9-2006

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**Recommended Citation**

WHO WAS COCK ROBIN? A NEW READING OF
ERNA BRODBER'S JANE AND LOUISA WILL
SOON COME HOME

BY DARYL CUMBER DANCE

Erna Brodber is among the most provocative, lionized, and influential novelists in Caribbean literature. Her first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (with which Brodber added a new critical term to literary discourse, *kumbla*), continues to challenge critics and to give every promise of being one of the most highly acclaimed Caribbean novels of the twentieth century. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido’s pioneering *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) takes its title from that novel, clearly an indication that scholars in the field recognize the degree to which Brodber’s work reflects, symbolizes, and articulates the issues, aspirations, and attainments of women writers, indeed of Caribbean writers, of black writers, of (in her own words) “intellectual workers.” The amount of critical attention that *Jane and Louisa* has received reinforces Jean-Pierre Durix’s claim soon after the novel’s 1980 publication that “[p]robably no one else in the West Indies, apart from Wilson Harris, has revolutionized the art of fiction as much as Erna Brodber.”

Much has been written about the quest of Brodber’s protagonist Nellie for identity, for wholeness, for balance, for sanity, for finding her way back home into the community. Nellie’s efforts to find herself and to integrate into the community will be easier, Brodber declared in a speech in 1988, “when Jane and Louisa come home, i.e., when the women find themselves” (Notes). Brodber also observed in that same speech, “‘coming’ rather than ‘being’ is the appropriate action word with which to address the issue of
integration into the community,” a fact suggested by the game that gives the title to this novel.  

An important influence on Nellie’s coming home (i.e., finding herself) is the little mentioned figure Cock Robin, apparently her sweetheart, whose life the reader knows nothing about but whose frequently referenced mystifying end occurred when he “got caught up in the spirit and burnt to grease like beef suet caught in a dutchie pot!” (Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home 52).

The focus of those critics who treat Nellie’s quest to integrate herself into the community is rather on her childhood friend Baba and his key role in leading her on her journey. No one stresses the importance of the fact that Baba appears in the life of the adult Nellie at precisely that point where Cock Robin has just “died.” The fact is, however, that it is really Cock Robin that both Baba and the reader must deal with in order to fully appreciate Nellie’s dilemma and the journey that she must take. Thus, the pertinent question here is not who killed Cock Robin but who was Cock Robin?

Joyce Walker-Johnson briefly mentions in passing that Robin represents the failure of “earlier political activist groups of a volatile and inflammatory nature” and suggests by his very name the fact that “such groups were male-dominated” (52). Carolyn Cooper gives two sentences to Cock Robin: she writes, “Her young man, Cock Robin, full of hot air, goes up in smoke,” and later notes, “[T]he parody of 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, Paul’s sermon on love, foreshadows Cock Robin’s ironic apotheosis” (145). Opal Palmer Adisa mentions his death only to illustrate Brodber’s “deft hand with imagery” (181). June E. Roberts, in her Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion, is the only previous scholar to explore Robin in some depth. In fact, Roberts confidently identifies Cock Robin as a parody of Walter Rodney (19, 23, 117, 120), presumably basing her identification on Brodber’s often stated response to the
Rodney upheaval and her affirmation that Cock Robin was influenced by the Black Power and Marxist movements in the United States and in Jamaica; Roberts further points to Brodber's declaration in an interview with Opal Palmer Adisa, "I wept all through the Rodney upheaval, wept all through the years after that. I wept and wept and wept until I was finally in the hospital . . ." (Adisa 166), a description that reminds us of Nellie's admission, "I wept and wept because I shouldn't weep . . . and so on. I just wept" (Jane and Louisa 53). Roberts also postulates that the name Cock Robin "might suggest an anagram for cocky Rodney" (23). She further proposes that "Cock Robin's immolation can also be read as a veiled reference to Michael Manley's defeat" (23). Though Roberts wrestles with the symbolism and death of the character Cock Robin, she never questions his reality, variously interpreting Brodber's description of his annihilation. At one point she interprets his death as "probably accidental self-immolation" (19); at another point she describes it "as an allusion to animist spirit possession" (23); still later she declares that Robin "had probably been immolated by a homemade bomb, since his death seems to have been caused by an explosion" (134).

Though Zora Neale Hurston is not a source for Jane and Louisa, it is interesting to look at her similarly perplexing end to Cock Robin in her short story, "Cock Robin Beale Street," and the ensuing debate regarding his identification. There Hurston has her Uncle July explain that Cock Robin was not a bird as others claimed, but a real person whom he knew, and that he was not killed with an arrow: "Jest heard Miz Pendleton reading out of some kind of a book how Cock Robin was a real-true bird wid feathers on him and got kilt wid a arrow. Hit's a sin and shame! Tain't a word of it so! I knowed Cock Robin well—was right dere when he got kilt wid a forty-four" (70).

While all the sources that Roberts cites are clearly influential in the development of Brodber's Cock Robin, her
explanation of his death is as problematic as that of Hurston's Miz Pendleton and would probably elicit from Uncle July some such retort as, "All this 'bout how Cock Robin was a real-true human being and got kilt wid a explosion. T'aint a word of it so!"

Brodber provides only a few references to Cock Robin in her text. The reader is led by Nellie to assume that Cock Robin is a member of the activist, nationalist, communist-inspired community-uplift group with which she is involved. Oddly enough, however, though Brodber provides details of the history, activities, personalities, and conversations of all the other male members of this group, she never offers any such introduction to Cock Robin. Through flashbacks the reader learns that Nellie and all the other male members of this group, Egbert, Errol, Barry, and even the somewhat indifferent Baba, grew up in the same village, playing together as young children until "It" (the onset of female development and menstruation) spoiled their innocent play. This, of course, marks the beginning of recognition of the gender divisions that are such an issue in the community and in Nellie's life. The reader learns that the boys went off to high school and then she saw them only on holidays. Later in life after the now-thirty-six-year-old Nellie has returned from university study in the United States, the group members live in a government housing development and work together in their community-uplift group, where it is clear that, with the exception of Baba, they have met regularly for several years: "We have always had a marathon 'think-in' to mark Emancipation Day" (55; emphasis mine), Nellie declares. Again she notes, "[We] repeated some of the basic premises with which we were all familiar after years of being together" (55; emphasis mine). In introducing this group as adults (including one female, Beatrice), Nellie informs of their personalities and roles in their organization:
“Egbert keeps our hearts warm. . . . Errol always finds time to tell us what is in those big volumes he is always reading. . . . Barry doesn’t read; he thinks it is bullshit. . . . Beatrice is rough: but never you mind; her bark is worse than her bite. She can always find time and cloth to make a bandage or two. . . and she is good with a darning needle. I do my small part. I take the minutes. . . .” (50)

In all of this development of these and a few other individuals in her life, there is no indication of Cock Robin’s history, of their meeting, of their interacting, nor of the development of a relationship. In her first mention of the person the reader later learns is Cock Robin, she simply says, “Yes. My man has died” (19). No more information is given about this unnamed individual until she later relates the aspects of his character that presumably caused his death by fire:

My young man loves his people. He gives half of his salary to his people. My young man talks in an unknown tongue . . . words like “underdevelopment,” “Marx,” “cultural pluralism.” I love my young man. He’s got the black spirit and it’s riding him hard. Lead on Robin. Lead on. (46)

Later she conveys the disturbing information that “my young man got caught up in the spirit and burnt to grease like beef suet caught in a dutchie pot” (52). Nellie often attributes her breakdown to the death of her sweetheart, confessing, “[That night] I wept so hard, my tears no longer held salt” (52). Presumably there is nothing left of his body: “my young man had burnt to ash, . . . he wouldn’t even get a headstone nor six foot six of earth but none of that was important since his spirit lived in us” (52). One must assume he burnt up in her room since she tells us that long after his death “bits of his fat had congealed on most of the papers” in her room (65), again a hard-to-explain fact, since one would assume that given the nature of his death, the papers and some other items in Nellie’s room might also have burned.

Despite the long-term closeness of this group, they meet immediately after Robin’s death and no one ever mentions
his name or his death. Is it possible that an activist group would casually proceed with business as usual without even mentioning the death of a member who had just that day been blown up by a homemade bomb as Roberts argues?

Who was this Robin whose death by fire leaves Nellie in a paroxysm of tears but is never remarked or apparently even noticed by anyone else? Who was this Robin who had no history and who appears beyond his devotion to the cause to have had no life? Who was this Robin whose death seems the one significant aspect of his being? On the day of his death, Nellie offers the following illuminating explication: "Robin had reached our highest phase of evolution: he had become a dried up bird and could only crumble into dust" (53). So he is a bird, dust, not the fire she had earlier described. The answer seems to be abundantly clear. Robin never existed outside of Nellie's dissociated mind, which fashions varying descriptions of his end that reflect her current sense of her own disintegration. At one point she declares that he was "reduced to a little bit of smoke" (68). He is an important symbol, one who represents an aspect of her personality, the dried up bird that inhabits her and which must be exorcised in her journey to wholeness. That Robin is indeed but an alter personality is reinforced in the language that ties her and Cock Robin together. She says she is being disintegrated into dust and "ticked . . . into" an urn (53); she is "a cracked up doll" (61); her "skin was feeling very dry and prickly" (65); she recognizes her danger of "becom[ing] a pillar of salt" (73). When Nellie is describing her depressed state, she declares, "So I scratched and walked. Walking fast and scratching, I know I looked like a fowl in an ants' nest. . . . As I walked and scratched in my circle, my body lifted itself into the air and I became nothing" (66; emphasis mine). Again she notes, "God . . . [s]eparates us chicken[s] from birds. Sends us to pick our way through crowded buses, electric wire and asphalt streets . . ." (17).
These frequent self-descriptions that mirror the nature of Cock Robin; the tone of the account of Robin’s death; Nellie’s previously cited sarcastic description of his radicalism and the impact of his life (46); her frequent uses of his death to rationalize her problems; and her occasional suggestion that Robin lives in her reinforce the fact that Robin is only a convenient figment of her imagination. He clearly serves the same function for her that Mr D serves for Miss D, the cold-hearted toll collector at the government house where Nellie and her friends live and where they must pay a fee every time they leave. Miss D explains that she cannot allow anyone to pass without the full fee because her boss, Mr D, will kill her (50). Nellie notes, “We suspect that she is also Mr D” (50). The reader, likewise, may suspect that Nellie is also Cock Robin, for Robin clearly represents the dead part of herself. Images of her disintegration are consistent with the descriptions of his presumed death by fire. The only cause given for the fire that led to his death is his enthusiasm for his cause—and it is precisely her dedication to this mockery of a cause that is, she will soon learn, burning her out. Even though others presumably respond to Robin’s death, even their “responses” appear to be creations of Nellie’s imagination. She asserts, “Today, in deference to me, Barry used no swear words” (52). “In their kindliness, they were trying to keep me from breaking down” (52). She mentions Errol’s efforts to “pretend that nothing had happened” (52), quite likely a result of the fact that indeed nothing perceivable to others had happened to a member of their group. The only direct comment that anyone seems to make about Nellie’s crying occurs when she wanders among the lower-class people in the compound and one person says, “What happen. Is you guy beat you up” (54). As Nellie’s unusual behavior continues, we have one vague and general account of neighborhood gossip that might arguably refer to Robin’s death: “Poor childe. She studying too much. Is the man you know. Just burn up
so. Is the reaction. . . . Soon gone off her head. Poor thing . . .” (65). It is very likely, given Nellie’s internal analysis of her own confused state, that this undocumented conversation was not something she actually heard, but rather imagined that others were saying, something not inconsistent with the dissociative personality. Brodber has said that the novel might have been subtitled “The Integration of the Dissociated Self” (Notes). One section of *Jane and Louisa* is titled “Voices,” and there we hear snatches of conversations and voices which the ego cannot yet integrate into a coherent tale. One might argue that this snippet is just one of those disembodied voices.

The fact that Cock Robin does not actually exist except in Nellie’s mind is clearly indicated: there is no actual direct reference to this historyless character, nothing more than something that Nellie perceives to be a reference; nobody ever calls his name; no direct scene portrays him; no statement is attributed to him; no part of his body remains after his death, only possibly some grease and ash. Indeed, it is clear that Cock Robin may be seen to be merely another kumbla that Nellie has invented for protection, another kumbla such as many of Brodber’s characters use to protect themselves, not unlike the imaginary “sons” that Anancy surrenders to Dryhead, who are all indeed but another facet of the one real son, Tacuma, that Anancy thereby tricks Dryhead into allowing him to take back home.

Cock Robin can only be explained as an imagined, created character that is merely an aspect or expression of Nellie’s own personality. Some hints that these two are really one may be suggested in Egbert’s lesson following Nellie’s description of Cock Robin’s death, where he reminds “of the transfiguration, of how Elijah and Christ became one” (52). Nellie interprets that to refer to “a spiritual fusion” and goes on to reflect that “[Robin’s] spirit lived in us. . . . Robin had once had body too. We had been bodies: and what was there to show for it?” (52).
She then reflects on the path that she and her colleagues had taken, one that "[led] to dessication" and "exterminating water" (53). At this point, she gains a critical awareness: "I saw that it was us who had killed Cock Robin" (53). It is here for the first time that she refers to him as Cock Robin, thus associating him with the song "Who Killed Cock Robin" that Brodber notes was dramatized at nearly every children's concert to which I went or in which I participated up until around age 12. I know it was in the Community Song book from which my mother played but I think the song was a community property rather than something which came immediately from the book at the time of my acquaintance with it. As you probably know I have been fascinated by the songs and ring games I played as a child and explore their meaning in my novels. 'Who Killed Cock Robin' has always fascinated me and bothered me. It was while I was thinking though the political issues which resulted in Jane and Louisa that I knew who killed Cock Robin. (Letter, 28 January 2006)

The song to which Brodber refers opens with the question,

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
with my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?
I, said the fly, with my little eye,
I saw him die.

And the song goes on and on with varied questions, "Who'll dig his grave?" / Who'll be the parson?" / "Who'll sing a psalm?" / "Who'll toll the bell?" etc., with varied birds and other animals volunteering for each request, and concluding:

All the birds of the air
fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,
When they heard the bell toll
for poor Cock Robin.
What is the relationship of Brodber’s unmourned and un-funeralized Cock Robin to the mourned, elegized, and buried Cock Robins of folklore and literature? In a response to my question about her intention, Brodber explained,

Cock Robin is by no means an after thought. Through his character I discuss male/female relations and critique the ‘academic’ politics of my peers. Robin is the quintessential black Marxist, giving his life to his people, cheered on by intellectuals but unable to create the revolution because he hasn’t been able to make the personal and honest link with his social past, his grass roots. He is another image of the man on the lonely donkey. (Letter, 28 January 2006)

Here in her allusion to “the man on the lonely donkey” Brodber refers to a story told Nellie by her spirit-guide, Aunt Alice. In this story another idealistic man rides away from a land engulfed in famine: “He stood for the right so he was leaving, riding upright. Not swinging with the gait of the donkey as women do, nor with his feet stuck out on either side, hurrying the donkey with the seat of his body as men do. Just upright and with determination” (39). The donkey collapses and he keeps walking right over the donkey’s head till he stopped and apparently went up in a blaze (39).

The rest of Nellie’s journey might figuratively be said to complete the process of expunging the Cock Robin (and perhaps by extension the man on the donkey) that is leading to her breakdown. This male fanaticism, this cockiness that blinds men to the traditional knowledge of the community and separates them from the folk is an unfortunate element that Nellie has embraced and that is now burning her out. She must expunge Cock Robin and dispose of his ashes before she can find her water, her community, her self. As Erna Brodber explained in a letter to me, “My position on the women’s movement is articulated through the character Robin: It is the women who will have to ‘come home’, understand and acknowledge their grass roots, and then make relevant the dissociated leftist
politics. Only then can the men be socially and politically realized” (28 January 2006). In another letter she explained, “When the women come back and find feet as Jane and Louisa eventually did, the men will be able to stand. They will not crumble to ash like Cock Robin and the man on the lonely donkey” (5 May 2006).

In Nellie’s case this process is facilitated by the reappearance in her life of Baba, a childhood friend who appears, unseen and unrecognized, when Nellie is at the point of collapse, crying uncontrollably about everything (Cock Robin, herself and others—the world). He mysteriously approaches from behind and kisses her, leaving with her the unforgettable smell of sweet lime and the possibility of carrying on. He materializes again at a “think in” of their organization, presumably unrecognized either by Nellie or the other neighborhood boys with whom he had played as a child. At a series of meetings for which Nellie, as usual, records the minutes, he observes and carves a pear seed baby doll that he ultimately presents to her. Predictably, it crumbles in her lap, reminding us of Robin, who had become a dried up bird crumbling into dust. This is clearly Baba’s way of warning her that she is a vulnerable, cracked up doll, being shaped by others, hiding from herself in meaningless activities, being, as she had before recognized, “ticked... into urns” (53).

Despite the fact that Nellie might be described as a new black woman—educated, sophisticated, worldly, politically active, career oriented, the truth is that she is vulnerable in her relationships with men and in her work in “the Brotherhood,” where she is relegated to taking the minutes, performing the thankless labor, and supporting the men, who make the decisions, do the talking, and enjoy the spotlight. She is little more than the only other woman mentioned, Beatrice, who, though rough, is most memorable for typically female tasks such as nursing and sewing. The only other comment about Beatrice suggests mental inferiority, too: “It struck me that everyone knew
Angry at Baba’s audacity in so brutally unveiling her true character with the pear seed baby doll, Nellie later goes to his room to confront him—and he begins the process of leading her on the journey to save herself. “Straight and tall in a long white gown [and] wearing Jesus sandals” (63), holding his hand out to her “shepherd-like” (63) as she enters his room, Baba is clearly a Christ figure. The Christian imagery is reinforced by his uncertain birth and origins and the revelation that he was “sent here for a purpose” (143) and that he has “saving power” (115). From early childhood, he has been a self-confident leader. Now he knows what she is thinking and planning to say before she speaks. He is always calm, peaceful, at ease, self-assured. His room is “sanctified” and “immaculate,” his life absolutely clean and uncluttered. He can effect cures through a laying on of hands: “With just his index finger he had probed the base of my skull that day, had made me sweat and broken my fever. He could draw water from the brain” (68). The imagery associating this Rasta man with divinity is not merely Christian: he is described as “an obeah man of an anancy” (69) and as a “Haitian obeah man” (60); he disappears into an electric bulb, offering “a fleeting glimpse of Nancy’s transfiguration” (76). But most importantly, he performs the miracles that lead to Nellie’s resurrection, assuring her, “You too know what the resurrection is like. You have a clean slate, you can start all over again” (67; emphasis mine).12

The ultimate indication of the true relationship of Cock Robin and Nellie comes in Nellie’s ensuing recognition that if she is resurrected, if she can “grow feet and stand, then perhaps . . . Cock Robin could stand up and sing again and the man on the lonely donkey needn’t dissipate into smoke” (147). Her resurrection is indeed their resurrection.
One cannot help but note that Brodber’s Cock Robin bears some similarities to Ralph Ellison’s Poor Robin, despite the fact that Brodber, who first read and was “very very impressed with” Invisible Man in 1968, did not consciously recall the references to Robin in that novel during our correspondence (Letter, 28 January 2006). Reflecting on the way in which he has been manipulated by his college president, Dr. Bledsoe, the white liberal New Yorker Emerson, and a host of others to whom he had been sent with letters that doomed him, Ellison’s Invisible Man observes a graveyard and a shoeshine boy dancing for pennies (all of which evoke those communities “dead and living” that Nellie knows can “form a pit or a shelter for you” [Jane and Louisa 12]), and finds himself singing:

O well they picked poor Robin clean
O well they picked poor robin clean
Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
Lawd, they picked all the feathers round
from Robin’s rump
Well they picked poor Robin clean. (IM 193)

He reflects on the

who-what-when-why-where of poor old Robin? What had he done and who had tied him and why had they plucked him. . . . Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. . . . Who was I anyway? . . . I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed. By slow degrees . . .

“My dear Mr. Emerson,” I said aloud. “The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running. Your most humble and obedient servant, A. H. Bledsoe. . . .”

Sure, that’s the way it was, I thought, a short, concise verbal coup de grace, straight to the nape of the neck. And Emerson would write in reply? Sure: “Dear Bled, have met Robin and shaved tail. Signed, Emerson.” (IM 193-94)

Like Nellie, Invisible Man recognizes that he is indeed Poor Robin. This is further reinforced when later, like Nellie, he finds himself seeking his identity in an activist, communist-inspired group, where he is again “picked clean.”
Ellison’s source is clearly the old signifying jazz riff that he attributes to the old Blue Devils Orchestra of the 1930s. (There is a recording of the same song by Luke Jordan, a Virginia blues guitarist and vocalist in 1927.) In a 1962 article, “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz,” Ellison notes that Charlie “Bird” Parker probably learned the song from the verse he (Ellison) attributes to Walter Page of the Blue Devils and that he uses in Invisible Man. Ellison concludes his discussion of his hearing of the song: “Poor robin [sic] was picked again and again, and his pluckers were ever unnamed and mysterious. Yet the tune was inevitably productive of laughter even when we ourselves were its object. For each of us recognized that his fate was somehow our own. Our defeats and failures, even our final defeat by death, were loaded upon his back and given ironic significance and thus made more bearable” (“On Bird” 75-76).

Brodber’s Cock Robin is a symbol of death and sacrifice just like Ellison’s Poor Robin—and, I might add, the Egyptian phoenix. Like the Egyptian phoenix that builds a nest that it then ignites and is reduced to ashes from which a new young phoenix arises, Robin’s sacrificial death by fire allows for the possibility of the regeneration of Nellie. And just as Jane and Louisa ends with the possibility of birth/rebirth/resurrection for Nellie—“We are getting ready” (147)—Invisible Man ends with a similarly optimistic vision also growing out of dreams: “I’m shaking off the old skin . . . I’m coming out.” (581). Both endings reinforce Brodber’s insistence that “‘coming’ rather than ‘being’ is the appropriate action word with which to address the issue of integration into the community,” a fact suggested by the game that gives the title and the structure to Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home.

In the essay “Fiction in the Scientific Procedure” Erna Brodber declares that one of her goals in her fictional, anthropological, historical, and sociological work has been to “explor[e] . . . the links between the way of life forged by
the people of two points of the black diaspora—the Afro-Americans and the Afro-Jamaicans" (167). She goes on to say that the “shipmates . . . made a New World thing of their own. . . . It is time now for the intellectuals and political activists to solidify this effort by using their special skills to clarify and describe these connections” (168). I was thus much delighted that my small efforts to discuss African American and African Jamaican shared use of Cock Robin and Poor Robin met with Dr. Brodber’s approval. After telling me of her current project exploring a group of African American enslaved living on a plantation near her home in Woodside in 1817, one with the name Dance, she concluded, “You can see why I am so excited by your interrogation of Robin.’ I am going back to your Folktales to see if there are any other similarities” (Letter, 28 January 2006).

How fascinating to continue together to explore the ties that bind!

Notes

1 This essay is a revision of a paper presented at the 10th Anniversary International Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars in Hollywood, FL, on May 30, 2006.

2 Noting the “activist intentions” of her sociology and “the fiction that serves it” in the fight for black solidarity, Brodber suggests that the most appropriate label for her is “intellectual worker” (“Fiction,” Caribbean Women Writers, 164 and 168).

3 In this game the children form a circle and sing, “Jane and Louisa will soon come home / Soon come home, / Jane and Louisa will soon come home / Into this beautiful garden,” while the initiate taps the circle and enters. The singing continues with the initiate performing accordingly, “My dear will you allow me to pick a rose / waltz with you / marry you,” etc. (my abbreviation of Brodber’s description in “Notes”).

4 See, for example, Carolyn Cooper, Joyce Walker-Johnson, June E. Roberts, and Daryl Cumber Dance, “Go Eena Kumbla.”

5 Walker-Johnson’s commentary on Cock Robin includes only two sentences and a footnote.

6 On October 15, 1968, Rodney’s visa was revoked and he was denied permission to return to Jamaica and to his job at the University of the West Indies, sparking numerous demonstrations and two days of rioting. Brodber told me after I read this paper that Rodney’s “influence” on her has been exaggerated (Conversation, May 30, 2006).
7 Beatrice, apparently the only other female, is also the only member of the group other than Robin who is given no history and whose voice we never hear; however, her presence in the meetings is clearly documented.

8 "I think I had a right to their pity. After all, how many women's men burn to ash? I had a perfectly good claim to being a martyr if they so felt like treating me" (66). "And had I not good reason to cry? How many women have seen their men reduced to a little bit of smoke, just enough to hold in an inkwell!" (68).

9 The image of the kumbla derives in this novel from a popular Anancy story in which Anancy dupes Dryhead into believing that he is surrendering all of his sons to him by telling Tacuma, the only son that is actually there, "Go eena kumbla," which Dryhead interprets as a bad word uttered by a grief-stricken father as he gives over all of his children; conversely, to Tucuma it means to find himself a camouflage, as he poses as first one and then another of his "brothers," goes into Dryhead's cellar, and then sneaks out again (123-30). The narrator explains that a kumbla is like a beach ball that never goes down, like an egg shell that does not crack, like a parachute, like a space ship, like a womb, a safe, protective cocoon that protects one from the outside world (123). Thus the comfortable, protected world of Nellie's childhood was her first kumbla. Everybody seeks a kumbla when threatened with pain or danger: Nellie's great grandmother Tia Maria "did everything to annihilate herself" (i.e., rejecting everything black (139)) and "built a fine and effective kumbla out of [her white mate] William's skin" (142). Prayer was apparently her Granny Tucker's kumbla (145). Nellie's "hoity-toity" fair-skinned Aunt Becca built a kumbla of respectability, and it was she who "showed [Nellie] where to find and how to wear [her] kumbla" (142). Indeed, it was a given that "black tinged women" had to build a kumbla to protect themselves as they waited for that unlikely miracle of finding the right man (142-43).

10 Carolyn Cooper notes lime's "capacity to 'run duppy,' and its folkloristic associations with asceticism" (146).

11 That it is the men who do the talking, and not Nellie, is frequently indicated. Speaking of their meetings, Nellie notes, "It could take a considerable amount of exposure to follow the gist of what we were saying (not me really. The fellows. I was taking down notes for all I was worth)" (55). On another occasion when a new recruit came in, she tells us what the different males said, suggesting that they spoke "on behalf of all of us," noting of herself only, "I smiled." Then she informs us that after her male companions did all the talking to him, his response seemed, unexpectedly, directed to her: "The funny thing, though, was that he addressed his words in my direction" (56).

12 This discussion of Baba is taken from Dance, "'Go Eena Kumbla,,'" 176.

13 Recorded August 16, 1927, by Victor (Vi 20957). Jordan (1892-1952) lived in Lynchburg, VA.

14 Earlier he was nicknamed "Yardbird."

15 In this closing scene, Nellie has dreamed that she is carrying a fish in her belly, but she is having trouble giving birth to it. However, she is not frustrated, for she is confident:

It will come.

Goodbye great grandfather Will, Tia, Granny Tucker, Corpie, aunts and uncles and cousins.
Goodbye Aunt Becca.
We are getting ready. (147)

16 Brodber, “Notes.”
17 Brodber’s reference is to Dance, Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans.

Works Cited


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