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The 'Brown Skin Gal' in fact and fiction

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Abstract
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I’m going away in a sailing boat
And if I don’t come back
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The ‘Brown Skin Gal’ in Fact and Fiction

Around the figure of the ‘brown skin gal’ — the Caribbean woman of mixed race — float many associations, some flattering, some detrimental. Several of them are implicit in the innocent words of a popular song of the 1950s:

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This refrain takes certain things for granted: the brown girl’s sexual desirability, her volatility and inclination towards pleasure, and her possible fate as a deserted mother. It draws, no doubt unconsciously, upon aspects of two literary stereotypes: the ‘sensual mulatto’ and the ‘tragic mulatto’, both related to uncertainties about mulatto identity and assumptions about the role of the coloured woman in Caribbean social history.

This essay is primarily concerned with the fortunes of the ‘brown skin gal’ in Jamaica and the French Caribbean during the nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries, but it also touches on the development of Caribbean stereotypes of ‘brownness’ and makes some comparisons between their literary representation and social fact. The brown individual in the Caribbean arose from the sexual exploitation of black slave women by European men during the slave trade and the plantation era. The first mulattos were, like their mothers, primarily destined for the canefields, but as time went by (and further degrees of race mixing took place) lighter-skinned slaves tended to be favoured with less arduous work, often in the Great House. This granting of special privileges, perceived as unfair by less fortunate workers, together with the fact that female slaves were more likely than males to benefit from white favours, must have contributed to the contradictory pattern of admiration and resentment that is apparent in many early accounts of the brown woman.

The term ‘mulatto’ is itself an uncertain one, having gradually shifted from its original meaning of half-black, half-white. In Jamaica, it indicates ‘loosely, any person with light-brown or yellowish skin’, and is said to be ‘among negroes, not a favourable term’ (Dictionary of Jamaican English). In the French-speaking Caribbean, however, mulâtre is a social marker designating a light-skinned person usually of the middle class or, in the case of the grands mulâtres, of the upper class. This usage arose in Haiti, the country where mulattos first gained political and socio-economic power. Even before the Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, free coloureds there had become a large, wealthy, and
sometimes landowning group. After the Revolution, mulattos took over the prestigious positions formerly occupied by the French. Hence the principal female deity of the vaudou religion, Ezili or Erzulie, powerful goddess of love and beauty, is portrayed by painters as a brown-skinned woman. She is, in fact, the archetypal ‘sensual mulatto’, discreetly sharing her favours between the gods of war and of the sea. With her taste for luxury and riches, she also represents the impossible social aspirations of the black peasantry, whose small gifts regularly adorn her shrines.

In other Caribbean countries where there was no parallel to the privileged mulatto class of Haiti, the brown population had to make its way through more difficult terrain. Interaction with dominant white society was limited, but initially women had more frequent contact with this group than men, and liaisons with white males helped to establish the ‘sensual mulatto’ stereotype. A brown woman could, if the opportunity arose, use her sexual appeal to a white man as a means of social advancement; but she was still uneasily situated between two extremes of the racial spectrum; and her relationships with black and brown men were likely to be fraught. Class and colour were long to remain tied together in colonial eyes, skin shade measuring social progress in a way that is clearly outlined in this account of a 1940s rural Jamaican childhood:

Early in our lives skin colour took on meaning for us. My father might have passed for white in England, though not in Jamaica. My mother’s skin was smooth chocolate. My sister and I were between them in colouring, and my brother was like my mother. We had relatives of every shade from black to white. Colour- and shade-consciousness was a family affliction. We learnt early that to be white was desirable and to be black a misfortune. My mother considered it a feather in her cap that she had married a ‘good brown man’ and not someone darker or of the same colouring as herself, rather as another woman might applaud herself on managing to catch a rich husband... All around me there was evidence that colour and class were linked: black people were mostly poor and uneducated, the people of property and social and professional standing were mostly white or light-skinned. (Gladwell 23–24)

Colour, though to be assessed alongside education, money and respectability, was an inescapable gauge of status. As mixed-race people set about negotiating social barriers, they were often ridiculed for their perceived desire to ape white society, and derided as stateless hybrids. Black slaves on sugar estates reportedly taunted lighter-skinned slaves with being outsiders, lacking any national identity: ‘You brown man hab no country .... only de neger and buckra hab country’ (Patterson 64). The stigma of hybridity, as a slur cast by blacks upon browns, has survived over centuries, and finds a modern echo in a satirical Jamaican poem where the ‘brown skin gal’ has become a ‘no nation gal’:

No nation gal is web yuh come from! My lawd!
A web yuh get dat deh head a hair
gal a so yuh skin fair!
Mississ, go back a yuh yard
When sun lick yuh, yuh turn
colour like green lizard…
eeh! yuh almost fava one a we
when likkle colour creep in yuh face!
But is a damn disgrace…
Because as cold wedda and cool breeze blow!
yuh start to fava English man. (Robertson-Douglass 110)

Europeans in the Caribbean had an ambivalent attitude to brown skin. White men’s suspicion of mulatto men (viewed, especially before emancipation, as dangerously ambitious) coexisted with white men’s liking for mulatto girls. The coloured ‘housekeeper’ often figures in accounts of early colonial society. White men had more money to support their mistresses than did brown men, and could give them lighter-skinned children, who would receive an education, perhaps inherit property or a financial bequest, and be better equipped to rise in a society based on a colour hierarchy with white at the top. According to one early nineteenth-century British commentator, free coloured women thought it ‘more genteel and respectable to be the kept mistress of a white man … than to be united in wedlock with the most respectable individual of their own class’ (Campbell 51). But preference for a white suitor had its drawbacks. The European male, tending to shift the blame for his sexual behaviour to his coloured partner, sought justification in the myth of the promiscuous African female with her legacy of unbridled sensuality (Bush 14–18). Early accounts of mixed-race women are often intensely negative, stressing their extravagant life-style, vulgar ostentation and lax morals — much of which contributed to the ‘sensual mulatto’ stereotype. Furthermore, the choice of an extramarital liaison with a white man often operated against the brown-skinned woman, maintaining her social and moral inferiority in white eyes as well as dividing her interests from those of the brown male.

Yet, driven by a like quest for upward social mobility, many coloured persons of both sexes acquiesced in white colonial society’s identification of blackness with ‘low class’ and cultural inferiority, and were united in their desire not to be identified with their African slave ancestors. This attitude may be detected in the indignation with which Mary Seacole, writing in the 1850s, described the rejection of her offer to join Florence Nightingale’s nurses in the Crimea. Nowadays sometimes referred to as ‘the black Florence Nightingale’, Mary Seacole was in fact a free coloured woman, the daughter of a Jamaican and a Scot, who was known, when she nursed cholera patients in Cuba, as ‘the yellow woman from Jamaica’ (Black 161). Although she succeeded in establishing herself as an independent healer during the Crimean War, she remained piqued that the British ladies, misled by her ‘somewhat dusker skin’, had failed to recognise
her middle class status as a ‘Creole’: ‘I … have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins’ (O’Callaghan 18).

The negative associations of blackness were maintained not only by white colonial attitudes but via the printed word. In the 1940s, a brown schoolgirl was shocked to discover that the Encyclopaedia Britannica in her Jamaican school library asserted the inferiority of the negro, attributing his ‘arrest or even deterioration in mental development’ to his obsession with ‘sexual matters’; he was also depicted as vain, childlike, and capable of atrocities ‘but often exhibiting in the capacity of servant a dog-like fidelity’. The schoolgirl knew that what she had read was not supported by the evidence around her, but still ‘felt condemned’: ‘it became terribly important to me to demonstrate to myself and to other people that this was not true’ (Gladwell 53–54). Maryse Condé, a Guadeloupean novelist, shows how the educated black middle class in the Caribbean was in its turn affected by these negative stereotypes. She describes her family’s social group in the years just after World War II as a closed circle, its members confined in a self-protective state of cultural retreat, afraid of contamination from a variety of sources:

Of course we mustn’t speak to lower-class black people in the street. We mustn’t associate with mulattos because they were white people’s bastards. We mustn’t associate with white people, naturally. They were the enemy. We lived in isolation, and we showed a kind of scorn for everything that wasn’t us, a kind of arrogance which was one of my parents’ dominant features. (Condé 11)

With mulattos, resentment of European prejudice could coexist with a horror of things African and a tendency to give primacy to European values. Léon Damas was born into the French Guyanese brown bourgeoisie but radically dissociated himself from this class. In Pigments (1937), the first literary text of the Negritude movement, he satirises the social attitudes prevalent in his childhood through the figure of a brown mother nagging her son to observe French table manners, speak proper French, and imitate French culture:

I heard you skipped your vi-o-lin lesson again
A banjo
You say a banjo
You actually say a banjo
No sir
No banjos or guitars in this house
Mulattos don’t do that —
Leave that to the Negroes. (Damas 36)

The interplay of class and colour in the Caribbean underpins the ‘sensual mulatto’ stereotype, as it later underpins the ‘tragic mulatto’ stereotype in literature. The romanticising of the mulatto girl chiefly occurs in the writing of middle-class males, who began by promoting an exotic vision of the coloured woman that hinted at the passionate African while carefully including European
traits. An example of this genre is the Jamaican novel *Psyche*, where the heroine is the offspring of a part-African, part-Arab slave mother and a white planter. She is beautiful, rich and clever, and her Africanness is discreetly minimised: ‘her nose was not aquiline like her mother’s, but straight with sensitive nostrils, as her father’s had been…. The lips were full, but not in the least sensual’ (deLisser 109–110). Exoticism could thus be enhanced by variations in skin shade and genetic composition. Early British observers had been fascinated by the diversity of complexion and physical features among mixed-race slaves, an interest evident in now outdated terms such as sambo, quadroon, octoroon or mustee. Similar French colonial terms included the griffe (a mulatto/black combination), the sacatra (a more European type) and the marabout (a ‘yellow’ girl). Some of these names were revived in early twentieth-century Haiti by nationalist poets who, in reaction against the racism of U.S. occupation forces, insisted on the beauty of the coloured woman and endowed her with succulent sensuality:

Marabout of my heart with breasts like tangerines,
You taste better to me than crab-filled aubergines,
You are the tripe flavouring my callaloo,
The dumpling in my peas, my herb tea too… (Roumer 135)

Most of these racial definitions are no longer current in the francophone Caribbean, or at least seem mainly confined to a feminine application. Where both genders are commonly invoked, it is interesting that the masculine form is often pejorative (perhaps an echo of the white colonial prejudice against mulatto males), while the feminine is flattering. This is the case with the term chabin, for instance. The protagonist of a St Lucian narrative poem is dismissively presented as:

a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois for any red neger (Walcott 4)

The Jamaican equivalent, ‘red’ (‘the combination of a light or yellowish skin with crinkly hair or other negro features’) is described in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* as ‘often in derogatory use by negroes’. A Martinican of mixed Chinese/brown parentage recalls the typical insults hurled at him in his childhood: ‘You damn ugly little chabin! … freckled like a turkey! … spotted like a ripe banana! … Chabin is a bad race that the good Lord should never have put on the earth!’ (Confiant 1993 41). But in French Caribbean society, the chabin with her golden skin, kinky blond hair and light eyes is regarded as a sexual prize. Envious for her beauty, she is also assumed to be hot stuff in bed: the *Dictionnaire des expressions du créole guadeloupéen* illustrates the word chabin by the local saying *Yo di chabin ka mi lé zîrè* (‘They say chabin girls bite your ears’). A Guadeloupian woman novelist, maliciously describing a blatantly erotic display in a nightclub, attributes it to this stock figure of sensuality: ‘Her superb golden
chabine’s backside never stops shaking, bouncing up and down, swaying and twirling around on the dance floor. She has an eager court of male dancers around her (Manicom 140). Late twentieth-century male writers in Martinique, who make a habit of underlining the racial diversity or ‘Creoleness’ of their island, frequently exploit the ‘sensual mulatto’ tradition. The acquisition of a chabine dorée mistress can serve as a sly indication of the social rise of a black police inspector (Chamoiseau 110). The coloured mistress may be voyeuristically displayed in a quasi-historical setting:

Duplan de Montaubert [a white planter] was still, after fifteen years of carnal relations, full of admiration for that curvaceous brown and gold body whose breasts alone were an invitation to wild sensuality. He always began by undressing her to that level, titillating her broad nipples with his tongue, covering them with sweeping licks that made the female quiver. Then he explored her at waist level, briefly teasing her belly-button before burying his head between her legs. Soon, the laundresses’ hut was filled with delirious noise… (Confiant 1994 209)

Such over-the-top literary exercises have attracted criticism from Caribbean feminists, who question the misrepresentation of the ‘mix race gal’ through a false masculine view of her racial ambiguity as well as her reputed sensuality. One Jamaican brown woman bluntly refuses to be stereotyped in this fashion:

to all you, white and black who eroticize mi light brown skin, who see me as different but never angry, who checking fi a hot pussy under dat deh skin, who see me as politically non-threatening because me blackness nuh apparent as real back off, mi tyad
to dem all who define me as it suit dem interest, as anodda black sistah in solidarity, as a lover, or as a light skin ooman who cyaaan be trusted tru mi have no race fi defend mi seh, kirout, define unnu self as a mix race gal ah me fi say who mi is. (Martin 158)

The ‘sensual mulatto’ is sometimes combined with the ‘tragic mulatto’ in romances about the mixed-race woman abandoned by a European lover. The semi-autobiographical novel Je suis martiniquaise (possibly ghost-written in part by a French lover [Arnold 148–66]) portrays a naïve brown-skinned girl growing up in Martinique just before World War II. She becomes the mistress of a white naval officer who, as in the ‘Brown Skin Gal’ song, sails away, abandoning her and her baby. Despite this rejection she still admires her lover, is proud of her fair-skinned child, and hopes to marry a Frenchman some day even though she fears that ‘a coloured woman is never quite respectable in the eyes of a white’ (Capécia 202). Frantz Fanon, the black Martinican psychiatrist and militant, was outraged by this apparently uncritical presentation of a racially alienated heroine, which he took as evidence of the persistence of the plantation colour hierarchy in Caribbean society: ‘What Mayotte wants is a kind of
Racial alienation and/or class conflict are key factors in more subtle fiction about ‘tragic mulattoes’. From Guadeloupe comes one intense exploration of mulatto neurosis in the novel Cajou, where the protagonist, a successful research scientist in Paris, is unable to accept her lack of resemblance to her white mother. Her perception of her ‘double’ self as physically ugly and undesirable (the very antithesis of the ‘sensual mulatto’) leads to a conviction of intellectual and moral unworthiness that no objective evidence can unseat. She is consumed by ‘a raging desire to be the Other, and also by hatred and the need to be judged by that Other’ (Lacrosil 30). Avoiding mirrors, rejecting reassurance, seeking the shadows, she finally escapes herself through suicide. Although there are echoes of romanticism in Cajou with its solitary, misunderstood heroine, the novel’s dispassionate first-person narration lends it the tone of a case study. Cajou’s insecurity is connected with the ‘hybridity’ stigma and the ‘no nation’ status traditionally attributed to the mulatto: ‘For the brown man aspires to become white, and loathes anyone who reminds him of where he came from’ (Winkler 287).

However, in another novel exploring the intersection of sex, colour and class, the ‘tragic mulatto’ does not display this type of fatal passivity. The protagonist of The Faces of Love is a Jamaican journalist, Rachel Ascom, a woman of mixed black and German ancestry, unsentimentally portrayed as ‘coarsely handsome’, with the light grey-green eyes of a chabine but with dull brown hair and mahogany skin. An ambitious professional, she is barred from top promotion by her colour and class origins. Like the stereotypical ‘sensual mulatto’ she is willing to use sex to achieve social goals. Her hard, predatory nature is her chief weapon against the lighter-skinned middle class, and her displays of wealth are calculated moves in her pursuit of status: ‘I am nothing, you see. I came from nothing and none of you people will ever forget that when I make a mistake. Everything I become, I’ve got to show. That’s why I buy such good clothes’ (Hearne 59). Her tragedy arises from external circumstance, not from personal angst about her colour; she differs from the stereotypical ‘tragic mulatto’ in that she does not desire whiteness in itself, but rather the power and freedom that have been the traditional attributes of whiteness in Caribbean history. She sets out to claim social territory long denied to brown women, who once could hope only to be ‘housekeepers’, later perhaps dressmakers, hotel-keepers, primary school teachers, or owners of a small business (Senior 106); but remaining — as Rachel refuses to remain — generally subordinate to men in public life. Dynamic where Cajou is despairing, Rachel’s attitude to life is still a response to the persistence of stereotypes linking the brown woman with social inferiority and dubious respectability.

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Unstable, ambitious, sensual, insecure, stranded between white and black identities ... would the ‘brown skin gals’ in my own family tree have recognised themselves in any of these stereotypes? Of my four brown great-grandmothers, two were mulatto women from the Jamaican countryside. What can one read into their lives, and those of their siblings or descendants? Their histories offer a piquant contrast in social evolution. One family fits into the pattern of mulatto upward social mobility. The great-grandmother from the northwest hills of Jamaica, child of a black mother and an English father, married a ‘red’ man, possibly descended from German peasant settlers in the area. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, she and her husband kept a shop; its small dark interior smelling of salt fish and old bullas must have held few charms for their offspring, who devoted much energy into escaping their place of origin. Marriage was one way for girls to achieve this. However, the brown girl could not necessarily find a partner in her own social circle, for if she was interested in raising her social status by finding a fairer-skinned spouse, so was the brown man. A black partner in those days would not achieve this goal and a white one might be out of reach. The respectable, educated brown spinster was a frequent figure in the living rooms of early twentieth-century Jamaica, and one of my great-aunts was among them; but her female siblings all took other paths. Two light-skinned sisters married ‘up’ skin-wise; their children became urban browns or ‘Jamaica whites’ and some even disappeared into white America. A darker-skinned sister’s descendants reached middle-class status one generation later. The youngest and brownest girl headed for New York, where she passed as a ‘Mexican’ and lived an independent life, returning to Jamaica in old age to annoy her sisters with her often-expressed preference for the superior excitements of Abroad. For the women of this family, brown skin seems to have been regarded not as tragic hybridity but more in the light of a potential social obstacle which was a challenge to negotiate. And sensuality? The woman I knew best, my grandmother, had left home at 15 to become a postmistress at the other end of the island, and married in her twenties. How did she live in the years before she met her country doctor? A grave, self-educated woman with a passion for Victorian poetry, Anglican hymns and British radio serials, my grandmother’s manner did not encourage conjectures about her romantic past.

In that respect, the family tree of my other mulatto great-grandmother, born on a coffee property in southwest Jamaica, looks more promising. Her parents were an unusual couple for the middle of the nineteenth century: an English girl had married a skilled black tradesman on her father’s estate. The relationships of their six daughters with the opposite sex in a way reflect the decline in prosperity of the estate: the two older girls making middle-class marriages, the younger ones contracting informal unions (sometimes of a serial nature) with white, brown and black men in the district. Their descendants illustrate both downward and upward social mobility, represented today in the black peasantry of southern
Jamaica as well as in the dark and light brown, working and middle classes of Kingston. My great-grandmother, who lived to be a centenarian, was a devout churchgoer and an energetic manager who looked after what remained of the property, brought up a son and five grandchildren single-handed, and later presided vigorously over batches of great-grandchildren sent for the school holidays. Her apparently unmarried status was a mystery that no Jamaican child six decades ago would have dared to ask about. Even when later confirmed, it never seemed quite credible, for although the family tree with its absence of male names is suggestive of a whole flotilla of sensual mulatto girls, it is belied by the family photo album that shows stiff-backed old ladies in long black skirts, their expressions forbidding, their hair flattened by hairnets and their broad-brimmed hats (to save their complexions) severely skewered with giant hatpins. These patently respectable old ladies were the ‘fact’ that we knew for certain: those wild brown skin gals were surely the ‘fiction’.

If the respectability of old age masked their past sensuality, these ‘brown skin gals’ were also reticent with younger generations about their attitude towards their own racial identity. Growing up on a country property which had employed slave labour within their parents’ lifetime, some of them, though not all, subscribed to the racial and social prejudices which were common in the nineteenth century. They never visualised an era in which colour and class might no longer be decisive factors in the relationships of their descendants, but did they experience that confusion about ‘hybridity’, or sense of marginality, that is so often portrayed in literature? One historian of the free coloureds suggests that, on the contrary, brown people developed a conscious sense of a distinct identity — different from that of blacks or whites — fuelled by the realisation that the Caribbean was their native region and they had nowhere else to go. They compensated for their exclusion from white society by vigorously pursuing their own civil rights and privileges (Sio 154). The world of fiction is the province of the ‘tragic mulatto’, of emotional crises and psychological extremes. The world of fact tends to focus on adaptation and survival, in the pursuit of which laughter is an important resource. As the Afro-Indian dougla in another Caribbean song replies to those who would prefer a hybrid-free society:

You can send the Indians to India, And the Negroes back to Africa, But will somebody please tell me, Where they sending me, poor me? I’m neither one nor the other — Six of one, half a dozen of the other, If they serious ‘bout sending back people in tru — They’re going to have to split me in two. (Nettleford 10)
NOTES
All translations from French texts are my own.

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