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Obeah and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive

Nicole N. Aljoe, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Benjamin J. Doyle and Elizabeth Hopwood*

In conjunction with this special issue of *Atlantic Studies*, the Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA) – developed at Northeastern University and available at ecdaproject.org – has created a collaborative archival project, “Obeah and the Caribbean.” This project consists, in part, of a digital exhibit of original obeah texts including a number of the primary sources that are discussed throughout the articles in this volume of *Atlantic Studies*. The ECDA is designed to serve not only as a repository but also as a digital commons and laboratory space for researchers and students interested in the early Caribbean: users of the site can curate, annotate, and discuss early Caribbean materials that are included in the archive. We invite readers of this issue to further engage and experiment with primary sources and to collaborate with other scholars by way of this exhibit and the digital workspace of the ECDA + CoLab. In the brief essay below, we discuss some of the core intellectual issues that inform the ECDA and our project on obeah.

Keywords: obeah; Caribbean; archives; Black Atlantic; digital humanities

A Treatise on Sugar: With Miscellaneous Medical Observations by Benjamin Moseley first appeared in London in 1799: it is, manifestly, a text concerned with instructing its reader in the cultivation of sugar on plantations in the Caribbean with the use of slave labor to do so. What this text produced in abundance, however, may not have been knowledge about sugar so much as obeah narratives. Embedded within Moseley’s text is the first iteration of the tale of “Three-Finger’d Jack” or Jack Mansong, a maroon slave who, according to Moseley, relied upon obeah to exert and sustain the authority of his revolt against the plantocracy in Jamaica. Moseley’s narrative of Jack became the basis of a pantomime, two novels, and later a melodrama that appeared in England and the USA. Reprints of these texts, as well as pamphlets, engravings, sheet music, and even playing cards, appeared, all retailing the tale of Jack and his obi.¹ As Diana Paton’s extensive bibliography of texts concerning Mansong (including reprint editions) indicates, at least *sixty-one* versions of the Three-Finger’d Jack story have appeared in print.² It is worth underscoring that this tale – so widely disseminated in a variety of genres – first appeared in an agricultural and medical treatise. The apparent topical dissonance between obeah and sugar production is significant – indeed, we might take this dissonance as emblematic of a clash between Afro-diasporic and Enlightenment European knowledge regimes. Obeah – described, alternately, as a religious, medical, legal, sorcerous, or military/revolutionary practice by European writers – engenders what we might call a category crisis in western European enlightenment knowledge systems.³

Importantly, this category crisis is one with material dimensions that are related to the archive on which “knowledge” is based. An archive is a repository of materials that are

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brought together in the name of knowledge: an archive is a knowledge event. And the archive, in turn, serves as the basis for the creation of new enunciations of truth and fact. Michel Foucault, for instance, defines the archive as “first and foremost the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”⁴ But in the case of obeah and more broadly, the history of the Black Atlantic, there is much that cannot be said. The Atlantic, argues Simon Gikandi, is a “deep crypt” in which are immured the voices and lives of the enslaved peoples whose forced labor in the Caribbean was the engine of capitalist modernity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The story of Jack Mansong’s obi, as we have seen, is buried – encrypted – within the “science” of sugar production; the knowledge produced by Moseley’s document aims at increasing productivity for European monocultural exploitation of Caribbean ground and African labor. Within that text is another story, however, concerning Jack and “all his Obi.”

How, then, might these resistant knowledge practices and embedded stories be brought into visibility? What are the ways of reading, studying, and writing about these and other texts that reveal and give value to Jack, obeah, and others like him? And, in doing so, what new knowledges might be created or made intelligible? Such questions have been a driving force behind the creation of the Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA), an open access archive dedicated to the sustained, collaborative study of pre-twentieth-century Caribbean literary and cultural texts and images.⁵ Although Jack Mansong’s story has been disembedded from Moseley’s agricultural treatise by a long history of revision and republication in multiple forms (and, importantly, reembedded in a variety of new European genres), the majority of obeah narratives remain buried, as it were, within larger texts that are not overtly concerned with obeah or with Afro-Caribbean knowledge practices. What we might think of as central texts concerning obeah include Moseley’s agricultural treatise; the legal and governmental record, 1788 *Report of the Lords of the Committee ... Relating to Trade And Foreign Plantations*; and the narrative history, Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (all available through the ECDA exhibit). In each case, the discussion of obeah represents a mere fraction of a much longer document aimed at advancing the colonial project in Jamaica. In each case, the account of obeah is encrypted within a European archive structured in relation to modes of knowledge that discount and fail to recognize obeah as a significant form of organizing an understanding of the world and the operations of power and authority in the world.

Thus, although there is no lack of archival material concerning the early Caribbean, it is crucial to recognize that the form and episteme of that archive is one that enables certain kinds of knowledge and forecloses others. As Simon Gikandi points out, colonials in Jamaica were obsessive record keepers, but the aim of this documentation was not simply to keep track of goods, production patterns, and costs but to naturalize and justify the system of slavery and racialized oppression that was at the center of the colonial project. The archive itself, Gikandi argues, was aimed at *producing* slavery as surely as were the iron manacles placed around the wrists and necks of kidnapped Africans:

Slave masters sought to assert their authority through relentless record keeping ... From Edward Long to Thomas Jefferson, slave masters turned to writing as a will to power; record keeping, and the archiving gesture, was a form of violent control; the archive was an attestation to the authority of natural history, the key to the ideology of white power ... And thus from logbooks and firsthand accounts of the slave trade to the major histories written by planters, the archive of the slavers established statements whose major role was to fix the

African as an object, as chattel, as property, and indeed as the symbol of the barbarism that enabled white civilization and its modernist cravings.⁶

The knowledge that was created within the colonial archive defined slaves as property, as barbaric, and as distant from and unqualified for access to the English liberty that formed the basis of white legal subjecthood. Further, slaves were denied access to the technology of the archive: reading and writing, for slaves, were punishable acts. The episteme of the archive, then, both barred slaves from access to the archive and positioned them within the archive as nonsubjects. As such, the colonial archive is fractured by a fundamental contradiction: because of the silence enforced upon them, slaves are absent from the archive as producers of official knowledge and yet are present in (and central to) the archive as producers of economic value. As Gikandi concludes:

African slaves could continue to both inform and haunt the early American archive, forming a crucial link in the Black Atlantic, yet one in which the only existing records were those committed to their subjection. In the process, the figure of the slave could come to complicate what an archive meant.⁷

Or to put it another way, the archive aspires to knowledge and transparency, but in its coloniality, it enacts erasure and violence. When we turn to the colonial archive, then, we must attend as much to the nonknowledge that it creates – the obfuscation of humanity, the erasure of lives, and the violent eradication of Afro-diasporic culture and meaning – as to the “knowledge” that it seeks to enunciate.

How then to proceed in the face of the violence of the colonial archive? Saidiya Hartman has written movingly on this question:

How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to it all? Is it possible to construct a story from “the locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins?⁸

A number of important responses to this question have been proposed. Here we outline four prominent ones that might loosely be described as methods of revisionary recovery, rereading, disembedding, and recombining. Gikandi, in the essay cited above, proposes a model of revisionary recovery, arguing that we might productively turn to what he calls “third texts” within the archive – namely, texts that are written by individuals who were neither masters nor slaves but by “observers whose relationship to the institution of slavery was tenuous, and whose intentions were driven by goals that were sometimes at odds with the systematizing function of the archive of enslavement.”⁹ An example of such a text, for Gikandi, is the Moravian missionary, C.G.A. Oldendorp’s *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John* (1770) – a text written in the interest of a religious discourse not directly aligned with the project of slavery. A second method emphasizes rereading, or reading for the fissures and ruptures in colonial knowledge. Kelly Wisecup, in her reading of obeah texts by Europeans, points to the ways in which resistant African knowledge disrupts the discursive mastery of colonial writers. Rereading texts by Bryan Edwards, Benjamin Moseley, and William Earle for moments of epistemological and discursive disruption, Wisecup concludes that “representing obeah produced generic hybrids and a blurring of generic differences, textual slippages that manifest the ways in which colonists responded

to encounters with alternate systems of knowledge.”¹⁰ In these slippages, Wisecup argues, the presence of resistant African knowledge becomes legible despite the coloniality of the archive.

A third method for approaching the colonial archive focuses on disembedding Caribbean slave narratives from the disparate texts and contexts in which they appear. Nicole N. Aljoe, for instance, points out the need to reconsider our notion of genre and authenticity in looking for the voices of the enslaved in the Caribbean: the absence of Caribbean slave narratives in existing scholarship on the slave narrative is due to the fact that Caribbean slave narratives that are embedded in the colonial archive do not resemble the self-written, autonomously published slave narratives with which we are most familiar, such as texts by iconic US narrators like William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Jacobs. Instead, Caribbean slave narratives appear in the archives in more complex manifestations: in the form of dictated, unsigned, and undated testimonies, portraits embedded in other texts, court depositions, spiritual conversion narratives, letters, interviews, brief narrative and ethnographic portraits, and representations of conversations. By disembedding such narratives from the context of the colonial documents in which they appear, a new form emerges – that of the Caribbean slave narrative or, as Aljoe argues, the “testimony” of the enslaved.¹¹

Saidiya Hartman, in contrast, proposes something of a double strategy – one that involves close attention to the archive but works to both disembed and *rearrange* its acts of enunciation and thus to tell a new story, one that Hartman describes as a counter-history, or an “insurgent, disruptive narrative.” In retelling the history of two enslaved girls who were murdered on board the ship *Recovery* in 1791, Hartman draws on the legal record of a trial of the ship’s captain, John Kimber, but recombines the events and language used in that document to draw attention to the fictive nature of the history presented by the archive and to begin to shape alternative imaginative engagements with that history. Hartman writes:

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis “what happened when” and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe “the resistance of the object,” if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity.¹²

Notably, Hartman emphasizes that this is not an act of recovery but something far more vexed; it is rather:

an impossible writing which attempts to say that which cannot be said ... It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history with and against the archive.¹³

In a related mode, albeit in a very different genre, M. NourbeSe Philip also engages in a recombinatory poetics of the archive. In her poetry collection, *Zong!*, Philip turns to one of the most horrifying archival sources of Caribbean slavery: the transcript of the 1782 London trial in which British insurers sought to avoid paying for the “destroyed cargo” of

enslaved Africans that the crew of the slave ship, *Zong*, had thrown overboard in an effort to conserve drinking water. Philip uses the 1783 report on the trial, *Gregson v Gilbert* – the only extant documentation of the *Zong* case – as a “word store” for the poems in her collection. She draws upon the musical metaphor of the fugue to describe the resulting interaction of the voices she illuminates in the poems. Indeed, the often atonal and disharmonious features of the fugue offer a compelling analog for the various voices communicating multiple definitions of oppression and redemption circulating throughout the collection. Through the paradigm of the fugue, Philip highlights polyvocal aspects of historical memory and reveals that even in those archival documents in which the voices of enslaved people are seemingly absent, such as the surviving transcription of the London trial in which none of the Africans testified, traces and aspects of their voices are nonetheless apparent. The languages used on the ship – in which enslaved Africans directly participated by listening, repeating, and speaking – provides the discursive foundations for the report.

Drawing on the four methodologies described above – revisionary recovery, rereading, disembedding, and rearranging – the ECDA serves as a digital remix of the colonial archive, one that seeks to unsettle the coloniality of the archive by recourse to the affordances of digital technology. Translated into digital media, the analog texts and images of the colonial archive appear in the ECDA in new contexts and new forms. As each of the methodologies described above implicitly indicates, genre is itself a mode of formalization that has to do with authority and knowledge creation: to violate generic boundaries is to violate categories that structure knowledge. The digital nature of the ECDA enables a particular flexibility or plasticity with which to reshape, recontextualize, and remix the formal shape of texts and images found in the colonial archive. This generic disruption and revision opens possibilities for reshaping the knowledge structures of the archive of the early Caribbean – and addressing and redressing, in some small measure, the silence of the Atlantic crypt.

How, exactly, does the digital nature of the ECDA enable the unsettling of the colonial archive? Is it possible to at once reproduce the colonial archive in digital form and to challenge the coloniality of that archive? In the case of the exhibit on obeah associated with this issue of *Atlantic Studies*, we provide something of a trial or case study of how such unsettling might occur. At the core of the exhibit are digital images of four central texts about obeah written by white Englishmen – texts cited frequently in critical discussions of obeah such as those included in the essays in this journal and texts that themselves are foundational with respect to other texts written about obeah in the colonial archive. In addition to reproducing the images of these texts, the exhibit also makes available to users transcribed portions of those texts that treat obeah directly. In short, we offer users access to both embedded and disembedded versions of the obeah narratives contained within these longer colonial histories, treatises, and records. The digital nature of the archive is particularly significant here because users of the site can read these materials within the context of the colonial archive (by viewing the images of the original texts), *and* as disembedded and remixed (by viewing the transcribed obi narratives) and thus, in effect, find an anthology of obi texts extracted and placed in conversation with one another that form a collective account of obeah practices.

In addition to making these obi texts available in multiple forms, the ECDA aims to serve as a site for the collective production of knowledge about early Caribbean texts and images. Part repository, knowledge commons, and text analytics lab, the ECDA makes a growing corpus of Caribbean materials widely accessible and invites users to participate

directly in the building of the archive and to take collective ownership and authorship over the various knowledges posited. Authorship is, in no small degree, a matter of curation – as much a matter of attaching authority to statements as it is attaching a proper name to words. Reauthored by the digital archive and its user community (we hope), the obeah narratives of the exhibit will remain both within and without their contexts by being resituated within a site of spatial, temporal, and conceptual play and negotiation, which the digital archive affords and the ECDA facilitates. We do not mean here to suggest the ECDA is yet another archive *taking* authorship/ownership/authority over these texts, but rather that we and users of the site might take a reflexive approach to ownership that acknowledges responsibility for knowledge authoring practices and makes accessible the full participation of interested publics in such authoring.

Our efforts in this regard are not without their own contradictions: given the conceptual and formal dissonances between obeah and the empiricist-oriented bent of archival knowledge practices (including the ECDA), we remain within the space of the contradiction and dissonance between Western and non-Western epistemologies. In part, we embrace this mode of dissonance and seek to underscore the multiple possible topical and generic frames within and across which obeah operates. Additionally, however, we hope to retain and promote the unsettling or troubling effect modeled here, given that it seems to us a productive referent for practices in text analytics and the commoning function of knowledge making. As Gikandi writes regarding the crypt of the Atlantic:

[T]he challenge of the archive ... is how [to] read the lives of the slaves in the archive of the masters, not to recover the authentic voices of the enslaved, but to witness new voices and selves emerging in what appears to be the site of discursive interdiction.¹⁴

The imperial archive, past and present, structures knowledge as though it were always already a disembodied record, neutrally poised and benevolently imposed, but we view knowledge as the product of unsettling and a sustained renegotiation of the given by a continuously changing ecology of agents. Knowledge is that which is made and necessarily remade within sites of generative dissonance, and we seek to build a user community that will engage the digital knowledge archive of the Caribbean as a site of radical remix and revision.

As we have found in our work on the ECDA, issues of dissonance and the unsettling of knowledge are not resolved by the digital archive but repeatedly engaged. For instance, the matter of obeah's dissonance with existing Western knowledge categories that we pointed to earlier is mirrored not only in the curation of the texts but also in the creation of transcribed digital scholarly editions. As part of the larger collection development for the ECDA, we are transcribing and encoding a corpus of early Caribbean texts using the TEI (Textual Encoding Initiative), a set of guidelines for encoding humanities texts using XML (Extensible Markup Language). Perhaps unsurprisingly, such encoding work raises, again, the questions of power, knowledge, selection, and authority that occur within conversations about archival work and Caribbean studies. The concept of the "embedded" narrative has informed not only our ideas about reshaping a digital archive but also our approach to text markup and the expression of our intentions behind the encoding. The formal language structure of the TEI allows for some customization: one might follow the TEI Guidelines in order to describe any number of textual elements and features, from paragraph breaks to

references to people. But in our creation of a scholarly digital edition of obeah texts, we continue to grapple with issues of embeddedness, interpretation, and ownership.

Specifically, we are developing and customizing a model outside the TEI Guidelines in order to mark up references to obeah and obeah narratives within colonial texts. Precisely because obeah entails a set of knowledge practices that does not easily map onto Western knowledge practices, we have pushed at the boundaries of the TEI Guidelines in deliberating how to mark it: are “references” the same as a “narrative”? What constitutes a narrative? What might we gain from creating our own customized element rather than using the TEI standards for describing religion? Using a structured way of marking up and describing these texts points more and more to the slipperiness of formalizing textual and interpretative elements, in general, and locating and describing such moments in early Caribbean texts in particular. Put another way, before the technical work of familiarizing oneself with the ins and outs of XML, parsers, and angled brackets, are the problematics inherent within Caribbean and Atlantic World scholarly discussions: what is obeah? To whom does a narrative belong? In a colonial space, whose stories are being told, published, and read? In addition to theorizing these questions across our site at large, we are using the TEI to argue that through a formalized marking system, we might disembed and re-present narratives, thereby beginning a shift in the production of knowledge within colonial archive.

In conjoining with the scholars in this issue, we expect that the ECDA obeah exhibit will allow for increased engagement with these texts and increased capacity for reading, analyzing, and commoning around these texts. With our digital obeah exhibit, we aim to aggregate and make available obeah texts that are often difficult to locate and reproduce for the purposes of research and teaching. Beyond placing these texts together and making them searchable, the exhibit also aims, as we have indicated, to dislocate and rearrange obeah narratives from their colonial contexts so as to allow a rereading of these texts and a reshaping of their meanings. We seek to make visible and unsettle the coloniality of the archive by foregrounding the presence of obeah narratives in the archive and by inviting users to compile and recompose these materials alongside their own original analyses of these texts. We invite users to annotate sections of the exhibit, pin notes and contribute metadata to archival materials, and upload new source material to the repository, as well as share insights, ask questions, and seek out collaborations on future research with other ECDA scholars in our community forums around this topic.

The archive, we argue, in its digital iteration must function as a compliment and partner to scholarly publication platforms by making visible and accessible the textual knowledge networks that constitute both the sources and resources of our literary scholarly practices. Contributing to ongoing research on obeah, the ECDA supports a sustained, collaborative engagement with the scholarly insights presented in this issue by allowing users to work with primary materials, not as independent works but as part of a collective or complex of knowledges, and to explore and expand upon such arguments and understandings by placing these shared observations and assertions in conversation with other scholars, methodologies, and archival materials.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributors

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Notes

1. For examples, see <http://obeahhistories.org/three-fingered-jack/>.
2. Paton, “Histories of Three-Fingered Jack: A Bibliography by Diana Paton.”
3. The editors of this special issue – Toni Wall Jaudon and Kelly Wisecup – have both written insightfully about the nature of the knowledge crisis that obeah engenders. Wisecup notes that, “Colonists’ encounters with obeah and their descriptions of those encounters disrupted their own epistemological and ontological categories, which separated natural and supernatural phenomenon and posited definitive boundaries between states of life and death” (“Knowing Obeah,” 406). Jaudon, in turn, points out that “obeah practitioners seem[ed] to live at once within the space of the colony and, somehow, beyond it ... It is [the] assumption of a stable, shared common ground that obeah contested for colonial authorities” (“Obeah’s Sensations,” 729). See also Stephan Palmié, “Other Powers.”
4. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 145.
5. The ECDA is freely available to all interested publics. The “Obeah and *Atlantic Studies*” exhibit can be found at <http://ecdaproject.org/obeahandatatlanticstudies>. Note that this is a work in progress and may change shape considerably over time. We describe its current instantiation in this essay. The ECDA homepage is available at: <http://ecdaproject.org>. Information on becoming an ECDA + CoLab scholar is available at <http://ecdaproject.org/commons/>.
6. Gikandi, “Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement,” 92.
7. *Ibid.*, 84.
8. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 3.
9. Gikandi, “Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement,” 94.
10. Wisecup, “Knowing Obeah,” 408.
11. Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*.
12. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12–13.
13. *Ibid.*, 12.
14. Gikandi, “Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement,” 92.

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