

# Obeah as Conduit in Elizabeth Nunez's *When Rocks Dance*

by

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## Abstract

*When Rocks Dance*, Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell's first novel, centres on the life of Marina Heathrow, daughter of a white cocoa planter and his black concubine, Emilia. Marina is the first of her mother's nine children to survive, and is the result of Emilia's supreme sacrifice, in adherence to Igbo/Obeah spiritual beliefs. Marina, having been born with the spirits of her dead brothers inside her, owes her very existence to Obeah, the very thing from which her mother has judiciously protected her. When Marina finds herself pregnant in turn, mother and daughter must reconcile, and the new mother must reconcile herself with Obeah, for the sake of her unborn child. It is through Obeah that both women return to their community, their faith and each other, and it is one of few forms of agency available to them in early twentieth-century Trinidad. In this article, I argue that Obeah operates, in the novel, as a conduit between the spiritual and material, and that which can bring those two planes (back) together. Through the novel's elaboration of Obeah, the political and psychological disenfranchisement engendered by the colonial encounter, with particular regard to women, is expressed as spiritual trauma, as well as material loss. Nunez-Harrell targets the internal separation, within colonised individuals, of the spiritual from the scientific worlds, and challenges "Western" criticism's failure to "[place] spiritual considerations at the discursive centre."<sup>1</sup> Obeah is not merely a belief but a reality in this novel, one that demands a linguistic and cultural structure that can rationalise it – or perhaps one that speaks with a logic that is not, strictly speaking, "rational." In this article I will argue that the "magic" of Obeah holds as much logic for the Trinidadian descendants of enslaved Africans as the Christianity they were forced or tricked into accepting as truth, and that through it these descendants can find their way back to self-reconciliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin B. Rahming, 'Theorising the Spirit: The Critical Challenges of Elizabeth Nunez's *When Rocks Dance* and *Beyond the Limbo Silence*,' *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37 (2004), 1-20 (p.2).

*When Rocks Dance*, Elizabeth Nunez's first novel, centres on Marina Heathrow, daughter of a white cocoa planter and his black concubine, in turn of the twentieth century Trinidad. Marina is the first of her mother's nine children to survive birth and infancy, and is supernaturally protected from illness and injury as the result of her mother, Emilia's supreme sacrifice – leaving her last pair of twin boys to die at the edge of a forest – in adherence to her African spiritual beliefs, and in defiance of her white lover/master. Emilia had previously suffered three stillbirths, all twin boys, and Marina is a manifestation of her punishment as well as her blessing. Marina carries the spirits of her dead brothers inside her but is unaware of this, as Emilia has judiciously shielded her daughter from Obeah, the power to which the young woman owes her very existence – and her supernatural strength. When Marina finds herself pregnant eighteen years later, mother and daughter must reconcile (and the new mother must reconcile herself with Obeah) for the sake of her unborn children. In addition to Emilia and Marina, Marina's mother in law Virginia, too, comes to rediscover herself through Obeah. Virginia is the wife of a disgraced Portuguese Jesuit priest, and the adoptive child of a white mother who arranged her marriage as a means of removing her young charge from the sexual advances of her own (white) foster father. Virginia, still a child at the time of her marriage, was nonetheless raped by her purportedly celibate husband, who subsequently rejected both his wife and his only son, Antonio. Forced not only to bear the trauma of rape alone Virginia suffers a loveless marriage, and her son is cursed to pay for the sins of his father. All the women Antonio impregnates die in childbirth, with their children; Marina – the Obeah she embodies – is his final hope. Virginia, Marina and Emilia have each turned their backs on Obeah at some point but must reckon with it in order to survive, as it comes to determine their common destiny. Obeah is one of the few forms of agency available to these disenfranchised black women – along with the promise and potential of their bodies – and functions in this narrative as Nunez's ultimate reckoner: it punishes these women's non-belief as much as it protects them from it.

It is through Obeah that these women return to their community, their faith and each other. Obeah operates in this novel as a conduit between the spiritual and material, and brings those two planes (back) together for black survival in the so-called New World. Moreover, Obeah emerges as a *communal* force, one that is intuited, embodied, and that avenges the wrongs done to this community by the hegemonic violence of slavery and colonialism. Through Obeah these characters redress their physical, political and psychological trauma on *spiritual* terms, and transmute their material loss into spiritual rediscovery. The author's "quarrel with history" is the internalised, post-Enlightenment separation, within colonised individuals, of the spiritual from the scientific world/s (Baugh). Her novel presupposes a pre-existent cosmological order from which present humanity has been estranged, and charges us to place spirituality not only "at the centre of critical discourse" but in our everyday, lived experiences (Rahming, "Critical Theory" 305). Obeah is not merely a belief in *When Rocks Dance* but a reality that keeps these women alive in the present, past and future. Its logic is not, strictly speaking, "rational," but magic, a magic that holds as much truth for the Trinidadian descendants of enslaved Africans as the Christianity they were forced or tricked into adopting. It has the power to reintegrate the diaspora and recreate, through spiritual means, a culture and identity that have been materially lost.

While exact definition is difficult to agree upon, Obeah can loosely be described as an association of syncretic, African-inspired spiritual, religious and cultural beliefs and practices that originated in, and are still popular throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, despite being illegal in most of the region's territories.<sup>2</sup> Obeah emerged on sugar plantations as part of enslaved Africans' responses to their capture, bondage and exile, and became a repository of lost cultures that sowed the seeds of a new one. It became a way of sustaining community in an environment in which physical life was brutally contingent, and functioned on these plantations as an alternative social, legal and scientific knowledge framework that governed all aspects of life. 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.<sup>3</sup> Obeah played a crucial role in the development of Tacky's Rebellion (Reynolds 5-8), and while Tacky himself may not have been an Obeahman, scholars agree that he was at least advised by one, if not several (Schuler 384, Browne, Bryson, Aravamudan). Vincent Brown observes that Tacky's Rebellion "threw the direct competition among different forms of sacred authority into stark relief," as the plantocracy was faced with an enemy they could not see, and could not ultimately defeat; one which offered enslaved Africans an even greater freedom than manumission – freedom of spirit (149). Obeah practitioners used this spiritual power to create a *community* of rebels, spiritually bound to each other through the administration of oaths that transformed the material by-products of slavery – death (blood, grave dirt) and sugar (rum) – into sacred power with which to defend themselves against their domestic, yet alien oppressors. The colonial authorities made particular examples of suspected Obeahmen in their responses to this and subsequent rebellions, which is indicative of the very real threat Obeah posed to plantation rule. Obeah has always, therefore, functioned as a symbol of resistance to colonial ideology, and as a marker of the black "folk" culture that now defines the Caribbean. Much Caribbean 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" (73-74). As such, it has always had an oppositional status to dominant (colonial) culture and discourse; Obeah may have lost much of its terror today, and may be ridiculed more than it is feared by the majority of the region's inhabitants, but this same "backwards" Africanness still holds subversive potential in Caribbean cultural discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> Obeah 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. See Fernández- Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert. At time of writing, Obeah has been decriminalised in Anguilla (1980), Barbados (1998), Trinidad and Tobago (2000) and St Lucia (2004). See Handler and Bilby.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Cooper observes that the Jamaican, Boukman Dutty, 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 (n.p.).

It is important to note, too, that Obeah was more than slave oaths and armed resistance. It was also an alternative form of medical and legal care among enslaved Africans, and retains these functions today. In the form of “fetishes,” such as glass bottles filled with salt, feathers, teeth, etc., or charms and amulets 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 used to ward off illness. Various oils and powders, too, can cure or cause disease, or attract or repel the attentions of a lover. These methods can also be used to inflict psychological harm, or visit bad fortune, upon one’s enemies.<sup>4</sup> 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 (Brown 146). More commonly in the pre-Emancipation period, Obeah rites were considered vital at funerals, as without them one’s soul could never be expected to return to one’s ancestral home. As Brown outlines, “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” (147). As is evidenced by these descriptions, Obeah had and continues to have multiple functions in Caribbean society. Dianne Stewart summarises that “Obeah is capacity and encompasses unlimited operative meanings” (43); what links these meanings is access to and enactment of spiritual power upon physical being(s). This power, for better or for worse, was wielded by enslaved Africans as a counterhegemonic balance to the power of the plantocracy – it was a spiritual weapon of both terror and fulfilment.

In this novel, however, Obeah is uniquely conflated with Igbo religious beliefs, or *Odinani*. While Igbo spiritual beliefs were undoubtedly integrated into Obeah, Obeah is an amalgam of several different African religious traditions, as well as Christian instruction – most notably, Obeah does not have any specific deities. Yet Taro, *When Rocks Dance*’s Obeahman, is repeatedly described as “the *Ibo*,” before whom a heavily pregnant Emilia must prostrate herself, at the beginning of the narrative, to save not only her life but those of her unborn children (6-7, my emphasis). This Igbo man is the most powerful Obeahman in Trinidad, and it is rumoured that he is 120 years old. “He knew everything,” informs the narrator:

as a young man, the son of an Ibo chief from Enugu in the Eastern region of Nigeria taking instruction in Christianity from a white missionary on his father’s insistence, he was betrayed into slavery and brought to Trinidad. And he remembered it all. Africa and freedom, slavery and colonialism (Nunez 8).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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 Porter.

<sup>5</sup> Per the novel’s timeline, Taro would have been born around 1763. The Church Missionary Society, however, only arrived in Igboland in 1857, followed by the Roman Catholic Mission in 1884-1885. See Nwaka.

Taro's memory and knowledge are multigenerational, multispatial and multitemporal; he embodies creolisation, and had done so even before he left his homeland. His lifetime spans the history of African diaspora, yet Taro is identified as African, not Caribbean. In the late 1800s, when this scene would have taken place, he would have been the last of his kind, of men and women born in Africa and sold into slavery.<sup>6</sup> From this opening scene Nunez positions her novel as a novel of reclamation, responding to Michael Thelwell's call to provide "unifying images of [our] 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." "Responsible" novelists, Thelwell argued, should operate as "conduits through whom the collective force and experience of the people is reflected, shaped maybe, refined a little perhaps, and given back" (229-230). Nunez raises questions of how symbolic or inherited memories complicate our understandings of the relationship between spirituality and being in time, while stressing the overwhelming Africanness of Caribbean experience. She re-synthesises Igbo and Obeah beliefs into a once and future imaginary of our collective heritage.

Taro is a *dibia*, an Igbo healer, seer and oracle who functions as his community's spiritual and cultural leader. Elizabeth Isichei explains that *dibias* formed a class of specialists in the supernatural. They were diviners rather than priests; their skill lay in interpreting the wishes of the gods to the people, detailing sacrifices they required, discerning witches, and so on. Often they possessed considerable medical skill. The *dibia* possessed no especial charisma; he was essentially a man with a body of professional expertise acquired by training. The profession frequently passed from father to son. They were among the strongest opponents of mission teaching, and especially detested by missionaries (128).

This is largely the function of an Obeahman, and both figures' subversive potential and position vis-a-vis Europe's "civilising mission" provided anticolonial alternatives to the institutional apparatus of church and government. Moreover, both the *dibia* and the Obeah(wo)man function as conduits between the spiritual and material worlds. Part of Taro's role in his community is to keep his culture; as an elder, he is responsible for upholding and maintaining social codes of behaviour, and so feels no pity for Emilia because she has forsaken her people and her faith to live with a white planter – the opponent and oppressor of her people. Taro does not accept Emilia's excuse that her lover has banned her from practising Obeah, nor that he has promised her land in exchange for a healthy son. The Obeahman accuses her three times of having forgotten who she is, and implies that she has been prostituting herself – although her intent may be to reclaim and recover, she continues to perpetuate, even after slavery, her physical and sexual debasement. Moreover, she has ignored Taro's several calls for her to return to her community. Emilia knows that her fourth set of twins, like the others, will be stillborn if Taro does not help her, but the Obeahman does not believe Emilia when she tells him that she wants children, not land; he informs her, flatly, that the gods owe her nothing.

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<sup>6</sup> Britain suspended its transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

In traditional Igbo cosmology, birthing twins was considered a grave taboo. Emilia, in Taro's eyes, is being punished with twins for having forsaken her beliefs. Misty Bastian records that "Onitsha Igbo elders [...] were emphatically of the opinion that twin births represented *nso ani*, an abomination against the earth and should be eradicated before the pollution reached out to touch other members of the offending lineage" (14). As humans are considered distinctly different beings to animals, two or more human beings being born out of a single body was structurally and spiritually disruptive (likewise, animals that had single births), and this disruption had to be spiritually counteracted. In order to restore order and balance twins were once left at the edge of a forest to die. Their mother would also undergo a purifying bath in order to cleanse her womb, and her family, from what was considered a curse. Emilia, desperate this time for children, not land, humbles herself before Taro, and does "what she should have done years ago;" she submits herself to her faith (Nunez 6). Her pain is too much, and her children will not live, nor will she be fulfilled, unless she exposes herself, "ready for the Ibo to save her." Taro orders her to remove her clothes, so that he may pray for her, yet despite her complete exposure Emilia felt no fear in the sudden terror of his voice. She felt no anxiety. Her soul responded to a comforting familiarity in the voice's awesomeness, a protective security in its forcefulness. Like a child, she obeyed. Like a child, she was grateful that he had found her at last. Like a child, she was glad that he would take her back to the point from which she had strayed (10).

Emilia's submission here is not a defeat or a resignation but a return, to a self-sustaining spiritual community that holds her past, present and future. She becomes a child again – at the same time as she becomes a mother – in a collapse of time and space that symbolises triumph over mortality, over her own social death and the apparently inevitable physical death of her offspring. As Bonnie Barthold explains, in pre-European Africa the view of time as cyclic was inextricable from beliefs and practices regarding birth, marriage, and death; it provided in its emphasis on human responsibility the basis for an optimistic religion and it shaped a philosophy of political leadership founded on community responsibility (10).

At this threshold moment/place, the boundaries between bondage and freedom also disintegrate; through Obeah Emilia, and her community, spiritually *and* discursively overturn their victimisation at the hands of History. The continuity between the spiritual and material worlds is most vulnerable at birth or death, and so Emilia, in order to be re-recognised and re-accepted into her community, must perform the ultimate sacrifice. It is worth noting that she goes to see the Obeahman on the suggestion of a Warao (indigenous) chief who told her that "the spirits of my dead babies want a resting place" inside a living child that she must bear (Nunez 9-10).<sup>7</sup> Emilia's spirituality, too, is creolised, as she takes direction from the elders of two cultural traditions, both of which share the shame and scars of subjugation under European hegemony.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Warao people are indigenous to what is now Guyana and Venezuela. In Trinidadian slang, "Warahoon" now denotes a "wild" or "crazy" person – another after-effect of colonialism.

<sup>8</sup> It is the Warao chief, moreover, who takes Emilia's twins into the forest, two weeks after they are born, with the intervention of Taro's ceremony.

As Obeah had ushered Emilia into womanhood years ago, so will it usher her into motherhood – Obeah maintains individual and community spiritual and cultural life at all stages, independent of linear concepts of time and space. Emilia’s desire for children has overcome her desire for land, and she sacrifices that which she wanted most (the material) in order to return to herself and her community (the spiritual, manifested in progeny). Marina, born nine months after her last brothers have died, is “no ordinary woman [...] no harm could come to a person who had the spirits of eight men in her,” explains the narrator (40). Yet she has also inherited her mother’s obsession with land. Having been forced out of their home with her father’s death eight years later, and having since lived at the whims of other white landowning men, Marina resolves that “no one, not even God, would stop her from one day owning the deed to land.” So, when the same Warao chief comes to ask Emilia for Marina’s hand in marriage on behalf of Virginia’s son, Antonio de Balboa (in exchange for fifteen acres of land), both women accept (31). Despite her reservations Emilia believes the chief’s promise that her child “would one day own land far and wide in Trinidad” – she still wants land, but this time believes that her adherence to her faith will protect both herself and her child (33).

Marina has no knowledge of the circumstances of her birth – no knowledge of the Warao and her brothers. When asked about this proposal and prophesy, Emilia is not forthcoming; Marina, in disgust, stutters “Not your – ? Not your – ?” She cannot even bring herself to say the word “Obeahman,” and when she does she distances herself from the tradition – he is *Emilia’s* Obeahman, not hers (47). It is strange that Emilia would go to such lengths to shield her child from Obeah, considering the price she paid for abandoning her faith, in addition to the fact that she owes her very motherhood to Obeah. Perhaps Emilia had meant to protect her child, perhaps her shame and distress over the death of her sons was too much to acknowledge, but she goes out of her way not to discuss it. In any case this shame and secrecy surrounding Obeah is a common result of the epistemic violence engendered by slavery and colonialism, and all of this narrative’s women will have to unlearn their shame in order to find fulfilment. Nevertheless, like her mother eighteen years before her Marina wants land, and she is willing to use the promise of her fertility to get it. Antonio falls in love with her at first sight; in addition to her physical beauty, he believes that Marina will end “the torment he had grown accustomed to and accepted as his lot” – he does not care about her association with Obeah, as he professes, at least, not to believe in its power (89). Marina scoffs at her mother’s last-minute tearful plea that she not marry Antonio, and scorns the Obeahwoman’s prophesy that Antonio will kill her, like he killed his other wives. She insists that Antonio’s three previous wives were too Victorian, too refined, too weak, too white – she, on the other hand, can “carry babies and babies forever” (88). Marina’s attitude compounds the popular stereotype of the black body as “an irresistible, destructive sensuality,” a “being” for her “captor,” Antonio, and evidences what Hortense Spillers called the “pathologisation” of black female “dominance” and “strength” as an “instrument of castration” (67, 74). Nunez subverts this stereotype, however, by having Marina initially pathologise herself (in stark contrast to white female sexuality and reproductive potential) in the hope of freeing herself from her husband/captor, and then by having Marina, like her mother before, almost lose not only her children but her own life in her lust for land. Marina is not, in fact, indestructible, and will need to swallow her scorn and humble herself before Obeah in order to survive.

Soon after her marriage to Antonio, Virginia finds Obeah in Marina's room, in the form of a pigskin pouch containing "tufts of human hair, the eyeball of a goat, clusters of herbs, a chicken leg with the foot attached and a small vial with an odious substance that stank up the whole room." From Virginia's perspective these are "omens of evil," and the older woman, hysterical, insists that the house be blessed (purged) by a priest, and that her son leave his wife immediately (Nunez 124). Virginia is a thoroughly colonised individual who has buried her culture – or has had it buried – so deeply that she can only comprehend it through the machinery of colonialism. She has always distrusted Marina, due to her "low birth" and association with Obeah. Marina, though she may know little about Obeah, does recognise her own hair in the pouch and sets off to find "the most important obeahwoman in Moruga," Alma, whom she feels is most likely responsible (125). Alma may be (in)famous, but when Marina asks her servant about the Obeahwoman the young girl insists that "I don't know no Alma, ma'am," whimpering and frantically biting her nails. Of course the girl is afraid to discuss Obeah with her "betters," but she is doubly afraid of crossing Marina, a woman she knows to be Obeah incarnate (126). Moreover, Marina's whiteness is a further barrier between her and her community: "in 1902," explains the narrator, "one did not give information about obeah to people with light skins, and Marina's pale face, dotted with freckles, was not above suspicion" (127). Even though Obeah is celebrated in *When Rocks Dance*, it is clearly a tradition for *black* people; Marina may personify both Obeah itself and, as Karla Frye has suggested, "the historical, social, and cultural processes [that constitute] the Black Atlantic," but she does not have automatic access to her community (196). She gets the same "very repetitious response" from a woman in the village, until she tells her her name, Heathrow. It is Emilia, her mother, who grants Marina access to this world, as everyone remembers "the woman whose sacrifice of her twin sons was proof of her loyalty to obeah" (Nunez 127). Marina may be a gentleman's wife but her colour/class status has no value here. Her mother's African, supposedly pagan, *spiritual* sacrifice not only guarantees Marina's survival, but ensures that Emilia herself will not be remembered (or forgotten) as a mistress or whore, but as a woman of faith. Her name operates as a shibboleth to allow her daughter into her community, and to bring forth her own children.

Alma, like Taro, lives away from her community. Her house is separated from the rest of the village by a dirt track, and "surrounded by tall bushes on every side." It is incongruous with its surroundings, just as Obeah is incongruous with European realist epistemologies; to Marina, it "seemed to be in a different place altogether. A different country" (127). But this different country is vaguely familiar to Marina, and she starts to recall sublimated memories of having accompanied Emilia there as a child. She still recognises (and is made uncomfortable by) the bottles "that hung ominously from dried branches planted in the soil in front of their houses," filled with "liquids, some with roots, others with pieces of hair, cloth, fingernails, toenails – a multitude of items that warded off evil from the obeahman or woman and brought evil or good to others" (128). Nunez's narrator's exaggeration of the strangeness of this scene, even as it indicates that Marina is not a complete stranger to Obeah, suggests their own discomfort and unfamiliarity with this world they seek to normalise, and their positioning between two competing ontologies, one that is "rational," and the other that is "magical."



This discomfort is indicative of Obeah's own "in-between-ness," its existence at the borders of Eurocolonial discourse. Marina is a product of European colonialism in the Caribbean *and* a child of Obeah, and as such is a doubly in-between being. Obeah constitutes her and repels her simultaneously, and emerges as a slippery, transformative signifier, capable of reconciling contradiction through a "magic" that, in Melvin Rahming's words, "transcend[s our] ontological bond with reality" ("Theorising Spirit" 7). While in the cold "realist" light of day Alma, a poor black woman, may simply sell snacks to schoolchildren, on certain nights she "presided over ceremonies" in "long, white cotton dresses and crisp white bandanas," and "no one asked her then about her food or about her age. She was a different Alma then..." (Nunez 126). The narrator repeatedly describes Alma as "eternal," as the Obeah she embodies is unaffected by the passage of linear time (125, 126, 327). While this description is undoubtedly exoticising, it hints not only at Alma's integrity to her community, but also to precolonial concepts of time, in which past, present and future exist simultaneously. Sacred time and mundane time exist at once in Alma, as Obeah will never die, and never be destroyed – they are not being but presence, presence that is self-sustaining. Obeah transforms Alma from mere mortal to spiritual conduit, from slave to priestess.

Alma is not at all surprised to see Marina, whom she calls "Emilia's chile" – not her father's (128). Marina's given name is arguably irrelevant here, as she has yet to make her personal sacrifice: indeed the community, of which Marina is not yet part, is greater than the individual. Marina is determined to find "answers" to her past, but does not immediately see the open grave underneath Alma's house, in which lies a young black man, naked except for a white loincloth, "like the one Jesus wore at the Crucifixion." "On his eyes," continues the narrator, "were bands of white cloth wound tightly around his head and sealed in spots with melted candle wax. A sickly odour emanated from him, not one of death, but of herbs and oils that the obeahmen use." As soon as she does see this grave Marina feels "defiance, determination, courage, intelligence, reason" – all "rational" things – "sucked out of her" and she falls limp against Alma, who explains to her that Harris, the man in the grave, is not dead but has been put, willingly, into a coma designed to mimic the three days after Jesus' death by crucifixion, before his ascension to Heaven. Jesus died in order to atone for humanity's sins; Harris is "dying" in order to tell Alma what she wants to know about the danger Marina is in; his sacrifice will hopefully save not only Marina's life but those of her children, the future of their community (129). Nunez demonstrates that Obeah is not antithetical to Christianity here, again in service to Thelwell's call to restore Caribbean readers to ourselves. In fact, the two religious traditions exist in symbiosis, in the suspended space between Harris's life and death. Marina's response demonstrates Obeah's disruption of colonial epistemological and ontological categories, as she and the narrative struggle with, as Kelly Wisecup has argued, "identify[ing] obeah's natural causes as well as [struggling] to account for the supernatural and non-human entities on which obeah practitioners drew" (406).

Obeah exists, and moves between, the natural and supernatural worlds, between life and death, “truth” and “myth.” Representing Obeah, therefore, produces “generic hybrids and a blurring of generic differences, textual slippages” that manifest the “clash of cultures,” as it were, between “established” and “alternative” ways of knowing (408). 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, rendering them inadequate, and bringing them to impasse.<sup>9</sup> Reason fails Marina, and so her brain, overpowered, shuts down.

Marina had wanted to know who had placed Obeah in her room and why, but now has even more pressing questions about her parents, her supernatural strength, and about Obeah itself, for which she cannot get “rational” answers. Alma is shocked that Emilia has not taught her daughter about Obeah, to which she refers, ambiguously, as “the very ting she want to protect you from dat will help you” (Nunez 129). Marina allows the Obeahwoman to lead her further into her house “as if she lacked any will of her own or ability to move herself.” Her innate imperiousness will not work here, and neither will reason as, once she is inside, she feels as though she were in “the world of the insane” (130). Alma tells her it was she who put the pouch in her closet, for Marina’s own good, at Emilia’s request. Harris’ spirit, she explains, will soon return to tell her everything she needs to know (132). This is a dangerous journey, however: if his spirit does not return, Harris could die – Alma impresses this upon Marina three times, once for each day of Jesus’ death, before his resurrection (135). Given Antonio’s father’s past – about which Marina is only just learning – Alma stresses that Marina is “a lucky chile dat your mother love you so much” (135). The knowledge that Emilia had never abandoned her conviction that Antonio would kill her enrages Marina so much, however, that she faints again, but not before “drums from her past” flood her memory “in a mass of confusion” (136). Marina’s body responds, if not her mind, to the suppressed memories of our collective past, and to the calls of our shared Ancestors. As Don Ohadike argues, “sacred drums are at the heart of most African music, dance and religious worship. Charged with supernatural forces, drums speak the language of the ancestors” (2). Drums were, and are, a means of sacred communication not only with each other across language barriers, but with the Ancestors, across the barriers between the physical and material worlds. She may not be able to understand it, but Marina can feel her religion – which is also her life force – within and without her very skin. This frightens her however, and when she revives she leaves immediately, without waiting to hear what Harris has learnt.

Marina does, however, remember that she had seen the Obeahwoman before, when she was eight years old and her mother promised her that she would see her recently deceased father again. She remembers a ceremony in which men and women, dressed in white, sang and danced around an open grave similar to Harris’, a ceremony that was disrupted by “white men dressed in high, black boots, waving long whips” (Nunez 138). Marina had erased the evening from her memory but the drums, through which her religion – her community – is communicating to her now, have once again collapsed space and time.

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<sup>9</sup> In Jamaican patois, to be “trickified” is to be cunning and deceptive, like Anancy, the trickster folk hero.

Obeah moves through chronology, just as it moves through epistemology; the consistent parallel, in this novel, between Obeah and Jesus' death and resurrection (the founding myth of Christianity) operates like a mirror – another side of the same coin; it is an interpretation (not desecration) of Christianity by and for the enslaved and colonised. Yet Marina refuses to move through the “here/there dichotomy” (Brodber 20) of the African-in-diaspora; she closes her ears to her Ancestors and, when she returns home, determines to feel “nothing” for her mother (Nunez 140).

Marina's husband, like his mother, sees a connection between his wife and the violation of his house, but concludes that Marina is too beautiful to be evil, and so could not have set the Obeah herself. Antonio can afford to hold a more moderate position than Virginia partly, the narrative suggests, because of his education. He reasons that the villagers, “with their silly superstitions,” had been trying to warn him against harming Marina, and blames himself for having “exposed his mother and their house to obeah by marrying a woman whose very existence was determined by the black magic” (143, 142). This patronising attitude is indeed the result of Antonio's education, but his ensuing conversation with his wife forces him to come to terms with his apparently antagonistic attitudes and reckon with his heritage. This conversation about Obeah represents an entire generation's coming to terms with its relationship with “the African past.” There was the first professional generation out of slavery and Antonio, as a schoolteacher, would have been one of the first native Trinidadians employed by the colonial government. Antonio and Marina, both of mixed ethnicity, are configured as archetypes of the new Trinidad, and their spiritual awakening is key to their country and region's cultural future. When Marina asks him if he believes she works Obeah, Antonio does not respond immediately. Obeah, as an item of knowledge, is difficult to describe, and “the question wormed itself into that uncertain portion of [his] soul,” the portion that does not have ready answers. When he argues that “it's not that simple” Marina takes advantage of what she sees as his weakness, accusing him of believing in “foolishness” despite “all your education” (146). Marina belittles her husband's response, but this is typical of many conversations that continue to be had across the Caribbean, about adherence to an “enlightened present” and/or an “African past.” Caribbean culture itself exists at these interstices – it is a culture created from and by the margins, the same margins that Obeah inhabits – and the difficulty Marina and her husband are having here is the difficulty of trying to “rationalise” what is seen as “nonsensical,” rather than embracing and creating from contradiction.

Antonio hazards that “I don't believe we have control over what we believe,” and even though Marina is unimpressed he “wouldn't dismiss the fact that obeah works for people who believe in it.” While intellectually he may “know” that Obeah is “nonsense,” he still cannot dismiss it from his lived reality (146-147). It is ironic that the partner who has the closest connection to Obeah, Marina, should be so dismissive, and Antonio's sadness turns into anger as she continues to taunt him. Marina calls her husband a coward because she still cannot see that he does not have to have to have a fixed position – Obeah is by nature syncretic and incorporative, and it is this very liminality that causes it to defy “logic,” as we have been taught to understand it.

Yet as much as he is unsure about Obeah Antonio is uncertain, too, about the Christianity he has been forced to learn, and which his father rejected. He recites, unthinking, that he believes “that God is in heaven, the devil in hell, that Jesus Christ was crucified, died and was buried and rose again on the third day,” as if to protect himself from Marina’s criticism. He does not question these beliefs, but accepts them “articles of faith woven into the very fabric of my existence,” much like, in fact, Obeah (148). We see from this passage that religion is not a matter of choice for either of them, but is integral to their very selfhood. They declare their faith simply by being and Antonio, at least, registers that Obeah is a part of him, even as Marina continues in her defiance. Neither of them, he tells her, has a choice “in believing in God, Jesus, the devil and Obeah.” “My beliefs,” he continues, “are a prison I cannot escape from. They do not allow me the freedom to deny the existence of the supernatural world” (149). Antonio’s confused admissions are a declaration of the fragmented nature of Carib-being itself, but he does not see this fragmentation as freedom from which to create. Nunez uses the trope of Obeah to reveal the in-between, chaotic, creolised culture of the Caribbean, as this phenomenon (and its place) originated in and speaks to conflict, a conflict that tends “to speak of incoherence, fracture, dislocation and marginality” (Griffith 3). Obeah functions here as an agent of conflict and resistance by simultaneously constituting and complicating Marina’s, Antonio’s, and the Caribbean’s identity.

Marina’s insistence that Antonio declare definitively that he does not believe she works Obeah is indicative of her own fears, too. She struggles to find her “habitual scorn for her mother’s ways” because to scorn her mother would be to scorn herself (Nunez 153). She struggles, too, with the realisation that Emilia had indeed been trying to save her life, and that Antonio had indeed married her for his own redemption, both because of their belief in Obeah. Her revulsion does not appear to last long, however, because as soon as she discovers that Antonio intends to sell his fifteen acres and move with her to Port of Spain (land does not matter to him as it does to her) she, like her mother, resorts to that same Obeah that she had scorned to secure material, not spiritual, not communal wealth. She mixes some twigs into her husband’s cocoa, then goes to bed with him – while heavily pregnant – which convinces him to sign over five acres of his land to her. Like her mother before her, her lust for land outweighs her desire for a family and a community, and she uses her body to secure it. This does not solve her problems however as, again like Emilia, Marina’s pregnancy threatens her life. Had she waited at Alma’s house Marina would have heard Harris prophesy that she would swell up like a bullfrog and die; as the swelling renders her immobile (like her mother, eighteen years ago) she yields to her hysteria and begs Antonio to summon Emilia. Instead, she gets Miss Victoria, a midwife who calmly tells her that “you can’t make obeah your playting and den trow it ‘way” (274).<sup>10</sup> All Moruga, it would seem, knows about Emilia’s sacrifice and Marina’s recalcitrance – as well as her manipulation of her husband with Obeah; it stands to reason that, if Marina believed in Obeah’s power to get her land, she should believe in its predictions. She should also, furthermore, believe in its power to punish misuse, and submit to it.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the same Miss Victoria who had helped Marina locate Alma.

The midwife's knowledge of her movements – and attendant indifference – frightens Marina even more, and this time she listens when Miss Victoria tells her that Obeah is holy. We a spiritual people, dou dou. We a lovin set ah people, dou dou. Obeah punish we enemies, it bring us happiness. We don't use obeah for we selfish self. You use obeah to get land. Tink we don't know dat? Why you tink you suffering so, dou dou? You had a right, you had a right, dou dou, to use obeah to punish [Antonio] de Balboa. His father curse him and you. But you didn't use obeah for dat, dou dou. No, you use obeah for yourself, you selfish self (275).

Miss Victoria explains that Obeah's function is supposed to be communal; it is meant to be used to uplift all of Trinidad's black people, not only for individual, selfish gain. Here, Nunez contradicts many colonial accounts of Obeah as a clandestine, individual, selfish practice, and rewrites the Obeah practitioner as an active agent in black communal advancement, rather than a hindrance to same. Marina has misused Obeah because she is not interested in community; she does not respect the tradition, so should not expect it to help her. Her refusal to acknowledge and understand her heritage is apparently leading to her demise, by the same Obeah that brought her into being. In her hubris Marina believed that she did not need Obeah to survive, but as Miss Victoria says, "not even all your strength can help you now if you don't believe in the spirit" (276). Marina is being required to declare her faith, to save her life. Obeah may be marginal and clandestine but it poses a real threat; the spiritual has the power to manifest – and destroy – the physical.

A few days later (and in the middle of a hurricane), Marina's labour begins. Emilia arrives to minister to her daughter, accompanied by male drummers, a female dancer, prayer books, incense, candles, oils and potions. She insists that her daughter must "remember the place where you came from [...] the spirits we prayed to. Believe in them." When mother and daughter touch Marina's abdomen at the same time, "the blood of three generations pulsated together in a single, unifying rhythm," much like sacred drums, while Emilia gives her daughter "the same lesson the old Ibo had taught her, the chastisement he had given her for her rejection of the old ways, the faith of her ancestors" (305). In the meantime Antonio manages to secure the services of a white doctor, but only in exchange for his, *and Marina's*, land. When they return the doctor is "convinced that Marina was an Englishwoman seduced there, as he had heard rumoured [...] by black blood and black magic. Obeah," and balks at the smoke and confusion (311).<sup>11</sup> He and Antonio chase the drummers away and clear the room, but not before Emilia slips something down Marina's throat and whispers in her ear. The men do not factor in Virginia, however, who is left with "an odd feeling now [coursing] its way through her, a strange emotion, familiar and yet foreign." This feeling is "at once comforting and irritating," as she feels both "compassion for Emilia and shame for herself" (313).

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<sup>11</sup> This is the second time Obeah has been referred to as "black magic." This occurs, in both instances, from the perspective of male characters.

Like Marina in Alma's hut, Virginia is responding to memories of her past that she has long suppressed, memories communicated to her through the drumbeats of her Ancestors. In an abrupt change of heart – or opening of heart – she ejects the doctor more forcefully from her home than her son does, and sends Antonio in search of Emilia.<sup>12</sup> Virginia, now, believes in Emilia more than her son does, and she speaks to him with the same amount of conviction, if not more, that she held when she insisted he call a priest to cleanse the house of Obeah a year ago. Antonio cannot understand his mother's sudden transformation, and so arrives at Alma's house with fear and revulsion, convinced that Emilia and Virginia intend to kill Marina.<sup>13</sup>

Alma and her followers force Antonio to apologise to Emilia, and to confess his “sin” of giving away Marina's land, and he begrudgingly obeys her orders to go to the same Catholic church that refused his father's corpse and take the Holy Communion, and then to return with the wafer whole in his mouth. Antonio has only recently learned that his father was a priest, and that this church denied his corpse not only because had he turned his back on his priesthood, but because he had fulfilled his desire for Virginia – for black flesh. That was the only intimacy he ever showed her, and the reason for his hatred towards her and all other women. At first, Antonio does not want to “desecrate the Sacrament [with] his soul blackened by mortal sin from years of omission,” but complies to save his wife, his children, and ultimately himself (Nunez 333). We see the conflict in his acquiescence to becoming Alma's “agent, her messenger, her partner in sacrilege against the Church,” and his shock at finding himself “in the shed of an obeahwoman playing the part of a believer in a mock mass that defied every rational thought that had crossed his mind since his Jesuit father had taught him scorn for the Church” (333, 345). Antonio is a doubly “interpellated subject,” taught to scorn Christianity by his European father, and to scorn his Ancestors by his African mother.<sup>14</sup> Obeah brings him back, ironically, to the Christian faith which, he thinks to himself, “is not intellect. It is feeling so deep that one is not conscious of believing until it's too late” (Nunez 333). He comes back to the Church in fear and trembling, and renounces Obeah even as he participates in its ritual. Antonio, an educated, creole man, is the last of his community to come around to the African part of his heritage, but instead of embracing these apparently contradictory traditions he violently rejects Obeah, even as he is compelled by it, particularly when (and even though) the body of a female creole – a body that he feels belongs to him – is in danger. He will not be rewarded for his sacrifice, and will swiftly be ejected from the narrative, which is inherited by the women.

As Alma performs the transubstantiation Antonio joins in with the ritual “with dismal finality” (346). Yet when Emilia drinks a cock's blood, “the logical impossibility – God becoming one with a wafer of bread – became for him the most rational possibility in that sea of madness that surrounded him” (347).

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<sup>12</sup> The doctor's diagnosis of blood poisoning, and subsequent botched bloodletting attempt, only worsen Marina's condition.

<sup>13</sup> Antonio does not appear to appreciate that, in Emilia's eyes, it is *he* who wants Marina dead – despite her repeatedly calling him a murderer (Nunez 311).

<sup>14</sup> David Winks uses the term “pedagogical interpellation” to refer to the “indoctrination, or translation, of the colonial subject into a European comprehension of the world and history” (65, 69). Antonio's interpellation is doubled, particularly in the area of religion, because he rejects both the teachings of the Church and of Obeah.

Antonio does not share the relief when Marina is saved, even though Harris's spirit does not return to his body. Alma and her followers embrace each other and disappear into the forest while Antonio, kneeling at Harris' grave, reaffirms his Confirmation vows to renounce the devil and his works: he "would not, he could not, have any part in the lives of people who dealt with magic, the unexplainable" (352). Marina gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl, but like his wife's father before him Antonio feels nothing for his children, because Obeah brought them into the world. He traded his life for hers, and delivered the Holy Ghost unto her in the form of children, but at a grave price. Firm in his belief that Alma has committed a murder in which he was complicit, Antonio abandons Marina that same night. Marina's rage subsides when, months later, she receives a letter (and some money) from Antonio, informing her that he is bound for London. When she arrives in Port of Spain she discovers that the doctor's house has been burned to the ground, thus destroying his deeds to her land. Emilia's – and, by extension, the African diaspora's – desire for land is finally fulfilled, through Obeah, and through the destructive dismissal of this narrative's men. In this narrative Obeah not only brings forth new life but it cleanses the land of self-serving European interlopers and of unbelieving, corrupted creoles like Antonio, who denounces Obeah after having *seen* it work. Obeah's true believers, all women, are left to rebuild Trinidad, and profit from its hidden oil wealth.

*When Rocks Dance* is an example of what Rahming calls a "spirit-centred" novel, one that "conceptually assumes [the] organic interrelatedness of all things in its fictive world." It draws our attention to our own interconnectedness with all things, and presupposes an infinite spiritual world which acts upon the material ("Theorising Spirit" 5). Obeah "works" in the novel because of sacrifice, and is sustained by faith. Emilia sacrificed her personal security and her own children for her belief, and Antonio sacrifices not only everything he has (his land, his position), but everything he believes in, so that his wife and children may live. Obeah is a weapon for these disenfranchised black women but it can punish them, for their non-belief, as much as it can punish their enemies. Emilia, Marina and Virginia had all turned their backs on Obeah at some point but are forced, as a community, to reckon with it to save their lives and those of their children. Obeah operates in this novel as a conduit between the spiritual and material worlds; as the manifestation of neutral spiritual energy, it is pure potential. Its fluidity allows it to inhabit the boundaries between the sacred and the mundane, and therefore soothe the wounds of the separation, wrought by slavery and colonialism, between these two spheres. Nunez uses Obeah to re(ad)dress this historic, material trauma on spiritual terms; the women who believe in the spirit(s) of Obeah are rewarded, in the material realm, with land that was stolen from them by white men. Most importantly, it is through Obeah that these women return to their community, their faith and each other, and through Obeah that they develop strategies for survival in the so-called New World. Nunez invites a reimagination of our conceptions of religion, spirituality and memory, and their place in our everyday lives. The magical is the real in this novel, and this synthesis can reintegrate the fragments of the African diaspora.

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