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"There's a Natural Mystic Flowing through the Air"<sup>1</sup>: Review of Diana Paton's and Maarit Forde's *Obeah and Other Powers*

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Diana Paton and Maarit Forde, eds. *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 376 pp.

Diana Paton and Maarit Forde are lecturers at Newcastle University and the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine respectively. Paton is a historian whose area of focus is the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica. In 2015, Cambridge University Press published her new monograph, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World*. Forde is a cultural anthropologist. Her current research project is titled "Passages and Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspectives to Death and Mortuary Rituals in the Caribbean." Their collection of essays, *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing* explores the sources of power most influential in the shaping of Caribbean spiritual belief systems.

The cover of *Obeah and Other Powers* reflects the text's focus on power. The cover bears an image of prisoners in an Antiguan jail in 1905. They are lined up in two rows, some seated some standing, and they are each holding a sign with their name and the island where they were convicted (3). Presumably they are deportees. The introduction suggests that this image functions as a motif for the collection because of its multilayered representation of the various kinds of power that orbit the practice of Caribbean religions. For example, although the image is a clear demonstration of the role of state power in controlling and containing these practices, Paton and Forde suggest that the manner in which the prisoners choose to pose themselves for the photo also reflects an enactment of agency (1-2).

The collection's appeal also rests with its dual approaches to the interrogation of how power is deployed in response to the practice of Caribbean religions. *Obeah and Other Powers* gives consideration to both efforts to silence and contain the visibility of practitioners as well as to the ways in which practitioners and others evoke obeah and other powers in acts of resistance. This bivalent engagement of Caribbean spiritual practices produces an intriguing collection that offers an observation from both behind the mirror and in front of it, and renders a rich and intellectually nimble selection of essays.

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<sup>1</sup> Line from the song "Natural Mystic" by Bob Marley.

While there is a healthy range of publications on African-derived spiritual traditions, many focus on specific practices. For example *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* by Maya Deren offers an extensive study of Voudoun. Other texts, such as *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery* by Noel Leo Erskine, pursue a very diasporic approach. *Obeah and Other Powers* is one of a limited number of texts published this century that straddles the middle ground with its pan-Caribbean, multi-tradition focus. Other texts that offer a similar pan-Caribbean focus include *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* by Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and *Enacting Power: The Criminalization of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760-2011* by Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby.

Organized into sections that in some ways reflect the book's themes, *Obeah and Other Powers* features a broad range of essays that contemplate varying Caribbean religious traditions in a number of geographic and disciplinary spaces. The introduction offers three themes around which the collection coheres, and these themes are also captured by the cover image. The first, according to Paton and Forde, is "the significance of state power, and more specifically, state hostility, in shaping the environment within which Caribbean religions were sustained and practiced" (2). The second is "the active role of practitioners in reshaping the religious traditions in which they participated" (3). The third theme centers around "the importance of mobility in constructing obeah and the other powers" as well as a consideration of how the borders between colonial empires can shift or dissolve in order to both facilitate or constrain movement (3).

The essay "Eh!eh! Bomba, hen! hen!": Making Sense of a Vodou Chant" appears in Part I and reflects that section's focus on "Powers of Representation." Written by Alasdair Pettinger, the essay charts the recoded history of a chant in Haiti and as Pettinger explains aims "to identify what is at stake in these attempts to make sense of the chant and whether translators of the chant can indeed fix its meaning any more than their predecessors for whom it was unintelligible" (81). This essay is a good example of the work this section seeks to accomplish by unpacking the strategic impulses that activate the manner in which aspects of Caribbean spiritual practices are represented. For example, Pettinger notes that when the chant was recorded in North American travelogues published during the occupation of Haiti by the United States (1915 to 1934), these accounts situate the chant "as a form of entertainment, comfortably satisfying a taste for the macabre and the pornographic" (86). However, in *Toussaint Louverture*, Aimé Césaire imbues the chant with a rich historical legacy by situating it as part of the now infamous ritual at Bois Caiman where the initiation of the slave revolt that eventually led to Haiti's independence from France took place (90). Further explorations of how versions of the chant is deployed by figures such as W.E.B.

Du Bois all collaborate to reveal the power inherent in representational forces. This essay is typical of Part I because it pursues numerous examples of how subject-position inflects the manner in which Caribbean spiritual practices are represented.

Part II, titled "Modernity and Traditions in the Making" contemplates the role of practitioners in the evolution of Caribbean spiritual traditions. An example of this contemplation is the essay "The Persistence of Obeah in Early Nineteenth-Century Martinique" by John Savage, in which he explores "the rampant use of poison by enslaved people to kill or harm livestock, fellow slaves, and, on some occasions, white masters" (151). According to the governor during that period, General François-Xavier Donzelot, these incidents were the result of the practice of "obi" (150). Savage's essay suggests that the spate of poisonings shaped the nascent image of practitioners of Caribbean spiritual traditions as "a master revolutionary" rather "than a master healer" (166). This perspective in turn "shaped white responses to both slave medicine and African cosmologies in this period" (166). This exploration of events in Martinique serve as an effective demonstration of the work of the chapter at highlighting the agency enacted by practitioners and the role those deliberate choices had on popular perceptions of Caribbean spiritual practices.

The third and final section, "Powers on the Move," considers issues around mobility. One essay in this section, "Rites of Power and Rumors of Race: The Circulation of Supernatural Knowledge in the Greater Caribbean, 1890 - 1940" by Lara Putnam deliberates the effect of migration within the Caribbean on the practice of obeah (243). More specifically, Putnam explores how turn-of-the-century print journalism exposes the multi-racial and multi-ethnic dimensions of participants involved the practice (251). Furthermore, Putnam infers that this resulted from obeah's ability to facilitate "communication across boundaries of empire, language, and continental origin" (262). "The Vodou State and the Protestant nation: Haiti in the Long Twentieth Century" by Karen Richman similarly considers how mobility has impacted Caribbean spiritual practices, with a focus on how the practice, and not the practitioners, has evolved in light of contact with other influencing factors. More specifically, Richman considers how Vodou, other religious practices, and Haiti's political economy have affected each other (268). These and other essays in this section recognize the profound impact of mobility on the shaping of Caribbean spiritual practices.

The collection does an outstanding job of contemplating Caribbean religions in the intriguing context of power. In fact, another way to conceptualize how ideas in the collection are clustered is in terms of the use of the word "power." *Obeah and Other Powers* conceives of three types of power. One is "other powers," a reference to the varying indices of powers aside from obeah, described in the text as "formations that have occupied similar, although not

identical, places to obeah in Caribbean societies” (5). The collection also recognizes the importance of what the editors refer to as simply “everyday powers,” the power enacted by a range of individuals and institutions such as judicial and military bodies but also the power wielded by artists and scholars (5). The third and final form of power is wielded by people in the region who experience religious traditions as a driver of resistance against hegemonic forces (5).

Power is an effective organizational motif, and *Obeah and Other Powers* seeks to reveal the complex relationships that have developed around Caribbean spiritual practices and reflects in some ways Michel Foucault’s broad understanding of the function of “government” as a site of control when the oppositional parties are not necessarily apparent:

Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government. This word must be allowed the very broad meaning which it had in the sixteenth century. “Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick.<sup>2</sup>

The collection succeeds in interrogating power as a kind of governance, and leaves readers with a rich and complex understanding of the historical dynamics that have impacted the evolution of Caribbean religions.

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. 2nd edition. Ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982 (221).