Enchanting Panics and Obeah Anxieties: Concealing and Disclosing Eastern Caribbean Witchcraft

JEFFREY W. MANTZ
Department of Anthropology
George Mason University
4400 University Drive, MS 3G5
Fairfax, VA 22030

SUMMARY  Between 1999 and 2001 on the eastern Caribbean island of Dominica, there were several panics revolving around the suspected use of Obeah, a form of Caribbean witchcraft/sorcery. My interest in Caribbean witchcraft was in fact catalyzed by one such event: a witchcraft scare in Dominica’s secondary schools in mid-1999. Some terrified parents had pulled their teenage children out of school, influenced by rumors that certain students intended to “sacrifice virgins” at a mass ritual. The timing of these panics was not incidental. Rather, the accusations coincided with the devastation of the eastern Caribbean economies by a series of foreign interventions: a WTO ruling that destroyed the market for their principal export crop, an Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development “blacklist” that decimated financial industries, and the failing of the tourism industries before and after 9/11. Accusations of witchcraft were a culturally logical response to socioeconomic anxieties. However, until this article, I never documented the school panics. Several of my closest interlocutors had been among the principal persons accused in these scares, and I had been concerned about maintaining their anonymity (even of those who had not been accused). Moreover, my interlocutors pleaded with me not to publish these events, arguing it would confer a sense of backwardness and exoticism that would damage the nation’s image at a time when it was struggling to adapt to the global economy. In this article, I examine the reasons for previously concealing this information and the cultural logic behind disclosing it now. [Keywords: Obeah, witchcraft accusations, sorcery, political economy, Caribbean]

Tjotjé thought my interest in Caribbean witchcraft was crazy. “Awa. [No way.] You such a smart fella. Why you study these things? Ou kay touvé anyen [You will find nothing],” he would sometimes scold, shifting diglossically between the West Indian–inflected Commonwealth English and French Creole spoken on the small Caribbean island of Dominica. Perhaps my closest interlocutor in the field, Tjotjé never quite took to my fascination with Afro-Caribbean religious mysticism and the supernatural. We spent many hours discussing why anthropologists are interested in such things, how scares and panics around the occult could symbolize larger cultural anxieties with socioeconomic changes or indicate challenges to existing orders. We talked about how the slave and maroon rebellions made use of Obeah (Genovese 1979; James 1963; Laguerre 1989; Lazarus-Black 1994; Moorish 1982; Patterson 1967)
and how Carl Jung (1959; Tjotjé had read some psychology) reasoned that UFO sightings were a socially rational response to Cold War anxieties and modernization. Most of the time, he would nod politely. Always he would proffer the same stubborn disavowal of the existence of any supernatural beings, sorcery, or the occult. He plainly did not share my interest in explaining how reports of such supernatural phenomena could actually be explained as culturally contextualized expressions of social anxieties.

So one could imagine my surprise when after 14 months in the field, as we sat atop a hill one night under the moonlit sky looking down on all the towns in the valley below, he started to tell me this story. He pointed to the easternmost village: “Wotten Waven there, you see?” I nodded. “And Morne Prosper there?” he motioned to a village atop the other opposing ridge of the valley: “Boy it’s a funny story. I was maybe 20 years old, and it was a full moon like tonight. And. . . .” He paused to giggle: “One soukouyan volè [flew] from Morne Prosper and another out of Wotten Waven, and when them meet, boy, they vex. So they fighting, all kind of sparks flying about.” He concluded, bellowing so heartily he was barely able to finish through his choked laughs, “That was a sight to see.”

Soukouyans are vampire witches that fly in balls of fire at night, and his memory of their nocturnal rumble evidently summoned a hilarious and terrible image. I was too stunned to spit out more than a transparently feigned chuckle. Battling bloodsuckers certainly did not seem like something this adamant skeptic of the occult should admit to seeing. So I asked: “But Tjotjé, I thought you said you don’t believe in that sort of thing, you know, in Obeah and witchcraft.”

“I don’t,” he quipped. I could tell he was mildly pleased with my confusion. He offered finally, “These are just people. If you don’t believe in them, they can’t hurt you.” He went on to explain that while practitioners of the occult have an impressive aptitude for “parlor tricks” because they have made deals with the devil, in the end they are just ordinary individuals looking to “make twaka [trouble].” They are not otherworldly and have no real power unless one gives it to them by actively participating in the optical and auditory charades they embellish.

I argue that Tjotjé’s explanation offers insight into an epistemic understanding of the unknown in Dominica that is based on a denial of sensory perception, as opposed to a system like that valorized in the more scientific-oriented North Atlantic societies, where empirical observation forms the basis of truth. In Dominica, there is little cultural interest in either refuting or proving the existence of the occult per se, in the sense that it is an exigent practice in which some people engage. The “Is it real?” factor, that persistent question Western researchers of the occult commonly encounter when explaining their research work, has far less resonance and meaning in this context. Rather, it is the social power of the occult with which Dominicans are concerned. And the occult achieves its power as individuals acknowledge the information obtained from their sensory perceptions as evidence of an effectual supernatural landscape (to borrow Tjotjé’s phrasing, in which practitioners are seen as more than mere people). To this extent, witchcraft panics could be viewed as instances where a substantial segment of the population has failed to adhere to social rules about the importance of denying (in principal and in practice) the existence of the occult. In effect, they have been enchanted by the power of something (this could
be an individual or, as we shall see, a socioeconomic relationship) over their lives and accordingly have become participants in structuring that relationship. In other words, if one accepts the proposition that what you do not acknowledge cannot hurt you, there is the inverse proposition that recognition engenders submission.

It is also important to note that the acknowledgment of witchcraft largely achieves its power in the present. So there is no contradiction in Tjotjé telling me that he had seen a couple witches fighting 20 years earlier, for this account is ostensibly a reporting of the oral historical record about Dominican Obeah of yesteryear. In history, witches and sorcerers lose their power to the stories that people tell about them. But in the present, they are potent threats to social stability and progress. To this end, I examine how a witchcraft panic between 1999 and 2001, involving among other things the belief that the island’s schools were in danger of being taken over by satanic cults, can be explained as an outlet for concerns about the political economic condition of the island at the time. The acknowledgment is peculiar because it conflicts with a cultural emphasis on the importance of occult denial, and thus an explanatory site suggests quite a bit about the cultural anxieties over the devastation of the Dominican economy during this same period.

There are also ethical questions relating to this ethnographic presentation of Obeah that my article addresses. My interlocutors were particularly concerned with being portrayed as “people who believe in witchcraft,” especially to the extent that they might be perceived by “outsiders” (in this case, economic development gatekeepers such as the WTO, the World Bank, foreign investors, and nongovernmental organizations) as “premodern” or unworthy of development aid and assistance. I see these concerns as flip sides of the same political economic coin, articulated here as an apprehension toward anything that might further entrench Dominica in a fiscal slump believed to be facilitated by, as several of my interlocutors believed, the “stupidity” of such beliefs and superstitions. Stupidity, as it were, is acceptable to Dominicans only if it can be located as part of a cultural history that later actions and forward thinking have transcended (literally, “it is fine to discuss Obeah so long as it is being discussed as ‘part of our history’”). Thus, stupidity is more or less an analogue for explaining the power of Obeah over Dominican lives, one that diminishes once it is located in the past and, if possible, in the time “before time” (which loosely means before emancipation), as Dominicans sometimes say. The ethics of delay in writing about these events more or less relate to a determination that the issues prompting the occult panics in 1999–2001 (specifically, the economic crises of that period) have ceased to have the power and austerity that they once did. As such, the permissibility of occult information has likewise transformed, as reporting the social context in question has become temporally repositioned, from existing empirical or sensory accounts (or validation of such accounts) of events in the present to being part of a richly detailed oral historical record about Obeah.

**Economic Turmoil as the Catalyst for Panic**

Between 1999 and 2001, during the substantive periods of my fieldwork, the economy of Dominica was repeatedly devastated by a series of international events. Most significantly, the World Trade Organization reinforced a ruling
outlawing certain protective licenses for the exclusive sales rights of bananas, the island’s principal export, to the European Union. Despite the proximity of the Caribbean to the United States, Caribbean bananas have not historically been sold here. Given the oligopolistic market dominance of the three main U.S. multinationals (Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte), the European market has been more or less a small niche for Caribbean producers commanding less than 5 percent of the world market. That 5 percent has been eroded by subsequent decisions further limiting “protective licenses.” Early on in the conflict, a former prime minister made the controversial statement that “fig [Creole for bananas] is dead.” There is no question about it these days. As another politician coldly stated to me recently, “Fig is not only dead but dead and buried.” What for decades had been a reliable export earner and economic fuel for the growth of a rural middle class has been completely decimated in less than a decade.

Other sectors of the economy were similarly disturbed during the period of my fieldwork in Dominica. In 1999, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a club of the world’s industrialized nations, issued a blacklist of nations that it deemed uncooperative in the fight against money laundering. Indeed, throughout the 1990s offshore banks had been a convenient place to wash drug money, and for the most part Dominica had been more than willing to look the other way at some of the activities going on in this thriving financial sector, because of the decent wage and development opportunities they offered. But in reality, the blacklist was a foil for normalizing global banking and tax regulations: the conditions for removal from the blacklist required the streamlining of banking laws and the elimination of corporate tax shelters for offshore banks. By the time Dominica was able to get itself off the blacklist in 2004 its own banking sector was destroyed. Taxation of a thriving offshore banking sector had been a major generator of hard currency in the late 1990s. The Dominican government even paid for the construction of a building across from the central government offices to house the offices of these banks. Since the opening of that building in 2002, most of those offices remain vacant, and many in public service tacitly acknowledge a lack of ideas over what to attract to this facility.

Tourism has of course sustained a serious economic impact in recent years as well. No one who works in the Caribbean need be reminded of the impact of the travel scare following September 11, 2001, on the tourist-dependent economies of the region. Dominica has never been a huge tourist destination, owing largely to its mountainous terrain, which makes for an abundance of rain forests and rivers rather than beaches and bungalows. Still, stagnation in tourism hit Dominica at the worst possible time, when its other sources of hard currency had disappeared.

Dominica, already the second-poorest country in the Caribbean after Haiti, has ostensibly been hit with economic depression since 1999. And there have been few successful attempts at rebounding the island’s economy with new products or markets. The economy is so bad that it is hard to imagine a politician who would want to have the responsibility for repairing the fiscal situation there. Two prime ministers (both in their early fifties) died in office, their causes of death directly linked to stress. In fact, the ruling party picked an energetic 32-year-old first-term parliamentarian from a remote northern parish to
head the government in 2003. Many Dominicans darkly joked that anyone older would have been doomed by the stress of that office.

Despite all this economic turmoil, one of the things that struck me as an ethnographer during my fieldwork there was the relative lack of news coverage on issues such as the WTO ruling. I counted only a handful of articles devoted to the issue during the crucial period when an appeal was under consideration. Certainly everyone recognized and complained about the financial state of the island, but there was little public discussion directed toward trying to emphasize the graveness of such events. At about the same time, there were a series of inexplicable panics over a feared resurgence of the occult in various parts of Dominica and a fairly aggressive public campaign to root out all such activities. This ranged from the summary deportation of Haitian migrant workers under suspicion for “practicing voodoo” to allegations that cults practicing Satanism and Obeah had taken over the island’s secondary schools and colleges. By early 2001, concern among some had become frenetic. A New Year’s Eve attack by two men on the Catholic Cathedral in Castries, St. Lucia (Dominica’s “sister” island, regarded as such because of their shared culture and language), left a priest and nun dead and another dozen injured. The two men stormed into the church with machetes and kerosene, hacking some and dousing others with kerosene and lighting them on fire. The two men were widely believed to be practitioners of Obeah.

The rampant accusations of Haitians and outsiders, as well as politicians and other public figures, were not merely anecdotal. They correlate to the worst years of the economic crisis. My examination of Dominica’s major news coverage of stories related to the occult revealed that there was far more during the two-year period in which the banana decision was under appeal (June 1999–June 2001) than there was in the five-year period preceding and three years since combined. Panic over the occult, certainly on the surface, appears to be a social outlet for economic anxiety. That most accusations were invariably framed as a kind of invasion of malevolent outside forces (Haitian “voodoo,” satanic cults from North America, teens mimicking films like The Craft or the television shows Charmed and Buffy, the Vampire Slayer) suggests a growing unease with the social and economic effects of globalization.

The Social Meaning of Panic

Koupé, one of my close sources of information, was accused of forming a cult in her school that reputedly planned to sacrifice several virgins in a satanic ritual. She was asked bluntly by a male student at her college as to her involvement, and she related this flip response:

Some girl [at school, speaking with the young male student] was like, “But look, she right there. Why don’t you ask her?”

I’m sitting in school on a ledge. I was like, “What’s that?” I was thinking the girl was telling the boy to ask me if I have a boyfriend, you know, he like to see me or whatever.

He say, “OK. You a witch?”

I say, “Excuse me.”
He’s like, “Are you a witch?”
I say, “Why do you ask?”
He’s like, “’Cause that’s what they say.”
I said, “They say a lot of things, you know.”
He’s like, “Well, I heard a rumor.”
I say, “Well, wait a minute, that’s all it is. A rumor. That’s why they call it that.”
He says, “But, no but, OK, you in the cult.”
I say, “No. I am the cult.”

Laughing, she added, “He never talk to me again. It’s just stupid. Dominicans just like to believe stuff like that.”

Sarcasm has its limitations in Dominican culture, which tends be very literal and at times visceral in personal emotional expression. Koupé was playing the role of the trickster under circumstances of social panic, and it should not surprise us that she was taken at her word.

In fact, a surprisingly large number of parents, convinced of the chastity of their children and thus their children’s concomitant vulnerability to virgin sacrifice by this cult, pulled their children—all in their late teens and early twenties—out of school. In checking various accounts about the cult from other Dominicans, Koupé’s name (or at least a reference to her surname and that of one of my other key interlocutors, who was a close friend of hers) repeatedly emerged, for instance, when I asked them to identify who the “cult leaders” were. I am fairly certain that my interlocutors were not sacrificing virgins, holding satanic orgies, or were otherwise accomplished practitioners of the occult. In fact, their “occult” knowledge and practice were confined to tarot reading and daily e-mail updates from astrology.com. I was, in fact, incessantly asked to smuggle tarot cards (as they are illegal in Dominica) back from “DeLaurence,” an occult book distributor popular in the first half of the 20th century, with offices on Wabash Street in Chicago (see Elkins 1986). When my interlocutors snorted at my report that L. W. DeLaurence had been closed for decades, I went instead to a well-known occult bookstore in Wicker Park and freely admit to supplying these “witches” with all the wares of their trade: two packs of tarot cards, a small talisman used benignly in Catholic mysticism, and a basic book on astrological sun signs. Once I gave them a copy of the Marilyn Manson CD Antichrist Superstar, which they were curious about because they had heard it was at the center of some controversy or another then related to the Columbine shootings, but they did not like his raucous heavy metal style and returned it.

The fact that such panics around the cult were based in rumor provides a context for the task of making sense of public behavior. No one ever publicly admitted to actually seeing any accused individual—almost exclusively young women—engage in witchcraft, sorcery, or satanic rituals. But yet they “knew that it was happening.” But as I noted at the beginning of this article with respect to Tjotjé’s story, the veracity of the claim is not what is important here. At the risk of appearing somewhat functionalist, I would suggest that such rumors provided Dominicans the ability to participate in a mass delusion about the activities of young girls as a sort of outlet for other socioeconomically constructed anxieties. Koupé’s exasperation is telling, as is her condemnation
of this kind of thinking as “stupid.” It was not that Koupé regarded the existence of the occult as untenable—indeed, she talked at length candidly with me about having witnessed several supernatural events; rather, she regarded (as did Tjotjé, as we may recall with respect to soukouyans) this kind of public acknowledgment of the occult as a concession to its power. Indeed, Obeah is a taboo subject in Dominica. Very few individuals will discuss it and even then only very privately and as an event that took place “in the past,” as part of Dominica’s history. Interestingly, the few published studies of Obeah (Bell 1946, 1947, 1970; Bilby 1993; Bilby and Handler 2004; Handler 2000; Handler and Bilby 2001; Moorish 1982; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 1997, 2003; Patterson 1967; Richardson 1997; Simpson 1978; Williams 1970) tend to focus on its diasporic elements or disputes over its origins. I submit that this fact is chiefly owing to the methodological difficulties in obtaining information about Obeah in the present.

Public discussion of the occult (accusations of cult formation and witchcraft in the newspapers) is thus exceptional. Generally, the concealment of witchcraft from public analysis and discourse is consistent with cultural beliefs about the practice, which suggest that belief in the occult and the expression of belief through public utterance of information about the occult give occult forces their power. To this extent, the suppression of discussion about the occult is consistent with local philosophical beliefs about the role of the occult in Dominican life; protecting yourself from it requires a faith that the use of otherworldly powers cannot hurt you if you do not empower them. Local folklore is replete with examples of how protection from the occult demands a denial of sensory perceptions. The infamous ladjablès, who appears as a luminous apparition late at night (often after a few too many rums), seduces men, who in turn discover the next morning the she-devil’s ruse, their genitals severely damaged by an evening’s enthusiastic coitus with an anthill. Such are the punitive consequences for visually acknowledging this temptress and, further, succumbing to her touch. Crying babies outside one’s door at night are sometimes the masquerade of homicidal demons. Dominicans notably do not answer their name when called until they can recognize who is calling them. A famous Obeah recipe for invisibility requires the refusal to answer the devil’s knocks at the door. Soukouyans rattling playfully on one’s roof should not be investigated, lest their acknowledgment becomes an invitation to enter the house and suck the blood of the occupant’s children. Everywhere in Dominican superstition and folklore we find that the power of the occult ends with the denial of its “existence.” If you do not believe that such things have the power to hurt you and if you agentively disavow their existence, then you do not place yourself in a condition where you can be enchanted or bewitched and thus stupidly fall under their control.

Temporal Transformation and the Ethics of Reporting History

I went to Dominica to study the cultural changes taking place in the context of the WTO decision on bananas. The economic crises—not just with respect to the effects of the WTO decision but from several other international economic interventions—turned out to be more austere than I anticipated and manifested a series of unexpected social responses, including the rash of occult panics
discussed here. The reasons for panic and anxiety appeared quite clear. For Dominicans, this was a time of stagnation or even going backward, reflected by the loss of economies, religious and moral anxieties, despair over the somewhat epidemic loss of forward-thinking political leaders, and mounting social problems—crime, drug use, and domestic violence—emerging from profound feelings of hopelessness in the face of a new world economic and political order. There was a general sense of idleness, prevalent in common discourse about young men “sitting in the road,” a metaphor for the inactivity of the estimated 80 percent of youth who were unemployed at this time. Dominicans repeatedly underscored the need to figure out a way to “go forward”; some evoked the late Grenadian Revolution leader Maurice Bishop’s famous call, culled from his political speeches, “forward ever, backward never.”

Presented with a number of interesting stories and an evident public anxiety over the increasing role of the supernatural in their lives, I found myself confronted with a number of ethical questions. Some of them are obvious to anyone who has studied the role of the supernatural in social life, such as confidentiality and the effect that discussing witchcraft has on supernatural retribution. In the short run, I have shrouded my interlocutors’ names here in anonymity: Tjotjé is the Creole verb for “exchange,” and koupé, the verb for “cutting.” Both names refer to inside jokes from which these interlocutors, when they read this article (as they have demanded), will draw on particular stories to mock the power of witchcraft over their lives. In the cultural context of Dominica, joking about or mocking witchcraft is regarded widely as effective for subduing it (hence Tjotjé’s uncontrollable laughter about the soukouyan). It is the next best thing to silence, and in the historical medium, it is even better than silence so long as the story you tell is entertaining and delivers an important moral lesson (much like storytelling and oral historical narratives in Dominica generally).

But even if their accounts have been concealed well enough to protect their anonymity, the tougher question still involves the dialogical process with which I was engaged with my interlocutors in analyzing the social problems emerging from the economic crisis. Several of my interlocutors were very concerned about what I intended to do with my research on the occult and witchcraft accusations in Dominica. In particular, they were concerned that writing about Dominica’s relationship to the occult, the panics around purported cults, and the accusations against public officials who were thought to be involved in witchcraft and Obeah would present Dominicans to outsiders as superstitious people and, by extension, unworthy of economic development assistance (to the extent that development aid is seen as a form of acceptance into the modern or globalized world).

My interlocutors are actually very much aware that it is unlikely that the bankers and economists at the World Bank, the IMF, or USAID are waiting anxiously for anthropological articles about Obeah in Dominica to be published or that they will use these to make funding or aid determinations. What Dominicans were concerned with more generally when asking me not to “go back to America and tell them all we believe in Obeah and voodoo” was whether power was being given to the demons that were undermining Dominican social and economic development. If the catalysts for these panics are tempered by Dominican hard work, innovation, and forward thinking—to
continue the analogy, if those demons have been slain—then writing about Obeah in this context becomes temporally repositioned. In essence, it becomes a historical account. It is not the actual passing of time that matters but, rather, a passing of the anxieties that produced a temporal ebb in the flow of forward-moving social thought and action. By contrast, writing about Obeah panics in the present would have constituted a tacit acknowledgment of its power at a time when it actually did have power. It would have been “stupid,” as Koupé put it, to give power to something so reactionary.

So when and why did it become appropriate to write about Obeah? The exception to the taboo on discussing Obeah is that it is acceptable to recognize it as part of the rich Creole cultural tradition of which Dominicans are part. Whenever I asked interlocutors to clarify something that involved Obeah, they would routinely qualify that “it’s part of our history,” somewhat automatically in fact, much like the call-and-response method of the Dominican kont (folk story). The temporal location of Obeah in the past is important, and in fact much of Dominicans’ reluctance to discuss Obeah with outsiders is related primarily to their belief that foreigners do not adequately understand the importance of its pastness. It took me dozens of painstaking conversations and months of research and cross-referencing of abstruse social data to persuade interlocutors that I was capable of ascertaining Obeah as historical, lest I give it power too potent in a contemporary sense.

Part of this discussion states the obvious polarities between “modernity” (for lack of a better word) and the supernatural. In a very direct sense, belief in Obeah does have a very direct antagonism to forward motion, progress, technological innovation, and development. In poorer communities, persons with observable mental illnesses are sometimes believed to be possessed by jombis (spirits of dead people, sometimes called duppies elsewhere in the Caribbean; see Ulysse 2002). Water and forest spirits dominate in more remote areas, where their lively spectral lives are explained frequently by the fact that these villages are “behind God’s back” (Gmelch and Gmelch 1997). When people do seek out a gadè (oracle or seer), there is a heavy emphasis placed on the importance of traveling to a far and remote destination, especially one that lacks modern amenities or one that is “caught in the past.” But as we have seen, it is not so simple as casting Obeah as something to be believed in or not. “Belief” entails a complex relationship among Dominicans, their temporal position, and a variety of verbal and bodily strategies for abating the power of the supernatural over one’s life.

Again, to say one “believes in” Obeah is much different from witnessing something unusual. One can witness a person act possessed or an unexplainable phenomenon occur. Balls of fire shooting about through the midnight sky, a shower of rocks on one’s roof, the sound of chains being dragged up the street—all of these commonly witnessed occurrences reference something meaningful in Obeah. As memories of events past, these sensory accounts represent lessons, forewarnings, or inducements to action of one kind or another. But “believing” in Obeah remains quite different from acknowledging its historical importance.

The panic has now passed; temporally, the panic endured most meaningfully during the period of OECD blacklists, WTO decisions, and heightened skittishness among tourists fearing terrorist attacks. Dominica was finally
removed from the OECD blacklist in 2005. In January 2006, the WTO decision took full effect in the Caribbean, after a decade-long transition, and did little to further diminish an already decimated banana industry. Dominicans have gradually developed effective methods for economic diversification and sourcing new strategies for the development of its agricultural sector. Tourism continues to be a sticking point for Dominica, but there has been great optimism after the 2005 filming of *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and *3* in Dominica. Dominica’s economy, though still not experiencing real GDP growth, has nonetheless moved from crisis to hope, and Dominicans are quick to credit themselves for their patience, hard work, and determination. Wayward discussions of Obeah can resume as historical accounts; to put it another way, it will not jinx Dominica to discuss Obeah, even with accounts only a few years old, because they represent a period in the past that contemporary activities have transcended.

To summarize, there is a difference between those who “believe in witchcraft” as opposed to those who “believed” in it, even if these are the same people. *Belief* does not necessarily index the same notions of timeliness and adamancy that connote the use of the word throughout much of the West. By contrast, belief is more flexible; individuals and their beliefs are presented, to borrow a literary analogy, as round rather than flat subjects. The word *stupid* (not a flat description of the subject but, rather, an assessment of a particular state of mind) was used repeatedly to characterize acknowledgments of the occult. In a sense, what my interlocutors were asking me to do was to figure out a way to not be “stupid” myself in the presentation of these stories. For them, stupidity is what is continuing to reify the fiscal crisis within which Dominica finds itself. I also want to suggest that there is something more deeply philosophical about the way that Dominicans approach the occult, as an expression of the domain of the unknown. What is at stake in the downplaying of social panic around these occult scares is the protection of a cultural rationality in which sensory denial undermines the power of these forces, be they economic or something else. Elsewhere, I have discussed how Dominican culture prides itself on its economic autonomy, political independence, and a history of resistance (Mantz 2007). For a society that values its tenacity so highly, panic is seen as part concession to and part participation in the dismantling of that economic autonomy. Thus, “stupidity” is fine so long as it is located in the past, preferably in the distant past, as something that later actions transcended. This allows for a sense of moving forward, of progression, to something new and promising. To the extent that the Obeah belief can be subsumed into a narrative moral account where the power of Obeah is defeated by the hard work and determination of forward-thinking Dominicans, the occult loses all power. In the narrative account of the witchcraft panics of 1999–2001 that enchanted so many Dominicans, disclosure of this transcendence becomes an important tactic for putting the beast to rest.

**Notes**

1. I am mindful of the difference between witchcraft and sorcery (Stewart and Strathern 2004). In strict taxonomical terms, Obeah is properly classified as a form of sorcery and not witchcraft; nor should it be regarded, except perhaps in Jamaica, as a religion (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 1997, 2003). In Dominica, there is a subtle distinction between Obeah, which is understood to be uniquely Caribbean, and witchcraft,
which has a more global understanding and recognition (though in practice, they draw
on the same occult resources; Mantz n.d.). For purposes of simplification, I use the terms
witchcraft, sorcery, and Obeah interchangeably throughout.

2. There is, however, a rich discussion of the use of accusations of Obeah as colonial,
political, and juridical tools (Bilby and Handler 2004; Handler 2000; Handler and Bilby
2001; Lazarus-Black 1994; Richardson 1997), as well as some interesting reflections on
the challenges of reflexivity and superstition in conducting Caribbean fieldwork (Owen

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