

THE ART OF POWER: POISON AND OBEAH ACCUSATIONS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE AND SURVIVAL IN JAMAICA'S SLAVE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Jamaica's criminalization of Obeah after Tacky's 1760 Revolt resulted in many accusations and prosecutions of alleged clients and practitioners by planters who intended to prevent similar future slave rebellions and eliminate rivals who competed for enslaved people's loyalty. Such efforts produced many slave laws and policing efforts, which legitimized and expanded slaveholders' dominance and power, but ironically, increased enslaved people's bargaining powers. Exploring how legal definitions of poison and Obeah changed over time and the political and social purposes poison and Obeah accusations served, reveals the complex ways in which the enslaver and enslaved struggled for dominance and survival within Jamaica's slave society. While poison and Obeah laws, accusations and prosecutions give us good insights into the complicated conflicts, tensions and negotiations between enslaver and enslaved and among members of slave communities, they yield an unfortunate legacy that defame Obeah as witchcraft and fraud and erroneously attribute poison as a key element.

Keywords: poison, Obeah, slavery, slave laws, slave resistance, slave communities

RESUMEN

La criminalización del Obeah en Jamaica después de la Revolución de Tacky en 1760 resultó en numerosas acusaciones y persecuciones a los alegados clientes y practicantes por parte de dueños de plantaciones que deseaban evitar futuras rebeliones de esclavos y eliminar rivales que competían con ellos para obtener la lealtad de los esclavos. Estos esfuerzos resultaron en numerosas leyes de esclavos y prácticas policiales, que legitimizaron y expandieron la dominación y el poder de los dueños de esclavos, pero irónicamente, les otorgaron a los esclavos más poderes de negociación. El explorar cómo las definiciones legales de envenenamiento y el Obeah cambiaron a través del tiempo y los propósitos políticos y sociales de las acusaciones de envenenamiento y el Obeah, revela las complejas maneras en que los dueños de esclavos y los esclavos pelearon por la sobrevivencia y el dominio en la sociedad

esclavista de Jamaica. Las leyes sobre envenenamiento y el Obeah, las acusaciones y persecuciones nos ofrecen una buena perspectiva sobre los complicados conflictos, las tensiones y negociaciones entre el dueño y sus esclavos y entre los miembros de las comunidades de esclavos, pero también han dejado un legado desafortunado que difama el Obeah como brujería y fraude y erróneamente atribuye el veneno como un elemento clave.

Palabras clave: veneno, Obeah, esclavitud, leyes para esclavos, resistencia de los esclavos, comunidades de esclavos

RÉSUMÉ

Les crimes de Obeah en Jamaïque après la Révolte de Tacky en 1760 ont donné lieu à de nombreuses accusations et poursuites judiciaires de clients présumés et praticiens par les planteurs qui voulaient prévenir des futures révoltes d'esclaves et éliminer des rivaux qui faisaient la concurrence pour obtenir la loyauté des esclaves. Ces efforts ont abouti à de nombreuses lois sur l'esclavage et pratiques policières, qui ont légitimé et élargi la domination et le pouvoir des propriétaires d'esclaves, mais ironiquement ils ont augmenté les pouvoirs de négociation des esclaves. L'article explore comment les définitions légales de l'empoisonnement et Obeah ont changé au fil du temps et l'intention politique et sociale des accusations, il révèle les complexités de la lutte entre les propriétaires d'esclaves et les esclaves pour la survie et le contrôle de la société esclavagiste de la Jamaïque. Tandis que les lois sur l'empoisonnement et l'Obeah ainsi que les accusations et les persécutions suggèrent des perspectives intéressantes sur les conflits, les tensions et les négociations entre les propriétaires et les esclaves et les membres des communautés d'esclaves, elles ont laissé un goût amer d'Obeah vu comme symbole de sorcellerie et de fraude, et à tort projettent le poison comme un élément clé.

Mots-clés : poison, Obeah, esclavage, lois sur l'esclavage, résistance des esclaves, communautés d'esclaves

Received: 21 December 2012 Revision received: 6 August 2013 Accepted: 8 August 2013

Enslaved teenager, Minetta, faced trial on February 20, 1816 for allegedly attempting to poison her master. Witness reports that the girl confessed to “having infused corrosive sublimate in some brandy and water” before giving her master the drink. Minetta then stood by his bed to ensure he drank the entire mixture, quietly standing by as he writhed in agony as the poison seeped through his body. According to those who eventually came to the master’s aid,

Minetta stood by witnessing the whole painful affair “without one expression of surprise or pity.” At the trial, Minetta supposedly retained a “hardened” countenance, confessing her murderous deed, but refusing to “say sorry” for having poisoned her master. The presiding judge returned a guilty verdict, condemning her “to die Thursday next, the day after tomorrow.” Even with a death sentence, the “girl of fifteen” purportedly remained unremorseful, hearing “the sentence pronounced without the least emotion.” And, as she ascended the gallows to her fate, “she was seen to laugh” (Lewis 1929:149-150).

The narrator of Minetta’s case, Matthew Lewis, further alleged that women poisoned enslavers with the aid of “Obeah men,” who supplied them with lethal substances. Their “worst fault,” Lewis disparaged, was their “prejudice to Obeah,” the “facility” which enables them to carry out their folly. At a property, neighboring Lewis’s, “three negroes [were] in prison, all domestics” indicted for poisoning their masters. Even so-called kind and benevolent slaveholders did not escape enslaved people’s reprisals. The attorney “who appear[ed] to be in high favour with the negroes ... was obliged to quit the estate from the frequent attempts to poison him.” The accused women allegedly added the poisonous substance to the coffee, which proved fatal to two young bookkeepers who had the beverage (Lewis 1929:126).

Lewis’s tales of domestics suspected of poisoning their masters are part of a much larger ethnocentric narrative that perpetrators used poison obtained from Obeah practitioners to murder white people during slavery in Jamaica (Mair 2006:244-51; Bush 1990:67). Other contemporaries and planter-historians, like Edward Long, Bryan Edwards and Richard Madden, similarly faulted Obeah practitioners, who were supposedly knowledgeable about Jamaica’s herbs and plants. Extensive knowledge of various “medicinal and poisonous species,” they contended, were “the chief qualifications for this curious office” (Long 1774, 2002, vol. 2:473; Edwards 1819, vol. 2:107-119; Madden 1835:167). Ethnocentric anti-Obeah chronicles further charged Obeah practitioners with brainwashing “weak,” “deluded,” and “superstitious Negroes” into rebelling against slavery. From their “pretence” to have “supernatural” power and abilities to “communicate with the devil” and “evil spirits,” white authorities defamed, they exerted political “influence” and spiritual guidance in planning and executing armed rebellions (Patterson 1967:189; Browne 2011:451-480). Tacky’s 1760 rebellion was purportedly one of the most significant Obeah-assisted uprisings in eighteenth century Jamaica. Tacky, identified as a “famous obeiah [sic] man or priest” organized and led a full-scale rebellion, which began in the St Mary parish, eventually spreading to at least four other parishes (Brown 2008:148; Paton 2012:235-264; Bilby and Handler 2012:46).

Dispensing protective powders and charms, and swearing secret blood oaths, Tacky provided invaluable spiritual leadership and fostered unity and commitment among the insurgents. Believing that “the Obeah-man was essential in administering oaths of secrecy, and in some cases, distributing fetishes which were supposed to immunize the insurgents from the arms of the whites,” Jamaican authorities passed its first anti-Obeah law in 1760 (Patterson 1967:192).

Suspected cases of poisoning and Tacky’s 1760 Rebellion were key reasons planters and their allies had misgivings that enslaved people’s cosmology posed tremendous threat to their lives and the system of slavery. To neutralize such threat, Jamaican lawmakers passed legislation in 1696, that made it a capital crime for enslaved people to “give, attempt, or cause to be given [poison] to any Person... free or slave” regardless of whether it caused harm. That the anti-poison legislation predated the 1760 anti-Obeah law, suggests that white officials did not initially see poison and Obeah as inextricably bound. They, however, viewed poison as one of enslaved people’s “bloody and inhuman transactions” that caused the “Ruin and Destruction of [white] families” and therefore included it as part of their larger efforts in 1696 to police “slaves” in order to prevent “Insurrections and Rebellions” (Acts of Assembly 1681-1737:55). Subsequent legislations in 1761, 1781 and the comprehensive 1788 Consolidated Slave Act that repealed many previous statutes, continued to treat poison and Obeah as separate, unrelated crimes (Acts of Assembly, 1681-1769, vol. 2:33; Acts of Assembly 1770-1783:277; Acts of Assembly 1784-1788:200).¹ Pre-nineteenth century legal trends in Jamaica reflect Kenneth Bilby and Jerome Handler’s insistence that “poison was not an intrinsic feature of Obeah,” and even where some Obeah practitioners used poison, its use was not unique to them (Bilby and Handler 2004:175; Bilby and Handler 2012:201-221). Jamaican whites constructed Obeah as a kind of witchcraft, and, as Diana Paton argues, they also defined poison as a part of Obeah because West Indian colonists emerged out of a cultural context where Europeans believed that poison was an essential element of witchcraft (Paton 2012:239-243). Jamaican colonists, however, did not immediately make such connections because definitions of Obeah as a form of witchcraft did not exist in 1696 when the Assembly passed its first legislations on poison. As Bilby and Handler painstakingly document, the earliest recorded references to Obeah in the English Caribbean, where a “Witchnegro can cure another ... as our country folk do in England” occurred in 1710, and not until 1730 in Jamaica (Bilby and Handler 2001:88; Bilby and Handler 2004:178).

By the time (1816) Mathew Lewis wrote about Minetta and other domestic cases of poisoning, popular (white) and legal understandings linked poison to Obeah. The 1788 and 1792 Acts were two key pieces

of legislations that shaped assumptions about poison and Obeah in 1816 Jamaica.² The 1788 Act retained most provisions of previous anti-Obeah legislations, including capital punishment for practicing it. It also continued to define practitioners as men and women “pretending to have communication with the devil or other evil spirits,” who “delude weak and superstitious” minded folks that they have “full power to exempt them whilst under their protection, from any evils that might otherwise happen.” It also prohibited people from “pretending” to have “supernatural power, in order to affect the health or lives of others, or promote the purposes of rebellion” (Acts of Assembly 1681-1769, vol. 2:33; Acts of Assembly 1770-1783:200; Lunan 1819:123). The 1792 law marked the most significant departure from previous Obeah Acts. Whereas previous laws (1761, 1781 and 1788) retained references to Obeah as practices relating to “supernatural” power, “evil spirits” and the “devil,” with minor word alterations, the 1792 Act defined poison as part of the practice of Obeah. Individuals found guilty of using “poison, or poisonous or noxious drugs ... in the practice of obeah,” faced death, exile or other punishment as the courts deemed suitable (An Abridgement of Laws 1681-1792, vol. 1:6). By 1816, it became illegal simply to have poison in one’s possession. Beginning with the 1781 law, Jamaican officials enumerated a list of items they considered “Obeah paraphernalia,” enacting the death penalty for simply possessing them (Moore and Johnson 2004:18-19). Among the items listed in the 1781 Act but excluded in the 1816 law were blood, feathers, broken bottles, grave dirt, rum and eggshells. In addition to poison and poisonous drugs, the 1816 Act added, “pounded glass, parrots’ beaks, dogs’ teeth [and] alligators’ teeth” to the list of illegal objects (Acts of Assembly 1770-1783:277; Lunan 1819:124-125).³

Legislative changes reflected Jamaican authorities’ obsessive efforts to define, control, and eradicate Obeah. The common result, Paton, Bilby and Handler agree, was that they portrayed it as witchcraft and fraud. Eighteenth century legislative and (white) popular emphasis on Obeah as “witchcraft,” or the *pretense* of having “supernatural” powers and abilities to manipulate “evil spirits” reflect officials’ disbelief in Obeah’s powers (Edward Long 1774, 2002, vol. 2:462; Bilby and Handler 2004:173; Paton 2012:259). The fact that all laws claimed that practitioners were merely “pretending” to have magical powers, speak to a latent effort to eradicate belief in Obeah. Even though it was not a crime to accuse another person of practicing or appealing to Obeah, as Paton rightly documents, this did not necessarily mean that outlawing Obeah was only to suppress its potential to incite rebellion or influence others (Paton 2012:259). The absence of legislations that made it a criminal offense to accuse another person of practicing Obeah

does not sufficiently support the claim that Jamaican lawmakers were uninterested in suppressing belief in Obeah. Jamaican whites depended on enslaved informants to keep them abreast of potentially subversive plots and protect them during rebellions. In fact, the Jamaican Assembly passed the 1760 “Act to make free several negro and mulatto slaves, as a reward for their faithful services in the late rebellions,” the same day (December 18, 1760) that it passed its first anti-Obeah Act (Acts of Assembly 1681-1769, vol. 2:33). It was more politically expedient for Jamaican authorities to incentivize accusers (informants) than to criminalize accusations. To launch a campaign against accusers—potential informants and allies—would be counterintuitive to whites’ anti-Obeah efforts.

Lawmakers in Jamaica were as interested in suppressing the practice of Obeah, as they were interested in suppressing general beliefs in its powers. Defining poisoning as an “instrument of obeah,”⁴ was merely a strategy to expose Obeah practitioners as frauds and rationalize claims of Obeah’s efficacy. Obeah practitioners’ real power rested on their clients’ belief, and Jamaican whites tried to discredit and malign Obeah by linking it to poison—a material object rather than spiritual or supernatural forces. White observers vilified Obeah men and women as secretly resorting to poison in order to prove the verity of their magic. “If the charm fails to take hold of the mind of the proscribed person,” John Stewart explained, “another and more certain expedient is resorted to, secretly administering poison” to the intended victim (Stewart 1823, 1969:119; House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). Bryan Edwards disparaged, the most “deluded ... and ignorant Negroes” believed that harm resulted from spiritual or supernatural wielding; however, “the wiser Negroes” were fully aware that Obeah practitioners had no magical power (Edwards 1819, vol. 2:109).

Planter’s medical allies also rationalized that Obeah’s power was psychological and not spiritual or supernatural. Once a person believes “Obi [sic] is set for him,” they asserted, he falls “under the Horror of impending calamities.” Dr. Adair argued that “the arts and means they use seem to operate on the Mind rather than the Body.” He clarified that the symptoms displayed by its victims were similar to those that “accompany Hypochondria and Melancholy,” causing them to settle into “Gloom of Despondency” and eat dirt or any other unwholesome substance. Victims considered the effects of Obeah as irreversible unless another, usually a “more eminent Obeah man,” gave a more powerful medicine to counteract the initial decay (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). Although proslavery medical assessments of Obeah’s influence differed from those of the slaveholding elites,

their claim that Obeah was mental, not magical, confirmed planters' misguided beliefs that Obeah was simply fraud, trickery and deception with disastrous outcomes for them.

From the 1696 anti-poison act and Obeah's criminalization in 1760 through to the ending of slavery in 1834, planters legislated, scrutinized, accused and prosecuted hundreds of enslaved men and women for practicing and appealing to Obeah. Legislations, accusations and prosecutions combined to define Obeah in the historical records and narratives as witchcraft and fraud used for malevolent purposes.⁵ Many scholars have successfully unraveled ethnocentric and proslavery legacy, and have convincingly shifted the narrative and definition of Obeah from a kind of sorcery to a multifaceted institution to which believers appealed for healing, protection and explaining tragedies and misfortune.⁶ Most recently, Diana Paton urges scholars to examine critically the political and power contexts from which definitions emerged and the prosecution of clients and practitioners occurred. Constructions of Obeah as "witchcraft, magic, superstition and charlatanism," Paton emphasizes, reflect the power of "colonial law making and law enforcing practices" to distort and exclude what can be considered a religion and distinguish between "true religion" and superstitious paganism (Paton 2009:2-3). Obeah was as much a "construct produced through law" as it was a medicinal and spiritual institution evolving from a wide assortment of beliefs and rituals of African, European and New World origins (Moore and Johnson 2004:16; Paton 2009:2-3; Brown 2008:145; Browne 2011:453). Comprehensively, Bilby and Handler summarized, it involved the "manipulation of material objects" and the "control[ling] and channeling of supernatural/spiritual forces, usually for socially beneficially ends such a treating illness, bringing good fortune, protecting against harm and avenging wrongs [but] was sometimes used to harm others" (Bilby and Handler 2004:153; Bilby and Handler 2012:4).

This essay is part of on-going scholarly efforts to expand our understandings of the complex meanings, functions and uses of Obeah in Jamaica's slave society. In addition to clarifying the legal distinctions between poison and Obeah, it investigates the role of poison in Obeah accusations; and agrees with Bilby and Handler, that while poison was not intrinsic to enslaved peoples' understanding of Obeah, planters and lawmakers associated poison with Obeah as part of their campaign to demystify and reduce it to sinister, malevolent practices. In our opening cases Matthew Lewis painted an especially diabolic image of Minetta, who allegedly showed no remorse for poisoning her master. By calling attention to her remorselessness, other perpetrators' ruthlessness despite their masters' kindness, and their ready access to poison and Obeah, Lewis wanted to show that Minetta's case was not an isolated

threat to white families' safety, but an index of the enormity of Obeah's danger to planter power. Planters strategized to nullify and eradicate threats to their power, while enslaved people maneuvered to gain ascendancy and resolve conflict within their communities. Poison and Obeah accusations were therefore mirrors of social tensions and political tools that planters and enslaved people wielded to obtain and maintain status and authority within Jamaica's plantation communities.⁷ It is extremely difficult to assess the veracity of claims or access enslaved people's voices because poison and Obeah allegations were part of political maneuvering and the sources, penned by white planters, reflect their racist, ethnocentric views. In an effort to appreciate, more fully, the complexities of Obeah, this essay explores possible truth claims behind allegations, and offers potential explanations of what individuals hoped to accomplish by appealing to Obeah's powers. Similar to accusations, Obeah offered its clients outlets for hardships and resolutions for problems, which yields further insights into the challenges enslaved people struggled to cope with and overcome.

Allegations of poisoning occurred within a number of contexts. Our opening case shows domestic workers accused of poisoning their masters, with revenge as possible motive. Yet, Mathew Lewis and other planters viewed such cases with incredulity because enslavers were supposedly generous and benevolent to their chattel. Even more mystifying for white contemporaries were nursemaids, whom they accused of poisoning innocent babies in their care. Such were the charges of a Vere proprietor who accused one of two wet nurses of poisoning his infant while she "suckled" it. Although the father was uncertain as to which of the two nursemaids killed his child, he suspected the woman who supposedly had a brother with connections to an Obeah practitioner. He speculated that the well-connected sibling supplied her with the poisonous substance. Confirming the nurse's guilt was easy enough by virtue of her "misbehaviour after" the incident (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646).

Why did this father so easily assume that his child was a victim of Obeah, particularly when the evidence was so sketchy? Jamaican whites believed in Obeah's power, even if they would not admit such beliefs readily or explicitly (Paton 2012:259). Obeah was the only explanation a grieving father could conjure to explain such unfathomable misfortune. Yet, to distinguish white's rational selves from "superstitious," "deluded Negroes," who saw inexplicable death as the wielding of supernatural powers, they rationalized that practitioners gave their clients poison to achieve their malicious ends. The anti-Obeah laws after 1792 that indissolubly linked poison to Obeah gave white accusers a ready-made theory of how Obeah caused the death of loved ones. Obeah was a convenient

explanatory device for mysterious catastrophes, and poison was the logical materialization of something they otherwise disparaged as fraud.⁸

Assuming that the wet nurse poisoned her charge, what motives would a domestic worker, supposedly, the most favored and specially treated of all enslaved people, have for turning on owners and their families? Studying similar cases in the French colony of Martinique, John Savage argues that domestics were critical members of a “powerful underground network” of assassins working to destroy the plantation system. With its reliance on “secret signs and passwords, initiation rituals ... and poison,” Savage argues, Obeah was a powerful weapon in their arsenal. According to Savage, seemingly benign nursemaids and domestics were key linchpins for such networks because of their easy access to planters and their families. Most household workers became pawns, whom practitioners pressured into mixing poison into their masters’ food or drink. Obeah men and women, in this interpretation, intimidated trusted domestics into compliance by threatening brutal reprisals (Savage 2007:635-662).

Savage’s analysis has potential applicability to the Jamaican context. In the opening case, Mathew Lewis speculated that Minetta had accomplices, specifically her mother and grandmother, who supposedly aided and goaded her. To reduce female assailants to the role of pawns, however, undermine individual agency. Planters launched a campaign in the Westmoreland parish to capture Plato, an alleged Obeah man and fugitive, to whom other runaways fled and appealed for help. In Plato, patrons found “freedom, protection and unbound generosity” in solving their problems (Lewis 1929:82-83). Studying similar cases, Jerome Handler, Kenneth Bilby and Trevor Burnard confirm that enslaved people appealed to Obeah for various reasons, ranging from “healing, locating missing property, protecting against illness and other kinds of misfortune” (Handler and Bilby 2001:87-100; Burnard 2004:224). Following the death of her four children within days being born, and her two six-year-old sons, Abba consulted Obeah man Will from a neighboring property. Discussing Abba’s case, Burnard argues that Abba sought Will’s help to explain the death of her children. Having been “almost out of her senses [and] quite frantic” after her last child died, Abba needed spiritual reassurance and explanation for the constant tragedy that befell her (Burnard 2004:224). Obeah practitioners therefore served as transmitters of psychological and spiritual comfort for those struggling to cope with inexplicable loss.

Women therefore resorted to Obeah according to their own volition. To maintain bemusement that favorite workers, or “faithful slaves,” as Monica Schuler puts it, perpetrated heinous crimes, like murder and infanticide, is to perpetuate planter stereotypes and ignore the dense

orbit of enslaved women's lives, marked by loss, cruelty and exploitation, which made life a daily struggle for their humanity and social connections (Schuler 1970:374-385). Haunted by the deaths of their own offspring, and denied opportunities to nurture them because they first had to care and attend the needs of their enslavers' children, who would grow to exercise mastery over them, were compelling reasons for wet nurses to lash out against their wards. Various scholars have exposed the exploitative undertones of incomplete portrayals of enslaved women as all loving, ever-giving mothers, who self-sacrificed for all children within their care (Beckles 1996; Bush 1996; White 1999; Shepherd 2002:24-25; Morgan 2004:114-115). Emphasizing masters' kindness and enslaved nurses' emotional bond and attachment to their wards downplay slavery's households as labor intensive, exploitative and abusive environments (Glymph 2008:2-4; Burnard 2004). And, while we need not discount affections and affective ties that might have developed between enslaved caregivers and their charges, our historical analysis will be deficient if we disregard the potential oppression enslaved mothers felt to neglect their families in order to nurture and care for their masters' children while they performed backbreaking, uncompensated labor for abusive masters (Collins 1994:90).⁹ One must carefully assess poison and Obeah accusations in the context of oppressed women seeking release from their exploitation. If indeed the father's charges against the wet nurse had truth claims, they suggest Obeah's potential for avenging wrongs.

Contemporaries further downplayed house workers' violent and overburdened life by claiming that they received greater and better living, food and clothing allowances, and that housework shielded them from arduous fieldwork (Beckles 1996:125-139; Moitt 2001:151-172). Given a life of privilege, white householders charged, domestics feared and viewed demotion to the field as the most severe punishment (Long 1774, 2002 vol. 2:415-416). Assuming that field work was a most unwelcomed fate for house workers, the grieving father demoted the wet nurse to the field. The fact that the victim did not seek legal redress or resort to corporal punishment (typical for lesser offences) begs the question of how much he truly believed the wet nurse committed the alleged crime, and a general lack of evidence to support his allegations. One would imagine that for crime as serious as murdering one's child, a parent, particularly a slave master, would exact the ultimate price—death—from the enslaved perpetrator. These perplexing questions spotlight the fuzziness of planters' allegations of poison and Obeah.

Learning of his sister's demotion, her brother, (a butler in the same household) allegedly poisoned the well "from which the Family had their Daily supply." No one in the master's family was hurt, since the householder had the well emptied after noticing the water was "very much dis-

coloured.” He thought nothing of the water’s discoloration, and simply assumed that its putrid state resulted from “the natural effects of Stagnation.” When the water continued “ill-coloured, nauseous to Taste and offensive to Smell,” he investigated the matter further. Investigations revealed, “a white fowl, in very putrid state, Beak, Claws had all been cut off” and stuffed into the well. The findings prompted “suspicions of some mischievous designs,” and after interrogating enslaved people on the property and searching their homes, the householder learned that the fowl belonged to the butler and wet nurse’s (brother and sister) grandmother. In the grandmother’s home, investigators also found a “Calabash with greenish liquid [that] had been recently emptied.” The cook confessed he had seen the butler with a phial containing a similar colored liquid, and recalled overhearing him “threatening Revenge, and vowing that he would buy some Obi [sic] to put on his master.” According to the cook, the butler was “highly incensed [and] discontent” by his masters’ ill-treatment of his sister (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). What began as a simple case of an aggrieved wet nurse supposedly poisoning her charge, expanded into a wider network of perpetrators. The multi-layered nature of this particular case reveals the complex mosaic of poison and Obeah accusations, “which drew enslaved men and women, practitioners and clients together in complicated ways as they struggle not only against their enslaver, but also for dominance and survival within their communities.”¹⁰ On the surface, it implicated a woman in defense of herself against exploitation, as well as a brother avenging his sister’s wrongful treatment. The grandmother, however, is the anchor in this story, acting surreptitiously on her grandchildren’s behalf. While the white narrator does not implicate the grandmother as one with an immediate grievance, slaveholders believed invisible conspirators in the background were among the most feared and dangerous of all. In the shadows, they incited rebellion among the masses, simultaneously inspiring “dread,” “devotion and confidence.” Many years after Tacky’s 1760 revolt Jamaican whites cited it as the greatest, most terrifying example of the “influence” “Professors of the Obiah [sic] Art” held over the enslaved masses (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). “The extent and secrecy of its plan, the multitude of conspirators, and the difficulty of opposing its eruptions in such a variety of places at once,” Edward Long concluded, made it “more formidable than any hitherto known in the West Indies” (Long 1774, 2002 vol.2: 462; Brown 2008:148). Both anti-Obeah legislations and contemporary reports continuously emphasized Obeah men and women’s tremendous power to “influence” “deluded,” “weak Negroes” “in order to excite rebellion and other evil purposes.” The “mind” of the believer, Bryan Edwards reported, was “so firmly prepossessed” by

practitioners, that few would “betray” who they were (Edwards 1819 vol. 2:110). Such assumptions emboldened planters’ anti-Obeah efforts.

It is easy to overlook the cook’s betrayal in this intricate tale. Yet, this act of “disloyalty” reveals an individual seeking to better his personal condition. It is clear that the wet nurse, butler, and grandmother shared common, definable heritage—blood ties and a collective appeal to Obeah. Though shared bondage and occupational status bound the cook to this group of domestics, he was not a blood relative and he did not belong to what appears to be a secret network. Thus, by revealing what he heard, the cook claimed an opportunity to strike his own deal that, while not consulting Obeah, aimed to secure individual survival. Although Obeah brought some enslaved people together, it also divided community members. This fracturing inevitably led some individuals to appeal to alternative mechanisms of survival, sometimes, like the cook had done, by seeking their masters’ favor.

Randy Browne also offers rich documentation of enslaved drivers on Op Hoop van Beter property, Berbice, who appealed to Obeah practitioners in order to protect themselves from their masters’ wrath. Following a mysterious illness, drivers Primo and Mey consulted a practitioner to “bring things on the estate to order.” They suspected a malevolent spirit was to blame for the inexplicable illness, and they called in an Obeah man to “put the estate to rights.” The drivers’ actions, Browne concludes, helps us to see how enslaved people used Obeah to “reinforce...and preserve” the “plantation regime” for their own benefit (Browne 2011:460-461). The cook and the drivers’ predicament also expose the muddled realities of enslavement, as those in bondage did what they could to escape punishment, retain status and save their lives, whether their own or others. If implicated and convicted as a consulter or practitioner of Obeah, the cook faced the death penalty or exile. In a world where white authorities were obsessed with suppressing the practice of Obeah, accusing others of being practitioners or clients offered immunity to the accuser. As discussed earlier, enslaved people who aided in suppressing Tacky’s Revolt were promised freedom as a reward. Obeah had the power to simultaneously bind communities together, and rupture them, sometimes forcing the enslaved to collaborate with their oppressors to save their own lives or escape torturous punishment. At other times, they collaborated with Obeah practitioners to achieve similar ends.

While Primo and Mey consulted an Obeah practitioner in order to avert a spiritual catastrophe, many others consulted them to resolve medical crisis. Practitioners’ extensive knowledge of tropical plants and herbs, West Indian agents affirmed, empowered them to “operate extraordinary Cures, in Diseases which have baffled the Skill of regular [white] Practitioners, and more especially in foul Sores and Ulcers”

(House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). The proven effectiveness of their remedies encouraged enslaved clients to favor their methods of healing instead of medicine offered by white doctors. In fact, several planters confessed that Obeah doctors' cures were more effective than western medicine, which in some cases, killed rather than cured patients. The presence of less than qualified doctors, who did more harm than good, unwittingly bolstered the importance of black healers (Sheridan 1985:80-82). Although many Jamaican planters reduced and maligned Obeah as sorcery, superstition and charlatanism, when it suited their needs, they acknowledged its positive health values. They not only permitted Obeah healers to treat their enslaved workers, they too sought their services.¹¹ One planter confessed, "I have myself made use of their skill... with great success" (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646).

Obeah not only had positive healing effects, it was also a spiritual and medicinal institution that created an alternative hierarchy and source of allegiance, empowerment and prestige among the enslaved. In Agent Fuller's view, "The Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them" because they had power to "Cure [any] Disorder" and aid in the "obtaining of Revenge for injuries or Insults, the conciliating of Favour, the Discovery and Punishment of the Thief or Adulterer, and the Prediction of Future events." Practitioners therefore "attract the greatest devotion and Confidence" (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). Enterprising drivers, like Primo and Mey, consolidated and enhanced their power and prestige within the plantation hierarchy and community by collaborating with Obeah practitioners. Jamaican planters and officials were as awed by Obeah's tremendous and variable power as they were threatened by it and their inability to control it. Their legal campaigns from 1760 to 1826 thoroughly reflect Vincent Brown's conclusions that "Jamaican masters could not abide by sources of authority they did not wholly control" (Brown 2008:149).

Enslaved people were not just oppressed, bonded workers; they were also members of social groups, households, and individuals with personal needs, desires and ambitions. Afro-Jamaicans fought to win their masters' favor and outdo rivals in competitions for elite and leadership roles, secure the affection and fidelity of lovers and defend their homes and legacies against external and competing claims. The professional and domestic conflict between Edward and Pickle at Mathew Lewis's Cornwall estate showcases these multi-layered competitions and the function of Obeah accusations as political ploys to outdo competitors. Pickle and Edward were long "intimate friends" who became "rivals," when Pickle became the "successful candidate" for an elevated position

at Cornwall estate. Pickle was the favored choice because he was “an excellent faithful negro” (Lewis 1929:114).

After Pickle married Edward’s sister, the professional conflict between the pair morphed into a domestic one. In January 1816, Pickle alleged his house was broken into at the same time that he became ill with pain in his side. During Lewis’s investigation of the events, Pickle charged, “Edward had Obeahed him!” According to Pickle, after he discovered his goods stolen, he begged Edward to help him recover his goods and expose the thief. Edward promised to aid Pickle. At midnight, he went to the bush “and gathered the plant whangra, which he boiled in a pot of fire leaves, over which he went puff, puffie.” Edward then cut the whangra root into four pieces, burying three at the plantation gate and then burning the fourth. He promised Pickle that this ritual would locate the goods. Instead of helping him find his goods, however, Pickle alleged he “immediately felt a pain in his side.” In that moment, he knew that “instead of using Obeah to find his goods, Edward” used it against him. When Lewis pressed Pickle for Edward’s reasons for wanting to see him dead, he replied, “When he married, Edward was very angry... and said that they never would live well and happily together; and they never *had* lived happily and well together.” Lewis dismissed Pickle’s claims as “foolish and highly improbable.” Defending Edward, Lewis claimed that he was innocent of such allegations because, Edward previously captured and delivered a notorious Obeah priest with his own hands “to my agent who prosecuted and transported him.” Edward’s actions had endeared him to the proprietor, which made it difficult for Pickle to convince Lewis that Edward had now become involved in such practices.

In accusing Edward of practicing Obeah, Pickle might have hoped that Edward would suffer a similar fate as the fellow enslaved man transported off the island after Edward accused him of being an Obeah man. Pickle was likely insecure about his own position and his marriage, and getting rid of Edward, would eliminate his long-time rival. Instead, Lewis and other bystanders, who also attested to Edward’s previous heroism in apprehending the alleged Obeah man, ridiculed Pickle for making complaints that were “improbable and childish.” Embarrassed, Pickle returned to the hospital, “quite sullen and unconvinced.” Later that day, Lewis swayed Pickle and Edward to reconcile, after promising Pickle he would repurchase the stolen goods (Lewis 1929:114-116, 118).

Almost two years after Pickle first accused Edward of practicing Obeah, Pickle again complained to Lewis that despite his best efforts to live at peace with Edward, they remained at odds. In April 1818, when Pickle’s wife miscarried for a third time, he alleged Edward had set Obeah for her. When Lewis pressed Pickle for Edward’s motive, Pickle explained, “in order to prevent [his] child claiming its share of the

grandfather property, Edward had practiced Obeah” to make his wife miscarry. According to Pickle, Edward wanted to ensure that his wife would “remain sole heiress of the father’s property.” Once again, Lewis dismissed his claims as “foolish,” since he had no proof of such things. In order to resolve the tensions and to prevent future conflicts, Lewis relocated the two families to either end of the village. The perpetual quarrel between the men’s wives also compelled Lewis to separate the families. As Lewis explained, “in a house so disunited” it was necessary to separate the families in order to keep “domestic peace” (Lewis 1929:331-322).

Accusing one’s brother-in-law of practicing Obeah was a serious matter, and whether or not Pickle really believed Edward worked Obeah on him and his wife, he willingly risked the worst fate for his wife’s brother and rival. As we saw in our earlier discussions of anti-Obeah statutes, individuals convicted of practicing or simply possessing “instruments of Obeah” faced the death penalty. Death would have eliminated Pickle’s competition for his father’s legacy, and resolved endemic insecurities and bitterness Pickle had towards Edward. Additionally, he would also get back at Edward for the humiliation he suffered in 1816 when Lewis and other community members ridiculed and mocked him for bringing false accusations against Edward. We have no way of telling whether these accusations were true, or whether by accusing his brother-in-law of practicing Obeah, he simply wanted an easy escape from rivalry and conflict. Pickle partially got his wish; he no longer shared a home with Edward. Despite legal vigilance, many planters sidestepped courts’ authority opting to privately punish by flogging or confining the accused, particularly in cases where no one was injured and planters felt they had the situation under control.¹² In both sets of accusations, 1816 and 1818, Lewis successful deflated the conflict between Pickle and Edward by offering material rewards and separating them. Obeah accusations solicited planters’ intervention, helped to release social tensions and resolve family disputes, but tacitly reaffirmed proprietors’ authority and mastery.

Obeah accusations further reveal the nature of family conflicts and communal bonds among the enslaved. While kinship was integral to enslaved people, varying degrees of devotion surfaced. Philip Morgan, for instance, identifies four types of kin ties, including husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings and extended kin (Morgan 2003:332-333). At one time or another, one relationship superseded another in terms of importance. If Pickle was correct in his accusation that Edward tried to prevent the birth of his sister’s children, then Edward’s bond with his wife and their potential children superseded ties with his sister. Although Afro-Jamaicans shared the slavery experience, they developed personal connections that demarcated unique circles of belonging, which excluded or marginalized others. Appealing to Obeah or accusing

competitors of practicing or consulting practitioners helped to resolve competing claims and preserve new attachments.

Enslaved people's various demands upon Obeah reflect how Jamaican folk culture, rites and customs evolved as responses to the tangled socio-cultural milieu in which Afro-Jamaicans found themselves and navigated in order to secure the best results for themselves and allies within their innermost circle. In this example, enslaved people also claimed their living spaces and provision grounds as family property, which passed from one generation to the next. Claiming work gardens and housing spots as family property, Sidney Mintz argues, re-established kinship ties in quite practical terms. Although rightfully owned by white proprietors, house and provision plots became spaces of belonging where mothers birthed their children and families buried their dead (Mintz 1979:213-242). To legitimize land claims, Edward Kamau Brathwaite notes, enslaved people consecrated the grounds through rites, such as burying the umbilical cords of their children under trees on the land. Birth and death sacraments, sometimes ritualized by Obeah practitioners, inextricably bound Afro-Jamaicans to the land, from which neither they nor their kin should be separated without dire consequences for the householder (Brathwaite 1971:213; Mullin 1992:183). A life of turmoil and unhappiness followed when an enslaved person believed they violated "sacred authority" (Brown 2003:24-53).

Edward was hardly an innocent victim of Pickle's scheming to eliminate a professional and personal rival. Edward maneuvered to secure his own dominance, and like Pickle, also accused another, Adam, of practicing Obeah. The dispute between Pickle and Edward had been settled only after Lewis had pulled Edward aside and paid him a dollar to confide in him. Edward assured Lewis that Pickle's accusations had no basis in truth, and that it was Adam, "long and strongly suspected of having connections with Obeah men," who had persuaded Pickle to make the allegations against him. When others confirmed to have seen Adam at the hospital at the same time as Pickle, Lewis was convinced that Adam had in fact planted the idea in Pickle's mind that his illness had resulted from Edward setting Obeah for him. Edward claimed Adam sought vengeance for rebuffing his efforts to inveigle him into "lay a magical egg under the door of a bookkeeper, whose conduct had been obnoxious." In Edward's account, Adam hoped that by getting Pickle to accuse him of practicing Obeah, investigations and prosecutions would lead to death or exile. Adam failed to receive his revenge because Edward faced neither fate. By confessing his resistance to Adam's efforts to co-opt him into the plot against white authority (now added to his previous exposure and aid in capturing another "notorious Obeah man") Edward rewarded and affirmed his master's trust (Lewis 1929:119).

Pickle and Edward had endeared themselves to Lewis, who despite their conflicts with one another remained faithful to him, at least from Lewis's perspective. Adam, however, appeared less controllable, and as white agents at the property reported, he "had always found means for evading [their] order." Adam was not only in conflict with Edward and Cornwall estate's white agents; he was also at odds with other community members who accused him of attempting to poison the estate's previous attorney, and setting a curse for Bessie, the enslaved woman who had betrayed his plot. Bessie blamed the subsequent deaths of her children on Adam's supposed curse. After Bessie confided in Lewis about Adam's past actions and the supposed "terror" he inflicted on fellow community members, he thanked her by giving her a "piece of money." Giving the mounting allegations against Adam, Lewis evaluated how best to restore order. He pondered, "I cannot get rid of him: the law will not suffer any negro to be shipped off the island, until he shall be convicted of a felony." Lewis understood he had no legal case against Adam because Edward's accusation that Adam inveigled Pickle to make false allegations and Bessie's claims that he put a curse on her were easily dismissed as foolish tales, punishable by flogging or confinement. Furthermore, no evidence materialized to support the claims that Adam attempted to poison the estate's previous attorney. Lewis doubted the veracity of these allegations, but understood well that they disrupted harmony on his property. He thought he would pacify the tension by encouraging Adam to baptize and gave him a "couple of dollars" to go to the clergyman. Lewis thought that baptizing Adam would convince community members that he no longer had powers they accused him of possessing and therefore would restore peace and harmony to the community. We will see, Lewis mused, "what effect "white Obeah" will have in removing the terrors of the black" (Lewis 1929:118, 126).

In exchange for Lewis's favor and lenience, Adam baptized on March 30, 1816. For the next few months, until Lewis left Jamaica (June 1, 1816) the baptism and monetary reward worked well to keep the peace between Adam and his fellow community members. Such mollification was, however, brief. When Lewis returned to his estate in February 1818, he found many people in an uproar over Adam, who accused him of poisoning twelve people, physically assaulting several others, and attempting to poison the head driver, Sully, and the well from which women drew water for their children. The women and men at Cornwall begged Lewis to get rid of Adam because they feared "Their lives were not safe while breathing the same air as" him (Lewis 1929:291-293).

The exploding conflict between Adam and his community has attracted the attention of several scholars; including Michael Mullin who argues that Adam's case is an example of how Obeah complicated dem-

onstrations and claims to power among the community of the enslaved (Mullin 1992:179). The legitimacy of the Obeah man's authority, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood clarify, were cut short by community members' betrayals and rivals for dominance. Workers who foiled Adam's plot to poison the well, and the cooks' refusal to poison Sully's food reflect "jealousies and enmities," and competing loyalties among the community of enslaved people (Frey and Wood 1998:61). Members of Adam's community no longer wished him to be a part of it, and collectively accusing him of poison and Obeah was the likeliest way to secure his excommunication.

Lewis accepted their pleas, and plotted the best legal strategy to secure Adam's expulsion from the estate. Diana Paton also examining Adam's case, emphasized that Lewis forwent a poisoning prosecution in favor of "obeah and having Obeah materials & c," because the former was a lesser crime, which, if convicted would have resulted in "a temporary punishment of flogging or imprisonment," after which Adam would "have returned ... to the estate with increased resentment against those to whom he should ascribe his suffering." An Obeah conviction carried the more serious penalty of death or transportation. The court found Adam not guilty for practicing Obeah, but guilty for possessing "Obeah materials" for which it sentenced him to transportation. The damning evidence in Adam's case was "a string of beads of various sizes, shapes, and colours arranged in a form peculiar to the performance of the Obeah-man in the Myal dance" (Paton 2012:262-263; Lewis 1929:222-223).

Lewis contemplated and subsequently dismissed bringing poisoning charges against Adam not because poisoning was a lesser charge that brought minor punishment, but because "the strong suspicion" of poisoning would have only yielded flogging (Lewis 1929:294). Poisoning and practicing Obeah carried the death penalty in 1818 Jamaica. Clause fifty-two of the 1816 Act for the Better Regulation and Government of Slaves imposed the death penalty for anyone preparing or giving poison or poisonous substance to another person in the practice of Obeah (Lunan 1819:124). The opinions of planter-witnesses appearing before the House of Commons committee confirm that although poison and Obeah are "punished in the same manner," poison "is much more serious in its Effect" because the practice of Obeah acts only upon the "*Imagination* of those who believe" (emphasis added). Unless poison had been administered, many whites in nineteenth century Jamaica believed that Obeah was only effective on the "minds" of "weak and deluded Negroes" (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646). Adam's accusers claimed he was an Obeah practitioner and had mixed and given them poison to put in Sully's food; they were, however, unable to present

Lewis with the powder Adam supposedly gave them. No one had died, and both cooks claimed they “threw away the powder privately” (Lewis 1929:293). Weak and circumstantial evidence compelled Lewis to avoid bringing poisoning charges against Adam. Charging him with practicing Obeah and possessing Obeah materials was the more strategic juridical choice because the broad framing of the 1816 statute gave wide latitude in legal interpretation, upon which planters could build the most circumstantial case. The damning evidence in Adam’s trial was the “string of beads,” which was *not* among the items listed as Obeah materials in the 1816 Act. The phrase “*other materials* notoriously used in the practice of obeah or witchcraft,” (italics my emphasis) gave magistrates extensive scope to interpret the string of beads as *other materials*, and therefore found Adam guilty for possessing Obeah paraphernalia. The vagueness of clause fifty-three that made it a felony for enslaved people to have in their possession “any other materials notoriously used in the practice of Obeah” secured Adam’s conviction.

Judging from Lewis’s previous conciliatory efforts with Edward and Pickle, and previous multiple accusations against Adam for practicing Obeah and attempting to poison white personnel, it is unlikely that Lewis believed the latest allegations against Adam. He took the 1818 accusations more seriously because it created irreparable turmoil on his property and from the community members pleading and “uproar,” the only way to pacify the situation was to remove Adam. Most importantly, Lewis was outraged by Adam’s alleged boasting on the property and on neighboring plantations that he “obtained an influence over [his] mind,” and could manipulate Lewis into doing what he pleased, including promoting him into Sully’s position. “Instead of attributing my lenity to [my] wish to reform him,” Lewis fumed, “his pride and confidence in his own talents and powers of deception made him attribute the indulgence I had shown him to his having obtained influence over my mind” (Lewis 1929:292). Lewis moved against Adam because he threatened his authority at Cornwall, and undermined his esteem in the plantation district. Unlike Edward, whom Lewis believed remained faithful and confided in him, Adam appeared uncontrollable and threatening. Lewis’s baptism and monetary reward clearly failed to subdue Adam. Prosecution and exile were the final solution.

Comparing Adam’s case to Edward and Pickle’s dispute, we see two sets of accusations, with ultimately different outcomes. Lewis simply separated the two warring families, while he dragged Adam through the court which sentenced him to transportation. Yet, Adam faced a fatal fate only after Lewis’s previous conciliatory efforts failed to subdue him. Collectively, these various cases demonstrate that Obeah prosecution was proportionate to how threatening planters sensed enslaved people’s

actions and their perceived ability to control the accused. Poison and Obeah accusations in the hands of planters were therefore mechanisms of social control (Brown 2008:148).

Enslaved people employed Obeah accusations to settle and ease jealousies, rivalries and tensions, while planters used them to strengthen political campaigns. Testifying before the 1789 House of Commons's committee to investigate slavery and the slave trade, Agent Stephen Fuller alleged that Obeah was a direct cause of "depopulation" among the enslaved in Jamaica. A most telling example, Fuller testified, occurred in 1775 when an unnamed proprietor lost many workers, while countless others suffered in a "very deplorable condition" as they battled a mysterious illness. Having tried a number of "Medicines and the most careful Nursing" without improvement, suspicions emerged that the dead and ailing were victims of Obeah. After repeatedly interrogating patients, who denied "having anything to do with persons of that Order, or any knowledge of them," a woman confessed. The woman, also battling the mysterious illness, admitted that "her step mother, a woman of the Popo country above Eighty years ... had put the Obi [sic] on her, as she had also done upon those who had lately died." The woman further confessed that her step mother "practiced Obi [sic] for as many years as she could remember" (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1789, vol. xxvi: no. 646).¹³

Following the step daughter's confession, the elderly woman's house was thoroughly searched. Carefully hidden in its roof and the "Crevice in the walls" were the "implements of her Trade: Rags, *Feathers*, Bones of Cats and a thousand of other articles" (Emphasis added). Further investigations uncovered,

a large earthen Pot or Jar [containing] prodigious Quantity of round balls or earth or Clay of various Dimensions, large and small, whitened on the outside, and variously compounded, some with Hair and rags, or *Feathers* of all Sorts and strongly bound with Twine, others blended with the upper section of the Skulls of Cats, or stuck around with cats' Teeth and Claws or with Human or *Dogs' Teeth*, and some Glass Beads of Different Colours ... *eggshells* filled with a viscous or gummy substance [were] found concealed under her bed. (Emphasis added)

Whereas the court convicted Adam of *possessing* Obeah implements (various glass beads) the extensive findings in this woman's home was "Indubitable proof" that she was an Obeah practitioner. Comparing these findings and those of Adam's home, one would suppose that the fine distinction between *possessing Obeah materials* and *being an Obeah practitioner* was that possessing one of these implements proved the former; while possessing several materials proved the latter. Interestingly, only three of the apparent findings in this woman's house

—feathers, dogs’ teeth and eggshells—were itemized as Obeah materials in the 1761 Act that would be applicable in 1775. It is worth emphasizing too the law retains the phrase “any other materials relative to the practice of Obeah,” which, as we saw in Adam’s trial, meant that just about any item found in an accused home could serve as evidence of possessing Obeah materials or practicing Obeah. Legal distinctions between possessing and practicing, however, made little difference to the fate of the accused, like Adam and the “woman from the Popo country”, who both faced transportation. Countless others received the death penalty on similar accusations. Such were the fates of Kent, hanged on the 29th of March 1779; Henry Turner who in 1825 was spared the death sentence and transported off the island; and James who was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor.¹⁴

What is especially striking about Agent Fuller’s testimony is the demonstrated malleability of planters’ *beliefs* in Obeah’s ability to cause harm. As we saw in the discussions at the outset of this essay, anti-Obeah legislations reduced Obeah to fraud, defining it as mere *pretense* to have supernatural powers. Most obviously, if planters saw Obeah as mere fraud, what reason did they have for telling, and retelling a tale that demonstrated and perpetuated belief in its power? (Edwards 1798: vol. 2, 116-117). An obvious explanation would be poison (as other planters alleged in similar mysterious deaths). But Fuller did not attribute poisoning to the woman’s alleged crime. Fuller testified about the “woman from the Popo country” in 1789, when anti-slavery activists campaigned to abolish the slave trade as a means of compelling West Indian planters to invest in the health, reproduction and longevity of their laboring populations. Agent Fuller was but one of many planter-witnesses who defended slavery and the slave trade by claiming enslaved people’s so-called barbaric customs and practices caused demographic failure. Telling the story of the Popo woman was part of a much larger proslavery trope, deployed by Fuller and many others, like Bryan Edwards, who would also publish this story in his polemic text, *History of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (Edwards 1819; Paton and Forde 2012:13-15). As the British abolitionist campaigns gained momentum between the 1780s and 1830s, planters and their trading and medical allies also singled out women as culprits. Women’s so-called promiscuity, abortion and late night excursions made conceptions and successful pregnancies impossible (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1790, vol. xxv: nos. 635-645:261). In some cases, they linked abortion to Obeah. Captain William Littleton, for instance, testified, many African women ended up in the transatlantic slave trade because of witchcraft convictions. Such women, Littleton explained, were the bane of planters’ efforts to boost population growth because they were known for “having and distributing

knowledge about ... drugs and medicines occasioning abortion” (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1790, vol. xxv: nos. 635-645:22, 26, 204). With the exception of Thomas Thistlewood’s anecdotal remark in 1780, that Damsel miscarried after Will “work his obiah” [sic] on her,” few planters privately pinned abortions on Obeah (Hall 1999:145, 279). They most often blamed midwives (Beckles 1989:158; Bush 1990:139-142; Morgan 2004:114; Mair 2006:241-242).

Parliamentary testimonies that blamed enslaved people for population failure had the political goal of swaying British public opinion away from planter culpability by shifting attention away from overwork, malnutrition and abuse as the real causes of natural decrease. The works of Richard Sheridan, Barry Higman and Kenneth Morgan, among others, have compellingly shown that the West Indian colonies were swarming beds of infections and illnesses that European doctors could neither diagnose nor treat. Although blacks and whites, enslaved and free died suddenly and frequently from unknown causes, the slave population declined more rapidly because of overwork, brutal punishment and poor nutrition (Higman 1984:260-302, 214-346; Sheridan 1985:185-221; Morgan 2006:231-253). Obeah explanations were merely political tools planters wielded to bolster their proslavery defense to mask their liability and the lethal effects of slavery.

The goal of the British Parliament’s investigations into the slave trade and slavery from the end of the eighteenth century into first three decades of the nineteenth century was also to assess enslaved people’s readiness for freedom and membership in civilized society. At stake in these debates was the possibility of racial equality in a society where slavery no longer existed (Drescher 2002:73-82; Cooper, Holt and Scott 2003:3-39). European’s seventeenth century argument that African and their descendants were culturally inferior and barbaric, which rationalized slavery, were redeployed by slavery’s defenders, like Stephen Fuller, in order to thwart British anti-slavery efforts. Proslavery witnesses before parliament did not just use Obeah as a scape goat for population failure; they also presented it as evidence of enslaved people’s savagery, superstition and immorality which made them unfit for equality with whites, or freedom. In place “of a system of religion,” witnesses testified, they were “superstitious” and only believed in “supernatural power” and “mercenary and revengeful spirits” (House of Commons Sessional Papers 1790, vol. xxv: nos. 635-645:17). Agreeing that afro-West Indians were “morally degraded,” British abolitionists and parliament promoted Christian instruction and baptism for the enslaved. From the late 1780s, missionaries infested the Caribbean with a mandate to eradicate superstition and replace it with *true* religion. The result of the work of missionaries was the further denigration of Obeah, vilification of believers and practitioners

and any other cosmologies that did not correspond with their Christian doctrines or suit their political agenda (Turner 1998:17-20; Hall 2002: 69-83; Moore and Johnson 2004:14; Brown 2008:200; Paton 2009:1-4).

Obeah legislations, accusations and prosecutions demonstrate that the power slaveholders held extended well beyond owning the body the enslaved. Whites held power to define and give meanings to black cosmologies and customs which they plied to influence and control enslaved people. By criminalizing and derogating Obeah, Jamaican authorities aimed to delegitimize practitioners' authority and undermine their abilities to influence fellow enslaved people. The legacies of white assault on black culture ran deep; the most enduring of which are present day associations of Obeah (blackness and black cultural practices) with backwardness, primitivism and criminality (Moore and Johnson 2004:15-16; Paton and Forde 2012:13-19). In the more immediate context of Jamaica's slave society, they expose how slaveholders manipulated social and cultural categories in order to suppress and disparage enslaved Africans and their descendants and legitimized their dominance and superiority. Yet, the power of manipulation was not an art unique to slaveholders. Obeah accusations made by enslaved people demonstrate how they converted the oppressive power of Jamaica's anti-Obeah campaigns into a productive power that they could use to navigate daily obstacles (Arens and Karp 1989:xix, xxii). Enslaved people manipulated Obeah as a legal category to bend planters to their will. The co-existence and continuity of Obeah as an integral part of post-slavery Jamaica illuminates Afro-Jamaican resourcefulness in distinguishing between Obeah as a malevolent legal concept and Obeah as a neutral force. Obeah, however, has not escaped unscathed, because uncertainties about its powers prevail and Jamaica's present-day legal and popular culture continues to erroneously reduce it to malevolence, fraud and criminality.¹⁵

Studying Obeah is invariably a study of power. Accusations from blacks and whites give us insight into the complex negotiation of power between masters and slaves and the far more obscure struggles between members of the communities of enslaved people. We also see more clearly that enslaved people's communities were not homogenous wholes, but rather heterogeneous factions where individuals and groups held contrasting and competing interests, allegiances and philosophies. And, in order to survive and dominate, each needed to be as cunning and manipulative as the other. Obeah was a malleable tool in such thorny maneuvers.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rutgers University and Washington University in St. Louis for their generous fellowships for the academic years, 2008-

2009 and 2009 to 2010 that gave me time and funds needed for research and writing.

I presented an early version of this essay at the 16th Annual Conference, Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture, University of Mississippi, Oxford Mississippi, June 10-13, 2010. Special thanks to commentator, Elaine Breslaw and the audience for offering useful questions and comments; and especially for encouraging me to pay more attention to fictive witchcraft accusations and confessions as indicators of political and personal conflicts. I also extend gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers of this article, whose rigorous and thorough critique and helpful suggestions have helped to strengthen this essay. Thanks especially to Tim Parsons, Iver Bernstein, Derek Hirst and Earl Bryson, for reading and commenting on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Shani Roper for double-checking archival sources and references in Jamaica. Special thanks to Luis Arata and Aileen Dever for assisting with French and Spanish translations.

Notes

- ¹ For a more in-depth look at these and other laws against Obeah, see (Bilby and Handler 2012:46-53)
- ² Note that Mathew Lewis wrote about Minetta's case on February 20, 1816 and the other cases on January 28, 1815 almost two years before December 31, 1816 law repealed the 1792 law.
- ³ Jamaica also passed a law in 1809 with only some of the 1781 banned items, for discussion see (Bilby and Handler 2012:47).
- ⁴ For a comprehensive overview of the various "instruments of Obeah", and how various laws defined them see (Bilby and Handler 2012:19-21); for popular definitions see (Moore and Johnson 2004:18-19). Note that many items popularly identified by ordinary Jamaican were not included in the statutes.
- ⁵ For key works in this regard see (Pitman 1926:650-668; Patterson 1967:188; Suttles 1971:650-668; Kopytoff 1978:287-307; Sheridan 1985:178-79; Geggus 1987:274-299; Bush 1990:73-76; Rucker 2001:84-103). For a more comprehensive critique and scholarly overview see (Bilby and Handler 2004:153-183 note 11).
- ⁶ (Goveia 1965:248; Brathwaite 1971:162-219; Craton 1982:299; Higman 1984:271-272; Handler 200:57-90; Bilby and Handler 2001:87-100; Bilby and Handler 2004:153-183; Brown 2003:24-53; Paton 2009:1-18;

Browne 2011:451-480; Paton 2012; Bilby and Handler 2012).

- ⁷ Michael Mullin, Vincent Brown and Randy Browne makes similar arguments, see (Mullin 1992:175-184; Brown 2008:150; Browne 2011:451-480).
- ⁸ Thanks to the anonymous reviews of this article, who emphasized the need to develop more fully how Jamaicans used Obeah as an “explanatory device for misfortune.” All misinterpretations, of course, rest with the author.
- ⁹ Equally important, are wet-nurses who understood well that “nourishing their white children” might secure their path to freedom. Displays of affections must be carefully read, since they could reflect women’s efforts to exchange kindness and loyalty for freedom. For argument, see (Beckles 1999:69).
- ¹⁰ Thanks to one of the journal’s anonymous reviewers for offering clarity to this argument, and helping to make a much clearer link to the paper’s thesis.
- ¹¹ At other times too, planters appealed to the darker side of Obeah for personal reasons. Vincent Brown, for example, discusses how plantation owners appealed to the craft to uncover theft. For discussion, see (Brown 2003:24-53). See also (Sheridan 1985:82-83; De Barros 2004:28-50.)
- ¹² See for example, Thomas Thistlewood’s flogging of Obeah man Will, from whom Abba sought comfort as she grieved the loss of her children (Burnard: 2004:224).
- ¹³ Other contemporaries would later repeat this story. For Bryan Edward’s version, which closely resembles Fuller’s see (Edwards 1798, vol. 2:116-117).
- ¹⁴ Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town. *St Ann Vestry Orders*, 1767-1790; Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town. *St George General Slave Court*, 1822-31; American Antiquarian Society. *Kingston Daily Advertiser* July 9th, 1791.
- ¹⁵ Current debates in Jamaica reflect a deeply divided nation on whether Obeah is neutral, good or evil, and whether to decriminalize it. On Obeah as a legal concept and a neutral force, and its legacies for present-day Caribbean see (Moore and Johnson 2004:15-16; Paton 2009:2; Paton and Forde 2012:11-30; Bilby and Handler 2012:1-15)

Author's note: For popular perspectives and debates, see Devon Dick "Decriminalize Obeah in Jamaica," *Jamaica Gleaner* May 24, 2005; Letter to the Editor, "Obeah Act Debate: A Mockery of Commonsense Jamaica," *Gleaner* February 23, 2013; Letter to the Editor, Diana Paton, *Jamaica Observer* February 25, 2013; Letter to the Editor, *Jamaica Observer* July 17, 2013. Articles from *Jamaica Gleaner* and *Jamaica Observer* are accessible online, <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20051030/>> and <<http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/>>.

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