

Janelle Rodriques: “Do Something to Mek She Change:” Reading Respectability in- and unto the National Female Body in two Jamaican Interwar Fictions of Obeah



“Do Something to Mek She Change”: Reading Respectability in- and unto the National Female Body in two Jamaican Interwar Fictions of Obeah

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Abstract: The short stories here compared articulate both agitation for and anxiety surrounding West Indian self-government, chiefly through the signifiers of “woman” and Obeah, two aspects of the imagined nation that are represented as volatile outliers that must be subdued by their narratives, either by silence or by ridicule. These narratives illustrate the struggle regarding the incorporation of both women and Obeah into fledgling conceptions of national identity, at a time when the former were increasingly visible in the public sphere, and the latter was proving a most stubborn “vestige of the African past” to eradicate. Their elaborations of Obeah as enacted upon women’s bodies by men in pursuit of heteronormative sexual relations demonstrate the complex web of associations among women, Obeah, and “the folk,” an intersection that brings together, while tearing apart, the discursive imaginary of a future Jamaican/ West Indian nation.

Keywords: Obeah, Jamaica, women, heteropatriarchy

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At Jamaica's independence in 1962 national character, as outlined by the country's urban intelligentsia, was contingent on the notion of "respectability," manifested through "education, thrift, industry, self-sufficiency via land ownership, moderate Christian living, community uplift, the constitution of family through legal marriage and related gendered expectations, and leadership by the educated middle classes" (Thomas 2004, 6). Respectability, an inherently elitist aspiration, meant adherence to Victorian ideals of family life – ideals institutionalised in Jamaica with the establishment of "free villages" by Baptist missionaries at the end of slavery. For the Baptists, male employment was crucial to family, cultural and national survival, as was heteronormative marriage, which discouraged women from engaging in waged labour out of "modesty and a sense of shame" (Hall 2009, 189). The ideal family comprised a husband who worked on plantation estates for low wages and a wife who took care of his home; one missionary boasted in 1843 that the "dark passions and savage dispositions" of "cunning, craft and suspicion," endemic in African Jamaicans, had given way to "a noble, manly, and independent, yet patient and submissive spirit" (Phillippo 1843, 253). The "perfect Negro," therefore, was at once independent and compliant; the perfect nation, by extension, was to be at once "modern" and Victorian – feminised and constrained by the stewardship of middle classes who adhered to essentialised, heteropatriarchal constructions of gender.

Concurrently, "respectability" and "progress" also meant the abandonment of "African superstition," the rejection of what Jamaicans recognise as Obeah, a complex of Afrosyncretic spiritual and faith practices developed by enslaved Africans on plantations across the West Indies and inherited by their descendants. Obeah is an expression of various religious, social, political and scientific knowledges, one that rejects the separation between the physical and spiritual worlds characteristic of European Enlightenment (colonial) thought. While it may have lost much of its terror today, Obeah still holds some intrigue, if not authority, as a cultural repository and defence against violent domination, despite its association with the "occult," with African-ness and therefore with "backwardness." As one of the Anglophone Caribbean's most embodied

African survivals Obeah has played an important, if problematic, role in the articulation of West Indian cultural identity, as a marker of black (majority) aesthetics and social and cultural logic. It is ideally suited to a culture that would define itself against colonial rule, but has often been shunned by the region's middle and upper classes, who would co-opt other, less threatening aspects of "folk" culture into their visions of Caribbean identity. These attitudes towards Obeah can be understood historically, considering that the practice allowed the enslaved to "act with more knowledge and authority than their masters," and as such undermined the dominant discourse of the (post-)plantation from *within* it (Levine 2007, 74). Obeah has always had an oppositional status to dominant colonial culture and discourse because it was a way for the enslaved to make sense of their enslavement, for those who had 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 did not necessarily belong. As I will demonstrate with the stories I have chosen for analysis here, both women and Obeah threatened paternalistic imaginings of "modern" West Indian nationhood, and as such were often narrated as volatile outliers that had to be subdued and/or ridiculed in order to maintain some semblance of national cohesion.

R. L. C. Aarons' "The Cow That Laughed" and Ethel Rovere's "Coolie Bangle" are two of the first expressions of the anxiety and ambivalence engendered by the interwar re-assessment of the West Indies' relationship with Britain and its empire vis-à-vis the question of self-governance. They are further significant in that they express this ambivalence through the enactment of Obeah onto the bodies of poor, rural black (or, rather, brown) women. Both narratives were published in 1939 in *Public Opinion*, a Jamaican weekly newspaper that established itself in 1937 as "a new voice" that would "focus attention on facts and theories, on *men* and events [...] to represent the new opinions of the present time – its ambitions and its hopes" (emphasis added). The front page of its first edition affirms that Jamaicans had "a national character, capable of giving them cohesion in framing institutions suitable to their history and environment," and asserts the magazine's purpose, "to meet [the] need for

some organ existing solely for the presentment of topics with a direct bearing on the welfare of Jamaica" (1937, 1). *Public Opinion's* self-appointed mandate was to foster and foment a national consciousness and present a popular alternative to political "business as usual." One of the ways it did this was to encourage the development of a domestic literary aesthetic – to promote "local colour" by publishing fiction that focused on the lives of the rural labouring classes. *Public Opinion*, as Raphael Dalleo observes, "attempted to map out the new nation by putting the cultural and the political together on the same page. In the movement toward Jamaican nationhood," he continues, "the early issues of *Public Opinion* seek to give roles to both the political and the literary, the technical and the creative" (2010, 59, 61). The period from 1939-1941 saw the publication of the most short stories in the newspaper's history (Dalleo 2010, 63). In one of the first issues of 1939 W. A. Domingo, a leading member of the New York-based Jamaica Progressive League, argued the need for a national history that would emphasise "events that occurred in Jamaica" over "the glories of England." He believed that "the masses must be imbued with those facts and interpretations that will bolster their love of country and develop a healthy respect for their rulers" – the socially mobile, British-educated, male middle classes (10). Deborah Thomas has identified "the pursuit of respectability and the acceptance of a paternalistic patriarchy" as "the two primary aspects of the creole nationalist project." After the labour disturbances of the 1930s, in which the majority of the region's people posed a very credible threat to Crown Colony rule, the creole elite's vision of "a particular ideological and material structure within which men and women would create families and contribute to community and national life" only intensified. The nuclear family unit was seen as "the determining institution of socio-political and economic stability," Thomas continues, a stability that depended on the separation, privatisation and domination of the so-called "feminine" sphere and on the further marginalisation of the rural from the urban, the "masses" from the elites (252).

Yet, this "stable" nuclear family has never been the norm in Jamaica – black Jamaican women, in particular, have always complicated these visions of "progress." In 1899 the editor of Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* noted that women

“earned their livelihood, and lived their own robust, independent life,” contrary to missionary ideology. The (black) Jamaican woman, he continued, “preferred her freedom, and accepted its greater responsibilities with equanimity.” This admiration of black women’s independence was limited, however: later in this passage he claimed that black women’s “unconscious sensuality [proved] the greatest obstacle to the development of their character” (Livingstone 1899, 46-47). This anxiety surrounding women’s sexuality and the “fortitude” of the nation has therefore long been established, and with the emergence of a black middle class in the aftermath of World War I women’s economic and sexual freedoms came under increased scrutiny. Belinda Edmondson observes that by the 1920s “women were at the vanguard of a new cultural class: working, mostly (but not always) middle class, often single, socially ambitious, and willing to spend money on leisure” (2009, 43). The elite’s obsession with upholding Victorian “respectability” however, in conjunction with their ambivalence and anxiety surrounding the character of these new nation(s), manifested in stories, columns and opinion pieces lamenting the future of black families – implicitly, the behaviour of these “new women.” Working-class women, in particular, “came to be perceived by the rest of society as both unusually industrious and sexually promiscuous” (Cobham 1990, 197). Henrice Altink notes that “in the two decades following the First World War” several middle-class, educated and professional black women used newspapers to “reflect on the condition of Afro-Jamaican women” – reflections stymied by their maintenance of the class and gender status quo. Not only did these professional women fail to demand their right to enter supposedly “male” professions, argues Altink, they ignored the physical and sexual abuse of black women at the hands of their employers, partners, fathers and brothers. Moreover, they did not demand suffrage for all women, demonstrating that they “did not favour the upward mobility of lower-class girls” (2006). Many of these “activists” appealed to their “sisters” on the basis of potential motherhood, implicitly *and* explicitly endorsing the exclusion of women from public politics. In 1929 a concerned reader wrote to the editor of the *Panama Tribune* that “our children are rising in such numbers. They must copy the lives we lead [...]. It is said a people cannot rise higher than its women, and so the responsibility hangs on us fellow West Indian women to raise the

standard by aiming high and living clean lives" (16). In Guyana, the Negro Progress Convention's 1931 assembly focused on "Women and Social Progress," but only in conjunction with the question of "family." As Lara Putnam observes, for many commentators at this time, "the 'upliftment' of the Negro race depended on women" (2014, 495). Women were charged with the burden of respectability for a nation in which they were not required to participate on an equal footing to men – particularly when these women were poor, black and undereducated.

This imagined woman was what Elaine Campbell would call a "dichotomised heroine," a protagonist "drawn to settle her dilemma – for good or for ill – through marriage or mating" (1987, 138). Marriage was considered the ultimate goal for responsible, respectable Jamaican women. In 1937 Jamaican educator and social worker Amy Bailey, who regularly contributed to *Public Opinion*, claimed that

the dream and aim of most women is to marry and have a home of their own. [Of] course, love should be the ruling factor in any union, and man has the privilege of bestowing the honour of his name and estate on the woman he loves. It is only unfortunate that he finds it so often impossible to love a black girl. Could he but love her, all other things would fall into their right places.

Jamaica, she mournfully concluded, was "losing the pleasing and beautiful spectacle of its cultured black families" (10). Yet even as Bailey decries this state of affairs her comments, in addition to demonstrating her internalised sexism, reinforce historical attitudes surrounding "brown" (mixed-race, lighter-skinned) women in Jamaica, as more desirable than black (darker-skinned) women – a phenomenon that is hinted at, but not extensively explored in Rovere's and Aarons' stories. "Brown people," argues Edmondson, "have always suggested a problem of cultural representation, a cultural 'otherness.'" Yet from the nineteenth century "cultural brownness" became definitive of the Caribbean, having "seized the popular imagination" as evidence of the region's supposed multiculturalism and creolisation. The same physiognomy that signified "cultural sterility" became archetypical of beauty, desirability and literary romance,

which “essentialises the traits of brownness from an unstable ‘mulatto-ness’ – and unsteady blend of black and white, embodying neither – into something natural, the characteristics of a people with their own habits, their own society, their own traditions” (2009, 51, 61). The competing anxieties of colour, class and gender converge in these stories, but are subsumed by the dark spectre of Obeah.

Obeah has long been used to both signify the credentials of these West Indian nation(s) in waiting *and* challenge the integrity of these discursive borders by at once “scandalising” and fascinating readers. Authors and editors were heavily invested in literature as a cultural barometer, and their stories championed (and exploited) these folk forms in their creation of an imagined national identity based on, but not made for (or by) these “folk.” Although nationalists were heavily invested in promoting “folk” aesthetics – such as beatification of the pastoral idyll and celebration of the cultural practices of the rural peasantry (often at the expense of the increasingly urban poor) – the progress they envisioned did not include what they would call “necromancy.” Considered one of the most “extreme” Afro-Jamaican folk practices, Obeah often featured in these stories as an indicator of how “far” we were away from “progress.” Suzanne Scafe notes that, due to “its potential to evoke a range of emotionally intense responses,” Obeah was “one of the most common topics for fiction writing and news reporting” during the 1930s and 1940s (2010, 74). A lasting problem with this return to the folk, however, is the attendant authorial condescension, even hostility, towards the black peasantry. Narratives of Obeah, in particular, tend to repudiate the “ordinary man” as much as they champion him, decrying imperial authority and ideology while simultaneously dismissing and bemoaning peasant “superstition.” These stories expose what Scafe describes as the “colonial anthropologist” tone in narrative (70), what Gillian Whitlock called “colonial realism,” 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 (1985, 17). The question of African-derived religious practices, Scafe continues, often “raised the spectre of barbarism and was evidence of the nation’s potentially ungovernable elements” (72). Early twentieth-century West Indian writers, while they may have

been keen to embrace the more respectable aspects of folk culture (and to romanticise them in their art), were engaged more in a process of idealistic re-imagination than of honest reflection. Obeah represented a limit case in terms of the integration of the folk into nascent nationalist literary ideals. Both Rovere and Aarons would have been aware of, and indeed exploited, Obeah's sensationalism, but while Aarons portrays Obeah as further suppression of the peasant classes based on their stubborn adherence to "superstition" and hardly considers the woman on whose body Obeah is enacted, Rovere presents Obeah as a tool of resistance and agency for women, a means to assert our rights over our own bodies and defy patriarchal domination.

Men dominated the literary field in the 1930s but their protagonists were mainly women, reflecting the anxiety that accompanied women's growing visibility in the public sphere. Obeah practitioners were often configured in this time period as "venal [male] charlatan[s]" with unsuspecting female victims (Johnson 1993, 228), reflecting in turn nineteenth-century missionary ideology that "identified the [black] woman's independence, along with the persistence of the practice of Obeah, as the two major obstacles in the path of 'civilising' the former slaves" (Cobham 1990, 195). The nexus of "woman" and "Obeah," therefore, was particularly fraught; together, they posed both real and imagined threats to the fledgling West Indian nation, even as they seemed to determine its parameters. The implicitly sexual danger Obeah posed to both woman and nation speaks to the fragility of the imagined national communities creole nationalists were trying to build and the significance of the figure of "woman" and the spectre of "Africa" to these imaginaries. These two short stories foreground the practice of Obeah as enacted upon women's bodies by men in pursuit of heteronormative sexual relations and illustrate the complex web of relations between woman, nation and "folk."

R. L. C. Aarons' "The Cow that Laughed" 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 (1939, 6). The story opens with Buddyjoe "plodding" home from a nine-night party; he is depressed because a

new Obeahman, skilled in more modern techniques such as the administration of oils and powders rather than roots, weeds and grave dirt, has begun to threaten his livelihood. Buddyjoe is unambiguously a figure of ridicule – the narrator has not even bothered to give him a plausible name. While there is no master/slave dynamic between any of the characters in this story its narrator is clearly a member of Jamaica's educated elite, and therefore “superior” to his protagonist, whom he explicitly disdains. Buddyjoe, devoid of any other apparent source of income, is introduced as a confidence trickster: when he stumbles upon the sick cow he immediately figures – according to the narrator, with “the swift low cunning of his kind,” not our “high” kind – that if the cow could fool him, it could fool others. He decides that he will use the cow to dupe peasant-proprietor Dan Smearbow, who had offered the Obeahman £10 if he could work it so that Zekie Grantham, the district's most eligible bachelor, would fall in love with his “brown skin” daughter, Mary. “Cow” reinforces the colonial marriage and racial norms decried by Amy Bailey by asserting that a woman need merely be “brown” to attract a wealthy, industrious husband – she proves her worth through her colour/beauty, while he proves his with his physical labour, and we are to infer that Zekie may want her because their offspring will have the potential to “lighten up the race.” We are not to infer that any of these characters may aspire to leave the land, or that they may want more for their futures than a life of marriage, labour and reproduction. Aarons further references (if he does not necessarily critique) popular literary romance tropes of the ideal “brown” woman, like “Bangle”'s Liza who, while she may be prized for her “high” colour, is also constrained by it, as I will demonstrate below. The matter of Mary's marriage, furthermore, is not her choice but her father's; to him (and her future husband) she is a status symbol, not a desiring subject. The same “masses” on whom this new nation is to be built, therefore, simply mimic colonial marriage, gender and respectability norms, rather than creating their own, and Obeah is helping them do it.

Yet Obeah, represented by Buddyjoe, is not to be trusted. The Obeahman “could have retailed [...] to the parties concerned” that Zekie had already expressed his interest in Mary to him but, we are told, “had no difficulty however

in resisting the temptation." Buddyjoe is not, as he pretends to be, an agent of nuptial – national – harmony; he has no scruples exploiting members of his own community for his individual financial gain. He does not even believe in his own Obeah – and neither should we. Dan Smearbow, to him, is "an old fool," engaging in Obeah while being a member of his local church. Obeah is not to be taken seriously in this narrative, even as Aarons indicates that the practice has far from been eradicated. The narrator's investment in ridiculing Obeah, however, belies his own nervousness about the practice's persistence. We are directed to recoil from Buddyjoe's "shaggy face with its pair of thick overhanging lips," a description which, while unnecessarily cruel and unsympathetic, is moreover humourless. This grotesque creature threatens Mary's virtue – Mary who is simultaneously objectified and sexualised in this narrative yet hardly described. Buddyjoe, the narrator continues, "seemed the perfect embodiment of all the powers of low cunning and trickery." "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 he is further described as a "nightmare figure of horror" – a frightful predator to Mary's helpless prey. Buddyjoe's masculinity is primal, unrefined, anti-intellectual in contrast to Mary, the feminised body of the somewhat childlike and innocent nation. In a parody of Gothic melodramatic horror, the Obeahman's yellow teeth are unhealthy, his aspect is terrifying and his "old black waistcoat [decorated] with the immemorial symbols of the wonder worker, the cross bones and skull" suggests a rapacious, murderous appetite. Aarons' sensationalism is exaggerated, but our laughter is still uncomfortable. The narrator's anxiety is not completely dispersed by his mockery and the spectre of the "evil Obeahman" must be exorcised from the pastoral idyll. Aarons reveals the dominant culture's terrified consciousness, which defines itself against "primitive," darkest Africa.

Buddyjoe summons "de damsel" into the living room and orders her to strip naked. Mary, "plainly not knowing what she should do," is reluctant. She giggles nervously throughout the ceremony and has to be physically supported by her parents. Her appeals that her mother protect her modesty fail; the older woman breaks her silence only to say "you'd better do it, darter – it's fe you' own good,"

thus sanctioning the violation of her female child in the name of Obeah and of narratory voyeuristic pleasure. Obeah, this narrative suggests, violates the rules of respectability and violates the “purity” of the feminised nation. Yet it is the narrative that sexualises Mary as a form of control, as we will see with Liza in “Bangle”. Edmondson argues that

brown women’s subjectivity was a hall of mirrors, reflecting and refracting the gaze of whatever constituency was watching. Next to white women, they were promiscuous. Next to black women, they were respectable. [...] 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. Brown women were, simultaneously, an asset and a liability: they were privileged and victimised; respectable and wanton; eroticised and desexualised (60).

Mary’s sexuality (her freedom of choice) is destined to be curtailed by marriage to an industrious black man, the supposed backbone of the nation, ostensibly in the name of familial “stability” and “modern” nationalism – at the hands of an extremely, grotesquely black Obeahman. We do not know if Mary is even interested in Zekie – she is barely spoken to throughout this narrative and speaks only to ask a question – she is then silenced in her attempt to protect her own body. The Obeahman is this story’s agent of subjugation, not liberation; he is impatient with Mary’s demurral, with the “very simple matter” of her desire to keep her body to herself. After rubbing their daughter with various oils and other “foul-smelling” liquids 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.” The narrator’s – and Buddyjoe’s – relief is ecstatic, their shared triumph over Mary’s body orgasmic. The Obeahman leaves the Smearbows trembling “with a terror they made no attempt to control,” and the story comes full circle (goes nowhere) as he “plods” his way home.

"Cow" is not a story of much consequence. No real change has been effected, nor has any real harm been done. Obeah functions in this story as a superstition to be mocked, a marker of poverty and ignorance, but as a serious threat to middle-class sensibilities, despite its persistence in the "lower ranks." This "defanging" of Obeah, however, also silences the brown female body, which exists as a canvas and catalyst for black male desire – a body to be smeared with foul-smelling liquids. Yet while Mary is subjected to Obeah in order to fulfil this paternal nationalistic desire Liza, in Ethel Rovere's "Coolie Bangle," uses Obeah to free herself from it – despite her story being narrated by an old black man, who is in turn narrated by a younger white man. The white man is our narrator but he does not tell his own story – the overwhelming majority of the page is taken up with direct quotation, in patois, of the implied Obeahman, in tricky dialogue with a member of the white landowning class. Yet this is not the old man's story either – it is Liza's. "Bangle" recalls the histories of slavery not only through location (like "Cow," in the post-emancipation countryside), but also through Anancy-like linguistic dissimulation that exposes the limitations of the Enlightenment ideal of (Anglo/European) encyclopaedic knowledge. She and her speaker(s) have access to knowledge unknown and ungovernable by the plantation apparatus; they frustrate official narratives and play on fears that neither women, nor Obeah, can be fully controlled. The unnamed narrator – and his silent, but wilful female protagonist – reveal the unease surrounding the creation of a "modern" West Indies, distinctly by *not* speaking truth to power.

Like "Cow," "Bangle" glances back at a past, perhaps present type of life that is fast disappearing, a type of life in which Obeah is a social determinant. Obeah is an ambivalent signifier of the West Indian nation and with this ambivalence comes anxiety about the character of this new imagined national community. The white landowning narrator does not have the story's opening words, but quotes his interlocutor, "the old fellow" – a presumably black man whom he notes "scraping his foot in the loose dirt on the road, after the old custom of his African forefathers" (Rovere 1939, 6). Rovere uses very few words to locate us on a post-emancipation plantation, evoking the memory (and 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 (perhaps degeneration) of African spiritual beliefs, thus reiterating that Jamaica's heritage is indeed African, far more than it is European. Again with ambivalence this one sentence, with its clear contrast of speech patterns, establishes not only the dynamic between these two men but also the imperial male gaze which we are initially encouraged to adopt. This woman's story, we come to understand, is to be narrated (mediated) by two men who claim not only her, but the pastoral idyll on which the new nation is to be built. Yet "Bangle" subverts these conventions and expectations, almost immediately as it establishes them. The narrator gently mocks the speaker's "sanctimony," as "I had known him all my life and was quite aware that the old rascal was an Obeahman," but 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, from the story he is (re)telling – and from Liza, the fledgling, feminised nation. This myth of the nation is therefore contingent, unstable and suspect, as we can trust neither of these narrators with Liza's story. Rovere suggests with this narrative construction that men (black as well as white) will always obscure women's stories, as each of these men is lying to the other and Liza does not and cannot appear on the page to defend herself. The narrator's language – most of which is ventriloquism – betrays his anxiety at being part of a dwindling minority and of a crumbling power structure: the black man's perspective overpowers the white man's, even in the latter's own story.

The rest of the "sketch" is taken up by the old man telling the younger, unsolicited, the story of Liza's unhappy yet brief marriage. Liza is a member of their community who had died the night before and the story is about the death of her husband, which may or may not have involved Obeah. Liza, who 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

falls on the massa himself. Rovere's feminist critique of colour/sex relations in the Caribbean 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. She also critiques the association of creole/mixed-race Caribbean women and "madness," a trope that is common in West Indian fiction. The suggestion – by the white man, not the black – of Liza's madness reinforces the paternalistic, misogynistic stereotype of "the spirited creole woman," which is again linked to her skin colour. The narrator in "Bangle" associates Obeah with perceived sexual-racial transgression, a trope that is repeated in novels such as Alfred Mendes' *Black Fauns* (1935), C. L. R. James' *Minty Alley* (1936), Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1934), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Herbert de Lisser's *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1929), whose protagonist Annie Palmer is believed to be an Obeahwoman, perhaps the natural extension of her madness and sexual depravity. 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/light-skinned individuals in the Caribbean, who indelibly signify some of the harshest excesses and betrayals of slavery. Rovere pulls away from this critique by placing Liza's pregnancy before the young massa's birth – firmly in the "bad old days" before "modern" reform – and the word "rape" is never used here. But Liza's story, as well as her mother's, cautions that women's bodies are always vulnerable; it follows, therefore, that so too is the body of the nation.

Liza had been uninterested in her many suitors (both black and white), and when she became pregnant refused to divulge the identity of her child's father – perhaps out of a desire to protect him. She was happy to raise her child herself but the interfering "missus," more concerned with appearances than with Liza's happiness, forced her to marry the plantation headman, a situation this white woman determined was better than Liza having no husband at all. 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," again suggesting that he may have known more about Liza's pregnancy than he was

willing to admit, and alluding to Liza's (and her mother's) precarity as an attractive, female, non-white member of his household. Rovere also alludes to the injurious effects of white (women's) interference in the lives of members of the peasant class – the colonising woman is often elided in narratives of slavery and Caribbean history – and Rovere's portrayal of this missus critiques this silence. Moreover, Liza's husband is a (slave)driver: at once exploited and exploiter, such figures were immediately and intimately responsible for some of the harshest punishments enacted on enslaved bodies and minds – they, too, are often overlooked in Caribbean historiography. As both victim and oppressor, such a figure perpetuates Liza's (the nation's) misery – in the service of a colonial “order” and “propriety” that, this narrative suggests, stymied the nation's “natural” development.

Liza might not have been thus exploited were she darker as, given her colour and class, she does not have as much freedom of access to her own body as would women considered “blacker” and therefore less valuable. Instead, because she is associated with the great house, whose influence extends to the private lives of its staff, she is forced into an alien, regressive family ideal that leaves her even more vulnerable and dependent. Liza's marriage may ostensibly reverse the trope of the workshy black man and enterprising black woman, but it is neither healthy nor progressive – in fact, the narrative strongly implies that this imposition goes against the “natural order.” “Bangle” thus places itself in direct opposition to normative discourses of the nuclear family and to the rhetoric of “maternalist social reform” popularised by women such as Amy Bailey who, as Putnam argues, did not acknowledge, and therefore did not renounce “white racist ideas about black people and sex” (504, 550). As Edmondson has also observed, middle-class Caribbean identity, from the late nineteenth century, was nervously predicated on women's sexuality and breeding potential (79). However, as Liza demonstrates, this sexuality was particularly slippery and neither the narrator nor the speaker – nor the author – can contain or suppress it. The nation, therefore, is also elusive and slippery – whatever it may be is only *partially* performed by the text.

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Liza is unconcerned with – indeed excluded from – Victorian notions of chastity. Her baby is born with straight hair (another indication of the “bad old days”) but when he dies within a week Liza becomes quiet, withdrawn and submissive. Again, Rovere suggests that coerced, anonymous sexual unions between white men and black women are not “healthy” options for the future. Three years later, her husband comes to this Obeahman claiming that his wife is “a bad wutless woman” because she has been seen wearing a “coolie man bangle” on her arm, which she claims to have found on the roadside. Liza’s husband may be particularly incensed by the fact that her new lover appears to be “Indian,” given ongoing tensions between the recently emancipated African peasant class and the indentured Indian labourers who replaced them. He takes his wife’s newfound happiness as evidence of her infidelity – her happiness is “improper” – and asks the Obeahman to “do something to mek Liza change.” Liza’s happiness represents her rebellion – against her husband, against societal pressure – and therefore immorality. Our speaker insists that he “doan know nuttin bout Obeah, Massa,” but agrees to “mix a bush tea dat can cure all kind of sickness” in order to placate Liza’s husband, even though both the narrator(s) and the readership know that Liza was not “sick.” The Obeahman, mindful of a change in Liza that he considers positive, “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 assists Liza in forming romantic/sexual bonds of her own choosing – thus upsetting, too, the already unsteady black-brown-white hierarchy on which the would-be nation imagines itself. 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 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 spies Liza naked, without her knowledge or consent, through the window of their home. As he goes to beat her (to punish her wilful, private use of and pleasure in her own body), he hears and sees a white owl. Rovere’s readership – or perhaps the

unnamed narrator – may or may not have known that “when white owl follow you to you house dat mean death.” The headman decides against the beating, eats his dinner and dies before morning. We do not know why and how the Obeahman would have gained access to so much detail about Liza’s husband’s last night (down to what the driver saw and felt before he died), 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 – we are not sure who is the official teller of the national tale. 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. The Obeahman answers “solemnly” that the driver had always suffered from stomach pains, so he had given him the same bitter aloes that he gave (may have given) Liza. When asked about the “coolie man” he replies, “vaguely,” that he “doan know nuffin bout no coolie man,” much like he doan know nuffin bout no Obeah. His repetition of “Liza fine de bangle on de roadside” is formulaic and rehearsed. The Indian man is dismissed as quickly and as stealthily as he is introduced and Liza is restored to herself. 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. The “truth” is irrelevant and “Bangle” uses Obeah to subvert discursive strategies and social norms, thus allowing the folk to speak for themselves – albeit under the not-so-watchful eyes of their colonial masters and within their narrative constraints. “Bangle” undermines plantation discourse, the system(s) put in place to subjugate and dehumanise poor black people. It is set in the past but suggests a future in which poor black women may take control of their own bodies, while critiquing a present in which these women cannot yet speak for themselves. Rovere may stop short of having her subaltern(s) speak, but in this narrative at least she exposes the fallibility of the speeches made for them.

These stories provide quick snapshots into the lives of Jamaica’s poor labouring classes during a period of increased political and social upheaval, during which Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean began to question its relationship to Britain and its empire, as well as the possibility of self-government. The new

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nation(s) that Jamaica's intelligentsia envisioned pivoted on the vexing question of Jamaican womanhood and the subsumption of feminised bodies into the rhetoric of "respectability." (Brown) female sexuality is a slippery signifier of nation in these narratives, which illustrate the anxiety and violence inherent in aspiring to both "modernity" and "propriety." This anxiety over feminised bodies, when coupled with a simultaneous rejection of and fascination with the "African past," exposes the fragility and elusiveness of these imagined communities. "Coolie Bangle" and "The Cow That Laughed" may indeed support Esther Chapman's assertion in 1934 that "there can be no kind of uniformity of political outlook in a people sundered by race, language and temperament" (quoted in Wade 2008, 18). In fact these two interwar fictions further sunder this "people," and problematise this vexed unity along the lines of gender. Both narratives' women are silenced and marginalised by their narrators and in both cases the agent of Obeah, and mediator of sexuality, is male. Yet while Aarons' Mary is subjugated to and by Obeah in order to maintain colonial moral codes, Rovere's Liza uses Obeah to free herself from them. Aarons maintains that Obeah is predatory and limiting, while Rovere suggests that the practice can be liberatory, even progressive. Their respective plots are inconsequential, but their intersection of nation, Obeah and female sexuality brings together, while tearing apart, the discursive imaginary of a future Jamaican/West Indian nation.

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