



Zalika Reid-Benta, *River Mumma*

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In Zalika Reid-Benta's debut novel, *River Mumma*, terms such as *obeah*, *myal*, *duppies*, and *journeying* become integral to the narrative, reflecting the author's exploration of Jamaican Canadian identity. Reid-Benta, celebrated for her vivid storytelling, narratively explores themes of identity reclamation, cultural heritage, and familial bonds, offering a nuanced perspective on the immigrant experience in Canada. By drawing on non-European epistemologies and challenging the linearity of time, her narrative explores human experience through a lens of spirituality and ancestry. The incorporation of ancestral spiritual forces underscores an often-overlooked dimension of daily life within the Black diasporic community in Canadian literature. Reid-Benta's previous work, *Frying Plantain*, a collection of short stories, has been widely acclaimed for its poignant and humorous depiction of immigrant life. It garnered several accolades, including being shortlisted for the 2019 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and longlisted for the 2020 Toronto Book Award. Likewise, *River Mumma* achieved notable recognition as a finalist for the 2024 Trillium Book Award and was listed among the best fiction books of 2023 by *CBC Books*. These accolades underscore the impact of Reid-Benta's prose in (re)centring the experiences of marginalized West Indian communities in Canada.

Published in 2023 and set in contemporary Toronto, *River Mumma* follows Alicia, a Jamaican Canadian character grappling with a sense of disconnection from her heritage. But, to show Alicia that her connection to her Jamaican roots is deeper than she ever imagined, River Mumma, a spirit from Jamaican folklore, visits her one night and gives her a quest. This quest involves returning a golden comb stolen from the River Maid before

sunset, with the looming threat that this powerful spirit will depart and take the rivers with her if Alicia fails. The novel, named after a water deity often depicted as a mermaid in various parts of the Americas following the slave trade, leverages the potency of this Afro-Jamaican figure to underscore the significance of ancestral wisdom in reconnecting with one's roots. The narrative explores themes of obeah and myalism—spiritual practices marginalized and criminalized in Jamaica since 1898—suggesting a reclamation of diasporic spiritualities and a form of resistance to systemic racism within diasporic contexts. *River Mumma* thus acknowledges the intricate relationship between the spiritual and physical realms, contributing to a cosmo-political perspective where humans and non-humans co-exist within the same sphere.

Reid-Benta continues a tradition established by twentieth-century Caribbean writers who integrate references to obeah into their narratives. As Janelle Rodriques observes, “Obeah has played a significant role in the articulation of West Indian aesthetics and has come to symbolize the ‘folk’ aesthetics that are now integral to West Indian literary and cultural production” (1). In this context, Reid-Benta aligns herself with other notable writers, such as Kei Miller, Erna Brodber, and Lorna Goodison, who explore these spiritualities; Goodison, in particular, has authored a poem dedicated to the River Maid. Reid-Benta's *River Mumma* can be analysed in relation to Goodison's poem “River Mumma Wants Out.” While Goodison critiques consumerism and commercial culture by portraying a “Mumma [who] no longer wants to be guardian / of our waters” but aspires to be “Big Mumma, / dancehall queen of the greater Caribbean” (54 lines 7–9), Reid-Benta depicts the River Mumma as a “dancehall queen” (158) who is “tired” (160) and laments that “[believers] only think of [her] as story and no longer respect tradition” (160). Both representations, though differing in tone and focus, converge on the notion that modernity—embodied in colonialism, racism, and capitalism—has corrupted the essence of this great spirit and has also hindered believers from practising their spirituality and worshipping these forces.

As a result, the narrative highlights the contrast between suppressing one's beliefs as a coping mechanism for racism and reclaiming them as a form of resistance and empowerment. This theme is poignantly portrayed through Grandma Mabel's suppression of her bush-medicine practices upon relocating to Canada, illustrating the impact of racism in contemporary Canada. Her decision to compartmentalize her abilities can be interpreted as a coping mechanism, aimed at assimilating into the dominant culture to mitigate racial barriers rather than actively confronting and challenging these oppressive forces. Consequently, when Alicia ventures into the realm of the spirits, she encounters all her foremothers except Grandma Mabel. This absence signifies a disruption in the ancestral cycle, highlighting that Grandma Mabel's suppression of her spiritual powers was a consequence of her need to fit into a new environment. This narrative underscores the adverse effects of racism and colonialism on spirituality and ancestral connections.

In contrast, Alicia embodies the theme of reconnection, acting as a bridge between the spiritual and physical realms, with a self-appointed mission to restore her family's spiritual lineage. Unlike her grandmother, Alicia represents the reclamation of lost heritage and the revival of suppressed spiritual practices—a form of resistance enacted by the newer generation. Through Alicia's journey, the narrative emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and reconnecting with one's cultural and spiritual roots despite the challenges posed by systemic racism. In a parallel manner, Reid-Benta's prose reclaims transatlantic spiritualities and integrates them into the Canadian literary landscape. Such interpretations are essential for understanding how reconnecting with cultural heritage often involves engaging critically with its elements, including spiritual practices.

River Mumma employs the imagery of duppies, such as the Rolling Calf, Ol' Higue, and the Whooping Boy, to act as obstacles to Alicia's success. Spirits like the River Maid and Alicia's foremothers are portrayed as repositories of history and memory, possessing the power to transform human emotions through their "soul-force," as proposed by Leonard Barrett. Additionally, the use of cleansing baths and bush medicine by characters underscores that, despite the acculturation losses experienced through migration from Jamaica to Canada, ancestral connections remain deeply embedded in the body and cannot be erased. In *River Mumma*, obeah and myalism transcend mere representations of transatlantic spiritual traditions; they actively influence the characters' trajectories. To engage with these characters without acknowledging the vital energy derived from transatlantic philosophies is to overlook the profound richness of their backgrounds. Spirituality in the narrative symbolizes liberation from the mental constraints imposed by the colonial-Western mindset that Alicia—and many Black subjects—contend with throughout their lives.

Reid-Benta integrates transatlantic spiritualities in *River Mumma* to reconnect characters with West Indian roots and challenge Canadian literary norms, thereby empowering Afro-Caribbean spiritualities against ongoing racism. For readers interested in a more pronounced exploration of transatlantic spiritualities, works such as *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James and *Myal* by Brodber offer deeper immersion. Reid-Benta's novel, however, serves as a compelling introduction, sharing a similar tone to the American fantasy writer Rick Riordan's storytelling. Both authors infuse mythology and folklore into their narratives, rendering ancient myths relevant and engaging for contemporary audiences. While Riordan modernizes Greco-Roman mythological and spiritual elements within a fantastical framework, Reid-Benta's focus is on reconnecting with the profound roots of Afro-Jamaican heritage and exposing the ruptures present in diasporic literature. She offers a richly layered exploration of cultural identity, spirituality, and ancestry that is both appealing and instructive to younger generations.

Reid-Benta presents an immersive journey into the complexities of cultural identity and the significance of spirituality within the Caribbean diasporic community. By

interweaving themes of obeah, myalism, and ancestral wisdom, Reid-Benta challenges the erasure of Black spiritual traditions and underscores their importance in cultural reclamation. Her narrative not only provides a poignant reflection on the immigrant experience in Canada but also serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring connection between the physical and spiritual realms in the quest for self-discovery and cultural continuity.

Works Cited

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