

# Feminine Power: Women Contesting Plantocracy in *The Book of Night Women*

by

Ana Ozuna, Ph.D.  
aozuna@hostos.cuny.edu  
Eugenio María de Hostos Community College  
Bronx, New York

## Abstract

This article employs a social-historical approach to examine *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James as he presents the night women as the true maroons and in turn reproaches post-treaty maroons for repressing rebellion among the enslaved population. Second, it engages a wide range of works across disciplines to interrogate postcolonial approaches to Black resistance in the Atlantic world, women's agency in Caribbean colonial society and the function of Afro-Caribbean spirituality in hemispheric Black resistance. Hence, this social-historical analysis offers new language to provide readers with epistemic access to the reality of the masses in James' work, situated in eighteenth and nineteenth century Jamaica at the height of slavery.

## Maroonage in the Atlantic World and Jamaica

Resistance against *Makumbo*, the European enterprise entailing the capture, enslavement and dehumanization of Black bodies, commenced on the African continent in villages and the coastal spaces of fortresses enslavement that continued throughout the Atlantic world.<sup>1</sup> According to Barbara Bush, Black rebellion during the colonial period “did not develop sporadically on a spontaneous basis but was part of a continuum of resistance which linked Africa and the West Indies.”<sup>2</sup> Richard Sheridan's essay, “*Resistance and Rebellion of African Captives in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Before Becoming Seasoned Labourers in the British Caribbean, 1690-1807*”, examines the studies by Darold, Wax, William Pierson, Winston McGowan, and Richard Rathbone which enumerates countless non-violent and violent resistance tactics implemented by Africans from the point of captivity to the trek to the coast and during the Middle Passage (182). Hence, enslaved Africans continuously reaffirmed their right to freedom by implementing day-to-day and large-scale resistance tactics during all stages of enslavement. Day-to-day resistance included sabotage, subversive behavior, poisoning and killing. Ship captains, enslavers and overseers may or may not have perceived these forms of resistance. On the other hand, large-scale resistance entailed open rebellion including armed warfare, revolt, and marronage.

In *Maroon Societies*, Richard Price describes marronage “as an heroic challenge to white authority” since it permeated the enslaved population throughout the Americas (2). This resistance movement disavowed the systemic oppression inherent in the imperial enterprise that fostered capitalistic gain based on the dehumanization of non-Europeans (Price 2). The individual or collective flight of the enslaved challenged the master/slave power dialectic. Twentieth century maroon scholarship codifies the flight from site of subjugation as either marronage as *petit marronage* and *grand marronage*. *Petit marronage* refers to the interim departures such as hiding out beyond the confines of plantation or colonial polity. Whereas, *grand marronage*, denotes long-term departures of either months or years from official sites of imperial authority and the constitution of autonomous communities known as *palenques*, *quilombos* and *manieles* among other terminologies (Landers 112; Price 3, 110-112; Thompson 53-57).<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Wynter’s *Black Metamorphosis*, elucidates the hemispheric Black resistance tradition, and expands the conceptualization of marronage beyond the binary categories of *petit* and *grand*. In the chapter, *The Mayflower and the Middle Passage*, Wynter states: “Each escape, each flight was a species of marronage, the quest for a free space from where to wage the ongoing process of revolt against the cultural colonization carried out by the productive bourgeoisie who attempted to model America in its own image” (438). For Wynter, marronage connotes the continuous plight of the enslaved to contest the dual process of commodification and victimization through endless revolt resulting in the affirmation of personhood and freedom.

The recent work of Sylviane A Diouf, *Slavery’s Exile: The Story of the American Maroons*, expands present-day scholarship on maroon polities during the antebellum period in the United States offering a comprehensive analysis of the diverse “maroon landscape” in the South (5). Diouf refers to runaways as those who constituted alternative communities in “wild land” such as marshes, swamps, caves, underground dwellings and other localities beyond the dominant centers of coloniality as “hinterland maroons”(5). In contrast, “borderland maroons” resided in areas in proximity to enslavers, “the wild land that bordered the farms and plantations and the cities and towns” (5). *Slavery’s Exile* reveals the plight for freedom of Black people living in the antebellum South enslaved in the Southern United States as well as their motivations, system of survival, and social, economic and political configurations.

*The Book of Night Women* presents Black rebellion and iterations of marronage in Jamaica as unrelenting and menacing to the white population. When describing the relationship of the white plantocracy to Black people, the narrator explicitly notes whites’ ingrained fear of the Black body: “The truth be this. They’s scared of the negroes. They scared of the arms that can grab three stalk of cane in one grip and chop it straight through with one swing. They scared of the fingers that sprinkle something in the soup that might be pepper today, poison tomorrow” (James 261). In the following passage, the narrator enumerates a litany of Black rebellions from 1702 to 1782 to suggest the unrelenting determination of enslaved Black people willing to violently rebel time and again to achieve their freedom.

In *Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, [1665-1740]*, Orlando Patterson examines the nature of early Jamaican maroon revolts and delineates the dynamism and describes Jamaican colonial society as a “brittle, fragile, travesty of a society [...] on the brink of upheaval and anarchy.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Book of Night Women* defies hegemonic notions of empire by pointing out the explosive and antagonistic relationship between the colonizers and colonized. The European uses and legitimizes a system of terror and structural violence to amass imperial wealth, while the latter opposes state power and vies to assert freedom and agency. This hostile and explosive milieu bred forged identities interconnected through a system of capitalistic gain what Ramesh Mallipeddi characterizes as “an economic unit built on coerced labor where white masters held a monopoly of legal violence over black slaves” (111). The maroons, emblematic of New World hybridity, dynamism and resistance, directly challenged the enslaver’s abuse of state power by resisting commodification and asserting their agency as humans in the making of a New World native as theorized by Sylvia Wynter.<sup>5</sup>

In Jamaica, during the height of the First Maroon War in the 1720s and 1730s, the Windward Maroon communities and Leeward Maroons affirmed their right to freedom and emerged as the primary Maroon “polities” on the island.<sup>6</sup> Windward and Leeward Maroon bands mastered the Jamaican landscape, formulated effective military strategies, raided plantations to obtain supplies and recruited the enslaved masses to assure their survival. For decades, large-scale revolts continuously jeopardized the entire system of colonial rule.<sup>7</sup> In 1739, the British colonial government signed two treaties with the Windward Maroons, under the leadership of Quao, and the Leeward Maroons, headed by Cudjoe, that elevated their status to “semi-autonomous free peoples”.<sup>8</sup> The terms of the treaty granted the subversives independent territories in the Cockpit Country and the Blue Mountains yet mandated their service as soldiers for the English militia. Kenneth Bilby describes the schism this arrangement fostered between the enslaved population and the post-treaty maroons:

After 1739, the British colonial government helped to further entrench the distinctions between Maroons and other Jamaicans by employing the former as a sort of internal police force whose responsibility it was to track down and capture future runaways and to aid in the suppression of slave insurrections.<sup>9</sup>

In the post-treaty era, Windward and Leeward Maroons conspired with the British militia to suppress rebellions of the enslaved and capture runaways. Moreover, Jamaican authorities mandated post-treaty maroons to close off their communities to non-maroons and suppress Black insurrections. Thus, when dispossessed Black peasants erupted in violence during the Morant Bay Rebellion led by the deacon, Paul Bogle in 1865, maroons and English troops jointly quelled the insurgency.

This was the last time post-treaty maroons collaborated with the English militia against the Black peasantry.<sup>10</sup> Joy Lumsden's essay, "A Brave and Loyal People" critically buffers criticism of post-treaty Maroon's cooperation with the British. For Lumsden, nineteenth-century maroons simply did not adhere to the "twentieth-century model of Black solidarity" since it was not part of their worldview and their protected status alienated maroons from the aspiration for freedom of non-maroons (472). On the contrary, I argue that the adoption of this protected status positioned them as enemies of the enslaved masses. Inarguably, the British authorities diverted their revolutionary fervor, severed their ties to the enslaved population, and ultimately coopted post-treaty maroons as agents of the Jamaican plantocracy who clearly abandoned their struggle against the white sociopolitical order. This epistemic schism served British authorities since some enslaved Black people still considered post-treaty maroons as allies; thus Black rebels seeking liberation fled to these pseudo maroons only to find agents of the oppressor who returned them to their enslavers. Demonstrably estranged from the Black masses, post-treaty maroons supported the oppressive structures of coloniality and in turn protected their autonomous status as guaranteed in the 1739 treaties. In the *Book of Night Women* James offering its readers "a tale of marronage within marronage" by presenting the *night women* as the true maroons and official post-treaty maroon as British agents (Lalla 180).

### **Post-treaty Maroons in *The Book of Night Women***

James exemplifies the antithetical relationship between the enslaved masses and the post-treaty maroons by depicting the official maroon as a pseudo maroon, an anti-hero and enemy of the Black masses. James masterfully depicts this oppositional relationship by linguistically blotting out the maroon from the text. Since Maroon creole language is not featured in the text, Maroons lack an authentic voice. In its place, James engages the reader in a revisionist-gendered history using the language of the Black masses, Jamaican patois.

Throughout the novel, the post-treaty Maroons aggressively reinforce the security apparatus of the plantocracy by halting the subversive activity of Black rebels. In chapter seven, James delineates distinct turning points in the revolutionary trajectory of the maroons, by first underpinning their legendary status as unfathomable warriors with extraordinary physical agility: "White man couldn't beat no Maroon. They fight and they war but Maroon could become ground, air, or bush if he wish. Green as leaf or black as midnight. One hundred militia go into the hills, less than thirty was coming back" (James 78). Here, James utilizes hyperbolic language by depicting the maroons as morphing entities capable of assuming the characteristics of natural elements and overwhelming their imperial enemies with supernatural prowess. Yet, James does not solely fixate the reader's attention on the fantastical qualities and celebrated victories of post-treaty maroons but instead demonstrates their tragic mutability from mythical heroic figures to traitorous British agents. The narrator sharply points to their complicity with plantation society after the 1739 treaties: "What every nigger done know was that after the treaty, the Maroon, the slave sworn friend, become him sworn enemy" (James 78).

This point of contention between post-treaty maroons and Black rebels permeates the text. James blots out the post-treaty maroon's revolutionary valor by highlighting their role in the systematic oppression of the Black masses. Throughout the text, maroons directly hamper the prospects of freedom for the Black masses: "A nigger who choose to run 'way to freedom now face a new enemy who breath like he breath and look like he look" (James 78). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon conceptualizes a hierarchy of oppression predicating that *men of color* hamper "the liberation efforts of other *men of color*" (103). Black-on-Black policing reinforced the imperial apparatus by creating an internal castigating force aligned with the systematic oppression of enslaved Black people.

Although James stresses the ever-present threat posed by the post-treaty maroons to Black insurgents, he concomitantly emphasizes the insatiable yearning of enslaved men and women to flee notwithstanding the likelihood of capture in hope of achieving personal autonomy. Scholar Alvin O. Thompson asserts that this desire for freedom and human dignity drove enslaved persons to risk their lives in spite of limited physical ability, the possibility of recapture and punishment: "They responded to the inner call to freedom despite the many risks to life or limb, including not only harsh punishments if they were apprehended but also natural obstacles and insalubrious environments" (45). Black rebels in James' text act individually and collectively to defy the colonial state through acts of flight and defiance despite all odds.

In part one, Niggerkin, Tatalus, an elderly castrated enslaved man flees the Montpelier estate, in spite of his "sore foot, bad back" and limited mental disposition (76). He did not get far before being captured by three Maroons who receive "two pounds each" as ransom. Robert Quinn, an overseer, chops off Tatalus toes with an axe in retribution for his act of flight. In another case, Homer escapes with her lover Benjy with the aspiration of joining a neighboring maroon polity. Although, Homer's pregnancy placed her at a higher risk of being captured, she yearns for complete freedom: "Me no know, something in me just break. Mayhaps every nigger reach that place where she say that done be enough now" (219). Nonetheless, the maroon militia truncates Homer's aspirations since they only welcome Benjy to join their contingency and subject her to scathing physical and emotional violence. Homer describes losing her self-worth and aspiration for freedom: "Them Maroons make me feel like no nigger deserve freedom. No nigger must be man or woman. They think they free but they base and wicked and fucking goat so long they don't even know woman" (James 220).

For Homer, the post-treaty maroons disavowed the struggle of the Black masses by sadistically mimicking the oppressor and carrying out state sponsored violence. The Brazilian theorist and educator, Paulo Freire, describes this ontological conundrum:

The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.' The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity (45)

This repressive “model of humanity” reinforces the enslaver’s mechanisms of oppression by stripping the Black masses of their human dignity and ultimately their right to freedom. The narrator chastises post-treaty maroons, and points to their inability to constitute a separate identity from the enslaver; thus failing to serve as the “restorers of the humanity” for both the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire 45). Instead, these former Black rebels truncate the efforts of enslaved Black people to preserve their autonomous status.

The forest or *bush*, usually characterized as an idyllic enclave of Black autonomy and resistance in the maroon narrative instead is depicted as an emblematic space of castigation, a hunting ground, a site where maroons entrap, assault, and ensure the continued bondage of the Black body and continuity of European hegemony in *The Book of Night Women*. In chapter 31, maroons magically navigate the forest “flying” and jumping from branch to branch in pursuit of one of the *night women*, Pallas (James 424). After aggressive confrontations with three male maroons, Pallas turns to an Accompong Maroon couple for help only to be mercilessly attacked: “Before she could even notice, they swarm her and used the rifle butt to knock her out. The Maroons hand her over to the redcoats and the magistrate charge her and others with insurrection and mass murder and throw her in the gaol” (James 425). The reader identifies with the disillusionment expressed by the narrator in this tragic moment of betrayal. Neither the post-treaty maroons nor the geographical terrain transcends the imperialist structure to protect the Black runaway.

## **Beyond the Official Gaze: The Flight of the Night Women**

James elucidates Black women’s participation in Jamaican resistance during enslavement by centering his text on the subversive activity of the *night women*: Gorgon, Hippolyta, Iphigenia, Pallas, Callisto, Lilith, and Homer. Their collective and individual aggressions escalate throughout the novel as they plan a multi-plantation uprising under the leadership of Homer, the eldest of the group, who draws inspiration from by the Black rebels of Saint Domingue led by François Dominique Toussaint L’Ouverture. As L’Ouverture, Homer seeks to usurp the plantocracy by instituting a multiple plantation revolt, deposing colonial authorities, and establishing an independent nation-state modeled on African matrifocal principals.

The *night women* plan their wide-scale rebellion and reinforce their spiritual allegiance by engaging in occasional acts of *borderland marronage* to a hidden cave on selected evenings. In this place of refuge, they freely express their aspirations for freedom and practice Afro-Caribbean spiritual rituals pertinent to Obeah and Myal. This spiritual incubator offers protection from colonial authorities and maroons. The narrator notes: “Not even massa dog can find this place” (James 68). The narrator further elevates the mystical status of the cave by suggesting that only individuals with Afro-Caribbean spiritual sensibility can find it. When Liltih locates the cave, Homer states that Lilith was able to find the cave “...with her own insight map” because “Olokun give her new sight...” (James 67-68).

Olokun refers to the subconscious in the Yoruba tradition and the masculine counterpart of Yemaya, which represents the mystery and power of the deepest part of the ocean. Lilith and the other *night women* recognize the existence of powerful African deities capable of addressing personal affliction, offering protection, and administering justice. Therefore, in another act of *borderland marronage*, the *night women* subversively gather at the river to call upon the orishas, Oya and Oshún, for healing and guidance (James 169). These dynamic feminine orishas play vital roles within African-based spiritual systems throughout the Atlantic world, Oya, as a powerful warrior woman and Oshún, as the representation of sensuality and feminine qualities. Overall, orishas control specific elemental energies to aid believers in overcoming adversity. For the *night women*, the female orishas serve as a metaphysical locus of power to inspire agency and the cultivation of feminine power during their act of flight and day-to-day resistance.

### **Rebel Women and Obeah/Myal Justice**

James juxtaposes Lilith and Homer, the principal female rebel figures in the novel. Homer epitomizes the “natural rebel”, that is, one that acts as a “cultural icon whose central location within the community of the enslaved-the politicized space- is derived from the ascribed matrifocality of the African social legacy.”<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Homer embodies the Queen Nanny archetype of the postcolonial Maroon narrative, a powerful roots woman with a distinctive ability to inspire and lead others. Thus, Homer holds some modicum of power, limited yet real within the context of the main house in the plantation complex as the head domestic enslaved person and confidant of Massa Humphrey. In this capacity, Homer receives special privileges, influences household decisions regarding the master’s family and enslaved Black domestics, yet defies plantation hierarchal social order since she “...downright run the house, and everybody including the massa do what she say” (James 33). This matrifocal domestic framework challenges normative plantation patriarchy and points to the destabilizing power enslaved women assumed within plantation society. Similarly, in *Abeng*, Mma Alli plays a pivotal role in the Savage Plantation as powerful roots woman, warrior, and griot reconstructing the African past for her enslaved cohorts while concomitantly subverting the white patriarchal power in the Savage Plantation by knowing “everything that goes on” in the plantation as irritably expressed by Massa Justice (39). Mma Alli as Homer, contest Eurocentric ideological frameworks by asserting an African identity, positioning Africa as motherland, and adhering to Obeahism and Myalism.

Obeah, the syncretic belief system of Ashanti-Twi origins spread throughout the West Indies by enslaved Africans of the Gold Coast. Obeah practitioners used their supernatural and medicinal knowledge to create spells, powders, and material objects to heal and protect the enslaved population.

Moreover, Obeah practices played a significant role in communities of the enslaved since it linked its practitioners to their African past, preserved a traditional healing system and provided practitioners access to a metaphysical realm beyond the plantocracy. Scholars have also correlated the Obeah practice to maroon leaders such as Queen Nanny and Tacky. According to Albert Edward, “[t]he priest/priestess was no doubt a central part of the Maroon community. It was their role to justify to the fighters the reason and importance of the struggle they were waging. It was the priest or priestess that the community looked for inspiration and moral building” (158-159). Consequently, white Jamaicans scorned Obeah as witchcraft since it markedly empowered the enslaved population and consequently threatened the colonial power structure. The anti-Obeah laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth century prohibited the afro-Caribbean practice and furthermore prohibited the signifiers of Black spirituality such as the use of drums during gatherings. Myal, a counterpart to Obeah, features similar practices to Obeahism but emphasizes group practice and possession by “ancestral spirits” that aid practitioners in achieving their goals (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 173).

In the novel, Obeah and Myal are recurrent motifs, and powerful counterhegemonic practices utilized by the ‘night women’ and other enslaved Black people to challenge the plantocracy and white power structure. The primary spiritual agents in the text, the *night women*, heal and protect, address discord among their constituency, and communicate with the spirit world. Hence, James affirms the centrality and power of these Afro-Jamaican religious systems not only for Black Jamaicans but also for the white plantocracy. The narrator notes: “But even white people whisper when they say Obeah. The blackest magic for which there be only one cure. For if Obeah be the Black, Myal be the white even though the two still black” (James 51). Miss Isobel, Massa Humphrey’s white Creole mistress, decodes an Obeah spell orchestrated by Gorgon, one of the ‘night women’, which results in the death of a domestic enslaved person, Andromeda. A slave-overseer, Robert Quinn, on the other hand, determines the cause of Andromeda death as “the flux” (James 108). Yet, Isobel refutes his judgment noting he “all but grew up nigger” in Barbados and should recognize Obeah (James 109). Hence for Isobel, as white Creoles, they have straddled a peripheral space between Black and White worlds, and should recognize the complexity of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices. Nonetheless, Quinn denies Obeah’s subversive potential, while Isobel affirms obeah cosmography and the agency of its practitioners by again noting “[t]his is not flux, this is Obeah” (James 109).

In another scene, Obeah upends the white power structure and in turn creates “... an alternative hierarchy and source of allegiance, empowerment and prestige among the enslaved” (Bryson 73). When Circe casts a Sasabonsam spell on Lilith, Homer makes an antidote of gunpowder, dirt, rum, and blood to neutralize its negative impact. Homer first marks Lilith’s chest and back with the liquid and then orders her to drink the potion to, in essence, regain her soul. News of this spiritual battle runs rapidly among Black people on the plantation, which in turn, reinforces Homer’s spiritual authority: “By the time Homer leave her cellar, word already spread through the house and field that Circe set Obeah on Lilith but Homer attack with Myal and make Circe own lifeblood kill her” (James 53).

Homer demonstrates her command of the Obeah and Myal spiritual systems to save Lilith's life but to also validate her ability to use this spiritual arsenal against the white plantocracy.

The Obeah and Myal practices of Homer and the *night women* tap into a metaphysical spiritual system capable of settling individual and intergroup conflict as well as undermining the white power structure. The works of scholars Diana Paton and Sasha Turner Bryson speak to the multidimensional subversive role of these transnational African base practices in enslaved societies throughout the Americas. In "Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life" Kenneth Bilby and Jerome Handler emphasize the integral role of obeah practitioners as revolutionary agents: "Throughout the West Indies, obeah men were alleged to have played prominent roles in slave revolts and conspiracies, and, especially in earlier periods..." (161). In the most significant Black rebellion in the eighteenth century, Obeah practitioner Tacky, "provided invaluable spiritual leadership and fostered unity and commitment among the insurgents".<sup>12</sup> Earlier eighteenth century Windward maroon leader Queen Nanny used Obeah to heal, protect and defeat the British in military combat while Leeward Maroon leader Cudjoe consulted Obeah practitioners to aid his constituency.<sup>13</sup> The Haitian Revolution, the most successful Black rebellion in the Caribbean that resulted in the establishment of a free Black republic started in 1792 with legendary Bois Caïman ceremony led by Dutty Boukman, a maroon leader and voodoo priest. Participants pledged their allegiance to collectively conceive freedom and drank the blood of a black pig to ignite their *sovereign marronage*, a twelve-year struggle leading to the defeat of three imperial powers.

Similar to other Black revolutionary leaders in the Atlantic world, Homer utilizes marronage percepts and African-based religiosity to defy the white colonial power structure. During a *night women* gathering in the cave, Homer affirms the power of Obeah in their struggle and asserts that an army of spirits will support their rebellion: "This is the Ifa bowl, Homer say looking at Lilith. From this one [and] two hundred spirit goin' rise" (James 278). Homer envisions the creation of a solely Black nation-state rid of all whites as conceived by Jean-Jacques Dessalines in the 1805 Constitution after the Haitian Revolution: "We goin' kill them, girl chile, every single white son of a bitch..."(James 281). Homer conjures Sankofa, a Ghanaian Twi concept, to denote the necessity of an Afrocentric grounding in their conceptualization of a new nation-state: "We goin' set things up like in the Africa. Six village in a circle, one to one to one" (James 345). This sovereign idealization of freedom evokes *sociogenic marronage* model of autonomy.

Lilith, an enslaved house servant, violently contests her bondage through acts of subversion yet aims to gain a privileged status within plantation society due to her mix-race status. An orphan born to an enslaved woman and a white overseer in 1785, her name alludes to the defiant Lilith of the Jewish folklore tradition characterized as a female demon and the rebellious first wife of Adam who fled from Eden after she defied his sexual subjugation.<sup>14</sup>

Lilith, a spirited child “with skin darker than midnight but the greenest eyes anybody ever done see” devises strategies for survival and resistance in a world the narrator describes as a “place of red” (James 3). This “place of red” is marred with the continual castigation of the Black body and continual local and hemispheric struggle against European colonial rule. Lilith conjures the fear and animosity of her cohorts and overseers. As a young child, Lilith commits her first act of self-protection by disfiguring a Johnny-jumper with boiling cerasee tea and killing him with his own cutlass after he attempts to rape her. In her ultimate act of rebellion, Lilith single-handedly kills her enslavers, their children, and other enslaved Black people before setting fire to the main house on the Coulibre plantation without raising suspicion.

Homer recognizes Lilith’s rebellious spirit and posits her as an essential revolutionary agent and *night women* yet her half-sisters, Pallas, Gorgon, Hippolyta, Iphigenia, and Callisto, all whose mothers were victims of rape by the same white overseer, distrust Lilith and perceive her as a traitor despite her propensity to contest white domination. Nonetheless, Homer ceaselessly informs Lilith of their secret meetings at the cave where she learns of their subversive plans and gains ontological insight of the Obeah/Myal spiritual traditions through Homer’s the spiritual insight.

Homer relentlessly offers Lilith tutelage in plantation domesticity, knowledge of Obeah arts, and furthermore secretly teaches Lilith to read. Homer considers the act of reading a powerful tool for liberation: “When a nigger can read, she can plan [...] Every time you open this you get free” (James 56-57). Both Homer and Lilith use this master tool to escape the horrors of enslavement by imagining a world beyond the plantation. Hence, James tactfully “transcends the old stereotypes of womanhood” by positing female characters as multidimensional literary heirs capable of bestriding the Eurocentric literary tradition, manipulating hegemonic power relations of plantation society, and practicing the Obeah/Myal spiritual systems.<sup>15</sup>

However, in spite of Homer’s attempts to secure Lilith’s loyalty, she lacks what Fanon regards as “ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” and aspires to obtain a privileged stature within the plantation society by submitting to the sexual subjugation of a white overseer, Robert Quinn (Fanon 110). As their relationship evolves, Lilith fanaticizes about achieving white domesticity: “Lilith think ‘bout what she not to think. About a different Montpelier where Robert Quinn live with her and she wear white to wedding and they have three pickney all different colour” (James 396). However, it is important to note that in spite of this delusion, Lilith had little choice noted by Beckles as the “problem for the enslaved Black woman in getting the slave master off her back in the day time and off her belly in the night time”.<sup>16</sup> For Lilith, the promise of *comparative freedom*, being an enslaved person in form yet free in fact and perhaps ultimately free in form and fact trumped her sexual victimization.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, Homer warned Lilith against yielding to the Western-European notion of romantic love: “You is not them and them is not you, no matter how soft he touch you these days” (James 361). Beckles asserts that the pleasure politics of plantation society rendered slave-owners with “unrestricted socio-sexual access to the slave woman.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, although documented exceptions exist, the economic role and sexual utility of the enslaved women hindered them from gaining the respectability of white women in the official domestic realm. Beckles further notes: “Social custom dictated that prominent white men should neither marry coloured women, nor allow them in any way to transcend white women in social respectability. In this way, coloured women’s social ambition could be kept in check without alienating their sexual usefulness.”<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, for Lilith, Robert Quinn represents a redeeming agent capable of protecting her from the brutality of slavery. Hence, Lilith’s illusions of achieving white domesticity neutralizes her rebellious fervor and alliance to Homer’s revolutionary mission.

Lilith’s insurrectionary fervor also dithers as she grapples with Homer’s autocratic stance and limited nation-building agenda. For Lilith, planning a revolution must encompass a clear and pragmatic trajectory before and after engaging the enemy. Lilith questions Homer: “And what happen after the militia come? What ‘bout tomorrow? The day after that?” (James 347). Yet, Homer falls short of elaborating a comprehensive framework for freedom yet affirms her vision of a free Black republic and a female orchestrated revolution: “...Saint-Domingue nigger can do it and they be the same nigger we be, that even you be. All it take is some smart thinking. That be why womens do the thinking and plotting, just like women do in Africa [...]”(James 347). This evocation of West African matrifocality nonetheless does not inspire Lilith to continue in her revolutionary trajectory.

One of the most influential scholars of postcolonial liberation ideology, Paulo Freire, affirms the important symbiotic relationship between the masses and their leaders in any revolutionary movement. According to Freire the masses are integral participants in the revolutionary process, and require responsible and responsive leadership that informs them of their role. Freire posits “[t]he leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting, whereas in fact they would continue to be manipulated--and in this case the presumed foes of manipulation” (126). In this conception of revolution, the masses form an integral polity; a driving force in constituting a revolutionary praxis, a freedom reflective of their own terms.

## Continuous Maroon Consciousness of the ‘Night Women’

When unnamed women from multiple plantations blow their abeng the action in the text rapidly unravels. The ‘place of red’ burns while masters, overseers, and Johnny-jumpers retaliate against the Black rebels. Ignoring the call of the abeng, Lilith instead protects her white overseer and white father and kills her half-sister, Hippolyta, as she defends them. Barbara Bush discusses the tendency of enslaved women to defend their white partner. “...because of their close proximity to the white man as domestic servants and /or sexual partners, some slave women were more likely to betray than to actively support the conspiracies of fellow slaves” (67). This act of betrayal and compromise secures her survival and relieves her from the sadistic acts of retribution suffered by the surviving ‘night women’ and other conspirators once the English militia and the post-treaty maroons quell the rebellion.

Despite Lilith’s acts of obedience and loyalty to her white masters, Massa Humphrey refers to Lilith as a “godforsaken wicked black bitch” while sexually assaulting her yet failing to penetrate her body. This moment encapsulates the ruptured master-slave relationship due to her ceaseless *slave agency*, which according to Roberts “accentuates the experience of slaves, privileging the slave viewpoint in describing existence within enslavement and strategizing what would be required to achieve lasting conditions of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and political freedom” (Roberts 42-43). Lilith’s affinity towards Afro-Jamaican spiritual systems also disrupts the binary power structure of coloniality.<sup>20</sup> Unable to cope with the mysteries of the colonial landscape, Massa Humphrey flees to England, leaving behind his fortunes. In turn, Lilith resides in her former overseer’s house and “act like a free negro” (James 422). Lilith continues her subversive trajectory by equipping her daughter, Lovey Quinn, with the counter-hegemonic tool of literacy. Lovey reads classical English texts *Joseph Andrews*, *Lives of the Poets*, the *History of Jamaica* and *Sense and Sensibility*, yet embraces the power of the pen to recount a gendered national history of Jamaica, centering the historical memory of the ‘night women’. During the act of writing, she celebrates her ability to become spirit and asserts, “We become who we be. In the dark with no skin I can write” (James 427). Her ability to enter a metaphysical realm beyond coloniality signals her affinity to the ‘night women’s rebellious legacy, their maroon consciousness and embrace of afro-Caribbean spiritual percepts. This concluding chapter most importantly reveals the authoritative voice of the text, Lovey Quinn, who writes unapologetically about the rebellious fervor of her foremothers. Hence, James writing as Lovey Quinn in the language of the Black masses, Jamaican Patois, provides readers with epistemic access to the true maroons.

This riveting text offers a women-centered account of Jamaican plantation society; one riddled with sadistic violence against the Black body yet the concomitant and continuous resistance of the enslaved masses. By juxtaposing the post-treaty maroons, and the *night women* James masterfully problematizes the responses to colonial domination and questions the emancipatory effectiveness of revolutionary action. Within this revisionist context, James pays homage to historically marginalized Black female agitators by underscoring their multifaceted, fluid and transcendent role as the true maroons.

## References

- Agorsah, Emmanuel Kofi. *Maroon Heritage: Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Historical Perspectives*. Barbados: Canoe Pr., 1994. Print.
- Balutansky, Kathleen. "Of Female Maroons and Literary Rebellions: Plotting the End of Caribbean Master-Narratives." *The Journal of West Indian Literature* 7, no. 2 (April 1998): 13-24. Print.
- Beckles, Hilary. *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. Kingston: I. Randle, 1999. Print.
- Bilby, Kenneth M. *True-born Maroons*. Gainesville: U of Florida, 2005. Print.
- Bilby, Kenneth, and Jerome Handler. "Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 153-83. Web. 7 Aug. 2015.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971. Print.
- . "Caliban, Ariel, Unprospero in the Conflict of Creolization: A Study of the Slave Revolt in Jamaica in 1831-32." *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies*. Eds. Vera Rubin and Arthur Tudan. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1977. 41-62. Print.
- Bryson, Sasha Turner. "The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society." *Caribbean Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 61-90. Print.
- Bush, Barbara. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838*. Kingston: Heinemann Publ., 1990. Print.
- Campbell, Mavis Christine. *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration, and Betrayal*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. Print.
- Diouf, Sylviane A. *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons*. New York: NYU, 2014. Print.
- Edwards, Albert. "Maroon Warfare: The Jamaican Model." *Maroon Heritage: Archaeological, Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives*. E. Kofi Agorash, ed. Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press/UWI, 1994, 158-159. Print.

- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2006. Print.
- Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1997. Print.
- Glover, Katama L. "Womanchild in the Oppressive Land." *New York Times* (1923-Current file): Mar 01 2009. ProQuest. Web.
- Goodison, Lorna. *I Am Becoming My Mother*. London: New Beacon, 1995. Print.
- Gottlieb, Karla Lewis. *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2000. Print.
- Hannan, Jim. "The Book of Night Women: Review." *World Literature Today* 84.1 (Jan/Feb, 2010): 66. Print.
- James, Marlon. *The Book of Night Women*. New York: Riverhead, 2009. Print.
- Kopytoff, Barbara Klamon. "The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35.2 (1978): 287-307. Print.
- . "Incomplete Polities: An Ethnohistorical Account of Jamaican Maroons." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1973. Print.
- Lalla, Barbara. *Defining Jamaican Fiction: Marronage and the Discourse of Survival*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama, 1996. Print.
- Landers, Jane and Barry Robinson. "Cimarrón and Citizen: African Ethnicity, Corporate Identity and the Evolution of Free Black Towns in the Spanish Circum-Caribbean." *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 2006. 111-45. Print.
- Lesses, Rebecca M. "Lilith." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 8. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 5458-5460. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 23 May 2015.

- Lumsden, Joy. "'A Brave and Loyal People': The Role of the Maroons in the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865." *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*. Ed. Verene A. Shepherd. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 490-501. Print.
- Mallipeddi, Ramesh. *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-century British Atlantic*. Charlottesville: UVA, 2016. Print.
- Mathurin, Lucille, and Dennis Ranston. *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery*. Kingston: Published by Institute of Jamaica for the African-Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, 1975. Print.
- Olmos, Margarite Fernández, and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. New York: New York UP, 2003. Print.
- Paton, Diana. *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. Print.
- Patterson, Orlando. "Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Socialhistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, 1665-1740." *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. Print.
- Price, Richard. *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. Print.
- Roberts, Neil. *Freedom as Marronage*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2015. Print.
- Sheridan, Richard. "Resistance and Rebellion of African Captives in the Transatlantic Slave Trade Before Becoming Seasoned Labourers in the British Caribbean, 1690-1807." *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*. Ed. Verene A. Shepherd. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 181-205. Print.
- Sued-Badillo, Jalil. "From Tainos to Africans in the Caribbean: Labor, Migration, and Resistance." Eds. Palmié, S., & Scarano, F. A. *The Caribbean, a History of the Region and Its Peoples*. Chicago: UP Chicago, 2011, 97-113. Print.
- Thompson, Alvin O. *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas*. Kingston, Jamaica: U of the West Indies, 2006. Print.

Vásquez, Sam. "Violent Liaisons: Historical Crossings and the Negotiation of Sex, Sexuality, and Race in "The Book of Night Women" And "The True History of Paradise." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 16.2 (2012): 43-59.

Williams, Weldon. *Naming the Unspeakable: Breakthroughs in Africological Nomenclature*. Ed. Katherine Bankole. *Africological Perspectives: Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Race and Africana Studies* (2008): 51-69. Print.

Wynter, Sylvia. *Black Metamorphosis* (unpublished ms., n.d.), 438.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Williams does not conceive the European enslavement of Africans as a real trade between the powerful in African societies and European entities and in turn argues: "...the best name of the enslavement period itself is the Makumbo.

<sup>2</sup> Bush, Barbara. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838*. (Kingston: Heinemann Publ., 1990), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Landers, Jane, and Barry Robinson. "Cimarrón and Citizen: African Ethnicity, Corporate Identity and the Evolution of Free Black Towns in the Spanish Circum-Caribbean." *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 2006), 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>5</sup> In "Black Metamorphosis" Sylvia Wynter delineates the creation of a New World native cognizant of non-imperialistic African culture: "[...] to revindicate the devalued culture of origin, and then to demonstrate that it was this original culture, metamorphosed, that had been transplanted by the black during a process in which they became indigenous to a new landscape and reinvented themselves as *natives* in a new world" (44).

<sup>6</sup> Kopytoff, Barbara Klamon. "The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies." *Caribbean Quarterly* 22.2 (1976): 37.

<sup>7</sup> Patterson, Orlando. "Slavery and Slave Revolts: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the First Maroon War, 1665-1740." *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), 246.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Bilby, Kenneth. "Maroon Autonomy In Jamaica." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 25.4 (2002): 26. *Cultural Survival*. 31 Jan. 2002. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> See Bilby, Kenneth. "Maroon Autonomy In Jamaica." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 25.4 (2002): 26. *Cultural Survival*. 31 Jan. 2002. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Beckles, Hilary. *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. (Kingston: I. Randle, 1999), xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Bryson, Sasha Turner. "The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society." *Caribbean Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 64.

<sup>13</sup> Kopytoff, Barbara Klamon. "The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35.2 (1978): 298.

<sup>14</sup> Lesses, Rebecca M. "Lilith." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 8. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 5458. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 23 May 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Balutansky, Kathleen. "Of Female Maroons and Literary Rebellions: Plotting the End of Caribbean Master-Narratives." *The Journal of West Indian Literature* 7, no. 2 (April 1998): 13-24.

<sup>16</sup> Beckles, Hilary. *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. (Kingston: I. Randle, 1999), xxiii.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Two in *Freedom as Marronage* for a comprehensive overview of the four possible models reflecting the dialectical relationship between slavery and freedom.

<sup>18</sup> Beckles, Hilary. *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. (Kingston: I. Randle, 1999), xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> Bryson observes that Obeah practices threaten plantation power hierarchy, hence: "Jamaican planters and officials were as awed by Obeah's tremendous and variable power as they were threatened by it and their inability to control it" (73).