

“What Time Has Proved”: History, Rebellion, and Revolution in *Hamel the Obeah Man*

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A number of early Caribbean novels written in English have been reprinted over the past several years, from Lise Winer’s critical edition of E. L. Joseph’s *Warner Arundel, or the Adventures of a Creole* (1838) to Karina Williamson’s edition of the anonymously published *Marly; or, a Planter’s Life in Jamaica* (1828) and John Gilmore’s *Creoleana* (1842) by J. W. Orderson.¹ Much of this publishing activity arises from interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Caribbean colonialism as scholars examine discourses of slavery and abolition through the critical lenses provided by current postcolonial studies and critical theories of race.² Certainly a reconsideration of early Caribbean fiction has contributed to this project, particularly the recognition that these texts are Creole rather than metropolitan productions. They are, as Kenneth Ramchand describes the West Indian novel, “written by West Indians about the West Indian reality” (qtd. in Winer xi).

To a large degree, construction of West Indian “reality”—that is, white West Indian reality—depicted in novels like *Hamel the Obeah Man* depends on a dramatic confrontation between Old and New World constructions of the Caribbean past, its present, and the future that white Creole authors meant to shape. Indeed, the intensity of these confrontations reminds us to be wary of our own historiographic practices. As David Scott argues in *Conscripts of Modernity*, scholars need to reexamine conceptions and representations of history that have led to “the facile normalization of the present” (2). We need, in other words, to complicate our readings of the past—as embodied in textual artifacts produced at particular socio-political moments—by going beyond simple acts of resurrection and commemoration, acts that discount the ongoing dialectic between historical moments. Such oversimplifying gestures encourage us to relegate the texts to a completed past even as we grant

them limited currency by bringing them back into circulation. Thus, while we happily read novels like the anonymously written *Hamel*, an anti-abolitionist, pro-planter work, as proof of an unenlightened colonial past and search for evidence of imperial discursive strategies within them, we ignore the ways such readings promote essentializing distinctions between “us” and the largely monolithic historical “them” of our enquiry.

One way to overcome such a temptation is to look at these early Anglo-Caribbean works not as static recordings of a completed historical moment. Rather, they should be seen as part of a colonial discourse that on one level is shaped by hermeneutical concerns over the reader’s role in the production of textual meaning and on another level by wider epistemological concerns over schooling readers to produce the texts’ “true” meaning, one that conforms to a colonial way of knowing. Central to both concerns are conceptions of history, temporality, and futurity and the role they play in dictating and assessing political events in the Caribbean. Among the most striking of these events were the numerous slave insurrections that took place in the years leading up to Emancipation. The most obvious response by proslavery writers to slave rebellions was to nurture fears of black violence. In this essay, however, I want to focus on another, more subtle response that can be found in works like *Hamel*, one that effectively displaces images of violent revolutionaries in order to privilege “revolutions in the manners and condition of mankind” (Williams *Tour* 75). Revolutions in manners, unlike the revolts that were part of British West Indian history from the beginning of Caribbean colonization, are represented as the “result of ages,” the product of advancing “civilization.” By arguing that enslaved populations were not ready for freedom, white Creole writers at once denied the possibility that rebellions were provoked by political motives, and positioned themselves as the promoters of peace, stability, and rational order.

To begin to tease out the implications of this response to revolutionary activity in early Creole fiction, it’s useful to look at a novel like *Hamel* in the way that Tilottama Rajan reads “the secrets of the political novel” of the 1790s. Like the Jacobin fiction that Rajan analyzes,

the first Caribbean novels in English present “history” as a shifting, ongoing retelling and re-visioning and simultaneously posit the reader as an active participant in constituting the text’s meaning. Although *Hamel* does not, like William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, introduce “the reader as a structural element of the text,” it does engage in a complex “commerce between present and future, textuality and reality” (Rajan 222), an engagement that invites an application of Godwin’s theory of hermeneutics as outlined in his essay “A Choice in Reading.” According to this theory, explains Rajan, “meaning is shifted by its articulation in language, and that is why the reader cannot be governed by the announced moral of the text, but must read actively, doing more than simply reproducing the text. For by making writing the production rather than the reflection of an anterior meaning, Godwin also makes reading the production, through ‘experiment’ or experience, of a text whose meaning is seen as still in process” (224). This “historicizing of intention,” moreover, assumes that there is a “prophetic reader” who will uncover the text’s “real” meaning, and that this reader will be “someone whose principles coincide with” the author, in this case, “Godwin himself” (Rajan 224).

Godwin’s principles and politics, of course, contrast sharply with those of Cynric Williams, the purported author of *Hamel the Obeah Man* (1827).³ Unlike the English Jacobins whose revolutionary rhetoric helped fuel the abolitionist cause, Williams clearly allies himself with the Caribbean plantocracy in the novel. And although he promotes—as did so many anti-abolitionists during the last decades of British slavery—the “just” and “humane” treatment of slaves and other ameliorative measures, Williams is clearly invested in upholding the status quo. So much so, in fact, that he published not one but two texts that articulate the desire to work through the fraught, unfolding history of the Caribbean in order to produce “prophetic” readers: *Hamel* in 1827 and *A Tour through the Island of Jamaica*, published the previous in 1826.

Both *Hamel* and the *Tour*, in fact, simultaneously construct and engage a discerning reader capable of divining the texts’ and, as an integral part of that text, history’s “true” meaning, thereby complicating Godwin’s hermeneutics by adding a third element to the textual “commerce between present and future.” In other words, for the “prophetic reader” to

uncover the “truth” of these texts and the Caribbean reality they claim to present, the reader must actively confront a history of colony and empire whose meaning is also “still in process.” The interrelationship between temporal categories reveals not only the contradictions of the moment of the text’s production in colonial history, 1827, but of those periods that immediately precede and follow it. Indeed, the decades following the 1807 Act of Abolition of the Slave Trade and leading to the passage of Emancipation legislation in 1832 saw a flurry of proslavery publications that, by providing an alternative reading and construction of Creole history to that represented by abolitionists, sought to redefine the terms of the Emancipation debate.

This is Williams’s intention in the *Tour*, as he explicitly declares in his preface. For despite all the publications surrounding the Emancipation question, Williams complains,

few persons, even of those who have taken the greatest share in the disquisitions which it has caused, seem to be at all informed of the general state of society in the West India Islands.

By the general state of society, it is meant to include the habits and manners of all ranks, from the rich slave owner to his slave; and although the author did not set out with this intention, the following pages will enable the reader to form a pretty correct idea of these habits and manners. The public, or a portion of it, will have an opportunity of learning that negro slaves are not worked and flogged alternately, at the option and caprice of their masters, as many good christians imagine, who have signed petitions for emancipating them; that they have their pastimes as well as toils, their pleasures as well as pains; and that they smile as often, and laugh as heartily, as the labouring people of this or any equally happy country. (iii–iv)

Even ignoring Williams’s stated intention, the *Tour*’s preface exhibits all the markers of the colonial hermeneutic project: well-intentioned but ignorant readers have blindly accepted the white West Indian “type” of tyrannical planter embodied by abolitionist writers, but with the help of the *Tour*’s disinterested report of Caribbean reality—taken, Williams

“What Time Has Proved”

assures us, “from the life”—they can now learn the truth not only about slave-owners but also about their slaves. With Williams’s assertion of experiential authority comes an invitation to the reader to engage in meaning-making, to correct previous misreadings (and writings) of Creole culture. Readers, in other words, will learn something new about actually existing phenomena in the Caribbean colonies, about “things as they are,” to borrow Godwin’s phrase, and through their active engagement with history, stem a tide of abolitionist fiction.

But encouraging readers to be suspicious of particular constructions of colonial history (i.e., those put forth by abolitionists) also produced an accompanying anxiety for Creole writers: a skeptical reading practice might open the “correct” representation of history to further misinterpretation. Thus, even as the text appears to grant the reader the ability to make meaning, there is a counter tendency to discipline the reader into the “correct” moral interpretation. This tension between the text’s hermeneutical and epistemological projects evident in the *Tour* and other Creole writings contributes to the mixed reception of the *Tour*. As Tim Watson points out, the reader for the *Monthly Review* (rightly) expressed disbelief over Williams’s claims that he was a disinterested visitor to Jamaica: “It is necessary to read but a few pages of this book in order to perceive that it has been much less his object to describe his tour in Jamaica, than to put forth, under that title, a defence of the slave system” (qtd. in Watson ms 6). The reviewer for *London Magazine*, in contrast, suggested that the project of correcting misrepresentations of colonial life was worthwhile, particularly as the *Tour*’s subject is a “country about which so much falsehood has already been published.” Unfortunately for Williams and his cause, the sympathy that the reviewer expresses is dampened by Williams’s tendency to “mix up fiction with fact.... The same admixture of the story-book with his own experience, likewise exceedingly diminishes the force of much that would otherwise carry conviction along with it” (qtd. in Watson ms 5–6).

While these two reviews illustrate the partisan nature of the Emancipation debate, the accusation of literary masquerading on one hand and of confusing fact with fiction on the other points to another connection between Williams’s writings and those of English Jacobin

novelists: the authorial desire to “cast political theory in narrative form” (Rajan 222). Like Godwin and other London radicals and Williams’s Creole contemporaries J. W. Orderson and E. L. Joseph, Williams moved between polemical nonfiction and the novel, publishing *Hamel* soon after the *Tour*.⁴ Unlike these other writers, however, Williams provides no editorial apparatus for *Hamel*, no prefatory remarks to spell out his intention as he does in the *Tour*, no dedication or advertisement to instruct the reader how to go about making meaning of his text.

Despite the absence of such instruction, it’s safe to assume that Williams shares the opinion of the anonymous author of *Marly*, a Creole novel published the year after *Hamel*.⁵ In the preface to the second edition of 1828, the author explains his decision to work in novel format. In doing so, he claims,

he only imitates the principal writers of the present day, who perhaps not unwisely imagine, that to awaken the interest and engage the attention of the mass of readers, there is nothing so effectual as the machinery of a novel. He thinks too, that essays and letters on slavery are already, probably, too numerous, and although he feels himself not altogether alive to the mysteries of *fiction* he was determined to avail himself like the generality of his publishing brotherhood, of the fashionable medium of a tale, to convey what *facts* he was enabled to pick up concerning West India matters, during a residence in Jamaica. (4; original emphases)⁶

Not only does “fiction” convey “facts,” but as the “principal writers” of the day recognized, by availing of the popular and wide-ranging narrative form that was the novel, authors could also disclose what they saw as “the fictions used in the economy of the political world, both the theoretical and the actual worlds” (Rajan 222).

But if Williams is aware of the political power of fiction, his turn to the novel is complicated by his position at the margins of the British Empire. Writing back to the center—or, in this case, writing as a white Creole from a margin that is at the same time the center of “other” oppressed subjects—Williams exhibits anxieties of literary influence that

“What Time Has Proved”

are not relevant to metropolitan writers, whether those writers assume a pro- or anti-slavery stance. At its most basic level, the relationship between colonial and metropolitan authors, between the “novel” subject matter occasioned by New World settings and the expectations attendant on the use of Old World literary conventions, is characterized by the tendency of Creole writers to validate their works by adhering to established forms and, at the same time, by following an impulse to break from them. The impulse to resist the “tyranny” of the “old stupid world,” as one of *Hamel’s* characters calls England, was fueled by the recognition that accurately representing Creole “reality” called, if not for an outright rejection of traditional forms, then for a self-conscious adaptation of them. Moreover, unlike their metropolitan counterparts, colonial texts of the Emancipation period routinely demonstrate the ways that colonial subjects, black and white, configured “new” identities while simultaneously adhering to “old” models of behaviour.⁷

In Williams’s novel this configuration is accomplished in part through the appropriation and adaptation of a variety of eighteenth-century novel forms, among them English Jacobin political fiction, gothic fiction, and historical romance.⁸ Borrowing from established literary (sub)genres Williams leads the reader to a recognition of specifically colonial subjectivities by evoking the particularized responses tied to particular genres, whether that response is outrage at injustice, a shudder of horror, or a sympathetic tear. At the same time, these responses are called forth by the author’s ability to rework “fashionable mediums” by claiming an authority borne of West Indian experience—an experience rooted not only in the author’s familiarity with the day-to-day effects of slavery on the formation and development of Creole culture, but more importantly, with the acute anxieties generated by the resistance to enslavement by black subjects.

Resistance to Atlantic slavery was not new to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Hilary Beckles points out, the slave uprisings and revolutionary plots in the West Indies, from their settlement in the mid-seventeenth century to Emancipation, should be read as “one protracted struggle launched by Africans and their Afro-West Indian progeny against slave owners. Such endemic anti-slavery activity represented ...

the most immediately striking characteristic of the West Indian world” (1). For Williams, whose novel is set in October 1822 and opens with a violent hurricane and earthquake, insurrection operates on a figurative and literal level: the upheaval created by the storm depicted in the first chapters sets the stage for the slave rebellion that unfolds in subsequent scenes. The centrality of rebellion in *Hamel* makes a sharp contrast with the *Tour*. In the earlier work insurrection remains in the background, minimized by descriptions of unrest as grumblings, discontent, and so forth. At one point, the *Tour*'s narrator relegates political agitation and slave uprisings to the realm of emotion, drawing attention to the manipulation of slaves' feelings by abolitionist missionaries. At another point, couched between a description of plantain juice and duppies [spirits of the dead] recent “disturbances in the Island” and their effects on master-slave relations are described by a young woman in the sentimental language of what Watson calls the Caribbean romance of the 1820s:⁹

Miss Neville . . . told me . . . that on the report of the insurrection at Saint Mary's, several of the negroes on their estate had assured her and her sister of their fidelity and attachment, and promised, let what would happen, to defend them to the last breath of their existence. They owned that they expected a rebellion, which they deprecated, and laid all the blame on Mr. Wilforce [sic] and the brewer or beerman, as they call Mr. Buxton. As I rode by the side of my fair companion, I could see a tear steal down her cheek . . . while she spoke of the faithful and affectionate attachment of the negroes. “It is really,” she said, “a dreadful calamity to be exposed to the fear of every horror that any set of human beings can be led to perpetrate in a state of phrensy and infatuation; but the cruelest thing of all is, to rend the ties of gratitude and affection that have for ages united the hearts of the blacks and whites. The negroes will be taught, as they already begin to think, that we are their greatest enemies, and that the quakers and the methodists are their best friends. They will never regard us again as they have done, nor shall we for ages be able to divest ourselves of fear and suspicion. (88–90)

“What Time Has Proved”

As in other parts of the *Tour* and *Hamel* we see the impulse to represent black insurgency in terms of romance, illustrated in this passage by the reassuring image of the faithful black retainer and the female plantocrat’s nostalgic tear. The disturbance, moreover, is represented as a disruption of social relations *and* history: the sentimental ties that have “for ages” united blacks and whites are severed, and a new age marked by fear and suspicion has been introduced by interfering abolitionists from England.

The perceived break with the past, the destabilization of the present, and the anticipation of an unsettled future are even more troubled in *Hamel* because that work features (and often valorizes) a rebel slave rather than a grateful and affectionate “servant.” Even so, each text traces the disturbance among the “common” slaves to missionary activity, and in their representations of the political climate of the island both strain to clarify causes and effects for readers in an attempt to help them correctly interpret its contemporary state of affairs. According to Williams’s texts, the slaves are not agitated by dissatisfaction over their present physical condition but by impatience for a future event—emancipation—for which they are ill-prepared. In other words, time is “out of joint” and the project of Williams’s *Tour* and *Hamel* is to “set it right.”¹⁰

This correction, moreover, does not call for a violent readjustment, but rather a recalibration of the white European reader’s sense of history and understanding of time’s movements. In other words, only with the recognition that history *gradually* unfolds will its lessons become clear to the reader, as Williams spells out in the *Tour*:

[What] is called slavery, has existed in all countries; it existed in some parts of Great Britain a very few years ago, and it exists still in many parts of Europe: its extinction has always been gradual. . . . [A] dispassionate review of history will teach [men], that revolutions in the manners and condition of mankind are the result of ages, the mind being gradually and almost imperceptibly prepared for them. . . . [I]f it were possible to put our slave population a few stages in advance in civilization, and . . . imbue them at once with sufficiently enlarged desires for

the comforts and luxuries of life, to induce them to work for wages eight or nine hours, six days out of the seven, I would most willingly give my slaves that boon, accompanied by their freedom; but their immediate emancipation, with their present ignorance and limited desires, would be destruction to us all, masters and slaves. (75–76)¹¹

Despite its formulaic articulation of the anti-Emancipation stance, this passage also reveals two key historiographic tendencies that shape the way the past is perceived and constructed and the role it plays for anti-abolitionists like Williams in the attempt to shape future events. That is, the passage illustrates a parallel between reading and futurity in the sense that reading holds the promise of future knowledge, and although the primary beneficiary of this knowledge is white, it also suggests that once this historical literacy is imparted to that privileged reader, it should become a goal of the slaves' education as well.

The first step in this educational process is to instill in readers the notion that gradual emancipation conforms and contributes to the natural and orderly unfolding of history. Part of this work had already been done by Enlightenment science, which by the early nineteenth century, had produced a paradigmatic shift in the way time and the earth's history was perceived. Williams's emphasis on gradual and imperceptible change occurring over a period of ages, for example, echoes the language of contemporary scientists who argued against reading the earth's history by reconciling geological phenomena to scriptural accounts. Charles Lyell's description of the "uniformity of nature" in his influential *Principles of Geology* (1830) had been expressed earlier in James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (first presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh and printed in the *Transactions* in 1788) and rearticulated by Hutton's friend and biographer John Playfair in *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth* (1802). Hutton's famous summary of his theory—"In examining things present, we have data from which to reason with regard to what has been; and, from what has actually been, we have data for concluding with regard to that which is to happen hereafter" (217)—can be compared to Joseph Priestley's influential system of chronography laid out

“What Time Has Proved”

in his *Chart of Biography* (1765) and *Chart of History* (1769). In those works, observes Daniel Rosenberg, the charts “convey not only the *unity* but the *uniformity* of historical time” (75). More important to my reading of Williams and other Creole writers, however, are the political implications of the enlightenment view of geological history and the way its language could be deployed as a rationale for maintaining the political status quo, both in England and its Caribbean slave colonies. Put simply, this conception of historical time allowed for the dismissal of revolutionary activity on the grounds that it represents anomalous, catastrophic interruptions of the smooth flow of history, aberrations that should not be encouraged.

After the numerous slave revolts that took place in the Caribbean at the turn of the nineteenth century—the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), Fédon’s Rebellion in Grenada (1795–97), the Second Maroon War in Jamaica (1795–96), and Bussa’s Rebellion in Barbados (1816), to name a few— notions of predictability and stability must have held great appeal for Creole writers trying to (re)write the Caribbean present and future. Certainly John Playfair’s assessment of Huttonian theory assumes a greater political significance when read in light of these rebellions: “Amid all the revolutions of the globe, the economy of nature has been uniform, . . . and her laws are the only thing that have resisted the general movement. The rivers and the rocks, the seas and the continents, have been changed in all their parts; but the laws which describe those changes, and the rules to which they are subject, have remained invariably the same” (421–22).¹² The desire to rise above the chaos of human political disturbance and take refuge in the uniform and consistent laws of nature expressed by Playfair can also be seen in the *Tour*’s minimizing of contemporary unrest in Jamaica (as described above) and read in the celebratory descriptions of the narrator’s pursuit of scientific information—his expedition to Jamaica’s Blue Mountain peak, the detailed explanation of the make-shift barometer used to calculate altitude and temperature “according to Sir Henry C. Englefield’s method and tables,” and Williams’s catalogue of plants growing in the mountains (277–78; 289–90).¹³

More significantly, privileging the Huttonian perspective—relying on the “data” of “what has actually been” (history), to draw conclusions “with regard to that which is to happen hereafter”—highlights the way Williams’s *Tour* presents the shift from chattel slavery to wage labour as part of a uniform historical process, a teleological end in the advance of civilization. Political revolution—and immediate emancipation as well as slave insurrection, are presented as ‘revolutionary’—disrupts the flow of this history by preventing the enslaved from acquiring, as the author of *Marly* puts it, “fictitious wants.” In such a construction capitalism becomes, paradoxically, de-historicized, represented as transcending historical processes. The naturalization of its laws and rules, in other words, functions in the same way as the rules and laws that dictate John Playfair’s “economy of Nature.” Indeed, this is the same paradox embedded in what Ellen Meiksins Wood refers to as the “commercialization model” of capitalism’s rise in which the market is traditionally presented as “an arena of choice” and “commercial society” as “the perfection of freedom”:

Yet this conception of the market seems to rule out human freedom. It has tended to be associated with a theory of history in which modern capitalism is the outcome of an almost natural and inevitable process, following certain universal, trans-historical, and immutable laws. The operation of these laws can, at least temporarily, be thwarted, but not without great cost. And its end product, the “free” market, is an impersonal mechanism which can to some extent be controlled and regulated, but which cannot finally be thwarted without all the dangers—and the futility—entailed by any attempt to violate the laws of nature. (16)

In the configuration of a similar model put forth by Williams and other Creole writers intent on shaping the Emancipation debate, human freedom is indeed ruled out: slaves should/will remain enslaved until they prove their readiness to participate in “civilized” (i.e., commercial) society by expressing “sufficiently enlarged desires for the comforts and luxuries of life” through their willingness to “work for wages.”¹⁴

“What Time Has Proved”

Given Williams’s representation of the destructive consequences of “immediate emancipation” in the *Tour* and the suggestion that insurrection runs counter to the natural order of things, it might seem strange that in *Hamel* he chooses for his protagonist a black revolutionary figure who is treated sympathetically and who retains his heroic stature throughout the novel. But even as Williams appears to enshrine African culture and romanticize rebellion, as Watson suggests, he also takes care to represent Hamel’s activities in such a way that rebellion is read as a catastrophe averted only by Hamel’s ultimate renunciation of revolution as an un-timely means to achieve his political ends.

Hamel’s goals in orchestrating the island-wide rebellion—a clear demonstration of political agency—constitutes a critical departure from earlier black heroes like Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko, who rebels to prevent his child from being born into slavery, and William Earle’s Jack Mansong, who rebels to avenge his father’s death in *Obi; or, the History of Three-Fingered Jack*. Initially, however, Hamel’s political sophistication is veiled by an air of mystery. Certainly the reader’s introduction to the obeah man, which occurs when the villainous Methodist missionary Roland takes refuge in his cave during the hurricane, encourages such mystification. As he sleeps, Roland’s guilty conscience generates a nightmare in which a “fend” fixes him with “eyes glaring with a malignant fury”:

The only sound which escaped the lips of the demon was that of his own name—Roland! Roland!—articulated in a voice of mingled triumph and revenge—Roland! The traveller started from his dream as if he had been roused by the sting of a scorpion. He sat upright for an instant, and stared wildly around, scarce recollecting his own identity or situation; but what was his amazement, not to say horror, on perceiving before him the very figure of the demon of his dream, or a figure which his fancy so quickly substituted for him, that the idea of the first was as if by magic resolved and condensed into that which he beheld? ...

“In the name of God or Devil,” cried Roland impatiently, “who or what art thou?”

The figure ... advanced a step forward with a gentle inclination of the head, and replied in a mild and almost musical tone of voice—"Master—what you will." (1.23–24)

Hamel, as his response suggests, is a fluid character, one who plays whatever part is necessary to forward his revolutionary aims. For Roland he is a demon; for Combah, the African-born prince to whom Hamel has promised the throne of Jamaica once the whites have been killed and/or forced off the island, he is a policy advisor; for Oliver Fairfax, his owner, he is a trusted and loyal slave. All of these roles, however, are shaped by Hamel's position as an obeah man.

Hamel articulates this position most frequently in his debates with Roland, as when he defends his religious practices: "Master Roland," he chides, "we say nothing against your religion, nor your God; we had a religion before we knew yours; such as it was, it is" (1.42). Here the apparently "timeless" African roots of obeah are not condemned by Williams so much as they are situated as a foil to emphasize the dangerous fanaticism of abolitionist missionaries.¹⁵ But choosing an obeah man to express heroic sentiments is a tricky business, particularly given obeah's association with slave insurrections. Hamel is, after all, the mastermind of a slave revolt, and desires nothing less than to create "a confusion in the island" and "revenge him and his countrymen on their oppressors" (2.141). Here, then, Hamel assumes the stereotypical role of the obeah practitioner as depicted in eighteenth-century colonial writings, from the "historical" accounts, say, of Nanny of the Maroons, who defied the British in the early Maroon wars, or of the obeah man who lent supernatural aid to Tacky during the 1760 uprising in Jamaica, or of Bashra, who, in Earle's fictionalized account of Jack Mansong, made Three-Fingered Jack invincible to everything but the power of the white man's obi, Christianity. The associations between obeah and rebellion, in other words, were long established by 1822. As Mr. Guthrie, a neighbor of Fairfax and father of the novel's heroine, explains, "there is always an obeah man in every insurrection; there always has been" (*Hamel* 1.286).¹⁶

Unlike many other treatments of obeah in the pre-Emancipation period, however, Williams's novel does not ridicule it or dismiss it as mere

“What Time Has Proved”

superstition, but rather emphasizes its political significance to African Caribbean resistance.¹⁷ Hamel, readers are told, fully understands how to wield the influence he has acquired “over his fellow Negroes by means of his superior talents, his spells, and his magic” (2.273); he also knows how to manipulate whites’ fears and perceptions of the practice as well, especially those possessed of a superstitious mind, like Roland. Indeed, one of the novel’s more fascinating strategies is to define abolitionism in the terms used by earlier colonial authorities to describe obeah. Hamel, for example, denounces missionaries who, “while they affect to be for making us free, and for saving our souls,” are actually “cramming us with dirt, and trash, and filthy foolish lies” (2.130). This reversal—dirt, trash, and filth were terms routinely used to describe the paraphernalia associated with obeah—is vividly dramatized in the scene where Roland is forced to participate in what he calls a “filthy ceremony of Obeah” (2.150). Part of the drama derives from Roland’s literal fall: while preaching friendship and rebellion on the ruins of a sugar estate Great House, the floor gives way and Roland crashes down into the cellars where Hamel is administering an oath of secrecy to his fellow rebels. Rather than be killed for his intrusion, Roland agrees to drink “the filthy-looking mixture” from the obeah cup and to swear himself to secrecy, an act that, as he understands it, puts him in league “with a Pagan and apostate” and transforms him into “an incendiary . . . —a traitor—a rebel” (2.151). Hamel, too, is very much aware of the implications of Roland’s act and uses it to his advantage, blackmailing Roland to use his influence over those slaves who have converted to Christianity and bring them into the rebellion. Clearly Hamel’s sophistication in using the obeah ritual, not for supernatural aid (as so often suggested by other colonial descriptions), but to ensure Roland’s participation and ensure the secrecy of the rebels’ plans, points to its politicized applications.

As important as it is to recognize Williams’s treatment of obeah as a corrective to other writings that tended to divorce the (ir)religious from the more political motives of practitioners, we should also pay attention to Hamel’s other powers, specifically those he derives from his understanding of the operations of “history” itself as “occult” in its suggestion of future events. At times Hamel disguises this understanding by en-

couraging supernatural explanations, as when he suggests to Roland, for instance that “there is nothing in these mountains, in this island, which is concealed from me” (1.32) and convinces him of obeah’s powers by divining the missionary’s past misdeeds and future plans. At the same time, Hamel realizes that such intentional mystification has its limits, as it depends “much, if not altogether, on the caprice” of his credulous followers (2.274). For this reason the more pointedly political forecasts Hamel delivers to the plantocracy seem more powerful, an application, as it were of Huttonian theory to the Caribbean context. Not everyone, however, is attuned to the wisdom of Hamel’s prognostications, particularly those who, like Roland, read contemporary events for only their supernatural significance or those who deny the urgency of the slaves’ discontent from a position of complacency. However, for those willing to view history as a key to the present and future, to read it as Priestley suggests—“all at a glance”—Hamel offers a pragmatic strategy for predicting “that which is to happen hereafter” given the data of “what has actually happened” (Hutton 217). One need look no further, he suggests, than a hundred miles east of Jamaica. The astute reader, in other words, should “Look at Hayti.... Look still at Hayti,” as Hamel tells Joanna Guthrie when warning her of the imminence of the revolt on Jamaica (2.185).

The mention of Haiti would, of course, function on several levels for Williams’s contemporaries given the significance of the Haitian Revolution for Creole and metropolitan readers. Reading the Haitian Revolution—whether in 1822 or now—is difficult, however, for as Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes it, the Haitian Revolution “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable [to whites] even as it happened” (qtd. in Childs 142). Moreover, as Matt D. Childs points out, the slaves’ triumph rendered the previously unthinkable a source of terror in the minds of most whites recording subsequent events, so much so that “some white observers after 1791 [tended] to view any black resistance as an extension of the Haitian Revolution” (qtd. in Childs 142). This tendency doesn’t seem surprising given the response among enslaved rebels who (at least according to colonial documentary evidence) cited the example of Haiti as inspiration and who

“What Time Has Proved”

invoked revolutionary leaders like L'Ouverture and Dessalines.¹⁸ In addition, reports circulated (and were believed by colonial authorities) that military advisors from Haiti had traveled or were prepared to travel to islands like Cuba and Jamaica to support revolutionary activities there. Indeed, the fears of Jamaican authorities would appear justified in light of L'Ouverture's proposal to Cuban military officials that Haitians would help Spain retake Jamaica from the British in exchange for weapons.¹⁹ When Haitian militants appear on the island to help Hamel's rebellion, Williams's readers would appreciate their presence as part of a history still unfolding.

But if Williams—through Hamel and the specter of Haiti—raises the possibility of a catastrophic event that will alter the course of Jamaican and British history, the novel also attempts to restore confidence in the progress of civilization charted out by the increasingly dominant and “natural” operations of finance capital and global commerce. In respect to Haiti, although the Haitian Revolution raised fears of violent insurrection, it also revived Jamaica's sugar-cane industry and diminished France's trading power in the region to such an extent that in his *Inquiry into the Permanent Causes of the Decline and Fall of Powerful and Wealthy Nations* (1805), William Playfair declared that “the superiority” of Britain's West India trade could be “set down as permanent.” Without St. Domingo, which was “lost for ever,” France would “never again be a formidable rival” in the Caribbean—particularly because the British government “is sufficiently aware of consequences not to neglect taking every precaution possible” to protect its slave colonies from internal and external threats (156–57).

Similarly, as an example of the complete destruction warned against in the *Tour* and cited above, the economic devastation that accompanied the Haitian Revolution was seen as proof that blacks were incapable of self-rule, that they had attained neither the self-discipline to work outside the institution of slavery, nor the kind of unlimited desire for fictitious wants that would instill that discipline. Such “proof” was (and is) useful in upholding racist notions of black inferiority while at the same time eliding the artificial restraints imposed on Haiti that effectively guaranteed its inability to participate independently in the world

market. The refusal by France, Great Britain, and the United States to recognize Haiti's independence until Haiti agreed in 1825 to pay 150 million gold francs as reparation to the French government for lost property and income during the revolution ensured nearly a century of crippling indebtedness—a fact that even today is neatly forgotten in discussions of the “failures” of the Western Hemisphere's first black republic.²⁰

Given the import of the Haitian Revolution and the way that contemporary historians presented it as both an isolated event and representative example, we can see the “inevitability” of *Hamel's* end. The novel closes when Hamel squashes the rebellion he had organized, exposes the villainy of the missionary Roland, acknowledges that the blacks are not ready for self-rule, and decides to leave the island. With the dissolution of the obeah man's agency—both as historian and as actor in the island's history—Williams's epistemological project appears successful. The novel's prophetic reader can now recognize the lessons of the past (since the record of that past has been corrected) and can apply them to make meaning out of Hamel's story and West Indian history, a meaning that in turn produces a future in which *eventual* emancipation facilitates the supposed organic development of capitalism. This particular point is anticipated by an earlier admission by Hamel that without white laws, blacks would regress and never become civilized.²¹ In the ensuing chaos of immediate emancipation, Hamel asks, “[W]hat will be our freedom? What are we to do—the ignorant, nasty, drunken Negroes, who were born slaves in Congo, and Coromantin, and Houssa, and Mundingo. Some will make the others work: there will be slaves for ever, unless the white men stay with soldiers and cannons to keep the strong ones from beating the weak ones, and making the women do all the work” (1.179). This tidy prophecy ultimately locates the source of brutal oppression in the absence of civilization rather than in the operations of slavery or in the unregulated forms of capitalism emerging in England and posited as the desired end of Creole and metropolitan history. More obviously, though, Hamel's departure from Jamaica demonstrates the inevitable futility, according to Williams's historical vision, of attempts by black rebels and abolitionists to confound and disrupt the natural progression

“What Time Has Proved”

of time and history. And so, despite Fairfax’s forgiveness of his role in the rebellion and the invitation to remain and “pass the evening of his days in peace” (2.326), Hamel leaves the Caribbean to return to Africa, the land of his birth.

Sympathetic as that return seems—an effect heightened by the lingering gaze of the white men as “they watched him without regarding the time they so misapplied, until his little boat had diminished to a speck” (2.326–27)—it also calls to mind other efforts at repatriation, like the Sierra Leone project, which by 1822 was seen by many commentators, whether abolitionist or antiabolitionist, as a disastrous alternative to the gradual transformation of slave labourers to wage-earners. For *Marly’s* author, the failure of the colony was due to the lack of inducements for the ex-slaves to work: “a natural consequence which evidently follows is, that till they acquire fictitious wants, they will never become good subjects, whether viewed in the light of improvement or as a means of improving the trade of the mother country. The negroes in the West Indies would naturally act in the same manner as the free negroes in Sierra Leone” if given their liberty (249). Far better, in other words, that slaves—even after they acquire fictitious wants—should remain on Caribbean plantations and estates in order to ensure, as William Playfair’s comment suggests, the permanence of Britain’s West Indian trading dominance.

But in the end, Hamel does not leave the island alone. Following the surrender of his revolutionary ambitions, he lays open the secrets of his cave, and reveals all its “natural and artificial contrivances.” The tour of this “extraordinary labyrinth” culminates with a view of the sea, where Fairfax and Guthrie, Joanna’s father, see another canoe “filled with Negroes, standing away to the eastward” (2.323):

“My comrades,” said Hamel, “the subjects of king Combah going back to the land of freedom—Haiti—with some of the wretches whom it vomited forth for your destruction, at the recommendation of the Obeah Christians in England. They will make up a pretty tale, no doubt—but they might have conquered.” (2.323–24)

The pretty tale of the Haitians and would-be rulers of a black Jamaica is still being constructed, Hamel and Williams suggest, a warning that white readers must heed by remaining vigilant interpreters of the past in order to navigate the present and ensure a future that will reconcile colonial and metropolitan desires.

Notes

- 1 Winer's edition of *Warner Arundell* was published by the University of the West Indies Press in 2001; *Creoleana* and *Marly* were reprinted in 2002 as part of Macmillan's Caribbean Classics series. Other titles include Srinivas Aravamudan's edition of *Obi; or, the History of Three-Fingered Jack* (Broadview 2005) and Tim Watson and Candace Ward's *Hamel the Obeah Man* (forthcoming from Broadview 2008).
- 2 See, for example, Young, Aravamudan *Tropicopolitans*, and Carey.
- 3 One contemporary advertisement for *Hamel* cites a review that identifies the author as the same individual "who published an amusing Tour in Jamaica" (*Westminster Review*); the *Tour's* title page identifies its author as Cynric Williams. Tim Watson has since uncovered the likely identity of Williams as a Creole planter who lived in Jamaica for much of his adult life. For more on his identity, see Watson's "Caribbean Romance and Subaltern History." I am grateful to Professor Watson for his generosity in sharing his manuscript with me and for our conversations about the novel.
- 4 J. W. Orderson's political pamphlet, *Cursory Remarks and Plain Facts Connected with the Question Produced by the Proposed Slave Registry Bill*, was published in 1816, his play *The Fair Barbadian and the Faithful Black* in 1835, and *Creoleana* in 1842. E. L. Joseph, a London-born Trinidadian, published his *History of Trinidad* and novel *Warner Arundell* in 1838.
- 5 The anonymously written *Marly* instructs the reader in the preface that the novel will reveal "the real state of slavery" in the British Caribbean colonies. Williamson identifies a likely candidate for *Marly's* authorship, a Scottish writer named John Stewart, "who was resident in Jamaica from 1787 to 1808, acquired property there, and wrote two books about the island: *An Account of Jamaica and Its Inhabitants* (1808), and *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (1823)" (xiv). If she is correct, then Stewart, like the other Creole writers listed here, turns from non-fictional reporting to fiction to document what he describes as the actualities of Jamaican life.
- 6 Again, a comparison to Godwin is fruitful: in the preface to *Caleb Williams*, he lays out the principles *Marly's* author alludes to: "It is now known to philosophers that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly

“What Time Has Proved”

it was proposed in the invention of the following work, to comprehend, as far as the progressive nature of a single story would allow, a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man. If the author shall have taught a valuable lesson, without subtracting from the interest and passion by which a performance of this sort ought to be characterized, he will have reason to congratulate himself upon the vehicle he has chosen” (1).

- 7 See, for example, James Grainger’s Virgilian epic *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), in which Grainger conformed to classical models and argued that although his theme was new—sugar cane was “to song unknown”—it was worthy of poetic treatment because sugar cane was “most momentous to [his] Country’s weal” (1.17). Another example is John Singleton’s blank verse *General Description of the West-Indian Islands* (1767), discussed in John Gilmore’s essay in this special issue. In terms of the novel, J. W. Orderson’s *Creoleana* borrows from British sentimental novelists to describe “Social and Domestic Scenes and Incidents in Barbados in Days or Yore,” and in *Warner Arundell* E. L. Joseph draws from picaresque novels like *Roderick Random* to depict his “Adventures of a Creole.”
- 8 See Nordius’s discussion of *Hamel* as colonial gothic in “Racism and Radicalism.” See also Watson’s discussion of the novel as colonial romance in “Caribbean Romance and Subaltern History.”
- 9 See also, as Watson suggests, Lambert’s discussion of the “planter ideal” based on the “romance of benevolent masters and loyal slaves beyond the reach of metropolitan meddling” (Lambert 65–72).
- 10 Williams opens each chapter with an epigraph, the majority of which are drawn from Shakespeare’s plays, including two from *Hamlet*. In a commentary relevant to my overall argument, Scott discusses the importance of *Hamlet* for James’s *The Black Jacobins*, in which James (partially) reconstructs the tragic figure of Toussaint L’Ouverture in the image of Hamlet. James’s Toussaint, Scott suggests, like Hamlet, “is the very embodiment of the historical conflict between the old and the new. This is why the alternatives with which he was confronted—France with reenslavement or freedom without France—were neither alternatives of his choosing nor alternatives between which he could choose. They were, in short, *tragic alternatives*” (*Conscripts* 133). In my reading, *Hamel* is also a tragic figure, caught up in the historiographic conflicts that shaped Williams’s construction of him.
- 11 The speaker here is the narrator’s “radical friend” Mr. Matthews, a character based, according to Watson, on the powerful Jamaican planter Simon Taylor. Matthews’s radicalism is defined by his hatred of the British aristocracy, who have been duped (he believes) by abolitionists, by his practice of boycotting English-made products, and by his spirit of self-reliance.
- 12 Cf. Priestley’s description of revolution in the *Chart of History*: “They are rather melancholy reflections, which the view of such a chart of history [civil history]

as this is apt to excite in the minds of persons of feeling and humanity. What a number of revolutions are marked upon it! What a broken appearance, in particular, do the finest, and most cultivated parts of the earth exhibit, as Greece, Italy, Persia, and Egypt! What torrents of human blood has the restless ambition of mortals shed, and in what complicated distress has the discontent of powerful individuals involved a great part of their species! Let us deplore this depravity of human passions, and may the contemplation of their fatal effects be a motive with us to keep a strict watch over our own" (15). Priestley, like many European historians, does not comment on the Haitian Revolution, though the *Chart's* title page describes it as "Containing a View of the Principal Revolutions of Empire that Have Taken Place in the World."

- 13 For more on the shared lexica of politics, geology, and poetry, particularly the comparison of political revolutions and geological phenomena like volcanoes, see Heringman's *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*, 2–3.
- 14 This language was not isolated to anti-abolitionists, but also was deployed by such ardent abolitionists as William Wilberforce in the parliamentary debates preceding the 1807 act to abolish the slave trade. Wilberforce and others argued (publicly at least) that the question of abolition and emancipation were two entirely different questions, that slaves were not ready—in their present circumstances—to be freed. Similarly, following the adoption of the resolutions that the slave trade was contrary to the principles of justice and humanity, another abolitionist, Lord Grenville, stated that "it was his opinion that in 'their present state of barbarism and ignorance,' emancipation would be productive of great injury to the Negro population in the West Indies" (Wesley 156).
- 15 For more on colonial explanations of the term "obeah" and its etymology, see Handler and Bilby, "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah.'"
- 16 Writing about Tacky's revolt, Long describes "a famous obeiah man or priest, much respected among his countrymen" captured by the colonial authorities, which checked an uprising on a St. Mary's estate: "He was an old Coramantin, who, with others of his profession, had been a chief in counseling and instigating the credulous herd, to whom these priests administered a powder, which, being rubbed on their bodies, was to make them invulnerable: they persuaded them into a belief, that Tacky, their generalissimo in the woods, could not possibly be hurt by the white men, for that he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction at his foes" (Long 2.451). See also Sharpe on Nanny of the Maroons, and Aravamudan's introduction to William Earle's novel *Obi* and its many appendices of contemporary sources on the practice of obeah.
- 17 Even when texts associate obeah with rebellion, as often happens, obeah is usually derided as superstition and as such, belief in obeah leads to the rebel's downfall (see note 14 above). In Earle's novel *Jack Mansong* was also described in this way, with the addition that his death at the hands of a converted maroon tracker

“What Time Has Proved”

was proof that the African religion/superstition was inferior to the white man's obi (Christianity). For more on Tacky's Rebellion, see Craton.

- 18 According to Geggus, “The example of Haiti was ... invoked by slave conspirators in Barbados in 1816 who planned ‘to set fire ... the way they did in St. Domingo.’” Denmark Vesey, leader of an uprising in South Carolina in 1822, had briefly lived in St. Domingo. As Geggus notes, Vesey “promised his followers the help of Haitian soldiers once they had taken over the city of Charleston. It is also probable Vesey planned to escape to the black republic, which was then advertising for black immigrants in U. S. newspapers” (xii–xiii).
- 19 In Cuba, it was reported that leaders of the Aponte Rebellion in 1812 “counted on the assistance of blacks from Santo Domingo,” including “several hardened black warriors that had served in Santo Domingo with military rank” (qtd. in Childs 142).
- 20 Damu, J. “Haiti Makes Its Case for Reparations: The Meter Is Running at \$34 per Second.” *Final Call* (Feb. 10, 2004). <<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/628.html>> Later this amount was reduced to 90 million, though impact of the indebtedness remained the same. Also, the terms of the agreement called for Haiti to take out a loan from a French bank at above market interest rates, further ensuring Haiti's grim financial future.
- 21 This argument is more fully articulated in *Marly*: too sudden emancipation will result, the anonymous author claims, in many abandoning the plantations to “seek asylums in the bush, and there lead a life of almost complete idleness.... And thus, in place of improving in the arts of civilization, they would retrograde from what they are at present, until they became equally savage with their forefathers.... [E]very one who retired into the bush would be lost subjects to the country, for no productive labour farther than to supply the wants of nature could be expected from them. The productive agriculture of the country would receive a severe check, if not a total annihilation.... Unfortunately, there is no occasion to argue upon this topic, or to theorize upon it, for we have the example before our eyes, of the captured negroes who have been colonized at Sierra Leone as free people” (247–48).

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