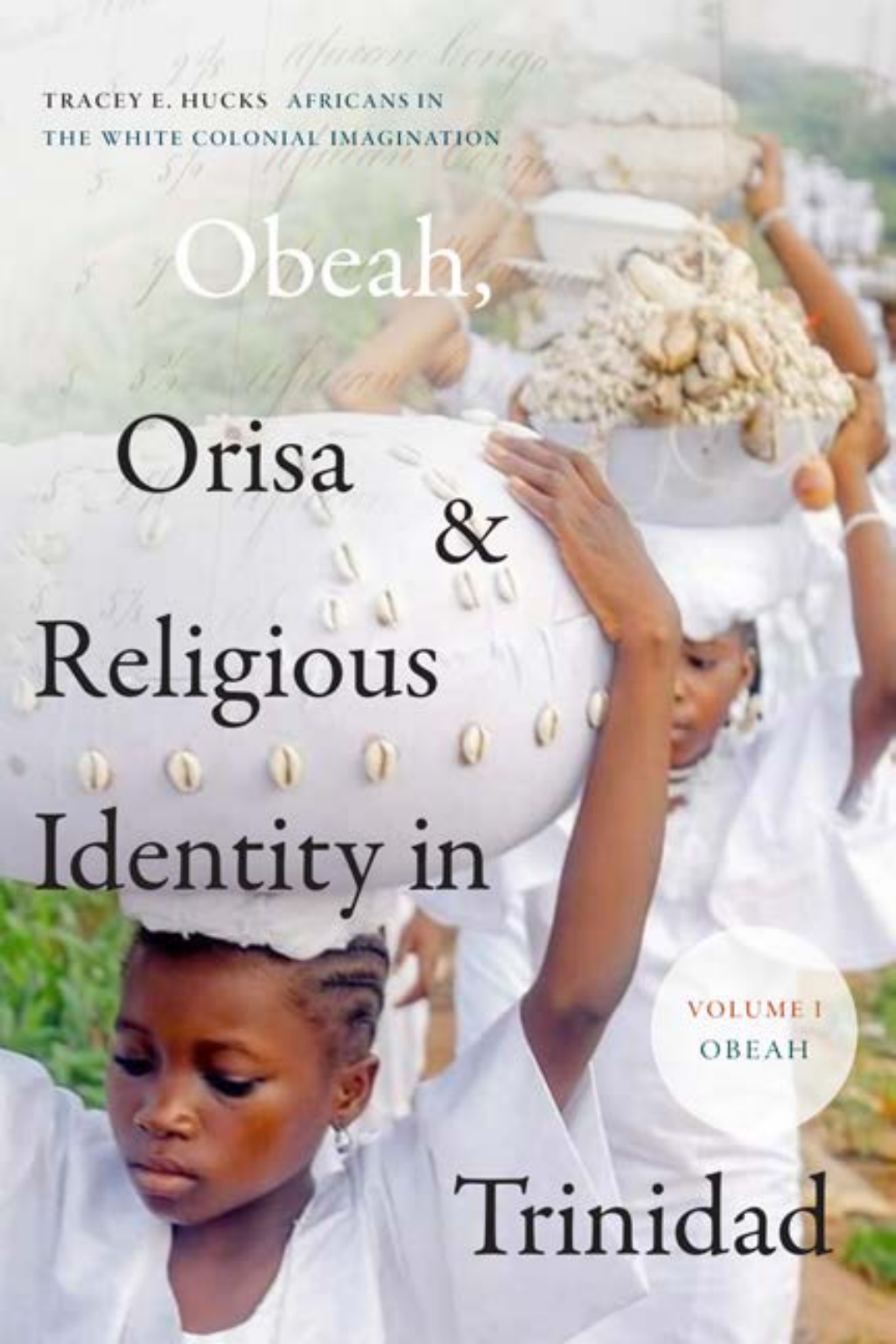




TRACEY E. HUCKS AFRICANS IN
THE WHITE COLONIAL IMAGINATION

Obeah,
Orisa
&
Religious
Identity in

VOLUME I
OBEAH

Trinidad

Obeah, Orisa, and Religious Identity in Trinidad
Volume I

BUY

Religious Cultures of African and African Diaspora People

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TRACEY E. HUCKS

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Orisa

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Preface

Obeah, Orisa, and Religious Identity in Trinidad is a collaborative study, the fruition of an idea that germinated in the plush accommodations of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba in Havana, Cuba, during the spring of 1994. Dianne Stewart and I were attending El Segundo Encuentro Internacional Yoruba, an international conference on Yoruba religion, and among the panelists was Iyalorisa Dr. Molly Ahye, an Orisa priestess from Trinidad and Tobago. We had read about Trinidad's Yoruba tradition of "Shango" in books by George Simpson and his mentor Melville Herskovits, who received a grant of \$3,250 from the Carnegie Corporation to conduct research in Trinidad in 1939, but we had much to learn about the richness of Trinidad's Yoruba diaspora. We were determined to do so after meeting Molly Ahye.

Iya Molly lectured on the Yoruba-Orisa religion in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to describing the ritual and ceremonial life of the Orisa community, she discussed Orisa devotees' struggle for religious freedom, a struggle they seemed to be winning—at least to a much greater degree than their counterparts in other regions of the African diaspora. By the end of our trip, we began to envision a womanist approach of "harmonizing and coordinating" our scholarly efforts to co-produce a volume on the Orisa religion in Trinidad and the role of women in the tradition's transformation during the latter decades of the twentieth century.¹ We were graduate students at the time and knew this book idea would be a future project for both of us.

We made our first research trip to Trinidad in December 1998 and over two decades conducted archival and field research that resulted in not one but two volumes, which we both expected and did not expect. Our two-volume project, as the title suggests, expanded beyond a focus on Orisa to incorporate

a study of Obeah, an opaque repertoire of African spiritual systems that has been practiced throughout the Caribbean and regions of the Americas. In our first monographs, I wrote about Orisa and Dianne about Obeah; in this case, we switched subjects, because I was better suited to address the historical framing of Obeah in early colonial Trinidad. We determined, too, that Dianne was better suited to explore how Orisa devotees intellectualize and make meaning out of their beliefs and spirituality. In this endeavor, Dianne addresses our original aim for this project by engaging womanist and feminist discourses to examine institutional developments within the Orisa tradition and shifts in both internal and external narratives of Orisa presence and practice in post-1980s Trinidad. During this period Molly Ahye and other contemporary Orisa mothers held prominence as local and global leaders in this rapidly changing religious culture, and we discovered that a proper treatment of their contributions required Dianne to flesh out other pertinent themes. Thus, volume II expanded into a study of the religious imagination and sacred poetics of African descendants—"Yaraba" nation-builders, Black Power sacred scientists, and women-mothers—in Trinidad who over a century and a half have held together "a moving continuity" they have called "Ebo," "the Yaraba Dance," "Yaraba Work," "African Work," "Orisa Work," "Shango," "Ifa," and "Orisa."²

While the project unfolded, we developed new perspectives as a result of our wider scholarly activities. We also offered direction to the field of black religious studies, especially through our 2013 article, "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," which appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Africana Religions*. In that article we revisited the Herskovits/Frazier debate, its cultural and ideological context, and its impact on theoretical and methodological norms in the scholarship of academics trained in black religious studies/theology. We specifically explored roughly seventy-five years of knowledge production that, with few exceptions, had reduced black religion to black church studies and black Christian theology. Far too many works had missed opportunities to conceptualize black people's African religious heritage. The scholarship gave little attention to the "image of Africa" in the black religious imagination, limiting our understanding of the polyreligious and polycultural realities that indeed characterized the spiritual lives of enslaved Africans in the United States and elsewhere.³ We concluded our article by providing some of the conceptual architecture and theoretical justifications for transdisciplinary Africana religious studies research as a way forward in twenty-first-century scholarship on African-descended peoples—their religions and cultures—in the Americas and the Caribbean.

While seeking to enrich Caribbean and Africana studies, we imagine this project as a contribution to a developing body of research in religious studies on the methodology we began to formulate in our 2013 article. I approached the archives with the intention of examining Obeah as an assemblage of Africana sacred practices and cosmologies.⁴ Instead, what I unearthed in the archives on Trinidad was a colonial cult of obeah fixation operating as a lived religion.⁵ Our most salient definition of religion in this project rests within the tradition of Charles H. Long. For Longians, religion is “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”⁶ The colonial cult of obeah fixation “comes to terms” with its “place in the world” through imaginations and persecutions of Obeah/African religions. In the colonial imagination, obeah functions as *cultus* (derived from the Latin words “to inhabit,” “habitation,” “toiling over something”; variant stem of *colere*, meaning “till”—the Old English word for station, fixed point).

With this etymology in mind, *cultus* encompasses the concept of inhabiting a fixed point. I discovered a singular and fixed approach to Obeah in the colonial archives that reduced it to an imaginary terrorizing supernatural blackness. African Obeah was virtually eclipsed by colonial obeah, a set of beliefs, rites, practices, and meanings mapped onto an imaginary enfleshed terror—the black body. Within this fixed orientation, ridding colonial Trinidad of obeah became of vital (and violent) significance to its civic, social, and public tapestry. Such devotion is what bound members of the colonial cult of obeah fixation one to another. Volume I courageously interprets the cult’s lived religion by taking up the topic of obeah and African religious repression. Thus, refracted through a chronological account of African religious repression (volume I, authored by Tracey E. Hucks) and struggles for religious freedom (volume II, authored by Dianne M. Stewart), our study of Trinidad attends to the problem of religious identity as an outgrowth of colonial “racecraft”:⁷ it excavates the authentic religious identity of colonial whites and offers a textured theoretical interpretation of Africana religion as a healing modality that has provided blacks with authenticating narratives, identities, and modes of belonging. Bridging phenomenology of religion, indigenous hermeneutics,⁸ and black affect theory, our interpretation pioneers an affective turn in Africana Religious Studies and underscores haunting insights of Afropessimist and black nihilist conversations that never lose sight of the black “death-bound-subject.”⁹

Equally significant, our volumes contribute to the wider fields of religion and Africana/black studies in several respects: First, through explorations of

colonial obeah, African Obeah, and Orisa, they excavate the phenomenon of relationality to expand the definitional and theoretical terrain for conceptualizing religion as sites of black care and black harm. An analytic of relationality has considerable implications for the broader study of religion.¹⁰ It provides a lens for investigating contacts, interactions, and exchanges among and across seen and unseen persons/entities. Whether within the context of religious traditions or within social structures broadly speaking, relationality is an indispensable guiding category for assessing intimacies that reveal and conceal individuals' and groups' authentic religion. Our collaborative study demonstrates that although orientation is the first step in the creation of a religious ethos, it is relationality that sustains a religious ethos and actually gives rise to religion, whether that religion is established through intimate care, intimate terrorism, or something else. Orientation determines positionings and suggests locative awareness while relationality operationalizes the perceptions and affects that substantiate them. Considering the singularity of whites' collective soul-life, we take seriously William James's designation of religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual[s] . . . so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to what-ever they may consider divine."¹¹ This understanding of religion accords with our privileging of affect and its mobilizing power in the making of religion. Interpreting colonial affects, however, led us to conclude that what white colonists considered divine was the image of themselves tethered to the mutilated black body; and the black body was a divine mirror of the white soul—the sacred fetish whites needed and created to live, breathe, and have their being. Sadly, as innovative as James was in theorizing religion, he was terribly shortsighted in his impoverished understanding of African religions. Our study both invalidates James's shortsightedness and embraces his privileging of affects, experiences, and relationality which help us to interrogate dimensions of religiosity that James himself could not perceive, namely *white racecraft as lived religion*.¹²

Second, and relatedly, in its investigation of the white colonial imagination our study offers a new theoretical interpretation of lived religion. Third, using indigenous hermeneutics, it theorizes *nationhood* in the Americas and the Caribbean as an autonomous Africana index of identity. Fourth, it contributes to Africana Religious Studies a foundational methodological imperative and method of applying indigenous hermeneutics within comparative assessments of African and African diasporic cultures/religions. Fifth, it elevates the Africana concept of *work* as a religious studies category for ritual practice and spiritual intervention. Sixth, it advances a mode of theological

reflection that privileges religious imagination and cultural values rather than systematic approaches to doctrine. Seventh, its analysis of white colonial responses to African heritage religions and its interrogation of the religious nature of antiblackness establish a new point of departure for theorizing white libidinal power. Eighth, it connects threads of continuity among African and African diasporic womanisms and feminisms through the non-gendered Africana concept of *motherness* and establishes an arena within Africana/black studies for further comparisons of womanist and feminist intellectual lineages.

Book-length studies on Trinidadian Obeah and Orisa are still quite sparse, but to our knowledge, anthropologists and other social scientists have produced them. To help balance the growing number of important ethnographies that focus on Orisa ceremonies and rituals, and to expose the religious dimensions of white colonial power, we emphasize what religious studies scholars are trained to examine: the symbols, originary narratives (myths), performances, practices, rituals, and experiences that orient religious persons as they confront limits and shape possibilities for themselves. As scholars in the humanities—a trained historian of religion and a theologian—we treat interiority perhaps as much as we do the exterior worlds of the figures and personalities the reader will meet throughout each volume. Privileging their sacred poetics and self-narrations whenever possible, we offer what we believe is a new way to think about black religion, black religious imagination, black love, and religious belonging in the African diaspora.

Bringing this project to completion involved numerous field trips to Trinidad between 1998 and 2013 and one continuous year of ethnographic fieldwork (2000–2001), during which we visited Orisa shrines across the nation; frequented rituals, ceremonies, and educational workshops; and conducted more than forty interviews and two oral histories. Our research also involved combing through disparate sets of archives in Trinidad, Nigeria, Cuba, Jamaica, France, England, and the United States. Most of these trips were undertaken to conduct archival research at the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago; Heritage Library of Trinidad and Tobago; University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica; University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad; Bibliothèque Nationale de France; Bibliothèque du Saulchoir; British Library; National Archives in Kew Gardens; Lambeth Palace Library; School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; Northwestern University Archives; and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. We also gained access to Hansard Reports, bills, and acts of Parliament from the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as unpublished

correspondence, minutes, devotional literature, and educational materials at various Orisa shrines in Trinidad. Nonetheless, although we believe both volumes reflect our careful historical and ethnographic work on Obeah and Orisa, they are not intended to be comprehensive histories or ethnographies of these traditions. Rather, they bear witness to the dynamic endurance of African heritage religions among Trinidad's pluralistic black diasporas, identifying Africa as the epistemic source of an enduring spiritual legacy and potent religious orientation across three centuries. This theoretical move propitiously anticipates productive scholarly frameworks in the future of Obeah and Orisa studies. But it also demands a sea change in how scholars analyze global antiblackness and account for the foundational pillars of religions in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Tracey E. Hucks and Dianne M. Stewart

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Introduction to Volume I

In the thirties, a feast was a strange thing. We built a bamboo tent; covered it with coconut leaves; bar round the sides of the coconut leaves because it could not have been anything that was permanent. The police would always make a raid. And in that time, we had no electricity and all of these things. We would get flambeaus; we would put kerosene in a bottle; and we would put a wick. And that supplied the light, plus what candles you could get to put on the ground. And so, from these humble beginnings came the Orisa people.

We had a man that was a very good Yoruba man that you don't hear the Yoruba people speaking about him; they whisper—a fellow they call Mr. Francis. The name of Mr. Francis is known in Yoruba as Mojunta, the dead one, because Mojunta Francis would have done anything.¹ Some of the people believe that he was what you call a true Obeah man. Anything that was done . . . that might have been along the supernatural was considered Obeah. If a person came by and they prayed for a sick and that sick even recovered, that was Obeah. If they prayed for a person to break their hand or foot that was deserving of it—that was Obeah. So, anything that was out of the norm of the society in which we live is Obeah.²

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During our final 2001 interview with Orisa elder Babalorisa Sam Phills (1924–2007), we never anticipated that his remarks about the two most salient repertoires of African religion in Trinidad—Obeah and Orisa—would foreshadow the eventual framing of our two-volume study. Through a focus on Obeah (volume I) and Orisa (volume II) in Trinidad, Dianne M. Stewart and I explore the problem of religious identity that ensues from obscene violations of black bodies and psyches and antiblack colonial state violence, and we address the affective and political dimensions of the black religious imagination in confronting the afterlives of slavery and colonialism. Because religion/theology scholars wrestle with interiority, attempt to apprehend and empathize with how religious subjects orient themselves in the world, and interpret the religious imagination of devotional communities, we conceive *Obeah*, *Orisa*, and *Religious Identity in Trinidad* as an aperture to new knowledge about black/African religious formation in an understudied Caribbean context with implications for future research on black religion in the broader African diaspora.

Volume I situates the beginnings of African religious expressions in Trinidad within repertoires of Obeah, an *Africana* nomenclature whose complexity as an umbrella term for African spirituality and thought systems remains eclipsed in the colonial record. With an emphasis on what we term *Africana nationhood* and *religious nationalism*, volume II explores Orisa, the second-most-pronounced religious system to have touched the lives of African descendants in Trinidad since liberated Yorubas were transported to this southernmost British Caribbean colony in the mid-nineteenth century.³

In Baba Sam's concise narrative of Orisa beginnings in Trinidad, the violence and persecution associated with the historical circumstances in which custodians of the Orisa religious culture operated are carryovers from a colonial era of Obeah's brutal repression.

One thing I claim with certainty in volume I is that ubiquitous colonial terror visited upon Obeah practitioners invited an *Africana* response that foregrounded defensive and offensive spiritual-medicinal technologies, including curative and poisonous remedies for personal and social afflictions. Thus, we learn more about Obeah as a repository of lethal potions, weaponry, and warfare than we do about Obeah as a source of priestly authority, divine revelation, and expertise in midwifery. When I commenced my research, I aspired to balance the discursive script on Obeah by underscoring the lesser-known narratives of Obeah's welcomed presence in the lives of Afro-Trinidadians across the centuries. I slowly discovered, however, that this goal would need to be postponed, for sources privileging the intentions and actions of Africans allegedly or actually involved with Obeah were anything but

forthcoming. My search for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century parallels to Baba Sam's nuanced description of Obeah failed to produce tangible results. Instead, the sources rendered a portrait of white colonial anxieties and race-making rituals that deserved interrogation and theorization.

The attention given, then, to the obeah phenomenon among the white ruling class in this volume in no way diminishes my commitment to the larger project of understanding Obeah's many valences and dynamic iterations across varied historical periods in Afro-Trinidad.⁴ Indeed, when possible, Africana perspectives are privileged throughout both volumes in theorizing Obeah as African religious culture in Trinidad. Baba Sam's account, for example, prepares readers to traverse a central meeting place where Obeah and Orisa are collapsed in the colonial criminal record and in Trinidad's popular imagination. He introduces us to a Yoruba man, Mr. Francis, aka Mojunta, whom some dubbed "a true Obeah man." As Yoruba (and indeed other liberated African nations) populated postemancipation waves of indentured laborers, those who became custodians of their inherited African religions—leaders, healers, and practitioners—were considered purveyors of obeah, a nomenclature that many liberated Africans would have found alien. John Cooper, Mah Nannie, and Ebenezer Elliott are three such personalities from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whom readers will encounter in each volume. They bore official priestly titles in the Rada (Dahomean) and Yoruba traditions, respectively, yet across two centuries, none could escape the ascriptive power of the colonial obeah appellative.

In Search of Polydore: The Challenge of Colonial Archives

While researching comparative perspectives on Obeah in the wider British Caribbean, for volume I, I came across Old Polydore in the UK colonial archives. He stood trial in Jamaica in an 1831 case designated "The King Against Polydore 'for Obeah.'" Polydore "pleaded Not Guilty" in the case. What I gleaned from the colonial transcript was that a woman named Jane Henry had a brother, Reid Baylor, who was "very sick" and "could neither walk nor ride," and "what the Doctor could do was no use." Because her brother's condition was "getting worse," Jane chose to consult Old Polydore, who was known to "give Baths to persons when taken sick." In diagnosing Jane's brother, Polydore revealed the moral neutrality of Obeah and admitted that his previous assistance to another man had resulted in "her [Jane's] Brother's shadow in the [silk] Cotton tree and his hand nailed to it." Requesting "2 Dollars, a Cock and pint of Rum" to now assist Jane, Polydore "took out the gut of the cock

and left it at the Cotton tree” and “threw the rum at the Cotton tree,” or, in another witness’s account, Polydore “threw part of the Rum on the Cotton tree and . . . held the live cock in his hand by the two legs and beat his head on the Cotton tree until he killed it” and “the blood gushed out onto the tree.” It was then advised to “hire Negroes to cut down [the] Cotton tree as it had killed too many people”; so the “Cotton tree was chopped up.” In the closing ritual, Polydore “made them stand at the door and he poured some rum in each of their hands and mixed chalk with it until it became like soap suds and then rubbed it on the dead cock.” Polydore informed those who gathered at the ritual “that he pulled [Jane’s] Brother out of the Cotton tree” along with “two babies” and “that nothing would hurt her brother and he would get better.”⁵

I was introduced to Polydore through colonial lenses as “a slave belonging to Alexander McCrae, Esquire, of Clarendon,” being prosecuted on behalf of “The King” for the criminal charge of “Obeah.” Although his not-guilty plea is registered, Polydore’s official referent is “the Prisoner,” and his associates are “cautioned to speak the truth” against him even if they are “not Christened.” Polydore was said to have “extorted from [Jane] some money, and some articles of food, performing in her presence . . . certain foolish ceremonies,” and feigning “his preternatural powers.” In the end, Polydore’s religious rituals were deemed unlawful and felonious, and it was further commanded “that the said slave Polydore be transported from this Island for life.” When Polydore emerges later in the 1836 British colonial record (still imprisoned but not transported), his crime is deemed less severe and “in short it appears to have been a mere case of quackery, with the substitution of conjuration for drugs,” thus resulting in the commuting of his sentence.⁶

As a contributor to the burgeoning field that Dianne Stewart and I have conceptualized as *Africana religious studies*, I was compelled to reflect on what it means to encounter *Africana religions* largely entrenched in prosecutorial archives and mediated through colonial tongues.⁷ My major conundrum was how to distill the substance of *Africana religions* through the archival filters of an “imperial imagination.”⁸ How might I reconcile my ambivalent gratitude at finding the truncated and illicit life of Polydore in the colonial records of Jamaica and those of Yala, Youba, La Fortune, and others in the colonial records of Trinidad with the frustration of being burdened by archives that fixed *Africana religions* within a moral terrain of malevolence and evil?⁹

Scholars of black performance studies and race theory interrogate phenomena (e.g., lynchings, policing blackness with lethal force) that foster the “epidermalization of blackness”—“the inscription of meaning onto skin color.”¹⁰ My challenge in the archives has been what I term the epidermaliza-

tion of religion—a theology of “racecraft” violently mapped onto black bodies and religious performances in Trinidad.¹¹ Consequently, approximating historically and contemporarily the reach and range of Obeah traditions in the lives of African descendants in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean requires interpreting with hermeneutical ingenuity the archived silences and marginalia in available colonial materials as well as the un/remembered details of oral data wherever they (dis)appear across the centuries. The conditions of erasure that contextualize African religions in Trinidad require a peculiar scholarly discernment, an extension of Saidiya Hartman’s method of critical fabulation: to do this work well, indeed thoroughly, I had to utilize the analytical “gift” of second sight and double vision—the methodological precision of seeing what is actually invisible and decoding the theological griffonage so characteristic of the colonial pens that have scripted the most enduring and damaging religious narratives about African-descended peoples.¹²

Still, my archival challenges went beyond those of representation and the historical muting of African-descended voices. Trinidad’s evolving pan-colonial history entailed Spanish occupation for its first three centuries, French economic and cultural domination during the slave period, and British colonial rule from 1797 to 1962. Thus, I had to negotiate three sets of colonial archives and three colonial languages, in addition to indigenous African languages virtually absent in the archives. Unlike older slave colonies, such as Spain’s Cuba, France’s Haiti, and Britain’s Barbados and Jamaica, Trinidad’s colonial records, newspapers, court reports, parliamentary acts, travel accounts, and missionary archives convey scant early observations of Africana religions. In addition, the African presence and vocal imprint are rare across the centuries, and studies in popular culture on calypso and carnival extensively outnumber comprehensive secular histories. Collectively, these impediments have made me more cautious about reaching premature conclusions, more attuned to the complexities and diversities of diaspora, and more steadfast in deploying transdisciplinary approaches to this Africana religious studies project.

Geocontextual Considerations: “Caribbeaning” Diaspora

The Caribbean is the first, the original, and the purest diaspora.

In “Caribbeaning” diaspora, I chart a theoretical landscape in diaspora studies that takes seriously the intellectual legacy of the late Stuart Hall, the esteemed cultural theorist and sociologist of the Caribbean.¹³ I propose a

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discourse on diaspora that not only positions Africa as the central locus of dispersal, movement, and migration but also advances a nuanced engagement with the Caribbean as a porous geography for diaspora formations. I carefully consider the intra-Caribbean and wider intradiaspora movements of African populations formed by Atlantic repopulations and exchange. Yet, even as it hosts this African diffusion, the Caribbean is also the terminus of concurrent non-African diasporas.

Caribbean geographies and their historical inhabitants have been multiply “diasporized,” observed Hall: “everybody there comes from somewhere else.”¹⁴ More specifically, Trinidad has been host to the diasporas of Spain, France, England, Ireland, Africa, neighboring Caribbean regions, and the United States. Even the indigeneity of the Lokono (or Arawak) and Kalina (or Carib) is disputed: these people-groups find their roots in South American dispersion. Thus, when Caribbeaning diaspora, I accept that entire populations’ “true culture, the places they really come from, the traditions that really formed them, are somewhere else,” leaving me to conclude that “retention characterized the colonizing cultures as well as the colonized.”¹⁵ For example, with reference to cultural reproduction in the Caribbean, Hall argues:

If you look at the Little Englands, the Little Spains and the Little Frances that were created by the colonizers, if you consider this kind of fossilized replica, with the usual colonial cultural lag . . . they were keeping alive the memory of their own homes and homelands and traditions and customs. This very important double aspect of retention [among colonizing cultures and colonized] has marked Caribbean culture from the earliest colonial encounters.¹⁶

Leveling notions of Caribbean diaspora, Hall extends to Europeans the analytical nomenclature of “survival,” “assimilation,” “retention,” and “syncretism” often mapped exclusively onto African-descended diasporas. Ultimately, I offer Caribbeaning diaspora to advance a useful framework of analysis, for it provides a typology of diaspora applicable to translocal regions of the Caribbean. Diaspora is then recast as “both a process and a condition . . . constantly remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle,” as historians Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley posit in “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World.”¹⁷ In the specific case of Trinidad, most helpful in examining its African heritage religious cultures has been an approach that considers Patterson’s and Kelley’s

concept of “unfinished migrations” alongside historian Kim Butler’s “phases of diasporization” over time.¹⁸

“Phases of Diasporization” in Trinidad

African presence in Trinidad was facilitated by a host of European handlers over an extensive period. An initial 470 Africans were transported to the Spanish colony in 1606 in fulfillment of an order for 500 enslaved Africans placed with Dutch merchants. As Catholic planters were incentivized to resettle in Trinidad by the first *cédula de población* in September 1776, those numbers grew: the 1779 statistics on new immigrants into Trinidad reveal an increase of 1,500 enslaved Africans. A second *cédula*, the “Royal Cedula on Colonization of 1783,” transformed the number of enslaved Africans in the colony: Trinidad’s enslaved population increased to 20,464 in 1803 and 25,696 in 1813. Most notable about this population was that 94 percent, or 24,154 of the total 25,696, were African-born captives who had originally been settled in French colonies such as Haiti and Martinique.¹⁹

Because Trinidad’s rate of African captive increase was not as exponential as that in Britain’s lucrative slave colony of Jamaica, with the close of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, Trinidad resorted to an “intercolonial slave trade” that imported close to 4,000 enslaved persons from Dominica and Grenada.²⁰ By 1813, severe restrictions were placed upon importations into Trinidad as a result of growing agitation and abolitionism in England. Smuggling ensued as an illegal alternative; however, the colonial government responded with heavy penalties and a mandated “registry of plantation slaves” that meticulously recorded an array of data including country of origin.²¹ Regarding its inhabitants of African descent, enslaved and emancipated/liberated Africans from Atlantic and intradiaspora transport and trade populated the colony. Following a small group of black loyalists that trickled into Trinidad after the American Revolutionary War, approximately 1,000 more African Americans from the United States were relocated to Trinidad between 1815 and 1816 as compensation for their loyalty to the British crown in the War of 1812. Other militia populations included those of African descent from Britain’s West India Regiment posted within the Caribbean. Trinidad was likewise home to a diaspora of free and mixed-race people who would own close to 40 percent of the enslaved population by 1813.²² Finally, after emancipation in 1834, Trinidad continued to experience phases of African diaspora in that the British-established Liberated African Department facilitated a movement of

close to 32,000 “liberated” Africans confiscated from illegal Spanish and Portuguese slave vessels into Britain’s Caribbean territories. Trinidad absorbed nearly 9,000 of this total number, many bearing “recognizable Yoruba or Central African cultures.”²³

Why are these phases of diaspora important to the study of Africana religions in Trinidad? Our knowledge of African diasporas in Trinidad has been deduced largely through statistics derived from population censuses, immigration documents, and colonial port disembarkation data, with several records indicating African nation-al and/or cultural origins. Historical periodization of Trinidad’s phases of diaspora remains crucial in plotting the trajectories of its Africana religions. For example, analyzing obeah trials during the slave period differs significantly from examining Company Villages of African American Baptists that missionaries in the 1840s stated “perpetuate[d] Africanism in their worship” and were skilled in the “special art of ‘bush medicine,’” which differs again from the study of the Mandingoes in Trinidad in the 1830s, who were deemed “Mohametans,” or the Rada and Yaraba (Yoruba) of Trinidad’s postemancipation liberated African communities. Such a chronological charting disrupts any notion of a static or monolithic African population in Trinidad and precludes facile assumptions and broad theorizations of creolization, syncretism, and cultural reconstruction. Therefore, the conclusions I reach regarding the nature of Africana religions in the region must necessarily be in close correspondence with Trinidad’s changing diasporas.

Returning to Stuart Hall, the current study of Africana religions in Trinidad derives from a story of what he calls “the other Caribbean; the Caribbean that was not recognized, that could not speak, that had no official records of its own transportation, no official historians.” As a religious historian, I adopt a chrono-thematic approach to Obeah through the late nineteenth century; I sift colonial documents through a sieve in order to filter Africana narratives from the colonial mire. Chapter 1 situates the reader in the colonial mapping and emerging of a slave colony of Trinidad (see figure 1.1).

Not officially joined with Tobago until 1889, Trinidad stood singly as a Spanish, then British, yet sizably French, slave colony. This opening chapter examines the competing negotiations of imperial nation (Spanish, British, French), indigenous nation (Carib and Arawak), diasporaed²⁴ nation (African, free colored), and migrating nation (East Indian and Chinese). In other words, how might readers reimagine the colonial landscape of Trinidad as a constant navigation of geopolitical conflicts and religio-cultural contacts



FIGURE 1.1 Trinidad, 1656. S. Luscombe, “Map of Trinidad, 1656” [online], <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/images2/1656trinidadandtobagomap.jpg>.

among indigenous societies; Spanish, British, and French settlers; Asian immigrants; and persons of African descent both captive and free who constituted the majority of Trinidad’s populace?

Chapter 1 intentionally disaggregates this last group of inhabitants into distinct identifiable social categories of African-descended communities and examines each community’s social status. Africa was not a national consensus symbol of unified racial solidarity but emerged as a complicated identity canvas for figuring, nation-al, geographical, linguistic, and racially hybrid identities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Trinidad did not possess a homogenous African population or collective religion. Its diversity encompassed enslaved persons of multi-nation-al origins on trial for obeah, black Baptist militia and their families resettled from the United States, stationed soldiers serving in the West India Regiment, free coloreds or mixed-race populations who looked to Catholicism and to the British Crown in

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order to legitimate their Trinidadian citizenship, and liberated Africans who maintained strong ritual ties to their immediate pasts. Thus chapter 1 seeks both to canvass and to complicate the diversity of these African-descended communities amidst a broader plural society.

Chapter 2 furnishes a documentary analysis of religious repression in Trinidad under Governor Sir Thomas Picton during the early nineteenth century. The perceived religious practices of Africa became unsympathetically symbolized and criminalized as obeah, resulting in colonial legislation, religious fear and trembling, and social panic. Obeah was the inspiration for a preponderance of colonial laws across the Caribbean, as well as a unique body of legal cases brought before the colonial commission in Trinidad. Each case disclosed angst and alarm related to the presence of enslaved Africans, the perceived risk Obeah posed to slavery and Christian domination, and Obeah's reputed similarity to the bedlam of European occultism. This chapter most explicitly interrogates the European imaginary regarding Obeah and the consequential Euro-colonial lived religion of violent somatic practices. In so doing, it reveals how public rituals performed upon the enslaved black body symbolized exertions of colonial power and socioracial consumption.

The conversation about Obeah as it was constructed in the nineteenth-century white racial and literary imagination continues in chapter 3. The chapter offers a comparative reading of nineteenth-century Trinidadian and North American fiction produced by female authors who disseminated portraits of Obeah and/or black religiosity to a wider white readership in the Atlantic world. Looking specifically at *The Slave Son* (1854), written by Marcella Fanny Noy Wilkins, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852), the chapter explores the influence of North American nineteenth-century literature upon the British Caribbean and scrutinizes how slavery, religion, and gender overlap in two hemispheric slave economies. Its main focus is to make sense of representations of black/African spirituality, especially the obeah representations found in colonial literature. North America and the Caribbean are engaged in this chapter not as mutually exclusive territories but as interpenetrating geographic regions of the Atlantic world that seek to wrestle with African presence, religious traditions, and women's positionalities.

Chapter 4 concludes the discussion of nineteenth-century Obeah with a close examination of two obeah court cases levied against liberated Africans in 1870s and 1880s British Trinidad (see figure I.2), the first of which was the most extensively documented case in the colonial record, "No. 5518, Case of John Cooper, Convicted of Obeah."



FIGURE 1.2 Trinidad, 1872. S. Luscombe, “Map of Trinidad, 1872” [online], <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/images2/1872maptrinidad.jpg>.

The landmark legal case of John Cooper (1871–1872) and that of his brother Mah Nannie (1886) are situated within five important historical contours: the liberated African presence in Trinidad; the reinscription of obeah laws in 1860s Trinidadian legislation; the shifting colonial responses to Obeah in postslavery society; competing notions of healthcare among Africans and colonists; and the reconstitution of cultural ties and nations that diasporised liberated Africans forged as distinguishing markers of identity. The Afterword recapitulates central connections between both volumes of this collaborative study on Obeah and Orisa in Trinidad: nationhood; inter-national exchanges and cooperation among Africans; African religious repression and the law; colonial and decolonial mythmaking; and comparisons of the antiblack violence that governed colonial Trinidad with contemporary manifestations of the same atemporal gratuitous violence in the diasporic space of the United States.

The narratives constructed across this volume and volume II are woven together by a conceptual focus on the image, imaginaries, and heritages of Africa as a central preoccupation of varied publics in colonial Trinidad. Both volumes address the themes of repression and nationalism, the memory and disfigurement of Africa, and the sustained appearance of nation-al African

religious cultures in Trinidadian history. In many respects, violence and persecution, be they physical, cultural, psychological, or discursive, are some of the thickest threads lacing together the two volumes. As a result, one of the principal questions addressed is how the factor of omnipresent terror conceals and reveals legacies of African heritage religious cultures in Trinidad and, by extension, the wider Caribbean and Americas.

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Notes

Preface

- 1 Layli Maparyan discusses “harmonizing and coordinating” as an important component of womanist methodology in *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 56–57.
- 2 Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 258.
- 3 Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies, 1995) (1986).
- 4 See chapter 1, n. 12.
- 5 “Within the discipline of religion, David D. Hall and Robert Orsi have for close to two decades been at the forefront in pioneering ‘a history of practice’ in American religious history through the heuristic rubric of ‘lived religion.’ Inspired from the French concept *la religion vécue*, Hall and Orsi sought to encourage new innovations in ‘cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion and American religious history’ by ‘enlisting perspectives’ that privilege human practice as an important lens for determining how humans ‘live with and work through multiple realms of meaning.’ Through examining ‘modalities of practice’ over and against normative theologies, doctrines, or elite orthodoxies, lived religion sought to recast the disciplinary representation of religion into a more flexible, ‘complex and multifaceted phenomenon.’ Lived religion expanded the interpretive gaze of American religious history to include not only practice as a crucial site for engaging religious meaning but also the inclusion of non-elite popular communities as significant actors in religious production.” Quoted in Tracey E. Hucks, “Perspectives in Lived History: Religion, Ethnography, and the Study of African Diasporic Religion,” *Practical Matters: A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology* 3 (Spring 2010): 3.

- 6 Long, *Significations*, 6.
- 7 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012), 5.
- 8 Olúpòṇà, *City of 201 Gods*, esp. 1–5.
- 9 Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 10 Scholars such as Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*; Tandberg, *Relational Religion*; Mwale, *Relationality in Theological Anthropology*; Harris, et al., “Womanist Theology;” and Krech, “Relational Religion,” have proposed the need for developing relational theories of religion and theology. Our approach to relationality is distinct from these perspectives in that it takes its point of departure from a Longian conception of orientation.
- 11 James, *Varieties*, 31–32. Emphasis added. On “soul-life,” see chapter 3, n. 66 of this volume.
- 11 See James, *Varieties*.

Introduction

- 1 Consultations with Yoruba scholars have confirmed neither that *mojunta* is a Yoruba word nor the meaning attributed to it in this context.
- 2 Sam Phills, interview by author and Dianne M. Stewart, tape recording, Port of Spain, May 8, 2001.
- 3 Nation, nationhood, nation-al, inter-nation-al, and other related word compounds are italicized in this study to signify Africana constructions of sociocultural networks and institutions that often included governing offices and micropolitical activities but were not political state structures. Africana assertions of nation identities and productions of nation mechanisms constituted a widespread phenomenon among enslaved and indentured laborers in every corner of the European slaveholding and colonial world. For more information on these institutions and their religious frameworks, see Olabiyi Yai, “African Diasporan Concepts and Practice of the Nation and Their Implications in the Modern World,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 244–55; Edison Carneiro, *Candomblé da Bahia* (Bahia: Secretaria de Educação e Saúde, 1948); Edison Carneiro, “The Structure of African Cults in Bahia,” *Journal of American Folklore* 53, no. 210 (October–December 1940): 271–78; Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco, Usos e abusos da África no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1988); Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity*, trans. Stephen Berg (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World: 1400–1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Patrick Taylor, *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

- 4 In both volumes, Dianne Stewart and I adopt a semantic strategy of employing a capital “O” when referencing Africana conceptions of “Obeah” and a lowercase “o” when referencing the colonial invention of “obeah”—colonial imaginings, beliefs, discursive ideologies, and so forth.
- 5 CO 137/209. Records of the Colonial Office (CO), National Archives, Kew Gardens, United Kingdom.
- 6 “Obeah Histories: Researching Obeah Prosecution for Religious Practice in the Caribbean,” WordPress, accessed May 19, 2016, <https://obeahhistories.org/polydore/>.
- 7 See Dianne M. Stewart Diakité and Tracey E. Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies,” 28–77. The Caribbean experience and its relationship to neighboring regions invite conceptual treatments of African religious heritage and contemporary practice within Caribbean studies, Latin American studies, diaspora studies, Atlantic world studies, and American studies frameworks. While the material uncovered for this book requires engagement with some of these rubrics, we found compelling reasons to offer an Africana framework as this study’s guiding conceptual rubric. We emphasize that our Africana framework is not insular and myopic but necessarily dialogical and resonant with other frameworks.
- 8 Comaroff and Comaroff, “Africa Observed,” 31.
- 9 Comaroff and Comaroff, “Africa Observed,” 32–33.
- 10 Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 1.
- 11 Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 5.
- 12 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.
- 13 The epigraph is from Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identity,” 6.
- 14 Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identity,” 6.
- 15 Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identity,” 6–7. Emphasis added.
- 16 Hall, “Negotiating Caribbean Identity,” 7.
- 17 Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” 20.
- 18 Butler, “Defining Diaspora,” 193.
- 19 Wood, *Trinidad in Transition*, 32.
- 20 Williams, *History of the People*, 66; Wood, *Trinidad in Transition*, 32.
- 21 A. Meredith John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad 1783–1816: A Mathematical and Demographic Enquiry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 165.
- 22 Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad*, 64, 70.
- 23 Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad*, 214; Schuler, “Alas, Alas, Kongo”: A Social History, 9.

- 24 I invoke my concept of “diasporaed” used in my first book in order to punctuate the fact that when discussing the African captives of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Western Hemisphere and their African diasporas, central to my analysis is the understanding that “diaspora” is used not as a noun but as a verb demarcating an occurrence and a series of processes that *happened* to those African captives who found themselves involuntarily exiled from their African homelands and enslaved in the Caribbean and the Americas. See Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions*, xxi.

One. The Formation of a Slave Colony

- 1 Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands*, 76.
- 2 Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands*, 76.
- 3 Besson and Brereton, *Book of Trinidad*, 11–18.
- 4 Besson and Brereton, *Book of Trinidad*, 118.
- 5 Besson and Brereton, *Book of Trinidad*, 118; Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands*, 77.
- 6 Summary of dispatch from Governor Hislop to the secretary of state on the slave rising, December 19, 1805, Public Record Office, State Papers, Colonial C.O. 295/11, Trinidad and Tobago.
- 7 Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands*, 77; Besson and Brereton, *Book of Trinidad*, 118–19.
- 8 Carmichael, *History of the West Indian Islands*, 77.
- 9 De Barros, Diptee, Trotman, eds., *Beyond Fragmentation*, xii.
- 10 Fraser, *History of Trinidad*, 272.
- 11 The term “inter-society pluralism” comes from Simpson, *Caribbean Papers*, 1/21.
- 12 Throughout the volume, I use “Obeah” to designate the spiritual practices of African-descended communities. In contradistinction, I use “obeah” to encompass the broad meanings of the European imaginary.
- 13 Gerbner, “They Call Me Obea,” 160–78; Stewart, *Three Eyes*, esp. 15–68, 139–88; Bilby and Handler, “Obeah: Healing and Protection,” 153–83; Handler and Bilby, “On the Early Use,” 87–100.
- 14 For more on the death-bound-subject, see Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 15 Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad*, 72.
- 16 *Cedula to all persons giving permission to wage war upon and enslave the Caribs of Trinidad and other places*, December 23, 1511, Trinidad Historical Society, Publication No. 75, 2–3.
- 17 *Cedula to all persons*, 2.
- 18 *Cedula to all persons*, 2.
- 19 Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad*, 72.