Caribbean Cabbage Trees: Settlers and Botany in England’s Early Atlantic Empire

The seventeenth-century Caribbean was filled with strange vegetation that fascinated early modern European observers and compelled them to develop new ways of representing nature’s variety. Whereas many natural historians sought to explain this vegetation within emerging classificatory schemes, many English settlers in the Caribbean, who were neither a part of transatlantic natural historical networks nor invested in the discipline’s principles, developed alternate traditions for conceptualizing unfamiliar flora. This talk
considers the exchange of knowledge between settlers, Indigenous people, and African people in seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Barbados and Jamaica. These diverse populations shared practical traditions of plant use that birthed alternative ways of understanding nature beyond the developing norms of natural history.

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