

2021

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Recommended Citation

Mondragon, Britanny (2021) "A Comparative Review: Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination and Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad," *History in the Making*: Vol. 14 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol14/iss1/20>

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A Comparative Review: Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination and Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad

By Brittany Mondragon

Obeah (sometimes spelled Obi, Obia, or Obeya) consists of various facets which makes it impossible to establish a wholly inclusive definition of the practice. At its most basic, Obeah is either labeled as “Caribbean witchcraft” by non-believers or is seen as a justice-making spiritual healing “experiment” or “science” by practitioners.¹ Overall, most scholars who study Obeah concur that it “is a complex and hard-to-define term that has contested West African etymologies.”² While there are several theories for the origins of Obeah and the name itself, most scholars acknowledge that slaves taken from various regions of Africa most likely combined their spiritualism and practices to develop Obeah. Even though there are similarities between Obeah and African-derived religions such as Voodoo, Hoodoo, and Santeria, Obeah is unique because there are no distinct canons, deities, or rituals that are fundamental to the anglophone understanding of religion. Instead, believers practice Obeah individually; each practitioner produces their own distinct personal actions not bound by traditional rituals. Because Obeah does not fit into the Western definition of religion and secular institutions see it as “evil,” many anglophone

¹ Eugenia O’Neal, *Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2020); Brent Crosson, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), xi.

² Crosson, 2.

Caribbean nations continue to criminalize Obeah and its practitioners to this day.³

In 2020, two works were published examining Obeah in the Caribbean. Each took vastly different approaches in methodology. However, both explore how Obeah influences the social, cultural, and political environment of the Caribbean following British colonialism in the eighteenth century and how past representation continues to hold contemporary influence. In *Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination*, Eugenia O'Neal observes the portrayal of Obeah in eighteenth to twentieth-century British literature. Through an abundance of literary sources, O'Neal illustrates how writers' perceptions of the practice influenced ideologies of racial inferiority and justified slavery on the islands. While O'Neal's work focuses exclusively on the British interpretation of Obeah, Brent Crosson's *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* juxtaposes this perspective with a decade's worth of interviews with Caribbean Obeahmen and women, or as they refer to themselves, spiritual workers. Crosson's work is a rich ethnography that examines the criminalization of Obeah starting in the eighteenth century and how modern practitioners continue to endure police brutality and discrimination. More importantly, Crosson reflects on the anglophone definition of religion, challenges what constitutes legitimate religious practices, and examines how belief in spiritual power influences the modern understanding of ecclesiastical and secular law.

According to O'Neal, African magic embarked on a triangular exchange across the Atlantic. African slaves took their beliefs across the ocean, where they evolved on Caribbean plantations, and then journeyed once again across the ocean to Great Britain in the form of travel journals, media coverage, and plantation reports. These works "shaped racial perceptions of blacks in the wider British society that continue to resound [in the Caribbean] today" as Britain's writers, poets, and playwrights

³ Crosson, 3.

tapped into the misconceptions and fears surrounding British and Creole interpretations of Obeah.⁴ These misconceived analyses, in turn, fueled the myth of black inferiority and increased white colonizers' perceived "burden" to civilize the rest of humanity, thus justifying colonial hegemony and slavery.

Following the evolution of Obeah in British writings, O'Neal's text contains several accounts of how Obeah was depicted and interpreted by British and Creole audiences over the past three hundred years, well up to the 1950s. Initially viewed as a satanic threat against Christianity prior to the Enlightenment, Obeah later became an object of ridicule by the British and white Creoles to demonstrate the "credulousness" and "savagery" of black people in the eighteenth century. It later took on a more menacing meaning in plantation owners' minds as Obeah became linked to slave revolts and power struggles in the nineteenth century. British and Creole public, both pro-slavery planters and abolitionists alike, perceived Obeah as evil and used it as grounds for their political agendas. People of color were portrayed as either malevolent beings who could be controlled under slavery or made mildly better. It was believed that whites could slowly introduce these "'savages' and 'brutes' into civility."⁵ These two perspectives on Obeah remained prevalent among Western literature and media up until the mid-twentieth century, and as O'Neal and Crosson both illustrate, these perceptions continue to influence and propagate stereotypes and theories of racial inferiority today. As O'Neal notes, "writers employed Obeah to emphasize Otherness of blacks over and over again, creating an

⁴ O'Neal, 9. Creole refers to an ethnic group that originated in the colonial era of the Caribbean, which resulted in the mixing of European and African cultures and peoples. The term often denotes a person of European, African, or mixed descent that was born and naturalized in the Caribbean rather than from the "mother country," a process known as Creolization. Mulatto (often a derogatory term) refers to a person of mixed descent often African and European or African and native origin.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

enduring image of black people and of black West Indians that, even today, has not been completely eradicated.”⁶

O’Neal convincingly argues that Obeah experienced three different portrayals in British literature following the colonization of the Caribbean. First seen as a devil-worshipping religion, Christians saw the need to convert slaves who practiced African “black magic” to Christianity. Rooted in ideologies of arcane versus divine magic, Christian relics, such as holy water and imbued crosses, fit within the realm of godly divine magic or miracles. In contrast, other charms or fetishes outside of the Christian canon were deemed arcane witchcraft.⁷ Moreover, Christians associated blackness with evil and whiteness with purity and holiness, and thus, perpetuated the stereotype of Africans as credulous, malintent “black demons.”⁸ The evidence throughout the book suggests that “[a]gain and again, writers link the practice to the ‘dark traditions’ of Africa, ‘The Dark Continent,’ and to an uncanny, if not supernatural, knowledge of plants which echoed or evoked the old folktales of bogeymen and wild women” in Europe.⁹

A second portrayal came into fruition after British Parliament passed the Witchcraft Act in 1735. Starting in the eighteenth century, British civilians and colonials mocked slaves for their “savage” practices and used Obeah as another tier to justify slavery.¹⁰ O’Neal examines the works of Jacob Bryant (1715–1804), Edward Long (1734–1813), and other Enlightenment scholars, to write historiography on Obeah. Several eighteenth-century scholars and writers, many of whom never traveled to the Caribbean islands, romanticized Obeah and created a distorted

⁶ O’Neal, 313.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. Up until the twentieth century in Britain, a fetish referred to a trinket, amulet, or charm sold by charlatans and “buffoonery” priests who claimed the object was imbued with some incantation or spell.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

Westernized understanding of the practice. Obeah practitioners were depicted as old and disfigured men and women who often had darker skin with unkempt hair and teeth, grotesquely amplifying distinctive physical traits. O’Neal argues that these racist representations continued through fiction and non-fiction literature, plays, and later in films, perpetuating contemporary stereotypes. Similarly, Crosson also suggests that “notions that black persons are somehow ‘demonic’ or that African-identified religion is really diabolical witchcraft have also played a key role in justifying contemporary police shootings” in the Caribbean today.¹¹

Lastly, the third depiction of Obeah spread when it became associated with slave revolts. Jamaican legislation outlawed Obeah after the Tacky Rebellion in 1760, something both O’Neal and Crosson recognize in their works. O’Neal acknowledges that prior to the rebellion, “West Indian planters considered Obeah something of a joke.”¹² Obeahmen played a lead role in the Tacky Rebellion by providing slaves with lucky fetishes and anointing them with oils that made them believe they were invulnerable. Through these practices, they set the psychological mindset for slaves to revolt. According to O’Neal and Crosson, plantation owners began to see Obeah as a problem as white anxieties over slave rebellions continued to grow in correlation to burgeoning black populations on the islands. The 1760 Jamaica Act was the first legislation passed in the Caribbean to criminalize black people (not white people) from possessing Obeah fetishes or materials. Almost every other island in the West Indies followed in pursuit. Legislation in the twentieth century continued to reveal their fears of Obeah, as seen in the 1904 Obeah Act passed in the Virgin Islands. Those caught practicing Obeah were sentenced to a maximum of six months in prison, often with hard labor, while the

¹¹ O’Neal, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

sentencing for the actual Obeahmen or women who provided the fetishes could be up to twelve months.¹³

The latter half of O’Neal’s book is an extensive compilation of literary works illustrating how the British depicted Obeah from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. While the amount of evidence is appreciated and bolsters her argument substantially, the number of sources can be overwhelming, and sometimes the text lacks a thorough analysis of each source. Using what is arguably the most famous Obeah story, the tale of runaway slave Three Fingered Jack, O’Neal provides a comparative analysis of three literary works written by Dr. Benjamin Mosley (1742–1819), William Burdett (1851–1921), and William Earle (1787–1864) and two pro-slavery plays starring the runaway slave. Interestingly, all five tellings of the story depict Jack as a handsome slave, which differs from the typical portrayal of slaves and Obeahmen at the time. Nevertheless, all five works show Jack as a rebel who leads an uprising; sometimes he is the Obeahman, and other times he merely pursues the assistance of one. Moreover, there is a recurring theme in the pro-slavery versions of the tale that depicts male slaves as a threat to white women’s virtues throughout the story, reemphasizing white anxieties of interracial relationships. Overall, the retellings of Three Fingered Jack over time depict the colonizer’s general fears revolving around Obeah and slaves who might use the practice as a way to rebel against the system.

O’Neal later explores British depictions of African-born slaves versus Caribbean-born Creoles and mulattoes throughout literature. In the minds of plantation owners, creolized slaves born on the islands made better, and more importantly, more “faithful” slaves because those born within the slave system were depicted as more submissive and less threatening than African-born slaves. A prime example is William Hamley’s (1815–1893) work in which O’Neal quotes, “in comparing creole blacks with African blacks, Hamley notes that the former ‘possesses a slight, a very slight,

¹³ O’Neal, 138–139.

advantage in point of skill and intelligence.”¹⁴ Lastly, she concludes by observing late nineteenth and twentieth-century literature that applied gothic themes like vampirism to Obeah in novels and children’s literature. She looks at various novels, boys’ adventure papers, and penny dreadfuls. Cheaper, more accessible literature like this perpetuated stereotypes about black people amongst the masses. Moreover, O’Neal does not fail to address the insidiousness of including these depictions in children’s works noting that Obeah portrayed in boys’ adventure papers and penny dreadfuls reinforced “their [children’s] perception of their rightful roles in the world vis-a-vis other races.”¹⁵

Overall, these eighteenth to twentieth-century portrayals of Obeah were misleading, distorted, and misinterpreted for the British audience’s entertainment to justify their anxieties. For practitioners though, Obeah was a method of enacting justice for those not protected by the law. While the law protected those who fell within the bounds of citizenship, slaves were excluded from secular protection and enacted a justice system themselves by practicing Obeah. O’Neal notes that the “law and justice system were everything Obeah was not: they symbolized order, white authority and its power.”¹⁶ Crosson explores this concept of power even further in his work, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad*. While O’Neal suggests that British depictions of Obeah still influence racial tensions today, Crosson examines how contemporary secular and ecclesiastical law continues to oppress Obeah practitioners and the subaltern in the present-day Caribbean, specifically Trinidad. Crosson writes, “While the law is an authority charged with protection and justice-making in regnant models of liberal governance and the rule of law, state law continues to inflict grave harm on subaltern persons

¹⁴ O’Neal, 275.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

(while often failing to protect them from harm) in modern states.”¹⁷

Drawing from similar observations as O’Neal, Crosson suggests that “obeah is not really what many contemporary Caribbean people seem to think it is. Instead, obeah actually represents African-inspired practices of healing and protection, which were positively valued before their colonial denigration.”¹⁸ The foundation of Crosson’s work walks readers through the murder of a woman known as Arlena (d. 2011) and her two friends at the hands of police brutality during Trinidad’s state of emergency in 2011. The government declared the emergency due to the rise of murders over the past decade. Many Trinidadians attributed these murders possibly to Obeah and saw it as a chance for the island to be rid of “demons” and “spiritual malaise.”¹⁹ Over 108 days, more than seven thousand people were arrested, most of whom were black males residing in impoverished communities.

Yet, it is the death of Arlena that spurred this subaltern community to protest against police brutality in 2011. Driving home in a stranger’s borrowed car, Arlena and her two friends unknowingly drove into a police ambush where police were holding a stake-out for the owner of the car. Recognizing the car, the police shot repeatedly at the passengers not realizing they were not the intended target. Arlena survived the attack, but the police refused to call in medical assistance in hopes of covering their mistake. Arlena passed away right there, and few expected the police to be charged with murder. However, to the surprise of many, the improbable occurred when the police involved in her death were arrested and put on trial. Whispers circulated that it was the work of Obeah to bring justice to Arlena. Even more surprising was when the host of *Crimewatch*, a popular television show in

¹⁷ Crosson, 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51. Crosson refers to Obeah as “obeah” in the lower case throughout the text.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

Trinidad, made the controversial comment that Obeah was to credit for the arrests, sending the country into a frenzy.²⁰

Crosson's ethnography uses the death of Arlena as a case study for the rest of the text, which explores Obeah practitioners' views on their own practices, skills, and beliefs in comparison to common portrayals of Obeah. He does this by interviewing several Obeahmen and women over ten years while living in Trinidad. Interestingly, he admits in the introduction that when he began writing, he intended to prove Obeah is a religion. However, his viewpoint changed drastically after the interviews, where he then began to reevaluate the modern understanding of religion. Contemporary perceptions of religion dictate that religion must possess hierarchical organization, a set canon, specific rituals, and be part of a communal experience. Crosson attributes this understanding to Western hegemony, the anglophone definition of what constitutes religion, and the interjection of imperialist ideologies into colonies.

When such imperialist ideologies are integrated so deeply into a culture, they become invisible and are practiced unconsciously. Working within subaltern studies, Crosson defines this as "Colonial False Consciousness" early in the book.²¹ Unfortunately, he rarely refers to the thought-provoking term in later chapters. Because Obeah falls outside of the progressivist view and cannot "be placed on one side of a racialized and gender divide of modernity and tradition," Obeah has been criminalized, unlike other practices that serve as "the moral foundation for the rule of law and citizenship."²² As Crosson clearly states, "racism goes a long way to explain which assumptions of supernatural power are superstitions and which are patriotic or legally recognized."²³ Through the inclusion and exclusion of certain superstitions viewed as legitimate or not by secular power, stigmas

²⁰ Crosson, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² *Ibid.*, 47, 235.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

of racial inferiority and underdevelopment continue to affect regions influenced by Anglo-colonialist ideologies, specifically affecting subaltern communities.

Moreover, because the anglophone definition of religion is acknowledged everywhere, Obeah practitioners themselves do not see any correlation between Obeah and religion and instead consider Obeah a scientific experiment. Crosson used Arlena's unorthodox burial ceremony and the experiments performed during her wake to explain this concept. Instead of burying her coffin horizontally faceup, Bishop Dawes decided to place the coffin face down in a slightly vertical direction. In an interview with Bishop Dawes, Crosson states that when "Dawes responded that his work was 'not a tradition' but an 'experiment with power' or 'science,' he planted a seed of 'epistemic disconcertment' in me that would root and ramify over my following years of field research in Trinidad."²⁴ While in the traditional, anglophone sense of religion her burial would be viewed as heresy, Bishop Dawes saw it as a justice-making experiment to observe if this unique burial would avenge, or in a scientific view, react to Arlena's death. He hoped to bring justice to Arlena believing that the systemic discrimination existing in secular and ecclesiastical laws would not avenge her untimely death.

Crosson's book is divided into three sections. Part one focuses on how Obeah practitioners responded to the police shooting that resulted in the death of Arlena. By building a new interpretation of Obeah that better reflects spiritual workers' beliefs of the practice, the book sets the groundwork for observing the relationship between religion, violence, and law. According to Crosson, "The colonial persecution of obeah and the 2011 state of emergency's professed exorcism of lower-class black 'thugs' and 'demons' are but two examples of the violence authorized by the moral and racial limits of religion."²⁵ He delves further into the justice-making practices that Obeah entails and seeks to explain

²⁴ Crosson, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

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the experimental and ethical thinking that challenges modern concepts of religion and law. Part two continues to explore the limits of religion and how religion systemically undermines the subaltern. Crosson argues that blood sacrifices define the moral constraints of modern religion, noting that beliefs classified as religion (i.e., Hindu, Islam, Christian) no longer acknowledge animal blood sacrifices as part of their doctrine. Additionally, he further explores the individuality behind each Obeah practitioner. Unlike secular identified religions, Obeah is rooted in a crucible of religions, cultures, and ethnic identities at the spiritual worker's discretion to benefit their practice. Crosson concludes in part three by looking at how Obeah practitioners' description of Obeah as a high science experiment challenges the rationality of what constitutes religion and modernity.

While different in methodology and approach, these two books work together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Obeah in the context of the power and oppression of the subaltern. From eighteenth-century slavery to modern-day police brutality, Caribbean peoples have sought out the problem-solving capabilities of Obeah to bring justice to a world that often ignores them. Both easily accessible reads, these books are both welcoming and timely contributions as they push our understanding of the power struggles and racial tensions that affect Caribbean communities, especially during the wake of the Obeah decriminalization disputes.

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Author Bio

Brittany Mondragon is a graduate student at California State University San Bernardino, earning a Master of Arts degree in History. Backed with a master's degree in Geographic Information Systems from the University of Redlands, Brittany concentrates on issues revolving around environmental history, empire, and colonialism, and commodity and trade histories. She has a particular passion for Trans-Atlantic and Caribbean history in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. Upon graduation, she plans to teach at the community college level and begin pursuing a doctoral degree in history. She currently works at Mt. San Jacinto Community College under the Professional Development department. Apart from scholarly pursuits, Brittany enjoys devoting her extra time to hiking, painting artwork, and gardening. She would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Murray and the editors on her pieces for all their support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the editing process.

