Spiritual Terror
and Sacred Authority

The Power of the Supernatural
in Jamaican Slave Society

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In his 1801 history of the British West Indies, Jamaican planter and slaveholder Bryan Edwards admitted that "in countries where slavery is established, the leading principle on which the government is supported is fear: or a sense of that absolute coercive necessity which, leaving no choice of action, supersedes all questions of right." Yet slave masters did not achieve the fear requisite to maintaining control over the enslaved by physical force alone. They in fact asserted their right to rule by trying to terrorize the spiritual imaginations of the enslaved. To do so, slave masters projected their authority symbolically through spectacular punishments visited upon the bodies of the dead. As anthropologist Katherine Verdery has noted, dead bodies carry great symbolic weight: "They evoke awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with 'cosmic' concerns, such as the meaning of life and death." Moreover, when dead bodies are managed with political intent, "their corporeality makes them important means of localizing a claim." In other words, the physical presence of a corpse connects its meaningful associations to its tangible location. Using dead bodies as symbols, masters marked territory with awesome icons of their power.

The use of spectacular terror to capture the imaginations of the enslaved was a staple feature of social control in slave society. Yet even more menacingly, slaveholders supplemented physical coercion with "government magic," as they harnessed the affective power of the dead and awe of the afterlife in an attempt to turn legal mastery into sacred authority. Though their intent was to dominate the imagination, the routinization of terrifying spectacles inspired novel
understandings of the relationships among dead bodies, haunting spirits, and political authority, understandings that could also enhance the sacred authority of slaves who were willing to resist or to rise up and strike their masters. For their part, the enslaved established competing discourses of authority by invoking the spirits of the dead and by selectively appropriating the symbolic power of the master class for their own purposes. Both masters and slaves tried to elevate their authority by connecting it to the transcendent. In other words, they attached worldly power to otherworldly concerns.

Slaveholders faced a persistent threat of dispossession by suicide. The harshness of the labor regime, social isolation, and diminished status as well as the longing to return to ancestral lands prompted many among the enslaved to destroy themselves. Henry Coor, who worked for fifteen years as a millwright in the Jamaican parish of Westmoreland, observed that unbearable workloads, physical punishment, and incessant hunger prompted many Africans to cut their own throats or hang themselves. "I remember fourteen Slaves," he told a British House of Commons committee in 1791, "that it was generally said, and I believe it was, from bad treatment, that them [sic] rise in rebellion on a Sunday, who ran away into the woods, and all cut their own throats together." For some, harsh treatment only aggravated the general indignity of lost social status. One plantation doctor who served in Jamaica from 1755 to 1765 told the same committee about an African "man of consequence" who reportedly refused to work for any white man. Even after being punished by his overseer, the African told the overseer to warn his owner that "he would be a slave to no man." Fearing that the man was an incorrigible rebel, the owner ordered him removed to another plantation. "His hands were tied behind him; in going over a bridge, he jumped headlong into the water, and appeared no more." Less esteemed Africans still faced the kind of disorienting social isolation that could lead to unrecoverable depression. The same plantation doctor owned a boy who "detested the idea of slavery so much that he refused all support, which brought on a dyspnea, and terminated in his death." New African immigrants were known to kill themselves more often than seasoned slaves; creoles (those born on the island) only rarely committed suicide. Commenting on higher death rates for newly arrived men than for women, former overseer William Fitzmaurice testified in 1791 that entering into relationships and being taken as domestic servants afforded women social roles and protections unavailable to men. Consequently, he surmised, men were more depressed and committed suicide in Jamaica more often than women. Recently arrived Africans "constantly told me," he said, "that they preferred dying to living."

Perhaps many Africans were sanguine about suicide because they believed they would return to their ancestral lands after death and there be reunited with lost kin and friends as spirits and ancestors. Mark Cook, a clerk, schoolmaster, and small planter in Jamaica, knew of several men and women, all Africans, who had hanged or shot themselves. Claiming to be acquainted with African funerals, he recognized that they made "great rejoicings on those occasions, because, as I have understood from them, they thought their countrymen were gone back to their own country again." When Lieutenant Baker Davidson of the Seventieth Regiment testified before a committee of the House of Commons in 1790, he was asked if he knew of any cases of Africans "expressing themselves with affection of their native country, and desiring to return to it." "I did," Davidson replied, "as I brought a Guinea woman to England who wished much to be sent back to her own country; and it is very common for Negroes when they are sick to say, they are going back to their own country." "Do they say it with apparent satisfaction?" the committee asked. "They certainly do," Davidson said, "as they express always a great deal of pleasure when they think they are going to die, and say that they are going to leave this Buccra country."

Slave masters throughout the Caribbean used spiritual terror to deter Africans from self-destruction. At least as early as the mid-seventeenth century, British West Indian planters hoped that mutilating the dead would impress Africans with the planters' power over the spiritual fate of the enslaved. Richard Ligon, a seventeenth-century chronicler of slave society in Barbados, lamented that Africans "believe in a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright, or threatening of their Masters, to hang themselves." A planter acquaintance of Ligon's, Colonel Walrond, had in a short time lost three or four of his most valuable slaves to suicide. Fearing that they had set a costly example to others, Walrond ordered that one of their heads should be chopped off and fixed to a pole a dozen feet high. He marched all his slaves around the icon, commanding them to gaze at the severed head, and he asked them to acknowledge that this was indeed the head of one of the self-murderers. As they did, Walrond told them that "they were in a main errour, in thinking they went into their own Countreys, after they were dead; for this man's head was here, as they all were witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body could go without a head." As Ligon remembered it, the Africans were convinced by the "sad, yet lively spectacle." They apparently changed their convictions, and no more hanged themselves.

Walrond may have been spared similar losses, but Africans continued to kill themselves with distressing frequency in the Caribbean, and slaveholders kept resorting to grisly techniques of deterrence. In the late-eighteenth-century Danish West Indies, C. G. A. Oldendorp reported that "the head and hands of such suicides have been put in a cage on public display—a measure not without effective results." In prerevolutionary Saint Domingue, French slavers mutilated the body of the first Ibo slave to die in a given shipment: they beheaded
the corpse or sliced off its nose and pried out its eyes to prevent losses among other captives from the Bight of Biafra, who were widely reputed to be prone to suicide.33 Cuban merchants and masters in the early nineteenth century incinerated corpses to achieve similar objectives with other groups of Africans.30

In Jamaica, such practices were widespread throughout the eighteenth century. Just before midcentury, an anonymous Jamaican planter wrote that to prevent Africans from believing that they could escape the island in death, their bodies were “often hanged up” by their masters to show the living that the dead remained in Jamaica.32 Around midcentury, masters began to apply the punishments for outright rebellion—burning the body down to ash—to suicide as well. And to dramatize the impossibility of repatriation in death, masters threatened to deny suicidal slaves their final rite of passage. In 1751 the Anglican rector of Westmoreland Parish wrote to his bishop that “to deprive them of their funeral Rites by burning their dead Bodies, seems to Negroes a greater Punishment than Death itself. This is done to Self-Murderers.”31 As late as the final decade of slavery, John Stewart remembered a time when newly arriving Africans committed suicide to “return to their native country, and enjoy the society of kindred and friends, from whom they have been torn away in an evil hour.” He also remembered the “dismal and disgusting spectacle” of their heads adorning poles along public roads and their bodies “sometimes consumed by fire.”33

Whether such mutilations in fact constituted an effective deterrent is open to question. Dismemberment certainly represented a compelling metaphysical threat to English Protestants, but there is little or no direct evidence that Africans believed that losing their head or a limb would prevent their return to ancestral lands.34 Many Africans had surely seen severed heads serving as trophies for warring state authorities in Africa. Indeed, in parts of West Africa, slaves were routinely beheaded after the death of nobles so that they could continue to serve their masters in the spiritual world.35 Whether or not European masters were aware of African precedents, in Jamaica they beheaded and disemboweled their own slaves with a similar desire that the dead continue their service. Through dead bodies they attempted to seize and manipulate African visions of the afterlife in an effort to govern the worldly actions of the living.

Mutilating the bodies of Africans who committed suicide was only part of a broader agenda that used ritual execution to give governing authority a sacred, even supernatural, dimension. As with the punishments for suicide, the punishments for rebellion were meant to inspire in the enslaved terror of their ultimate fate by visiting extraordinary torments on their bodies before and after death.36 By at least the late seventeenth century the bodies of slave rebels were burned alive. Sir Hans Sloane, who visited Jamaica just before the turn of the eighteenth century, described the grisly tortures meted out to slaves and the meticulous method of executing rebels, “by nailing them down on the ground with crooked Sticks on every Limb, and then applying the Fire by degrees from the Feet and Hands, burning them gradually up to the Head, whereby their pains are extravagant.”37 Only two weeks after Thomas Thistlewood arrived in Savanna la Mar in 1750, he watched his host, William Dorrill, order the body of a dead runaway dug up and beheaded, with the head to be fixed on a pole and the body to be incinerated.38 Just months later, Thistlewood “saw a Negro fellow nam'd English belonging to Fuller Wood Tryd, and hung'd upon ye 1st Tree immediately (for drawing his knife upon a White Man), his head Cutt off. Body left unbury'd.”39 Once he assumed the post of overseer on the Egypt sugar plantation, Thistlewood had the opportunity to use the dead to enhance his authority. In October 1752 he was pleased to receive a letter, two returned fugitives, and “also Robin's head, who was hanged yesterday for running away with those two boys.” As a warning to others, he “put it upon a pole and stuck it up just at the angle of the road in the home pasture.”40

Lady Maria Nugent passed just such a fetish on her way to church one day in 1803. She protested to her diary that if the members of her party had not already promised their attendance to the clergyman in Kingston, “I would not have gone, for we were obliged to pass close by the pole, on which was stuck the head of a black man who was executed a few days ago.”41 Placing the bodies of the condemned along well-traveled paths served to haunt those places with memories and narratives of crime and punishment. Once, while touring western Jamaica in 1816, Matthew Gregory Lewis was inspired to ask “to whom a skull had belonged, which I had observed fixed on a pole by the roadside, when returning last from Montego Bay.” As it turned out, the severed head had been there since about 1811, when “a Mr. Dunbar had given some discontent to his negroes in the article of clothing them…. [T]his was sufficient to induce his head driver, who had been brought up in his own house from infancy, to form a plot among his slaves to assassinate him.”42 The recycling of these kinds of stories reintroduced past evidence of white power to the present and fastened it to particular places through the bodies of the dead.33 At times the colonial state even tried to convert the oppositional discourses of the enslaved into such narratives of plantocratic power. Jamaican authorities hanged Ebene Dick in 1816 for “making use of singing, propagating and disseminating seditious and rebellious words, songs, and expressions.”42 Placing his head on “the most public place at Lindhurst” plantation, officials hoped to make him sing a different song.

Such ghoulish displays served clear purposes. They made dead bodies, dismembered and disfigured as they were, into symbols of the power and propriety of slave masters. Severed heads stood sentry over the plantation landscape, watching passersby—white, black, and brown—conveying warnings to potential rebels and assurance to supporters of the social order. Such symbols
were thought to be effective because they were affective: they harnessed the otherworldly and the sacred to specific bodies, places, and narratives, which in turn signified the social power of the rulers. Jamaican planters brought most of these conventions from the British theater of social control, but in the Caribbean they had to restage several elements of the exhibition.

Exaggerated tortures and postmortem humiliations were staple punishments in early modern Europe and England. As in Jamaica, they served to graft sacred and social power onto the bodies of condemned criminals. Disfiguration and scorching gave criminals a foretaste of the punishments their souls would receive in hell. Thus man brought the wrath of God to bear on enemies of the state. Dismembering and scattering corpses or exposing them to be "consumed by the air and the birds of the sky" protected living communities from the evil that criminal spirits might continue to work in the world. Incineration of criminals' corpses effected the complete physical and metaphysical eradication of the their presence. Denial of a decent burial arrested the spirit’s passage into the otherworld and desecrated the memory of the dead by fixing the attention of the living on the rotting body. Throughout Europe, the public exposure of bodies at places of execution and at well-traveled intersections "formed part of a dual system which maximized display... The executions themselves were primarily meant as an example to the inhabitants. Exposure of corpses along the roads was a special warning directed at non-residents coming in." Indeed, late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century English road books and guides often mentioned gallows and gibbets as road marks.

The fear and submission evoked by such measures depended in part on understandings held in common by both the rulers and the ruled. To a degree, the populace and the people who managed them shared religious idioms for thinking about death and the afterlife, though they surely interpreted them differently, in accordance with their experience of material life and status hierarchies. Also, they shared understandings of the sacred dimensions of courtroom protocol and public execution.

Assize judges, who descended on the eighteenth-century English countryside twice a year, carefully scripted their rhetoric to connote godly paternalism as well as the power and passion of righteous vengeance as a means of legitimating the rule of law. When the time came to pronounce a death sentence, "the powers of light and darkness were summoned into the court with the black cap which was donned to pronounce sentence of death, and the spotless white gloves worn at the end of a 'maiden assize' when no prisoners were left for execution." Most importantly, the rites of legal practice likened judges to God, and they thus derived their authority from the divine. A death sentence, then, represented a supernatural judgment, merely mediated by the state. At the place of execution, dramatic pageants of sin, redemption, and damnation organized scaffold rituals around shared signs. The widespread sale of "last dying speeches and confessions" pamphlets created common idioms and expectations for the drama of the executions. Recurring forms and ceremonies drawn from religious narratives and regional experiences played to "generations highly literate in emblematic meaning." The gallows itself stood as a symbol that a given place was a "city of law" and heralded the majesty of the authorities who enforced it.

Symbolic authority was enhanced by judicial mercy and personal patronage. Judges wielded broad discretion in waiving death sentences. The intervention of well-heeled and influential men often saved the lives of convicted felons. The effect was to force those under threat of execution (disproportionately poor laboring folk) into the keeping of the propertied elite, who generally controlled the legal institutions. In short, to enhance their power, authorities drew on common discourses about legal ritual, symbolic authority, and death produced by local histories of personal and cultural interaction.

Such common discourses were scarcer in Jamaica. Africans and their descendants, schooled to understand very different and disparate emblems of sacred power, replaced the "visually literate audience" educated in the sacred signs of English legal authority. One can only assume that similar rites of terror read quite differently to a Jamaican audience. In Douglas Hay's conception, "Justice, Terror and Mercy," managed with delicacy and circumspection, tutored people to respect the authority of the elite in England. The Jamaican plantation, which initially shared very cultural idioms with slaves and perhaps none with Africans, ruled largely through magisterial terror. Despite drawing on cultural resources from England, the planters had to adapt them to the Jamaican situation.

Unlike the English common folk, Africans and their children were cultural outsiders. When Edward Long evaluated Jamaican slave laws in 1774, he opined that the "Africans, first imported, were wild and savage in the extreme." In this he only echoed the language of the 1661 Barbados slave code, which condemned "negroes" as a "heathenish, brutish and an Uncertaine dangerous Kinde of people" who could not be adequately governed by English law. Early in the life of the colony, lawmakers in Jamaica had drawn on the legal experience of both England and Barbados. By the eighteenth century, the legislators had adapted their slave codes to local conditions, chief among them the persistent threat of open rebellion. The legal system was in place, but a belief system was not.

Rapid demographic turnover in the sugar islands meant that the implementers of social order could never count on people knowing or internalizing the rules. Moreover, the meanest enforcers of plantation discipline, the "petty whites," shifted about constantly, from plantation to plantation, from colony to colony, and from life to death. "New-come buckra" regularly confronted "new
negroes" of diverse origins. Jamaica was perpetually threatened by a fluctuating and restless enslaved population. As Long put it, expressing the characteristic negrophobia of the planter class, "their intractable and ferocious tempers naturally provoked their masters to rule them with a rod of iron." Their masters also struggled to conjure an effective symbolic discourse to legitimate their rule, a discourse based on quite different principles and practices than those operating in England.

In 1664 the Jamaican Assembly established parallel courts specifically for the trial and sentencing of slaves. In her study of the slave courts in Saint Andrew's Parish (from 1746 to 1782), Diana Paton convincingly argues that judicial practice in Jamaica "emphasized the difference between slave and free, and valorized the slaveholder's private power" rather than "representing the supposed common discipline of all to a single rule of law, as did the contemporary English spectacle of trial and punishment." Throughout most of the century, slave crimes were tried before informal and irregularly scheduled tribunals composed of three freeholders and two magistrates, who were usually prominent planters. Until 1788 there was no jury, and even after the law provided for nine-man juries (paid two pounds each by the parish vestries to attend) and then twelve-man juries in 1816, there was never any opportunity for appeal.

At any rate, there was no time because, as planter-author William Beckford remarked, "a negro is often condemned in one hour, and receives execution in the next." Rather than trying to envelop slaves in the idea of a unitary system of justice, slave courts demonstrated to the enslaved that, for most intents and purposes, their masters and the law were one and the same.

It followed that the punishments decreed by the court resembled those routinely meted out by slaveholders. The slave courts ordered corporal punishments much more frequently than did courts in England. The slave courts' punishments featured use of the whip, that enduring symbol of plantation authority. Mutilation for non-capital crimes—the chopping of ears, noses, feet—continued long after European courts had discontinued such punishments. For the capital crime of "assault on a white person" or "rebellious conspiracy," post-mortem punishments were common. The frequency of mutilations and aggravated death sentences, reserved for traitors in eighteenth-century England, signaled the expansion and racialization of the concept of treason. Indeed, any "crime committed by slaves might be interpreted broadly as resistance to the social order" and thus defined as betrayal. It was ironic: a population that had fewer reasons to be loyal to the ruling elite than had English common folk was more regularly defined as traitorous. Slave codes and courts in Jamaica operated on behalf of a public that was narrowly viewed in terms of the collective interests of slaveholders. Planters and merchants may have been convinced of the legitimacy of such a system, but they hoped only to terrify the enslaved.

The centerpiece of legal terror was exemplary punishment and execution. Yet unlike the regular, carnivalesque dramas of state authority in England, Jamaican executions consisted of sporadic, localized demonstrations. When groups of rebels were hanged or burned after failed uprisings, crowds certainly gathered, but at most times, in most parts of the island, public executions were used more to dramatize the power of masters than to construct a community governed by recognizably just laws and punishments. After a 1766 uprising in Westmoreland Parish, Thistlewood noted that "2 of the Rebel Negroes were tried yesterday and one of them burnt with a slow fire (alive) near the gallows at Savanna la Mar, yesterday evening; and the other, this morning at Cross-Path, where they killed Gardiner." Killing the second rebel at the same place where the white man had been slain certainly represented an attempt to reclaim the place for white authority. After landing in Saint Ann's Bay, Jamaica, in 1779, Captain Thomas Lloyd of the Royal Navy saw a man and a woman "in irons, bound together, leading to trial, and attended by very few people." He was told that they had been runaway slaves. At the time Lloyd was on his way to dinner at a plantation in the interior, but when he returned in the evening to his ship, the Hercules Victualler, he inquired about the couple. An officer from another ship in the harbor who had been ashore described what had transpired: "They were both executed on the wharf, in the sight of the ship's company... [T]he sister of the woman who was executed, bewailing her loss, the owner came to her, and said, Take care of yourself, you B——, you see how your sister is served. Upon enquiring of some of the Planters, the man had been hanged for running away, and the woman for secreting him." In the late eighteenth century, constables or deputy marshals were paid to attend trials and carry out executions. In 1794, for example, the Saint Thomas in the Vale Parish vestry paid deputy marshal George Coward two pounds for the trial and ten pounds for execution of Frank, a black horse thief. Coward collected one pound, twelve shillings for "the Hire of a Horse and Cart to convey Frank to his gallows at Bog Walk." The vestry also reimbursed him five pounds for providing a party of light dragoons with refreshment. The soldiers had been ordered to attend the execution. The dragoons provided security as well as the imposing presence of the colonial state, but apparently they also comprised most of the audience, as did the sailors in Saint Ann's Bay who watched the execution of the enslaved couple. Perhaps the military officers and the slaveholders conspired not only to keep the enslaved in subjection but also to warn the long-suffering rank and file not to challenge military hierarchy. After all, the West India garrison had an extraordinarily high mortality rate and, according to historian Roger Norman Buckley, the soldiers "were driven to misconduct by the danger of their new lives." To control them, officers were encouraged to "treat them all like slaves." Common soldiers could watch such executions...
with conflicting feelings of pride and anxiety; they stood with slaves on the gallows but for the grace of colonial power.

The enslaved were often tried, sentenced, and executed in towns, but post-mortem punishments usually took place on the plantations where slaves had committed crimes or hatched rebellions. Planters even preferred that the whole demonstration of authority occur locally. In 1731 landowners in the Carpenter's Mountains in Saint Elizabeth Parish sent a petition to the assembly requesting permission to set up a court nearby so that they would not have to travel the "near forty miles to give an account of their white people, slaves, and cattle, in order to be assessed." They also complained that the usual custom of trying slaves in town at Lacovia, at such an inconvenient distance, allowed many of them to escape "just punishment." The planters proposed that they be allowed to try slaves "nearest the place where any facts are committed." The example of such a trial, and the punishment ordered by the justices and freeholders, in the neighborhood, must strike a greater terror in the other slaves than their bare hearing of its being acted at a distance, although, if condemned to death, the head may be ordered to be put up at the place where the fact was committed." The petitioners hoped to harness the whole ritual of judicial majesty to local authority, thereby making their private land synonymous with public power. Whether they got their way is unknown. A century later, it seems clear that while slave trials took place in towns, the executions had been relocated to countryside crime scenes. In the wake of the 1831 Baptist War, Methodist ministers Thomas Murray and Henry Bleby watched as thirteen convicted rebels were taken from the town of Lucea into the Hanover Parish countryside for execution." In any case, the Carpenter's Mountain planters already possessed the ability to deploy what was perhaps their most fearsome token of authority: the relics that haunted space.

Paton has illuminated the "detailed and finely calibrated language" of the sentences involving mutilation in the Saint Andrew Parish slave court records. Not only was the court specific about which body parts would be removed at what time from each individual criminal, it often ordered that the severed pieces, especially ears, be nailed to significant landmarks. For example, magistrates ordered that ears be nailed to the gallows, to watch hut gates, or, quite often, to great trees. Jamaican authorities employed a "symbolics of mutilation" trying to extend to Afro-Jamaicans the meanings that such punishments had carried in Great Britain a century earlier. They also innovated. The court often ordered lashings to occur beneath large silk cotton trees and body parts to be nailed to the trees. Blacks in Jamaica reportedly believed that the spirits of the dead dwelled in and around such trees, sometimes by choice but more often because they had been caught and trapped by magical means. As Paton notes, "the belief in the symbolic importance of the cotton tree was something that Jamaican

whites were aware of, tried to manipulate, [and] to some extent adopted." In effect, they co-opted African understandings of spiritual capture.

The few contemporary descriptions of the African spiritual worlds were recorded by European visitors and missionaries whose biases led them to misrepresent African religious ideas and practices. Nevertheless, they commonly and consistently acknowledged the salience of the spirits of the dead in African social worldviews. In the mid-eighteenth century, the first British missionary to the Gold Coast, Thomas Thompson, noted that Akan-speaking Africans thought "the soul, after death, keeps haunt about the body, and is latent in, or near its repository." Across seventeenth-century West-Central Africa, according to John Thornton, missionaries observed that "those who had died violent deaths, outcasts, or people who were not buried . . . formed a category of ghosts and other wicked spirits. . . . Religious precautions were taken to prevent them from doing harm." But people could also harness and manipulate such spirits. Among Africans shipped to Jamaica from the Loango Coast, who made up the bulk of British captives from West-Central Africa, nkisi, or spiritual charms, could be used to effect one's will in the world. According to Robertarris Thompson, "the nkisi [was] believed to live with an inner life of its own. The basis of that life was a captured soul. . . . The owner of the charm could direct the spirit in the object to accomplish mystically certain things for him." By the late eighteenth century, whites certainly knew that such techniques of spiritual capture made strong impressions on slaves. Similarly, whites knew that blacks often feared and shunned the spirits of the dead. Matthew Lewis observed in 1615 that those enslaved on his property held that "the duppies of their adversaries are very alarming beings, equally powerful by day as by night, and who are spiritually terrific." Lewis learned that an African man hospitalized with fits had been stricken by the specter of a recently deceased white man whom the African had formerly offended. He had received what Lewis called the "ghostly blow" when passing through a burial ground used exclusively for whites.

Lewis's story highlights a curious congruence between the spiritual beliefs of the enslaved and the disciplinary techniques of the plantocracy. At Half Way Tree in Saint Andrew, the old cotton tree that gave the spot its name and that commonly bore the bodies and relics of maimed and executed blacks lived next to a well populated (and potentially dangerous) church graveyard for prominent whites. The evidence that the slave courts intended to domesticate the dead in accordance with their understandings of African cosmologies is admittedly suggestive as it is demonstrative. Yet the rituals of sentencing and punishment, taking place as they did in quick and irregularly scheduled trials before modest audiences, were no doubt less awesome to the enslaved than the lingering presence of body parts and mutilated corpses or, more precisely, the presence of the spirits attached to them. The unfortunate Mr. Dunbar's head driver, Matthew
Lewis learned, had been above suspicion until investigators searched his house. There, they found not only Dunbar’s watch “but with it one of his ears, which the villain had carried away, from a negro belief that, as long as the murderer possesses one of the ears of his victim, he will never be haunted by his spectre.” The necromancy of the planter class was more impressive than its law.

The way that Africans and their descendants in Jamaica harnessed the dead to political authority was not fully apparent to the plantocracy until after Tacky’s Rebellion in 1760. Long before that time, however, Africans brought magical talismans and medicines with them when they crossed the Atlantic and tried to use them against their captors. Cruising off the Windward Coast of Africa in 1751 aboard the Duke of Argyll, Captain John Newton discovered that nearly twenty of the captured Africans below decks had broken their chains. The slavers barely averted a rebellion, but days later the Africans tried another tactic: “In the afternoon we were alarmed with a report that some of the men slaves had found means to posyson the water in the scuttle casks upon deck.” Newton recorded in his journal, “but upon enquiry found they had only conveyed some of their country fetishes, as they call them, or talismans into one of them, which they had the credulity to suppose must inevitably kill all who drank of it.” Replied, Newton nervously congratulated himself on his own “superior” spirituality: “if it please God they make no worse attempts than to charm us to death, they will not much harm us, but it shews their intentions are not wanting.”

Earlier in the century, some Englishmen showed a greater concern about the efficacy of African spiritual power. Thomas Walduck, an army officer stationed at Barbados in the early 1700s, wrote that “white men, overseers of plantations and masters have been forced to leave this island by being bewitched by the Negroes.” Yet most Jamaican planters seemed as unconcerned as Newton.

When they wrote in diaries or in published accounts, whites in Jamaica often referred casually to the magical practices of the enslaved. Before 1760, whites considered these practices to be a generally harmless and bizarre feature of slave life, not unlike witchcraft and conjuring in Europe. In the spring of 1753, Thistlewood wrote as Guy, from the nearby Salt River Plantation, “acted his Oba, &c. with singing, dancing, &c. odd enough”—odd, but not serious.

Early the next year, Thistlewood noted with amusement that Jemmy Quaso, a well-known obeah man, was “pretending to pull bones, &c. out of several of our Negroes for which they was to give him money.” Somehow, Jemmy Quaso’s clients discovered that he was a fraud, and “they chased him out of the estate, frightened enough.” The event reminded Thistlewood of a scene he had witnessed in Yorkshire when a noted conjurer from Wakefield, Black Lambert, was chased out of the town of Acothor. Such innocent and innocuous compar-

isons ended a few years later when an islandwide slave conspiracy in Jamaica brought the alarming aspects of obeah to the forefront of planter concerns.

Obeah (obia) was the catchall term used to describe a complex of shamanistic practices derived from different parts of Africa and conducted by ritual specialists working largely outside formal institutions. Obeah practitioners operated as herbalists and wise folk, tending to physical, social, and spiritual needs, though whites generally mischaracterized obeah as simple witchcraft, failing to see its larger role in social and spiritual healing and protection.

According to the most recent research on the provenance of obeah, the term probably originated among Ibo-speaking peoples transported from the Bight of Biafra to the West Indies as slaves. There, obeah’s closest semantic and phonological analogue, dbia, refers to an adept, or master of knowledge and wisdom. Thus, the anglophone Caribbean term obeah man probably referred in a similar way to a “master of knowledge and wisdom” in the sacred arts.

Through most of the eighteenth century, obeah was mastered almost exclusively by Africans. Nevertheless, one of the earliest reports on Jamaican obeah to the House of Commons claimed that the “Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them; to these Oracles they resort, and with the most implicit faith, upon all Occasions, whether for the cure of Disorders, the obtaining of Revenge for Injuries or Insults, the conciliating of Favour, the Discovery and Punishment of the Thief or the Adulterer, and the Prediction of Future Events.”

While the term may have come from the Ibo language, the practice of obeah combined elements from the sacred traditions and medical knowledge of Africans seized from several areas of the continent. For example, many obeah men in Jamaica were Africans from the Gold Coast. Moreover, the term obeah also referred to the charms that carried spiritual power and could be placed strategically around the individual who was to be cursed or protected. These were made up of a variety of materials thought to have sacred significance, including blood, feathers, porcupine’s beaks, animal teeth, broken glass, eggs, and grave dirt. The materials used in obeah evoke Robert Farris Thompson’s description of the Kongo minkisi in West-Central Africa. Believers held that minkisi worked through “two basic classes of medicine within the charm, spirit-embedding medicine (earth, often from a grave site, for cemetery earth is considered at one with the spirit of the dead), and spirit-admishing objects (seeds, claws, miniature knives, stones, crystals, and so forth).”

Capturing souls, or “shadow catching,” was one skill that obeah practitioners were thought to possess long after enslaved Africans stopped arriving in Jamaica. In 1826 Alexander Barclay claimed to have been present at the trial of a “notorious obeah man, driver on an estate in the parish of St. David.” One of the
witnesses against the driver was another man enslaved on the same plantation. When asked if he knew the accused to be an obeah man, the witness replied: “Ees, massa, shadow-catcher, true. . . . Him ha coffin, (a little coffin produced) him set for catch dem shadow.” The court asked for further clarification and the witness complied: “When him set obeah for [somebody], him catch dem shadow and dem go dead.”

The similarities between the shadow-catching obeah man and the practices described by Thompson are striking but do not point to the conclusion that obeah was a “Kongo” rather than “Ibo” practice. Indeed, C. G. A. Oldendorp recorded in the 1970s that “the Amina, from the Gold Coast, used the same term for ‘soul’ as for ‘shadow.’” The practices described by the term obeah clearly changed with the arrival of new groups of Africans. Early commentators maintained that only Africans practiced obeah, but by the time the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1807, enslaved persons of creole birth had taken up the practice. Sources may never permit us to track all the ways in which the Afro-Jamaican magical practices described by the term obeah responded to changes in immigration patterns and political-economic developments. However, it is probably safe to agree with Nigel Bolland that obeah took on a “whole new meaning in the societies of the Caribbean, a meaning derived from the power structures, the social oppositions, in these societies.”

In Jamaica, obeah was centrally concerned with spirits, with haunting and spiritual cure. For example, in 1799 one Mr. Graham, a free black man and a Christian, reportedly sought out an obeah man because “his first Wife, who was dead, came into his ground and troubled him.” The obeah man prepared “Guinea Pepper and red head Roots,” which Graham was to put above his door to drive away the spirit of his former wife. Graham paid the obeah man a rooster and a dollar for his services. If obeah also often acted broadly as a counterhegemonic practice and ideology, as anthropologist Mindie Lazarus-Black maintains, it was most authoritative when dealing with the dead. Rampant death made such a technology of the spirit critical at all times, but as masters recruited dead bodies and parts of bodies to announce their power, the political significance of obeah for the enslaved became more pronounced.

The enslaved used obeah to treat disease, to manipulate human behavior and the spirits of the dead, and to enhance the political authority of ritual specialists and their patrons. During the mid-1700s, Edward Long described obeah as “a sort of witchcraft of most extensive influence. . . . [T]he authority which such of their old men as had the reputation of wizards, or Obeah-men, possessed over [slaves], was sometimes very successfully employed in keeping them in subordination to their chiefs.” In fact, Long was looking back to 1760, trying to explain the role of such “wizards” in the most extensive slave revolt in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean.

Tacky’s Revolt, as it was later called, threatened British control of Jamaica for the first time since the Maroon Wars of the 1730s. Taking advantage of Britain’s Seven Years’ War against France and Spain, more than a thousand enslaved blacks revolted in the first phase of the uprising, which began on Easter April 7, 1760, and continued until October of the next year. Over that time, rebels killed sixty whites and destroyed thousands of pounds worth of property. Some estimates put the number of blacks involved at 30,000 out of a total enslaved population of less than 150,000.” During the revolt and the repression that followed, more than 500 black men and women were killed in battle, executed, or committed suicide, and another 500 were transported from the island for life. “Whether we consider the extent and secrecy of its plan, the multitude of the conspirators, and the difficulty of opposing its eruptions in such a variety of places at once,” wrote Long in his 1774 History of Jamaica, Tacky’s Revolt was “more formidable than any hitherto known in the West Indies.” Tacky, an enslaved African from the Gold Coast, had planned and instigated the uprising with obeah practitioners as his closest counselors. He and his coconspirators called on the shamans to use their charms to protect the rebels from bullets and to administer binding loyalty oaths. The oaths required the plotters to consume a concoction made up of blood, rum, and grave dirt, which they believed to have sacred significance. The rebellion ultimately failed, but its aftermath showed direct competition between different forms of sacred authority in stark relief.

In the wave of executions that followed the rebellion, none were more impressive than those of the obeah men. Revealingly, colonial authorities felt that they needed to resort to more awesome displays than they normally projected. In a report to the House of Commons, one witness described the scene: “At the place of execution he bid defiance to the Executioner, telling him that it was not in the Power of the White People to kill him; and the Negro Spectators were astonished when they saw him expire. On the other Obeah-men, various Experiments were made with Electrical Machines and Magic Lanterns, which produced very little Effect; except on one who, after receiving many severe Shocks, acknowledged his Master’s Obeah exceeded his own.” The government of Jamaica hoped to overawe the shamans and their adherents with the latest technologies, but most of the displays were less impressive than desired. Perhaps some slaves had witnessed them before as entertainments. In Antigua, experimenters put on exhibitions of “the newly-discovered electric fire” as early as 1753. In one of them, a “Flash of Lightning [was] made to strike a small House, and dart towards a little Lady sitting on a Chair, who will, notwithstanding, be preserved from being hurt; whilst the Image of a Negro standing by, and seeming to be further out of Danger, will be remarkably affected by it.” There is every reason to believe that the more wealthy and worldly masters of Jamaica were treated to similar displays of scientific wizardry. In any case, the amusing sight of lightning
striking the "image of a Negro" had progressed by 1760 to the "severe" and no doubt excruciating electric shocks given to Tacky's obeah men. Jamaican masters could not abide sources of authority they did not wholly control. After Tacky's Revolt, Jamaican law punished by death, imprisonment, or exile "any Negro who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power." The aggressive prosecution of obeah practitioners remained a prominent concern in the slave court trials of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Whites both believed and doubted the efficacy of obeah. They continued to regard it as superstition, but of a particularly threatening kind. Because black men and women in Jamaica believed in the power of obeah, they could fall into despair and die if they thought they had been bewitched. Obeah practitioners were also expert poisoners and could, when they chose, settle disputes by murder. More importantly from the standpoint of the Jamaican plantocracy, obeah could motivate the enslaved to direct political action. In 1784 Judge John Grant rejected a master's appeal to stop the transportation of a convicted obeah man. "If granted in this instance," warned the judge, "application with equal reason might be made, while a rebellion might be raging throughout the country." The judge clearly worried about obeah's political potential, but in his notes on the case he defined obeah as the "pretended exercise of witchcraft or sorcery, a crime which the new negroes bring with them from Africa, and which does infinite mischief among their fellow slaves." Such ambivalence toward obeah characterized the colonial state's persecution of its practitioners right through to the end of slavery and beyond. As long as people believed in its power, governing authorities would have to punish its practice. The consolidated Jamaica slave act passed in 1833 clarified the real issue at stake: "Obeah practised with intention to excite rebellion, or endangering the life or health of a slave, shall be punished at the discretion of the court." Thus, the ban on obeah was a ban on alternative authority and social power.

The operation of obeah in Jamaican society is difficult to glean. As a highly illicit activity, obeah was almost always practiced in secret, and the whites who left written descriptions probably knew very little about it. The surviving records of obeah trials, however, provide opportunities to ask fundamental questions about obeah's place in the social relations of slavery. The Public Record Office in London possesses a nearly complete record of Jamaica slave trial returns for the period 1814–18. In these years, the colonial government prosecuted eighty-five obeah cases, fifty-one of which resulted in convictions. R. R. Madden claimed that by the 1830s, obeah practitioners were generally old women. Yet less than two decades before Madden's sojourn on the island, only ten of the eighty-three defendants for whom gender can be determined were women. Moreover, women were acquitted of obeah charges in six of the ten cases. For men, the trend was reversed: they were found guilty 62 percent of the time. Unlike

earlier witch trials in Europe and North America, neither women's autonomy nor the intersection between the supernatural and the sexual seem to have been a significant concern, at least not for the colonial government.

The most interesting question and puzzling problem presented by the returns concerns the ages of the accused and convicted. Contemporary reports and subsequent scholarship have stressed that persons most commonly accused of practicing obeah were aged Africans. "The oldest and most crafty are those who usually attract the greatest Devotion and Confidence," Jamaica agent Stephen Fuller reported to the House of Commons during the 1770s, "those whose hoary heads" and a "peculiarly harsh and diabolical" appearance "qualified them for Successful Imposition upon the weak and credulous." Following Fuller, sociologist Orlando Patterson maintains that "people accused of obeah were in the great majority of cases poor, abused, uncared for, often sick with yaws, and isolated from other slaves. They were also usually old people or Africans." Similarly, Robert Dirks notes "the tendency for witch hunters to persecute only outcasts or anyone alienated from the mainstream" for the whole of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century British West Indies. Yet the obeah trial returns hint at other interpretations.

When the Jamaica slave courts condemned the guilty to death or transportation, the courts were required to pay compensation to owners. Specific values were partly determined by the loss of productive labor masters would suffer and so corresponded to age, health, and ability to work. The trial returns for 1814–18 record the appraised value for thirteen convicted obeah practitioners, eleven men and two women. Unfortunately, the returns did not always record the amounts paid out, so the sample is too small to permit the drawing of firm conclusions. Nevertheless, the appraised values challenge the assumption that old and outcast slaves were the primary targets of the witch hunts. The compensation scale progressed from fifteen to one hundred Jamaican pounds. The average value for the condemned men and women was seventy-one pounds but was seventy-five pounds for the two women alone. At the upper limit, four men were valued at one hundred pounds, while only one clearly "superannuated" man was valued at the minimum of fifteen pounds. Three people were valued between seventy-five and eighty pounds, while only one was valued at forty pounds, the second-smallest value. Rather than most zealously pursuing the old and afflicted, the slave regime seems to have had the most success prosecuting vigorous men and women—also the most likely to wield material and social power.

Of course, these findings only raise further questions about the witch hunts. Do the compensations only reflect the influence of planters trying to get maximum value for their confiscated property? Did the highest values go to the most influential planters? Perhaps older obeah practitioners were cruder and harder
TABLE 1  
Obeah Cases by Gender (Jamaica, 1814–1818)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Acquittals</th>
<th>Convictions</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Cases</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Unknown</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public Record Office, Colonial Office 117/147.

TABLE 2  
Obeah Cases by Sentence (Jamaica, 1814–1818)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>% of Convictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Cases</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
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<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Convictions</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Convictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workhouse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public Record Office, Colonial Office 117/147.

to convict. Maybe the younger practitioners were more prominent among the enslaved (and therefore more threatening), more public, and so more urgently prosecuted. After all, it should not be a surprise to discover that the plantocracy went after potential rebels who combined social and spiritual power more aggressively than they pursued social outcasts. If slaves identified such outcasts as the cause of misfortune, slaveholders blamed their troubles on enslaved men and women of influence.

Most of these queries and possibilities highlight the connection between obeah and other forms of social power in slave society. For example, slave drivers were also at times shamans, witches, and adjudicators. Plantation attorneys and overseers commanded the right to appoint drivers and headmen to subdue the enslaved. Nearly always men, these drivers acted as plantation foremen, enforcing labor discipline and implementing the work regime. As such, they received special privileges and comforts from their masters. They had more freedom of movement around and between the plantations; they lived in larger houses or cabins; they were allotted more land for cultivating provisions and more food from plantation stores; some were even allowed to carry guns for hunting and policing, a clear violation of Jamaican slave codes. Though the drivers ultimately served at their masters' pleasure, they also had to find convincing ways to exert their authority over their fellow slaves. As historian Robert Paquette has observed, drivers "often wore several hats, whether as religious authorities or artisans," and they held a preeminent status as communicators of useful knowledge across distance and social class.

To enhance their eminence, drivers presided over unsanctioned judicatures. John Stewart was one of the few whites in Jamaica to witness an independent court set up and maintained by and for the enslaved. "On many estates," he observed, "the headmen erect themselves into a sort of bench of justice, which sits and decides, privately, and without the knowledge of whites, on all disputes and complaints of their fellow slaves. The sentences of this court are frequently severe. . . . [T]hey consist in pecuniary fines, which often exceed the means of the party." Quite often, the means of determining guilt or innocence involved trial by ordeal, or spiritual divination via the techniques of obeah. But illicit court was just one space where obeah united sacred and social power. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, drivers also recommended itinerant Christian ministers to white authority. Testifying before the House of Lords in 1832, planter William Shand recollected "a chief man upon an estate coming to me (on Norris Estate, in the parish of St. David's); he applied for permission [to preach] for a man who was a stranger to me, and I was not inclined to think favourably of his being allowed to come there and read prayers to the negroes." As it turned out, one shaman was vouching for another. Three months later, "the negroes charged this Driver with practising obeah." Shand recalled that his slaves claimed to have suffered great injuries by the driver's sorcery "and that he had been the occasion of the loss of many children on the estate." The driver apparently had also bragged that he had caused "the death of the former manager of that estate, Mr. Grant." On the evidence of the slaves, the man was tried, convicted, and executed.

Inevitably, many enslaved headmen in Jamaica used their authority for personal and antisocial ends. At least many slaves assumed they did. On Trathall Estate in 1809, Johana, an enslaved woman who had lost three children to "purrid sore throats" in quick succession, accused the second driver, Napier, with practicing obeah. Napier had been pursuing Johana's attention. She spurned him, and now she knew Napier was conjuring his revenge. Without proof that could lead to a conviction in court, the plantation managers decided only to confine Napier for several months and then send him back to work. Perhaps Johana suspected Napier had achieved his station as driver through occult means. Such a belief would be consistent with the conclusions of leading
anthropologists and historians of African witchcraft. As historian Ralph Austen has noted, "The African conception of the witch is tied to various forms of belief in a world where the apparent production of new wealth depends upon appropriating the scarce reproductive resources of others while collaborating with an arbitrary and destructive external power." Witchcraft accusations have also functioned as a leveling discourse that protected community harmony from prolific accumulators of wealth.  

As Orlando Patterson has found, "Obeah accusations were also made against people who either threatened to be too successful or were the source of much anxiety."  

People who used obeah for selfish ends, especially drivers who collaborated with arbitrary and destructive white power, probably drew more frequent witchcraft accusations from the enslaved than did common folk. As a potential threat to enslaved communal equilibrium, on the one hand, and as a subversive and potentially insurrectionary force, on the other, Jamaican obeah exemplifies Peter Geschiere's supple description of witchcraft as both "a resource for the powerful and also a weapon for weak against new inequalities." 

For obeah certainly embodied the enslaved to resist the supremacy of their masters and allowed blacks more generally to believe that they could challenge whites. 

Describing the case of Plato, a notorious outlaw in Westmoreland Parish, Matthew Lewis remarked in his typically droll manner that "besides his acknowledged courage, he was a professor of Obi, and had threatened that whoever dared to lay a finger upon him should suffer spiritual torments, as well as be physically shot through the head." In this case, the spiritual threat was perhaps more effective than the material. Plato was captured, tried, and executed, but he died most heroically; kept up the terrors of his imposture to the last moment; told the magistrates, who condemned him, that his death should be avenged by a storm, which would lay waste the whole island, that year; and, when his negro gaoler was binding him to the stake at which he was destined to suffer, he assured him that he should not live long to triumph in his death, for that he had taken good care to Obeah him before quitting the prison. It certainly did happen, strangely enough, that, before the year was over, the most violent storm took place ever known in Jamaica; and as to the gaoler, his imagination was so forcibly struck by the threats of the dying man, that, although every care was taken of him, the power of medicine exhausted, and even a voyage to America undertaken, in hopes that a change of scene might change the course of his ideas, still, from the moment of Plato's death, he gradually pined and withered away, and finally expired before the completion of the twelvemonth.  

In a world where violent storms were always on their way and where mortal sickness was always on the hunt for a weakened immune system, events often confirmed the awe of sacred authority.

As long as the spiritual power of obeah was credible, black men and women, free and enslaved, wielded it to combat the worldly power of whites. In a report to his cadre back home, John Shipman, the Kingston district chairman for the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, described a fascinating encounter between an overseer and a free black man armed with an obeah charm. One night about midnight, the overseer heard someone digging not far from his house. When he looked out the window, he saw a man, whom he recognized, digging a hole and "depositing something which he knew to be an Obeah-Spell." The overseer said nothing at the time, but the next morning "he sent for the person who had done it and opened the hole and took out the deposit (intimating that something extraordinary had informed him of it) and found it to consist of a Bottle filled, I believe, with rain water, and some feathers and cat's teeth." As Shipman put it, "This Gentleman got to understand that it was intended to remove him from office, by death of course." The overseer harangued the man, "informing him that he could Hang him for what he had done," but then let him go, "charging him to escape to America or some other place."

Though the missionaries who arrived in Jamaica in the latter decades of the eighteenth century emphasized the spiritual harm caused by "communication with evil spirits" and with "the Devil" (similar to the concerns of prosecutors in seventeenth-century European and American witchcraft trials), Jamaica's colonial government worried more about the supernatural practices that undercut the plantocracy's ability to harness the dead to its own authority. Because obeah drew its gravest authority from its relationship to spirits and death, the prohibition amounted to a strategy to limit the sacred authority the enslaved derived from the spirits of the dead while maximizing the power of the colonial government to use the dead as an element of social control. In this sense, power in Jamaican slave society operated through various species of necromancy that would influence the course of social events by invoking, animating, or placating the dead.

Various forms of sacred authority were put to different and often opposing purposes even as considerable cultural borrowing and appropriation occurred between slaveholders and the enslaved. Each appropriated from the other symbolic resources that carried social and spiritual power. The use of powerful objects, cultural categories, and symbols did not necessarily correspond to their distinct and original uses in Africa or Europe, even when they were put to distinct and irreconcilable purposes by blacks and whites. Slaves and their overlords wielded intersecting and competing forms of authority that revolved around relations with the dead.

Authority nearly always has a transcendent—that is, sacred—dimension.
The politics of slavery in Jamaica provides an exemplary case in point. The Jamaican plantocracy tried to place its authority above human contestation by alternately appropriating and censuring the spiritual authority of the enslaved. Indeed, masters put what they considered to be distinctly “African” divining techniques into practice for their own benefit. In the first published description of a grave-dirt oath-taking ceremony in 1740, Charles Leslie claimed that Africans in Jamaica administered such oaths at the behest of their masters.

When any Thing about a Plantation is missing, they have a solemn Kind of Oath which the oldest Negro always administers, and which by them is accounted so sacred, that except when they have the express Command of their Master or Overseer, they never go about it, and then they go very solemnly to Work. They range themselves in that Spot of Ground which is appropriate for the Negro’s Burying-place, and one of them opens a Grave. He who acts the Priest take a little of the Earth, and puts into every one of their Mouths; they tell, that if any has been guilty, their Belly swells and occasions their Death.33

Whites in other Caribbean slave societies also held African supernatural power in high regard. Sometimes they tried to employ it for their personal benefit, and sometimes they attempted to co-opt it to extend authority over the enslaved.33

In Jamaican slave society, the cultural forms that sacred authority took underwent a continual process of convergence and redefinition as they resonated with the practical demands of domination on the one side and of survival struggles within slavery on the other. Colonial masters engaged African spirituality, while black shamans wielded power over material circumstances. In effect, African tradition and European modernity, supernatural beliefs and the mechanisms of the colonial state, became inextricably intertwined.33 In practice, neither masters nor the enslaved maintained a distinction between material and spiritual power. As a political phenomenon, colonial necromancy thus forces our attention to strategies for manipulating cultural practices in a world where the dead constituted an active social presence and where domination, dissent, and the threat of incredible violence plagued every interaction.

Everyone dies. Consequently, the dead have the ability to hold everyone’s attention, acting as a significant fulcrum for political activity in the process. By yoking the dead to their claims to authority, contenders for power in Jamaican slave society could fasten their efforts to powerfully affecting spiritual idioms. Relations with death and the dead made the transcendent available for use in worldly conflicts, wrestling awesome questions of spiritual existence into temporal, place-bound social struggles. The supernatural imagination was the wellspring of a spiritual authority that drew its economic, social, and political efficacy from the haunted and terrifying landscape of Jamaican slavery. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Jamaican social context was the awareness that the dead populated the world and could be conscripted for political use.

NOTES

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2. As contemporary Philadelphia reformer Benjamin Rush knew, “The punishments of wicked men, in the world of spirits, are invisible; we have no knowledge of their reality, nature, degrees, or duration, but what was revealed to us near eighteen hundred years ago; and yet governments owe their stability, chiefly, to that morality, which the terror of these invisible, remote, and indefinite punishments, excites in the human mind” (“An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments upon Criminals and upon Society,” in A Plan for the Punishment of Crime: Two Essays [1787; Philadelphia, 1954], 16).


6. As surrealist ethnographer Michael Taussig has explained in another colonial context, “The colonized space of death has a colonizing function, maintaining the hegemony or cultural stability of norms and desires that facilitate the way the rulers ruled in the land of the living. Yet the space of death is notoriously conflict-ridden and contradictory, a privileged domain of metamorphosis, the space for excellence for uncertainty and terror to stunt permanently, yet also revive and empower with new life” (Colonialism, Shamanism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing [Chicago, 1987], 374). To explore similar themes in another Caribbean context, see Joan Dayan, Haiti, History, and the Gods (Berkeley, 1995); see also Douglas R. Egerton, A Peculiar Mark of Infamy: Dissent, Burial, and Rebel Slaves in Slave Societies,” in Mortal Remains: Death in Early America, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia, 2003), 140–60;


9. Ibid.

10. Testimony of William Fitzmaurice, March 9, 1791, in *ibid.*, 231: "From the observation I have made, three men die to one woman; this I know from experience; the Negro men take everything unpleasant to heart, and often have recourse to different species of suicide; the women have many protections which the men have not."

11. Ibid., 230.


14. The query may seem ridiculous in hindsight, but the committee asked this question while proslavery ideologues and apologists were commonly arguing that black slaves preferred living under the English "rule of law" to living under the "arbitrary and absolute" authority of African rulers; see, for example, the testimony of John Wetherburn, twenty-seven years a planter in Jamaica: "In their own country the stronger party, who are the part of most consequence, often do as they think proper to the weaker party, whether it is attended by justice or not" (March 19, 1790, in *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, ed. Lambert, 72791; see also Bryan Edwards, *History of the British West Indies* (London, 1819), 238–83).


17. Ibid.


23. John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica*, with Remarks on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Slaves, and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies (Edinburgh, 1823), 281. Following the abolition of Britain’s transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and the consequent growth of the creole population, the belief of a return to Africa had diminished currency.

24. Fear of postmortem mutilation terrorized common Londoners as much or more than the gallow's itself; see Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003); Peter Linebaugh, "The Tyburn Riots against the Surgeons," in *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, F. P. Thompson, and Colin Winslow (New York, 1975); Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1989), 229. In England, before the eighteenth century, suicide was widely thought to be caused by diabolic possession directly attributed to Satan and his demons. This immediate concern with evil forces yielded to anxieties about the preservation of secular and divine authority. By the eighteenth century, according to McLynn, the self-murderer was abominable because “he offended against the king, whose interests dictated the preservation of his own subjects,” and because “he blasphemed against the law of God,” usurping the Lord’s authority over life and death. "The reign of George III saw the decisive abandonment of the belief that suicide was diabolically inspired. Put simply, the eighteenth century saw the secularization of the crime of suicide." *Crime and Punishment*, 50, 54. For Anglo-Atlantic slaveholders, however, it seems clear that suicide was conceived very early as a secular crime that ought to be deterred with spiritual punishments.


29. Thistlewood diary, October 2, 1750, quoted in ibid., 39.
31. Maria Nugent, Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805, ed. Philip Wright (Kingston, 1866), 165. The man was one of two executed for "rebellious conspiracy."
32. Matthew Gregory Lewis, Journal of a West India Proprietor Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica (London, 1834), 181–82. Before the plantocracy made terrifying examples of Dunbar’s driver and his conspirators, the murder reverberated among the enslaved in ominous ways. "The stranger-youths, two of Dunbar’s negroes, and the driver, were tried, confessed the crime, and were all executed; the head of the latter being fixed upon a pole in terrorem. But while the offenders were still in prison, the overseer upon a neighboring property had occasion to find fault in the field with a woman belonging to a gang hired to perform some particular work; upon which she flew upon him with the greatest fury, grasped him by the throat, cried to her fellow—Come here! Come here! Let’s Dunbar him! and through their strength and the suddenness of her attack had nearly accomplished her purpose before his own slaves could come to his assistance. This woman was also executed" (182–83).
33. As Katherine Verdery has noted, "A body’s materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy: unlike notions such as ‘patriotism’ or ‘civil society’, for instance, a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places. Bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present" (Political Lives of Dead Bodies, 27).
35. It would certainly be fair to ask, as did contemporary reformers in Europe, if such displays did not lose their evocative power over time. In 1791, Henry Cook testified before the House of Commons that "at my first coming to the island, a common flogging of a Negro would have put me in a tremble, and disordered me so that I did not feel myself right again generally the remaining part of the day, but by degrees and custom it became so habitual, that I thought no more of seeing a black man’s head cut off, than I should now think of a butcher cutting off the head of his calf” (House of Commons Sessional Papers, ed. Lambert, 82/99).
38. Ibid., 44.
42. Ibid., 27.
43. According to Hay, it is possible that by the eighteenth century, "the secular sermons of the criminal law had become more important than those of the church" (ibid., 29).
46. Spierenburg, Spectacle of Suffering, 57.
47. Hay, "Property, Authority and the Criminal Law," 40–49.
48. Gatrell, Hanging Tree, 83.
53. Long quoted in Gaspar, "Rigid and Inclement," 95.
55. The first tribunals established in 1664 consisted of one justice of the peace and two "sufficient Neighbors" who adjudicated capital cases and passed sentences to be carried out by slaveholders (Gaspar, "Rigid and Inclement," 83). The number of judges was increased in 1696.
57. William Beckford, Remarks upon the Situation of the Negroes in Jamaica (London, 1788), 93.
whites expanded on the English legal principle of “petit treason.” “Under this theory, murder by a subordinate—a wife, child servant, or apprentice—of the person who had legitimate authority over him or her—husband, father, or master—was considered treasonous within the household, a crime analogous to treason against the state. Jamaican lawmakers expanded this idea so that all white people had legitimate authority over all slaves. A violent act by a slave against a white person could never be just that; it always carried with it the implicit threat of slave rebellion and the overthrow of white power” (931). On punishments for petty treason in England, see McLynn, Crime and Punishment, 121–24.

59. Thistlewood diary, October 20, 1766, quoted in Douglas Hall, In Miserable Slavery, 142.
63. Ibid.
64. “Petition from the Carpenter’s Mountains, 14 May 1731,” Journals of the Jamaican Assembly (Kingston, 1826), 38.
65. Thomas Murray to Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Montego Bay, April 3, 1832, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, West Indies General Correspondence, box 131, fiche box 9, no. 446.
67. Ibid., 942.
71. Lewis, Journal of a West India Planter, 98.
72. Ibid., 99.
73. Ibid., 182.
75. Ibid., 56.
77. Thistlewood diary, April 3, 1753, quoted in Douglas Hall, In Miserable Slavery, 56.
78. Thistlewood diary, January 6, 1754, quoted in ibid., 61.
81. Ibid., 90–92; see also Douglas Chambers, “My Own Nation: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora,” Slavery and Abolition 18 (April 1997): 72–97, though Chambers overstates the degree to which obéah can be described as an Ibo practice.
84. Ibid., 217; R. R. Madden, A Twelve Month’s Residence in the West Indies (Philadelphia, 1833), 289.
88. The open question of how obéah practitioners trained apprentices in their arts remains crucial to a full understanding of how shamanism developed in the West Indies (Jerome Handler, personal communication).
96. For more on grave dirt and oath-taking among Africans and their descendants, see Charles Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1740), 324; Long, *History of Jamaica*, 2:422–23; Kenneth Bilby, "Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties among the Guianian and Jamaican Maroons," *Ethnohistory* 44 (Fall 1997): 659–84; see also Dirks, *Black Satinaria*, 158. For a comparative example, see Gaspar’s analysis of the 1768 conspiracy in Antigua, in which he surmises that the Cumanantec conspirators might have interpreted the drought, depression, epidemics, and crushing labor requirements of the 1730s "in terms of their ancestors’ displeasure with them." Then, "though a solemn damnation oath they appealed for the ancestors’ help to change things, to bring back good fortune, and also to destroy slavery." *Bandmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, 1985), 245.


99. As early as 1767, Thistlewood began to show his magic lantern (an early type of slide projector) to favored slaves (Thistlewood diary, September 14, 1767, quoted in Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, 160). Also, the books Thistlewood received in a 1771 shipment included Benjamin Franklin’s *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, 225). Though interest in electricity among planters may have begun with the torture of Tacky’s oaths men, it is more likely that interest was early and ongoing.

100. This is potentially the first reference to the use of electricity for purposes of torture. A recent general history of torture maintains that the "use of electricity is the signal contribution of the twentieth century to torture." (Brian Innes, *The History of Torture* [New York, 1998], 144). The authoritative text on early science in the Caribbean also makes no mention of electricity’s utility in the torture of slaves; see James F. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore, 1992). If indeed the history of punitive electrocution begins in the slave societies of the Caribbean long before electricity’s use for the “betraying of mankind,” it would seem to support the contention of Paul Gilroy, among others who reject the "mesmeric idea of history as progress," that slavery and terror constituted integral aspects of modernity rather than its opposites; see Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1993), esp. 53–54.


104. One plantation manager complained that obeah practitioners were extremely difficult to catch—that masters succeeded only one in ten times (William Anderson to James Chisholme, Tronhill Estate, February 16, 1810, MS 5466–112, Papers of William and James Chisholme, MS 5466–76, National Library of Scotland). I thank Roderick McDonald for providing me with his notes on this source. For historical accounts of obeah drawn from textual and oral sources in another context, see Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an African American People*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 2002). Richard Price, *Alabi’s World* (Baltimore, 1990).


112. *Public Record Office, Colonial Office* 137/147 records 13 compensation values for convicted obeah practitioners: £100 = 4; £80 = 2; £70 = 1; £50 = 1; £40 = 1; £30 = 1 (three male, 2 female [£170 and £30]); average value = £71.

113. When no value was recorded, it did not mean that no money was paid out. Most parishes simply did not list the compensation values in the general returns ("Returns of Slave Trials," *Public Record Office, Colonial Office* 137/147).


115. Ibid., 53.


117. "Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Inquire into the Laws and Usages of the Several West India Colonies in Relation to the Slave Population, &c. &c. &c.," 1831–32. House of Lords Record Office, 220.
118. William Anderson to James Chisholme, Trouthall Estate, April 13, 1809, Chisholme Papers, ms 5466-76. I thank Roderick McDonald for providing me with his notes on this source.

119. William Anderson to James Chisholme, Trouthall Estate, February 5, 1810, Chisholme Papers, ms 5466-112.


121. Ibid. The literature on witchcraft as social sanction in Africa is too voluminous to recount here. As for a recent comparative article, see Austen, "Moral Economy of Witchcraft." For the classic discussion of witchcraft and wizardry as "behavior in a social field," see Victor W. Turner, "Witchcraft and Sorcery: Taxonomy versus Dynamics," Africa 34, nos. 3-4 (1964): 214-24.

122. Patterson, Sociology of Slavery, 194.

123. Peter Geschiere, The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa, trans. Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville, 1997), 16. "Healers are always highly ambivalent figures," notes Geschiere, "they can only heal because they have killed" (196). For a more narrowly pessimistic view, see Austen, "Moral Economy of Witchcraft," 109: "It is difficult to depict African witchcraft idioms as a weapon of African resistance. Their immediate moral targets are other Africans while they leave the European bases of power mystified to a point where they can only be avoided."

124. For insightful discussions of African/American spiritual warfare in slavery, see James H. Sweet, Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770 (Chapel Hill, 2004); Palmié, Wizards and Scientists, 176-81; MacGaffey, Religion and Society, esp. 156-64.

125. Lewis, Journal of a West India Proprietor, 91.

126. Ibid., 94.


128. Ibid., 13.

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid.

131. Ibid.

132. Verderé, Political Lives of Dead Bodies, 57.

133. Leslie, New and Exact Account, 124.


135. For a sophisticated study of modernity and tradition in the Caribbean, see Stephan Palmié, Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition (Durham, 2002).

Corresponderces in Black and White
Sentiment and the Slave Market Revolution
PHILLIP TROUTMAN

In 1859, at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, Dangerfield Newby went into battle against slavery armed with more than steel and zeal. He carried in his pocket a small collection of letters written by his wife, Harriet Newby. Living in slavery in Brentville, she had recently urged him to come and buy her, fearing impending doom at her master’s hands. "He may sell me," she wrote, "I am then all my bright hopes of the future are blasted." She had but "one bright hope to cheer me in all my troubles," she confided, and "that is to be with you." If I thought I should never see you," she assured him, "this earth would have no charms for me." She signed all her letters, "your affectionate wife, Harriet Newby." Their specific sentimental acts were intended—each in a different way—to unite them; she wrote the letters to plead for a physical reunion; he treasured them as keepsakes to hold her close to his heart as he risked all against slavery. Her bright hopes were indeed blasted, as Dangerfield Newby was killed in John Brown’s conflagration at Harper’s Ferry. When authorities found her letters on his broken body, she was promptly identified and sold south. These tokens of sentiment, aimed at reuniting them, effected her separation even from his corpse.¹

In 1861, the letters of another enslaved woman, Emily Plummer, indicated what Harriet’s letters might have meant to Dangerfield Newby. Emily and her husband, Adam Plummer, had lived largely apart since 1855. "My heart aches at the thought of this long and painful separation," she wrote to him. Fantasies of Adam’s presence taunted her. "I dream of you and think you are once more with me," she wrote, "but wake to find myself alone and so wretchedly unhappy." She urged him "under any circumstances," whether or not he could visit, to "write
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