Vol. 27, no. 2, Winter 2025

Caribbean Healers in the Botanical Archives

Rachel O'Donnell

Abstract: What does it mean to organize medicinal plants of interest to Indigenous women in archives organized by last name of European botanical scientists? In this personal reflection, I recount my story looking for the 'missing' women in the colonial history of the botanical sciences, and the natural knowledge they possess and pass down, specifically of abortifacient plants, in the botanical archives. Botanical archives often house collections of correspondence, field notes, manuscripts and other writings, and collections are arranged alphabetically by botanist's name. This categorization, both of plants and of people, reveals a European-trained male botanist as a knowing individual and silences many women who grow, develop, and heal with these plants, making entire communities unknown and 'unknowing.'

Keywords: botany, Abortifacients, colonialism, archives, science, discovery

Doi: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.20

What does it mean to organize medicinal plants, especially those of interest to Indigenous women, in archives organized by the last name of European botanical scientists? When we go looking for the 'missing' women in the colonial history of the botanical sciences, and the natural knowledge they possess and pass down, specifically of abortifacient plants, in the botanical archives, it is often missing.

I came across my own research topic on abortifacient plants by accident. I had been studying International Relations and Latin American Politics in a doctoral program and had decided to take one course outside my program. The course I signed up for was called Historical Perspectives on Women and Nature, and in it, we read histories of female scientists, Feminist Science Studies, and scientific writings by women. I was most taken with the work on a 'masculine' form of science and the history of botany, which seemed especially connected to what I came to call women's 'natural knowing,' the idea that Indigenous women in particular had a scientific understanding and development of medicinal plants, including those used for contraception and abortion. In a 2016 paper titled, "The Politics of Natural Knowing: Contraceptive Plant Properties in the Caribbean," I made sense of this term by in part examining how Indigenous and local knowledge of medicinal plants, particularly those with contraceptive properties, played a crucial role in the development of European botanical sciences during the colonial era. The archival research I did began to highlight the significance of Caribbean natural knowledge in shaping historical perspectives on nature and the interplay between European scientific practices and Indigenous understandings. By employing a feminist methodological approach to analyze concepts of natural knowledge and knowledge production, I was able to emphasize the centrality of women's knowledge in the use of specific plants for fertility control throughout the region.

Rachel O'Donnell is Associate Professor in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program at the University of Rochester. She has written about the political economy of bioprospecting in the Americas and revolutionary forces during the Guatemalan civil war. She has done archival research at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, the Archives at Kew, the Natural History Museum London, the Linnean Society, the Royal College of Physicians, the Wellcome Collection, and the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

Through this work, I was able to underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the context of colonial history and the development of modern scientific methods. My research, I hope, contributes to a broader understanding of how local knowledge has influenced scientific practices and the politics surrounding knowledge production.

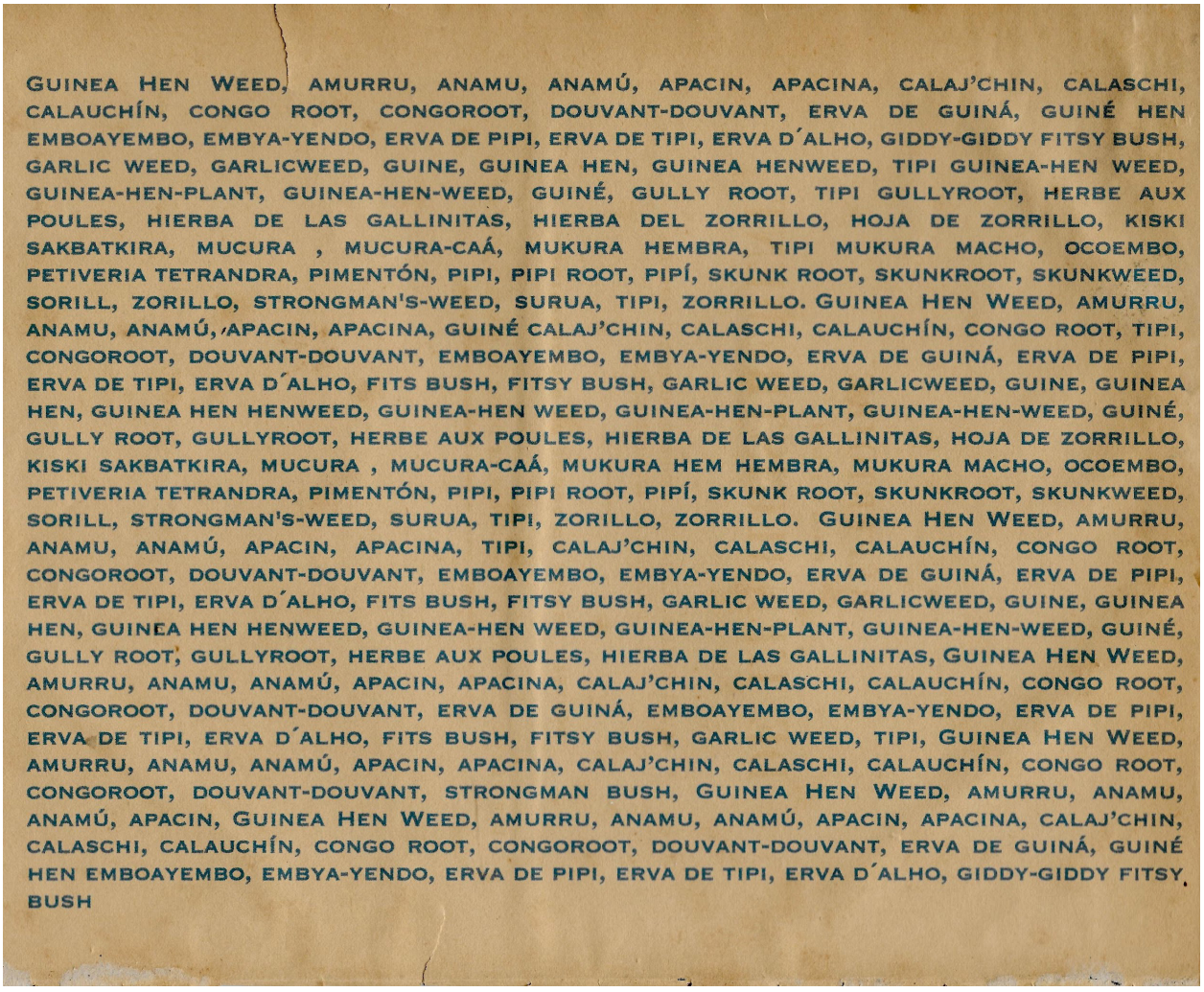
I also remembered, from doing international development work in rural Guatemala, that Mayan women in that community often had elaborate plant-based remedies growing alongside their homes in their gardens and fields, and often reflected on their plant uses as part of their everyday lives. If I complained of a stomach ache, I would be given chamomile or peppermint or a combination of both, or other remedies from the wide selection of available plants. Eucalyptus was used during ritual bathing in the temazcal. Midwives, healers, and herbalists often spoke of what plants they used to assist with birth or pregnancy, and women spoke of plants they used to 'bring down their menstruation,' coded terms for fertility and pregnancy management. I soon learned of 'abortifacient plants' and wrote about them—their legacy, their usages, and the ways in which much of this information is present or perhaps disappeared with the professionalization of botany in the early modern period.

Botanical archives at universities, museums, and institutes house many documents in their collections. They often have correspondence, field notes, manuscripts, and other writings of importance to the field of botany and botanical history. Researchers often use these archives to make sense of the 'discovery' of plants and plant species, the legacy of where plants have been found and what they have been used for, and the way in which they were discovered. Botanical exploration has been closely linked with colonialism, as many physician-botanists in the early modern period were funded members of the Royal Academies who traveled from Europe to other parts of the world to 'uncover' natural products and gather plant specimens to study and return to gardens and herbariums in Europe, often for profit.

Archival collections like these are arranged alphabetically by the botanist's last name. This categorization, both of plants and of people, centers a European-trained male botanist as a knowing individual. What did he work on? Where did he travel to look for the plants? His name is present, and what he named the plant is present. But what is missing when we center his name? This type of cataloguing silences the many Indigenous communities, and women in them, who grow, develop, and heal with these plants, making entire communities categorized as unknown and 'unknowing.' These were often the people who found the plant specimens for European collectors, helped differentiate among plants, and shared their knowledge of plant properties. Yet, in the botanical collections, only professionally trained European men with connections to the Royal Academies are deemed worthy of the title of botanist. The names of the Indigenous collectors are of course not even recorded.

Plants themselves are often catalogued and categorized as well. On a recent visit to the Smithsonian Herbarium in Washington, DC, I walked past many pressed plants named in Linnaean fashion, with a Latin binomial. Herbarium collections are arranged alphabetically by name of the plant, so the plant I was

searching for, *Petiveria alliacea*, was named by 'the father of modern botany,' Carl Linnaeus, for his friend, botanist James Petiver and the plant's garlic smell. Petiver was an early modern physician-botanist from Europe, known for his mistreatment of Indigenous people when he was working in the field. The attached image by artist Wendy Morris lists only some of the known local names for the plant, including Apacina, Anamu, and Guinea Hen Weed, used throughout Latin America and the Caribbean for medicinal purposes, including as an abortifacient. The archives do not catalogue the plant at all by these local names.



Title: Congo Root Guinea Hen Weed

Wendy Morris 2022

Blue inkjet print on recuperated paper

Photograph: Petiveria alliacea growing in Garden of Medicinal Plants in United States Botanic Garden, Washington, DC

2024 image by Rachel O'Donnell

In the Register of Botanical Biography and Iconography database, the Smithsonian Botanical Collections, the Gardens at Kew, the Natural History Museums in the US and the UK, the Linnean Society, all the botanical information is listed alphabetically by botanists. When I went to do my first archival research at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation at Carnegie Mellon University, for example, I had to guess at which male botanists and collectors, from Europe or later the United States, went to search for plants in the locations I was interested in, mostly Central America and the Caribbean.

The collection of Hans Sloane provides a powerful case study for how Indigenous women's knowledge became obscured or stolen in the archives. Hans Sloane was a collector, and his collection would later be the basis for the British Museum. Sloane was trained in London and France as a physician. In 1719, he became President of the Royal College of Physicians; in 1727, he was elected President of the Royal Society. He also became the pre-eminent collector of his time, amassing many thousands of books, manuscripts, specimens and objects, gathered by numerous hands from around the world. In line with his will, the British Museum was posthumously created to house this collection as a national public trust.[1]

While in Jamaica at the turn of the 18th century, Sloane collected more than 800 plant specimens, live animals, shells and rocks, and wrote notes on local plants, animals and customs. The frontispiece of his *Voyage of Jamaica, an account of the natural history of Jamaica and its neighboring islands* is of a ship. It was published in London in 1707. He undertook this journey to improve his knowledge of Caribbean species and discover useful and profitable new drug, and see how the slave trade and emergent plantation systems created possibilities for new scientific knowledge (Delbourgo 7-21).

When I look for information on Guinea Hen Weed, the known abortifacient used by Jamaican women, used previously by those enslaved, and now being extracted and genetically modified for a potential cancer treatment by US pharmaceutical companies, I can find records of the early botanical writings about the plant. I have to look under the name Hans Sloane, for information on its first 'discovery' in Jamaica. We can only imagine what Sloane's time in Jamaica looked like—which healers did he ask for plant specimens? How did he coerce them into speaking of their location and usage? How did he record this? In 1673, Jamaica's white population was approximately 7,800, already outstripped by an estimated 9,500 enslaved Africans. A century later, Africans outnumbered colonists by some 200,000 to 18,000. Which part of the population do we suspect had knowledge of this plant?

Sloane's writing about enslaved Caribbean women gives insight into how he approached them in his research. Hans Sloane wrote of enslaved Caribbean women in the early eighteenth century: "They are fruitful and go after the birth of their children to work in the fields, with the little ones tied to their backs" (qtd. in Bush 121), reinforcing the commonly held belief that only white European women were subject to pain in

1 His entries on many plants are still understood as botanical history and science. *Cacao*, for example, featured anatomical description, notes on the preparation of drinking chocolate, and extensive excerpted commentary on the cacao nut's function as a form of money in Native American societies. It omitted to mention the role of enslaved Africans in harvesting these nuts in the Caribbean (Delbourgo).

childbirth and that African women could produce an endless number of children. Indeed, it has also been shown that many physician-botanists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries promoted the ideas that medicines derived from certain areas were only appropriate for the bodies that came from those parts of the world. They argued that certain peoples were more connected to the natural objects themselves. Are these the same women Sloane or his assistants asked for their botanical information? Is this what is living in the archives in Sloane's collection at the British Museum and other places?

The domination of male botanists obscured some of the contraceptive aspects of the plants, advantages that the Indigenous women would have certainly known and noted if given a platform in the archive. The most illustrative example comes from Sloane's later description when he describes this plant, *Petiveria alliacea* (before it was named such) as Guinea Hen-Weed, and as food for cattle. He writes again of its strong smell and taste: "Hence Cows Milk in dry Seasons, in the Savannas, tast[e] so strong of it as not to be savoury, and the Flesh of Oxen tast[e] of it so much as scarce to be endured, and their Kidnies after a very intolerable manner [sic]" (172). Sloane and his contemporaries were therefore well aware of the effect of *Petiveria* on mother's milk, meaning that its use of an emmenagogue, or plant that could restore menstruation, was well-understood. John Riddle, who offers us the most complete description of abortifacient plants throughout history, argues that any 'emmenagogue,' or plant known to 'bring down the menses' was perhaps a coded term for contraceptive use or abortifacient for centuries, since a woman who is pregnant may have a need to hide or terminate a pregnancy and resume menstruation. In Europe, up until the nineteenth century, a woman was not necessarily considered pregnant until the child's quickening or movement could be felt, allowing a woman time to figure out a way to force her menstruation to return and not speak of a pregnancy (Riddle 179-182). The importance of listing a plant that 'induces menstruation' is more appropriate here, given Sloane's context and time period, than one that 'procures abortion.' Yet he left this out. Would the Caribbean women of Jamaica have left this out? Did they leave it out or did they tell him and he ignored it? We don't have the record of those who collected the plant on his behalf.

What would it mean to redo the archives by plant name? By local plant name? If we list the plant as Guinea Hen Weed, we will honor the local name in Jamaica, and if we list it as *Petiveria alliacea*, we organize it as named by Linneaus, the 'father of modern botany,' again named for another white male European botanist who was known for his poor treatment of those in the field. Should we organize by plant name? Location? Usage? What would it mean if I could walk into the botanical archives and search for abortifacients? What kind of political situation would we need that would even allow me to do this?

An archive centered on collective, Indigenous women's knowledge would be a radical departure from current systems of botanical cataloging, prioritizing relational and communal understandings over individual names or colonial hierarchies. Such an archive would organize its collections by local plant names, cultural practices, and geographic contexts, emphasizing the uses, stories, and lives tied to each plant. It would integrate oral histories, ritual practices, and visual representations contributed by the communities that have stewarded this knowledge across generations. This approach would challenge the silences of tradi-

tional botanical archives, foregrounding the labor, creativity, and resilience of Indigenous women who have sustained ecological and medicinal traditions. By reimagining archival practices in this way, hope emerges in the form of restorative justice—acknowledging the vital contributions of Indigenous women, resisting the erasure of their knowledge, and fostering a future where scientific inquiry and cultural heritage coexist with mutual respect and recognition.

The colonialist foundation of botanical archives, where plants are catalogued under the names of European scientists rather than the local names and knowledge systems from which they originate, reflects a broader pattern of colonial extraction and erasure. This practice exemplifies how archives have historically served as tools of empire, framing Indigenous lands and peoples as objects of "discovery" while erasing their roles as creators and custodians of knowledge. Naming a plant after Hans Sloane or Carl Linnaeus—rather than its local names like Guinea Hen Weed or Apacina—reinforces a narrative that centers European authority while obscuring the systemic violence and exploitation underpinning these "discoveries." Recognizing this connection underscores the necessity of decolonizing archives, creating space to critically engage with the legacy of imperialism and honor the epistemologies and contributions of the communities whose knowledge has been appropriated.

Title: Guiné

Wendy Morris 2022

Woodcut[2]

2 I include Wendy Morris's drawing of Guinea Hen Weed and Ann Shelton's photographic work on plants that have been important to women. Both artists counter narratives that center male botanists in this story, and reconsider in what ways

Botanical archives have much to offer us in terms of the rhetoric of science, and below, I place at the forefront the images of the plants, and not the images of the botanists. You may know the names of these male botanists, or you can look them up, and I'm not going to reprint them here. Some of them are very famous, like the two mentioned above, and some even have plants (re)named for them. You can look them up easily and find their papers, field notes, and letters, by their last name in many of the botanical archives listed above. What you won't find are the names of Caribbean healers, including those who continue to do this work, that are lost or invisible to us. Yet it is thanks to them that we have much of this plant knowledge, including the rows of plant specimens in herbariums in the United States and Europe. Please remember them as you look at the images of these plants below, one plant, whose Latin name reflects one male European botanist, and what importance it may have to the rest of the globe.

plant knowledge has been developed and maintained in Indigenous communities, mainly by women, throughout the world.

Title: On certain days or nights she anoints a staff and rides (brugmansia, datura [misleading], huacacahu, trumpet flower, angel's trumpet, snowy angel's trumpet, angel's tears)

Ann Shelton, from the series i am an old phenomenon, 2022 ongoing

In a postcolonial reading of these botanical archives, we can imagine the coercion and extraction of scientific knowledge, and we know the fame and wealth that came from the way it was collected and brought to Europe. This is the work of feminist history and politics, where we can uncover what little information we have, bring it to light, and hope for a better world in which the Caribbean healers who maintain and develop are given reparation and honored for the scientific work they have done. We can argue for the importance of a feminist methodology that highlights the role of the communities making use of these plants to both botanical history and science. And we have some artists' reimaginings of abortifacient plants and the ways in which they are used, and the memory of those who placed the plant in our archives in the first place.

"As is the case with many hunter-gatherer cultures, the women of the Paleolithic hunters and gatherers certainly knew a number of fertility-regulating plants, such as mugwort, wild carrot seeds, savin juniper, polypody fern, and others. The reindeer hunters of Lascaux had huge quantities of mugwort, which in the correct dosage can trigger the monthly cycle, but we don't know whether these cave painters used it in this way, or as a ritual plant. Probably the Paleolithic peoples knew such a function, as today the Shoshone and other Native Americans do, in addition to estrogen-containing herbs, such as the gromwell, or stoneseed (*Lithospermum*) that prevent ovulation."

Wolf D. Storl, "The Healing Lore of Neolithic Farmers," in *The Untold History of Healing: Plant Lore and Medicinal Magic from the Stone Age to Present* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2017), 109.

ABORTIFACIENTS & EMMENAGOGUES

"Both of the infamous texts on witch hunts, the German *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Witches' Hammer) of Henrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger and the French *Demonomanie* of Jean Bodin, railed against midwives and various forms of birth control commonly practised by women in that period. Ordinary women through their use of herbs in cooking also acquired knowledge of herbs for various medicinal purposes. Midwives, however, had expert knowledge."

Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, *Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 134.

A manuscript of Pseudo-Apuleius Platonicus's *Herbarium*, showing a pregnant woman alongside a woman holding pennyroyal and using a mortar and pestle, 13th century, miniature.

"Pennyroyal—this herb is famously written about by Nirvana singer-songwriter Kurt Cobain, a song that was never released as third single of the album In Utero (1993) due to Cobain's death. On the abortive quality of the tea, also stimulating menstrual flow as emmenagogue Cobain says: I threw that [Pennyroyal Tea] in because I have so many friends who have tried to use that [as abortificant] and it never worked."

CPR (Charlotte Rooijackers) in *All Heal (Valerian)*, an exhibition presented by Rongwrong (Amsterdam, 2017), quoted in Laurie Cluitmans, ed. *On the Necessity of Gardening: An ABC of Art, Botany and Cultivation* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 120.

Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), 1487, trans. ed. Christopher S. Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 163.

"[...] sorcery is used not only to prevent someone from being able to carry out the carnal act, [...] but also to prevent a woman from conceiving, or if she does conceive, to cause her to have a miscarriage. A third way is added along with a fourth in that in a case where they do not cause a miscarriage, they eat up the baby or offer him to a demon. There is no doubt about the first two ways, since without the help of demons a human can use natural means, like plants and other impediments, to cause a woman to be unable to beget or conceive [...]"

Chichester's English Pennyroyal Pills, c. 1887, advertising pamphlet. New York Historical Society

"Like many medical writers during the Middle Ages, Trotula does not disclose the secrets, at least not openly. She provides no details about birth control devices, either of the contraceptive or abortive variety. Just the same, without saying so she lets her readers and patients know how to produce an abortion. She tells us about emmenagogues or menstrual stimulators. A woman with a delayed menstruation should drink artemisia in wine and take baths. If this combination does not work, there is a stronger combination: take artemisia together with other herbs."

John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 32.

Double page spread from *worm, root, wort... & bane,* Ann Shelton. Published by The Alice Austen House Press (US) 2024, 312 pages.

Works Cited

Bush, Barbara. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990.

"A Catalogue of the Fifty Plants from Chelsea Garden, Presented to the Royal Society by the Company of Apothecaries, for the Year 1737. Pursuant to the Direction of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart. Med. Reg. & Soc. Reg. Praes. by Isaac Rand, Apothecary, F. R. S. Hort. Chel. Praef. ac Praelec. Botan." London 1737. Archives of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation.

Delbourgo, James. *Voyage to the Islands: Hans Sloane, Slavery, and Scientific Travel in the Caribbean.* Exhibit at the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University. 2015.

Petiver, James. *Musei Petiveria ni Centuria Prima, Rariora Naturae*. London: Smith and Walford, 1695.

Morris, Wendy. Nothing of Importance Occurred. https://www.nothingofimportanceoccurred.org/. Accessed 17 March 2025.

Riddle, John. *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Sloane, Hans Sir. *A voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieces, S. Christophers and Jamaica, With the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, and c. of the Last of Those Lands; To Which is Prefix'd an Introduction, Wherein is an Account of the Inhabitants, Air, Waters, Diseases, Trade of that Place with Some Relations Concerning the Neighbouring Continent, and Island of America. Illustrated with Figures of the Things Described, Which Have not Been Heretofore Engraved; in Large Copper-Plates as Big as the Life. Volume 1, the Natural History of Jamaica, One of the Largest and Most Considerable of Her Majesty's Plantations in America.* Printed by the Author, 1707.

Shelton, Ann. https://www.annshelton.com/texts-and-media

Shelton, Ann. *worm, root, wort... & bane* book 1. March 2024. aliceausten.org/exhibitions/