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“The Rites, Ceremonies, and Superstitions of their own Countries”:

Race, Rebellion, and Medicine in the British Atlantic World

This talk is derived from a chapter in my book project, which is titled *Medical Encounters: Knowledge and Identity in Early American Literatures*. The chapter focuses upon Scottish poet-physician James Grainger’s 1764 georgic poem *The Sugar-Cane*, and on Grainger’s representations of African medical knowledge. In the book, I show that colonists departed from medical narratives of disease and healing when they came into contact with Native and African medical knowledge. I read these fragmented narratives as rhetorical signs of encounters with Natives’ and Africans’ medical knowledge and of the influence of that knowledge upon colonists’ writing. The book traces a literary history of medical encounters and, specifically, the ways in which medical knowledge informed oral, written, and performative reactions to cross-cultural exchanges. In this talk, I broaden the book’s focus on Grainger’s poem in order to delineate a longer cultural and literary history of obeah, which was a complex of African medical and religious knowledge that was employed by enslaved Africans throughout the Caribbean.

I want to begin by moving briefly from the Caribbean to Virginia, and to Thomas Jefferson’s 1781 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this series of reports on America’s social, religious, natural, and cultural characteristics, Jefferson infamously argued that Africans could not write poetry. He explained that “love is the peculiar oestrum [Estrum] of the poet. [Africans’] love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination.” Jefferson concluded: “Religion has produced a Phillis Wheatley but it could not produce a poet,” thus suggesting that Wheatley’s mind was limited by her African identity and was thus fixed in a category inferior to that which Anglo-Europeans occupied. Jefferson went on to present the

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hypothesis that Africans were members of a “distinct race,” and he made their color into a sign of their allegedly weak minds. Jefferson’s statements are often regarded as articulating a key shift in colonists’ understanding of identity: from theories that bodies were changeable and open to environmental influences to views of identity as stable and fixed.

Yet taking Jefferson’s statements as representative of theories of cultural difference in the Americas overlooks articulations of difference that circulated throughout other parts of the Americas, particularly the Caribbean. It is perhaps no surprise that Jefferson maintains a key place in narratives of American freedom and inequality, given his political career and his location in the newly formed United States. Jefferson was certainly ideally positioned to defend America’s nature and culture to European philosophers. However, the Caribbean posed several difficult questions for colonists seeking to articulate their relation to both Africans and to their counterparts in Europe. How, for example, could one place various bodies and minds in stable categories in a place in which the environment seemed bent upon corrupting, decaying, and transforming those bodies and minds? Second, how, if at all, did the Caribbean fit into European hierarchies of learning and culture? While Jefferson argued that the United States had already produced statesmen and artists, despite its young age, the Caribbean was notorious for its lack of culture and learning; stereotypes of colonists in the West Indies as indolent, greedy, and degenerate were well known throughout the Atlantic world.

In his book *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benitez-Rojo defines such disorder as constitutive of the Caribbean. He calls the Caribbean a “discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagull squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescences, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification” (2). Rather than

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searching for order—for example, a clear narrative of either colonial or African identity, or a clearly demarcated literary history—Benitez-Rojo locates Caribbean history and culture in processes and dynamics that repeat themselves and that move slowly in an approximate direction.

Benitez-Rojo's approach to studying the Caribbean provides a framework for considering early Caribbean writings about obeah, in which colonists both acknowledged the usefulness and power of obeah on plantations and moved to define obeah as dangerous superstition. While colonists ultimately sought to limit the power of African knowledge, Africans responded by complicating colonial representations of their minds and bodies. Elements from African, Afro-Caribbean, British, and colonial medical cultures come together—or formed discontinuous conjunctions—in these texts. Such conjunctions define an early Caribbean literary history of obeah that was created out of a number of disorderly experiences and processes in which both colonists and Africans participated.

I'll next discuss some of the first colonial responses to obeah: in particular, accounts inspired by a slave uprising, called Tacky's Rebellion, which was allegedly encouraged by an obeah man. By comparing representations of obeah from before and after the rebellion, I show that colonists began to locate obeah's power less in religious and herbal practices, as they'd first argued, than in Africans' minds and their fears of obeah men. However, even as colonists repudiated obeah as a manifestation of Africans' inferior minds, obeah began to inspire colonists' imaginations, with the result that obeah novels of the nineteenth century told tales of heroic warriors protected by obeah and of wise, ethical obeah men. While these novels usually concluded with a sequence in which white obeah, or Christianity, defeated black obeah, enslaved

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Africans in Jamaica complicated this division by mixing Christianity and obeah in the oaths they took before an 1831 rebellion.

To begin with Tacky's Rebellion: on the evening of Easter Day, 1760, fifty to one hundred enslaved Africans attacked a Jamaican fort in Saint Mary Parish, killing the storekeeper and seizing guns and gunpowder. The Africans moved on to attack a nearby plantation house before gathering recruits and traveling to the hills, where they successfully eluded the colonial militia for over a year. The rebels were led by a slave named Tacky, who an Akan [Ah-kahn] was from Africa's west coast and who planned to transform Jamaica into a Black colony led by his country men. While the rebellion did not achieve its ultimate goal, it did dramatically influence both enslaved Africans and colonists in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean: the rebel slaves killed sixty colonists and devastated several plantations before the militia succeeded in putting down the rebellion. Three to four hundred slaves were killed or committed suicide rather than surrender, as many as five hundred rebels were transported out of the island, and one hundred were executed (Campbell). Colonists lost about one thousand slaves and at least 100,000 pounds as a result of the rebellion.

Colonists attributed the rebels' success to obeah, which was an inherently neutral practice composed of herbal practices as well as spiritual elements. [SLIDE] Colonial historian Edward Long explained in his 1774 *History of Jamaica* that unnamed obeah men gave the rebels "a powder, which, being rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable: they persuaded them into a belief, that Tacky, their generalissimo in the woods, could not possibly be hurt by the white men, for that he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction to his foes."¹ Long admitted that the obeah priests' powder had effectively

¹ Long, 451.

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convinced Africans of their own invulnerability and had given them courage that made the rebellion effective, even if only temporarily.

However, Long went on to discount obeah by arguing that its real powers were located in Africans' minds, [SLIDE] writing that: "The most sensible among them fear the supernatural powers of the African *obeah-men*, or pretended conjurer; often ascribing those mortal effects to magic, which are only the natural operations of some poisonous juice, or preparation, dexterously administered by these villains" (416). Scholars of Caribbean history, literature, and anthropology frequently cite Long's account of Tacky's Rebellion as representative of colonial views of obeah, in order to argue either that colonists did not understand obeah or that they dismissed it as a superstitious belief. [ref. slide] For example, for Long, the fear of obeah men's supernatural powers, rather than the poisonous juice, is what influences the slaves and is to blame for Tacky's Rebellion. But Long's *History* was far from the definitive word on obeah, for colonists had not always aligned obeah with superstition and conjurers, nor did they always misunderstand obeah's composition and uses. Instead, obeah's status as magic that opposed colonial medical knowledge was the result of a process in which colonists revised their views and descriptions of obeah after Tacky's Rebellion. In what follows, I suggest a different narrative of obeah accounts by comparing accounts written before and after Tacky's Rebellion. I show that, while colonists initially represented obeah as a powerful herbal and religious practice, they began to present Africans' medical practices as indicative of differences between colonial and African minds.

[Hughes/Kalm]

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One of the first European depictions of obeah in the British West Indies appeared before Tacky's Rebellion, in a 1750 natural history of Barbados by Griffith Hughes, a Fellow of the Royal Society. [SLIDE] Hughes described obeah men as "a sort of Physicians and Conjurers, who can, as they believe not only fascinate [slaves], but cure them when they are bewitched by others."² Hughes described a case in which an obeah man healed a woman of her rheumatism using a "Magical Apparatus" that included "Earthen Basons, a Handful of different Kinds of Leaves, and a Piece of Soap."³ This description suggests that European travelers perceived obeah as an herbal practice with some magical elements—or those that worked by accessing non-human powers—all of which were employed for practical purposes. Moreover, Hughes explained that obeah, far from charming or duping Africans, actually cured slaves who were bewitched. If he viewed some elements of obeah as witchcraft, he nonetheless acknowledged obeah practitioners' roles as healers, and he represented obeah as a practice that combined medical and religious elements and that could be put to dangerous or beneficial uses. Finally, Hughes insisted that: "The Capacities of their Minds in the common Affairs of Life are but little inferior, if at all, those to those of the *Europeans*" (16). If Africans believed in obeah's power to heal them, it was not because their minds were inferior or irrational, but rather, Hughes explained, because they found obeah a useful means of addressing physical or psychosomatic illnesses.

As Hughes's account suggested, obeah was composed of a mixture of African religious practices and Afro-Caribbean herbal knowledge. Africans in the Americas did not perceive obeah as an intrinsically evil or harmful practice; rather, obeah was used "for protection against sorcerers" or against slaves whose actions made them outsiders to the Afro-Caribbean

² Hughes, 15-6.

³ Ibid., 15.

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community.⁴ In contrast to what Europeans designated as black magic (also called witchcraft or sorcery), which was “practiced by genuine sorcerers, who call up the spirits of the dead, render them slaves to their malevolent will, and force them to work for evil purposes,” obeah men used their access to *won*, that is, neutral spirits, for either good or evil purposes.⁵ African medical practitioners possessed both herbal, therapeutic knowledge as well as techniques for accessing natural, spiritual, and ancestral deities, whose anger was believed to be the ultimate cause of disease.

In addition to using obeah for healing, enslaved Africans also relied upon obeah to seek revenge upon other slaves for reasons they perceived to be socially useful. Writing of his encounters with Africans in Pennsylvania in the 1750s, Swedish botanist Peter Kalm reported that: **[SLIDE]**

[Africans] commonly employ it [obeah] on such of their brethren as behave well, are beloved by their masters, and separate as it were from their countrymen, or do not like to converse with them. They have likewise often other reasons for their enmity; but there are few examples of their having poisoned their masters.⁶

Noting that obeah was a secret art, Kalm did not describe its ingredients, writing only that **[SLIDE]** “It is full of *****. I purposely omit what he mentioned, for it seems undoubtedly to have been the name of the poison with which malicious Negroes do so much harm, and which is to be met with almost everywhere.”⁷

⁴ Bastide, 60.

⁵ Ibid. 60. See also 101 on Creole Africans’ uses of Obeah. For an opposing view of obeah as a “type of sorcery,” see Patterson, 188.

⁶ Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America; containing its natural history, and a circumstantial account of its plantations and agriculture in general*, trans. John Reinhold Forster, vol. 1 (Warrington, 1770-71), 398-9.

⁷ Ibid., 400.

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Kalm's decision to elide the name of the herb suggests that the word itself had power to bring about certain ends. Thus, while Long claimed that the obeah practitioner's words affected others only because Africans gave them power, Kalm acknowledged that obeah practitioners' words could alter bodies and minds. This move was not an unusual one for Europeans, for the idea that words had healing powers that influenced bodies and minds went back, in the western tradition, to Apollo, the Greek god of poetry and medicine, whose healing words soothed the mind and healed the body. Kalm's decision not to print the word for the herb represented the invisible power that obeah rituals possessed, and the asterisks paralleled the ways that Africans understood obeah—as a series of herbal, spiritual, and ritualistic practices given power by non-human forces. While Kalm was a student of Carl Linneaus, he departed from the Linnaean model of giving each newly discovered plant a botanical name and categorizing it in a system among all other known plants. This system was, in theory, universally accessible to all; it stripped plants of their local contexts and uses in order to represent features deemed significant to determining their identities. By contrast, Kalm's representation of the plant emphasized its local contexts and African understandings of power in the poison and its name.

In addition to representing the powers of the plant and its name, Kalm nodded to a New World African viewpoint, according to which obeah offered a set of practices by which Africans in the Americas maintained cultural traditions and reinforced their belief in the power of the spiritual forces inherent in medicines. **[SLIDE]** After poisoning the Europeanized slave, Kalm reported that “The other Negroes and Negro-women fell a laughing at the complaints of their hated countryman, and danced and sung as if they had done an excellent action, and had at last obtained the point so much wished for.”⁸ As anthropologists of African cultures in the New World have noted, slaves' dances and songs often transmitted and sustained Old World beliefs.

⁸ Kalm, 400.

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Similar to the holidays that provided slaves with what Roger Bastide has called an “institutional context” through which they preserved “chants, dances and various other manifestations of African art,” obeah offered a framework with which slaves preserved their interconnected medical beliefs and religious beliefs.⁹ Africans in Pennsylvania likely employed obeah and dances to celebrate African traditions and affirm cultural solidarity. While Kalm’s description suggests that obeah could be used for purposes colonists perceived as “malicious,” he also represented the communal practices whereby obeah was transmitted, and he hinted at the fact that Africans perceived obeah as a powerful practice that could be employed for the good of the community.

In the first reports of obeah to follow Tacky’s Rebellion, colonists began to alter earlier representations that had acknowledged obeah’s power and Africans’ intelligence. Four years after Tacky’s Rebellion, in 1764, James Grainger provided a detailed account of the range of uses to which Africans put obeah. Grainger acknowledged obeah’s “wondrous power” (IV.399) to make “diseases fly” (IV.398), in this way continuing the older practice of representing obeah’s “magic spells” as having positive, medical uses. Moreover, Grainger acknowledged in a footnote to the verses on obeah that just as obeah men “can do mischief, so they can also do good on a plantation, provided they are kept by the white people in proper subordination” (194). The footnote manifested conceptions of obeah as a socially beneficial practice, held by colonists and Africans alike throughout the Caribbean.

In addition, Grainger listed the specific ingredients that composed obeah men’s potions and “charms” (IV.386), including: **[SLIDE]**

Fern root cut small, and tied with many a knot;

⁹ Bastide, 90.

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Old teeth extracted from a white man's skull;

A lizard's skeleton; a serpent's head:

These mix'd with salt, and water from the spring,

Are in a phial pour'd; o'er these the leach

Mutters strange jargon, and wild circles forms. (IV.387-92)

Grainger's reference to the "Old teeth extracted from a white man's skull" (IV.388) manifested the direct threat to white colonists that obeah men had recently posed, while the images of ill slaves represented the ways in which obeah disrupted orderly production on sugar plantations. Yet while Grainger acknowledged that the obeah man's rituals were "strange" and "wild," he did not discount the obeah man's practices as deceitful, as Long would a decade later. Grainger attributed obeah to specific materials and practices, rather than to the obeah man's deceit.

However, Grainger also began to associate obeah with specifically African practices, ideas, and minds. In a footnote to his verses on obeah, Grainger explained that: [SLIDE]

The blacks imagine that its [obeah men's staff] blow, if not mortal, will at least occasion long and troublesome disorders. A belief in magic is inseparable from human nature, but those nations are most addicted thereto, among whom learning, and of course, philosophy, have least obtained. (194)

Grainger's attribution of obeah's power to Africans' imaginations linked their medical practices to their Old World, African culture and "learning" rather than to the Caribbean environment they shared with colonists (194). In this way, he extended modes of evaluating slaves' worth as workers to categorize their intellectual traits as well. Throughout *The Sugar Cane*, Grainger explained variations in slaves' abilities on the basis of the African environments from which they hailed. For example, he identified the causes of slaves' illnesses, even those contracted in the

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tropics, by turning to their various African origins. He wrote that “*The Mundingos, in particular, [are] subject to worms; and the Congos, to dropsical disorders*” (145). [SLIDE] Grainger likewise connected slaves’ physical characteristics to their African origins, writing that planters seeking strong workers for hard labor should “chuse the slave,/ Who sails from barren climes; where want alone,/ Offspring of rude necessity, compels/The sturdy native, [...] to plant the soil” (IV.57-60). Similarly, Africans from “many a sylvan realm,” (IV.89) being “hardy,” purportedly made good laborers in the cane fields (IV.96). [These are just a few examples from a much longer list that correlated Africans’ national origins with their bodies.] Grainger interpreted slaves’ physical traits by mapping geographical information about Africa onto their bodies. His understanding of Africans’ behavior and health suggested that uniquely African environmental features shaped slaves’ constitutions.

Grainger developed these connections between slaves’ physical attributes and Africa’s environment by tracing Africans’ belief in obeah to their intellectual faculties. His comment that uneducated nations are “most addicted [to magic]” positioned slaves’ African cultural origins as the cause not only of the particular diseases they contracted in the tropics but also of their fear of the obeah man’s staff, and, likewise, their “imaginary” ills (194). This description was consistent with earlier characterizations of Africa’s hot climate as endowing its inhabitants with what Spanish physician Juan Huarte called a “difference [or kind] of imagination” that made them “great enchaunters” who excelled at “obtaining things, and finding remedies to their necessities.”¹⁰ “Superstition” was traditionally a trait of people from southern climates, as Pierre Charron explained when he wrote that “The temperature of the imagination is hot, from whence it commeth that frantick mind, and such as are sicke of burning maladies, are excellent in that

¹⁰ Juan Huarte, *The Examination of mens Wits. In which, by discovering the varietie of natures, is shewed for what profession each one is apt, and how far he shall profit therein*, trans. R.C. (London: 1594), 183.

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[which] belongs to imagination, as *Poetry*, [and] *Divination*.”¹¹ Grainger’s attribution of obeah to Africans’ imaginations thus suggested that their temperaments were influenced by a hot climate and, accordingly, that their minds were ruled by fancy and superstition. In addition, Grainger suggested, Africa’s distance from European centers of learning left Africans’ minds open to irrational ideas.

Grainger’s simultaneous acknowledgment of obeah’s effectiveness and his attribution of obeah to the superstitious minds created by hot climates speak to the ambivalence with which he represented African medical knowledge and mental faculties. This ambivalence is due, in part, to the fact that Grainger’s references to Africa’s hot climate and distance from centers of learning threatened to include colonists among those whose minds were influenced by obeah. Colonists in the Caribbean were, like Africans, distanced from Europe, and the West Indies’ tropical environment threatened to alter their minds and incline them to credit superstitious practices. In 1707, physician and fellow of the Royal Society Hans Sloane described the effects of tropical air on British colonists’ minds. [SLIDE] He explained that: “it is thought by some Men, that they are bewitch’d or charm’d by the Air; by others that desire in Women by this heat is Augmented.”¹² While Sloane claimed to be uncertain whether the air actually caused people to become “bewitch’d,” he did explain that “The Passions of the Mind have a very great power on Mankind here, especially Hysterical Women, and Hypochondriacal Men. These cannot but have a great share in the cause of several Diseases, some of the People living here being in such Circumstances, as not to be able, to live easily elsewhere.”¹³ Sloane’s comment on the connections between the tropical air, the “Passions of the Mind,” and being “bewitch’d or

¹¹ Charron, 50 and 171.

¹² Hans Sloane, *A VOYAGE To the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers AND JAMAICA, WITH THE Natural History OF THE Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beats, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the last of those ISLANDS* (London: 1707), xxxi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

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charm'd by the Air" manifested concerns that transatlantic travel or an American birth would alter colonists' minds by degrading their reason and strengthening their imaginations.¹⁴ In this context, Grainger had to face the possibility that the tropical air had strengthened his own imagination and influenced his representation of obeah.

Grainger's move to redefine the location of obeah's power from the practitioner's apparatus or knowledge of herbs, to slaves' minds and their African environments allowed him to perform his own rationality and his cultural distance from enslaved Africans. He suggested that slaves lacked the "antidote" of reason with which Europeans defended themselves from such irrational "poisons" as obeah (IV.394), and thus that Africans could not protect themselves from their own delusions and the depredations of obeah men (185). In this context, slaves believed in obeah because their imaginations left them vulnerable to magical beliefs and to conjurers' deceptive practices. This geography of medical knowledge allowed Grainger to attribute Africans' medical practices and mental faculties to their places of origin and learning, rather than to the tropical environment they shared with colonists. While Grainger argued that Africans shared with all peoples a belief in magic, he also argued that Africans' place of birth and its hot climate made them more susceptible to believing in irrational forms of knowledge than colonists originating in Europe's more temperate climates. He could thus locate Africans at the bottom of what Roxann Wheeler has described as a "theoretical hierarchy" based upon "proximity to Europe and to temperate climates."¹⁵ By focusing upon the African features shaping slaves' behavior and health, Grainger's account of obeah foreshadowed racial explanations of difference, for he defined reason as a trait inherent in Europeans, whether they lived in hot climates or not, while suggesting that uniquely African environmental features produced unique

¹⁴ Ibid., xxxi.

¹⁵ Wheeler, 23-4.

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intellectual and physical features, features not shared by colonists. Grainger's attribution of obeah to slaves' minds was as much a performance of his own rationality as it was an attempt to categorize and understand obeah.

In the nineteenth century, colonial medical practitioners developed Grainger's diagnosis of the causes of obeah by redefining it as a mental disease, not just the result of strong faculties of the imagination but a "perversion of every rational exercise of the mind."¹⁶ Colonists sought to discover and control the "designing crafty people" who caused slaves' "mental disease, despondency, and death."¹⁷ Admitting that slaves' "assent, approbation, and confidence [in] such ignorant pretenders," made it difficult for a physician to "do his duty,"¹⁸ medical practitioners advised planters to counteract the "unaccountable confidence which negroes put in old women, and persons who, they imagine, are gifted with supernatural powers."¹⁹ John Williamson, a physician in Jamaica, recommended a "ceremony of making [Africans] Christians by baptism" in order to "do[...] away with Obi influence,"²⁰ and he wrote that "[u]nless the mental disease is relieved or palliated, it is in vain to try the power of medicine."²¹

As Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gerbert point out in their collection *Healing Cultures*, representations of Africans' bodies as diseased justified colonial control and upheld racial structures imposed by planters (xix). Yet, as Grainger's concern regarding the status of his own mental faculties shows, colonists did not escape colonial diseases, nor could they unproblematically identify themselves with white bodies in Europe after they had been exposed to the tropical environment. Instead, colonists occupied a position between

¹⁶ Williamson, 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 327-28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

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enslaved Africans and Europeans in the metropole: colonists' bodies and minds were viewed as diseased and degenerate back in Europe, even as they attempted to define Africans' minds as irrational and their bodies as diseased.

Even as colonists redefined obeah as a function of Africans' minds, then, obeah exerted power over colonists' literary imaginations, by continuing to influence their writing. In novels about obeah, colonists attempted to control both obeah and their own anxieties about rebellion, but they also acknowledged obeah's power. In these novels, Africans' reliance upon obeah to rebel, colonists' anxiety about obeah's power, and both parties' shared acknowledgment of the healing power that words had over bodies and minds came together in a "discontinuous conjunction." In contrast to scholars who have argued that colonists disregarded obeah merely as foolish superstition, I suggest in the remainder of this talk that obeah played a key role in a cross-cultural contest over classifications of Africans' minds and knowledge, a contest that played out in obeah novels and in rebellions. In positing that obeah novels do not represent colonial perspectives alone, I am arguing for a view of early Caribbean literature as composed of knowledge from the various cultures that met in the West Indies. Colonists could not and did not cut themselves off from the knowledge of enslaved Africans; instead, they engaged, appropriated, and sometimes redefined such knowledge as they attempted to defend colonial identities. My goal here is not to efface differences between African and colonial knowledge or the real atrocities of plantation slavery and the transatlantic slave trade; instead, it is to show that colonists did not monopolize the meanings and representations of medical knowledge in the Caribbean.

Obeah men became key figures in nineteenth-century novels written about or from the Caribbean, in which colonists dramatized and sometimes sympathized with slave rebellions

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against harsh masters. Obeah men usually inspired these rebellions, and they provided protection for rebel slaves, who are presented as having just causes. However, the rebels are often overcome by Christianity, or by a loyal slave who alerts his master to an impending rebellion. While scholars debate how much effort colonists actually put into converting their slaves, Christianity did take on a status as “white Obi,” if not in every planters’ practice, then certainly in their imaginations. In William Earle’s 1800 epistolary novel *Obi, or the History of Three-Fingered Jack*, the eponymous hero takes an obeah oath in order to protect himself as he revenges his parents’ enslavement and his father’s death by killing an evil overseer. Thanks to his obeah, Jack performs feats of superhuman strength, such as escaping from jail and from a crowd of armed soldiers. However, he is ultimately caught and killed by another slave, Quashee, who converted to Christianity and was baptized as James Reeder. When Jack hears that Reeder has “White Obi,” Earle writes, “Jack started back in dismay; he was cowed; for he had prophesied that White Obi should over come him, and he knew the charm, in Reeder’s hands, would lose none of its virtue or power” (156). [SLIDE: HERE ARE a few

REPRESENTATIONS OF JACK’S DEATH: the image on the left is from an 1800 edition of Earle’s novel; the image on the right is from a melodrama about Jack produced in London in 1854 (Jack is attempting to strangle Quashee). In Earle’s novel a small child finally shoots Jack—which we see reflected in this image, from the 1824 *Fairburn's Edition of the Wonderful Life and Adventures of Three Fingered Jack, the Terror of Jamaica!*] In Europeans’ imaginations, even Africans who believed in “Black Obeah” admit the power that White Obi, or Christianity, has over them. While safely restricting obeah’s powers with Christianity, these novels nonetheless acknowledge the depredations against which slaves rebelled and they, like

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early writers about obeah who admitted its value, represent the ways in which obeah was employed to right wrongs and resist slavery.

Yet colonial writers did not always successfully restrict obeah's power. For example, Jack and his Obi were not entirely overwhelmed by Reeder and white Obi: Earle explains at the beginning of his novel that he writes because he "can think of nothing else" (6) but "Jack, his three fingers, and his Obi." Earle further admits that "many of the Europeans believed in the fancied virtues of [Jack's] Obi" (139). Jack and his obeah haunt Earle's mind; they force the act of writing as an attempt to control Jack's power. Moreover, some novels employed the character of the obeah man to critique the Baptist ministers who, planters argued, encroached upon their ability to control their slaves. As a result, the obeah man was given qualities of loyalty, honesty, and wisdom, in contrast to the minister's corrupt, selfish characteristics. In Cynric R. Williams' 1827 novel, *Hamel, the Obeah Man*, Roland, a Baptist minister, takes obeah oaths in order to save his own life and, ultimately, to advance his designs on a planter's beautiful daughter. Roland's corruption is contrasted by Hamel's wisdom and rationality: the obeah man foils Roland's plot, assists Africans in planning a rebellion, and—near the book's conclusion—puts an end to that rebellion and ensures that order is restored on plantations.

Williams—a colonist who spent several years in Jamaica—depicted the obeah rites in which Hamel, a group of rebel slaves, and Roland participate, but he makes several key alterations to prior representations of obeah. The mixture on which the men swear is composed of blood, grave dirt from a skull, and gunpowder. However, rather than a "white man's skull," as Grainger wrote, the skull in *Hamel* is from a child for whose death Roland is to blame. In this context, the obeah oath reminds readers of colonists' violence against slaves. Moreover, Hamel is a slippery character: the story ends with him placing his master's hand on his head, a move

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that would seem to contain his powers. As Candace Ward has pointed out, however, Hamel plays whatever part is necessary to advance his revolutionary means (62). Moreover, black obeah is not defeated by white obeah, for Hamel advances a strong critique of Christianity. [SLIDE] He says, “It is such as [...] preaching Roland who make my countrymen eat dirt. Who brought us from Africa? Who made slaves of us? Who treated—and treat us still—as the dirt they buy and sell? And while they affect to be for making us free, and for saving our *souls*, are cramming us with dirt, and trash, and filthy foolish lies?” (321). If Hamel’s words served the purposes of the plantocracy—to control the influence of ministers upon slaves—his speech also makes a strong case for obeah as a powerful and revolutionary religious and medical practice. Hamel’s words and actions display the power of obeah to influence colonial writing even as colonists sought to display their superiority over slaves and obeah. Moreover, the fact that Hamel embodied many of the same characteristics traditionally associated with colonists and with white obeah—such as kindness, morality, and loyalty—complicated the division between white and black obeah, and, by extension, between colonial and African forms of knowledge and healing.

Enslaved Africans furthered the breakdown of such hierarchies by combining elements of both Christianity and obeah in their plans for rebellion. In the Christmas Rebellion of 1831—also known as the Baptist War, slaves incorporated Christianity into obeah practices, which inspired the rebellion. Planters had allowed Baptist, Methodist, and Moravian missionaries to establish missions in Jamaica in hopes of convincing metropolitan legislators that they had taken appropriate measures to improve the system of slavery. Despite planters’ efforts to restrict missionaries’ influence over slaves and the missionaries’ own obligations to planters, many slaves were converted to Christianity, and a system of African-organized or “Native Baptist”

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churches developed throughout the early nineteenth century. [SLIDE] Led by Sam Sharpe, who was a Native Baptist minister or daddy, the slaves planned a nonviolent strike as well as a rebellion for Christmas 1831. These plans, similar to those made for Tacky's Rebellion, were "sealed by oaths" (Gordon 98). The rebels swore on a Bible for inspiration and protection, thereby adding Christianity to their traditional source of inspiration from the obeah man.²² As a rebel named Linton, whose confession was recorded after the rebellion's end in 1832, noted: "We were all sworn upon the Bible to do our best to drive the white and free people out of this country" (62 (Linton; Shepherd). Moreover, Sharpe was reported to have laid what colonists called "pagan" oaths upon the Bible (Brathwaite, *Great Slave* 14).

Colonists' attempts to "cure" Africans of their deluded minds and belief in obeah were ultimately unsuccessful, for slaves responded to colonists' representations of obeah as superstition by undercutting the premise that their minds were irrational. If Christianity, a belief system that Africans shared with colonists in 1831, could serve a purpose parallel to that of obeah, then it followed either that Africans were capable of carefully and rationally planning to obtain their freedom or that believing in Christianity was a sign of irrational mental faculties. While Jamaican planters sought to separate themselves from the Baptist ministers they blamed for instigating the rebellion, the planters did not go so far as to suggest that the ministers—with whom they shared an English identity—possessed inferior minds. Africans' use of Christianity in the Christmas Rebellion thus posed a counterargument to theories of their mental inferiority.

While Jefferson denied Africans' ability to put their sensations to rational or artistic use, early Caribbean writing reflects a very different trajectory of colonial comments on Africans' knowledge. Early Caribbean writing emerged out of a zone of chaos and disorder and as such, it

²² See Aravamudan, "Introduction," William Earle, *Obi; or the History of Three-Fingered Jack*, ed. Srinivas Aravamudan (Ontario, Canada: Broadview, 2005), 29.

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represented multiple viewpoints and epistemologies. At the same time that colonists attempted to place Africans in stable categories of mental and physical inferiority, obeah also acted upon colonists' writing, by leaving its traces in novelistic plots and colonists' representations of African knowledge. The prevalence of obeah novels shows that obeah continued to influence colonists' own minds and writing long after Tacky's Rebellion. The representations of powerful, wise obeah men and Africans' incorporation of Christianity into obeah practices in the Christmas Rebellion undercut colonists' best efforts to ensure that white obeah remained superior to black obeah. Thus, in spite of theories that Africans' minds were inferior to colonists' rational mental faculties, Africans' actions and medical knowledge compelled colonists to acknowledge obeah as a powerful, effective system of curative and revolutionary knowledge that served the African community.