Due to a history of persecution and sensationalist approaches to African-derived religious forms, sorcery is a vexed topic in Latin America and the Caribbean. The salacious lies spread about vodou in Haiti during the U.S. Marine Occupation (1915–1934), for example, underwrote the notion that Haitians required repression and overrule since they purportedly could not manage on their own. As a result, vodou scholarship has traditionally treaded carefully around the problem of evil and the occult arts, largely avoiding the topic of witchcraft lest it become anti-Haitian fodder. Yet healing and protection are not easily separated from the problem of supernatural malevolence, particularly during the era of colonialism. As this trio of books makes clear, in the colonial context of se-

1 This cautious approach is evident in Paul Farmer’s work, which is concerned only with the medical consequences of sorcery accusations. See Farmer, Aids and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame (Berkeley, 1992). See also Karen McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn (Berkeley, 2001). A notable exception is Wade Davis, The Serpent and the Rainbow (New York, 1985), which was the basis for a sensationalist film with the same title in 1988.
vere repression, when slaves had little or no agency, sorcery, as well as a fear of African conspiracy, flourished.

Indeed, whether it is called Obeah as in the British West Indies, Vodou as in Haiti, Candomblé as in Brazil, Brujeria as in Puerto Rico, or Palo Monte as in Cuba, similar beliefs in invisible powers are found across Latin America and the Caribbean wherever slavery occurred. Centrally concerned with “the manipulation of the spirit world,” these supernatural beliefs had their adherents among numerous religious adepts, Evangelical Protestants and Catholics among them (Forde and Paton, “Introduction,” Obeah, 14). The fact that they seem to be widely taken for granted by people from every social station, thus transcending ideology, renders the use of the term belief problematical. Hence, many contemporary scholars emphasize practices instead, thereby underscoring the pragmatic logic of this esoteric knowledge (Edna Brodber, “Foreword,” Obeah, xi). Yet few studies have considered these practices in a comparative framework, or across linguistic boundaries, since the historiography has been constrained by nationalism and linguistic divides. The three books under review herein, however, demonstrate how revealing and insightful a comparative approach can be.

These volumes underscore the transnational aspect of the “believers” and their magical practices, a fact noted yet undeveloped in the literature. Scholars have speculated that these diverse religious forms bear a family resemblance due to their common origin in early slavery with the Kongo peoples of Central Africa. These similarities may have acquired reinforcement from the migration circuit of West Indians during the post-emancipation period, as employment opportunities at home dwindled and West Indians dispersed, relocating to Panama, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic and bringing Obeah with them. Indeed, Dios Olivorio Mateo, a twentieth-century mystic from the Dominican Republic, who became a national hero because of his resistance to U.S. Marines during the occupation (1916–1924), had an English-speaking partner who probably hailed from St. Vincent. Furthermore, the extraordinary tale of Domingo Álvares in Sweets’

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Domingos Álvares is an important reminder that even in the colonial period, slaves had far more mobility than is often assumed.

Obeah and Other Powers and Sorcery in the Black Atlantic set a new standard for research on comparative sorcery in Latin America and the Caribbean. The chapters in Sorcery in the Black Atlantic are analytically driven; they sensibly locate Latin American case studies within the long durée of research on witchcraft, including the classic works about Europe and Africa that established the analytical frameworks that still reign within the field of comparative religion. Drawing upon case studies from Africa and Brazil, they critically engage canonical texts as well as challenge the Enlightenment view that witchcraft beliefs would wither away with modernity, exploring the myriad ways in which sorcery practices have continued, and even increased, after industrialization and development.⁴

In Sorcery in the Black Atlantic, a number of important scholars of religion in contemporary Brazil, Africa, and Cuba present highly original arguments about how the meaning of African sorcery changed over time, starting with the emergence of the notion of the fetish on the coast of West Africa in the sixteenth century. As Sansi, “Sorcery and Fetishism in the Modern Atlantic,” explains, the term *feitiço*, which in Portuguese means to charm or seduce, was intended to connote the uncanny agency of objects to act with their own will, in particular the talismanic *bolsas* or *mandingas*, magical pouches filled with texts and medicines (Sorcery, 21, 22).⁵ Sansi offers the intriguing argument that the power of a fetish derives not from its symbolic meaning but from its use as the indexical sign of an “exceptional event,” an approach that resituates the meaning of objects as conveyors of historical memory (Sorcery, 31).⁶

Several of the authors take issue with the idea that witchcraft

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⁶ See also Andrew Apter and Derby (eds.), *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World* (Newcastle, 2010).
was necessarily a form of slave resistance, noting that the elements of spells often draw from Catholic idioms, not just African ones. Nor were they the unique province of slaves; freedmen and whites deployed them, too (Sansi, Sorcery, 24; João José Reis, “Candomblé and Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Bahia,” Sorcery, 55–74). Reis provides a chronology aimed at carefully situating Candomblé in history, arguing that scholars have applied a religion and resistance framework borrowed from the United States to Brazil without attending to local dynamics and meanings. In Brazil, many slave owners were priests, and freedmen—not slaves—often had positions of authority within the terreiros (ritual spaces). According to Reis, intraslave conflict was also an important determinant of sorcery manipulation (Sorcery, 58, 65).

Latin American and Caribbean sorcery has long been considered a holdover from Africa, even by its practitioners. Yet Sansi cautions that “it is not enough to take local discourses for granted, because they are the result of a long and convoluted history of exchange, appropriation, imposition and subversion” (Sorcery, 37). Laura de Mello e Souza’s chapter, “Sorcery in Brazil: History and Historiography,” seeks to recast the important contribution of European witchcraft traditions to Brazilian magic as forms of experience rather than static survivals (Sorcery, 40). Basile Ndjio sees the witchcraft accusations in South Africa and Cameroon as largely a result of popular efforts to contend with highly disruptive economic, political, and social change. Patricia Birman’s chapter, “Sorcery, Territories, and Marginal Resistances in Rio de Janeiro,” examines conversion to evangelical Protestantism as a means of escaping accusations of moral corruption, factional violence, and drug trafficking in a favela or Brazilian shantytown (Sorcery, 209–252).

Gender emerges as a fascinating thread in Obeah and Other Powers. According to Lara Putnam, “Rites of Power and Rumors of Race: The Circulation of Supernatural Knowledge in the Greater Caribbean, 1890–1940,” Caribbean women resorted to occult powers to prevent their men from creating liaisons with other women when they left their islands for employment elsewhere (Obeah, 253). Katherine Smith’s chapter examines the contemporary cult of the Gede trickster spirits whose rule-breaking antics hold great appeal among young men in contemporary Port-au-Prince. The chapter by Stephan Palmié—“Other Powers:
Tylor’s Principle, Father William’s Temptations and the Power of Banality”—stresses the cosmopolitanism and modernity of Caribbean religion, which he describes as a “transcontinental palimpsest of inter-articulated occult modernities” (Obeah, 317).

Another feature of these books that breaks new ground is the range of research materials brought to bear on the analyses—visual media, criminal records, medical treatises, ethnographical writings, songs, and contemporary interviews. Alasdair Pettinger’s chapter, “‘Eh! eh!, Bomba, hen! hen!’ Making Sense of a Vodou Chant,” traces the appearances of a Saint Domingue vodou chant first in a canonical study of the island’s eighteenth-century society by Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de St. Méry—Déscription de la partie française de Saint-Domingue (1789)—and then in texts about New Orleans Creoles and Native Americans in the United States (Obeah, 80–102). This chapter demonstrates how the same lyrics were used to make opposing points in lurid accounts of Haitians by U.S. Marines during the occupation of 1915 to 1934 and in early French Dadaist works. Kenneth Bilby, “An (Un)natural Mystic in the Air: Images of Obeah in Caribbean Song,” examines the moral ambivalence of Obeah in popular songs among Surinamese maroons abroad as it has become a form of “cultural revindication” (Obeah, 49).

By placing manifestations of these Caribbean beliefs side by side, Obeah and Other Powers reveals some interesting differences. Notwithstanding the relative economic modernity of the Caribbean region, popular understandings of the morality of exchange vary considerably from place to place. On the one hand is the case of Puerto Rico, which due to its status as an imperial colony, or “unincorporated territory,” of the United States, enjoyed early industrialization, achieving distinction as an “American success story of development.” Correspondingly, Raquel Romberg, in “The Moral Economy of Brujería under the Modern Colony: A Pirated Modernity?” argues that popular religion in Puerto Rico became infused with an entrepreneurial spirit; the thrust of much spell-making there aimed at justifying economic and spiritual success, since “material prosperity is a sign of being blessed spiritually” (Obeah, 290, 295, 297).

7 Palmié authored another important work about Cuban sorcery entitled Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuba Modernity and Tradition (Durham, N.C., 2002).
By contrast, in Haiti, which has seen its share of U.S. Protestant missionary activity, popular understandings of “capitalist marketing techniques” have folded into a vodou worldview, which tends to attribute the seemingly boundless cash resources of the Protestants to magik or money-making sorcery. Conversely, as Richman’s chapter reveals, some people embraced conversion to Protestantism as a means of protection from sorcery—more specifically, from certain spirits or lwa. Richman thus views Protestantism in Haiti as inextricably tied to the homegrown creole religion of vodou (Obeah, 277, 278).

Unlike traditional ethnographies of Caribbean religion, which focused on African heritage, these books stress the heterodox aspect of popular belief and practice. In “The Trials of Inspector Thomas: Policing and Ethnography in Jamaica,” Paton, for one, challenges a monolithic approach to the state in her study of the legal repression of Obeah, highlighting the role of local figures in aiding and abetting sorcery persecution in Jamaica (Obeah, 180). Elizabeth Cooper, “The Open Secrets of Solares,” shows that the secret society of nañiguismo originated not within slave communities but in the freedmen tenements of Havana, underscoring that the often-reproduced diabilito costume, which closely resembles an Efik masquerade, cannot be seen as an African survival (Obeah, 223). Putnam maintains that the spate of child abductions purportedly by witches in early republican Cuba was sparked by European antisemitic blood-libel allegations, which helps to account for the shift toward white victims and increased blood imagery in 1908 (Obeah, 260). The portrait of Caribbean occult practices presented in these works emphasizes their cosmopolitan nature and their location within global idioms that are historically contingent.

Notwithstanding the persecution first by colonial authorities and then by postcolonial states, scholars tend to see Caribbean sorcery as morally ambiguous, highly dependent on context and use. John Savage, “Slave Poison/Slave Medicine: The Persistence of Obeah in Early Nineteenth-Century Martinique,” reveals that colonial authorities relied heavily on slave vernacular healing arts, which at times addressed disease more effectively than European medical approaches; they even trusted slaves to do posthumous examinations. Planters depended upon female hospitalières to attend to the myriad ailments of their slaves, despite the fact that slaves’ knowledge of toxins laid the basis for conspiracy theories about
poisoning in Saint Domingue (colonial Haiti) and Martinique (Obeah, 160, 166).

This deep ambivalence surrounding slave healing is the central story of Sweet’s fascinating book on Domingo Álvares. Drawing upon a wealth of source materials—from inquisition records to rumors—this stunningly rich and complex story is an excellent example of the methodology that Putnam advocates for Atlantic history, melding individual life histories, collective biographies, and macro-Atlantic processes. Álvares embodies the dilemma that slave healers faced in the New World. The very skills that the colonial authorities both valued and needed could easily get their practitioners into trouble with the law for crossing the line into superstition and heresy.

Álvares was from the Mahi area of Dahomey, a region that in the early eighteenth century had just become consolidated both militarily and religiously; the gods of conquered peoples were incorporated into the royal pantheon. With novelistic detail, Sweet writes about what Álvares might have experienced as he was swept up in the slave trade, a convenient way to dispatch those who were causing a disturbance at home, possibly as sorcerers. He first arrived on the coast of Brazil in the sugar zone of Pernambuco, later moving with his indebted master to Recife where he became a slave healer, thereby earning extra revenue for his owner.

Sweet deduces from a patchwork of evidence that Álvares’ sorcery began to attract suspicion just as the community of urban slaves was growing menacingly large and an epidemic was threatening the local livestock; it eventually landed him in jail. Released and sold to another master in Rio de Janeiro, Álvares faced further rumors that he was responsible for multiple deaths of slaves and cattle on his old plantation. His case reveals how planters’ anxieties could easily transform healing skills into potential sorcery (Domingo Álvares, 70). Álvares’ reputation eventually recommended him to a family in Rio where he became a personal healer to his infirm mistress amid a large urban slave community. After several years, misgivings about his sorcery again led to his undoing, in particular when his mistress’ health deteriorated. Denounced and arrested for sorcery by the Inquisition, he was banished to a remote interior town in Portugal.

Although the elaborate case file of the Inquisition supplies the backbone of Álvares’ story, Sweet skillfully embeds it within a range of contexts, from the Mina community in Dahomey to the slave trade, a sugar plantation in colonial Brazil, the urban slave community of Rio, and finally, to the prisons of Portugal’s interior. Sweet’s microhistorical tracing of an individual across continents resembles other powerful recent transatlantic accounts, such as Scott’s detailed study of a family’s travels through Senegal, Saint Domingue, New Orleans, Veracruz, and eventually Belgium. It also complements recent work on slave healing practices in the African diaspora and across the Black Atlantic.

Nonetheless, Sweet’s book left some lingering questions. Although Rio de Janeiro’s depiction as a predominantly African city in the eighteenth century is beyond dispute, the nature of Álvares’ ethnicity in Dahomey is not entirely clear. Sweet might have cast his net a little wider in locating Álvares’ West African roots. The region of Dahomey was heavily influenced by the Oyo kingdom (which today comprises the Yoruba peoples), one of the most studied regions in West Africa. Drawing upon some Oyo research might have helped to complete the picture of Gbe-speaking people’s religious practices. Sweet also sidesteps the Mintz/Price approach to culture change by insisting on Álvares’ identity as a Mina, a coastal group comprised of those who fled Dahomey’s invasions (Domingo Álvares, 59). The current debate about whether “Mina People” ever constituted a distinct ethnicity per se might have been worth considering in this context. Sweet’s several references to Herskovits’ work on Dahomey may indicate that Sweet is as liable


to the charge of hypostasis with regard to African ethnicity as Herskovits was.¹³

One of Sweet’s major themes is that Álvares negotiated his religious identity as an African in the New World by retaining the core principles of his faith. Yet Álvares may have incorporated some novel Catholic techniques during his sojourn in Brazil—for example, baptism, since he was baptized himself (although Sweet does not deem it a significant addition to his religious repertoire). In this regard, Sweet’s approach challenges recent works about African Christianity by Thornton and Heywood, which stress that early Catholic conversion in Central Africa, not in the New World, commenced the creolization process.¹⁴

Given the preference for adolescent slaves, Álvares’ arrival in Brazil as an adult was unusual, but the question of whether he was untouched by contact with Africans of other ethnicities, not to mention Europeans, remains—especially since his status as a healer allowed him far more European contact than slaves ordinarily received. Not allowing for any culture contact risks portraying Africans as locked into a static model of culture incapable of change. Álvares did not appear to be averse to innovation. After all, he wore rosary beads around his neck and tried binding his mistress with a cord of St. Francis when *voduns* (African-derived spirits) failed to cure her, showing that ultimately Atlantic medicine was less about entrenched belief than the need to find cures. His use of a stone taken from the head of a jackfish, similar to the use of manatí stones by Amerindians in early conquest Hispaniola, suggests that Amazonian indigenous practices could have become popular among Brazilian slaves.

Although religious affiliation was sometimes more a requisite of status than belief, Álvares, according to Sweet, did not seek membership in the Catholic brotherhoods that were becoming important institutions and networks during the late eighteenth century (*Domingo Álvares*, 86–89). Álvares’ reputation as a healer, which conferred an unusually privileged status upon him within the slave hierarchy, might explain his reluctance to join a group in which he would not necessarily have secured leadership. Sweet’s

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contention that the healing arts primarily helped to build a slave community makes perfect sense, but healing was also one of the sole avenues to prestige and thus status marking available to slaves.

Sweet’s book stretches the contours of Atlantic scholarship, offering new insights about slave healers in colonial Brazil, as well as about the hiring out of slaves to work as day laborers to earn cash for their owners. It reveals the often murky divide between slavery and freedom; the lingering stigma of slavery remained with Álvares even after he had secured his manumission. It goes beyond a superficial analysis of what an Inquisitional accusation entailed to trace what arrest and banishment actually meant to the life course of a slave. Surprisingly, Africans comprised a small minority of the cases brought before the Inquisition in Portugal, unlike in Mexico (Domingo Álvares, 152).15

These three excellent volumes set a new bar for scholarship about sorcery in the Caribbean and Latin America. They provide richly contextualized case studies of African-derived practices related to illness and health, as well as the quotidian experience of slaves outside of the plantation. They also challenge the most entrenched assumptions about sorcery and extend its use to a range of social actors, not just slaves, thus serving to relocate the practice of the occult arts in Latin American sorcery within a broad comparative frame that includes Europe and the Americas as well as Africa.

15 See also Laura A. Lewis, Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico (Durham, N.C., 2003).