Paul C. Johnson, University of Michigan, response to Alexander Rocklin, "Haunting Violence: Obeah and the Management of the Living and the Dead in Colonial Trinidad"

I read this essay while awaiting a flight from Surinam to Trinidad. An African Trinidadian young man filled the seat next to mine, and the word "Obeah" on the paper in my hands caught his eye when I pulled it from my bag. He put his finger on it and began a question I couldn't decipher. His friends tugged him in another direction and I was left alone holding a print of "Obeah." It is just a word on paper, yet is able to call and focus the boy's attention; to gather, condense and direct force, and to demand a response.

 Alexander Rocklin sifts through untold histories of 19th and early 20th century Trinidad, through a reading of obeah, jumbies, and the strategic burial postures given to the dead. This is a work of anthropological history in the best sense, by virtue of its attention to everyday practices and an expanded idea of "the archive." Even when Rocklin works with familiar sources like newspaper reports, he always reads them, as he says, "against themselves." The materials are compelling and riveting. I am persuaded by the argument, at least in broad terms, and learned much. In this response I will name four issues that attracted and focused my attention, and evoked a response, much like obeah itself. This is not meant as critique so much as a reflection on how this work, like all of our work, might be further extended and refined.

First issue: Rocklin wades into the enduring Afro-Atlantic issue of the transculturative process. I apply transculturation deliberately because it is a term born in and of the Caribbean, first appearing in the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz's 1940 masterpiece, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar.* Ortiz asked how the material environment impinges upon and structures the outcomes of cultural contact, and emphasized the ways all the entities engaged in contact are infiltrated and transformed in the event. Rocklin's paper productively shows how, since their arrival in the 19th century to replace slave labor after emancipation, East Indian Trinidadians availed themselves of African Trinidadian material and religious repertories in order to adapt to, resist or transform the brutal social order in which they were abruptly inserted. He notes that African Trinidadian religious forms were already solidly established; this accounts for why arriving East Indians sought out its specialists to address conditions Africans had long practice at naming and engaging. True enough, but I am curious about the instances where the opposite occurred, and Africans adopted practices and figures of East Indian devotion. For example, sometimes African Trinidadians sought out rituals devoted to the East Indian goddess, Kali Mai; even as in 20th century Jamaica, pan-African Garveyites began smoking "ganja" in order to better "reason," in apparent imitation of East Indian sadhus. Even further: Did, or do African Trinidadians participate in Islamic Hosay events in Port of Spain, and if so, to what degree, and how?

 I mention these counter-examples that expand out from Rocklin's paper to ask how broader comparative questions might be posed about what and who becomes the dominant or encompassing religious system in transculturing

situations, and why: Why, to wit, did the so-called "Yoruba" (lukumi in Cuba, nagô in Brazil) provide the enframing vocabulary and ritual repertory in 19ᵗʰ century Brazil, even though they were mostly late arrivers to a land where Kongo practices, and practitioners, had a two-centuries' long head-start? There are some obvious explanations that aren't worth detailing here, but I use this example to note that, 1) there are other issues besides temporal priority that may determine which given religious repertory serves to frame and absorb others; and 2) there are exceptions to every attempted encompassment, as in the case of Afro-Trini's use of Kali Mai. It might be fruitful for Rocklin to explore what those exceptions suggest.

Second issue: Rocklin gives close attention to how law and colonialism in a sense help to constitute Obeah, through the repressive measures taken against it. I take this to mean that, by focusing attention on Obeah as a particularly African danger those repressive efforts enlivened it and endowed it with force, both from the perspective of the ruling class and from the perspective of those they ruled. In Brazil this was certainly true: law was infiltrated by the very terms of Afro-Brazilian sorcery—macumba, feitiço, etc. Much has been written on Cuba in this vein as well. Perhaps there is even something of a recent rush on finding the primitive magic and sorcery that lurk in all things "modern," whether it is the state, the neo-liberal economy, technological hybridities, or the experience of time-space compressions and global immanence and immediacy. In taking this move, of course, we are only knock-offs of Marx, Freud and Durkheim, who all paved the way with their uses of fetishism and the totem to characterize what was then the new industrial human being and form of sociality. The move of turning the tables to locate "the primitive" within the modern state, economy and legal apparatus has been important as a device for interrogating mystifications of early 1900s rationalities to the present. But it risks becoming fuzzy, to use Rocklin's term. In part this is precisely because the intervention's rhetorical force can bury the micro-processes it was intended to reveal. With this in mind, I would like to ask how, exactly, the state and its repressive legal systems help to create Obeah, since the assertion can be read in various ways. Does it imply something as strong as that obeah would not have existed, or exist, without its legal repression? Or the weaker but subtler hypothesis that obeah gained force through the objectifying language and legal prosecution of its illegality? I suspect the latter, but if so, further questions are begged by the fuzziness of the phrases I've now been forced to resort to, such as the assertion that Obeah "gained force." This could mean it gained more practitioners, or that those using it were endowed with new capacities they hadn't previously had, or that this thing called "Obeah" began to take on a life of its own, circulating in gossip and second-hand reports and laws, without any tethering to actual communities of practice whatsoever.

Third issue: I was intrigued by Rocklin's description of a 1929 report as a moment of subaltern contestation of official and elite classifications. In the cited report, Obeah was renamed as "Hindoo mysticism," and an "obeahman" becomes a "science man." Here the claim of resistance must be harnessed to consequences that followed *outside* of ritual practice and its claims, in order to become more persuasive. For

example, the conferral of Obeah's new status as "mysticism" might have led to debates about granting it new legal protection, or have afforded new opportunities to attract devotees or confer authority. It may have helped the practice acquire legitimacy as a bona fide "religion" and thereby win rights to property, support, or tax-free status. In that case, though, we might ask whether benefits won only by Obeah's being emptied of its putative Africanness should be viewed as resistance or as something else—even, perhaps, accommodation or defeat.

Rocklin is astute in framing Obeah as a cluster rather than a thing, comprised of a cast of victims, specialists, legal systems, materials, questions of sincerity and so on. Yet perhaps there is still another frame to add here, in this case by scaling up to the issue of comparative categories circulating at the time. To my view, circa 1930 can be seen as a moment when a new vocabulary for the study of Afro-Atlantic religions began to take shape, as Boas's students like Melville Herskovits, Gilberto Freyre, Zora Neale Hurston and others began to publish. After 1930, Afro-American religions ceased being labeled under rubrics like fetishism or fetishistic animism, and began to be renamed as things like "mysticism," just as occurred in the case attended to by Rocklin. To refer again to the case of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, the great transformer was the French scholar, Roger Bastide, who carried his early interest in Christian mysticism with him to Brazil, and then indiscriminately applied it to all the Afro-descendant religions there encountered. At least in Brazil, one can point to the revamped terminology of the 1930s and see how the shift in terminology helped initiate changes outside of ritual practice. Afro-Brazilian religions like Umbanda and Candomblé slowly began to appear as real "religions" in conferences, in academic writing and, ultimately, in law. It would interesting see how this played out in Trinidad and other British colonies, and to begin to generate regional comparisons on the temporalities of law and legal regimes, as they were variously applied to Afro-Atlantic religious practices.

Fourth issue: Rocklin points to the important issue of the ways ritual practices related to jumbies, obeah, and the treatment of the dead, index histories of enslavement and at least occasionally the resistance to it. I agree with Rocklin's perspective, and have tried to develop it in my own writing as well. It should be said, however, that this perspective has critics. The idea is that the economy of slavery, and the trope of persons-as-property, figure prominently in possession practices, as well as in the figurations of ghostly bodies named as zombis or jumbies. Rocklin notes that the possessed are as often the "owners" of their spirits as vice versa. This is surely right. In Brazilian Candomblé, Stefania Capone has described phrases of personal ownership like "João's Xangô" (John's Shango [deity of thunder, kingship, and male charisma]), as though the personal edition of this god could be compared with other persons' enunciations of him. At the least, such phrases express the interdependency and reciprocity of human-divine relationships. A priest may play the role of a parent in relation to her spirit, striving to properly civilize an unruly child, as when dealing with a "santo bruto," a deity that manifests but does not yet know how to properly behave. People are possessed by, but also possess their spirits; they are ridden, but also ride the spirits; they are corrected and disciplined by spirits, but also correct and discipline their spirits. It is possible to

imagine possession as less a loss of self than a "widening" of self, to borrow William James' term, into a multivocal being. A society constituted of such multivocal beings also may enjoy expanded possibilities in forms of relationships, systems of ethics, and notions of past-present relations. Rather than a loss of agency, working with spirits may multiply potentialities of speech and act. If so, though, as scholars like Michael Lambek have argued, it is far from clear that the history of slavery, and its conversion of persons into possessable things, provides any *determinative* role in the possible significations of interactions with the dead, the spirits, or the possessed.

This is an important issue, since arguments like the one Rocklin mounts here seek to do important work in finding agency in practices historically dismissed as empty or merely expressive. In my perspective, and I believe in Rocklin's too, such complexity does not invalidate the basic semantic links between spirit-work and servitude; to the contrary, it thickens them. To be sure, we need to treat Afro-Atlantic ritual complexes formed within and on the margins of chattel slavery in their proper specificity, rather than as typical of spirit possession and other forms of human-spirit sociability in general. Then too, we should properly distinguish the formation of "spirit possession" as a generic comparative class in the gaze of Europeans—which in my view *must* be contextualized in relation to the Atlantic slave trade and other colonial ideas of the body-as-property—from spirit possession *practices* which are far from determined by such historical frames. And we should observe that the figurations of "master" and "slave" activated in ritual performance do not determine how these roles are played out, since these roles may be worked, inverted, redeemed, or transcended in their enactments.

Though the idea that the interaction with spirits is a local, subaltern form history-making has been extraordinarily important, we can now admit that not all ancestral or divine returns are about tradition, history or the past at all. The Angolan and Caboclo nations of Candomblé in Brazil affirm this every day with their cast of cowboys, harlots, race-car drivers and "turks," as do spiritists with their pantheons of impressionist painters, scientists and presidents. In these cases, maybe it isn't worth arguing for the ancestors-as-lived-history idea.

Still, noting the play of possession and its creative capacities to shift frames and characters does not alter the import of tracing the histories of domination when they *are* worked—remembered, revisited, revised, reversed—in at least many ritual events of the Caribbean. Alexander Rocklin offers a brilliant intervention on that front, and puts Trinidad and its fascinating African-East Indian interfaces, mostly poorly investigated until now, front and center.