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Reseña de "Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue"
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How did the enslaved simultaneously maintain and resist the system of slavery? Or put another way, how did enslaved Africans and their descendants survive the deadly disease of European slavery? Karol K. Weaver engages these questions through an interdisciplinary approach to slave medicine. She provides a simple yet profound answer; enslaved Africans and their descendants survived by becoming “medical revolutionaries.” Forced by the “pathological effects of slavery” to tend not only to themselves, but also to the wider community, the enslaved employed medicine as both bodily remedy and political weapon. Medical Revolutionaries, in affirming the contributions of enslaved medical practitioners to Western medicine and the Haitian Revolution, provides an impressive account of how individual groups of healers and personal acts of resistance characterized slave society and eventually liberated the enslaved. Although the text is particularly limited in its relative thinness, condensed bibliographic format and occasional indiscriminate use of sources, it complicates notions of agency, rewrites the history of medicine and advances the discourse on slave medicine and resistance in the Caribbean.

Weaving history, the medical sciences, the veterinary sciences, pharmacology and anthropology into the theoretical construct “historical ethnomedicine,” the text disrupts traditional historiography on Haiti and tropical medicine and points to the increasing relevance of interdisciplinarity for Caribbean research. Weaver argues for the cumulative effects of minor acts of slave resistance while chronicling the formation of Afro-Caribbean medicine from the incorporation of Amerindian and European remedies into African healing traditions. Interdisciplinary studies generally provides for a larger framework of analysis and interpretation with an attendant cultural critique that aims to change the position of specified actors; in this instance, the elevation of enslaved healers. Weaver’s approach, called “historical ethnomedicine” is defined by interdisciplinary attention to primary texts containing ethnomedical information. In the comparative absence of records by enslaved healers, the method requires that the historian “watch for them and listen for their voices in the texts and documents of eighteenth-century writers,” while being aware of the “perspectives
and prejudices” of these writers (p. 7). In this regard, Weaver achieves unqualified success in critiquing the historical and medical discourse which elides the contributions of enslaved healers. In this rewriting of Haitian history, revolutionary healers such as Kingue, Arada, Jerome, Julie and Marie Michelle are exhumed from the historical graveyard to take centre stage as outstanding leaders in the slave community excelling not only at the practice of medicine but also at the deadly game of politics.

The work succeeds in its claims to distinctiveness by: 1) focusing on the variety of medical practitioners; 2) highlighting the contributions of enslaved healers to the Haitian revolution; 3) showing how enslaved healers both accommodated and resisted slavery; 4) centering the role of women in resistance, and; 5) proficient utilization of an interdisciplinary methodology. Comprised of seven chapters (plus introduction and conclusion), the text’s structure evinces serious attention to the theoretical, ideological and cultural context in which both European medicine and the medical practices of the enslaved coexisted. The emphasis on cultural mores, medical theory, ideas about race and gender serves to “demonstrate the complex dialogue and struggle between various colonial medical practitioners and the fissures and debates within the medical discourse of the period” (p. 7). The first two chapters focus on St. Domingue society and the official European medical system, respectively. Chapter One, “Saint Domingue: Life in the Torrid Zone,” is important for presenting an overview of the island as a French colony. Focus on the complex social, economic, racial and medical environment of St. Domingue provides for an understanding of Haiti’s historical stigma as a “diseased island.” In Chapter Two, “European Medicine in the Torrid Zone,” a comprehensive treatment of official medical policy and practice gives insight into the corrupt, competitive and unstable medical environment that produced medical revolutionaries. Together, these first chapters add phenomenal depth to a work which transcends the promise of the title. The remaining five chapters are devoted to exploring the variety of enslaved medical practitioners – hospitalières (hospital caretakers), infirmières (hospital aides), accoucheuses (midwives); herbalists; gardiens de bêtes (veterinarians); magnetizers and Kaperlatas (assumed sorcerers). The chronology of these Chapters evidences distinctions made between healers sanctioned by official plantation policy and those who were not. The book therefore progresses as an exposition of medical practices and
practitioners along a continuum, beginning with medics in the slave hospital and ending with the practitioners of spiritual medicine.

The organization of Chapters Three to Seven also reflects the text’s concentration on notions of agency and the important role of women in resistance. Each successive chapter describes healers with increased medical and revolutionary prowess; beginning with the \textit{hospitalières} — the least powerful female practitioners — and ending with the \textit{Karperlatas} — the most powerful healers. In this way, Weaver succeeds in rendering an exposition and classification of the complex range of medical practitioners in St. Domingue, which resists the traditional over-emphasis on the religious aspects of enslaved medical and political practices. Categorization of healers in the African Diaspora remains a persistent challenge for ethnomedical scholars, and Weaver’s formatting resonates reasonable well with existing disciplinary categories. Slave hospitals, herbalism, animal caretaking, and magnetism and sorcery correspond respectively with the medical sciences, pharmacology, veterinary sciences and anthropology. If the work at times seems repetitive, it is because these categories are in no way discrete. This disciplinary typology is a convenient, inclusive and legitimate, if not totally systematic way to represent the diverse skills of enslaved healers.

In Chapter Three, “Enslaved Healers on the Plantation,” \textit{hospitalières}, \textit{infirmières} and \textit{accoucheuses} are confirmed as efficient managers of slave hospitals, delicately balancing accommodation and resistance. Chapters Four and Five focus on herbalism, rewriting the history of Western pharmacology. While Chapter Four, “Enslaved Herbalists” focuses on the use of herbs for medicine; Chapter Five, “Makandal and the Medical Care of Animals: The Veterinarians Who Inspired the Haitian Revolution,” chronicles the utilization of herbalism by the enslaved as a revolutionary weapon. The chapters are important for detailing pharmacopoeia used by the enslaved in the treatment of various illnesses. Throughout the text herbalism is shown to induce a ubiquitous fear of poisoning and the story of Makandal is retold here with an emphasis on his expertise in herbalism which he used with great success to terrorize the society and inspire countless acts of resistance.

In Chapter Six, “Magnetism in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue,” Weaver presents the skillful appropriation of Anton Mesmer’s therapeutic magnetism by the enslaved as a means of resistance. It highlights the “nocturnal and numerous assemblies” organized
by the enslaved in order to practice African religion. The practice of African religion afforded by “prétendu magnétisme” as well as the Karperlatas gave greater access to familiar therapies and rituals that energized its practitioners and instilled the confidence to rebel against the white establishment and enslaved collaborators. Chapter Seven, “The Transformative Power of the Kaperlata,” is important for emphasizing how the employment of disease and bodily harm as resistance by enslaved healers was successful because the different types of healers provided for multiple avenues of resistance. Abortions, infanticide, suicide, self-mutilation, poisoning, and feigned illness, fortified by repertoires of resistance such as rituals, guards and charms sustained a climate of fear in a hostile environment.

The seven substantive chapters are preceded by a useful introduction and followed by a comparatively thin conclusion. The introduction outlines the practices and diversity of enslaved healers, the theoretical assumptions of the text and the wealth of primary sources used. Importantly, concepts of resistance and an interdisciplinary methodology are stated as the primary theoretical concerns of the work. While the reader could have benefited from a more detailed attention to Caribbean theories of resistance, the shift from emphasis on maroonage and Vodou certainly helps us to rethink theories of resistance. Medical Revolutionaries distinguishes itself in the interdisciplinary quest for the medical repertoire of the enslaved. The term “historical ethnomedicine” as “the search for traditional medical techniques and remedies via primary sources,” (p. 7) affirms the historiographic revolution demonstrated by the text, while exemplifying a distinctive if not entirely “new” methodology. However, readers unfamiliar with recent trends in the historiography of tropical medicine would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with this field which is only given brief attention. Such an exposition would have made for a clearer articulation of the construct “historical ethnomedicine” as well as the utilization of a bibliography reflective of the text’s distinctive methodology. Readers would have benefited from a more detailed presentation of the material used, in particular, a separate cataloging of primary sources. Additionally, given the book’s project, readers will be interested in the absence of Archives Nationales rue Borgella, Port-au-Prince, Haiti from the archival sources listed.

Weaver’s employment of the traditional false dichotomy between Obeah and Myal as an interpretive lens for African religious practices among the enslaved in St. Domingue begs for an even closer read-
ing of the historical documents. While there may have been African medical practitioners who engaged with neutral mystical power for predominantly good or evil purposes, neither the historical documents nor African worldviews allow for an easy differentiation into two distinct modes of religio-medical practice. Indeed the terms *Karperlatas* —“practitioners of spiritual and natural medicine”—and *Makandalistes* —“purveyors of charms and talismans,” (p. 3) as presented by the text are not defined in terms of good and evil. Further, an entire chapter is devoted to a positive rendering of Makandal as a medical revolutionary, yet two chapters later his revolutionary legacy becomes negative in relation to the *Karperlatas*, who were considered by European observers as “akin to sorcerers” (p. 115). Although Weaver exposes the stigmatized misinterpretation of practices of the *Karperlatas*, more meticulous attention could have been given to the apparent contradictions in the characterization of *Karperlatas* and *Macandalistes* which result not only from the ideological bias of eighteenth century writers, but also from the divisions (in particular tensions due to ethnic, occupational, gender differences) among the enslaved themselves. The flawed analysis of African religious practices remains a persistent problem in the scholarship, and only recently have scholars begun to redress this important issue.¹

Perhaps these contradictions might have been evidenced with greater attention to the provenance of the enslaved. In this regard and others, readers would have welcomed more engagement with Caribbean and Diasporean scholars—especially the emerging voices of religious studies scholars and other historians also engaged in the project of rewriting Caribbean history.

In articulating “The Influence of the Enslaved Healers—Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Medical Revolutionaries* concludes with an aborted historiographic innovation. In a disappointing three and a half-page juxtaposition of the literal “landscape of modern Haiti” against the backdrop of eighteenth century St. Domingue, an elderly healer, Frederic Geromi is compared with enslaved healers in the absence of contextual grounding which shapes the other chapters. Given the preponderance of extant materials on Haiti, this section is much too short, and represents a missed opportunity to contextualize Haiti’s current medical environment. A more extensive treatment of the current social, theoretical, economic and political climate in the twenty-first century could have been meaningful for Caribbean ethnomedical

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Caribbean Studies scholars engaged with marginalized healing traditions and groups in a post-colonial era.

It would be counterproductive however, to focus on these areas of concern in an otherwise outstanding rendering of Caribbean history and ethnomedicine. The interdisciplinary thrust of the text is commendable and its careful languaging makes it accessible to a wide audience. Caribbeanists interested in health and medicine will benefit from Weaver’s portrayal of the emergence of Afro Caribbean medicine within the context of the persistent failure of a bureaucratic health care system. Ethnomedical scholars will find much opportunity for comparative analysis in the wealth of remedies documented. Readers specializing in resistance studies will appreciate Weaver’s case for a more inclusive definition of resistance. Women’s studies and gender scholars committed to understanding the complex role of women on the slave plantation will welcome the text’s detailed attention to enslaved women healers. Other readers who engage with the text as a historiographic document, will further the conversation on the Caribbean’s need for urgent and positive attention to the historically marginalized. This self-reflexive text which complements similar projects in Asia and the American South, necessarily broadens our knowledge and understanding of medicine, liberty and the Caribbean.

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References


Notes

1 For an instructive discussion of the false dualism between Obeah and Myal see the works of Dianne Stewart (2005), and also that of Juanita de Barros (2004). De Barros’ article looks at attempts by the enslaved to deal with medical malpractice among obeah practitioners.