feelings of isolation and alienation in foreign lands, but *Banana Bottom* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are the only of their respective authors' novels set, for the most part, 'at home.'³ Yet while all but perhaps two of the characters in *Banana Bottom* belong to a particular local, domestic space and community, all of *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s characters are displaced, calling into question the very notion of home and (un)belonging. McKay's portrayal of rural Jamaica at the turn of the twentieth century is a romantic celebration of an idealised past; Rhys' portrayal of Jamaica and Dominica in the aftermath of Emancipation, on the other hand, is haunting and distinctly *unheimlich*. One of the ways in which this 'home' space is made simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar is through the employment of the trope of Obeah; *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Banana Bottom*, in addition to being Rhys and McKay's final novels, are the only ones to significantly treat Obeah.⁴ Obeah is used in these novels to signify that which is 'primitive,' in direct opposition to – and implicitly threatening to – that which is considered 'modern.' 'Primitive,' in these cases, is that which is 'African,' 'savage,' and terrifying; 'modern' is 'European,' civilised' and

¹ Simon Gikandi, 'Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference', *Modernism/modernity*, 10 (2003), 455-480 (p.457).

² Rhys visited Dominica briefly in the 1930s, but died in Exeter and is buried in Devon. McKay died in Chicago and is buried in New York.

³ Part Three of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in *Jane Eyre* (1847)'s Thornfield Hall, right before Bertha Mason leaps from the roof and sets the mansion on fire.

⁴ Elaine Campbell has identified other Rhysian references to Obeah, in the short story 'Mixing Cocktails' (1927) and in the reminiscing of Anne Morgan, the heroine of *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). See Elaine Campbell, 'Reflections of Obeah in Jean Rhys' Fiction', *Kunapipi*, 4 (1982), 42-50. In 2012, a 1941 manuscript entitled 'Amiable With Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem' was discovered in a Columbia University archive. Permission has been granted by the McKay estate to have this manuscript published as a novel. See Felicia R. Lee, 'New Novel of Harlem Renaissance Is Found', *The New York Times*, September 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/15/books/harlem-renaissance-novel-by-claude-mckay-is-discovered.html?pagewanted=all& r=0> [Accessed May 21, 2014].

‘progressive.’ As we will see, however, Obeah in fact exists in a liminal space between these two extremes, and exposes one’s dependency on the other. In McKay’s novel, Obeah is one of the means by which the community defines and expresses itself, and makes sense of its reality. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Obeah is a means of both protection from, and manipulation by, an alien imperialist presence. Obeah is depicted in both of these novels, though, as the strict preserve of the black rural peasant class, which is resistant to the meddling presence of white visitors and creoles alike – despite being caught up in a European(ised) imaginary and discourse. Obeah seems to be the one aspect of their culture that these peasant classes refuse to surrender to ‘modernisation,’ i.e. becoming more ‘civilised,’ and this (white) modernity is ultimately ejected from their respective pastoral idylls. Those who ‘inherit the earth,’ so to speak, are the folk, the black peasantry whose culture came to define twentieth-century Caribbean nationalism. Obeah is that which is marginal, and clandestine – thus subversive of the two extremes of ‘African past’ and ‘European future.’ McKay and Rhys both critique the primitive/modern binary by foregrounding Obeah’s threshold space.

Much criticism of McKay’s and Rhys’ work focuses on their ‘modernism,’ or employment of ‘modernist’ aesthetics, even though both authors’ relationship to modernism is not straightforward.⁵ ‘Modernism’ is associated with the artistic responses of writers such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf to the technological advances of the early twentieth century. In literary criticism, modernism has come to be seen, argues Morag Shiach, as ‘first as a point of resistance to the instrumentality and alienation of modern life and culture and then as a compensatory aesthetic, and even ethical, alternative to modernity’s fragmentation.’ This alternative is characterised by ‘innovations in the representation of time; complex explorations of the nature of consciousness; formal experimentations in narrative structure; and an intense use of the imaginative power of the image.’⁶ Yet European modernist writers’ experiences of

⁵ See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Joseph Clarke, ‘Caribbean Modernism and the Postcolonial Social Contract in *Voyage in the Dark*’, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 3 (2003), 1-16; Urmila Seshagiri, ‘Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century’, *Modernism/modernity*, 13 (2006), 487-505; Anna Snaith, ‘C. L. R. James, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer: The ‘Black Atlantic’ and the Modernist Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.206-223; Emery, *Modernism*; and Reade Rosenberg, *Nationalism*.

⁶ Morag Shiach, ‘Reading the Modernist Novel: an Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. by Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.1-14 (pp.4-5).

these changes varied greatly from McKay's and Rhys', not least because of race, 'ethnicity,' and relationship to the colonial metropole. J Dillon Brown draws attention to the 'prominent and long abiding' divide between 'critics seeing Rhys either as a modernist (European) or a postcolonial (Caribbean) writer.'⁷ McKay's legacy as a Harlem Renaissance (i.e., American) writer, complicates his position further. Peter Kalliney argues that late colonial and early postcolonial intellectuals were 'strongly attracted to the modernist idea of aesthetic autonomy,' but that 'many black Atlantic writers acknowledged neither the full compatibility, nor the absolute irreconcilability, of their aesthetic and political platforms.' He reads these black Atlantic 'projections of artistic liberty' as 'a realignment of modernist doctrine with the goal of overcoming racial boundaries [and] holding the arts to a higher ethical standard.'⁸ Both Leah Rosenberg and Midori Saito have observed that Rhys and McKay subvert modernist aesthetics as much as they employ them, transforming these aesthetics in the process; I submit, further, that these particular novels use Obeah to expose and critique the imperialism implicit both in notions of (European) modernity *and* in the modernist aesthetics that critiqued this modernity.⁹ Rosenberg asserts that Rhys and McKay expose 'the ostensibly radical modernist primitivism which was deeply implicated in Europe's colonial and national projects.' Both writers, she continues, 'expressed their critique of modernism and nationalism by exposing the racialised sexual politics of modernist aesthetics.'¹⁰ We see this in both novels' concerns with the sexuality and 'respectability' of their respective heroines, and the relationship of these and other sexualities to Obeah. Antoinette resorts to Obeah in order to bring her husband back to her bed, and Obeah enters McKay's narrative through a young woman's desire to express her own sexuality. Both of these novels centre on female creole bodies – one black, one 'white'

⁷ J. Dillon Brown, 'Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys' Critical Discourse', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 56 (2010), 568-591 (p.568). For accounts of this divide, see Helen Carr, 'Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual' in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.93-113; and Louis James, 'Sun Fire — Painted Fire: Jean Rhys as a Caribbean Novelist', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 8 (1977), 111-127.

⁸ Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.5; p.7.

⁹ See Midori Saito, 'Gendered Negritude, Women's Representation and the Novels of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys: Caribbean Authors in Modernist Europe', in *I Am Black/White/Yellow - an Introduction to the Black Body in Europe*, ed. by Joan Anim-Addo and Suzanne Scafe (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), pp.37-54; and Leah Rosenberg, 'Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys', *Modernism/modernity*, 11 (2004), 219-238.

¹⁰ Rosenberg, 'Models,' p.219.

– who must come to terms with Obeah in order to find their places in a supposedly modern Caribbean idyll.

Rhys and McKay's critiques of modernity and modernism negotiate the 'primitivist' aesthetics that shored up those discourses. Michael Stoff defines the 'cult of primitivism' in the United States in the 1920s as manifesting in a rising interest in jazz and the study of African arts and cultures. The image of the black man, Stoff continues, was figured as 'the uncorrupted remnant of preindustrial man' and became 'the central metaphor in this cult [that] represented a fundamental challenge to the effete civilisation of white America.'¹¹ This fascination and fetishisation of 'the Dark Continent' among white artists often dehumanised Africa and Africans however, and presented them just as grotesquely and savagely as did 'modern' discourses of imperialist exploration and expansion. Moreover, modernism defined itself *against* 'the primitive.' As Gikandi argues, (the myth of) Africa presented, for white avant-garde modernists, a fantasy as well as a threat, which they 'both wanted to deconstruct and yet secure as the insignia of white, European, cultural achievement.'¹² Rodney McIntosh reflects that for Caribbean writers the contrast between artistic views of the "'primitive" and natural Caribbean life-style' and 'the corrosive and artificial values of the West' led to 'a tragic and ambivalent situation' in which this dilemma 'could only be resolved by the renunciation of either "primitivism" or the liberal West.'¹³ McIntosh presents this 'dilemma' as one of extremes but these novels use Obeah to reveal the interdependence of these two concepts, neither of which can completely suppress the other. While McKay's critique is most explicit in *Banana Bottom's* ironic narration and irreverent subversion, and Rhys' more subtly expressed in the anguish of her narrator/protagonists, their respective treatments of Obeah expose the lasting effects of this cultural erasure, then appropriation, on colonised peoples.

Banana Bottom narrates the return to Jamaica of Bitia Plant, a black peasant girl who was removed from her village at thirteen years of age after having been raped. Having been

¹¹ Michael B. Stoff, 'Claude McKay and the Cult of Primitivism', in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. by Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), pp.126-146 (pp.126-127). This was a problem for West Indian literary and political nationalism, too.

¹² Gikandi, 'Picasso,' p.459.

¹³ Rodney J. McIntosh, 'Aspects of Primitivism in the West Indian Novel of the 1930's', *The International Journal of Bahamian Studies*, 3 (1982), 37-46 (p.38).

'adopted' by white missionaries who sent her to be educated in England, and after seven years of absence from her home, she finds that she must negotiate a space for herself between her peasant tradition (what is considered the 'African past' in the novel) and her newly acquired intellectualism (a more 'European' future). The 'big episode' of Bitá's homecoming is divided into several smaller episodes, including recollections of the town's founding, the Plant family history, Bitá's rape, and a coffee crisis. We are also treated to real-time vignettes of characters such as Tack Tally, Yoni Legge and Herald Newton Day (all of whom are closely associated with Obeah), and events such as a tea dance and a Revival meeting – what would have been called 'African survivals.' The narrator uses each of these episodes in turn to illustrate historical observations about Jamaican rural life at the turn of the twentieth century, thus establishing the novel as 'a model for that imaginary fiction built around the lives of the folk' which has served as a blueprint for much West Indian fiction that has come after it.¹⁴ *Wide Sargasso Sea* narrates the story of Antoinette Cosway-Mason – who becomes The Madwoman in the Attic – from her childhood, to her unfortunate marriage to an unnamed Englishman whom we assume to be *Jane Eyre* (1847)'s Edward Rochester, to her subsequent relocation to England and into Eyre's narrative.¹⁵ Rhys employs techniques associated with high modernism – chronological disruption, repetition, fragmentation – to critique the denial, in Victorian romance and subsequent literary genres, of the savagery, brutality and dehumanisation inherent in the 'modernity' on which they depend. While high literary modernism may involve 'a certain "dehumanisation of art"' the dehumanisation in Rhys' and McKay's art is the dehumanisation of their characters, who bear the scars of the Columbian encounter.¹⁶ McKay uses irony and satire to show these scars while Rhys uses temporal and psychic disruption. Rhys' and McKay's simultaneous critiques of modernist politics and embrace of modernist aesthetics mutate this genre into a hybrid form that expresses their own ambivalent aesthetics, their own 'quarrel(s) with history.'¹⁷

¹⁴ Ramchand, *West Indian Novel*, p.15.

¹⁵ Antoinette is renamed Bertha by her husband. Where he renames her, Rhys un-names him. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores Edward being denied the name of the father in 'Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 243-261.

¹⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, 'Modernism', in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. by Peter Childs and Roger Fowler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp.145-146 (p.145)

¹⁷ Edward Baugh, 'The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History', *Small Axe*, 16 ([1977] 2012), 60-74.

Obeah is just another feature of rural Jamaican life in *Banana Bottom*; it is a little-understood and largely ridiculed superstition that affects its heroine only indirectly. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Obeah is a mysterious, shadowy presence and dangerous weapon, of which Antoinette is both victim and perpetrator. Both heroines, however, confess ignorance of what Obeah is and does. Obeah's hold over Banana Bottom is clear throughout McKay's novel, despite the narrator's mockery – in fact, faith in Obeah magnetises these villagers, with the exception of Bitia, the novel's supposed hope for the future. There is very little community in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Obeah's role is unclear. Antoinette seeks what she believes is Obeah to protect herself from her husband, but he uses 'Obeah' of his own to defeat Christophine, Antoinette's childhood nurse and 'Martinique obeah woman,' and trap Antoinette into the 'cardboard world' of Brontë's text.¹⁸ Ambivalence towards Obeah and other forms of Caribbean 'folk' belief illuminates both these narrators' in-between positions, between what are considered 'African'/indigenous and European/'modern' aesthetic and cultural constructs. Obeah signifies that which struggles to be articulated in these in-between texts, as it exists in a liminal and chaotic zone of uncertainty. These novels extend the manipulation of what 'ought' and 'ought not' to be known about Obeah to highlight that its power is not necessarily in what it *is*, which is indeterminate in the text, but what it is *believed to do*. Obeah signifies anxiety in these texts, as much as it signifies resistance.

I propose to read both these novels of nostalgia as articulating a struggle between longing for and fear of the past, between fascination with and fear of Obeah, and between movement towards and retreat from the future. I will examine how Obeah, as narrated in this in-between mode, emerges as that which, although it may not be desired in the future-present, remains and repeatedly returns to haunt it. John Su argues that, while nostalgia has been 'characterised as a form of amnesia,' and therefore dismissed in twentieth-century literary criticism in favour of studies of memory, these two concepts are intertwined.¹⁹ I contend that both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Banana Bottom* 'share a sense that the economic, social, and political forces associated with late modernity have evoked widespread

¹⁸ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. ed. by Angela Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p.30; p.148. Subsequent references to *Wide Sargasso Sea* will be made intertextually as *WSS*.

¹⁹ John Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.2.

nostalgia,' and 'consciously exploit nostalgia's tendency to interweave imagination, longing, and memory in their efforts to envision resolutions to the social dilemmas of fragmentation and displacement.'²⁰ Although *Banana Bottom* makes the case for the existence of an 'African' past, this past is not necessarily romanticised in the novel; although *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not optimistic of a resolution, it does present Antoinette's problems as problems of wider social and historical origin. Neither McKay nor Rhys uses their fantasies of their lost or imagined homelands to return to some prelapsarian utopia. Both of these novels use religion – Obeah – as the matrix of their respective culture clashes, and demonstrate that the primitive is not pure, and the modern is not progressive. Neither of these heroines fully embraces, or is embraced by, Obeah, however. Bitia is the only 'native' character who is seen intellectually considering Obeah's cultural merit, but she categorically refuses to be involved with it. Antoinette, when given the opportunity, refuses to 'see' Obeah. In these oblique descriptions Obeah is understood as something which is allowed to be real and significant to the folk characters, but not to the 'dichotomised heroine' (and those associated with her) who must '[weigh] the values of conflicting cultural systems.'²¹ Obeah is not part of the balance these heroines eventually negotiate; for Bitia the consequences are happy, but for Antoinette they are tragic.

Return to the roots in Banana Bottom

Bitia Plant, according to Ramchand, is 'the first achieved West Indian heroine.'²² By name and by expectation she is a child of the soil, and McKay's narrator repeatedly uses horticultural imagery to describe her, even from other characters' perspectives.²³ She is the subject of McKay's idealised return home of the intellectual émigré, but Bitia's return is not necessarily synonymous with her fulfilment. While Elaine Campbell, despite her reservations about the patriarchy of this and other West Indian novels, affirms Ramchand's conclusion by arguing that Bitia succeeds to 'an integration of self through rejection of imported values,' I

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²¹ This figure, identified by Elaine Campbell, must 'settle her dilemma – for good or for ill – through marriage or mating.' See Elaine Campbell, 'The Dichotomised Heroine in West Indian Fiction', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 22 (1987), 137-143 (p.138).

²² Kenneth Ramchand, 'Claude McKay and *Banana Bottom*', *Southern Review*, IV (1970), 53-66 (p.54).

²³ Priscilla Craig, Bitia's English guardian, worries that Bitia may have become a 'deceptive lovely flower' that 'would wither to seed a similar tree,' and that her 'careful cultivation' of Bitia would come to naught. See Claude McKay, *Banana Bottom* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p.72.

submit that Bitá remains imprisoned by McKay's imagination in a reconstructed past, not a freshly imagined future.²⁴ Bitá's rejection of Obeah is representative of an artistic/intellectual struggle with tradition, and complicates the critical consensus that she is 'reunited' with or 'reintegrated' into her native land. The novel suggests that there are some aspects of the past that should stay there, and that Bitá cannot access. Obeah in particular, despite its opposition to paternalistic imperialism, is figured as an outdated and divisive vestige of a less-evolved age, even less evolved than the past of this novel, and therefore unwelcome in McKay's utopia – even as it is constitutive of it. Bitá's being more or less removed from the novel's religious conflict suggests the difficulty the intellectual may face in fully embracing the 'folk' aesthetic; this is particularly telling when we consider that the characters who are most closely associated with Obeah are also closely associated with Bitá. Our heroine does not completely escape Obeah – it still touches her life. It can be seen, therefore, as a ghost that cannot be exorcised from the folk idyll, much like Bitá herself is denied 'exorcism' at a Revival meeting.²⁵ Obeah disturbs McKay's vision of intellectual return to and reintegration with the folk and suggests that Bitá's education away from 'that rude and lonely mountain life' may ultimately be a restraint against her selfhood.²⁶ She may wish to escape this 'primitivism,' but it defines her people, and therefore it defines her – to reject it is to reject part of herself.

Similarly to the yard fiction discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, Obeah is linked in *Banana Bottom* to questions of sexual (im)propriety.²⁷ It enters the plot through Yoni Legge, a young woman who wishes to assert her own sexuality away from the watchful patriarchal eye of her (step)father.²⁸ Yoni, the village school's sewing-mistress, is in love with resident

²⁴ Campbell, 'Dichotomised Heroine,' p.141. Campbell also concludes that Bitá's struggle 'is in some ways McKay's struggle' (p.139).

²⁵ As Bitá is about to succumb to the drumming, she is rescued by Jubban, who will eventually become her husband, just after she has fainted, and just before she is to be ritually flogged with a supple-jack. Bitá is thus denied the opportunity to integrate into another 'primitive,' aspect of her tradition. The next morning the narrator claims that Bitá is 'at a loss to explain what had happened to her,' thus closing down an opportunity to discuss what this 'extreme' folk belief and practice may be or signify. See McKay, *Banana Bottom*, p.253.

²⁶ Claude McKay, *Banana Bottom* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p.123. Subsequent references to the novel will be made intertextually as *BB*.

²⁷ For discussions of the politics of Bitá's sexuality and 'respectability,' see Elaine Campbell, 'Two West Indian Heroines: Bitá Plant and Fola Piggott', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 29 (1983), 22-29; and 'Dichotomised Heroine.' See also Helen Pyne-Timothy, 'Perceptions of the Black Woman in the Work of Claude McKay', *CLA Journal*, 19 (1975), 152-164; Carolyn Cooper, "'Only a Nigger Gal!' Race, Gender and the Politics of Education in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 38 (1992), 40-54; and Reade Rosenberg, *Nationalism*.

²⁸ 'Yoni' is a Hindi word for 'vulva.' Yoni's very name, therefore, suggests female sexual pleasure.

Colon Man and 'undesirable' Tack Tally.²⁹ Yoni's biological father is unknown but her 'exotic' Indian looks mark her as naturally transgressive, and as a symbol of sexual and political infraction, similarly to Benoit and Estelle in *Minty Alley* and *Black Fauns*.³⁰ Yoni is described by the narrator as 'deliciously pretty,' as if she were a fruit to be eaten, and her complexion is 'most admired and desirable among the Negroes' (*BB*, p.64).³¹ She is perhaps the village's second most desirable woman, and a potential rival for Bitá. The position of sewing-mistress is highly prestigious and Yoni's relationship with Tack, the 'first among the rum-shop fellows,' puts her social standing in jeopardy. Tack represents another objectionable aspect of modernity – this time his rude manners, American affectations and disregard for social mores. The narrator lingers, in describing Tack, on his gold jewellery (his 'decorations from Panama') and his American mode of dress, which make Tack highly esteemed among members of his entourage but maligned among the village's more 'respectable' inhabitants (*Banana Bottom*, p.65).³² While the narrator may not be particularly concerned with upholding respectability, he is neither a fan of Tack, whom he quickly despatches from the peasant idyll.

Despite the entire village's counsel against him, the narrator claims that Yoni's head 'was turned for Tack' (*BB*, p.68). She is attracted to his nouveau-riche attitude and determined to defy her father to be with him, even if that means running away to Panama or Cuba, which function in this narrative as frightening yet mysterious, 'unsafe' yet desirable dreamscapes. McKay's narrator cannot allow Tack and Yoni to disrupt his Jamaican peasant paradigm, though, so he constantly undermines them both. Despite her beauty, skill and loyalty Yoni is presented as no match for Bitá. Predictably, Tack pursues Bitá almost immediately upon her return, and is immediately rebuffed – he cannot be allowed to undermine the heroine's respectability, which is of higher value than Yoni's. He drives a

²⁹ Tack's association with Panama suggests that it may be a dangerous, almost mythical place. Priscilla complains that Panama is to blame for 'our Negroes' rude manners (*BB*, pp.34-35). The industrial modernity that Panama represents is a threat to McKay's national(ist) peasant ideal, not least because of the real-life cost of its canal's construction.

³⁰ It is worth noting however that, unlike Benoit and Estelle, Yoni is not discriminated against for her 'coolie' heritage. Neither is she portrayed as cruel.

³¹ Yoni's mother, despite having worked at a sugar estate which employed several Indian labourers, denies that her child's straight hair and dark skin are the result of a liaison with an Indian man. 'Bangle's Liza displays a similar attitude.

³² The narrator suggests that Tack's followers secretly resent him, too. Nevertheless Tack is a success, unlike others for whom the Panama dream had failed.

wedge between the two women until Yoni ‘comes to her senses’ and relinquishes her attraction to him and all he represents – and this only after he dies. Unlike Bitá, Yoni is ‘a simple, affectionate girl’ who ‘preferred to be open about what she did’ (*BB*, p.132); she is not allowed Bitá’s calibre of sentiments – nor the privacy of love letters, which Tack writes to Bitá but not to her. Instead of love letters Yoni, it would appear, reads too many romance novels, and wants her ‘unconventional’ romance to proceed along ‘conventional’ lines. As a ‘romantic,’ claims the narrator, she would ‘like to receive the fellow she admired the way it was done: genteelly sitting upon a couch and pressing hands and more’ (*BB*, p.132). The narrator insinuates that Yoni is incapable of having the kind of love ‘ladies’ have, however, because she is a poor peasant. Rosenberg’s argument regarding popular contemporary romances and modernity bears repeating, here, as in this passage McKay satirises these notions of courtship, romance and ‘respectability’ by making both Yoni and Tack seem ridiculous in their attempts at ‘making love.’ In so doing, he highlights the gap(s) between these cultural ideals and the real, lived experiences and emotions of Jamaica’s peasantry.³³ Yoni is punished for wanting to conduct her relationships according to imported models of ‘respectability’ instead of what the narrative configures as typical Jamaican lines; she is not configured, as is Bitá, as a site of a battle between an ‘African’ past and a ‘modern’ future, a battle which is evident in her resort to Obeah in order to resolve her relationship with Tack vis-à-vis the rest of the village.

When Yoni, seeking advice, cuts into the narrator’s preamble to ask Bitá outright: ‘do you believe in Evil?’ Bitá assumes Yoni is referring to the Christian concepts of Good and Evil. Yoni insists, clarifying, ‘don’t you believe in [...] nigger Evil?’³⁴ Bitá, shocked, is not even allowed to say the word Obeah at first – Yoni does it for her. When she does find her words Bitá is ‘harsh’ in her response: ‘No! I don’t believe in Obeah,’ she snaps. ‘It is stupid. Beastly.’ The thoroughly-native-yet-thoroughly-modern Bitá refuses to have anything to do with Obeah – an integral part of the culture into which she is supposed to be replanting herself. Even Yoni registers Obeah’s ‘low’ status, despite arguing that ‘the Bible says there *are* evil and good spirits’ and insisting that ‘Obeah is black people’s evil god’ (*BB*, p.132, original

³³ Once Yoni renounces Tack she marries another young man (who was also once interested in Bitá) at the same time as Bitá marries Jubban, when Yoni has already had her first child and when Bitá is already pregnant.

³⁴ Miriam, in *Black Fauns*, uses similar terminology.

emphasis).³⁵ At the mention of Obeah in the same sentence as the Bible Bitia forgets her role as a representative of and successor to her foster parents' Anglican mission. 'I don't have to swallow everything the Bible says,' she responds, 'and I could never believe in a foolish thing like Obeah, Yoni, and I hope you don't, either' (*BB*, pp.132-133). Bitia is merciless in her denunciation of Obeah, and does not pause to consider any cultural value it might have or role it might play in the lives of her would-be flock. Neither does she pause to consider her friend's feelings. Bitia's shrill rejection demonstrates Obeah's marginal (and threatening) position in Jamaican cultural discourse, and suggests that the folk who believe in this practice cannot communicate this belief and understanding to the middle classes who would co-opt this 'folk' sensibility into their visions of cultural identity, which will remain incomplete and impoverished. Bitia who, like Haynes, is supposedly capable of 'intellectual reasoning,' cannot apply such reasoning to Obeah, which will forever be transmitted, and recorded, as 'foolishness.'

Bitia reverts to English colonial Christian attitudes towards the folk at exactly the moment she is asked by Yoni, a folk character, to consider Obeah's merit. Yoni is articulate and intelligent but no match for Bitia, with whom she cannot 'reason.' Bitia's severe response is doubly surprising, considering that this exchange comes after her meeting with Squire Gensir, an eccentric, wealthy Englishman of letters who has chosen to exile himself to rural Jamaica in order to collect local songs and stories.³⁶ For the squire, the peasants are a 'hobby'— theirs is not his life but he chooses to observe them from afar, much like the novel's narrator (*BB*, p.71). When Gensir discloses his interest in 'the mumbo-jumbo of the Obeahmen,' which he compares to Anancy stories and European fables (which he is convinced 'have their origin in Africa'), Bitia responds, as would her foster mother Priscilla, that 'Obeah is not the same,' that it is 'an awful crime' (*BB*, p.124). Her answer is vague, rehearsed, formulaic, and shows no real understanding – or even contemplation – of Obeah's multiple social functions. David Nicholls contends that *Banana Bottom* 'argues for a return to the "folk" roots and a celebration of the anti-modern,' but the novel's narration of

³⁵ Ma Christine has a similar position.

³⁶ He is widely held to be based on Walter Jekyll, McKay's own mentor and author of *Jamaican Song and Story* (1907). According to McKay, Gensir is the only of his characters who is not imaginary. See 'Author's Footnote' (*BB*, n.p.).

Obeah suggests that this is not wholly possible.³⁷ Despite *Banana Bottom* being repeatedly configured as Bitá's ultimate rejection of colonial modernity and return to her roots, Obeah is the one aspect of this culture that she cannot and will not embrace, regardless of who defends it. Even as this scene is designed to display Bitá's intellectual superiority it displays her cultural inferiority, much like Haynes in *Minty Alley*. Obeah's 'foolishness' betrays Bitá's ignorance. Moreover, this conversation does not take place between two peasant characters; Obeah's case is not pleaded by one for whom it is immediately relevant. Nicholls continues that the rejection of Christian cultural ideology entailed in the anti-modern folk return is a 'route to autonomy for Afro-Jamaican peasants,' but the only really autonomous and relatively complex character in *Banana Bottom* is Squire Gensir who, despite his sympathetic, if detached, intellectual appreciation of village life is still a member of the ruling class whose imperialist ideology he purports to renounce.³⁸ His gender, class, race and education allow Gensir a freedom that is not possible for Bitá, and render him incapable of any real, embodied appreciation of what Obeah may signify for Bitá and 'her' people. Gensir is very much representative of 'avant-garde' modernist intellectuals who fetishised these religious beliefs (collecting them in books), while dismissing them as 'primitive,' therefore incapable of future purpose.

Bitá's inability to shake the colonial indoctrination that Obeah is necessarily an evil and dangerous threat to progress makes her unable, too, to be the archetype of this imagined peasant autonomy, one capable of expressing itself and its beliefs without being self-consciously ashamed of them. She proudly tells the squire that one of the reasons her father is so prosperous is that he does not believe in Obeah, and uses one of her very few speeches to condemn those who spend their money on setting Obeah against the Plants. She insists that Obeah is 'a low practice' which she, like her father (also a good progressive) detests (*BB*, p.124).³⁹ Gensir agrees with her that her neighbours' money could be better spent but insists that 'one must be tolerant' (*BB*, p.125). Tolerance is a permission that he and Bitá, the educated and refined, have the luxury of granting to the benighted peasants.

³⁷ David G. Nicholls, 'The Folk as Alternative Modernity: Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* and the Romance of Nature', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23 (1999), 79-94 (p.80).

³⁸ *Ibid.* Priscilla is relieved to hear that Bitá is spending time with the squire, despite his atheism.

³⁹ Hidden in this celebration of her father's non-belief (and resultant success) is the intimation that all is not well in *Banana Bottom*, and that Jordan Plant, who has been buying up several small plots of land, may be more capitalist than the peasant imaginary would encourage.

For all his cultural relativism the squire still does not see Obeah as ‘culture,’ in the sense of a tradition to be cultivated – only a phenomenon to be observed from afar, as an artefact. It belongs in the past, a dead custom that will die with the coming of modernity and enlightenment.

For Gensir Obeah is not ‘faith,’ or even ‘tradition;’ it is ‘mumbo-jumbo.’ It is ‘only a form of primitive superstition. As Christianity is a form of civilised superstition’ (*BB*, p.124). While Gensir dismisses all forms of religion as ‘superstition,’ one is more superstitious than the other – and that other one is more ‘civilised.’ In reality his ‘liberal’ position follows a colonial anthropological line of thinking, as does McKay’s narrator’s ‘gentle’ ridicule of his supposedly ideal peasant community. The squire concludes that ‘Obeah is part of your folklore [and] your folklore is the spiritual link between you and your ancestral origin. You ought to learn to appreciate it as I do mine’ (*BB*, p.125). His appreciation of these mythologies, however, is at a significantly farther remove than Banana Bottom’s peasants’ appreciation of Obeah. Obeah, to these folk, is not contained in old leather-bound volumes but is a living, breathing faith – which the squire does not consider. As Paul Jay concludes,

privileging the “natural,” “instinctive” freedom of the peasants over the more abstract, artificial, educated freedom [...] Gensir introduces a set of idealisations that undermine his position. [...] He doesn’t get beyond the binary logic [Bita] invokes; he simply reverses its valuation.⁴⁰

Bita’s encounter with the squire demonstrates that the ‘problem’ of Obeah cannot be solved by binary logic, as it exists outside it. The intellectuals’ inability to come to a conclusion could be McKay’s acknowledgment that there are some things that are lost in cultivation, that the native (or naturalised) intellectual will not be able to grasp. Gensir’s simplistic essentialisation of ‘your peasants’ who ‘don’t know what repression is’ (*BB*, p.121) implies that these peasants, to him, indeed remain ‘primitive’ in the Freudian sense, as they have not had to (or cannot) repress these elements of themselves in order to become ‘civilised.’⁴¹

⁴⁰ Paul Jay, ‘Hybridity, Identity and Cultural Commerce in Claude McKay’s *Banana Bottom*’, *Callaloo*, 22 (1999), 176-194 (p.184).

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud argued, in his first introductory lecture on psychoanalysis, that ‘civilisation is to a large extent being constantly created anew, since each individual who makes a fresh entry into human society

Bitá and Gensir are intellectuals in the English tradition, and their conversation goes nowhere. As Bitá demonstrates in her unsympathetic treatment of Yoni, she takes nothing from this exchange. She, the recently re-grafted native flower, does not appreciate Obeah at all, neither culturally nor intellectually. Nicholls argues that when Obeah is presented to her as ‘a question not of faith, but of aesthetics’ she comes to see that ‘through aesthetic appreciation she can recover her ancestral origin, and no spiritual conversion is required.’⁴² His conclusion is premature however, given Bitá’s response to Yoni and the fact that her meeting with the squire does not end with her agreeing with him. She is adamant in her refusal, or perhaps incapacity, to see Obeah as even culturally valuable – despite the squire’s entreaties, Obeah will *not* be included in her return to her roots.⁴³ Yet while this de-consecration and aestheticisation of Obeah may be useful in converting it into a signifier for cultural nationalism and anticolonial resistance – and, incidentally, making it more ‘respectable’ – the more ‘primitive’ faith element of Obeah cannot truly be erased from McKay’s imaginative vision of the future and remains at its margins as a constant threat, the ‘returned repressed.’⁴⁴

Yoni’s visit to Wumba, Banana Bottom’s Obeahman, is suitably sensationalist, and simultaneously reproduces and satirises prevalent ‘gruesome fascination’ discourses of Obeah. Nonetheless, it highlights Obeah’s pervasiveness and significance in this community, illustrating that

that particular and purely midnight mission was not typical of Banana Bottom only. Of the thousands of native families, illiterate and literate, in that lovely hot island there were few indeed who did not worship and pay tribute to Obi – the god of Evil that the Africans brought over with them when they were sold to the New World (*BB*, p.134).

repeats this sacrifice of instinctual satisfaction for the benefit of the whole community.’ See Sigmund Freud, ‘Lecture I: Introduction’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. trans. James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. 24 vols. Vol.15 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), pp.15-24 (p.23).

⁴² Nicholls, ‘Alternative Modernity’, p.89.

⁴³ Moreover, Nicholls does not consider, in his conclusion, that faith and aesthetics are not separate for adherents of African/Caribbean religious practices.

⁴⁴ See Freud, ‘Introduction.’

Here the narrator also plays with the discourse of the tourism advertisement, common in newspapers and magazines promoting the Caribbean as an 'island destination,' an ideal place for an exotic vacation, and a space of transgression and mystery. He suggests danger beneath the surface of the touristic imaginary – the other side of Paradise – and that the 'primitive' has not been fully repressed. Yet in so doing, this sensationalism recalls the brutality of the Atlantic Slave trade (the plantation in paradise), of which Obeah is a direct result. It hints moreover, at the brutality inherent in the definition of that-which-is-'modern' against that-which-is-'primitive.' The narrator's hyperbole satirises primitivist discursive tropes of the tropics as isolated idyll, and of African religion as 'savage' and 'atavistic.' His ambivalence suggests that despite – *and because of* – the inexorable march of modernity, Obeah is still alive and well in the pastoral idyll. Obeah still signifies Africa, which is still represented as a dark, amorphous, threatening and savage space, but the self-conscious subversion of these various discourses exposes the narrator's 'double consciousness,' both a product of and a voice against imperial ideology.⁴⁵

The description of Wumba himself is blunt, unsophisticated and laboured, and marks the Obeahman as the very image of primitive-ism. Wumba is said to be

a stout junk of a man, opaque and heavy as ebony. Two goat skins were strapped around his loins and from the waist up he was naked except for a necklace of hogs' teeth and birds' beaks. His hands and forehead were stained with mangrove dye and his hair was an enormous knotty growth (*BB*, p.136).

Whether or not Wumba's description strives for realism is moot – it is overly stereotypical and difficult to take seriously. It subscribes to what Joyce Johnson called 'this idea of the ugly, old Obeah man, who lacks visible employment but continues to grow rich at the expense of poor people' and does not deviate significantly from nineteenth-century depictions – it is not modern at all.⁴⁶ McKay's engagement with 'the popular image of the African witch doctor,' here, still suggests that the Obeahman poses a significant threat to the peasant progressive ideal that Bitá's homecoming is supposed to represent.⁴⁷ Yet by

⁴⁵ See W. E. B. DuBois, 'Strivings of the Negro People', *Atlantic Monthly*, 80 (1897), 194-198.

⁴⁶ Johnson, 'Shamans,' p.226.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.228.

calling the Obeahman an 'apparition,' the narrator suggests that his own description cannot be trusted (*BB*, p.136). He thus, again, plays into – and plays with – primitivist aesthetics.

Wumba engenders conflict where there is none, telling Yoni that she 'hab a wicked enemy,' despite no evidence to support this claim, and encouraging her to identify this enemy as Bitá (*BB*, p.138). The Obeahman thus reinforces what Yoni had already thought – that Bitá had warned her off Tack because she wanted him for herself – and reignites old envy and suspicion towards the Plants, who are the most successful of Banana Bottom's residents.⁴⁸ Yoni's mother recalls that Jordan Plant, Bitá's father, was 'a man who was all for himself.' She attributes his buying of all the spare land in the district and his 'bamboozling' the Craigs into educating his daughter abroad to some strong Obeah – despite his family's protests against the practice (*BB*, p.139). While this scene may ridicule Ma Legge, her concerns are legitimate. The Plants may represent 'progress' but their movement into modernity, the novel suggests, comes at the price of the very idyll McKay's narrative seeks to preserve. Obeah, as Ma Legge sees it, is a conduit to success – a means of advancement, not regression. The Plants may see Obeah as an obstacle and may not believe in its power, but they are not totally free from it and neither is their community, which they appear to be leaving behind. This scene takes place directly after Bitá's talk with Yoni – perhaps even during Bitá's meeting with Squire Gensir. Despite all their 'high talk,' Yoni and her mother are convinced that only 'black people's evil god' can help them, not 'sensible advice' or 'modern intellectualism.'

The villagers, unconcerned with the differences between religion and 'folklore,' worship 'the Christian God-of-Good-and-Evil on Sunday, and in the shadow of night they went to invoke the power of the African God of Evil by the magic of the sorcerer' (*BB*, p.135). Even the Reverend Lambert, a black, native preacher who is 'honest and sincere in the denunciation of the practice [...] believed in its potency' – and uses the same Bible to which Yoni referred in her discussion with Bitá as reference and proof of Obeah's existence and power (*BB*, p.134). Despite McKay's clumsy designation of Wumba and Obeah as so distinctly part of an 'Evil' African tradition, he still locates them firmly on Jamaican soil, and in Jamaican consciousness. His simplistic language mimics generalisations prevalent in

⁴⁸ Jordan's nephew Bab is also due to study for the Civil Service in Kingston and to thus, in Squire Gensir's words, educate himself 'up from the peasantry' (*BB*, p.121).

discussions of African/Caribbean religion and culture but demonstrates, even begrudgingly, Obeah's continued presence in modern Jamaican life. 'Obi was resorted to in sickness and feuds, love and elemental disasters,' he explains (*BB*, p.135); as does Ma Christine in *Black Fauns*, McKay's narrator and characters understand that there are certain spheres for Obeah and others for Christianity – and that any viable Caribbean modernity must embrace and negotiate both.

This does not mean that the narrator can accept this easily, however. When Tack hangs himself outside of Wumba's cave – after believing he was the cause of Yoni's father's death (which was in fact a heart attack) – Wumba's fall from grace is comic and tragic in turn.⁴⁹ The Obeahman runs from his cave to the village church (not the Craigs' Anglican mission in town) screaming 'Lawd Jesus judgement come!' and is presumably welcomed back into the fold, never to be heard from again (*BB*, p.150). He is thus removed from the idyll (as is Tack), we are provided with a 'reasonable explanation,' and order is restored. Barbara Griffin, in her brief consideration of this scene, asserts that 'McKay's transformation of Wumba the Obeahman is intriguing. He deliberately degrades him from a foreboding but dignified presence to a fearful black caricature who flees from "haunts" (ghosts) and "the unknown."' ⁵⁰ She does not follow this with any insight into the purposes, effects or implications of such a degradation however, apart from identifying it as another facet of the novel's 'patriarchal meta-structure.'⁵¹ Yet it is not that Wumba does not know from what he is fleeing; he is fleeing from his own guilt and fear of having been outwitted by Obeah, and returning to the familiar-yet-imported Christian faith of his colonial upbringing. Moreover, my reading of Wumba does not support the assertion that he was ever 'dignified.' Wumba may have impressed Yoni, but the scenes involving him are narrated so comically, and with so much sensationalism, that he does not have the same effect on this reader. With Wumba, McKay satirises the colonial narrative preoccupation with 'defanging' Obeah, and with proving Obeah practitioners to be frauds – at the same time as he ridicules those who hold faith in Obeah's powers. He is not so much afraid of Obeah as amused by it, and

⁴⁹ Pa Legge had confronted Tack about his relationship with his daughter, during which he collapsed. Tack had been using Obeah of his own to ensure Yoni's affections, and believed it to have backfired.

⁵⁰ Barbara Griffin, 'The Road to Psychic Unity: The Politics of Gender in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*', *Callaloo*, 22 (1999), 499-508 (p501n6).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.501.

accepts that, despite repeated attempts to fight the practice it will return, as it cannot be repressed for long, and refuses to fall naturally out of existence.

Even after Wumba's spectacular demise, there is little evidence that the threat Obeah poses to modernity is over. At the sermon following Tack's funeral the Reverend Lambert uses the Witch of Endor passage in the Bible – commonly used as 'evidence' of Obeah's validity – to denounce the practice.⁵² The narrator's sarcasm returns as he describes the 'solemn congregation' of 'the most childlike and pure in heart [of] all the worshippers of Jesus' being lambasted by the desperate preacher (*BB*, p.153). Lambert rehearses the well-worn hyperbolic rhetoric of various missionaries and 'native preachers,' telling his 'benighted brothers and sisters' that by practising Obeah they place themselves lower than swine. He closes his hysterical tirade with 'You can't serve Jesus-God and Obi-God,' threatening eternal damnation for the wrong choice, and begs his congregation to 'throw the jungle out of your hearts and forget Africa' (*BB*, pp.155-156). The reverend has the chapter's last words, to which the narrator does not add; such input would be unnecessary as the preacher's words are their own satire. From the narrator's perspective one need not serve either Jesus-God or Obi-God, and the peasants he describes are caught between these two supposed extremes, neither of which will lead to autonomous development.

This dilemma is brought to a head in the 'episode' of Herald Newton Day, Bitá's fiancé. He was selected for Bitá, by her white, Anglican missionary foster parents, without much consultation, and is a caricature of the dangers of colonial ideology on the black, socially mobile classes – a lesson in the dangers of too much education. Herald fulfils the 'black Englishman' stereotype, and is treated mercilessly by the narrator. He represents the worst of colonial mental and spiritual conditioning, and threatens Bitá's modern re-rooting with his lack of vision. He is not an intellectual, but uses his narrow ecclesiastical education to elevate himself above his people.⁵³ He takes himself too seriously, does not appreciate art as Bitá does, and is not as intelligent as her, therefore clearly undeserving of her hand in

⁵² See 1 Sam. 28: 3-25. Revd. Lambert also refers to the Gadarene Swine (Mk. 5: 1-13).

⁵³ He is a theology student, and is expected to take over the Craigs' mission. Yet 'to the critical ear,' claims the narrator, 'there was a sound of too much oil on his tongue like a person who was full of self satisfaction and, considering his youth, on too intimate terms with God' (*BB*, p.76).

marriage.⁵⁴ When Herald is caught in a compromising position with a nanny goat the narrator is gleeful in his description of the 'holy man's disgrace. It was 'one of those pleasant Sunday mornings,' the narrator claims, disturbed by 'one of those strange, unaccountable phenomena that sometimes startle with impish ingenuity even the most perfect Utopia' (*BB*, pp.174-175). With little ceremony (but with much melodrama) the narrator claims that 'Herald Newton Day had descended from the dizzy heights of holiness to the very bottom of the beast' (*BB*, p.175). As far as the villagers are concerned,

in some occult struggle between the unseen spirits Obi had triumphed and was supreme in Banana Bottom. God was using Obi to chastise them for their sins and Herald Newton had been doomed to abomination and sacrificed as a victim to Obi (*BB*, p.176).

Obeah is 'unaccountable,' unfathomable by reason, and 'startles' this utopia – both that of the village and of the narrative. McKay's narrator recognises Obeah's disruptive potential, and accepts that even 'utopia' is precarious and fleeting – perhaps his idyll never even existed. Herald is ignominiously dispatched to Panama and never heard from again – he will not herald a new day in Banana Bottom, or anywhere in Jamaica. Herald's disgrace demonstrates that no one in the village (except, it would seem, Bitá) is immune from Obeah and that while 'utopia' cannot be sustained with Obeah's startling interruptions, perhaps a utopia without Obeah is not achievable. Obeah existed long before Herald, so it is not Obeah that threatens the peasant idyll but him, the embodiment of the perverse, restrictive effects of missionary education.

The narrative, replete with melodramatic irony, describes 'consternation [falling] upon that sweet rustic scene like a lightning ball of destruction' (*BB*, p.175) – and no sure conclusion is drawn. The villagers are convinced that 'the mighty African Power of Evil' had 'spirited Herald Newton Day away from his sermon and his God' (*BB*, p. 175). For the squire, though, with his 'high erudition,' 'the thing was not so simple to accept and understand' (*BB*, p.176). He tries to explain it away as 'temporary amnesia, the result of too much exclusive concentration on sacred textbooks and holy communion,' but the schoolteacher (a

⁵⁴ He is the opposite of Bitá's eventual husband in many ways. Jubban hardly speaks and has not been formally educated at all.

member of the native middle class) insists that 'there is nothing mysterious about it in spite of the stupid talk of Obeah among these bush people' (BB, p.177). The schoolteacher condescendingly declares that the 'ignorant person,' who is 'nevertheless in whole contact with life,' can comprehend 'deviations from the common and regular procession of daily living around him' (BB, p.176). It is the educated who insist on drawing conclusions, not the people for whom Obeah is an everyday reality, and who use it precisely to reconcile contradiction. This Obeah, as an 'ignorant person' may call it, provides the bridge in understanding of events that are 'unaccountable' in a rational, modern frame of reference. It may create strife, but also assuages this conflict, with all the irreverent delight of the trickster.

In all of *Banana Bottom's* vignettes, Obeah is presented as a shadowy reminder of an 'African past' that refuses to stay there. Despite characters' attempts to repress this past it returns to 'startle' the new lives they have made for themselves, according to the instructions of English missionary ideals of progress and modernity. Obeah reminds us of the incompatibility of these new, imported epistemologies of religion and 'morality' with the peasant ('plot') consciousness exemplified in McKay's portrayal of turn-of-the-century rural Jamaica. There is a lesson in Obeah's trickery, that repression of one's natural instincts – denial of one's culture – is not the route to progress. The narrator's treatment of Obeah throughout the novel reveals that, despite his own discomfort with the practice, he acknowledges Obeah's slippery ability to unravel cultural paradigms and expose the fault lines of any attempt to categorise and contain it. He acknowledges, moreover, the integrity of Obeah to Jamaican cultural identification. Obeah may be 'nonsense' for many, but while on the one hand the narrator insists that African power is essentially 'evil,' on the other Obeah delights in undermining these same designations as empty rhetoric – as 'nonsense' too. It is through Obeah that the narrative is rid of its undesirable elements (Tack, Wumba and Herald), who threaten the heroine's reintegration and the narrator's vision of a modern folk idyll, but Bitá ends the narrative alone, with only her son for company. She does not, in fact, reintegrate into her community, arguably due to her refusal to engage with Obeah. The 'civilised'/'savage' debate is not settled in this narrative, whose treatment of Obeah raises more questions than it can answer, and thus highlights the hypocrisy and inadequacy of not just evangelical proselytisation in a recently emancipated slave society but also of the same

'progressive' ideology that opposes it. *Banana Bottom's* chief contribution to twentieth-century representations of Obeah is that the narration is itself ambivalent and inconclusive. It uses Obeah to keep ideological absolutism in check and expose, then balance, primitive/modern manichaeism.

(Re)turning and (re)turning in Wide Sargasso Sea

Both of these novels explore the notion of 'an African past' as manifested in religious praxis, but 'Africa' in *Wide Sargasso Sea* more aptly, to borrow from Supriya Nair, fulfils a role 'similar to that of Hamlet's ghost' – a parent who has been murdered and usurped and cannot rest in his grave, so returns to haunt his child, the Caribbean, so that he may be avenged.⁵⁵ This 'African past,' in Rhys' novel, offers Antoinette neither refuge nor comfort, and Rhys uses Obeah to signify this past reconfigured in the Caribbean present – a present whose insecurity is reflected in the novel's unsteady, untrustworthy narration. This present, the immediate aftermath of plantation slavery, is personified in Christophine, the character most associated with Antoinette's own past, with Africa, and with Obeah. Antoinette, as a white creole born after Emancipation, is disconnected from the pasts of both Africa and of plantation slavery, but their repeated and repeating hauntings nevertheless threaten her safety, as well as the integrity of Rhys' narrative. This past is at once intriguing to Antoinette and destructive; the Obeah she seeks out, despite being told it is not 'for' her, does not protect her from the 'modern' imperialism of her English husband, with whom she may share skin colour – almost – but not culture. Antoinette cannot find a place between her husband's 'modernity' and Christophine's 'primitivism.' These two represent Antoinette's future and past, respectively, and each employs Obeah – what is *considered to be Obeah* – to lay claim to Antoinette, who finds that her only option is silence: it is the only space she can occupy. In addition to signifying 'Africa' and operating at the threshold between past and present, Obeah functions in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a tool for possession, a means of exercising control over the creole female body which, as with Bitia, signifies the West Indies themselves.

⁵⁵ Supriya Nair, *Caliban's Curse: George Lamming and the Revisioning of History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 13.

Although Antoinette is Part I's narrator, Christophine is the first identified speaker in the novel. Her expression – 'she pretty like pretty self' – remains with Antoinette throughout her life, even during her exile and 'madness' (*WSS*, p.5). Keith Russell argues that Christophine's repetitive speech indicates childishness, but repetition of adjectives is common in West African and Caribbean speech at all ages.⁵⁶ Moreover, Christophine's words are almost always insightful: with this simple phrase she succinctly and insightfully outlines the particularly perilous position of a white creole woman at the end of plantation slavery, at once explaining the other (white) Jamaican women's animosity towards Antoinette's mother and the politics of white creole womanhood. She later describes money as being 'pretty like pretty self' when explaining Antoinette's husband's motivations for marriage (*WSS*, p.72), thus linking creole women and money as commodities of the colonial encounter. Christophine only speaks when she chooses to, and her words are often portentous – distinctly *not* juvenile. She chooses the language(s) in which she speaks and is at any given time *deliberately* unintelligible to someone – particularly Antoinette's husband.⁵⁷ When Christophine chooses silence she chooses it as protection (much like Antoinette learns to, but with less tragic consequences), and as a weapon. While I agree with Russell that Christophine's language(s) underscore her 'ability to seamlessly flow between different cultural and lingual groups [...] to have the most impact in a given situation,' and that her 'verbal agility commands attention from every character she contacts,' I would observe further that Christophine is particularly threatening *because* she is 'unintelligible.'⁵⁸ Although her words are always contained within Antoinette's or her husband's narration (she is only portrayed in conversation with at least one of them), Christophine's words are the text's most significant, and disruptive. I will return to this in due course.

⁵⁶ Keith A. Russell, "'Now Every Word She Said Was Echoed, Echoed Loudly in My Head:": Christophine's Language and Refractive Space in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 37 (2007), 87-103 (p.89).

⁵⁷ We are told early in the novel that Christophine 'could speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois.' Later, when Christophine is introduced to Antoinette's husband, he claims that 'her language is horrible.' Antoinette counters that Christophine speaks very good English, but he is infuriated by the older woman's refusal to make herself intelligible to him, and concludes that Christophine is lazy and stupid (*WSS*, p.6; pp.52-53).

⁵⁸ Russell, 'Every Word,' (pp.93-94).

In addition to her linguistic dexterity, Christophine's appearance also marks her difference. Antoinette describes her as:

not like the other women. She was much blacker – blue-black with a thin face and straight features. [...] No other negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion. She had a quiet voice and [took] care to talk as they talked. But they would have nothing to do with her (WSS, p.7).

The locals, black and white, avoid Christophine out of a mixture of xenophobia and ignorance, yet the black residents bring her tributes of fruit and vegetables, which suggests even reluctant respect – mixed with fear – for Christophine as a woman of extraordinary powers. Christophine remains profoundly isolated, though, and her criminal history – which again is only alluded to – suggests that she may be dangerous, despite the protective role she plays in Antoinette's life.⁵⁹ Her quietness suggests that she is a keeper of secrets, a person who sees without being seen (or heard), who exists in spaces of silence – as does Obeah in this text.⁶⁰ Her peculiar dress is defiantly dull against the rich colours of the landscape, and the darkness of her skin intimates a stronger connection to Africa than her neighbours. Her multilingualism (she sings different songs to the Jamaican songs) and Catholicism further indicate that Christophine is not 'of here,' and demonstrate her, and Obeah's, ambivalent and disturbing positions.

During her writing process Rhys was particularly vexed with Christophine and with Obeah. She claimed that Obeah was the 'first clue' to unlocking Antoinette's relationship with her husband and thus the entire narrative – and I would argue that it is.⁶¹ As in *Banana Bottom*, Obeah is strongly associated with sex in *Wide Sargasso Sea* – particularly the brief, tumultuous relationship between Antoinette and her husband. Rhys insisted that they had to be 'magicked' with each other because, as Rhys told her then-editor, 'that is what it is – magic, intoxication. Not "Love" at all.' Obeah, or 'magic,' replaces love for Antoinette and her husband, who fall under the 'spell of the tropics,' what Rhys called 'the magic of the place, which is not all lovely beaches or smiling people – it can be a disturbing kind of

⁵⁹ It also suggests colonial misunderstandings of her practice.

⁶⁰ Perhaps this is why her laughter perturbs Antoinette's husband so much.

⁶¹ Jean Rhys, *Jean Rhys: Letters, 1931-1966*. ed. by Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (London: Penguin, 1985), p.262.

beauty.⁶² As in McKay's narrative, Obeah is key to unsettling Rhys' Caribbean dystopic/utopic landscape, too. Like McKay, Rhys writes Obeah as the frightful underside of tropical paradise; Obeah also 'startles' this utopia. Yet despite Rhys' insistence on Obeah's centrality to her story – 'from the start it must be made clear that Christophine is an "Obeah woman,"' – Obeah's introduction into the narrative is not straightforward.⁶³ Christophine never utters the word 'Obeah,' and we do not see her perform any rituals. Early in the novel Antoinette reflects that 'it was their talk about Christophine that changed Coulibri [her childhood home], not the repairs or the new furniture or the strange faces. Their talk about Christophine and Obeah changed it' (WSS, p.14). It is *other people's talk* (i.e., colonial misconceptions about Obeah), not Obeah itself, that shatters Antoinette's childhood idyll, and that haunts Rhys' narrative. These malicious, anonymous gossipers (and later, a colonial official) determine Christophine 'a Martinique obeah woman,' not Christophine herself. Before this talk, Antoinette had been relatively safe, despite her poverty, under Christophine's protection. After, with more scrutiny of Christophine's activities, the bond between the young girl and her nurse became strained. Rhys regretted, in a later letter to her publisher, that 'the most seriously wrong thing with Part II is that I've made the obeah woman, the nurse, too articulate.'⁶⁴ This could suggest that Christophine and Obeah are indeed too 'primitive' to command so much narrative power, or it could speak to Rhys' desire to equate Obeah with that which cannot be explained – to present Obeah itself as 'unintelligible.' In any case Christophine is the novel's signifier of Obeah, and neither can be fully captured by Rhys' fragmentary, unreliable narrative.

Christophine is a vague signifier, and her 'Obeah' is even vaguer; it is introduced into this text not as what it is, but as what people believe about it. Immediately after her reflection on people's *talk* about Christophine and Obeah, Antoinette recalls one day being 'certain that hidden in [Christophine's] room' was 'a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly' (WSS, p.14). She *imagines* hearing the cock's blood dripping into a red basin, and reflects that although 'no one had ever spoken to me about Obeah [I] knew what I would find if I dared to look' (WSS, p.15). The child, understandably frightened, invents her own Obeah – she does not discuss what she

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.297.

does not see with anyone. Obeah thus comes to us via the terrified consciousness of a child – a child who is an outsider by nature because of the colour of her skin. In turn, Antoinette reflects her author's own terrified consciousness: Rhys, in an attempt to describe Obeah to her editor, claimed that 'the god himself enters the person who has drunk [a potion]. Afterwards he (or she) faints [...] I wouldn't know,' which sounds more like possession by a loa, in Vodun, than the practices of Obeah. She then claimed that 'a Zombie is a dead person raised up by the Obeah woman [...] a zombie can take the appearance of anyone. Or anything.'⁶⁵ Zombification is not commonly associated with Obeah, at least not in the Anglophone Caribbean, and Rhys' description, while it may hint at the syncretism of all Caribbean religious practice, more likely reflects her ignorance. Antoinette's imagined projection, therefore, cannot possibly be 'real.' Rhys may have been adamant that Christophine be understood as an Obeahwoman but her narration of her comes in the form of allusions, suggestions, imaginations and rumours. In this sense Christophine *is* inarticulate and Obeah, in this novel, cannot be 'rationally' narrated.

On her second visit to Christophine's hut, this time as an adult, Antoinette actually does see chicken feathers in the corner, but looks no further.⁶⁶ She refuses, again, to learn or even see what Obeah may be, and continues without knowing, and without speaking her ignorant silence (WSS, p.74). Since Christophine will not speak her knowing silence, Obeah remains a fabrication of white creole minds, without its alleged practitioner ever having an opportunity to explain herself – though it is doubtful that Christophine would take such an opportunity. This particular subaltern will not speak, and is represented, as Gayatri Spivak has argued, 'as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness' – irretrievable to *béké*, the white seeing/narrating individual.⁶⁷ *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds 'Obeah's creation as a translated subject of colonial discourse; as such, its meaning is always incomplete. It cannot be known by *béké*, and so remains outside the text. Its treatment in the text – its co-optation by Antoinette and her husband – reminds us that 'the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject [will] cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.262-263.

⁶⁶ Antoinette's unfamiliarity with Christophine's home highlights the young woman's distance from her only constant companion, despite her dependence on her.

⁶⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp.271-313 (p.287). *Béké* is a French creole term for 'white person.' It is unclear if its usage in this novel is derogatory.

mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilisation.⁶⁸ It is what Rhys' narrative *cannot say*.

The novel's only confirmed Obeah act – if we take Obeah to mean the use of charms, powders, potions and/or fetishes – is also its pivotal scene. In her letters Rhys referred to this as the 'Obeah night,' during which Antoinette spikes her husband's drink with a powder she compelled Christophine to prepare for her, and then spreads some of this same powder across the threshold of his bedroom.⁶⁹ Antoinette had intended this powder to make her husband love her again but he, believing he has been 'poisoned,' uses this to justify his ultimate cruelty towards her – removing her from everything she finds familiar (if threatening) and imprisoning her in the Attic. The night itself, like Obeah, is vague; neither participant remembers (or narrates) it clearly. After having visited Daniel Cosway, who had written to him, unsolicited, with salacious and damning details about Antoinette and her family's past, the husband seems willing to hear Antoinette's 'other side' (WSS, p.82).⁷⁰ She agrees to talk to him somewhat reluctantly, but then tells him that the truth is 'forgotten.' He begins to wonder 'how much of all this was true, how much imagined, distorted' (WSS, p.84), and she tells him that 'words are no use' (WSS, p.86). He agrees to separation – suggested by Christophine – but Antoinette insists on using Obeah to keep him, although she admits that he is the source of her unhappiness.⁷¹ In his retrospective narration, the husband insists that 'she need not have done what she did to me' (WSS, p.87).⁷²

Antoinette's (mis)use of Obeah accelerates her own destruction, even as she engages with it as an exercise of her agency – this Obeah Night demonstrates, indeed, that Obeah can both kill and cure. He had simply wanted her to talk, to narrate, to 'rationalise,' but her refusal of this 'modern' method of reconciliation in favour of the 'primitive' use of Obeah compounds Antoinette's isolation (even from Christophine) and leads to her

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.295.

⁶⁹ Rhys included the poem 'Obeah Night' in one of her letters. It has not otherwise been published. In it, the husband describes his dismay at having been deceived by his wife. See Rhys, *Letters*, p.264-266.

⁷⁰ Daniel Cosway claims to be Antoinette's half-brother, the illegitimate son of her father. He is particularly embittered towards Antoinette and her family, and is an extreme example of the poisonous effects of the colonial encounter.

⁷¹ Antoinette is miserable in her marriage, but balks at Christophine's suggestion of divorce or separation because of her own concerns with 'respectability.'

⁷² It is important to note here that Antoinette's victimhood is not absolute. Like Ella O'Grady in *Myal* and all the significant female characters in *When Rocks Dance* Antoinette is complicit in her own victimisation, however well-intentioned and/or misinformed she may be.

imprisonment in the 'cardboard world' of Jane Eyre's diaries (WSS, p.117). Antoinette's use of Obeah does not liberate her, and runs counter to prevalent narratives of Obeah as a tool of resistance for figures such as Nanny of the Maroons, Tacky and Dutty Boukman – all of whom were black, which Antoinette is not. Moreover, these historical figures each used Obeah to precipitate and perpetuate an African-creole community's armed resistance to colonial imperialism – particularly the system of plantation slavery – and to usher in new ages of cultural nationalism. Antoinette, by contrast, acts alone, against a man who at least looks like her, without a community of which to speak. Instead of strengthening her claim to this land, Antoinette's use of Obeah accelerates her departure from it.

Rhys strongly implies that Antoinette has no business meddling with Obeah. *Her* West Indian identity is not the same as Christophine's, and her understanding of the region's culture is critically flawed. Antoinette does not quite grasp *how* Obeah works, but simply that it can and does; she assumes, therefore, that it will work for her. She does not ask Christophine to teach her (she refuses to 'see' Obeah when she has the chance), and does not appreciate what Christophine knows, that Obeah does not belong in the sphere, or serve the concerns of, *béké*. Even as she refuses her nurse's advice that she leave her husband, thinking her an 'ignorant, obstinate old negro woman' because she is not certain if England exists, Antoinette forces a 'cure' out of Christophine despite the older woman's warning that 'If the man don't love you, I can't make him love you' (WSS, pp.70-71). Antoinette does not pause to consider the implications of her request, and again, the Obeahwoman's 'ignorance' only highlights her own. Obeah, for Christophine, has little to do with 'love,' and Antoinette fundamentally misunderstands this; once again, the fiction under consideration in this thesis suggests that 'romance,' as it is conventionally understood, has no place in the West Indies.⁷³ Antoinette cannot see Christophine as anything other than a 'primitive,' albeit powerful, Obeahwoman who cannot share her delicate sentiments, and so ignores her advice, forcing Christophine instead to fulfil the role Antoinette has already imagined for her (but which Christophine herself has never confirmed) as a worker of spells and magic.⁷⁴ Antoinette does not know much about Obeah, but neither does she know much about love; her combination of these two concepts has disastrous consequences.

⁷³ Christophine's sentiments echo those of the washerwomen in *Black Fauns*.

⁷⁴ Su argues that Antoinette 'reproduces the tendency of the former slaveholders to deny blacks independent subjectivities.' See Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia*, p.60.

Christophine refuses Antoinette's money – another mistake the young woman makes – claiming to only 'do this foolishness because you beg me – not for money' (WSS, p.74). In this scene Christophine refers to Obeah – what Antoinette believes is Obeah – as 'foolishness' five times, and as 'folly' and 'tim-tim story,' implying that Antoinette's belief is childish and misinformed (WSS, pp.67-75).⁷⁵ We suspect that there is something that Christophine is hiding, even as it is possible that the 'foolishness' she refers to is not Obeah itself, but Antoinette's insistence on something that is not for her, and cannot work for her. Once again Christophine articulates herself, *but at the same time makes herself unintelligible*, with her sarcastic remark just before Antoinette leaves that 'if *béké* say it foolishness, it foolishness. *Béké* clever like the devil. More clever than God. Ain't so?' (WSS, p.70, original emphasis). Christophine may be mocking Antoinette here, ridiculing the dialectic concept of Absolute Good vs Absolute Evil that is antithetical to many precolonial African religions, but her speech illustrates her own position, as a black woman and former slave, at the bottom rung of the colonial ladder. Christophine's elusive speech suggests that she knows that Antoinette will never see, understand or appreciate her for what she is; her words cannot be 'trusted,' therefore, not because she may not be speaking 'the truth' but because she speaks within the discursive and cultural hierarchy of colonialism, which strips her (and her words) of value. Whatever we see Christophine say is actually Antoinette's confused recollections. Whatever Obeah may be is thus moot – it is an unstable category within the modern/European framework of the novel, and so cannot have a tangible meaning to its narrators. Obeah is what *béké* says it is, not what *béké* knows it is; *béké* can never know what it is, so Obeah means (is) nothing.

As she leaves Antoinette hears a cock crow and thinks to herself: 'That is for betrayal, but who is the traitor?' (WSS, p.74) The parallels between Christ and Judas Iscariot, and Christophine and Antoinette, are not incidental, yet it is unclear which is which – either woman may have betrayed the other, or Obeah may have betrayed them both.⁷⁶ It is even possible that Obeah may have been betrayed, as it is now in the hands of *béké*. Christophine could finally exacting be her revenge on *béké* for her enslavement and servitude by teaching Antoinette a lesson, but we will never know. Antoinette knows she should not have asked

⁷⁵ 'Tim tim?' 'Bois sec!' is the call and response at the beginning of French creole children's folk tales.

⁷⁶ As Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, Antoinette's husband was 'sold' for thirty thousand pounds – Antoinette's 'dowry.'

for this 'favour,' and the relationship between the two women will never be the same. Even money, which Christophine claimed is pretty like pretty self, is made 'ugly' by their transaction (WSS, p.75). Obeah opens up a chasm in Antoinette and Christophine's relationship; perhaps it widens the chasm (of race and class) that was already there, despite their shared womanhood. They are no longer friends – if they ever were – but are now simply client and consultant, supplicant and benefactor. As disruptive a presence as Obeah might be, its explicit use in the text reinforces old colonial hierarchy, and acts counter to cohesion.

The 'Obeah night' comes shortly after Christophine 'abandons' Antoinette, which is shortly after Cosway's first letter to Antoinette's husband, whose affections towards his wife have waned as he cannot shake his obsession with her racial 'impurity.' Christophine announces that she is leaving, saying only that 'I see enough trouble' and 'I have right to my rest' (WSS, p.63).⁷⁷ Her leaving is abrupt, and her explanation unsatisfactory. She leaves Antoinette at her most vulnerable, 'marooned' like her mother was in a haunted, isolated house, surrounded by people who hate her (WSS, p.6). This triggers in Antoinette a similar descent into 'madness' – she becomes, even more, an echo of her mother's ghost.⁷⁸ Antoinette will not or cannot tell her husband her past – speak her silence – and so he places value in that which can be read and traced, Daniel's letter, even though these sources may themselves be fabrications.⁷⁹ The husband can only understand narrative, not silence, and exists only within this (scribal) epistemology. Having spent the first days of his honeymoon delirious with fever (from which he never quite recovers), his sense of foreboding is exacerbated by not having access to (or means to obtain) the 'truth,' as he understands it – the version of it that has been recorded and certified via the written word. He confesses retrospectively – having failed to *write his father a letter* – that his 'confused impressions [will] never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up' (WSS, p.46). The blank impressions pertain to Obeah, that which cannot be fixed in text, and

⁷⁷ Unlike Antoinette Christophine has her own house and land, which she has not sacrificed to marriage. She may therefore be less 'respectable,' but she is freer. It is arguably Christophine's interference into her mistress' marriage, however, that is the real 'bone of contention' between her and her husband (WSS, p.63).

⁷⁸ Antoinette's mother, also (white) creole, ended her life as an isolated, alcoholic 'lunatic.'

⁷⁹ Similarly to Ella recounting her past for her husband in *Myal*, 'the half will not be told.' See Chapter Five of this thesis.

about which Antoinette is persistently silent. Obeah seems to pervade all he encounters, but he cannot grasp its meaning.

After witnessing Christophine's dramatic exit the husband stumbles on what appears to be an Obeah offering in the woods near the house, but is again denied 'the truth' by Baptiste the overseer, who insists that he 'don't know nothing about all that foolishness' and that there is no road there (WSS, p.66).⁸⁰ Again frustrated, the husband turns to an old travel narrative called *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* for an explanation of zombies and Obeah. The writer concludes his determinations with 'So I was told, but I have noticed that negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe. [...] The white people, sometimes credulous, pretend to dismiss the whole thing as nonsense' (WSS, p.67). Even in the written word, the Englishman cannot find 'the truth,' if there is such a truth to be found. The writer of this account can only report what he has been told – or rather what he has *not* been told. In matters of Obeah, imperialistic notions of 'foolishness' cannot be trusted, and even this writer acknowledges that he can never be sure – this does not stop him, of course, from publishing his non-findings. The 'scholarly' text, which the husband takes as inviolate, is incomplete and unreliable; its author cannot definitively say what Obeah *is*, but only what it is *said* to do. Baptiste knows that his remarks are not 'true' either, but he simply parrots the words that he assumes *béké* wants to hear, or is capable of understanding. Baptiste, too, appreciates the value of silence; more than anything, he wants *béké* to leave him alone.

Subsequently, Antoinette's husband filters all his recent experiences through the colonial traveller's tale. Rather than hurt her physically his violence towards Antoinette is epistemic, and therefore more lasting.⁸¹ He renames her Bertha, to which Antoinette can only respond 'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too' (WSS, p.94). Antoinette was also her mother's name, and with Bertha he begins to erase whatever history his wife had and replace it with his own – in effect, committing an epistemological hate crime. His hate for her is consolidated when (because) she refuses reconciliation on his own terms. She had

⁸⁰ Baptiste's response is similar to Sibley's 'Quashie' and Rovere's 'old rascal.'

⁸¹ Spivak defined 'epistemic violence' as 'the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project,' she continued, 'is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of the Other in its precarious Subject-ivity.' See Spivak, 'Subaltern,' pp.280-281.

claimed she wanted to talk, to tell him 'anything you wish to know, but in a few words,' but deliberately omitted to disclose her visit to Christophine – once again, Obeah is silence (WSS, p.86). Antoinette refuses to speak to her husband in a language he understands, and perhaps she cannot. Perhaps Rhys' novel is suggesting that Obeah cannot indeed be communicated to *béké*. Antoinette is the only one of these characters to use the word 'Obeah;' her husband simply insists that he has been 'poisoned,' even as he admits that he cannot remember (cannot discursively express) what may or may not have happened to him, which may or may not have been the result of Obeah. He does not remember his passionate desire for Antoinette and, despite his obsession with mixed (and therefore inferior) blood, he sees no problem with committing adultery the next morning with a servant who is slightly darker than Antoinette, who had called her a 'white cockroach' (WSS, p.62). 'Obeah' has turned him, it would seem, into a caricature of the racist, lascivious white planter.

In an unpublished manuscript of the novel, the husband claims that 'all I will remember of the night a devil entered into me, a devil of lust and cruelty, of destruction.'⁸² As Christophine predicted, the potion did not make him love Antoinette, but it did make him come to her bed. Perhaps what Christophine did not predict – although we can never be sure – is that it also brought out his deepest, ugliest desires; it showed him himself. He uses this incident to excuse his behaviour and displace responsibility, but Obeah emerges as a mirror, and as a catalyst for destructive self-revelation. It is after this 'Obeah night,' too, that he writes to a solicitor, claiming to be researching for a book on Obeah – another discursive impression or trap – asking for information on Christophine's criminal past. Thus although he does not call his 'poisoning' 'Obeah,' it is implied that he believes that 'Obeah' is the cause not only of his illness (he still feels feverish), but of his depravity. His research into Christophine is the first step in his 'rationalisation' process, and the first line of his defence against her.

The 'final showdown' between Christophine and Antoinette's husband is an enduringly significant passage for postcolonial literary criticism. Christophine re-enters the narrative after Antoinette begins to fight back against her husband, at which point he barely recognises his wife. Christophine's re-entrance is another threshold moment; at a word

⁸² Qtd in Lee Erwin, "'Like in a Looking-Glass: History and Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22 (1989), 143-158 (p152n3).

from her, Antoinette ceases crying and her husband exits. Antoinette was at her most defiant and her husband still weak, but Christophine's voice is 'calm' in his 'nightmare moment,' in which he feels endangered by sounds and sights he cannot comprehend (WSS, p.95). Christophine is 'capable of speaking Rochester's own desire,' argues Lee Erwin, and in their last confrontation 'her speech repeats itself within his mind [and] continues to do so even after she has walked out of the text [...]. Rochester has suppressed his own memories [but] Christophine restores them to him in speech.'⁸³ Christophine not only speaks the husband's desires, though – she reflects them to him, as would a sonic and lexical mirror. As we know the narration to be unreliable, it is possible that the words the husband attributes to Christophine may not be hers, but his – we cannot trust his 'confused impressions.' Nevertheless, as her powder brought out his repressed sexual desires, so her speech, if it is hers, brings out his depraved indifference and hatred. If we assume that Christophine's quoted speech is accurate, in making herself intelligible to him for the first and last time she unravels herself as much as she unravels him. She gives him the tools, indeed, to her own de(con)struction. Erwin describes Christophine as 'both the locus of a powerful orality and the purveyor of its materialisation.'⁸⁴ She is a liminal, ambivalent presence in the narrative and, like the Obeah she represents, unpredictable. Yet by entering the husband's discourse Christophine is trapped by it – indeed, *he narrates her*. By speaking herself (through his narration) she seals Antoinette's fate.

Christophine berates the husband for his treatment of Antoinette, but he wants to know 'exactly what [she] did' when Antoinette was in her care (WSS, p.98).⁸⁵ Christophine is succinct in her reply; when he insists on more detail she says 'I don't speak of all that to you' – again if she did work Obeah, that is the one thing she will not tell him (WSS, p.100). She does, however, speak of Antoinette's family history and her mother's 'madness,' which is what he had most wanted to hear about. She also 'rationalises' Obeah for him in arguing that the Bible makes references to spirits, giving him an identifiable (if partial) reference point for comparison. In her indignation, Christophine articulates to him what he refused to tell himself, what he refused to write to his father: she tells him *why* he has been so cruel to

⁸³ Erwin, 'History and Narrative,' pp.151-152.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁸⁵ Antoinette had fled to Christophine a second time, having discovered her husband's infidelity.

Antoinette. 'You start calling her names. Marionette,' says Christophine.⁸⁶ 'Because she don't speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak' (WSS, p.99). Antoinette will not speak and so Christophine does it for her, in an attempt to get her husband to love her again. It backfires however, because at the mention of money – the husband's *real* reason for marrying Antoinette – he 'no longer felt dazed, tired, half-hypnotised, but alert and wary, ready to defend [him]self' (WSS, p.102). He understands money, he does not understand love and Obeah; Christophine understands Antoinette, she does not understand money. Both money and Antoinette are 'pretty like pretty self;' both will leave the West Indies as chattel of the colonising man and never return. Antoinette's husband repeats Christophine's speech in his mind like an incantation, and it functions like a healing spell. At the end of this conversation he has regained his strength and she has lost hers; he threatens her with the *written word* of a letter from a solicitor in Jamaica, who promises to have Christophine arrested at his word, should she meddle in his affairs again.⁸⁷ Rubbing salt in her wounds he suggests that she can write to Antoinette, but 'read and write I don't know,' Christophine replies, 'other things I know' (WSS, p.104). What Christophine knows cannot be transcribed, cannot be brought into the cruel modernity Antoinette's husband has planned for her. Christophine's illiteracy makes it all the easier for him to rewrite Antoinette's history in his own image, with no record of Christophine or his stay in the West Indies. His trump card is the Letter of the Law, an Obeah that Christophine's cannot match.

Yet as he leaves the West Indies, the husband is 'certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true' – the idyllic West Indian space remains inscrutable (to him), and so he rewrites it as a dream (WSS, p.108). He will be forever overwhelmed, and will never get the 'truth' that so obsessed him. His (re)writing of Antoinette's story is incomplete, as he can never force either her or the West Indies to speak to him again. He scarcely recognises his wife, whom he regards as a 'doll [with] a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice' – the doll that *he* turned her into (WSS, p.110). He removes himself and Antoinette from 'the magic and the

⁸⁶ This is the second name Antoinette's husband has given her without her consent. This time, it is not even a proper noun but the very signifier of an inanimate, inhuman object, a doll to be manipulated by his (not her own) will.

⁸⁷ It is significant that Antoinette's husband wrote his letter on pretence of researching a book on Obeah. As Handler and Bilby have argued, Obeah became known through writing. As Kelly Wisecup has argued, though, this writing revealed more about what colonial officials did *not* know than what they did. Obeah remains that which is un-writable. See Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*; and Wisecup, 'Knowing Obeah.'

loveliness' and renders her speechless and immobile, but his hatred is mixed with fear – while Christophine may have given him words, she has not given him meaning. Try as he might, he will never recover what he has lost, which is the ability to rationalise. His search to find Obeah's meaning has robbed him of all meaning: 'All my life,' he reflects, 'would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it' (*WSS*, p.111). Obeah in *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not only function as an alternative source of medicine and/or faith, but it is also that which is un-understandable, that which cannot be controlled. It is a form of vengeance which may be overpowered, but only at high cost. Antoinette may have lost power over her voice and her body, but she has her mind, which she shuts away from her husband forever. Her silence, like Christophine's, is her (only remaining) protection. Her husband cannot conquer the incomprehensible, and so he silences it, and turns it into a 'ghost.' His triumph is temporary, however, because that ghost – call it Antoinette/Bertha, call it his past, call it Obeah itself – *returns*, and costs him his fortune, and his sight. As a mirror she could determine little, but she did reflect: after looking into Christophine and seeing himself, he goes blind.⁸⁸

Writing as Rhys was from the 'wrong' side of the colonial encounter, positionality is key to this novel's narration of Obeah. Antoinette says as much when she tells her husband that the place in which they find themselves 'is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else' (*WSS*, p.82). It is because of Antoinette and her husband's variously 'outside' positions that they cannot see or understand Christophine, Obeah, and the West Indies. It is Christophine and Baptiste who claim this space when Antoinette and her husband are forced to leave – it is (the misuse of) Obeah that accelerates the white people's departure from the land, and the black people's reclamation of it. Carine Mardorossian has drawn attention to *Wide Sargasso Sea's* being written and set during two significant periods of colonial history, the immediate aftermath of Emancipation and the disintegration of empire after World War II. The novel exists between two periods considered 'the best and worst of times,' Mardorossian argues, 'since they represented liberation, hope, cultural and intellectual regeneration as well as

⁸⁸ He told Christophine that he would have given his eyes never to have seen the West Indies. She responded: 'You choose what you give, eh? Then you choose,' and muttered to herself in a language unknown to him (*WSS*, p.104). He loses his sight, and much of his property, in the fire at Thornfield, and Christophine's prophesy is fulfilled.

continued political and economic dependence.⁸⁹ Rhys is aware of the continuities between these two periods, though; Christophine's early retort that 'new ones [white landowners] worse than old ones— more cunning, that's all' demonstrates not only the novel's acknowledgement (and mistrust) of these thresholds, but its haunting quality of being a text in-between time and place, unable to rest (*WSS*, p.11). This remark also establishes the novel's abiding concern with return and repetition. Its narrative format is unstable, not least because of its reliance on dubious narrators, who themselves are unsure about time, space and place. Faizal Forrester argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is 'a writing that is haunted: it is possessed by an already dead protagonist, whose destiny has already been written.'⁹⁰ Apart from Antoinette, though, the novel is also haunted by Obeah, another ghost of plantation slavery that has nowhere to which to return. Obeah has no singular, exact origin, and Rhys' novel configures it as an ambivalent, contrary force that can be manipulated by any interested party in the colonial encounter, a force that can kill as well as cure. Because of this ambivalence Obeah is often narrated as silence, that which cannot (will not) be said, even though it can be named, and that which cannot be predicted. It has been made into a ghost by 'civilisation,' as it were, but will not be exorcised from it.

Obeah occupies a threshold, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, between the black, unseen world and the white, official one. Its liminality renders it unspeakable in this text, and for Antoinette and her husband it is a conduit to their being trapped in Brontë's. There is no omniscient narrator in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, only Antoinette and her husband (then briefly Grace Poole, the woman charged with caring for 'Bertha' at Thornfield Hall), and we are never sure when or from where they are speaking. The closest we get to a subaltern voice is Christophine but she is quoted, and therefore translated, by both of these narrators, who are never confident in the meaning(s) of her words – or their own. Rhys' narrative preoccupies itself with presenting a spectrum of positionalities, which are stressed most clearly in relation to 'Obeah.' Obeah is signified on different levels in this novel: first, there is the 'talk' of Obeah at the beginning of Antoinette's narrative. Then there is the zombification of which Antoinette's husband reads. There is also the 'literal' Obeah

⁸⁹ Carine Mardorossian, 'Shutting up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Callaloo*, 22 (1999), 1071-1090 (p.1085).

⁹⁰ Faizal Forrester, 'Who Stole the Soul in *Wide Sargasso Sea*?', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 6 (1994), 32-42 (p.32).

Christophine may or may not use to poison others (and which may or may not be in a corner of her hut), and for which she has previously been arrested. Antoinette and her husband use Obeah on – against – each other too, which backfires on them both. At any given time no one supposedly perpetrating Obeah calls it that, but the common denominator of all these ‘instances’ of Obeah is that there can be no confirmation in the text that Obeah is actually happening. The text’s narrators, both unreliable, ascribe the term ‘Obeah’ to that which they admit they do not understand. As Mardorossian argues, it is not what Obeah is or does in the novel that is significant, but ‘the ways in which obeah gets deployed discursively by various characters;’ their positionality vis-à-vis this unspoken, unseen presence in the text.⁹¹

Wide Sargasso Sea is narrated in uneasy, incomplete fragments, and ‘Obeah’ is engendered in the *failure of communication*, as a type of by-word for that-which-cannot-be-understood. Glissant described ‘the right to obscurity’ as ‘the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view,’ which cannot ‘be organised in terms of a series of clarifications.’⁹² Clarification, for him, meant speaking certain silences to power that power would only exploit, obscure and destroy in its domination. Mardorossian, who translates Glissant’s demand as ‘opacity,’ argues that in *Wide Sargasso Sea* this opacity is signified in Obeah – that which is fundamentally unreadable, and therefore deeply unsettling.⁹³ Obeah’s presentation, in this novel, is even more fragmented, as it is barely presented at all. It has been granted the right to obscurity, and repeatedly haunts not only Antoinette and her husband, but Rhys’ entire text. Rhys may return to an idealised Caribbean past in this novel, but her narrators’ various pasts are suspicious, not liberatory. Antoinette/Bertha’s only ‘resolution’ to her own fragmentation and displacement is to destroy herself, as well as the prison/castle of colonialism which has fragmented her. The only way out of her double-bind, Rhys suggests, is suicide.

Savory argues that Rhys’ writing is ‘summoning spirits or drawing on a level of consciousness far beyond the logical or rational;’ a level that is often also considered

⁹¹ Carine M. Mardorossian, ‘Opacity as Obeah in Jean Rhys’ Work’, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 1 (2003), 133-142 (p.137).

⁹² Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1999), p.2.

⁹³ Mardorossian, ‘Opacity’.

‘primitive.’⁹⁴ Rhys configures ‘Obeah’ as ineffable but, as something outside of linear, coherent narrative structure, also ‘irrational,’ and therefore ‘ghostly.’ Savory goes on to argue that Antoinette’s position vis-à-vis Obeah is one of ‘conflicted, alienated awareness,’ yet her contention that Antoinette attempts to ‘redefine moral parameters by refusing to accept what is established without coherent and effective challenge’ is not supported by the text.⁹⁵ Antoinette never challenges Obeah – her blind acceptance and insistence upon it is her downfall. Moreover, she does not challenge her engagement to her husband – although her aunt warned her against it – and does not challenge her husband until it is too late. Even then it is Christophine who faces him directly. Savory argued that this is ‘the novel as Obeah,’ but the element of Obeah with which Rhys and her narrative struggle is itself particularly elusive, and cannot be controlled by anyone who uses it – not Antoinette, not her husband, not Christophine and not Rhys. Much like *Banana Bottom’s*, the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not provide a resolution to its own conflicts – it cannot.⁹⁶ Although Rhys’ narrative presents ‘the other side,’ it presents a side which is itself exploitative and which, though it too suffers from colonial subjugation, re-enacts the violence of the colonial encounter onto black bodies.⁹⁷ Significantly, Antoinette does not see Christophine in this ‘fraction of a second’ view of all her life before the jump (*WSS*, p.123). She does not see the most significant person in her life, an Obeahwoman, right at that life’s end. Obeah may not have stowed away into the modern world of Brontë’s text, but it returns and returns again to haunt Rhys’.

Conclusion

Both of these novels can be classified as ‘literature of reconnection’ or literature of ‘how it could/should be,’ but *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Banana Bottom’s* respective backward

⁹⁴ Savory, ‘Poor Devil,’ p.217.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p.220.

⁹⁶ For discussions of *Wide Sargasso Sea’s* ending, see Paula Grace Anderson; ‘Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea: The Other Side/”Both Sides Now”*, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 28 (1982), 57-65; Mary Lou Emery, ‘The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys’ Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), 418-430; Lucy Wilson, ‘“Women Must Have Spunks:” Jean Rhys’ West Indian Outcasts’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 32 (1986), 439-448; Forrester, ‘Who Stole the Soul’; and Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia*.

⁹⁷ Su explores Antoinette’s own reinvention of colonial stereotypes in her rejection of them, as have Teresa Winterhalter and Gayatri Spivak, among others. See Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia*; Teresa Winterhalter, ‘Narrative Technique and the Rage for Order in *Wide Sargasso Sea*’, *Narrative*, 2 (1994), 214-229; and Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts.’

glances to an imagined Africa are not simple embraces of an exalted precolonial utopia.⁹⁸ Both of these novels present 'culture clashes' between 'European' progression and 'African' regression, with Obeah at the threshold of these extremes. Obeah is an ambivalent and ambiguous force that simultaneously keeps these pastoral idylls together, and threatens to tear them apart. Rhys and McKay configure the rural West Indies as metaphysical battlefields on which the 'African past' wages war with the 'European' present, but English moral values, such as marriage, Christianity and 'chastity' are depicted as corrupting influences on a newly emergent black peasant consciousness, the most extreme manifestation of which is Obeah. It is not Obeah that is ejected from these idylls but England, represented by Squire Gensir and Bitá's foster parents, then by Antoinette's husband and, to some extent, Antoinette herself.⁹⁹ Antoinette's husband is not rewarded for his 'rationalism,' and his wife is ejected from a 'home' which she discovers never really was hers and turned into a ghost. Bitá ends McKay's narrative as a recluse from the very folk with whom she was supposed to integrate, with only her husband, their child, and her aunt for company. *Banana Bottom's* critique of imperialism is biting satirical, and *Wide Sargasso Sea's* distinctly haunting, but they both emphasise Bitá and Antoinette's interpellation by the extremes of 'black/savage,' 'white/civilised' and 'primitive'/'modern.' Neither 'progression' nor 'regression' wins, necessarily.

Even though both these writers to some extent essentialise their characters, they emphasise their ambivalence; these heroines must necessarily exist between two extreme, competing discourses, and in both cases end up alone and silent. In their depictions of their heroines, McKay and Rhys keenly locate them in a place, culture and civilisation that is not European, but isolate them in these respective places that may or may not be 'home.' In looking back, these authors demonstrate that the idealised space is not ideal, that utopia is in fact constructed on colonial aesthetic, moral and social conditions. While both Antoinette and Bitá are regarded as 'belonging,' by other characters at least, to a particular space, neither of them feels she belongs in the narrative laid out for her. Moreover while they are

⁹⁸ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature', *Daedalus*, 103 (1974), 73-109 (p.99).

⁹⁹ Gensir travels to England at the end of the narrative, and never returns. Bitá's foster father dies in a flood, and is followed shortly by his grieving widow. Bitá's biological father, the aspiring rural petit-bourgeois, also dies in this flood.

both judged against it, neither woman hankers for some essentialised 'African past.' Bitá rejects this notion and seems to long only for a romantic peasant present and future, and Antoinette's obsession with the past is exposed as an illusion of a perfect time when she was (never) happy. In both of these speculative returns 'home,' the heroine finds that the home she imagined no longer exists.

Obeah functions in these narratives as a signifier of that which is 'primitive,' with which these heroines should not be concerned but which affects them, directly or indirectly. For both Bitá and Antoinette Obeah is a repressed element of their individual and collective unconscious that returns and returns to threaten their respective narratives' presents and futures. Both Rhys and McKay intervene into the grand narrative of modernity to challenge the story of modernity as the story of progress, and to challenge the position of the non-European as primitive and pre-historic. Rhys uses fragmentation and silence while McKay uses irony to satirise tropes of benighted, uncorrupted Africa, and the epistemic violence of creating this Africa as the constituent Other of Europe. Obeah occupies the space in which these subjects are created, and challenged, a threshold that is not easy to cross, and that remains in the West Indian idyll long after these narratives end.

Chapter 4. 'In a zone of direct contact with developing reality:' Obeahmen as heroes, in novels of Independence.¹

The novels in this chapter – Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* (1959), Ismith Khan's *The Obeah Man* (1964), and Sam Selvon's *Those Who Eat the Casadura* (1972) – all feature male protagonists who are charged with 'fixing' the problems of their respective societies. They are thus typical of West Indian writing after 1950, which Cobham argues was 'characteristically centred around single male protagonists,' and reflected 'a concern with the problems of the male ego [attempting] to establish his right to participation in the political decision-making process of his community.'² In two of these novels the protagonists are Obeahmen; in the other, the protagonist pits himself against the followers of a recently-deceased Obeahman whose presence lingers in his community after his death. In each case, however, the fictional hero's individual crisis is a metaphor for social crisis, which is chiefly configured as entrenched colour and class stratification. Members of these communities look to their respective Obeahmen for leadership and guidance, and each Obeahman embodies his narrative's anxieties for these nations yet-to-be. These crises, in these novels, are overcome through a reassessment of Obeah. In Salkey's example, Obeah is an obstacle to 'progress' and cohesion; in Khan's example, it is the key to self- and therefore community realisation; and in Selvon's, Obeah is an expression of faith not in a higher power, necessarily, but in oneself and one's community. In each of these narratives Obeah is enmeshed into the ways in which a community sees itself and is seen by others, in how these nations present themselves to 'the outside world.'

I have designated these three texts 'novels of Independence' because they were all either set or written at the cusp of Jamaica's and Trinidad's respective political independence (and separation from the West Indian Federation), and express concerns surrounding questions of self-determination and viable alternatives to colonial rule. Each of these protagonists assumes responsibility for the formulation of these alternatives, and is tasked with preserving himself against the debilitating effects of colonialism, in order to

¹ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist. trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp.3-40 (p.39).

² Cobham-Sander, 'The Creative Writer', p.6; p.240.

‘assert his own ego against the emasculating strategies of the dominant culture.’³ In this he is depicted as a Christ-like saviour, but also approximates to the figure of the author/artist in society.⁴ In this chapter I examine the ways in which these heroes negotiate the leadership roles assigned to them vis-à-vis their negotiations of Obeah.

In *Quality* and *Cascadura*, Dada Johnson and Manko, respectively, are the centres of their communities. *Obeah Man*’s Zampi lives away from his community, but all three men direct their respective narrative’s plot. In all three cases, too, the destinies of the nations these narratives imagine are characterised by the destinies of their respective Obeahmen. Dada dies early but his antagonist, Brother Parkin, spends most of the remaining narrative trying to rid their village of Dada’s posthumous presence. *Obeah Man*’s Zampi is his narrative’s hero, and Khan’s novel is written almost entirely from this Obeahman’s perspective. *Cascadura* does not have a chief protagonist, *per se*, but there are few aspects of life in the narrative that do not involve its Obeahman, Manko. Each of these men must lead his people through some kind of ‘darkness,’ be it drought in St Thomas, Carnival in Port of Spain, or the arrival of a mysterious stranger in Sans Souci, and perhaps in an echo of these ‘unstable’ states, Obeah is depicted in these novels as transitory, illusory and ephemeral. Each narrative features a great disaster or upheaval, after which each hero must ‘pick up the pieces’ and rebuild his community from the wreckage. To do so he must manoeuvre the tension between what he believes Obeah to be and what his community perceives Obeah to be. He comes to realise, despite this tension, that how his community sees Obeah is closely linked to how it sees itself, and that in order to lead his community he must embrace this tension, and can no longer differentiate himself from his neighbours. We find each Obeahman at a different stage of this realisation, but these novels, to varying degrees, all consider the role Obeah might play in emergent, independent West Indian societies, and reappraise it as an identifiable element of national culture that distinguishes these West Indian societies from either a romanticised Africa or an imperialist Europe.

³ *Ibid.*, p.239.

⁴ This pattern is also evident in Mais’ *Brother Man*. Bra Man is a prophet of the poor, and healer of the sick, who is betrayed (with counterfeit coins) by a mentally unstable woman who allies herself with an Obeahman – one who uses his spiritual powers for ‘evil’ instead of ‘good.’ See Roger Mais, *Brother Man* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2004).

These Obeahmen, for better or worse, serve as their communities' cultural repositories. It is either understanding of Obeah that leads the hero to triumph, or misunderstanding of it that leads him and others to disaster – and communication of this understanding is key. Manko fails to communicate Obeah's power and meaning to an unbelieving tourist; Zampi has to re-learn how to communicate Obeah's role in what is left of his community; and Parkin almost loses his life in his battle with his community, whose beliefs about Obeah he cannot reconcile with his own. Dada indeed loses his because he miscalculates his followers' expectations. Salkey's novel differs distinctly from the other two in that its portrayal of Obeah is overwhelmingly negative. *Quality's* closed atmosphere does not envision a hopeful future, and denies Obeah's potential moral or social value. Instead, the narrative configures Obeah as a 'monster' that Parkin must vanquish, and the community for which he fights as not only primitive but doomed. *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura*, by contrast, foreground Obeah as a *valuable* cultural element, one that can bring these communities together. In this chapter I will analyse the roles these male protagonists play, as heroes of their narratives and representatives of their (imagined) nations. I argue that *Quality*, with its pessimistic portrayal of Obeah as 'real African power' that is ultimately harmful to its adherents, yet which persists in entralling them, represents a turning point in considerations of the cultural relevance of Obeah.⁵ We see this turn further realised in *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura*, which reject the fetishisation that we see in earlier texts, and indeed take the practice seriously as a cultural artefact, whose history can be repurposed to fashion a West Indian present and future.

Quality tells the story of a few weeks of drought in rural St Thomas, Jamaica. The story begins with the ritual suicide of the novel's Obeahman (during a Kumina ceremony, designed to bring rain) and ends with the stoning to death of his wife. Dada Johnson is his community's cynosure even after his death, and performs the function Joyce Johnson describes as 'sustaining community values against interlopers.'⁶ Before Dada's death Parkin performs the role of the sceptical yet benign, detached observer-intellectual, who does not mount much of a challenge to Dada or Obeah. Yet after Dada's death, Parkin emerges as reluctant 'saviour,' antagonistic not only to Dada but also to the values of his (their) own

⁵ Andrew Salkey, *A Quality of Violence* (London: New Beacon Books, 1978), p.144.

⁶ Johnson, 'Shamans,' p.229.

community. *Obeah Man* is set during Carnival in Port of Spain, during which the titular Obeahman descends into the city in search of his jilted lover. He does not have a community to speak of and is shunned by his former friends, but ultimately finds fellowship and fulfilment and a deeper understanding of his powers. *Cascadura* portrays life on a rural cacao estate in Sans Souci, Trinidad, which is upended by the arrival of the owner's old friend from England. The tourist falls in love with the local beauty but leaves soon after the hurricane that his presence is suspected to have caused. The novel's open end raises questions about the survival of the pastoral idyll, both as a physical landscape and as a narrative trope. As in *Banana Bottom* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is not Obeah that threatens the idyll, but British (imperialist) intervention.

While it was common in West Indian narratives (like *Banana Bottom*) to paint the Obeahman as a comic, hapless fraud, there is little comedy in these three novels.⁷ Nevertheless, despite their narratives' concerns with nation-making none of these Obeahmen takes an explicitly political stance, as does Takoo in *White Witch*.⁸ Instead, they all distance themselves from 'official' discourses of nation (such as party politics or labour unionism), choosing instead to inhabit the local, spiritual and emotional spheres. Their focus is on their communities' immediate needs, such as cures for ailments, romantic advice and prayers for rain. As the concept of 'nation state' is yet to be formed in these narratives (they are all set before Independence), these Obeahmen/leaders do not speak of themselves and their practice in terms of forming a 'nation' – a concept which is itself imagined, these narratives suggest, by forces outside of the communities here described. Instead, these men see their practice as service to particular communities, thus acknowledging, as Michel Rolph Trouillot argued, that 'the correlation between cultural identity and claims on the state [...] is not a simple one.'⁹ Trouillot described nation as 'a concept that operates *against the background of political power*.' Cultural constructs (in these cases Obeah), he continued, 'become relevant to the "national question" when [they operate] within the realm of

⁷ Dada provides some light relief, but his speeches are insightful and at times prophetic, even as they are dismissed by Parkin and the narrator.

⁸ Takoo proclaims himself, right before murdering Annie Palmer (the white witch) and instigating a slave rebellion, as 'chief an' leader of the people of St. James.' See de Lisser, *White Witch*, p.250.

⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), p.25.

politics.¹⁰ As none of these Obeahmen has any political power, he does not concern himself with ‘the national question.’ Nation is indeed, in these texts, ‘the culture and history of a class-divided society,’ but has yet to be related to issues of state power, or be ‘translated in political terms.’¹¹ Dada, Zampi and Manko operate outside of these political terms, and are part of their respective authors’ efforts to ‘articulate new possibilities for social regeneration and to project original kinds of collectivities,’ such as communities that constitute themselves vis-à-vis a the cultural practice of Obeah, in the absence of bourgeois political leaders.¹² The process of articulating these new possibilities involved, as Michael Niblett argues, endeavouring to ‘recover the histories repressed under colonialism,’ such as the history of Obeah, and attempting to ‘construct a Caribbean aesthetic able to integrate this past into a critical or emancipatory vision of the present.’¹³ We see this more clearly in the latter two novels than in Salkey’s, which in my view experiments with this integration, but finds it impossible.

In all these novels, Obeah is presented as a great power bestowed upon exceptional men who must learn to wield it responsibly and are punished for abusing it. It is not merely a supernatural power but a psychological and pastoral responsibility. Dada, Zampi and Manko do not believe their own hype, as it were, but understand that their job is to make other people believe, not only in ‘magic’ but in themselves and in each other. They understand that their power exists beyond them, and is not beholden to them at all times. Dada dies during an Obeah ritual, and Parkin assumes the task of banishing this ‘nastiness’ from the land *only* when it has been usurped and manipulated by Dada’s vengeful wife (*Quality*, p.131). Zampi destroys the stick he had charmed for a friend after this friend is killed by his own recklessness and hubris, for which Zampi claims partial responsibility. Manko loses his powers after attempting to heal a stranger who does not and cannot believe in Obeah – after he has attempted to alter the course of destiny and misjudged his own relationship with Obeah. The Caribbean aesthetic to which each of these narratives hints, but which not all of them necessarily realise, is one that figures the Obeahman as

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p.5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

hero and as artist, a figure who does not seek differentiation from his people, but who engages in sustained contact with humanity, not only for humanity's benefit, but for his own.

Salkey's novel was published in the first year of the West Indian Federation, whose ideologues carried high hopes for 'the day when, our islands linked together in an administrative and fiscal union, the West Indian Dominion will take its place, small though that may be, in the glorious Empire.'¹⁴ Khan's was published two years after Federation's dissolution, when Jamaica's prime minister, Norman Manley, then Trinidad's prime minister, Eric Williams, shattered the dream of 'dwelling together in unity.'¹⁵ Selvon's novel was published a decade later, while he was resident and in decline in Canada, a full sixteen years after *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Of greater significance, though, are the periods during which these novels are set. Khan and Selvon's novels are clearly placed in an immediate and recognisable present, while Salkey's remains in the distant, unidentifiable past. Moreover, the dominant mode in *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* is romance; Obeah is secondary in their plots to central love affairs. I will be using Bakhtin's distinction between the epic and the (romance) novel to argue that *Quality* represents a style of narration from which *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* depart, particularly regarding their depiction of their respective Obeahmen-heroes. While *Quality* dramatises the battle between the 'African past' and the 'New World present,' and scorns Obeah as the chief signifier of that 'pre-modern' past, *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* play upon Obeah's discursive exoticism and challenge these old conceptions of its (lack of) value to Caribbean life. They thus illustrate new ways of thinking through the slavery and indenture of the past, and colonialism of the present, which avoid *Quality's* somewhat shameful preoccupation with 'African retentions.' These two later novels bring Obeah into the future, moving through the fraudulence and ambivalence of the present to appreciate a new, creole understanding of the meaning of Caribbean selfhood.

Epic sensibility in A Quality of Violence

¹⁴ Theophilus Albert Marryshow (1887-1958), a Grenadian, was one of the key figures of West Indian Federation. This quotation is taken from the first issue of his newspaper, *The West Indian*, dated January 1, 1915. It is quoted in Shridath Ramphal, 'Is the West Indies West Indian?' Eleventh Sir Archibald Nedd Memorial Lecture (St George's, January 28, 2011).

¹⁵ 'To dwell together in unity' is the motto on the West Indian Federation's coat of arms.

Quality is not, formally speaking, an epic, as it is not an oral poem. Nevertheless it is set, as epics are, in what Bakhtin called the 'absolute' and 'national heroic past.' Its narrator assumes the position of 'a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent.' Both he and the audience are removed from the action he describes by 'an absolute epic distance,' and the world Salkey presents to us 'stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane.'¹⁶ Like an epic, Salkey's novel is unconcerned with the present; in it the past is immutable, events are predestined and the narrator is powerless to effect any kind of change in or exert any kind of influence over the narrative. Obeah is even more inaccessible in *Quality*'s world, as it is located in the 'forgotten' past of the characters themselves; it cannot be altered, and has no future potential. Set in 1900, *Quality* foreshadows the devastating 1907 Kingston earthquake. This was a time, argued Bill Carr, 'about which not a great deal [was] known and which [was] sufficiently free from the possessive clutch of modern Jamaican intellectuals to enable [Salkey] to establish his drama on his own terms.'¹⁷ Hegel argued that 'the content and form of epic proper is the entire world-outlook and objective manifestation of a national spirit presented in its self-objectifying shape as an actual event.' The epic proper, he continues, expresses 'the childlike consciousness of a people [...] in which a people has awakened out of torpidity, and its spirit has been so far strengthened as to be able to produce its own world and feel itself at home in it.'¹⁸ Salkey uses this inaccessible past as the background for his national story, which he mythologises and rewrites *as past*, declining to (re-)imagine it as present or future – the majority of his fictional villagers, indeed, are childlike. His novel is, in part, an historicisation of the making of Jamaican subjecthood, but he diverges somewhat from the classical Greek epic formula in that he does not celebrate the past he describes. J. B. Hainsworth contends that 'a community sees reflected in heroic poetry an image of itself that it likes to see, and in seeing it the community is encouraged.'¹⁹ There is no encouragement to be found in

¹⁶ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', pp.13-14.

¹⁷ Bill Carr, 'A Complex Fate: The Novels of Andrew Salkey', in *The Islands in Between: Essays on West Indian Literature*, ed. by Louis James (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.100-108 (p.101).

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures in Fine Art*. trans. T. M. Knox. 2 vols. Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.1044-1045.

¹⁹ J. B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.6.

Quality, however, which begins and ends in tragedy and anticipates cataclysm throughout, implying that the society it portrays has no value and no capacity for change.

The novel's epigraph, 'they change their climate, not their soul, [those] who run beyond the sea,' taken from Horace's *Epistles*, further roots us in an inescapable, immutable destiny, and the novel in the epic tradition (*Quality*, p.6). The subsequent prologue ends with the phrase 'drought first began on Calvary,' recalling the even more immutable past of the Bible. Moreover, by recalling Christ's passion, it also foreshadows the novel's own 'crucifixions' – that of Dada and his deputy, of Parkin, and of Mother Johnson, the Obeahman's wife. The drought is described as 'a carrion-crow' and the land as 'a mirror;' a mirror which, unlike a window, only reflects the past – it cannot provide escape into the present or future. Moreover, this past is not to be celebrated; if one were to look into this mirror, the prologue continues, 'he would only end by resenting what he saw [...] he would hold the mirror high above his head, fling it from himself with disgust, and smash it on some unsuspecting rock' (*Quality*, p.7). There is nothing in this past we would like to see, suggests the prologue, only violence and (self-)destruction. Hainsworth argues that 'against whom the hero struggles and by what means depends on the forces ranged against the community for which he fights.' This community is in its infancy, and so its heroes, 'who are little more than sorcerers [...] express the desperation of those who live on the edge of survival.'²⁰ This is Dada's function in Salkey's narrative – he is indeed a shaman, praying for rain to sustain his community whose peril is heightened by the drought, which threatens their very lives with its 'carrion-crow.'²¹

Like an epic, *Quality* begins *in medias res*, states its theme early, and is characterised by long and formal speeches; these speeches, however, are in patois, placing this nation language at the very formation of Jamaican identity. Most of the characters appear to have no past except the vague spectre of enslavement, and their actions are sudden, abrupt and violent.²² In many ways they approximate to a Greek chorus, a homogenous mass of non-individuals who share one voice – indeed, the longest and most significant scenes in the

²⁰ Hainsworth, *Idea of Epic*, p.5.

²¹ The term 'carrion-crow' appears three times on p.6 of *Quality*. It is also the novel's last word, on p.207. The carrion crow is a hunter and scavenger – in this narrative, it is a metaphor for the drought.

²² Dada is the exception to this, although his past is criminal, and is only alluded to by Parkin in a private conversation.

novel take place before a mob.²³ *Quality* departs further from the classic epic format in that it does not feature divine intervention *per se*, even though its conflict centres on religious and spiritual belief and praxis. Dada's function as religious and cultural leader continues after his death, as does Jesus Christ's in Christianity; in fact, Dada is believed to 'live on' not only in his wife, but even in the minds of the village's children. Furthermore, his death is a ritualised self-sacrifice, as was Jesus'. Parkin also approximates to Christ, as he too is paraded through his village and ritually humiliated. Unlike Christ and unlike Dada, however, Parkin physically survives his ordeal. He is not necessarily rewarded for his efforts, though, as while the mob allows him to live it is not necessarily converted to his way of thinking, and it does not appoint him its new leader. Parkin embodies the *readers'* sensibilities (and with them, those of the epic narrator, singer and listener), but not those of his community, and the national peasant consciousness they represent. One is supposed to see one's own world reflected in an epic; in *Quality*, the reader might see herself represented in Parkin, but still does not identify with the world of the text. *Quality* may thus borrow from the epic tradition, but with regards to its treatment of Obeah, the novel departs from these conventions. The nation imagined in *Quality* is not one in which the reader is invested, or feels responsibility for – it is a condemned past, of which its narrator is ashamed.

There have been no single-text studies of *Quality*, although it is often referred to in wider studies, all of which portray the novel's action as symbolic of the struggle between the 'African' past and the 'Christian' future.²⁴ Recently, Victor Chang has noted *Quality's* 'clear nationalist impulse,' and its 'intention of embedding [the] notion of what Jamaica and Jamaicans should be.' Like an epic, *Quality* is concerned with the establishment and recording of a *national* character, as embodied by select individuals.²⁵ Salkey, Chang argues, 'was motivated by his belief that focusing on the African retentions in rural Jamaican society would validate that section of the society which had always been oppressed and victimised

²³ Bill Carr observes that *Quality* 'offers little in the way of character,' and that the protagonists are simply 'disparate points of view.' See Carr, 'Complex Fate,' p.101.

²⁴ Daryl Cumber Dance notes that 'it is surprising that [Salkey] has received very little extended critical consideration,' and cites only two contemporary reviews of *Quality*. See Daryl Cumber Dance, 'Andrew Salkey,' in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Daryl Cumber Dance (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.418-427 (p.424).

²⁵ Hainsworth argues that 'heroic poetry [of the classical Greek period] has a tendency to show patriotic overtones, usually tribal or national but sometimes religious or cultural.' See Hainsworth, *Idea of Epic*, p.6.

by colonial structures.²⁶ Yet in *Quality* the subjectivity of these 'Africans' is always mediated, either by the narrator or by Parkin. Moreover, by depicting them as so simplistic and childlike, Salkey in fact victimises them further. Chang observes the 'deep-seated ambivalence in Salkey's treatment of these African retentions' but remains likewise preoccupied with this inherent determinism.²⁷ Furthermore, Chang does not isolate Obeah, or religion more generally, as the chief aspect of these retentions. O. R. Dathorne, in his brief assessment of *Quality* with regards to the theme of Africa in West Indian literature, argues that there is a struggle in the narrative between two popular attitudes: the first, that Africa has no power over or value to the descendants of slaves; the second, that Africa is at the heart of all that black Caribbean people are and do.²⁸ Significantly, this latter is the view espoused by Mother Johnson, who is violently put stoned to death by the mob despite Parkin's efforts to save her life. The mob itself claims that 'we is no slave people, and there is no Africa in we blood that way you would-a like we to believe' (*Quality*, p.146). These African retentions, Salkey's novel suggests, have no redemptive power.

Lloyd Brown goes further than Chang to argue that 'African heritage' in *Quality* is 'doomed from the outset,' as 'middleclass [*sic.*] leaders see it wholly in terms of the sadistic perversions and greed that the Johnsons practise.'²⁹ Sylvia Wynter contends that Salkey's 'middle-class ignorance of the true significance of Jamaican cult religions, and the mechanics of these cult religions, *trapped* him into a fraudulence which has been endemic to the whole New World attempt to revindicate the *despised* "native."³⁰ This is the most salient criticism of *Quality*, which Brathwaite has also levelled against it.³¹ Arthur Kemoli's suggestion that *Quality* attempts to 'resolve the dilemma of building from [present] ruins' may indicate a concern with a future, but the novel is still more of a cautionary tale than a progressive

²⁶ Victor L. Chang, "'So Differently from What the Heart Arranged:'" *Voices under the Window, New Day and A Quality of Violence*, in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.165-172 (p.165).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.170.

²⁸ O. R. Dathorne, 'The Theme of Africa in West Indian Literature', *Phylon* (1960-), 26 (1965), 255-276 (p.264).

²⁹ Lloyd W. Brown, 'The Crisis of Black Identity in the West Indian Novel', *Critique*, 11 (1969), 97-108 (p.102).

³⁰ Sylvia Wynter, 'One Love - Rhetoric or Reality? - Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism', *Caribbean Studies*, 12 (1972), 64-97 (p.70), original emphasis.

³¹ Brathwaite argues that 'Salkey, in the heart of the *tonelle*, opts for the Euro rational/descriptive and therefore fails to celebrate with his worshippers [...] Salkey, like so many others caught up in the tradition of the Master, remains ambivalent in his attitude to the African presence in the Caribbean.' See Brathwaite, 'African Presence,' p.86, original emphasis.

vision.³² In any case this savage/civilised dialectic is no longer fruitful for discussing West Indian identity; while of course there are 'African survivals' to speak of, Caribbean descendants of slaves live in a world of our own making, one replete with several diverse, coexisting heritages. My concern with *Quality* is to examine the implications of Salkey's prescriptive treatment of Obeah for imaginations of West Indian national leadership.

Peter Nazareth, however, departs from the popular line of criticism of *Quality* by venturing that Salkey's is 'an Anancy story,' whose language 'invisibly contains and imposes a pattern, expectations that are frustrated.'³³ He agrees with Wilson Harris that the Johnsons' sacrifice is ultimately meaningless, but goes on to argue that Salkey's 'tricky' narration is not to be taken at face value.³⁴ While it is arguable that Salkey could indeed be reflecting, not reinforcing, class and colour prejudice, and while the novel's depiction of Obeah does not deny the ambivalence of the practice, Obeah is still denied any part in this movement away from slavery. After the ritual suicide of Dada and the ritual murder of his wife we are told that 'the procession and the others drifted apart,' thus dissolving Obeah's presence in this village (*Quality*, p.207). Furthermore, if the Johnsons' sacrifices are meaningless, then there is no moral, as is customary in Anancy stories. In *Quality*, no one has the last laugh, and the only thing in store for the villagers is further, more widespread destruction, for which they are unprepared. Dada, in the tradition of the epic, prophesies his own death. Mother Johnson actively demands hers towards the novel's end. Kemoli argues that this was 'in order that the spirit of Africa may continue,' but I maintain that her removal from the land, and the narrative, serves instead to banish 'Africa' from the past, present and future, thus leaving these villagers with no religion or culture from which to build a nation.³⁵

Neither Dada nor Parkin is a complex character. Instead, each represents an ideological position, opposed to but mutually constitutive of the other.³⁶ They are both

³² Arthur Kemoli, 'The Theme of "the Past" in Caribbean Literature', *World Literature Written in English*, 12 (1973), 304-325 (p.307).

³³ Peter Nazareth, *In the Trickster Tradition: The Novels of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar and Ishmael Reed* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture Press, 1994), p.19; p.28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22. Wilson Harris argues that *Quality* portrays 'the enforced multiplication of sacrifice that echoes into absurdity, the cult of sacrifice for its own sake' in 'Books - a Long View', in *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacons Books, 1973), pp. 21-27. (p.25).

³⁵ Kemoli, 'The Past,' p.309.

³⁶ As Gregory Nagy argues, antagonism between a hero and a god in an epic 'does not rule out an element of (often fatal) attraction. See Gregory Nagy, 'The Epic Hero', in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp.71-89 (p.87).

'nothing' outside of their situation and fate, and each man plays the role assigned to him by the narrative, thus fulfilling the epic prophesy. They emerge as two sides of the epic hero coin – Dada is 'the people's hero, while Parkin is the readers' – yet Parkin is at once antagonist and hero – a slippery role which might support Nazareth's argument for *Quality* as an Anancy story.³⁷ Dada's early death precipitates the power struggle in which Parkin will ultimately triumph, but this triumph is bitter and short-lived and furthermore remains in a past that has been and will be destroyed by tragedy. Dada's continued presence – even after his death – functions in some ways as epic divine intervention and directs the narrative's action, but still does not bring the narrative into the future. Moreover neither man is rewarded for his heroic trial – Dada's death does not bring rain, and Parkin's humiliation does not bring this community together. *Quality's* presentation of Dada and Parkin as two halves of a hero adheres to the classic format in so far as the two men are presented as unchanging and unchangeable, but diverts from it in the sense that they are also presented as incomplete, as parts of each other.³⁸ Together or apart, however, they both fail in their function(s) as hero, as neither Parkin's middle-class liberalism nor Dada's 'African fetishism' delivers their people from danger. The people of St Thomas are not left with much choice of a saviour, nor with much chance for survival.

Dada is the only character in this novel who is given a detailed physical description. He is 'a tall, inky-black man [...] about sixty, or sixty-five, but looked and acted like a young man of thirty,' and walks with a limp (*Quality*, pp.46-36). The limp is particularly significant to West Indian readers, who will recall that Anancy, too, walks with one. Similarly to Benoit, the narrator's description of Dada suggests a natural shiftiness, which contrasts to Parkin's apparent steadfastness. This is undermined later, however, by Mother Johnson's remark that Parkin's 'wrong sort of skin colour' elevates him above his neighbours (as he is closer to whiteness than they are), and is a reason for his community, if not this narrative, to distrust him (*Quality*, p.100). Parkin stands for 'code and custom,' the inviolate ideal of the past, and his community does not regard him as their natural leader. Dada, by contrast, regards code

³⁷ See Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' pp.36-37, in which he argued that the epic hero is 'a function of the plot fate assigns him,' and 'completely coincides with his situation and his fate.'

³⁸ Bakhtin argued that the hero of the novel 'should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious.' See Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.10. Hegel argued that classical epic figures are 'whole and entire individuals who brilliantly concentrate in themselves those traits of national character which otherwise are separately dispersed [...] The nation is concentrated in them into a living individual person and so they fight the national enterprise to its end.' See Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p.1068.

and custom as the sort of enemy ‘that you can’t even make out as a thing to hold or to talk to or to clout’ (*Quality*, p.41). For all of Dada’s deception he represents the plot, not the plantation, and his introductory speech critiques colonial hierarchy – it is code and custom that are slippery and elusive, that frustrate the expression of the peasant consciousness of those who adhere to Obeah; code and custom that are to blame for the drought.

Despite Salkey’s narrator, there are signs in Dada’s characterisation that *Quality’s* treatment of Obeah allows for a nuanced, if fleeting, appreciation of its cultural value. Although Dada is ultimately dismissed, he is given an unusual amount of space to explain himself and his beliefs to Parkin, the brown middle-class intellectual. He explains that

those people [...] depend on me and what I can give them. [...] I am not just one day of the week to them. I am all seven – morning, noon, and night. It can’t matter if I am a rass or not [...] I not really causing them any harm. All I do, that is bad, is collect a little “dues” off them, and that is my living. And for that collection, I give them hope and faith. I give them what the big decorated church door can’t satisfy (*Quality*, p.37).³⁹

While Dada clearly articulates his role in his community – this subaltern *does* speak – the overarching narrative does not recognise Dada as a legitimate leader of his people. The Obeahman is still circumscribed by power, and the narrative undermines his critique by commenting that his ‘impatience and anxiety began to affect his usual easy flow of words;’ Dada’s eloquence can only go so far. Parkin yawns and nods ‘listlessly’ while listening to Dada; the intellectual is at ease, while the Obeahman is agitated (*Quality*, p.42). Parkin is Dada’s friend before his death, and has a measure of respect, if not reverence, for the Obeahman and his balm yard, but still reminds Dada that he is ‘considered an obeah man and as such you are breaking the law. In this modern world,’ he continues, ‘you have to have a piece of paper which gives you authority to heal people. A doctor is a man with such papers, and an obeah man is the other kind of healer’ (*Quality*, p.41). Although Parkin still defers to the authority of these ‘official’ structures, this exchange implicitly critique these ‘official’ and certified leaders as failing to fulfil the needs of their nation-in-waiting. Despite

³⁹ Parkin repeats this sentiment in his defence of Dada and his balm yard to his friend and neighbour, Mr Marshall. He says: ‘Dada Johnson is giving them what the Church can’t’ (*Quality*, p.49).

his reservations Parkin recognises that Dada has a function, regardless of that function operating in opposition to state apparatus – in fact, it is the weakness of the state apparatus that necessitates Obeah practitioners. Middle-class intellectuals may hope for a time when their less advantaged compatriots may not need Obeahmen, but it is clear from this passage that that day has not yet come.

Parkin may hold Dada in high esteem but with the introduction of a speaking, thinking Obeahman Salkey's narrative returns to the social realist conventions (discussed in Chapter One of this thesis) to undermine Dada, so as to allay the threat he poses to its 'enlightened' ideology. Dada's explanations are prefaced with 'Brother Parkin was the only person in St Thomas who knew that Dada Johnson was a confidence trickster,' thus prejudicing the reader against the Obeahman. We also learn that Dada has served six months for Obeah and two years for larceny (*Quality*, p.36).⁴⁰ Irony returns to the narrative, with the narrator claiming that, despite Dada being an ex-convict, twice over, Parkin considers him 'a small-time business man with certain progressive ideas.' We are not told what these 'progressive ideas' are, so cannot make our own informed decisions, but we *are* told that while the district's people are in dire straits Dada wears a real diamond, which he pretends is false. He is unfaithful to his wife in the name of 'duty' (he impregnates other women to prove they are not infertile, he claims); and he owes Parkin money due to the drought's effect on his illegal marijuana business. From this we are to infer his innate dishonesty, and place no faith in his healing or leadership abilities. The Obeahman's words do carry a warning, though. Dada anticipates not only his own death but the decline of the entire island with his comment that 'this Jamaica that we living in nowadays, always give me the feeling that it destroying itself [...] this island is just one big suicide place' (*Quality*, p.42). Even he sees no value in the epic time and space presented in this novel, from which there is no escape. His death may indeed signify not the meaninglessness of Obeah, but the meaninglessness of the neo-colonial society in which he finds himself.

We question Parkin's judgement, too, in his close association with the Obeahman and his willingness to profit from Dada's deception. Not to mention his supposed selflessness: in a time of drought Parkin has money to spare – Parkin is the village 'usurer'

⁴⁰ Larceny charges were often associated with Obeah. See Paton, *Cultural Politics of Obeah*.

(*Quality*, p.19), a turn of phrase which indicates an ambivalence towards Parkin, and suggests that this hero may not be altogether heroic.⁴¹ Nevertheless Parkin's superiority to Dada is further reinforced when the narrator adds that 'Brother Parkin held the trump card in their secret game, and Dada Johnson knew it, and behaved towards him accordingly' (*Quality*, p.36). It is Parkin who reminds Dada of his place in the eyes of the law, according to 'code and custom.' Since he does not have his 'piece of paper,' continues Parkin, 'all the good that you feel that you are doing for the people in St Thomas might just as well be curses and crosses for your own neck' (*Quality*, p.41). The narrative's epic sensibilities will not allow Dada to challenge the hierarchies of the past; its rationalist sensibilities, moreover, will not allow him to challenge the hierarchies of the present. Despite being able to speak himself, Dada the Obeahman will always be circumvented by power – be it the power of the state, or the power of the narrative. He is always-already contained within the narrator's dominant ideology, to which he poses no real threat.

Before Dada's death Parkin, his wife Bidy and their neighbours, the Marshalls, discuss Dada's brand of religious work. The lines between Kumina, Obeah and Vodun are blurred in this passage, in which the narrator informs us that Parkin 'hastened to answer' their questions and 'restore the balance of power' by telling his neighbours that 'the Jamaican celebration of Pocomania closely resembled Haitian Voodoo and that Pocomania was only a rather feeble tower of Babel that certain Jamaicans erected in order to get nearer the truth of the power of the Almighty' (*Quality*, p.25).⁴² Here, as with Parkin's discussion with Dada, the narrative intervenes to reassert dominance over Obeah by 'rationalising' it (in Standard English), therefore robbing it of its complexity, not for those who believe or practice but for us, the 'rationalising intellectuals.' It is not Dada, who is best qualified to educate us in these matters, who speaks of his beliefs but Parkin, who has no faith. By dismissing Obeah as a 'tower of Babel,' not only does Parkin de-historicise the practice, he undermines its religious and cultural value; his later 'respect' for Dada seems disingenuous, and appears to be borne either out of their mutual disdain for their neighbours or out of Parkin's own hypocrisy. Hypocrisy and disdain for one's own people are

⁴¹ This also supports Nazareth's theory of *Quality* being an Anancy story.

⁴² The term 'Pocomania' itself is often used derisively, as it suggests 'a little madness.' See Morrish, *Obeah, Christ and Rastaman*, pp.51-52.

not heroic traits: this suggests that Parkin's candidacy as 'hero' is never guaranteed, and further supports the argument that he, as well as Dada, may be a confidence trickster.

Parkin's wife Bidy appears to have no respect for his authority, however.⁴³ She repeatedly attacks Parkin's armchair philosophy during this conversation, and her chief criticism is that he does not know about 'these things,' so does not have the right to pass judgement on them. She claims to know something her friends and husband do not, which is that 'Voodoo and duppy' are real, not abstract psychological or philosophical constructs (*Quality*, p.22). She does not attend Dada's balm yard, but she does not doubt its power. Parkin tries to silence her by calling her 'an excitable woman,' but she insists that 'you and all your fine thoughts about things don't belong to this world, at all. Most of your preachings can't stand up to view in the hard cruel life that all of us have to live' (*Quality*, p.22-23). Bidy tells her husband that he is not part of this land – he, like Haynes, cannot view 'his' people's beliefs as real – and, paradoxically, she pre-empts many of the sentiments that the mob will later use to threaten her husband's life. Bidy claims to have seen and spoken to a man who bought the souls of the infirm, which he then extracted from them after death. Parkin, in an effort to dismiss her claims, has to resort to shouting at her – losing his 'patriarchal calm' in the process, and thus the argument. He does not 'reason' with her, but simply leaves, blaming her temperament on her (not his) inability to have children (*Quality*, p.24; p.30).⁴⁴ Obeah thus threatens Parkin's authority from the very beginning, and with it the narrative's 'rational' authority.

Dada's sensational, ritualised death creates a spiritual and religious power vacuum, and three of the village's children – Doris, Marion and Linda (Marshall) – form their own secret society to pray for rain in Dada's absence. Linda believes Dada is speaking to her from beyond the grave and has many theories about the Obeahman's death, which her friends do not understand and which are not fully explained in the novel.⁴⁵ Linda is portrayed as a mischievous child, who conflates Anancy with Jesus (*Quality*, p.14), and tells her mother

⁴³ Bidy fulfils the 'old bidy' stereotype, and exemplifies a mistrust of women vis-à-vis the 'national struggle' in literature at this time (See Cobham-Sander, 'The Creative Writer').

⁴⁴ This, like the other novels in this chapter, does not portray women as emotionally complex human beings.

⁴⁵ Linda and Dada's peculiar relationship could have suggested a future for Obeah, were Linda not removed to Haiti. Perhaps in Haiti, 'the land of Voodoo,' she might develop whatever powers she may have to communicate with the dead.

that Dada regularly asks her to ‘jump pocomania’ with him, despite never having attended a Kumina meeting and despite her parents being staunch unbelievers (*Quality*, pp.67-68).⁴⁶ The allusion to Anancy once again configures Dada as a trickster figure who may return at any point to wreak further havoc – which he does, through Linda and through his wife. Parkin intrudes on the girls’ play and, unsolicited, informs them that ‘Missa Dada Johnson was a man who liked to earn his living by fooling people, or rather by helping people to fool themselves.’ This is the first time that Parkin has openly maligned Dada, and Linda defies him by insisting that ‘I don’t think that a man like Missa Dada could ever dishonest at all. Too much people follow him and did love him’ (*Quality*, p.81). Parkin’s words only serve to whip Linda into a rage, causing her to attack Doris and call her a ‘Judas person’ for revealing their secret to Parkin (*Quality*, p.84). This is the second time Parkin has tried to ‘educate’ his community about Obeah, and for the second time his efforts have caused strife. It is *he*, not Dada, who disrupts village life by intruding not only on ‘folk’ spiritual matters, but also on apparently ‘female’ matters. Biddy and Linda do not see him as their saviour; they do not share his values, and neither does their wider community. Parkin dismisses the girls’ beliefs as ‘idle labrish’ – labrish is a word reserved for women’s talk – but Linda still believes that, with Dada’s death, it is now she who is ‘the force that was working for rain for all the people of St Thomas’ (*Quality*, pp.81-82). She maligns Parkin as ‘a spider called Anancy,’ who had “‘mashed up” everything that was nice and good, everything that wasn’t his business’ (*Quality*, p.83).⁴⁷ In particular, Parkin has frustrated her claims to leadership and her expression of what can be considered nascent religious beliefs. The narrative may perceive of Dada as a fraud, but its characters make clear that this particular practice, this part of folk life, does and should not concern this intellectual ‘hero.’

Parkin was one of the last people to speak to Doris after her fight with Linda and, when the young girl falls ill and dies of fever Mother Johnson, who had advised Doris’ mother against calling a doctor, seizes the opportunity to blame Parkin and the Marshalls

⁴⁶ Linda says to her mother: ‘I don’t imagine anything. I see with my two eye like anybody else. And I see Missa Dada Johnson, and him talk to me, nice-nice as a ninepence’ (*Quality*, p.67). Linda also prefers Anancy stories to Bible stories, which alarms her mother.

⁴⁷ Linda later considers Parkin a ‘destroyer spider with a thousand cunning eyes’ (*Quality*, p.83). Both Parkin and Dada have now been compared to Anancy, which supports my reading of them as parts of a whole, and Nazareth’s contention that *Quality* is an Anancy story. Salkey’s placement of ‘mashed up’ in quotation marks exemplifies his remove from his subjects’ reality.

not only for Doris' demise but also Dada's.⁴⁸ Carr sees Mother Johnson as 'the embodiment of brutal will, with a deep vein of masochism,' but nevertheless argues that she 'poses a complex of questions crucially relevant to the emotional experience of her society.'⁴⁹ These questions are not necessarily answered by her destruction though, and it is too simplistic to conclude that a community can begin to rebuild itself by simply killing its old gods. Mother Johnson, addressing her grieving community, claims to have 'the whole of history' contained within her (*Quality*, p.102). She does not mention the future, though, thus keeping the narrative in the epic past, and foreshadowing her own death. Salkey's narrator nullifies the validity of these questions by portraying Mother Johnson as hysterical, even suggesting mental illness. She repeatedly tugs at a bandana she has tied around her wrist in a compulsory gesture, and hallucinates during one of her speeches that she sees Dada carrying his deputy in his arms, both wearing sackcloth (*Quality*, p.107). While Bidy is also portrayed as an 'hysterical woman' she is merely cantankerous; Mother Johnson, on the other hand, is homicidal.⁵⁰ She wants the Marshalls, then Parkin, to be put to death not only out of grief for her husband but out of a sort of megalomania.⁵¹ Dada's alternative to Christianity was not a threat to the dominant order, but his wife's is. In particular he was not a threat to Parkin, like both these women (and Linda) are. Parkin must defeat them, and Obeah, as they are all unstable foils to the narrative's already anxious nation-building project.

Mother Johnson is anxious of Parkin, too. She reflects that he is 'a strange friend for anybody to have [...] He seemed to move into everybody's life and leave it untouched, and he seemed untouched himself by any of his excursions into people's trials and endeavours' (*Quality*, p.108). The narrative may portray her and Linda as destructive, but these women see in Parkin what the narrator does not, and what he may not necessarily want the readers

⁴⁸ Mother Johnson is resentful of the Marshalls' having slighted her husband some years ago. In addition, the Marshalls and the Parkins are also their village's lightest-skinned and wealthiest residents. The Marshalls had scorned the balm yard, but Mr Marshall was in attendance the night Dada died, as a visiting (horrified) spectator.

⁴⁹ Carr, 'Complex Fate,' p.102.

⁵⁰ Both of these women are childless, and both are portrayed as hindrances to their respective husband's supposed missions. Their portrayal supports Cobham's argument that 'middle-class Jamaican men no longer saw women as contributing either physically or intellectually to the process of resistance to colonialism or social injustice.' See Cobham-Sander, 'The Creative Writer,' p.239.

⁵¹ Mother Johnson exclaims, before she is executed: 'You is nothing but what I make you [...] like slaves [...] And I manage you like you is on a bit-a-string' (*Quality*, p.203).

to see, if his vision of Parkin as hero is to succeed – perhaps this is why they are configured as so dangerous. What Linda and Mother Johnson do not see, however, are the several similarities between Parkin and Dada. The narrator states that Dada's strength 'lay in the personal relationships he had fostered [...] the private commissions [...] the family secrets he held, the intimate knowledge of family histories he shared' (*Quality*, p.55). Like Parkin, he too moved in everyone's life. Parkin and Dada are parts of a whole, liminal figures whose power and status in their communities depend on at once being seen and unseen, on knowing, but not showing. The women's concerns may be brushed away as part of their own emotional and mental 'sickness' but this image of hero as trickster is pertinent, particularly in comparison to, say, Hamel, who is at once a hero and a trickster, a keeper of secrets and a threat to (narrative) plantation rule. Parkin and Dada are epic heroes in that they cannot escape their story's plot, but they are both ambivalent, tricky, and untrustworthy heroes.

When Parkin is captured by/surrenders to Mother Johnson's thugs, he is dragged to the centre of the stage outside Doris' house with his shirt 'speckled with blood stains' and his chest 'raked with long weals.' After the narrator's detailed description of his injuries Mother Johnson, her eyes 'red and frightened,' exclaims: 'but, what a way he look like Jesus Christ' (*Quality*, p.122). Sandra Pouchet Paquet is the only critic of *Quality*, so far, to draw attention to the analogy between Parkin and Jesus, but she does so only to argue that 'the sustained parallel with Christ's passion and death on Calvary stresses the cult's potential for violence and irrational action rather than its framework of authentic religious belief.'⁵² The villagers' potential for violence is activated by their grief (for both Dada and Doris), and by the desperation of the drought. Pouchet Paquet's conclusion is too simplistic, and forecloses any discussion of the genuine religiosity of these folk beliefs. Moreover, it ignores the spectrum of folk belief in which both Dada and Parkin exist – both men, and Jesus, too, are also compared to Anancy.⁵³ In any case Parkin is no Christ – the affable intellectual loses his temper when Mother Johnson *patronises* him, disrespecting the paternalism she forces him to reveal, as did Bidy. In both of these instances, the challenge comes during a discussion

⁵² Sandra Pouchet Paquet, 'The Fifties', in *West Indian Literature*, ed. by Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.51-62 (p.58).

⁵³ Linda insists that 'Missa Dada Johnson dead like Jesus Christ,' whom she compares to Anancy, too (*Quality*, p.67).

of Obeah. When Mother Johnson accuses Parkin of having ‘fixed’ Doris by slipping something into her mouth, he calls her a ‘common obeah woman,’ and ‘mad,’ and for the first time refers to Obeah as ‘black magic and a lot of nastiness’ (*Quality*, p.131). In Dada’s absence, the middle-class intellectual reverts to type. Obeah forces Parkin’s prejudices to the surface, and pushes him off his pedestal. It illustrates Fanon’s argument of the ‘empty shell’ of national consciousness, given the ‘incapacity of the national middle class to rationalise popular action, that is to say their incapacity to see into the reasons for that action.’⁵⁴ Parkin does not understand the rules by which this community organises itself, and is nearly put to death because of his ignorance. Even his survival is futile, as there is no community left for him to influence at the novel’s close.

It is unclear who is winning the battle of wills until Doris dies, and her mother attempts suicide. Despite Parkin’s intercession Mother Johnson is violently put to death by the same mob that would have murdered Parkin at her request – this national narrative has now become absurd. We do not see Mother Johnson’s death however, and it is not celebrated as a triumph of ‘Good’ over ‘Evil,’ or even as a victory for common sense. Parkin saves his own life but he cannot save hers, and with her goes the villagers’ faith in themselves as, despite her hysteria, she was the repository of their history and (national) character. Parkin’s victory is still a defeat, though, as Mother Johnson takes with her what would have become a national (peasant) consciousness. Her passion is an important, if belaboured, exploration into the meaning of Africa to the contemporary Jamaican labouring classes – and to the intellectuals who wrote about them. For these characters, to believe that they are ‘African’ is to believe in Mother Johnson, who comes to represent wickedness, falsehood and treachery. The allegorical message is clear: the poor, uneducated peasant classes have (will) put their faith in unworthy, lying, trickified leaders, who have (will) lead them astray. When these already dubious leaders fail, by their own folly, these vulnerable people are (will be) left with no choice but to destroy themselves and each other. Yet while *Quality*, on the surface, may allegorise the suffering of the intellectual artist/hero caused by his community’s ignorance, its treatment of Obeah allows for the interpretation that the novel is also a warning to those same intellectuals that there are some aspects of folk life that, even though they may be unable to penetrate, and cannot destroy, they cannot and

⁵⁴ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p.119.

should not seek to dismiss. Obeah once again exposes the limits of representational realism, and presents readers with a counter-hegemonic challenge to this dominant mode. The novel's pessimistic and reductive conclusion also reflects its position as stylistically and aesthetically transitional, between 'old' condemnation of Obeah as 'superstition and nastiness' and a newer appreciation of Obeah's value in the formation of West Indian nation(s). We see this transition more fully in *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura*.

Quality depicts the folk slowly getting to grips with modernity but their evolution comes at a price – the loss of illusion, yes, but ultimately the loss of faith. It is impossible, in Salkey's text, for the folk to 'progress' into modernity while still holding on to Obeah, but without Obeah there is nothing left to hold on to. There can be no future because Obeah is not allowed, as it is in *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura*, to be part of the people's new self-realisation. Salkey's narrative is not hopeful for West Indian leadership; the Johnsons may have been martyred, but they are not mourned – neither are they replaced. The drought continues, with an earthquake imminent, and the land itself consumes its people. Johnson argues that *Quality* 'depicts a decline in the authority of the magico-religious leader, and his increased distance from other sectors of the society.'⁵⁵ Yet when we read *The Obeah Man* and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, then *Myal* (in Chapter Five of this thesis), we see another reappraisal of this magico-religious leader, a reappraisal that is altogether more positive towards the practitioner and his community. While Salkey's novel, in the tradition of the epic, serves 'the future memory of a past, a broadening of the world of the absolute past, and enriching of it with new images,' Selvon's and Khan's serve contemporary reality, which is both their subject and their starting point, and imagine and seek to contribute to a near future.⁵⁶ In *Cascadura* and *Obeah Man* Obeah, 'the subject of serious literary representation,' is 'portrayed without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Johnson, 'Shamans,' p.231. Johnson contrasts Dada to Prophet Moses Barton in Sylvia Wynter's *Hills of Hebron* (1962) who, although he has a more political role than Dada Johnson, likewise 'retains his congregation because of his capacity to inspire his followers,' a capacity that Dada feels is slipping away because of the drought. See Johnson, 'Shamans,' p.232. See also Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2010).

⁵⁶ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.19.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.22-23.

The self in society in The Obeah Man

While *Quality* is set at the turn of the twentieth century in a community that vividly remembers slavery, *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* are set around Independence, in the early 1960s. As Bakhtin argues of the novel, both these narratives occupy a 'zone of contact with the present in all its openendedness,' and reflect 'reality itself in the process of unfolding.'⁵⁸ Like *Quality* they communicate a sense of underlying existential instability, but do not express this in sudden violent outbursts; nor do they portray this instability as ultimately frustrating. They work through this uncertainty and are hopeful for the future, which is not inevitably doomed. Zampi and Manko, unlike Dada and Parkin, are not dysfunctional leaders – although, as we will see, this is not true throughout their respective narratives. They do not seek dominance like Dada and Mother Johnson, nor to patronise, as does Parkin. Instead, these two Obeahmen seek communion, and are genuinely responsible to the people who look to them for spiritual guidance. Not since *Hamel* has an Obeahman-character been his novel's chief protagonist and Zampi, although he is less experienced than Manko, is not only Khan's protagonist but his archetypal man.⁵⁹ Zampi's realisation of his full potential allegorises Khan's vision of a modern, independent Trinidad coming to terms with itself; Zampi approximates to Wilson Harris' artist, who must first learn to be, then to know, in 'a precarious existence where nothing seems given, [and] no traditions exist to provide a stable culture.'⁶⁰ Khan's narrative thus follows from Salkey's, which left us without a coherent culture, and attempts to create one by reincorporating Obeah into his vision of Trinidadian self-identity.

There is little scholarship on *The Obeah Man*, which is not even fleetingly referenced like *Quality*. Arthur Drayton observed in 1986 that 'Ismith Khan seems not to have caught the attention of a critic until the appearance of his second novel, and to date no one has done any extended study of his work.'⁶¹ In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh Khan spoke of being 'outside the mainstream of any traditional culture or region,' and being plagued by

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵⁹ In contrast to *Hamel* though, Zampi is uninterested in leadership, revolution and revenge.

⁶⁰ Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (London: Longman, 1975), p.3.

⁶¹ Arthur Drayton, 'Ismith Khan,' in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Daryl Cumber Dance (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.246-254 (p.253). Roydon Salick is the only critic to have done so to date, and not until 2012. See Roydon Salick, *Ismith Khan: The Man & His Work* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2012).

'isolation and alienation, loneliness and boredom.' Even in New York, where he spent much of his life, Khan had 'little in common' with his fellow West Indians.⁶² He did not, therefore, align himself with the traditional canon of West Indian writing, which may explain his being critically overlooked. Khan's novels' concerns are the usual home, nation, race and colonialism, but *Obeah Man* marks a significant departure from the microscopic view of the East Indian West Indian community detailed in his first novel, *The Jumbie Bird* (1961); in Naipauls Sr and Jr's fiction; and in Selvon's Tiger novels.⁶³ *Obeah Man*, with its movement to cosmopolitan Port of Spain and into Obeah, a traditionally 'African' religious practice, is even further apart from this tradition – even though, as we have seen in Chapter Two of this thesis, African ethnicity is not a determinant of belief in or practice of Obeah. Roydon Salick dismisses Obeah's centrality to Khan's narrative's aesthetic and ideological concerns, arguing that 'the reader looking for insights into obeah will be disappointed,' as Obeah is 'a means to a much larger end, a hazy vehicle for a focused critique of West Indian culture.'⁶⁴ He does not appreciate, however, the integrity of Obeah to Zampi's character – and the fact that this critique of West Indian culture is itself a result of the Obeahman's vocational retreat from, and then return to, his society. Zampi cannot come to himself and his community, and therefore Khan's narrative is not viable, without Obeah. Zampi is an Obeahman, and any insight into him, this novel's central interest, is insight into Obeah. It is through Obeah that Zampi realises his potential as artist, leader and man, and through Obeah that we understand Zampi as an archetypal hero. Obeah is the conduit to the hero's spiritual enlightenment, and to the fulfilment of his personhood.

It is no accident that *Obeah Man* is set during Carnival. These two days of debauchery before the Lenten fast represent bidding farewell to the 'sins' of the previous year, and metaphorise Zampi's descent into the underworld of his old life, where he is harrowed by (memories of) past excesses. Moreover, Obeah and Carnival exist on the same spectrum of African-Caribbean religious belief; Kela Francis suggests a spiritual basis for carnival in the act of 'playin' mas,'" as by

⁶² Frank Birbalsingh, 'Interview with Ismith Khan', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 41 (1995), 50-58 (p.53; p.55).

⁶³ Jeremy Poynting has explored this world in 'Literature and Cultural Pluralism: East Indians in the Caribbean', (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1985).

⁶⁴ Salick, *Ismith Khan*, p.47.

embodying spirits, African maskers bring the mysterious world of nature and the supernatural into the known and more predictable community of humans, so that the spirits may commune with the people and cause them to respond in various ways: dancing, drumming, praying, hand-clapping, offering, and singing.⁶⁵

Embodying the essence of a deity is not unique to the Caribbean – indeed, there exist numerous masquerades during festivals throughout West Africa. In the Caribbean, communication between the world of the gods and the ancestors is a central tenet of ‘traditional religions’ such as Vodun, Candomblé, Santería and Myal/Obeah. Carnival, too, inhabits the same spectrum of African-Caribbean folk or peasant cultural practices, all of which developed as responses to British colonial cultural suppression. Drumming, stick fighting, masquerading and steelpan, all integral to Carnival, have each been outlawed at some time by the colonial state, as has Obeah, as challenges to this colonial order.⁶⁶ All were associated with riot and rebellion, so the confluence of these forces in Khan’s novel show them all to be key aspects of the Trinidadian/West Indian culture and nation that he is imagining – one that expresses itself in resistance to British colonial values.

Crucial to Khan’s imagined nation is the end of colour/class stratification. Zampi is described as ‘mysterious because he was one of the breeds of the island that has no race, no caste, so colour; he was the end of masses of assimilations and mixtures, having the eyes of the East Indian, the build of the Negro, the skin of the Chinese, and some of the colour of all.’⁶⁷ This archetypical man has no racial advantages or disadvantages, no historical determinants, but is wholly Caribbean. Having denounced the city and its sins four years ago, Zampi lives on a mountain above Port of Spain. He is physically and emotionally detached from the rest of the city, the country, and the world, and is reluctant to look for his former lover Zolda, even as he seems compelled to do so. He abandoned Zolda to become an Obeahman and curses himself, other people, and the ‘ugliness’ of Carnival for his desires, which he perceives as weakness. Yet his most compelling reason for being brought back to the ‘real world’ is a need for communion – a desire to no longer be isolated – which is configured, explicitly, as lust. Carnival exemplifies vulgarity, amplifies cruelty and

⁶⁵ Kela Nnarka Francis, ‘The Spirituality of Carnival: Using Yoruba Cosmology to Read *The Dragon Can’t Dance*’, *International Journal of Art and Art History*, 3 (2015), 63-82 (p.64).

⁶⁶ See Andrew Pearse, ‘Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4 (1956), 175-193.

⁶⁷ Ismith Khan, *The Obeah Man* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 1995), p.6.

tests Zampi's humanity, but it also signifies togetherness, the (re)creation and celebration of Caribbean community. By the end of the novel (and the end of Carnival), Zampi comes to see above and beyond himself, and learns to love humanity at its basest, by which he may help it realise its best. Carnival represents the Christ-like hero's wilderness, which he must negotiate and survive in order to fulfil his role as leader. His triumph is his realisation that his real weakness is his isolation. Khan explores Obeah's potential as the essence of the romantic hero's being, not a hindrance to his development. This speaks to Khan's interest in reappraising Obeah as culturally valuable, in contrast to Salkey's suggestion of decline and degeneration.

Adeline Johns-Putra argues that the allegorisation of the epic form in the nineteenth century provided the inspiration for a 'distinctly Romantic form of truth-telling, that of self-development.' Emphasis shifted from heroic patriotic deeds, she continues, to 'the poet-hero and his quest for poetic power. Focus, in Victorian and post-Victorian epics, became 'the question of selfhood – more specifically, the question of how self-development occurs in tandem with social demands.'⁶⁸ In a similar vein, the central quest in *Obeah Man* is Zampi's quest for his role in a shifting society – he uses Carnival to find himself, not lose himself, as is suggested by the tradition of masking. The world Khan's novel presents, in contrast to Salkey's, is constantly in flux, and the hero is never completely self-assured. This present world is, as Bakhtin argues, 'something transitory, it is flow, it is an eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness.'⁶⁹ Carnival is an ideal setting for this fluctuating world, as it is a festival that celebrates liminality, during which people express themselves by expressing someone or something else. Zampi begins Carnival as an isolated character, out of step with his own world; *Obeah Man* dramatises his reintegration into this world and demonstrates that for a hero to lead his society, he must embrace it as a part of him, even if he chooses to live apart from it. In addition, the narrative uses Zampi's reintegration to allegorise its own aesthetic movement from a preoccupation with the past to a celebration of the future. Not only does Zampi, as Salick suggests, set 'a standard of conduct worthy of emulation;' the novel too sets a standard, one that takes

⁶⁸ Adeline Johns-Putra, *The History of the Epic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.8.

⁶⁹ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.20.

Obeah seriously as a legitimate aspect of Caribbean culture and selfhood.⁷⁰ *Obeah Man* uses Zampi's discovery of the meaning of Obeah to comment on the movement away from the archetype of the self-sufficient, consolidated hero of Victorian English fiction to the more ambivalent, unconstructed, yet fulfilled hero of Harris' formulation, who 'both transcends and undermines (or deepens if you will) the mode of society since the truth of community which he pursues is not a self-evident fact.'⁷¹ Zampi thus approximates to Harris' vision of the writer (artist) in Caribbean society, who 'sets out again and again across a certain terrain of primordial but broken recollection in search of a community.'⁷² Zampi must set out across the terrain of Port of Spain Carnival – a festival that recollects and refashions 'primordial' memories of the Middle Passage and enslavement (in practices such as limbo dancing and stick fighting, for example) – to find his community, which is emblematised in Zolda, a figure whose very corporeality signifies Carnival, and Trinidad. Khan's novel uses Zampi, an Obeahman, not only to interrogate notions of what it means to be a West Indian hero, but what it may potentially mean to be a West Indian novel – and the relationship of both to a West Indian nation.

'One of the basic internal themes of the novel,' Bakhtin argues, 'is precisely the theme of the inadequacy of a hero's fate and situation to the hero himself.'⁷³ Zampi begins his journey through Carnival full of questions about himself and his relationships, all of which are filtered through questions about his powers. During his time in the city he is repeatedly confronted by others' perceptions of Obeah, and of him, which cause them to scorn his attempts at communion and push him even further away. The narrative acknowledges this paradoxical alienation by declaring that Zampi was 'always amused by what other people thought obeah was, for deep within himself he did not know' (*Obeah Man*, p.53). This is illustrated early on when Zampi is verbally attacked by a street vendor, for no other reason than her suspicion of Obeahmen. She chases him away from her stall because she 'don't want no obeah man shadow to fall 'cross my goods' (*Obeah Man*, p.4). The tension between what is expected of him by society and what he feels he might be is

⁷⁰ Roydon Salick, 'Introduction,' in *The Obeah Man*, by Ismith Khan (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 1995), pp.v-xvii, (p.vi).

⁷¹ Wilson Harris, 'The Writer and Society', in *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967), pp.48-64 (p.60).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.54.

⁷³ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.34; p.37.

the greatest source of his doubt, and the novel's pivotal conflict. It is what Bakhtin described as the 'crucial tension [between] the external and the internal man,' as a result of which 'the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation.'⁷⁴ Zampi's subjectivity is this novel's chief experiment, and it is Carnival that creates the optimum conditions.

Carnival exacerbates the gulf between Zampi and his would-be community. The festival is itself unreal, as characters assume diverse 'false' identities that further confound our hero. Salick's suggestion that Obeah is 'an antidote against carnival' presents not only a false dichotomy, but a problematic one.⁷⁵ Salick, like Zampi initially, and even Dada and Parkin, sees Trinidad as 'an ailing society which must heal itself;' to suggest, however, that Carnival is a national disease which must be exorcised like Zampi's own demons is to deny Carnival any cultural value, and to imply that that it is somehow antithetical to Obeah, which is not the case.⁷⁶ Zampi *needs* Carnival; it is only by passing through it that he, as archetypal Caribbean man, can achieve understanding of himself and of others, and vice versa. He needs Obeah, too, as only by completely mastering and understanding its power can he become a leader. Unlike in *Quality* these 'African retentions,' both Obeah and Carnival, are not Zampi's monsters – their essence is the object of his quest, and of himself.

Initially Zampi disparages humanity, and feels 'a certain kind of reward in remaining aloof' (*Obeah Man*, p.5). He is conscious of being a spectator at Carnival, not a participant, and cannot even identify himself as subject. When asked by a reveller what his costume is he responds, having to control his temper: 'I playin' obeah man...you know a obeah man not suppose to imitate anything or anybody' (*Obeah Man*, p.28). Zampi is masquerading on many levels. He is pretending to be participating in Carnival (although he is, by his presence), and he feels he is pretending to be an Obeahman, although others recognise him as one, and despite having abandoned his former life to become one. Moreover, Zampi is 'masking' his emotions and only pretending to participate in life more generally. Ever aloof, he views his surroundings 'through a special kind of lens,' like 'a new and fascinating possession' (*Obeah Man*, p.5). He does not see himself as part of this world, or one of these

⁷⁴ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.37.

⁷⁵ Salick, 'Introduction,' p.vi.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.v.

people, and cannot lay claim to an identity within it. He is not the fully-formed champion of the epic, at this stage; instead he is 'stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness.'⁷⁷ Zampi is the 'tragic *isolato*,' a figure Lloyd Brown characterises as 'an ego that has been cut off from the West Indian reality by a cocoon of [...] colonial self-hatred.'⁷⁸ After having essentially kidnapped Zolda on Carnival Tuesday he tells her that his life is 'nothing,' and that he is merely a 'sieve that the whole world pass through and leave nothing behind' (*Obeah Man*, p.47). In an echo of Dada Johnson's 'suicide place' comment Zampi claims that he, Zolda and Trinidad are 'dead,' that all the West Indian islands are 'drowning and we going down with them.' He claims to have 'no uses for you or nobody or nothing,' but Zolda does not join him in his insulting self-pity. Instead she calls him a coward. In response to his 'ramblings' she tells him that 'the trouble with you is that you can't be happy, you don't know how to enjoy yourself anymore, and when you see other people having a good time you sour up your face' (*Obeah Man*, pp.48-49). She informs him that his self-imposed exile is his problem, not other people, and that his retreat from humanity is a result of his own selfishness. From this, the only real conversation he has had with another human being for four years, Zampi comes to admit that he does not understand other people.⁷⁹ He is still not convinced, like Zolda, that nothing is wrong with Trinidad, but on the bus back (after Zolda has demanded to be set free) he is hit with 'a terrible sense of responsibility,' and begins to lose even more faith in himself and his powers (*Obeah Man*, p.81). It is not enough for this Obeahman to simply acknowledge his lack of humanity, he must embrace that humanity. With this realisation comes doubt, but also clarity: when Zolda asks him to make a love charm for the bus driver the Obeahman flatly refuses. 'Obeah was not aphrodisiacs and charms for sour old men,' claims the narrator. 'This much he knew' (*Obeah Man*, p.82).

Despite this, Zampi comes to his fullest realisation of himself and his responsibilities not through Zolda – who, in keeping with the attitudes towards women during this period (and in these texts), is depicted as a sensuous, frivolous, childlike distraction – but through the being most unlike himself in this entire narrative, an English tourist painter. The tourist

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel,' p.30.

⁷⁸ Lloyd W. Brown, 'The Isolated Self in West Indian Literature', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 23 (1977), 54-65 (p.54), original emphasis.

⁷⁹ Khan does not give Zolda enough credit for helping his hero to this point though, and configures her as Delilah to Zampi's Sampson.

has come to Trinidad looking for 'The Spirit of Independence.' After watching Zolda dance with Massahood, Zampi's old friend and romantic rival (in an attempt to make Zampi jealous), the painter decides that they will be 'Man and Woman of the Caribbean,' the subject of his publicly commissioned mural (*Obeah Man*, p.104). Massahood is clearly contrasted to Zampi: the stick fighter is large and loud, and the narrative lingers in describing his physicality. The Obeahman's eyes are mysterious and tortured, while Hood's are 'keen, quick, the kind of eyes that could act swiftly without stopping to think' (*Obeah Man*, p.21). While Zampi's thoughts are dangerously powerful, Hood's weapon is his body.⁸⁰ Hood is the man Zampi might have been, had he chosen a different path: 'these two would have been brothers,' reflects the narrator, 'but in their eyes they were different men' (*Obeah Man*, p.21). Hood's corporeal lifestyle and appetites represent temptation for Zampi; their similarities demonstrate how easy it is for the hero to slip, as well as an acknowledgement of his connection with his immediate, if oppositional, reality. The similarities between Massahood and Zampi highlight the Obeahman's alienation from 'his own kind,' who no longer believe in his powers, if they ever did. Hood is convinced that, if he can have the Obeahman's woman (whom he regards as a possession and talisman), he will no longer need to visit Zampi to protect himself from injury. Zampi blesses Hood's stick for him every Shrove Tuesday, despite being well aware of his 'friend's feelings.'⁸¹ Both Zolda and Hood are Zampi's closest friends – if he can be said to have any – but they also present his greatest challenge, and the greatest threat to his self-realisation.

While dancing is of course part of Carnival, and therefore of Trinidadian/Caribbean culture, the painter's vision is short-sighted. He has no appreciation of the spiritual roots of Carnival, the festival which even he realises has come to signify Trinidad itself. His stereotypical, romanticised view of Caribbean culture has little to do with Independence, and serves only to perpetuate the tourist imaginary. It does not represent a country trying to express itself on its own terms and instead, by narrowly essentialising the region's

⁸⁰ 'Hood' is slang for 'penis.' The night before, when Zampi had been frustrated in his efforts to find Zolda, his thoughts about her caused a shooting star to fall, ripping a silk cotton tree in half and causing it to burst into flames. Silk cotton trees are widely held to be the domain of duppies, spirits of the dead. See *Obeah Man*, p.18.

⁸¹ Zolda's consent is not factored into these two men's tacit struggle; she is still believed to 'belong' to Zampi, despite having had no contact with him for four years, and having taken no lovers since the Obeahman, despite her obvious sex appeal.

diversity, forms precisely the type of discourse that this passage challenges, the type codified by Aldous Huxley in his introduction to Alfred Mendes' *Pitch Lake* (1934), that designates the Caribbean as a mysterious realm of forbidden desire.⁸² The power dynamics embedded in this discourse are clear in this meeting scene, in which Zampi is introduced as 'local colour' by the black tourism officer accompanying the English painter. In a 'rocklike British voice' the official claims, struggling to enunciate in his approximation of 'the Queen's English,' that Zampi is

what we call an obeah man. A voodoo practitioner...a witchdoctor, if you prefer [...] You see before you the vestiges of the dead past...the darkness and the fumbings of prehistoric man to find himself. Culture and breeding take time, my friend...time. But it shan't be long now before we rid ourselves of all this nonsense and make ourselves a credit to the Empire (*Obeah Man*, pp.105-106).

This florid prose marks this as clear satire and exposes the colonial condition that the Obeahman-artist must overcome. The official is so indoctrinated (and institutionalised, in local government) that he misunderstands not only 'prehistoric' Obeah but the intentions of the 'modern' painter, who is silently impressed by Zampi's silent challenge to his vision, which in fact strengthens it. The official's double bind is such that he can only envision his past as 'dead' and his future as service to empire – he sees himself as 'empire' sees him. He shuns Zampi and Obeah, even as he includes them in the quasi-ethnographic survey that he performs for the benefit of the white visitor-seer.⁸³ In the language of imperialism he too dismisses Obeah as 'nonsense,' language that characters such as Sibley's 'Quashie' and Rhys' Christophine and Baptiste use to deceive their colonial masters, yet there is no irony here. Khan's novelisation of this discursive bind shifts the gaze onto the myopic official and away from the Obeahman, thus forcing us to re-evaluate our own views on Obeah and 'local colour' vis-à-vis Caribbean culture.

Zampi hardly addresses the tourism official. His calm composure is exaggerated against the other man's nervous 'authority' (which is really just sad mimicry), and the

⁸² See p93n71 of this thesis.

⁸³ Wilson Harris argued in 1966 that 'the investable destiny of the imaginative artist [...] is one of automatic rejection [...] For the value of such an imagination remains unpredictable, since it is an imagination related to no party or faction.' See Wilson Harris, 'Impressions after Seven Years', *New World*, 44 (1966), 17-20 (p.18).

painter's embarrassment. Obeah, the most extreme or 'prehistoric' element of West Indian folk aesthetics, is here juxtaposed (in opposition) to the colonising artist, who is charged with 'capturing' the essence of these islands as they supposedly create themselves but who will ultimately 'remake' them, again, in the old colonial image, given his limited knowledge of these people and their culture. Obeah aesthetics, although Zampi may not articulate them, are *not* the aesthetics of the tourist imaginary. Zampi is instinctively antipathetic towards the painter, wondering if he might see in him 'all that was British and become sullen or insulting' (*Obeah Man*, p.106).⁸⁴ Yet this is the encounter that brings Zampi out of his existential slump, and which occasions the clearest instance of Khan's authorial interjection to explain the role of the artist, as personified in Zampi, the Obeahman, in the making of West Indian identity. Through the narrator Zampi reflects that he wishes to impress upon the visitor that 'the Caribbean was not only the abode of "Calypso Joe" but that here too men were concerned with questions of destiny, existence, where they were headed and why, even if they did all these things in their own slow and stumbling ways' (*Obeah Man*, p.106). Zampi's subjectivity is closest to the narrator's here, yet only the night before, the Obeahman had pronounced Trinidad and the other West Indian islands to be 'drowning.' Moreover, the narrator's use of the phrase 'slow and stumbling' implies that he does not quite see Trinidad as equally 'advanced' as England, either. Khan's narrative has not yet passed the stage of 'writing back' but remains reactive to the established English canon. Crucially, it is 'prehistoric' *Obeah* that challenges these old ways of seeing the West Indies, and Obeah that ushers in a new expression of Caribbean identity.

Zampi's laconicism is curious here, unless we read this passage within the framework of Obeah's 'unknowability.' When asked to define Obeah, Zampi 'found that he did not have ready answers for these questions [...] words and sentences which would not only communicate what he meant to the others but which would also contain the essence of what he felt' (*Obeah Man*, p.107). This is Zampi's chance to articulate the narrative's central question, but words appear useless as tools of representation in the face of this challenge. There is something about the essence of the Obeah that cannot be expressed through words alone; and this is another example of a recurring trope throughout all the literature examined in this thesis. This passage demonstrates Obeah's incompatibility with the

⁸⁴ We see this dynamic recreated in Manko's later interactions with Garry, *Cascadura's* visiting English writer.

language that the Englishman and his colonised guide can understand. Zampi's other drinking companions are unimpressed by the Obeahman failing this test – especially in front of such a distinguished guest – but their ensuing argument leaves the painter 'more sober,' and he feels 'a little bit foolish for the wild imaginations his mind had set loose.' His epistemology has been challenged by Obeah, without words, and this passage illustrates Handler and Bilby's, and Wisecup and Jaudon's arguments regarding the 'unknowability' of Obeah, and the epistemic violence done to this practice, and by extension Caribbean identity, by colonial linguistic proclamations about it. The painter no longer knows where to find the spirit of Independence, and is made to feel (ashamed of) his critical distance. Zampi interrupts the tourist's reverie to declare that 'a man have to find the road that cut out for he,' from which we are to infer that a foreign painter cannot determine Trinidad's independence, but that Trinidad must find independence for itself (*Obeah Man*, p.110). Zampi cannot find words to express what Obeah is to the painter, because the Caribbean culture it represents, Khan's narrative suggests, cannot be expressed according to colonial paradigms.

When faced with the question of defining Obeah, established epistemological assumptions disintegrate, as does the language that conveys them. When the painter asks Zampi if he is a 'sounding board,' the Obeahman claims not to understand (*Obeah Man*, p.107). Yet, Zampi himself had reflected, at the beginning of Carnival, that he was 'a mere sounding board through which the lives of other people moved back and forth' (*Obeah Man*, p.29). Later, when talking to Zolda, Zampi had claimed that 'I is like a sounding board...like a conch shell that people could put they ears to and find out what they have to do' (*Obeah Man*, p.47). As much as Zampi has disturbed the painter's vision, he appears to have disturbed his own. He makes excuses to the painter, who does not push him further; we are to infer that he somehow just tacitly understands what Obeah is, and accepts that Obeah's existence is not contingent on his knowledge of its meaning. We are to believe that Zampi has achieved his goal of communion without having to explain anything – despite him being unable to articulate it, Zampi's vision is considered, by the narrative, as superior to the painter's. This may seem too simplistic an escape for the Obeahman, but we see this descriptive impasse repeated with Manko in *Cascadura*. Similarly to *Wide Sargasso Sea* these novels acknowledge that they cannot define Obeah. Although it cannot be spoken (or

written) in these texts, Obeah is not a weapon in *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura*, but a conduit to understanding. Even beyond its supernatural power it is a medium through which humanity can be shared, and through which the isolato can 'realise a total selfhood [through] the experience of a group consciousness.'⁸⁵ Just as Zampi does with the tourist, Khan asks us to suspend our disbelief and exercise our faith.

At the end of his 'conversation' with the painter Zampi feels 'as light as air, and a joy of simply being what he was, an obeah man.' He understands that Obeah 'was felt and you could not communicate it to anyone,' and is no longer frustrated by this (*Obeah Man*, p.118). In Khan's conceit of Obeah, it is a philosophy or mode of being, rather than an arcane religious practice. It is a calling for Zampi, and a conduit through which he can and must transcend his own world, in order to reconnect to it. This is reminiscent of Ivan Van Sertima's formulation of the trickster figure, what he calls the 'Transcendent Criminal,' who represents the 'pristine potential of the human before he is squared and squeezed, boxed and beaten, drummed and driven into a shape that would fit the patterns of a particular culture, time or place.'⁸⁶ The trickster/criminal is a fluid counterbalance to ideological absolutism – what Orlando Patterson called 'ethnic chauvinism' – as it refuses definition.⁸⁷ Obeah is not to be translated into words, but intuited as an expression of shared humanity, across linguistic, racial or ethnic differences. The Obeahman-hero's task in, *Obeah Man*, is to break through the apathy of 'programmed ways of seeing;' he cannot use words for this, as words themselves are bound in this same chauvinism.⁸⁸ Obeah is essentially contradictory, and somewhat unsatisfactorily, Khan asks us to accept that a man who knows almost nothing of the Caribbean can comprehend Obeah without the use of words – the tools of the very narrative imaginary of nation he is creating.

Nonetheless, the insults and challenges Zampi receives from the other Trinidadians in the bar cause him to recognise, similarly as he did with Zolda, a critical flaw in his worldview.⁸⁹ As a result of this abuse Zampi realises that he had only, until this point,

⁸⁵ Brown, 'Isolated Self,' p.54.

⁸⁶ Ivan Van Sertima, 'Trickster, the Revolutionary Hero', *Journal of African Civilisations*, 12 (1994), 445-451 (pp.448-449).

⁸⁷ Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein & Day, 1977), pp.13-32.

⁸⁸ Van Sertima, 'Trickster,' p.445.

⁸⁹ Again, the narrator does not give them enough credit for this.

spoken of Obeah in negative terms, 'instead of pointing like a determined leader' (*Obeah Man*, p.109). He is forced to see that in order to heal his society he must embrace and communicate with it, no longer remaining aloof. He assumes his role as a leader and comes to realise that alienation is only a temporary escape that can offer neither transcendence nor renewal; having begun the narrative 'playing obeahman' Zampi ends it secure in this identity. He fills 'the cultural void created by a self-serving, contemptuous colonialism' by accepting the unanswerability of questions posed to him by the colonising man – or rather through both him and the colonising man accepting that such questions need not be answered within the constraints of colonial discourse. He thus finds 'a self-affirming identity, a self-definition that will help [him] transcend the emotional, spiritual, and cultural no man's land' of the colonial position.⁹⁰ The paradoxical position of the Obeahman is that his identity is at once rooted and transcendent. Zampi comes to see the difference between individualism and isolation, and when Ash Wednesday dawns he is elated. He understands that he need not remain a tragic isolate, but can now see his society and his place in it, precisely from its margins.⁹¹ He may be, as Patterson constructs the sorcerer, 'deviant, individualist, exile, creator and revolutionary,' but is 'above all else human, wholly human.'⁹² Zampi steps out of Carnival's unreality with a keener perception of reality, and with more security in his place. He is a hero of and in his world, although he may be (because he is) peripheral to it.

Khan's Caribbean archetype is an Obeahman, a man who must at once know all of humanity, be all of humanity, and withdraw himself from humanity. He is Wilson Harris' artist, and Van Sertima's Transcendental Criminal. Zampi approximates to the trickster not in the sense that he brings strife, but in the sense that he hovers at once above and within tradition (at the edges of tradition), and in so doing creates tradition. Khan configures the mode of the sorcerer as the ultimate human mode, and his novel portrays his Obeahman-protagonist becoming this ideal, in the 'unreal' crucible of Carnival, itself an expression of quintessential Trinidad. This Caribbean man, like the Caribbean itself, must become stable

⁹⁰ Harold Barratt, 'An Island Is Not a World: A Reading of Sam Selvon's *An Island Is a World*', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 27 (1996), 25-34 (p.28).

⁹¹ Zampi returns to his mountain, with Zolda, but only after their friends have died in Carnival-related violence.

⁹² Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism*, p.22.

within instability, and transcend the 'tragic failure' of the futile, isolated ego.⁹³ Obeah is not an antidote against Carnival, but Carnival is Obeah's catalyst – both lead to the hero's self-realisation. Zampi comes to understand that 'an obeah man had to practise at distancing himself from all things. He had to know joy and pleasure as he knew sorrow and pain, but he [...] must be in total possession of himself' (*Obeah Man*, pp.118-119). It is this self-possession and assurance, that he acquires through Obeah, that mark him as an individual, regardless of his ethnicity. In Zampi we find not a futile ego but a *transcendence* of ego – we find a hero who, because of Obeah, does not exist for any pristine ideal but for all of chaotic, unfinished humanity. Khan's interpretation of Obeah is not stuck in a forgotten 'African past' but is a celebration of present Caribbean multifacetedness – Obeah is therefore not only in transition in this novel, it is in transcendence. In *Cascadura* we find an Obeahman that has already come to this conclusion, and a narrative that portrays Obeah as much more prosaic, yet no less special.

Defying fate in Those Who Eat the Cascadura

Manko, the Obeahman-hero of Sam Selvon's *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, is very much a 'man of the soil,' and a central part of his community. He is the only black man on a post-Emancipation cacao estate, but is not presented as an 'African,' or even as a Trinidadian, necessarily, and appears to have no tradition, and no past.⁹⁴ Nevertheless he is the most 'rooted' of all of this novel's characters, firmly connected to his present location; in the manner of Patterson's and Van Sertima's sorcerer-criminal, he has transcended any fixed, imagined notion of culture. No one knows the estate and surrounding land better than Manko, and his judgement is often deferred to by the plantation's English owner, Roger Franklin – much to the chagrin of the 'Indian' overseer, Prekash.⁹⁵ Manko is welcomed into all areas of the estate, including the greathouse where the housekeeper Eloisa feeds him daily, and where Roger consults with him on cacao-related matters.⁹⁶

⁹³ Brown, 'Isolated Self,' p.55.

⁹⁴ The only exception to this is that Manko lives in a round hut, 'denoting African rather than East Indian origin.' Manko does not have any family. See Samuel Selvon, *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 1990), p.87.

⁹⁵ 'Prekash' is homophonous with 'prick,' which speaks to the character's sexual frustration and disagreeable attitude.

⁹⁶ Despite constantly berating Manko for 'divining some stupidity,' Eloisa has deep affection for him (*Cascadura*, p.15). Eloisa is the estate's only other black resident.

Manko is even allowed to put a charm in Roger's car to protect the Englishman from traffic fatality. The Obeahman does not suffer from the petty racial rivalries of his neighbours (particularly Prekash) and is the only character at ease in all of the estate's black, white and Indian spaces.⁹⁷ He too is archetypal, and approximates to Harris' ideal Caribbean artist in that he recognises that 'the so-called economic unity of man [...] is an illusion, in particular when it is maintained as a blanket moral proposition over the actual and obscure moral crises in the heart of those it professes to change.'⁹⁸ Manko may live apart from his community, but understands and serves all of it. Like Khan's, Selvon's narrative moves beyond the convention of associating Obeah with some obscure 'Africanism,' and instead associates it with faith in community and common humanity.

Cascadura was published twenty years after Selvon's first novel, *A Brighter Sun* (1952). It also came after *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and three years before *Moses Ascending* (1975), the first and second titles in his 'Moses Trilogy' of diasporic novels. The novel began life as a short story in 1948, which was revised in 1957.⁹⁹ It was also performed as a radio drama in 1971, which has not otherwise been published. Both Roydon Salick and Jeremy Poynting have compared these to the novel in their respective studies of Selvon and Indian-Caribbean literature, but the most salient point for this thesis is that neither short story features a credible Obeahman character.¹⁰⁰ In these stories, and the eventual novel, Selvon returns to the plantations of rural Trinidad, but this time the crop is not cane but cacao, which reflects this novel's concern with changing, uncertain times. Like cane, cacao is also susceptible to blight and fluctuating prices, and Roger is often called away to deal with labour unrest in Port of Spain, suggesting that this pastoral idyll, if it is one, is never out of danger. The estate's small, self-contained world is startled from its isolation by the arrival of Garry Johnson, whose affair with Sarojini poses such a threat to the estate's way of life that it is violently rejected – both by other individuals and by nature, in the form of a hurricane.

⁹⁷ Eloisa, by contrast, refuses to leave Roger's house.

⁹⁸ Harris, 'The Writer,' p.60.

⁹⁹ See Sam Selvon, 'Johnson and the Cascadura', in *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose, 1946-1986*, ed. by Kenneth Ramchand and Susheila Nasta (Harlow: Longman, 1989), pp.104-111; and 'Johnson and the Cascadura', in *Ways of Sunlight* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), pp.1-27.

¹⁰⁰ See Roydon Salick, *The Novels of Samuel Selvon: A Critical Study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), and Poynting, 'East Indians.' The 1957 short story makes mention of a character consulting an Obeahman, but this is not pursued any further. I am unsure if the radio play featured an Obeahman.

After Garry leaves the narrative closes; the fate of the estate is unknown, as it that of a soon-to-be independent Trinidad.

Selvon's choice to include an Obeahman in his third or fourth rendering of this story suggests a career-long preoccupation with this practice as constitutional to Caribbean cultural identity. In a later interview, however, Selvon stated that he never found Obeah 'exotic;' to him, 'obeah and magic' was 'a natural occurrence.' He claimed to be more interested 'in the human point of interest, in the way people believe in it and react to it in Trinidad, for instance,' and that he had 'no anthropological intent.'¹⁰¹ We get the impression, from this novel, that 'anthropological intent' had a lot to do, for Selvon, with remaking natural phenomena in the image of the observer, and investing these phenomena with significance other than that intended by, or relevant to, local populations. Garry, the closest this novel gets to an antagonist, has come to Trinidad to write a book on what Roger calls 'local superstitions.'¹⁰² Manko is never impressed by Garry and, as we will see, makes no effort to exoticise or embellish his beliefs for the tourist's benefit – similarly to Zampi's interaction with the English painter. The Obeahmen's positions demonstrate their authors' rejection of the 'colonial anthropologist' approach of their predecessors. Neither Selvon nor Khan was interested in presenting Obeah as some terrifying, yet exotic hangover from 'darker days' (from the point of view of an outside visitor), but accepted Obeah instead as a fairly pedestrian part of present Caribbean life. For the first time in these fictions here presented, Obeah is seen as normal, not shocking or deviant, and the practitioner is presented not as a charlatan or a lunatic, but as a fixture of life in his community. As we will see in this novel, and later in Brodber's *Myal*, Obeah will no longer be feared or fetishised.

Like Khan, Selvon also opts for the romance mode which, also like Khan's novel, is unconvincing. Jeffrey Robinson argues, in his critique of West Indian romances, that 'romantic love' is an Anglo-European import that conflicts with West Indian labouring-class understandings of man-woman relationships.¹⁰³ Selvon may have been aware of this disjuncture, as he has his Obeahman-protagonist-hero frame Garry, even before the latter's arrival, as a danger to the estate and its people. Moreover, the union of Garry, a white

¹⁰¹ Qtd in Michel Fabre, 'Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,' in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1988), pp.64-76 (p.65).

¹⁰² Sam Selvon, *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* (Toronto: Tsar Publications, 1990), p.44..

¹⁰³ Robinson, 'Native Traditions,' p.67.

Englishman, and Sarojini, an 'Indian' woman, is a taboo. Manko forewarns Sarojini of 'a stranger, a white man, who going to make this girl forget everything and everybody' (*Cascadura*, p.22), thus prefiguring *Garry* as a threat to plantation order, not Obeah. *Garry* may be initially portrayed as an innocent visitor who sincerely falls in love with Sarojini, but his desire is soon shown to be exploitative. He cannot match the intensity of her feelings for him and seems to take no notice that she is severely disadvantaged by their relationship, whereas he risks nothing.¹⁰⁴ *Garry* regards Sarojini, and the estate, with 'a feeling of unreality;' she does not live in what he perceives as the 'real world,' and he cannot engage in the fantasy she imagines for them (*Cascadura*, p.85). He does not tell Sarojini this as he believes she will be unable to understand – to him, she is little more than a child. She is an ideal, not a real person – an extension of his 'spell of the tropics,' and not a part of his future.¹⁰⁵

Garry may be the closest Selvon's narrative gets to a romantic lead, but he is not a hero; he does not direct the novel's action and is in fact a minor character, despite events centring on him. Furthermore, Selvon makes it clear on several occasions that *Garry* is incompatible with this landscape. *Garry* is more like an epic or tragic individual who, as Bakhtin argues, 'by his nature must perish,' as he is nothing outside his destiny. *Garry* does not perish, although he leaves Sans Souci just after the earthquake, but he does 'completely [coincide] with his situation and his fate,' and so the 'surplus of humanity is realised in the main protagonist' – Manko.¹⁰⁶ It is *Manko* who sets the pace of life on the estate, although the central drama is not his. Not only does Manko foresee *Garry's* arrival and the resultant tragedy, he also attempts to 'put a spoke in the wheel' of fate and cure the Englishman, thus challenging the inevitability of Selvon's plot and throwing it into disarray (*Cascadura*, p.162).¹⁰⁷ Manko dares to 'change the nature of his own image' by wilfully testing the limits

¹⁰⁴ Sarojini borrows food and clothes (even underwear) from a friend to impress him, but he does not compensate her financially at all. Salick overlooks this in his critique of the novel, which amounts to little more than an ode to Sarojini. See Salick, *Novels of Sam Selvon*.

¹⁰⁵ Similarly to Zampi, *Garry* does not have to change or adjust in order for his woman to love him; he leaves her behind and she determines to wait for him. Similarly to Zolda, too, Sarojini is not portrayed as a complex, rational character.

¹⁰⁶ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p.37. *Garry* may not perish in the novel, but he has a brain injury that will shortly end his life.

¹⁰⁷ These are Manko's own reflections.

of his power as an Obeahman.¹⁰⁸ For this he is punished with the loss of his powers and the future of the estate – and the society it represents – is left uncertain.

Mark Looker argues that Selvon's employment of literary romance conventions, in *Cascadura*, rewrites this tradition 'in a much less contentious and reflective manner' than in *Turn Again Tiger* (1958), the sequel to his first novel. I submit however that *Cascadura* still exposes European romance mores as lacking, particularly in their juxtaposition with Obeah. Obeah uncovers the fissures in the Caribbean modernity project, particularly the unquestioning acceptance of European romantic ideals; the novel does not, as Looker claims, '[soften] the ironies of modern life after colonialism.'¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the harshness of Garry's treatment of Sarojini is only highlighted in contrast to the love she has for him, which he finds 'embarrassing' (*Cascadura*, p.102). Obeah and romance fit uncomfortably in this narrative, and neither can keep Garry and Sarojini together. It is their *romance* that destroys Selvon's idyll, robs the Obeahman of his powers, drives Preakash to attempted rape (of Sarojini) and accelerates Garry's departure from the island.¹¹⁰ This is not, as Looker concludes, evidence of 'a text working against itself,' but evidence of the text rejecting, to some extent, inherited modes such as the Victorian romance as successful modes of expression for Caribbean reality – or at least dramatising the collision between one set of beliefs (represented by Manko and Obeah) and another, represented by Garry and his 'rationalism.'¹¹¹ The text reflects the various and several traditions and contradictions endemic to Caribbean culture and society, and refuses to offer a tidy solution.

Selvon's novel features an unnamed omniscient narrator, but Manko's prophesy determines its plot. 'Manko' is the novel's first word – the Obeahman is at once part of, and above and beyond, the landscape he commands – and he is introduced calling the labourers to work with a conch shell. Time is taken to detail the stretching of Manko's cheeks with the physical effort of the task, and at *his* call 'the cacao-workers bestirred themselves,' not Preakash's (*Cascadura*, p.11). Clement Wyke argues that Manko's role evidences Selvon's

¹⁰⁸ Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p.38.

¹⁰⁹ Mark Looker, *Atlantic Passages: History, Community, and Language in the Fiction of Sam Selvon* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p.153.

¹¹⁰ Sarojini holds hope, however, that Garry will return, as he has eaten the cascadura fish, which legend has it compels whoever eats it to end his/her days in Trinidad.

¹¹¹ Looker, *Atlantic Passages*, p.154.

focus on 'evoking an atmosphere associated with mysterious secrets,' and that the Obeahman himself 'is described with a sense of mystery and terror,' but this is not the case.¹¹² Manko is not at all exoticised by the narrator, who merely describes his cheeks as 'gaunt' and his skin as 'black' (*Cascadura*, p.11). His neighbours may or may not believe in Manko's powers to varying degrees, but no one fears him. Moreover, Manko's attitude towards his own Obeah is starkly pragmatic. 'He had spent much time within himself trying to understand what made him as he was,' claims the narrator, 'and in the end simply accepted the fact that he had been blessed' (*Cascadura*, p.16). Like Zampi, Manko manipulates and is amused by the difference between what Obeah might be, and what people think it is. 'People' call Manko an Obeahman, the narrator continues; it is they who say 'he possessed powers which denied others,' not Manko (*Cascadura*, p.16, emphasis added). Manko accepts that there can be no definition of Obeah, and so accepts the powers and privileges it affords him without ceremony. In Manko, we see that Selvon is not preoccupied with 'knowing' or explaining Obeah, but simply with how it works.

Selvon's description of Obeah differs significantly from most other portrayals of Obeah hitherto discussed in this thesis in that it does not seek to shock or scandalise its readers, or elicit sympathy or disdain. Manko is not a 'venal charlatan,' like Benoit, or a deluded virago, like Ma Christine. He does not intervene into his clients' lives to destroy their families by charging extortionate fees, or to victimise already disadvantaged women.. Manko sees his work as ministry and responsibility to and for his community, and knows better than to deceive people. He chooses, adds the narrator, not to make 'a comfortable living as a practising obeahman,' and instead is an industrious estate worker, with identifiable, indispensable, practical skills (*Cascadura*, p.16). Manko is not operating in secret or in fear of persecution from any kind of authority, unlike Brother Peters, and is even a philosopher: knowing 'the dearth of faith in his fellow men,' the narrator continues, Manko 'costumed his gifts ['logical advice'] with a certain amount of ritual,' a figurative spoonful of sugar to help his clients with their medicine. Manko plays with his neighbours' auto-exoticism of Obeah, and Selvon does not attempt to defang the practice. While there is

¹¹² Clement H. Wyke, *Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991), pp.96-97.

little humour, sarcasm or anxiety in this description, there is respect for this Obeahman, who is the novel's hero and a respectable, respectful, multifaceted human being.

Manko is not a figure of ridicule, nor an unconscionable con artist, like Buddyjoe. His presence is neither primitive nor threatening, as Christophine's is in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In comparison to Zampi he is a mature servant of his land and his people, a figure sought out in times of stress, instead of scorned by the very people who may need his help. Selvon's narrator does not seek sensationalism, and his Obeahman is under no illusions about the 'mysteries' of his powers – he simply accepts them as they are, as gifts from sources outside of his control. Manko does not seek strife, like *Banana Bottom's* Wumba, but understanding, of himself and his relationships with other members of his community.¹¹³ Even after the hurricane, which leaves the plantation devastated, the fact that Manko's hut is still standing only serves to bolster people's faith in him and his abilities, when the Obeahman himself no longer has control over these powers. It is not Obeah that is preternatural in this novel but Manko himself, whom the narrator describes as 'no ordinary man' (*Cascadura*, p.16). Much like in Zampi's case, Obeah appears to have chosen Manko, as a man of extraordinary ability, even without special powers. As a character he refuses to be only that which is expected of him; as a plot device he, like Patterson's sorcerer, 'makes objectivity possible' because he is 'not rooted in the particularities of the traditionalist,' and can 'view their passions and conflicts with detachment and can win their confidence and their intimacy.'¹¹⁴ Selvon's characterisation sees no benefit in exoticising the Obeahman and his practice but appreciates their communal cultural value; the narrative reimagines Obeah as a type of therapy, a way to selfhood.

Similarly to Dada Johnson (but without the exploitation) Manko offers his clients – black, 'Indian,' white – something that neither a priest nor a pundit can satisfy. Unlike Dada, what Manko offers them is not simply a palliative for the ills of colonial alienation, but a philosophy of common humanity that challenges both his clients' and our understandings of what Obeah might be, even if it comes in a costume. This Obeahman is almost universally beloved and trusted by his community, across racial and ethnic lines, and does not configure

¹¹³ Zampi comes to this position of understanding at the end of Khan's novel, where Manko begins Selvon's narrative already there.

¹¹⁴ Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism*, p.21.

himself as a ‘messiah,’ as does Dada Johnson; he represents, therefore, a significant change in attitude towards the ‘magico-religious leader’ as one who attends to everyday pedestrian needs, from common colds to divination. Manko has faith, but it is an informed faith – he encourages his clientele to make informed decisions, too. This faith has stood the test of his own scepticism, and he has simply resigned himself to the existence of more things in heaven and earth than his philosophy.

Sans Souci, when we encounter it, is supposedly divorced from ‘independence and the cry to fling the white man out of the country’ – immediately, the gaps between urban, middle-class cultural and political nationalism and the reality of the ‘folk’ aesthetics on which these ideologues based their claims are brought to our attention. Yet the narrator re-establishes the connection between these supposedly disparate groups – and reinforces the ‘organic intellectual’s dependence on folk romanticisation – by referencing the ‘birth-pangs of a *people* moving from subjugation,’ a people which, despite their social and class differences, were all moving in one direction, and are in a similar position vis-à-vis European colonial hegemony (*Cascadura*, p.27, emphasis added). According to Poynting, the cacao estate is presented as

both an idyllic and an imprisoning spot, an eden where people have a frank innocence and a place which is itself infected by the “evil spirits, dissension, confusion and every conceivable badness” which the housekeeper, Eloisa, mistakenly imagines is only found in the world beyond the estate.¹¹⁵

Even as it is created it is evident that Selvon’s plantation idyll is slipping away, despite Manko’s appearing to call it to order. Such an idealised vision of the Caribbean is no longer sustainable, and Selvon’s introduction of romance works *against* the order the Obeahman represents to highlight the cruelty of the colonial encounter implicit in these bucolic descriptions, a cruelty which, despite his apparently ‘sympathetic’ nature, is embodied in the character of Garry.

From the Obeahman’s first meeting with Garry, we see that Manko unsettles the visitor. Garry may want ‘entertainment’ from the Obeahman, but even before Manko

¹¹⁵ Poynting, ‘East Indians,’ p.478. Poynting quotes from *Cascadura*, p.12).

arrives Roger warns Garry that ‘when you’ve lived here as long as I have, you grow cautious about what you disbelieve’ (*Cascadura*, pp.44-45).¹¹⁶ Roger is ‘not smiling’ as he says this, and does not attempt to hide his lack of surety behind condescension or arrogance (*Cascadura*, p.45). Manko’s self-assured presence immediately changes the mood of the gathering, as if ‘some strange dimension had entered the atmosphere with his coming’ (*Cascadura*, p.45). He tells Garry that he has seen him before in a dream – with ‘the uttermost indifference whether they believed him or not’ – and that he, Garry, does not have long to live (*Cascadura*, p.46). There is no way Manko could have known about the shrapnel in Garry’s brain, and though he does not want to believe in Obeah Garry finds himself drawn to Manko, ostensibly out of curiosity. Roger and Garry try to explain away Manko’s foresight as ‘some sort of mental telepathy’ – a scientific term – but they are still disturbed by it (*Cascadura*, p. 46). Even Garry’s concept of space and time is confused: he feels as if ‘one minute he had been standing in a London street and the next he was here in this hot island listening to an old man who performed magic’ (*Cascadura*, p.49). ‘Magic’ is Garry’s term, not Manko’s; he is upset on his first night in Trinidad, but cannot deny that Manko had ‘remarkable powers, radiating an almost hypnotic spell about him’ (*Cascadura*, p.90). Similarly to Christophine and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Garry is at once attracted to and unsettled by Manko. The Obeahman’s mysteriously compelling aura may be a simple plot device, but Manko still challenges the belief system of the colonising men, like Zampi does with the tourist painter, and the narrator does not provide any ‘rational explanations.’ Like Van Sertima’s *Transcendent Criminal*, Manko presents a challenge to accepted modes of seeing. In his presence colonial hierarchies break down, as do linear conceptions of time and space progression.¹¹⁷

As Manko tells Garry stories of Obeah and other folk beliefs, we see the Obeahman’s subversive potential. Garry may be the writer, but Manko is the storyteller. It is Manko who frames Sans Souci, for the stranger and for us. He may not be Selvon’s narrator, but the Obeahman determines the novel’s trajectory. Manko is, metafictionally, the “‘depicting” authorial language’ that exists on the same plane as that which is being depicted, and in

¹¹⁶ We see this ambivalence throughout the stories discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis.

¹¹⁷ Prekash is also present at this meeting. He, the thoroughly colonised individual, is made even more uncomfortable by Manko’s composure, much like the tourism official in *Obeah Man*, but unlike Khan’s official he is alone in his ridicule. The overseer resents the Obeahman, but does not dare challenge him openly.

dialogue with it.¹¹⁸ He does ‘nothing in the way of emphasis or pantomime to add weight’ to his stories of diablisses and lagahoos – he does not *perform* these stories for the outsider, or cheapen them for tourist trade (*Cascadura*, p.47). In fact, continues the narrator, ‘it was this lack of demonstration and auxiliary movement that heightened the story’ (*Cascadura*, p.48). Telling ‘our’ own stories, without embellishment for outsiders, this narrative suggests, makes them more appealing, and even more meaningful. As Obeahman, Manko is at once cultural repository and native informant, but he is also artist and visionary. Though his stories may be subsumed into Garry’s book he determines this larger narrative’s content – as he determines the direction of Selvon’s narrative, too: it is Manko who foresees Garry’s arrival, and who provides narrative tension by attempting to thwart destiny and work Obeah for Garry, despite the tourist’s disbelief. Manko has a different way of looking down and in than Lamming suggested: he offers no answers or explanations for these strange happenings and, despite Prekash’s misfired interruptions, is not embarrassed by them. Selvon’s narrator, through Manko, does away with the convention of explaining the West Indies to outside readers, and thus reclaims his right to obscurity. Prekash is left stupefied by how ‘the two white men had seemed to accept all the talk of obeah and spirits, when he had expected them to ridicule the old man or at least have a good laugh’ (*Cascadura*, p.50). There is little room for questions of ‘veracity’ here, and even less for colonial prejudice. The imperialistic view of Obeah as ‘exotic’ custom is defeated in this passage, not reinforced.

As Garry’s relationship with Sarojini progresses Sarojini begins to avoid the Obeahman, for fear that he will ‘take something away from her, shorten her happiness or divine trouble’ (*Cascadura*, p.86). She holds the strongest faith in Obeah of all the novel’s characters yet suffers the greatest tragedy, the loss of romance. Yet it is Sarojini who, despite her reservations, pesters Garry to visit Manko. The Englishman is reluctant but Sarojini believes Manko can save Garry’s life, and has more faith in the Obeahman’s powers than the Obeahman himself. As Manko had challenged his worldview when they first met, Garry attempts to challenge Manko in turn, by announcing up front that ‘I haven’t much faith, in spite of what I think you can accomplish’ (*Cascadura*, p.101).¹¹⁹ It is curious, however, that in this same sentence Garry expresses both faith and disbelief. The tourist insists on a ‘rational’ explanation for the procedure – the application of aloe vera sap to an

¹¹⁸ Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel,’ p.37.

¹¹⁹ The scepticism of this Garry is markedly different from the faith of the Garrys of the short stories.

incision in his scalp – and ignores Manko’s repeated entreaties that he must *believe* in order for the cure to work. Sarojini, frantic with desperate hope, insists on spectacle; she demands that Manko take Garry to his shed and ‘work big magic’ (*Cascadura*, p.102). Eyes ‘wild and bright,’ she threatens to kill herself if Manko cannot save Garry (*Cascadura*, p.92). For her efforts she is depicted as an hysterical child-woman in both of the ‘consultation’ scenes, and her faith is exposed as illusory not because of Manko’s failure to live up to her expectations, but because of her refusal to understand that the performance and reality of Obeah are not one and the same. Garry repeatedly pushes her away, and speaks to her ‘softly, pacifying her’ (*Cascadura*, p.91), reducing her to a child. For his part Garry feels like a ‘pawn’ between Sarojini’s ‘embarrassing’ emotion and what he perceives as Manko’s condescension (*Cascadura*, pp.101-102). What is most crucial in this scene is not what Manko may or may not be doing, but Garry and Sarojini’s respective reactions to what they *believe* he may be doing.

Once Sarojini has been sent away to tend a fire, Garry endeavours to reassert his dominance with rationalism. Insulted by the ‘change in Manko’s tone and demeanour’ he remarks that the Obeahman is ‘a different man when you’re surrounded by your magic herbs and concoctions.’ Manko retaliates with a series of sarcastic remarks about the experience being ‘a good story for your book,’ and Garry returning to England to ‘fool up them white people’ (*Cascadura*, p.104). Manko-the-storyteller protests Garry’s appropriation and distortion of our culture, particularly in travellers’ tales, because like Zampi’s painter Garry’s impressions are not and cannot be based on faith. This passage recalls, too, that the term ‘Obeah’ is itself a product of colonial discourse, and the paradox that this same discourse cannot contain whatever Obeah’s meaning might be. Manko, as artist, sees no value in this procedure as Garry has no faith in him, in Sarojini, in this community, in Obeah. He loses interest after having to explain himself: at the very moment that Garry insists that he be communicated to – *about Obeah* – communication fails, like it did in *Obeah Man*. Conversation is awkward: ‘it seemed as if they were talking to each other but could not make a connection,’ claims the narrator (*Cascadura*, p.104). Garry’s insistence on knowing Obeah, instead of intuiting it like Zampi’s artist, causes Selvon’s romantic idyll to disintegrate. This passage suggests that the type of ‘reason’ that Garry extols has no place in this new West Indian imaginary, one that is moving away from English epistemic classification.

Manko's sarcasm comes to a head when he remarks 'I go to rattle my bones and chant some spells and give you some potions to drink. Else you would feel I cheating.' Manko mocks the visitor's preconceptions of 'entertainment' and 'magic' – the same preconceptions on which the tourist imaginary of the West Indies is built – and will not fulfil them. Garry, frustrated by Manko's 'discourtesy' (despite his own), calls the procedure a 'ridiculous farce,' and is offended by Manko's 'cold, disinterested superiority' (*Cascadura*, p.104). Having expected a performance in accordance with his status as a white client – having expected this experience to conform with the narratives he has no doubt read about 'West Indian witchcraft' – he is 'irked by a feeling that [...] he had let Roger down by indulging in this confidence with the natives' (*Cascadura*, p.105). This is the first time the word 'natives' is used anywhere in this text, and Garry's (and our) realisation of this signals that his departure is inevitable and imminent. Obeah breaks through Garry's façade of friendly visitor and exposes his true imperialist nature, similarly as it does with Antoinette's husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Obeah's presence the concept of cultural confluence is tested and found lacking, and it demonstrates that the old line between 'civilised' and 'savage' has not been erased.

Manko, here, represents Wynter's plot system, as he recreates the 'traditional values' of impulsive creation in response to human needs, and operates within an understanding of humankind's relationship to the earth. He resists the imperial ideologies of the plantation system, embodied in Garry, which produces not in response to basic human needs 'but rather to the demands of external shareholders and the metropolitan market.'¹²⁰ The Obeah he represents is also, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, an agent of heteroglossia. In Selvon's case, however, these two sets of values face each other in the Obeahman's hut and reach impasse. As in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Banana Bottom* it is the plantation that is driven out of the pastoral idyll, not Obeah, but Manko nevertheless suffers. For having attempted to cure Garry, for 'daring to think he could challenge the spirits that had graced him with a little supernatural power' (*Cascadura*, p.93), the Obeahman accepts his punishment, for thinking he 'could challenge what had been decreed' (*Cascadura*, p.157), and washes his hands of both Garry and Sarojini.¹²¹ Even as he may have

¹²⁰ Wynter, 'Plot and Plantation,' pp.99-100.

¹²¹ Manko makes reference to the plantation's ethnic differences, for the first time, by telling Sarojini to go back to her foreign gods (*Cascadura*, p.159).

foreseen the future – in so much as Garry’s arrival – Manko cannot determine its outcome. He has lost his battle with fate and has ‘nothing more to divine, no advice to give, no opinion to express’ (*Cascadura*, p.159). His offhand comment about the cascadura legend inspires Sarojini (who remains faithful in the Obeahman’s powers), but at that moment ‘spirits were being manifested, taking shape,’ and Manko had ‘no idea where they came from, or why’ (*Cascadura*, p.163). He is frightened by this lack of control and chastened by his encounter with the outsider; the confrontation between the plot and the plantation, here, has left the plot worse off – Garry may not have been cured, but he leaves the narrative no sicker than he entered it, and his stint in Trinidad can become a mere memory. Manko, on the other hand, is powerless – even if temporarily so. Garry’s visit represents the encroachment of ‘rational,’ Eurocentric ideals of modernity into the West Indian space, whose underlying tensions are brought to the surface by the havoc he creates. Attempting to bring Obeah out of the idyll and into Garry’s world destroys that idyll; his imperious insistence on an explanation causes the plot to unravel. The narrative will not tolerate Garry’s attempts to demystify Obeah, and even with Sarojini’s pregnancy we cannot be sure of the future for Sans Souci. Perspective shifts from Garry to Manko, greatly reducing critical distance and further exiling the visitor. Whether Obeah (or something else) has ‘worked’ is moot; Manko, as artist, has sketched and plotted this narrative, and even though this community will never be the same again it is this same Obeahman-artist who will recreate it, in ‘the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality.’¹²²

Conclusion

In this chapter, I evaluated how these novels’ Obeahmen-protagonists fulfil their roles as ‘hero.’ I analysed each of these character’s places in his community, and each of these narratives’ exploration of Obeah vis-à-vis this question of leadership. The Obeahmen in these novels are community leaders, protectors and visionaries, who provide their followers with spiritual means for tolerating their worlds. None of these narratives suggests a naïve return to Africa, but accepts that an uncritical embrace of European ‘modernity’ is not acceptable, either, if a national/regional culture is to be sustained. While Salkey’s narrative still relies on ‘primitivist’ portrayals of ‘fetishistic’ practices, Khan and Selvon move

¹²² Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel,’ p.39.

away from 'gruesome fascination' to consider Obeah as an element of social renewal in the soon-to-be independent Caribbean world, on its own terms. The 'mystery' of Obeah is kept intact, safe from the prying eyes of English artists and writers who would manipulate it into their own images and narratives of Caribbean identity. Even Brother Parkin, in Salkey's novel, does not succeed in ridding the land of Obeah – all of these texts suggest, therefore, that Obeah is an element of our culture that cannot and perhaps should not be spoken to power. While *Quality* invests considerable energy in explaining away Obeah, *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* eschew 'rational explanations' in favour of an appreciation of Obeah's cultural, if not 'logical' value. *Quality's* epic style keeps Obeah in the past, whereas *Obeah Man* and *Cascadura* engage with Obeah in a chaotic present and future.

In all of these novels Obeah is more than a 'hazy vehicle' for a critique of West Indian culture, and more than simply 'local colour.' It represents a 'folk' consciousness, a counterpoint to the 'impossible reality' of colonialism, represented by those who do not understand, and therefore would abuse, Obeah's power. These Obeahmen are allowed the privileged status of hero or leader by way of their individualism, but it is a privilege which must be carefully managed. They come to understand that Obeah is not something to be bent to individual will – it exists for its own sake and cannot be manipulated, packaged or transformed to suit desire, particularly if that desire is not rooted in community. Dada dies upon this realisation; Zampi comes to it after losing most of his friends; Manko loses his powers as a result of forgetting this. These Obeahmen work within their communities to overturn the convention of conversation strictly between the centre and the periphery, and Obeah in these novels, as a signifier of a community's collective unconscious, forms the basis of communication among Caribbean people themselves. This communication is not necessarily achievable by words – the language of colonial power – but is the ultimate expression of West Indian identity. Obeah emerges, therefore, as more than arcane, obscure religion, but as faith in common humanity. These texts represent a movement away from exoticisation of Obeah to more nuanced understandings of its social role(s). By examining these narrations of Obeah with respect to their Obeahmen-hero-protagonists we see Obeah placed at the centre of questions of identity, selfhood and community in anticipation of independent nationhood. Despite their different approaches, all of these novels show concern with the passing of the 'old' way of life into the new, ambivalent

modernity. They all stress the imperative of overcoming colour-class prejudice in these imagined futures, even as they are plagued by it in their presents and pasts. Questions of colour, as well as the history of slavery, indenture and colonialism which these novels reference but do not explore in great detail, are re-addressed in the last novel explored in this thesis, Erna Brodber's *Myal*.

Chapter 5. 'The peace of those she must touch and who must touch her:'

Obeah as healing in Erna Brodber's *Myal*¹

In his critique of European modernism, Michael Thelwell argued that black writers have a 'responsibility' to provide 'unifying images of their historical experience and identity,' to 'apprehend the past, define the cultural future, and to engage and control the immediate and fiery passions of revolutionary change and the chaos of transition.'² Responsible novelists, continues Thelwell, 'operate not out of any alienated, fevered, individual genius' but as 'conduits through whom the collective force and experience of the people is reflected, shaped maybe, refined a little perhaps, and given back.'³ In this he echoes Elsa Goveia's assertion that 'the artist cannot afford to isolate himself from the question of how the future is formed.'⁴ This is the spirit in which Erna Brodber self-consciously writes her fiction, and the struggle to which that fiction contributes. While the other fiction discussed in this thesis is of course engaged with our people's experiences, Brodber's writing is noticeably inward-looking and addresses us directly, with little concern for an implied overseas audience, or for the superstructure of the plantation system. *Myal* is Brodber's second novel, and the sole focus of this chapter. It is unique because, as Curdella Forbes argues, it 'may be considered the first Anglophone Caribbean novel in which the ancestors as "living, active dead" and the world of the spirit are not historical descriptors or tropes, but factual reality.'⁵ Although she does not name Obeah as such Brodber does take it seriously, and does not use Obeah to signify anything other than what it is – spirit work. In *Myal* Brodber uses Obeah to not only challenge the 'facts' of History but the very making of these facts – historiography itself. Obeah is integral to her 'dismantling the master's house,' to her 'developing a philosophy, creed, myth, ideology of our own.'⁶

¹ Erna Brodber, *Myal: A Novel* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988), p.1.

² Michael Thelwell, 'Modernist Fallacies and the Responsibility of the Black Writer', in *Duties, Pleasures, and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), pp.218-232 (pp.229-230).

³ *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁴ Elsa Goveia, 'The Social Framework,' *Savacou: A Journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement*, 2 (1970), 7-15 (p.14).

⁵ Curdella Forbes, 'Redeeming the Word: Religious Experience as Liberation in Erna Brodber's Fiction', *Postcolonial Text*, 3 (2007), 1-19 (p.7).

⁶ Erna Brodber, 'Me and My Head-Hurting Fiction', *Small Axe*, 16 (2012), 119-125 (p.122).

While she does not use the term 'Obeah' in her novel, neither does Brodber use the term 'Myal,' apart from in her title. Nevertheless, she does provide us with examples of both harmful and beneficial spirit work, and the twin concepts of theft, and then reclamation, of one's spirit.⁷ She thus avoids essentialist Eurocentric binaries of 'Good' vs 'Evil,' and returns our attention to more Afrocentric understandings of spiritual power as neutral. Brodber's wariness of labelling also recalls both terms' origins in colonial discourse, of which her narrative is mistrustful. *Myal* narrates the coming of age of Ella O'Grady Langley, a mixed-race girl who is 'adopted' by the English wife of a rural Methodist pastor who, though Jamaican himself, has been educated abroad and, like Ella, is mixed-race. Ella, already alienated from her community by her colour and education, eventually has her spirit stolen by her American husband, Selwyn Langley, who turns her stories of rural Jamaican life into a grotesque minstrel show, while Ella is in exile in New York. Having watched her husband's show Ella 'trips out on foreign' (*Myal*, p.4; p.84), and is returned to her village to be both physically and psychically healed by a group of Myalists, who reverse the effects of her husband's appropriation of her stories and reintegrate Ella into her self and her community. Ella functions as a surrogate for and a personification of Grove Town, her native village, and the novel's ending implies that this community can begin to come to its healing through hers. Grove Town, in turn, stands as an example of the postcolonial Caribbean, coming to self-realisation out of the epistemic violence of the Columbian encounter, through specifically spiritual means.⁸ Brodber's telescopic, incomplete narrative(s) disrupt conventional literary aesthetics to reflect non-European conceptions of time and space, as well as trauma and healing. Crucially, the supernatural is not presented as 'unreal' – in fact, it is the 'true' reality for those who, like the implied reader, exist at the margins of the colonial enterprise. *Myal* consciously foregrounds spiritual (i.e., 'non-scientific'), communal healing as a means of reversing the effects of slavery and colonialism, and as a means of self-renewal and re-engagement with History on 'our' own terms. This novel goes beyond the texts discussed in previous chapters to reimagine not only a present for West Indian

⁷ 'Spirit theft' is a key concept in this novel, to which I will return throughout this chapter.

⁸ Grove Town is in St Thomas, the Jamaican parish most associated with Obeah. See Rowland Henry, 'Obeah Enters Mainstream Commerce', *Sunday Observer*, May 7, 2006. http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/104063_Obeah-enters-mainstream-commerce [Accessed January 6, 2016]; and Carolyn Cooper, 'Tek Di Obeah Offa St Thomas!', *Sunday Gleaner*, August 23, 2015. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20150823/tek-di-obeah-offa-st-thomas> [Accessed January 6, 2015].

selfhood through Obeah, but also a spiritual future, through an alternative (re)construction of the past.

While Ella's story begins when she is thirteen, Brodber's novel does not. It begins with Ella having returned to St Thomas, aged nineteen, for her healing.⁹ Intertwined with Ella's story are many others, particularly that of Anita, another young woman (who is older than Ella) having her spiritual energy stolen by the Obeah of an impotent older man. Anita's story, unlike Ella's, follows a brief linear trajectory and is quickly forgotten, which may be because it involves a more explicit and straightforward instance of Obeah. Anita is Grove Town's promising young black female scholar, who begins experiencing a nightly shower of stones on her roof, causing her to lose sleep and weight.¹⁰ The 'poltergeist' is driven away (by a figure who, we will discover, is one of the Myalists), but Anita soon begins to experience nightly visitations by an unseen presence that 'rides' her in her sleep (*Myal*, p.54).¹¹ The duppy is driven away again, this time by a group of Myalists, led by Miss Gatha, Grove Town's Kumina leader.¹² The next morning Mas Levi, a respected member of the community, is found dead by his wife. She finds him clutching a doll of Anita, with knife marks between the legs and a nail through its neck; his 'flaccid thing' is 'hanging loose.' Among other papers she finds a Bible, which her husband had stabbed with a knife (*Myal*, p.75). Not much explanation is given, as not much is needed; most West Indians can recognise Obeah when they see it. The matter is hardly mentioned again, and while the same Myalists are responsible for both Anita's and Ella's respective healings, and while it is 'the Anita business,' as Ella's adoptive father calls it, that precipitates Ella's physical departure from her folk (*Myal*, p.54), this link between the two girls is not immediately apparent: Anita's healing is a cacophonous affair, but Ella does not hear it.¹³ June Roberts argues that the brevity and tangentiality of Anita's narrative suggest that 'this story of

⁹ Chronology is deliberately confused in *Myal*, which has Ella as thirteen years old in 1904, yet 'not fully twenty' in 1919 (*Myal*, p.5; p.4).

¹⁰ In Jamaica, such occurrences are commonly attributed to Obeah. See Robert J. Stewart, *Religion and Society in Post-Emancipation Jamaica* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p.61; Williams, *Psychic Phenomena*, p.67; and Morrish, *Obeah*, p.44.

¹¹ The word 'poltergeist' is used by the narrator, from Ella's husband's perspective. None of the characters uses this term

¹² At the ritual's climax, Anita's face replaces Miss Gatha's, and vice versa.

¹³ The narrator explains that, as the drumming was faint in Morant Bay, where Ella then resided with the Brassingtons, 'only those who had the kind of ears or who knew what the drumming could mean, could hear. Ella was none of these' (*Myal*, p.79). After 'the Anita episode,' Ella is sent to school in Port Antonio, from where she travels to the United States.

obeah, sexual perversion, and quasi-incest [is] part of the half that has never been told,' and demonstrate Brodber's 'feminist interest in bringing to light women's oppressed narratives,' including abuses of patriarchy.¹⁴ Yet Brodber's feminist interest in abuses of patriarchy is amply satisfied by Ella's narrative, and giving so little attention to Anita's story further suppresses this 'other half,' as much as Roberts claims Brodber brings it to light. Nevertheless while Brodber may reinforce cultural disparagement of Obeah, Anita's story, with its veiled resonances with Ella's, does indeed outline Obeah (or does not) as Myal's other half. Despite Obeah being considered 'bad' and Myal 'good,' one cannot exist without the other – Ella's narrative is contingent on Anita's.

Brodber's fiction addresses historically embedded social alienation and community breakdown, which she expresses in terms of spiritual illness. Ella's alienation from her village, her people, her family and herself are not physically harmful to her, but are configured as a series of traumatic experiences for the protagonist, experiences which Brodber links directly to slavery and colonialism. I concur with Joyce Walker-Johnson that Ella's 'process of self-discovery and social adjustment is conveyed in images of mental trauma and psychosomatic illness,' but argue further that these processes are not simply conveyed in images of trauma, they *are* her trauma.¹⁵ Part of Ella's ultimate trauma is the realisation that her entire childhood and upbringing were themselves traumatic, which she had not recognised as such before. The healing of both this and her adult trauma, of seeing herself as others saw her – which prompts the realisation that she had never really seen herself – requires the spiritual efforts of her entire community, even the natural environment. This is a cure that no doctor can give, and though it may be African in origin it is universal in execution. While it would be too simplistic to read *Myal* as 'trauma fiction' only, the novel is centrally concerned with the mental and physical (implicitly sexual) suffering inflicted upon a female body that exists at the margins of its society, similarly to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Moreover, given its engagement with what I call the 'inherited trauma' of slavery and colonialism, and its conscious reimagining, revision and re-membering of

¹⁴ June E. Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), p.157. The phrase 'the half has not been told' is repeated several times in *Myal*, which I will also address shortly.

¹⁵ Joyce Walker-Johnson, 'Myal: Text and Context', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 5 (1992), 48-64 (p.49).

these experiences, it can be fruitful to consider trauma theory when reading *Myal*.¹⁶ That being said, while much trauma theory focuses on the single, extraordinary event *Myal*, on the other hand, presents slavery and colonialism as quotidian experiences with lasting effects, for which characters already have or discover spiritual coping mechanisms. The novel thus offers new insights into the nature of the 'traumatic event' itself, the question of healing as a spiritual, communal (not individual) process, and questions of literary responsibility to speak to trauma. While Brodber's novel is set in the past it is mindful of the future, as well as the readers' 'real time,' contemporary neo-colonial alienation. The narrator makes references to anachronous events which have not yet taken place diegetically, but are 'history' in the world of the reader; this non-linear chronology both reacts to the disruption of trauma, and functions as a normal expression of (traumatised) consciousness. 'African' spirituality is configured as a way of healing or transcending trauma, chiefly as a kind of inter-generational, inter-spatial communication which is unavailable to 'official' (colonial) spheres of discourse – Gilroy's 'politics of transfiguration.'¹⁷

Cathy Caruth argues that 'to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed.'¹⁸ The image of possession is particularly important in *Myal*, as in order to enable a cure one type of possession must displace another – Ella and Anita must both be (re)possessed for their minds, bodies and community to heal. Shalini Puri argues that Brodber's novel uses the trope of spirit possession to make itself opaque to official knowledges – much as traumatic possession renders its subject 'opaque' (unintelligible), too. This possession is both liberatory and controlling, Puri continues, curative and injurious, as *Myal*'s poetics 'demands a multiplication of the meaning of spirit possession so as to dramatise the complex relations between possession, dispossession, repossession, and self-possession.'¹⁹ Ella and Anita are hurt by one form of possession, then subsequently healed by another – self-realisation therefore, the novel suggests, is necessarily an ambiguous process. Selwyn's possession of

¹⁶ See Janelle Rodrigues, "'Immortal in the eyes of our descendants:': Death, Mourning and Socio-psychic trauma in Orlando Patterson's *Die the Long Day*,' presented at *Postcolonial Traumas Conference* (Nottingham Trent University, September 13-14, 2012), in which I read *Die the Long Day* as an expression of the 'inherited' sociopsychic trauma of slavery. A more extended version of this paper will be included in a 2016 edition of *Callaloo*.

¹⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1996), p.37.

¹⁸ Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.3-12 (p.4).

¹⁹ Shalini Puri, 'An "Other" Realism: Erna Brodber's *Myal*', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 24 (1993), 95-115 (p.101).

Ella's stories leads to her nervous breakdown and a phantom pregnancy, which must be 'exorcised' by the Myalists. Through this trauma she repossesses herself however, and can begin healing the trauma she inherited, which began before she was born. While much trauma discourse expresses frustration at the 'unknowability' of trauma, *Myal* makes a strong case that this trauma does not *need* to be known, in that it does not need to be rationalised into a linear, chronologically concise romance in order to be healed. Moreover, Brodber's novel suggests that this trauma need not be spoken, and can only come to be through the 'unseen' process of spirit possession. The trope of spirit possession emphasises, here, that what we see cannot be taken at face value, and that healing may even necessitate that meaning be intentionally obscured. Brodber's narrative exercises its right to obscurity – it is not interested in speaking truth to power, but in (inter-)communication among the dispossessed, via spiritual means.

Scholarship on *Myal* is extensive, and mostly focuses on the novel's 'postcolonial' concerns, either with reclaiming identity, or with gender and race.²⁰ While a discussion of African spirituality is inescapable when reading *Myal*, few critics engage with the practice of *Myal* itself. A notable exception is Melvin Rahming, who uses *Myal* to decry literary criticism's failure to foreground considerations of spirituality.²¹ Brodber's novel, Rahming argues, dismantles the very structures on which literary critical discourse is built. Pin-chia Feng observes, similarly, that Brodber 'invites her readers to participate in this ritual,' which formulates 'a marvellous "spiritual community" in which [the Myalists] can communicate with each other telepathically,' yet while Feng appreciates the communal effort required for *Myal* she falls short in her understanding of the practice as 'collective magic of sympathy.'²² Such a conception denies *Myal*'s theology, as well as its dependence on communion with ancestors across space and time – aspects that are stressed in the novel. What is also

²⁰ Ada Haiman reads *Myal* as part of a critique of the 'anglocentric [*sic.*] English curriculum,' arguing that the novel can lead students to question their own identities and ideologies. Michelene Adams focuses on *Myal*'s half that has never been told, arguing that the novel is 'quintessentially post-colonial in its thematic concerns and in its narrative approach.' See Ada Haiman, 'Erna Brodber's *Myal*: Theorising through Narrative', *Cuaderno de Investigacion en la Educacion*, 21 (2006), 13-34 (p.13); and Michelene Adams, "'The Half Has Never Been Told:": Revisioning West Indian History in *Myal*', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 18 (2010), 160-180 (p.160).

²¹ Melvin B. Rahming, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Spirit: The Insistent Demands of Erna Brodber's *Myal*' in *Changing Currents: transnational Caribbean literary and cultural criticism*, ed. by Emily Allen Williams and Melvin B. Rahming (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), pp.305-320.

²² Pin-chia Feng, 'Rituals of Rememory: Afro-Caribbean Religions in *Myal* and *It Begins with Tears*', *MELUS*, 27 (2002), 149-175 (p.157; p.159).

stressed in the novel, and not necessarily in these critiques is, as Tabish Khair has argued – and which must be taken into account in any study of Caribbean/Creole aesthetics – that *Myal/Myal* may ‘dismantle’ these structures, but ultimately builds out of them, too.²³ The Caribbean is a product of several, often conflicting, cultural processes operating together, simultaneously, over time. Brodber herself acknowledges this in her reflection that

it is time that some of us faced the possibility that we were collaborators in our enslavement and that few of us can manage the responsibility of freedom and that some of us are not uncomfortable with the myths of the master’s superiority.²⁴

Part of Ella’s self-acknowledgment and realisation is her admission that her victimhood is not absolute, and therefore not insurmountable. In fact, the Myalists’ recommendation that she absorb the ways of the colonists, like an antidote (*Myal*, p.68; p.98), suggests that the ‘new’ Caribbean identity Brodber envisions does not involve a complete break with any of the region’s pasts. As Wynter argued, ‘there is no question of going back to a society, a folk pattern whose structure has [not] already been undermined by the pervasive market economy;’ Brodber’s celebration of African spirituality is not an idealisation of an imagined past, but a negotiation of future free from the frustration of the colonial double bind.²⁵

Roberts situates Brodber’s fiction within the wider West Indian writing canon which, dominated by male émigrés, tends to be determined by a self-perception of the writer as ‘tragically displaced, permanently rootless, and despairing,’ trapped in the posture of Caliban.²⁶ Brodber’s fiction, by contrast, expresses an alienation born not from simultaneously loving and hating the ‘mother country’ but from a ‘dislocation from the safety of the folk community,’ a domestic alienation ‘which leads to the perversion of its beneficence.’²⁷ Ella’s repeated separations from her folk, even before she leaves home, are the root(s) of her distress; she – they – can only be healed when she is brought back to them. Moreover the Obeah that heals her is a *communal* effort, one that has very little to do with the ‘mother country.’²⁸ *Myal* addresses the communication breakdown not

²³ Khair, ‘Correct(ing) Images.’

²⁴ Brodber, ‘Head-Hurting Fiction,’ p.123.

²⁵ Wynter, ‘Plot and Plantation,’ p.100.

²⁶ Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber*, p.60. This is the situation in which Zampi finds himself, at the beginning of *Obeah Man*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ella’s abuser, furthermore, is an American, which complicates even more the colonised/coloniser dynamic, and draws attention to the United States as a new imperial power in the region.

between the centre and the periphery, but between the periphery and *itself*. In its portrayal of Ella's repeated alienations, which take place at home as well as abroad, followed by her spiritual healing upon her return home (which reverses her alienations), *Myal* bridges the gap between the tragic, futile migration narratives of the 1950s and the then-emergent tradition of female writers of the 1980s, which tended to foreground domestic religious experience.²⁹ While earlier narratives tend to exoticise folk religion, Roberts argues that women's writing from the 1980s, by contrast, utilises the trope of religious praxis and expression, in the *Bildungsroman* format, to '[centralise] the trope of passing from one kind of psychic life into another,' and to foreground 'an existential moment when the status quo is questioned.'³⁰ This moment usually comes at the beginning of puberty, but for Ella it comes a year into her marriage, and is not immediately a cause for celebration.

Critics have also focused on Brodber's stylistic strategy, which begs questions of the very aesthetics of a narrative of spiritual healing. As is common in trauma fiction, *Myal's* 'temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection.'³¹ What is uncommon in *Myal*, however, is that these strategies are self-consciously aimed at freeing the narrative, in method as well as in content, from colonial discourse. In her review of *Myal* Evelyn O'Callaghan observes that 'narrative voice is elusive. One gets the sense of a communal oral delivery [...]. Insofar as there is a narrative voice, it is very much a part of the community and can move from cool, ironic detachment to the tone of intimate gossip.'³² My only addition to O'Callaghan's observations is that this elusive narrator is self-consciously engaged in a process of repeated and sustained code-switching that refuses to be contained by narrative and/or aesthetic paradigms. Brodber's narrator recognises his/her place in dominant discourse, and engages in linguistic liminality to subvert it. Linguistic dissimulation is key to *Myal's* narration, and its narrator behaves as

²⁹ Roberts attributes this 'sea change' to 'decolonisation, the rise of feminism, the rise of Rastafarianism, black nationalism, and renewed interest in African charismatic religions.' See *Reading Erna Brodber*, p.65. Malachi McIntosh goes some way to explaining the tragedy of émigré writers in his argument that authors 'had to address questions of Caribbean identity, but because of their unique positions in relation to the Caribbean people as culturally and locationally deracinated, they could only provide answers that betrayed their own singular standpoint and their changing conceptions of self and society [...] in all of their depictions the authors' own origins, locations, and constraints were present and palpable.' See Malachi McIntosh, *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.16.

³⁰ Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber*, p.79.

³¹ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.3.

³² Evelyn O'Callaghan 'Myal, by Erna Brodber', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 4 (1990), 50-59 (p.51).

Anancy, whose chief strategy, it must be remembered, is verbal trickery. Anancy can never be trusted because his words always have hidden meaning, yet he is also successful (as much as he is unsuccessful) because of his liminality, his ability to exist at the margins of any space(s) in which he might find himself. Brodber is aware of Anancy's cultural relevance to the region, and integrates his trickery into her narrative rendering of a Caribbean aesthetic. Emily Zobel Marshall has argued that Anancy and the Caribbean writer share similar discursive positions. 'Like Anansi,' Zobel Marshall continues, 'the Caribbean writer deconstructs the imperialist "text" and transforms the landscapes of the formally colonised world, like a rite of passage, into new perceptions and insights.'³³ Zobel Marshall's argument is similar to Houston Baker's, that

where talk is concerned, Anancy's web is like the vertical intersecting sonics of melancholia, rebellion, or revolution, erupting through the linear spaces of hegemony. Anancy talk is thus a discourse outside the normal or traditional precincts of the historically valorised and hegemonically inscribed good, beautiful and true.³⁴

Myal's discourse is an Anancy discourse. The novel is a discursive *and* spiritual response to the epistemic violence of colonialism, an examination of 'the myths which it engendered' through *text*, and an experiment in reclaiming or recreating myths of its own.³⁵ Brodber writes from a counterhegemonic position, the result of which is a text that, while it may address the effects of hegemony, does not address that hegemony itself, and she does this chiefly through the language of spirituality. Ifeona Fulani has argued that, while 'in English literary studies, style is usually distinguished from content,' Caribbean writing does not follow suit. In Caribbean writing 'content – Caribbean subjectivity and experience – is communicated in a style that is the product of that subjectivity and that experience' – a 'tricky,' manipulative style that subverts the meanings of the very language(s) that it has inherited.³⁶

³³ Emily Zobel Marshall, "'The Anansi Syndrome: A Debate Concerning Anansi's Influence on Jamaican Culture', *World Literatures Written in English*, 39 (2001), 127-136 (p.134).

³⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., 'Foreword: Post-Colonial Talk and the Critic as Anancy', in *Anancy in the Great House: Ways of Reading West Indian Fiction*, by Joyce Jonas (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp.vii-ix (pp.vii-viii).

³⁵ Walker-Johnson, 'Text and Context', p.52.

³⁶ Ifeona Fulani, 'Caribbean Women Writers and the Politics of Style: A Case for Literary Anancyism', *Small Axe*, 9 (2005), 64-79 (pp.69-70).

The goal of Brodber's tricky narrative, the 'moral' to this story, is to 'correct the ugly images of ourselves that the colonial experience has given us, wittingly or unwittingly, and which we have actively or otherwise absorbed,' to 'rewrite works offensive to us.'³⁷ Yet rewriting offensive works is not simply a matter of reversing polarities; *Myal* centres on the key concept of spirit thievery, essentially the stealing of one's spirit, soul or essence through discursive, implicitly imperialist, means. The concept of 'spirit theft' is introduced into the novel by Maydene Brassington, interfering wife of William (the English-trained Methodist missionary), and representative of the colonising (wo)man. Maydene warns William that, with his mission to 'exorcise and replace' the already-existing spirituality of his flock with his own inherited notions of Christianity, he is a 'spirit thief.' He does not have, she continues, 'what to give people instead when you take away what they've got' (*Myal*, p.18). William, the 'native,' like Haynes before him, is a victim of Winks' 'pedagogical interpellation,' and thus cannot be of service or benefit to his community's self-realisation.³⁸ By contrast Maydene, the colonial ideal, spurns 'being held up as the thing with which to fill those sacks which he has emptied' (*Myal*, p.18). She recognises that her selfhood is not theirs, and that her husband's attempts to 'civilise' these people amounts to little more than draining them of their essence. In Maydene and William, Brodber reverses the civilised/savage, native/imperialist positions; they demonstrate her refusal to adhere to accepted epistemic conventions, and her thesis of black/Caribbean complicity in our own victimisation.

Maydene is the last member of the Myalist circle, and her criticism of her husband comes after her own spiritual awakening – the result of exposure to the Myalists. She is not introduced sympathetically into the text and is shunned by Grove Town's inhabitants, who resent her whiteness, and her interference into their lives. She later uses the term 'spirit theft' to refer to Selwyn's distortion of Ella's stories, too, but not to Mas Levi's more traditional, more obviously 'African' crime against Anita.³⁹ This may suggest a disparagement or dismissal of Obeah – the title we give to Mas Levi's crime, not the narrator or any of the characters – but the implication that Obeah does not belong in the realm of 'official text' (represented by Maydene) suggests in itself that Obeah is the half that has not been told, that it is Myal's – and *Myal's* – discursive shadow. Maydene is admitted

³⁷ Brodber, 'Head-Hurting Fiction,' p.122.

³⁸ See p.52 of this thesis.

³⁹ This may be explained, too, by Maydene's spiritual awakening starting during 'the Anita business.'

into the Myalist circle before she sends Ella away to the United States, but after she has removed the young girl from her mother and her community, which she does not consider to be spirit theft either. Maydene's admission into this secret spiritual community exemplifies Brodber's refusal to settle on any particularly defined subjectivity or come to any fixed judgment, as well as her delight in deconstructing, at the same time as reinforcing, our expectations of her text.

In Brodber's text the spiritual is also the scriptural; it is significant that the first words we see Ella speak are from Rudyard Kipling's 'Big Steamers' (1911), which prompts Reverend Simpson (who will later be revealed to us as one of the Myalists) to question whose 'burden' she might be (*Myal*, p.6), referring to Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' (1899).⁴⁰ Ella imagines herself to belong to the world of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904) because its characters look like her (and not like anyone around her), but she does not comprehend that she, a 'mulatto,' cannot enter that world, which is as much real as it is fictional (*Myal*, p.43).⁴¹ Her husband Selwyn is the first person to call Ella a mulatto, an act which she does not register as epistemic violence. Having no roots as it were, because of her skin colour, neither does Ella register her childhood misreadings as the first stages of her trauma. When she tells her husband about her childhood, Ella further does not realise that, in giving him her (half-)stories, she is giving away her spirit. Barrie's text is unnamed in the novel, but these references to British canonical texts indicate that Brodber's narrative is not only consciously interacting with canonical colonial children's texts, but also responding to and challenging the *Bildungsroman* format – Ella does not come to her realisation post-puberty but post-marriage, post sexual encounter with a colonising white man. Her appreciation of the true nature and significance of her relationship with her husband does not come until after she sees her already alien-yet-familiar childhood world grotesquely re-reflected at her in his 'coon show' (itself another text), into which she and her community have been written, but much distorted (*Myal*, p.80). Selwyn's act of remaking her and her world in his own image triggers a physical and

⁴⁰ I do not use 'scriptural' here to refer to holy works, but simply to pertain to that which is written. Rev. Simpson is particularly opposed to Maydene, possibly because the black Baptist tradition of which he is a part exists in competition with the Brassingtons' Methodism. Rev. Brassington consciously avoids Rev. Simpson, too, which is clearly a function of the latter's own ignorance of and alienation from the people of Grove Town.

⁴¹ Ella leaves this world once she 'grows up,' soon after her honeymoon.

psychological rupture in Ella, which can only be healed in Mas Cyrus' balm yard. Walker-Johnson reads *Myal* as a 'rhetorical structure which comments on its literary antecedents;' Brodber's disruptive aesthetic is a strategy for conveying the social, historical and spiritual disruption of the colonial text itself.⁴²

If spirit theft is literary, so is its healing. After her 'post-traumatic experience' of healing Ella is brought to the realisation of her colonised condition through the act of *reading*, this time the paternalistic children's story of Mister Joe's Farm, which she is tasked with using to help teach children how to read.⁴³ The Myalists who healed her, after discovering Ella's realisation, rejoice that she will take her new ways of reading to Whitehall, as seminars and published *papers* (*Myal*, p.109). The Myalists themselves are literary, too, as well as literal and spiritual. We discover that they are Mas Cyrus (in whose balm yard Ella is healed); Ole African [the 'ragged necromancer' who drove away Anita's duppy (*Myal*, p.87)]; Miss Gatha (Grove Town's Kumina leader); Dan Simpson (Grove Town's 'Native Baptist' preacher), and Maydene Brassington.⁴⁴ They are the embodiments of Percy the chick, Willie the pig, Mother Hen and Dan the dog from the Mister Joe story, respectively. Maydene, the group's newcomer, is given the title/identity White Hen, on account of her skin colour. The Myalists physically embody their spiritual/literary characteristics: Maydene is white, inquisitive, domineering and broad, a 'blasted white pillow case with a string tied in the middle' (*Myal*, p.20). Rev Simpson is 'black and with a mouth stretching from one side of his face to the other like a bulldog' (*Myal*, p.45). Ole African 'seemed to like filth' (*Myal*, p.45; p.92), and Miss Gatha's 'ten little black toes [...] scratched the gravel of the road like a common fowl looking for worms' (*Myal*, p.70). In keeping with the novel's fluid structure, this group is not established immediately. We learn in disrupted and disruptive pieces that the characters who constitute this group are the embodiments not only of the fictional farm animals, but also of spirits that have travelled to Jamaica from Africa, and that have been

⁴² Walker-Johnson, 'Text and Context,' p.50.

⁴³ Ella resettles in Grove Town as a primary school teacher. 'Mister Joe's Farm' was one of several stories in *Caribbean Readers: Book 1*, by Arthur James Newman and Philip M. Sherlock, first published in 1937 and designed for children entering the Jamaican school system. The characters in these stories include Mr Joe, a farmer; Mr Grumps, a goat; Master Willy, a pig; Mrs Tibbs, a cat; Miss Peg, a jenny; Mr Dan, a dog; Mother Hen; and her chick, Percy. Percy was the only black chick in a brood of twelve, all the others of whom were golden coloured, and was forever getting into trouble. Ella identifies the story as a perpetuation of the myth that the colonised cannot survive on their own, without the British paternalism represented by Mr Joe. See Arthur James Newman and Philip M. Sherlock, *Caribbean Readers: Book 1* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1937).

⁴⁴ It is Maydene's husband, William, who refers to Ole African as a 'necromancer,' five times over six pages (*Myal*, pp.87-92). 'Necromancer' is often used in place of 'Obeahman.'

communicating with each other for several hundred years. They carry several significations, simultaneously, and as Rahming argues,

although these myal spirits are cognisant of their allegiance to a higher cosmic order [...] the novel contains no indication of a conflict between [their] African-related rituals and their ties to cosmic purposes. Nor does the novel contain any suggestion that the cosmic order [...] is in any way static.⁴⁵

The Myalists may be literary, but they have freed themselves from colonial space, time and narrative, freely inhabiting – and travelling between – dimensions. Instead of being doubly bound by the experience of colonialism (and the colonial text), they inhabit a ‘double space’ – if not a boundless one – that is primarily spiritual. In fact, this boundlessness is enabled by their spirituality. The most obscure and confusing of all the Myalists is Ole African, with whom the phrase ‘the half has not been told’ is most associated.⁴⁶ It is his initial intervention into Anita’s story that first alerts us to clandestine spiritual workings in Grove Town, but he disappears almost as suddenly as he appears at that young woman’s doorstep. Ole African is an obscure and frightening figure, who is at once ‘necromancer,’ animal character, African Myal spirit and, in Brodber’s own words, ‘hermit herbalist, and at the symbolic level an embodiment of those great black creators the jazz musicians.’⁴⁷ Ole African may be a repository of black Atlantic culture, but he is also the novel’s most subversive character. He lives on Grove Town’s outskirts, and while he does not appear to have regular contact with the villagers, and is never depicted speaking (except to say the half has not been told), he seems integral to village life – much like an Obeahman. He has ‘dreadful hair,’ and his clothes are ‘old and torn and so dirty, the bits fell like strips of leather around his waist’ (*Myal*, p.45; p.56).⁴⁸ Of all the novel’s characters, he is most

⁴⁵ Rahming, ‘Insistent Demands’, pp.312-313.

⁴⁶ ‘Half the story has never been told’ is a lyric from Bob Marley and Peter Tosh’s ‘Get Up, Stand Up,’ which featured on The Wailers’ 1973 album, *Burnin’*. The song urges black people to question (and ultimately reject) dominant discourses of Christianity, much like Ella comes to reject the Mister Joe story. Another indication of Brodber’s engagement with Reggae and Rastafari is the narrator’s comparison of a mournful Mas Cyrus, leaning against a bastard cedar tree and contemplating the ‘confusion and destruction’ Ella has brought to his world, to ‘Gonzalez with his statue of Marley’ (*Myal*, p.3). Christopher Gonzalez’s statue of Bob Marley was unveiled in Kingston in 1983, 64 years after the novel’s action takes place but five years before it was published. It depicts Marley with a tree trunk for a lower body and a distorted face – much like Cyrus’.

⁴⁷ Erna Brodber, ‘Beyond a Boundary: Magical Realism in the Jamaican Frame of Reference’, in *Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Timothy J. Reiss (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), pp.15-24 (p.18).

⁴⁸ In this sense, Ole African also approximates to stereotypical depictions of male Rastafari.

associated with Africa (in name, in appearance, and in 'incomprehensibility') and with Obeah – 'necromancer' is another word for 'Obeahman.' His description, very similar to that of *Banana Bottom's* Wumba, recalls 'African witchdoctor' stereotypes and designates him as threatening, despite the restorative role he plays in his community. Ole African appears to work in secret and alone (particularly in the case of removing Anita's stone-throwing duppy); we do not know that he is in the Myalist circle for a long time. We expect him to be the novel's Obeahman given his peculiar appearance and behaviour, but Brodber's non-binary narrative does not allow for such a simplistic conclusion. Instead, *Myal's* description of its Obeah/Myalman illustrates Obeah's ambiguity, reminds us of its discursive distortion in dominant discourses, and reinforces the understanding of these practices as integral, not antithetical, to each other.

We see this hinted at in a telepathic conversation between Dan/Rev Simpson and Willie/Ole African which, significantly, takes place directly after Maydene cautions Anita's guardian, unsolicited, against visiting a 'conjurer' about Anita's duppy, and just before Maydene joins the Myalist circle.⁴⁹ Willie's conversation with Dan makes little 'sense,' not least because it does not 'really' happen, but is the most we hear from the herbalist/pig/spirit/potential Obeahman. Dan asks Willie to tell him the half that has never been told and Willie responds in a series of jerky half-sentences (therefore only giving half, again) that 'conjure men, voodoo men, wizards and priests [didn't] like us,' and therefore 'stole our sound.' 'Conjure men' is another term for 'Obeahmen,' and Willie seems to be saying that Obeahmen sold their own people into slavery ('they sold Joseph in Egypt') in exchange for power and fear because they had 'no faith in the people, no faith in themselves.'⁵⁰ Yet as we know, Obeahmen were sold into slavery too, and became spiritual leaders of their enslaved communities. I contend that the implied Obeahmen to which Willie refers are African slave-dealers, and that the half that has not been told is that 'folks should keep their power,' a power that is innate and communal, and which was twisted by European imperialism into 'evil' (*Myal*, p.66). This is the spiritual power that was once

⁴⁹ During the conversation, Rev Simpson is in his office, and Ole African is at his home. In Maydene's parallel conversation with Anita's guardian, the Englishwoman warns that solving Obeah with Obeah 'would be giving somebody else control over your spirit and as good as he might be, that could be dangerous, it is unhealthy' (*Myal*, p.64). Both conversations – one physical, one which requires no voice at all – concern spirit theft.

⁵⁰ This is the communal faith that Zampi finds lacking, and which Manko encourages, in Chapter Four of this thesis.

harnessed by our enslaved ancestors, which became known as 'Obeah,' which colonialism taught us to view as 'evil.' Willie's half sentences argue for a re-evaluation of what we call 'Obeah,' of the roots of African spirituality that we carry within us, but which we no longer acknowledge. His message, that we should keep hold of our spiritual power, is a clear argument for the continued value and relevance of Obeah in our everyday lives.

Willie allows for the possibility of recognising the ambivalence of spiritual power by, as Winks argues, 'embodying the figure of the uncanny stranger [...] the ghost that shadows every discourse [...] the disturbing interrogation, the estrangement, that potentially exists within us all.'⁵¹ His incendiary claim that in 1760 'they split man from his self' and 'made us a joke' suggests a sound renunciation of Obeah, but in the same breath he insists that he is 'planning a strategy' to 'send them back to their tacky old ships' (*Myal*, p.67).⁵² Reimaginings of Tacky's Rebellion usually valorise both Tacky and Obeah, and Brodber appears, at first, to be turning this mythology on its head. However, this reference to 1760 making us a 'joke' could also refer to 'Obeah' being defined in, and constricted by, colonial text in that year. 'Obeah' was turned into a joke once colonial legislation robbed African spirituality of its myriad meanings, of its spirit – by 1988, when this novel was published, Obeah was indeed (and still is, for many) an object of ridicule. Ole African resists this discursive violence by insisting on making himself 'unintelligible,' as well as obscuring whatever power he may wield; if he is an Obeahman as well as a Myalist his power – the same communal spiritual power – is that which cannot be apprehended; it is the half that cannot be told, that which exists outside of the text. Willie maintains Glissant's obscurity, 'through which our anxiety to have a full existence becomes part of the universal drama of cultural transformation.'⁵³ Ole African understands that our power can never be made manifest if we continue to give it away, to allow its meaning to be warped. Perhaps this is why Willie never names the source of this power that was stolen and sold, and why his spirit work is mostly undertaken in secret. Ole African's tricky and wilfully obscure characterisation suits his role, of shadowing, echoing and obscuring meaning. His words function as a warning, a refrain and a framing device. They reinforce *Myal's* narrative dis-location and remind us that these stories are

⁵¹ Winks, 'Translation,' p.71.

⁵² 'Tacky old ships' is an echo of Kipling's 'Big Steamers.' Willie says as much when he claims that 'them tacky ships have dropped their sails and turned to steam' (*Myal*, p.67).

⁵³ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, pp.1-2.

echoes of stories that have been told (or not told) before. The old man only speaks in half sentences, or does not 'speak' at all – yet this is not to indicate stupidity on his part. His partial presence reminds us that we can never be sure that the language used at any given point in the narrative is reliable, or is signifying as it ought. There will always be something else, and meaning will not be found in the text alone – even with *Myal's* several intertextual references. The half remains untold because the 'truth' is not only in language but in spirit. When *spirit* is stolen or manipulated, there can be no communication or transcendence.

Ole African's encounter with Ella is the most significant episode in the young girl's life, and is the 'episode' Brodber chooses for her protagonist's first act of self-expression. It is also this episode that forms the climax of Selwyn's minstrel show, which in turn triggers Ella's psychotic break. It is this memory that occasions Ella's second recorded speech, and her only narration.⁵⁴ It occurs halfway through the novel, and we only know that Ella is speaking because the narrator interrupts her to explain that 'when she was telling her stories of back home, Ella always fell into broken English' (*Myal*, p.54).⁵⁵ This 'broken English' is incomplete in more ways than one, as Ella 'had not told the half. She did not know it' (*Myal*, p.56). Her narration is unreliable and Ole African is again presented to us in fragments. The narrative voice switches to omniscient and detached as it describes Ella walking home with Maydene 'in that same week that the poltergeist stopped' (*Myal*, p.54) – another indication of the link between Ella and Anita, through Ole African. Maydene, surprised to see Ole African for the first time, asks Ella if she knows him. Ella did not know Ole African personally and had never seen him before, but 'no child in Grove Town needed to see Ole African to know him,' the narrator continues. 'They had been hearing about him for centuries.' Ole African is more than a physical being; his spirituality transcends the narrative. The narrator continues that Ella 'knew the right question and the right answer,' but for Maydene's benefit chose '*deliberately*' to answer '*literally*,' thus leaving out half, again (*Myal*, p.55, emphasis added). Not only is Ole African 'unintelligible,' but language itself breaks down in his presence, too. Ella reflects, in her retelling, her confusion not only

⁵⁴ Ella's first recorded speech, her recital of Kipling, is not really her own. The narrator claims that 'the words were the words of Kipling, but the voice was that of Ella O'Grady' (*Myal*, p.5).

⁵⁵ The reference to patois as 'broken English' may suggest a change in narrators, or may suggest a single's narrator's code-switching for an assumedly ignorant reader (including the bourgeois classes, who frown upon the use of patois). The only named narrator is Ella, who narrates only part of this story.

at Maydene's question, but her response. The single word 'leave,' the narrator informs us, could not have been directed at either Ella or at Ole African, but despite her story seeming 'to have some part missing' Ella dismisses her doubt (*Myal*, p.56). We do not yet know what could be missing either, and are forced to merely hazard guesses. We discover much later that this is also the scene in which Maydene was accepted into the Myal circle, and the being to whom she directed her command was the duppy that was riding Anita. Ella still does not know the half, the connection between Maydene, Ole African, Anita and herself – their spiritual connection, and the power of this spirit.

Ole African represents a history that cannot be seen (or told), but which is intuited. Obeah, with which he is associated, is part of this memory; it may be suppressed, but it is not forgotten. Ella's residual shock at her own suppressed memories manifests as 'cold bumps' on her skin, a 'sharp electric shock through her body' and a 'shudder.' As she has 'not as yet reached this truth,' however, the cause of her shock, she is not able to express herself to Selwyn, or to protect herself from him (*Myal*, p.55). We are left to infer that her shock may result from the ease with which she denied Ole African and the history he carries within him – as well as a subconscious, visceral reminder of the history she does not know she carries within herself. Ella may not articulate it as such, but perhaps her reaction also suggests an acknowledgement that she has been a collaborator in her own enslavement. Her denial echoes Peter's denial of Christ, but she ignores the warnings of her own body and 'pressed on to give Selwyn *her version*' (*Myal*, p.56, emphasis added). Ella reinforces the suppression of 'the other half' in her confused retelling, the epistemic *and spiritual* violence of which will soon be revealed to her in Selwyn's show. To him, it is simply 'delightful theatre' (*Myal*, p.55), but Ella will soon discover that it is much more than that – that it is spirit theft. The fact that this moment occurs during a memory of Ole African configures him as a conduit between Ella's past and her future. He is already a liminal and chaotic figure, and now we (and Ella) see that his words are prophetic. He precipitates Ella's speaking which, although it results in her trauma, also results in her liberation.

Ella's response to her husband's show is to stop speaking to him, and to imagine that she is carrying the baby Jesus, who will cleanse her of her sins. Her abdomen swells, despite having not slept with her husband for months, and Selwyn calls Maydene to return Ella to Jamaica, where Cyrus is to drain her 'bad bad water belly' (*Myal*, p.96). Selwyn had been

using prophylactics, unknown to Ella, and her phantom pregnancy is clearly a traumatic symptom of the shock of seeing herself and her people so grotesquely reflected and distorted.⁵⁶ It is also a response to the guilt she feels in having misrepresented herself in the ‘broken English’ of her retelling. ‘Long [i.e., ‘unbroken’] conversations between her selves’ take place in Ella’s head, ‘mostly accusations (*Myal*, p.84). Her adult, present self puts Selwyn ‘in the dock’ but her past, child self accuses her of having *given* Selwyn the tools to deconstruct her, and scorns her excuse of not knowing, calling her a ‘mule. With blinders on.’⁵⁷ The only words she speaks to her husband, the only words she can speak to herself, are ‘Mammy Mary’s mulatto mule must have maternity wear’ (*Myal*, p.84). Ella’s alliterative, hysterical refrain returns her to a childhood that she perhaps never left, and marks her registration of her own trauma. Ella *places herself outside herself*, into a discourse that is about her, but not for or by her – she does not even use the personal pronoun. Her (first) self-discovery is the result of a grotesque act of mistranslation. Her ‘mirror moment’ results in a fragmentation of the ego, thus a fracturing, not an integration of the self.⁵⁸ This is what Maydene calls spirit theft, and what Christophine, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, calls Obeah.

By speaking herself for the first time Ella does that which Maydene and Ole African warned against – she gives away her spirit to a voodoo and conjure man. It is well documented that Obeah practitioners are believed to have the power to steal duppies for nefarious purposes.⁵⁹ Selwyn has caught Ella’s duppy, her story (contained in which is the

⁵⁶ As the heir of a pharmaceutical company, the novel implies that he, too, has ‘worked Obeah’ on Ella.

⁵⁷ Mules are not only blind, but sterile. Ella blames herself for what she believes is her inability to become pregnant.

⁵⁸ While in the Lacanian model of the mirror stage the infant recognises him/herself in the mirror (and subsequently can view him/herself from outside him/herself), Ella does not recognise herself and her people in the image her husband/mirror reflects. Thus her ego is shattered instead of formed, as it is in Lacan’s conception. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English*. trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁵⁹ Duppies are the ‘shadows’ of the deceased. The ‘soul’ transcends after death to Heaven or Hell, while the duppy can linger on earth if not sufficiently placated. Martha Beckwith defined ‘working’ Obeah as ‘setting a duppy for someone;’ she defined ‘pulling’ Obeah as extracting said duppy. Leonard Barrett records the belief in Jamaica that duppies ‘sometimes become the evil agents of the obeah-man to do harm to people.’ Ivor Morrish argues that ‘a great deal of obeah ritual is concerned with this belief in duppies and the catching of a person’s shadow by the “shadow catcher” or obeah-man.’ Joseph Murphy argues that a ‘trickify *duppy* [...] uncontrolled by community ritual sanctions,’ like a nine night, ‘can disrupt human lives by its own wilfulness or it can be captured by *obeah* workers to carry out aggressive commissions.’ ‘*Duppies* “set” or shadows “caught” by *obeah* practitioners,’ he continues, are liberated by the community of [Revival] Zion,’ similarly to Miss Gatha’s exorcism of Anita. Matthew Lewis recorded that, in addition to being a ghost, a duppy ‘seems to be a supernatural attendant on the practitioners of Obeah.’ Handler and Bilby also draw attention to the penal

half that has not been told), in an almost predetermined echo of Mas Levi and Anita, of Rhys' Antoinette and her husband, and of countless colonising men and colonised women. As Mas Levi used his powers to drain Anita, so too has Selwyn drained (and taken possession of) Ella. He intends to commit the show to film and 'Ella's spirit,' continues the narrator, 'and with it that of Grove Town would be locked into celluloid for the world to see for ages on end'— the Obeahman's calabash or skull is this time substituted for Selwyn's celluloid (*Myal*, p.92).⁶⁰ Yet while Ella's fragmented, alienated sel(ves) may insult each other, they force her to admit her own complicity in her entrapment. The process of reintegration will and must be painful, but it is only after this pain, and this admission, that she can have her epiphany. Selwyn's Obeah splits her, and Mas Cyrus' (and her community's) Obeah puts her back together again. It is the task of the Myalists to release (repossess) Ella's duppy, and reintegrate her into her community. In so doing, they can restore this other half, without the already mistrusted mechanism of text.

In an interview Brodber asserted that *Myal* was about 'the struggle to get back the spirit.'⁶¹ The spirit, but not the letter: Ella has to get her spirit back, as she will never reclaim her words. Moreover words are unreliable, they only tell half. While this process of reclamation does involve a 're-affirmation of the sacredness of the African heritage which is very much a part of indigenous West Indian culture,' it is also a hybridised, creolised process – we are new people, for whom Africa is not and cannot be home.⁶² Yet hybridity need not be confused with acquiescence. Ella still has to read and teach the Mister Joe story, but her way of reading and teaching has been fundamentally altered as a direct result of the healing of her trauma. Having been immunised against colonial discourse, Ella can now subvert the text from within it, like Anancy. Brodber's narrative has little interest in an essentialised imagined Africa; it seeks to use the traces of African spirituality still present in the Caribbean to find a way of reading in and out of the imperialist European discourse that would define

codes of Monserrat and the Cayman Islands, which both include 'duppy catching' in their anti-Obeah laws. See Beckwith, *Black Roadways*, p.104; Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum*, p.45; Morrish, *Obeah, Christ and Rastaman*, p.44; Murphy, *Working the Spirit*, pp.143-144, original emphasis; Lewis, *Journal*, p.184; and Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, p.80; p.100.

⁶⁰ Obeahmen are often thought to keep duppies in calabashes or skulls (see Handler and Bilby, *Enacting Power*, p.38). In Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* Rudy Sheldon, criminal mastermind and Obeahman, keeps enslaved duppies in a calabash, against their will and at his complete behest. See Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Warner Books, 1998).

⁶¹ Qtd in O'Callaghan, 'Myal', p.52.

⁶² O'Callaghan, 'Myal', p.58.

it. As Willie counsels Dan, Ella's task and ours is to 'learn the outer's ways, dish it out in little bits, an antidote man, against total absorption' (*Myal*, p.68); *that* is the spirit work that he and his colleagues perform – their own kind of Obeah/Myal. Brodber sees the artist's duty/burden as providing a means of engagement with the 'impossible history' of colonial trauma and giving it contemporary meaning.⁶³ The inherited trauma that it addresses is given clear historical precedent, but is also given a solution outside of this precedent. While theories of the treatment of psychological trauma tend to focus on trauma's speaking or writing – on 'bearing witness' through narrative – Brodber's protagonist does not simply 'talk her cure' but discovers the curative effects of speaking (and reading) herself *to herself and her community*. Ella's transcendence of trauma through spiritual, unspoken healing returns her to this community and replenishes it, in turn. Thus, *Myal* challenges Caruth's model by demonstrating that trauma is not so much unspeakable, but rather that its sufferers need a local, communal audience to speak it to.⁶⁴ Obeah is the means by which this community addresses, expresses and heals its everyday, latent trauma.

Conclusion

Myal is explicitly concerned with the healing of trauma for future generations through local, communal, spiritual (re)engagement. Its 'quarrel with history' is with colonial texts, but it also acknowledges that the healing of trauma is not necessarily its speaking (or writing), and is not only a question of healing the individual. Ella's trauma cannot be spoken because speaking it further binds her to an alienating discourse which she is part of, but which is not 'for' her. The novel suggests that we should no longer preoccupy ourselves with speaking to power, and envisages a movement through the 'here/there dichotomy' of the African-in-diaspora by speaking to ourselves and each other, spiritually.⁶⁵ Its chronology is resolutely unclear but it is 'realistic' in the sense that it does not present supernatural

⁶³ See Caruth, 'Introduction,' p.5.

⁶⁴ I am indebted to Anne Whitehead for this observation. She also argues, in her exploration of trauma theory *vis-à-vis* the work of Wole Soyinka, that Soyinka's work 'forces us to encounter a response to trauma that asserts the relevance of localised modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, thereby undermining the centrality of western knowledge and expertise.' See Anne Whitehead, 'Journeying through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria', *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008), 13-30, p.27.

⁶⁵ See Brodber, 'Beyond a Boundary', p.20.

elements as at all unnatural or absurd. The supernatural, here, is an everyday, integral part of community life that sustains and heals this community in its suffering. The novel offers an alternative epistemological framework, one that reintegrates the spiritual into the discursive to provide a means of engaging with the inherited and sustained trauma of the Columbian encounter. *Myal* uses Obeah to address the imperatives of a new, post-colonial, post-independent, Jamaican, Caribbean and black Atlantic world.

Puri reads *Myal* as an attempt at 'a poetics that can make real the colonised subject' by eschewing the formal characteristics of literary (colonial) mimesis.⁶⁶ Brodber achieves this through what Puri calls 'a complex series of halvings and doublings;' she refuses to present reality to us in ways we have been taught to understand it.⁶⁷ The text's polyphony displaces us, forces us to see beneath what is shown, hear more than what is played. Ella must therefore be read as a fragmented text, a palimpsest that we must put back together, and in so doing restore ourselves. Ella is a metaphor for the Caribbean's several silent, obscured histories; a cypher, not a self. Through the communal healing powers of Obeah she becomes a person, reintegrated into her self and her community. Brodber is cognisant that the very terms 'Obeah' and 'Myal,' having come into being as colonial designations for 'unknown' religious practice, cannot be trusted to express the spectrum of spiritual being, not only in Jamaica but across the formerly enslaved Caribbean and Atlantic worlds. She does not name these terms, and neither does she allow for simple 'good'/'bad' binaries between them. *Myal* responds to the generic conventions of realism and modernism (factual accuracy, linear chronology and their subsequent disruption) with an intentionally slippery narrative that exemplifies a particularly creole aesthetic, one that exists both within and without the fixed poles of 'European' and 'African.' It is expressive of a commitment to 'rewrite works offensive to us' yet is till mindful that we, too, have offended us. *Myal* is a nationally (self-)conscious narrative, a new hybrid cultural genre that understands our 'dual relation between plantation and plot,' the ambivalence between which 'is the distinguishing characteristic of the Caribbean response [...] at once the root cause of our alienation; and the possibility of our salvation.'⁶⁸ Obeah, in this novel, becomes a means of redressing the imbalances created by colonial history. The question here is no longer 'can we bring Obeah

⁶⁶ Puri, 'Other Realism', p.96.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.99.

⁶⁸ Wynter, 'Plot and Plantation,' p.99

into modernity?' but a consideration of Obeah as a way to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery, with little regard for the question of 'the modern.'

Conclusion: Shifting Obeah

This study has recovered the trope of Obeah in Anglophone Caribbean fiction and tracked the evolution of its use during the twentieth century. I have examined each text not merely as a fictional construct but as a repository of cultural values and anxieties that places itself in dialogue with older and/or more dominant traditions of writing about the West Indies – from travelogues and tourist brochures, to colonial legislation and anthropological treatises. My chosen texts engage with the literary paradigms of realism, modernism and the oral and heroic traditions to address wider discourses, such as questions of modernity, nationhood, identity and self-determination.

The Caribbean was defined, in colonial discourse, as a space of absence, on which to displace fear as well as desire. Obeah, as a product of Caribbean slavery, developed as a response to the domination of the plantation system, and has therefore always represented a threat to ‘order,’ and to established ways of seeing. Necessarily, they both occupy an ambiguous discursive space, in which Obeah functions as a taboo, enshrouded in mystery. Early writing about Obeah fed into the British metropole’s worst fears and anxieties regarding the worst excesses of colonial power. Obeah functioned in relation to power not only as a challenge to this power but as an ‘uncanny’ shadow, what Freud/Schelling described as everything ‘that ought to have remained hidden and secret, yet comes to light.’¹ The threat Obeah represented may have diminished over time and been neutralised in print, but it never disappeared. Obeah lingered in the ‘terrified consciousness’ of power and order.

The texts I have analysed are part of this tradition, even though they may be ‘writing back’ to it. They manipulate readers’ historic perceptions of Obeah to create their own, necessarily hybrid and unstable representations of this phenomenon. These authors do not seek to define Obeah ‘accurately,’ but instead to explore its function in their emergent communities and nations. This lack of definition is not necessarily a failure of representation, but a reflection on any fixed discourse’s inability to capture such a diffuse phenomenon. For the purposes of this thesis it is not what Obeah ‘really’ is that is of

¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. trans. James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. 24 vols. Vol 17 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.219-252 (p.224).

significance but what it does in the text. The concerns of this writing are the preoccupations of postcolonial writing itself: undermining binary stratification; exploring hybridity; recovering an imagined, prelapsarian past; exposing the damage of colonialism; challenging hegemony; and foregrounding 'the notion that past systems of oppression continue into the present.'² These texts use Obeah to do all these things but what is common to them all is that despite how each individual text may employ the trope, Obeah still emerges as something fundamentally unknowable or un-representable – that which exists outside of discourse.

The yard fiction of Chapter One plays on the boundaries between public and private space, and in so doing foregrounds, if not legitimises, Obeah's cultural value. *Minty Alley* and *Black Fauns'* representations of Obeah place the practice at the forefront of national literary culture, and challenge their own realist, 'rationalist' assumptions of veracity, authenticity and narratory authority. The Obeah trope, as chief agent of heteroglossia in these novels, demonstrates that there are some things that the modern, seeing intellectual cannot know, and portrays the Caribbean as a necessarily hybrid, chaotic, creolised cultural space. The short fiction of Chapter Two manipulates notions of what readers ought and ought not to know about Obeah even further, experimenting with the very definition of what constitutes 'West Indian' literature, culture and nationhood. With their focus on 'folk' characters and preoccupation with 'local colour,' these stories engage with questions of legitimacy and authenticity in native cultural production. While Obeah seems essential to these visions of folk, and therefore indigenous culture, its incorporation also exposes these narratives' own anxiety and ambivalence, and the fragility of their imagined boundaries. It demonstrates that whatever visions these narratives may have of a unified identity is not only dis-unified, but 'abnormal,' not universally accepted. Once again, the West Indian nation emerges as a constantly contested ideal, as opposed to a foregone reality.

The concern with the ambivalence of modern nation- and selfhood bleeds into *Banana Bottom* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but my reading of these novels goes beyond this to explore how they both figure Obeah as the limit case between that which is considered 'modern' and that which is considered 'primitive.' Rhys and McKay's narratives expose the

² Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p.3.

dangers of fetishising and calcifying supposedly indigenous cultural traditions, and the lasting effects of this fetishisation and calcification on the psyches of colonised peoples. These novels accept that there can be no return to an authentic past, but also that there can be no wholesale embrace of a brave new future. Obeah is still a vexed question for them, a problem that cannot be solved, the returned repressed of these narrative utopias.

In Chapter Four we see a significant paradigmatic shift in the way Obeah is represented in fiction of the twentieth century. Although *A Quality of Violence* speaks to the older tradition of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of 'African retentions,' *The Obeah Man* and *Those Who Eat the Cascadura* move beyond seeing the relationship between primitive and modern as tragic impasse to imagine a new Caribbean selfhood that largely moves away from this dichotomy. The question for them is no longer 'how can we prove ourselves modern and still believe in Obeah?' but 'how does Obeah define us as human subjects?' These are thoroughly *creole* texts, looking forward as well as back, and they are hopeful for a West Indian future. They re-engage with heroic archetypes to envision a hero who no longer shuns society but is the artist within it, who creates on its behalf. It is Obeah that enables this artistic creative vision and sustains the hero's role in society.

Myal concerns itself with a re-engagement with History on 'our' own terms, and is the least concerned of my chosen texts with addressing (colonial) power. Brodber exposes the textuality of 'traditional' history – the same imaginary in which the Caribbean learned to read itself – but does not use Obeah to signify anything other than what it is, spirit work. Obeah, in *Myal*, is a communal, spiritual healing strategy through which we in the present can re-member ourselves through an engagement with our past. It is no longer an isolated, alien 'African retention' but the key to Caribbean spirituality and selfhood, a tool for reintegration and healing of the traumatic alienation engendered by slavery and colonialism.

My readings show Obeah's development from a Gothic metonym for terror and awe, to a humorous/shameful byword for 'local colour,' to a positive expression of native (spiritual) selfhood. Yet what is common about all of these texts is that while they may foreground Obeah, it still exists at their respective borders. While nineteenth-century depictions of Obeah traded on sensationalism, romanticisation and ambivalence, twentieth-century writing, while still cognisant of and indebted to this tradition, was also aware of

Obeah's normality, its quotidian significance in West Indian life. Obeah therefore intrudes upon the cultural and aesthetic assumptions of any given text, but is nevertheless presented as an inalienable aspect of its narrative vision. It is at once *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, and shows the ambivalence (and similarity) of these terms: it may be concealed, but is always familiar. Obeah defies imposed symmetry, by shadowing or doubling this symmetry with difference. Its discursive shadow highlights the dynamism and inherent contradiction in defining such a thing as a 'nation,' or cultural identity. Obeah can be found at moments of impasse, in these texts, in 'in-between' spaces which, while unstable, offer the most opportunity for creativity. With contestation also comes elaboration, and identity and is negotiated in interstices, which are the same 'in-between spaces' from which Obeah operates in these texts. Despite their varying approaches, none of them 'captures' Obeah completely. They all demonstrate that Obeah is an aspect of the text that the text cannot define. It may be a 'tricky' or unruly subject of narration therefore, but it is through this that we can synthesise new ways of reading from the margins.

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