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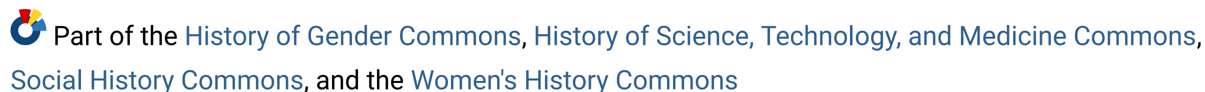

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FLORA'S FOURTH CHILD

RACE, GENDER, AND BOTANY IN THE COLONIAL BRITISH CARIBBEAN

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

History

---

by

Brittany Linnea Mondragon

May 2022

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Approved by:

Dr. Tiffany Jones, Committee Chair, History

Dr. Jeremy Murray, Committee Member, History

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ABSTRACT

In 1824, an enslaved woman named Catalina (alias Susannah Mathison) induced an abortion by drinking an herbal mixture on the Castle Wemyss Estate in Jamaica. Consequently, the estate's attorney denounced her as an African witchcraft practitioner. Many enslaved women faced similar convictions for their botanical knowledge as British colonists misinterpreted Obeah for witchcraft or superstition. This thesis sheds light on these women's experiences and examines how the British Empire imposed imperial rule over enslaved women by reflecting on the intersectionality of race, gender, and botany. Focusing on the Greater Caribbean area and centering primarily around Jamaica, this research explores the appropriation and management of enslaved women and their botanical knowledge during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Drawing from ecofeminist framework, it begins by considering the personification and sexualization of nature in scientific journals, literature, and artwork during the rise of modern science. These beliefs and the association of nature and women were carried over the Atlantic, which furthered Western society's depiction of Black women as sinful, inferior, and chaotic. Despite British male botanists and physicians relying on enslaved women's botanical expertise, enslaved women's ethnobotanical medical practices were often ignored, viewed as inferior, or even considered witchcraft. As this thesis shows, Western societies association between women, nature, and witchcraft led to the misrepresentation of

alternative healing practices like Obeah and justified racial hierarchies and slavery in the minds of British colonists.

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In addition, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my family and friends for all their love and unwavering encouragement these past years. My mother, father, and brothers and their wives have continually encouraged me to follow my dreams inside and outside academia, and they are always there to listen. In addition, I could not have completed this thesis without the support of my closest friends, who provided happy distractions and reminded me that there is more to me than solely my research and education. Their ability to make me laugh and let me be myself outside a life of research means more to me than they will ever know (a special thanks to Ian and Karla!).

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DEDICATION

To my friends and family who give reason to my accomplishments.

They are loved.

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INTRODUCTION

"One day I met an old woman selling,
And I wanted something to eat…
I thought she had bananas, orange or pear,
But was nothing that I need.
For when I asked the old woman what she was selling,
She said she was selling weed...

Sweet Broom, Sweet Sage, and Lemon Grass,
I hear them good for making tea.
Oh well, I hear Zèb Grass and Wild Daisy
is good to cool the body."

Billy Rogers
Lyrics to "West Indian Weed Woman" (1934)

In May 1824, an enslaved 35-year-old woman, Catalina, alias Susannah Mathison, on the Castle Wemyss Estates in St. James parish in Jamaica, drank a self-made herbal concoction that successfully induced an abortion. The correspondence between Simon Halliday, the overseer of the Castle Wemyss Estates owned by Gilbert Mathison, and the attorney, Mr. Phillips, documents the encounter. Both letters reveal Catalina's sentencing to a month of solitary confinement in the "Dungeon" for her "wicked action" of aborting her child, only to survive on enough bread and water to keep her alive.[1] Moreover, the attorney further accuses her of performing African witchcraft for procuring the herbal mixture, coming from a family of known Obeah practitioners.[2]

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[1] Castle Wemyss Estate Papers (CWEP) ICS 101/3/2/8 and ICS 101 2/1/27. Jisc Archive Hub. https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/256a2b8a-b68f-3bbf-933f-b17e52304894
[2] CWEP ICS 101/3/2/8.

Obeah is commonly known in the Anglophone definition as a form of witchcraft or sorcery brought from Africa and practiced in the Caribbean, Central America, South America, and parts of North America. Only recently have scholars attempted to decolonize the definition of Obeah to instead see it as a practice of spiritual healing and justice-making.[3] Catalina's conviction as an Obeah practitioner rather than solely a woman whose botanical knowledge led to a successful abortion illustrates the social tensions and racial hierarchies surrounding enslaved women's reproduction and British colonists' anxieties over enslaved women's autonomy of their own bodies. This association of botanical knowledge with witchcraft dates to early Anglophone superstition and denotes the fear of women's knowledge of the plant kingdom that undermined patriarchal authority.

By the late eighteenth century, Western society divided botany into two fields of study - masculine scientific botany and feminine amusement botany. Initially viewed as a woman's domain with female healers, botany became male-dominated and excluded more and more women from the practice. Botany became regarded as a science suitable for "experts" and "specialists" who aided in the pursuit of biomedicine and soon became associated as a field only appropriate for White men at the end of the eighteenth century. Earlier that same century, British women healers became protected from witchcraft accusations

[3] See J. Brent Crosson, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

with the Witchcraft Act of 1735, which made the conviction of witchcraft obsolete in court. Though herbal medicine was no longer tried for witchcraft, British women's access to learning medicinal and botanical knowledge also became more restrictive as social anxieties increased over women's societal roles. As a result, White women who would have learned biomedicine and midwifery from previous practitioners, along with the rest of the female population in general, gradually became more reliant on male medical practitioners to prescribe medicine and assist with birthing.[4]

Despite the rise of scientific botany, however, flora continued to be associated with traits deemed feminine and became popularly used as gendered literary devices during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By hyper-sexualizing plants, flowers became analogies for teaching British women about their place, while also fueling social anxieties about the degeneration of civilization. Women who once participated in the scientific process of researching biomedicine were now sidelined and expected to instead participate in "female botany" for amusement, never reaching further than the title of an amateur botanist.[5] The discussion of female botany is not new amongst historians of science or literature as the subject provides an insightful view of women's prescribed roles in Western patriarchal society. Some noteworthy studies on the topic include *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and*

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[4] Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 39.
[5] Sam George, *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing 1760 - 1830: from Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 5.

Botany in England, 1760 to 1860 (1999) by historian Ann B. Shteir and its similar successor *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing, 1760–1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (2007) by historian Sam George.[6] Both are fascinating studies that explore the feminized discourse of botany, British botanical literature, and women's engagement in a field becoming ever more polarized in eighteenth-century Britain. While more apparent in George's work, both texts also discuss nationality and sexuality debates within the framework of botany and the natural world.

The intersection between nature and gender is further complicated when race is added to the discussion. Both Shtier's and George's texts briefly discuss how British flora became associated with virtues considered "proper" while “luxuriant” exotic flora faced demonization.[7] In the British imagination, non-European women could still be drawn to “harlotry” and were often depicted as seductresses and demonized in art and literature.[8] This also extended to literary comparisons of "exotic" women and flora, as non-European flowers adopted “othering” traits.[9] Neither text, however, fully explores how British literature portrayed non-European women in association with botany. There is also an absence in their studies of how non-European women participated in curating botanical knowledge. In fact, there seems to be little scholarly research

[6] Shteir, 200.
[7] Ibid, 30-35.
[8] George, 95.
[9] Building off the term “othering” first proposed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

examining how Britain connected and portrayed non-White women and non-native British flora to promote an imperialistic agenda that controlled both nature and women, even though most women outside of the Western-centric sociopolitical structure, including enslaved African and Amerindian women, continued to be valued for their medicinal knowledge in their own societies.

Though several British male botanists traveled to the Caribbean in search of new biomedicine, they often referred to enslaved and Indigenous peoples' botanical knowledge to make up for their lack of understanding of new plants and diseases. Several recent publications examine Africans' and Amerindians' contributions to medicine and cultivation in the Atlantic World such as historical geographer Judith Carney's and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff's work *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World (*2011) and *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* by historian Londa Schiebinger (2017).[10] Though different in content, both texts recognize the botanical contributions of enslaved Africans forced to the Americas and Caribbean by the transatlantic slave trade. Carney's and Rosomoff's work inverts conventional attention on the traditional transatlantic network by showing how enslaved Africans and their provision garden plots richly contributed to the foodways between the Atlantic. In addition to cultivating African crops, such as yams, okra, watermelon, and plantains, enslaved Africans also

[10] Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World (*Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017).

relied on various medicinal herbs and plants from the Americans to help with common ailments.[11] Similarly, Schiebinger examines the colonial medical complex that took place between Africa, the Americas, and Europe in the eighteenth century. While some bioprospecting botanists and physicists examined some facets of African medicine to treat what became known as "tropical disease," other aspects of African medicines were dismissed and ridiculed.[12] Schiebinger explores how European colonists' misunderstanding of spiritual aspects of African healing, such as Obeah and vodou, highlighted social anxieties and violence in the colonial Caribbean. Overall, both works add to the scant amount of literature acknowledging enslaved Africans as botanical agents who were both valued and scrutinized for their plant knowledge.

While the body of research about botany in the eighteenth century and the African transatlantic trade nexus are robust and continue to increase, there appears to be a lack of inquiry about the connection between women of color and the natural world. This thesis is an attempt to correct this silence in the literature and aims to add to the body of knowledge on the social history of science by examining the appropriation and management of the enslaved Black female body in relation to botany. It will add to the discourse of transatlantic history by examining the intersection of race, gender, and sex in relation of botany and

[11] Carney and Rosomoff, 90.
[12] Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves*, 4-5. The term "tropical disease" arose in the eighteenth century and encompassed new illnesses that European physicians were unfamiliar with and unsure how to treat.

empire in British literature and medical travel journals. By doing so, it challenges the concept of objective science by focusing on the development of biomedicines in the Caribbean during the Enlightenment starting the eighteenth century. It also examines enslaved African women's contribution to the Columbian Exchange in terms of medical knowledge.

First, this thesis examines how the Black female body was personified in African and Caribbean plants in art, literature, and scientific journals and infused with negatively associated traits such as vivaciousness, rebelliousness, and bad motherhood in contrast to European flora that often took on modest, innocent, and virtuous traits. These stereotypes stem from the Western historical association between women and nature that perceived both women and the natural world as chaotic and needing to be tamed in order to be prosperous. Secondly, it reflects on Afro-Caribbean enslaved women's contribution to biomedicine, and recognizes that despite their practices being recorded in some physicians' and naturalists' texts, there remained a social stigma that connected them to witchcraft, poisoning, or bad-mothers. As with the case of Catalina mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, the persecution of enslaved women as Obeah practitioners, which in the colonial imagination, was the equivalent of witchcraft, represents the relationship between male colonists and enslaved females. While the Witchcraft Law of 1735 on the surface suggests that Britain no longer believed in the existence of witchcraft objectively, the fact that women of color in the Caribbean could still be tried for practicing Obeah for their

botanical knowledge illustrates the power imbalance that occurred between colonists and the enslaved based on perceived race and gender hierarchies.[13]

Colonizing the Caribbean Landscape

To fully understand the complexities of the colonial views of botany, we first must understand the work that has already been done on the depictions of the Caribbean landscape as either a lost paradise or as a dangerous unknown in the British imagination. These views fueled aspirations and anxieties to cultivate and establish dominance over the land. As some historians have noted, British colonists drew from the Western perceptions of women and nature being intertwined, emphasizing a need to "tame" both in a patriarchal society. Combining social history and the history of science, *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany and the Representations of Nature* (1996), edited by David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, is a cross-disciplinary work exploring the colonization of the New World. The collection of essays analyzes the relationships between nature, science, politics, economics, and culture across the wide reach of the British Empire in the eighteenth century. Working in tandem, the contributors contend the process of discovery centered around the problem of representation. European scientists and travelers, rather than creating passive botanical

[13] Several women have been convicted of witchcraft well up to the mid-twentieth century for this practice. In fact, Obeah is still illegal in Jamaica since its outlawing in 1760. Only in the last decade or so have scholars begun to decolonize the term and study its impact on the subaltern community.

collections and objective descriptions of the flora and landscape, added to the expansion of the British and other European empires. Some essays explore the politics and economics behind nature and discovery, such as the voyages of James Cook and Joseph Banks as they located natural resources to allocate back to Europe. Others examine how the science of botany affected European society, such as Janet Browne's essay on the Linnaeus taxonomy for plants, also known as Linnaeus' Sexual System. Linnaeus' metaphors for plant propagation, correlating plant sexuality with human reproduction, suggests the association of botany as a scientific field, as well as a culturally constructed one based on gender differences.[14]

Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan’s edited work, *Colonial Botany* (2005), elaborates on the idea of the power dynamics involved in the botanical sciences by regarding the colonization of the Caribbean and the slave trade and botanical science through a global perspective. Composed of a collection of essays, the collection adds to the literature on the relationship between the Caribbean, nature, and empire. The work responses to Roy MacLeod's callout for scholars to examine the similarities and differences in colonial science among imperial empires in his work, *Nature and Empire,* published in 2000.[15] Reaching around the globe from India, Asia, and the Americas, the essays in *Colonial Botany* explore how the taxonomy, cultivation, and the study of non-European

[14] David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[15] Londa L. Schiebinger, and Claudia Swan, *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 15.

plants and flora simultaneously resulted in and continuously shaped European scientific exploration, global commerce, and imperial conquest. The work challenges the traditional narrative of botanical history, which characterizes "its rise as coincident with and dependent on the development of taxonomy."[16]

However, to sequester scientific botany and examine flora from a strictly objective perspective is, as the editors note, "to overlook the dynamic relationship among plants, people, states, and economies in this period."[17] Instead, this work provides new insights into how the categorization of plants provided the nexus of imperial politics, global commerce, and modern science. Of particular interest are the contributions of Londa Schiebinger and Judith Carney as they pertain to the colonization of the Caribbean and the botanical exchange that took place in the Atlantic. As the title suggests, Schiebinger's "Prospecting for Drugs: European Naturalists in the West Indies," discusses European's naturalists' and physicians' quest to discover "green gold" such as biomedicines or cash crops in the eighteenth century. In doing so, she discusses the manipulation of Indigenous and enslaved African's ethnomedical botanical knowledge while searching for "green gold" by physicians.[18] On the other hand, Carney's "Out of Africa - Colonial Rice History in the Black Atlantic'' examines the African plant diaspora and the knowledge that traveled along the transatlantic complex by narrowing in

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[16] Ibid., 3.
[17] Ibid., 3.
[18] Londa L. Schiebinger, "Prospecting for Drugs: European Naturalists in the West Indies," in *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa L. Schiebinger, and Claudia Swan. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 119.

on rice cultivation.[19] Without the cultivation knowledge of enslaved Africans, she argues rice would not have become the lucrative staple it was in the Americas.

Published the same year as *Nature and Empire*, Richard Drayton's book, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (2000), further explores British imperial expansion and science. According to Drayton, science became a valuable instrument to colonial expansion as it explored and exploited exotic environments and justified imperial agendas. Emphasis is on the role of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in Britain, which botanist and explorer Joseph Banks founded in 1840 to house and cultivate many non-British native plants. However, before delving into the establishment of the Kew, Drayton's narrative begins by reflecting on Western and Christian biblical and classical views of the garden as a Lost Eden or Paradise. Only through recovering the "lost'' landscape through agriculture could humanity regain order and perfection.[20] Overall, the book illustrates how botany and agriculture were part of the push for world hegemony and the professionalization of science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than being an objective science, the categorization and cultivation of flora represented Anglophone ideals of taming nature.

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[19] Judith A. Carney, "Out of Africa - Colonial Rice History in the Black Atlantic," in *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa L. Schiebinger, and Claudia Swan. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[20] Richard Harry Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3-4.

Jefferson Dillman's *Colonizing Paradise: Landscape and Empire in the British West Indies* (2015) further discusses the spectrum of British perceptions and depictions of the Caribbean landscape from the beginning of Christopher Columbus up to the start of the nineteenth century. Across three centuries, British sentiments over the Caribbean shifted from Edenic analogies and satanical landscapes to the belief that nature's chaos required cultivation and redemption through the classification of flora to the development of tourism of the tropics. However, all these various and sometimes paradoxical portrayals had one aspect in common, they all maintained Britain's empire-building vision. Dillman begins the text in a broader scope beyond the confines of British imperialism, arguing that the Spanish portrayal of the New World landscape influenced British colonists' depictions of the Caribbean. Starting with Christopher Columbus' naming of natural features such as Boca de la Sierpe (Mouth of the Serpent) and Boca del Dragon (Mouth of the Dragon), the Caribbean took on dark undertones that alluded to Satan and the demonic to describe the dangers of the landscape.[21] Britain also utilized these pre-constructed depictions of the Caribbean to its advantage. According to Dillman, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, "English visitors saw the Spanish Model of the spiritual battle as an effective way to recast colonial difficulties in light of the Christian duty to engage and defeat evil, and to bring civilization and order to the barbaric land."[22]

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[21]Jefferson Dillman, *Colonizing Paradise: Landscape and Empire in the British West Indies* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015),11.
[22] Ibid., 54.

Conforming to the Edenic and satanic portrayals established over the centuries, Britain conceived the Caribbean as a backward landscape in need of correction but also as an investment for extracting resources.

In addition to examining the construction of the Caribbean as a "paradise lost," Dillman also explores how British literature and art portrayed slavery as pastoral bliss with "cheerful husbandmen" tending an Edenic scene.[23] This fallacy stood in stark contrast to the backbreaking work and violence inflicted among enslaved Africans and the portrayal of the Caribbean as an ominous place. Dillman further discussed this concept, stating:

> These landscapes emphasized the visual excellence of agricultural order and efficiency, and presented the slaves as naturally occurring elements of the environment. The picturesque West Indian landscape with its focus on the natural beauty and splendor of the islands worked in tandem with the pastoral to, ideally, mitigate any reservations one might have about the Caribbean as the site of virulent pathogens and a vicious slave system.[24]

As Dillman contends, the Caribbean was portrayed as either a “hell” or a “lost paradise” that needed saving, rhetoric used by both Spain and Britain to justify colonization.[25] The only way to save the land was to restore “agricultural order,” optimize land productivity, and categorize “undiscovered” plants. From naming and ordering plants using the Linnaeus taxonomy to constructing botanical gardens, Britain aimed at taming and improving the landscape illustrates a direct

[23] Ibid., 171.
[24] Ibid., 6.
[25] Ibid., 11.

correlation between the collection of botanical data and the expansion of the British empire.

Adding to the work of Dillman and Drayton, Carolyn Merchant's classic work, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (2003), argues that the biblical creation story and the Garden of Eden molded Western thinking about nature. Though much of the work focuses on the United States depiction of nature as female, her main argument encompasses a broader theme of Western views of the natural world, starting with Greek philosophy, that applies to the New World in general. Returning to the idea that Britain identified the Caribbean as a lost Eden, Merchant's argument that nature represents Eve is particularly relevant. She notes the commonality of seeing nature referred to as a woman in the nineteenth century as either a "virgin, vixen, or mother," which also shows in earlier eighteenth-century literature.[26] According to Merchant, "The romantics found that nature could be schizophrenic – without notice 'she' might become wild, savage, and vindictive. Here nature is akin to fallen Eve - dark, unknown, potentially savage, and chaotic."[27]

The fabricated correlation between women as nature, and nature as fallen Eve, becomes increasingly complex in relation to African and Amerindian women. In agreement with several contemporary historians, Merchant notes that enslaved Africans and Amerindians played critical roles in what she calls the

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[26] Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture,* 2nd ed. (Boca Raton: Routledge, 2013), 116.
[27] Ibid., 117.

"Recovery Narrative."[28] Enslaved Blacks, in particular, were considered essential in the restoration of Eden, a point that Dillman also discusses when discussing enslaved men and women being incorporated in Edenic landscape paintings. However, as Merchant notes, the British and Anglo-Americans did not view Amerindians and Black people equally. While both were considered inferior, "Europeans associated blackness with witchcraft, Satan, beasts, and putrid, decaying matter, and these beliefs carried over to African people."[29]

The connection between botany and empire is one avenue many scholars have analyzed to understand the hegemony of the British Empire. The association between landscape and empire took theological undertones rooted in Christian beliefs that called for the redemption and taming of the Caribbean landscape. Nature often depicted as the fallen Eve fit well into the agenda since it portrayed both women and nature as chaotic and unruly. As part of this thesis aims to show, the association of blackness with evil also transcended to the plant kingdom as many African and Caribbean plants personified Black female bodies or typified were with Obeah practices.

The Personification and Sexualization of Flora

In the late eighteenth century, botany as a science shifted to a field only for experts while literary botany personified and sexualized flowers in British

[28] Ibid., 125.
[29] Ibid., 133.

literature at the turn of the century. Prior to the Enlightenment, women's plant knowledge provided justification for accusations of witchcraft and the occult despite their early contributions to Western medical advancements. The main theme was knowledge, as it placed women within the realm of scholarship and scientific discovery, not merely enjoying the visual pleasantries of flowers or their association with the natural world. Originally regarded as a woman's domain, botany became male-dominated and barred more and more women from the practice by the end of the eighteenth century. The transition of botany becoming a science and simultaneous the exclusion of women from the field has received ample historical scholarship.

Carolyn Merchant is one of the earlier scholars to discuss the decline of women’s participation in scientific botany in her work *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980). Now considered a classic work in the history of science and environmental history, the book contains a strong ecofeminist perspective that examines women's roles during the scientific revolution and the social repression of women in science throughout the centuries. Londa Schiebinger’s, a notable historian of science within transatlantic and gender studies, appraisal of Merchant's work argues that current historians "date the origins of modern feminist science studies... from the publication of Carolyn Merchant's The Death of Nature" because of the text's wide breadth of

women in relation to Western scientific thought.[30] Though the book explores the sciences in general and not solely botany, her work opens discussion into women's displacement in science and their access to scientific knowledge during the early eighteenth century.

Broad in scope, and in many ways similar to her later work, *Reinventing Eden* (2013), Merchant discusses the association between flora and femininity beginning in Greek mythology to provide the framework for the rest of the text. She examines the role of the environment in Western capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by reflecting on commercial farming practices and medicine. Drawing from ecofeminist theory, she provides several cases illustrating the injustices inflicted on both Mother Earth and women themselves, from the execution of those convicted of witchcraft to their dismissal as medical practitioners and midwives during the eighteenth century. Overall, she argues that women and nature are conflictingly depicted as cruel, chaotic, and witchlike while also being bountiful, nurturing, and a good mother.[31] In a paternalistic society, the goal toward a progressive future included mastery over both nature and women. *Ecofeminism and the Scared* examines the interconnectivity between women, ecology, and world religions. This collection of essays is noteworthy as Adam defines the book as "the first anthology devoted entirely to

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[30] Londa L. Schiebinger, "Retrospective Review: *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* by Carolyn Merchant." *SIGNS on Gender and Science* 28, no. 3, (2003): 899.
[31] Merchant, *Reinventing Eden,* 20.

the issue of ecofeminism and spirituality."[32] Delores S. Williams, an Afrocentric ecofeminist, contributed to the anthology with "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies" by discussing the relationship between enslaved women and nature and their oppression and degradation in a colonial and postcolonial context. Drawing from Christian theological beliefs, Williams argues that both colonial land and Black women were at the mercy of dominating imperialistic actions due to eighteenth-century modern thought about nature, femininity, and race.[33]

Schiebinger builds on Merchant’s study in her work *Nature's Body: Gender and the Making of Modern Science* (1994). Working in a social history of science perspective much like Merchant, Schiebinger tracks the eighteenth-century botanists' use of the Linnaeus Sexual System taxonomy as an analogy for the social anxiety of female morality and gender roles. Examining how botanists personified plants to polyamorous marriages, incest, and “wanton” women, *Nature's Body* exposes assumptions regarding gender, sex, race, and nature during the rise of modern science like Merchant's work.[34] Though both historians note race as another factor of appropriation, Schiebinger and Merchant predominantly examine European women's suppression from botanical studies and their association with flowers and plant reproduction. However, the narrative

[32] Carol J. Adams, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 4.
[33] Delores S. Williams, "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred,* ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 35.
[34] Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 1.

of women's connection with nature and nature with sexuality is further complicated when intersected with race.

In *Cultivation Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760 to 1860 (1999)*, Ann B. Shteir further touches upon the change from women healers to masculine science revolving around plant medicine during the Enlightenment. According to Shteir a transition took place in the eighteenth century where "though lower-class women worked as community simpers in some areas... many women in the gentrifying middle ranks lost or left behind their familiarity with traditional healing practices and relied more on male physicians than on female skills."[35] The word "simples" also denotes the social stigma revolving around women's medical knowledge. As the work implies, herbal treatments were viewed as the most basic of treatments. In contrast, "official" medicine drew on scientific research, often composed of compound materials, and prescribed by a male physician, while women and Indigenous peoples practiced herbal and simple folk medicine.

As Shteir acknowledges, women's writing on botany transitioned from being scientific to a more "familiar format" based on entertainment and moral etiquette.[36] She states, "The broad history of women and science writing in nineteenth-century England records the separation and exclusion of women and the 'feminine' from science and science writing as women were pushed to the

[35] Shteir, 39.
[36] Ibid., 81.

margins of an increasing masculinized science culture."[37] By the nineteenth century, scientific botany and literary botany emerged as two polarized discourses, one being the masculine field of natural law and the other being an amusement rooted in the language of flowers.[38] As a result, women who previously fought their way into the sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found the subsequent generations of women excluded from research. Instead, European women's botanical writing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became less intellectual and more for leisurely amusement.

Sam George's *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing 1760 - 1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (2007) followed Shteir's original work and contained similar conclusions about the transition of women's botanical writing. However, George also provides new insight on the debates surrounding what was "proper for a female pen" and the construction of feminizing botany.[39] The book further explores the transition of women's writing from scientific research to pleasure writing, the complex association between British women and the field of botany, and the shift in social consciousness at the start of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Unlike Schiebinger and Merchant, who argue that women's participation in the sciences decreased after the Scientific Revolution, George asserts that women's participation in scientific botany flourished during

[37] Ibid., 103.
[38] Ibid., 157-158.
[39] George, 8.

the Enlightenment and did not dwindle until the nineteenth century during the Victorian Era:

> The outcome was an unfortunate regression to a sanitized, unscientific and politically conservative feminine botany that, in the early nineteenth century, came to replace the enlightened women's botany that – despite some ambivalence – had had a genuinely emancipatory character. I argue that the most progressive botanical texts by and for women were produced during the Linnaean years in England.[40]

By examining various texts written by female botanists and male botanists that wrote for ladies' consumption, George explores "how botany becomes a discourse of female sexuality in eighteenth-century literature" and investigates "the moral backlash against female botanists and the problems of representation facing literary women who practiced the modern, sexual system of botany."[41]

This moral backlash reached its climax at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and George suggests that women's appearance in botany shifted away from masculine science to feminine ornamental observation. The Linnaean Sexual System for classifying plants evoked social concerns around female morality and constituted as suitable education for women; thus, leading some male botanists to de-sexualize plant classification. However, at the same time, writers began to draw analogies between nature, women, and sexual promiscuousness, which simultaneously linked femininity to flowers. De-sexualizing terminology in botanical textbooks published in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century highlights this shift as "conventional morality

[40] Ibid.,15.
[41] Ibid., 2.

dictated that women should not become too familiar with the terminology of the Sexual System and by the early nineteenth century there was a movement to ensure that no botanical textbook would bring 'the blush of injured modesty to the innocent fair.'"[42] Similar to Shteir's work, George also looks at the duality between Withering's and Erasmus Darwin's writing. Juxtaposing Withering's scientific approach, Darwin hyper-sexualized botany and the association of women with flora. According to George, "Withering had been inspired by analogies of military rank but Darwin took the botanical/social analogy in a new direction, shifting away from order and discipline towards promiscuity and sexual anarchy," which is apparent in Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, a work analyzed in this thesis.[43]

Shteir's and George's work provide evidence that most women participated in botany for recreation, with few becoming novice botanists. Even fewer women received recognition as professional botanists. However, for those who managed to become professional botanists, women who professionally studied botany acted both against and for their nation's nationalistic agenda. Women who pursued botanical scientific studies outside those for mere pleasantry defied the paternalistic restrictions placed on the "fairer sex" in an attempt to maintain their modesty and limit a woman's position in society. While infrequent in European history, some women during this time traveled abroad to

[42] Ibid., 11.
[43] Ibid., 90.

study botany; for those who did travel, many accompanied their husbands on journeys, and even fewer traveled abroad for their own educational pursuits. Regardless of their professional level, however, many female botanists also acted as "agents of empire" by categorizing plants, exploiting, or dismissing Indigenous plant knowledge, and privileging certain plant species over others.[44]

Despite these preeminent studies of the history of botanical sciences, the history of women in science in the Caribbean has only recently emerged in historical discourse as the previous focus was often on male naturalists and physicians. The brief article "On the Periphery: Women, Science and Caribbean Natural History" (2013) by Aleric Josephs exposes the gap in information historians have about women naturalists who traveled to the Caribbean and their contribution to science. Moving outside published materials, Joseph pieces together women's letters, travel journals, and drawings to recover the neglected efforts of those who lived and traveled to the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Joseph specifically used the works of Maria Riddle, Lydia Byam, Amerila Murray, and Emelia Russell Gurney to show how their observations were "beyond mere fascination with the new and exotic."[45] By no

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[44] David Mackay, "Agents of Empire: The Banksian Collectors and Evaluation of New Lands," in *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature*, ed. David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38. The term "agents of empire" is also used in *Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2016) by editors Yota Batsaki, Sarah Burke Cahalan, and Anatole Tchikine. However, there is a subtle difference in their terminology. It expands on the original term used to define British imperialism to also include other global empires over the eighteenth century.

[45] Aleric Josephs, "On the Periphery: Women, Science and Caribbean Natural History," *International Journal of Education and Research* 1, no. 5, (2013): 2. https://www.ijern.com/images/May-2013/36.pdf

means of discrediting the noteworthy work of these women, Joseph's work, along with most discussions on rise of scientific botany, again focuses on the achievements of European female botanists and their research being sent to the periphery, implicitly overlooking women of color's contribution to botany and biomedicine.

The sexualization and personification between women and flora also extended to non-British flora and non-European women, including Black women. Intersectionality between the two is seen in Miranda Mollendorf's riveting "Allegories of Alterity: Flora's Children as the Four Continents" in the anthology *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century*. *The Botany of Empire* contributes "to the ongoing investigation of the intersections between natural history and geopolitics" by examining how the "long eighteenth century" of experienced a burgeoning of exploration and taxonomy in botanical specimen and horticulture.[46] Expanding on the concept of "agents of empire," rather than focusing on Western culture and nations with colonial territory, this book includes other imperial powers that did not have overseas colonies, including the Russian empire, the Ottoman empire, and the Quing dynasty, as well as, other political powers such as South Africa, New Zealand, and Yemen.[47] Attempting "to sketch an inclusive and nuanced picture while avoiding predominantly Anglocentric

[46] Yota Batsaki, Sarah Burke Cahalan, and Anatole Tchikine, Introduction in *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century,* ed. Yota Batsaki, Sarah Burke Cahalan, and Anatole Tchikine. (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 1-2.
[47] Ibid., 4.

interpretations of the meanings of botany," the essays present a more global understanding of natural history and empire during the period of study.[48]

Mollendorf's "Allegories of Alterity" surveys Robert John Thornton's (1768-1837) botanical book, *The Temple of Flora* (1797–1812), which he describes as being about the "choicest flowers of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America."[49] Thornton compares thirty-one plant specimens in the book, twenty-three being non-European and the remaining being of European descent. Mollendorf explores how Thornton's *The Temple of Flora* allegories connects plants, women, and race by utilizing the traditional classification of The Four Continents. Assigning racial and cultural characteristics to the flora of the region instilled a hierarchical pyramid that privileged Europe and identified itself as the hegemonic "locus of culture and power" in the world.[50] Mollendorf argues that "what Thornton did was to combine an old system of categorization based on the Four Continents with Linnaeus's new system of sexual classification."[51] In doing so, Mollendorf illustrates how *The Temple of Flora* humanized plants and flowers by arranging the female allegorical figures in a hierarchical order from "savagery" to "civility," starting with Africa, followed by the Americas, then Asia, and Europe.[52]

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[48] Ibid., 4.
[49] Miranda Mollendorf, "Allegories of Alterity: Flora's Children as the Fourth Continent," in *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century,* ed. Batsaki, Yota, Sarah Burke Cahalan, and Anatole Tchikine. (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 283.
[50] Batsaki, Cahalan, and Tchikine,18-19.
[51] Mollendorf, 287.
[52] Ibid., 285.

The depiction of African female bodies and the landscape illustrates the binary beliefs regarding Black and White female bodies. The European woman represented the pinnacle of beauty both in body and behavior, while the African woman represented everything immoral or unwomanly. This binary depiction is based initially on European male scholars of the eighteenth century who desired to uphold patriarchal standards and keep women in a domestic and subservient role. However, many female botanists and writers perpetuated this personified association between plants and moral attributes, thus adding to the construction of the empire. Building strongly from Mollendorf's research and other works examining the sexualization of flora, this thesis further explores the connections made between race, gender, and botany. As British native flora became personified with feminine virtues traits expected of a White woman, so too did exotic "luxuriants" become imbedded with the opposite characteristics that deemed Black women unvirtuous and sinful.[53]

Rethinking the Trans-Atlantic Exchange: Food, Medicine, and Magic

Recent discussions on the intersectionality between race, gender, and botany in the context of the transatlantic slave trade reveals enslaved women's crucial role in cultivating African native plants and botanical knowledge in the Americas. Until recently, the study of African diasporas and the disbursement of African plants and animals across the Atlantic has been an understudied aspect

[53] George, 95-96.

of the transatlantic scholarship. Carney is one of the leading scholars focusing on Atlantic environmental history who researches and conducts fieldwork on Africa's botanical legacy in the Americas. She is best known for her work on the development of African rice cultivation in *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2001). Assisted with independent researcher Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, Carney's work *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (2009) examines how the enslaved contributed to the botanical knowledge, exchange of flora and fauna, and agricultural practices in the Atlantic world. Since the publication of the groundbreaking work, she continues to expand on the scant literature of the transatlantic network from an Afrocentric perspective.

Carney and Rosomoff begin by interrogating the traditional Columbian Exchange narrative that neglects Africa's contribution to the global exchange of produce and crops. They cite Alfred Crosby's influential work *The Columbian Exchange (*1974) to illustrate the ecological importance and environmental histories of the Atlantic world, but also observe that Crosby's pioneering work overlooks Africans' plant and cultivation knowledge, as well as the plants and animals brought with them. Similarly, the authors argue other subsequent scholarship often emphasizes the interaction and exchange of Amerindian crops with European ones and "unintentionally occludes the African components of intercontinental crop exchanges and the role of Africans in pioneering them

elsewhere."[54] Relying on archeological findings, Carney and Rosomoff discuss the process of animal and plant domestication in Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans, beginning around 10,500BP.[55] In doing so, they debunk the Anglocentric fallacy that Africans required the assistance of Europeans to cultivate their land and domesticate pastoral animals more effectively and instead argue that African diasporas played a substantial role in the trade of commodities across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean prior to European arrival.

After establishing Africa's importance in global trade, Carney and Rosomoff largely focused on African crop production in the Americas, focusing on the Caribbean, Latin America, and the southern colonies of America. The several missionary reports, botanical collections, oral histories, and plantation owner accounts presented validate that African crops (i.e., rice, millet, yams, plantains, black-eyed peas, groundnut, coffee, and taro, to mention a few) began to spread throughout the colonies via Maroon communities, slave ships provisions, and "the slave provision ground[s]."[56] These dooryard provision grounds became the "botanical gardens of the dispossessed," where enslaved Africans cultivated African and Amerindian crops to sustain themselves and gain, if only minimally, some economic autonomy.[57] While the focus is not specifically on the experiences of enslaved female, there are also apparent feminist undertones of subaltern women scatted throughout the book. From the

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[54] Carney and Rosomoff, 121.
[55] Ibid., 11.
[56] Ibid., 135.
[57] Ibid., 135.

discussion of women processing crops to feed those on slave ships, to women contributing to the botanical exchange by hiding rice in their hair, to tending their own small provision gardens to feed themselves, enslaved females contributed significant botanical knowledge and skills that led to the success of African plants in the Americas.

Carney further explores the influence of slave provision grounds in the very recent publication "Subsistence in the Plantationocene: Dooryard Gardens, Agrobiodiversity, and the Subaltern Economies of Slavery" (2021). According to Carney, "slave subsistence plots add a subaltern history to narratives of agricultural production in the Plantationocene" as these sites represent not only survival but a story of resistance and autonomy."[58] She expands on her previous works by reflecting on the expansion of monoagriculture in the tropical regions of the New World through Plantationocene development and how the system juxtaposed African agroecological practices. Land deemed unsuitable for commodity production became the grounds where enslaved Africans cultivated their own food, and it is here that "seed and root crops, fruit trees, and medicinal plants were interplanted."[59] Drawing on archeologists Fellows and Delle's terminology of "spatial sovereignty" in "Marronage and the Dialectics of Spatial Sovereignty in Colonial Jamaica" (2015), Carney contends the provision gardens of the enslaved found on the periphery of the plantations provided Blacks with

[58] Judith A. Carney, "Subsistence in the Plantationocene: Dooryard Gardens, Agrobiodiversity, and the Subaltern Economies of Slavery." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 5 (2021): 1076.
[59] Ibid., 1080.

some autonomy within the plantation system while also being means of liberation for Maroons who carried the root cuttings and seeds to the new areas they settled. Similar to *In the Shadow of Slavery*, Carney again notes the importance of women in the cultivation of provisional grounds and markets, stating "females played such a prominent role" they were often called "' higglers' in British colonies."[60] As were her intentions, Carney again adds to the discourse on subaltern communities' agricultural systems in the Americas and complicates the traditional transatlantic trade narrative.

"African Traditional Plant Knowledge in the Circum-Caribbean Region" (2003) is another one of Judith Carney's earlier works highlighting that Africa's botanical legacy remains obscure on the discourse of plant exchange and knowledge via the transatlantic networks during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As with her other works, Carney's article decentralizes Europeans contributions in the intercontinental botanical exchange between the Old World and the Americans by illuminating scholarship on how "the plant exchanges, botanical gardens, and scientific societies that accompanied the European Enlightenment drew upon the botanical resources of those they colonized and enslaved while privileging European agency."[61] Additionally, those enslaved became the keepers of Amerindian plant knowledge as native populations

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[60] Ibid., 1086.
[61] Judith A. Carney, "African Traditional Plant Knowledge in the Circum-Caribbean Region," J*ournal of Ethnobiology* 23, no.2 (2003): 181.

diminished from the islands, which resulted in "two indigenous ethnobotanical systems [that] met and hybridized" in an effort to survive.[62]

In the article, Carney examines the paradoxical way Europeans and White native-born Caribbeans perceived and utilized African plant knowledge during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Living in unfamiliar terrain and surrounded by unknown plants, Europeans often struggled to treat illness and often sought the knowledge of slaves and African healers who had superior knowledge of botanical medicine. As paranoia circulated among plantation owners over the fear of being poisoned or rebellion, enslaved men and women who were medical practitioners were often labeled as "root doctors, "conjurers',' and mid-wives who exercised witchcraft and sorcery."[63] She also delves into specific plants brought to the Americas via the African diaspora, charting ninety different plant species that made the transatlantic journey throughout Africa. Of these, fifty-two are native African species and the remaining thirty-nine were established in Africa due to trade diasporas throughout the eastern hemisphere prior to Europe's arrival to Africa.[64] These African-derived "plants were grown by New World Africans on plantation provision fields, dooryard gardens, and subsistence plots," and again, there is a conflicting position of plantation owners to allow enslaved Africans to tend to dooryard gardens as they provided provisions for them but could also contain deadly unknown plants.[65]

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[62] Ibid., 168.
[63] Ibid., 170.
[64] Ibid., 173.
[65] Ibid., 169.

Schiebinger also pulls from the Plantationocene system like Carney by drawing on Philip Curtin's "plantation complex" definition to create what she defines as the “Atlantic World medical complex” in *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine in the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World* (2017).[66] Throughout the book, she traces three nexuses of the history of medicine: first, the well-known colonial relationship between Europe and the Americas, the slave nexus connecting Africa and the Americas, and lastly, the conquest nexus that shifted Amerindian medicinal knowledge and practices to the plantation complex.[67] Working with subaltern studies, Schiebinger recognizes the challenges presented in this book noting, "we glimpse African healing regimes primarily through European eyes and it is difficult to know exactly how these rich knowledge traditions transferred into the plantation complex."[68] However, the book presents hypotheses rather than answer questions, and she questions rather than asserts her viewpoints from her findings. Nevertheless, *Secret Cures of Slaves* is a refreshing addition to scholarly literature in that it breaks away from the traditional Transatlantic complex to examine how Amerindian and African medicinal knowledge added to modern medicine.

Inspired by Carney's and Rosomoff's *In the Shadow of Slavery*, Schiebinger uses a similar framework and methodological approach to argue for African contributions to the science of medicine. According to Schiebinger,

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[66] Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves,* 158.
[67] Ibid., 13.
[68] Ibid., 153.

"African slaves used flora (herbs and wood) familiar to them or their forebears in Africa, and importantly, they became experts in the use of new plants learned from the Amerindians."[69] Using Carney's and Rosomoff documentation regarding the Africanization of Caribbean food systems, Schiebinger expands this framework to encompass medicinal herbs and plants and suggests that "seeds could be carried in the holds of ships and also in hair, fur, or soils. Enslaved Africans may have cultivated these familiar plants in their kitchen gardens."[70] However, at the same time, she questions if Africans' ethnobiomedicinal knowledge transferred directly across ships or instead was learned by Amerindians who used plants Indigenous to America.

In addition to the slave ship theory, Schiebinger argues "that no 'pure' African medical regime was transplanted to Caribbean plantations."[71] Instead, a combination of botanical and medicinal knowledge from Amerindians, Africans, and Europe created a crucible of medicinal knowledge in the Caribbean. Like Alfred Crosby's work *Ecological Imperialism* that took into account Pangaea and geographical factors as influencers of human development, Schiebinger also hypothesizes that enslaved Africans could have found substitution plants in the West Indies that they would have used on the west coast of Africa.[72] In her research, she found that "Both West Africa and the great Caribbean are tropical,

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[69] Ibid., 155.
[70] Ibid., 46.
[71] Ibid., 45.
[72] See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900,* 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and some eighty-five floral families are common to both. These plants shared a common origin in West Gondwana (a southern supercontinent of Pangaea) prior to the separation of the land masses that subsequently formed Africa and South America."[73]

However, not all Indigenous and African medicinal knowledge was treated equally. Schiebinger also examines the growing fear and concerns over enslaved people medicine and particularly non-Western forms of healing. She spends a great deal examining the healing practices of the body, mind, and spirit seen in Obeah and vodou. She also explores the growing fear of enslaved Blacks' connection to botanical knowledge and poisonous plants. Discussing the outlawing of enslaved Africans' medicine and Obeah among different colonies, Schiebinger notes the"...clashing belief systems between European medical practices and what Europeans came to understand as African Obeah and vodou."[74] Her addition in examining non-European healing practices that emphasized spiritual healing, highlights European physicians' reliance on Indigenous medicine and what medicines were tested for scientific validity and other non-Western practices that were ridiculed and dismissed.

Many historians of science over the decades have taken a fascination in understanding the importance of alternative medicine and healing that continues to be a fundamental aspect of subaltern communities in the Caribbean today.

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[73] Schiebinger, *Secret Cures of Slaves*, 61.
[74] Ibid., 117.

Richard Sheridan's extensive research in *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680 – 1834* (1985) contributes to the long-standing historical debate about the enslaved Black population's inability to sustain itself in the British colonial Caribbean. Starting in the preface, Sheridan states his intentions saying, "In this study the overriding problem is to explain why, apart from new recruits from Africa, the slave population on West Indies sugar plantations suffered attritions because the deaths exceeded the births."[75] Unfortunately, the framing of the question reads insensitively to the plights of enslaved people, and at times, reads more like an investigation report due to the emphasis on statistics and demographics rather than looking to the lived experiences of those enslaved. Moreover, some scholars have questioned the validity of some of the medical information presented in the book, such as disease historian Kenneth F. Kiple, who noted that Yaws was presented as a venereal disease when, in reality, it spreads through direct physical contact.[76] Similarly, medical physician S.I. Terry noted the confusion presented between sickle cell disease and the sickle cell trait among asymptomatic carriers.[77]

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[75] Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvii.
[76] K. F. Kiple, "Doctors and Slaves; A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834. By Richard B. Sheridan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985)." *Journal of Social History*. Berkeley: Oxford University Press (1986): 404.
[77] S.I. Terry, "Doctors and Slaves." *Caribbean Quarterly*, University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Studies (1985): 113.

Despite the minor medical inaccuracies, *Doctors and Slaves* continues to be a valuable addition to the history of slavery and medicine in the Caribbean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sheridan explores several reasons for the high mortality rates of slaves in the Caribbean, from infectious and parasitic diseases to malnutrition to low birth rates among enslaved women. He also spends some time observing folk or ethnomedicines transferred from Africa to the Caribbean, noting that "two medical cultures - one African, one European - have dominated the British Caribbean territories during the past three centuries."[78] He discusses the collision and intertwining of the two medical cultures, which often meant Europeans drew on some African-based healing knowledge for their own practices while criticizing other practices viewed as non-scientific such as Obeah. The book also discusses how "women played a more important role in African medicine than their counterparts in Western countries" by discussing how African women were often sought after for their botanical knowledge for remedies and poisons.[79] However, Sheridan's work reiterates the Western definition of Obeah as a form of witchcraft and sorcery.

Decolonizing the term Obeah only recently became a topic of scholarly debate as it continues to become more associated with alternative healing methods than with the Anglophone definition of witchcraft. In *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (2008), Vincent Brown

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[78] Sheridan, 72.
[79] Ibid., 74.

poses a similar question to Sheridan's work but instead is interested in the cultural and social aspects of death rather than mortality demographics. Centering the narrative in Jamaica, he argues that death was abundant for both White and Black people and that neither could naturally increase their numbers on the island. Due to the high death tolls, practices around death became a fundamental part of creole culture and part of what Brown defines as "mortuary politics."[80] Plantation owners, the enslaved, healers, and rebels alike used the dead and beliefs about death to further their political agendas or gain agency over their socio-political environment. While Brown discusses how White colonialists and physicians navigated around issues of death, he also spends a great deal discussing how death played a pivotal role in slave communities and cultivated a culture unique to the enslaved.

Various African funeral ceremonies to prepare and celebrate the dead merged in the Caribbean and created distinct creolized practices. Obeah and myalism, Brown argues, were essential in enslaved healing and held "supernatural political authority among the enslaved" for both the living and the dead.[81] Unlike Sheridan, who refers to Obeah as a form of witchcraft, Brown provincializes the Anglophone definition of the practice and instead aims to observe how Obeah provided those enslaved Africans agency over matters of life and death. As Brown observes, "Practitioners of obeah operated as herbalists

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[80] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.
[81] Ibid.,145.

and sages tending to physical, social, and spiritual needs, though Whites generally mischaracterized obeah as simple witchcraft, thus failing to see its larger role in social and spiritual healing and protection."[82] Some historians, such as Jenny Sharpe, suggest that women may have assumed a more dominate role as healers and spiritual leaders in their community since many African tribes are matriarchally structured.[83]

Even more recently, scholars continue to redefine Obeah and its association with the Western perception of witchcraft. For example, Eugenia O'Neal's *Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination* (2020) and J. Brent Crosson's *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (2020) both aim to show the power dynamics behind demonizing some spiritual beliefs while validating others. O'Neal research investigates British writers' distorted perceptions Obeah practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how this misconception prompted ideologies of racial inferiority while justifying slavery. [84] In contrast, Crosson's work reads like an ethnography that challenges the anglophone definition of religion by interviewing Obeah men and women who consider

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[82] Ibid., 146. Depending on the author, Obeah or obeah is either capitalized or not. For this thesis, Obeah will be capitalized throughout the paper until cited otherwise.
[83] Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 22. Sharpe examines Queen Nanny's role as a Maroon leader during the Maroon War in Jamaica from 1728 to 1740. She suggests the matriarchal structure of the Asante nation maybe a reason for her assuming such a prominent role as a leader and Obeah practitioner.
[84] Eugenia O'Neal, *Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination* (Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2020), 9.

themselves "spiritual healers" of a "science" who conduct healing and justice-making "experiments."[85] He also explores the history of the criminality of Obeah and the power dynamics between the subaltern community and colonialists. While O'Neal and Crosson utilized different methodologies, they come to the same conclusion about how Obeah influenced the cultural, social, and political climate of the British West Indies and how past representation continues to influence the postcolonial Caribbean.

Collectively, these works bring together various aspects of Africans' contributions in cultivating botanical knowledge in the Atlantic World from agriculture to medicine. While several of the texts acknowledge enslaved women in food production and medicinal healing, they do not focus explicitly on enslaved women's contribution to modern medicine or their imagined connection to witchcraft in the British imagination through their knowledge of plants. This thesis will contribute to the scholarship conducted on the social history of science and medicine as it is concerned with aspects of biomedicine used by enslaved women in the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing on enslaved women's contributions to medicine found in medical and travel journals, this research will also illustrate the falsehood of science being neutral and objective. As we will see, White male physicians often discredited some aspects of ethnobiomedicine and exploited others.

[85] Crosson, 20-21.

Contraceptive Plants: Botany, Reproduction, and Resistance

Enslaved women's reproduction and the use of botanical abortifacients have witnessed an increase in scholarly attention over the last couple of decades. However, this study would not have begun without first considering the role of women in slavery in general. Now considered a classic for those studying women in Caribbean history, Barbara Bush's noteworthy book *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990) is one of the first publications to examine the lives of enslaved women specifically' Bush calls out the invisibility of enslaved female in historiography and dismantles the stereotypical images and myths Europeans imposed on the Black female body, which portrayed a Black woman as "sexual temptress", "promiscuous harlot," or "negligent mother.[86]" She examines socioeconomic labor structures that viewed Black women as laborers while also observing how these women reserved some self-agency. Her later chapters, for example, address the complex nature of reproduction, women as spiritual leaders, and female resistors in slave revolts. Though botany does not assume a predominant role in Bush's work, there are indicators that plant knowledge played a crucial part in the roles of enslaved women. Her work also is also one of the first to reflect on the depiction of the Black female body in Western culture. As part of this thesis aims to show, these negative portrayals of

[86] Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston: Heinemann Publishers, 1990), 166.

enslaved Black women also transcended to botanical writings about non-British flora.

Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery (2004) by Jennifer Morgan and Sasha Turner's *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childbearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (2017) are in many ways similar to Bush's earlier work. However, Morgan and Turner add to the historiography of slavery by examining how race, gender, class, and reproduction influenced the notions of slavery with Morgan examining the West Indies and early America history and Turner narrowing specifically on Jamaican history. Using a similar social history and feminist approach to Bush, Morgan's and Turner's research places women at the forefront of slavery. Both authors insist that reproduction, and therefore the female body and motherhood, played a central role in reinforcing racist ideology revolving around slavery. "Women's work and women's bodies are inseparable from the landscape of colonial slavery," Morgan argues, since "their reproductive lives were at the heart of the entire venture of racial slavery."[87]

Reflecting on the intersectionality between sex, race, and class, Turner similarly complicates the work conducted on slavery by focusing on how abolitionists' ideas of the purpose of the body and portrayal of Black women as sexually vivacious contributed to the treatment of Black women. At the heart of creating otherness, the Black female body was repeatedly objectified as savage,

[87] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 3-4.

ugly, and unwomanly, thus fortifying the Africans role as slaves and legitimizing a racial hierarchy in the European imagination. Moreover, both authors cover delicate but necessary topics from women being purchased for “breeding" to enslaved women's portrayal as bad mother to self-induced abortions often through botanical means.[88]

Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World (2007) by Schiebinger is a noteworthy addition that brings together the conquest of nature and enslaved women's botanical contraceptive knowledge. Inspired by the writings of Maria Sibylla Merian (1647 - 1717), one of the only female botanists who traveled to the New World for the pure pursuit of science, Schiebinger unveils how plants tie into the narrative of eighteenth-century imperialism as European physicians and scientists brought biomedicine and non-native plants back to their country. Using a moving passage from Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis insectorum surinamensium* (1705), Schiebinger focuses on the tropical abortifacient plant, the Peacock Flower (*Poinciana pulcherrima)*, a "luxuriant plant [that] still grows wild and in hedgerows and gardens throughout the Caribbean, and continues today to be known to many herb women and bush doctors as providing effective brews for inducing abortion."[89] Noting the limitation of documentation when studying the subaltern, she relies on the journals, reports, correspondence, and pharmacopeia of European botanists who traveled

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[88] Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2017), 46.
[89] Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.

to the colonies of Surinam, Jamaica, and Saint Domingue but tries "to draw out the knowledges and experiences of African slave, Arawak, Taino, and Carib naturalists albeit as reported through the eyes of Europeans."[90]

Schiebinger illuminates the political and moral climate of eighteenth-century Europe that forbade the transfer of knowledge of the abortifacient plant to Europe even though the plant itself was successfully cultivated across the sea. Moreover, she calls out that the gender politics of the eighteenth century is an understudied aspect of colonialism and ethnobotany, particularly in the reproduction of enslaved Black women and abortion practices. Using agnotology, "the study of culturally-induced ignorance," as the primary framework of the study, Schiebinger highlights Europeans' perceptions of Indigenous medicine and the transfer of ethnobotany to Europe.[91] While Europeans gained valuable information from their informants, the knowledge they collected was often partial and subjective to what they chose to acknowledge. One particular example is the merge of the spiritualism and medicine seen in Obeah or voodoo that combined medicinal herbs with spiritual rituals in medical practices of the enslaved. Schiebinger points out a common hindrance among several scholars in the subject stating, "it is especially frustrating when approaching subjects that Europeans reported so negatively that historians have no direct access to their eighteenth-century West Indian practices."[92] Schiebinger's work is a revealing

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[90] Ibid.,14.
[91] Ibid., 3. Schiebinger further defines agnotology as refocusing questions about "'how we know' to include questions about what we do *not* know, and why not."
[92] Ibid., 88.

and robust addition to the literature on Caribbean history as it explores the social and gender politics behind botany and the transfer of botanical knowledge between Europe and the Caribbean. This thesis aims to contribute to her acknowledgement regarding the lack of scholarship on enslaved women's botanical knowledge and parts of it will focus directly on nature-based abortifacients.

Schiebinger's "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients: The Cultural Production of Ignorance in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World" (2005) appears to be the initial research on the Peacock Flower that later made its way to *Plants and Empire*. In this article, she focuses on the history of the Peacock Flower and its use as an abortifacient in the Caribbean slave society. She recounts three naturalists from three different European countries who reported on the abortive properties of the "highly political plant": Merian from French Surinam, Michel Decourtilz in French Haiti, and Hans Sloane in British Jamaica.[93] While Merian saw the use of the Peacock Flower as a way to prevent future children from becoming slaves, Schiebinger contends that male naturists demonized the knowledge and use of the plant as an abortifacient. Like *Plants and Empire*, this article reveals the differences in perceptions over the uses of abortifacients between female and male European scientists and how enslaved women were portrayed in travel journals for using such plants.

[93] Londa L. Schiebinger, "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients: The Cultural Production of Ignorance in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 3 (2005): 317.

Others have also studied the importance of various plants in the reproduction aspect of enslaved women's lives and some of the autonomy they gained over their bodies through their plant knowledge. In "The Politics of Natural Knowing: Contraceptive Plant Properties in the Caribbean" (2016), Rachel O'Donnell investigates the development of modern science by taking a feminist methodological approach when observing the botanical knowledge of abortifacients plants. She examines plants like the Guinea-hen Weed, whose properties were well-known for inducing abortions and continued to be used in subaltern communities in the Caribbean. O'Donnell clearly communicates the centrality of plants and the binary socially constructed relationship between nature and women, stating:

> plants are central to political history and contemporary understanding of social relations if we understand their impact fully. At the same time, links made between women able to heal and women able to harm reflects the complicated position of women and the role of gender and knowledge throughout history.[94]

Drawing from Bush's research on reproduction, O'Donnell's work adds to the discourse of enslaved women's childbearing, the transatlantic botanical knowledge exchange, and imperial body politics of the Caribbean in the eighteenth century.

Botany is essential in understanding social and political relations found in the British colonial Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To

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[94] Rachel O'Donnell, "The Politics of Natural Knowing: Contraceptive Plant Properties in the Caribbean," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 3 (2016): 60.

contribute to the literature mentioned above, this thesis examines enslaved women’s roles as healers in the Caribbean due to their expertise in ethnobotanical medicine, as well as Western perception of African and enslaved women in relation to botany. Through travel journals, news reports, botanical poems, botanical illustrations, and literature, Western perceptions of and associations between females and nature depicted the Black female body as uncivilized, chaotic, unruly, sexual, and immoral. Even as male botanists and physicians relied on these women for their medicinal knowledge, enslaved women's botanical practices were often ignored, viewed as inferior, or even considered witchcraft. Thus, as mentioned earlier, this research shows how the association of Black women with negatively attributed exotic plants was another way Britain imposed imperial rule - through body and nature - over their Caribbean colonies that maintained racial hierarchy beliefs and legitimized slavery.

Analytical Methodology

Unfortunately, little to nothing exists of enslaved women’s accounts about their medicinal techniques written in their own hand. Working from this subaltern studies standpoint, this work is obligated to analyze documents written by colonists rather than from the subaltern community. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), transformed the historiography of colonialism as this postcolonial theoretical framework studies hierarchical power

relations and the continued domination of Western culture imposed on previous imperial colonies. As a feminist scholar, Spivak also notes the difficultly of understanding the lives of women within the subaltern communities:

> It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow.[95]

Due to these limitations and the lack of first-hand manuscripts, one of the only avenues to glimpse into the lives of enslaved women and their use of botanicals is through the works of physicians and naturalists who traveled to the Caribbean. Working from this mindset, it is "what the work cannot say [that] becomes important" as it pieces together enslaved women's healing practices and their impact on their communities.[96] Only then can historians piece together the experiences of enslaved women in the Caribbean and their interaction and knowledge of the surrounding environment.

The scope for this research ranges from the eighteenth century and into the beginning of the nineteenth century, leading up to the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1834. It encompasses the region known as the Greater Caribbean, expanding from the islands found in the Caribbean Sea to the coasts of Central and South America. However, most of the accounts come from Britain's largest Caribbean colony, Jamaica. Since the mid-eighteenth century, Jamaica had

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[95] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 28.
[96] Ibid., 28.

received the status as Britain's most valuable colonial economy in the Atlantic, which correlates with the high number of enslaved people on the island. Between 1740 to 1807, the British forcibly removed 2.2 million men, women, and children from their African homes and chained them below on slave ships; Jamaica alone received 33 percent of the 1.9 million who survived the seafaring journey.[97] The slave economy of Jamaica boomed and the abundance of enslaved Blacks which comprised of 90 percent of the island's population meant that the communities and culture built by the enslaved could not go unnoticed in written accounts.[98]

However, some extraordinary accounts are outliers worth noting, such as Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis insectorum surinamensium* from the late seventeenth century and the various news accounts of tropical zone carnivorous plants written in the later nineteenth century. Nevertheless, they are both exemplary examples of the connections made between Black women and nature either through actual botanical usage or symbolic association. They also show Western societies' progression of subjecting the Black female body throughout the centuries.

Many physicians noted they obtained botanical knowledge from enslaved and Indigenous communities in the pursuit of science. However, they also continued to perpetuate the misconceptions surrounding slave practices such as Obeah. Hans Sloane's *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S.*

[97] Brown, 25.
[98] Ibid., 15.

Christophers and Jamaica (1707), Henry Barham's *Hortus Americanus (*1711), Matthew Gregory Lewis' J*ournal of a West India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (1806), and Dr. James Thomas' *A Treatise on the Diseases of Negroes as They Occur in the Island of Jamaica* (1820) are just a few examples of these writings that note herbal medicinal practices and the concerns over enslaved African's botanical knowledge. Henry Barham, for instants, provides accounts of enslaved woman treating patients with herbal remedies like that of Broom-weed while another account states a woman poisoned her enslaver using the Savannah Flower. All the texts allude to the dangers of Obeah at some point. Most scoff at the validity of witchcraft, but they do acknowledge the power of Obeah among the enslaved and the potential threat of Obeah towards White colonists regarding slave riots and poisons.

Few women naturalists or botanists traveled to the Caribbean. However, there are a few exceptions who documented their travels in journals and provide historians insight into the social concerns of slavery at the time. Though she traveled prior to the eighteenth century, Maria Sibylla Merian is noteworthy as one of the earlier female botanists who traveled to Dutch Suriname in 1699. Her publication of *Metamorphosis insectorum surinamensium* is a testimony to female scientific botanists and is credited as one of the first books on butterfly metamorphosis and insects. The most interesting part of her research, though, is perhaps her documentation of the Peacock Flower, which was used as a

botanical abortifacient by Indigenous women and is well researched in Schiebinger's *Plants and Empire*.

Lady Maria Nugent personal journal written from 1801-1806 while her husband served as governor of Jamaica, and Janet Schaw's *Journal of a Lady of Quality* written from 1774-1776 regarding her travels to Antigua and St. Christopher also give insight into how enslaved Blacks were perceived by British female colonists and provide some social context around the debates of slavery. For example, Lady Maria Nugent writes a riveting account of her interaction with an enslaved woman working in the governess' estate, Nurse Flora, who seeks to provide her with non-Western midwife care while she gives birth to her child.

Acknowledging ecofeminist theory is also critical in evaluating the connection made between the environment and enslaved women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1974, French author Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism, a branch of feminism studies that explores the intersectionality between women and nature, in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). The publication further prompted many feminist scholars to continue examining the intersection between the natural world, sex, and gender from an array of historical, political, economic, social, and environmental disciplines. At the foundation, ecofeminism argues that nature and women are frequently depicted as irrational, chaotic, and in need of control, and once controlled, can be nurturing and plentiful. On the other hand, men are attributed as rational and orderly and thus capable of taming, cultivating, and

developing both nature and women. Due to this binary depiction, ecofeminists contend that the patriarchal structure has allowed men with power to exploit nature and women with particular force in non-Western societies.

Using the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, Shiva and Mies well-known work *Ecofeminism* (1993) questions the validity of modern science as a universal and objective entity. They present the argument that modern science is not objective as originally proposed but rather a projection of Western patriarchal thoughts and observations of the world. Drawing on Merchant's *The Death of Nature* on the displacement of women in modern science, Shiva and Mies argue that modern science was constructed on men's interrogation of the natural world, "Force and violence constitute the invisible foundation upon which modern science was built. Hence, violence against women in the witch pogroms, and violence against nature which was perceived as a woman."[99] Oppression and exploitation of nature and women is enforced by assuming these binaries to absolute truth under the definition of modern science. Building off their work, this thesis also adds to the dismantling of modern science as objective truth, especially in the science of botany. The appropriation of enslaved peoples' enthnobiomedicine and the dismissal of other forms of healing exposes an imperialist agenda that solidified Britain as a hegemonic paternalistic power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much like European women were tried for witchcraft for their botanical remedies and midwifery up to the eighteenth

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[99] Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, and Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 176.

century, so too were the enslaved women of the Caribbean well up to the twentieth century. In fact, Obeah is still illegal in Jamaica even to this day since its outlawing in 1760 as with many other Caribbean countries, illustrating the impact of post-colonization.

One branch of ecofeminism is cultural ecofeminism or the theory that women possess a greater connection to nature than men due to gender roles. Though cultural ecofeminism is unquantifiable and often criticized for mysticism, it provides an interesting perspective when looking at how nature and the Black female body is portrayed in historical narratives. Therefore, this thesis does not aim to prove cultural ecofeminism as a theory but rather examine the perpetuation of the association between women and nature and the sexualization of flora throughout history. The sexualization and female personification of exotic flowers can best be seen in Robert John Thornton's *The Temple of Flora* (1799) and Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants* (1793). The beautifully illustrated prints in *The Temple of Flora*, for example, reveal British stereotypes placed on their colonies from around the world. Unlike most botanical illustrations that solely depict the flower on a blank background, Thornton's illustrations are more pictorial, and therefore, can be interpreted even further based on surrounding objects, color usage, and background. However, the associated poems and their introductions for each flower provide the most insight into the connection between women and nature and draw from the "Allegory of the Four Continents"

device, which personified land as female.[100] The various literature iterations of the man-eating plants of Africa and Central America published in the late nineteenth century is also representative of the association of women and nature in a foreboding context. The images of the African native plants draw on Britain's portrayal of Africa as a "dark continent," associating the plant with female hyper-sexuality, "black magic," and otherness.[101]

Accounts of Obeah women using herbs to harm or heal are subject to the imagination of newspaper journalists and literary writers. *The Royal Gazette* was a Jamaican newspaper founded in 1779 and several of the printings can be found in the British Newspaper Archives.[102] Some issues recount women, sometimes called out for practicing Obeah, for poisoning or attempting to harm their enslavers or others. While the accounts are brief, only a sentence or two in length and many remain nameless, the formal circulation of news about enslaved women being tried in slave-courts revels the mass hysteria around poisoning and Obeah.

The association of the Black female body with the chaotic depiction of nature and witchcraft comes together in the interesting case of Catalina Susannah Mathison. This brief account is found in the parish papers of Castle Wemyss Estates in St James, Jamaica and documents the trial of Catalina for inducing an abortion in 1824. Though brief, the account documents two common

[100] Mollendorf, 285.
[101] O'Neal, 90.
[102] Originally known as *The Jamaica Mercury*, and *Kingston Weekly Advertiser*, until its government patronage in 1780.

and well-known plants that grew in Jamaica and her knowledge about the plants as abortifacients. She is convicted of practicing Obeah for her knowledge and decision to abort her child. This case reveals the power dynamics over the body both in terms of race and gender in the British colonies. When a woman could rebel against socially constructed laws due to her botanical knowledge, most men became anxious and reverted to the ideology that both women and nature needed to be dominated; this anxiety and need to control intensified when a subaltern woman was the one performing the defiance.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAOTIC NATURE AND THE UNTAMED WOMAN: WESTERN DEPICTIONS OF THE BLACK FEMALE BODY IN BOTANY

Africa in tears. Africa arrived in tears.
Sailing on the Caribbean, Africa arrived in
tears; she came with her orichas, myths and
legends, magic rituals.
-Kele Kele[103]

When the Portuguese landed in sub-Sahara Africa in 1415, they encountered a completely unfamiliar landscape that would spur the imaginations of Europeans for centuries. Often referred to as the “Dark Continent,” Africa came to represent many negative tropes by acting as backdrop for defining what modernity was and was not. In other words, Africa became a “rhetorical ground” for modern Europe and the opposite end of the binaries between civility and savagery, Europe and Other, progress and backwardness, light and dark, and human versus commodity.[104] Death often accompanied Europeans daring to move beyond the relatively safe coastline, thus making Africa an illusive and enigmatic figure for those attempting to enter the interior landscape. As a result, in the words of archeologists Jean and John Comaroff, “the symbolic terrain of a rarely-seen Africa, then, was being shaped by a cascade of narratives that stung together motley ‘scientific facts’ and poetic images.”[105] Eighteenth century

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[103] Excilia Saldana, *Kele Kele,* trans. Fernandez Olmos, in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, ed. Margarite Fernanxes Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, (New Jersey: Rutger University Press, 2000), prologue.
[104] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 86-87.
[105] Ibid., 87.

botanical books, in particular, often combined scientific observations with poetic descriptions, artistic images, or even poems.

This chapter starts by examining the “Allegory of the Four Continents” artistic devices that began in the Renaissance, which personified each continent in the female form. This popular allegory continued well into the eighteenth century as nature became ever more sexualized and connected to gender. Botanical poems and literature such as Thornton's *The Temple of Flora*, Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants*, and Grainer’s *The Sugar-Cane* provide a glimpse into how non-native British and European plants were associated with negative feminine traits that juxtaposed characteristics given to European flora. It also analyzes later nineteenth century fictitious tales on cannibalistic plants and man-eating trees that found their way into scientific journals and newspapers and perpetuated an unconditional fear about the Caribbean and African landscape.

Africa in the Allegory of the Four Continents

Since the Renaissance, many European artists created allegorical representations of the “four continents” identified at the time using the female form. The continents were depicted monolithically and ignored the geographical and ecological difference found on each continent. Moreover, the arrangement of figures was often arranged in a hierarchical order from most to least civilized: Europe, Asia, America, and Africa. Artists frequently drew Africa and America, represented as women, in the nude or with minimal clothing revealing their

breasts, the lack of clothing suggesting their imagined hyper-sexual nature and uncivility. Large wild animals surrounded the personified continents, symbolizing the dangers of the unknown geography to the common Westerner. In contrast, Asia and Europe wore lavished aristocratic attire and were in the presence of domesticated animals.[106] This is in part due to Europeans' greater understanding (those certain misrepresentation) of the Asian continent.

Though trade routes established between Europe and Asia date back centuries, the most famous being the Silk Road network, Europeans did not trade directly with East Asia frequently until the eighteenth century when Britain maliciously began to export opium from India to open trade lines with China. Earlier Europeans had more direct access to the Middle East, and thus, were more familiar with Middle Eastern cultures and practices. As a result, Asia in the female form is commonly seen wearing elaborate Orientalized Turkish fashions in allegorical depictions illustrating the riches and civility of the East.[107] Similarly, Europe also wore luxurious or noble fashions rather than common garments, demonstrating Europe's perceived wealth and power. The presence of domesticated animals also suggested both Europe and Asia had reached a level of civility in taming nature, despite Africa having domesticated livestock as early

[106] Mollendorf, 285.

[107] Though Asia was often depicted in civilized and lavished attire, Europeans still perceived peoples from Asia as "other." While considered more civilized than American and African native peoples, Western fallacies about Eastern counties continue to influence how Western society depicts and views peoples of the East. Depictions of the "Orient" found in art, literature, and linguistics homogenized and stereotyped peoples in the east as exotic, sensual, irrational, violent, mystical, and inferior. In contrast, the Occident was rational, moral, proper, industrialize, modern, and civilized.

as 10,500 BC and the Americas having established agricultural systems.[108] While Europe and Asia showed a mastery over nature, America and Africa were part of the unknown wilderness.

Most Europeans never traveled to Africa. Artists often reused preexisting images and descriptions created by other creatives when producing their work, similar to Edward Said's observation of Western depictions of the Middle East.[109] Inspired by previous works, artists tailored them to their own needs, rehashing images and accounts of Africa that overtime continuously misrepresented and distorted the land and the people. Extending beyond the "Dark Continent" narrative, the Comaroffs have identified different tropes placed on Africa including the romanticized "geographical mission" and "noble savage" to the sexualization of a bountiful "Maternal Africa" and Europeans need to "penetrate the terra incognita" to extract resources.[110] In this "more and more elaborate model" the relationship between Europe and Africa was one of "complementary opposition and inequality, in which the former stood to the latter as civilization to nature, savior to victor, actor to subject."[111] In the minds of Europeans, Africa represented a battlefield of humanism and a definition for what constituted human. Despite the various tropes, however, the African continent was mostly degraded and subjectified.

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[108] Carney and Rosomoff, 10.
[109] Referring to Edward Said's *Orientalism.*
[110] Comaroff and Comaroff, 89 - 90, 106.
[111] Ibid., 88.

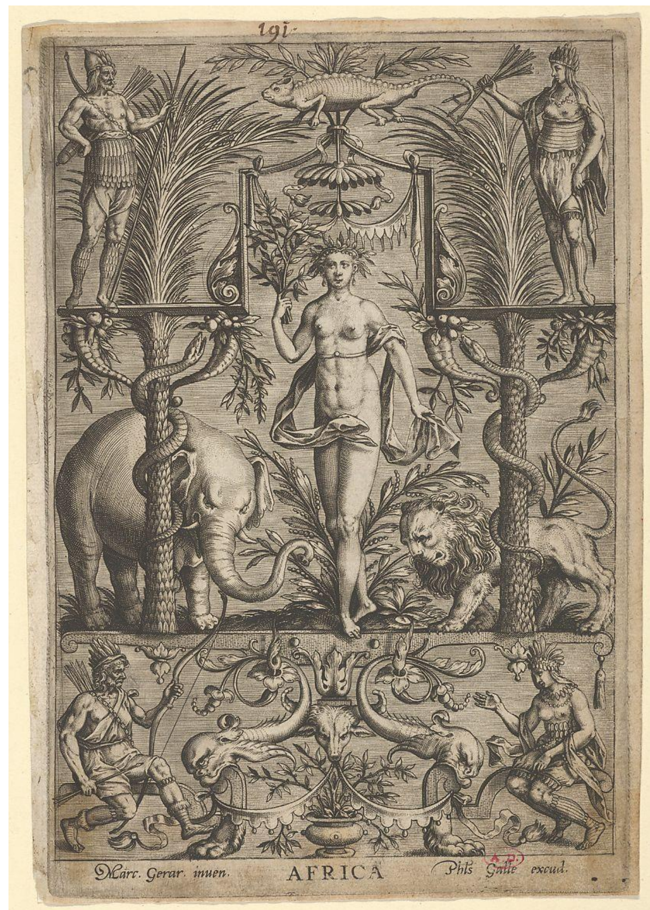

Figure 1. *Allegory of Africa* from the *Four Continents* (c. 1590), etched by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder (c. 1520-1590). Personified Africa in the nude holding a bouquet of branches while surrounded by wild animals and warriors. Image provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[112]

Several early drawings of the allegory of the four continents created during the European Renaissance continued to influence eighteenth and nineteenth century European artists and writers whose works personified Africa in the female form. Etched by Flemish artist Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder (c. 1520-

[112] Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, *Allegory of Africa from The Four Continents*, 1590, etching, 8 3/16 x 5 5/8 in. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/385668

1590) sometime between 1590 and 1600, *Allegory of Africa* is part of a four series engraving, representing his vision of the four continents. Maternal Africa is portrayed as a naked woman wearing a leaf headdress and holding a cluster of branches, symbolizing the fertility and resource rich continent. Only a cloth draped around her crotch held by a belt covers her. A ferocious looking elephant and lion surround her on both sides, while each corner of the frame depicts male and female warriors carrying spears and bows and arrows. A lizard, most likely a chameleon, sits at the top of the etching representing a tropical climate.[114] Unlike the other three etchings, *Allegory of Africa* suggests the land is also dangerous and immoral, which is exemplified through the two snakes wrapping around the palm tree on either side of the personified Africa. With their mouths opened wide, the snakes grab at the nearby hanging fruit that appears to be apples. The biblical story of Eve being tempted to eat the forbidden fruit, most commonly portrayed as the apple, by the devil disguised as a serpent alludes to Africa being a place of sin. In this case, Africa being portrayed as a woman is also representative of Eve, who falls from God's favor after being charmed by the devil.

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[114] "Allegory of Africa, from the Four Continents ca. 1590–1600," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 8, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/385668

Figure 2. *Allegory of Africa* from the *Four Continents* (c. 1580-1600), printed by Adriaen Collaert (c. 1560–1618). Personified Africa in the nude riding an allegator and surrounded by wild animals. Image provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art[115]

Several other works placed the snake in the forefront of the allegorical representations of Africa, making the snake a symbol of all that was to be feared of the "Dark Continent." The print *Allegory of Africa,* from the *Four Continents* by Netherlandish artist Adriaen Collaert (c. 1560–1618) created sometime between 1580 and 1600 portrays a more fanciful landscape Africa, once again a naked woman, riding on the back of an alligator. Similar to Gheeraerts' work, Collaert's Africa is also only covered with a cloth over her cotch held up only by a similar

[115] Adriaen Collaert, *Allegory of Africa, from the Four Continents, 1580–1600*, print, 8 1/4 x 10 1/8 in. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/385681

looking belt. However, there are more pronounced ethnic features in this work than the other, which illustrates the construction of race within geographical place. Again, various African animals roam in the background, but a chameleon and two intertwined snakes take the forefront and are positioned on each side of the alligator. One dangerous mythical creature, a cockatrice (also known as a basilisk), positions themselves in a fight against a lion to an onlooking ostrich.[117]

The symbolism behind dangerous animals like the snake, which became synonymous to Africa, also appears in writing and literature regarding Obeah in the Caribbean. Moreover, the incorporation of a mythical creature like the cockatrice was symbolically used to represent their belief that Africa was a treacherous place for White travelers. The association among Obeah, serpent worship, and witchcraft held sway well up to the late nineteenth century, and scholars are only now attempting to decolonize the image of the practice. In 1893, Hesketh J. Bell wrote the book *Obeah, Witchcraft in the West Indies*, which infamously solidified Western's distorted perception of Obeah. For decades, Obeah was thought to have come from Egyptian lexicon:

> The term ' Obeah 'is most probably derived from the substantive ' Oh',' a word used on the East coast of Africa to denote witchcraft, sorcery and fetishism in general. The etymology of Obi has been traced to a very antique source, stretching far back into Egyptian mythology. A serpent in the Egyptian language was called ' Ob 'or ' sub '—' Obion ' is still the Egyptian name for a serpent. Moses, in the 'name of God, forbade the Israelites ever to enquire of the demon ' Ob,' which is translated in our Bible : charmer or wizard, divinator or sorcerer. The witch of Endor is

[117] In European lore, a basilisk or cockatrice is a mythical serpent-like creature capable of killing or petrifying creatures with its deadly stare. Today, the basilisk and cockatrice are more distinctly separated with a basilisk being more snakelike in appearance and the cockatrice being a combination of an avian rooster-like creature with a snake body.

> called ' pub' or 'Ob,' translated Pythonissa; and ' Oubois ' was the name of the basilisk or royal serpent, emblem of the Sun and an ancient oracular deity of Africa.[119]

Europeans failed to recognize their predisposition linking Obeah and serpents that stemmed from their own Christian beliefs, which associated the snake with the devil. Obeah did not necessarily deal with snakes than European travelers belief that it did. Thus, the snake came to represent the evils Europeans saw in Africa and their belief in witchcraft.

Figure 3. *Africa* from the *Four Continents* by printmaker Crispijn van de Passe (c.1594 – 1670). Personified Africa in the nude sitting on a mythical animal while talking to a satyr. Image provided by Google Art and Culture.[120]

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[119] Hesketh J. Bell, *Obeah, Witchcraft in the West Indies, 1864-1952,* HathiTrust, 6. https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/downloads/neu:m0415d66m?datastream_id=content

[120] Crispijn van de Passe, *Africa* from the *Four Continents*, c.1594-1670. Google Art and Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/africa-crispijn-de-passe-the-elder/FAHLTtZ8bqrv4Q

Published sometime between 1589 and 1611, *Africa* of the *Four Continents* series by Dutch publisher and engraver Crispijn van de Passe (c.1594 – 1670) is another example of a woman representing a continent and nature itself in the Renaissance. Once more, Africa is personified as a naked woman sitting on some mythical-looking reptilian creature while gazing at a basket of corals held up by a satyr. Again, a snake curled up by Africa takes the front while a cockatrice, similar to Collaert's work, calls out on a rock right above it. While the satyr, half-man and half-goat, takes its origins in Greek mythology to represent physical lust, the image also resembles common depictions of the Christian devil Lucifer. Therefore, Africa is being associated with sexual desire by conversing with a satyr while also conveying a possibility of being associated with evil. As a fourth example, *Africa* by *The Four Continents* by Italian iconographer Cesare Ripa (1560 – 1645), published in *Nova Iconologia* in 1603, shows Africa wearing an elephant headdress and a coral necklace. She is surrounded by dangerous animals, such as a lion and three entangled snakes, while holding a scorpion in one hand and an abundant cornucopia in the other to represent a resource rich environment.

Figure 4. *Africa* from *The Four Continents* by Cesare Ripa (1560 – 1645) in *Iconologia* (1636). Personified Africa in an elephant headdress and holding a cornucopia and a scorpion. Image provided by the Getty Research Institute.[122]

Many early representations of Africa in the female form possess various similarities, including the lack of bodily and ethical differences; overall, artists did little to differentiate between the four women of the continents by altering facial features and skin color. Art historian Oliver Wunsch suggests the uniformity of these women in Renaissance illustrations, specifically examining Ripa's work, originates from the allegorical representation of the Classical ideal female body. He also notes:

[122] Cesare Ripa, *The Four Continents* from *Iconologia*, 336. Getty Research Institute, https://archive.org/embed/iconologiaouerod00ripa

> The decision to leave Africa's skin white may also relate to the technical properties of woodcut printmaking, which did not lend themselves to reproducing tonal variation. But the homogeneity of the figures also suggests that the bodies of the continents, unlike the various commodities and natural resources that surround them, had not yet been fully assimilated into the logic of colonial commerce.[124]

The modern concept of race had not fully developed during the Renaissance and is seen in the lack of ethical differentiation in earlier allegory depictions of the continents. Only in the early eighteenth century did Europeans began to formulate the construction of race and racial hierarchies. Later eighteenth century works of the continents personified illustrate how ideologies of bodily difference became more prominent in European discussion as empires built out their colonies. The visual representation of each personified continent's skin color highlights the links between the conception of race and location in the eighteenth century.[125]

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[124] Oliver Wunsch, "Rosalba Carriera's Four Continents and the Commerce of Skin," *Journal 18 A Journal of Eighteenth Century Art and Culture*, accessed January 15, 2022. https://www.journal18.org/issue10/rosalba-carrieras-four-continents-and-the-commerce-of-skin/#_edn7

[125] Ibid.

Figure 5. *Personification of Africa* (c. 1720) by Rosalba Carriera (1675 – 1757). Personified Africa in a white turban and pearl jewelry holding a bunch of snakes with a scorpion on a chain climbing up her neck. Image provided by Journal 18.[126]

Italian female painter, Rosala Carriera (1675–1757), a well-reputed artist who specialized in miniature portraits and allegorical figures, created yet another allegory series of the continents using pastel. Examining Carriera's *Four Continents* created in 1720, Wunsch noted it as a marker in the construction of race through artistic means, remarking "Carriera pushes the traditional attributes of each continent to the margins of the frame, relying instead on skin itself as a

[126] Rosala Carriera, *Personification of Africa* in the *Four Continents*, pastel, accessed January 15, 2022. https://www.journal18.org/issue10/rosalba-carrieras-four-continents-and-the-commerce-of-skin/#_edn7

primary means of distinguishing each figure."[128] Instead of being surrounded by various flora and fauna native to the continent, she instead focuses on skin color for audiences to recognize Africa from the other four continents. The natural world itself is devoid in the image against an all-blue background unlike previous illustrations. Instead, even after a 130 time span, she used two familiar poison creatures to denote Africa – the snake and scorpion. This time, Africa is holding a bundle of small snakes in her hand while a scorpion on a chain rests around her neck. Another notable difference in comparison to other personifications of Africa is Carriera's Africa not only appears to be fully clothed, though not much of her outfit is seen, but she also takes on a noble appearance. Adorned with large pearl earrings and a necklace, it is possible this illustration alludes to Africa being abundant in natural resources rather than denoting the civility of African people.

[128] Ibid.

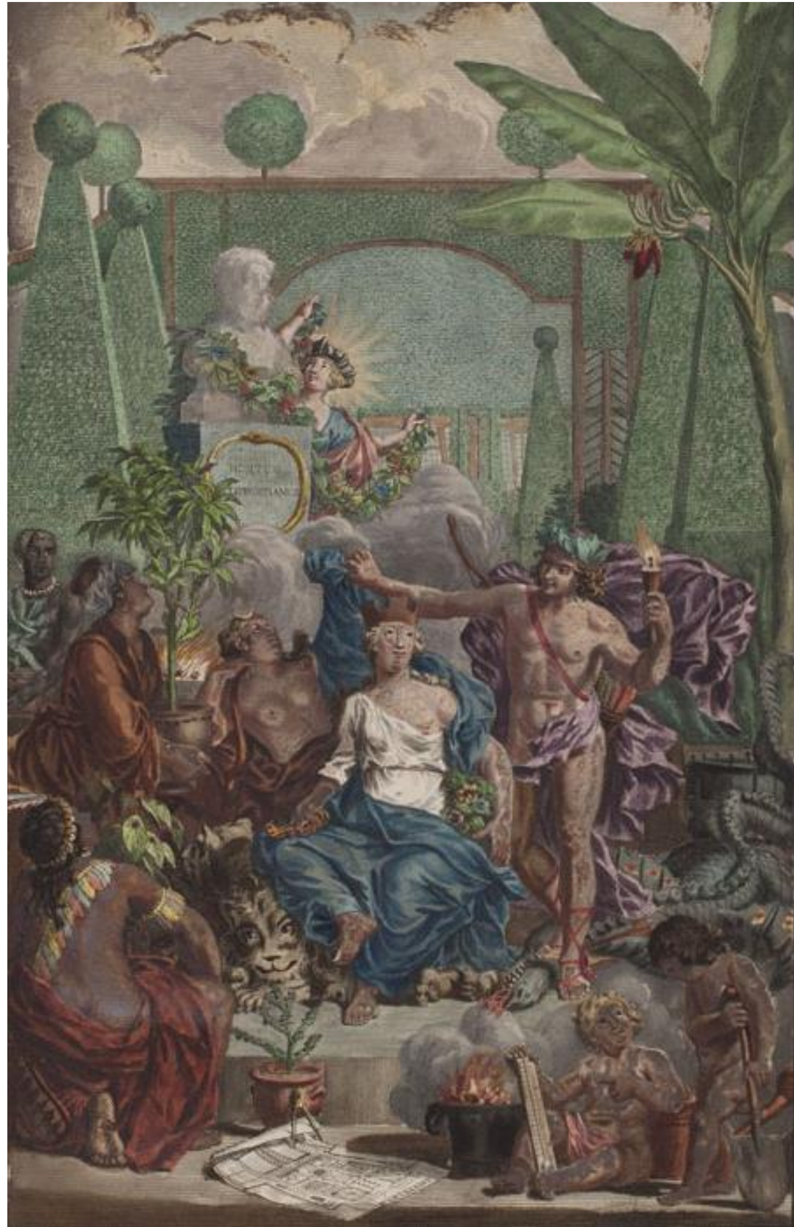

Figure 6. *Hortus Cliffortianus* Frontispiece by Jan Wandelaar in *Hortus Cliffortianus* by Carl Linnaeus (1738). Mother Nature sitting next to Apollo and Selene while awaiting offerings by the personified continents. Image provided by Dumbarton Oak. [129]

[129] Jan Wandelaar*, Hortus Cliffortianus Frontispiece* in *Hortus Cliffortianus* by Carl Linnaeus, 1738. Dumbarton Oak, accessed January 8, 2022. https://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/botany-of-empire/subscriptions-dedications-and-patrons/hortus-cliffortianus

Perhaps one of the most apparent illustrations that connects the female body to nature is the frontispiece of Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus' (1707-1778) *Hortus Cliffortianus* published in 1738 painted by artist Jan Wandelaar. Traditionally credited as the man who invented the binary taxonomy for botany that is still used today, Linnaeus might be better known as the man who classified all living species. The Linnaeus classification system, also referred to as the Linnaeus' Sexual System, worked on the premise of categorizing organisms between a common group, or Kingdom, and then identifying each individually though the species. In 1735, Linnaeus published *Systema Naturae* in which he categorized humans into four different categories based on skin color. In discussing Homo sapiens, Linnaeus defined "Europaeus albus" (white European), "Americanus Rufus" (red American), "Asiaticus luridus" (pale yellow Asian - luridus directly means sickly paleness often yellow in color, ghastly, horrifying, and waning), and "Afer niger" (black African).[131] The frontispiece of *Hortus Cliffortianus* references the Allegory of the Four Continents in addition to the newly established taxonomy of racial categories constructed by Linnaeus.

Despite its aesthetic quality, the frontispiece of *Hortus Cliffortianus* serves as more than mere decoration and features classical figures and allegories an educated audience at the time would understand. The book featured a collection of international botanicals found at the Hartecamp estate by financier George

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[131] Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae*, 1735, Biodiversity Library, 20-21, https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/10277#page/3/mode/1up

Clifford. In the center, a golden-crowned White Mother Nature sits herself on top of a lion and lioness, ironically suggesting she has conquered nature herself. Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, and Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon surround themselves around Mother Nature, representing the trinity between the Earth, Moon, and Sun. At her feet, lies a slayed dragon, children holding a thermometer and shovel, and blueprints for Clifford's garden layout. In all modesty, the statue is of a bust presumably of either Linnaeus or Clifford with an ouroboros engraved on the side signifying eternity.[132]

On the left are the personified continents bringing gifts to Mother Nature. At Mother Nature's feet, America is represented as a sexualized Native American woman brings Hernandia, *Hernandia nymphaeifolia*. Asia presented in Orientalized Turkish garb bears a coffee plant, *Coffea arabica*. In the far back, almost out of frame, is an African woman holding an Aloe, *Aloe Vera*. The positioning of the personified continents from the foreground to the background represents a hierarchical ranking of importance in the British imagination about the prosperity and economic opportunity of each region. Africa in the farthest corner signifies her role as a continent in relation to the rest of the world. It is difficult to identify the man or woman hanging garland around the statue. However, one possibility is the personification of Europe. The sun halo and

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[132] "Linnaeus Hortus Cliffortianus Frontispiece," WikiCommons, accessed January 8, 2022. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Linnaeus_Hortus_Cliffortianus_frontispiece.jpg

abundance of flowers, as well as the figure's positioning in the piece, reflect the Anglocentric construction of racial superiority imposed on the world.

Figure 7. *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (1796) colored engraving by William Blake from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South America; from the Year 1772 to 1777* (1796). Personified Africa and America enslaved in gold chains and holding up personified Europe. Image provided by WikiCommons.[133]

[133] William Blake, *Europe Supported By Africa and America*, 1796, engraving. 7.6 in x 5.5 in. Illustration from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South America; from the Year 1772 to 1777.* WikiCommons, accessed January 9, 2022. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Blake-Europe_Supported_By_Africa_and_America_1796.png

Later artworks continued to be aware of bodily differences as seen in the post-colored print *Europe Supported By Africa and America* by artist William Blake printed in 1796. In 1774, John Gabriel Stedman, a Scottish-Dutch soldier, traveled to Suriname and later wrote *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. The book, which included this illustration by William Blake, recounted Stedman's witnessing of brutal violence and oppression amongst slaves during a military campaign against Maroons in Suriname. Drawing from the "Four Continents" allegory, Africa is depicted as a Black woman, America as a Brown woman, and Europe as a White woman. Europe's long blond hair covers her, and she is adorned with a long strand of blue beads, possibly representing her wealth or femininity. Africa and America are on either side of Europe propping her up and wear bands around their upper arms representing their enslavement. In this image, the Black female body is no longer only associated with Africa like other allegorical references but also her enslavement in the New World. It also solely relies on skin color to denote the continents and minimizes nature altogether with a belittled mountain background.

The popular allegorical representation of the continents as female illustrates the association of gender and sex within the context of nature and geography. The imagined African landscape drove European's rhetoric of heroic and objective science.[135] With Africa set at the foundational baseline, the border between humanity and animality, Western civilization established itself at the

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[135] Comaroff and Comaroff, 87.

world's center and leader in modern progress. Originally identified by external elements like animals and plants in the Renaissance, the allegory of the four continents transitioned to more racialized viewpoints that placed skin color at the core of its symbology. As we shall see in further detail later, plants also took on humanizing traits as botany intermingled with the construction of race. Much like the female body was used to allegorically represent the landscape, the opposite was also beginning to occur in eighteenth century botanical writings, as plants began to take on feminized human attributes.

"Dire Enchantress" and "Mischief Fraught:" The Personification of Plants in *The Temple of Flora*

The allegory of the four continents and the personification of nature as women also extended to the botanical illustrations of the plants themselves. British botanist and physician Robert John Thornton (1768-1837) wrote literary botany that includes scientific observations within artistic poetry, in which he assigns racial and femininity attributes to various flora around the world. In Thornton's botanical book *A New Illustration of the Sexual System of Carolus Von Linnaeus*, with book three being the most notable titled *The Temple of Flora* (formally published in 1812), he compares thirty-one plant species. He described the plants as being about the Flora's "choicest" flowers from the four continents

(Europe, Asia, Africa, and America), with twenty-three being "exotic" and the remaining being of European descent.[136]

Mollendorf in *The Botany of Empire* explores how Thornton's *The Temple of Flora* allegories connects plants, women, and race. Mollendorf makes the claim that "what Thornton did was to combine an old system of categorization based on the Four Continents with Linnaeus's new system of sexual classification."[137] In doing so, *The Temple of Flora* humanized plants and flowers by arranging the female allegorical figures in a hierarchical order from "savagery" to "civility" similar to the allegory of the four continents.[138] Assigning racial and cultural characteristics to the flora of the region further instilled a hierarchical pyramid that privileged Europe and identified itself as a hegemonic power. Mollendorf convincingly illustration how:

> Thornton attempted to control and objectify the uncultivated sexuality of Africa and America through floral prototypes that suggest a symbolic substitution between women and objects. Thornton's images of overseas flowers do not look like women, allegorical or otherwise. Still, their textual transformation from inhuman visual objects into hybrid women-flowers make them ripe for reinterpretation as objects of exotic or colonial desire.[139]

In *The Temple of Flora*, all illustrations of African and American flora are removed from architecture while European and Asian native species are placed in backgrounds with buildings and other forms of civilization. The poems that

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[136] Robert Thornton, *The Temple of Flora*, 1812. Internet Archive, 14. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n3/mode/2up
[137] Mollendorf, 287
[138] Ibid., 10.
[139] Ibid., 285.

accompany the European flora also highlighted "'whiteness, paleness, fairness,' and classical origin" as the color white and pastels are utilized significantly more in European flowers than the other illustrations depicting African or American flora Botany of Empire.[140] In effect, European flora (i.e. Snowdrop, Rose, and Carnation to name a few) became synonymous with the concepts of "modestly, innocent sexuality, and civility" in comparison to exotic plants (i.e. Stapelia or Venus Flytrap).[141] These traits became synonymous to the virtues of European women while the opposite characteristics were imposed on non-European women. Mollendorf's analysis covers each of the four continents and selects only one or two illustrations for each continent to support her theoretically sound argument. She specifically examines the illustration and poem for the African native Stapelia, which personified the plant as a "hag" and "enchantress."[142] While an insightful analysis, there are several other illustrations in *The Temple of Flora* requiring examination to further support Europe's personification of exotic plants to the Black female body.

The Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) appears as the first botanical illustration with an accompanying description and poem in *The Temple of Flora.* Thornton introducing the Snowdrop first is not coincidence; this bulbous perennial described as being "the first-born child of the vernal Flora" is native to Europe.[143] Early records indicate that the Snowdrop established itself in Britain as early as

140 Ibid., 285.
141 Ibid., 285.
142 Thornton, 124 – 125.
143 Ibid., 44.

the 1500s in ornamental gardens and later was viewed as a native-wild British flora in the 1700s.[144] Being the "first born child" of the goddess Flora, Thornton explicitly places Britain at the top of flora hierarchic kingdom while also legitimizing its position based on reproduction.

Though poisonous if ingested, there is no mention of the flower's poisonous properties as with other exotic flora.[145] The poem commissioned for the Snowdrop written by Cordelia Skeeles refers to the flora as being a "humble muse" of "simple beautify" dressed in the "purest white."[146] Here, the poem refers to the Snowdrop as a graceful White woman containing all the positive feminine traits associated with "proper" womanhood in Western society - modest, shy, beautiful, and sexually innocent. However, the opening description before the poem solidifies the binary contrast between the European and African landscape. While the Snowdrop represents the "spotless" and "graceful" landscape of Europe, Thornton begins the introductory description with the following before mentioning the Snowdrop:

> When utter darkness closes the scene, the frog croaks, the owl screeches, and all partake of the solemnity of night. An African scene at this late hour is dreadful indeed! Besides the hissing of serpents, there are the continual barkings of the wolf and jackall, the yell of the tyger, hyaena, and panther, and the roaring of the lion, appalling every heart with fear. With the same judicious harmonizing of parts, the first flower that appears on the verge of winter is the Snow-Drop, of a pale white, with a little green in the three central petals, whose form the poetess thus elegantly depicts.[147]

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[144] "Snowdrop," Woodland Trust, accessed December 23, 2022, https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/plants/wild-flowers/snowdrop/
[145] Ibid.
[146] Cordelia Skeele, "Snowdrop," in *The Temple of Flora*, 44-45.
[147] Thornton, 44.

The choice to draw such a stark comparison between the two landscapes paints Europe as a peaceful and beautiful landscape while condemning Africa as a dangerous and wild geographical unknown. The words “darkness,” “night,” and “late hour” also hint towards a different unknown, one filled with mystery and possibly the occult. There is also the mention of the “hissing of serpents,” a symbol frequently used in images of the personification of Africa in the “four continents’ allegory.

One of the most striking images in *The Temple of Flora* is the Stapelia (*Stapelia gigantea*), a native African plant, which underwent two illustration iterations during its publication. As concluded in Mollendorf’s analysis, the depiction of the Stapelia in Thornton’s work is one of the most notable examples of the personification of flora through the allegory of the female form. Titled originally as the *Maggot-bearing Stapelia*, Mollendorf contends “Thornton’s African plants reflect stereotypical early modern European anxieties about Africa and African women.”[148] Both illustrations of the Stapelia are devoid of any civilization in the background and contain a minimal amount of white. A fly blemishes the beauty of the flower and adverts the focal point from the flower to the insect itself. The plant is accompanied by a serpent hiding underneath as a symbol of Africa and Obeah.

[148] Mollendorf, 298.

Figure 8. *The Maggot-bearing Stapeli*a from *The Temple of Flora* (1801) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). A fly out stages the flower and a snake lurks underneath the plant. Image provided by New York Public Library.[149]

[149] Robert Thornton, *The Maggot-bearing Stapeli*a from *The Temple of Flora* (1801), New York Public Library, accessed December 18, 2022. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-e929-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

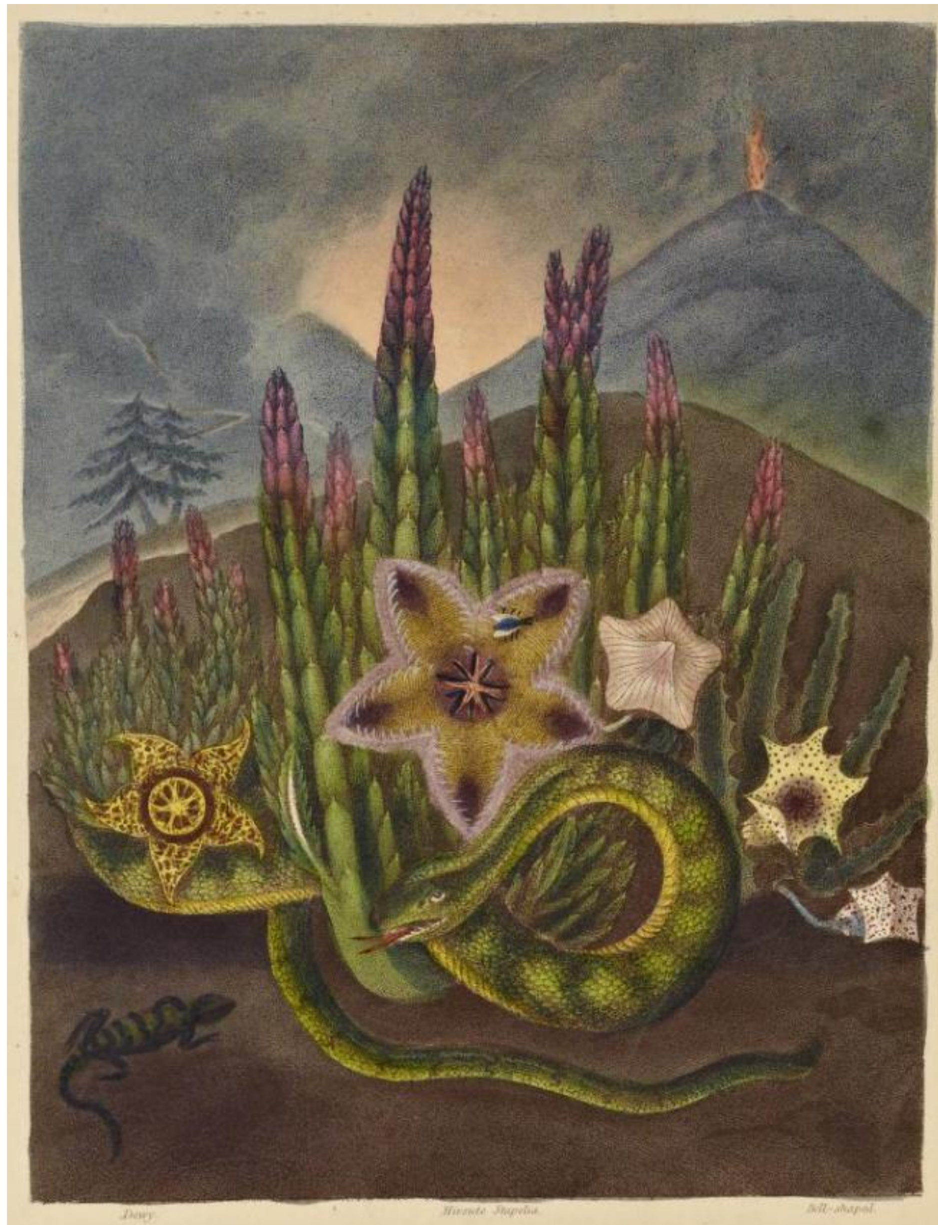

Figure 9. *Stapelia* from second edition of *The Temple of Flora* (1812) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). The snake is in the forefront of the image, a fly is on the main flower, and the background takes on ominous tone with the presence of an erupting volcano. Image provided by Internet Archive.[151]

[151] Robert Thornton, *Stapelia* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812). Internet Archive, 122, accessed December 15, 2022. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n121/mode/2up

The two illustrations of the Stapelia are similar, but not without their differences, between the first edition of *The Temple of Flora* published in 1801 and the quarto edition printed in 1812. The second illustration presents even darker color tones and features an enlarged snake that dominates the picture and a new lizard. The colorful back of the lizard can be interpreted as another poisonous creature added to the landscape. Even more striking is the change in the background scenery as the first illustrations' river and lively greenery is replaced by lightning and a violently erupting volcano spewing ash and rivers of lava. This reprint depicts Africa as an even "darker" continent than the original plate and illustrates the growing anxieties Europeans had about Africa and African people.

Opening the dialog about the Stapelia, Thornton argues "nature has well marked it of the natural order" by describing the plant's ugliness and brutal behavior.[154] He describes the plant as being "dispersed over the arid wilds of Africa" with "hooks like claws" and "speckled like the belly of a serpent."[155] The observation of the plant does not just mention how it dissolves flies as a food source from a scientific perspective, but instead paints a more cannibalistic picture that depicts "the horror of the scene."[156]

In addition to the illustrations, Thornton commissioned the natural history curator of the British Museum, Dr. George Shaw (1751-1813), to compose a

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[154] Thornton, 125.
[155] Ibid., 125.
[156] Ibid., 125.

poem about the Stapelia plant. The sexualized and gendered nature of the poem is palpable as Shaw describes the plant as a “gorgon shape[d]” “hag” who casts “horrid spells” and performs “magic rites.”[157] The relevancy of the poem merits that the whole piece be included:

> Mid the wild heights of Afric's stormy cape,
> The fell Stapelia rears her Gorgon shape ;
> Spreads her rough arms, and turns, with scowling eye,
> Her bearded visage to the thund'ring sky.
> To magic rites she bends her wayward care,
> And with unholy vapours taints the air.
> Distils with fatal art each secret bane,
> And gathers all the poisons of the plain.
> By native instinct, round her drear abode,
> Glides the green snake, or crawls the shapeless toad.
> Lur'd to the hag, by horrid spells subdu'd,
> The care-craz'd mother brings her numerous brood;
> Hears the smooth tale, and trusts in evil hour,
> The tender offspring to her guardian pow'r.
> The subtle fiend assumes a softer air,
> And falsely smiles, and feigns a mother's care:
> But gone the parent, 'mid the cavern's gloom
> The dire Enchantress drags them to their doom;
> In pining atrophy to yield their breath,
> And slowly languish in the arms of death;
> Till, dried each wasted limb, each haggard eye,
> Their shrivell'd forms her hideous rites supply.
> No soft remorse her fell resolves can stay,
> Born of the rocks, as pitiless as they!
> So foul Caniiia,\ with malignant joy,
> Watch'd the slow progress of the buried boy;
> So dire Erichthro, fraught with spells accurst,
> Feign’d pious cares, and murder’d while she nurst!
> So fierce Medea, with relentless eye,
> And soul unmov’d behalf her children die!
> And ruthless plung’d, by demon rage possess’d
> The fatal dagger in each infant breast”[158]

[157] Shaw, “Maggot Bearing Stapelia” from *Temple of Flora*, 124-125.
[158] Thornton, 124-125.

In Shaw's poem, the female personification of the Stapelia portrays "her" as a grotesque and wicked woman who dabbles in the magic arts and is poised to kill with poison. Writers like Thornton and those who contributed to *The Temple of Flora* repeatedly portrayed Africa and all things of African-origin as part of the "Dark Continent."[159] Like early modern English writers who pitched the Black female body against a White female body, writers also subliminally referenced the connection between the Black female body, witchcraft, and their botanical knowledge as in the case of the Maggot-bearing Stapelia.[160] Likewise, enslaved African and Afro-Caribbeans faced similar accusations of practicing "dark traditions" from Africa that fed into the fears of White plantation owners and colonialists.[161]

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[159] O'Neal, 90.
[160] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 14.
[161] O'Neal, 90.

Figure 10. *The Dragon Arum* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). Also known as the Voodoo Lily, the dark purple lily is set against a background with an erupting volcano. Image provided by Internet Archive.[162]

[162] Robert Thornton, *The Dragon Arum* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812). Internet Archive, 116, accessed December 15, 2022. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n115/mode/2up

Another illustration in *The Temple of Flora* is *The Dragon Arum* (Dracunculus vulgaris), also commonly known as the Voodoo Lily, is a tropical plant though the exact origin of the plant is disputed. Over 200 species are believed to exist around the world including Central America and Southeast Asia, though many contend that the plant may be native to the Mediterranean and North African coasts.[164] It now flourishes in the Caribbean in places like Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.[165]

Since the Middle Ages, Europeans have associated the Dragon Arum with magic and medicinal uses, (though some parts of the plant are poisonous), believing it to be an aphrodisiac and a ward against snakes.[168] The illustration of the Dragon Arum is also strikingly similar to the Stapelia with an erupting volcano against a black ash sky, signifying the danger of the plant. The association held with the plant continued well into the early nineteenth century as demonstrated in Thornton's account of the Dragon Arum:

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[164] In my research, I have not been able to find an exact answer to where this plant originated. The majority of sites state it is a tropical plant native to the Mediterranean and North Africa while others have said they belong to southern China and south-east Asia. What is clear is that there are several species of this plant that reside along the Earth's tropical zone. Salmaan Farooqui, "Five Things about the 'Voodoo Lily,' a Plant That's Stinking Up the Calgary Zoo," Calgary Herald, 2016, accessed December 15, 2022. https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/five-things-about-the-voodoo-lily-a-plant-thats-stinking-up-the-calgary-zoo

[165] The Dragon Arum (Dracunculus vulgaris) has several names depending on the region it is located. Some names include the Voodoo Lily, the Snake Lily, the Black Lily, the Devil's Tongue, the Stink Lily, the Corpse Flower, and the Black Dragon. "The Dragon Arum," United States Department of Agriculture, accessed December 15, 2022. https://plants.usda.gov/

[168] Christina Alphonso, "The Ghastly Smell of the Dragon Arum," *MetMuseum*, 2015, accessed December 15, 2022. https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/in-season/2015/the-ghastly-smell-of-the-dragon-arum

> This extremely foetid [sic.] poisonous plant will not admit of sober description. Let us therefore personify it. She comes peeping from her purple create with mischief fraught; from her green covert projects a horrid spear of darkest jet, which she brandishes aloft: issuing from her nostrils flies a noisome vapour, infecting the ambient air: her hundred arms are interspersed with white, as in the garments of the inquisition; and on her swollen trunk are observed the speckles of a mighty dragon; her sex is strangely intermingled with the opposite ! confusion dire ! — all framed for horror.[169]

In this description, Thornton drops all forms of scientific observation arguing it does "not admit of sober description," and therefore, attempts to "personify it."[170] Naturally dark purple in color, almost black, Thornton sexualizes the plant as "she" reveals herself from the leaves and is prone to "mischief." However, her sexuality is also in question as Thornton observes the plant's unique reproductive process. Framing the plant as intersexed simultaneously "others" her from Western society's heterosexual norms while also removes herself from womanhood all together.

The accompanying poem by Frances Arabella Rowden, however, is somewhat contradictory to Thornton's description of the plant. Though both are "framed for horror," Rowden personifies the plant as a cannibalistic mother throughout the short poem. Nevertheless, this juxtaposing portrayal of Black women as both "unwomanly" by also "bad-mothers" continues throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the poem, the Dragon Artum can "sap thy life's blood" by the way of "charm[ing] her victims with a siren's tongue," a kiss by

[169] Thornton, 118.
[170] Ibid., 118.

"mother's sweetest joy." Depictions of African women, and in this case the sexualization of exotic plants, as being "unwomanly" established a division between Africans and Europeans women. Africans became human commodities while justifying Europeans as part of the legitimate human population, an ideology which racial slavery depended on in the Caribbean and Americas.[171]

[171] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 49.

Figure 11. The Queen's Flower from The Temple of Flora (1812) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). Also known as the Bird of Paradise, the plant is set against a tranquil natural landscape. Image provided by Internet Archive.[172]

Another plant in *The Temple of Flora* collection, the Queen's Flower (*Strelitzia reginae*), known today as the Bird of Paradise, showcases British imperialism of the natural world.[174] Prized for its ornamental beauty unlike the above-mentioned native African flora, the South African native Bird of Paradise was first introduced to the Royal Botanical Gardens Kew in Britain by Francis Masson in 1773.[175] Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) gave the scientific name, *Strelitzia reginae*, to the plant in honor of King George III's wife, Queen Charlotte, the Duchess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. However, Thornton provides credit to Sir Joseph Banks instead of Francis Masson for the importation stating, "This is one of the many lovely productions imported from the Cape of Good Hope, introduced into our gardens by Sir Joseph Banks."[176] The illustration portrays a more tranquil paradise in comparison to the background of the 1812 illustrations of the Stapelia and Dragon Arum, with lush rolling hills and palm trees swaying in the backdrop. The color palette also displays more vibrant colors, adding to the generally warmer tone of the piece. In addition to the description, Thornton

[172] Robert Thornton, *The Queen's Flower* from *The Temple of Flora*, 1812. Internet Archive, 102, accessed December 15, 2022. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n101/mode/2up
[174] I will use today's common vernacular for the plant, Bird of Paradise, rather than its former name, Queen's Flower.
[175] "Strelitzia reginae," Plants of the World Online, *Royal Botanic Gardens Kew*, accessed January 3, 2022. https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:798194-1
[176] Thornton, 104.

commissioned a poem by James Henry Pye, with some verses praising British nationalism and its conquest to "improve" the natural order:

> On Afric's southern steep, where Gama's sail
> To the tempestuous clime was first underlined,
> Courting with ample sweet the dangerous gale,
> And op'd to Europe's sons the Eastern World…
>
> ... Advent'rous Banks! Her bolder march pursues,
> Through the rude desert, and the billoy storm,
> And 'mid the elemental conflict views
> The mighty wonders of her awful form...
>
> ...Crown of his labours! This imperial flower,
> Wafted from burning Afric's rugged scene,
> 'Neath Britain's better skies, in happier hour,
> Enjoys the patronage of Britain's Queen.[177]

Ignoring the climatic temperatures required to maintain the Bird of Paradise in Britain, Pye makes the claim that Africa is not the most desirable place for, or deserving of, such an ornate flower to exist. Africa is depicted as an unworthy, "dangerous" place while Britain is portrayed as the most civilized nation in its "happier hour."[178] Only by transplanting the Bird of Paradise under "Britain's better skies" can the plant flourish to its full potential and enjoy its namesake of Queen Charlotte.[179] The personification of the flower as female also insinuates that while in Africa the Bird of Paradise is not in her most beautiful form and only can achieve the pinnacle of beauty by becoming the imperial

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[177] James Henry Pye, "Queen's Flower" in *Temple of Flora*, 104-106.
[178] Ibid.,106.
[179] Ibid., 106.

flower in British gardens. Thus, the flower was “saved” from the wild and her beauty redeemed by growing on British soil.

Figure 12. *The Night-blooming Cereus* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). Illustration shows two Cereuses in full bloom under the night sky. Image provided by Internet Archive.[180]

[180] Robert Thornton, *The Night-blooming Cereus* from *The Temple of Flora*, 1812. Internet Achieve, 96, accessed December 15, 2022. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n97/mode/2up?q=Cereus

Figure 13. *The Passion Flower Quadrangular* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812) by Robert Thornton (1768-1837). The Passionflower grows on a column with buildings in the background, indicating its transportation to Britain, and presumably to the Botanical Gardens Kew. Image provided by Internet Archive.[182]

[182] Robert Thornton, *The Passion Flower Quadrangular* from *The Temple of Flora* (1812), 182, accessed December 15, 2022. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012607053/page/n181/mode/2up?q=Passion

Two flowers native to Jamaica are mentioned in *The Temple of Flora* - the Cereus and Passionflower. Though they are not as outwardly objectified as the African native plants, the scientific naming and sexualization of these two Caribbean florae represents the imperialization of the colonized landscape, and therefore, are worth mentioning. Thornton's description of the Night-Blowing Cerus (*Cactus grandiflorus*) is conflicting as he describes the “Sweet Maiden of the Night” as being “beautiful” but the plant itself being “equally grotesque as terrific.”[184] He also mentions Linnaeus’ scientific naming of the plant, “large-flowering cactus” or *Cactus grandiflorus*, and ignores any previous names given to the plant by native Taino people as with most of the flora kingdom.

Three species of Passionflower present themselves in *The Temple of Flower*, but the Passionflower Quadrangular (*Passiflora quadrangularis*) is a native to Jamaica unlike the other two found in South America.[185] The pillar on which the Passionflower vine grows is a stark difference to the rest of the illustration of non-European flowers since it represents civilization. The inclusion of the classic Doric Roman column suggests the transportation of the Passionflower from its natural tropical habitat into the Kew Gardens, whose columns and trellises the flowers climbed. Behind the column is another decorative building with what appears to be a pine tree in the background.

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[184] Thornton, 96

[185] Thornton describes three different species of Passionflower in the Temple of Flora. The Common Blue Passion Flower (*passiflora caerulea*) originally discovered in Brazil by Spaniards. (170), the winged passion flower (*passiflora alata*) native to South America with “Murucuia is the ancient American name” that “is dropped by Linnaeus” (178), Quadrangular passion flower (*passiflora quadrangularis*) from Jamaica.

Thornton also addresses the transplantation of the Passionflower in the opening description, suggesting that the illustration portrays a Kew specimen, writing "this climbing plant, introduced from Jamaica into our gardens in 1768, by Philip Miller, is supposed to be a variety of the Alata, or winged Passion-flower…As with the other Passion-flowers, it brings to mind the mysteries of our religion."[186]

Similar to the Bird of Paradise, the image suggests that the Passionflower's beauty can only be fully-appreciated and its potential maximized while on British soil. *The Temple of Flora*, like several other documents, mentions the origin of the name Passionflower, dating it to the arrival of the Spaniards in Brazil. Early Spanish missionaries named the flower based on its distinctive structure, believing the flower represented Jesus Christ's crucifixion and the apostles. The accompanying poem written by Loweth draws heavily from the flower's namesake claiming that the flower is the "Heav'nly babe the virgin mother bears," and the focus of the poem describes the biblical event of the crucifixion more than the plant itself.[188]

The Temple of Flora's personified illustrations of flowers embodies British sentiments toward the colonization of the landscape and people. It reveals racial and gendered conventions developing in Britain in relation to plants and colonial ambition. Thornton effectively subjectifies non-European as "other" by drawing from the allegory of the Four Continents and the Linnaeus Sexual System for

[186] Thornton, 183.
[188] Lowth, "The Passion Flower Quadrangular" in *Temple of Flora*, 183.

plant taxonomy. In the words of Mollendorf, the distinction "between personified plants and objectified humans became blurry" in his work and with several other botanical writings at the time.[189] European women and plants became intertwined with virtues deemed proper by a patriarchal modern society; thus, solidifying the role of White women by defining and othering what was non-European. African plants and women found themselves the most objectified, which can be seen in the well-known poem about sugar production in the Caribbean.

Plants and Obeah in *The Sugar-Cane*

Scottish physician and poet, James Grainer (1721–1766) is best known for his long poem *The Sugar-Cane,* published in London in 1764 by R. and J. Dodsley publishing. *The Sugar-Cane* witnessed immediate success and underwent several reprints throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1759, Grainger moved from London to the Caribbean island of St. Kitts where he continued to study medicine in the Caribbean islands while traveling from plantation to plantation providing medical assistance to colonists and slaves. In the same year as the publication of *The Sugar-Cane*, Grainger also authored a disquisition on slave management and medical treatment, *An Essay on the Common West-India Diseases and the Remedies which that Country Itself Produces. To which are Added, some Hints on the Management, &c. of Negroes*, which he supported pro-slavery efforts and the "science" of slave

[189] Mollendorf, 303.

management.[190] Plantation medical treatments systemized in the 1760s, and it's likely Grainger primarily focused on treating enslaved Black populations, who drastically outnumbered colonists. Historian Vincent Brown, for example, argues that approximately 90 percent of the Jamaican population was enslaved and about 93 percent were of known African ancestry by 1788.[191] During his time, Grainger most likely witnessed and recorded African medicinal and botanical knowledge which combined physical and spiritual healing.[192]

Grainger organized his famous poem *The Sugar-Cane* in four books. The first book portrays the fertile environment for cultivating sugarcane, focusing on the soil, geography, and climate of the island of St. Christopher while also mentioning other islands such as Jamaica and Barbados. The second book addresses natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes and other environmental threats to growing sugarcane prosperously such as plant diseases, weeds, and vermin. The third book describes the sugar-making process from harvesting the cash-crop to the sugar-boiling boiling process. In the last book, Grainger recounts enslaved Black culture found on the sugar plantations within his own perspective and argues favorably for the enslavement of Africans. A portion of the last book discusses his perspective of Obeah and his

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[190] William Bond, "The Sugar-Cane. A Poem. (1764): A Scholarly Introduction," *The Early Caribbean Digital Archive.* Boston: Northeastern University Digital Repository Service, 2016. https://ecda.northeastern.edu/item/neu:m0410946n/
[191] Brown, 15.
[192] Kelly Wisecup, "'All Apollo's Arts': Divine Cures, Afro-Caribbean Knowledge, and Healing Poetry in the British West Indies." *Literature and Medicine* 32, no. 2 (2014): 299.

dismissal of the practice as “fraud.”[193] In this section, Grainger connects Obeah with the female personified broom bush, also known as broom-weed (*Spartium scoparius*), jalap (*Ipomoea purga*), and nightshades (the genus Solanum).

Today, broom-weed is used to treat fluid retention in hands and feet, lower blood pressure, and help with urinary flow.[194] Jalap is a strong cathartic or laxative drug. Introduced to Europe in 1565, Jalap became obscure in Western medicine in the nineteenth century since physicians considered it a highly toxic and intoxicating plant.[195] On the other hand, the Solanum is a large plant family of nightshades that include various poisonous flowering plants but also three food crops: the potato, tomato, and eggplant. Linnaeus noted the healing and harmful abilities of the Common Nightshade (solanum dulcamara) stating its use as an anti-inflammatory and fever reducer; however, taken in excess, nightshade is one of the most recognized lethal poisons.[196] However, Grainger’s poem does not address the medicinal uses of the plants, but instead ties the plants to the female, witchcraft, and slavery:

> 'Till morning dawn, and Lucifer withdraw
> His beamy chariot; let not the loud bell
> Call forth thy negroes from their rushy couch:
> And ere the sun with mid-day fervour glow,
> When every broom-bush opes her yellow flower;
> Let thy black labourers from their toil desist:
> Nor till the broom her every petal lock,

[193] James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane*, 1764, Northeastern Library. Early Caribbean Digital Archives, 144.
[194] L. Mike Henry and K. Sean Harris, *The LMD Official Dictionary of Caribbean Herbs and Medicinal Plants and Their Uses* (Jamaica: LMH Publishing, 2002), 6.
[195] Andrew Chevallier, *Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine*, 3rd edition (New York, DK Penguin Random House, 2016), 223.
[196] Ibid., 270-271.

> Let the loud bell recall them to the hoe.
> But when the jalap her bright tint displays,
> When the solanum fills her cup with dew,
> And crickets, snakes, and lizards 'gin their coil;
> Let them find shelter in their cane-thatch'd huts.[197]

In the poem, Lucifer is used as an analogy for night and darkness on the island when enslaved men and women “toil” idlily and rise from their “rushy couch.”[198] It portrays the enslaved not in need of rest but being drawn towards dark activities while being unsupervised during the hours of the night. For a Western audience, the passage undoubtedly stirred up images commonly portraying witchcraft from muttering “strange jargon” to “wild circles forms.”[199] The next stanza, introduces the broom-bush, or broom weed, who becomes the timekeeper and overseer for when enslaved Blacks are expected to work in the field. When she opens “her yellow flower” in the morning to when “her every petal lock” at night, enslaved men and women are forced to work in the fields tending to plantation crops.[200]

Jalap and solanum are mentioned in the next verses, and these two toxic and potentially deadly plants are intertwined with two animals commonly associated with Obeah - the snake and the lizard. Grainger also mentions snakes and lizards a few stanzas earlier in the poem when describing how Obeah practitioners use “A lizard’s skeleton; a serpent’s head” during their spells.[201] The

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[197] Grainger, 146.
[198] Ibid.,146.
[199] Ibid., 145.
[200] Ibid., 146.
[201] Ibid., 145.

verses prior to the ones provided above, provide more context for the "magic spells, in Obia, all the sons of sable Africk trust," and the ominous and occult tone continues to the mention of the various plants.[202] Grainger refers to Obeah as a mere superstition, and as a pro-slavery advocate, he portrays Africans as an ignorant and uncivilized people who believes in nonsense. However, there continues to be a frightful tone to the piece as Grainger is unable to avoid the power Obeah has on enslaved Black culture despite that Obeah had not yet solidified itself as a cause for slave revolts among colonists.[203]

Naughty by Nature: Flowers in *The Botanical Garden*

As botany became increasingly fashionable in the late eighteenth century, many naturalists wrote botanical books incorporating scientific observation and poetry that gained traction among public audiences. Written by British naturalist and poet Erasmus Darwin (1731 - 1801; grandfather of Charles Darwin), *The Botanic Garden (1791)*, a book comprising two long poems, *The Economy of Vegetation* and *The Loves of the Plants*, became a prominent book that used Linnaeus' plant classification taxonomy based on plant reproduction. *The Economy of Vegetation* is a testimony to Enlightenment ideals and the belief in scientific and modern progress. Darwin celebrates the marvels of the steam engine and gunpowder while also depicting inventors and scientists as heroes of

[202] Ibid., 144.
[203] Bond, "The Sugar-Cane. A Poem. (1764): A Scholarly Introduction."

a new era of human progress. He also discusses the wonders of geography and the environmental sciences while providing heavy scientific observation footnotes.

Throughout *The Economy of Vegetation*, Earth is female. She is portrayed as both a nurturing mother and chaotic woman both in need of man to cultivate and tame her. For instance, when describing how "beauty beams amid tremendous fire" of volcanoes, Darwin writes:[204]

> NYMPHS! YOUR fine forms with steps impassive mock
> Earth's vaulted roofs of adamantine rock;
> Round her still centre tread the burning soil,
> And watch the billowy Lavas, as they boil;
> Where, in basaltic caves imprison'd deep,
> Reluctant fires in dread suspension sleep;
> …
> YOU from deep cauldrons and unmeasured caves
> Blow flaming airs, or pour vitrescent waves;
> O'er shining oceans ray volcanic light,
> Or hurl innocuous embers to the night.—[205]

The choice of the word "cauldron" is particularly interesting as it again enforces themes of witchcraft to the audience. Earth and its volcanoes are not only discussed scientifically as a geographical marvel but also personified as a dangerous and disordered woman. The mention of cauldron also paints her as a practitioner of witchcraft creating a brew of molten lava. When paired with Thornton's illustrations of the Stapelia and Dragon Arum in *The Temple of Flora,* both Darwin and Thornton use the volcano to symbolize the female Earth's

[204] Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, The Economy of Vegetation*. Gutenberg Project. Ebook. Line 156 https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9612/pg9612.html
[205] Ibid., Lines 137 - 142 and 149 – 152.

unruly nature and sexuality. Nevertheless, Darwin portrays only the sexual quality of the volcano while Thornton also alludes to race by only having the volcano appear in the background of native-African plants. This is perhaps because Darwin condemned slavery, which is apparent in the poem:

> Hear, oh, BRITANNIA! potent Queen of isles,
> On whom fair Art, and meek Religion smiles,
> Now AFRIC'S coasts thy craftier sons invade
> With murder, rapine, theft,—and call it Trade![206]

Nevertheless, Darwin's Africa continues to take on a dark, ominous tone like other British writers of the period. Even in the stanzas above, Darwin notes the superiority of Europeans to that of Africans stating that "craftier sons" are enslaving their "BRETHREN."[207] The snake also appears frequently throughout the poem including one in relation to Africa where a "silver serpent" lays in the goddess Olympia's arms while overlooking the "daisy'd land" of "Afric's strand."[208] As with several writers and illustrators over time in Europe, the snake became synonymous with everything forbidden in Africa.

Darwin's sexual imagination took flight in the second poem *The Loves of the Plants.* Drawing from Linnaeus' Sexual System in *Systema Naturae* (1735), Darwin uses the stamens (males) and pistils (female) reproductive parts of the plants to produce a visceral image of the sex lives of personified flora from monogamous marriages to polygamy to wanton women. The publication of the

[206] Ibid., Lines 420 – 424.
[207] Ibid., Lines 423 and 428.
[208] Ibid., Lines 235 – 237.

poem did not go without criticism for its overt sexually promiscuous. Darwin himself faced accusations of being an advocate for open polyamorous love, a perception challenging the norms of Western society and their values on monogamous marriage.[209] *The Loves of the Plants* personifies Africa as a wild and unruly woman, and there are also a few stanzas throughout the book that connect some feminized plants to sorcery. Similar to the various "Allegory of the Four Continues" artworks, Darwin paints a similar image in his poem:

> O'ver Afric's stable sons the sultry hours;
> When not a gale flits o'ver her tawny hills,
> Save where the dry Harmattan breaths and kills;
> When stretch'd in dust her grasping panthers lie,
> And wraith'd in foamy folds her serpents die"[210]

Again, Africa is personified as a female with "tawny hills" that allude to a woman's tanned breasts. The Harmattan winds blowing over West Africa during the dry season between November and March possess the capability to kill. In traditional Western culture, witches spread diseases and cause blights by using their breath as well as their ability to create potions to poison the surrounding air and water. The toxicity of a witches' breath dates back to Hippocrates' *Air, Water, and Places* (c. 400 BCE) in reference to wind patterns and accounts of witches poisoning victims with their breath are also found in the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) written by Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer (c. 1430 – 1505).[211] References to toxic breath are also found in Thornton's *Temple of Flora*

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[209] George,119
[210] Darwin, 219
[211] Brenda S. Gardenour Walter, *Our Old Monsters: Witches, Werewolves and* Vampires from Medieval Theology to Horror Cinema (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.,

when describing the native-African Stapelia and Dragon Arum. Undoubtedly, both plants are known to produce an unwelcoming scent that is often comparable to the smell of rotting flesh to attract insects; however, Thornton uses this opportunity to again compare the exotic plants to the occult rather than noting the evolutionary biological function of the plant. The Stapelia whose "unholy vapours taints the air" and the Dragon Arum who "nostrils flies a noisome vapour" alludes to Western perception of witchcraft.[212]

The Loves of the Plants also mentions the Kleinhovia that grows "In Afric's groves with hideous yells" coming from "the dogs of hell."[213] Darwin notes that the Kleinovia is the Ethiopian sour-gourd in the footnotes of the poem that can climb to a towering fifty-five height with a canopy of approximately 150 feet.[214] The personified plant becomes a monstrous female giant, a "grace and terror of Orixa's plains" acting up in "playful violence" to dominate over "her trembling lovers."[215] Kleinhovia is promiscuous, seeking the affection of several lovers, while the men themselves are portrayed as inferior, timid, and weak. Though Darwin opposed the institution of slavery, the poem suggests he viewed Black

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Publishers, 2015), 91. In *Air, Water, and Places*, Hippocrates metaphorically compares the plague winds coming from the south with that of the toxicity of a witch's breath. The early depiction of a witch's capability to breathe poison continues to be used as a metaphor throughout the centuries in Europe. During the medieval period, the *Malleus Maleficarum* written by Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer mentions several causes of witches using their breath to harm their victims. One case includes a tale from Constance where a woman contracts leprosy after a witch blows a warm wind upon her after an argument. In another case, a woman jailed for witchcraft and awaiting trial blows on her jailer's face, and he too contracts leprosy within a few days.

[212] Thornton, 124-125; Thornton, 118.

[213] Darwin, 164.

[214] Ibid., 25.

[215] Ibid., 25 - 26.

people as a subordinate subcategory of the human race when compared to White Europeans. The reference to “Orixa” is unclear but stirs several possible meanings. One possibility is that Orixa is a plant genus, which contains several species of flora. However, Orixa is written in the possessive and in ownership of the plains the Kleinhovia plant grows. Thus, another possibility is its reference to the Yoruba religion of West Africa that made its way to the Caribbean. Orixas (also spelled Orishas or Orichas) are spirits that are an important element to Yoruba religion and other African religious diasporas that derive from it such as Santería, vodou, and Obeah.[216] If this is the case, Darwin makes a direct connection to African sorcery and the female personified Kleinhovia.

Cannibal Plants and Man-Eating Trees

Plants outside of Europe’s native flora continued to be used as allegories for evil and the unknown in English literature well into the late nineteenth century. Though outside the focused timeframe for this thesis, it is worth noting the infamous “man-eating” plants of tropical Africa and Central America that circulated widely in newspapers and journals. In October 1874, the *South Australian Register* newspaper published an article titled “The Man-Eating Tree of Madagascar,” requested by Dr. R.G. Jay who previously presented the

[216] Orixa [Orisha],” *Collins Dictionary*, accessed February 6, 2022. https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/orixa#:~:text=or%20orixa%20(%C9%99%CB%88r%C9%AA%CA%83%C9%99%20),Word%20origin

research at the Willunga Institute. [217] The article also mentions *New York World* printed the story and was originally printed in *Graefe & Walters Magazine*. In the account, the discoverer of the supposed man-eating tree, Carl Liche, discusses his travels to Madagascar where he observed the Mkodo people.

Today, the story is undoubtedly fictional as both the plant and Mkodo people do not exist in the real world, but the wondrous account captured the attention of many. According to Liche, the Mkodos followed no Western approved religion and instead paid "awful reverence" to a "sacred tree."[218] The "black forest" manifested fear to all those who entered the jungle, reiterating many former European writers' attitudes towards Africa's interior. When the Mkodos and Liche approach the tree, he describes the "dark dingy brown" tree as being in the shape of a "pineapple" bearing black leaves similar to the "well-known fossil the crinoid lilystone" with thorny branches.[219] Due to its resemblance to the crinoid lilystone, Liche scientifically named the tree *Crinoida dajenna*. The top of the tree also produced a clear, honey consistent liquid described as "violent[ly] intoxicating and soporific."[220] During his twenty-day journey, he supposedly encountered six more of the same trees despite not being able to provide a

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[217] "The Man-Eating Tree of Madagascar," *The South Australian Register*, Tuesday October 27, 1874.https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/39810790?searchTerm=man-eating%20tree%20madagascar&searchLimits=l-title=41
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.

sample for further observation.[221] However, the article does not solely describe the tree but tells a provocative and horrifying story of human sacrifice:

> My observation on this occasion were suddenly interrupted by the natives, who had been shrieking around the trees with their shrill voices, and chanting what Hendrick told me were propitiatory hymns to the great tree devil. With still wilder shrieks and chants they now surrounded one of the women, and urged her with the points of their javelins, until slowly, and with despairing face, she climbed up the stalk of the tree… she drank of the viscid fluid in the cup, rising instantly again, with wild frenzy… The atrocious cannibal tree, that had been so inert and dead, came to sudden savage life. The slender delicate palpi, with the fury of starved serpents, quivered a moment over her head, then as if instinct with demoniac intelligence fastened upon her… The viscid honey-like fluid, mingled horribly with the blood.[222]

The sacrificed woman who reluctantly climbs the tree and drinks from its nectar is not portrayed as a witch but a common woman. Nevertheless, Liche's story connects women and nature together as well as race. The woman, coming from a "very primitive race" of people who dress "entirely naked" while dancing and chatting around the tree, provokes ideas of sorcery and witchcraft in the British imagination as European witches are often portrayed as dancing wildly and often naked in the forest at night to commune with the Devil.[223] She then ingests a botanical drug that sends her into a dancing frenzy before being devoured by the tree with serpentine vines. After being consumed, the woman, in part, becomes part of the tree itself with her blood intermingled with the plant. The claim is ridiculous at best, and even the *South Australian Register* wrote a disclaimer

[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.

stating, “We are not aware that the existence of this remarkable tree has been confirmed.”[224] However, the search for a man-eating plant in Africa or the American tropics continued throughout the nineteenth century and similar accounts are found in scientific literature.

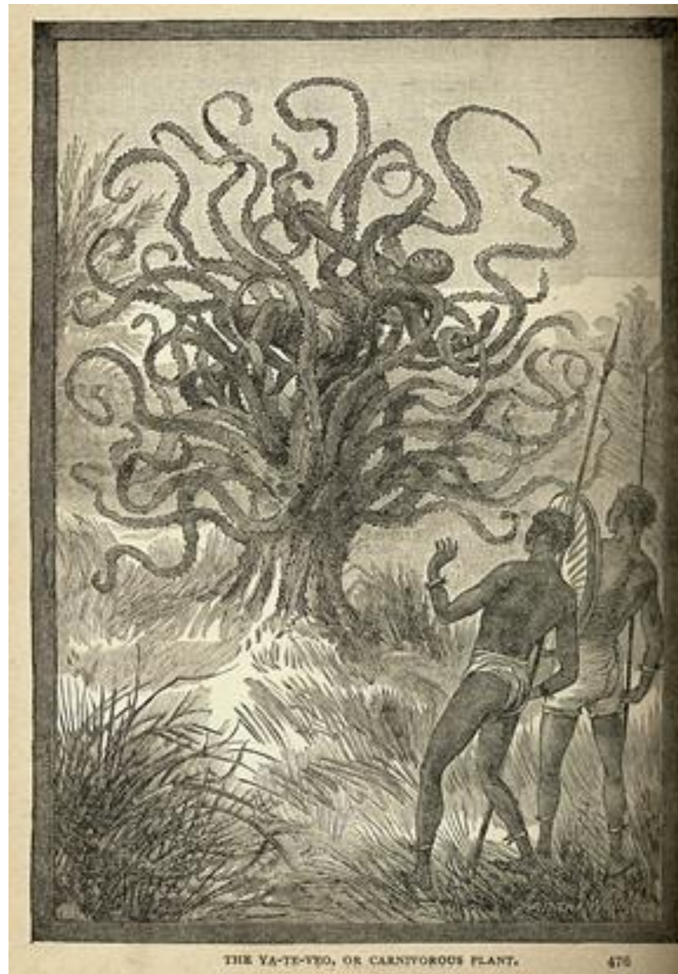

Figure 14. *The Ya-te-veo or Carnivorous Plant* from *Sea and Land: An Illustrated History of the Wonderful and Curious Things of Nature Existing before and since the Deuge* (1887) by James William Buel (1849-1920). The mythical Ya-te-veo tree ensnaring a person with two horrified African warriors watching. Image provided by Internet Archive.[225]

[224] Ibid.
[225] James William Buel, *The Ya-te-veo or Carnivorous Plant* from *Sea and Land: An Illustrated History of the Wonderful and Curious Things of Nature Existing before and since the Deuge,*

Another elaborate account can be found in *Sea and Land: An Illustrated History of the Wonderful and Curious Things of Nature Existing before and since the Deuge (1887)* by American author James William Buel. From tales of sea monsters to interspecies sexual encounters, Buel's natural history is littered with fanciful accounts of mythical creatures and large wild animals over actual descriptions of animal and plant physiology and behaviors. In a chapter dedicated on the "Cannibals and Wild Races of the World," Buel describes a similar cannibalistic tree to that of Liche's story growing in Africa and tropical Central and South America. The account draws a similar description to that of Liche's claim with throned serpentine vines entangling its victim and crushing the body, so as the plant can harvest all of the victim's blood. Moreover, Buel states that the tree produces a hissing sound like a snake that resembles in the Spanish the saying "ya te veo" which translates ominously to "I see you."[227] Therefore, the tree is known as Ya-te-veo in Central America.[228] The Ya-te-veo not only engulfs its victims but contains a lethal poison that kills whoever is pricked by its thorns within a few hours.

1887, Internet Archive, 476.
https://archive.org/details/sealandillustrat00buel/page/476/mode/2up?q=man+eating

[227] James William Buel. *Sea and Land: An Illustrated History of the Wonderful and Curious Things of Nature Existing before and since the Deuge.* Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1887. Internet Archive, 177. https://archive.org/details/sealandillustrat00buel ; The first section of the book focuses on the natural history of the sea titled "Mysteries of the Deep Sea", the second on the natural history of land-animals "The World Ashore", and closes with "Wild Races of the World" with the section "The Cannibals and Wild Races of the World, their Customs, Habits, Ferocity and Curious Ways."

[228] Ibid., 477.

Buel makes a direct reference to women and witchcraft with the Ya-te-veo tree unseen in Liche's man-eating tree account. The account describes how one explorer witnessed an unnamed African tribe utilize the tree as a form of punishment for those practicing evil witchcraft or committing heinous crimes:

> It is a singular thing, and much to be deplored, if such a voracious plant exists, that we can find no description of it in the most elaborate works on botany; and yet hundreds of responsible travelers declare they have frequently seen it, and not only watched it when in a normal condition, but one African explorer declares he once witnessed the destruction of a native who was accidentally caught by one. It has also been asserted that in the Fan country of Africa, criminals and those convicted of practicing witchcraft, are sometimes fed alive to this man-eating plant.[229]

Buel goes further noting the plant "resembles the instrument used in the dark ages for inflicting a tortuous death… this inquisitorial instrument was made, somewhat crudely, to represent a woman, hence the name applied to it was " The Maiden," by which it is still known."[230] The Ya-te-veo tree is thus personified in the female form and in reference to a torturous and violent temptress.

Yet another mention worth briefly noting exists in the scientific journal 1893 issue of T*he Western Druggist*, published in Chicago by G.P. Engelhard and Company. The Nicaragua native plant, identified by an unidentified "great botanist," became vernacularly referred to as the "vampire vine" or "devil's snare" when translated from the native language.[231] A later naturalist named Mr.

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[229] Ibid., 177. The Fan country of Africa may refer to the Southern Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea area of Africa where the Fang (or Fan) live.
[230] Ibid., 177.
[231] "The Cannibal Plant," *The Western Druggist*. 1892, 93 https://books.google.com/books?id=UkbnAAAAMAAJ&dq=vampire+vine+lucifer&pg=PA93#v=onepage&q=vampire%20vine%20lucifer&f=false

Dunstan described the plant as being in the shape of a weeping willow, “dark, nearly black hue” with “a disagreeable animal odor, powerful and nauseating to inhale.”[232] Again, there is reference to the darkness of the plant, both physically and psychologically dark, and the article mentions the horrid odor the plant produces, which is referenced again and again in literature. The author compares the vampire vine to the Venus Fly-trap, yet another plant personified as a cannibalistic temptress in *The Temple of Flora,* and claims topical plants grow to enormous sizes rapidly that it is merely a question if “evolution” has yet to procure a plant on a “large enough scale” to need to feast on humans rather than flies.[233] Similar to the other two accounts, *The Western Druggist* shows reluctance in believing in the plant’s existence, though notes “we can not help hoping very much that the story of the vampire vine will turn out to be true… if the plant really does exist, we shall soon have a specimen at Kew.”[234]

All three accounts over the decades of the late nineteenth century note the writers’ hesitancy to believe in the “discoveries," yet their existence in newspapers and scientific literature suggests there was a general hope that such a plant did exist. If such a plant could be added to the plant kingdom, it would solidify Britain's long held belief that Africa and Central America were truly hellish landscapes that brought death to most who entered. In a transitive manner, the existence of such a plant would also strengthen racial hierarchy beliefs as race,

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[232] Ibid., 93
[233] Ibid., 93.
[234] Ibid., 93.

sex, and gender crossed from human identity constructs and into the natural world.

Conclusion

Considered the father of modern botany, Carl Linnaeus created a taxonomy system founded on the male and female reproduction parts of flowers, which became known as the Linnaeus Sexual System. Through nature had been personified through the female body centuries earlier, as seen in the allegory of the “four continents,” Linnaeus famously constructed human-plant analogies and wedding metaphors that inspired botanical writers in the eighteenth century that further propelled the association of women with nature.[235] As a result, literary botany became a ground for the discourse of the female sex and emblematic of the virtues desired in European women. While native European flora personified virtuous traits associated with and expected of White women, “exotic” flora embodied the sinful aspects of women that, in effect, reflected the perceived traits of non-European women. In other words, European flora became synonymous with the representation of nature as bountiful and nurturing, while non-native European flora represented the chaotic and untamable side of Mother Nature.

Either tied to the “Dark Continent” narrative or through the missionary belief to “save” Africa from itself, African plants faced degradation as did its’

[235] George, 1.

people. African plants were either sexualized as unruly women tied to witchcraft and cannibalism like the Stapelia in the *Temple of Flora*, or they fit into the missionary narrative. Like the Jamaican Passion Flower or Bird of Paradise in the *Temple of Flora*, transplanting African botanicals in the Kew Garden and other botanical institutions signified the tamability of nature, from wild landscapes to domestic gardens, and from savage beauty to full aesthetic potential. Writers and explorers even went to the length of fabricating mythical and cannibalistic flora to project their beliefs about the untamed and dangerous landscapes in the tropics.

In addition, the inclusion of snakes in illustrations and poems symbolically referenced African witchcraft as the British connected African healing and spiritual practices to Egyptian snake worship. Africans forced into slave labor in the Caribbean brought their medicinal and botanical knowledge from their homeland, which combined physical healing with the spiritual. British physicians and botanists greedily sought their knowledge of medicinal plants, but colonials continued to negatively associate Black women healers with witchcraft or rebellion.

CHAPTER TWO

SORCERESSES, POISONERS, AND REBELS: OBEAH WOMEN AND THE "MAGIC OF RESISTANCE"

Ha! I'm the Obeah woman, above pain
I can eat thunder and drink the rain
I kiss the moon and hug the sun
And call the spirits and make 'em run.

— Nina Simone
Lyrics from "Obeah Woman" (1973)[236]

While exotic flora was depicted as sensual, immoral, monstrous, and luxuriant, these traits extended from the plant kingdom to women and reinforced negative stereotypes already placed on the Black female body. This chapter explores this connection further by evaluating Westerners long-time association of women and botany as something to fear, from killing their enemies with poison to malignant witches. Misunderstood by White colonists, British writers and colonists demonized Obeah and perpetuated fictitious portrayals that connected Obeah with the Western understanding of witchcraft. Similar to midwives from Medieval Europe, the association of witchcraft with female power and reproduction extended to enslaved female healers. Originally ridiculed for their superstitious beliefs, Obeah men and Obeah women became figures that struck fear into the minds of several plantation owners as it reevaluated enslaved-

[236] Nina Simone, "Obeah Woman," Track 8 on *It Is Finished*, 1973, accessed April 3, 2022. https://genius.com/Nina-simone-obeah-woman-lyrics

enslaver relationships and became associated with slave rebellions and assassination.

British Imperialism and Systems of Domination in the Caribbean

Between 1525 and 1866, over 12 million African people were abducted and sent aboard slave ships across the Atlantic, and even hundreds of thousands more African descendants born with slave status in the New World were internally trafficked in the Americas.[237] Unfortunately, the lack of documentation means it is impossible to truly know how many African women lives were uprooted as they were sold into slavery. However, historians continue to ponder the question and seek to better understand enslaved women's experiences in the New World. In her most recent work, historian Jennifer Morgan discovered that nine out of ten voyages failed to provide shipping records of sex rations of enslaved Africans on board. Examining ship records over a hundred-year period, between 1700 to 1800, "only 2,396 of 21,001 ships provided information on the number of women on board."[238] Of those who did maintain records, she estimates averages that 37 percent of enslaved Africans aboard these ships were women.[239]

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[237] "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Estimates," Slave Voyages, accessed January 3, 2022. https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates?selected_tab=timeline. Slave Voyages is the largest public database to date archiving slave and ship records of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to date.
[238] Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 51.
[239] Ibid., 31.

Of the estimated 12 million enslaved Africans, approximately 45 percent landed on the shores of the Antilles. Referred to as "a truly horrific social experiment" by historians Stephan Palmie and Francisco Scarano, the Caribbean defined itself as the oldest theater of European imperial expansion and an initiator of modern-day capitalism on which slavery was based.[240] It is on these islands that Plantationocene economies developed, or as historian Philip Curtin identified as the South Atlantic System. These complex economies centered on the production of tropical commodities by colonists for the consumption of European homelands based on African and Amerindian forced free labor.[241]

The Caribbean experienced swift ecological and demographic changes from the Columbian Exchange, beginning with Spain's colonial conquest in the New World in 1492. Home to the native Taino people, the collapse of the Antilles Indigenous population resulted in the demographic transformation of the Caribbean by White colonists and enslaved Africans.[242] During the 1520s, the region known as Hispaniola began to see the first modern labor-intensive plantation system, primarily in sugar-cane cultivation, as well as the development of gold mining. Tainos and other Amerindian forced labor met most of the early

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[240] Stephan Palmie and Francisco Scarano, Introduction in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6-7.
[241] Ibid., 6.
[242] Scholars are unaware of the name the Indigenous peoples of the Antilles called themselves. Therefore, Taino is a term used by scholars to identify the native peoples who lived on the islands. According to historian L. Antonio Curet, European colonists first heard the term Taino in 1493 during Columbus' second voyage while on Guadeloupe. The term taino meaning "good" or "noble" in Arawakan was used as an adjective to describe themselves. L. Antonio Curent, "The Earliest Settlers," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) ,54.

labor demands along with European indentured servitude; however, records indicate Africans were in the Caribbean as early as 1518.[243] As the Amerindian population quickly dwindled due to disease, famine, rebellion, and exploitation, the need to find a new labor source and European colonists' gazes turned quickly to Africa. By the 1530s, a total of 34 sugar-mills operated in Hispaniola, relying on the multitude of sugar-cane plantations cropping up over the decades with enslaved population of about 25,000 Africans by the middle of the sixteenth century. [244] Spanish colonies continued to produce topical commodities for the next three centuries until the ninetieth century. However, by the start of the seventeenth century, Spain's plantation system experienced continuous decline.

Other European powers, particularly the British, Dutch, and French, attempted to gain control over some part of the Spanish empire by the 1560s. In addition to governmentally endorsed piracy aimed at weakening the Spanish, other European powers started cultivating plantation on less appealing islands to chip away at Spain's monopoly of the Caribbean.[245] By the mid-seventeenth century, Britain took control of a substantial part of the Antilles - St. Christopher in 1624, Barbados in 1627, Nevis in 1628, Providence in 1630, Antigua in 1632, Montserrat in 1632, and Jamaica in 1655. Britain's control of Barbados proved to

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[243] Jalil Sued-Badillo, "From Tainos to Africans in the Caribbean," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 109.
[244] Stephan Palmie, "Toward Sugar and Slavery," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 135.
[245] Ibid., 138-139.

be a turning point in the power relations. Britain established its first slave-based plantation in Barbados, and eventually, the island became Britain's most valuable island in the New World by 1680.[246] By 1673, the population of Barbados reached about 55,000 with the enslaved Black population outnumbering the European colonist population by three to two.[247]

Britain's conquest of Jamaica in 1655 marked another defining moment in Caribbean colonial history and further illustrated the shifting power dynamics of European empires. According to historian Alison Games, the control of Jamacia in British hands ended the frontier stage of imperial expansion and indicated "a new era of plantation settlement."[248] By the late seventieth century, the shifting geopolitical climate of Europe clearly favored Britain. Changing social and economic environments by the mid seventieth century required a new and more sustainable labor model, which consequently led, to the climax of the transatlantic slave trade. This new system placed African enslaved labor at the center of production. Though historians continue to debate the actual numbers of enslaved peoples in the slave trade, it is estimated that British Jamaica alone imported appropriately one million enslaved Africans between 1655 and 1807.[249] After Britain's acquisition of Jamaica, the island became the largest sugar

[246] Ibid.,138-139 and 145.
[247] Alison Games, "The Atlantic Framework of 17th Century Colonization," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 197.
[248] Ibid., 200.
[249] Palmie and Scarano, 8.

producer from 1750 to 1830.[250] Despite sugar production peaking in the 1750s, Jamaica by itself produced approximately 50,000 tons of sugars by 1774 across its 775 sugar plantations. Enslaved populations also continued to outnumber White colonists. By 1774, over 193,000 enslaved Africans resided and worked on the island in comparison to the 18,000 colonists who oversaw them.[251]

However, the British Caribbean faced various challenges by the end of the eighteenth century. The lack of agricultural diversification created pressure on provisions and pushed the colonial system to its limits. Though provisions continued to grow on the island, the planation economy focused on producing sugar and other cash crops that eventually make their way across the Atlantic to Britain and not in the hands of colonists. The American Revolution further affected the economy of the British Caribbean by isolating the islands even more from urban markets.[252] The war and its aftermath resulted in a seven-year famine from 1780 to 1787, and it is estimated that 15,000 enslaved Africans in Jamaica died from starvation.[253] Political unrest also continued to increase between British plantation owning colonists and local officials as regional and ruling government often had contradicting views of how to manage the colonies. The largest debate focused on the institution of slavery.

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[250] Selwyn H.H. Carrington, and Ronald C. Noel, "Slaves and Commodities: The Caribbean in the South Atlantic System," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 241.
[251] Ibid., 240.
[252] Ibid., 240.
[253] Ibid., 241.

As European antislavery sentiments rose and conversations of ending the transatlantic slave trade increased, plantation owners shifted their attention away from Africa and into the wombs of enslaved women. On March 25, 1807, the British government announced the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. While the act of capturing and selling Africans became illegal, the practice of slavery remained legal in the colonies.[254] Natural reproduction gained new importance as women's reproductive value came to represent the continuation of slave-labor and plantation life for wealthy colonists who claimed ownership over human beings. Some plantation owners viewed the opportunity to invest in women reproductive capacities optimistically as "breeders" to avoid the heightening taxes on the slave trade.[255] By solely viewing enslaved women's productive and reproductive capacities, the commodification of Black women meant they existed simultaneously within and outside of womanhood. Black women were undeniably mothers but describing women as "breeders" portrayed enslaved women on the

[254] Abolitionists believed ending the trade would abruptly halt the commodification of Africans. In fact, any British ships leaving Africa harboring enslaved people, were deemed pirate vessels subject to capture by the British Royal Navy. However, the shortage of government intervention meant that some African slaves continued to be transported to Caribbean. Between 1807 to 1860, the British Royal Navy intercepted 1,600 illegal slave ships and freed 160,000 Africans, but how many slave ships managed to reach the shores of the Antilles and sell commodified humans on the black market is unknown. Diana Paton, "The Abolition of Slavery in the Non-Hispanic Caribbean," in *The Caribbean A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, ed. Stephan Palmie and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 291; "Chasing Freedom: The Royal Navy and the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade," Achieve History, Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past and the Institute of Historical Research, accessed March 22. https://archives.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/museums/chasing.html#:~:text='Between%201807%20and%201860%2C%20the,'

[255] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 227.

fringes of animality and apart from being identified as part of the legitimate human population.[256]

Many enslaved Africans and those born in the Americas rose to challenge the institution of slavery throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across the New World. Today, perhaps the two most well-known liberation movements besides the Haitian Revolution in 1791 took place in Jamaica – the First Maroon Wars in the 1720s and Tacky War, also known as the Tacky Rebellion, in 1760. Contrary to previous beliefs, contemporary historians actively acknowledge women's participation in slave resistance and dismiss the notion that enslaved women passively accepted their condition.[257] In particular, those who practiced Obeah and other healing practices often had great influence in their communities to spur retaliations and the methods to liberate themselves. As a result, Obeah women in British literature are portrayed as something to fear as they challenge both the institution of slavery and gender norms placed by male White colonialists. In fact, many women were attracted to the practice of Obeah as a "magic of resistance."[258] Obeah provided free and enslaved Black women with social and economic advantages and a form of autonomy that were less available to them otherwise since the patriarchal colonial society often imposed barriers that made them more vulnerable to poverty and violence.

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[256] Ibid.,104.
[257] See Jenny Sharpe's *Ghosts of Slavery* and Jennifer Morgan's *Reckoning with Slavery*.
[258] "Obeah and Gender," Early Caribbean Digital Achieves, Northeastern University, accessed February 20, 2022. https://ecda.northeastern.edu/home/about-exhibits/obeah-narratives-exhibit/obeah-and-gender/

“Black Magic” Women and Resistance

Obeah entails several aspects that it is difficult to determine an inclusive definition of the practice. Described as Caribbean or African witchcraft by European colonists that has held sway for centuries, scholars have only recently begun to dismantle Western assumptions and the definition of the practice. Eighteenth century Jamaican physician and surgeon, for instance, Benjamin Mosely (1742–1819) considered Obeah as a superstition “for the purposes of bewitching people [using]… some potent roots, weeds, and bushes, of which Europeans are at this time ignorant.”[260] Overall, most scholars who study Obeah today accept that it “is a complex and hard-to-define term that has contested West African etymologies” and is viewed as a justice-making spiritual healing “experiment” or “science” by practitioners.[261] The origins of Obeah and the name itself is unknown; however, most scholars acknowledge that people taken from several regions of Africa, particularly the Gold Cost, combined their beliefs and rituals to develop Obeah.

Independent researcher Eugenia O’Neal has revealed that Obeah underwent three different portrayals in British literature after the colonization of Africa and the Antilles. In the early years of European expansion in the sixteenth century, European Christians viewed Africa’s religious diaspora as a devil-

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[260] Benjamin Mosely, *Treatise of Sugar*, 1800, Internet Archive, 190, https://archive.org/details/b24925123/page/190/mode/2up
[261] Crosson, xi.

worshipping religion entrenched in “black magic.” Europeans’ association of whiteness with sacredness and purity countered the perception of blackness with evil and immorality. O’Neal contends 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.”[262] She argues that Europeans often believed wild men possess the ability to shapeshift into different animals while the “wild woman was said to be knowledgeable about medicinal herbs.”[263] Moreover, she contends wild women represented unconstrained sexuality and commonly associated with carnal demons like the succubus, and “those who did not worship the Devil outright were said to worship snakes.”[264] As seen in the previous chapter, the association of plants, womanhood, witchcraft, and sexuality or a combination of these themes merged in both British literature and artwork.

The second depiction of Obeah began during the Enlightenment period and the passing of the Witchcraft Act in 1735 by the British Parliament, which is examined further in the next chapter. Though writers continued to romanticize Obeah and distort the practice as witchcraft, perceptions of Obeah changed from British subjects believing in Obeah as actual supernatural rituals to being a “savage” practice believed by “backwards” people. However, this is not to say that all White colonists dismissed Obeah as superstition. On the contrary, some

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[262] O’Neal, 90.
[263] Ibid., 18.
[264] Ibid., 18 and 24.

British colonists believed in the power of Obeah, and due to its impact on both Black and White Creole culture, everyone was aware of the practice.[265]

Attitudes towards Obeah shifted once more when British colonists associated the practices with slave revolts. Originally viewed as superstition, Obeah struck fear into the hearts and minds of plantation owners who began to see the influence Obeah had on inspiring enslaved Africans to challenge the institution of slavery. One of the most recognized rebellion leaders was Queen Nanny, a self-liberated woman from Jamaica who led the First Maroon War in Blue Mountains of Jamaica from 1728 to 1740. In 1975, the Jamaican government recognized Nanny as a National Heroine, and she is featured on Jamaican $500 dollar.[266]

Historians do not know when Nanny was born nor when she died since conflicting accounts exist of her being alive even after being killed in 1733. In the *Journal of the Assembly of Jamaica* published in March 1733, she supposedly died after being shot by William Cuffee, a “loyal slave” in a British band of soldiers, who managed to kill “the rebels old obeah woman.”[267] Today, Nanny is believed to have been born to the Ashanti in present-day Ghana before becoming enslaved and sold in Jamaica. After escaping slavery with her four brothers, Nanny rose as a Maroon leader and established Nanny Town where

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[265] Ibid., 5.
[266] Sharpe,17.
[267] Mavis Christine Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal*. (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990) 177.

she is believed to have led over 800 people.[268] Nanny posed such a threat by representing the collapse of the institution of slavery that the British decided to place a bounty on her death or capture.[269] In fact, it was the first time the British used the term Obeah as a campaign technique to rally colonists against a self-liberated Maroon.[270]

Historian Jenny Sharpe has written considerably on the mysterious Nanny whose life primarily survives due to oral accounts and a few British written records. Skilled in "bush chemistry," Nanny was an Obeah woman who used her botanical knowledge to provide to her community's spiritual, medicinal, and provision needs, as well as provide protection.[271] According to oral accounts, Nanny successfully defeated a whole British battalion singlehandedly by placing a cauldron of boiling water without a fire onto a narrow pathway. When each solider glanced into the pot, they were compelled to fall off the cliff.[272] Stories also tell of her ability to grow pumpkins for food within a few days from magical pumpkin seeds and her capability to camouflage so well into the landscape it was thought she were invisible. She possibly used Spirit Weed to make herself unseen. As Maroon legend tells, Spirit Weed collected during the full-moon had the power to make a person invisible when they chewed on the roots and was

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[268] Sharpe, 7; Ian Bernard, "Queen Nanny of the Maroons (? – 1733)," *Black Past*, March 1, 2011, accessed March 21, 2022. https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/queen-nanny-maroons-1733/
[269] Sharpe, 25.
[270] Ibid., 3.
[271] Ibid, 17.
[272] O'Neal, 125 – 126.

commonly used by Maroons during their guerilla tactics to resist British soldiers.[273]

According to Sharpe, in Maroon history, “Nanny is not simply identified with nature… she is also identified as a woman who had power over nature” while British literature portrayed her inversely as a “hag” or “old” woman.[274] In British written accounts, Sharpe further contends that Nanny’s “female-gendered agency is reduced to nature so that a powerful Black woman can be made to represent an unconquered land that needed to be tamed.”[275] For British colonists, Nanny represented ultimate female autonomy and threated Anglophone racial and gender social structures in the colonies. As such, she is portrayed as a practitioner of witchcraft by writers, drawing on classical stereotypes of European witches as old and malignant women who did fit into women’s roles in a patriarchal society.

The largest uprising of enslaved Africans known as the Tacky’s War ensued on Easter morning April 7, 1760, in Jamaica. Inspired by the Maroon Wars, the revolt was led by an African-born enslaved man named Tacky for whom the rebellion is named. The attack began by killing the White plantation owners and overseers of Frontier and Trinity plantation, though the Trinity plantation owner escaped, before the group moved to Fort Haldane and

[273] Henry and Harris, 52.
[274] Sharpe, 16.
[275] Ibid., 16.

confiscated four barrels of gunpowder and forty firearms.[276] The series of raids and attacks over the coming year ending with the rebels defeat at Wager against the British militia and hired Maroons on the opposite side of the island. A total of sixty White colonists died during the fight along with the four hundred self-liberated Africans who joined the rebellion.[277] An additional hundred enslaved Africans faced execution after the rebellion and five hundred more were shipped to British Honduras to prevent further disturbances.[278]

Several Obeah men and women joined the resistance and inspired many uprisings following the initial revolt, possibly including the obeah woman and Ashanti warrior queen Cubah Cornwallis also known as Queen Akua or the Queen of Jamaica. Unfortunately, the lack of historical documentation makes piecing her legacy difficult and any hope of restoring her existence is a fragmented one.[279] Some have argued she was a maturely aged woman by the time she was selected to led subsequent slave rebellions after Tacky's death. In that leadership role, she fought with Tacky's allies until her capture and execution in 1761.[280] Other timelines suggest she was only around the age of twenty at the time of the Tacky's War and most likely uninvolved. Known as Cubah Cornwallis,

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[276] Samuel Momodu, "The Tacky's War (1760 – 1761)," Black Past, December 2021, accessed February 20, 2022. https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/tackys-war-1760-1761/
[277] O'Neal, 45.
[278] Ibid., 45.
[279] Unfortunately, I could not find enough information about Cubah Cornwallis. Though she existed, tracing her history is a difficult one, and I found many various and conflicting accounts about her.
[280] Kesse, "Queen Akua, Ghanaian slave who became a Queen in Jamaica," Ghanaia Museum, April 2020, accessed February 20, 2022. https://ghanaianmuseum.com/akua-the-influential-slave-healer-who-became-queen-in-jamaica-but-was-executed-by-the-british/

rather than Queen Akua, she eventual became a free and well-known Obeah woman consulted for her herbal medicine. This version of Cubah Cornwallis died in 1848 after living an exceptionally long life, since documentation exists noting her as a skilled healer as early as 1780. Though an elusive figure, and perhaps more legend than real, Cubah Cornwallis demonstrates the power and influence Obeah women had on the Jamaican community either by resisting slavery or be treating the ill.

Figure 15. *Obeah Women Resisting* from "An Act for the substance, clothing, and the better regulation and government of slaves, for enlarging the powers of the council of protection; for preventing the improper transfer of slaves; and for other purposes" (1816). Western depiction of African women dancing and performing rituals. Image provided by Early Caribbean Digital Archives[281]

[281] *Obeah Women Resisting*, from "An act for the substance, clothing, and the better regulation and government of slaves, for enlarging the powers of the council of protection; for preventing the improper transfer of slaves; and for other purposes" (1816), "Obeah and Gender," Early Caribbean Digital Achieves, Northeastern University, accessed February 20, 2022. https://ecda.northeastern.edu/home/about-exhibits/obeah-narratives-exhibit/obeah-and-gender/

Figure 16. *La Mama-snekie, ou water-mama, faisant ses conjurations* by Pierre Jacques Benoit and Jean-Baptiste Madou, 1839. Western depiction of an Obeah woman preparing a spell or remedy for a client. A large dead snake hangs on the wall along with Voodou dolls and figurine of a demon or devillike creature. A pig and a cat watch the preparations. Image provided by The John Carter Brown Library.[283]

The role of Obeah practitioners in inspiring enslaved Africans to fight back against the system struck fear into plantation owners, and by the end of the Tacky's War, the words Obeah and rebellion became interconnected. Within less than a year of the rebellion, the Jamaica Assembly passed "An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves" making the island the first colony in the Antilles to constitute Obeah as a crime:

> And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women, pretending to have Communication with the Devil and other evil

[283] Pierre Jacques Benoit and Jean-Baptiste Madou, *La Mama-snekie, ou water-mama, faisant ses conjurations,* 1839, The John Carter Brown Library, accessed April 17, 2022. https://jcb.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet/detail/JCB~1~1~594~230107:36--La-Mama-snekie%2C-ou-water-mama%2C-?qvq=q:madou&mi=7&trs=26

> spirits, whereby the weak and superstitious are deluded into a Belief of their having full Power to exempt them whilst under their Protection from any Evils that might otherwise happen…any Negro or other Slave who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power, and be detected in making use of… Materials relative to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft in order to delude and impose on the Minds of others shall upon Conviction thereof before two Magistrates and three Freeholders suffer death or Transportation any thing in this Act or any other Law to the contrary notwithstanding.[285]

Other European colonies followed suit in the following decades, and by the end of slavery in 1838, almost every Caribbean colony outlawed the practice. By denouncing Obeah instead of witchcraft, the Jamaican authority was able to target enslaved people's spiritual values as superstition on the basis of backwardness rather than admitting to the belief of real magic, which directly countered modern scientific believes circulating during the Enlightenment.[286] However, Obeah continued to be an influential practice that strengthened the enslaved and free Black communities of the Caribbean, and some documents suggest that laws did little to prevent the practice from occurring. For instance, eighteenth century Jamaican surgeon-general Benjamin Mosley remarked that "Laws have been made in the West Indies to punish this Obian practice with death; but they have been impotent and nugatory."[287]

As the Jamaican Assembly acknowledges in the bill, Obeah women, not just men, played a valuable role in enslaved communities and were regularly

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[285] "An Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760," Obeah Histories: Researching Prosecution for Religious Practice in the Caribbean, accessed April 3, 2022. https://obeahhistories.org/1760-jamaica-law/

[286] Diana Paton, "Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2012): 240.

[287] Mosely, 194.

sought after for their spiritual and medicinal knowledge. Some scholars even suggest Obeah women have been equally (or more renowned) and often leading figures to their male counterparts due to matriarchal religious and societal structures of many African nations.[288] At the time, most colonists did not have the same sentiment. Mosely who "considered obeah akin to quackery" considered Obeah mens' practices superior to women. His sexist perspective is quite transparent when he wrote:

> In general, obi-men are more sagacious than obi-women, in giving, or taking any diseases, and in the application of poisons… It is the province of the obi-woman to dispose of passions. They fell foul winds for inconsistent mariners; dreams and phantiasies [sic.] for jealousy; vexation, and pains in the heart, for perfidious love.[289]

Thus, women are sexualized and undermined for their healing knowledge, suggesting they dabble in love potions and hexes, whereas men's practices, even if considered quackery, are deemed more impactful as they handled cases between life and death.[290] In the view of Mosely, the Obeah woman was a feigning witch whereas the Obeah man was a charlatan healer. Mosely's view of Obeah women, however, did not speak for all colonists and their views of female practitioners.

The presence of Obeah women in newspapers demonstrates colonists' concerns over the practice and their association with rebellion and poisoning to

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[288] Sharpe, 22.
[289] Mosley, 192.
[290] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 88.

Obeah practitioners. Originally founded in 1779 as the *The Jamaica Mercury and Kingston Weekly Advertiser* by David Douglass and William Aikman, the Jamaican newspaper changed to the *Royal Gazette* after receiving government patronage in 1780. The newspaper targeted White colonists and plantation owner, and frequently featured sections regarding rewards for self-liberated Africans who left plantations and court cases regarding incriminated enslaved Africans. In the July 1815 issue of the *Royal Gazette*, the section discussing slave court proceedings mentions an enslaved African woman named Deborah working on the Duckworth plantation. Deborah is tried for practicing Obeah and for "meditating the death of Charles W. Williams, Esq. her master."[291] She is found guilty of the practice and contemplating murder and is then deported off the island to another unknown place. Similarly, the October 1813 issue mentions an enslaved woman named Violet who was also accused of Obeah after finding "in her possession Obeah implements."[293] The article claims she had already been brought to court earlier that year in April and found guilty of Obeah and poisoning two enslaved men. She was exiled off the island, but somehow was found "selling different articles" on Upper-King Street in Montego Bay, Jamacia.[294] She is attained and brought before the local Magistrate awaiting trial, and the article ends saying the case requires further investigation.

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[291] *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, Saturday July 8, 1815, No. 27. *British Newspaper Achieves.*
[293] *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, Saturday October 16, 1813. *British Newspaper Achieves.*
[294] Ibid.

With Black populations significantly outnumbering White colonists, plantation owners were often concerned about being killed by those they enslaved either through revolts or more covertly through poison. Examining the correlation between Obeah and the political climate of the Caribbean, historian Diana Paton observes:

> Poisoning and witchcraft were separate crimes that shared some key characteristics, including secrecy and an association with women. Thus, while conceptually separable, the two crimes were likely to call one another to mind. Moreover, although poisoning and witchcraft were distinct crimes, the former could be considered an aspect of the latter.[295]

Considered a women's weapon of choice, plantation owners grew suspicious of the Black women they enslaved, especially those who were familiar with a variety of plants. While poison did not necessarily correlate to Obeah, Obeah practitioners became intrinsically linked to poisoners due to their botanical knowledge. Thus, witchcraft developed into a subcomponent of a greater panic among plantation owners - the fear of being poisoned.

Where the Poisonous Plants Grow

Many of those who believed they owned human property had concerns over being poisoned by those they enslaved, and Africans' superior botanical knowledge meant they often could distinguish between which plants could heal and which could harm. As a result, many plantation owners were weary of the plants that grew in enslaved African's provision gardens and in the tropical

[295] Paton, "Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery," 240.

mountains. Keeping in mind the association between witchcraft and poison, Reverend William James Gardner (1825 – 1874) noted in his work *A History of Jamaica* that Obeah practitioners were “well versed in all the vegetable poisons of the island, and sometimes had them planted in his garden.”[296]

To supplement the minimal provisions provided by enslavers, if any were granted at all, enslaved Africans cultivated their own food on small plots of land known as provision gardens. Plantation owners often allocated land deemed unsuitable for commodity production to those they enslaved, often found on the periphery of plantation estates. Provision gardens granted enslaved women and men a form of minimal autonomy within the plantation system. Judith Carney has spent most of her academic career exploring African food diaspora and Africa botanical impact on the New World. Defined as "botanical gardens of the dispossessed," these gardens were where African and New World "seed and root crops, fruit trees, and medicinal plants were interplanted.”[297] These gardens provided slaves with some minimal control over their lives while living on the plantation by giving them more choice over what they consumed for food or medical treatment.

Both enslaved women and men tended to their crops at nightfall after a strenuous day in the plantation fields or during a day of rest, usually a Saturday or Sunday, if their enslavers allowed a day off to care for provisions. Scottish

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[296] William James Gardner, *A History of Jamaica from its Discovery by Christopher Columbus to the Present Time* (London: Elliot Stock, 62 Paternoster Row, E.C. 1873), Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/ahistoryjamaica01gardgoog/page/n6/mode/2up
[297] Carney, “Subsistence in the Plantationocene,” 123.

slavery abolitionist and statistician Zachary Macaulay (1768 - 1838) wrote that provision gardens were the only means enslaved Blacks received food in Jamaica, stating ""[i]f, therefore, they neglected to employ in their provision-grounds a sufficient portion of the Sunday, to secure to them an adequate supply of food, they might be reduced to absolute want."[298] However, there is room to suggest that enslaved women were the primary caretakers of these allotted plots. During his time in Jamaica, travel writer and novelist William Beckford (1760 - 1844) wrote a detailed account of his experiences while on the island titled *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*. Being a plantation owner, his writing heavily conveys pro-slavery sentiments, and at one point in his work, he makes the comment that "the women, [are] to plant provisions upon the estates (their grounds in the mountains having been previously attended to)" for the rest of the day.[299]

Autonomy over the provision grounds generated paranoia among plantation owners. On the one hand, having enslaved Africans tend to their own gardens removed the responsibility of plantation owners to feed and provide for people while also increasing the probability of finding new potentially-commercial produce. On the other hand, general anxiety manifested over what kind of plants

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[298] Zachary Macaulay, *Negro Slavery, or, A View of Some of the More Prominent Features of That State of Society: As It Exists in the United States of America and in the Colonies of the West Indies, Especially in Jamaica.* London: Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions, 1824, 39. Internet Achieve. https://archive.org/details/negroslaveryorvi00maca

[299] William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica,* 1790, 140. Googlebooks. https://books.google.com/books/about/A_Descriptive_Account_of_the_Island_of_J.html?id=PTdiAAAAcAAJ

could be growing in the garden, from the edible and medicinal to the poisonous. Concerns over Africans' plant knowledge and the possibility of being poisoned by the enslaved caused genuine concern among enslavers who feared slave rebellions. While plantation owners placed caution on all slaves, they viewed women and Obeah practitioners the most suspiciously. Women caring for the domestic needs of the plantation manor, especially as cooks, posed a more likely threat of poisoning White families. Their access to preparing and serving food meant they were the closest proximity of mixing poison or other ingredients to make their enslavers ill or cause them to die.

British novelist and travel writer Matthew Gregory Lewis' (1775 - 1818) visited Jamaica twice after inheriting a large plantation estate with 500 enslaved Africans. During his years on the island, he kept a journal ultimately titled the *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, which was published in 1834, years after he died from yellow fever while on his second voyage back to Britain. Known for his gothic horror style of writing, Lewis writes extensively on Obeah and his work is one of the better accounts of British colonists' understanding of the practice. In his February 20, 1816, journal entry, Lewis attends a slave court hearing where a fifteen-year-old enslaved girl named Minetta faced the accusation of poisoning her enslaver. He does not attribute this crime to Obeah, but discusses how the girl put an unknown substance (most likely an herbal powder or liquid) into a spirited drink:

> I attended the Slave Court, where a negro was tried for sheep-stealing and a black servant girl for attempting to poison her master… the latter

> was a girl of fifteen, called Minetta, she acknowledged the having infused corrosive sublimate in some brandy and water… She was condemned to die on Thursday next, the day after to-morrow: she heard the sentence pronounced without the least emotion; and I am told, that when she went down the steps of the course-house, she was seen to laugh.[300]

The court decides to execute Minetta for murder within two days. Even though Lewis does not witness the events afterward, he portrays Minetta as an unruly woman, conniving and chaotic, who laughs at the death of her enslaver even after her sentencing. Minetta's side of the story is never disclosed. In hindsight a lot can be assumed but never answered. Was she a victim of physical violence? Had she endured through unwanted sexual abuse? Did she seek justice for being in life-long enslavement? The absence of her accounts illustrates the gender and racial social hierarchies existing in Jamaica. However, his account led future audiences to see the connection between enslaved women and their ability to poison their enslavers for justice and liberation.

Lewis also describes another instance where a serving woman supposedly unknowingly poisoned her owner after consulting with an Obeah man to provide her with "'a charm to make her massa good to her.'"[301] Mixing the unidentified ingredient in with coffee, she gave the coffee to her enslaver and two bookkeepers which "proved fatal."[302] He does not go into further details about the case, so there is no way of knowing what happened to the unnamed woman

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[300] Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 1806, ed. Judith Terry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 110-111.
[301] Ibid., 149.
[302] Ibid., 149.

based solely on this account. However, there is a direct correlation between Obeah and poisoning. O'Neal's insight on the account sheds further light as she notes this was the woman's second attempt at "charming" the plantation owner. Knowing he fell grievously ill the first time, she goes back to the Obeah practitioner for a stronger "charm."[303]

Interestingly, O'Neal has argued that in early years of colonization, most botanists and colonists were interested in discovering poisonous plants but there was no connection to Obeah at the time. Only decades later did writers like Lewis begin to associate Obeah with the act of poisoning. In 1749, Jamaica legislation outlawed the use of poison, but at the time, colonists did not view Obeah as a threat or associated the practice with poison, so the bill does not mention it.[304] However, later British colonists and writers instilled the notion that Obeah and poison paired together after Obeah became linked with retaliation. The Tacky's Rebellion of 1760 in Jamaica marked the turning point from Obeah being ridiculed to it becoming a threat that "captured and held British attention for more than a hundred years."[305]

Lewis' accounts are only a part of a broader narrative that perpetuated plantation owners' fears of being poisoned. Botanist and physician Henry Barham (1670-1726) wrote about one case of an enslaved woman poisoning her enslaver using a plant known as the "Savana Flower" (*Apocynum erectum*

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[303] O'Neal, 83.
[304] Ibid., 79.
[305] Ibid., 45.

fruticosum). Apocynum is a highly toxic species that produces a milky substance and the leaves of the plant fresh or dry are lethal, which can cause death within six to twelve hours.[306] He records the account and the effects of the poisoning:

> A practitioner of physic was poisoned with this plant [Savana Flower] by his negro woman, who had so ordered it that it did not dispatch him quickly, but he was seized with violent gripings, inclining to vomit, and loss of appetite; afterwards he has small convulsions… The whole plant is full of milk, it is always green, and no creature will meddle with it.[307]

Whether this story is true or not, the account illustrates plantation owners' real or imagined fear of being poisoned. For some colonialists, the concern over the "Savana Flower" and other poisonous plants growing in provision garden or in the tropical mountains produced genuine concern. Similarly, Hans Sloane mentions an enslaved woman knowingly or naively poisoning her mistress with jalap (*convolvulus jalapa*). Part of the morning glory species, the dried tuberous root of this plant is a strong purgative and given at sufficient dose is a hallucinogenic that can prove lethal.[308] Sloane suggests the enslaved woman either mis-dosed the amount of jalap or "maliciously" tried to poison her with a stronger dose. The mistress survives the ordeal, but a month later dies from some unknown event.[309]

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[306] Apocynum today is commonly known as dogbane or Indian hemp and is in the same family as the Savana Flower. "Hemp Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*)," Agricultural Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, accessed April 7. https://www.ars.usda.gov/pacific-west-area/logan-ut/poisonous-plant-research/docs/hemp-dogbane-apocynum-cannabinum/

[307] Henry Barham, *Hortus Americanus*, Kingston, Jamaica. 1794. Internet Achieve, 166. https://archive.org/details/hortusamericanus00barh/page/166/mode/2up

[308] Chevallier, 223.

[309] Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, London, 1707. Internet Archive, 134. https://archive.org/details/voyagetoislandsm02sloa

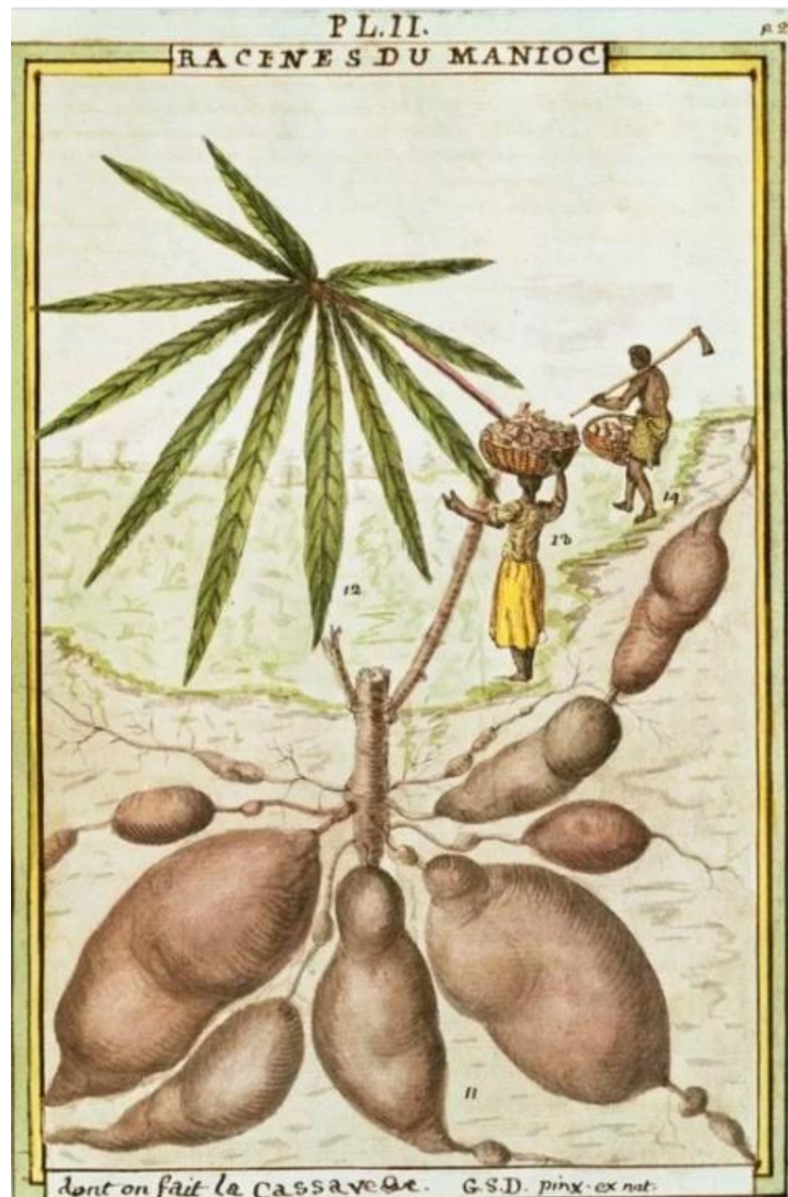

Figure 17. Cassava or manioc roots (Manihot esculenta) used to make cassava bread from *Florindie ou Historie physico-economique des vegetaux de la Torride*, 1789. An enslaved man and women gather the harvest. The plant contains lethal amounts of cyanide if not prepared properly. Image provided by Getty Image.[310]

[310] Dublin Core, *Cassava or manioc roots* (Manihot esculenta), Watercolor, 1789. From *Florindie ou Historie physico-economique des vegetaux de la Torride, 1789*, accessed April 17, 2022. Salam State University, http://di.salemstate.edu/provisions/items/show/43

A staple food known to grow in provision gardens was Cassava (or manoic), a root vegetable, that requires careful preparation before serving. The image above is a watercolor botanical illustration by artist Delahaye found in *Florindie ou Historie physico-economique des vegetaux de la Torride* published in 1789. The image combines scientific observations of the plant anatomy with the subjective construction of race by including artistic additions to increase the aesthetic of the piece. In the image, a Black woman and man carry baskets of cassava suggesting only enslaved Africans relied on the plant for nourishment. The fear over the plant can be seen in several written accounts that caution the poisonous properties of the plant if not prepared correctly for consumption.

Native to the Caribbean and tropical Americas, enslaved Blacks most likely learned how to cook Cassava by Indigenous peoples.[312] Barham's account bolsters this idea as he discusses the Cassava as both a plant that can be used to nourish and harm the body:

> The expressed juice of the root is very sweet to the palate, but soon putrifes [sic.] and breeds worms, called *topuea*, which are a violent poison, and which Indians too well know the use of: Get dry these worms or maggots, and powder them which powder, in a little quantity, they put under their thumb-nail, and after they drink to those they intend to poison, they put their thumb upon the bowl, and so cunningly convey the poison, wherefore when we see a negro with a long thumb-nail, he is to be mistrusted.[313]

Naturalists and botanist Maria Riddell (1772 - 1808) also mentions the Cassava root in her book *Voyages to the Madeira and Leeward Caribbean Isles: with*

[312] Carney and Rosomoff, 107-108.
[313] Barham, 34.

sketches of the natural history of these islands (1792). Though her description is different from Barham's in that there is no mention of worms, she also notes how slaves use the plant for food and the dangers of the root. In her journal she writes, "the root is a deadly poison; yet, when the milky liquor it contains is expressed from it, it is converted into a bread called cassava; The Negroes make it their chief diet, and prepare it themselves."[314] The raw consumption of Cassava can cause vertigo, vomiting, and death within one to four hours due to its high toxicity levels of cyanide, but with proper preparation, the root provides starchy nutrients.[315]

The fact that poisonous plants grew commonly in provision gardens, such as the Cassava, undoubtedly triggered concern among plantation owners who were anxious about being poisoned by those they enslaved. However, it was not just about the crops cultivating on provision grounds that caused worry but also the unknown plants growing in the tropical mountains that botanists continued to document and catalog. Many colonists did not fear Obeah practitioners for their supernatural abilities, as many (but not all) believed their claims to be pure superstition. However, they were weary of the real possibility of being killed by poisonous plants.

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[314] Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. Frank Cundall (Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1907), 93.
[315] "Toxic Substances and Antinutritional Factors," *Roots, Tubers, Plantains, and Bananas in Human Nutrition*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States, 1990. https://www.fao.org/3/t0207e/T0207E08.htm#Cassava%20toxicity

Conclusion

European witches did not cause revolts or revolutions, nor did they have any influence in warfare. As a result, British colonists were unfamiliar with the spiritual and psychological power Obeah practitioners had on enslaved Africans to inspire them to rebel against their enslavers.[316] Coupled with assigned gender norms, Obeah women spurred particular concern. They challenged Western societal beliefs of women as subservient and passive while also encouraging and leading revolts that defied the colonial economic system, which relied on free forced labor.

African healing and spiritual practices varied across the continent, and each nation practiced their own traditions. However, early European colonists' monolithic approach of viewing non-Christian traditions deemed African practices unanimously as witchcraft. Originally viewed as a form of devil worship, early missionaries set out to convert Africans to Christians and bring them closer to what they viewed as civility. With the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans from across the continent boarded ships and took with them their spiritual beliefs, magic, and healing knowledge that eventually merged in the Caribbean.

Westerners' fascination with empiricism and methodological observation arising in the eighteenth century shifted their views of African practices as actual

[316] O'Neal, 126.

witchcraft to another reason justifying their barbarism and incivility. Belief in the supernatural exemplified the credulousness of Africans in the minds of Europeans. The Tacky's War of 1760 and former Marron Wars in the 1720s shifted Jamaican British colonists' views of Obeah as they began to associate the practice with rebellion. Obeah and its correlation with self-liberation movements spurred local legislation to pass a law in 1761 criminalizing the practice, and many other European colonial islands followed pursuit over the next few decades.

Women played a larger role in retaliation and resistance than previously believed by historians. Obeah women like Queen Nanny and the countless unnamed women that are lost to history besides their brief mention had pivotal roles in the resistance of slavery and colonialism, and therefore, were demonized by British journalists and writers. Even when colonists did not document Obeah at play, they often accused enslaved women of poisoning or attempting to kill their owners through the use of plants. Armed with botanical knowledge, enslaved women had the power to both inflict harm and to heal. Nonetheless, male European botanists and physicians seeking new medicines to treat diseases unfamiliar to them relied on enslaved women's botanical knowledge for procuring treatments and medicine for the sick.

CHAPTER THREE

HEALING WITH ETHNOBOTANICAL MEDICINE: BLACK NURSES, HEALERS, AND WITCHES

This is how to make a bread pudding;
this is how to make doukona;
this is how to make pepper pot;
this is how to make a good medicine for a cold;
this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child
before it even becomes a child.

Jamaica Kincaid
"Girl" (1978) The New Yorker June 26, 1978 [317]

Examining enslaved women's contribution to modern medicine and botany in an understudied field in the history of science. Transitioning from British colonist's views of Obeah and alternative healing practices, this chapter explores enslaved women's healing techniques and the exploitation of their knowledge in modern medicine. Regrettably, accounts of female Black healers are rare, and their documentation solely exists in the writing of those written by colonists. Nevertheless, these accounts provide a glimpse into the lives of enslaved women and their application of botanical knowledge for medicinal purposes. In pursuit of new biomedicine, medical journals written by physicians like Hans Sloane and Henry Barham contain some insight into enslaved women's medicinal practices. Other travel journals like those written by Jamaican governess Lady Nugent and

[317] Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl," *The New Yorker*, 1978. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1978/06/26/girl

British novelist Matthew Lewis document how enslaved women were perceived and provide some social context around the debates of slavery.

With reproduction on the forefront of plantation owners' minds to "increase" their productivity, especially with the illegalization of the transatlantic slave trade, control over women's reproductive and productive abilities took center stage. This chapter also reflects on enslaved women's agency over their reproductive bodies through their botanical knowledge and their use of abortifacient plants as a form or resistance. Many accounts, such as those by Hans Sloane and Maria Sibylla Merian, document how enslaved women induced abortions through abortifacient plants, again connecting sexuality and gender with the plant kingdom. While the act of willingly having an abortion painted Black women as lustful bad-mothers, in some cases, Obeah was directly attributed to the act rather than science of botany. The case of Catalina Susannah Mathison, a Jamaican slave accused of Obeah for having an abortion, brings all these themes together as it illustrates the power relations over managing the enslaved female body in regard to botany.

Healers, Witches, and Patients

The birth of modern medicine began in the eighteenth century. Prior to the Enlightenment, plant knowledge and herbal medicine were viewed as part of the woman's domain where they worked as cooks and healers. Known as "wise women," practitioners came from all hierarchies in the caste systems and applied

their healing knowledge to both peasants and elites in medicine and midwifery. Much of their knowledge passed on through oral tradition, except for a few composed journals for the few elites who could read and write. However, illustrated books called herbals did circulate and provided the nexus for medical knowledge during the rise of "modern" science.[318] Such texts include Countess of Kent, Elizabeth Talbot Gray's book *Choice Manuall, or Rare and Select Secrets in Physick and Chyrurgery* published in 1653 and Elizabeth Blackwell's work *A Curious Herbal* published in 1739. Even though wise women provided essential services to their community by formulating tonics and acting as midwives, applying this knowledge also had drawbacks. Many women who practiced herbal medicines faced accusations of witchcraft during the medieval period up to the turn of the eighteenth century and were seen as either “helpful healers or horrible hags.”[319]

For centuries, people have viewed a deeply rooted connection between the natural world and witchcraft. Tamed nature portrayed as Mother Earth or the goddess Flora offered bounty and fertility; chaotic nature spread disease, generated storms, caused famine, and ultimately death. Women ran parallel to this binary depiction of nature as either modest virgins or malignant witches.[320] Though a popular and fascinating topic worth its own historiography, a basic foundation is required for understanding witchcraft in the English imagination

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[318] Shteir, 38.
[319] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36.
[320] Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 127.

from the medieval period until the Enlightenment. By gaining this insight we can understand how these ideologies carried over the Atlantic and were applied to women of color in the Caribbean and their connection to the natural world.

Two works, Marion Gibson's *Witchcraft And Society in England and America, 1550–1750* (2003) and Malcolm Gaskill *A Very Short Introduction to Witchcraft* (2006), provide that framework. Over 80% of those convicted of witchcraft in Britain were women due to the belief that the female body was a "weaker vessel" or "corruption of the male ideal," and thus, more susceptible to temptation.[321] As Gaskill argues, "the notion that female wilfulness threatened society quickly surfaced in times of crisis" and the infamous witch hunts carried out through the sixteenth and eighteenth century are exemplary of society's concerns over gender roles.[322] When society felt the pressures of social decay, either imagined or through external hardships, women became the scapegoat, especially those who lived outside or challenged prescribed subservient and domestic roles. Men often became intimidated by an independent woman's status and concerned by her lack of dependency.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious tension led Henry VIII to enact the first of a series of Witchcraft Act in 1542 formally called the "Act "Agaynst Conjurations Inchantmentes and Witchecraftes" in England.[323]

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[321] Ibid., 37.
[322] Ibid., 37-38.
[323] In 1563, under the early regime of Elizabeth I, the monarch amended some of the clauses of the previous law and, in some respects, lessened the punishment of those found guilty of witchcraft. The death penalty was reserved for cases that intentionally inflicted harm or killed individuals, while those accused of lesser offenses faced imprisonment terms. Another additional

The law defined the practice of witchcraft as a felony punishable by death.[324] The law underwent a few amendments throughout various reigns but continued to view witchcraft as an existing threat to public wellbeing. According to Gaskill, "for a relatively short period of time, between the 15th and 18th centuries, witchcraft was made real, not just through superstition and primitivism but through law and science."[325] However, the Witchcraft Act of 1735 inverted the previous laws and reflected the social attitudes of the Enlightenment. Now viewed as an impossible and unconstitutional crime, the once traditional penalties for practicing witchcraft were replaced by penalties for the pretense of practicing sorcery. Those claiming to commune with the dead, foresee futures, cast spells, or concoct potions became seen as charlatans accused of fraud rather than witchcraft.

While undoubtedly some continued to practice some form of sorcery, the Witchcraft Act of 1735 protected most people, especially women, from being tried and convicted for no reason. More importantly, though, and not necessarily intended, the law contributed to the imperial agenda of Britain because White women collectively could no longer be associated with ultimate sinful and evil by

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law followed in 1604 during the rule of James I, which extended the death penalty to those convicted of conjuring spirits or communicating with familiars. Moreover, public hangings replaced the common burning at the stake punishment except for rare occasions involving additional serious convictions such as treason. Those accused of their first minor offense also found themselves imprisoned for one year, while the second offense resulted in hanging. Marion Gibson, "Witchcraft in the Courts", in *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550-1750*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

[324] According to Gaskill, previous numbers of witch trials and executions were extremely exaggerated. Today, historians estimate that about half of those accused of witchcraft were executed, a still staggering 40,000 and 50,000 people, mostly women. Those who were not killed underwent religious reform and intrusive observation. Gaskill, 66.

[325] Ibid., 56.

the law. Protected by both Enlightenment ideals and Christianity as the sovereign religion, British women continued to be viewed in a submissive and domestic role in a patriarchal society, but collectively the reversal of the Witchcraft Acts meant that British and other European women held a higher status than other women. On the other hand, the rest of the female population around the world could still be drawn to wickedness, and were often depicted as seductresses, and were demonized in European art and literature. Similarly, European flora and its women became representatives of a bountiful, beautiful, and nurturing while non-European flora and women symbolized the "other" unruly side.

Nevertheless, removing witchcraft as a plausible option for condemnation legally and scientifically did not mean that the beliefs about witchcraft disappeared. On the contrary, witchcraft remained prevalent in British and other European cultures. In other words, just because witchcraft was no longer real, it did not mean it did not exist culturally in the people's minds. Gaskill notes that the memory of witchcraft continues to give perspective to contemporary Western society, stating:

> By the later 18th century, witchcraft was self-evidently nonsensical and not worth refuting. Voltaire considered occult phenomena irrelevant to the operation of nature, and a symbol of medieval superstition. Meanwhile, witch-beliefs remained part of plebeian culture in Europe, and lingers in pockets to this day… Traditional witch-beliefs are resistant to innovations in thinking because their basis is emotional and material, their rationale instinctive.[326]

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[326] Ibid., 80.

As witchcraft shifted from reality to fantasy, botany and medicine simultaneously transitioned from a female domain to a masculine one. Originally viewed in relation to herbalism and healing within a female private sphere, botany developed as a public scientific field departing from superstition and simple folk herbalism.[327] In *Cultivation Women, Cultivating Science*, Shteir argues that a transition took place in the eighteenth century where "though lower-class women worked as community simplers in some areas... many women in the gentrifying middle ranks lost or left behind their familiarity with traditional healing practices and relied more on male physicians than on female skills."[328] The word "simpler'' also denotes the social stigma revolving around herbal medical knowledge, and as the word implies, herbal treatments or "simples" were viewed as the most basic of treatments and considered folk medicine.[329] In contrast, an attempt to professionalize medicine emerged in the eighteenth century and drew on what male physicians considered "scientific" research.

However, biomedicines founded and prescribed by European female healers were adopted into modern medicine practices without acknowledgement as was the various treatments utilized by enslaved women in the Caribbean. In *Plants and Empire*, Schiebinger notes that in the case of women healers as "root

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[327] George, 54.
[328] Shteir, 39.
[329] Simplers were people in the local community who were familiar with botanicals and their employment as medicine, relying on herbs and other plants to provide treatment to common ailments. The term simples referred to the plants themselves. Shteir uses Sir Joseph Banks account of first learning botany from a woman at Eton in 1750 who "culled simples," which she then would sell to apothecaries. Ibid.,39.

cutters" in Europe, "Most of the women whose cures were eventually adopted and published in the various European Pharmacopoeia remained nameless, as was true also of most of the West Indian indigenous and slaves who offered cures."[330] In search of new medicines validated under the name of modern science, many male physicians and botanists traveled to the Caribbean and around the world in search of “green gold.” There, they discovered several plant based medicines, many of which were made aware to them by women.

In the Pursuit of Green Gold

By the eighteenth century, the Antilles had established itself as a place of medical experimentation as Western practitioners struggled to find cures for “tropical diseases.”[332] Physicians sought rigorously for tropical medicines needed to keep colonists and slaves alive from tropical diseases. As Amerindian populations decreased, medicine used by enslaved Africans became unexpectedly crucial as they were more familiar with tropical diseases than European colonists.[333] Physicians eagerly turned to them for medicinal practices, often taking credit for the so-called discovery in their works or verifying their use through what they deemed a scientific methodology. Rarely are Black women

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[330] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 98.
[332] Tropical disease was a term created in the eighteenth century to describe ailments unknown to Europeans. Physicians recognized yellow fever, dysentery, malaria, cholera, and some venereal diseases as tropical diseases and searched to find cures for patients through the use of tropical medicines. Africans were more familiar with tropical diseases than European colonists, and thus, were better able to prepare remedies. Therefore, many physicians looked to non-Western ethnobotanical medicine for treatments.
[333] Schiebinger, *Secret Cure of Slaves*, 5.

mentioned in these medical journals or manuscripts, and if mentioned at all, they are often referred to as "slave woman" or "female slave" rather than being addressed by their name. Unfortunately, historians are restricted by these European sources, and as Schiebinger has noted in her work, "it is especially frustrating when approaching subjects that Europeans reported so negatively that historians have no direct access to their eighteenth-century West Indian practices."[334] Nonetheless, much can still be extracted about enslaved women's healing practices despite physicians filtering their knowledge, recording what they found to be useful and dismissing what they deemed unimportant or nonsensical.

One of the most prominent distinctions of Western modern medicine at the turn of the eighteenth century was the separation of physical and spiritual approaches to treating diseases. Physicians distinguished between religious approaches to illness that were often credited to "divine acts of judgment[s]" to that of physical illnesses caused solely by natural factors.[335] Unlike African medicine practices aimed to treat physical, mental, and spiritual ailments, a shift occurred in the eighteenth century with Western physicians only treating scientifically observable physical ailments. Those who continued to heal patients physically and spiritually were viewed as being "backward" from the professionalization of modern medicine; nonetheless, physicians readily tested

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[334] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 88.
[335] Wisecup, 304.

non-European medicine and medical techniques. Schiebinger's recent work *The Secret Cure of Slaves* thoroughly addressing this topic:

> Europeans avidly collected and tested African medicines and techniques, yet they set strict limits on the types of knowledge they were willing to consider… Europeans, who increasingly took pride in their new empirical methods, tested African herbal remedies and medical interventions, such as inoculation for smallpox and yaws. But, they tended to ignore, deride, and ridicule the ritual and spiritual aspects prominent in slave healing regimes - identified variously as Obeah, conjuring, myalism, sorcery, and, eventually *vodou*.[336]

Even when physicians found certain methods effective, many credited Africans herbal healing knowledge to sheer luck. Edward Long (1734 - 1813), a well-established Jamaica plantation owner and contemporary historian, defended slavery staunchly and wrote contentiously about slavery and Africans in *The History of Jamaica* (1774). The lengthy comprehensive book contains slighted and racist descriptions of Black Jamaicans and Afro-Caribbeans condemning them as "bestial" and the "most offensive" of the human race.[337] Though he clearly acknowledges the effectiveness of African medicine, Long attributes enslaved Africans' ability to heal sheer coincidence:

> The chief medicament among the Negroes are lime juice, cardamoms, the roots, branches, leaves, bark, and gums of trees, and about thirty different herbs. The latter have been experienced in many cases wonderfully powerful, and have subdued diseases incidents to their climate, which have soiled the art of European surgeons at the factories. However, the Negroes generally apply them at random, without any regard to the particular symptoms of the disease; concerning which, or the operation of their *materia medica,* they have formed no theory.[338]

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[336] Schiebinger, *The Secret Cures of Slaves*, 118-119.
[337] Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica* (London: T. Lownudes, 1774), Internet Archive, 352-353. https://archive.org/details/historyjamaicao01longgoog
[338] Ibid., 381.

Long's dismissal of enslaved people's capability to knowingly treat themselves using natural remedies illustrates the subjectivity of the modern science of medicine. Though he notes White botanists and physicians have witnessed miraculous cures with herbs, bringing to shame "European surgeons," his preconceived notions of enslaved people as inferior prevents him from acknowledging the impact of their botanical knowledge in modern medicine.

Yet, British and European physicians and botanists continued to search for plant medicines. Though not documented as heavily as general statements about non-Western medicine practices used by enslaved Africans, there are cases of enslaved Black women specifically giving insight to herbal treatments. In 1794, Henry Barham published *Hortus Americanus*, a botanical biomedical journal containing his observation of dozens of plants and vegetables produced in the Caribbean and tropical South America. Focusing primarily on Jamaica flora, he documents various plants being used for treatments while living in Jamaica. He discusses Broom-Weed (*Spartium scoparius*) as native Jamaican plant that has "no resemblance to the English broom" plant, but states enslaved Blacks called the plant Broom-Weed "because they make a broom with it, being very though and ready at hand, growing almost every where in Jamaica, even in the poorest red land."[339] He also describes the medical use of the plant, "the only medicinal use I saw of it was, the negro women, when their children were scabby

[339] Barham, 24.

or mangy, would make a bath of this herb, which would cleanse them, and make them thrive."[340] Broom-Weed reduces blood pressure and eases the flow of urine, which has been documented as early as 12th century Europe.[341] Since the plant is also known to cause uterus muscles to contract, it also has been used to reduce and prevent blood loss during and after childbirth.[342]

He also describes the healing properties of the Majoe, also known as the Macary Bitter (*Picramnia antidesma*), whose name comes from an enslaved woman named Majoe.[343] We can infer that Majoe, used a similar practice as described by Barham:

> This admirable plant hath its name from Majoe, an old negro woman so called, who with a simple decoction, did wonderful cures in the most stubborn diseases, as the yaws, and in venereal cases, when the person has been given over as incurable by skilful [sic.] physicians… This plant was first shown to me by a planter, who had done many excellent cures amongst his negro slaves in old inveterate stubborn ulcers, and that by only boiling the bark and leaves, or flowers and fruit if they happen to be on the tree when wanted to make use of, giving them plentiful to drink, and washing the sores with some of the decostion [sic.]; then laying over them a leaf of the jack in the bush, until their sores were healed.[344]

Barham also recounts a time he fell grievously ill in 1716 with a "severe fever" along with "violent inflammation" and pain in his legs.[345] He explains how one enslaved man used the leaves and bark of the hog-plum tree to precure a bath. After following the regiment another four times, Barham recovers from the

[340] Ibid., 24-25.
[341] Henry and Harris, 6.
[342] Chevallier, 200.
[343] I was unable to find this herb in the two herbal medicine books referred to for this research.
[344] Barham, 96.
[345] Ibid., 148-149.

illness. It is quite possible that women healers were also aware of the healing properties of the hog-plum tree. Relieved, but in frustration over his ailment, Barham unleashes his contempt in writing, “I was perfectly recovered… giving God thanks for his providential care, in bestowing such virtues to mean and common plants, and that the knowledge of them should be made known to so vile and mean objects as the negro slaves and Indians.”[346] Similar to Long, Barham outwardly expresses his contempt for Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. However, unlike Long who determined Africans skills in herbal medicine was sheer luck, Barham proposes African were aware of the herbs they used and how to best apply them for maximum affect.

Barham mentions several other herbs introduced by Africans but does not specifically note their use by enslaved medicine women. It is likely women were familiar with the herbs’ properties and employed them when needed. In one account, he describes a time when an enslaved man accidently poisoned himself and “two or three” others by mixing a misidentified herb with rum. Whether this unnamed herb was intentionally or unintentionally mixed or the dosage was incorrect is unknown. However, Barham notes that the men began vomiting and convulsing, which “alarmed the plantation” and a surgeon was sent for to treat the patients. By the time the surgeon arrived, two or three of the men were already dead and the other one barely alive. Unsure how to aid the men, the

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[346] Ibid., 147-148. In the section titled “Plum-Tree,” Barham mentions five different species of plum trees: the Spanish yellow plum, the common plum, the hog-plum tree, the maiden plum, and the coco plum.

surgeon stated all of them would perish. The document then states "somebody" from the group of onlookers mentioned using the juice of the Arrow-root, a plant known to treat poisoning from poison tipped arrows used by Indigenous peoples. It is possible this "somebody" could have been a enslaved woman, and she used the juice from the root to cure the man after two doses.[347]

Barham also acknowledges the healing properties of the belly-ache weed, which as the name suggests, helped with relieving stomach pains. The plant was "first made known in Jamaica by Papaw negroes" and thus also known as Papaw weed.[348] He also documents Self-Heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) and mentions it as "healing of all wounds and stubborn ulcers."[349] The herb continues to be known for its wound healing properties with antioxidant properties and it is also utilized to reduce inflammatory bowel disease and diarrhea.[350]

Another notable plant mentioned in *Hortus Americanum* is referred to as Oily Pulse though what plant he is describing is unclear.[351] The following is an excerpt from his description of the plant's medicinal and culinary properties:

> [Oily Pulse] which is called zefamum, or Jefamum Africanum. The first time I saw this plant, it was growing in a negro's plantation, who told me, the ground the seed between two stones, and eat it as they do corn… The oil that is drawn from it is called *cergulim* oil. The seed is often mixed and ground with coco, to make chocolate. In Ethiopia and Egypt, they use the oil as we do oil-olive… A decoction of the plant is good for coughs,

[347] Ibid., 6-8.
[348] Ibid., 20.
[349] Ibid., 171.
[350] Chevallier, 256.
[351] I was unable to find this herb or plant in the two herbal medicine books referred to for this research nor could I find it referred to as anything else in further research. What is known is pulses are part of the legume family, which grow in pods, such as beans and lentils. There is an unlikely possibility the plant described could be *Gnetum africanum*.

> pleurifies [sic.], inflammations of the lungs, hard schirrous [sic.] tumours, and women use it for hardness of the womb.[352]

Barham continues to discuss how it is used as a poultice for tumors and can be used as a stool softener. Though it is not evident exactly who told Barham about the plant, besides the high probability that it was presented by an enslaved man or woman, but its scientific name *Jefamum africanum* indicates the plant grows natively in Africa or was at least assumed so by naturalists. The importance of this description is its reference to Oily Pulse "growing in a negro's plantation."[353]

Another account of an enslaved woman's botanical knowledge comes from Thomas Henry's entry on a plant called Zanthoxylum or "prickly yellow wood" written in the medical journal *Memoirs of the Medical Society of London* published in 1794. In the account, he mentions a plantation owner by the name of Mr. Crosdale who purchased two female slave sisters, one of whom continuously fell ill with "dry belly-ache" that deliberated her from her work for months.[354] After being unable to treat her, the woman asks Henry to bring in her sister to help heal her. The sister then beseeches Henry to allow her to procure a medicine "communicated to her by their mother, and employed to cure herself, on a similar occasion in Africa."[355] After granting her permission, the sister

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[352] Barham, 121 - 122.
[353] Ibid., 121-122.
[354] Thomas Henry, "On the Efficacy of the Zanthoxylon," *Memoirs of the Medical Society of London* 5, 1799, Google Books, 49.
https://books.google.com/books?id=4CpFAAAAcAAJ&pg=PR12&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=Zanthoxylon&f=false
[355] Ibid., 49.

returns a few hours later with the “root and flowers of some plant” and pounds them together into a juice, at which point she does not reveal what herbs she gathered. Henry documents that after “two spoonfulls” given twice within a two-hour interval, the sister’s symptoms resided.[356] The other sister then boils the remaining juice with water to create a diluted tea, which the sister drinks throughout the next day. Eager to discover the woman's secret, Henry has someone spy on her when she goes to the forest, stating “we had her so narrowly watched, as to discover the secret to be the fresh root of the Zanthoxylum.”[357]

The next account is not recorded in a scientific observation journal but is yet another tale of a female “bush doctor” not only well-known for curing the sick but skilled in “preserv[ing] the dead.”[358] On an unnamed Caribbean plantation during the 1830’s, the wife of a well-established plantation owner died after battling a serious illness while her husband was away. The family postponed the funeral until he returned, and the family sent for Mongo Maud to preserve the body. In the account, “This woman [Mongo Maud], originally from West Africa, was noted for her knowledge of medicinal herbs.”[359] When she arrived at the plantation, she carried “several sacks full of dried leaves, twigs, and the cut bark

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[356] Ibid., 50.
[357] Ibid., 50.
[358] Isidor Paiewonsky, *Eyewitness Accounts of Slavery in the Danish West Indies Also Graphic Tales of Other Slave Happenings on Ships and Plantations*, 1987, 129. https://archive.org/details/eyewitnessaccoun00paie/page/128/mode/2up?ref=ol&view=theater&q=Mongo+Maud
[359] Ibid., 50.

of special trees" though none are described in careful detail. After seeing the body, she prepared a "coarse powder" within a few hours and demanded to be left alone with the corpse as "she wanted no one prying into her techniques."[360] When the husband returns home from his trip, he finds his wife alive sitting up in a chair "pale and wan, but very much alive."[361] Had the husband been home during the death of his wife, the account ends stating the woman would have been buried alive.

Mongo Maud is referred to as bush doctor in this account, highlighting her usefulness to the White colonial community. Her title portrays her as a woman skilled in medicine rather than a witch dabbling with death, though in this tale, the wife is clearly acknowledged as being dead and not on the verge of death. She teeters on the borderline of healer and necromancer during her dealings with death and her ability to save or resurrect people. However, the mysticism in this story reiterates back to the supernatural. It is highly likely Mongo Maud practiced Obeah or some other form of African religious diaspora, especially if she was an enslaved woman brought to the New World directly from Africa as the story suggests. For the average reader, the story is left to interpretation. On the one hand, it portrayed an African woman skilled in botany and medicine, and on the other, it echoes the connection of women, plants, and witchcraft.

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[360] Ibid., 130.
[361] Ibid., 130.

Many enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were reluctant to offer colonists their secrets, such as Mongo Maud, the unnamed woman who heals her sister, and the unnamed woman who was spied on while gathering herbs in the mountains. There is power in knowledge, and the enslaved were well aware of the power their botanical knowledge gave them over their enslavers. In one aspect, enslaved Blacks with botanical knowledge possessed greater autonomy than those who did not by acting as doctors and healing those in their community and occasionally White colonists. Sometimes plant knowledge could also be used to harm, though the fear of being poisoned generated more hyped hysteria among enslavers than actual accounts of assassination attempts. Botany played a major role in Obeah practices. Obeah, defined more accurately as a spiritual healing practices and justice-making system rather than witchcraft, relied on plants. Since Obeah provided a sense of power and justice-making among slaves, releasing their botanical techniques to White colonists implied giving up some of the autonomy they managed to maintain.

The Charms of Nurse Flora: Lady Nugent's Journal to Jamaica

In May 1801, Lady Maria Nugent (1771-1834) boarded a ship heading to the British colony of Jamaica with her husband newly appointed as Governor of Jamaica. Born in the United States, she was the daughter of Cortlandt Skinner, Attorney-General of New Jersey, an extreme loyalist to the British Crown. She married Sir George Nugent in November 1797 after her family became exiled in

1783 from the newly established United States for being British loyalists. Lady Nugent became the first American wife and governess of any British colony, and her personal journal written from 1801 to 1805 conveys many of her experiences and thoughts while on the island.[363] Her journal was first published in 1907 and provides valuable insight into the gentry lifestyle, the "creolization" process, and slavery in Jamaica during the Napoleonic Wars. The journal also frequently discusses Sir Nugent's anxieties of the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint Louverture and the spreading of liberation revolts by enslaved Africans over the Caribbean. Her journal concludes in 1805 when she travels back to England with her two children born in Jamaica, George and Louisa, and expresses concern about her husband and family being sent to India. In 1811, Lady Nugent traveled to Calcutta, India after Sir Nugent was appointed Commander in Chief of the army in India.There, she also continued composing her journal though it has not received the same recognition as her first travel entries.

Though she expresses sympathy to enslaved laborers, Lady Nugent did not side with the abolishment of slavery but rather believes that "if religion, decency and good order, were established among the negroes" the need for physical violence and discipline from overseers would not be required.[367] She also frequently complained about the "dreadful" heat, "innumerable" insects and

[363] Frank Cundall, Introduction in *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. Frank Cundall (Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1907), xlviii. Hathitrust https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b270332&view=1up&seq=56&skin=2021

[367] Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*. Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1907, xlviii. Hathitrust, 117-118. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b270332&view=1up&seq=56&skin=2021

arachnids, and "dreadful" thunderstorms and earthquakes that are only occasionally separated by pleasant weather.[368] Death is prevalent throughout her journal as several colonists are mentioned to have met their ends on the islands often due to illness. She conveys her melancholy of the island exclaiming, "only three subjects of conversation here [Jamaica], - debt, disease, and death."[369] Historian Vincent Brown argues that the excessive death rates provided fertile ground for establishing a new creole culture in Jamaica, which he refers to as a British colony "death trap."[370] During her residence, Lady Nugent falls ill several times along with her husband and acquaintances. Her journal provides some insight into the medicines and medical practices of the time, and she occasionally notes enslaved peoples medicine and the treatment of infirmed enslaved men and women.

While her husband conducted business at the Hope estate, Lady Nugent observes an infirmary on the property, writing "I should mention that there is an excellent hospital on this estate, which is called a hot-house, where the blackies appear particularly comfortable, and well taken care of."[371] She also notes the existence of an unspecified bath-house used for medical purposes, which she visits and is attended to by a Black "old woman":

> The bathing-house is a low West India building, containing four small rooms, in each of which there is a marble bath. Then there is another

[368] Ibid., 20; 12; 29.
[369] Ibid., 239.
[370] Brown, 13.
[371] Nugent, 40.

> house for infirm negroes, &c. In fact, a kind of public hospital with baths, and they tell you of wonderful cures performed by the waters.[372]

There is only one mention of plant-based medicine in her journal unlike male physicians who more frequently, though still rare, documented how the enslaved utilized plants for medicinal purposes. While viewing the acacia trees outside of her room, she writes a brief comment about the tree, claiming the "maid tells me that the negroes say that they make a very good aperient medicine from it.[373]

Despite being surrounded by so much death and falling ill herself many times, Lady Nugent also experiences the birth of her first two children while in Jamaica. The birth of her first child, George, is a difficult one that she recounts in much detail. Her account is one of the few descriptions of a named Black woman, referred to as Nurse Flora, attempting to help with the birthing process after the labor became tedious. While most Black healing practitioners went unmentioned and unnamed, Lady Nugent's journal provides her audience not only with a name but also a portrait of Nurse Flora.

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[372] Ibid., 91.
[373] Ibid., 125.

Figure 18. Image of Nurse Flora in Lady Nugent's journal. Image provided by Internet Archive. [374]

Lady Nugent recounts her labor, and Nurse Flora bringing in "a cargo of herbs" and "charms" to quicken the process before being turned away by White midwives. In her journal, she documents the experience:

> Then, the old black nurse brought a cargo of herbs, and wished to try various charms, to expedite the birth of the child, and told me so many stories of pinching and tying women to the bed-post, to hasten matters, that sometimes, in sprite of my agony, I could not help laughing, and at others, I was really in a fright, for fear she would try some of her experiments upon me. But the maids took all her herbs from her, and made her remove all the smoking apparatus she had prepared for my

[374] Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. Frank Cundall. Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1907, 235.

> benefit. That very night my dear baby was born…My English maids too, were so attentive, and took such care, that old nurse Flora should not pinch, or suffocate me to death with her charms, that I shall not forget it.[376]

The morning after she gives birth to her child, Lady Nugent has a bath drawn for her presumably by enslaved women with “all sorts of sweet herbs and scented leaves, such as orange blossoms,” which she described as a “refreshment” to alleviate her “fatigue.”[377] She continued this regimen for a few days after the birth.

This rare account provides a small glimpse into African healing practices despite the actions not being actually performed. British hegemony and imperialism allowed colonists, naturalists, and physicians to subjugate the botanical knowledge of female Black healers. Enslaved Africans who practiced traditional medicine that combined the physical with the spiritual were often accused of African witchcraft, which left more extensive records of criminality rather than medical documentation.[378] What Lady Nugent's journal does not mention is also important, and much can be inferred from the text. Lady Nugent does not specifically refer to her as an Obeah or Vodou practitioner; however, by mentioning Nurse Flora’s handling of “herbs, “charms,” and a “smoking apparatus,” it is apparent Nurse Flora held an important title in her community as

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[376] Nugent, 164.
[377] Nugent, 164.
[378] Diana-Lyn Baptiste, Sasha Turner, Nia Josiah, Joyell Arscott, Carmen Alvarez, Ruth-Alma Turkson-Ocran, Tamar Rodney, et al. “Hidden Figures of Nursing: The Historical Contributions of Black Nurses and a Narrative for Those Who Are Unnamed, Undocumented and Underrepresented.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 77, no. 4 (2021): 1627-1629.

an Obeah healer. Never mentioning a hospital on their own estate, it is possible Nurse Flora cared for most, if not all, of the slaves at the Nugent's residence on a regular basis.

"The Young Black Wenches": Sex, Reproduction, and Contraceptive Plants

In 1774, Janet Schaw (c.1730-1800) and her brother sailed aboard *The Jamaica Packet* from Edinburgh, Scotland to the Caribbean and America. During her two-year voyage, she kept a journal, or series of journal letters, documenting her experiences in St. Kitts and Antigua in the Caribbean and then in North and South Carolina, before returning home to Edinburgh in 1776. Her negative perception of African and Afro-Caribbean women as "young black wenches" painted them as lustful and immoral females who willingly "lay themselves out for white lovers."[379] To prevent them from becoming pregnant, she writes that these women "have certain herbs and medicines that freed them from such an encumbrance."[380] Her accusation, though bigoted, grossly exaggerated, and denies sexual violence, alludes to one certainty. Enslaved women's knowledge of botanicals provided another means to rebel against slavery, and gain autonomy over their own reproduction.

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[379] Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774-1776,* ed. Evangeline Walker. Andrews, and Charles McLean Andrews (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 112-113.
[380] Ibid., 112-113.

In recent years, scholars have taken more interest in the reproductive lives of enslaved women and have also gleaned much information about the use of abortifacients in the Caribbean. According to Morgan, "The few references to contraceptives are abortifacients in Afro-American and Caribbean sources support the notion that women and men transferred knowledge of fertility control from Africa to the Americas."[381] In her work, she has identified women using okra, cotton root, aloe, and Snakeroot as abortifacients.[382] However, one of the most well-known abortifacients is the Peacock Flower (*poinciana pulcherrima*), which continues to be used by contemporary bush doctors and herbal healers for procuring abortions.[383]

Schiebinger has spent much of her professional career researching the "highly political plant" called the Peacock Flower, a beautiful yellow and red flowering plant that grows natively throughout the Caribbean and South America.[384] Specifically, she reflects on how the knowledge of the Peacock Flower traveled across the Caribbean and to Europe. Though the abortifacient properties of the plant were recorded by botanists and physicians Hans Sloane in Jamaica in 1687, Maria Sibylla Merian in Suriname in 1699, and Griffith Hughes in Barbados in 1750, the luxuriant plant traveled to European botanical gardens

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381 Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 113.
382 Ibid., 114.
383 Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire,*1.
384 Schiebinger, "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients", 317. Jennifer Morgan also provides a brief one-paragraph account of Merian and the Peacock Flower's abortive properties. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 113-114.

without its use as an abortifacient becoming common public knowledge.[385] Schiebinger deduces the absence of this knowledge being transferred across the Atlantic to agnotology, the study of cultural ignorance, as botanists and physicians collected partial and subjective information or choose to remove certain information from public view for social reasons.[386]

Figure 19. *Peacock Flower with Carolina Sphinx Moth* (1702-1703) by Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717). Image provided by the Royal Collection Trust.[387]

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385 Schiebinger, "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients," 338.
386 Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 88.
387 Maria Sibylla Merian, *Peacock Flower with Carolina Sphinx Moth* (1702-1703), watercolor. Royal Collection Trust, accessed April 3, 2022. https://www.rct.uk/collection/921202/peacock-flower-with-carolina-sphinx-moth

Maria Sibylla Merian has received much attention from scholars. At the age of fifty-two, Merian traveled to the Dutch colony of Suriname with her daughter and apprentice, Dorothea, collecting and drawing flora and insects from the region. Many historians consider Merian the only woman to travel outside of Europe in her own pursuit of science unlike other women many have kept botanical journals, but often accompanied their husbands, such as Maria Riddle.[389] Documenting the Peacock Flower in *Metamorphosis insectorum surinamensium* (1705), Merian writes how enslaved Africans and the Indigenous Suriname population use Peacock Flower seeds as an abortifacient:

> The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use the seeds [of this plant] to abort their children, so that their children will not become slaves like they are. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. In fact, they sometimes take their own lives because they are treated so badly, and because they believe they will be born again, free and living in their own land. They told me this themselves.[390]

Similarly, Hans Sloane footnoted Merian's work, writing "it provokes the Menstrua extremely, causes Abortion," and according to Schiebinger, he compares the plant to Savin (*junniperus sabina*), a popular herbal abortifacient used by European women.[391] Unfamiliar to the Suriname landscape, Merian

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[389] Currently, scholars including Judith Carney and Londa Schiebinger have only found documentation to suggest Maria Sibylla Meria was the only European women to travel to the New World on her own accord in the pursuit of the science of botany. While less scientific than Merian's work, Maria Riddles' *Voyages to the Madeira and Leeward Caribbean Isles* (1792) is a mixture of scientific observations with personal journal account.
[390] Maria Sibylla Merian, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705) cited from Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 1.
[391] Hans Sloane from Londa Schiebinger, "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients," 323.

relied on enslaved African and Indigenous botanical knowledge and their ability to guide her through the landscape. They located and identified specimens of plants and insects, shared their medicinal and cultivation knowledge, and performed the hard labor of cutting down jungle paths, carrying supplies, and rowing boats. Merian even took an Indigenous enslaved woman back to Amsterdam when she departed from the Dutch colony.[392] Though Merian does not provide credit and provided limited information about these women, Merian's work most likely would not have existed or been as influential if not for their understanding of Caribbean flora.

Another plant known for procuring abortions was referred to as the "Penguin Plant" and noted in both Hans Sloane's and Henry Barham's botanical writings. Today, the plant is sometimes referred to as wild pineapple (*Bromelia pinguin*). Sloane notes "It [the plant] is very diuretick [sic.]... It causes Abortion in Women with Child, of which Whores being not ignorant make frequent use… to make away their children."[393] Similarly, when talking about the fruit the Penguin Plant produces, Henry writes about the plants diuretic and abortive properties, stating, "They are very diuretic [sic?]; and the juice, given in rhenish [sic?] wine with sugar, brings down the terms in women so powerfully as to cause abortion, if given in too great a dose."[394] Unlike Merian who shows some sympathy to the plights of enslaved women and acknowledges their hard-made reason for

[392] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 35.
[393] Sloane, 248.
[394] Barham,138.

aborting their children, Hans attributes their use to the plant due to their heighten sexual activities. In the same manner as Schaw referring to Black women as "wenches," Hans dismisses the harsh realities of slavery and denounces them as "whores." Lady Nugent also mentions the plant in her journal though does not identify it as an abortifacient but as an ornamental plant. While traveling to the city of Penn, Nugent admires the plant from her carriage, exclaiming "The road to the Penn is most exceedingly pretty. Penguin hedges, which are like gigantic pine-apples, with beautiful red, blue, and white convolvulues [sic.] running all over them."[395] Her unawareness of the plant's abortive properties reflect the disparity of botanical knowledge between enslaved peoples, scientific researchers, and the average colonist with no botanical training.

Women's reproduction functioned as the heart of systemic slavery. Though it is difficult to determine how many abortions occurred during this period, as performing an abortion was a private and often secretive action, enslaved females performed abortions as a resistance strategy to slavery, as well as a way to prevent future generations from becoming enslaved.[396] For some women, it was better to remove the child before it was born than to watch their child suffer through an entire (and often shorted lived) life of slavery. As the British abolitionists efforts to end the slave trade increased, enslavers began to rely more readily on birthrates than importing new enslaved Africans. In the

[395] Nugent, 22.
[396] Schiebinger, "Agnotology and Exotic Abortifacients," 329.

words of Schiebinger, “slave women, whom planters had used primarily as ‘work units,’ become increasing valuable to planters as ’breeders’ as abolitionists in Europe threatened to shut down the slave trade.”[397] This became especially true in 1807 when the British government ended the Atlantic slave trade, and plantation owners could no longer purchase free laborers from Africa.

Abortion did not always imply Obeah, but it always signified resistance. However, in the minds of some British colonists and plantation owners, there was a connection between witchcraft and herbal abortifacients. In 1826 in Jamaica, Reverend Henry Beame accused Obeah for being the reason women aborted their child, proclaiming, “The procurement of abortion is very prevalent… there being herbs and powders known to [slave], as given by obeah men and women… these observations respecting abortions have been collected entirely from Negroes, as the white medical men know little, except from surmise.”[398] While it is true that bush doctors and Obeah practitioners were well aware of herbal abortifacients, British colonists’ and enslavers’ misguided understanding of Obeah as witchcraft made abortions not only an economic issue but a moral battle. With the desire to increase enslaved labor populations naturally, women aborting fetuses halted plantation owners’ human-commodified production lines.

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[397] Ibid., 324.

[398] Reverend Henry Beam, quoted from David Cover “This horribly wicked action;” Abortion and Resistance on a Jamaican Slave Plantation.” The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers, ed. Sandra Courtman. Vol 8, 2007, 141. Cited from Craton, Walvin, and Wright, *Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire: a Thematic Documentary*, 1976. https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3120/

However, by accusing Obeah, rather than botanical science, plantation owners exerted control over enslaved women.

"Drinking Profusely of Vervain & Contreyerv" : The Case of Catalina Susannah Mathison

In May 1824, 35 year-old enslaved woman, Catalina, also known as Susannah Mathison, residing on the Castle Wemyss Estates in St. James parish in northern Jamaica, consumed an herbal mixture that resulted in a successful abortion. Specific abortion accounts liked the one mentioned are not easily found in primary manuscripts as Western society condemned abortions, which led many women to perform the practice in private and in secret.[399] While women remained mostly invisible in writing due to paternalistic sentiments, Black women faced even further invisibility for their intersectionality of race and gender. Historians of subaltern studies know all too well that colonialism has relinquished the subaltern from the narrative, and in the context of subaltern women, they are even more overshadowed.[400]

Accounts like the one of Catalina, though less than a paragraph in length, are essential in attempts to reconstruct a history, which tells the unheard stories of enslaved women in the Caribbean. Though documented by the estate's

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[399] David Cover, "This horribly wicked action;" Abortion and Resistance on a Jamaican Slave Plantation." *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers* 8, ed. Sandra Courtman, 2007 https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3120/1/olvol9p1.PDF
[400] Spivak, 28.

overseer, Simon Halliday, and attorney, Mr. Phillips, the correspondence reveals enslaved women's agency over their sexuality and reproduction, slave resistance, and colonialist's efforts to maintain dominance over those they enslaved through women's bodies. It also shows one of womanhood, botany, and their association with witchcraft in a male-dominated society.

Gilbert Mathison inherited the sugar plantation of Castle Wemyss along with a substantial £16,000 debt in 1802 after his father's death. That same year, Mathison married Catherine Farquhar. In debt and with the estate not producing at an efficient capacity, Mathison mortgaged the estate to Simon Halliday, the husband to Catherine's half-sister. In 1823, Mathison relinquished the estate to Halliday in an effort to resolve his financial hardships. Unexpectedly, the estates experienced a short-lived return on sugar and rum production the following year. However, Halliday determined that Mathison's should continue to run the estate under his ownership, resulting in the dispatch of several monthly reports that provides a thorough account of estate affairs from 1823 to 1829.[401]

The Slave Trade Act of 1807 officially abolished the transatlantic slave trade, declaring the seizure and trading of any persons from the counties of African unlawful. The act posed serious consequences for enslavers as enslaved Black populations in the Caribbean were unable to maintain its population rate naturally. Historian David Cover's examination of the Castle Wemyss records

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[401] "Castle Wemyss Estate Papers, Jamaica 1802-c1990," Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, University of London, Archival Portal Europe Foundation, 2020, accessed April 13. https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/ead-display/-/ead/pl/aicode/GB-101/type/fa/id/gb101-ics101

show a continual decrease in enslaved population of the estate, coinciding with the general decline of numbers of the enslaved across the British Caribbean colonies between 1807 and 1834. His research suggests that the estate's enslaved community dropped substantially:

> After 1802 the Castle Weymss Estate experienced a continual loss of total slave numbers, falling from 241 to 200 in 1817 and 180 in 1820. Despite purchasing additional slaves in 1823, thus increasing the number to 203, numbers fell to 200 in 1825 and by 1827 numbered only 177. An examination of the records for the years between 1817 and 1828 shows that the greatest drop of numbers came in those aged over forty. In other age groups the decline was constant but slight. [402]

The correspondence between Simon Halliday and Mr. Phillips documenting the "wicked actions" of Catalina takes place in the timeframe of enslaved Blacks population decline in 1824. In the overseer's monthly report, he describes Catalina as a "deceiving" woman:

> This women having been threatened (tho' not punished) in the Field by the Driver in the course of her work for quarrelling with another woman made a complaint to me at the same time informed me she thought herself pregnant and could not work in great Gang in consequences of which I desired her to be examined by the Midwife who reported her as being so (her infant dying only six week previous to the examination of the Midwife) I put her into the second Gang for light employment, the doing so of which excited the curiosity of her fellow Negros who ridiculed her as making a pretence (she having formerly been a deceiving character) to escape working in the Field. She threated the Midwife that she would bring on herself an abortion (because the Negroes troubled her) two weeks previous to the facts taking place on Monday May 3rd. She actually went to the Pastures and picked a herb called country Ebo which she boiled and Drank consequently brought on the fact she so coldly premeditated, the Doctor of the Estate was applied to who directed me the confine her until Mr. P [Mr. Phillips] arrived which was done and upon Mr. P. strictly examining the case caused her to be confirmed in the Dungeon for one

[402] Cover, 3.

> month and kept on as much Bread and water only as she could consume as punishment.[403]

The attorney sent a noticeably different account of the same incident in his report to Halliday. Specifically, he mentions two different herbs instead of Ebo and accuses her of African witchcraft.[404] However, both mention her punishment of solitary confinement:

> The only case of misconduct is of a woman called Catalina alias Susannah Mathison which is of too serious a nature to overlook, she belongs to a family notoriously bad having been one of those formerly practicing Obeah, this woman brought on abortion during last month by drinking profusely of Vervain & Contreyerv, which she threated to do in consequence of a disagreement with her husband, for this horribly wicked action I have directed she should be punished with solitary confinement.[405]

Native to Europe and North Africa, Vervain (*verena officinalis*) has long been known for its magical properties and was used by the ancient Celtic Druids in ceremonies. Known as a "cure-all," Vervain is documented in European, Asian, and African traditional medicine practices.[406] The species Catalina used to induce an abortion, however, is known as Blue Vervain (*Verbena hastata*). Blue Vervain is native to North America and used in the same way medicinally as Old World Vervain.[407] Schiebinger has suggested that enslaved Africans could have found substitution plants in the West Indies that appeared similar to those on the

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[403] CWEP ICS 101/3/2/8
[404] I could not find any further reference to Ebo in my research; therefore, I focused on Vervain and Contreyerv.
[405] CWEP ICS 101 2/1/27
[406] Chevallier, 149.
[407] Ibid., 149.

west coast of Africa.[408] Vervain is presumably one of these plants. Earning its title as a cure-all plant, Vervain as a tonic was traditionally known to improve digestive functions, is used to treat the nervous system, alleviate migraine headaches, and is an anti-inflammatory. The active compound in Vervain, Verbenalin, is a strong purgatory bitter, which can induce vomiting and stimulate contraction of the womb due to its estrogenic and progestogenic hormonal activity.[409] Catalina must have been aware of the plant's capabilities as a hormonal agent and used to stimulate premature contractions. The second herb used in the mixture, Contrayerva (*dorstenia contrajerva*) grows natively in the Caribbean and South and Central America. Meaning “antidote” in Spanish, Contrayerva was traditionally used to treat poisoning and venomous bites, gastrointestinal issues such as dysentery, and a poultice to extract pus from wounds. Two similar species of the plant, *dorstenia convexa* and *dorstenia klainei*, are native to tropical Africa.[410]

By taking control of their own reproductive processes, enslaved women held onto some autonomy while also resisting systemic slavery. As populations of the enslaved dwindled and enslavers could no longer purchase new African laborers after 1807, enslavers became ever more concerned and interested in the reproductive capabilities of their enslaved female laborers. In the words of Morgan, “slaveowners contemplated women’s reproductive potential with greed

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[408] Schiebinger, *Secret Cure of Slaves*, 61.
[409] Chevallier, 149.
[410] Chevallier, 203.

and opportunism" as they looked to increase their slave holdings naturally.[411] Enslaved women were at the heart of the Plantationocene monoagricultural economy of the Caribbean, and their ability to reproduce new laborers were central to the institution of slavery.[412] Catalina's actions were one of direct defiance to systemic slavery, demonstrating agency over her body through her botanical knowledge. Halliday's account suggests that Catalina brought on the abortion after fighting amongst the other Blacks who ridiculed her for pretending to be pregnant to receive lighter work. She also quarrels with the midwife, who is unidentified but is presumably another Black woman, and threatens to induce an abortion if not helped. Mr. Phillip's contradictory account notes Catalina used abortifacients after arguing with her husband. However, there is a third possibility, Catalina could possibly be a woman refusing to birth another human into slavery while also looking after her and her potential child's welfare. Threatened by her autonomy and moment of independence Mr. Phillips denounced her as a practitioner of African witchcraft for her botanical knowledge.

Conclusion

On 25 March 1807, the British government passed the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which banned the trading of enslaved African people from Africa to the New World. However, slavery persisted in the British colonies until

[411] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 4.
[412] Ibid., 4.

its complete abolishment in 1838. Between these two decades, smuggling enslaved Africans into the New World continued despite British government interference, but plantation owners seeking to replace or add to their free labor forced no longer had a ready supply of commodified humans entering ports. Their attention towards enslaved women shifted even more so from viewing women as productive laborers to reproductive producers. Natural production became the primary way plantation owners could maintain the Plantationocene economy in British colonial islands.

Until recent years, historians viewed enslaved women on the periphery of rebellion, often assuming a more passive role in their condition as slaves. Contemporary scholars, however, recognize that women actively rebelled against their oppressors from small acts of defiance to self-liberation movements. Enslaved women's botanical knowledge often aided in their retaliation and must not be overlooked. Catalina's decision to induce an abortion directly countered systemic slavery, preventing those who believed they owned her from capitalizing on her reproductive capacities. As many scholars now contend, it is impossible to know exactly how many enslaved women turned to plant-based abortifacients, however, they were commonly employed and a significant component of rebellion. Often threatened by their autonomy, abortion often became synonymous with Obeah much like poison.

Abortifacients plants only make up a small sub-group of plants utilized by enslaved women. Indeed, these women were highly familiar with

various plants for their medicinal properties and often employed them to help treat their community. While often unrecognized or nameless, there are brief occasions when documents acknowledge these women to suggest that enslaved women played an essential role in developing modern medicine and midwifery. Those titled as Obeah practitioners were often sought after for their skills in herbal medicine like Mongo Maud. Nevertheless, many British colonists and physicians remained skeptical of alternative healing practices, as with Lady Nugent sending away Nurse Flora during childbirth. Viewed as superstition or non-scientific in methodology, Obeah women and enslaved women who used botanicals enforced Westerners' perceived perception of Africans and those of African descent as primitive.

CONCLUSION

I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest.
It is hostile. The path was overgrown but was possible to follow it…
Here were the ruins of a stone house…
Under the orange trees I noticed little bunches of flowers
tied with grass.[413]

Jean Rhys
Wide Sargasso Sea, 1966

Just as enslaved Africans brought their own healing practices and botanical knowledge across the Atlantic, so too did British colonists bring their beliefs regarding the union of witchcraft with the natural world and their perception of modern medicine. The convergence of these ideas melted together a crucible of new and distinct cultural and social norms that eventually became known as creolization. The discourse of transatlantic history and slavery has been popular amongst historians for years, but only in recent decades have scholars turned their attention to enslaved women's lived experiences as well as Africa's botanical legacy in the New World. Contemporary scholars have also begun to decolonize current definitions of Obeah that previously explicitly linked this alternative healing and spiritual practice as something adjacent to witchcraft. Moreover, the newfound appreciation for objectivity and observation during the Enlightenment spurred Western societies to reconsider the importance of the science of botany and the need to classify the natural world. Various scholars have discussed that while scientific botany grew in popularity and became a

[413] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea.* 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966). Internet Archive, 95. https://archive.org/details/widesargassosea0000rhys_q8x3/page/94/mode/2up?q=orange

male-dominated field suitable for physicians and naturalists, literary botany also continued to flourish and reiterate allegories between women and flora.

However, little scholarly attention has been directed to the interconnectivity of these studies and the alchemy of botany, race, and gender in the British colonial Caribbean during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As this thesis has set out to show, Britain enforced imperial rule over their Caribbean colonies and those they enslaved through the appropriation and management of both the enslaved female body and nature. By doing so, Britain maintained racial hierarchical beliefs and subjectified African women based on both race and sex, which consequently justified the institution of slavery in the minds of the oppressor. It also adds to the discourse of transatlantic colonial history by challenging conventional ideas of enslaved women as peripheral to larger themes of rebellion while also contributing to the dismantling of Western concepts of modernity and scientific objectivity through the lens of medicine and botany. By provincializing Western medicine practices, enslaved women who practiced Obeah and alternative herbal medicines transitioned from European notions of witchcraft practitioners to effective botanical healers and contributors to modern medicine.

Using concepts found in cultural ecofeminism, this research has highlighted Western societies long held association of women and nature. It has not set out to prove this framework but rather use it as a historical methodology for understanding how this association between the female body and flora has

persisted for centuries. Beginning with an observation of literary botany, European writers frequently personified nature as women and imbued plants with feminine traits. Sexualized nature took on binary feministic characteristics and was either portrayed as bountiful and nurturing or wicked and untamed. Stemming from early Renaissance artistic devices such as the allegory of the "four continents," African flora and Black women were reduced and deemed inferior to other continents while also solidifying notions of race based on skin color. As a result, African women became the underappreciated and disgraced fourth child of the goddess Flora.

The personification of nature as female burgeoned when Linnaeus introduced the Sexual System plant taxonomy in 1735, which constructed human-plant analogies and classified plants based on reproduction. Literary botany extenuated this metaphor by giving plants feministic traits and reflected eighteenth-century British social anxieties about gender roles. European flora often personified feminine traits viewed as positive, such as beauty, grace, and modesty, desired by White women in a patriarchally dominated culture. Inversely, non-European flowers reinforced Western associations of the "other" with negative feministic traits such as overt sexuality, wickedness, and being careless mothers.

Thornton's illustration and poem of the African-native Stapelia in *The Temple of Flora* reiterate the "Dark Continent" trope by depicting the plant as a witchcraft practitioner and cannibalistic mother. Other plants fall victim to the

savior narrative, suggesting that only British botanists could genuinely appreciate and prosperously cultivate non-native flora. The presence of serpents in illustrations and poems allegorically represented Europeans' imagined belief of African witchcraft, which again is seen in Thornton's painting of the Stapelia. References to snakes are also present in other works such as Grainer's *The Sugar-Cane* and Darwin's *The Loves of Plants*. However, Europeans did not realize that their symbolism of the snake to African witchcraft stemmed from Christian beliefs rather than their actual use in African healing practices.

These sexualized botanical tropes and the Western association of witchcraft with nature carried themselves across the Atlantic and were reiterated in colonists' misrepresentation of Obeah and alternative healing practices. Seen as a subclass in identifying race and gender, enslaved women who used their botanical knowledge as a form of resistance caused particular concern for British colonists and plantation-owners, and they were often portrayed as poisoners, abortionists, or rebel leaders. Originally viewed as a monolithic devil-worshiping religion, the several African religions and beliefs carried across the Atlantic merged to create Obeah, a distinct cultural practice and belief amongst the enslaved community. Many colonists dismissed Obeah as superstition, validating their beliefs of Africans as credulous beings, but the results of the 1720s Maroon Wars and Tacky's War of 1760 changed this colonial perception. Obeah provided enslaved Africans and Maroons with the spiritual and psychological strength to

rebel against colonialism. After the end of the Tacky Wars, British legislation immediately illegalized Obeah.

Enslaved women filled a substantial role in resistance and their botanical knowledge often provided the means to do so. From famous Obeah women like Queen Nanny to the more obscure, women relied on their botanical expertise for medicinal purposes, spiritual rituals, and sometimes as weapons against slavery. Like Catalina, who successfully brought on an abortion with Vervain and Contrayerva, several women utilized abortifacients to regain their autonomy and used it as a form of rebellion. Abortifacients and poisonous plants only constituted a sub-group of flora enslaved women were familiar with; however, they caused the most concern for plantation owners who feared being poisoned or worried about losing future investments in women's offspring.

Nevertheless, their superior experience in herbal medicine could not go unnoticed by British male botanists and physicians traveling to the Antilles. Unfamiliar with many of the diseases found on the islands, physicians sought the knowledge of enslaved women when it came to producing plant-based medicine and providing treatment to the sick. Unfortunately, enslaved women's botanical knowledge can only be gleaned through the occasional references found in colonial works. When convenient and analyzed under scientific means, male physicians captured the use of these plants in their scientific journals, occasionally referencing the women who employed these remedies. When seen as superstition or non-scientific in their approach, it enforced Western

associations of Africa as the opposite of modern progress, and occasionally, linked these women to witchcraft.

In brief, enslaved women possessed the power to harm and to heal due to their proficiency in plants. Their contributions should be recognized. Many women were convicted of witchcraft well up to the mid-twentieth century for practicing non-Western medicine techniques, while other Obeah women like Mongo Maud were sought after when Western medicine practices failed. The criminalization of Obeah in present-day Jamaica since its outlawing in 1760 demonstrates the influence of Western beliefs even after post-colonization. Even today in the Western public imagination, the female body is still very much identified with witchcraft as it is with nature. It seems the tropes that were established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries prevail.

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