Although *The Jamaica Lady* belongs to the imperial romance discourse, it affords insight into configurations of identity within the eighteenth-century Jamaican space that fits into the wider discourse on the romance of identity with which I am concerned. *The Jamaica Lady* is one of the earliest novels which invests in the representation of women’s sexuality and its affinity to the West Indian space. Its examination allows for an understanding of how women’s sexual effrontery and passivity increasingly begin encoding ideas of otherness and identity. *The Jamaica Lady* also brings into prominence issues of language and voice by entwining speech and silence with women’s sexual and social powers or lack of them. Importantly, this novel engages the relationship between the romance and otherness and their impact on shaping social control through power over the female body.

Therefore, this paper examines the manner in which otherness and gendered identity are inextricably linked in the literary representations of the eighteenth-century West Indies and constitute an integral part of the imperial romance. I analyze the gendered representations of women, not merely in terms of racialized constructs, but also within the broader dynamic of eighteenth-century imperial conventions which saw ambivalent contestations of power between white men and women. The question of subjectivity and its subsequent representations lie at the centre of this paper and evoke necessary questions about essentialist concepts of power, identity and otherness. There are two ways of responding to this question. The first is to observe that otherness, as it occurs in *The Jamaica Lady*, is framed largely as fluid and the movement from self to *other* occurs as much at will as it occurs as a result of socio-cultural constructs. The second response lies in what Carol Barash describes the centrality of women’s sexual agency to substitute for cultural otherness (410). These responses are both subsumed within varying ideas of ‘romance’ and the importance of the sexual body in (re)configuring identity and power.

To achieve an examination of this idea, I have divided this paper into two main sections: the first examines how female identity is othered in the New World space. In this section, I argue that in order to solidify male imperial identity in the New World, women are necessarily othered to ensure that the imperial project is masculine one. In particular, I pay attention to the manner in which this othering is done primarily through attempts to control women’s sexuality. In the
second section, I examine the manner in which women’s voices and silences are tied to their sexualities. In this section, I focus on the manner in which control of the female voice is tied to sexual identity and is used as a tool of oppression geared at controlling or silencing women’s vocal expressions while privileging the male voice. These foci will allow for an examination of the manner in which other is represented in the early eighteenth-century romances belonging to imperial discourse.

Undoubtedly, the romance and the nation enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Both Ian Duncan and Robert Rix, respectively, observe that during the eighteenth-century, the romance became even more integral to the creation of a “national literature” and was even more helpful in initiating a “new canon-making in English romances” which further popularized the romance (Duncan 4; Rix 3). In turn, England’s nationalist discourse was a significant basis from which the romance drew its energies in the eighteenth-century. Additionally, much of this eighteenth-century nationalist discourse imbibed England’s burgeoning imperialist ideas about adventure, discovery, conquest and the appeal for travel: all vital aspects of the romance brought to life. Necessarily, this imperialist romance discourse evoked questions about English identity and what it meant to be English within the context of the imperial project. Hence, the imperial and national romances converged on ideas which attempt to define Englishness within both the geographical and cultural margins of the nation imagined. For this reason, England’s culture becomes central in forging a holistic definition of Englishness especially as it pertains to its colonial spaces. Homi Bhabha’s observation about the roles of slippages in categories of sexuality, class affiliation and cultural differences and how these work as useful vehicles for writing modern nations into being, are therefore just as applicable to eighteenth-century England and the manner in which it too wrote its identity into being (201). The discourse of nationalism, which emerges in both the modern postcolonial and eighteenth century contexts, is predicated on the fact of otherness. For eighteenth-century Englishness, the other could very well be an undesirable version of English identity that must be eradicated.

**Jamaica: A Messalina’s Paradise**

I wish to begin this first section by examining the manner in which otherness is constructed through female sexuality and geography. At the most basic level, the formation of otherness in the first half of the eighteenth century is established in terms of a simple pole which sees England – at one end of the spectrum as the ideal space - and the West Indies – at the other end – as the othereed space. Close attention to the novel’s title provides the first inkling of how other and self are represented in the novel are constructed:

The Jamaica Lady of The Life of Bavia containing An Account of her Intrigues, Cheats, Amours in England, Jamaica, and the Royal Navy. A Pleasant Relation of the Amours of the Officers of a Fourth Rate Man of War with their Female Passengers, in a Voyage from Jamaica to England. With The Diverting Humours of
Captain Fustian, Commander of the Said Ship. And the Character of his Irish Surgeon; the Reason of his Preferment; and the Manner of obtaining his Warrant.

There are two types of polarizations being used to create otherness in the title of the novel: the first occurs between the women and the men; and the second occurs between England and Jamaica. I wish to begin with the polarization between England and Jamaica. As I pointed out earlier, the novelist frames England as the ideal place and Jamaica as less than ideal. Fustian is the first character to argue that “none but mad people and fools” would leave “Paradise [England...] to go to Jamaica” (95). In her evaluation of the representations of Jamaica in the novel, Erin Mackie opines that in The Jamaica Lady, the West Indies is presented as “a nightmare vision of the effective evacuation of all categories of value, secular and spiritual” (194). Throughout the novel, Jamaica is consistently represented and configured in terms of its alterity which results from its accommodation of “mad people and fools” (95).

Interestingly, while the West Indies is represented in terms of alterity, its difference is in large part determined not only by the cultural practices in the West Indies, but also through its accommodation of unacceptable forms of English identities that threaten to displace or destabilize an imagined concept of Englishness. As such, early novels like The Jamaica Lady are peopled with transported women and their progenies, naval officers and their subalterns who cannot be fully accommodated within mainstream English culture. Formulations of otherness are necessarily initially represented in the novel in the form of transported individuals: white indentured servants and extensions of English power as represented in the form of the soldier, doctor or sailor in the Caribbean. The end result is that The Jamaica Lady is a piece of writing about others and conveys a subculture of otherness within the imagined margins of the fledging English empire. Whereas many novels tend to represent an other-self binary, The Jamaica Lady provides insight into life as other and as a doubly other in the early eighteenth century Jamaican space.1 Certainly, much of this geographical polarization is tied to depicting bad versions of female identity and its accompanying ‘bad’ sexuality.

This polarization between the sexes dominates the second half of the first sentence in the novel’s descriptor. On the whole, it is connected to the novel’s concern with women’s sexual independence. Close attention to the order of the title focuses on women’s sexual behaviours. The usage to the personal pronoun her in the initial sentence of the title descriptor also operates as a proform which is being used in a collective, yet abstract manner, to describe the activities of several women: the Jamaica Lady or Holmesia, Bavia and to a lesser extent Pharmaceuticus’s wife. By using her as a proform, the author subtly manipulates the personal pronoun to represent women as a multiple-faced threat. The usage of the nouns intrigues, cheats and amours further connotes a sinister side of sexual relationships in which these women are engaged and also alludes to their sexual habits and practices outside of England as less than savoury.
The second sentence of the title describes the sexual actions of the male characters as “pleasant relations of the amours.” Embedded in this description is the idea that male sexual experiences in the empire are positive. This idea is later reflected in the sexual encounters that Frutesius has first with Bavia and then with Holmesia. In the case of Holmesia, Frutesius’s sexual encounter with her is framed as one in which the woman is presented as a passive receptacle for men’s sexual pleasure:

He entered the gallery safe and went into Holmesia’s bed. No noise was made; all was hush and silent; she lay as quiet as if fast asleep and did not dream anything of the matter. But whether she was willing to receive as he to offer his service I know not, or whether she imagined loss to honor consisted only in the discovery and that ‘twas more shame to let the world know the opinion Frutesius had of her and the rudeness offered than privately to permit him to take his own liberty; but there he continued some hours and frequently afterwards repeated his nocturnal visits at the usual time. (108)

Therefore, part of the emphasis of the novel’s title and its plot rests on the sexual encounters of the female passengers and their receptiveness to these sexual encounters. Necessarily, these first two title sentences reflect polarized attitudes to sexuality which are tied to gendered identities. Additionally, when they are read together, the initial sentences reveal that women’s sexual conducts are entwined with the activities of imperial expansion. This is not unusual, as Tamar Mayer notes that the national ego is “intertwined with male and female ego that is inseparable from gender and sexuality” (1). Mayer’s theory that nation is constructed on the exclusion of “them” or “Other,” is a useful strategy for reading how The Jamaica Lady’s author engages both gender and sexuality as tools for controlling and repressing unacceptable forms of behaviours throughout the novel. Using this approach, it is possible to conclude that by evoking the differences in sexual attitudes at the level of gender, the author of The Jamaica Lady is able to distinguish between self and other and begins to map ways through which that other can be excluded from the nation.

But why map otherness on to sexuality? It is incongruous that the romance is tied to the sexually explicit. In traditional European and English romances, the sexual component gives way to acts of chivalry and courtship which are oftentimes concluded in marriage. In these traditional romances, sex is implicitly reserved for the safety of marriage, thus underscoring the romance’s traditional Christian trajectory. Therefore, the explicit referencing of the sexual in the imperial romance is just one of the ways in which the eighteenth-century romance accommodates the imperial project by implying that sex should be available for men engaged in the imperial project. Anne McClintock observes that within European porno-tropic imagination, spanning as far back as to the second century, sexuality in far off places was often construed as excessive (22): female sexuality even more so to accommodate the appetites of the European male. In the case of England’s imperial project, excessive male sexuality is condoned; conversely, excessive female sexuality challenges
male authority and becomes the backdrop against which British national and imperial identities are being formed.

The 1720 *The Jamaica Lady* is one of the first pieces of creative writings which articulates an inextricable link between the West Indian environment, female characterization, women’s sexuality in the colonies, and English national and British imperial identity. What is interesting here is the manner in which the Jamaican space becomes a site that absorbs the female sexual threat to family relationships and social order within an English context. Carol Barash postulates that much of the alterity and consequent otherness associated with the Jamaican space in *The Jamaica Lady* are engendered by notions of female hyper-sexuality (411). Pharmaceuticus attributes this hyper-sexuality to astrological forces which rule Jamaica and affect women’s sexual behaviours:

> [it] was not so much the fault of the woman as that of the climate, [...] that cursed malevolent planet which predominates in that island [...] so changes the constitution of its inhabitants that if a woman land there as a chaste vestal, she became in forty-eight hours a perfect Messalina, and that ‘tis [...] impossible for a woman to live in Jamaica and preserve her virtue. (*The Jamaica Lady* 110)

The idea that women’s sexual behaviours in Jamaica are socially different because of the climate underscores contemporary understandings of the relationship between sexuality and temperature. Kevin Hutchings contends that within the eighteenth century imagination, there existed the tendency to correlate climate with morality (44). He further contends that this correlation, especially in hotter climates, rationalized the European colonizer’s sexual actions by arguing that these actions were shaped by adverse environmental realities as opposed to cultural practices (Hutchings 45). Reasonably, much of the male anxiety about women’s sexual behaviours which occurs in *The Jamaica Lady* results from the fear that Jamaica could “change [your] whole mass of blood and totally alter [...] nature” (111). The threat Jamaica poses lies in its ability to other an individual simply through residence in its geographical space.

While Jamaica is configured as a threat to traditional sexual roles for men, for women it is configured as sexual utopia. By mapping Jamaica as a hyper-sexual space, the author relatively normalizes women’s excessive sexuality within the West Indian space, thereby creating a utopic space in which women construct their sexual identities. The romance idiom, which is evoked through the journey motif, exemplifies this especially in Pharmaceuticus’s second history of Holmesia. Pharmaceuticus’s recounted transportation of Holmesia’s mother to Jamaica maps an entrance into female autonomy. The act of transportation maps the movement of the ship away from the English space, with its legal and rigid order, towards Jamaica with its less legally ordered and less rigid social space in which the acts of women’s sexual effrontery are more pronounced and affected. Therefore, through the act of transportation, Holmesia’s mother moves from being a shoplifter to a woman who consorts with “a mulatto,” a rebellious indentured servant, a prostitute in The Brewsters, and, finally, the madam of a whorehouse. The final image of her as a
brothel owner reflects a powerful self-owning, which results from a commodification of sexual labours:

One of these houses the woman with her brat entered, and ‘twas the fittest receptacle she could have met with, for, as she was a new face though owner of a very indifferent one, she was presently entertained, and in short time insinuated herself so much into favor of the rakehelly customers, out of whom she cajoled a small sum of money, that she scorned to be a plier any longer but took a little hut, set up for herself, and had her house the most frequented of any in the whole seraglio, by which means she procured for herself and daughter a competent, though a vicious maintenance. (116)

Laura R. Rosenthal contends that during the eighteenth century, the figure of the prostitute is represented as a threat to “masculine authority and personal boundaries [as it] feminizes men who enter the sexual marketplace” (10). To this extent, Rosenthal argues, women who work as prostitutes claim the masculine position of self-ownership (10). Therefore, the journey Homlesia’s mother undertakes maps not only a physical movement but also an emotional journey into a self-possession and autonomy typically manifested through sexual agency. Implicit in her transportation is the othering of a geographical space by mapping it as sexually and culturally different. Therefore, throughout The Jamaica Lady, displays of female sexual independence not only dominate the Jamaican space but are also considered as Jamaican and as other.

To this extent, Jamaica is represented as being peopled by women who actively seek their sexual pleasures and used sexual agency to gain autonomy. The wish fulfilment dimension of the romance is key here: in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, white women – indentured or otherwise – overtly used their sexuality as an agency to access relative social and/or economic power; and, as Barbara Bush points out, used their sexuality to a lesser degree to improve their social status (249). The wish fulfilment idiom of the romance affords to these women the opportunity for self-owning. For this reason, these radical self-owning representations of the women in the novel further emphasize the manner in which the New World space fulfills both sexual and economic wishes. Consequently, the author’s presentation of Bavia’s reaction to Captain Fustian’s discovery of her initial sexual liaison with Frutesius is framed within this context and necessarily evokes the romance image of the knight: “She rather (to the shame of her sex) gloried in her guilt and was proud to have it known that she had acquired so complete a gentleman for her gallant” (104).

However, fantasies about British national identity are also subsumed within the act of transporting women, perceived as deviant, away from England. Implicit in this act of transportation is the physical shifting of sub-cultural practices from within mainstream English culture to ensure limited threats to Britain’s social ideals. Consequently, the journey motif is also used to perform male fantasies about power over the woman’s body. Reasonably, in The Jamaica Lady primacy is given to the journey from Jamaica to England, which not only forms the backdrop
for most of the activities in the novel, but also emphasizes women’s loss of sexual and financial autonomy. It is on this journey towards England that Holmesia experiences a loss of autonomy and sexual power. Holmesia is also othered in England because of her sexual independence and multiple lovers. Her failure to perform the role of a faithful wife within the English space results not only in her ejection by her in-laws, but abandonment by her husband when she returns to Jamaica. Indeed, her gradual loss of power and female autonomy can be first evidenced by the abrupt removal of Quomina from the narrative. Ultimately, the social limitations placed on her sexual powers results in her being subject to poverty and destitution first in England and later, Jamaica: “Holmesia had a cold reception [...] into a hot country, and was forced to undertake the meanest drudgery to acquire a miserable livelihood, which, how bad soever, was rather too good for a person that had been so infamously scandalous” (148). By preventing Holmesia from practicing as a prostitute, the narrative structure construes to make her economically dependent and pushed aside socially.

Holmesia’s journey reverses her fortunes and emphasizes her otherness by marking out her linguistic and sexual difference in England. The abrupt conclusion to Holmesia’s sexual career as a prostitute is in keeping with the author’s desire to regulate female sexuality on both sides of the Atlantic. By symbolically crippling her economic power, Holmesia becomes safely contained within the male strictures and is less of a threat to social order. She is weakened by the removal of her otherness - which in this case is her wantoness – and through a reduction to drudgery. In the context of the early eighteenth century West Indies, social development and control in terms of power over women’s sexuality was not yet as rigid as it was in England. Bush attributes this to the fact that sexuality had not yet been fully manipulated by the ruling planter class into an overall effective form of social control (246). The authorial voice’s justification of Holmesia’s punishment can be read as an extension of male power outside of England and portends to later enactments of laws which would seek formal control over white women’s sexuality in the West Indies. Within the novel, women’s sexual independence – and by extension their bodies – become “hotly contested sites for patriarchal control” (Barash 410).

Within that context, we can begin to understand why many of the early representations of the figure of the West Indian female are framed as contentious. Holmesia is presented as almost always in contention with British patriarchal powers. As most of the action in the novel occurs at sea, the ship is used symbolically as the first site which begins to sterilize women’s power. On the one hand, the physical layout of the ship with its multiple cabins is useful in helping to conceal the women’s various sexual liaisons. On the other hand, the cabins act as jails in which the women become imprisoned at various points in the novel in order to limit their physical movements about the ship. After placing the women in the holds of the cabins, the men occupy the deck of the ship thereby, keeping the women literally underfoot. Certainly, men’s descents into the cabins are either to enact beatings on the women or for sexual pleasure as occur in the case of Pharmaceutius and Frutesius respectively.
Contrariwise, the novel unwittingly reveals female solidarity in reconfiguring various means to counter threats to their sexual independence. In the case of Holmesia, Bavia subjects herself to assisting Frutesius in his seduction of Holmesia only after she is assured that his place as her lover will be filled by Compass. Bavia ensures that while she loses Frutesius as a lover, her sexual pleasures are not stymied. She acts on behalf of Frutesius only after she has had sex with Compass: “The captain’s son made good the engagement, and the next morning she applied herself to Holmesia in behalf of Frutesius” (104). No regard is given to an emotional relationship between the lovers – Bavia/Frutesius, Bavia/Compass - the emphasis lies on the delights that blossom from the various sexual encounters.

Much of this othering through sexuality is also tied to magic. The pairing of colonial femininity with the magical is used to create a double otherness and signifies both Bavia and Holmesia as a caste apart: essentially as other. Much of the violence meted out to Bavia in Jamaica results from her various roles in helping women achieve sexual liberty through her ‘magical’ prowess. The male characters use of violence throughout the novel marks attempt to reassert their loss of power over a female body caused by Bavia’s magical spells:

she [...] no sooner entered the house but was laid hold on by the old gentleman’s command, bound hand and foot, and for three days fed by an old Negro with nothing but cassava bread and water, then stripped bare to the waist, and lashed tightly by the overseer with a horsewhip, and this continued for a whole month – the same provisions and every third day the same correction, and then turned off to seek better food for herself. (131)

Most of the various punishments dealt to Bavia occur from the need to counter the ‘magic’ she uses. The importance of control over the body in the eighteenth century West Indies was not dissimilar to control exercised over subjected bodies in England and Europe. Bush contends that indentured servants in the late seventeenth century West Indies were similarly subject to regulations which invaded both their private and public lives (247). However, in a bid to create distinctions between the slave and indentured classes in the West Indies, indentured servants, unlike their slave counterparts, could not legally be whipped naked (Bush 247). Consequently, Bavia’s bareback whippings during her period of indenture are geared at stripping her of her humanity and correspond with what Bush describes as a part of the appropriation of power over the subjugated body (246).

Likewise, it is through legal channels that the old Jew attempts to hold Bavia responsible for the loss of his wife: “[t]he Jew [...] was resolved to have his revenge on her, so took horse immediately and rode to Spanish Town to get a warrant from the governor and was fully bent to try her for sorcery” (135). Through the machinations of male solidarity in the form of legal recourse, Bavia’s performances as a witch are curtailed and brought to an abrupt end in Jamaica. Ultimately, magic, especially as it is represented in Bavia’s escapades in Jamaica, is a weapon which is used to breach male legal and give women sexual power over their bodies.
However, the usage of magic in the novel shifts focus once the man-of-war departs from Jamaica. Whereas in Jamaica, Bavia’s magic is presented as an extension of her con artistry, aboard the ship she is made to fully assume the character of a witch. This is not achieved through any action on her part, but through Fustian’s superstitious nature and a series of imagined coincidences. For Fustian, when he first sees Bavia he expresses that the very sight of her portends a “dreadful disaster” (102). Much of his ill-treatment is engendered by her physical appearance: “a piece of deformity [...] the picture of ill-luck” (101-102). Therefore, while Bavia is allowed some degree of humanity in Jamaica and England, at sea she is characterized as an animal and treated as such:

“... That’s your kennel, woman. You had best turn in, for you do more hurt than good here.” Away she hopped in a fright, shut herself up directly, and there continued for two days and two nights without speaking to or being spoken to by anyone, nor had she so much as a bit of biscuit during the whole time. (103)

Throughout the voyage, most of Fustian’s treatment and reactions towards Bavia occurs as a response to his fear of her as a witch. He finds visible proof of her being a witch in the sexual encounters she had with Compass. Based on his reaction, it is reasonable to assume that Fustian assumes that “Compy-boy’s” seduction could not have occurred unless he was bewitched:

For anyone to have a natural inclination for such a piece of ugliness, which was rather an antidote against provocative sensuality, and that she never could seduce his son, unless by the help of her old friend, Satan; thought she had given “Comy-boy” a philtrum; and made a resolution that, as soon as the bruise on his shoulder would give him leave, he would heave her overboard. (136)

Fustian’s belief that Bavia is a witch is predicated on Compass’s assumed seduction through magic, rather than his active participation in the sexual encounter.

By conjoining female sexual effrontery with the magical, the author further plays upon the idea that the sexually independent female is a threat to British national ideal. By suggestively tying the descriptions of British national identity to the sexual, the author directly questions what behaviours are appropriate for women in the imperial project. He implies that by allowing women their sexual freedoms, the good version of Britain’s national identity is compromised through sexual liaisons which birth individuals, who are biologically, culturally and linguistically other, into the nation: “[Holmesia] was a Creole and consequently of a pale complexion ... [h]er language was a sort of jargon, being a dialect peculiar to the natives of that island, it being partly English and partly Negroish” (94). As such, Holmesia comes to symbolize the tangible consequence of Britain’s failure to control the sexuality of English women in the colonies. However, as a means of countering these acts of independence, women’s voices are seized, silenced or ventriloquized through male agents.
Stealing and Silencing Women’s Voices

In this second section, I am concerned with examining the manner in which women’s voices are stolen, silenced or used to corral them into the category of other. Much of this linguistic difference is represented through the non-English speaking female, Holmesia, in England. In addition, much of this linguistic difference in *The Jamaica Lady* is also attached to magic and is useful in framing the non-English speaking woman as doubly other. To a great extent, I agree with Barash’s position that Holmesia is othered through language in England (421). From the onset of her arrival in England, the title of witch is transferred to Holmesia as a result of her Jamaican Creole language. Her inability to speak English and her performances of violence through Quomina, who is perceived as the devil, are used to mark her as a gypsy witch and provide tangible signs of witchcraft for which she is led away as a criminal outside Rochester: “We know you are a pack of counterfeits and stroll about only to cheat the country under pretense of telling fortunes . . . I suppose you pass for queen amongst them, but we’ll take care of your queenship. You shall have a taste of the whipping-post before you go, and glad if you come off so” (143). By using language as a marker for otherness, the author alienates and subjects Holmesia to legal sanction.

This legal sanction, especially as it looms in the form of a whipping, is ironic especially as Holmesia’s position is a slave owner. Throughout the voyage, Holmesia is presented as a typical Jamaican slave-owner. The initial description of her as haughty and pretentious and being able only to speak “a sort of jargon, being dialect peculiar to the natives of that island” are markers of difference which cannot be enforced until she arrives in England (94). This stymieing of her social power, especially her ability to inscribe violence on the bodies of perceived subordinates, ousts her from any position of authority she held in the Jamaican space and reduces her to other within the English space. Holmesia is made to understand, through eviction first from the home of her in-laws and then from Galenicus’ care, that female independence, sexual or otherwise, cannot be accommodated within the English space: “she by her imprudent management so exposed herself that the brother would entertain her no longer. He only gave her time till the next week to provide for herself” (146-147). In short, Holmesia’s androgy nous nature derived from her socio-economic power and sexual effrontery in the Jamaican space are not considered as feminine within the English space. As a result, the perceived male facet of her personality, her socio-economic power, must be neutered in order to begin the process of redefining her as an English female. It is only after she becomes economically dependent, that is ‘female’, that she can effectively be normalized: [she] was forced to undertake the meanest drudgery to acquire a miserable livelihood” (148).

This neutering raises questions about the extent to which *The Jamaica Lady* is a version of male imperial fantasy about controlling the female body in the colonial space. While I do agree with Barash and Mackie that *The Jamaica Lady* reflects male desire to control the colonial space through control of the female body, I am suggesting that a more stringent form of control was exercised over the women in the form of narrative design. Throughout the novel, the authorial and the narrative voices are indistinguishable and reflect to a great extent male frustration with
thwarted attempts to control women’s bodies in the colonial Jamaican space. Authorial control 
and voice in the narrative suggest particular ideological thrusts about female patterns of 
behaviours. In the Preface, the author makes his twofold intent clear:

My design in publishing this story is, first to divert and please the reader; and secondly, to expose 
the vice of two notorious women, that others, whose inclination direct ’em the same course, may 
(if not from fear of future punishment, yet) by the dread of present and of public shame, be 
restrained from their ill intentions. If I succeed in both, I have gained my end; if in either, I am 
satisfied. (88)

The first objective which he outlines is the observably lesser of the two; primacy is obviously given 
to the latter objective of discouraging women’s sexual effrontery. Throughout the novel, power 
over women is exercised in the denial of a voice to them. The novel employs reportage as one of 
the main techniques in the telling of the tale and the tale is told almost exclusively by males. 
Barash points out that Bavia’s history, like Holmesia’s history, is told twice by men (416). The first 
versions of both their histories are told by men whom they have asked to represent their stories; 
these initial versions of their stories are presented as fictions and belong to the realm of self 
invention. The narrator discredits these initial histories by aligning them to self inventions and 
characterizing them as feminine and dangerous.

The novel presents these initial histories as Holmesia’s and Bavia’s respective ventriloquizing of 
themselves through men they have paid to tell Fustian these versions in order to secure their 
passage to England. The narrator, first through Pharmaceuticus’s recanting of his initial history of 
Holmesia, erases Holmesia’s version of herself and casts her instead as famed prostitute turned 
mistress turned wife. In Pharmaceuticus’s version of Holmesia, he narrates her story without 
sympathy:

And as the girl grew in years, she trod in her mother’s footsteps and, being young, 
was a great favourite with the buccaneers [...] she brought much custom to her 
mother and much money to herself [...] and became famous amongst women for 
her rich gowns and petticoats as infamous for her manner of obtaining them [...] 
thus continued in her glory (as it was there called) for several years, but then she 
fell very ill. (116-117)

In this version of Holmesia, the exclusive use of the noun her serves to depersonalize Holmesia 
and operates to distance her from the immediate reality of the happenings on the ship. The 
seeming avoidance of the usage of her name is another facet through which the author 
emphasizes her taboo sexual behaviours and distances her from the nearing civility of the English 
coast.

Certainly, Holmesia’s sexual effrontery is compounded not only by her past as a prostitute but 
also by her journey to England in order to engage in an adulterous lovers tryst with her long-time
lover Galenicus. For this, Holmesia’s voice is further compromised through her inability to use the English language and must depend on Galenicus to define her to the threatening mob outside Rochester:

[Galenicus], seeing Holmesia guarded and led as a criminal, inquired into the cause; which when he understood, he acquainted the fellows with their mistake, telling them what she was, from whence she came, and whither she was going[.]

(143)

By placing control of the women’s voice in the mouths of male speakers, the narrative voice assumes control of history and is able to erase types of femininity that are dangerous and threaten social order. This authoritative male voice which assumes prominence in the narrative effectively rewrites the women’s respective histories from the beginning and ensures a conclusion that is more in keeping with male power and desire. Hence, the novel concludes with the punishments of Holmesia and Bavia which sees each respectively ejected from the mainstream societies in England and Jamaica, and in Bavia’s case, later Ireland.

Ironically, there is no single male voice that assumes omniscience in telling the tale of the women’s lives; instead there is a collection of male voices that vie for control over the telling of the histories of the women. The ensuing result is a fracture in the narrative as many stories intersect, are begun but never are interwoven or completed. The most noticeable fracture perhaps more reflective of the badly told tale that *The Jamaica Lady*, is the glaring inconclusiveness to the love triangle between Galencius, Holmesia and her cuckolded husband. Pharmaceuticus tells us that Holmesia’s marriage occurs as a result of Galencius wanting to mask the fact that he is the cause of Holmesia’s pregnancy. No mention is made of the pregnancy or the child again. Instead, at the novel’s conclusion, we are asked to accept the husband’s ignorance of Holmesia’s history and his subsequent abandonment of her upon discovering this ‘truth’. The novel displays the colonial male’s fear about women’s sexual agency and authority and concludes in a manner not entirely in keeping with the facts laid out.

Although the author seems to privilege the suppression of the female voice, he seeks to bring attention to its difference via Holmesia’s inability to express herself in English. Holmesia’s other language is decidedly presented not only as Jamaican, but also as distinctively feminine: “You, Baccararaman, which de way is to grandee town?” [...] Quomina, fumfum yon baccarara, fumfum him grandee” (142). There is much to be said about this attempt at representing eighteenth-century Jamaican Creole and its inclusion of specific African words. However, for the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on the manner in which it is used to linguistically distinguish women.

Once Holmesia speaks within England, her voice and actions are negotiated by male characters that perform on her behalf. By placing control of Holmesia’s Creole voice in the mouth of an English-speaking male, the narrative voice assumes control of her and is able to erase her type of West Indian femininity which is considered both dangerous and threatening to English social
order. Therefore, despite the flaws in linguistic representation, the author successfully emphasizes Holmesia’s Creole voice to emphasize her Jamaican difference to English society.

As such, Jamaican Creole is gendered feminine. The femininity does not occur as a direct result of a separate language for the women but on the fact that it is the language used in the only instance in which the women are given a direct opportunity to verbally express themselves. Barash contends that in part, Holmesia’s language constitutes part of the relationship between the overarching “sexual and linguistic warfare” in the novel. She further observes that Holmesia’s Creole language is part of the proof that the “Creole woman [is] powerful and threatening” (Barash 419). Therefore, her voice is also part of what must be controlled within patriarchal England. The author successfully uses Holmesia’s linguistic difference as a signifier to mark her as other and silence her voice in the society. Undeniably, for the remainder of the novel, Holmesia’s voice and actions are negotiated by the male players who, finally through letters, write her out of the social mainstream.

I agree with Barash that Holmesia’s language cannot be read without its affiliated temper and body postures. I wish to extend Barash’s reading further by examining the manner in which Holmesia’s language is invested with the temper and power of the typical slave owner in eighteenth century Jamaica. Holmesia’s position as a slave owner lends power to her violence and oral expressions. For instance, after she unmercifully beat Quomina for giving away her citron-water she is described as being “swelled full of choler” (112). For Holmesia, her position as a civilian does not deter her from demanding that Fustian punish the sailor who drank the citron-water. Embedded in Fustian’s response to Holmesia’s demanding language and tone is a recognition of the power she holds as a slave owner: “I have heard talk of Furies with whips of steel and hair of serpents, and if it be true that the devil does employ such instruments, a Negro had better live in Hell than with a Jamaican termagant” (112).

Only Fustian and Holmesia hold positions of social power throughout the novel. Both characters respectively have under their control subjugated bodies either in the form of a slave or subalterns. Both Fustian and Holmesia at various times on the voyage mete out whippings to those under their subjugation. As part of the narrative strategy to emphasize Holmesia’s otherness, the narrator presents her as devoid of mercy and human compassion especially in his representation of her whipping of Quomina. Against this he juxtaposes Fustian’s attempts at whippings. For instance, although Fustian orders a whipping for Compass, his paternal love inhibits the performance of the actual whipping: “[t]hey were sensible the captain acted purely by his son’s direction, who would not fail, without real fault, to accuse them and have them punished, so that though they made a seeming offer to approach him at the captain’s menaces, yet in reality, they came not near him” (106). In the second instance, Fustian is at first inclined to whip the sailor for his perceived sexual liaison with Quomina; however, Fustian forgives the sailor after he pleads that he had merely gone to Quomina for dram. In this particular dram incident is pitted Holmesia’s response to the discovery of Quomina’s unauthorized giving of the dram. Certainly, we can read
that Holmesia’s violence is triggered by more than this unauthorized distribution of the dram: it also extends to the possible unauthorized lending of the physical slave body without her permission: “Holmesia ...flew at [Quomina], threw her down, cuffed and kicked her unmercifully, then laid her on to that degree with a manatee skin, that she fetched near the same quantity of blood from the wench’s side which she missed from her citron-water” (112). By pitting Holmesia’s response to perceived insubordination against that of Fustian, the narrator further others her as she, unlike Pharmaceutius’s wife, is devoid of feminine softness and subtlety typical of good British women.

By the late eighteenth century, however, the figure of the hypersexual white female was no longer typical in British romances about the West Indies. To a large extent, the image of the white woman, especially its incarnation during the Age of Abolition, was largely desexualized. This desexualisation was essential in distancing the white heroine from her previously hypersexual image and allowed for her reinvention as a type of lady. White West Indian romance heroines during the early nineteenth century would reappear either as the passive wife or daughter of a planter, but never as single or independent women. White female identity became tied to the white woman’s social position within the hierarchy of the plantation structure. This later realignment would impact on the overall characterization of the white heroine; however, the greater site of impact was the manner in which the white woman’s sexuality and radical self-owning would come to be represented.

Conclusion

So on the whole, how do these actions lend themselves to the business of refashioning the nation? I am suggesting that *The Jamaica Lady* incorporates the romance element primarily through wish fulfilment. The novel can be read as a type of wish fulfilment about the erasure of cultural otherness in the form of female sexual effrontery and independence. It relies heavily on the polarizing of English-Creole culture in Jamaica against English naval decorum at sea. The sexual and social subjugation of the woman becomes a large part of this romance as she represents a threat to male sexual and social identities. The West Indian space revolts against this fantasy through its porous sexual roles which are engendered by positions of power offered under the system of slavery.

On the whole, we can assume that the only nation that can be refashioned is England. This refashioning is contingent up on the fact that all the unsavoury types of behaviours in women can be excised from the English space and grafted on the empty spaces of the far away West Indies. In the end, the novel’s England is a place that is peopled with faithful, submissive wives whose passive presence is enough support in the business of imperial expansion.
Double otherness in The Jamaica Lady occurs in many instances in the novel. For instance, Bavia is doubly othered through her social status as a former indentured servant and because of her ugliness; the sailors, because of their low social statuses and their positions as subalterns; Holmesia because she is a former prostitute and a Creole. However, Quomina’s character is othered on many levels: her position as a woman, her position as a slave and blackness of her complexion.

Works Cited


