

## Anne Hart Gilbert (re)collecting The Rise & Progress of Religion in Antigua

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### Abstract

Anne Hart Gilbert (1768-1834) is the first known published African Caribbean woman writer. Her earliest extant piece of writing is an 1804 letter to the Methodist missionary Richard Pattison. This essay analyses Gilbert's representation of the meanings of African diasporic culture and of Methodist conversion in the letter, a text marked by encounters between and across African and Methodist spiritual cosmologies. Gilbert's collecting and mediation of local knowledges of religion points to the complexity and nuances of cultural crossing and creolization. Using a literary critical and historiographical approach, the essay demonstrates the need to contextualize 'religion as a social framework, as a rhetorical construction, as part and parcel with ideology, and as a category of experience' (Stein and Murison, 2010, pp. 3-4).

**Keywords** Anne Hart Gilbert, West Indies, reading religious conversion, cultural creolization, representation of obeah, coscinomancy

In June 1804 the missionary Richard Pattison, who was then posted in Antigua, forwarded to the Methodist Missionary Society in London letters written by three women classified legally as free coloured, Anne Gilbert, her sister Elizabeth Hart (later Thwaites) and Sarah Moore, Jr. He had commissioned Anne Gilbert to write about the 'Rise & Progress of Religion in Antigua' (Pattison, 1804), which prompted her to update a chronological history of 'Gospel' or evangelical ministry that she had begun in 1798 (A. Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 57). The letters of Elizabeth Hart and Sarah Moore, Jr are in the Methodist life-writing genre of the experience or account. Ferguson has brought Gilbert (1768-1834) and Thwaites (1771-1833) to renewed historical attention in her edition *The Hart sisters: Early African Caribbean writers, evangelicals, and radicals* (1993). She titles their 1804 letters 'History of Methodism'. Gilbert is the first known published African Caribbean woman writer, publishing in 1821 in the Methodist genres of the happy death and the experience. As Sue Thomas showed in Chapter 1 of *Telling West Indian Lives: Life narrative and the reform of plantation slavery cultures 1804-1834* (2014), with the support of her husband John (1767-1833), a white Methodist lay preacher, sister Elizabeth, brothers-in-law Charles Thwaites and William Dawes, and sister-in-law Grace Dawes, she would develop a Creole benevolent network as a basis of new community in a plantation slavery culture, a 'negative opposition' to plantocratic values (A. Gilbert, 1824/1999), that had a profound influence, particularly through the Female Refuge Society she founded and championed, on female anti-slavery societies in Britain from the mid-1820s, leading them to campaign to 'awaken (at least in the bosom of English women) a deep and lasting compassion, not only for the *bodily sufferings* of female Slaves, but for their *moral degradation*' (Female Society for Birmingham, 1826?/c. 1970, p. 3). In this essay, I analyse Gilbert's representation of the meanings of African diasporic culture and of Methodist conversion in her letter to Pattison, a text marked by 'cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity' (Gilroy, 1993, p. 2) of encounters between and across African and Methodist spiritual cosmologies. My approach is both historiographical and literary critical.

In Gilbert's 'Rise & Progress of Religion in Antigua' the representation of the afflicted condition of enslaved people produces generic shifts as the Methodist convert works to construct a history that in relation to slavery takes the story-form of Gospel Romance with amelioration in the temporal, material world and the promise of eternal life as the prizes of spiritual redemption. My formulation draws on Scott's argument that historiographically 'anticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been plotted in a distinctive narrative form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of *Romance*. They have

tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication’ animated by ‘anticolonial’ ‘longing.’ (2004, pp. 7-8). As scholars of black Christians point out ‘the expansion of European colonial interests was accompanied by the spread of Christianity and Western letters’, with ‘religious conversion’ producing ‘complications of cultural identity, epistemology, and political alignments’ (George, 2002, p. 5). By the early nineteenth century, the cultures of worship and lay organization of the Methodist congregation in Antigua had creolized or syncretized African diasporic and Methodist epistemologies and religious practices. Gilbert’s history of evangelical worship digresses into ethnographic description, into repository (a personal store of Christian wisdom), and into a happy death (a Christian death-bed scene in which the dying person finds peace in the consolation of redemption). The latter two digressions are part of an ‘epistolary “performance”’ (Jolly & Stanley, 2005, p. 77) of the meanings of having been reborn as a Christian and of her and her family’s separation from the popular culture of the enslaved and the dominant culture of the plantocratic elite. The lay organization of the Antiguan Methodist church also accommodated African diasporic practices of othermothering, that is, women in community leadership roles and caring for children not their own (S. Thomas, 2014, Chapter 1). In the first paragraph of her letter Gilbert (1804/1993) explicitly foregrounds her commitment to ‘matter of fact’ in her narrative (p. 57), and it is the dominance of this voice with some editorializing comment that allows her to partly ‘describe the central “emic” value’ of the prevalent culture of the enslaved, that is, its meanings among them (M’Baye, 2009, p. 165). Spiritual practices classified under the umbrella term obeah (Forde & Paton, 2012, pp. 19-26) were also creolized. Handler and Bilby (2012) point to the difficulty of defining obeah, situating it as ‘African-derived cultural phenomena’, ‘African religiosity’ proscribed by colonial authority and ‘denigrated with terms such as *savage*, *depraved*, or *debased*’ (pp. 1-2). Adéèkó(2009) has highlighted the way in which the binary ‘tradition and modernity’ has ‘made it possible for critics to construct Africa’s story of continuity across historical moments, vast geographical extents, and modes of production’ (p. 2).The binary has often worked implicitly to position obeah as tradition and Christianization as modernity. Creolization, though, draws attention to ‘the inescapable historicity, indeed often highly dynamic and open character, of ... supposedly “closed” systems of ritual and belief’ (Palmié, 2008, p. 5). Historicizing Gilbert’s account of divination practices points to the complexity of their cultural genealogies and porous processes of cultural crossing and transfer over millennia.

Pattison (1804) notes that all of the letters he is forwarding are in the ‘hand writing’ of the senders ‘and without alteration.’ The differences among the handwriting and prose styles, use of paragraphing, and levels of proficiency and idiosyncrasies in spelling, grammar and punctuation in written English certainly validate this claim. The letters were written for potential publication in the *Methodist Magazine*, which by 1800 had a global circulation of c. 100,000 copies. Antigua was of particular interest to the readership of the *Arminian Magazine* (1778-1797), later the *Methodist Magazine*, as the site of the first Methodist overseas mission. Methodism was introduced in 1760 shortly after the establishment of a Moravian mission in 1756 not by British missionaries, but rather by brothers Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert, white Creoles from the island, who had been converted to Methodism in England by John Wesley and ordained ministers. Francis Gilbert had converted Anne Gilbert’s and Elizabeth Hart’s black grandmother Frances Clearkley to Methodism (Hart, 1804/1993, p. 89). Anne’s white Creole husband John was the nephew of Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert, and in 1797 the only white Methodist lay preacher. The *Arminian Magazine* had carried letters about the Antigua mission by Nathaniel Gilbert (1780, 1783), Francis Gilbert (1782, 1786), lay preacher John Baxter (1788), and Quaker anti-slavery campaigner Anthony Benezet (1787) and an experience by a black convert Samuel Paynter(1790) (Gunter, n.d.). Neither Gilbert’s, Hart’s nor Moore’s text was published in the *Methodist Magazine*. Gilbert’s letter or extracts from it might have been copied and read at Methodist meetings. In Antigua Gilbert would have related aspects of her experiences orally at Methodist class meetings and love feasts (at which bread and water were served, charitable collections were taken up, and Christian life story was narrated).

Literacy and education were highly prized in Gilbert’s family, and put freely in the service of the illiterate and of bonds people. Gilbert and her sister Elizabeth, for instance, began teaching enslaved children in 1787-88 (Black, 1840, p. 3).Gilbert’s father, Barry Conyers Hart, a free coloured man, was probably the illegitimate, but recognised son of John Hart, former Governor of Maryland (1714-1720) and Captain-General of the Leeward Islands (1721-1727). Barry Hart was the owner of Hart’s Estate, and ‘distinguished as an able writer’, ‘often [taking] part in newspaper controversy, the “poet’s corner” being frequently filled with pieces of poetry of his own composition’ (Horsford, 1856, p. 190). Gilbert’s mother, Ann, a free

coloured woman, had reportedly had ‘a very superior education in England’ (Horsford, 1856, p. 193). The Hart family pastimes included reading of the Bible, such poets as John Milton, Edward Young, William Cowper, and Thomas Moss, and Hannah More on cross-class social obligation and bonding. Cowper was a notable anti-slavery poet, and anti-slavery materials were also published in the *Arminian Magazine* in the late 1780s and early 1790s (Gunter, n.d.).

Scholars of letters have recently pointed to distinctive features of the genre: that they are ‘dialogical’, ‘perspectival’, have ‘emergent properties’, and may, as in Gilbert’s account of the ‘Rise & Progress of Religion’, mix genres (Stanley, 2004, pp. 202-203). Gilbert’s letter is part of a dialogue with Pattison, the imagined audience of readers of the *Methodist Magazine*, the earlier articles about Antigua in the *Arminian Magazine*, many noted in the letter, and some of the letter’s explicit intertexts. The valediction of Gilbert’s letter to Pattison affirms her spiritual and gender equality with him: she styles herself his ‘sister & servant in Christ’ (1804/1993, p. 75). English (1994) argues that Wesley’s pointed reiteration of the familial ‘term “sister”’ stressed ‘that women as well as men are full members of the Christian Church’ (p. 27). The valediction also affirms Gilbert’s use of her temporal freedom as a coloured woman of equal intellectual and rational capacity to ‘white people’ to engage in what Gilbert calls ‘the virtuous, refined, or literary pursuits of the mind.’ It is this use of her time that she represents as allowing her to transcend ‘Heathenism’ (1804/1993, p. 60). Gilbert’s perspective is that of a deeply engaged layperson, ‘collect[ing]’ and mediating the historical knowledge and views available locally (1804/1993, p. 57), and passing judgment on ministers whose moral turpitude had been exposed by the congregation and on worldly missionary wives. Her letter shows ‘emergent properties’ in that it has its ‘own preoccupations and conventions’ and ‘epistolary ethics’, not meeting ‘researcher-determined concerns’ (Stanley, 2004, p. 203). Gilbert’s history closes with a prayer (Matthew 9:38) for more ‘labourers into the [Christian] Harvest’ in Antigua, a challenge to the Methodist hierarchy for more funding, with Gilbert implicitly presenting herself as a model of what the church might achieve (Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 75).

Jesus was prompted to the prayer ‘when he saw the multitudes’ and ‘was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd’ (Matthew 9:36). John Wesley encouraged Methodists to read the compassion of this verse as a prelude to the ‘deliverance’ of ‘souls’ (Biblos, n.d.). In an 1824 letter which doubles as a manifesto of her community activism Gilbert (1824/1999) would position her other mothering evangelical self in the role of a shepherd in her community. Cornelius, a Moravian helper, in St Thomas, whose life was first published in 1801-1805, also references the abomination of racialized enslavement of Ethiopians (Africans) through Biblical allusion as a scattering abroad, ‘A Nation meted out and trodden under foot’ (see Thomas, 2014, Chapters 3 & 5, as cited on p. 132). Both Gilbert’s and Cornelius’s ‘horizon’ is diasporic (Palmié, 2008, p. 14), and in their religious leadership roles they address urgent ‘observable New World presents’ rather than turn to ‘African pasts’ (Palmié, 2008, 21).

That Anne Gilbert (1804/1993) styles Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert’s Methodist living as them having organized their ‘families’ as ‘miniatures of the Primitive Church’ (p. 62) suggests that their ministries, like Wesley’s scheme of establishing a mission among Indian peoples in Georgia (1735–1737), were to be a ‘laboratory’ for the realization of Wesley’s ‘vision of primitive Christianity.’ That vision of the relative purity of the primitive, that is, early Christian church emphasized the importance of moral and spiritual discipline; the development and maintenance of Christian community, and communal rituals like love feasts; the implementation of the ideal of holding goods (property) in common; and ascetic living. On his journey to Georgia and during his time there Wesley took a keen interest in Moravianism and its model of communal living as contemporary instantiations of the values of the early Christian church and had discussions with Moravian leaders to test the differences between his and their conceptions of early Christianity (Hammond, 2009, p. 175). Among Methodists holding goods in common could take the form of strong commitment to practical piety in the form of charity. Walsh (1990) points out that Wesley ‘saw charity not as a series of episodic acts, but as a way of life, whose demands were total, continual, and embedded in the heart of the Christian life itself’ (pp. 36-37). Anne Gilbert (1804/1993) alludes to Cowper’s *The Task* to represent Nathaniel and Francis Gilbert’s primitive Christian ministries as venerable, ‘honest in the sacred cause’ (p. 62), implicitly representing a string of Anglican and disgraced Methodist ministers as too worldly, ‘slave[s]/To [their] own pleasures’ (Cowper, 1785/n.d.). Gilbert (1804/1993) acknowledges the coevalness of ‘heathenish’ and Gospel time (p. 59), positing as the primitive not obeah, as obeah commonly was in colonial discourse (Aravamudan, 2005, p. 27, p. 29; Wisecup, 2013, p. 415), but rather a

regenerative purer and idealistic model of ancient Christian living.

Many scholars have commented on the creolization of evangelical faiths in the Caribbean and the United States during the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century (see, for instance, Austin-Broos, 1997; Frey & Wood, 1998; Sobel, 1979; Taves, 1999; Wigger, 1998). The ethnic mix of the congregation in Antigua and its leadership for a considerable period by two women of African heritage may also have legitimized the process of creolization in Antigua. In 1804 the Methodist congregation in Antigua reportedly comprised 3,516 'blacks and colored' and twenty-two 'whites' (as cited in Coke, 1808-1811/1971, vol. 2, p. 456). By comparison in April 1803 the Moravian congregation numbered 13,287; Moravian missionaries did not proselytize among white people (Maynard, [1968], p. 37). After the death of Nathaniel Gilbert in 1774 and Francis Gilbert's departure for England in 1775 on health grounds Methodism in Antigua, in the absence of clergy, was sustained until 1786 by a 'praying remnant' and, later, also white laypeople. Mary Alley, a woman of colour, and Sophia Campbel, a 'black' woman, led the praying remnant (A. Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 63). Descriptions of the congregation in the early nineteenth century indicate that members practiced a highly interactive and acted-out style of worship, especially around rebirth as a Methodist (Coke, 1808-1811/1971, pp. 361, 452). 'African initiation experiences were rebirth experiences,' observes Sobel (1979, p. 101). The ecstatic experience of faith and visionary or prophetic experience, both notable features of African spirituality and worship, were accommodated within Methodist religious practice.

Practical piety, Methodist discipline and ethical rationalism defined the Antiguan Methodist congregation's sense of community and rightful being. Anne and John Gilbert explicitly represent their extensive other-directed charitableness as consistent with Methodist discipline, not 'laying up treasures' for themselves 'on earth' (J. Gilbert, et al., 1835, pp. 18, 39-40). Lyerly (1998) explains Methodist discipline as developed by John Wesley:

First came the duty to do no harm by 'avoiding evil of every kind,' such as breaking the Sabbath, violating the Golden Rule, drinking liquor, marrying an unbeliever, fighting, buying and selling slaves, wearing 'costly apparel,' and 'laying up treasures on earth.' Second came the duty to do good. Methodists were to care for the 'bodies' of others by tending to prisoners, the poor, and the sick. To care for others' 'souls,' Methodists were to reprove, exhort, evangelize, and set a good example. Third came the duty to obey 'all the ordinances of God'—to attend church, take the sacrament, pray as families and as individuals, read the Bible, and regularly fast. (p. 16)

As Mack (2008) points out,

early Methodists ... defined agency not as the freedom to do what one wants but as the freedom to want and to do what is right. Since 'what is right' was determined both by absolute truth or God and by individual conscience, agency implied obedience and ethical responsibility as well as the freedom to make choices and act on them. ... [A]gency implied self-abnegation as well as self-expression. (p. 9)

Austin-Broos (1997) highlights the way in which Baptists, Methodists and Moravians in the Caribbean promulgated 'a form of Christianity that de-emphasized the liturgy and placed the focus on ethical acts based in a rationally conceived moral code' (p. 36). Gilbert saw the Methodist community in Antigua as 'Choosing [like Moses in Egypt] rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.' Her allusion to Hebrews 11:25 pointedly positions Antigua as a place of material and spiritual captivity and highlights the centrality of the Exodus typology to the congregation, a distinctive feature of African diasporic Christianity; the word 'season' resonates, too, with the practice of acculturating newly arrived slaves to the everyday labour and cultural regimes of the plantation system (A. Gilbert, 1824/1999).

For Gilbert enslavement in the temporal world is 'constituted by an essence, namely, a totalizing principle of degradation and dehumanization' (Scott, 2004, p. 94), in her words 'imbrut[ing] in ... body & mind' which renders 'the poor Slaves' 'abject & despised fellow-creatures' on the basis of skin complexion (A. Gilbert, 1804/1993, pp. 74, 73; Thomas, 2014, p. 43). Austin-Broos (1997) observes that '[t]he Christian cosmology, anchored in God, presented an ontology in which evil was located in the person and addressed

by moral discipline and rite' (p. 6). Gilbert's understanding of the location of sin is both broader and racialized: for her sin is located in the person of white people; in black people it is located in the degrading institutions and racial ideologies of the plantation slavery system, in a cosmology rooted in 'a multiplicity of spiritual forces, including ancestral living-dead' (Austin-Broos, 1997, p. 6) and obeah, which she positions as a diasporic rather than African phenomenon, and in the person. In everyday plantation slavery cultures black people are in Gilbert's view reduced to labour, "'beasts of burden,'" an allusion to the Reverend Samuel Magaw's representation of enslavement in his speech at the opening of the African Church of the City of Philadelphia, one of the very earliest African-American Christian churches, in 1794. Of enslaved people in Antigua in 1760 Gilbert writes: 'The torch of Moral and divine truth was carefully hid from them, lest by it they should discover that they were Men, and Brethren, and not Beasts, and Reptiles; or as Doctor Magaw observes "kept back from Knowledge expressly for this reason lest it should unfit them for beasts of burden."' 'Reptiles' is a Methodist metaphor for sinners. Gilbert's recollection of the 'past, & present mercies' which separate her from the 'heathen' opens with the first two verses of a Methodist hymn, Charles Wesley's 'What am I, O thou Glorious God,' the lyrics of which celebrate the new birth of the sinner ('the vilest reptile') as a Christian (A. Gilbert, 1804/1993, pp. 59, 58-59, 66, 65). Methodist conversion is represented here in stock forms as 'movements from darkness to light, error to knowledge' (Adéékó, 2009, p. 17). Magaw (1794/1862) opines that enslavement 'is a hard allotment. It sinks the mind, no less than the body; weakens its capacity; destroys all principle; corrupts the feelings; and prevents man from either discerning, or choosing aright in any thing' (p. 66). In Gilbert's narrative, the exercise of ethical rationalism among the enslaved as a direct or indirect result of Gospel ministry has an 'over-awing,' ameliorating 'effect' on the institutions of plantation slavery. It vindicates their common humanity as 'Men, and brethren' or sisters, and directly challenges the racism endemic in plantation slavery culture (1804/1993, pp. 73, 58). The phrase 'Men, and brethren' resonates with the anti-slavery motto 'Am I not a man and a brother?'

The recognition of common humanity across colour lines was so controversial in Antigua in the 1790s that John Gilbert, Anne's husband, who as lay preacher 'addressed' enslaved people 'by the appellation of brother', was the object of a rumour campaign among fellow militia members that he 'should be tried by a court martial, for acting in this instance so unbecoming the rank of an officer' (J. Gilbert, et al., 1835, p. 21). John was forced, as a result of his marriage to Anne, 'to resign his commission in the militia under threat of court martial and his commission as a notary public was withdrawn because he had so "basely degraded" himself' (S. Thomas, 2014, p. 43, as cited in J. Gilbert, et al., 1835, p. 24). John observes mincingly in his memoir: 'if I had determined upon seducing and degrading the object of my regard and esteem, I should have been considered by the ungodly aristocracy of the country as having acted quite properly, and incurred no reproach from them, as she was a woman of colour' (J. Gilbert, et al., 1835, p. 25).

Gilbert's ethnographic description of the culture of enslaved people opens with generic scenes of funeral and supplicatory practices that she has observed in which the vital connection between the natural world and 'the world of Spirits' and the influence the spirit world exerts over the course of the material realm are affirmed (Gilbert, 1804/1993, pp. 60, 59). The order of her description properly accords cultural priority to connection with ancestor spirits. She also pointedly references European belief in a spirit realm, alluding to John Wesley's publishing of extracts from Richard Baxter's *Certainty of the world of spirits; fully evinced by unquestionable histories of apparitions & witchcrafts* in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1783. Taves (1999) highlights the 'open[ness]' of 'Wesley and the Methodist tradition ... to manifestations of the supernatural' (p. 47). Baxter (1691/1834) urges in his Preface that the 'God of love' has 'conquered death and devils' and 'maketh advantage of our not seeing the world of spirits for the exercise of our higher intellectual faculties, by a life of faith. ... He that chaineth up these devils, that they molest us no more as their malice doth desire, will make our passage safe through all their envy and defiled regions' (pp. xxvii, xxviii, xxvii, xxviii).

The dichotomy between the Methodist and the 'heathenish' in Gilbert's letter has registers of both differences and, in relation to obeah, abjection. The experience and performance of Methodist spirituality inspires awe in her; parts of the ethnographic description of demotic cultures of spiritual observance strive for the matter of fact tone Gilbert desires. The filling of Gilbert's 'heart' with the 'word' of the Gospel, her 'spiritual strength,' is illustrated through densely woven biblical allusions in the section of the letter in the genre of the repository. 'The word was indeed,' she writes, alluding to Isaiah 25:6, 'like marrow & fat things,

and all that could relish divine things were sure to feed richly on immortal food while sitting under the preached word' (Gilbert, 1804/1993, pp. 59, 65, 58, 75, 66). John Wesley comments on the Biblical verse: 'A feast made up of the most delicate provisions, which is manifestly meant of the ordinances, graces, and comforts given by God in his church' (Biblos, n.d.). In Gilbert's letter this spiritual food contrasts with the food offered by enslaved people to their dead, 'departed friends' on 'Christmas mornings' (a holiday from labour): 'strewing quarters of boiled, and roasted meat; or fowls & yams, & pouring bottles of Rum, upon their graves.' Gilbert's commemoration of the life of the missionary Mr McDonald in a favourite evangelical genre, the happy death, contrasts with the songs sung by funeral processions among the enslaved: 'some heathenish account of the Life & Death of the deceased; invoking a perpetuation of their friendship [sic] from the world of Spirits with their Surviving friends and relations, & praying them to deal destruction among their enemies' (Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 59). Hempton (2005) notes that '[t]he approach of death ... was the final testing point of Methodist spirituality' (p. 67). Gilbert (1804/1993) introduces the happy death of McDonald: 'As the hour of his dissolution approached, The [sic] glorious scene of a dying Saint, giving his last testimony for God, & closing a useful life with the most powerful effusions of his ardent faith & love, grew brighter and brighter' (p. 68). She groups 'Witchcraft' or 'Obeah,' fortune-telling and divination rituals as signs of 'Heathenism,' and observes that the clientele includes, to varying degrees, people from all racialized legal categories of the population (Gilbert, 1804/1993, pp. 59–60, 73, 59–60). Her outline of a particular case of the 'diabolical work' of obeah involving an 'Obeah-man' raising the spirits of 'two little Devils,' 'about four inches high, quite black,' and using powder and ritual, reported second-hand, most notably veers between abject repudiation and the effort to be matter of fact. Drawing on primary texts from a later period, Sobel (1979) observes that in the creolization of African religion in the United States 'spirits' came to be 'generally viewed as being in literal cahoots with the devil. Here is where the influence of the white [Christian] ethos can be seen to have played a most significant role' (p. 48). The world for Gilbert (1804/1993) is a battlefield between the 'Redeemer's Kingdom' and the rival Kingdom of Satan ('[o]ur vigilant enemy') (pp. 74, 67).

The seminal criminalization of obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760 Jamaican legislation, represents obeah practitioners as 'pretending to have Communication with the devil and other evil spirits'; the earliest Antigua legislation to include obeah, enacted in 1809, refers in its first clause to 'persons pretending to exercise any witchcraft, fortune-telling, or any crafty science to discover stolen goods [and the person responsible for the theft]' and in its second clause to 'the wicked art of Negroes going under the appellation of obeah men and women, pretending to have communication with the devil and other evil 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 evil that might otherwise happen, or to affect them with any evils' (as cited in Handler & Bilby, 2012, pp. 46, 71-72). The framings of the laws are consistent with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century empirical practices that, Wisecup (2013) explains, 'posit[ed] that supernatural phenomena had only natural causes. ... The suggestion that preternatural phenomena had supernatural causes thus came to mark one as gullible, as influenced by the imagination rather than by reason, or as an enthusiast' (409-410). Eighteenth-century Methodists were often described as enthusiasts. Wisecup points out that

Supernatural and natural realms were not separate for many enslaved Africans, for supernatural entities could act on the natural world, and other entities could traverse the boundaries between natural and supernatural. ... By restoring dead bodies to life and communicating with ancestors or other powerful spirits, obeah practitioners established relations between the living and the dead and, consequently, between natural and supernatural realms. Such ceremonies managed the activity of spirits in the social and material world. (p. 411)

Gilbert, as I have noted, affirms the continuum between natural and supernatural worlds. Handler and Bilby (2012) comment 'that attempts to discover lost or stolen property were often associated with obeah practitioners in British West Indian laws, but there is no mention of lost or stolen property in the two clauses [the second and third] that specifically addressed obeah in the 1809 Antigua act' (pp. 71-72). As in Gilbert's history, divination practices were grouped with obeah, which suggests that there was a local consensus that this was appropriate. Not all West Indian legislatures criminalized practices deemed 'witchcraft,' 'fortune-

telling' and 'crafty science' to discover theft and thieves. Apart from Antigua in 1809, St Vincent and the Grenadines proscribed the practices in August 1803 (specifically referring to 'divination by ... sieve, [and] bible and key'), Barbados in 1826, and St Lucia in 1872 (Handler & Bilby, 2012, pp. 92, 55, 89).

Gilbert's yardstick in representing 'Heathen' practices and the personal wealth amassed by obeah practitioners as sinful is Methodist discipline. Gilbert, for instance, reports that during the horseracing season obeah practitioners were in great demand among many classes 'to supply Ointments, to rub the Horses, & Riders & materials to bury under the ground over which the Horses run.' Here obeah practitioners, abetting gambling, are represented as 'Ministers of Satan' and, in an allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 'Factors for the Prince of darkness.' She notes more generally that people who 'could afford' to consult obeah practitioners do so confident that they have powers 'to prevent their enemies from injuring their persons or properties, to procure, & keep the favor of their owners, to give their children good luck, and to make them prosperous in every thing' (Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 60, p. 59). In terms of Methodist discipline these are worldly desiderata and the wealth accumulated by obeah practitioners constitutes worldly treasures.

Gilbert (1804/1993) cites white people having recourse to 'fortune-tellers' to discover thieves through divination rituals: administering grave-dirt mixed with water to assembled household slaves and employees, with the intent that the offender swell up over 'three days ... to an enormous size'; and '[t]urning the sifter' (p. 61). The first of the practices resembles 'African poison ordeals,' with a version being recorded in Jamaica in 1740 (Paton, 2012, p. 249); Chireau (2003) observes of a similar ritual in the U.S. that the 'ingestion of the grave dirt as a sign of solidarity with the supernatural realm remained consistent with African beliefs' (p. 62). Gilbert (1804/1993) offers a detailed description of turning the sifter:

The sharp points of a pair of scissors are stuck into the circumference of a hair sieve & the handle of the Scissors balanced upon the fingers of two people that stand opposite each other and alternately repeat the following words—'By Saint Peter by Saint Paul Such a one stole such a thing' mentioning the name of some or other of the family, & naming the thing that is stolen; and they say that if they call over fifty names the sieve remains unmoved till the name of the guilty person is mention'd & then it swings round and drops off the balance. (p. 61)

The procedure matches accounts of coscinomancy and divinatory practice elaborated in the grimoire *The Key of Solomon or Clavicula Salomonis*, noted by Davies (2009) to be '[t]he most enduring, influential, and notorious Solomonic book' (p. 15). For Gilbert recourse to the practices is a sign of 'great ignorance & superstition.' She is concerned that the ordeals to which slaves and servants were subjected were disproportionate to the offence of petty theft (Gilbert, 1804/1993, p. 61). In *Antigua and the Antiguans*, Lanaghan (1844) notes a similar 'incantation' to the one cited by Gilbert as being integral to turning the sifter being part of divination by key and Bible to expose a thief (p. 56).

Writing in 2003, Greer outlines coscinomancy:

Divination with sieve and shears, an extremely ancient form of divination still practiced by folk diviners in several European countries, and used principally to detect the guilty party in criminal cases. ... Coscinomancy was much used by the ancient Greeks, and is referred to by the Greek poet Theocritus in his *Third Idyll*. (p. 114)

Theocritus was writing in the third century BC. Use and textual record do not determine origin. Greece was actively involved in trade and cultural traffic around the Mediterranean and with its northern neighbours. Coscinomancy is also mentioned in Act I of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, first performed in 1610 (act 1, scene 1, line 95). The comments of Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600), a Lutheran scholar, on 'divination by sive & sheeres' and by a 'psalter and a keie fastned upon the 49. Psalme, to discover a theefe,' practices traced to 'Popish preests' and 'Chaldaeans,' are discussed by Scot in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584, pp. 401–402). Brand notes Scot's error in referring to Psalm 49 rather than Psalm 50: the recitation of the first part of verse 18, 'When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentst with him,' was crucial to the ritual (1813, vol. 2, p. 641). In *The Athenian Oracle* (1703) the likeness of the two practices is noted (A Member

of the Athenian Society, p. 309). Divination by sieve and shears is outlined in *The Key of Solomon or Clavicula Salomonis*. Davies (2009) observes:

The earliest versions of the text were written in Greek in the fifteenth century ... There is no one definitive version of the *Clavicula* but, along with conjurations to command and control the ‘Angels of Darkness,’ manuscripts usually contained rituals and symbols for personal rather than spiritual well being, such as to provoke love, punish enemies, become invisible, and deal with thieves.

He notes that by the sixteenth century grimoires were ‘increasingly filtering down to the social level of cunning-folk,’ with ‘literary magic’ becoming ‘an increasingly important component of popular magic’ (pp. 15, 67).

In *The Key of Solomon* the prayer and details of the ritual in the ‘experiment’ involving scissors and sieve are more elaborate than the Antigua practice outlined by Gilbert. In his translation of *The Key of Solomon the King* Mathers (1976) notes that the experiment ‘is the ancient divination by the sieve and shears, and from St. Peter and St. Paul being mentioned in it, has evidently undergone a medieval reconstruction.’ The ‘Conjuration’ is preceded by a specified ‘Oration’ requesting from the ‘Lord God’ ‘the power and the virtue ... to accomplish this experiment’ and preparation of the site for its conduct and is followed by another prayer to the ‘Almighty Father and Lord’ (pp. 50, 48-49). The Antigua practice described by Gilbert is another of a series of reconstructions. Keith Thomas (1971) notes that the earliest recorded instance of the practice of divination by sieve and shears in England dates from 1554, and that there is a recorded 1551 example of practice of divination by key and Bible. Versions of ‘divination by the key and book (the latter usually being a psalter or Bible)’ were practised in England from the medieval period to the nineteenth century (pp. 213-214). Divination involving sieve and shears and a key and psalter were recorded in Brazil and Portugal from the sixteenth century (de Mello e Souza, 2003, pp. 93-96). Yet Madden, writing of divination by key and Bible in Jamaica in 1835, comments: ‘This is a singular instance of African superstition ingrafted on Christianity’ (p. 70). In one of Chireau’s sources, an 1891 article ‘Negro Superstitions,’ Handy describes turning the sifter as ‘an African survival,’ noting that ‘on the Guinea coast a shield’ was ‘used instead of a sifter, a negro chant corresponding to the Christianized song’ (p. 738). In *Black Magic* Chireau (2003) cites versions of both practices being used in the nineteenth-century United States (p. 26).

The genealogies of turning the sifter and divination by key and Bible or psalter suggest that practices coded as obeah or grouped with practices understood as obeah came to be marked ‘culturally’ in the Americas ‘as “African” and “black”’ (Handler & Bilby, 2012, p. 103). Over time, at least two millennia in the case of coscinomancy, these divination practices travelled across the globe and cultures through trade and intercultural contact, imperial expansion, and population resettlement contingent on forced labour regimes. Neither Methodism, obeah, nor religious conversion is a transparent category. Gilbert’s collecting and mediation of local knowledges of religion points to the complexity and nuances of culture transfer and creolization, and the need to historicize ‘religion as a social framework, as a rhetorical construction, as part and parcel with ideology, and as a category of experience’ (Stein and Murison, 2010, pp. 3-4).

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