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Makandal and Pandemic Knowledge:
Literature, Fetish, and Health
in the Plantationocene

Abstract Key aspects of the plantation economy, centered in the early Caribbean, include the theft of Indigenous land, agricultural monocropping, and racial capitalism as well as an epistemological effort to separate out humans, animals, and plants into discrete species. This essay identifies the current pandemic as a crisis in knowledge—one in which assumptions such as Linnaean categories and species boundaries need re-examining—and explores historical and disciplinary means of challenging the limited and often deadly knowledge regime of the Plantationocene. Turning to the historical revolutionary figure of François Makandal, the essay explores alternative knowledge systems that help us to understand modes of human-environmental connection, semiotics of relation, and text networks of literature and oral history. These alternative ways of knowing the world are fugitive from, and revolutionary with respect to, racial capitalism and the plantation project and are traceable within a line of literary Makandal texts.

Keywords Plantation project, agronomy, anti-colonial epistemology, human-environmental relations, Black radical tradition

In a *New Yorker* essay on the relation between the current pandemic and environmental and agricultural history, science historian Kate Brown (2020) foregrounds a pressing need to rethink the science of species boundaries:

The history of civilization has hinged on the building and demolition of boundaries between species. Early agriculture disregarded most of the natural world in order to cultivate only the most productive plants and animals; this allowed populations to grow and cities to flourish. But crops and livestock, once they were concentrated in one place and cultivated in monocultures, became vulnerable to disease. As cities and farm operations grew, people and animals crowded closer together. The result was a new epidemiological

order, in which zoonotic diseases—ones that could jump from animal to human—thrived.

The move to “disregard” most of the natural world in favor of monocropping for reasons of hyperproductivity (extraction in the name of capital accumulation) lies at the origin of the Plantationocene—an era we now inhabit (Haraway 2015), defined by a plantation project that works toward “ecological simplification” (Tsing: 2015) or disentangling organisms from one another—an effort through which, as Sylvia Wynter (1970: 36) writes, earth is reduced to land and man is reduced to “units of labour power” alone. This system, aimed at crop production or “improvement” of land appropriated from Indigenous peoples, is one of racialized labor and humanity and, importantly, one of knowledge organization known to us under the broad sweep of the term Enlightenment.¹

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s (2015) descriptive term for the structure of the Plantationocene—“disentanglement”—is particularly instructive here: the plantation works to disentangle plants and people from their life worlds in the interest of extracting value from them. Yet as Brown (2020) concludes in her discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, our methods of disentangling one species from another, which extend from scientific taxonomies to the plantation project, bear reconsideration if we are interested in the health of the planet and of people:

The interconnectedness of our biological lives, which has become even clearer in recent decades, is pushing us to reconsider our understanding of the natural world. It turns out that the familiar Linnaean taxonomy, with each species on its own distinct branch of the tree, is too unsubtle: lichens, for example, are made up of a fungus and an alga so tightly bound that the two species create a new organism that is difficult to classify . . . In the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, this idea of a body as an assembly of species—a community—seems newly relevant and unsettling.

Linnaean taxonomies separate species into discrete categories, forming the basis of a knowledge system consonant with, and implicated in, the aims of the plantation project and its work of ecological simplification.

In the literary and historical figure of François Makandal, a vital alternative mode of thinking appears, albeit one that has been largely exiled from the realm of historical and scientific knowledge. In this essay, we turn to Makandal as a source of anticolonial, Black speculative knowledge that has direct bearing on our pandemic moment

today. While the historical record concerning Makandal is slim and contested, the literary record is rich, robust, and generative.² Born in Africa and enslaved in colonial Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in the mid-eighteenth century, Makandal was knowledgeable about a wide range of matters: health, spirituality, cultivating plants, using plants as medicine and poison, caring for animals, making sugar, fomenting revolution, dancing, crafting curses and blessings, political leadership, and reading and speaking languages that may have included Kreyòl, French, Arabic, and Kongolese. He was burned at the stake by French colonial leaders in the public square in Le Cap-Français in 1758 after being convicted of poisoning and plotting to poison thousands of white enslavers. Historical documents indicate that many people saw him escape from the ropes tying him to the stake before his execution; a few testify that he was immediately recaptured and then killed. Literary and oral sources, on the other hand, describe him taking the form of a mosquito and flying out of reach of death at the hands of the French.³

As Kate Simpkins (2016) argues, we might be well served to see Makandal, the so-called Lord of Poison, as a twinned figure with the French “absent agronomist” (9)—the Enlightenment theorist of a new agricultural and economic science who reaped the profits of stolen land and enslaved labor and whose plantation flourished in the soil of colonial Saint-Domingue.⁴ Though Makandal was not present at the later events associated with the 1791 Haitian Revolution, he is often described as a forefigure of the revolution; he was a laborer on the same plantation (owned by his absent enslaver, Lenormand de Mézy) at which the famous 1791 Bois Caiman gathering of the enslaved took place, which inaugurated the revolution. Makandal’s name is seeded across multiple languages and disciplines in the domains of medicine, agriculture, and spiritual and political literature. The person/textual object and idea of Makandal present a decidedly different understanding of human-environmental reality from the planter’s and suggest that literature reproduces this tension as a means of articulating alternative formulations of human-environmental relations as well as health and community.

On Caribbean plantations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, French agronomists aimed for efficiency in production, high volume, and automated predictable yields through data logs and labor management. By the 1750s, elaborate roller and cooking technologies increasingly installed on sugar plantations made colonial Saint-Domingue the chosen geography of the most modern scientific

practice. But despite claims to scientific and technological progress, the planter's profit was made possible not through machines but through the forced labor of enslaved Africans and the theft of Indigenous land. Indeed, as French creole planter Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797: 652) reports, the gin technology produced not only sugar but also carnage: Makandal, like many other enslaved workers who fed sugar cane into the crushing cylinders of the mill, lost an arm while working to produce sugar for the absent agronomist.

Lenormand absented himself from Saint-Domingue around the time of Makandal's injury in order to perfect cotton gin technology in Louisiana; no longer able to feed the mill with sugar, Makandal was tasked with herding livestock—he subsequently absented himself from this position in an act of *marronage*, taking up his home on the geographical margins of the plantation project and serving as a healer and priest to other Africans. In 1758 he was named by fearful French enslavers as the leader of a conspiracy to poison all whites on the island. The few documents that report on his trial betray a fascination with the makandals or fetishes he created—objects whose curative power was, at least according to the French, related to the ability to poison others to death. One document concerning Makandal is a sort of handbook penned by Sébastien Jacques Courtin, the French judge who sentenced Makandal to death.⁵ The booklet rehearses and explores testimony from enslaved individuals about the methods of creating makandals and Makandal's leadership.⁶ The makandal, according to this document (Courtin 1758), is composed of “bones from the cemetery, preferably those of baptized children . . . some nails, some crushed roots of the banana tree, a cursed fig tree and so on, some holy water, blessed incense, and the blessed host. [The sorcerer] ties it up many times around with a string to form a packet the size of between two to four thumbs, of the shape, more or less, of a sausage” (Pluchon 1987: 209–10). Once assembled, the makandal is “given a name,” blessed with French and Arabic words, and, in the hands of its user, fed with a potion of smashed eggs, holy water, and the “black of the kettle” (211). A “very great sorcerer” has the capacity to impart to such packets, or “body guards,” an animate power (209). Worn beneath one's hat, the powerful body guard might turn the hat or wriggle: Courtin reports, “All agree that the fetishes of François Macandal wriggled on their heads when they speak to them; some even said that the fetishes cried like little chickens” (210).⁷ Category crossings proliferate in this account. Boundaries are breached between animate/inanimate, animal/soil/human, sacred/profane, and Arabic/

European. Yet the sense of violation—what he calls the “detestable composition” (217)—that strikes Courtin in viewing these assemblages speaks of a fundamentally non-Western epistemology: the subject/object boundary is foundational for Western science and medicine, but, as James Sweet points out, African medicine links spirituality and health through an alternative understanding of these relations. In African medicinal-spiritual praxis, plants are neither poisonous nor curative but rather “empowered” in a manner that breaches the divide between animacy and inanimacy (Sweet 2011: 145).

Sentenced by Courtin to be burned at the stake for his poisoning efforts, Makandal declared he could not be killed (Moreau de Saint-Méry 1797: 651). The subsequent reports of his transformation into an insect suggest a capacity to move across species boundaries, just as the makandal moves between animate and inanimate categories as an “empowered object” with the capacity to harm or to heal. Monique Allewaert (2019) further argues that the makandal functions as a semiotics—one that assembles partial objects to restructure relations and create meaning from materiality in an indexical rather than referential fashion. Indexes function by virtue of their material relation to their referent—an index points to the whole of which it is a part. Specifically, the semiotics of the makandal operates by way of mobilizing the link between materiality and signification rather than by abstracting signification from the material: “The indexes gathered into the makandal bear portions of a particular material surround into the ground and arrangement of the makandal. By virtue of the artifact’s mediation, the bearer stands to gain a different relation to human-scale phenomena (the body and its pleasures and pains, the threat of specific enemies) and to inhuman-scale ones (the forces of history and the phenomenal world in and through which historical force manifests)” (475). Building on Allewaert’s formulation, we suggest the semiotics of the makandal further serves to open a two-way vector of meaning-making: signification is not only derived from materiality, but materiality can serve as a means of escape from rigid signifying regimes. In short, materiality is here mobilized in indexical fashion to craft a set of relations that are athwart the logic of the plantation project and its aims of disentanglement. In this sense, as Katherine McKittrick (2013) suggests, it is within the very structure of the plantation that a creative marronage occurs, not simply in leaving the plantation behind but also in remobilizing it to find within a different geography and spaces of life.

Allewaert (477) reads the narrative of Makandal’s transformation

into an insect as a way of naming the different species/materiality/signification he assumes following his attempted execution: “Makandal vowed that incineration would transform him into a series of fragments of the colonial scene that, instead of simply referencing or returning this scene . . . passed from this scene” into other fragments, including those of revolutionary narrative and Makandalism. In pandemic terms, we might note that the work of the mosquito was instrumental in defeating the French during the Haitian Revolution. As Cristobal Silva (2016) argues, the yellow fever that killed French troops by the thousands during the revolution was transmitted on the basis of varying degrees of immunity and susceptibility conditioned by herd immunity that protected Black troops who lived in Saint-Domingue but not the newly arrived French troops. Conveyed across species, from mosquitoes to humans, the yellow fever microbe effectively assisted in destroying the plantation project’s work of disentangling enslaved workers from any kind of lifeworld and attacked the French soldiers who were not materially interrelated with the diverse species and microbes of the Caribbean with particular virulence.

The transformative semiotics of Makandal remains lodged in a long line of literary texts, ranging from Victor Hugo’s historical novel, *Bug-Jargal* ([1826]) 2004 to the magical realism of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) to the speculative fiction of Nalo Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads* (2004). The specificity of Makandal-knowledge appears with particular force in Hugo’s novel, one of the longest treatments of the Haitian Revolution in the nineteenth century.⁸ Although critics have tended to associate the charismatic African leader in the novel, Bug-Jargal, with the historical figure of Toussaint L’Ouverture, as Simpkins (2016) argues, he bears more resemblance to Makandal than to Toussaint. Further, reading Bug-Jargal as Makandal opens the way to understanding a different mode of anticolonial resistance than the martial heroism of Toussaint—one that disrupts the geography of the plantation as well as the boundaries enjoined upon us by the epistemology of the Plantationocene. Hugo’s knowledge of Makandal may have arrived in part by way of an absent agronomist; the young Hugo, who drafted *Bug-Jargal* at the age of seventeen in 1819, had secured for himself the patronage of one François de Neufchâteau, a French agronomist and poet who served as Procureur-Général of Saint-Domingue from 1783 to 1787 and later penned a proposal for founding a college of agricultural science in France. In a twisting history, Hugo helped to research and write the novel *Gil Blas* by Alain-René Lesage, which Neufchâteau edited. To his edition of the novel, Neufchâteau

added a footnote concerning Makandal that repeats a story first recorded in Courtin's handbook:

The famous Makandal . . . filled three clear vases with water. He took three white kerchiefs and put them in the three vases. The first kerchief that he took out of the first vase came out yellow, and it represented, according to him, the reign of the whites, which would pass. The second handkerchief came out more and more red, which represented the Caribs destroyed by the European, whose reign had passed. The last white handkerchief came out of the vase completely black: "and there we have the reign of the blacks!" cried the juggler. Makandal sported this black flag at the end of a pole . . . and one can judge the effect which it produced on the assembly of these poor slaves. (Lesage and Neufchâteau 1825: 286)⁹

The footnote imports into European literature (as a mark of agronomist expertise) the force of the makandal: that of transforming raw material (here, literally, cloth) into signification with the power to mobilize collective relations. The power of the makandal/Makandal, smuggled through narrative, footnotes, and translation, forms political bodies of people and imagines and enacts revolution.¹⁰

In Hugo's novel, we see cross-racial, homosocial, cross-species alliances form as an undercurrent of revolutionary resistance, and we see the force, too, of a literary Makandalism—namely, an attention to how material re-assemblages serve to challenge the signifying regime of the plantation project. We see not just the destruction of the plantation from without—burning mansions in flames during the revolution—but from within, by way of the transformative semiotics of the makandal. *Bug-Jargal* is told through the eyes of a young planter, Leopold d'Auverney, just arrived from France to learn the business from his uncle. On his wedding night in 1791, a mysterious enslaved man named Pierrot (later revealed as maroon chief, Bug-Jargal) steals d'Auverney's wife, Maria, which begins d'Auverney's odyssey in the mountains surrounding Le Cap-Français searching for her and fighting maroons. Initially enemies, d'Auverney and Bug-Jargal form a brotherhood through their love for Maria, who is frequently equated with the island itself. The two men are also linked, perhaps more potently and materially, by their love for a dog—the mastiff Rask. Rask is a Saint-Domingue dog "born and bred," who blends d'Auverney's and Bug-Jargal's shared history.¹¹ In the beginning, Rask serves as messenger between the imprisoned Bug-Jargal and d'Auverney,

bearing messages on palm leaves (*kanda*) attached to his neck. When Bug-Jargal escapes from prison through a portal created for Rask, he leaves a communique carried by Rask for d’Auverney: “Yo que soy contrabandista” (I’m just a smuggler) (43). Smuggling signification across plant-animal-human lines, Bug-Jargal opens a portal within the plantation prison to his own freedom. Throughout the novel, curative elixirs, black flags, and reconsecrated Bibles and crucifixes used in a makeshift “horrible profanation” (120) of a mass for Black revolutionary troops serve as related makandal lines of flight. While Hugo is hardly an anti-colonial writer, his novel stands in a line of Makandal texts that speak to the reconfigurable relations of the plantation, especially from within the era of the Plantationocene.

The makandal assemblage places partial objects in new relations, producing new diagnoses, new collectives, and new cures that were not possible previously—such new relations are vital now. The novelist Arundhati Roy (2020) has invited us to see the despair and destruction wrought by the current COVID-19 pandemic as a portal that “offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves”—a door through which we might pass in order to “break with the past and imagine [the] world anew.” As Alondra Nelson (interviewed in Mosley: 2020) has noted, Black radical thinkers and artists have required these portals and found them in the past and the future: the “portal metaphor” of the moment, she notes, lies at the heart of Afrofuturism and speculative possibility: “The Afrofuturist tradition in arts and letters and music is really writing with and up against the possibility of black annihilation—the sort of possibility that the world could end, but that there were always sort of spaces of possibility.” The spaces of possibility—those linking and crossing geographies and species boundaries—are ones the current pandemic can and should train our eyes on in new ways, including through a long anticolonial Black radical tradition and cross-disciplinary knowledge by way of science and poetics, literature and history.¹²

As we write this essay, one of us (Kate) still coughs at home. She is alone, in quarantine but embedded in a vast human and nonhuman assemblage. Her symptoms are subsiding, thankfully. COVID-19 evidently found its way into her circulatory system when she was treated for an emergency appendectomy in April 2020. Kate teaches at Auburn University, which began as a land-grant agricultural college and remains surrounded by farms, including poultry farms. COVID-19 has convulsed Alabama’s \$80 billion poultry industry because workers in

American meat processing plants—a largely brown and Black labor force with poor access to healthcare working in crowded and unsafe conditions—have been hard hit by the virus. An advertisement by Tyson Foods, the largest food-producing and food-packaging company in the United States, in the *New York Times* warns us that the food supply chain will break without this labor; President Trump has declared the processing of chickens a matter of national security and has invoked the Defense Production Act to force laborers back into their crowded congress with chickens. For Tara Williams, a long-time worker in a Tyson processing plant, Trump’s orders speak of the plantation: “Tyson really aren’t going to give a fuck about us at all,” she says in an interview, “For us employees that work in production, we are treated like modern-day slaves” (Laughland and Holpuch 2020).

Whether Auburn University opens in person or online next semester, students in Kate’s classes will read Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* together with Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* and Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads*, although many students will be more focused on succeeding in courses on data science or agricultural economics than in literature courses. Auburn’s College of Agricultural Science, which has educated generations of poultry scientists, was founded in 1872 when it received 139,464 acres of land, under the term of the Morrill Act, from across the western territories of the United States that were appropriated (often violently) from Indigenous people; Auburn sold this land immediately to raise a \$216 thousand endowment that has burgeoned to \$778.2 million today (see Lee et. al. 2020). As a “land-grab university” (Lee and Ahtone 2020) focused on agronomy, Auburn’s history (like many other universities in the United States) is deeply entwined with key aspects of the plantation project, including the theft of Indigenous land, agricultural monocropping, and racial capitalism. When we see the current pandemic as a crisis in knowledge—one in which assumptions such as Linnaean categories and species boundaries need re-examining—it also becomes clear that the knowledge regime of the Plantationcene is limited and death-dealing in its pursuit of the impossible work of disentanglement. Literary Makandalism points us toward alternative ways of knowing—modes of being and understanding the world that transform and transgress boundaries that are foundational to the plantation project. Makandal, as a historical figure and as a literary semiotics, takes us deep into a long history of thinking outside of the plantation from within it and reveals the structural force and costs of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness still present within

our world today. Thinking with and through the Makandal narrative lineage, in turn, offers us a portal from this pandemic toward other possible pasts and futures.

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Notes

- 1 On the relation between the concept of land “improvement” and the origins of capitalism, see Wood 2002.
- 2 The written historical record rests primarily on Sébastien Jacques Courtin’s handwritten “*Mémoire*” (1758); *Macandale, chef des noirs révoltés, arrêt de condamnation par le Conseil supérieur du Cap-Français à Saint-Domingue* (1758; Archives Nationales Colonies, Paris; AN E 295); the eight-page “*Relation d’une conspiration tramée par les Negres, : dans l’Isle de S. Domingue; défense que fait le Jésuite Confesseur, aux negres qu’on suplice, de révéler leur fauteurs & complices*” (1758; John Carter Brown Library, Brown University; <http://archive.org/details/relationdunecons00pari>); and Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry’s *Description topographique et politique* (1797: 651–53). The oral and literary record stretches from 1758 to the present and includes newspaper stories, pantomimes, novels, songs, and even a video game, *Assassin’s Creed: Liberation*. For scholarship see Simpkins, Johnson, and Brice 2019; Allewaert 2019; and Simpkins 2016. For a digital teaching edition of a nineteenth-century newspaper account of Makandal in English, see “Account of a Remarkable Conspiracy” (Faherty, White, and Jaudon 2016).
- 3 Allewaert (2019: 460–61) diagnoses the “mutual disregard of Haitian vernacular historians and professional Western historians” as the result of “drawing on two different archives, two different theories of the archive”: one in Western institutions housing European colonial records and the other in a three-century “archive of oral histories.”
- 4 On the development of French agronomy, see Bourde (1953) 2013.
- 5 Courtin’s manuscript is housed at the Archives Nationales Outre Mer (ANOM) F3/88 in the collection Moreau de Saint-Méry. For a transcription of the manuscript, see Pluchon 1987: 208–19. Citations below are

translated by Kate Simpkins and Monique Allewaert from Pluchon's French transcription.

- 6 Makandal's name is derived from *Makanda*, a "packet of animal, vegetable, or mineral matter wrapped in a leaf" in Mayombe, a region north of the Congo River and in Kongolese, a "large, flat leaf that is like the palm of a hand (*kanda*)" (Mobley 2015: 75).
- 7 Pluchon (1987: 209) notes the hat trick is associated with Papa Legba himself, the Vodou *loa* or god who holds keys to the cemetery and access to the soil and who acts as a portal to the spirit world as well as Guinea, home.
- 8 On *Bug-Jargal* as a translingual, hemispheric "text-network," see Gillman and Gruesz 2011.
- 9 Translation from the French by Kate Simpkins for this essay.
- 10 Neufchâteau's knowledge of makandals was grounded in a 1786 incident, when, as a Saint-Domingue royal attorney, he was called to investigate a nocturnal "class of macandals" gathered against a colonial law banning these meetings in Marmelade, a parish populated mostly by enslaved Central Africans like Makandal (Margairaz 2005: 138). The agronomist wrote about the inspiring designs of the sugar operations belonging to Monsieur Belin de Villeneuve, the owner of the gin where Makandal lost his arm, and proposed censoring advertisements for the "elixirs" maroons made in Saint-Domingue (Cheney 2017: 65).
- 11 At the opening of the novel, Rask is taken captive in the English camp. The image of Rask straining against chain and tree to escape parallels the famous moment when Makandal broke free from the chain that held him to a pole and enslaved witnesses yelled "Makandal sauve!" "Overcome with emotion," when Rask appears in the French camp, d'Auverney drops his cigar, which Rask tramples in the dirt on his way to lick the captain's feet and rub "against him with his tail." The dog trampling the cigar in the dirt just as he embraces d'Auverney creates a trans-species dog-tobacco-soil-human assemblage that frames the whole novel (Hugo [1826] 2004: 59). For further discussion of the novel's cross-species assemblage, see Dillon 2014.
- 12 Katherine McKittrick (2016: 16) articulates the need for multi- and extra-disciplinary knowledge, including literature, for decolonial thought: "because thinking otherwise demands attending to [a] whole new system of knowledge—and therefore honoring radical relational reading practices and knowledges—wherein the brutalities of racial violence are not descriptively rehearsed, but always already demanding practical activities of resistance, encounter, radical disobedient black studies, and anti-colonial thinking."

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