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The Daughters of Bertha Mason: Caribbean Madwomen in Laura Fish's 'Strange Music'

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Abstract: Inspired by the history of poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," *Strange Music* (2008) by Laura Fish tells the story of Elizabeth and two former slave women working on her family's plantation on Jamaica. The women suffer from two different types of madness: what might be called the madness of the metropolis and the madness of the colonies. In the case of Kaydia and Sheba, two Afro-Caribbean women, the text disputes the nineteenth-century notion that madness is inherent to black women. Their madness is instead grounded in the pain of sexual and racial exploitation. The uncontrollable sexuality is that of the white master rather than the black slave. Elizabeth's hysteria has its roots in sexuality; centrally, through the double that appears to her in her opium hallucinations, the madness of the metropolitan woman is connected to that of the colonial women.

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Chapter 4

The Daughters of Bertha Mason—Caribbean Madwomen in Laura Fish's *Strange Music*

Olivia Tjon-A-Meeuw

Bertha Mason is an iconic figure of nineteenth-century literature. The madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) casts a large shadow in both literature and literary criticism. Already during the nineteenth century, Brontë's madwoman became famous, influencing even medical discourse: "Bertha's violence, dangerousness, and rage, her regression to an inhuman condition and her sequestration became such a powerful model for Victorian readers, including psychiatrists, that it influenced even medical accounts of female insanity" (Showalter 1985: 68). She has been read as Jane's "truest and darkest double" by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gunbar (2000 [1979], 360), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has read her as the white colonial Other (1985). Clare Savage, the protagonist of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), chooses Bertha as her heroine, a model for her own revolutionary self. One of the most influential readings of this character remains Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), in which the novelist reimagines Brontë's "clothed hyena" (Brontë 2000 [1847], 293) as Antoinette Cosway, a young creole woman, shattered by the changes that abolition has wrought on Jamaica. Instead of a voiceless, animalistic Other of the white woman Jane, Antoinette becomes the narrator of her own story. This move from the margins to the centre of the text is typical of women's writing in the 1960s, Monika Kaup explains. The madwoman is no longer the double but the protagonist (1993, 93). This shift is evident in the neo-Victorian novel under discussion here; *Strange Music* by Laura Fish (2009 [2008]), inspired by the life and poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, follows the path laid out by *Wide Sargasso Sea* by featuring three narrators who experience madness.

Rhys' novel is an early example of both neo-Victorian and postcolonial re-writing. As a neo-Victorian text, it is engaged in a conversation with a seminal Victorian text. Rhys

challenges the marginalisation of Empire in Victorian texts, instead choosing to show how the Victorian novel had a vested interest in the project of Empire, anticipating Edward Said's theoretical discussion of this fact, when he writes that "imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible ... to read one without in some way dealing with the Other" (1994, 71). As a postcolonial Caribbean text, *Wide Sargasso Sea* prefigures much of later Caribbean women's writing. As numerous critics have pointed out, there is an obsession with the madwoman in Caribbean writing; the figure of Bertha Mason in particular is rewritten again and again. Such rewritings, Ankhi Mukherjee argues, signal the constructedness of literary texts, identity categories and cultural formations: "the work of rewriting then is to look awry at virtual pasts, interrupt collective identities and the habitual coherence of cultural experience" (2007, 54). *Strange Music* engages in such disruption by showing how the madness of both black and white women is not intrinsic to women and blackness but, instead, is the result of the violence of slavery. By analysing the narratives of the three women, white and black, from the metropolis and the colonies, and their versions of madness, it will become clear how the novel posits their insanity as the only reasonable answer to the systemic violence of the colonial enterprise, engaging in a neo-Victorian and postcolonial challenge to the Victorian predecessors.

Madness is more than insanity; according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "madness" also refers to "imprudence, delusion," "wild excitement or enthusiasm" or "uncontrollable anger, rage, fury" (n.p.). Whenever someone is described as mad, all these meanings are also activated. John Thieme expands on the specific Caribbean context of madness from a Foucauldian framework, arguing that madness "is culturally constructed, a discursive formation, in which a group, usually a dominant group, designates deviations from its supposed norms as 'mad'" (2013, 95). In the West Indian context, these deviations from the norm are often based on race as well as gender. Frequently, it is the rebellious Other who is designated

as mad. Depending on who is speaking, Kelly Baker Josephs (3) explains, “mad” thus has different connotations; “it can be both derogatory and desirable, both criticism and commendation” in the Caribbean context (2013, 3).

During the nineteenth century, the black woman was widely believed to have a so-called excessive, primitive sexual appetite, which was said to even drive her to copulate with apes (S. Gilman 1985a, 212). Kathleen J. Renk explains that in addition, the tropical climate was seen as conducive to madness, making the Caribbean the place where madness and sexual excess came together (1999, 89). She argues that the preoccupation with the madwoman in anglophone Caribbean writing is a direct challenge to these Victorian stereotypes of “the primitives,” which continue to shape the image of the West Indies: “This focus on female and colonial madness challenges the nineteenth-century discourse that positioned the madwoman and the colonies as loci of uncontrollable sexuality equated with a madness that must be controlled by paternal surveillance and governance” (89). Rather than controlling and suppressing madness, the patriarchal surveillance and governance actually produces it in the first place.

Wide Sargasso Sea rewrites *Jane Eyre*’s portrayal of madness as a congenital disease. When Rochester tells Jane the story of his marriage to Bertha, he discusses the Mason family, laying out a pattern of madness: Her mother “was mad; and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too; a complete dumb idiot. The elder one ... will probably be in the same state one day” (Brontë 305). In contrast to this, Rhys reads Antoinette’s madness not as something intrinsic to Creole women, but as a result of the destabilisation of Jamaican society in the wake of the abolition of slavery. As a white Creole, she falls between the black freedmen and the new white arrivals from the metropolis; she is a “white nigger” (10). Her husband, who is one of the new arrivals from England, is obsessed with finding out what he calls the truth about her heritage: “Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but

they are not English or European either” (40). As this otherness in her unsettles him, the husband ultimately drives her to madness.

He exerts his power over Antoinette in two ways; firstly, he constantly questions her about her family, surveilling her, which undermines her sense of identity as a white creole subject. Secondly, he uses sex as a tool of power. Antoinette and her husband initially seem to engage in sexual activities every night during their honeymoon. The husband refers to orgasm as dying, so Antoinette symbolically dies every night as a result of sex (57). But literal death is also threatened, as the husband confesses that Antoinette came close to actually dying during their sexual encounters: “I... wonder if she ever guessed how near she came to dying. In her way, not mine. ... Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness” (58). Christophine, the observant servant, analyses his behaviour succinctly: “And then . . . you make love to her till she drunk with it, no rum could make her drunk like that, till she can’t do without. It’s *she* can’t see the sun any more. Only you she see. But all you want is to break her up” (98). The husband does not inflict sexual violence on his wife, but instead he uses abstinence to purposefully destroy her. At the same time, he casts her as a woman with an insatiable sexual appetite: “She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would—or could. *Or could*” (106). He reads Antoinette as mad because she is sexual; he speaks within a Victorian discourse that, as Renk explains, equates madness with sexual behaviour (91). The novel as a whole challenges this notion but finds no escape from the madness of the creole.

In her postcolonial neo-Victorian novel *Strange Music*, Laura Fish follows in Rhys’ footsteps by challenging the notion that madness is an intrinsic part of the tropical colonies, race or women, instead revealing the madness of the metropolis and the colonies to be the result of the trauma of slavery. The novel takes as its starting point the life of Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and in particular, her poem “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s

Point” (1848). In that poem an American slave tells of why she chose to murder her own child: “I could not bear / To look in his face, it was so white” (1850 [1848], 18:120–21). The child was the result of a sexual assault by the white master. She cannot live with the constant reminder of the rape in the form the child’s light skin colour, so she kills the baby. The poem, however, does not cast her as a madwoman. Defiantly, she exclaims to the white men who have caught her and strung her up to the flogging-place: “I am not mad,—I am black!” (32:217); thus, the poem points to the fact that her behaviour is intimately tied up with her position as black slave woman in a pre-emancipation United States. Her so-called mad behavior is the direct result of her existence as an enslaved woman.

Fish picks up on this understanding of madness by telling a broader story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her family. In her correspondence with her friend, the historical Barrett Browning explained that the poem was inspired by a story her cousin Richard told her. Richard was an illegitimate cousin of her father and lived in Jamaica. The Barrett family had extensive holdings on the island; Barrett Browning’s paternal grandfather owned more than 10,000 acres distributed over four estates. Similarly, her maternal grandparents’ fortune was in part based on Jamaican sugar plantations. Barrett Browning felt uncomfortable about the origin of her family’s fortune and was active in abolitionist circles; her poem is part of the abolitionist effort (Stone 2008, n.p.).

In her novel, Fish imagines Elizabeth’s life between 1838 and 1840, when she was sick and sequestered in Torquay, on the coast of Devon. She mixes first-person narration with excerpts from the historical Barrett Browning’s correspondence to weave an image of the poet’s mental state. This mixture of archival material and imaginings points to the porous boundary between fiction and history (Brindle 2014, 9). Using “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” as her point of departure, Fish interweaves Elizabeth’s metropolitan story with that of two colonial women in Jamaica, during and after the apprenticeship system, which

followed the abolition of slavery. One is Sheba, a former slave, who works in the cane fields. She is raped by the white masters, amongst them Elizabeth's cousin Richard. When she falls pregnant—like the nameless speaker in the poem—she kills the child once it is born. The second woman is Kaydia, who works in the great house on the Cinnamon plantation, where Elizabeth's brother Sam is installed. When she realises Sam is abusing her nine-year old daughter Mary Ann, Kaydia desperately tries to divert his attention from her by seducing him.

By interweaving three different first-person narrators and jumping in time and place, the novel gives room to the voice of the subaltern, just as Rhys does by putting Antoinette at the centre of the narrative: "The voices of resistance are represented linguistically through hybrid and experimental languages, and generically through patterns of fusion and disruption: the epistolary, diary, and first-person novel is broken up by omniscient narration ...; the realist novel is injected with the uncanny and transformed into magic realism" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 69). Sheba and Kaydia's narration is hybrid, as they speak in Jamaican patois, which is the result of English and African languages colliding. In Victorian texts such language would have been used as a marker of inferiority; in *Strange Music* it is a way of representing the specific identity of these women. It is not a monolithic identity because Kaydia's variety is closer to standard English than that of Sheba. The magic realism which Heilmann and Llewellyn allude to is strong in Elizabeth's sections where she has visions of a woman in the mirror. All three women have brushes with madness, which are, however, specific to their respective locations in the metropolis and the colony and the consequences of this situating; as Elizabeth thinks at one point, "places are ideas that can madden or kill" (Fish 66).¹

To Be Guilty Is to be Mad—Elizabeth

Elizabeth's madness bears traces of that typical nineteenth-century ailment of women: hysteria that shows itself in both physical and mental symptoms. For instance, Elizabeth has lost her

appetite (Fish 5). Anorexia, Elaine Showalter explains, was seen as one of the symptoms of hysteria (129). Darwinian psychiatrists such as T. Clifford Allbutt saw this behaviour as the most extreme version of the feminine role: a performance of self-sacrifice by turning oneself into a little woman. Showalter, in contrast, reads it as a means of protest, in a time when their bodies were paramount for women (128–29). This reading is relevant for *Strange Music*. Right after explaining how much weight she lost, Elizabeth adds, “But I am bloated with guilt” (Fish, 5). This guilt is the result of her family’s involvement, first in slavery, and then in the exploitation of the freedmen, as she explains at a later point. It is a guilt she tries to assuage with fasting after her father is furious about her signing a petition to abolish the apprenticeship system early: “But that night Arabel and I did not eat—we shared in the apprentices’ suffering” (14). Elizabeth is not turning herself into an ideal angel in the house, but aligning herself even more radically with the racial Other. As punishment for this rebellion, the sisters are whipped by their father, paralleling the plight of the apprentices. Clearly, the anorexia, while the result of physical ailments, is a way of rebellion; yet, the text does not champion hysteria as a way of resistance, but ultimately as a sign of impotence. Elizabeth exclaims: “I conversely belong to that pitiful order of weak women who cannot command their bodies with their souls at every moment, and who sink down in hysterical disorder when they ought to act and resist” (132).

Elizabeth’s hysteria is triggered by both extreme emotional states and a lack of sexuality. Over the centuries, the causes scholars saw at the root of what they called “hysteria” have shifted, but they have generally been rooted in a lack or excess of sexuality. This emphasis on sexuality is not surprising, considering the root of the word, which goes back to the Greek word for “uterus.” In ancient Greece and Rome, it was thought that hysteria was caused by a loose uterus moving around in the body (Beizer 1994, 5). The uterus was always present in the various theories on hysteria throughout the centuries, at the very least metaphorically, making hysteria an essentially female disease, until the etiology of the disease shifted from physiology

to psychology towards the end of the nineteenth century (Bergo 2007, 8). And yet, the association with femininity remained.

Some of Elizabeth's hysterical attacks are brought on by rejections by men. She remembers her friendship with Hugh Stuart Boyd, a scholar of Greek. Elizabeth is attracted to him, but he shows no interest, "so I would boil over for hours in near hysterics after my long visits amounted, at most, to my reading Greek aloud to him" (Fish 69). It is a lack of sex that brings on these hysterical attacks. Interestingly, Elizabeth describes Boyd as "almost bleached of colour" (69), while her own skin colour is something of a source of anxiety. Boyd is not the only man to deny Elizabeth her sexuality; by her father's decree, all the Barrett siblings are barred from marrying, because there are already too many Barretts in Jamaica and their racial origins are questionable. Instead of controlling the madwoman, the paternal governance is what brings her forth in the first place. Other hysterical fits are brought on by extreme emotional states; whenever a family member departs, Elizabeth is "prone to fainting and uncontrollable tears" (8).

These leave-takings increase Elizabeth's isolation which has been prescribed by her doctor. This isolation is a form of the rest-cure, which has become infamous through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), wherein a nameless narrator is ordered to stay in a former nursery in order to recuperate after the birth of her child; she is considered to have a "slight hysterical tendency" by her husband (1). She is specifically forbidden from writing by her doctor, who also happens to be her husband. She does it anyway—the short story is in the form of her diary—but more importantly, she begins reading the yellow wallpaper in her room; slowly, she comes to see a woman behind the pattern and finally identifies with her entirely, as she frees her double and herself from behind the walls, as she slowly turns insane: "I don't like to *look* out of the windows even – there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper

as I did?” (17; emphasis in original). *Strange Music* picks up on this seminal text by enriching the metropolitan feminist themes with a more intersectional approach.

Like the nameless narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Elizabeth is a writer who is forbidden from writing by her physician Dr. Barry, in order to further her convalescence. The neo-Victorian *Strange Music* makes explicit what is only implicit in the short story, namely that it is only the injunction of writing which allows the text to be produced. Gilman’s story is the very product of the prohibition: a text about secretly writing. At one point the narrator exclaims, “There comes [the husband and physician] John and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word” (4). Elizabeth herself explains that she can only write when she is forbidden from doing so: “I never can write when ordered to, but when refused, *that* is when I can” (Fish 6; emphasis in original). The patriarchal veto makes these women productive, bearing out Michel Foucault’s theories on the productivity of power in *History of Sexuality* (1998). Indeed, when Dr. Barry dies and with him his prohibition, Elizabeth longs to write, but she cannot: “now Dr. Barry is gone, I *must* write. I *must* write. What grand thoughts these are—I *cannot*” (Fish 174; emphasis in original).

It is not only texts which are produced as a result of the interdiction, but also madness. Gilman’s narrator turns mad as a result of her forced inactivity: “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (5). Elizabeth fears her fate would be the same: “And I fear that if much more goes wrong I shall go mad!—Such thoughts are, to Papa, but phantoms of the mind. Yet from a play of thoughts and words what is not becomes reality. No, I am *not* mad. I am cut off from the world. Maddeningly” (17). It is the treatment which produces the illness. Additionally, Elizabeth also connects madness to the role of imagination; to think of one as mad endangers one’s sanity. Crucially, she also rejects the designation of madness, but cannot quite escape it after all.

While *Strange Music* treats Elizabeth’s suffering seriously, hysterics were often

accused of faking their symptoms. Thus, modern criticism of hysteria has frequently focused on the performance element of the condition, in particular in relation to Jean-Martin Charcot and his treatment of hysterics at his clinic La Salpêtrière in Paris during the final decades of the nineteenth-century. Even at the time, there was the suspicion that the hysterical attacks which Charcot's patients displayed in the lecture theatre were the result of, if not fraud, then suggestion (Showalter 150) because the patients wanted to please their doctors. *Strange Music* moves away from these suspicions. Elizabeth's symptoms are not on display when her other doctor Mr. Weale is around: "When we were next alone Mr. Weale said it was '*a nervous cough*.' He then made me talk of poetry, and gave me Coleridge's works—though I was nervous, I did not cough" (Fish 64). The diagnosis of nervous cough is treated with a certain irony, but what is central here is that Mr. Weale responds to Elizabeth's interests and, instead of forbidding her to even think about poetry, he encourages her, thus making her symptoms disappear—at least for the moment. Poetry is what keeps her sane.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is invoked even more directly, when Elizabeth writes to her friend Miss Mitford, asking her if she knows "what it is to be shut up in a room by oneself, to multiply one's thoughts by one's thoughts—how hard it is to know what 'one's thought is like'—how it grows and grows, and spreads and spreads, and ends in taking some supernatural colour—just like mustard and cress on a (wet) flannel in a dark closet?" (Fish 63). Her thoughts take on a yellow colour and, like the nameless narrator, she finds her thoughts growing, but they do not become visible on a wall; Elizabeth does not find her double in the wallpaper but in her mirror, at least at first. During her opium high, she keeps seeing a woman in the mirror, whom Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn interpret as versions of the other female characters in the text (84), but who is more fruitfully read as Elizabeth's dark double—just like Bertha was read as Jane's dark double by Gilbert and Gubar (84). Furthermore, as made clear by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this dark double needs to be thought in terms of race.

The choice of the mirror for the appearance of the double is a fitting one, since it functions as a middle ground between utopia and heterotopia, as Foucault argues in “Of Other Spaces” (1986).² The utopian aspect of the mirror is due to the fact that it is a place without a place which opens up a virtual space. Seeing oneself in the mirror reveals a sort of shadow that makes the self visible. The heterotopian aspect of the mirror is due to its existence as a physical object: “Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and reconstitute myself there were I am” (Foucault 1986, 24). The gaze into the mirror forces the subject to see herself and in the wake of that gaze to refashion herself, incorporating what she has seen of herself. In addition, heterotopias are spaces in which all other spaces in a culture are represented, inverted and contested.³ In *Strange Music*, the mirror connects Elizabeth to a virtual space, namely a reality where she has an African heritage as the result of her family’s association with slavery. It contests her identity as a white subject and forces her to reckon with the other that made her.⁴

The novel picks up on debates between Barrett Browning’s biographers such as Julia Markus, who, according to Marjorie Stone, speculated that the poet did, indeed, have African blood. Yet, while other branches of the Barrett family were racially mixed, there is no evidence to support the speculation that the same was true for the poet’s lineage (quoted in Stone n.p.). Fish nevertheless uses this starting point to connect Elizabeth to her family’s legacy, both on a personal and poetical level. At one point Elizabeth speaks of a “grotesque vision,” when the woman is nursing a child with brown skin colour. “A Negro baby, here, in my room? Surely it isn’t kin of mine. I do not fear the future. It is the past that scares me. It is impossible to reconcile the past” (Fish 173). The double reveals the hidden fear of a dark secret, to be exposed through a child, whose African heritage could not be ignored. This revelation would be the result of past misdeeds of her family, which Elizabeth cannot undo.

Elizabeth is both fascinated and repulsed by the woman in the mirror; she says: “I am small and black. (Black, I imagine, as Sappho.) A thin partition divides us; why do I regard the woman who watches me with distaste? ... The mouth is large, obstinate, projecting—she is full-lipped—and has dark eyes, deep and calm, and long thick ringlets, again, dark brown, almost black”(10). She sees in the reflection both herself, but also someone else. This moment is found, too, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when Antoinette finally sees the woman that has been haunting the house in England: “It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with the streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (Rhys 123). She misrecognises herself. This misrecognition is the basis of hysterical identity, according to Mukherjee: “Hysterical identity is predicated on and presupposed by moments of non-identity, not eradicated by them” (2007, 2–3). Elizabeth, too, experiences moments of non-identity when she looks into the mirror.

Elizabeth calls herself black, a description which becomes racialised by the observation that the woman is full-lipped, a physical feature that is often associated with an African heritage. Through the invocation of the poet Sappho, blackness is connected to poetry; yet, the invocation of the ancient writer also puts Elizabeth firmly in the Western literary tradition.⁵ She cannot or does not want to connect to an African narrative tradition. The double does, however, connect her to the Western literary tradition about those of suspected African heritage, specifically both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. At one point, the vision woman appears wearing a magenta dress, similar to Antoinette’s red dress (15). The woman also burns down a house, at least within the virtual space of a dream: “She is burning a house of memories” (12), which is reminiscent of the conflagration of the master’s house in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This destruction of houses is repeated in the visions. The house of memories might stand for the house of the slave master, but also for the legacy of a certain system of knowledge that needs to be destroyed; this conflagration of the symbol of oppression at the

hands of the black subaltern is the utopian side of the vision. Elizabeth's madness is steeped in literary history. This intense intertextual awareness is limiting Elizabeth, she feels. To break out of this Western tradition, she needs to rid herself of her textual ancestors. She cannot talk to the black woman in the vision, yet, she is convinced that her imagination will allow her "to experience ... an *otherness*," for as she says, "I have a vision of a poet. *A poet's vision*" (Fish 129, 118). The madness both limits her and shows her a way forward.

After all, it is these visions that give Elizabeth the impetus to write, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," inspired by a story her cousin tells her. "Imagination is like the act of remembering, without memory being in the consciousness—I have heard this before. I have been here before. I have lived this already. I am black, I am black!" (183). Picking up on this claim, Heilmann and Llewellyn explain that "in Elizabeth's project of empathic remembering Fish extends Toni Morrison's concept of rememory: The collective re-membering of communal trauma is complemented by an individual act of bearing witness to trauma shared imaginatively through identification" (88). While this impulse is utopian, the novel also shows the limits of such imaginative solidarity and identification. Elizabeth, in spite of her fears of blackness in the family, remains a resolutely white metropolitan woman. Thus, it is only her double, who burns down the house in the virtual space. Unlike Bertha/Antoinette, she does not have to eradicate herself in a conflagration, because, in spite of the doubts, she is not a creole; her racial identity is not in question. Additionally, the text also shows how the imagination of the metropolitan woman cannot capture the lives of those living in the colonies. Elizabeth bases her story on that of a slave named Quasheba. One of the other women narrators in *Strange Music* is called Sheba, and like her name, her story is very similar to that of the speaker in the poem. Yet, there are important differences, for instance her rejection of any deity, as well as the fact that the poem is set in the United States, while Sheba lives in Jamaica. By having a figure who is different from the one in Elizabeth's imagination, the novel shows that

understanding based solely on imagination can only go so far. The others need to tell their own stories. Elizabeth's madness might be the result of colonial injustices, which the black women share in, but it is nonetheless specifically metropolitan, because she is more perpetrator than victim.

Like Mother like Daughter—Kaydia

In having two colonial women narrate their own stories, this postcolonial neo-Victorian novel allows for resistance toward Victorian discourse in which they were portrayed as sexually deviant madwomen. The colonial context, was seen as marked by excessive sexuality, which, in contrast to Britain, was not tempered by reason and therefore needed stricter control. Unrestrained sexuality was feared as a threat to civilisation and Empire, as it undermined notions of British rationality, crossed racial lines and sometimes even produced offspring (Levine 2004, 134–35). While Elizabeth's hysteria is the result of a lack of sex, Sheba and Kaydia's brushes with madness are the result of too much. In contrast to the nineteenth-century thinking on black women, this excessive sexuality is not intrinsic to them, but something that is forced upon them by the white male masters. In fact, it is the white master's sexuality that is excessive: "E like black woman's pum-pum too much" (33), Sheba's lover Isaac explains of Sam Barrett, Elizabeth's brother. In Victorian thinking excessive sexuality was often connected to madness, as it is in *Jane Eyre*, where Mr. Rochester explains Bertha's descent into madness, partially with her family history—a Creole history—and partially with her own excessive sexual appetites: "What a pigmy intellect she had—and what giant propensities! ... Bertha Mason,—the true daughter of an infamous mother,—dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste. ... And I could not rid myself of [her] by any legal proceedings; for the doctors now discovered that *my wife* was mad—her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (Brontë

306, emphasis in original). This understanding of madness as the result of compounding of congenital factors with habits is typical of what Showalter calls Darwinist psychology—although somewhat avant-la-lettre in this case (104). In *Jane Eyre*, by specifically naming Bertha's mother a creole, Rochester calls upon race as a factor in her insanity. In fact, during the nineteenth-century, the black body, like the female body, was thought to be prone to hysterics. "The 'hysterization of women's bodies' is paralleled on the racial-sexual border by the hysterisation of the black body, which is also represented as saturated with sexuality," Abdul R. JanMohamed explains and goes on to argue that the hystericised male black body was used to police the border between black and white (1995, 104). Yet, the supposedly hysterical black female body was not treated in the same manner; instead, white male sexuality was acted out on it.

In *Cambridge* (1991) Caryl Phillips draws the portrait of madwoman named Christiania, whose madness is not intrinsic, but instead the result of her violation first by a slave husband and later the white master Mr. Brown. Her second husband Cambridge recognises this: "The woman steadfastly refused to adopt the Christian religion ..., but to my horror she now reverted to dirt-eating and other abominations. I traced this filthy behaviour to a *sickness* brought on by Mr Brown's hunger, although this by no means justified such paganism" (1993 [1991], 163). While Cambridge understands the causes, he still judges his wife for her mad behaviour. She is not given a voice of her own, but, like Bertha Mason, remains mute. In *Strange Music*, it is the so-called madwomen who tell their own stories. This allows for a more intimate understanding of their actions and shows that they are termed mad not by themselves, but by others. What others call madness is to them the only possible reaction to the violence they experience.

Kaydia's story spans three days in February of 1840. She is taking care of Sam Barrett, who seems to be dying of fever. She is distraught because she does not know whether he has

provided for her in his will. She believes he should because she is pregnant with his child. Their sexual relationship started because she wanted to distract his attentions from her now 12-year old daughter, Mary Ann. He has been abusing her since she was nine and the sexual relationship is the only way for Kaydia to protect the child. The abuse has driven Mary Ann insane: "From then on Mary Ann had monsters in she head" (Fish 44). There are also physical signs of the abuse, as Mary Ann grew lumps in her mouth and throat. The child's behaviour is reminiscent of other literary madwomen: "Kicking, fighting, snarling, wildly matted mane muddled round she honey-brown neck, screaming like she felt to tackle hell's fire when Mister Sam forced she into that blue dress" (45–46). Compare this description to that of Bertha Mason: "It grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hit its head and face" (Brontë 293). As far back as the Middle Ages, the mad woman has been described as both hairy and black (S. Gilman 1985b, 142). Her unkempt hair is a sign of a mind in disarray.

Bertha then goes on to attack Rochester, the man who is her master. Mary Ann does the same when Sam wants to dress her up in a new dress from Europe. Both Bertha and Mary Ann fight back the only way they can, yet their behaviour is understood as madness by those around them. Neither woman can articulate herself. Bertha never speaks, Mary Ann only in a few instances, and never to explain her behaviour. It is left to her mother to read the signs on her body. Due to this silence, Heilmann and Llewellyn consider Mary Ann to be the ultimate subaltern: "Muted, traumatised, and maddened, she represents a young Bertha Mason who can articulate only her rage" (87).

This silence also means that Mary Ann is marginalised; it is not her story, but that of her mother. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue that neo-Victorian fiction posits itself as the rescuer of children and the righter of historic wrongs against them by the ubiquitous presentation of children as abused, molested and murdered (2011, 24). Interestingly, Heilmann

and Llewellyn explain that in the nineteenth century, there had been rumours about the historical Sam Barrett making presents to Mary Ann, the daughter of a plantation worker; her exact age or the precise nature of their relationship was apparently unclear (256n32). Yet, Fish decided to make Mary Ann a child, which illustrates Kohlke and Gutleben's point and is, in fact, a sign of what Kohlke elsewhere calls a desire for imagined perversity in the reading of neo-Victorian fiction (Kohlke 2011, 143–44). The perverse desire of the abuser is predicated on the desire of the reader.

During the nineteenth-century, Foucault explains, it was the children who were thought to be naturally perverse (1988, 42). Charles, Mary Ann's father, does indeed blame his daughter for what happened to her. He calls her crazy and says she "let Satan have im way wid she" (Fish 44). His impression of his daughter's culpability is furthered by the presents of jewellery that Sam makes Mary Ann. Like Sam himself, Charles seems to think that by accepting these trinkets, nine-year old Mary Ann is welcoming the abuse. Yet, the neo-Victorian text does not posit the child as the source of the problem, but as a victim by calling attention to Sam's excessive sexuality; he is described as a zombie, someone who does not feel his own body and rampages through the freedmen village in search for further victims: "E a-zombie, Mister Sam! ... True, Mister Sam walkin dead man ... No feelin in him body, no memory in him head" (Fish 33). It seems to give credence to the Victorian fear that the hot colonies were places that led to sexual excesses by white men, which were all the more dangerous for being lived out on the body of a black woman (Mohanram 2007, 74).

The neo-Victorian text furthermore refutes the notion that the mother is to be blamed for her daughter's madness. Victorian psychiatry believed mental disorders to be passed down along the maternal line (Showalter 123). In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester clearly blames Bertha's mother for passing on her vices and her madness to her daughter when he calls Bertha "the true daughter of an infamous mother" (Brontë 306). Indeed, even in neo-Victorian texts, it is often

mother and daughter both who are mad. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, both Antoinette and her mother Annette Cosway go mad; however, just like her daughter's madness, Annette's madness is the result of outside powers pressing down on her, rather than something intrinsic. Christophine explains of her former mistress: "They tell her she is mad, they act like she is mad. Question, question. But no kind word, no friends, and her husband he go off, he leave her" (Rhys 101). They accused Annette of being mad, questioning her constantly. This constant surveillance combined with her husband's abandonment drove her insane.

Charles blames Kaydia for what is happening to Mary, claiming she cannot watch over their daughter. At the same time, he also holds Mary Ann responsible for what he perceives to be Kaydia's madness, while comparing that madness to that of Kaydia's own mother. All three women are put in a maternal lineage of madness. Kaydia herself draws a comparison between her daughter and her mother, saying, "[Mary Ann's] eye's glazed and crazed like [my mother] Rebecca Laslie's" (Fish 49). Kaydia remembers how her mother once ate dirt; she interprets the behaviour as a way of burying loneliness and the feeling of being wronged (158). As Kaydia finds out, her mother had a relationship with old Mr. Sam, an uncle of Elizabeth and the current Mr. Sam; Kaydia is their child. Rebecca was hoping to be considered in Old Mr. Sam's will, but young Sam is worried what it will signal if a black woman is bequeathed an inheritance by her white master, so she receives nothing; she is wronged. It was this relationship with old Mr. Sam that drove Rebecca mad. This madness comes to the fore, again, when she attacks Kaydia after the latter accuses her of never helping her and her own daughter. Rebecca flies into an act of rage, similar to those of Bertha and Mary Ann, strangling Kaydia, while disavowing her. She is wearing a red dress, like Antoinette (162). Before this disavowal, Kaydia was longing for her mother, because she needs her to make sense of her own suffering; the mother needs to teach the daughter about madness.

It is for this relationship with the master that Rebecca is considered a lunatic by other

black workers on the plantation; to have a sexual relationship with a white man is considered insane (152). Kaydia and her mother do so because it is the only way of gaining a modicum of power. The Obeah woman, Leah, advises Kaydia to do so in order to protect her child.⁶ Now Kaydia is also considered mad by the other black people on the estate. This madness is only ascribed to her from outside. To her, all of her actions make perfect sense and are, in fact, the only logical solution to her problem. The only instance when Kaydia truly loses her reason for a moment, is when she thinks about what has been done to Mary Ann: “Reason and order vanished in a haze of beating wings flying like my own rage” (87). She experiences the uncontrollable rage, which is one of the aspects of madness. It is not insanity but anger at the situation. Yet, there are also moments, when her own condition threatens to tear her apart: “Before I lay with Mister Sam inside I was crumbling, now I’ve lost too much of myself to hold on to days” (102).

The madness is grounded not only in sexual exploitation but also intimately connected to race. Firstly, these abuses can only take place because the abuser is white and the abused is black. Secondly, what is termed mad behaviour by the black population is also often considered to be white behaviour. Kaydia is frequently accused of being too white, which is a reference both to her skin colour—she is mixed-race—as well as her behaviour. This also picks up on “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” where the speaker considers her child to be too white. Conversely, Kaydia’s mother also claims that her white blood actually serves as a barrier against madness: “Yu not backward as Congo nigger, not tainted wid deir lunacy. Me high cheekbones come fram white England’s criminals made to work in dis ere colony” (160). There was racial mixture in the family line before; yet a few moments later Rebecca accuses Kaydia of being too white. Thus, it seems in the eyes of the Afro-Caribbean people, for the most part, madness is something which comes from white people.

Ultimately, Kaydia sees only one way out her situation; as Charles takes Mary Ann

away from Cinnamon Hill, she realises she cannot stop him. So she turns away, instead choosing to save her unborn child, who is even whiter than her. By removing herself from not only white, but also black patriarchal surveillance, she flees madness, making the only rational choice open to her.

Not Your Negro—Sheba

Sheba is the figure in *Strange Music* who is most directly inspired by “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point.” Yet, by making certain changes, Fish comments on questions of responsibility and agency. As previously mentioned, she sets Sheba’s story in Jamaica on the Barrett family plantation, rather than in the United States. This lessens the distance between Elizabeth and Sheba and implicates the former in Sheba’s fate. Since Sheba’s narration covers a period from 1838 to 1839, she is no longer slave, unlike the speaker in the poem. Yet, her fate clearly shows that the abolition of slavery did not lead to a sudden change in power relations; black women were still at the mercy of white masters. A further central point is the final fate of the two women; the speaker in the poem is hunted by the slavers, caught and flogged until she dies. Sheba commits suicide by walking into the ocean. The outcome might be the same, yet, in her neo-Victorian rewriting, Fish gives the black woman agency to decide her own fate. Both women find release in death but that release looks very different. The poem’s speaker is finally united with her white child, “who is waiting for [her]” (1850 [1848], 36:250). In death, the black mother and the (too) white child can be reunited. In contrast, Sheba dreams of a reunion with her lover Isaac. There is no reconciliation with the child born of rape.

Sheba is the only narrator in the novel who enjoys sex. In fact, this is how she is introduced to the reader: “Happily me body moves under Isaac’s, moving on love” (Fish 25). Comparing this to the way in which the other narrators engage with sex, it becomes clear that sexuality is highly racialised, in a manner reminiscent of Victorian logic, in spite of the neo-

Victorian ethos. Sheba, who is the darkest of the three narrators—she was probably born in Africa—has a lot of sex. Kaydia, who is mixed-race, has some sex; quite apart from the abusive relationship with Sam, she has a child with Charles. Elizabeth, the white woman, finally, is the one who has no sex. However, Elizabeth is driven mad by this lack of sex; clearly, she has sexual desires. This might once again point to a reading of her as a black-ish woman. Thus, the text reproduces the discourse about black women as highly sexualised and white women as the opposite (Weeks 1989, 41–42). Yet, this sexuality is not problematised in Sheba's case, but instead celebrated and even a source of rebellion; the lovers hide from the overseers, trying to evade their surveillance. The problem only arises when white men force themselves on her.

After Isaac challenges Sam to a cane-cutting race and wins, he is brutally beaten and eventually killed. Perhaps as revenge for this, or for some entirely different reason, Sheba is later hunted down and raped by a group of white men. Afterwards, both Sheba and her fellow workers think her sick: "Sickness's a blister spreading out from me belly, out from between me legs" (Fish 78). The illness is the direct result of the rape. It also burrows into her mind, making it hard to think: "Again. Tiny pieces come too sharp to see clearly. *Slippery red between me legs*. Memory splinters embedded in me head, cling to me throat back" (138). She is traumatised. Yet, while this could well have been a cause for madness, Sheba only calls herself a lunatic, when she has not run away after the baby is born (188). The failure to rebel is madness. Thus, her decision to run away and kill the baby must be read as the opposite of madness. Her infanticide is not insanity, but resistance. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the escaped slave Sethe takes a similar path and kills her daughter rather than have her fall into the hands of the slave master. What Londa Schiebinger calls "reproductive resistance" historically was a part of the fight against the white masters (1993, 181). Thus, Sheba is not mad: she is black.

The woman who sets both Kaydia and Sheba on their path of resistance is the Obeah

practitioner, Leah. The women turn to her when they do not know what else to do and she advises them on how to resist; in Kaydia's case, she advocates using her sexuality to save her child, in Sheba's case she recommends abortion or infanticide. Leah has traces of the madwoman about her: "Untidy. Overgrown, Leah's hair's sprinkled with burrs; grass heads heavy with seeds are woven into curls. Standing naked and tall in hut's dark light" (Fish 144). Like Bertha and Mary Ann, her hair is wild and she is dirty. Later she performs an Obeah ritual to help Sheba placate the child's spirit. The way she moves is reminiscent of a hysterical fit: "Hunched up, shouting, Leah dances faster than John Canoe dancer; mouth gaping, yes bulging dangerously. ... Leah's soul fights, shaking terribly, as Loa comes from we God. Long flat feet stamp. She falls. She have left she body, Loa makes it move now, she all shake-shivering legs, arms stretched across sandy ground" (147). Hysterical attacks are signified by fits, fainting, vomiting, checking, sobbing, laughing, and paralysis. The seizures that were observed at La Salpêtrière included loss of consciousness, eccentric physical movements as well as the miming of emotions (Showalter 129, 150). Renk explains that spirit possession, which is part of some African religions, is seen by Western cultures as madness, because to them it is associated with "a sexually ecstatic, transformative state" (102). Leah does not perform at the behest of a male doctor; her behaviour is not a sign of illness. Rather, she is the one with the authority to cure, and in fact, the quasi-hysterical behaviour itself is part of the cure. When Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca ask whether, "what passes for madness [could] actually be something other, such as resistance to the truly demented logic of race, class, and gender prejudice enshrined in the popular consciousness of Caribbean societies," the answer, in this case, has to be yes (2018, 6).

By bringing together three narratives from women in the colonies and the metropolis, *Strange Music* allows for an understanding of the common root of their madness: the violence of a system predicated on racial difference and subjugation. As the three narratives weave in

and out of each other, they jump from location to location and between different times, occasionally making it difficult to follow the plot. This disjointed narrative also reflects their madness and the moments when their identities are similarly disjointed and fragile. “Leaning over the side of the boat, my face is broken into thousand pieces; and ... the reflections floating on the gloomy surface diverge and diffuse into fragments that stare up at me,” Elizabeth ruminates at one point (Fish 67).

Yet, while their stories make a whole, the three women are always next to each other, textually speaking, but they never actually interact. Sheba and Kaydia are in the same location, yet they meet only once, and do not even speak. As they are both visiting the market—Sheba about to run away, Kaydia worried about her pregnancy—they have the urge to reach out to the other, but they do not. Even though their situations are very similar, they cannot connect. Elizabeth, meanwhile, is an ocean away. The only moment of connection is when Kaydia sees a painting of Elizabeth at the plantation. White and black women do not interact in this text, apart from a mixed-race relation of Elizabeth who lives in England. White women only figure in the thinking of the Jamaican women with regard to their inability to keep their husbands (152). As pointed out above, solidarity through imagination is limited. The same can be said for the solidarity that the reader of the neo-Victorian text experiences for the subaltern subjects that have been given a voice in *Strange Music*.

By picking up on a dense intertextual tradition of madwomen in Caribbean writing, Fish deconstructs Victorian notions of women, madness and race. Yet, it also becomes clear that some women are more steeped in this literary tradition; Elizabeth complains about how she is trapped in it. Indeed, even her madness is configured in these traditions. She is a woman who belongs to the metropolis, but also struggles with her ties to the colonies, just like Bertha and her daughters. Thanks to a neo-Victorian feat of revisioning, Sheba, Kaydia and Mary-Ann, however, move outside this literary tradition. Their position is clearly that of colonial

subjects, and their madness does not make them like Jane's dark double, but instead helps them to free themselves from the heritage of Bertha Mason.

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Notes

1. The novel devotes most of its pages to Elizabeth. This imbalance is therefore also evident in the space devoted to the analysis of the three narrators.
2. Simon Joyce uses the metaphor of the rearview mirror to describe how we, and indeed neo-Victorian texts, engage with the Victorians. We never engage with the Victorians directly, but rather with a mediated image: “The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what’s behind us” (4). This is what happens when Elizabeth looks into the past in order to figure her possible future as the mother of a child with African heritage.
3. Elizabeth’s room or more extended, her house at Torquay can be itself read as a heterotopia. Through the visits by her family and the correspondence with her family, she is connected to the outside world, both London and Jamaica. At the same time, the location at the Atlantic coast connects her to the island and the women on it.
4. This is also to be understood in terms of finances, since the inheritance that makes Elizabeth’s lifestyle possible is built on the proceeds of slavery.
5. Additionally, it also invokes a queer heritage which, however, is not further pursued in the text.
6. Alan Richardson explains that «[l]ike Voodoo, Obeah is a «hybrid» or «Creolized» Caribbean religion with indigenous West African roots, which includes such practices as ritual incantation and the use of fetishes or charms» (1997, 173).