

## Ritual Observance: Colonial Representations of Afro-Caribbean Spiritual Practices in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century French Caribbean

Ray Leonard

*Over the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, colonial observers repeatedly recorded Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices in the French Caribbean. “Ritual Observances” charts four such records; the 1698 journal of Jean Baptiste Labat, trial records from 1784, Moreau de-Saint Merie’s 1794 Description Topographique, and Drouin De Bercy’s De Saint Domingue. Although these records span distinct historical periods and textual mediums, they all employ a set of recognizable forms to express the convergence of disgust and desire that have historically attended colonial observations of Afro-Caribbean agency. I argue, however, that the significance of this ambivalence is constitutive of the historical moment in which it appears and that these observations are connected by more than a “shared” ambivalence. Instead, we might categorize these records as themselves ritualistic. The term ritual observance gestures to the act of observing a ritual, but also the way in which the observation is itself ritualistic. The repeated and sequential forms, or “actions” as I term them, of the ritual observance work to inscribe a legible history over the turbulence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French colonialism.*

**Keywords:** Caribbean, slavery, colonialism, ambivalence, eighteenth century, Haiti, Saint-Domingue

Over the eighteenth century, plantation owners, colonial officials, and other observers in the French Caribbean recorded, narrated, and fictionalized scenes of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice. While over the course of the eighteenth century, the French colonial government increasingly prohibited social and spiritual gatherings among the enslaved, the legal, literary, and ethnographical representation of these rituals reveals the structural ambivalence upon which such disavowals rested. In colonial accounts, observers produced and maintained seemingly paradoxical claims about ritual practices among the enslaved. On the one hand, observers

Ray Leonard is a PhD student at the University of Miami. His work has also been accepted at the *James Joyce Quarterly*. His current project, a panel titled “Blood Moves: Disease, Discourse and Race in the Early Caribbean,” has been accepted by the Society of Early Americanists’ Biennial Conference in March 2017. (Email: Rxl220@miami.edu.)

dismissed Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as forms of charlatanry, spectacular performances designed to dupe “ignorant” slaves. On the other hand, these accounts also clearly subscribed to the magical potency of these practices and warned other whites of the dangers of observing or interrupting them.

Some scholars point to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s theory of the “unthinkable” Haitian revolution when explaining the ambivalence inherent in colonial representations of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices.<sup>1</sup> Trouillot argued that in the French Caribbean, the racialized discourse of Enlightenment freedom and citizenship made it impossible for white settlers to even conceive of black political agency. White settlers and colonial officials, in this theory, were literally unable to process the idea of black spiritual practices. The frenetic oscillation between desire and disgust, belief and mockery, in colonial representations of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices thus represent a kind of broken colonial compass, a site where the mechanisms of reflexive inscription break down. Although Trouillot’s theory is essential to understanding the fraught politics of prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue, the idea of “unthinkable” black agency seems predicated on discourses that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, part of what made revolution “unthinkable” was how *huge* it was—the size of Saint-Domingue’s enslaved population in comparison to its white population. Yet very similar accounts appear near the end of the seventeenth century, long before the French had a significant presence on the island at all.

Doris Garraway’s *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* argues that the ambivalence inherent in ritual observances was in fact a careful strategy geared toward perpetuating the mutual existence of racially exclusionary laws and libertine relationships between whites and the enslaved. The interplay of disavowal and desire was “mutually reinforcing” and “representative of a larger fantasy informing colonial slavery in the Caribbean and elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup> Though she argues that this fantasy undergirds colonial discourse as far back as the seventeenth century, critics such as Phillip Boucher have accused her of anachronism. He notes, as I have with Trouillot, that her argument, though compelling, seems to rely on the complex sexual politics of the French plantocracy. “What” he demands “do Exquemelin’s buccaneers have to do with plantation agriculture based on slavery?”<sup>4</sup>

1 Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2. Also, Colin (Joan) Dayan, in discussing Moreau, argues that it was the toxic crossover of “clandestine Catholic traditions” like the Free Masons and the “no less powerful attractions of African beliefs and cult practices” that stunned “colonial taxonomies into a vital ambiguity.” Masonry, however, was only considered a threat in the islands near the end of the eighteenth century. Colin (Joan) Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 251.

2 He writes that “between the first slave shipments of the early 1500s and the 1791 insurrection of northern Saint-Domingue, most Western observers treated manifestations of slave resistance and defiance with the ambivalent characteristic of their overall treatment of colonization and slavery. On the one hand, resistance and defiance did not exist because to acknowledge them was to acknowledge the humanity of the enslaved. On the other hand, because resistance occurred, it was dealt with quite severely, within or around the plantations.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995) 83.

3 Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 32, 34.

4 Phillip Boucher, *The American Historical Review* 1.111.5 (2006): 1564–65.

I take the issue of historicity in these accounts as my central focus. To do this, I closely examine four colonial representations of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice that span the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. In doing so, I hope to elucidate the complex interplay between similar accounts across distinct historical periods. I begin with Père Jean-Baptiste Labat, a roaming missionary who sailed across the Caribbean in the late seventeenth century. His best known work, *Nouveau Voyages aux isles de l'amérique*, was written in 1698 and published in 1724. I read the most infamous passage in his multivolume work, in which he discovers and brutally punishes an African spiritual healer. I move on to 1784, where I read recovered court documents in which two slaves were accused of organizing “nighttime gatherings.” Their names were Jerome dit Poteau and Jean Ledot. I then provide my own interpretation of a passage from Moreau de Saint-Méry’s 1789 *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île Saint-Domingue*.<sup>5</sup> A massive ethnographic travelogue, *Description* itemizes topics ranging from local fauna to the sexual proclivities of creole women. Of particular interest to scholars has been his description of a “vaudou” ceremony, which is the first recorded use of the term. I end with Drouin de Bercy’s 1814 *De Saint-Domingue de ses guerres, de ses révolutions, de ses ressources et des moyens à prendre pour y rétablir la paix et l’industrie*, written as an argument for reinstating slavery in Haiti.<sup>6</sup> In an addendum at the end of the book, he provides a detailed description of the induction ceremony for the “vaudou brotherhood.”

### Ritual Observance

I use the term *ritual observance* to describe colonial representations of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices through the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French Caribbean. As a term, *ritual observance* gestures both toward the colonial act of observing and recording Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices, but also the way in which colonial observation and recording were themselves ritualized. In this sense, I hope to exploit the interplay between secular “observation” and religious “observance”; in colonial writing, to observe is to observe. Furthermore, by naming written accounts *ritual observances*, I aim to destabilize the binary between objective spectatorship and subjective performance. Ritual observance narrates the anxiety engendered by two overlapping rituals, the “secular” and the “superstitious.” Here the word *ritual* is an unstable signifier, denoting a linguistic space shared by two historically distinct practices.

The ritual observance is ritualistic in the sense that each observance encodes a set of rehearsed actions according to a certain order. There is, however, no master-text that prescribes the sequencing of the ritual observance, rather the sequence is reified through what Bhabha has called the “anxious repetition” of colonial discourse.<sup>7</sup>

5 Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île Saint-Domingue*, 2e (Paris, 1875).

6 Drouin De Bercy, *De Saint-Domingue: de ses guerres, de ses révolutions, de ses ressources, et de moyens à prendre pour y rétablir la paix et l’industrie* (Paris: Chez Hocquet, 1814).

7 Homi K Bhabha “The Other Question: Homi Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” *Screen* 24.6 (1983): 18–36.

“Ritual observance” looks to avoid recourse to a prescriptive colonial discourse writ large and instead be more attentive to the way that such discourse “need[s] to be set against its historical and geographical particularities.”<sup>8</sup> As such, I interrogate each ritual observance as constitutive of the historical moment in which it is performed. Nonetheless, the repeated performance of the ritual observance gestures toward a set of enduring anxieties that cannot be easily localized. In sum, the ritual observance is a trans-historical text that also itemizes the particularity of distinct historical moments.

I focus specifically on observations of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices for two closely related reasons. First, because they highlight the fraught relationship between colonial authority and alternate forms of black sociopolitical agency. “Nighttime gatherings” as these practices were often referred to, were in many ways a ubiquitous part of life in the French Caribbean over the eighteenth century. As my reading of the court documents suggest, there was a surprisingly *laissez-faire* attitude toward slave gatherings in the French Caribbean. The disjunction between planters’ reluctance to confront slave gatherings and the frenetic representations of these practices was not, I argue, simply a vagary of colonial ideology but a deliberate strategy. Second, as Garraway has noted, “the world of the spirit supplied a . . . medium for the enactment of cross-cultural encounters, as well as the imbrication of violence and desire— spiritual, commercial, and libidinal,” for both colonial observers *and* spiritual practitioners.<sup>9</sup> Though the factual reliability of ritual observances are dubious, the potency of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as an object of colonial desire nonetheless marks their performance as a site of discursive rupture.

Afro-Caribbean spirituality was not itself a monolithic and defined practice across the eighteenth century and beyond. Labat’s ritual observation, for instance, might more accurately be framed as an engagement with African spiritual practices. The vaudoux ceremony Saint-Méry describes, by contrast, was no doubt a product of both diasporic African practices and the experience of slavery in the French Caribbean. Garraway recognizes this kind of spiritual-creolité when she argues that “contrary to the image of Christian influence and authority projected in missionary narratives, the French colonial populace was not immune to ideas of spirit they attributed to Caribs and Africans.”<sup>10</sup> Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth exploring how embedded within (and lurking beyond) the ritual observance is an archive of Afro-Caribbean spiritual development, a spiritual and political chronology that both seduces and confounds the colonial gaze.

There are three key actions that define the ritual observance. They appear consistently in different forms across the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century.

1. The white colonial observer positions himself as an illicit observer, whether it be peering through the cracks of a hut or feeling vulnerable to the very authoritative gaze he represents. Although French law had already begun regulating gatherings among the enslaved as early as

8 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 156–57.

9 Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 296.

10 Ibid.

the 1685 Code Noir, the ritual observance portrays the white *observation* of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as a transgressive act that might be “discovered.”

2. The colonial observer codes the ceremony as secretive and hidden. At times, it is not clear at all whether the spiritual practitioners are at any pains to conceal their ceremony.
3. The colonial observer records a desire to both violate and participate in the ritual he witnesses. Violation and participation are, as Garraway argues, inherently tied up in the colonial fantasy of sexual possession. Yet the ritual observance also articulates a desire to *be* violated; in positioning his own observation as a kind of illicit ritual, the colonial observer sets up a scene where his own violence and desire might be refracted onto him.

I refer to “ritual actions” when itemizing the recurring motives constitutive of the ritual observance. I avoid using terms like *trope* or *genre* in order to further destabilize the distinction between record and practice. The “text” of the ritual observance, as I argue, is an active agent in the governing anxieties and quotidian relationships of the eighteenth-century French Caribbean. Moreover, as a term, *ritual action* performs a mediation between the “textual” ritual of colonial observers and the “practiced” rituals of Afro-Caribbeans. Terms like *text* and *practice*, left unchallenged, risk reifying the binaries that *ritual observance* complicates. Although I use terms such as *ritual observer* and *ritual practitioner* to distinguish between colonial observers and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practitioners, the terminology nonetheless implies that they are simply two different positions within the *same* ritual. Finally, the ritual observation may even be collaborative, as with the court documents, recording a litany of different actions and actors that nonetheless congeal to produce a recognizable ritual.

### Père Jean Baptiste Labat

The missionary priest Père Jean-Baptiste Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amérique*, written around 1698 and published in 1724, is a roaming travelogue that spans the Caribbean.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the eight-volume work, he baptizes pirates, observes indigenous Carib funeral rights, and owns slaves. During a stay in Martinique, he observes—and then interrupts—an African spiritual healing ceremony. Hearing news one night that a shaman had come to tend to the mysterious ailment of one of his slaves he decides to “hunt down and punish” the offending practitioner. “But as I approached the door I stopped myself, in order to observe through a slot in the hut what was happening” (164). Labat’s authoritative intention—to punish—is suddenly and inexplicably replaced by his desire to observe secretly.

It is not entirely clear how long Labat observes the ritual; he uses phrases like “a little while later” and remains hidden despite “more incensing and prostrations” (164). He implies that he observes silently for at least a few minutes. His vantage of the ceremony is also limited. He hears the shaman ask the *marmouset*—an early term for the *fetish object*—if the slave has been healed. But he “does not hear the response”—he only sees the assembled slaves burst into “tears and cries” (166). Finally, he breaks into the room, grabs the *marmouset*, and demands an explanation.

11 Père Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amérique* Vol. 1, La Haye, 1724.

The woman being healed responded “that the devil had said she would die in four days, and that she had heard the voice come from the little figure” (166). He proceeds to brutally torture the shaman and whip the participating slaves. Labat describes this torture as if it was itself a kind of ritual performance, particularly the brutal whipping of the shaman.

Central to the punishment of the shaman is the denigration of the fetish symbol, the marmouset. “I brought a chair, put the marmouset before him, and told him to pray that the devil deliver him from my hands, or carry off his body. As [the devil] did neither, I continued to have [the shaman] whipped” (166). Although Labat’s punishment is putatively enacted to disabuse the shaman and the witnessing slaves of their belief in “devil worship,” he is nonetheless brandishing a fetish object while flagellating a spiritual healer for failing to successfully summon the devil. The boundary between regulation and participation here is vague, to say the least.

As Garraway notes, Labat’s punitive method of putting pimentade in the shaman’s wounds was an important action in Carib rituals marking the passage of young men into manhood.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in accounts of vaudoux later in the century, the “vaudoux king” is portrayed as brandishing a fetish object (a serpent, or an adder) above a kneeling supplicant, stabbing him or hurting him to test the participant’s capacity for pain. Labat, consciously or not, puts himself in this very position of spiritual authority. Furthermore, his attempt to disabuse the slaves of their faith in the marmouset also drives him to destroy it “even though [he] really wanted to keep it” (166). This act of violence mirrors the violence enacted on the body of the shaman in “an explicit analogy between the body and the fetish object,” and, certainly from the perspective of the enslaved around him, merely reinforces the putative power of the marmouset.<sup>13</sup> To continue Garraway’s point, by violating both the marmouset and the slave’s body, he reifies the material connection between the body and the ritual object that was understood by colonial observers to be central to West African (and thus Afro-Caribbean) spiritual practices.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the ritual observance, Labat senses that he has been somehow interpolated into the healing ceremony. Yet he neither endorses nor denies the “demonic” potency of the ritual:

What was troublesome in this adventure was that the negress in effect died the fourth day, either because her imagination had been struck by the devil’s response, or because she had truly known that her infirmity would take her in that time. (167)

Labat’s incomplete observation of the shaman’s discussion with the marmouset earlier becomes suspiciously convenient in this final passage. Because he did not “hear the response” from the marmouset earlier, he can’t be sure whether the ritual truly did summon the devil or not. Labat’s investment in placing the ritual practice somewhere between charlatanry and witchcraft will be echoed nearly a century later in the writings of Moreau de Saint-Méry. His clever narratological trick reveals that,

12 Garraway, *The Libertine Colony*, 170.

13 Ibid.

14 William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish II,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987) 44.

as Garraway argues, the ambivalence of the ritual observance is deliberate, even structural. Labat participates in the ritual not only by inserting himself into the ritual space and performing a regimen of pain and fetishization associated with Afro-Caribbean spirituality, but he formally resists transcending the scene and adopting the discursive distance of the ethnographer. This is not to say he is abandoning a discourse of domination, but rather that it is constituted differently than much of the ethnographic literature of the time.

Much of Labat's writing, though written as a travelogue, is ethnographical. *Nouveau voyage* tends to position the Caribbean as a potential archive of imperial knowledge. At one point, Labat witnesses an indigenous Caribbean funeral rite. The scene is narrated in a recognizably ethnographic manner.<sup>15</sup> The "strangeness" of the funeral rite is always in contrast to Labat's objective gaze. In his ritual observance, rather, Labat deliberately complicates his own subject position by declaring himself vulnerable to the very language of mystification he uses to define his slaves. It is by internalizing, or self-directing, the ritual mystery that Labat makes a curious move. The violence on the bodies of the enslaved is characterized as a refraction onto his *own* body—through the discourse of participation—because he recognizes that he is punishing others for believing in what he himself believes.

The disjunction between Labat's initial intention, to punish the ritual practitioners, and the muddled account we receive instead, is articulated as a rupture between what his body "does" and what his mind "thinks." The third ritual action, the ambivalence of desire and disavowal, is usually phrased as a "split" of the body/mind of the ritual observer. Labat is disdainful of the spiritual practice that he witnesses. Yet he also allows his body to be drawn into a performance of violence and vulnerability that betrays his (at first) glib dismissal of African spirituality. Furthermore, while Labat describes the ceremony he interrupts as devil worship, he also appears to be aware that forms of African spirituality did not cohere easily to European understandings of witchcraft. Although scholars like Diana Paton and Garraway have adroitly argued that Labat was a firm believer in witchcraft (he was), this passage reveals a kind of nascent awareness that such a term may be only uncomfortably applied to the spiritual practice he observes.<sup>16</sup> As William Pietz has shown, "the formation of the novel idea of the fetish on the West African coast, and its later elaboration into the general theory of fetishism, were expressions of a new historical problematic outside the horizon of Christian thought."<sup>17</sup> Labat's ascription of witchcraft and demonology to the spiritual practices of enslaved Africans belied his own awareness that the "logic" of African and Afro-Caribbean practices had no precedent in traditional Euro-Christian thought.

15 Père Jean-Baptiste Labat, *The Memoirs of Père Labat*, trans John Eaden (London: Constable, 1931), 80.

16 Diana Paton also goes on to show that white Christian narratives depicting spiritual practices on the West Coast of Africa rarely mention witchcraft directly. She writes that the "absence of discussion of the witch in these sources does not mean that the concept of witchcraft did not exist in these societies, but it does suggest that witchcraft caused less concern there than in early modern Europe." I'd like to contend, rather, that these missionaries, like Labat, were aware that the forms of West African spirituality they witnessed operated in a register beyond familiar Christian thought. Diana Paton, "Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic—Slavery," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69.2 (April 2012): 243.

17 William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish II," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (Spring 1987): 44.

The term *fetish* was developed because the symbolic meanings of the idol, which was still sometimes used to describe ritual objects, was insufficient. Pietz continues: “Fetishes were external objects whose religious power consisted of their status almost as personal organs affecting the health and concrete life of the individual.”<sup>18</sup> The difference between an idol and a fetish was that the idol was powerful only as a conduit to a (false) divinity. The fetish was itself powerful, its potency derived through a physical connection with the body. The power of the fetish object, to colonial observers, was in the way that it was seen to connect two separate worlds. As Toni Wall Jaudon notes “the planter and those he enslaves may both be resident within the same colonial, Atlantic, hemispheric, and global scales, but they also find that their worlds are differently organized, containing different possibilities.”<sup>19</sup> Although the ideologies supporting this Manichean divide shift over the century, ritual observers consistently portray the “fetish” object as the site in which these worldviews converge. Labat’s insistence on projecting a familiar Christian methodology on the ceremony he interrupts is compromised by the fetish symbol, which he recognizes as an object that resists such an inscription. In destroying the symbol, he only makes it stronger, admitting its potency as an object of control. Because the fetish object operates on the physical body, beneath the brush of discourse, he fears that his body has been indoctrinated into an identification that his mind cannot articulate.

### **Trials**

Scraps recovered by Gabriel Debien from district courts in 1780s Saint-Domingue reveal the way in which Labat’s carefully ambivalent relationship to Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices was codified into legal documents. They also offer a glimpse into the day-to-day relations between plantocratic authority and the political and spiritual life of the enslaved. My comparison here, between court documents and the travelogue of a roaming missionary nearly a century prior, is a strange one. What I aim to show, however, is that the currency of the ritual observance is irreducible to its immediate sociopolitical context, but also more attuned to its historic moment than theorizations of a monolithic colonial ideology might allow.

In 1784, a “mulatto” slave named Jerome dit Poteau was charged *in absentia* for organizing “nighttime gatherings” on the estate of Sieur Beliers. Sieur Desplas, the plantation owner of an adjacent estate, claimed that he had overheard numerous gatherings being held on his neighbor’s property and “that one time in particular there was one so tumultuous that he was constrained to go there.”<sup>20</sup> His testimony reveals the extent to which such ceremonies were a quotidian event during this time. If this “secret” ritual had been perhaps a little less cacophonous, it seems Sieur Desplas would have probably ignored it, as he usually did. Even here, he goes only reluctantly, as he feels *constrained*, as if he has no real choice. Even contemporary scholarship often takes the secrecy of “nighttime gatherings” for granted. Yet the relative secrecy, as

18 Ibid., 44.

19 Toni Wall Jaudon, “Obeah’s Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn,” *American Literature* 84.4 (2012): 717.

20 Gabriel Debien, “Assembles Nocturne d’Esclaves,” *Annales historiques de la revolution francaise* 44 (April–June 1972): 273–84.

described in these documents, seems rather to be a deliberate *strategy* on the part of colonial observers. Gabriel Debien writes that these cases were “undoubtedly” an exception, and most “nighttime gatherings” were secret.<sup>21</sup> He does not provide evidence of this, and I assume he is referring to the expansive legal system in place to punish such transgressions. This system, however, often seems more invested in *inscribing* secrecy onto Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices than it is in pursuing them.

Sieur Desplas arrives with one of his slaves and finds the gathering dispersed, but “the next day this same servant of the witness was taken by a violent colic that was soon followed by his death.”<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to tell if this actually happened—just as there is no way of knowing whether Labat’s slave really died four days after he interrupted her healing ceremony. Nonetheless it is telling that both ritual observances I have analyzed thus far have narrated a marked hesitation on the part of the observer over his intrusion into an Afro-Caribbean ritual space. In both cases the observers express anxiety that their intrusion into the ritual space resulted in consequences they could not quite understand. Both literalize this anxiety through the violent death of a slave. By using their slaves as proxies for their own culpability in the ritual act, ritual observers perform a kind of tentative vulnerability, an almost playful half-surrender to the “mystery” of Afro-Caribbean spiritual performance.

In 1698, Labat could publicly term Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as *witchcraft* or *devil worship*, but by the late eighteenth century, discourses of rationalism and science had largely relegated such “superstitions” to the enslaved or a backward European peasantry.<sup>23</sup> Sieur Desplas, in connecting the death of his slave to the interrupted ceremony, intimates that he believes in the magical potency of Afro-Caribbean spirituality. The court document, by including this addendum, also acknowledges this possibility. Yet, in the verdict of the court, belief in the magical potency of such practices is attributed to a “gullible and moronic multitude, seduced and deceived by skilled performers or clever charlatans, who take their stupid belief and use it for their own profit.”<sup>24</sup> Both Desplas and the court are putting themselves in a somewhat awkward position here. On the one hand, the document provides testimony to the magical power of the ceremony; on the other hand, it roundly mocks anyone who believes in the magical power of the ceremony.

That same year, an enslaved man named Jean Ledot was accused of conducting similar gatherings on the plantations of a Monsieur Esteve. The overseer of his estate was called to witness. Per his disposition:

In the course of the month of last July, he saw clearly through the cracks in the hut of the negro Jean Ledot, the negro Jean in the middle of a considerable gathering, the said negro on his knees before a table covered with a cloth and lit by two candles, raising to different

21 Debien also notices that the “secrecy” of these rituals was largely a fiction—at least in the cases presented here. He advances that “perhaps the assemblies were called secret in the sense of ‘mysterious,’ or ‘incomprehensible.’” Here he seems to be looking forward to Trouillot, who popularized the notion of black agency as “inconceivable.” As I have argued, however, this theorization cannot account for the historical significance of the ritual observance. Debien, “Assembles Nocturne d’Esclaves,” 283.

22 Ibid., 280.

23 Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic—Slavery,” 237.

24 Debien, “Assembles Nocturne d’Esclaves,” 281.

heights a “fetage,” and that he was not able to clearly identify the negroes silent on their knees during this ceremony.<sup>25</sup>

Here an overseer, in a clear position of authority to arrest such a proceeding, squats like an illicit intruder and gazes at an incomplete scene through cracks of a hut. Jean Ledot is not doing very much to hide the ritual; he is conducting it on the plantation, at a time when overseers are walking about. Rather it is the overseer who puts himself into a position of perverse spectatorship; he becomes a voyeur who mystifies, even sexualizes, the ceremony by making it secret. Such a move makes his own position illicit, as if he were the offending party. The “crack in the hut,” which seems to be a kind of recurring action in the ritual observance, also allows the observation to be spotty and incomplete, further mystifying the ceremony.

Neither of the witnesses I have examined enact the kind of violence that Labat described in his ritual observance. This is not to say that violence, one of the key ritual actions I previously outlined, is not present in the court documents; it *is* the court documents. Or, rather, the dispersed colonial apparatus the court documents represent. The violence is judicial, a function of the state; the bodies of Jerome dit Poteau and Jean Ledot are interpolated into a sophisticated legal system. This “system,” however, is prone to the very same ambivalence expressed by Labat; in punishing the bodies of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practitioners, these documents also betray a nascent awareness that they have legitimized them. In the sentencing verdict, the court admits that if these rituals “did not inspire well founded fears and dangerous consequences,” then there would be no real crime to them at all.<sup>26</sup> The mere fact that they felt the need to justify their decision betrays a clear sense of culpability inspired by colonial violence on the enslaved body.

### Moreau de Saint-Méry

Written shortly before the start of the Haitian revolution, Moreau’s *Description* is often analyzed as a window into a colonial system on the brink of collapse. Yet *Description* is also notable for scarcely acknowledging—or even recognizing—the increasing precariousness of French colonial control. His description of a vaudoux ceremony is thus read as a kind of psychological “working through” of the specter of insurrectionary violence repressed elsewhere in the text. Famously, the revolution was inaugurated by a similar “nighttime gathering.” Though the account is contested by historians, it at the very least attests to the colonial association between Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices and slave revolt.<sup>27</sup> This is no doubt true, but my interest begins with the striking similarities between Labat’s and Moreau’s treatment of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice. Both negotiate the tense interplay between horror and desire and encompass paradoxical assertions that Afro-Caribbean spirituality is both charlatanry and dangerous magic. Moreau cites Labat repeatedly throughout *Description*, and was more than likely familiar with Labat’s now infamous ritual observance. Although it is not clear to what extent Moreau’s writings on vaudoux are

25 *Ibid.*, 273.

26 Debien, “Assembles Nocturne d’Esclaves,” 281.

27 Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789–1804* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 73.

informed by Labat, my reading of the legal documents showed that the ritual observance surpasses the textual referentiality of an ethno-literary genre, or trope. The ritual observance operates in and *through* the textual history of French Caribbean colonialism.

Moreau's ritual observance suggests that his depiction of a vaudoux ceremony is not so much a direct observation but an aggregate of common knowledge and other ritual observances from colonial police. Although his hyper-specific rendering of the vaudoux ceremony implies that it's a firsthand account, he never specifically places himself at the scene. Nonetheless he articulates a clear sense of white vulnerability, writing that "whites caught ferreting out the secrets of the sect and tapped by a member who has spotted them have sometimes themselves started dancing and have consented to pay the vaudoux Queen to put an end to this punishment" (56). Just like Labat, Moreau describes the observer's identification with Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as a disjunction between mind and body. While the white's body dances along with the other performers, he negotiates frantically with the vaudoux queen to make it stop. And just like Labat, this disjunction is triggered by the "discovery" of the white observer.

The erotic underpinnings of the scene are hard to ignore; a white observer is touched and then forced to dance with the vaudoux queen. Considering all the regimens of pain ritual observers associated with Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice, being forced to dance is surprisingly innocuous. Moreau seems to be describing a punishment that could just as easily be coded as pleasure. He also suggestively leaves out how the overly inquisitive observer might "pay" the vaudoux queen. Although Garraway spends little time on the erotics of this moment, it perfectly encapsulates her overall argument about the libidinal economy undergirding colonial ambiguity; namely, that it is an ideological tool deployed to shift the blame for libertine relationships in the colonies from white creoles to "seductive" Afro-Caribbean women. Garraway's theory of the libidinal economy, however, can only partially explain Moreau's troubled account. Earlier in the passage, Moreau reiterates a familiar ritual action; the vaudoux king and queen are charlatans. He states that "[the vaudoux queen] says whatever she likes, in the name of the adder, to that assembly of imbeciles, who never raise the slightest doubt over the most monstrous absurdity" (55). Like the "moronic multitude" maligned in the legal disposition, Moreau's (dis)identification with the "assembly of imbeciles" remains an unresolved ambiguity.

Near the end of the ritual, he warns his readers that "in order to quiet the alarms which this mysterious cult of Vaudoux causes in the Colony, they affect to dance it in public . . . but I assure you, this is only one more calculation, to evade the watchfulness of the magistrates and to better guarantee the success of this dark cabal" (59). Moreau stresses that the "success" of vaudoux depends on its secrecy—on its capacity to operate outside the purview of colonial authority. Like the court documents mentioned previously, however, vaudoux's secrecy is largely a construction. Moreau repeatedly pauses his narrative to stress how vigilant the ritual practitioners are in protecting the secrets of the ceremony. He even implies that secrecy is a core action of the ritual itself. He writes of practitioners staining their lips with goats' blood to keep them from revealing the secrets of the vaudoux (58). Yet he also implies that colonial police regularly observe vaudoux ceremonies and that the forced "dancing" is in many ways

designed to interrupt them while the ritual practitioners flee. It's hard to imagine there are many "secrets of the sect" left to be discovered if, as Moreau suggests, the ritual observation is something of a colonial pastime.

At one point Moreau adopts the subject position of one of the Afro-Caribbean practitioners, stressing that the rituals are "sheltered from all profane eyes" (54). He is presumably referencing his own eyes, or the eyes of other ritual observers. In this configuration, it is his *gaze* that is depicted as a hidden and sacrilegious ceremony, one that must be discovered and punished by the regal authority of the vaudoux queen. It is an almost complete reversal of the terms of colonial inscription; the vaudoux queen becomes an all-seeing figure of authority, taking control of the bodies of those who practice profane rituals in the dark. It is by insisting that the ceremony is so secret, despite evidence that suggests otherwise, that the ritual observance establishes a convoluted relationship wherein the white body experiences the thrill and horror of its own inscriptive practices.

Moreau's absurd insistence on the secrecy of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices, despite the critical ambiguity it engenders, also functions as a template for biopolitical domination. The chief difference between Moreau's account and the others I have examined is that Moreau's is comprehensive; unlike Labat, who strategically misses key parts of the ceremony he witnesses, Moreau's gaze is scientific, an itemized analysis of the vaudoux ceremony's smallest details and gestures. Foucault argues that "the explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" is the defining feature of Western modernity.<sup>28</sup> Moreau strategically invests in the secrecy of the ceremony and claims that there are also decoy rituals performed in public to extend the possible reach of his gaze. Along with the court documents, Moreau's ritual observance operates as part of the biopolitical imperative of the late eighteenth century. The court documents look to fold deviant black bodies into a legal terminology that can be processed by the state. Moreau's ritual observance looks to obliterate the "space" outside of colonial language and quantify the subjectivity of enslaved subjects in a way that reduces them to objects of proto-capitalist production.

### **Drouin de Bercy**

Drouin de Bercy's *De Saint-Domingue*, published in 1814, a decade after Haitian independence, marks another turn in the colonial history of the French Caribbean. Originally published in France, *De Saint-Domingue* advocated for violently reinstating slavery in Haiti. Throughout the book, he argues for an almost wholesale purge of the former French colony, including mass extermination of "mulâtres" and most "nègres." Afterward, France would resume the slave trade and repopulate the island with Africans. Central to his argument is the corrosive effect of national freedom on former slaves and freedmen. He believed that the corrupting influence of independence had so deeply compromised the Haitian citizenry that it was no longer enough for the French to simply reassert control; they had to, in a way, *rediscover* the island.

28 Michel-Rolph Foucault: *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 173.

Although bearing similarities to Moreau's ritual observance, Drouin de Bercy portrays the induction ceremony of an initiate into the "vaudou brotherhood." Drouin de Bercy does not imply that he personally witnessed the vaudoux ceremony; in fact he doesn't insinuate any form of direct observation at all. He simply presents the "facts" with no recourse to how they were obtained. Gone are the vagaries of subjective observation; here the white colonial subject does not even need to be present as an observer. The vaudoux brotherhood in *De Saint-Domingue* is less about "profane eyes" like those in *Description*, but rather careless initiates spilling their secrets. Drouin de Bercy figures discursive control as within and beyond the individual subject; the state/colonial gaze is no longer predicated on a witnessing body.

Although he does mention that the initiates are vetted for their ability to hold a secret, the ritual is not itself coded as particularly hidden. The violence of Drouin de Bercy's ritual observance is in divorcing the textualization of the observed practice from its actual performance. I am not claiming earlier observances should be read as direct observations, but that they referenced, at least, a specific spatio-temporal context in which these practices occurred. In *De Saint-Domingue*, the vaudoux ceremony exists as a spectral truth, a known deviance that moves through the colonial archive regardless of whether it is even putatively connected to actual practices. That Drouin de Bercy does not have to appeal to firsthand knowledge, or even collective knowledge like Moreau, to establish the "truth" of his claim speaks to the way in which racial discourse had permeated French thought by the early nineteenth century.

The vaudoux brotherhood is a telling addition to the ritual observance. Drouin de Bercy speaks of an initiate "who undergoes a month of trials. If he proves by his skill at stealing, by his patience, his constancy, and his willingness to suffer blows that nothing can extract his secret, they bring him blindfolded to the ritual hall" (341). In earlier ritual observances, the observer portrayed Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as spontaneous and relatively unorganized. Drouin de Bercy's vaudoux brotherhood, by contrast, is an institution. Although Moreau intimates that the vaudoux queen has a kind of authority that mirrors the colonial government's prying gaze, Drouin de Bercy portrays the vaudoux brotherhood as a complex political apparatus, capable of monitoring the activity of hopeful initiates over a period of months. The "danger" of vaudoux is not the temporary insanity of ignorant slaves succumbing to the hysteria of spiritual performance, but of an institution capable of competing with the colonial government. Drouin de Bercy's reinterpretation of familiar ritual actions marks an emerging awareness of what might once have seemed paradoxical; black sovereignty. Even for those like Drouin de Bercy, who sought to delegitimize Haitian independence, black political agency was certainly not as "unthinkable" as it was in 1789. Drouin de Bercy's narrative seems calculated, rather, to associate Haitian nationalism with a kind of vaudoux nationalism.

Drouin de Bercy also looks to delegitimize vaudoux nationalism by hyperbolizing the monarchical aspects of the vaudoux ceremony popularized by Moreau. In *Description*, the vaudoux king and queen regulate the ceremony, but they also mingle among the other practitioners. In *De Saint-Domingue*, Drouin de Bercy stresses the strict hierarchical nature of the ceremony. The vaudoux king also plays a much more prominent role. At the beginning of the ceremony, he is announced by "a frightening

sound.” After he enters, he performs what seems to be a perverse version of knighthood; when the initiate leans before him “[the vaudoux king] shoves the point of the dagger into his arm and applies the firebrand to the back of his leg” (342). Where Moreau merely had the king and queen stand at the end of the room, Drouin de Bercy places the king on a throne while “the initiate crawls across the room on his hands and knees” (341–42). The induction ceremony has a distinct tenor of feudal despotism not present in earlier ritual observations. Perhaps in the wake of the liberalizing imperative of post-revolutionary France, Drouin de Bercy wished to present Haiti as a kind of regressive holdout in need of some “liberalizing.”

Finally, even though the white observer is removed from the ritual observance, Drouin de Bercy still articulates a clear sense of white vulnerability. He writes:

After the sermon, the men and women begin to dance completely naked, and drink tafia. The room becomes nothing more than an indecent orgy, in which both sexes can be found entwined in each other’s arms. (343)

In the final lines of the ritual observance, the distinction between bodies is confused. Not only is gender blurred, but individual bodies also blur into a mass. Coded in his disgust at the “indecent orgy” is a fear that different races might become similarly undifferentiated. After Haitian independence, when fear about the “contagion” of revolution was at its height and former slaves were employing enlightenment language of liberty and citizenship, apologists of slavery and colonialism had to adjust their ideology of difference. Drouin de Bercy implies that all the ceremony, hierarchy, and ritual performance in post-revolutionary Haiti was little more than an excuse to participate in drinking and lechery. On the other hand, he also expresses an anxiety that the technology of racial discourse, the institutionalization of difference, is similarly superfluous, and that beneath his rhetoric of otherness lies the potential of embodied identification. He insists, for instance, that the room becomes “nothing more” than an indecent orgy, but still allows the narrative gaze to linger on the ritual actors. He is careful to find both sexes entwined, with the narrative itself becoming entwined in the arms of the ritual practitioners. This narrative desire, recorded as a tortured participation in Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice, marks the convergence between desire and disavowal that anchors the ritual observance.

### Conclusion

I hesitate to say that my four readings here have charted the “progression” of the ritual observance over the eighteenth century. Though certain ritual actions do appear to change slowly over time—the gradual disappearance of the embodied white observer, for instance—these transitions are constitutive of the moment in which they were deployed, not proof of the inevitable refinement of a ritual trope or convention. It would be more appropriate to say that these readings chart the “progress” of colonial relations in the French Caribbean, however, I’d argue that it would be equally appropriate to claim they resist them as well. What I aimed to show was that the fundamental actions that define the ritual observance—violence on black bodies, desire and disgust, enforced secrecy—are not always already embedded in the ritual

observance, but are employed because they *work* as (de)scriptive tools in the moment they are performed.

Though recourse to any trans-historical language of “colonial ideology” can be problematic, so can a localized explanation that doesn’t consider the persistence of ritual actions across distinct historical periods. I have tried to reconcile these two positions by arguing that the ritual observance is a performance of subjective refraction, where the ritual observer sees himself from a position of alterity. What he “sees” depends on the moment in which the ritual observance is enacted, but in each case the observer is alienated from his own language and as such finds the borders between self and other unsettled. I have also sought to complicate contemporary criticism of what I have termed the *ritual observance*. It is not that the scholarship is incorrect, rather it too often turns to essentialist notions of colonial ideology to compensate for its historical specificity. I have advanced the term *ritual observance* as a practice of reading that might find common ground between these historically opposed reading practices.