

Overlooking Obi: An Analysis of How Portrayals of Obi in William Earle's "Obi" Affect the Novel's Abolitionist Message

By Tess Casher

William Earle's book *Obi; or The History of Three-Figured Jack* is an anglicized literary account of Jack Mansong, a historical leader of a 1780 slave rebellion in Jamaica. This event captured the "British imagination" and sparked the creation of "over twenty biographical accounts in the Romantic period alone."¹ These novels, pantomimes and plays were met with wide colonial critical acclaim and germinated a "self-reflexive repertoire that reproduced colonial attitudes toward the enslaved Africans in Jamaica for English audiences."² In the English literary space, Jack transitioned from a political leader to a practitioner of the spiritual-medical practice Obi. From the modern perspective, eighteenth-century Caribbean Obi practices can be broadly understood as a "crisis cult," where enslaved communities morphed a diverse array of traditional African cultural beliefs into a metaphysical worldview that sought to address their psychological needs within transatlantic slavery.³

Earle's novel informs nineteenth-century colonial representations of Jack and his Obi, as the text invokes and perpetuates racist ideas, themes and tropes within its abolitionist moral. The novel follows an epistolary structure as George Sanford, a Jamaican resident, writes to Charles, his friend in England. Throughout these letters, George narrates the "African Tale" of Amri and Makro. The married couple belongs to the fictitious "Feloop" people, which may be based on the Fulani ethnic group.⁴ Living near the Gambia, Amri and Makro rescue two shipwrecked Europeans, Captain Harrop and his ward, William. Captain Harrop preaches Christianity to his rescuers then sells the couple as slaves. Makro is murdered on the transatlantic passage, and Amri promises her dying husband to raise their unborn child as their avenger. Upon arriving in Jamaica, Amri is bought by Mr Mornton. He brings her to Maroons Town and her son, Jack, is born into slavery. Amri keeps her promise, raising Jack to be-

lieve that leading the rebellion of enslaved persons is his honour and duty. Amri's father, Feruarue, is also captured. He leads a small uprising using Obi but is seized by plantation owners and chooses execution over revealing the secrets of Obi. Amri then takes Jack to receive Obi, or spiritual-medical protection, from Bashra, another Obi-Man. Jack then leads a larger uprising but is abandoned by all except his close friend Mahali. Escaping jail, Jack seizes Captain Harrop as his prisoner, receives more Obi from Bashra, and the town offers three hundred pounds for Jack's capture. Meanwhile, a romantic relationship develops between William and Mr. Mornton's daughter, Harriet. Captain Harrop lies to both parties to wed the wealthy heiress, and the heartbroken William retreats to the woods. Eventually, the government sentences Amri to death for refusing to provide information about Jack's whereabouts. Jack and Mahali rescue Amri from the stake, but once they arrive in the Blue Mountains, Mahali and Amri die from their injuries. Jack is driven mad by their deaths and begins violently killing both those who attempt to help him and those trying to capture him. Quashae, the person who previously dismembered two of Jack's fingers, is christened as James Reeder. James kills Jack and Earle concludes the novel with Harrop dying of starvation in Jack's cave, while William and Harriet are happily wedded.

Earle's creative, and at times contradictory, text reinterprets Jack's biography in deliberate and problematic manners. While original documents indicate Jack Mansong was from the Koromantyns people, Earle's work aligns with "later sources [which] claimed that Jack was a Feloop from [regions] near the Gambia."⁵ The historical Jack hid in the Blue Mountains and Earle also copies the Jamaican Governor's 1780 proclamation for Jack's capture.⁶ From this historical framework, the book illustrates Jack as a sympathetic protagonist and

narrativizes the horrors of slavery, garnering the text revolutionary status for its antislavery message upon its publication in 1800. This messaging was couched in the context of the French Revolution (1789-1799) and its infectious spread of liberty, equality and fraternity, which sparked the 1798 Irish Rebellion and the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution. As Jack's reputation as a powerful Obi yielder became mythologized, the worried Jamaican Assembly outlawed Obi in 1760, and convicted practitioners faced capital punishment.⁷ This legislation demonstrates a deep historical fear of Obi, and English depictions of Jack mapped these "colonial anxieties."⁸ Today "Jack Mansong remains a significant though problematic figure" as he continues to circulate on the peripheries of mainstream Jamaican culture.⁹ Jack can be considered the "Jamaican Robin Hood,"¹⁰ and Jamaican artistic leaders "harnessed [his] energy to celebrate independence from England and from a past of slavery and colonialism,"¹¹ retelling Jack's story where he appears as a "symbol of strength and power."¹²

However, Earle's text promotes racist thoughts, ideas and practices, like many nineteenth-century English works featuring Jack. In this essay, I use the 2005 Broadview Press edition edited by Srinivas Aravamudan as the standardized version of Earle's work. Revisiting *Obi* with a modern lens, this essay seeks to demonstrate the discriminatory effects of Earle's representation of Jack and Obi. I argue that Earle disvalues Obi's scientific authority and predominantly represents Obi as a supernatural power. This characterization facilitates a direct comparison between Obi and Christianity, in which Earle represents Christianity as an abolitionist and superior religion. Overarching, Earle paradoxically employs racist ideas that delegitimize African practices to support his overarching abolitionist message. The intermingling of progressive and problematic sentiments ultimately stresses the importance of carefully considering the ramifications of Earle's work.

As an Obi-Man can control his environment to produce a desired outcome, Obi can be understood as a "demonstration of metaphysical and technological mastery."¹³ This understanding aligns with Obi's etymological roots; *Dibia* or *di abia* means "master of knowledge" or "doctor" in the Igbo and Ibibio languages. When "transposed into Caribbean vernaculars with the English morpheme 'man,'" the word became *abia-man*, which was anglicized into "Obi-Man."¹⁴ Earle's portrayal

of Obi loosely reflects the practice's scientific etymology as Bashra uses snails, lizards and vipers, to heal enslaved persons "from the wounds of their assailants."¹⁵ The juxtaposition between Bashra and William emphasizes an Obi-Man's ability to control nature. When Bashra was presumably infected with yaws and sequestered "in a cell, near Mount Lebanon,"¹⁶ he learned to reap nature's pharmaceutical properties. In contrast, when the heartbroken William removes himself from Jamaican society, he becomes a "wild being."¹⁷ Instead of controlling his environment, nature physically consumes William as his habiliments "bore the resemblance of nothing made by the hand of man."¹⁸ This discrepancy highlights how practicing Obi can be understood as yielding impressive control over the environment.

However, Earle uses narrative and structural devices to depict Obi's ability to manipulate nature as a religious, not scientific, power. Minimizing Obi's empirical value encourages audiences to understand Obi as an invocation of the supernatural, inviting a direct comparison between Obi and Christianity; As James's "white Obi"¹⁹ defeats Jack's implicitly "Black" Obi, Earle unequivocally asserts that Christianity is the superior ontology. Examining the narrative, the body of Earle's text largely refrains from rationally explaining Obi's methodology, and his portrayal of the source of Obi's power is "ambiguous."²⁰ In either case, the lack of empirical explanation negates Obi's veracity for Enlightenment readers. While Feruarue's martyrdom to avoid revealing to Mr. Mornton how he "spirited up the slaves to rebellion"²¹ is a way in which Feruarue reclaims power within slavery, Earle did not provide a separate narrative space that depicts Feruarue learning Obi or teaching the practice to another African character. By avoiding a narrative strategy that could inform readers, but not the plantocracy, how Obi works, Earle again fails to "demystify"²² Obi, reducing the practice's empirical value.

Earle also employs structural devices that belittle Obi's scientific authority, characterizing its ability to control nature as a supernatural power. As a science and metaphysical worldview, Obi operates at the "intersection" of secular-religious, natural-supernatural Enlightenment epistemological binaries.²³ For example, Bashra "fill[s] Jack's horn with Obi" so Jack's countrymen "might not betray him,"²⁴ which Earle's earlier footnote describes as a process of filling a goat's horn with an emulsified mixture of "grave-dirt, ashes, the blood of a black cat, and human fat."²⁵ Here, it is useful to employ

Elizabeth Dillon's concept of "knowledge categories," where different types of knowledge and methods of inquiry are associated with specific disciplines.²⁶ Ostracizing Obi's scientific explanation to the paratext visually implies that Obi's science is separate from its providential power and mutilates the practice into Enlightenment knowledge categories. Similarly, Earle solely refers to the practice as "Obi," when other spellings include "obeah, obea, obeye, or obia."²⁷ While conforming to grammar conventions, this difference highlights how Obi primarily operated within African oral culture. Narrativizing orality *de facto* results in a text losing the complexity and nuance of tone and expression when conveying a concept.²⁸ Amri, Makro and Jack use Enlightenment vocabulary to assert the anti-Enlightenment nature of slavery, repeatedly calling the practice "tyranny" and explicitly desiring their "much wished-for liberty."²⁹ This language is a relatively faint echo of the introductory heteroglossia, where Saunders argues with an imagined interlocutor that "'Jack is a MAN'" and "'MAN cannot be a slave to MAN.'"³⁰ The premise that philosophical arguments only occur outside the main narrative dilutes the African Tale's Enlightenment legitimacy. Earle also separates the "mock-epistle" text from Amri's tale with "a series of formal markers," such as a centred title, capital typeface, epigraph and a "subtitle that defines [a separate] geographical setting and genre category," encouraging the "intertitle" to be "read like a secondary title page."³¹ The implied genre difference dichotomizes the Enlightenment value of the different sections, signalling that Saunders's epistles are more empirically reliable than Amri's Obi-filled tale. Thus, in answering Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's pervading question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"³² Earle's text responds, "yes, but not with the same empirical value as a white man." Earle's imposed structural binary that implies that Obi is "not" empirical is also reflected in the titular conjunction "or," as "Obi" is not part of, but an alternative to the empirical "*History of Three-Fingered Jack*" (emphasis added). Thus, these structural and narrative tools delegitimize Obi's scientific value to characterize the practice as a religion that is inferior to Christianity.

Delegitimizing Obi's scientific value and portraying it as an ontology that is inferior to Christianity disempowers the enslaved characters. Firstly, representing Obi as a religion minimizes its physical and placebo, but nonetheless tangible, effects. Secondly, considering Obi as a religion bet-

ter allows "colonial and plantation authorities to differentiate themselves"³³ from Obi practitioners. Thirdly, "Obi knowledge is a form of intellectual property"³⁴ that Black persons could access within a slavocracy that denies them property ownership and basic human rights. Disparaging Obi's empirical value within a cultural-intellectual movement that prioritizes individual rights and rationality saliently undermines the societal perception of Obi's power. Fourthly, drawing on Latour's Actor-Network Theory that interprets objects and subjects as actants, Obi's distributed structuring of agency creates ontological "liberatory possibilities" for enslaved persons.³⁵ Obi interprets humans as "sub-agential subject[s]" inhabiting "a world peopled with semi-agential objects."³⁶ While "eschewing the prestige of the human" as an "agential figure," Obi allows enslaved persons to access the agential power of objects, "escaping the inhumanity that is associated with humans."³⁷ Denying this ontology's scientific authenticity and supernatural superiority effectively belittles a worldview that empowers enslaved peoples.

While severing Obi from its scientific understandings, Earle's overtly abolitionist book also suggests that the same epistemological severance should be applied to Christianity, as Harrop's racist application of Christian natural theology supports his acceptance of the slave trade. Natural theology "[argues] for the existence of God on the basis of observed natural facts."³⁸ Harrop demonstrates his belief in natural theology when he claims that "the glorious sun was but a substance created by his God, who was the great father of all"³⁹ and that the gradual transition from "light to dark" demonstrates the infinite "wisdom of the [Christian] Creator,"⁴⁰ linking the Christian God to natural law.⁴¹ However, natural theology creates a "unitary normative natural order immanent in the cosmos."⁴² Thus "whatever befalls is according to [the causal laws of nature] and is as it ought to be."⁴³ Harrop gut-wrenchingly believes in the "natural" superiority of white people, and the "world reflects" that it is the "duties of this life" for Black persons to be enslaved.⁴⁴ Harrop's trust in natural theology means that he believes that his immensely racist worldview is divinely supported. Thus, this highly racist character showcases that using science to justify Christianity can create religious support for prejudiced thinking and the slave trade.

Earle implies that Harrop's natural-theology beliefs are incorrect and suggests that the inverse,

an emotional-based understanding of Christianity, is a more accurate manner of understanding the faith. Harrop is the novel's antagonist. He enslaves the protagonist's parents, who rescued him from shipwreck, and convinces Harriet that William no longer loves her so he can wed the wealthy heiress. Harrop's villainous portrayal insinuates that his worldviews are vile and incorrect. Furthermore, Harrop's flawed logic invites the established philosophical critiques of natural theology. The theory does not prove many "divine attributes that are important for sustaining traditional theistic religion," such as God's definite goodness in the wake of naturally occurring evils and God's intervention in human affairs.⁴⁵ The metaphor that "trade [is] [Harrop's] idol"⁴⁶ explicitly identifies Harrop as holding a false interpretation of the Christian faith as he contradicts the Second Commandment stating humans "should not make [themselves] an idol."⁴⁷ Finally, Saunders' overt insistence on the truth of sensibility, as the "tear of sensibility" works to "glitter on [his] page,"⁴⁸ aligns with the New Testament's teachings of the importance of mercy and compassion. The narrator's pro-sensibility stance suggests that emotion-based understandings of Christianity are more accurate conceptualizations of the faith than Harrop's natural theology that creates the "Christian whip."⁴⁹

Thus, the text asks readers to avoid applying empirical understandings to both Obi and Christian ontologies. The epistemological severance delegitimizes Obi's authority and seeks to prevent Christianity from being employed to support racist thinking. Considering both concepts as religions facilitates a direct comparison between the ontologies in which Earle characterizes Christianity as the more powerful "spiritual truth."⁵⁰ Earle's text is not a theological analysis that demonstrates Christianity's support for abolitionism. Instead, Earle employs a selective array of Christian ideas that can contradict the faith but ultimately work to imply that the Christian God supports Jack's initial quest for revenge. Consequently, the text paradoxically delegitimizes African beliefs and uses Christianity's represented superiority to narratively imply that Christianity supports abolitionism. This religious premise ultimately highlights the need for readers to carefully scrutinize the implications of Earle's representation of Jack, Obi and religion.

The book portrays the Christian God as being the most powerful supernatural force in the novel. Amri's nuclear family's langue implies that

the Feloop God is separate from the Christian God. Jack states that he "swore by the great God [he] worshiped,"⁵¹ and when Amri speaks to Makro and Jack, she consistently classifies the divine as "our God," again separating the Feloop God from the Christian God. The inherent plot of Jack being defeated by James's "White Obi," and it being "prophesied that White Obi should overcome [Jack],"⁵² suggests that Obi, and the Feloop God by extension, recognize the superior power of Christianity and enable the Christian God to retain perennial omnipotent power in the novel. Furthermore, this "charm" "lose[s] none of its virtue or power"⁵³ because the newly christened James Reeder yields it. The dynamic reinforces the novel's characterization of Christianity as being the more powerful religion because a greater engagement in the ontology physically strengthens the believer. Earle also describes Reeder as being "lion-hearted,"⁵⁴ which represents the character as a figure of Christian ultimate justice as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah,"⁵⁵ is a metonym for Christ during the Second Coming. Christianity's superior providence is again insinuated when, upon hearing the "church bell," Reeder, then Quashee, was able to discover Jack's "place of concealment."⁵⁶ Even the Obi-Man, Bashra, will eventually be "left to die or recover, at the will of Providence."⁵⁷ By demonstrating that the Christian God can empower and continuously maintain providential control over the characters, the text suggests that the Christian God is the most powerful supernatural force.

Earle employs an array of Christian ideas, language and symbols that imply that the Christian God supports Jack's initial quest for revenge. Earle's Christian ideas contradict the Christian faith and delegitimize Obi but ultimately support the text's overarching abolitionist message. Reconciling the "laws of nature" "sanction[ing]" Jack's revenge, Jack being "endowed" "with more than common strength" and "gifted" "with a power to revenge"⁵⁸ from a supernatural force and the demonstrated superior providence of the Christian God, Earle's Christian God supports Jack's "just" revenge of committing the bloodshed necessary to kill Harrop. Christianity supporting revenge directly opposes the idea of perpetual forgiveness and the direct instruction that "if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also"⁵⁹ that is a core component of the Christian faith. Indeed, this providence abandons Jack after he descends into insanity upon Amri and Mahali's deaths and

kills people unprovoked. However, stating that a forgiveness-oriented faith sanctions Jack's channeling of Obi to avenge his parents inverses Christian ideas to emphasize the horrors of slavery. While the Christian God's co-existence with another supernatural force contradicts the monotheistic religion, the creative distortion implies the Christian God's support for abolitionism. Furthermore, Jack's immense "passion of revenge"⁶⁰ can be interpreted as a combination of action and sensibility, and as demonstrated earlier, the text implies emotionally driven perspectives are more accurate interpretations of Christianity. Additionally, Amri dies pagan, but "heaven received her amidst a choir of angels."⁶¹ Again, this reading violates the foundational Christian principle that one's belief in the Trinity generates spiritual salvation. However, the imagery still implies that the Christian God supported her quest for revenge. Earle's hermeneutic broadly aligns with the intertitle's epigraph, "I am innocent of this blood, SEE YE to it,"⁶² an adaptation of Pilate's assertion that "I am innocent of this man's blood. . . . You bear the responsibility"⁶³ that aligns readers with "Pontius Pilate symbolically wash[ing] his hands of the blood of Christ."⁶⁴ This is an explicit example of Earle appropriating Christian ideas so that they better support abolitionism. However, Jack's Christian-supported status is an extension of the racist "Black European" trope that insinuates that Jack's superiority stems from his European-like traits. Earle purports this characterization when describing Jack's character and physicality, stating that his nose was "aquiline" and "not like the generality of blacks."⁶⁵ During a rebellion attempt, Jack's enslaved peers "set up a loud yell and fled," and Jack "disclaim[s] [them]" for being "traitors" to their "liberty."⁶⁶ This dynamic reflects Earle's paradoxical delegitimization of Obi that works to fortify his abolitionist moral. Earle disenfranchises Jack's African identity to more thoroughly situate him as a European Christian God-supported protagonist in order to encourage Christian readers to endorse the abolitionist movement.

Ultimately, *Obi* is a complex and, at times, contradictory novel. As the historical figure of Jack Mansong is being reclaimed by contemporary Jamaican artists, it is important to examine how early colonial representations of the revolutionary created a character and story that largely aligned with colonial sentiments. Throughout the text, Earle uses narrative and structural strategies to discredit Obi's scientific value and encourage readers to interpret

the practice as a religion. The supernatural characterization works to directly demonstrate Obi's inferiority to a non-natural theology interpretation of Christianity. Reconciling Christianity's implied superior power and Jack's providential victories, Earle employs an array of Christian ideas that contradict the faith but suggest that Christianity supports Jack's initial quest for revenge, emphasizing Earle's abolitionist message to Christian audiences. Thus, a contemporary analysis of this novel reveals that Obi leaves readers with the tenuous and paradoxical task of addressing and disentangling Earle's racist ideas that disvalue African practices from his abolitionist advocacy.

Endnotes

1. Frances Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean: 'Three-Fingered Jack' and the Jamaican Pantomime," *Callaloo* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 494.
2. Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean," 495.
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4. Aravamudan, "Introduction," 11.
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6. Aravamudan, "Introduction," 12.
7. Aravamudan, "Introduction," 18.
8. Aravamudan, "Introduction," 39.
9. Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean," 494.
10. Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean," 505.
11. Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean," 494.
12. Botkin, "Revising the Colonial Caribbean," 499.
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15. William Earle. *Obi: Or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack*, ed. Srinivas Aravamudan (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005), 85.
16. Earle, *Obi*, 119.
17. Earle, *Obi*, 150.
18. Earle, *Obi*, 150.
19. Earle, *Obi*, 156.
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 22. Layne, “Re-evaluating Religion,” 58.
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 24. Earle, *Obi*, 121.
 25. Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on Sugar: With Miscellaneous Medical Observations* (London: John Nichols, 1799), 173-174, <https://www.google.ca/books/edition/A Treatise on Sugar/OhDAQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1/>.
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 27. Katherine Charles, “Speaking Across: Literary Form and Speech in Obi: Or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack,” *The Eighteenth Century* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 301. Project MUSE.
 28. Charles, “Speaking Across,” 302.
 29. Earle, *Obi*, 96.
 30. Earle, *Obi*, 70.
 31. Charles, “Speaking Across,” 299.
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 33. Layne, “Re-evaluating Religion,” 60.
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 35. Dillon, “Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment,” 177.
 36. Dillon, “Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment,” 177.
 37. Dillon, “Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment,” 176.
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 41. Layne, “Re-evaluating Religion,” 59.
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 46. Earle, *Obi*, 128.
 47. Exod. 20:4 (New International Version, all subsequent citations are from this version).
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 54. Earle, *Obi*, 155.
 55. Rev. 5:5.
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 57. Earle, *Obi*, 119.
 58. Earle, *Obi*, 96.
 59. Matt. 5:38.
 60. Earle, *Obi*, 71.
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 63. Matt. 27:24.
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 65. Earle, *Obi*, 72.
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