CONJURING MOMENTS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

WOMEN, SPIRIT WORK & OTHER SUCH HOODOO

KAMEELAH L. MARTIN

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Kameelah L. Martin

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INTRODUCTION

> Where there are preachers, there are also Conjurers; where there are conversions, there are dreams and visions. And where there is faith, there is, and ever continues to be, magic.
>
> —Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic*

YVONNE CHIREAU'S ASSERTION THAT THERE IS A thin differential line between religious fervor and the supernatural speaks insightfully about the permanence of folk belief among people of African descent. In May 2003, that permanence moved to new levels of acceptance when American Express aired an advertisement on primetime network television in which two members of the NBA team the New Orleans Hornets paid a local conjure woman—with their American Express card, of course—to put a "fix" on the jersey of Los Angeles Lakers player Kobe Bryant in anticipation of the first round of the postseason play-off series.[1] As the commercial aired, I began jotting down ideas on how I planned to turn my fascination with black women and spirit work into a dissertation project for the completion of a doctoral program I had not yet entered. I was sighting these women—conjure women—in almost every facet of American culture: film, television, music, visual art, and most notably in literature of the African diaspora. I was determined to get down to the bottom of what was driving these figures to the most visible realms of popular culture and what exactly was the significance of such hypervisibility. *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* is the culmination of that journey. This monograph takes as its core focus African American literature and the conjuring tradition. I am most interested in the point where these two subjects intersect, particularly as it relates to Africana women and spirit work. By "spirit work," I mean to suggest an intimacy with both the healing and harming ritual practices of African-derived religious practices that evolved in the New World: obeah, Vodou, Lucumí, espiritismo, conjure and hoodoo, Candomblé, Voodoo, and others.[2] Spirit work also involves, as the term suggests, communication with supernatural entities that in some cultures may be referred to as ghosts, ha'ints, specters, or apparitions but across the African diaspora are known as the Ancestors, loa, orisha, or simply Spirit.

Images and tales of the African American conjurer have permeated the literature of Africans in the New World since Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and are thus, "as Faulkner would call Dilsey, enduring" (Christian 2).[3] There is no static definition of a conjurer, but Alma Jean Billingslea Brown articulates one conceptualization that I have adopted. She submits that the conjurer "contains a sacred dimension, a transcendent sphere of awe and untouchability derived from the features of spirit possession, altered states of consciousness and spirit worship. Manifested practically in the acts of healing, divination, and the casting and uncrossing of spells, [a conjurer] works through the use of curative herbs, roots, rituals amulets, fetishes and oral and transcribed incantations"(34). The conjurer, as a historical figure, is an evolution and consolidation of the African medicine man and priest; it is a position of spiritual leadership that survived the transition from the western coast of Africa to the New World. This lineage is, as Houston Baker argues, one of the reasons the conjurer is such an esteemed figure in African diasporic memory: "One reason the conjurer is held in such a powerful position in diasporic African communities was her direct descent from the African medicine man and her place in a religion that had definable African antecedents" (*Workings* 79).

I use *conjurer* as an umbrella term that encompasses the individual vocations of root worker, fortune-teller, midwife, herbalist, two-head doctor, spiritual medium, persons born with second sight, and others who are gifted with verbal and/or visual communication with the invisible world. As such, the term comprises the various forms of healing and spiritual praxis with expressly African derivations rather than a catchall phrase for the occult. The conjurer served as the spiritual advisor and doctor during the centuries of chattel slavery in the Americas and has since advanced into a type of hero recalled in the folktales, personal narratives, fiction, and visual representations of the African diaspora. "The religious specialist," as John W. Roberts calls the conjure figure, "was seen as a kind of generator of life-force and his or her presence in the community as essential to the maintenance of the quality of life that allowed individuals to attain the fullest ontological being" (80). Those in positions of authority in the plantation system were often helpless in their efforts to control or discipline conjuring folk, as the power of the conjurer emanated from a source that the dominant culture could not manipulate. The unpunished defiance of African American healers validated their power and thus raised them to the status of folk heroes.

Increasingly, it has been the conjure *woman* who bears these vital cultural responsibilities, particularly in twentieth-century African American fiction. As an archetype that has endured over two centuries of development in the literary imagination, the conjure woman has emerged as such a complex, multidimensional figure that a study focused on her character as its own ontological being promises to initiate an exciting and lively discourse within the academy. In *Conjuring Moments*, I interrogate the underinvestigated representation of the conjure woman, tracing her presence and function in African American material culture through the historical record of slavery, oral histories, blues music, and African American folklore. More specifically, I engage issues of representation and stereotype; female agency and mobility; gender performance and blues music; ethics and Christian spiritualism; and the legitimacy of the conjure woman's power.

Although the conjure woman is represented in fiction far more frequently than her male counterpart, especially over the last century, few critical studies delve into her origins and function as a literary archetype. The conjure woman as a literary folk heroine has only recently piqued the interest of literary scholars and critics. There are a number of works that reference the association of twentieth-century African American fiction and the conjure tradition but do not explore the female practitioner in a focused manner. For instance, Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers theorize how African American women writers act the part of the conjurer in the creation of their art in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (1985), yet they make no mention of the conjure woman as literary figure. Valerie Lee, in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* (1996), explores the historical and literary lives of midwives in the work of Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. While Lee's work is exemplary, it is limited in the way it focuses singularly on the midwife and childbirth and does not differentiate other types of spirit work from that group. John W. Roberts's *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero from Slavery to Freedom* (1989) and H. Nigel Thomas's *From Folklore to Fiction* (1988) provide an insightful look at how the male conjurer fits into the rubric of folk hero; however, neither study addresses the extent to which such a formation is applicable to black women. More recently, Judylyn Ryan's *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (2005) offers a complex theoretical paradigm for reading African American women's use of divinity in their creative endeavors but does not reveal the inner workings of their use of conjure women to manifest such divinity. James W. Coleman also investigates the place of faith in literature, whether based in the Judeo-Christian or African-centered traditions, in *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth Century African American Fiction* (2006). Though both authors engage the conjure tradition, African American literature, and, in some cases, black women, the conjure woman as literary figure is not granted an in-depth, nuanced exploration.

Chireau's *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003) is an excellent historical exploration of how conjure has functioned as a folk religion in the United States since slavery. She even dedicates a chapter to the relationship between conjure and blues music. In fact, I am indebted to her work for inspiring my own exploration of blues and hoodoo; yet she offers a restricted analysis that lends little insight into how this relationship may function as a trope in African American literature. Sharla M. Fett and Jeffery Anderson have likewise published integral historical works on the conjure tradition in the United States—*Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (2002) and *Conjure in African American Society* (2005), respectively—but neither focuses exclusively on the importance and development of the conjurer as a folk hero in African American culture, literary studies, or visual culture. Elizabeth West's *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction* (2011) perhaps works in tandem with my efforts by addressing the prevalence of African epistemologies in works by African American women writers; the difference is that West's scholarship concludes around the Harlem Renaissance and does not focus solely on the conjure woman, per se. By no means am I suggesting that the views or critical positions in these works are flawed; each has certainly informed my own critical perspective. Rather, my intent is to identify a gap in the scholarship surrounding the conjure tradition in which *Conjuring Moments* can be situated. Where there is a body of criticism that explores other black female figures, or a lack thereof, a void exists where the conjure woman is concerned. The absence of such scholarship is surely felt as authors such as Marlon James, Toni Morrison, Tina McElroy Ansa, Nalo Hopkinson, and Arthur Flowers continue to invoke the conjure woman in their works and as older texts such as Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Mercedes Gilbert's *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* (1938), and J. J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* (1966) are reevaluated for their conjure content.

As scholarship and fiction surrounding African American women's spirituality continue to abound, a critical understanding of women practitioners is significant in heightening awareness of and building continuity within the body of work that already exists. It is my hope that *Conjuring Moments* can serve as a bridge to beyond and assist in situating

African-based spiritual systems and female spirit workers in a more expansive scholarly discourse. *Conjuring Moments* explores the ethical dilemmas and religious tensions involved in conjure work and questions why contemporary writers are incorporating conjure *women* into their creative works more now than in previous eras. It draws connections between historical conjure women like Tituba and Marie Laveau and the creation of fictional conjurers like Tante Rosie, Melvira Dupree, Minnie Ransom, Homer, and Indigo. I position the conjure woman as one of the most adept agents of mobility, resistance, and self-determination in the realm of African American womanhood, thereby expanding the narrow view of African American women and African-based spirituality in the academy. The primary arguments voiced in *Conjuring Moments* are as follows:

1. Within the last century, African American writers have subverted the negative connotation of women and spirit work through their literary expressions.
2. The conjure woman figure has evolved as a type of *biomythographical* subject used to resist the subjugation and marginalization of black women and provides critical sociocultural commentary a role that other black female archetypes and characterizations do not.
3. There is a symbiotic relationship between conjure women and the blues specific to African American fiction.
4. With the proliferation of the conjure woman in history, visual and print media, music, and popular culture, her position in American mainstream culture should be reevaluated to reflect her status as a cultural icon.[4]

In developing said arguments, I introduce several concepts to assist in articulating what occurs in conjuring fiction and other narrative forms that employ conjure as a major theme. The first term I want to introduce is *conjuring moments*. Conjuring moments are identifiable points in the text where conjuring or African-derived ceremonial practices occur and advance the narrative action. They usually appear in the text as descriptions of a syncretic sacrament, as in Mama Day's divination by egg yolk or the elusive conception ritual she performs for Bernice in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*; however, passages in which instructions are given to a client, an incantation is performed, or ingredients are prepared also serve as viable conjuring moments. Conjuring moments are highly improvisational constructions of the author and are often based on more well-known folk healing remedies and rites. They can stem from either documented or orally transmitted conjure spells. The curse prayer that

Alice Walker borrows in her short story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," from the collected folklore of Zora Neale Hurston is one example of such documented use. Other authors, via their conjure women, indulge their creative licenses by allowing conjuring moments to become simultaneously individualized yet communal in their broad appeal. Much like a recipe for red velvet cake or peach cobbler, each conjure woman adds her own modifications to the spells, ingredients, and ritual space of her craft—making it uniquely her own. Tina McElroy Ansa's Nurse Bloom, for example, ritualizes the preservation of Lena McPherson's birth caul much differently than Marie Laveau does for her daughter in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* (1993). The act of preserving the veil, however, is a rite that belongs to the diasporic community in the same way the folk is the proprietor of a classic twelve-bar blues; the blues ditty only becomes personalized with the riffs and ad-libs of various performers. Conjuring moments set into motion events that may conversely affect the protagonist and other central characters or offer an opportunity for growth and development; they are seminal points in the narrative that ultimately inform the dénouement. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the conjuring moment in which Charles W. Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy transforms a cruel slave master into a field hand, for instance, is the root cause of Mars Jeems's sudden change of heart.

The concept of the *nonbeliever*, which builds upon Toni Morrison's and Farah Jasmine Griffin's notions of ancestors and strangers in the urban landscape, is the second idea central to my study.[5] As Griffin suggests, "the ancestor is present in ritual, religion, music, food, and performance. His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations like the oral tradition. The ancestor might be a literal ancestor; he or she also has earthly representatives, whom we might call elders. The ancestor's presence in Southern cultural forms such as song, food, and language sometimes provides the new migrant a cushion with which to soften the impact of urbanization" (5). The Ancestor is largely associated with the Southern, rural landscape—the ambivalent home place for many African Americans. Conversely, the stranger is linked to the Northern, urbanized cityscape. The stranger is often a wanderer and has "severed all ties with the ancestor" and "possesses no connections to the [culturally defined] community" (7). I extend this paradigm by viewing the stranger as not simply an outsider who is disengaged with the cultural forms that fix communal bonds. The stranger in the context of conjuring fiction is also an unyielding nonbeliever in the spiritual power and supernatural possibilities of the healer, conjuring community, or ancestral entity.

This failure to acknowledge, particularly, an African-centered spirituality proves detrimental to the nonbeliever's well-being. Margaret Washington Creel has observed the religious function of Ancestor worship among the Gullah communities of coastal Georgia and South Carolina, which sheds some light on how the casting out of such entities can be bad for one's spiritual well-being: "Ancestors retained their normal human passions and appetites, which had to be gratified in death as in life. Ancestors felt hunger and thirst. They became angry or happy depending on the behavior of their living 'children.' The living dead were vindictive if neglected but propitious if shown respect . . . Among the Bakongo, food was put out immediately after the burial and palm wine poured over the grave. Survivors believed the deceased would eat the food and bless those who placed it there" (88). Conjuring moments then, function as "sites of contestation" between conjure women and nonbelievers (Griffin 8). The nonbeliever adamantly rejects the notion of hoodoo, root work, and the spiritual efficacy of bodily objects and charms imbued with the *ashé*, or life force, of conjurers. There is often a consequence tied to such nonbelief. The nonbeliever's refusal to acknowledge Africa, and thus the Ancestors, as the source of divine power evokes the wrath of Spirit, who then finds any number of ways to punish the nonbeliever for his or her irreverence. As Griffin upholds, "often, the rejection of the ancestor leads to further alienation, exile, the status of stranger, or sometimes death" (8). George, from Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), exemplifies the consummate nonbeliever; he loses his life due to his failure to suspend disbelief in the spirit work practiced so abundantly in Willow Springs. In keeping with the idea of the nonbeliever, Marie Laveau's adversary, John, in *Voodoo Dreams* meets his end when he selectively recalls and exploits the religion of his native Africa, never daring to submit to Spirit. Death, however, is an extreme form of retribution and is the exception rather than the rule. The punishment accorded the nonbeliever varies widely. A string of bad luck, a decrease in health, harm done to loved ones, and a myriad of other disharmonies of life can occur when one refuses to believe. Historically, much of the negative attention to and distancing of African Americans from conjure and hoodoo are due to what I explain as "problems of modernity" and notions of racial uplift that sought to assimilate African Americans to white cultural norms. Progressive thinking and the rhetoric of the New Negro actively encouraged black folk's ambivalence to and estrangement from the cultural forms and vernacular traditions that were linked to their slave past.[6] The nonbeliever is a recurring trope within conjuring fiction, as is the *professional rivalry*.

The professional rivalry is another constant that arises in the body of work examined here. Such rivalry develops between two or more persons, ritual specialists by trade, who are not in agreement with the particular methods, ethics, or personal politics surrounding the other's practice. The antagonism that defines such ill relations usually involves two conjuring figures or develops between a conjurer and healers who are versed in and authorized by more Western, scientific traditions of medicine and/or religion. The function of the professional rivalry is subject to one's own interpretation, but I offer two possibilities. It serves either to situate a conjurer along a particular ethical or moral path (i.e., practicing with the left hand—malicious, negative, vengeful activities—versus the right hand, which deals in curative, protective, and balanced rituals) or to demonstrate the vastness of a conjurer's spiritual prowess. In other cases, it nullifies the perception of folk religion or alternative healing methods as inferior, chipping away at the wall of Western cultural hegemony. The professional rivalry has become part of the fabric from which conjuring fiction dating from the early twentieth century is woven. I credit Zora Neale Hurston as one of the earliest writers to expose the reading world to the professional rivalry in 1934 with the short story "Uncle Monday." Hurston spins the tale of shape-shifting Uncle Monday, whose conjuring is bad-mouthed and challenged by Aunt Judy Bickerstaff, who is, incidentally, losing her clientele to him. "Uncle Monday didn't seem to mind Aunt Judy, but she resented him and she couldn't hide her feelings," and as the folk expression goes, Aunt Judy let her mouth get her into a situation that her ass could not handle ("Uncle" 113). I offer conjuring moments, the notion of the nonbeliever, and professional rivalry as part of the idiom with which to formalize conjuring fiction as a subgenre of African American literature. I use the terms consistently and consider them to be a small but functioning part of the framework of *Conjuring Moments*.

The methodological approach I take to my subject combines an examination of conjure women within the historical record with the literary analysis of a number of fictional texts. The literary analyses involve close textual readings and the application of limited theoretical paradigms to novels and short stories published primarily in the latter half of the twentieth century, though the analyses are not constrained by those parameters. While this project focuses on the contemporary period, it is necessary to reach back into the early history of African American letters to accurately trace the lore cycle of the conjure woman within that respective tradition. I pull my argument together by building on such paradigms as W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of *double consciousness*; Farah

Jasmine Griffin's articulation of the *Ancestor* and the *stranger* in traditional migration narratives; Toni Morrison's definition of *literary archaeology*; and Pin-chia Feng's concept of *rituals of rememory.*[7] Georgene Bess Montgomery's "Ifá Paradigm" has been particularly useful in reading traditional African spirituality encoded in the symbolism, iconography, imagery, and allusions in the texts examined.[8] The specific chapters and themes I have conceptualized begin with a historical overview of women and spirit work then move forward to discuss this broad theme within the African American literary tradition.

Chapter 1, "'Thou Shall Not Suffer a Witch to Live': Women and Spirit Work," focuses on reconstructing the historical *othering* of African American healing women in order to provide a context for the reclamation of the conjure woman by African American writers. The negative association of women and spirit work, I argue, is founded on a European distaste for the occult, which developed alongside the rise of Protestantism and culminated in the persecution of female witches across the continent. Coupled with racial myths and a hugely differing spiritual epistemology, Protestantism in the New World equated African spiritual and healing traditions with devil worship, heathen superstitions, and "black magic," which created a hostile environment—to say the least—for enslaved ritual specialists, women in particular. Tituba enters the discussion here, as historians debate her place of origin, speculating a possible movement from the Caribbean to colonial America. As the first woman accused of witchcraft in the 1692 Salem witch trials, Tituba's history exhibits how Protestantism and the stigma against African-based spirituality determined the future of conjure women in North America. I look to Ann Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964) and Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba Black Witch of Salem* (trans. 1992) to interrogate the ways in which authors of African descent have viewed Tituba's story through a different lens and elevated her to the status of cultural icon. Marie Laveau also figures prominently in Chapter 1 as I continue my discussion of the history of conjure women in North America.

Laveau, infamously recognized as New Orleans's sainted Voodoo queen, was the object of sensational, negative publicity aimed at denigrating her reputation. I review the scarce sources on the lives of Marie Laveau and the daughter who later assumed her name to evaluate their importance in the rendering of conjure women as folk heroes in the literature of African Americans. I situate Tituba and Marie Laveau, who have been immortalized in the legend and lore of America, as the quintessential ancestors of fictionalized conjure women. These women serve as the foremothers of American's identifiable, tangible conjuring past. Their lives are a testament to the fact that there is indeed a historical precedent for conjure women being magnificent, larger-than-life heroines. The historical lives of these women reveal that conjure women are not new to the cultural landscape of African America; rather, authors and filmmakers such as Tina McElroy Ansa, Kasi Lemmons, Arthur Flowers, and so forth are pulling their images and tales from a long and rich tradition of African American women and spirit work.

Chapter 2, "From Farce to Folk Hero; or a Twentieth-Century Revival of the Conjure Woman," engages the negative connotations and stereotypes surrounding the conjure tradition that have affected its female practitioners. In some of the earliest literary references to conjure by African Americans, the skepticism usually attributed to the dominant culture appears to have pierced the early black literati. Olaudah Equiano, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Martin Delany all approach the subject with striking apprehension. Many readers are familiar with the well-known incident in Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) in which he is given a root by Sandy Jenkins for his protection from a slave breaker, to which Douglass responds, "I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he said, and was not disposed to take it" (342). Nat Turner (though the authenticity of his narrative should be called into question) makes an aside about his feelings toward conjure in *The Confession of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (1996), and Equiano tells of his ambivalence in dealing with a "wise woman" during his travels to Philadelphia.[9] This ambivalence is challenged as Charles Chesnutt begins to publish his conjure tales at the turn of the twentieth century. I situate Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) as a precursory text in a slow and quiet movement that eventually made twentieth-century African American fiction a safe place for the conjure woman to reside. With the explosion of the Black Arts movement, during which African American folk traditions and African retentions were openly celebrated, contemporary writers have since moved toward reclamation of the conjure woman figure. This is not to suggest that the conjure woman was not a well-known character before this time; Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy had penetrated the minds of countless readers. However, the ways in which writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Elizabeth Nunez, Rainelle Burton, and others project healing women in their works marks a clear movement away from Eurocentric ideas about and representations of the conjure woman.

Chapter 2 places the evolving literature in context and articulates the methods contemporary writers employ to "recover the conjure woman," to use Lindsey Tucker's language.[10] Looking specifically to the problematic areas of image and body politics, I submit that while assuming some of the common attributes of the more notorious black female caricatures, the conjure woman is an entity that must disrupt her own set of stereotypes and misrepresentations and move to demonstrate what those entail and how certain authors are subverting such images. Just as Griffin warns readers against imagining "one static migration narrative," Chapter 2 argues that contemporary writers construct conjure women who "are as diverse as the people and the times that create them"; they are figures who do not have to be discussed in relation to other literary representations (4). I look to the literary texts of Charles Chesnutt (*The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*), Gloria Naylor (*Mama Day*), Alice Walker ("Strong Horse Tea"), Ntozake Shange (*Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*), Arthur Flowers (*Another Good Loving Blues*), Tina McElroy Ansa (*Baby of the Family* and *The Hand I Fan With*), Toni Morrison (*Song of Solomon*), and others to demonstrate how African American writers are taking up the challenge. Lastly, this chapter also looks closely at the power wielded by conjure women to determine the degree to which healing women challenge the patriarchal stance of preachers, politicians, and doctors—hoodoo or otherwise—and how such power affects gender performance and roles. I contend that the conjure woman is often an autonomous persona who disrupts ideas of gender and femininity, exercises self-determination, and defies authority and Western ideologies of cultural supremacy as she sees fit, seldom forgetting that her otherness is often the source of her autonomy.

Moving away from stereotype and representation, Chapter 3, "Troubling the Water: Conjure and Christ," considers the function of the conjure woman in history and literature. I discuss the conjure tradition as a tool of resistance for enslaved Africans, citing examples from Chesnutt's stories and other historical narratives. Conjure worked, as Richard Brodhead suggests, to limit the power of the master and helped those in bondage to resist absolute subjugation.[11] The reliance on conjure and other African-based spiritual practices by African Americans assisted the enslaved in retaining their cultural heritage, particularly as the dominant European culture sought to replace African ways of knowing with their own. The syncretic nature of the conjure tradition often lent the problem of Du Boisian double consciousness to those who sought its council, as evidenced in Shange's character, Indigo, and in the title character of Rhodes's debut novel. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which conjure women negotiate their double consciousness, especially in relation to Christian doctrine. In particular, I examine the source and legitimacy of the conjure woman's power and whether Christianity factors into her conjuring moments. I also look at how conjure women (as well as the writers who create them) recreate the divine to reflect a supreme being and spirituality that fulfills the needs of African American women. Other research questions involve what Theophus Smith terms the "harming and healing" duality of the conjure tradition and how women healers reconcile the many ethical dilemmas that arise in their work.[12] Does Christianity play a major role in the moral decisions of conjure women? Does the rejection of Christianity allow conjure women a higher level of agency or sense of empowerment?

In thinking about the conflicts and different ways of knowing and doing between conjure and Christianity, I also explore the connection between spirituality and sensuality in Chapter 3. I posit that spirituality is often manifested in the physical body—the catching of the Holy Spirit, spirit possession, the ring shout, moments of conception—making it a very sensual, even sexual, bodily experience. Christian ideas theoretically work against such bodily manifestations of spirit, condemning such expressions and often suppressing female desire and sexuality in the process. Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) challenges Christian separation of sexuality and spirituality in the juxtaposition of the Virgin Mary and Erzulie, a Haitian Vodou loa.[13] Reed's text, with its rewriting of history, attests to the connection between the spirit and the body—implying that it is quite necessary. I explore this idea in the following novels: Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (1992); Tina McElroy Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With* (1996); Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (1980); Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1992); Rainelle Burton, *The Root Worker* (2001); and Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* (1997). I discuss how specific characters—Naylor's Eve, Butler's Anyanwu, Ansa's Lena McPherson, and Rhodes's Marie, to name a few—embody their spirituality and power in expressly physical ways, suggesting that the body plays a foundational role in the holiness of the conjure woman.

In *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, Chireau discusses the impact that conjure had on the creation of the blues as a musical form, suggesting that the relationship is one of mutual need and respect: "While the blues captured the black experience in song, they also served as a prime conduit for African American supernatural beliefs. Conceived in the blues as hoodoo or Voodoo, Conjure was a constant inspiration of blues composers. From the country styles of the Mississippi delta songsters to the urban blues performers of the post—World War II era and beyond, black blues people utilized the rhetoric of Conjure in their songs" (145). The connection between conjure and the blues tradition certainly does not stop with the music. J. J. Phillips, in her novel *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale* (1966), and Arthur Flowers, in *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993), transfer this relationship to the written word. Chapter 4, "Of Blues Narratives and Conjure Magic: A Symbiotic Dialectic," investigates the intersection of conjure and the blues as two expressive forms in the African American literary tradition. As it relates to the conjure woman, my interest lies in exposing the symbiotic relationship between the two. I explore blues lyrics that make reference to conjure women (Seven Sisters, Aunt Caroline Dye, Marie Laveau, and other anonymous conjurers) as well as conjure women who make reference to blues lyrics to decipher an unexplored dialogue. The blues were often an expression of African Americans' "experiences of alienation, victimization and loss and, as such, like Conjure, became existential appeals for control in an uncontrollable universe" (Chireau, *Black Magic* 146). According to Sharla M. Fett, some of the most noted reasons for seeking a conjurer revolve around "discord between men and women in the arena of love, sexuality, and marriage," so that conjure is used as a remedy for the blues (91). Likewise, the blues help to keep conjure alive by working as a cultural valve—a device through which conjure could be filtered into the larger, popular, mainstream culture of the United States. Similarly, Flowers's Melvira Dupree and "Sweet Luke" Bodeen share a dependency that must be balanced and nurtured in order for each to function at a peak level: Melvira doing her spirit work and Luke playing his blues. Shange's title character, Sassafrass—who is searching to come into her power as a writer, weaver, and priestess—is visited by Billie Holiday, which I suggest is also symbolic of the reciprocal relationship between conjure and the blues. Sassafrass must cure herself of the blues so that the conjurer in her can blossom, a dynamic that is ripe for exploration.

The research contained in this volume not only strongly assists in the deconstruction of the negative stigma attached to black women and spirit work, but it also provides a wider space for a very old persona to enter the discourse on African American women's representation. The conjure woman is no stranger among us. Ask several members of the African American community (or even the Southern, rural, white community or the Caribbean community) if they know what it means to have "roots" put on them, and my guess is that the majority will answer in the affirmative. The conjure woman is present in the literature, film, religion, and music of African descendants worldwide. It is surprising that, given the prevalence of such an archetype, scholars have paid little attention to the conjure woman within her own literary milieu. Currently, no comprehensive study of the conjure woman as a literary figure has emerged from the academy. The project I have undertaken is an attempt to lessen that void by offering one interpretation of the conjure woman as a cultural icon. Particularly in the area of literary studies, where authors are continually resurrecting the conjure woman figure, I offer insight into and continuity within the scholarship that already exists as well as provide a link for the scholarship that is yet to come. A study of the conjure woman as a literary figure makes the black female ritual specialist more familiar to those who know her intimately and less intimidating to those who realize her importance but have not the vocabulary to articulate their ideas. More important, such a study validates women and African-derived spirit traditions as fruitful topics of critical inquiry and helps expand the narrow treatment of African American women within academic scholarship. It also exposes the possibility of conjure as a literary trope—an idea I have developed and used in my pedagogical designs. My purpose is to call attention to the lack of research and criticism on the topic of the conjure woman. There are many issues relevant to her historical and literary continuations that remain unexplored. While *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature* surely cannot cover them all, I believe it provides a viable starting point.

CHAPTER 1

"THOU SHALL NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE"

WOMEN AND SPIRIT WORK

> Thou shall not suffer a witch to live.
>
> —Exodus 22:18

BY CONTEMPORARY STANDARDS, THE TERM *WITCH* HAS invariably come to signify femaleness. Defined as a "sorceress . . . a woman believed to practice sorcery" or a "spiteful and overbearing woman," a look into the social history of the word exposes the path by which women and spirit work became synonymous with malfeasance.[1] Although originally terms that were not gender specific, by the fourteenth century, *witch* and *witchcraft* assumed a feminine identity that has since left an irreparable stain on such activities as conjuring, Wicca, herbalism, obeah, and other spiritual and healing arts practiced by women living in the Western world. The effects of the stigma against female spiritualists is still felt as African American authors continue to write against popular ideas about "black" magic, riding hags, and soul-snatching housemaids, as depicted in the film *The Skeleton Key* (Softley 2005). The atrocity of the witch trials of colonial America is a testament to the ill regard paid to women in possession of *konnaissance*, or spiritual knowledge and power.[2] The attitude and actions taken in the American colonies, however, were a gross extension of the much older frenzy that stirred across medieval Europe over the association between the "weaker" sex and occultism.

Heinrich Kramer's now infamous handbook on witch hunting, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) also belies the indoctrination of European patriarchy on the "spiritual weakness" of women and "their natural proclivity for evil," though it is certainly responsible for disseminating such gender-biased rhetoric (Bailey, "Feminization" 120). While Kramer's text has become widely notorious for its misogynist stance and even more widespread influence on the persecution of women as spiritual deviants, Michael D. Bailey asserts that "the idea of the female [as] witch was not new to Kramer" (120). Rather, he traces what he calls the "feminization of magic" to another medieval text produced fifty years prior to *Malleus Maleficarum*. Bailey points to Johannes Nider, a Dominican theologian, as the "first clerical authority to argue that women were more prone to become witches than were men" in his five-volume treatise *Formicarius*, which appeared in 1438 (120). Fourteenth-century theologians and papal officials, from whom Nider built his argument, had come to a consensus about the nature of witchcraft.[3] They determined that witchcraft was the result of a complete submission of body and soul to Satan and that said subservience was "characteristically female" (Bailey, "Sorcery" 988). While the more learned arts—necromancy, astrology, and alchemy—were represented as exerting some sort of mastery over the supernatural world, especially demonic spirits, the opposite was true of witchcraft, which positioned its practitioners as foreseeable targets of persecution. The act of submission, the major difference articulated between witchcraft and the other occult arts, only heightened such vulnerability: "The central aspect of witchcraft, from a theological point of view, was the complete and absolutely explicit submission of the witch to demons and ultimately the devil. This was typically acted out in the supposed ceremonies of the witches' Sabbath. At these assemblies, filled with all the lurid horrors that centuries of accumulated clerical polemic against heretics and heretical cults could provide, witches came before the devil, surrendered themselves entirely to his service, and in exchange were given magical potions, powders, and the ability to command demons with only simple gestures or spells" (Bailey, "Feminization" 127).

Nider expanded his ideas from these early notions about the spiritual weakness of women and specifically placed emphasis on "female susceptibility to the carnal temptations of the devil" (Bailey, "Sorcery" 988). As the female body continued to be associated with witchcraft, the language with which such situations were discussed took on "metaphors of fecundity and sexuality" (Reis 24). The indoctrination of such rhetoric was so deeply ingrained in Protestantism that it was accepted as common knowledge by the seventeenth century. In Puritan New England, the devil's seduction was "conceived as rape and possession," and submission to Satan often meant "yielding [the female] body sexually to his imps" (24, 31). Relegating women to the realm of Satan's courtesans stripped the woman healer of any agency that may otherwise have been attributed to her and her spiritual power. She was no longer in control of her own power or sexuality; this position held women spirit workers captive to the whims of the evolution of European spiritual consciousness. Nider's text set the standard by which women spiritualists would be measured and condemned as satanic worshippers for centuries to come. Such an unapologetic rendering of women as "always ready to succumb to the devil" impressed a mark of suspicion and judgment upon any woman who delved into the spiritual arts (Reis 15). The stigma against women and spirit work had a firm grip on the Western world that would not be easily loosened.

It should, however, be clarified that there was an increased interest in combating all forms of wizardry, sorcery, and other types of occult practices regardless of gender among the European clergy as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries due in part to the (re)discovery of "a whole host of classical, Hebrew and Arabic texts" on such subjects (Bailey, "Feminization" 125).[4] These texts, and more specifically the magical secrets they revealed, were limited to the most elite learned circles, which were the exclusive domains of men. Citing necromancy, or "divination performed by summoning the spirits of the dead," as an example, Bailey elaborates on why occultism was conceived early on as men's work: "It [necromancy] involved skill, training, preparation, and above all education. A necromancer, whatever else might be thought of him, had to be intelligent and have a certain force of will to work his magic" (126). Witchcraft, on the other hand, was not considered a learned, scholarly art—a point from which the seeds of negative connotation grew and evolved into a rampant scandal concerning women and the supernatural.

Bailey continues his discussion, explaining that "witches, of course, be they male or female, were typically not highly trained or educated people, and the external mechanisms by which they worked their magic were far different from the complex rites of the necromancers" (126). Here the gender divide widens; women "could hardly be suspected of anything like learned necromancy" because the popular beliefs surrounding women dictated that "they had neither the training to perform such acts nor . . . the [mental] capacity for such knowledge" ("Sorcery" 986). From this particular line of thought, the European clergymen and inquisitors in authority began to parse out the differences between what I refer to as *literate occult arts*—those requiring skill, crude science, and most importantly literacy—and *illiterate occult arts*, which are accessible without formal education. The privileges accorded to literacy and the elite served to indict the underclass and women in particular of a crime of which a formal education would have absolved them.[5] In oral societies, such as the communities of formerly enslaved Africans, where there was less focus on the written word, those versed in folk religion and healing were indeed subjected to a lengthy period of apprenticeship, where one must study the techniques, potions, and prayers of any given craft. Zora Neale Hurston documents her own apprenticeship and training under a myriad of mentors in *Mules and Men* (1935). She had been trained and initiated by five different hoodoo practitioners before her studies with Luke Turner.[6] Hurston's quest for *konnaissance* takes her to Haiti in 1937 and continues in various stages of her career. Folk magic and holistic healing practices, in a preliterate world or otherwise, were neither easily transposed into written format nor meant to be in some cases. Healers had to rely on memory, experiential knowledge, intuition, and improvisation to effectively serve their clientele. To suggest that there is no skill and training involved is a gross oversight on the part of the European patriarchy.

Nider's highly influential *Formicarius* marked a monumental shift in consciousness about witchcraft and women. It was continually reprinted and circulated among the clergy well into the seventeenth century.[7] Large portions of Nider's treatise appear verbatim in Kramer's *Malleus*, in which he elaborates in greater detail on the devil's misuse of the insatiable female soul. Kramer reiterates the inherently sexist charge against women, cementing the troubled correlation between women and spiritual arts that is assumed even today. With the availability of such texts, which were supported and written by Inquisition officials, the persecution of heretics increasingly moved toward a focus on female witches. The witch craze spread across Europe at an alarming rate with no country immune to the prejudice against supernatural arts and the women who practiced them. During the peak of the European witch hunts in the seventeenth century, more than 80 percent of those executed for witchcraft were female.[8]

COLONIAL CONTINUITIES, OR OL' BUCKRA IMPORTS MORE THAN BLACK BODIES, SUGAR, AND BRER RABBIT TALES

Despite the two manifestos on the evils and heretical nature of occultism produced by clerical authorities, the practice of folk religion and magic continued. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Europeans continued to have faith in charms and religious artifacts and believed in ghosts, spirits, and nymphs.[9] Roots and herbs were gathered for both magical and medicinal use, with mandrake, valerian, chamomile, garlic, and mugwort among the most commonly used. Others, according to Carolyn Morrow Long's *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce* (2001), believed magical spells could "be achieved by introduction of one's own body parts or by-products into the food of another, or by possession of the target's bodily products or unwashed clothing" (11). Long also reveals a belief in the efficacy of the remnants of human corpses. She explains that "the preserved hand of a hanged man, called the 'hand of glory,' " was believed to "render the person who carried it invisible and enable him to commit crimes without detection" (11). Another European-based folk belief claimed that "a bag buried under the threshold, containing hair and fingernail pairings from a corpse" would "cause chills and fever" (11).

The advent of the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century, however, put a halt to so-called pagan activities—at least in the public sphere—and called for the elimination of "those practices considered to be more magical than religious" (12). Particularly for those countries under Protestant rule, "the veneration of the saints," as well as the use of "sacramental objects and relics," was prohibited (12). The Catholic sovereignties were unmoved by the happenings in Protestant Europe or elsewhere and continued their "reliance on the intercession of the saints" and employment of such sacramental charms as rosary beads, holy water, the crucifix, and other iconography (12). Catholic countries and their stance on religious practices would have a huge impact on the development of African-based, syncretic religions in the New World. Catholicism's higher level of tolerance for religious objects and their belief in the saints made it possible for Haitian Vodou, Cuban Lucumí, and Brazilian Candomblé for instance, to develop and flourish, whereas in Protestant colonies such as Jamaica, Barbados, and North America, obeah and conjure were practiced with much more discretion, which resulted in a perceivable discontinuity of African spiritual traditions.[10]

While Protestantism supposedly removed folk magic from Christian religious worship, it did not render such beliefs inoperable; the practices simply moved underground. The tumult surrounding the Reformation—the bias against folk magic, women practitioners, and pagan celebrations and the desire for religious freedom—easily found its way to the North American colonies. Such biases were notoriously manifested in the witch trials of colonial America. Taking a cue from the mother country, the European witch hunts so infamous in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries were reincarnated in Massachusetts and Virginia with an overwhelming emphasis on women as deviant spiritualists. The Salem witch trials, the most well-known of the colonial American witch hunts, claimed the lives of twenty accused witches—all but one of them female—by means of public execution.[11] The defamation and unwarranted fear of women and spirit work had literally taken a death hold on the New World.

The European-bred disdain for supernatural work grew even more complicated as racial prejudices developed through cross-cultural exchange with indigenous North American and African populations. The link between bodily submission and devilry found renewed fervor when Africans were enslaved in the New World and the practice of spirit possession was introduced to the colonial landscape. The physical manifestation of African deities in the bodies of people who were already perceived as cursed by the Christian God only fueled fears and prejudices against the spiritually inclined.[12] Timothy McMillan informs that people of African descent in seventeenth-century New England "were viewed by whites as true witches in the anthropological sense—they were inherently evil creatures, unable to control their connection to satanic wickedness" (112). Unsurprisingly, this attitude is decidedly linked to "the presuppositions that Europeans brought from the Old World concerning the nature of African people and the color black" (100). McMillan also concludes that the very same biases that stirred such prejudice against people of African descent also "prevented whites from executing blacks as witches because of the possibility of supernatural retribution"—an interesting point indeed (100).

Tituba, a slave woman and the first accused witch of Salem Village, has a history that has been oddly shaped by such racist ideology. As the colonists encountered Native Americans and other indigenous peoples throughout the Caribbean and then imported Africans across the Atlantic, they assumed a cultural superiority over these racialized *others* whom they "discovered" during their insidious explorations. Europeans assumed preeminence in phenotype, civilization, education, and religious worship. In particular, they interpreted African spiritual worship and healing practices—which were not far removed from European folk magic practices—as more than just pagan: they were incantations to the devil.[13] Europeans perceived the African and indigenous groups to be heathens, cannibals who consorted with demon spirits, and idolaters whose dark skin was a mark against the Christian God: "Like the practitioners of pre-Christian religious, magical, and medicinal traditions in Europe, practitioners of the African-based New World religions were called devil-worshippers, their dancing and drumming ceremonies were perceived as sexual orgies, and their practice of animal sacrifice was assumed to include human sacrifice" (Long, *Spiritual Merchants* 14).

Colonial powers in the Caribbean islands enacted *Code Noire* and other legislation to silence and even erase the traditional African practices that they unknowingly imported alongside the black bodies, sugar, and Brer Rabbit tales.[14] While slaves of both sexes were punished for practicing their spiritual traditions—particularly in the English Protestant colonies—Barbara Bush acknowledges that enslaved females were often more threatening to the master class due to the intimacy with the colonizer afforded them by their domestic servitude. Bush argues in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society* (1990) that women of African descent were at the helm of the obeah practices that took hold in Barbados and Jamaica and often used their knowledge of botany to resist bondage and inhumane treatment.[15] The use of obeah, which simply could not be contained by the colonial authorities, as a source of resistance is attributed to the legendary Nanny of the Windward Maroons.[16] Nanny, a very powerful obeah woman, gained mythical status due to her use of obeah and spiritual leadership to promote *marronage* and rebellion against captivity in Jamaica.[17] Similarly, Haitian oral history credits the success of the Haitian Revolution to a Vodou ceremony held in the hills of the island in which an elder *mambo* was possessed by the loa Ogu, the deity of war. Unfortunately, her identity has long been forgotten.[18] The legend tells that this mambo, under the possession of Ogu, instructed her brethren to entreat the wisdom and blessings of the loa through ritual sacrifice before the rebels launched the first attack. Such instances confirmed European perception of African-derived spiritual practices as dangerous and malevolent. Bryan Edwards, a planter in Jamaica, had this to say about obeah and the enslaved: "All of them attached to the gloomy superstitions of Africa (derived from their ancestors) with such enthusiastick [*sic*] zeal and reverential ardour, as I think can only be eradicated with their lives" (239). Refusing to comprehend any type of spirituality outside of Christianity, colonists soon condemned obeah, Vodou, and the like and outlawed its practice in many of the island colonies.[19] Much like in Europe, this had a minimal impact; in 1816 Nanny Griggs, an obeah woman in Barbados, incited a slave revolt with her spiritual efficacy and powerful rhetoric.[20]

The manifestation of unfounded biases against women and spirit work soon found its way into the realm of healing, childbearing, and nursing as well as slave insubordination. Bernard Moitt, in *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles 1635–1848* (2001), points to the dubious treatment to which many women healers were subjected. The healing women in the French Antilles, known as *hospitaliéres*, fell under much closer scrutiny than other domestic workers due to the direct role they played in the life-and-death matters of the plantation system. Moitt submits, "Of the health care practitioners, midwives attracted the most attention from slave owners and were both praised and condemned in practicing their craft . . . The occupation of midwifery left slave women open to charges of infanticide, which planters in the eighteenth century believed they committed as a means of resisting slavery" (62).

Unfortunately, such ill-defined causes of death were not exclusive to the Francophone colonies. Just as slaves were placed on the auction block in the New World, so too were European ideals and biases surrounding women and spirit work available for all who wanted to partake in them. As Valerie Lee observes about early American practices in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* (1996), "[u]sing the results of deliveries as the litmus test for determining which women were good healers and which ones were in cohorts with the devil resulted in suspensions of practices at best and death at worst" (26). Rather than being accountable for the poor health conditions and lack of prenatal attention for women, slave owners absolved themselves of any responsibility for stillbirths or infant mortality, blaming the midwife of foul play. Infanticide and abortion as means of resistance to slavery were certainly not unheard of, as exemplified in the case of Margaret Garner, on whom Toni Morrison based her novel *Beloved*; however, it is not unlikely that countless enslaved women were charged and punished for plantation sabotage without any conclusive evidence.

This indignity of deceit, maliciousness, and murder that surrounds women healers and spiritualists, particularly those of African descent, inherited over centuries of Western hegemony, is not easily dismantled. Fast-forward to the modern era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and one still finds suspicions of women engaged in malfeasance. This includes accusations and retaliation from within the African American community. Yvonne Chireau has identified several examples:

> Evidence is sparse, but accounts indicate that some black women were chastised and punished by other members of the community for their use of the supernatural. In 1868, for example, a missionary of St. Helena Island described the battering of a black female by a family member in revenge for her 'bewitching' a man. In an earlier incident in South Carolina a male slave was censured by the Walsh Neck Baptist Church for attacking an aged woman whom he was convinced had hexed him. In a separate case years later, former bondsman Jake McCloud recalled the hanging of an African American female slave who was accused of attempting to poison a white family. It was well known among the other slaves, McCloud contended, that the woman practiced witchcraft. ("Uses" 186)

And as scientific medical practices began to take hold in America, black women healers—long the preferred health care provider for many—once again bore the brunt of racialized ideas about their work. Lee explains the denigration of African American midwives (grannies) and healers this way:

> The reductive gaze of the physicians saw the grannies as their bodily parts, especially their hands. Because of infections and fevers, government publications warned the granny: "keep your hands out of the mother," an ironic admonition given that their hands of flesh would not enter the mother nearly as much as the hands of iron [forceps] eventually would. The grannies had prided themselves on the ability of their hands to catch babies. In their oral histories, they speak of catching babies as an art. However, science told them that their hands were dirty, weakening the potency of their primary vocational metaphor . . . By the 1920s in America, the black woman, bearing the burden of the stereotype of the large mammy, everybody's mother and nobody's woman, was the one whose hands the medical personnel criticized. Her hands were too large, too ashy, too dirty. (V. Lee 36)

Whichever way the dominant culture and those who assimilated into it may have slighted African American women healers, the cultural memory concerning these figures appears to have developed differently across diasporic communities. According to Pin-chia Feng, African-based religion—at its core—is an "attempt to remember the historical separation" from the African homeland and, I would add, to heal that traumatic disunion (153). Feng contends that Afro-Caribbeans—and I kindly extend this idea to the entire African diaspora—ignite this catharsis through the ceremony and ritual of syncretized New World religions. The practices of obeah, myal, Vodou, espiritismo, Lucumí, conjure, and others rouse the *rememory* of the African descended and a literal, (or perhaps, spiritual), "re-membering [of] their ancestral cultures and to a certain extent [this] frees them from the traumatic nightmares resulting from tribal dismemberment and racial encounters" (154).[21] These acts—"rituals of rememory," Feng terms them—are a poignant framework for articulating what African American writers are achieving by inserting the conjure woman as a literary figure into their work.

The collective act of mythmaking and creating *folklore in literature* with specifically African derivations serves as a ritual of rememory as Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Flowers, Nalo Hopkinson, and others invoke acknowledgment of a communal experience of survival and resistance to the inhumanity of bondage through the body of the conjure woman.[22] In my scenario, however, the curative that twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers are rendering is not a salve over the wounds of slavery—not directly. Rather, I argue that these writers mean to recoup the loss and reinstate the systematic disenfranchisement of the figure so often at the center of African-based religious retentions—the conjure woman, the mambo, the santera, the root worker, the obeah woman, the Voodoo queen. These authors, by penning narratives surrounding conjuring women, provide "a narrative form for an unspeakable" cultural void, which "helps the victim go beyond the dis-ease of individual suffering and reach the reality" of a consciousness and history that is recoverable in many ways (168).

Rather than be relegated to the realm of fictive *magic realism* or risk the negation of their cultural heroes by the dominant culture, these writers often invoke the spirits/ancestors of the recent past—concrete historical examples of African-descended women—performing rituals of rememory in factual communities. They develop characters modeled on the lives of healers with whom they have personal experience or of whom they have memories. Writers of the African diaspora recognize that Western notions of legitimization center on what can be documented in the written historical record. Reinstating the conjure woman is not just a revival of a forgotten folk hero but also an invocation of her spirit—an offering made in her honor by speaking her name and "documenting" her memory in the fiction of transnational African diasporic writers. For example, Gloria Naylor constructs Miranda "Mama" Day from her memory of a healing woman in her parents' native Mississippi community.[23] Charles W. Chesnutt was likewise inspired to write his conjure tales from engaging with conjure folk from his upbringing.[24]

To take this point further, I offer an assessment of the histories (folk, literary, and social) of two of America's most well-known conjuring women: Tituba and Marie Laveau. The historical record, or lack thereof, would have one believe these women of color have little (if nothing at all) to offer in the making of an American quilt—that they are nothing more than silent participants in the Western, capitalist, whitewashed story of the young republic. Due largely to the rituals of rememory—led by raconteur and novelist alike—these historical figures have risen to iconoclasts: the foremothers of a tangible American conjuring past with identifiable, phenomenal female antecedents at the helm. I am suggesting that readers reconsider the importance of such figures in the contemporary configurations of black women and African-based spirit work. By reading the histories of these historical conjure women through a lens that recognizes the power imbued in retained and syncretized African religious practices, their collective significance to African diasporic cultural memory—and thus African diasporic cultural production—is made more apparent.

The legends associated with Tituba and Marie Laveau establish a tradition of Africana women using spirit work to manipulate oppressive conditions and force the white, Western status quo to recognize their presence; in fact, they inject a sizable hiccup into the Western patriarchal hegemony in American history. Tituba and Marie Laveau are exceptional examples of conjure women garnering national recognition, but their lives also provide evidence that African Americans are born from a legacy of black mystic women that is traceable and knowable if we only know where to seek it. Their pasts demonstrate that history is always three or four layers deep and that the majority perspective does not speak to all audiences. By recalling the memory of these lives and translating them into a culturally specific way of knowing, one begins to unearth new connections between black women's experience in a New World context and the characterizations of black women in literature. This work being done by African American writers is something akin to Audre Lorde's notion of *biomythography*.[25] They build narratives around the biographies, histories, and mythos of the black conjuring woman that appropriate and transform conventional modes of discourse about the raced female. It is unfortunate that the political and racial climate of the United States will not allow for Tituba or Marie Laveau to be deemed national heroes in a similar vein as Jamaica's Nanny of the Windward Maroons, but a number of writers honor them through literary means, taking cues from their incredible lives to retell, revise, and essentially reincarnate not only Tituba and Marie Laveau but also so many other conjure women whose names are recorded only in our rememories.

NOTORIOUS WITCH OF SALEM

Tituba's history and legacy within the metanarrative of American history have largely been determined by the colonization of America by the English and their concomitant biases. Despite being the first accused of witchcraft and the first confessed witch in the 1692 Salem witch trials, Tituba's place in the history of colonial America has gone relatively unexplored. While she is not totally removed from history, very little is recorded about her. What has been left in the metanarrative, however, does not draw an appealing picture. Whether Tituba was of either African or indigenous American descent is a topic heavily under debate. She married John Indian and perhaps had a child named Violet.[26] Little else is known about her. As Veta Smith Tucker voices, Puritans and historians alike have done an injustice to her memory: "Rather than extinguishing Tituba from history, they have given her a permanent though tarnished historical presence that has survived for three centuries" (626). Brought to Massachusetts from Barbados by Samuel Parris as a slave, Tituba's life was one of little note until 1692. Accused of bewitching three young girls in Salem Village, Tituba was persecuted, tried, and found guilty by way of her confession; she was remitted to jail until, over a year later, she was sold to pay for her boarding at the jail house.[27] Her whereabouts following her release from jail are undocumented. Tituba, if recognized at all, is solely connected to the witch hysteria of colonial Salem; she is the deviant slave woman who brought disgrace to young Puritan girls. Bernard Rosenthal catalogs several sources that continue to cast the myth of Tituba in the realm of the demonic. He cites Charles Upham's *Salem Witchcraft* (1867), Marion Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1949), and scholarly studies by Kai Erikson, Paul Boyer, and Stephen Nissenbaum.[28] There are also a number of popular culture sources that perpetuate Tituba's history as guilty witch of Salem, including Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1952), the PBS film *Three Soverigns for Sarah* (1985), a historical marker in Danvers, Massachusetts (the present-day moniker of Salem Village), and a variety of social publications.[29]

For the children of the African diaspora whose histories, legends, and heroes are otherwise determined, Tituba is an iconic representation of the resistance and resolve to survive possessed by the enslaved. For those who interpret her story using a non-Western worldview, Tituba moves "from a passive Indian unleashing forces she could not control into a woman of African descent actively shaping events" (Rosenthal, "Story" 195). As Elaine Breslaw rightly suggests, Tituba may well have worn "the mask that grins and lies" while giving her confession to the Salem magistrates.[30] She argues that "Tituba's testimony was not merely the frightened response of a slave woman, but . . . a sophisticated manipulation of her interrogators' deepest fears. She was sufficiently familiar with Puritan customs to know which questions required positive responses and what form they should take" ("Confession" 541). Similar to the trickster figures derived from African antecedents—Anansi, Brer Rabbit, and later John the Slave and High John de Conqueror—surely Tituba had sufficient savvy to give the colonial inquisitors what they wanted in exchange for her life. She had full comprehension of what was at stake. By Puritan standards, a confessed witch could reasonably repent and undergo spiritual conversion, after which he or she could be reclaimed by the Christian community. By confessing her association with witchcraft, whether true or not, Tituba transferred the "blame to outsiders" and "distract[ed] her tormentors with the fear of evil" (548). With the mention of talking birds, hairy beasts, and red and black rats and slipping into trance possession for all to observe, Tituba's confession "saved her life even as it simultaneously elevated the level of fear" and racial prejudices already formed in the minds of the Puritans (549).[31] Of the three initially accused witches, only Tituba escaped with her life. Sarah Osborn died in jail and Sarah Goode was sent to the gallows.

The art of manipulation for personal gain was by no means a novel idea for the enslaved but rather a way of life and a survival mechanism. Other bondsmen throughout the diaspora who would hear Tituba's story—an oral ritual of rememory perhaps being enacted even then—could surmise that she too had survived by whatever means necessary; thus her tale becomes epic in many ways. I suggest that Tituba is an iconic figure, particularly for people of African descent, precisely because she used her wit and subterfuge to evade capital punishment when her white counterparts could not. The role she played in the witch trials is essential to colonial American history: "Tituba supplied the evidence of a satanic presence legally necessary to launch a witch-hunt. Had she remained silent, the trials might not have occurred or, at the least, would have followed a different course" (536). Her life is equally meaningful (if not more) to people of color under an entirely different rationale. Tituba's act of trickery, if one reads her confession as such, transforms her from "a slave from the West Indies probably practicing hoodoo"—an act of tricksterism itself—into a folk hero of the oppressed masses. Rosenthal believes that the key to Tituba's heroic status lies in her being identified as an African slave: "As a cultural icon, apparently Tituba has not been sufficiently useful as the Indian her contemporaries knew her to be . . . Now fixed in popular imagination as a black woman, Tituba retains her usefulness only if she remains so, for only through her blackness can a new generation, seeking to reverse the sins of the past, reinterpret and empower her, convert her from a trouble-making victim into a noble woman powerfully resisting oppression" ("Story" 201–2).

Tituba's racial identity is an intense debate among scholars. I am positing, however, that her specific racial identity, whether Indian or African, has little bearing on her status as a folk hero. It is her identity as an enslaved, nonwhite *other* that situates her history as one of resistance that is important, not the cultural differences between Africans and Amerindians. A number of scholars, nevertheless, insist on designating a racial category for Tituba. Let us review the evidence. According to Chadwick Hansen's 1974 article "The Metamorphosis of Tituba, or Why American Intellectuals Can't Tell an Indian Witch from a Negro," in seventeenth-century court documents, Tituba is only referred to as an Indian, from which evidence he bases his entire argument. He distinctly calls her a Caribe Indian hailing from the English colonial island of Barbados. In addition to the court records, Hansen supposes that Tituba must have been Indian, as her supposed magical practices in Salem were of English origins rather than African, which he attributes to the Puritan influence. Interestingly, Veta Smith Tucker also pulls from the same court records to disprove Hansen's theory. She cites Cotton Mather's testimony as evidence that Tituba did indeed have an African heritage: "Only one eyewitness, the famed Cotton Mather, thought the testimony describing Tituba's racial identity worthy of note. Mather wrote that Tituba underwent a metamorphosis in the testimony of the accusers from African to Indian, just like the Devil, who was reported first as a Black man and later tawny [or Indian] in testimony given by the same witnesses" (627).

In the only book-length study on Tituba to date, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem* (1996), Breslaw makes a claim very similar to Hansen's based on a 1676 plantation inventory from Barbados that reveals "one of the children on that plantation was called 'Tattuba,' a name so similar to Tituba's that it would appear to be merely a variant spelling" (22). She later explains that "[Tattuba] is listed as one of the Negro girls and boys," which for other scholars might have solved the problem of Tituba's race conclusively (30). Breslaw, however, convinced that Tituba simply could not have been of African origin, refutes her own evidence by asserting that "negro" was used as a catchall phrase in this particular instance and that this category was also used for Indians. Her argument might be more convincing if she did not immediately contradict herself by recounting that in the previous years "John Beeke sold to Thomas Sturt ten acres near the south coast of Barbados on March 1674 and included on the list of 10 slaves were eight Negro men followed by the names of two other people, Jack and Mary, identified as Indians" (30).

Hansen and Breslaw argue for Tituba's Indian ancestry, citing that any African heritage would have undoubtedly labeled her as "Negro." Breslaw's own research puts a damper on that assumption with the association of "Tattuba," whom she steadfastly identifies as the same Tituba that Samuel Parris brought to Massachusetts, with the other "negro" children of that particular plantation; this does not automatically move Tituba into the box marked "Indian" either. As Jeanne Snitgen reveals, "the native population had disappeared by the time the British arrived in Barbados; thus the historical Tituba would have been of African-British or pure African parentage" (qtd. in Barnes 197). What these scholars fail to consider is that in the cross-cultural, hybrid space of the Caribbean, Tituba might well have been of mixed heritage. Racial admixture is not always visible on the physical body, a reality that neither Hansen nor Breslaw entertains. V. Tucker calls them to task on this very point:

"Operating within contemporary racial myths, contemporary scholars—Hansen included—presume African and Indian identities to be and to have always been exclusive, uncrossable boundaries" (631). While it cannot be conclusively proven that Tituba was not African, neither can it be disproved that she was not some variation of the ethnicities present on Barbados in the late seventeenth century. "Given the circumstances of the time," Tucker explains, "—the frequent opportunities for cross-racial encounters occasioned by cross-Atlantic colonization, the incomplete legal codification of racial segregation, especially among servants of all racial backgrounds—it seems timid not to conclude that Tituba embodied a mixture of African and Indian ancestry" (633). It is not unfathomable that Tituba emerged from the Creole ranks of Barbados but physically looked the part of an indigenous woman. Her racial identity will continue to be in question, yet I find it sufficient that she was a woman of color and enslaved—two historical categories with which children of the African diaspora can identify.

Tituba's association with Barbados, and with the trafficking of bodies across the Atlantic in particular, establishes a closer connection to African spiritual traditions than scholars care to admit. Breslaw even admits that Tituba was no stranger to obeah and other New World religious practices. She explains that "on Barbados, Tituba had been exposed to the African influences omnipresent there. She was a product of an emergent Creole culture, marked by planter indifference to the religious and cultural lives of the slaves. As a result, non-Christian and occult practices flourished on the island" ("Confession" 537). If, as Hansen suggests, the words of those present in Tituba's time are of greater import than any research, then the reference by which Tituba is often identified is telling indeed: "A slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.' "[32] V. Tucker clarifies the term: "*[H]oodoo* is a vernacular term for the maleficent practice of voodoo, which is itself a form of occult practice imported into the Americas by West Africans" (627). The phrasing of Tituba's judges clearly belies the one-dimensional category of "Indian" in which Hansen and Breslaw wish to contain her. Furthermore, Tituba's behavior and subsequent trance possession following her testimony also provide evidence that she was indeed "probably practicing hoodoo" or else perfecting her shuckin' and jivin' routine: "Tituba's behavior at the end of her first day of testimony, when she claimed to be blind and went into a trance, would have been unusual for an English witch. Since the Reformation, in English and continental European belief, victims of witchcraft exhibited strange symptoms, but witches themselves did not go into trances, any more than priests did in the exercise of their offices. In the African and Indian rituals of 1670s Barbados, however, the shaman or obeah did undergo possession of the spirit" (Breslaw, "Confession" 547). Lastly, Tituba herself acknowledges that she is versed in the art of divination during her testimony. She does not elaborate on what system of divination she has knowledge of; nor does she reveal the name of her former mistress, who she claims taught her how to divine.[33]

That Tituba is tied, at least circumstantially, to obeah traditions by location and culture lends credibility to the African-centered reminiscence of her deeds, which has been inspired and spurred on by the various oral transmissions about her. This connection undoubtedly planted the seeds of inspiration for two diasporic writers to perform rituals of rememory that at once lend themselves to the healing of Black Atlantic traumas and pay homage to Tituba's ancestral spirit, where ever it may rest. Ann Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964) and Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (trans. 1992) are testaments to the emblematic status Tituba may hold for many people of color. More important, these authors are "rendering [Tituba's] experience visible and voiced"; they are also "revising the [white] male canonized view . . . creating meditations on her/story," as Paula Barnes says so poetically (193). Tituba, I argue, is claimed as a folk hero by the likes of Petry, Condé, and others across the diaspora not because of her racial ambiguity but because she represents enslaved women of color, across history and across borders, whose spiritual inclinations and voice were wielded in such a way as to momentarily shift power and authority in a direction most benefiting themselves.

The difference in generation, culture, and nationality between Petry and Condé emphasizes further how Tituba's life—rendered as myth or reality—is valued and honored in death like a beloved grandmother. Petry, born in 1908, was raised in New England, where the incidents at Salem Village were part of the local history. Condé entered the world 22 years later in 1930 and claims the Francophone island nation of Guadeloupe as her place of origin. She lived in France, Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal before taking residence in the United States. These women, however, share Tituba in common; both were moved to "rescue Tituba from the philosophical and cultural expendability to which her blackness and her slave status consigned her" (Rahming 24). Both come to their respective texts with expertise and experiential knowledge about Tituba's bifurcated identity. Condé's Caribbean heritage and Petry's traditional New England upbringing serendipitously bring Tituba's history as a woman of color to actualization. In considering the ways of the folk with full acknowledgment of the alternative epistemologies with which they come to know things, I would like to emphasize the tenuous line between fact and fiction here. Dare I suggest that the fictional tales spun by Petry and Condé might exhibit some truth?

That little is recorded in the official Salem histories about Tituba suggests that "those who assumed the authority to record these events found it completely acceptable to omit the biography of Tituba, Salem's first witness and confessor" (V. Tucker 624). Rosenthal offers an explanation for such an omission and the subsequent rendering of Tituba as a social deviant, particularly since the modern period: "Tituba has been collectively imagined as the dark outsider, the intruder who could be blamed for the community's troubles. The romanticized Indian of the nineteenth century having been virtually eliminated or removed to reservations, the feared 'Negro' survived. In popular culture's unrelenting effort to shape history by elevating heroes and punishing villains, an identity was forged for Tituba, and it is not all that surprising that [her] identity should be racialized, that Tituba should be classed with others like her who inspire fear" ("Story" 202). If Tituba, as the blatant omissions of her biography and Rosenthal's comment imply, is so insignificant and damnable, why has America continued to invoke her name and legacy in countless ways? This unfortunate classification and slanderous reference to Tituba's memory is being challenged by Petry and Condé, who both reenvision Tituba as an enslaved woman of color from Barbados and imbue her with emotion, voice, agency, and spiritual power—the very things that many enslaved people were surely in possession of but that were too easily stripped from historical recollection along with their humanity. Both authors build on the innate spirituality of Tituba, acknowledging and reaffirming the importance of such a way of knowing for people of color. They reject the hegemonic view that has long assumed superior knowledge of diasporic histories, opting rather "for a creative synthesis of available perspectives, [and] thereby opening a gateway to a possible rebirth or imagination and sensibility" (Feng 150).

Within the first chapter of *I, Tituba*, the reader can ascertain why Condé insists that African-based spirituality informs Tituba's life. The naming ceremony performed by her surrogate African father, Yao, is infused with African-derived ritual offerings and gestures. Tituba herself is offered to Spirit: "He took me in his big bony hands and anointed my forehead with the blood of a chicken, after having buried my mother's placenta under a silk-cotton tree. Then, holding me up by my feet, he presented me to the four corners of the horizon. It was he who gave me my name: Tituba. TI-TU-BA" (Condé 6). The reader is then introduced to the master-apprentice relationship between Tituba and Mama Yaya, the Nago obeah woman who tends to the child Tituba following her mother

Abena's lynching. Through Mama Yaya, Tituba discovers the majesty and bounty of the earth. She becomes dependent on nature, learning balance and harmony: a lesson of survival seldom taught by the colonizer:

> Mama Yaya taught me about herbs. Those for inducing sleep. Those for healing wounds and ulcers. Those for loosening the tongues of thieves. Those that calm epileptics and plunge them into blissful rest. Those that put words of hope on the lips of the angry, the desperate, and the suicidal. Mama Yaya taught me to listen to the wind rising and to measure its force as it swirled above the cabins it had the power to crush. Mama Yaya taught me the sea, the mountains, the hills. She taught me that everything lives, has a soul, and breathes. That everything must be respected. That man is not the master riding through his kingdom on horseback. (9)

Tituba, after mastering the secrets of the physical world, easily slips into the realm of the supernatural and shares a moment with the spirit of her deceased mother: "One day I fell asleep in the middle of the afternoon . . . Then I saw my mother. Not the disjointed, tormented puppet swinging round and round among the leaves, but decked out in the colors of Yao's love . . . She came and took me in her arms" (9). Here, Condé alludes to Tituba's coming into her spiritual consciousness and how she will be called to be initiated "into the upper spheres of knowledge" (10). At this point in the novel, she is still a young girl, and the lessons that Mama Yaya imparts are deeply ingrained in Tituba's impressionable mind. She rattles off her spiritual pedigree for the reader:

> Mama Yaya taught me the prayers, the rites, and the propitiatory gestures. She taught me how to change myself into a bird on a branch, into an insect in the dry grass or a frog croaking in the mud of the River Ormond whenever I was tired of the shape I had been given at birth. And then she taught me the sacrifices. Blood and milk, the essential liquids. Alas! shortly after my fourteenth birthday her body followed the law of nature. I did not cry when I buried her. I knew I was not alone and that three spirits were now watching over me. (10)

Tituba emerges as a priestess in possession of an esoteric *konnaissance* and the protection of her African ancestral spirits.

Although Petry is more subtle in her depiction of Tituba as spiritually inclined and grounded in the traditions of an African past, the signs are ubiquitous. Petry's narrative begins on the morning Tituba is sold to Samuel Parris rather than with her early life in Barbados. Upon the realization that she and her husband, John Indian, are being sold away from their beloved Barbados, she immediately questions "why she had

had no feeling of foreboding to indicate that something dreadful was going to happen" (Petry 3). As Melvin Rahming observes, "except for her temporary and contrived confession to involvement in witchcraft, *all* of [Tituba's] personal behaviors are motivated or directed by her impulses. These impulses never contradict—in fact, they issue from—her spirit, which obviously exerts the most powerful influence upon her actions and attitudes" (33). That Tituba is so dependent on other ways of knowing suggests a type of "spirit vitality connected to nature and hence open to nature's limitless possibilities," which is only unorthodox within the context of the Western world (34). The novel, written for a juvenile audience, also reveals that Tituba is skilled at divination with tarot cards, and she performs a divination for the young Puritan girls who later equate the act to black magic and devilry. Tituba predicted that "Mary Warren was going to marry a rich Boston merchant, that she would live in a fine big house and have many servants" before reading the message in the cards, but "then she stopped talking, troubled because the cards did not say this. The cards said people would hang because of Mary Warren" (Petry 126).

A clearer indication, however, that Petry's Tituba is linked to the Caribbean traditions of obeah comes during the conjuring moment in which she divines her own future. Curiously, the first time the reader discovers that Tituba can see visions through water-gazing, it appears that Tituba herself simply happens upon such knowledge while daydreaming during her daily chores:[34]

> Sometimes in the morning, when Tituba went outside to water the horse or feed the pigs, she stopped to stare into the stone watering trough. She had discovered that if she looked at it long enough, she could see things in it that were not there—not this pale blue sky, or the trees with their leaves beginning to turn red and gold and orange, or her own reflection. If she stared steadily with an unwinking gaze at the water in the trough, she imagined she saw the coral-encrusted coast line of Barbados, the palm trees, the dark green flags of the cane waving in the fields. (106)

Petry's language in this passage is ambiguous; in one instance, she says that Tituba could "see things in it that were not there," and in the next, she suggests that Tituba can only *imagine* her distant island home. The next time Tituba uses water to see things—real or imagined—Petry is quite clear about who is doing the conjuring and for what purpose. Tituba deliberately invokes her powers of divination in one of the few conjuring moments in the text:

> Before anyone else was up, she filled a small bowl of water, carefully floated some fine oil on its surface, just a thin layer so she'd have a bright surface to look at but no glitter to it. She sat down at the table and looked into the bowl, stared into it, her gaze fixed, unwinking. She waited, staring. She experienced another vision. She saw herself. She was standing on a table or a bench. People were staring at her. She had seen this scene before in the horse trough. Only this time she could see the master. He was way off to one side, and he was sitting at the table writing, writing, writing, very steadily. (188)

Tituba's possession of a thunderstone, one of the sacred stones of the orisha Shangó, is the most convincing evidence that Petry privileges an African-based epistemology in her text. Robert Farris Thompson submits that the power of the West African thunder deity "streaks down in meteorites and thunderstones, stones both real and imagined" (86). Thompson goes further to explain that "the àshe of Shàngó is found within a stone, the flaming stone that only he and his brave followers know how to balance unsupported on their heads" (86). In the New World, these stones represent a significant part of the initiation process and "become part of the permanent altar of the *iyawo* [or the newly initiated], the primary symbolic medium for presence of the orishas in his home and life" (Murphy 96). It is unclear whether Petry was privy to such information, but other details from the novel support the idea that she had some intelligence on the subject. Tituba is uncertain of the stone's origins and the power surrounding it, but she clings to it with blind devotion, for "as long as she kept it with her, she would have a part of the island with her" (Petry 14). Interestingly, Alfred Raboteau reveals that in Cuba, "Santeros believe that the most powerful stones were carried from Africa by slaves who had swallowed them" (22). In a similar fashion, Tituba carries the stone hidden between folds of her body and clothing as a constant reminder of a lost homeland and perhaps even a lost consciousness.

The reader discovers that Tituba came into possession of the stone when she healed an old man who lived "way back in the hills of Barbados" of fever (206). He presented her with the stone as payment in kind and "told her that if she ever thought her life was in danger, she was to unwrap the thunderstone and hold it in her hand. If she felt it move in her hand, it was a sign that she would live" (14). The stone, then, holds a particular type of power. The gifting of the stone, Tituba's reluctance to be without it, and its connection to the life force of its keeper is reminiscent of the story of African-born Joseph Bin-bin Mauvant, who offered "a small, smooth stone," which he had regurgitated, to his young grandchild as a gesture of both his parting from the physical world and the passing of his spiritual power to the next generation (K. Brown 32).[35] Tituba allows Spirit to guide her mind concerning the stone. "She wasn't sure that she believed" what the elder imparted about it, "but she [did not] want to lose the thunderstone" (Petry 14). That she is a healer and uses her knowledge of herbs and roots to heal those in Salem Village and Barbados is also an indication that perhaps Petry is being more suggestive of Tituba practicing an African-derived spirituality to her young readers than originally perceived. Both she and Condé bind Tituba to alternate spiritual cosmologies that, for people of color, are usually indicative of the syncretic cultures of the African diaspora. This association connects Tituba and the spirit-working traditions that moved from Africa, to the Caribbean, and finally to the North American continent.

Just as Breslaw suggests about the historical figure, the Tituba of Petry's and Condé's imaginations is the consummate trickster and master manipulator. Rather than the passive, voiceless, immobile woman depicted in much of the "official histories," both authors portray Tituba with a good deal of agency: she actively determines the outcome of her own life. She consciously decides when and how she will manipulate those around her. In *I, Tituba*, the protagonist initially, and perhaps naively, believes by simply giving her word that she had nothing to do with the bewitching of the Puritan children, the community will grant her clemency in the ensuing witch hunt. She is brutally misinformed but comprehends the lesson with alacrity. She carefully plots her next course of action to ensure she is not twice made the fool: "Yes, I was going to take my revenge. I was going to denounce them and from the pinnacle of these powers they accorded me I was going to unleash the storm, whip up the sea with waves as high as walls, and toss the beams of the houses and barns into the air like straws. Whose names did they want me to give? Because I wasn't just going to give the names of the poor wretches who were being dragged along with me in the mud. I was going to strike hard. And at the top" (Condé 93). Petry's Tituba is just as cunning. She falsifies the tarot card reading of Mary Warren because "unless Mary Warren left the minister's house excited and happy by the thoughts of what her future held for her, she would surely tell her master that there were fortune-telling cards in the house of the pious Mr. Parris" (Petry 126). Several times Tituba outsmarts the young and equally conniving Abigail Williams, who, in Petry's version, is the ringleader of the occult practices in Salem. She and several of the neighboring girls gather in secret to witness young Betsy Parris fall into a debilitating trance as she attempts to emulate Tituba's water-gazing. Tituba subtly deflects Abigail's plan: "Tituba gave them just enough time to get settled at the table, and then she entered the room . . . Tituba sat down at the table in the place they saved for Betsy. She glanced at the bowl of water, got up, removed it, saying, 'I didn't know I'd left this on the table' " (110). It is Tituba who anticipates that her husband, John Indian, will be accused of being the devil when she hears talk of a "tall, black man" being discussed among the afflicted. She quickly invents a plot to acquit John and turn the accusers' trick back on them: "When the girls have their fits in Ingersoll's taproom, you must pretend to have fits, too. Just as though you were bewitched . . . Then you could not be called a witch or wizard or a devil. Unless you do this I think they will look at you and think . . . John—Indian—is—a—tall—black—man—and then suddenly they will all be rolling on the floor screaming, 'Ah, ah, John pinches, ah, ah, John bites, ah, ah, John is sticking pins in me" (203–4).

Through the reconstructions of Condé and Petry, Tituba reaches folk hero status indeed. In one of the final gestures of reclamation, Condé imagines how other enslaved communities may have received the news of a Barbadian witch in Salem Village. Upon Tituba's return to Barbados following her trials in Salem, she is greeted by fellow slaves who have been informed of her arrival. Tituba is surprised to find out that her name and story have traveled across the water to be celebrated and praised among those still in bondage. She tells her readers who are also listening to her tell her story "One of the young women then curtsied in front of me. 'Honor us, mother, with your presence' " (Condé 142). Rather than condemning Tituba as evil, or the devil incarnate, the colored people of Barbados view her as a great healer and obeah woman whose power is legendary. She is honored, not forgotten but kept alive in the oral histories and tales of the captives. Condé brings the folklore and myth of Tituba into a positive light in her novel, a task she intentionally set out to complete. She admits, "I wanted to turn Tituba into a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary 'Nanny of the maroons' " (Scarboro 201). Condé's position as a Caribbean writer should also be considered. Her nation of origin grants her an insider's perspective on how such heroes of the slave era are received in that region. Tituba takes her place in history as one of the earliest conjure women in the historical record of the United States whose life does not end in tragedy or violent death. I am inclined to side with the authors and assume that Tituba had a hand in such an outcome. Her tale, now legendary in its various manifestations, established the heroic status of women and spirit work among those African captives who would later inhabit the North American continent in droves. While the history of colonial America finds her deeds less than suitable to record beyond their immediate use in the construction of the white, patriarchal metanarrative, for the history of Africans in the New World—particularly women—Tituba's role in the Salem witch trials is a milestone not easily overlooked.

Not only is she a folk hero in the war waged between the dominant culture and women's spirit work, but she is also an identifiable bridge that connects obeah and Vodou from the Caribbean to the North American continent, continuing an ever evolving lineage stretching back to the West African coastline. Considering the numerous versions of her story that have abounded over the centuries, what grants previous authors and historians the authority to render one version more authentic and others like Petry's and Condé's a fabrication? Ina Johanna Fandrich emphatically states, "To view one printed version of a myth as the only authoritative model . . . would not provide a complete picture of it" ("Mysterious" 38). With so much of Tituba's history unaccounted for and undocumented in the Western tradition of written text, the truth of Tituba's existence can only be recalled through imagination and improvisation, which returns us to my inquiry about fact, fiction, and truth. Ann Petry and Maryse Condé render two variations of Tituba's life, but one does not negate the other; in the spirit of the African griot, both authors bring to life narratives that Arthur Flowers would call "true lies" (1). Even with the parodic subtext of *I, Tituba*, both novels work toward the ritualistic healing of a lost African past, recalling the heroines and experiences that kept a people as near to whole as possible. That such healing can and does occur through a creative exposition speaks to another kind of truth embodied in Petry's and Condé's texts. Robert Morsberger understands that with such a prolific character in history, Tituba's story was bound to take on epic proportions. He argues that "it was only to be expected that eventually the story would come full circle and Tituba would be transformed from the traditional source of the witchcraft delusion to its heroic victim, a new addition to the pantheon of black heroines" (458).

ENIGMATIC VOODOO QUEEN

If we move forward a couple of centuries and skip across the Caribbean isles to the port of New Orleans, American history reveals yet another infamous conjure woman whose history is also decidedly different on either side of the color line. The mysterious Marie Laveau, hailed as the Voodoo queen of New Orleans, was celebrated as a folk hero among people of color during her lifetime, unlike Tituba.[36] Or should I say *lifetimes*? Indeed, part of the mystery and allure of the famed Madame Laveau is her uncanny ability to be born in 1783, bear 15 children, and rise from the waters of Lake Pontchartrain in the body of her girlhood in 1872. This great legend that shrouds Laveau is much more a historical oversight than a manifestation of the Voodoo powers for which she is so well known.

In reality, there were two Marie Laveaus: the mother, Marie Laveau, and the daughter, Marie Heloise Eucharist Glapion, who more commonly went by her mother's name. Both women were known throughout New Orleans as powerful women healers initiated into the secret societies of New Orleans Voodoo, but there is a striking difference in their lives that should be clarified. The elder Marie Laveau, who I will refer to as the Widow Paris, was born in New Orleans on September 10, 1783, to Marguerite D'Arcantel, a free woman of color, and Charles Laveaux, who is described as a wealthy Creole of color by some accounts or a wealthy white planter by others.[37] Under the tutelage of her mother, Marie (the Widow Paris) worked as a nurse during the yellow fever epidemics that plagued New Orleans and during the 1815 Battle of New Orleans, according to Martha Ward's study *Voodoo Queen: The Spirit Lives of Marie Laveau* (2004).

Marie Laveau, the Widow Paris, married Jacques Paris, a free man of color from Saint Domingue around 1819. It is with her marriage that the mysteriousness of her life begins to unfold. According to rumor, oral histories, archival records, and current research, Jacques Paris disappeared shortly after their marriage, never to be seen again.[38] His body was never accounted for in Louisiana public records. Shortly after his disappearance, Marie Laveau began to take on the proper title for which her status called: the Widow Paris. The Widow Paris was a devout member of the Catholic Church and volunteered a great deal of her time to the parishioners of St. Louis Cathedral. Under the mentorship of one Padre Antonio de Sedella, the Widow Paris watched over orphans, prisoners, and others in need as part of her faith. She would be remembered in her later years for visiting the parish prison inmates who had been sentenced to death and praying with them during their last moments.[39] One of the legends surrounding her life tells of her power to stall the public execution of two men by conjuring the hangman's ropes loose. Scholars insist that such an incident did actually occur—however, the Widow Paris's involvement is expunged from the newspaper reports. Ironically, this was the last public execution to take place in New Orleans.[40] The two criminals, Jean Adam and Anthony Delille, were inexplicably released from their nooses and fell to the ground unharmed when the executioner released the platforms on which they were standing. The men, however, were quickly bound by the neck a second time and shortly thereafter hung for their misdeeds. The crowd attributed the mishap to the power of the Widow Paris, who supposedly was also responsible for conjuring the torrential thunderstorm that preceded the hanging.

Contrary to many sources that claim the Widow Paris birthed 15 children, Carolyn Morrow Long, in *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau* (2006), contends the Widow Paris and lifetime companion, Christophe Glapion, were parents to five children, only two of whom survived to see adulthood—Marie Heloise Eucharist Glapion and Marie Philomène Glapion.[41] Ward explains that the other ten children attributed to the Widow Paris were likely those of her two surviving daughters. Each daughter birthed five children of her own, many of whom resided at the same St. Ann Street home as the Widow Paris. The Widow Paris is believed to have been a hairdresser and a noted Voodoo queen who supposedly reigned for a significant portion of her life.[42] It is this role for which she is most remembered. She died around the age of 98 on June 15, 1881, in her St. Ann Street home with daughter Marie Philomène close by. Local records and folklore attest that the Widow Paris was laid to rest in a family crypt in the famed St. Louis Cemetery no.1 which is adjacent to Congo Square—yet another place associated with her legendary life.

"Marie Laveau II," or Marie Eucharist, rumored to be the spitting image of her mother, was born February 2, 1827. Very little is known about her young life, probably because she was living in the shadow of her famous mother. At some point, however, lore dictates that she did rise to power among the New Orleans Voodoo society. Long, on the other hand, questions the real identity of "Marie II," unsure if Marie Eucharist is the most likely fit for the legendary character.[43] Unlike her mother, Marie Eucharist is not linked to the Catholic Church or charitable acts. In fact, Marie Eucharist's life took on an exceedingly different shape than her mother's. She was not a practicing Catholic; "the church was pushing women of color out of their sanctuaries, and there was no Père Antoine in [Marie Eucharist's] life. Her Voodoo ministry and spiritual mentors took her in directions her mother, Marie [the Widow Paris], had not chosen; her love life was far more daring and indiscreet than was her parents' " (Ward 70). This, Fandrich surmises, is one way to distinguish between the two; "the stories that portray Marie essentially as a charitable figure probably refer to the elder Widow Paris, while, most likely, the stories that stress Marie's primary interest in sex and money point to the younger [Marie] Eucharist Glapion" ("Mysterious" 275).

Oral histories tell of Marie Eucharist's supposed prostitution ring headquartered at the *Maison Blanche* on the shores of Bayou St. John. Marie Eucharist would, reportedly, introduce white men to free women of color for a fee.[44] She is also purportedly responsible for the St. John's Eve/Voodoo celebrations with which the New Orleans media were obsessed.[45] The dates and events of her lifetime lead me to believe that it is Marie Eucharist that Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) recalls through her association with Luke Turner, who claims to be Marie Eucharist's nephew. Turner's narrative corroborates the historical facts scholars have been able to verify about Marie Eucharist: "She was born February 2, 1827. Anybody don't believe I tell the truth can go look at the book in St. Louis Cathedral. Her mama and papa, they wasn't married and his name was Christophe Glapion" (192). Turner also comments on the social and romantic motivations of Marie Eucharist. He tells Hurston, "[S]he was very pretty, one of the Creole Quadroons and many people said she would never be a hoodoo doctor like her mama and grandma before her. She liked to go to the balls very much where all the young men fell in love with her" (192). Indeed, she found herself the affectionate object of Pierre Crocker—a married, free man of color 24 years her senior.[46] By the age of 17, she birthed the first of the five children fathered by Crocker. Following the birth of Victor Pierre in 1853, Marie Eucharist is scarcely found in any reliable, documented records.

Ward observes that Marie Eucharist was last seen publicly—and by publicly I assume her to mean outside of the free Creole community within the French Quarter where she resided—around 1873 based on a report in a local paper, *The New Orleans Times*: "Marie Laveau, the Voudou Queen, made her advent as a spectator yesterday in the lobby of the Criminal Court, and attracted special attention by her weird appearance. She was dressed in all the soiled and dingy frippery of an impecunious princess, with her rather commanding form encircled by a red shawl, and a faded yellow Madras, wrapped in the form of a turban around her head and in her face there was an expression of the supernatural. She finally disappeared from the court room, whether astraddle of broomstick, or otherwise" (163). Supposedly, in 1874, Marie Eucharist pulled a hoax on the local journalists who were obsessively trying to sensationalize her character, her association with Voodoo, and her famed St. John's Eve celebrations by witnessing it firsthand. In search of the mysterious Voodoo leader, journalists swarmed the Pontchartrain lakefront area known as Milneburg following an ad in the newspaper thought to be from Marie Laveau, which invited all to join her for the St. John's revelry.[47] The journalists and would-be partygoers, however, searched for Laveau in vain: "Some newsmen got drunk. Others fell into slimy swamp waters. The people they questioned lied to them or laughed at them . . . Not one journalist found any woman who resembled the Marie of their imagination"

(150). It is highly improbable that Marie Eucharist, or the Widow Paris for that matter, had anything to do with the media hoax, but after this incident newspaper reporters resisted printing claims of having laid eyes on the enigmatic Voodoo queen.

Curiously, Ward also reports that "neither Philomène nor the Widow Paris ever referred to her [Marie Eucharist] in the interviews they granted the press" after 1871 (163). Not only was she not mentioned by her family in public, but in 1871, her only surviving daughter—Aldina Crocker, aged 26—died, and Marie Eucharist is not listed as the next of kin. Rather, the Widow Paris left her mark of signature on the death certificate. Ward suggests that "under ordinary circumstances, one might assume that a daughter's death had cast her mother into despair and that a levelheaded grandmother who had nursed the sick and dying all her life carried out the death duties," but in the last third of the nineteenth century, "[Marie Eucharist], in her mid-forties, was an enigma"(155). The last living heir of Marie Eucharist, Victor Pierre Crocker, petitioned the court to have his mother declared dead in 1881, only five months after the death of his grandmother, Marie Laveau, the Widow Paris. Both he and his aunt, Marie Philomène Glapion Legendre, signed an affidavit that Marie Eucharist Glapion died in June of 1862.[48] This sounds plausible, but both Fandrich and Ward uncovered court records that cited Marie Eucharist Glapion for unpaid taxes in 1865 and 1866, which were subsequently paid, and while "in New Orleans dead people are allowed to vote in most elections . . . they do not have to pay real estate taxes," Ward remarks (166).

Neither Fandrich, Long, nor Ward, who have produced the most in-depth studies on Laveau to date, found any civil documentation of a body, burial, or death certificate to corroborate the evidence that does exist about Marie Eucharist's life. Several Works Progress Administration interviewees claim to have seen her regularly in her neighborhood and even participated in her Voodoo services.[49] Legends and local folklore claim that Marie Laveau never died and can be found in various forms if one knows how to summon her. Luke Turner tells Hurston of a sacrificial death on the shores of a storm-raging Lake Pontchartrain, though the evidence to support the story is minimal. The puzzle of Marie Eucharist's death paired with her son's legal declaration of her death only months apart from the expiration of the Widow Paris only further clouds the reality surrounding the Laveau women. It is uncomplicated to see how the two lives are conflated into one. For a great many, the lives and legends surrounding the Laveau women are inseparable—the healing work of one attributed to the other. Stories and myths abound concerning Marie

Laveau that speak of the mother and daughter as one entity, while "some narratives also tell us about both women. However, in many stories it is impossible to tell whether the narrator had the mother or the daughter in mind" (Fandrich, "Mysterious" 276). Hurston, for example, does not make any mention of the Widow Paris and understands there to have been only one Marie Laveau.

One must ask, what was Marie Eucharist trying to achieve by taking on the moniker by which her mother had established a decided legacy? Was there some elaborate plot between the women to feign immortality? Irrevocably, folklore and popular history recall Marie Laveau as only one person, suggesting that Marie Eucharist did indeed live in her mother's shadow and remains so even in death: "Operating under the name of her mother, [Marie Eucharist] lacked the charitable nature of the latter. Hence, though like her mother, unusually beautiful and highly talented in dealing with the spirit world, Marie [Eucharist] remained a dark negative extension of her mother's glory, dwelling in New Orleans' underground. She was never able to establish a reputation of her own. Thus, ironically, though being two historical persons, the mythical Marie Laveau with her legendary power is one figure" (299). While it is academically responsible to acknowledge that there were two legendary Marie Laveaus who, in many ways, share a history, I use the Laveau women as an example of historical conjure women in the United States precisely because of the way their lives have merged into one. The legendary status that the name Laveau has assumed—even during their lives—is unprecedented, with perhaps the exception of Harriet Tubman. It seems almost a history too well planned—two women using the same name, sharing a reign over Voodoo rites, with personal lives shrouded in secrecy and devotion. In terms of the Laveau women's status in African American history—and American history in general, for that matter—I must agree with Fandrich when she says, "[I]t hardly makes any difference whether the elder or the younger Marie was meant. For the work of both was very similar and the lives of those women were inextricably interconnected" ("Mysterious" 276). I will, henceforth, reference the Widow Paris and Marie Eucharist as a single historical figure to maintain consistency with popular culture and histories.

With such sensationalism and curiosity floating around Laveau for the entirety of the nineteenth century, numerous journalist, historians, folklorists, and creative writers have continually tried to document her life. More to the point, a certain faction wanted to exploit her so-called blasphemous involvement with Voodoo. The same Old World ideologies concerning race, gender, and spirit work that determined Tituba's fate would be visited upon Marie Laveau. While celebrated in life, Laveau was not immune to false characterizations, slander, and disdain for women and spirit work. Racism and religious intolerance were much more radical in the nineteenth century. The association of Vodou, conjure, and the like with the Haitian Revolution and slave insurrections in the United States had stirred a great fear in the populace concerning African spiritual traditions.[50] As Fandrich documents in her dissertation, "The Mysterious Voodoo Queen Marie Laveaux: A Study of Power and Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans" (1994), *The New Orleans Commercial Bulletin* took an elevated interest in such matters in 1869:

> The first of June is the season devoted by the Voodoo worshippers to the celebration of their most scared and therefore most revolting rites. Midnight dances, bathing and eating together with other less innocent pleasure make the early summer a time of unrestrained orgies with the blacks. This season is marked by the coronation of a new Voodoo Queen in the place of the celebrated Marie Laveau, who has held that office for a quarter of a century and is now superannuated in her 70th year. Old Marie gained her place through her reputation in laying out dead bodies, and maintaining it by a powerful fetish in the shape of a large doll-like idol from Africa. She has held her office of Priestess against all her rivals, until now old age compels her to retire, and a more youthful hand puts up love philters [*sic*] and makes fetishes for the intelligent freedmen. (259)

Other reports were more scathing, such as the article printed in *The New Orleans Democrat,* which was known as a Protestant-affiliated paper and thus less tolerant of alternate spiritualities: "The fact is that the least is said about Marie Lavoux's [*sic*] sainted life, etc. the better. She was, up to an advanced age, the prime mover and soul of the indecent orgies of the ignoble Voudous; and to her influence may be attributed the fall of many a virtuous woman. It is true that she had redeeming traits . . . but talk about her morality and kiss her sainted brow—puah!!!" (267). Robert Tallant's account of the infamous priestess in his 1947 book *Voodoo in New Orleans* also provides a very negative, European-biased perspective of the Laveau women. Martha Ward elaborates:

> Robert Tallant was a reporter for a local newspaper and aspiring novelist when the head of the WPA Writer's Project hired him to prepare some manuscripts for publication. From these sources and his own prejudices, he compiled a "non-fiction" book he called *Voodoo in New Orleans*; it has been in print since its publication in 1947. Some citizens of New Orleans told the staff of the WPA Federal Writer's Project that Marie and her followers were sorcerers and witches who sold their souls to the devil

> in return for power or changed little children into black cats, and Robert Tallant promoted their viewpoints in his book. (17)

The very same notions of witchcraft that Nider articulated in his treatise resurfaced in the late nineteenth century, which suggests that his argument about women and witchcraft truly had a lasting effect. It is partly due to Tallant's white, patriarchal influence that "many people think that the 'voodoos' were devil-worshippers who added Catholic statues of saints, prayers, incense and holy water to their sacrifices of snakes, black cats, and roosters in rituals of blood" (Ward 17).

Oral histories and regional folklore speak of Laveau with much more reverence and respect contrary to what the white, male-dominated print media led the public to believe. Here I grant privilege to the oral narratives and folklore that Laveau scholars relay surrounding the Laveau legacy, as I believe them to contain some element of truth and, more important, the stories reflect the sentiment of the folk who walked the same streets and lived in the same neighborhood as Laveau—a valuable perspective indeed. African American writers are pulling much of the context of their inspiration from such oral histories and folk testimonies, not from the print sources that fail to reflect a culturally specific way of knowing. This oral history sets the precedent for written narratives penned in celebration of conjure women like Laveau and so many others.

The "gumbo ya-ya," as it's called in Louisiana, depicts a competing account about Marie Laveau: "Laveau is said to have traveled the streets of New Orleans as though she owned them, counseled the socially elite of both sexes, won every court case she took to court, influenced city policy, borne fifteen children, grown rich, and died in bed (though legends hold she was reborn young again to reign as queen some twenty years more), all as a woman of color in the ante-and postbellum South" (Duggal 163). According to less-official sources, Ward notes, Marie Laveau is descended from a line of women healers. Her maternal grandmother, Catherine Henry, is rumored to have come "directly to Louisiana from the central African kingdom [of Kongo] and passed on spiritual customs to her daughter and granddaughter that resemble . . . [the] religious movements of that region" (Ward 11). Ward's study, based on both oral and written histories, corroborates the hearsay about Laveau's conjuring ancestors. There is supporting evidence that Laveau's mother, Marguerite D'Arcantel, was indeed dabbling in the healing arts and was rewarded for it: "In a will dated October 22, 1817, Henry D'Arcantel, a prominent white man, rewarded a 'Mulatto named Marguerite' for having taken exceptional care of him during his severe illness" (40). It was most likely Marguerite who taught Laveau how to treat and dress the wounds of the military soldiers she nursed during the Battle of New Orleans. Her healing instincts were apparently of value: "During the recurring deadly epidemics of cholera (1831, 1850) and yellow fever (1835, 1867) [Marie Laveau's] herbal treatments supposedly saved many people's lives" (Fandrich, "Mysterious" 283).

In addition to her strengths as a healer, the Laveau legend paints Marie Laveau as an abolitionist and conductor on the famed Underground Railroad. Once in cohabitation with Christophe Glapion—who changed his social race from white to colored in order join his life with Laveau's—the two ingeniously bought and sold slaves in what Ward claims was a well-documented scheme for the sole purpose of granting them a "*Statu Libre*, or a pledge of freedom" (85).[51] Long contests this point, suggesting instead that the Laveau-Glapion homestead bought and maintained slave labor as was the custom of the day.[52] As far as her status as a Voodoo priestess, Laveau's power was said to be unparalleled. There is, perhaps, something to be said about the political pull she held in the Crescent City: curiously "throughout her long life the famed queen of the Voodoos was never arrested, while many of her sisters on the Voodoo path got in trouble with the police" (Fandrich, "Mysterious" 277). Fandrich implies that Laveau had many clients on the police force as well as in city government and that her potency in the invisible world assured her leniency in regards to the law.

Laveau, myth has it, was consulted for the usual life travesties, such as impotence, infidelity, financial or judicial problems, and pregnancies, but her specialty was "*affairs d' amour*" (284). She is rumored to have made many matches and destroyed an equal number of marriages. She served the affluent and the impoverished, receiving a cashmere scarf for advising Queen Victoria.[53] She is held responsible for rallying the antebellum gatherings in Congo Square, where the New Orleans residents of African descent convened to dance, trade information, and enjoy the fellowship of their African heritage in a sanctioned setting. It is here that Laveau allegedly danced seductively with a giant reptile draped across her shoulders. Whatever her feats as Voodoo queen, the syncretic nature of her ministry is certain: she did not separate her Voodoo faith from that of her Catholic ties: "[B]esides being a devoted church-goer, the stories suggest that she insisted, whenever her treatment or advice was successful, that her clients go to church and thank God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints for their mercy. For she made clear that it was God and not she who performed the deed" (294).

One sees evidence of how the folk histories infiltrated the material production of future generations. A full century after Laveau's death, she is canonized in Jewell Parker Rhodes's debut novel, which is the first fictional depiction of Laveau's life by an African American writer. Rhodes crafts a story in which Laveau embarks on a journey of spiritual actualization. Readers witness her rise to power and reconciliation of Voodoo and Catholicism. Rhodes weaves history, myth, and creative license to tell yet another version of the Marie Laveau legend that speaks to the experience of women of color. Unlike Tallant, who allows the negative stigma of witchcraft and a gross misunderstanding of Voodoo into his work on the Laveau legacy, Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993) reflects a more reverent treatment, as I will demonstrate in full detail in subsequent chapters. A "re-imagining of history," Rhodes's work, much like that of Petry and Condé, puts into perspective how and why the imagination of the diaspora continues to envision folk heroes where the dominant culture sees none (Quashie 431). In Rhodes's text, it is the common folk who praise Laveau's name; this is unsurprising since that was the case both during and after her lifetime. Fandrich articulates this sentiment succinctly when she says, "For those who benefited from [her] services and [her] influence, the name Marie Laveaux [*sic*] designated a local saint. Those who were threatened by [her] activities and power turned this name into a synonym for evil witchcraft" ("Mysterious" 299). The few verifiable remnants of Laveau's life—she was much too powerful to allow the hegemonic powers to totally eradicate her from the American metanarrative—reveal that she valued and lived in accordance with a diasporic epistemology. Though her status as a free woman of color granted her some privilege, she never failed to speak in the language of the oppressed and often tried to soften their burdens, particularly those of the women of New Orleans:

> The enslaved African and African-American women were attracted to her because she represented a familiar form of leadership. By preserving and practicing the African traditions, she reestablished their violated sense of cultural identity. The free women of color were also empowered by her because she was one of them. They respected her especially because she gained this position of power by fully exploiting all the possibilities open to her, as a free woman of color. Finally, the white Creole women were drawn to her and her religion because she provided a powerful female role model—a role model that did not exist in their Christian tradition. (300)

Marie Laveau is a folk hero because she served the people of New Orleans—Creole, African, mulatto, white, quadroon, or any other variant—and kept alive a spiritual system that served as a coping mechanism for the troubles the New World had presented. The white, male power structure simply could not quell the overwhelming power and influence Laveau wielded over the city: “There were efforts by the white male press to ridicule and silence her by branding her ‘the prime mover and soul of the indecent orgies of the ignoble Voudous’ and the cause of ‘the fall of many a virtuous woman.’ Many of the enslaved Africans, however, remained unmoved by these efforts. To them, Laveaux [*sic*] was a powerful saint, or holy woman, loved and feared at the same time. She symbolized for them African wisdom and spirit reversing the power relations of the city” (301). Laveau’s spiritual connection to Africa, the Caribbean, as well as a recent African ancestor (Catherine Henry) draws a distinct line between the Black Atlantic and the manifestation of African spirit work on the continental United States. New Orleans and the Caribbean share a particularly pointed relationship concerning people of African descent and African-based religions. This point is not lost on Fandrich, who postulates that “since the Haitian Revolution there was a close connection between the French Creoles of color in New Orleans and the people of Haiti. This intimate exchange continued to be strong until Reconstruction. Since boats and secret messages constantly went back and forth between the island and the metropolis in the Mississippi Delta, a secret traffic of Voodoo paraphernalia and supplies . . . might have been among the underground exchange items” (“Mysterious” 257). If supplies were being cast across the Atlantic, then certainly an equal amount of spiritual mentorship was shared among those people of color who followed Voodoo. Marie Laveau *is* the embodiment of conjure and Voodoo practices in North America. It is no coincidence that Voodoo took such a strong hold in New Orleans—a point of entrance and influx of Black Atlantic culture for North America.

While Voodoo was certainly making itself known prior to Laveau’s lifetime, Marie—with her flamboyant and defiant soirees in Congo Square and legendary festivals on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain—consciously became the icon with which New Orleans Voodoo will ever be associated. More readily than Tituba, Laveau exemplifies the power and prominence of what happens when an African captive comes “from the West Indies and [is] probably practicing hoodoo.” If Tituba is the seed, then Marie Laveau is the fruit representing African American conjure women, ripe and ready for consumption. It is in this vein that I situate both Tituba and Marie Laveau as exemplary ancestral figures; they serve as “foremothers in the human past” from which literary and filmic artists are influenced when invoking conjure women in their work (3). Disney’s recent foray into Voodoo is one tangible example of how my idea takes shape. In *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Mama Odie, the film’s Voodoo queen/fairy godmother, is a two-hundred-year-old priestess that has a giant python named Ju-Ju as her companion. The ways in which this character echoes the legacy of Laveau are quite obvious.

RITUALIZING REMEMORY AND LITERARY ARCHAEOLOGIES

Whether or not they base their conjure women on the historical feats of Tituba and Marie Laveau like Petry, Condé, and Rhodes, many African American writers summon historical women of spiritual power to create the conjurers—female and male—contemporary audiences are constantly reading and writing about. But why? What is their importance and where does the value lie in situating Tituba and Marie Laveau as the conjuring ancestors to Naylor's Sapphira Wade, Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy, and Ansa's Nurse Bloom? Focusing momentarily on Condé's and Rhodes's respective works, I argue that the value lies in several places. What is most obvious is that their works are paying homage to the ancestral past of conjure and obeah women throughout the African diaspora whose names are not always recorded in history but who we know existed. *I, Tituba* and *Voodoo Dreams* symbolically reflect the "literary archaeology," to borrow from Toni Morrison, by which contemporary authors are empowered to use their words as rituals of rememory—an act of healing for a far-reaching audience. These novels are but two examples of how conjuring fiction acts as a "journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (Morrison, "Site" 92). The remains in this particular instance are those old, unacknowledged retentions of spirit work employed by Mama, Nanny, Granny, Big Ma, Auntie This, and Sister That: not allowing strange hands in a pregnant woman's hair, feeding a constipated baby cane syrup, burning fingernail and hair clippings to protect oneself, and insisting on honorable funerary rites for the deceased. These "remnants of African beliefs . . . can be regarded as sites of collective memory of a deprived homeland," says Feng (155). The inclusion of such rituals in literature "help[s] to reactivate these memories for the sake of racial health" (155).

Rhodes, Condé, and a growing number of contemporary writers have merged these scraps of memory with the "act of imagination" to create fiction that is "serious about fidelity to the milieu out of which [they] write and in which [their] ancestors actually lived" (Morrison, "Site" 92). As Jenny Sharpe describes it, these narratives of conjure women "function less as a story to be told than as bits and pieces of stories we once knew but have forgotten because [we were taught] they no longer matter" (xi). The fictive biographies of Tituba and Marie Laveau are nudging readers to remember why the conjure woman was/is important and urging them on in the process of reappropriating Tituba from the depths of Puritan hell. Marie Laveau, however, has been literally and figuratively claimed as the Voodoo Matriarch of the literary world for some time. Zora Neale Hurston recalls Marie Laveau's memory in *Mules and Men* (1934). Hurston's initiation into Voodoo is led by Luke Turner, who claims to be the nephew of Laveau. By identifying her priestesshood with Laveau, Hurston is able to claim a spiritual lineage with her and invoke the legendary, reverent powers of Laveau's Voodoo dynasty. Arthur Flowers inserts Laveau (and Hurston, for that matter) in his conjuring fiction, providing one example of how Laveau acts as an ancestral figure.[54] The stories of Tituba and Marie Laveau, and many like them, encourage readers to reenvision a history in which Africana women are not always victims. They remind us that conjure women did exist and had an impact on the development of the communities to which they belonged. These conjuring women left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the New World by asserting their infinitely African and female way of knowing and imparting a spiritual memory by which to recognize them. Built on the ruins of a cultural past, the novels in question remind us that our African antecedents are not as distant and unreachable as the dominant culture would have us believe. Contemporary authors are filling the page with that memory, imploring their readers to remember the relevance and reverence of healing women across the diaspora and, by doing so, engage in purgative rituals of rememory of their own.

Morrison, among the writers/guardians of this conjuring legacy, insists that "no matter how 'fictional' the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory" (98). These memories of our conjuring kin, regardless how faint and disjointed, are real and reflect the spiritual imprint embedded in the (un)consciousness of the African diaspora. The healing prescribed through reconstructing the literary archaeology of conjure women is of a spiritual nature, but it is also an exercise in consciousness-raising. As the reading public engages texts that reconnect them in new ways to a conjuring cultural heritage, they inevitably become fixed to the otherworldly and to other ways of knowing. Rituals of rememory embedded in the literary landscape are tools for healing the ancestral wounds of both the readers and writers of conjuring fiction. Morrison concedes this point, explaining how the process grants her access to "her people" and how that, in turn, is transformative: "They are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them—the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth" (95).

By invoking the lives and retelling the legends surrounding conjure women according to the authors' creative license, African American authors continue to challenge the Western, white male hegemony in history—a second point of value. Condé, conscious of the need to tell the subaltern side of history, voices the hardships and complexities of examining that history for people of color:

> For a black person, history is a challenge because a black person is supposed not to have any history except the colonial one. We hardly know what happened to our people before the time when they met the Europeans who decided to give them what they call civilization. For a black person from the West Indies or from Africa, whatever, for somebody from the diaspora, I repeat it is a kind of challenge to find out exactly what was there before. It is not history for the sake of history. It is searching for one's self, searching for one's identity, searching for one's origin in order to better understand oneself. (Scarboro 203)

Rhodes, in addition, "set out to do something else with [her] work; at least in part as a result of the racist, sexist, and utterly Euro-centric responses to her subject matter . . . she wanted to celebrate other ways of knowing as being legitimate" (Quashie 431)—one of which is the power of nommo, or the spoken word. Condé's and Rhodes's fiction privileges the oral tradition even in its written form by having both Tituba and Marie Laveau tell their life stories to avid listeners. Condé herself is Tituba's audience: "Tituba and I lived for a year on the closest of terms. During our endless conversations she told me things she had confided to nobody else" (Epigraph). Likewise, a dying Marie Laveau recounts her rise to power to one Louis DeLavier four days before her death, as noted by the journal entries scattered throughout the text. It is significant to recognize in both instances that "oral traditions differ significantly from Western written forms of documentation and transmission. They do not preserve once and for all eternalized, unchanging truths that are hence retrievable verbatim" (Fandrich, "Mysterious" 35). The fact is that the oral histories, the gumbo ya-ya of the lives of the enslaved, reflect an *ever-changing* truth in which the trauma of the middle passage continues to play out. One experience may not be the same as another, and one telling of the tale may not match another telling of the same tale, but Africana narrative traditions privilege the oral and recognize that separate and varied tellings do not negate the multiple truths revealed therein.

If one interprets *I, Tituba* and *Voodoo Dreams* as oral performances of Tituba's and Laveau's life stories as I suggest, then Fandrich's assessment of the usefulness of oral histories and narratives becomes even more poignant. She elaborates on her meaning, arguing, "Although they are creative, fictive products of spontaneous improvisation, unique within themselves, and in every performance a nuance different, [oral histories], too, convey an unchangeable message or truth (e.g. genealogies, specific important historical or mythical events, the deeds of extraordinary personalities, explanations for certain conditions of the natural environment, educational stories, etc.) that can be extracted from its changeable, ad hoc, improvised 'package' " ("Mysterious" 35). Tituba and Marie Laveau—with Condé and DeLavier acting the part of amanuenses—are griots of their own lives; their performances of the events of their existence "are not random coincidences but elaborate crafts that require skillful deployment of rules and forms in order to communicate clearly the functions of the contents of their discourses to their audiences—who, it goes without saying, had been equally trained in 'reading' those forms of discourse" (36). The more distant, secondary audience of literary critics, scholars, students, and lay readers who are fluent in the cultural language in which the tales are performed certainly "read" the commentary being communicated. The unchangeable message in their performances informs that both of these historical figures lived exemplary lives, but they also lived an existence that was common to many unknown and unrecorded conjuring women. By privileging African-based spirituality in the form of obeah and Voodoo, Condé and Rhodes grant credence and reverential acknowledgment to those spirit work traditions and the women who practice them. Their texts recognize that the heroes of the diaspora were living and breathing black folk whose names can be called upon and are not just a figment of our literary imaginations. They continue to be summoned and reborn in the literary reincarnations of Rhodes, Condé, Petry, and the other writers included in this study.

These writers indulge in a surreptitious act of mythmaking wherein the line between fact and fiction becomes irrevocably blurred as the folk heroine exists as "an evolving cultural icon" in the liminal space in-between (V. Lee 2). Building from the folk histories of and the communal relationships and personal experiences with conjuring aunts, grandmothers, and sisters, African American writers are indebted to and their stories cannot exist without these tangible filiations to a conjuring past. Lee articulates this inevitability in a way that is particularly resonating: "The writers highlight the act of storytelling by choosing a folk character, the [conjure woman], whose performance in the literary text speaks to the text of her historical performance. The constructions of the literary and historical [conjure woman] become inseparable narrative performances. The historical [conjure women] were involved in the labor of childbirth. The literary [artists] are involved in what literary critic Anne Goldman refers to as the painful labor of becoming a speaking subject" (10).[55] This act of mythologizing ultimately usurps authority and control from the Eurocentric patriarchal master's narrative to etch a new chronicle of the conjure woman on the walls of Western literary and cultural history. "The stories the historical [conjure women] recount and the stories the fictional narratives reconstruct create a larger meta-narrative wherein the oral histories of the [conjure women] read as cultural fictions, and the writers' fictions read as cultural performances" that reinscribe conjurers onto the American cultural landscape and validate such figures as more than unchristian figments of a black imagination (4). The relevance for the writers, speakers, and listeners is implicit; the conjure woman as folk heroine is validated both through the historical figures and by being documented in print culture. The dominant group is forced to reckon with the unacknowledged history of the black experience rather than politely pretend that Tituba and Marie Laveau were not powerful, black magic women. US "history" evolved much differently for its people of color. There were no maroon colony revolutions in which conjure women used magic and malice to defeat the colonizer as Jamaica's Nanny did. There are no national celebrations or memorials for Tituba, Gullah Jack, Harriet Tubman, or other heroes from the era of US slavery. African Americans have always had to create and claim their heroes where mainstream America refused to acknowledge them. Conjuring fiction is an extension of that tradition.

Through their employment of historical conjure women, the authors in question are reminding the literate world that there is indeed a historical precedent for conjure women to be magnificent, larger-than-life folk heroes. As Rhodes confesses, "I learned while writing *Voodoo Dreams* that history lies, obscures, twists truth, particularly about women and African Americans, those who may have been disempowered because of race, religion, class, or gender. My role as a novelist is to tell better lies which, paradoxically, I hope will convey an emotional truth which far outweighs inaccurate historical texts" (Quashie 431). Their respective texts proclaim to a global audience that conjure women are not new to the cultural history or imaginations of people of African descent. We only have to engage in other ways of reading those histories to see that the conjure woman's truth was in the telling all along. Before Condé, Petry, and Rhodes, there were legions of folklore, songs, and such that praised the likes of Nanny of the Windward Maroons, Nanny Griggs, Marie Laveau, Tituba, Seven Sisters, and Marie Laveau again. Contemporary writers are pulling from a rich and long-established tradition of women of African descent and spirit work. "In the folkloristics of African American . . . writers, healing, rootworking, and midwifery are important activities," Valerie Lee emphatically states, "and these characters who practice these skills are central to their narratives" (2). It is for this reason that recalling and reenvisioning conjuring ancestors in a much more culturally specific discourse is of monumental importance. The conjure woman's "life is not depicted as a past historical occurrence, but as an evolving cultural icon" (2). Before any of the conjure women I will discuss in the following chapters could ever come to life on the page, real conjure women walked their own paths and stood as champions among people of color. It only makes sense that such a prolific figure and iconic symbol would find a home in the material culture of those they served. Conjuring fiction resonates so much with people of color because it taps into an unrecognized memory of past lives and experiences—rituals of rememory and healing indeed. Perhaps then it is no coincidence that the conjure woman is so familiar to us and she continues to make her presence felt.

CHAPTER 2

FROM FARCE TO FOLK HERO, OR A TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVIVAL OF THE CONJURE WOMAN

> Some say she was born with a veil on her face
> So she could look through unnatchal space
>
> —Margaret Walker, "Molly Means"

BY THE OPENING OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, the negative stigma looming over spiritual and occult practices had permanently etched its way into the minds of Americans. The Eurocentric disdain toward spirit work was easily transferred to syncretic African practices once they began to visibly take hold in North America. Most noted for their use in slave resistance, African-based spiritual practices were unable to salvage their reputation as the North American colonies grew toward nationhood. In 1712, reports of a free African conjurer named Peter the Doctor, who "provided magical powder to a group of slave rebels in New York," were recorded, which, for the ruling class, solidified their attitudes and actions against such practices (Long, *Spiritual* 75).[1] Rumors and fears of revolt in the British Caribbean highlighted slaves' propensity to use their indigenous practices against the planter class.[2] A conjurer by the name of Dr. Henry was implicated in a 1741 conspiracy in New York and the state of South Carolina had become abreeding groundfor conjure-inspired rebellions.[3] In addition to Caribbean Lucumí, and obeah, Vodou was at the heart of slave resistance in the French, English, and Dutch colonies. François Makandal proved exactly how effective such covert actions could be when more than six thousand people died from his "composition and distribution of poisons" in Haiti, and it is believed that the Haitian Revolution would not have been successful without supplication to the loa (Dayan *Haiti* 253).[4] An 1822 slave insurrection, which failed to come to fruition, is attributed to Denmark Vesey, but an African-born conjurer by the name of Gullah Jack Pritchard was also among the initial conspirators.[5] Nat Turner's massacre in South Hampton, Virginia, in 1831 is similarly clouded with the supernatural.[6] By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was evident to the young republic that African spiritual practices were more than just a nuisance—they threatened to disrupt the entire plantation system and thus the burgeoning American world economy.

Though there were numerous reports of slaves who used what in the late nineteenth century would come to be known as conjure and hoodoo, there were also those within the enslaved community who felt indifferently about such traditions.[7] A number of early African American narratives of bondage reflect the internalization by African Americans of the biases toward African spiritual belief projected by the dominant culture. As Jeffery Anderson argues in *Conjure in African American Society* (2005), many "African Americans followed the lead of whites, condemning hoodoo as a sign of backwardness" (7). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) provides a poignant example. During his worldly travels in the eighteenth century, Equiano shares an encounter with a "wise woman" in Philadelphia in whose divining powers he has faltering belief, as his faith is wholly reserved for his Christian convictions: "I put little faith in this story at first, as I could not conceive that any mortal could foresee the future disposals of Providence, nor did I believe in any other revelation than that of the Holy Scriptures" (111). Much to his surprise, the conjure woman—a Mrs. Davis—proves Equiano's assumptions false as she accurately renders the past events of his life and those that will unfold in the near future. He confesses, "[Mrs. Davis] related to me many things that had happened with a correctness that astonished me." It cannot be argued, however, that this experience changed his stance on African spirituality (111).

Nat Turner also expresses his intolerance for conjure in the only written text that supposedly reflects his sentiments. During his confession to Thomas R. Gray following the deadly 1831 slave revolt in Virginia, Turner makes disparaging remarks about conjuration, though he contends that his entire life had been surrounded with signs of the invisible world: "Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing said it had happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened" (Greenberg 44).

Rather than attributing his visions, dreams, ability to see apparitions, and otherworldly knowledge to his African heritage, Turner rejects the primacy of residual African spirituality, commenting that he had obtained significant spiritual influence in his community, though "not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks—for to [his neighbors he] always spoke of such things with contempt" (46).[8] Turner's brand of religion, however, is indicative of the transitory space wherein syncretic African epistemologies and Christianity were neither fully separate nor completely merged. In *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture and Identity Formation in Early America* (2006), Walter C. Rucker corroborates this supposition, explaining that "between conjure and Christianity was a temporal and religious middle ground inhabited by numerous slave exhorters, preachers and prophets—like Nat Turner—who bridged the two spiritual worldviews while not completely belonging to either" (188).

Frederick Douglass is also among the black intelligentsia who disassociated himself from intangible, misunderstood aspects of diasporic spiritual traditions. His interactions with African-born conjure man Sandy Jenkins is a well-known anecdote from his slave past; yet Douglass is reluctant to give root work its proper due. In the more detailed version of his encounter with the conjure man published in 1855, Douglass says this about participating in the hoodoo activity Sandy has prescribed for him:[9]

> Now all this talk about the root, was, to me, very absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful. I at first rejected the idea that the simple carrying of a root on my right side, (a root, by the way, over which I walked every time I went into the woods,) could possess any such magic power as he ascribed to it, and I was, therefore, not disposed to cumber my pocket with it. I had a positive aversion to all pretenders to "*divination*." It was beneath one of my intelligence to countenance such dealings with the devil, as this power implied. (239)

When confronted by slave breaker Covey for his insubordination, Douglass simply "forgot [his] roots" and only credits his own resolve to defend himself for besting Covey at his own game (242). By refusing to place any confidence in conjure, Douglass pledges his alliance to Western normative thinking, which refused to acknowledge conjure and hoodoo as anything other than the tomfoolery of the ignorant and African descended. Henry Bibb also recounts the tradition of his fellow slaves in *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849):

> There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call "conjuration," tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them

> pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others, to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them. The remedy is most generally some kind of bitter root; they are directed to chew it and spit towards their masters when they are angry with their slaves. At other times they prepare certain kinds of powders, to sprinkle about their masters dwellings. This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some Peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue at all in it. (25–26)

Bibb announces to his readership that only during his time in bondage did he have a "great faith in conjuration and witchcraft," which he quickly discarded following an unsuccessful attempt at using it to protect himself from the master's violence: "My master declared that he would punish me for going off; but I did not believe that he could do it, while I had this root and dust; and as he approached me, I commenced talking saucy to him. But he soon convinced me that there was no virtue in them. He soon became so enraged at me for saucing him, that he grasped a handful of switches and punished me severely, in spite of all my roots and powders" (26). Bibb espouses a break from such "vain imagination[s]" of the enslaved mind to pursue loftier goals, such as freedom (28). The slave narrative, though the most popular form of African American authorship in the nineteenth century, was not the only genre in which conjure was rejected by its cultural heirs.

Even fictional accounts of conjurers and hoodoo doctors published by early African American authors reflected unflattering dispositions. William Wells Brown, a former slave and author of the first African American novel and play, curiously depicts Cato—the plantation "doctor" in *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom* (1858)—as a buffoon who makes quackery out of his vocation.[10] This, however, is a common depiction in Brown's body of work, as Anderson notes: "Brown . . . used the semihumorous character Uncle Dinkie, a conjurer, to demonstrate the 'ignorant days of slavery' [in his second narrative, *My Southern Home* (1880)]. In addition to being a fraud who earned his reputation by fortunetelling, love potions, and 'medicine,' Uncle Dinkie had learned to serve the devil instead of God 'kase de white folks don't fear de Lord' " (7). Brown makes his position on the issue known as he declares, "[I]t is not strange that ignorant people should believe in characters of Dinkie's stamp; but it is really marvelous that well-educated men and women should give any countenance whatever, to such delusions as were practised [*sic*] by the oracle of 'Poplar Farm' " (77). Martin R. Delaney's serial novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859–62) also implies a deep-seated disavowal of the so-called backward beliefs of uneducated, Southern slaves on the part of the progressive, educated class of African Americans. During the hero Henry Blake's trek across the United States as a fugitive slave, he discovers a camp of self-proclaimed conjure men taking refuge in the wetlands and pacifies them by undergoing an initiation into the "order of High Conjurers" mainly to "satisfy the aged devotees of a time-honored superstition," the reader is told (114). Blake expresses his opinion about Maudy Ghamus and Gamby Gholar, the two elderly conjure men in question, when Charles, his fugitive companion, inquires about what good can come from being initiated into the order of High Conjurers. Blake replies, " 'It makes the more ignorant slaves have greater confidence in, and more respect for, their headmen and leaders . . . It only makes the slaves afraid of you if you are called a conjuror, that's all!' " (126).

Blake refuses to acknowledge any spiritual power in conjure as a practice but fully expects to benefit from the psychological power of being identified as a conjurer. Brown quips that it did not matter whether a hoodoo specialist's power was "true or not, [if] he had the *name*, and that is about half of what one needs in this gullible age" (Brown, "Narrative" 91). Blake is operating from this vantage point; he understands the pervasiveness of extant African-derived spiritual beliefs among the enslaved—even if he does not believe in them himself—and commandeers the respect and reverence granted to ritual specialists for his individual purposes. Several chapters later, Blake again returns to the issue of conjuration when Charles considers the power that Ghamus and Gholar could wield if they were indeed "High Conjurers" as they portend. Delaney is sure that Blake's, and quite possibly his own, thoughts on the subject are articulated in no unclear terms:

> "Now you see boys," said Henry, "how much conjuration and such foolishness and stupidity is worth to the slaves in the South. All that it does, is to put money into the pockets of the pretended conjurer, give him power over others by making them afraid of him; and even old Gamby Gholar and Maudy Ghamus and the rest of the Seven Heads, with all the High Conjurors in the Dismal Swamp, are depending more upon me to deliver them from their confinement as prisoners in the Swamp and runaway slaves, than all of their combined efforts together." (Delaney 136)

As if Blake's statement fails to clarify to the reading audience that within the space of the novel conjuring and other such traditions are not valued, Delaney depicts the conjuring figures similarly to Brown. Gholar and Ghamus are painted as charlatans who deal in simple acts of wonderment. The reader quickly infers that these conjure men of the highest order are trying to convince themselves of their power as much as they are trying to convince Blake:

> He took from a gourd of antiquated appearance which hung against the wall in his hut, many articles of a mysterious character, some resembling bits of woolen yarn, onionskins, oystershells, finger and toenails, eggshells, and scales which he declared to be from very dangerous serpents, but which closely resembled, and were believed to be those of innocent and harmless fish, with broken iron nails. These he turned over and over again in his hands, closely inspecting them through a fragment of green bottle glass, which he claimed to be a mysterious and precious "blue stone" got at a peculiar and unknown spot in the Swamp, whither by special faith he was led—and ever after unable to find the same spot—putting them again into the gourd, the end of the neck being cut off so as to form a bottle, he rattled the "goombah" as he termed it, as if endeavoring to frighten his guest. (113)

Through a detailed description, Delaney seems to draw out the inadequacies and transparencies of Gholar's conjuring moment. This type of degradation and dismissal of conjure and hoodoo was common among the burgeoning black literati. In an attempt to challenge the popular notion that African Americans were ill mannered and incapable of learning and living in equal status with whites, Douglass, Brown, Delaney, and other former bondsmen who were often in the public eye believed that renouncing folk beliefs about sympathetic magic and communication with the dead was the first necessary step toward racial uplift and progression. There was still, however, a large contingency who believed in and practiced conjure with no regard to how the white mainstream or black middle class reacted. Conjuring culture permeated the South in particular, and this too found its way into the literature. The relentlessness of African cosmologies of circum-Atlantic creation is what pushed novels such as Mary A. Owen's *Old Rabbit, the Voodoo, and Other Sorcerers* (1893), Thomas Nelson Page's *Red Rock* (1899), Helen Pitkin's *An Angel by Brevet* (1904), and later, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928) into popularity and created a boon of folklore studies by white Americans, though some of the representations can hardly be deemed favorable.[11] Anderson captures the truth of the matter in a resonating yet simple statement: "For both races, it [conjure] was part of what it meant to be southern" (9).

ALL AUNT PEGGY'S CHILDREN

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) emerged as one of the earliest creative publications by an African American to reflect conjure as the American cultural phenomenon it was. In Chesnutt's work, both white and black believe in the power of conjuration and use it for personal gain, revenge, and resistance and to help others in need. The main character, Aunt Peggy, takes center stage as one of the first depictions of a conjure *woman* that disrupts the stigma of spiritually efficacious women so deeply ingrained in Western society. Pulling his influence from his childhood experiences and the oral histories of his native Fayetteville, North Carolina, Chesnutt's collection of stories carves out a literary niche for the conjurer as an icon of Southern/African American experience on which future generations of African American writers have built.[12] Rather than focusing on one particular aspect of conjuring, Chesnutt's stories project the numerous scenarios in which conjure was invoked. Chesnutt did not shield his audience from the seemingly negative attributes but reflected both the healing and harming perspectives of New World spiritualities, allowing the audience to interpret the role of conjuring in American culture for themselves.

For instance, in "The Goophered Grapevine," it is the white plantation owner who seeks the powers of Aunt Peggy, not a so-called ignorant, lazy "darkie" (to use the language of that time). " 'Mars Dugal' tuk [a basket of food] in his buggy en driv ober ter Aun' Peggy's cabin,' " Uncle Julius recalls. " 'He tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy. De nex' day Aun' Peggy come up ter de vimya'd. De niggers seed her slippin' 'roun,' en dey soon foun' out what she'uz doin' dere. Mars Dugal' had hi'ed her ter goopher de grapevimes' " (Chesnutt, *Conjure* 36). For America at large, conjure was conceptualized as the exclusive "nonsense" of the enslaved and their descendants with few exceptions made for a number of white practitioners who went against the grain. Anderson notes several examples to the contrary, including the original Dr. Buzzard. A famous conjure man from South Carolina, Dr. Buzzard was a white man whose name was inherited by his African American successor (Stephaney Robinson) upon his death; however, there is not an overabundance of white conjurers in the historical record.[13] The cross racial references that Anderson's study uncovers "demonstrate[s] how belief in the power of black Conjure practitioners transcended racial boundaries," a reality that Chesnutt develops in his fiction (Chireau, *Black Magic* 19).

For Chesnutt to insert a white property owner as a participant in conjure activities rocked the status quo of *fin-de-siècle* America, but by doing so, he grants conjure a more inclusive audience. Instead of projecting conjure as devil worship or a feast of animal sacrifice preceded by sexual orgy, Chesnutt's conjure is accessible and *useful* to both the planter class as well as the enslaved. Conjure, especially on Southern plantations, is a complex system in which power relations are fluid, and the "oppressor" is neither unquestionably synonymous with "master," nor is the conjuring moment always successful. *The Conjure Woman* underscores the political and social positioning inherent in negotiations of power within the "white/black binary of signification," to borrow W. Lawrence Hogue's paradigm.[14] Chesnutt depicts the use of conjure as subversion in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" when Aunt Peggy transforms a plantation owner into a slave as a life-altering lesson on how he should treat his fellow man. Chesnutt also portrays conjure as a deadly weapon of vengeance when Phillis conjures a tree on the plantation of "Marse Aleck," who is responsible for either the death or sale of her children in "The Marked Tree."[15] Uncle Jube, one of the conjure men in Chesnutt's collection, uses his power to avenge the accidental death of his son by the hands of another slave in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," revealing the vicious intraracial conflicts conjure is often invoked to mediate—often with deadly repercussions. The wide range of depictions of conjure in *The Conjure Woman* challenged prevailing assumptions about the tradition, as Chesnutt both perpetuates and nullifies many of the stereotypes surrounding the practices of African American folk belief. Richard Brodhead comments on the intricacies of Chesnutt's usage, suggesting that he had both political and cultural reasons for incorporating conjure in his work: "The practice of conjure is complexly characterized in these tales, where it combines occult properties of magic with the thisworldly, even businesslike properties of a social administration system. Conjure figures in these tales as a way to control property and settle property disputes, a way to regulate love conflicts, and, in 'A Victim of Heredity,' even as a bank, and it is used by whites and blacks. But above all conjure figures as a recourse, a form of power available to the powerless in morally intolerable situations" (9).

The portrayal of Aunt Peggy is particularly relevant for the scope of this study. As one of the most prominent literary conjure women to appear in the fiction of an African American writer prior to the Harlem Renaissance, Aunt Peggy serves as a prototype of sorts for the conjure women portrayed in the works of twentieth-century writers. On the surface, Aunt Peggy consumes little space in the overall geography of the tales, but the fact that the collection is titled *The Conjure Woman* is, I believe, quite telling. Chesnutt grants Aunt Peggy more mobility and autonomy than any of his other characters—with the exception of Uncle Julius, perhaps. She is first referred to in "The Goophered Grapevine," and she is apparently held in great esteem both by her community and perhaps by Chesnutt as well. Uncle Julius introduces her thus: " 'Dey wuz a cunjuh 'oman livin' down 'mongs' de free niggers on de Wim'l'ton Road, en all de darkies fum Rockfish ter Beaver Crick wuz feared er her. She could wuk de mos' powerfulles' kin' er gopher—could make people hab fits, er rheumatiz, er make 'em des dwinel away en die; en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night' " (Chesnutt 36). Within this terse description of Aunt Peggy, much is revealed. She lived among the free community of African Americans, which informs the reader that she was *not* enslaved and had ownership of herself, her services, and her time. Her status as free person might well be a result of her conjuring abilities and reputation. Chesnutt cloaks the details of Aunt Peggy's life in mystery, but her freedom inspires her standing among her peers.

For Aunt Peggy, whose "knowledge and power emanated from a source outside the slave system," respect for her craft and position was easily earned, as her power "could be neither controlled nor usurped by the masters" (J. Roberts 94). That she may have secured the right to her own body with African spiritual retentions only exacerbates her position as a folk hero. Her freedom also implies a wider range of mobility within the community. Historically, it is accepted that African Americans were not permitted to roam uninhibited whether free or enslaved during the antebellum period, yet Aunt Peggy moves between her home and the local plantations without much trouble. Though Aunt Peggy is revered and even feared for her uncanny abilities, Chesnutt is clear that her power is not without limit. When Solomon realizes that Aunt Peggy has turned the master into a slave hand in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," he decidedly acts in the spirit of solidarity by keeping his discovery to himself for fear that "she'd 'a' got in trouble sho', ef it 'uz knowed she'd be'n cunj'in' de w'ite folks" (Chesnutt 68). Apparently, while the masters cannot usurp her power to conjure, they can surely hold her accountable for her behavior, which, in the inhumane world of chattel slavery, often translated to death.[16] In the same story, Aunt Peggy has to give Solomon a second potion in which to undo his negligence concerning the first, which also supports the idea that she is not all powerful; she, too, must monitor her spells to make sure the outcome does not betray her intentions. Aunt Peggy is neither malicious nor overly conservative in the type of conjure she performs. She performs for the customer who renders fair payment regardless of race, putting her own quality of life at the top of her priorities. She does, however, seem inclined to consider the suffering of fellow African Americans, as she helps a grieving child reunite with his mother who was recently sold to another plantation in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny," and she certainly takes a huge risk by turning Mars Jeems into a slave. Aunt Peggy is not without compassion in her shrewd, businesslike transactions.

The most telling feature of Chesnutt's introduction of Aunt Peggy, however, is the (intentional?) omission of her physical appearance. Chesnutt, perhaps recognizing that conjurers simply do not fall into a fixed set of physical characteristics contrary to assumptions propagated in the popular literature, allows his readers to determine Aunt Peggy's appearance within their own imaginations.[17] She is neither an old, toothless, wrinkled hag nor a bandana-wearing, obese, black woman—unless the individual reader imagines her thus. Her age, height, skin tone, and weight and the color or condition of her hair are absent from the entire collection, leaving room for her to be all of the above or none, if the reader so chooses. Chesnutt allows Aunt Peggy to take the form of any number of African diasporic women without regard to stereotype or controlling images.[18] With his simple omission, conjure women are unrestricted to be as beautiful as Diahann Carroll playing the role of Elzora in *Eve's Bayou* (1997) or to exude as much sexual energy as Melvira Dupree in Arthur Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993), as their literary prototype is not cast in a suffocating, unbreakable mold. This point is particularly salient as the problem of African American women's representation continues to be a much discussed topic in literary, film, and popular culture forums. Yvonne Chireau observes, "Although males appear to be more prominent in nineteenth century and early twentieth century accounts of Conjurers, African American female practitioners apparently made their mark in significant numbers as well . . . Other black female supernatural specialists were presented in a gamut of gender stereotypes in fiction and folklore, from the sinister, decrepit hag to the dangerous, bewitching mulatta. African American conjure women inherited a legacy of powerful spiritual roles that had been instituted by their foremothers" (*Black Magic* 22). Chesnutt's collection, with its obvious emphasis on conjuration and the female practitioner, then serves as a precursory text for African American literary depictions of conjure women. *The Conjure Woman* provides one of the earliest portraits of conjure women that at once reflects the seriousness with which they are considered folk heroes and reclaims them from the depths of Western racial and cultural biases. It is also one of the first published collections by an African American that takes the oral genre of the conjure tale from spoken to written word. As David H. Brown suggests, the conjure story constitutes its own literary category: "Given the frequency and elaborateness of conjure references in the ex-slave, African survivals, and folklore literature—references that are often developed into poignant stories—it is fair to suggest that the conjure story be considered a sub-genre of African American oral literature" (26).

Both John W. Roberts and Sharla M. Fett corroborate Brown's contention, arguing that the orally disseminated conjure tale operates as its own genre with a specified function and format. Roberts explains in *From Trickster to Badman* (1989) that conjure tales were the primary means by which conjurers were hailed as folk heroes. "These brief, often first person accounts," he posits, "served as an ideal expressive vehicle for transmitting a conception of conjurers as folk heroes. In these narratives, narrators recalled a specific instance in which a conjurer utilized his/her extraordinary spiritual powers to overcome a threat to the physical, social, or psychological well-being of an individual known by or connected in some way to the performer and/or audience" (96). Surmising that such tales were exchanged during "tale-telling sessions," Roberts also suggests that the tales worked to dissuade any fear and skepticism associated with conjure or to promote the uncanny abilities of a particular practitioner.[19] Fett takes this idea a step further by demonstrating the narrative structure of such tales in *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (2002). Basing her analysis on oral histories of conjure collected between 1870 and 1940, Fett demonstrates that the stories evolve in a four-step process:[20] "First, conjure accounts laid out a conflict, identifying a soured relationship with a well-known neighbor or family member as the source of the conjure spell . . . Next, the narrator described his or her affliction by mapping out the bodily effects of the hoodoo 'dose' . . . Third, the afflicted person searched for a conjure doctor, a healer with 'second sight' into the workings of the spiritual world. Fourth and finally, the narrator recounted the steps taken by the conjurer to bring about a cure" (86).

Many of Chesnutt's tales conform to this format. Though he certainly improvises on the structure by adding more description and details surrounding the initial conflicts, his stories incorporate all four steps of narration. Julius, who casts spells with his words, begins the story of the "Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" this way: " 'Dey wuz a cunjuh man w'at libbed ober t'other side er de Lumbe'ton Road. He had be'n de only cunjuh doctor in de naberhood for lo! Dese man yeahs, 'tel old Aun' Peggy sot up in de bizness down by Wim'l'ton Road. Dis cunjuh man had a son w'at libbed wid 'im, en it wuz dis yer son w'at got mix' up wid Dan—en all 'bout a 'oman' " (Chesnutt *Conjure* 97). Julius immediately points to the conflict that sets the use of conjure into action. Chesnutt, through the vehicle of Julius's storytelling, also reveals the physical ailments that caused his minor characters to seek the help of a conjurer. In "The Goophered

Grapevine," Henry's inclination toward scuppernongs changed him from being " 'ez ball ez a sweeten' 'tater' " to " 'Henry's ha'r . . . quirl[ing] all up in little balls, des like dis yer reg'lar grapy ha'r, en by de time de grapes got ripe his head look des like a bunch er grapes' " (39). Julius carefully details the conjuring moments of Aunt Peggy in several of the tales. He reveals her methods for returning Mars Jeems to his original status as overseer in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare": " 'You take dis yer sweet'n' 'tater,' sez she,—'I done goophered it 'speshly fer dat noo nigger, so you better not ear it yo' se'f er you'll wush you hadn',—en slip off ter town, en fin' dat strange man, en gib 'im dis yer sweet'n' 'tater. He mus' eat it befo' mawnin', sho', ef he doan wanter be sol' erway ter Noo Orleens.' " (64). Aunt Peggy similarly devises a path toward Dan's protection from the vengeful hoodoo man Uncle Jube: "So Dan went down ter Aun' Peggy de nex' night,—wid a young shote,—en Aun' Peggy gun 'im de cha'm. She had tuk de ha'rs Dan had lef' wid 'er, en a piece er red flannin, en some roots en yerbs, en had put 'em in a little bag made out'n 'coon-skin. 'You take dis cha'm, 'sez she, 'en put it in a bottle er a tin box, en bury it deep unner de root er a live oak tree.' " (98) Chesnutt takes great care in documenting the conjuring moments in this particular example. His attention to detail works to authenticate the tale; the conjuring methods are not far removed from those cataloged in various folklore studies of the tradition.[21] Chesnutt additionally creates a fifth step to Fett's model through his ad-libbing on the oral structure. Julius, as master raconteur, informs his listeners of the final outcome of the conjuring moment—that is, whether the hoodoo was successful or ill fated. For example, in "The Conjurer's Revenge," Julius enlightens John and Annie that the nameless conjure man " 'got de goopher all tuk off'n Brer Primus 'cept'n' one foot. He hadn' got dis foot mo' d'n half turnt back befo' his strenk gun out enti'ely, en he drap' de roots en fell back on de bed' " (78). The format Chesnutt renders from the folk to the page, like the image of the conjure woman, continues to evolve and appear in writing of the late twentieth century. This is evidenced most readily in the work of Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor. For this reason, I submit that *The Conjure Woman* marks a shift in the African American literary tradition toward carving out a safe space for the conjure woman and oral conjure tales to exist in the print culture of African Americans in a more reverent, valued, and culturally specific creative form. "Rather than the negative associations of witchcraft," within Chesnutt's stories "conjuring has been an empowering concept . . . Conjuring pays homage to an African past, while providing a present day idiom for magic, power, and ancient wisdom within a pan-African cultural context," even if that was not necessarily his intention

(V. Lee 13). Chesnutt's collection is, for the purposes of this project, the single most important text of the early twentieth century.

Authors such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Ottie Beatrice Graham, Zora Neale Hurston, Mercedes Gilbert, and Rudolph Fisher would follow Chesnutt's lead by publishing fiction that centers African American folk belief and conjure practices during the first half of the twentieth century: "The Goodness of St. Rocque" (1904), "Blue Aloes" (1924), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and "Uncle Monday" (1934), *Aunt Sara's Wooden God* (1938), and *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), respectively. Other writers still expressed some ambivalence toward the tradition. For instance, Margaret Walker's poem "Molly Means," published in 1942, pays tribute to the conjure woman as a folk hero but teeters on an ambiguous fence about Molly's "black-hand arts and her evil powers" (line 19). It was not until the post–civil rights era that contemporary African American writers began to pick up where their literary ancestors had left off. I attribute this to a generational shift in consciousness and awareness about African retentions and heritage in American culture. Following the harrowing years of the Civil Rights movement, African Americans began to express this awareness, explains Bernard Bell, in new ways: "Responding to the needs of the black lower class, some groups such as US [United Slaves], promoted the development of an indigenous African-based cultural value system, ritualized in the ceremony of Kwanza . . . Others, such as the Black Panther Party, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Republic of New Africa, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, adopted the ideology and strategy of achieving black self-determination by any means necessary, including armed struggle" (238).

The Black Power and Black Arts movements, out of which many of these organizations developed, are partly responsible for the resurrection of the conjure woman in African American literature. With an elevated interest in African history, culture, and retentions, a generation of African Americans assumed cultural expressions that affirmed their African heritage and pride. African American artists, musicians, writers, dancers, and the like began moving away from Eurocentric standards of beauty and models of living. Bell summarizes the popular thought of that time: "In the late sixties . . . many Afro-Americans were encouraged by historical circumstances to continue resisting or rejecting Eurocentric models and interpretations of manhood and womanhood. They turned instead to non-Western, nonwhite communities and Afrocentric models to discover or create possibilities for autonomous selves and communities" (240). Many African Americans embraced their natural hair texture and melanin-rich skin and looked to Africa as a home site of pride and respect. Colleges and universities began to develop curriculum based on the new field of African American or black studies. As Houston Baker argues in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), it was not until the Black Arts movement that African American vernacular and folk traditions were understood, valued, and critically engaged as "a complex of material and expressive component" within the African American literary tradition (84). Certainly Hurston, Chesnutt, and Langston Hughes experimented with the vernacular, but their work was not granted critical acclaim or literary value following publication because white America still found such expressions only "quaint." The generational shift of the post–civil rights era flipped the reception and scholarly attention of black folk toward the vernacular, which resulted in the celebration of Hurston's genius and a conscious move to privilege folk belief and vernacular traditions in African American literature.

Conjuring, root work, and other African spiritual retentions that had taken refuge underground and had not wholly disappeared slowly became subjects with which many in the literary world became interested—both as writers and as scholars. Alice Walker's rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston tapped into a cultural memory of conjure and hoodoo that had been suppressed.[22] This was particularly true of the women's rights movement out of which Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell began to call for a black feminist criticism in literary studies—a criticism that sought to acknowledge and critically understand black women's folk traditions.[23] Toni Cade Bambara commented on the new direction in which the consciousness of women of color, particularly, was heading: "We're more inclined now, women of color, to speak of black midwives and the medicine women of the various communities when we talk of health care rather than assume we have to set up women's health collectives on the same order as non-colored women have" (qtd. in Bell 241). The visibility of immigrant diasporic communities (Afro-Cuban, Haitian, Jamaican, Dominican, Guyanese, etc.) also raised awareness of the forgotten spiritual traditions of Africa in America.

African American male writers were advancing the New Black Aesthetic, which focused partly on the reclaimed African retentions across the diaspora. Don Belton's *Almost Midnight* (1968), Steve Cannon's *Groove, Bang, and Jive Around* (1969), the early works of Ishmael Reed—*Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down* (1969) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)—and Henry Dumas's *Ark of Bones* (1974) all situate African-based cosmologies as the dominate paradigm with which to interpret their novels. The explosion of black women writers in the late sixties and seventies solidified the resurrection of the conjure woman as African American women began to explore African spiritual paradigms and incorporate them into their creative works. J. J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* (1966), Alice Walker's "Strong Horse Tea" and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" (1967), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Ellease Southerland's *Let the Lion Eat Straw* (1979), and Toni Cade Bamabara's *The Salt Eaters* (1981) were among the first works of fiction by African American women that allowed an African-based way of knowing to dominate post-1965 publications and featured conjure women as well-developed characters.

They, in turn, ushered in Ntozake Shange's phenomenal *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Elizabeth Nunez's *When Rocks Dance* (1986), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family* (1989), and Arthur Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993)—one of the few male writers who contributes to the current trend. The list continues to expand with writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Nalo Hopkinson, and Marlon James. Akasha Gloria Hull, in *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African America Women* (2001), suggests that African American women witnessed a swing in the outward practice of their faith in the early 1980s: a shift that voiced the discontent of African American women who found the religion of the dominant culture "inadequate, inconsequential, or confining" (44). Such discontent was already being incorporated in their writing and other creative endeavors.

Hull documents the movement of writers and artists like Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Bambara, Michelle Gibbs, and Lucille Clifton from "having religion" to accepting "everybody's ancient wisdom" (3). One of the distinctions between religion and spirituality that Hull pushes forward is that "religion is about rules, but it's about following man-made rules . . . spirituality is a more inclusive consciousness that allows for exploration of many, even heterodox, avenues to the divine" (40). She concludes, however, that "religion can be spiritual though not automatically" (40). These African American women were practicing and reclaiming the spiritual systems of their African past. Ifá, Santería/Lucumí, Vodou, and espiritismo practices rose in popularity as African American men and women found new spiritual fervor in the ways of their ancestors and as Afro-Caribbean populations in the United States continued to expand. The "new" spirituality of which Hull speaks, however, was not really new at all. In fact, the ancestor worship, divination practices, and altar-building rituals performed openly and unabashedly in the contemporary moment were the same traditions that enslaved Africans in the New World were largely forbidden to practice. Such customs can be traced to the ancient Dahomey, Yoruba, and Fon people of West Africa.[24] Rather, "only [African

Americans'] enlarged capacities to accept, explain, appreciate, and benefit from [a revived spirituality] is fresh" (52).

In 1981, this hybrid spirituality found validation in the literary world when Toni Morrison graced the cover of *Newsweek* magazine and was praised for her use of "signs, visitations, [and] ways of knowing that reached beyond the five senses"; although, I might add that for a great number of readers, mainstream recognition was not a prerequisite for belief but rather an affirmation of what they already knew to be true (Strouse 52). Morrison and her contemporaries have redirected the African American literary tradition—giving voice, mobility, and undeniable presence to the spiritually informed women characters and vernacular traditions in their narratives. Morrison and others pull from the oral performances of their youth, the healers in their communities, the folk practices of the present, and the ever-evolving vernacular language of African Americans to construct narratives that not only acknowledge diasporic religious experience but also work toward the preservation of cultural traditions. In "A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition," Joanne Gabbin comments on the effect such works have had on the literary establishment: "They are telling their stories, born in intimacy and nourished by communal revelation, by drawing upon a rich legacy of storytelling and myth-making. Transforming these oral forms into innovative literary structures, black women writers are giving evidence of another aesthetic experience and, in the process, using particularly womanist forms of thought and expression, are rocking the foundations of a Eurocentric male hegemony which has dominated American Literature" (246). Though folktales, songs, verbal arts, blues motifs, and the like are present in the works in question, Valerie Lee emphasizes the ways in which authors of the contemporary period overwhelmingly invoke conjure women as the primary purveyors of folk magic: "Although the authors write works that present a full range of African American folklore, including proverbs, myths, superstitions, folk language, folktales, folk customs and customary behaviors, dance, and music, the figure of the granny midwife/woman healer provides a pivotal structural and thematic framework" (20).

The authors of the late 1970s and early 1980s set into motion a literary movement toward the reclamation of African cosmologies and the conjure woman as cultural icon. The conjure woman ceased being a relic of the supposedly archaic slave culture and returned to the status of honored Ancestor and spiritual leader. African American authors imbue the character of the conjure woman with the intimate recollections of Southern-born grandmothers that healed with cod-liver oil, predicted weather patterns, and dreamed of fish. Pilate Dead, Nurse Bloom, Minnie Ransom, and Aunt Haydee all represent a nostalgic remembrance of and reverence for the folkloric antecedents of African American literature and culture. Contemporary writers such as Tina McElroy Ansa, Arthur Flowers, Rainelle Burton, and Jewell Parker Rhodes privilege the conjure tradition and conjure women in ways that directly challenge the notion of black women as victimized others and stereotyped, minor characters. The conjure woman moves from farce to folk hero. These writers and many others construct unforgettable conjure women who take center stage in their narratives, encouraging the reading audience to see and read conjure women within the cultural space out of which they developed. The conjure woman is resurrected by contemporary authors to walk the literary world in a new body that is free of the ideas from her past life. She strides with her head held high in unquestionable recognition of the diasporic cultural matrix that has revived her. Indeed, this second life appears to be a lasting one.

BLACK FEMINIST CRITICAL REPRESENTATION

Each author paints a starkly different picture of the conjure woman, giving evidence of the diversity and complexities within this one figure; yet the history and degradation of women and spirit work unite the representations as one body meant to counteract that history and degradation and unveil the many ways that black women were *not* victims. Concerning black women and the problem of representation, contemporary authors shatter the one-dimensional views of womanhood to which African American women have historically been relegated. The fictional conjurers Melvira Dupree, Indigo, and Sapphira Wade disrupt what Western patriarchal society would have many believe about the physical appearance, able-bodiedness, and spiritual weakness of African American women healers. Gloria Naylor's Miranda "Mama" Day rejects the notion of the mammy, for instance, and J. J. Phillips's Eunice Prideaux, though of biracial heritage, is far from tragic. The reconstituted conjure woman runs the gamut of physical characteristics and descriptions. Western standards of beauty take a backseat, and the image of the wrinkled hag simply does not apply where African American conjure women are present. Rather than relying on the dominant culture's ideas of what women immersed in supernatural acts should look like, a number of authors take their cue from Chesnutt and allow their conjure women to take on the physical diversity of the Africana women after whom they are modeled. There is no static imaginary for the conjure woman.

Arthur Flowers, for instance, ignores the lore that claims conjurers are "either 'tall or dark' or extremely short and [have] red eyes, blue gums, a piercing gaze, or some unusual feature such as a shriveled arm" in his depiction of Melvira Dupree (Fett 97). Common notions of conjurers cast these women as witchlike figures: old, dark-skinned, wrinkled, and sexless.[25] In contrast, Melvira is a vital young woman whose physique is well put together, according to the reaction of one Lucas Bodeen: "Thick pretty head of hair he couldn't wait to put his fingers into," he thinks to himself as he approaches her (Flowers 2). Melvira's professionalism, however, is questioned by her clientele because of her unusually attractive appearance. "Sweet Luke" is even taken aback when she introduces herself as a conjurer: "Conjure? Didn't know if he was ready for all that . . . 'Well I declare you ain't like no conjure I ever seen . . . [and] I seen hoodoos and conjures of all persuasions' " (3). The townsfolk of Sweetwater, Arkansas, Melvira's hometown, even find it peculiar that conjure has laid claim to such a pretty girl: "Melvira Dupree was considered by folks in these parts of Arkansas to be a somewhat unconventional conjuror. First off she was such an attractive woman. Folks had very clear-cut ideas about what a conjure should look like: strange, weird and otherworldly" (28).

Flowers is apparently cognizant of the image he is disrupting by making Melvira pleasant on the eyes. He returns to the oddness of her appearance later in the novel by invoking the legendary Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, in the early stages of her career, finds herself in a café on Beale Street in which Melvira enters, escorted by her hoodoo mentor, Hootowl. Hearing that two conjurers are present, "Zora took the opportunity to scoot her chair closer to Melvira" (118). She is curious to explore the conjure tradition from every angle so she can "write books. Good ones too. Immortal ones" (119). During her interaction with Hurston, Melvira's legitimacy as a practitioner of the spiritual arts is challenged, albeit silently: "This Melvira Dupree intrigued her. She didn't fit Zora Neale's idea of a conjure woman. The clear brown eyes regarding her were open and without subterfuge. And way too attractive. It was only after she had looked closely that Zora recognized the amusement that had also been in the eyes of the really good conjures she had known back home in Florida" (118). The two women "recognized in each other sisters of the cloth," and through Hurston's presence in the novel, Melvira is validated as a true source of power and the issue of her appearance is laid to rest.

Marie Laveau's beauty was almost as legendary as her status as Voodoo queen both in life and in Jewell Parker Rhodes's fictional account *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993). A free woman of color in reality and in the literature, Laveau's racially mixed heritage might signify for some readers a tragic ending, though the opposite could not be truer. While Rhodes certainly allows the beauty of her conjure woman to permeate the novel, it is also important to note that the story of a mulatto woman with the power to summon gods is a far deviation from the trope of the tragic mulatto. In this sense, Rhodes challenges several problematic stereotypes at once. Flowers and Rhodes, however, are not the only authors to challenge what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "controlling images" of black women.[26] The necessity to continue racial oppression in order to reify white identity "fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of black womanhood" that were used, according to Collins, to justify and maintain "black women's subordination" (72). The mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the jezebel are discussed in Collins's work. I argue that the tragic mulatto can also be part of this paradigm due in part to the proliferation of her image and the recurrence of her narrative (and variations of it) in popular culture.

Ntozake Shange also invests time in constructing an image of her conjuring characters according to popular assumptions only to demolish it by the novel's end. In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), she paints Indigo as mentally and socially impaired only to later reveal her as one of the most spiritually stable and culturally grounded characters in the entire narrative. Shange employs minor characters to project the idea that Indigo is fanatical and untamed. The novel opens with a description of the child looking "quite mad" among her dolls, and her mother, Hilda Effania, often refers to Indigo's doll play as childish and make-believe, insinuating that her daughter's relationship to the dolls at a pubescent age is atypical and problematic (Shange 3). In addition to her mother's admonition, Indigo's behavior is characterized as wild, heathen, and otherworldly by Sister Mary Louise. "Indigo had a reluctant soul, to Sister Mary's mind," the omniscient narrator explains. "Not that Indigo was a bad child, only she'd been exposed to so many heathenish folks, pagans out there on those islands" (17). Indigo's reputation around town is indicative of her perceived mental imbalance. Mr. Lucas, the local drug store owner, relieves his anxiety about his sexual advances toward the child by exclaiming, "The whole town knows that child's crazed. If she says a thing, won't a soul put no store in it" (29). While the discussion of her otherworldliness is isolated to those who seem to know her best, Indigo admits to Uncle John, "I can't seem to get on with the chirren in the school I go ta" (25). Though there could be other reasons why the school children ostracize and ignore Indigo, one can guess that if the whole town believes her to be "touched in the head," as the folk saying goes, the local children are probably not exempt from that group. Shange does not offer a description that details Indigo's complexion, body shape, hair, or other physical attributes that could possibly negate the untamed image closely associated with insanity. She does, however, strategically describe Indigo as being insanely connected to the earth. In her favorite costume—"tough winding branches growing from her braids, deep green leaves rustling by her ears, doves and macaws flirting above the nests they'd fashioned in the secret, protected niches way high up in her headdress"—Indigo is likened to an imagined earth goddess, which gives a far more favorable connotation than a heathen, crazed child (4). As one connected to nature, Indigo is repositioned as a charmed adversary of the ill intentioned; she is balanced between nature and humanity, ensuring one world does not infringe on the other. The image invokes the spiritualist leanings of Indigo, not those of the insane.

In discussions of black female representation, questions of body image and sexual politics are sure to arise, and Indigo's body is curiously positioned in the text. As Barbara Christian suggests in *Black Feminist Criticism* (1997), a sexual dichotomy exists where black female characters are concerned. Black women are represented as either hypersexual or asexual but are rarely depicted as having a healthy sexual sense of self. Indigo's position in this dichotomy is rather liminal; her sexuality is neither totally erased nor overly emphasized. Shange does write a degree of asexuality into young Indigo's body politics. While Indigo is well aware of her femaleness and even embraces and celebrates it, she remains detached from love, romance, and the opposite sex. She explains her indifference to boys to her mother after attending her first coed dance: "Mama, I don't think boys are as much fun as everybody says" (63). Indigo's mother is tickled that her youngest daughter is so unenthusiastic when it comes to romantic liaisons. Indigo clarifies her meaning: "Well, they dance & I guess eventually you marry 'em. But I like my fiddle so much more. I even like my dolls better than boys. They're fun, but they can't talk about important things" (64).

Trudier Harris discusses the erasure of sexuality and romantic relationships in literary depictions of powerful, African American healing women in *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001). She argues that the spiritual power possessed by such women often displaces love, sex, and romance: "[M]ost worldly and several other worldly phenomena are possible to these characters, and what they miss in emotional relationships, they more than make up in power and the satisfaction of transcending human limitations. They are nearly complete unto themselves" (12). Harris's argument proves true for Indigo, who is much more comfortable with mastering her workings of the spirit than chasing after boys. Even with Spats and Crunch, her fellow Junior Geechee Captains, in her presence "Indigo's specialties were other worlds" (Shange 40). Indigo does put the time she spends with her male playmates to good use, however; it gives her the opportunity to experiment with her divine gifts: "Here [Indigo], Crunch & Spats performed, mixing the skills of modern wayward children with the past-times of the more traditional colored iconoclasts" (41). Indigo's missing or rather undeveloped sexuality is not as troublesome as Harris suggests in this instance; she *is* only 12 years old. Her detachment from amorous notions about boys saves Indigo from being reprimanded by the older women in her community for being too "fast" or eager to secure the affections of men; yet the fact that Indigo prioritizes her spiritual prowess over a sexuality that she has not yet fully experienced may eventually lead to the erasure of her sexuality like the other black female characters about whom Harris writes. Indigo rides the fence where stereotypes of black female sexuality are concerned. She resides neither completely inside the stereotype nor completely outside of it—perhaps a ploy on the part of Shange to steer her conjure figure away from the common myths that pervade African American womanhood.

Probably the most well-recognized and criticized controlling image of African American women is that of the mammy figure. Christian describes the image this way: "Mammy is black in color, fat, nurturing, religious, kind, above all strong . . . She relates to the world as an all-embracing figure, and she herself needs or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service. She must be plump and have big breasts and arms" (2). The mammy is the epitome of domestic service, sacrificing the needs of her own family for those of the ruling class. She is present in the forms of "cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, [and] seamstress" and often doubles as midwife (5). It is in this last role that the mammy figure is often conflated with the work and image of conjure women. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) exemplifies how the two archetypes easily overlap. Miranda "Mama" Day is a permanent fixture in domestic space—by her own volition, I might add—baking cakes from scratch, quilting, and tending to the garden at the "other place." Her domesticity quietly extends into her healing work; she depends on the products from the garden and in the woods for the remedies she procures for the community: "She scalds the countertops before opening her canvas pouch and laying her dried herbs out on them. She don't use much: all together it's only a teaspoon of senna pods, coltsfoots, horehound, white cherry bark, and black cohosh set to steep into the third change of water. She weighs them out by touch—some the roots, some the leaves, some the whole plant" (Naylor 193). Her role as midwife and nurse are not separated from her domesticity. Like the mammy figure, Miranda gives her time and service to those around her, neglecting her own desires. People relied on her "gifted hands, folks said. Gave to everybody but [her]self. Caught babies till it was too late to have [her] own. Saw so much heartbreak, maybe [she] never wanted [her] own. Maybe [she] never thought about it" (89).

Gloria Naylor, I contend, deliberately confuses Miranda with the mammy figure. With the exception of one small note in the text that informs the reader that Miranda is toothless, Naylor withholds the description of Mama Day until late in the second half of the novel. Without a definitive portrait of Mama Day, the all-too-familiar image of the large, bandana-wearing woman of African descent rumored to sacrifice her sexuality and family for the care of other (white) people's children becomes a natural surrogate. Miranda's nurturing disposition, coupled with the prefix *mama* attached to her name, conjures up images of elder black women known affectionately as "Big Mama." Unfortunately, African American women in such roles historically have been depicted as full-bodied and dark-skinned, leaving little room for variation on this theme. Hattie McDaniel's Oscar-winning role in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is evidence of such depictions, as is the role of Aunt Tempy in Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). The "Big Mama" of Willow Springs, however, does not exactly fit Christian's profile of the mammy figure. George, a stranger to the island, describes Miranda three-fourths of the way through the novel, which in no unclear terms separates her physically from the controversial and unwavering image of the mammy. She is neither large nor dark-skinned and full-breasted. George recalls, " 'And then there was the little one: I don't know why I thought your Mama Day would be a big, tall woman. From the stories you told about your clashes with her, she had loomed that way in my mind . . . But she was barely five feet and could have been snapped in the middle with one good-sized hand' " (175–76). George's assessment confirms that Miranda does not fit the mammy image physically. What is more interesting is that George imagines Miranda Day in more stereotypical terms, which supports the notion that Naylor purposely wanted the mammy image to be invoked if only to disrupt it.

Naylor strategically portrays Miranda as being deeply situated in the traditions of the mythical mammy yet not acquiescing to those ideas at all. She has mastered domesticity, yet she does not wear the crown of motherhood—a role that seems almost intrinsic to domestic service save for the instance of the mammy. The fact that Miranda does not have any children raises the question of her sexuality, which for the mammy figure is assumed to be nonexistent. Furthermore, a false characterization of Miranda as a mammy makes readers expect her to be sexless and undesirable. The presence of children becomes proof of sexual activity for women—an undeniable truth. The absence of children for Miranda threatens to preclude her sexuality in accordance with the mammy parable, in addition to possibly deeming her sterile and thus stripping her of her femininity. To be sure, Naylor rejects the correlation of Miranda with the classic mammy, as the families to which Miranda devotes her time are not white, nor is she asexual. Naylor does not include any specific history of intimacy between Miranda and a male character (or a female character, for that matter), but she does make several inferences that compel the reader to assume that the heroine of the novel has surely had a sexual encounter or two. Just once, the reader shares a memory of romance with Miranda. She recalls "that summer of the boy with the carnival smile. Lean as an ear of Silver Queen corn and lips just as sweet" (89). Naylor does not elaborate on what happened between this mysterious young man and Miranda, but the narrative implies that they may have shared more than an innocent kiss.

The novel evinces other instances in which Miranda is not shy about her sexual inclinations. In response to her sister's question about her arthritis, Miranda uses sexual metaphors to discuss her ailment: "Now, he's dependable as ever. Only man I been able to roll out of bed with since I passed my seventies . . . Felt Old Arthur this morning, and he sure don't help. Just a poking me in my back, poking in my left hip. You think he gonna get it right one day and start poking in my—"(37). Abigail jokingly chastises her sister for such suggestive language, but the reader later gets the sense that Miranda is no stranger to sexual language, acts, or images for that matter. Accompanying Cocoa, her grandniece, to New York after George's death, Miranda finds her way into a pornographic theater during one of her tourist excursions. She even "sat through the darn thing twice," which suggests that Miranda either enjoyed herself or, at the least, was not offended by the material (306). Miranda's reasons for remaining childless may be in question, but certainly her sexuality is not. Naylor implores her audience to read with more depth and insight in order to recognize that the recurring trope of the mammy perpetuated by popular culture and antebellum nostalgia is only a social edifice that fails to capture the function and purpose of African American women domestics to their larger community. Miranda Day's character reflects a more authentic narrative surrounding black women as domestic caretakers and mother surrogates.

BLESSED AND IN GOOD FAVOR: ORIGINS OF POWER

Even with the movement away from Eurocentric stereotypes and biases in the late twentieth century, African-based religions such as Voodoo were still plagued with long-standing assumptions of devil worship and cannibalism. African American authors have found creative and enduring ways to combat such conjecture. As if in direct response to the European idea that women of spiritual prowess entered into a pact with the devil, African American writers have disputed those biases by creating (sometimes) elaborate histories that authenticate the source of the conjure woman's power. The origins of fictive African American healing women's power are multifaceted; some receive their knowledge of healing through the "normal" channels. The most common ways for a conjurer to rise to power are cataloged by David H. Brown in "Conjure/Doctors: An Exploration of a Black Discourse in America, Antebellum to 1940." Brown asserts that "[c]onjure doctors often claimed to be a seventh son (of a seventh son) and to have been born with a caul, or double caul . . . One also could become a conjurer through initiations involving ritual isolation, fasting, and ordeals, accompanied by the learning of dreamlore, charms, and remedies" (8). Hurston's initiation experiences in *Mules and Men* (1935) offer one real-world corollary to Brown's theory of initiation or process of spiritual rebirth. She recollects that "with the help of other members of the college of hoodoo doctors called together to initiate me . . . I was made ready and at three o'clock in the afternoon, naked as I came into the world, I was stretched, face downwards, my navel to the snake skin cover, and began my three days search for the spirit that he might accept me or reject me according to his will" (199). Karen McCarthy Brown offers another example in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (2001).[27]

Tina McElroy Ansa's novel *Baby of the Family* (1989) is the tale of young Lena McPherson, who is born into the modern world with a veil over her face, and the trials she faces as a result of her upwardly mobile family's rejection of the norms of African American folk culture.[28] Similarly, Miranda "Mama" Day's "gifted hands" are an inheritance passed down through the generations of the Day family. Miranda descends from a long line of conjurers—both men and women. Her father, John-Paul, was the seventh son of Jonah, who was also a seventh son. Jonah's mother, Sapphira Wade, was a potent conjure woman whose legacy took on godlike qualities: "Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade . . . She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched, grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of the lightning to start the kindling under her medicine pot—depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" (Naylor 3). One could say that Miranda receives her gift honestly.

There are a number of other literary conjurers in African American fiction who are also "ordained" through birth, though the process sometimes extends beyond a layer of amniotic skin over the face or body. Pilate Dead, Toni Morrison's enigmatic conjure woman from *Song of Solomon* (1977), gains her spiritual dexterity from a truly miraculous birth: "After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water . . . [She] inched [her] way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her . . . Once the new baby's lifeline was cut, the cord stump shriveled, fell off, and left no trace of having ever existed" (27–28). As a result of her posthumous birth, Pilate's "stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel" (27). Pilate, however, is not considered an aberrant spawn of the devil. Rather, she is feared for the supernatural power everyone believes must accompany such a birth: "[Pilate] was also believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (94). She is not the only enchanted woman of color who comes into the world like a mythical Greco-Roman god. There is some repetition of this theme in other late twentieth-century texts.

Eve, of Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* (1992), is immaculately conceived by nature. Her parentage is unknown, and the absence of a gestating body at her birth scene indicates that Eve is born from the earth rather than human progenitors: "The very day he said he found me in a patch of ragweed, so new I was still tied to the birth sac and he had to bite off the umbilical cord with his teeth and spit it out to save me from being poisoned" (83). Likewise, Anyanwu—the wild seed in Octavia Butler's novel of the same name—also receives her gift of healing, shape-shifting, and immortality through her genetic disposition. Anyanwu's mother possessed the ability to work the spirit and passed it down to her child. "It was Anyanwu's mother who made magic," Butler's narrator informs the reader. "She had highly accurate prophetic dreams. She made medicine to cure disease and to protect the people from evil" (10). Bequeathing the mystical aptitude embedded in her DNA to her offspring, the mother and daughter often "shared a unity of spirit that actually did involve some exchange of thoughts and feelings, though they were careful not to flaunt this before others" (10). Anyanwu's shape-shifting ability, however, is a gift that her mother did not possess. The uncanny births of Pilate Dead and Eve imply that these women are not the devil's minions but more likely the consorts of the gods. The power emanating from these women is otherworldly—divine, one might say. If female conjurers are under any influence, it is that of the invisible world: a world in which a devil or—more appropriate for African-based epistemologies—a trickster deity is not excluded but also by no means wields the power to create lives the likes of Pilate, Eve, or Anyanwu.

The other path toward a conjuring lifestyle that Brown mentions is by way of mentorship: one experienced, usually elder, conjurer mentors a young disciple who either has earned a place in the conjure ranks through family lineage or has displayed behavior indicating a proclivity toward the invisible world. There are, of course, those who seek the knowledge of the sacred world of their own volition, although in African American conjuring literature this is not usually the case. Toni Cade Bambara's conjure woman in *The Salt Eaters* does not realize her spiritual calling until early adulthood when Spirit begins to summon her more forcefully. Minnie Ransom is stricken with peculiar behavior—read as insane—as a young woman, and her law-abiding, Bible Belt community is at a loss as to what ails her. Minnie refers to this period in her life as "the old times before the gift unfolded" (Bambara 51). Her father is one of the few with an inkling about her condition; everyone else "called her batty, fixed, possessed, crossed, in deep trouble" (51). Interestingly enough, each of those descriptors connotes a working of the spirit via hoodoo or some other residual Black Atlantic spirituality. The good folk of Claybourne, Georgia, are beside themselves when "full-grown, educated, well-groomed, well-raised Minnie Ransom" begins gorging herself on the literal goodness of the earth (51):

> Said they'd heard of people being drawn to starch or chalk or bits of plaster. But the sight of . . . Minnie Ransom down on her knees eating dirt, craving pebbles and gravel, all asprawl in the road with her clothes every which way—it was too much to bear. And so jumpy, like something devilish had got hold of her, leaping up from the porch, from the table, from morning prayers and racing off to the woods, the women calling her back, her daddy dropping his harness and shading his eyes, which slid off her back like slippery saddle soap. The woods to the path to the sweet ground beyond, then the hill, the eating hill, the special dirt behind the wash house. (51–52)

Other than her indifferent father, there is one other person who sees the touch of the divine in Minnie, even before her strange behavior manifests itself. Karen Wilder, known in the community as Old Wife, crosses paths with Minnie and shares her insight with the bewildered child: "Not long, now, Minnie, and take care" (53). Old Wife, once respected as a wise woman, has since become "the teller of tales no one would sit still to hear anymore," and Minnie is spooked by her wild and mangled appearance and the indecipherable message she has given her. Ironically, the one who sparks fear in Minnie is the same person who initiates her into the world of spirit work when her gift presents itself. It is Old Wife who teaches Minnie Ransom "to clear the path that led up to the cliffs, set the trees, fix the rainbow, erect a fountain and build the chapel in The Mind. And going there—cooling dark, the candles, the altar—[Minnie] saw the gift and knew, for at least that instant, where the telling came from" (53). With the help of Old Wife's ancient wisdom, Minnie grows in spiritual power and becomes a legendary healer in Claybourne. Through her apprenticeship with Old Wife, Minnie is able to "read the auras of the trees and stones and plants and neighbors . . . And [she] studied the sun's corona, the jagged petals of magnetic colors and then the threads that shimmered between wooden tables and flowers and children and candles and birds" (48).

Recalling their meeting, Minnie explains her apprehension at Old Wife's strange words, claiming that "Karen Wilder after all was a teller of strange tales, and who could know then that the message wasn't about death coming to sting . . . but about a gift unfolding?" (53). The relationship between Minnie Ransom and Old Wife begins in the earthly plane, but with Minnie learning to maneuver in and out of the spiritual plane, their mentor/mentee relationship extends into the afterlife after Old Wife passes on. With the suicidal, despondent Velma Henry, Minnie's healing ability is challenged to a degree she has never experienced, and she relies on Old Wife to continue to teach her even in death: "We got a problem here. I can't seem to reach this child and you keep acting like you dumb as me stead of telling me what to do. Now, suppose you just dig on down into that reticule bag of yours and fish me out a bat bone or some magic root"(50). Maryse Condé's black witch of Salem also communicates with her mentor, Mama Yaya, after she transcends into the spirit realm in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (trans. 1992). Naïve about the ways a woman can entice the heart of a man, Tituba calls forth her spiritual guardian with the appropriate blood sacrifice: "I went over to what remained of the chicken house and grabbed one of the few chickens that had been faithful to me. With an expert hand I slit open its belly, letting the blood moisten the earth. Then I softly called: 'Mama Yaya. Mama Yaya' " (Condé 14).

Melvira Dupree is fortunate enough to have two mentors over the course of her conjure training—which, for those dedicated to Spirit, does not end until ascension into the invisible world. Melvira is raised by Hoodoo Maggie, who serves as her first teacher:

> All that she knew of the hoodoo way she had learned from Hoodoo Maggie . . . a strange little pigtailed girl whose days were spent squirming as Hoodoo Maggie drilled her with the lore of herbs and the powers of earth, air, fire, water, and the mojo. Had dragged her in tow to her consultations. Taught her how to read signs, how to see, to know, to command the spirits. Taught her how to conjure reality from secrets, words and dreams, taught her the true names of gods and things. Taught her the magics of love and hate and the human passions. (Flowers 15–16)

After reaching Memphis, Tennessee, Melvira crosses paths with Hootowl, a Beale Street hoodoo elder. Finding her suitable for the task of healing the "tribal soul," Hootowl initiates Melvira into the upper echelons of conjure lore. She dons the apparel of the new initiate, glowing in the new revelations of Spirit that she has come to know: "She was so at home on Beale Street now that she had even adopted a style. She always wore white; fresh, clean, whites, liking the feeling of it and aware of the drama it added to her act" (110). Likewise, Ntozake Shange's curious little Indigo is trained in the ways of childbirth and healing by her Aunt Haydee, and Lil Bet—the unborn child come to life in Julie Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust* (1997)—is cultured in the ways of the "salt water" Africans by Nana Peazant.

In Alice Walker's short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," the narrative is told from the perspective of a young woman who has recently engaged in an apprenticeship with Tante Rosie, a root worker. She reveals the indifference she faces while studying under her mentor, explaining that "Mrs. Kemhuff . . . wondered if Tante Rosie knew the reason she looked so old. Tante Rosie said she did not and asked if she would mind telling us about it. (At first Mrs. Kemhuff didn't seem to want me there, but Tante Rosie told her I was trying to learn the rootworking trade and she nodded that she understood and didn't mind)" (Walker, "Revenge" 61). Still others gain their passage into spiritual healing through more clandestine means. Indigo, for instance, is trained by Aunt Haydee, but as a reincarnation of her ancestor *Blue Sunday*, Indigo's calling to heal and perform spirit work on the slave descendants of Charleston is preordained. It is a calling that even Aunt Haydee is forced to recognize:

> Indigo'd studied violin with the white woman Miz Fitzhugh sent every summer, but she concentrated more on learning what Aunt Haydee knew. Giving birth, curing women folks & their loved ones. At first Aunt Haydee only allowed Indigo to play her fiddle to soothe the women in labor, but soon the mothers, the children, sought Indigo for relief from elusive disquiet, hungers of the soul. Aunt Haydee was no fool. She watched Indigo playing the fiddle one evening as the tide came in. It'd been a long time since a colored woman on Difuskie moved the sea. Some say it was back in slavery time. *Blue Sunday*, that was her name 'cause she was born on a Sunday & as black as pitch. (Shange 222)

Occasionally in conjuring fiction, a practitioner appears whose prominence in the world of conjure and hoodoo stands in direct contrast to the Western religious concept of a single, sovereign male god. Such personalities, such as Sapphira Wade, credit their power to a source on an equal or greater plane than the Westernized, Christian deity. Proving that her conjure woman is no mere witch or subordinate to the whims of man, Naylor positions Sapphira as an equal partner in the creation of Willow Springs, her island home: "The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. 'Leave 'em here, Lord,' she said. 'I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people but I can lead on with light' " (*Mama Day* 110). Not only does a black woman stand face-to-face with God, but she seems to appear out of thin air; the text indicates neither that "the greatest conjure woman on earth" was a creation of God nor that her power was an extension of his. Sapphira, the great mother of Willow Springs, is descended from African deities that stand on equal ground with the Western God, which explains why she is present at the creation and able to negotiate directly with the creator. Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* also locates a black woman healer in the likeness of Christ, suggesting that the arms of African American conjurers are *not* too short to box with God, as the colloquialism taunts. In a miraculous ceremony that echoes the historical yet sensationalized oral accounts of her priesthood, Rhodes's Marie Laveau dives into the waters of Lake Pontchartrain while under the possession of Damballah.

Submerged for more than three minutes, the excited crowd of Voodoo devotees and doubters believe that Marie has perished in the dark, cold waters; however, as the narrative voice informs, "There was an afterlife. Christ sacrificed on the cross would rise again. So too would Marie" (Rhodes 304). Marie rises from the deathly cold waters of Lake

Pontchartrain in a resurrection scene that rivals that of biblical lore: "*Up she flew, through ageless and ancient waters, bursting into the air. Marie was convinced she could pluck the moon. Then her body lowered to the wet surface. Damp, tangled hair clung to her face and back. Her yellow skirt and blouse outlined her curves, the soft swelling of her abdomen*" [italics in the original] (307). Then Marie, in affirmation of her position as a vessel of the divine, reenacts the miracle of her Christian rival: "*[S]he walked on the surface of the water as if it were earth*" [italics in the original] (307). By walking on water, a power usually only attributed to Christ, Marie defies the association of women, Voodoo, and African-based spirituality with devil worship and black magic.

Instead of relying on a devil or other figure of evil to control her actions, Marie performs a miracle that is historically linked to the omnipotence and grace of the supreme being of Christian faith. While her power stems from an African-based tradition, the association with and likeness of Marie's miracle to that of Christ clearly delineates her spiritual authority as the will of a divinity as influential and evocative, if not more so, as the Christian God. It is an association that certainly calls the attention of the reader. By granting their respective conjure women all but omnipotency, Morrison, Naylor, Butler, Bambara, and Rhodes subvert Nider's and later Kramer's supposition that women engaged in spirit work are the tools of an evil and usually male entity. Their conjure women, in contrast, perform acts that tap into the spiritual richness of the Ancestors, Africa, and a woman's autonomy. The source of their divinity falls outside the jurisdiction of Satan, extending it then to the far reaches of the universe and dating it to a time before creation.

A WOMAN'S PLACE: SUBVERTING THE NORM

The mythology in which these writers are engaged is rooted in a long tradition of Africana vernacular culture in which such manifestations of the invisible world—duppies, being mounted by the loa, Sandy's root—not only are probable but also appear with regularity among the folk.[29] It is a venerable tool with which to reflect upon an epistemology that is relevant and attractive to communities of color, but perhaps one of the most obvious ways that writers of the contemporary period have reclaimed the conjure woman as a symbol of cultural pride is through the myriad of ways in which conjure women display an unwavering autonomy. Particularly for the mission of black feminist criticism, the portrayal of able and voiced women characters in fiction of the spirit assists in challenging the hegemonic interpretation of black females as stock, undeveloped, peripheral characters. Moving past the physical representation of conjure women, authors like Naylor and Shange use their conjure characters to speak about and take action against patriarchal society's oppression of women of African descent and others who fall outside of the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant category. Several writers demonstrate that a woman can indulge her sexuality without fear of falling from grace or having to spend the rest of her life earning a living on her back. Nalo Hopkinson's mambo Mer, from *The Salt Roads* (2003), is blazing other trails, as there are few literary conjurers who espouse a lesbian orientation.

Shange's youngest protagonist, on the other hand, disrupts male activities of senseless killing. Tormented by the violent, testosterone-induced act of cockfighting, Indigo uses her untrained powers to show the bloodthirsty men of Charleston that such careless regard for life leaves both physical and spiritual scars. Angered at the animal cruelty, she turns the male audience against each other as if they were the fighting birds: "Indigo felt a steely vengeance growing in her spirit. Grown men laughing at dying animals. She felt birds hovering above her eyes. She moved the razors off the roosters. Put them in the palms of the onlookers. Let them cut each other to shreds, she thought. Let them know the havoc of pain" (Shange 44). The men rip and carve each other in unsolicited anger, and there is an abundance of blood on the ground. Indigo's juvenile companions are amazed by what they see: "Spats and Crunch had suspicions 'bout Indigo's powers, but couldn't believe she'd gone & done something like this" (44). In accordance with the tenets of ritual sacrifice, Indigo acts to protect the animals that are needlessly made to slaughter themselves, not to incite the goodwill and presence of the orisha or loa, but for the mere entertainment of men.

Rhodes's Marie Laveau, in like fashion, proves a worthy adversary for Western religious supremacy as she stands in opposition of the suffocating traditions of the Catholic Church. A Catholic priest tries to warn her that Voodoo is a path into an evil darkness that will eventually destroy her. Marie indignantly challenges the notion that darkness and evil are synonymous: "How can darkness be evil if your God made the universe? Didn't he make darkness too?" (Rhodes 109). She takes her interrogation of good and evil a step further when Louis DeLavier, a white Northern journalist, declares that "snakes are the devil": " 'Why?' Marie probed. 'Because a snake taught Eve the difference between good and evil? How good is a good without a choice? Voodoo gods are like you and me—they fight, they love, they try to conquer death. They aren't perfect and remote like the white God and Virgin' " (241). Arguing that Catholicism strips its flock of agency and fails to let human nature take precedence over improbable expectations of perfection, Marie articulates the very ways that Catholicism works as another patriarchal vehicle to constrict the spiritual actualization of the people of New Orleans, if not the world. As the Voodoo path becomes clearer for Marie, she becomes emboldened and blunt in voicing the limitations Catholicism places on its practitioners, women especially. She even disputes the power of Christ to judge her: "She looked closely at Father Christophe. Pale skin, a shaved circle on his head, a coarse tunic. He was remarkably unintimidating. It was the setting of painted saints, gold filigree, and custom and ritual that made him seem more powerful. But a man is all he is, thought Marie. A man like DeLavier. Like Jacques. Why should he, or any man, have the power to condemn her? Even Christ had been a man once" (111). Mer, Indigo, and Marie are just a few examples of the elevated level of autonomy and power granted to conjure women of the contemporary period to challenge patriarchal heteronormative domination. Chesnutt's Aunt Peggy proved to be able-bodied and had the mobility to use her conjure to work the spirit as she saw fit; the conjure women of the second coming follow in her shadow, using their magic to reject spiritual, gender, and sexual oppression.

The privilege of men to use the female body for sexual pleasure at their disposal is one means of describing the sexual subjugation of women. Particularly for women of the African diaspora, the history of chattel slavery directly informs the type of sexual oppression to which they were often victim. Many enslaved women were forced to breed like farm animals and reproduce children for the sole purpose of populating a booming slave economy. Women of color endured centuries of male dominance over their reproductive systems—if not stealing the fruit of their wombs, planters, their aristocrat sons, and overseers were guilty of stealing entrance *into* those very same wombs. Well known is the metanarrative that tells of the white planter serial raping his female slaves. Less familiar, unfortunately, are the ways in which conjure women worked their mojo in order to protect a woman's right to choose centuries before *Roe v. Wade* was ever a signifier for reproductive freedom. Infanticide and intentional miscarriage by means of natural, abortive herbs and roots were common practices in slave plantations in the United States and across the Caribbean.[30] The post–*Roe v. Wade* era, which coincides with the movement toward the resurrection of the conjurer as a folk hero in African American fiction, has had a lasting impact on the ways today's healing women are conceived.

Several of the conjure women explored here emphasize a woman's freedom to reproduce when and where she chooses. Using various conjure methods to control their reproductive systems, these particular women defiantly voice their absolute sovereignty over their bodies and their babies.

The Tituba of Condé's imagination makes no apologies for her decision to abort the child she conceives with John Indian. She announces bluntly and with no feeling, "I realized that I was pregnant and I decided to kill the child" (Condé 49). A slave in the house of Samuel Parris, Tituba sees only a dismal existence for her child and terminates the pregnancy without consulting the father. Sensing the disapproval of her reading audience, Tituba explains her rationale: "There is no happiness in motherhood for a slave. It is little more than the expulsion of an innocent baby, who will have no chance to change its fate, into a world of slavery and abjection" (50). She recalls from her native Barbados a litany of methods of ridding oneself of an unwanted pregnancy, assuring the reader that she is not only willing but also profoundly capable of performing the task: "Throughout my childhood I had seen slaves kill their babies by sticking a long thorn into the still viscous-like egg of their heads, by cutting the umbilical cord with a poison blade, or else by abandoning them at night in a place frequented by angry spirits. Throughout my childhood I had heard slaves exchange formulas for potions, baths, and injections that sterilize the womb forever and turn it into a tomb lined with a scarlet shroud" (50). In a similar scenario of bondage, Anyanwu consciously uses her spiritual knowledge and shapeshifting abilities to humble men who demand too much of her body. She aborts the child she and Doro, her captor, conceive once she realizes that he only hopes to breed a superbeing with his abilities and those of the wild seed woman: "Within her body, she killed his seed. She disconnected the two small tubes through which her own seed traveled to her womb. She had done this many times when she thought she had given a man enough children. Now she did it to avoid giving children at all, to avoid being used" (Butler 121–22). Shange's Blue Sunday transforms into an alligator to violently resist penetration by and likely conception with a man not of her choosing. Melvira Dupree, who is not living under slave law, still maintains her privilege to decide when and if she will conceive. With the help of Hoodoo Maggie, Melvira ensures that Luke Bodeen, her "good-for-nothing-but-the-blues bluesman," will not plant any unwanted seeds in her womb while she is away from her home in Sweetwater, Arkansas (Flowers 43). When Luke questions her about her desire to abstain from motherhood, Melvira's "hand [strays] to the redflannel bag she kept tied on a red string around her waist and hanging between her legs" in silent response (185). She only informs Bodeen that "there're ways," keeping the particulars of her uterine health out of the minds and hands of men, just as generations of women before her had done (185).

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The twentieth century has witnessed the growth of new genres, characters, and tropes across the African American literary tradition. Within the wide and varying expressions of a cultural group, conjure women emerged as a staple, quickly moving from the debased remnants of "heathen" Africa to the regal vessels of divinity they had once been. Particularly in the contemporary period, African American authors have viciously confronted the false characterization of their folk heroines as grotesque, ungodly beings in league with the European figure of evil. Rather, they have moved to return the African American healing woman to a position of admiration and value—a position that was deviously usurped from her over centuries of Eurocentric hegemonic rule. Gloria Naylor, Maryse Condé, and Ntozake Shange write novels in which women and spirit work form the basis for survival in a world meant to objectify and exploit the racialized, gendered other. Not only do African American conjure women call on their innate spirituality to survive their own hardships, but they extend their power to assist in the preservation and healing of an entire community of people who look to them for guidance. The political and social positioning of conjure women in contemporary African American literature is second only to the innovative representations of them as beloved icons. Morrison, Flowers, Ansa, and others finally do away with mammies and tragic mulattos to replace them with images of black women that reflect the diversity in physical attributes, spiritual disposition, and sexual experience of the millions of women of color across the diaspora. Contemporary writers craft images of conjure women that do not easily fit into the historical molds originally cast for such characters. Instead, they create new patterns and models for healing women that have extended the ever-present image into the twenty-first century. The work of contemporary authors has loudly called the attention of the literary world to the conjure woman. The issues of agency, authority, and gender that arise with the study of black women are thoroughly explored in conjuring fiction published since 1965. A plethora of authors are doing the work of reappropriating the image of healing women from the depths to which she has been cast by the uninformed and uninterested. The conjure woman has enjoyed this second life, finding shelter in the creative work of novelists and in the innovative visions of filmmakers such as Julie Dash and Kasi Lemmons. However, resurrection is only the first step. Now that "sistah conjurer" is overwhelmingly present in the literary tradition, it is up to the scholars and critics to flush out her nuances and dissect the complexities of such a worldly figure (V. Lee 1). *Conjuring Moments* is an attempt to move in that direction, looking first to the relationship between conjure, women, and Christianity—a coupling that has continued to be complex, multidimensional, and even enigmatic at times.

CHAPTER 3

TROUBLING THE WATER

CONJURE AND CHRIST

> "Here's the thing," say Shug. "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for."
>
> —Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

IN THIS MEMORABLE SCENE FROM ALICE WALKER'S *The Color Purple* (1982), Shug Avery imparts to Celie the wonder and freedom of a woman's autonomy to define her faith. Shug, who lives a life in contradiction to her father's religion, teaches Celie to theorize her own system of belief rather than suffocate under the weight of a constricting Christianity. Only after she fondles with the idea and renegotiates her own concept of the divine is Celie able to come to voice and action, defending herself against "Mr._____'s evil" (Walker, *Color* 204). Shug's discourse on renegotiating faith is not, however, an original concept. The practice of adapting Western ideas of the divine to better accommodate the confines of peculiar patriarchal institutions has been commonplace in African American religion, reaching back to the forced introduction of Africans to the New World. The syncretization of African and other religious practices is evidenced both in pre–middle passage Africa as well as in the New World.[1] Albert Raboteau points to the Convince cult and Revivalist tradition of Jamaica, the Spiritual Baptists of Trinidad, and Evangelical Protestantism in the United States as primary examples of such blending and borrowing among religions.[2] This history is certainly not lost on Walker, whose tragic character blossoms into a new woman upon the realization that spirituality can take any form she imagines. Harkening back to the legend and lore of Africa, such contemporary authors as Ntozake Shange, Jewell

Parker Rhodes, Toni Cade Bambara, Arthur Flowers, and Tina McElroy Ansa have also embraced the revisionist attitude of Walker's unforgettable characters, opting to privilege conjure—an assortment of the spiritual and supernatural traditions of their recent African ancestors—in their work. While functioning in a minor role, Christianity, however, still makes its presence felt in conjuring fiction. It is as deeply embedded in the religious rites of African Americans as residual African elements—some may even argue more so.[3]

Conjure and Christianity develop out of two different cultural traditions but are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As religious studies scholar Yvonne Chireau notes, "while it may be useful for academic interpreters, a rigid dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian expressions in black folk traditions belies practitioners' own experiences" (*Black Magic* 4). The reality is that conjure and Christianity influenced each other. Parallels between baptism by immersion in the Christian faith and the importance of water-dwelling deities of West Africa were easily drawn by enslaved communities, for one example. Such similarities resulted in the merging of the two traditions, as Raboteau explains: "In Africa, Dutch Guiana, and Haiti, possession by water spirits drives the possessed devotee to hurl himself bodily into a stream, pond, or river. Similarly, in the baptismal service of rural blacks Baptists the spirit occasionally falls upon the new Christian emerging from the water, causing him to shout" (57). Likewise, in the New Orleans tradition of Voodoo, it is hard to separate Catholic practices from those of the Voodoo rites: "St. John's Eve was a Catholic holiday characterized in Europe by bonfires and visits to holy bodies of water. Voodooists linked traditional African practices of ritual bathing, drumming, singing, and dancing to the occasion and made it the most important Voodoo celebration of the year" (Anderson 57).

So how do contemporary authors strike a balance between two traditions that *appear* to be contradictory to each other? By interrogating the presence of Christian ideology in fiction that grants primacy to African-centered cosmologies, this chapter explores how this particular strand of Du Boisian double consciousness is negotiated and expressed in the African American literary imagination. A number of authors stylistically weave Christianity and conjure together, while others reinvent spiritual paradigms that best fulfill the needs of their fictive African American communities. I contend that such repositioning of theological boundaries is by no means random. By addressing how a number of African American authors inscribe ritual, morality, sexuality, and an agency to recreate God onto their conjure women figures, my inquiry intends to (1) deconstruct the critique of Western spiritual praxis offered through

African American conjuring fiction as well as (2) demonstrate how conjure and Christianity overlap and eliminate the need for conjure women to privilege one tradition over the other.[4] A brief genealogy of the conjure tradition and its relationship to Christianity in a US context is certainly in order with such an undertaking.

GENEALOGY

Conjure, a mélange of spiritual concepts, pulls from a number of ethnic and cultural influences. A derivative of such traditional West African religious practices as ancestor worship, divination, and spirit possession coupled with the shamanism of American indigenous populations and Christian doctrine, conjure takes on a variety of forms specific to the experiences and geographic locations of enslaved Africans.[5] It is critical to note that the conjure tradition is a separate entity from such African-based, syncretic religions as Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería or Lucumí, and Brazilian Condomblé, though they do share a common African past. I use *conjure* as an umbrella term that encompasses syncretic African spirituality practiced in the United States. This includes Louisiana Voodoo and the hoodoo, goopher, or root work traditions often associated with the American South. Jeffery Anderson, in *Conjure in African American Society* (2005), suggests that "conjure is broader than such faiths" (x): "Functionally, syncretic religions seek to honor the gods and spirits who people the believers' world. For example, both [Vodou] and Santería have historically included sacrifice to please such deities as Papa Lébat and Ogun. Conjure, however, pursues no such lofty aims; instead it seeks to accomplish practical objectives through appeals to the spirit world" (x). Conjure, Anderson argues, is not confined by the theological and hierarchical structures of organized religion, syncretic or otherwise. Conjure indeed lacks "the developed theology of syncretic religions," which contributes to the arbitrariness of praxis found in the historical record and within the African American literary imagination (x). In an assessment of how African American women incorporate spirituality into their art, Judylyn Ryan argues that "spirituality, as depicted in Black women's literature and film, is recognizably African/Black but rarely conforms to a single traditional African religion" (23). There are, however, a number of markers that identify conjure as part of the New World phenomena of African-based religions. Conjure practices, as Chireau suggests, undoubtedly "adhere to characteristic traits of African religions," such as "highly structured cosmologies, concepts of a diffused monotheism, rituals of sacred meditation, an emphasis on devotions to ancestors and the dead, and the use of spiritually efficacious objects" (*Black Magic* 37).

In the same way that a renewed spirituality freed Celie from Mr. _____'s evil, so too did conjure grant African Americans one form of agency needed to resist the evils of slavery. The merging of African, European, and Native American spiritual cosmologies offered enslaved Africans a "magical art" that has "moved freely across ecclesial boundaries, drawing copiously from the symbols and language of Christianity" (Chireau, "Conjure" 226). One of the most recognized points of "borrowing" in the realm of Africana religious experience in the New World is identifying African deities or spirits with Catholic saints. The importance of the saints in conjure spells and rituals is a direct reflection of the merging and melding of cultures. It seems that "Catholic notions about the role of Christ, Mary, guardian angels, and patron saints as intercessors with the Father in heaven for men on earth proved quite compatible with African ideas about the intervention of lesser gods in the day-to-day affairs of human life," which helps to explain why a conjurer has no problem calling on St. Anthony or the Virgin Mary in his or her incantations, but relies less on intervention from the Creator, who "remained benevolent and providential but distant" (Raboteau 23). The use of candles—another religious borrowing from the Catholic Church—"provided [conjurers] a way to please deities, usually by choosing colors favored by particular gods/saints" (Anderson 59). Conjurers were not above using the Bible to affect the potency of their magic, either. Anderson explains that "[c]onjurers chose verses for their clients based on the verses' similarity to the result to be accomplished, keeping within the rules of sympathetic magic" (60). Such cultural exchange gave birth to an alternate way of knowing that "provided the spiritual fodder by which bondspersons challenged slave owner hegemony and retained a powerful ancestral heritage" (Chireau, "Conjure" 226). I return to Frederick Douglass's famous account of his life in slavery, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), to demonstrate how magico-religious accoutrements assisted enslaved Africans in disrupting the power structure of plantation society. After fleeing from the brutal slave breaker Edward Covey and taking refuge in the nearby woods, Douglass finds himself seeking the council of one Sandy Jenkins: "I found Sandy an old advisor. He told me with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me" (49). Upon returning to Covey with the root securely positioned on his right side as instructed, Douglass is soon confronted with yet another violent attack:

> We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. (50)

Douglass never fully attributes the changing dynamic of his and Covey's relationship to the root; rather, he leaves the reader to make his or her own conclusions.[6] Furthermore, his use of the root did not invalidate his Christian faith but instead acted as a supplement to it. African American writers, particularly in the twentieth century, paid close attention to the power dynamics associated with the conjure tradition, and such episodes often found their way into the fiction of the time.

Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), for example, is one of the earliest collections of fiction by an African American writer to reflect the resistant nature of conjure. Aunt Peggy, the neighborhood conjure woman in Chesnutt's tales, uses her knowledge of the supernatural to humble Master Jeems McLean's "monst'us stric" disposition toward his slave hands in the tale "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" (Chesnutt 57). After Solomon's "junesey," or sweetheart, is sold off of the McLean plantation, he combats Mars Jeem's spitefulness by seeking the wisdom of Aunt Peggy. When a new slave appears on the plantation with little recollection of his name or to whom he belongs, Solomon concludes that "Aun' Peggy's gopher had turnt Mars Jeems ter a nigger, en dat dat noo han' wuz Mars Jeems hisse'f" (68).

Conjure, in all its hoodoo and root work variations, functioned not only as a tool with which to dismantle the Master's house, but more important, it provided many displaced Africans and their descendants with a sustaining spiritual framework in the face of adversity: "Black Americans utilized conjuring traditions not only because they saw them as a valuable resource for resistance, but because they believed that the supernatural realm offered alternative possibilities for empowerment" (Chireau, *Black Magic* 18). Such a firm grounding in faith was of particular importance, as John W. Roberts argues, because "despite the enslaver's effort to create a relationship between themselves and Africans that would force dependency on them in almost every respect, they demonstrated an almost total disregard for their spiritual needs" (86).

The suggestion that slave owners neglected to indoctrinate their charges in the teachings of the Bible seems problematic on the one hand because history informs us that European colonists, planters, and missionaries justified the transatlantic slave trade by suggesting that the African populace needed to be "civilized" and Christian conversion was the path to such salvation. While a number of European powers, primarily those under Catholic rule, did commence with the Lord's work, the English—who dominated the North American colonies—were of another ilk:

> Although Europeans justified the enslavement of Africans as a way of converting them to Christianity, the predominantly English slaveholding class demonstrated a great deal of reluctance in providing Christian religious instruction for their slaves. During the early years of slavery, many slave holders refused to allow their slaves to be converted because they believed that they would not be allowed by the state to keep Christians of any hue in permanent bondage. Even after they were assured that conversion would have no impact on the legal status of an African, many still resisted on the grounds that the equalitarianism inherent in Christianity would make Africans unruly. (J. Roberts 86)

This largely accounts for the difference in how Vodou and other African-derived religions in the New World were able to evolve and flourish with much of their Africanity more intact than in predominantly Protestant countries.[7] In her study *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (2005), Ryan offers an explanation for such a bold contradiction. Her answer, a matter of semantic specificity, is aimed at preventing a gross generalization of Christianity at large. She urges readers and scholars alike to differentiate Christianity used to further material wealth from that of "Christianity proper"—the teachings of Jesus Christ (Ryan 30). She makes this distinction in her work by using the term *Christendom* to refer to "that branch of European imperialist apparatus disguised under religious rhetoric that espoused the goals of territorial expansion, colonization, and the accumulation of wealth—through the exploitation of human labor and natural resources" (31). I make the distinction by addressing Ryan's *Christendom* as "white Christianity."

The distinction offered by Ryan sheds light on why some authors, such as Ishmael Reed, insist on displacing white Christianity—more specifically, Western cultural hegemony—in their work. Refusing to privilege a religious system that acted as an accessory to high crimes against African peoples, much of Reed's early work reflects an African-centered worldview—one that challenges popular notions about the universality of white Christianity.[8] His 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* is one such attempt to subvert Western religious supremacy. Reed and other twentieth-century writers allow their work to pay homage to a tradition that for centuries sustained people of African descent on the North American continent who often had only their faith to which to cling. Ntozake Shange, Arthur Flowers, and Charles Chesnutt, for instance, honor their African past through the vehicle of the conjure woman. Through the incorporation of the African American healing woman in their texts, these writers are doing the work of cultural preservation and challenging cultural norms. As Valerie Lee suggests in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* (1996), "These authors invest women healers with magical, ancient, life-affirming powers that rise out of their characters' folkloric pasts and persist as part of their functioning present. Despite the early efforts of science and history to silence [the conjure woman], the writers continue to bring to voice Pilate, Circe, Marie-Thérèse, Ajax's Mom, Indigo, Minnie Ransom, Aunt Cuney, Nana [Peazant], and a host of other women healers and midwives" (9). Literary conjure women are brought to life from the real histories and memories of such figures in the African American community. "Sistah Conjurer," to borrow Lee's phrase, is so alive and prevalent in current literature because she was such a powerful force in the not-so-distant past.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE RECREATION OF GOD

While supplanting Western patriarchal values with the ancient wisdom of the African diaspora, the repositioning of cultural authority is not necessarily an attack on or a disavowal of Christianity as a religious practice. For many African Americans, Christianity became the primary mode of worship and served them well. The poetry of Phillis Wheatley and the spiritual narratives of Jarena Lee and John Marrant are but a few examples of an enriching development between African Americans and Christianity.[9] Conjure and other New World religious practices are "the consequence of an incomplete Christianization of Black Americans that began in slavery" and has continued to nurture the souls of black folk (Chireau, "Conjure" 226). It is erroneous, then, to think that Christianity—complete or otherwise—did not saturate African American life. In the nineteenth century, according to Chireau, enslaved African Americans were organizing their own Christian denominations, places of worship, and religious leadership. Richard Allen, a former slave, founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, for example. Toni Morrison demonstrates the possibilities of Christian worship developed in bondage with the praise gatherings officiated by Baby Suggs, Holy in *Beloved* (1987). Not surprisingly, much of this "slave religion" retained the influence of its African heritage, if not the theology behind it, including an "emphasis on ritual efficacy, the appropriation of invisible powers, and ceremonial spirituality" (*Black Magic* 54).

It was not unusual, however, for Christianity as practiced by African Americans to conform to an African epistemology rather than the inverse, as was quite common with the different manifestations of the conjuring tradition. Margaret Washington Creel notes that "the Gullahs converted Christianity to their African world view, using the new religion to justify combating objective forces, to collectively perpetuate community-culture, and as an ideology of freedom. Thus it was less a case of Christianity instilling a sense of resignation because of beliefs in future rewards than of an African philosophical tradition being asserted in the slave quarters" (74). Among the Gullah, Sea Island communities worshipped their ancestors through elaborate burial rites and ornamentation that hardly resembled Christian funeral ceremony, though remnants are discernible.[10] Anderson points out that in such overlapping of faiths, "while conjurers may consider their religion to be Christian, this has not prevented some of them from calling on Papa Lébat to perform specific deeds. Likewise, Christian conjurers might try to compel God to bend to their will through selective Bible reading" (x). In other cases, the overlap was due more to a sameness of ideals rather than a privileging of one faith over the other. Cornelia Bailey, a direct descendant of Bilali Muhammed, discusses how Islam, Christianity, and African religious traditions were maintained in the First African Baptist Church on Sapelo Island, Georgia: "You couldn't come to church with bare arms. Never. That's right. You had to have your shoulders and upper part of your arms covered. It was disrespectful not to, and the women also had to have their heads covered by a hat at all times . . . We'd walk in the church together and then we'd separate, and that was another Muslim tradition. The men didn't sit with the women" (159–60).

Whichever way African Americans understood the relationship between their memories of a cultural heritage and the redeeming qualities of white Christianity, it is clear that they molded an alternate spirituality that catered to their experiences with slavery and racial oppression. Rather than considering that contemporary authors are attempting to either uplift or negate white Christianity as a viable system of worship for African Americans, I argue that Rhodes, Ansa and others are resurrecting a forgotten spirituality—one that crossed the troubled waters of the middle passage and provided the safety and familiarity of home for enslaved Africans. This forgotten spirituality is neither wholly African nor Christian but recognizes those elements from both religions that best sustained a life in bondage. Consciously practicing and accepting a system of belief that has both African and Anglo antecedents, however, is not always an easy task. Conjure women, like many other people of African descent, are placed in the dubious position of either assimilating into the dominant culture or maintaining some type of cultural allegiance and agency. Or perhaps it's better to suggest that they imagine that a single choice has to be made. Many lose themselves searching for the middle ground.

The conjure woman is often perplexed by the internal struggle of these "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 38). In Chesnutt's tale "Po' Sandy," Tenie is confronted with just such a dilemma after her husband, Sandy, informs her that he is to be loaned out to a plantation more than forty miles away and thus will be separated from his wife for an unspecified amount of time. Tenie must decide whether to reveal the power she has to influence the outcome of their lives. Tenie chooses to confess to Sandy that she is a conjure woman, offering the proviso that "I ain' goophered nobody, ner done no cunjuh wuk, fer fifteen year or mo'; en w'en I got religion I made up my mine I wouldn' wuk no mo' goopher. But dey is some things I doan b'lieve it's no sin fer ter do" (Chesnutt, *Conjure* 48). Tenie, torn between being a Christian woman and holding on to the family structure that has been denied to both her and Sandy, is effortlessly swayed to use her African way of knowing once her husband gives his consent. This example demonstrates how Christianity acted as the window-dressing that many enslaved persons maintained during times of stability, but when life was turbulent, African Americans returned to their ancestral spirituality. Other spiritually enriched women are not so easily moved to choose one lifestyle over the other.

In Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993), a fictional account of the legendary Marie Laveau of New Orleans, the heroine also admits to her estranged, Catholic husband, Jacques, that she is indeed the infamous Voodoo queen as has been rumored and cannot disavow either of her faiths regardless of the perceived conflict between them: "I can't let go of Christian gods any more than you can. I thought I could. But I can't. Maybe to be free of them . . . to love Damballah with all my soul, I would've had to have been African. But Grandmère baptized me Catholic. It makes all the difference in the world" (Rhodes 285). The novel follows Marie from childhood to her rise as a powerful Voodooienne, detailing her struggle to reconcile the legacy of her family's dedication to the serpent god, Damballah, and her Grandmère's sudden conversion to Catholicism when her daughter, Marie's mother, is brutally lynched by an angry Christian mob for attempting to perform Voodoo rites in historic Jackson Square.[11] As Marie reclaims the faith of her ancestors and finally pulls the truth about her mother's death from her dying grandmother, she realizes that she *must* make both Voodoo and

Catholicism work for her—a reconciliation that comes at the expense of her marriage, Grandmère's life, and the relationship between Marie and her unborn daughter. In a moment of quiet epiphany, Marie accepts her position as both devil and mambo:[12]

> Mixed blood; mixed legends and faiths. This, then, was real and crucial to survival. Marie felt that she had to keep on doing what she had been doing, blending white and black saints, not choosing one over the other as Grandmère had done. Exclusion had been the mistake. It was the blend that kept remnants of Membe's faith alive. Marie would pray to African and Christian gods because there wasn't a single truth, a single people. Voodoo wasn't African anymore. But, in some form, Voudon had survived. Black peoples had survived. Damballah didn't say to Membe, I am the one true and only God. He said, Mother my children. (Rhodes 341)

Marie is able to find the middle ground, merging Voudon—the faith of her African born great-grandmother, Membe—and Catholicism into a new religion. This may be the exception rather than the rule for literary conjurers. Certainly, some conjure women reject the notion of any responsibility for balancing two oppositional traditions. In Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), for instance, Indigo, an 11-year-old priestess in training, furiously removes Western religious ideals from her spiritual platform. Indigo is a resident of Charleston, South Carolina, a vital locus within the most highly concentrated area of African retentions in the United States—the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor.[13] For her, white Christianity is offensive and in no way functions as the intermediary between her and the divine; it is the very thing that has attempted to separate Indigo and her ancestors—"the slaves who were ourselves"—from an intuitive African cosmology (Shange 49). Indigo's rejection of Christ is most apparent in her reaction to Sister Mary Louise's insistence that she behave like a "good Christian girl" (17): "Now Indigo was angry. The bread wasn't ready. Sister's saying little girls make bread and take care of beauty. Indigo thought her stomach was going to jump out of her mouth and knock over all the flowers, stomp the breads, and let hell aloose in Sister Mary's big white kitchen, where Jesus looked down from every wall. The Last Supper. The Annunciation. From way up on Mt. Calvary, there he was waiting for 'his sons to shepherd.' Indigo was so mad she felt lightheaded; hot all over" (18). Indigo's adolescent mind is not quite able to verbalize why so much anger and contempt are aroused by the images of Christianity around her, nor why her emotions manifest themselves physically. Uncle John, the resident old-soul junk man, attempts to piece together Indigo's fragmented emotions: "Them white folks what owned slaves took everythin' was ourselves & didn't even keep it fo' they own selves. Just threw it on away, ya heah. Took them languages what they could, but they couldn't take our feet. Took them languages what we speak. Took off wit our spirits & left us wit they Son" (27). Indigo's physical ailments and vexation are results of the blatant disregard Sister Mary Louise shows for the Ancestors by forcing Jesus into their place. For Indigo and other conjure persons, the Ancestors are a critical part of their art. Indigo's connection to the earth and the Ancestors is her spiritual base. Shange makes it a point at the onset of the novel to situate her young folk heroine as intimately connected to both: "A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss . . . Whenever her mother tried to pull the moss off her head, or clip the roses round her thighs, Indigo was laughing. 'Mama, if you pull 'em off, they'll just grow back. It's in my blood. I've got earth blood, filled up with the Geechees long gone, and the sea' " (3). Sister Mary Louise's kitchen is unwelcoming to the influences of Indigo's African past, thus riling the young conjurer to seek a safe space for her dolls, her spiritual companions. Nor is Sister Mary Louise receptive to the spiritual forces that appear to be vying for her attention. Shange takes an unwavering stance toward the place of white Christianity in her work by inserting an African religious philosophy as the primary mode of spirituality for Indigo and her sisters. She advances the idea that Western concepts of the divine are too narrow and limited to serve the needs of black folk—black women folk in particular. While Indigo and the other title characters reflect this notion most obviously, it also rears its head as the reader learns of Sister Mary Louise's internal conflict with her religion.

Oscillating between a structured Christianity and an unnamed connection to the invisible world, Sister Mary Louise is in denial about which way Spirit is guiding her. She does, after all, perform a most unconventional menses ritual for Indigo, instructing her to "smile like you will when God chooses to give you a woman's pleasure" (19). She also adamantly refuses Indigo's spirit dolls' entrance into her house, telling the child outright, "No haints coming in my house. What do you imagine the Lord God Jesus Christ would think, if I set my table for haints?" (18). The irony in such a statement is ripe. Sister Mary Louise unknowingly invites Spirit into her home every time Indigo visits. As much as she loathes any association with those "heathenish folks, pagans out there on those [Sea] islands," Sister Mary Louise cannot deny that "she was heartened when Indigo came around" (16–17). Sister Mary Louise also fails to recognize that the two can exist in one body. She is so thoroughly indoctrinated into Western notions of otherness that she feels compelled to “choose” a faith when, truly, the two are already combined within her in ways she is too blind to recognize.

In her unwavering manifesto announcing her blood ties to the land, Indigo also proclaims she is the embodiment of the Ancestors. Elaborating on the role of the Ancestors in her work *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African American Migration Narrative* (1995), Farah Jasmine Griffin sheds light on how deeply Indigo embodies the Geechees of her family’s past. Griffin observes that such figures are “present in ritual, religion, music, food and performance” and function in compassionate, instructive ways (5). For Griffin, “the ancestor might be a literal ancestor; he or she also has earthly representatives, whom we might call elders” (5). Indigo is surely the earthly representative of “the slaves who were ourselves,” making an exception to Griffin’s interpretation, which also explains why Indigo is present where there is ritual, music, and food in the novel and where ancient wisdom is needed to guide and heal (Shange 49). Perhaps Indigo’s position as an ancestral reincarnation explains why Sister Mary Louise is so drawn to her.

Not only does Sister Mary Louise fail to realize that she speaks out against the very presence that is beckoning for her submission, but her body is also a site of spiritual turmoil. Some supernatural force is using her body to convey its message—a message Sister Mary Louise ignores: “For all her Godfearing ways, Sister Mary [Louise] Murray had been known to get the spirit outside of Church. Sometimes, when she was walking to the fish market or delivering breads, she’d be singing ‘I Ain’t Got Weary Yet,’ or ‘Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,’ and she would just get happy in the street” (Shange 17). Unlike the Holy Spirit that is usually “caught” in the midst of worship in the house of the Lord, the deities associated with conjure and other African-based religions are not confined to appear in a specific location, time, or space. As Shug Avery warns Celie, the divine is apt to manifest itself when least expected, and Sister Mary Louise is noticeably a vessel for Spirit, having an obvious connection to the otherworldly, as evidenced by her occasional “fits in public” (18). Sister Mary Louise’s refusal to acknowledge an African way of knowing, however, stifles her potential to master such power. Instead, the omniscient narrator tells the reader, “[a]t many a sermon she would be called forth to testify about how the Devil seizes her in broad daylight, taking on the movements of the Holy Spirit, tempting the sinner in her” (17).

The inability of white Christianity to singly protect or, better yet, to “save” black female protagonists when they are confronted with the affairs of the supernatural world resurfaces in the work of Paule Marshall and Tina

McElroy Ansa. In Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Avey Johnson relinquishes her connection to her Sea Island cultural roots in striving to maintain her middle-class status and finds herself ill at ease when she experiences a literal visitation of spirits. Avey is forced to embark on a psychospiritual journey to mend those same broken bonds. With the help of her Great Aunt Cuney's spirit, Lebert Joseph, and the experience of an Afro-Caribbean homecoming ritual, Avey rectifies the error of her ways and strikes a balance between her obligations to the Ancestors and her life as a modern woman. Not coincidentally, Avey's white Christian orientation is incapable of seeing her through her difficulty; she must make her appeal through the spiritual language of her Sea Island Ancestors—a language she reacquaints herself with after departing from the *Bianca Pride*.

This conflict unfolds a bit differently in Ansa's novels *Baby of the Family* (1989) and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), both which focus on the spiritual journey of Lena McPherson. Lena's battle to make peace with her birthright begins the moment she is born into a modern Catholic family with a caul over her face. History informs us that Catholicism, in particular, was well blended with remnants of traditional African spiritual practices.[14] Ansa's characters, however, reject the notion that Catholicism and African cosmologies have anything in common, thus doing more harm than good to the baby girl. Folk belief from around the globe dictates that a child born with a caul—a thin layer of skin from the amniotic sac that encases the face, head, or sometimes the entire body—will have the uncanny ability to see ghosts, spirits, and other events of the spirit world. Nellie, Lena's mother, gives no credence to the folk beliefs relayed to her concerning her baby girl; nor does she adhere to the caul tea formula Nurse Bloom prepares to secure Lena's safety from harmful haints: "Nurse Bloom is a sweet woman, going to all this trouble for my baby, yes, she is, for my sweet little Lena . . . but if she thinks I'm gonna give my baby girl any of this old-fashioned potion shit—God only knows what's in it—she better think again . . . Nellie unscrewed the cap of the glass bottle, lifted off the nippled top, and slowly poured the precious [caul tea] into the vase of roses" (Ansa, *Baby* 33). Nellie destroys Lena's birth caul shortly thereafter, which sets the stage for a troubled life for such a "special child." Lena is raised Catholic and clings to her faith for the greater portion of her life, yet all her "Hail Marys" and pleas to the Lord to "keep me near the cross" could not fix what her mother had broken. Catholicism alone fails to protect Lena from the repercussions of her mother's actions; it simply is not broad enough to address the spiritual conflicts that fall outside of the Christian scope. In her attempt to rebuke the devil, who she believes took over her voice during a private meeting with her Catholic school principal, Lena splashes herself with holy water—a task done in vain, as it offers her no consolation and certainly no clear resolution to her haunting: "The Holy water did not sear or scorch her skin as Sister Louise Marie had said it would a person possessed by the devil . . . She didn't know whether to feel relief or disappointment. On the one hand it meant that she was not possessed, as she had thought the night before. On the other it meant she was right back where she had been when the voice had issued from her throat in the principal's office. She knew there was something different about her, but she didn't know what" (Ansa, *Baby* 223). What Lena fails to realize is that her plight is steeped in African American folk belief, and that same tradition must be evoked in order to escape Nellie's negligent mistake. Lena is trying to exorcise what she conceptualizes as "the devil" using a white Christian model of belief. This particular framework is unuseful within an African-centered episteme that does not recognize such an entity.[15] Rather, Lena must embrace African American folkways to heal and be at peace with her gift. As a child and even through young adulthood, Lena is simply unable and, more important, *unwilling* to deal with her gift, thus invoking the wrath of the spirit world, much like Sister Mary Louise in *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*. As a result, her life is not one of normalcy. Nellie provides an example of how the tensions between faiths are often constructions of our socialization, while Lena's journey shows us how such tensions can effectively be eased.

The reader learns in *The Hand I Fan With* that Lena fails to develop a healthy sexual sense of self. She is unable to experience the intimacy and pleasure of lovemaking; "[N]o matter who her man of the moment was, just at the point of sexual play and intimacy in their relationship, the powers of her birth caul would kick in and she could suddenly *see* . . . Lena would have to call a halt and stop the graphic pictures in her head" (Ansa, *Hand* 46–47). Even when she takes steps toward embracing the ways of the folk, disingenuous as they may be, Lena still fails to quell the raging spirits: "[She] had done everything she could from what she had heard and read to calm the spirits of her family's house: burning candles, splashing holy water around, burying one of her braids in the backyard near the stream. Nothing worked" (57). Only when Lena is forced to confront the spirit world and the power of her birthright through the presence of Herman (a hundred-year-old ghost) does she begin to reconcile Catholicism and conjure. Through Herman, Lena *has* to recognize and learn to appreciate the spirit world. She retains her Catholicism but introduces her own ad-libs and personal touches that are "barely in the confines of the Roman Catholic Church" (264). Herman's presence creates a protective barrier within which Lena feels safe and comfortable with the otherworldly. Within the space of Herman's love and guidance, Lena is finally able to traverse the family home that once made her so ill at ease. She discovers her deceased mother's final gift to her—her family recipes—opening the door for mother and daughter to have a moment of healing and forgiveness that can only occur after Lena ventures in to the invisible world: "Now that the ghosts and demons had settled down since she had found her mother's recipes, her family's home was peaceful and serene" (383).

Through Herman's tutelage, Lena learns the extent of her power and how to become the master of her head. Not only does Lena embrace the supernatural, but she also finds the balance between giving relentlessly and saving some of herself for herself—a lesson on the same level of importance as rectifying her connection to Spirit, for surely Lena, with the busy-body, do-for-everyone-but-myself lifestyle she was leading prior to Herman's arrival, was well on her way to becoming a victim of what Trudier Harris describes as "this disease called strength" (Harris *Saints* ix). Herman, as temporary as he is, is the conduit through which Lena finally accepts her gift and reconceptualizes her faith to include an African-based cosmology. Herman offers the confidence and support Lena needs in order to find her own place—a safe space—in the world of the unliving, without which Lena may have destroyed herself. I would be remiss if I did not mention that the safe space also offers Lena the clarity of mind (finally) to experience all the wonders of the spirit world, including a woman's pleasure. As Shug teaches us, "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did," and as Lena figures out who and what her image of the divine truly is, a pastiche of Christian and non-Christian practices, she takes the time to admire the color purple and experience all of Spirit's sensations (Walker *Color* 203).

For Shange's little miss conjure, folk religion also provides a safe environment for her womanhood to blossom. Indigo's proclivity toward her ancestors' ways of knowing serves her well, softening the tumultuous transition into adolescence for a girl who "crawled up into [her dolls'] arms when she was unavoidably lonely, anxious that no living black folks would talk to her the way her dolls and Aunt Haydee did" (Shange 6). With her dolls, or rather with the spirits that speak through them, is where Indigo feels most secure as she sways between girlhood and womanhood. Miranda, Candace, and the other dolls are able to "keep pace with her many changes, her moods and dreams, as no one else could. Indigo [hears] them talking to her in her sleep" (4). Rather than being taught that her menses is a shameful curse and admonished for a woman's ability to produce life, Shange's revision of divinity allows

Indigo to embrace and celebrate her life-bearing powers. She and Sister Mary Louise share a sacred moment as Indigo's first menses commences: "Sister Mary Louise rose, her thin body coated with Indigo's blood. She gently took off Indigo's clothes, dropped them in a pail of cold water. She bathed Indigo in a tub filled with rose petals: white, red, and yellow floating around a new woman. She made Indigo a garland of flowers, and motioned for her to go into the back yard . . . There in the garden, among God's other beauties you should spend these first hours . . . Take your blessing and let your blood flow among the roses" (19). For Lena and Indigo, their incorporation of other ways of knowing allows them to develop healthy sexual identities, though Lena's comes much later in life. The connection between the physical body and ideas of the divine in African American conjuring fiction is not one to be overlooked, however, as it is not only a recurrent theme addressed in the literature but also more often a condition of African-based spiritualities.

DIVINITY AND THE BLACK BODY

Within conjuration and other African magico-religious systems, divinity is often expressed through the physical body, which directly contradicts specifically Catholic ideas that wish to separate female sexuality from spirituality. The use of the erotic as spiritual power and a point of privilege is not an uncommon notion to practitioners who invoke their gods through dance or by offering their bodies as temples in which Spirit can dwell. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde affirms that "the erotic is a resource within each [woman] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (49). Such an avid separation of spirit and flesh is pushed forward most notably in the narratives of the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception. Mary, it is believed, conceived a child through the Holy Spirit though she had not yet engaged in intercourse with a man. It should be acknowledged that over the history of the Roman Catholic Church there has been no monolithic view or understanding of Mary; yet it is largely accepted by many Christians that "Mary is nonsexual but not nonprocreative"(Hamington 85).[16] In *Hail Mary?: The Search for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (1995) Maurice Hamington details several varying accounts of the conception of the Christ child; yet none of them is suggestive of a sexual exchange wherein the Holy Spirit copulates with Mary or otherwise inserts semen into her womb.[17] Rather, popular and orthodox considerations of Mary and the Immaculate Conception extol her as the epitome of femininity, valuing her self-denial of pleasure through her perpetual virginity.[18] The Catholic Church teaches its female flock that to be truly virtuous in the sight of the Creator, "women should not know 'carnal pleasures,' since the greatest woman of all time did not know such pleasures" (Hamington 80).

The image and lore of the Virgin Mary set the standard to which many women, particularly in the Western world, are held. Though Protestant denominations did not particularly consider the Virgin Mary in their religious doctrine, they did have rigid ideas about women's sexuality. The nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood" is just one example of how similar ideas have become indoctrinated into Western society.[19] This same unreachable standard of perfect femininity is partly responsible for the diminished reputation of black women's sexual behavior "within a U.S. culture that routinely accused Black women of being sexually immoral, promiscuous jezebels" (Collins 125). Unfounded theories of race that equated Africans with nonhuman species in sixteenth- through nineteenth-century Europe, however, carry the lion's share of the blame.[20] The problematic of the Virgin Mary's elevation as a symbol of feminine normality that relegates all other signs of womanhood that do not conform to a marginalized, unvalued, debased "other" is unsettling. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen notes the pervasive "distrust of the body and antipathy toward sexuality" found in "classic Catholic theological sources" that informs this *othering* (207). African slaves and other indigenous inhabitants of the Roman Catholic empire often relied on bodily expressions of their culture, which contrasted with the papacy's ideas about the body. To invoke another biblical woman, the story of Haagar demonstrates that a clear distinction was made between the bodies of women of means and those of lower social status.[21] "An essential reality of slavery evoked by the story," argues Jennifer Glancy, "[is] the sexual availability of enslaved women," which, as an unspoken part of Christian sexual ethics, was transferred onto black women held in bondage by white Christians (147).

Believed to be more animal than human, it seemed rational to conclude that African women innately contained a base, uncontrolled sexual desire. Western colonists then branded African women as sexually loose and unethical, which justified their sexual abuse. A number of scholars have addressed how "the sexual violation of enslaved women and girls set a long-lasting foundation for contemporary notions about black female sexuality," most noticeable in the characterization of black women in the Jezebel myth (D. Roberts 42).[22] Through the vehicle of religious law, "the male psyche had such a dominant control of the society that male [sexual] guilt was imposed upon women" (Hamington 71). By pointing to the perceived flaws of women of color, the male-dominated church orders could continue to "constrain women's sexuality" and exert what

Andolsen calls the "double standard": "Female purity and chastity safeguarded men's virtue as well as women's own. The final vestiges of such control of female sexuality are found in the fading, but still perceptible traces of the 'double standard'—male sexual lapses are an understandable result of men's inability to control their raging sexual urges, while women's falls from purity represent grave female failures to contain not only their own sexual passions, but those of their male partners as well" (209).

Some African-centered, *speakerly* texts—those that signify on and are in discourse with each other—are attempting to correct such an imbalance through the conjure woman figure. Ishmael Reed, for instance, in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), subverts the traditional, Western division of sensuality and spirituality through a subtextual comparison of the Virgin and Erzulie, the Haitian loa of femininity, sexuality, and love. Considered the "single most significant female religious figure in western civilization," the Virgin Mary represents, in Reed's novel, idealized Western womanhood (Hamington 1). She is celebrated for her "humility, her lowliness in the sight of God and her lack of sexuality," as well as for being the vessel through which the Messiah was brought into the world (2). A number of feminist critics take issue with such portrayals of her as the "pinnacle of womanhood" in the Catholic Church (54).[23] Hamington observes that the negative reaction of feminist critics to the Virgin Mary is based on how her "traditional portrayal perpetuates feminine stereotypes that fuel oppression" (2). He argues, poignantly, that "a Christian feminism struggling for reproductive rights, feminist spirituality, sexual legitimacy, and freedom collides with the trajectory of the Cult of the Virgin Mary" (81). While I recognize that there are other biblical women who represent a vested interest in sexuality, I focus my attention on the Virgin Mary (1) because of the way white Christianity—Catholicism to be precise—has appropriated her narrative and symbolism as a tool to subjugate women's bodies and (2) because New World African religions appropriated the Virgin Mary in a way that simultaneously reflects African spiritual praxis, Christianity's influence on enslaved Africans, and, most importantly, the experience of Africana women who endured slavery.

As Patricia Hill Collins posits, "the jezebel image [contrasted to the Virgin] reinforces racial oppression by justifying assaults against black women[, and] gender ideology also draws upon the jezebel image—a devalued jezebel makes pure White womanhood possible" (132). Reed's criticism of the icon falls in line with Collins's, suggesting that Mary symbolizes yet another form of Western cultural domination—especially over women of color; as a Catholic icon of "sexual standards and gender based hierarchies," the Mother of Christ is "on a collision course with women's liberation" (Hamington 66). Across the ages and imaginaries, women of various ethnicities who develop and exercise a healthy sexual appetite outside of the marriage bed have been scorned and punished for the economic loss associated with a deflowered bride.[24] The oppressive reactions to female libido that developed out of white Christian thought compose a unique phenomenon. "Despite virgin goddesses [found in other cultures]," Hamington explains, "virginity was not given the religious valorization or reification found in Christianity" (55). Rather, "it was the Judeo-Christian tradition that transformed the concept of virginity from an economic consideration to a sacred religious consideration in western culture" (55). This was particularly damning for black women, who often had no control over their chastity. Reed responds to the West's monopolization of womanhood by supplanting it with an image that validates the historical experience of women of African descent in his novel.

Erzulie, one of the most celebrated female deities in Haitian Vodou, serves as an analogue to the Virgin Mary. Joan Dayan describes Erzulie as a loa "born on the soil of Haiti," as she has no equivalent in Yoruba, Dahomey, or Congo—the points of origin for many African-based religions ("Erzulie" 40). Erzulie, in Dayan's estimation, "bears the extremes of colonial history" and "dramatizes a specific historiography of women's experiences in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean" (42). Conceptualized in the Western worldview as the negative side of such dichotomous pairings as innocent/guilty, chaste/impure, and good/evil, Erzulie's place among the godly trumps such feeble attempts to articulate her nature; "whereas western religions depend on dualisms such as matter and spirit, body and soul, for their perpetuation and power, [Vodou] unsettles and subverts such apparent oppositions" (40). Erzulie is a living paradox. She is innocent and guilty, male and female, life and death, creation and destruction all at once. Erzulie is both concubine and virgin, much like the displaced African women who inadvertently became both guilty and innocent of promiscuity at the hands of white landowners. She exists in the visible and invisible worlds simultaneously so that such contradictions are of no consequence to her. Erzulie represents the lived experiences of those who created her. As Dayan states poignantly, "Gods were born in the memories of those who served," and such is the apotheosis of Erzulie (42). Maya Deren poetically rationalizes the loa's existence in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953): "It is possible, even that there is no conflict between these several truths, for the concept of Erzulie as virgin is not intended as physical analysis. To call her virgin, is to say that she is of another world, another reality, and that her heart, like the sacred heart of Mary Magdalene, is innocent of the flesh, is inaccessible to its delights and its corruptions" (44). As such an ambiguous figure, Erzulie becomes the perfect sign to characterize Reed's disdain for hegemony of any sort in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Within the novel, Erzulie is positioned not as a variation of the Virgin Mary, as some might expect, but rather as the counterimage to the mother of Jesus with which Reed forcefully challenges the authenticity of Catholicism's icon of femininity. Erzulie is falsely associated with the Virgin by ethnographers, a misinterpretation made apparent by the fact that men are her passion. Erzulie "treats men with such affection that it might seem, at times, embarrassing" (Deren 141). Reed inserts his critique through Papa LaBas, who provides a historiography of *Jes Grew*, the strangely erotic, fever-like trance sweeping the nation within the universe of the novel. While recapping the history and origin of the epidemic, LaBas also provides a genealogy of iconic female deities that positions Erzulie as a descendant of the Egyptian goddess Isis. He continues to describe how the Atonists (an archaic, European-based body of gatekeepers modeled after the Catholic Church) later appropriated the image and worship of Isis and succeeded it with the image of Mary: "[B]ut they kept on Isis as Virgin Mary. In fact, in many African locales the passion for Isis was transferred to the Atonists' Mary" (Reed 170). Hamington corroborates Reed's assertion, suggesting that "the image of Isis with Horus, the infant God-King on her lap was replaced by the Madonna imagery in artistic representations" (12). According to the history that Papa LaBas provides, Mary and Erzulie descend from a common ancient tradition but evolved in two different directions. In the description of Isis in the text, the Virgin appears to have strayed farthest from the image of her progenitor: "At about 2 A.M. he awoke to someone running her hands through his hair and kissing him. It was Isis in the Petro aspect of herself. She was dressed in a scarlet see-through gauzy gown and covered with the odor of a strange perfume" (Reed 180). Against the sexually charged image of her ancestor, the Virgin does not fare well. The Virgin Mary is, in fact, on the opposite extreme of sexual energy and seems to have little in common with the icon from which she is said to descend. The image ascribed to the Mother of Christ is thus incongruous with Isis and her lineage, as it totally erases the provocative, sexual energy that preceded and engendered it, according to Reed. Reed proceeds to *other* the Virgin Mary. With her credibility compromised, the Virgin is rendered inauthentic—an unreliable standard by which women are to be measured. Reed offers an alternative way of viewing the Virgin Mary's evolution and meaning in spite of Western culture's dominant interpretation.

The iconography of the Virgin Mary perpetuates a view of womanhood that erases all sexual autonomy. The iconic Virgin has influenced the separation of divinity and sexuality when arguably such a connection could not be more enforced through her narrative. Lorde argues, “We have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, reducing the spiritual thereby to a world of flattened affect—a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is further from the truth” (52). The act of conception, ethereal or in the flesh, remains a highly sensual exchange. Furthermore, women arguably share a more intimate connection to divinity directly correlated to their sex/reproductive organs. Hamington admits as much when he submits that “the fear of women because of their power to give birth may have led to a desire to control this danger by having priests and nuns avoid sex altogether” (71). Marie Laveau comes to this realization when she ponders why Damballah has chosen to share his power with her: “Marie didn’t understand her new faith at all. Why would Damballah want to visit a reluctant priestess? What was so special about her? She’d been taught women weren’t special. Christ and God were special. The Virgin was special because she gave birth to Christ. But could God, the Father, exist if a woman hadn’t birthed Him, too? . . . Damballah honored women as creators . . . Maybe that was the secret. Damballah favored women because they could do what men couldn’t. They birth themselves—woman to woman—in a chain as old as creation” (Rhodes 145–46). Hurston also points to the vagina as the source of spiritual truth in *Tell My Horse* (1938): “ ‘What is the truth?’ Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked the question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life” (113). Perhaps it is more accurate, then, to suggest that *wo*man was created in God’s likeness. As Sojourner Truth exclaimed, “And how came Jesus into the World? Through God who created him and the woman who born him. Man, where was your part?” (Truth n.p.). Yet the Virgin Mary continues to symbolize sexual repression, while Erzulie negates the suppression of any emotion, sensuality being at the top of her list. Erzulie, the divine temptress, disrupts the divide between spirituality and sexuality, not only through her persona, but also in the way she manifests herself through human contact. Dayan reminds us that “no matter how we look at it, the business of possession, initiation, and service is suffused with sex, or more precisely, with the idea of submission” (“Erzulie” 59).

Reed's repositioning of Erzulie as the ancient prototype of feminine energy thus solidifies the innate connection between the physical body and divinity. This union between spirit and body is a theme that continues to arise in the work of contemporary African American fiction. In Gayl Jones's novel *The Healing* (1998), the faith healer Harlan Eagleton contemplates the division of God from the erotic, explicitly stating that "not just men and women, even the gods can be amorous and sensuous. The West can't imagine gods who are sensual, you know. Because spirituality is supposed to transcend the sensuous, you know, because all the Western gods and holy men are supposed to be virgins. Or celibates. You can't be holy and sexual" (153). Contemporary African American authors directly oppose the notion that one cannot exude holiness and virility simultaneously by renegotiating the sexuality of their characters to coincide with their place among the divine. For African American women who involve themselves in spirit work, the physical body is a vessel through which Spirit moves and their spirituality is voiced—oftentimes the ecstatic moans indicating the Holy Spirit is descending are indistinguishable from those of coital pleasures. Gloria Naylor, for instance, rewrites the narrative surrounding the first woman of biblical lore, Eve, in *Bailey's Café* (1992), suggesting that white Christianity's repulsion toward sexual relations and incomprehension of the intrinsic need for physical human contact—breast-feeding, masturbation, and intercourse—are responsible for corrupting the union of spirit and flesh: "But [Godfather] did stop bathing me on Saturday nights in that old tin tub, and the dark brown homespun he used for making all my dresses was cut loose and full from the shoulders to the hips. They now hung on me like the ugly brown sacks they were. Did those women understand what they had done with their slitted eyes and evil questions? I was now forced to go through months and months with no one and nothing to touch me" (Naylor 83).

By virtue of her uncanny birth, Eve is a magic woman imbued with the power of the divine. In Naylor's revision, she is born of the earth rather than of man's rib. She has no mother or father, no male counterpart from which she was begotten. The relationship between Eve and Godfather is easily read as an allusion to the Genesis narrative in which God creates Adam and Eve from dust. In the popular version of the biblical tale, Adam and Eve are thrown out of the Garden of Eden because the woman seduces the man to eat the forbidden fruit and conspires with the serpent incarnate of Satan.[25] As Naylor's rendition of Eve's life with Godfather unfolds, it becomes apparent that she, too, is banished from his presence; however, her involvement with fruits and serpents is not to blame. She is banished because of her instinctive sensuality. Eve's body responds erotically to the touch, smell, and movement of the earth—a particularly natural reaction for one born from it. Eve, in Naylor's account, is condemned because "the earth showed [her] what [her] body was for" (87). Eve masters her own sexuality, uses it at her will, and knows—without shame—what it is to feel carnal pleasure, which contradicts many of the notions that Western, male-centered, white Christian culture has embedded in American society about woman's sexuality. Patricia Hill Collins, concerned with the problems surrounding black female sexuality in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), outlines the genealogy of the binary tradition from which Eve's self-discovery of tactile arousal becomes sinful and sexually deviant: "First, *African* or *Black* sexuality becomes constructed as an abnormal or pathologized heterosexuality. Long-standing ideas concerning the excessive sexual appetite of people of African descent conjured up in White imaginations generate gender-specific controlling images of the Black male rapist and the Black female jezebel, and they also rely on myths of Black hypersexuality. Within assumptions of normalized heterosexuality, regardless of individual behavior, being White marks the normal category of heterosexuality. In contrast, being Black signals the wild, out-of-control hyperheterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite" (129). Eve's outwardly displayed sexuality is condemnable because she is African American and, by association, falls into the realm of "devalued jezebel" once the first spark of sexual energy, innocent as it may be, is discernible in her behavior (132). Naylor's text reveals the ways in which the black female body is misunderstood in the context of Western, patriarchal ideas of sexuality, which continue to view it as a "sign of female inferiority" and submission (Lorde 49). I recognize that there are other Christian interpretations that resist a positioning of woman as the root of evil and sin, yet the reading that has dominated American discourse relies on marking Eve as the evil seductress responsible for the fall of humanity. Here I am suggesting that Naylor is responding to this particular conversation and placing a decidedly black feminist spin on a narrative that has been used to maintain the Jezebel myth. Her version of the Eve (as a conjure woman) narrative calls on her readers to reconsider the Western paradigm that equates women of color with sexual licentiousness.

In *Voodoo Dreams*, Jewell Parker Rhodes picks up Naylor's point by challenging the intrusion of white Christianity on the intimate relationship between black women and their bodies. Rhodes's Marie Laveau manifests Spirit through her physical body as a path to worship and praise. As is the way in Voodoo, spirits take over Marie's host body, slipping into her flesh like hand in glove. When Marie is first introduced to the religion of her ancestors, she experiments with her novice abilities fueled by her emotional desire to reconnect with her deceased mother, Maman. Marie pleads to Damballah to "send my mother to me. I need to feel her, please" (Rhodes 123). Not fully understanding what she has asked for, Marie is quickly mounted by her mother's spirit: "*Maman dove inside her, possessing, fitting neatly into sinews, bones, and blood.* Maman took glory where Marie couldn't. So this, Marie marveled, is what Maman felt like" (123). Marie gives her body over to the whims of her mother's spirit, rejoicing over her connection to the spirit world. Corroborating Dayan's argument that spirit possession is inherently linked to sexuality, Rhodes takes this notion a step farther by demonstrating the intensity of sexual energy conjured up when Spirit enters the human body:

> Marie wept. Turning, she ran her tongue along his while stroking the backs of his legs. John sucked her breasts and she felt explosions inside her womb. Loving him, she felt a healing of old wounds. Her mouth surrounded his scrotum. Loving him, she nudged the woman out of herself. Everything sensual. Marie lay atop, shivering as they melted into one. *Maman preferred to ride him.* Marie tried to separate feelings. Something in Maman wanted to hurt. *Maman dug her nails into his sides. She slapped at his chest. Maman played the coquette, lifting her torso.* Marie preferred loving more sweetly. *Maman forced him to move beneath her while her hips remained still.* (125)

Rhodes's novel appears to be in conversation with Naylor's, continuing to challenge the Western metanarrative of Eve and the serpent through Marie and Damballah. Rhodes dismantles the ancient rhetoric that places humanity's fall from grace on the shoulders of a woman through Marie's reverence of Damballah, an African deity in the form of a serpent, who will only bestow his bounty on female worshippers. It is precisely Damballah's proclivity toward his female devotees that enrages John the misogynist, false prophet who wants to gain power and infamy through Marie's reign. John "couldn't quite forgive Damballah for favoring women with His powers" (127). Ironically, John's hunger for power and wealth and his disregard for the loas leads to his demise. Marie is endeared to the African python, a fitting representative for Damballah, which John buys with the intention of scaring the young priestess into submission. "The snake was cold against her chest," but she did not fear it; "Marie realized it served as her shield. Intuitively, she knew John would never harm her while she held the snake . . . The snake coiled about her waist. The snake knew she'd never hurt it, and Marie trusted the snake to do the same" (206–7). Rather than leading Marie into temptation and disgracing her before the high god, Damballah, embodied as a serpent, *is* the high god. Through his blessings and movement through Marie's body, she is imbued with the confidence and agency to defeat the abusive, oppressive, and manipulative nature of John—who in many ways is more analogous to Satan than the python. Rhodes turns the association of women, serpents, and evil on its head, indeed. Audre Lorde maintains that once "in touch with the erotic, [women] become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to [them], such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, [and] self-denial" (54). Her words certainly resonate loudly for Marie Laveau. Damballah nurtures and mentors Marie while speaking through her body: "Damballah was filling her up, augmenting, not suppressing, her identity. The relationship was symbiotic. Damballah was the wise one, making her feel powerful, sharing secrets of creation, encouraging her to shed old images of herself" (156). And if the image of a serpent spirit penetrating Marie's host body is not convincing evidence that conjure women share a conjugal relationship with a higher power, Rhodes proclaims it in no uncertain terms: "Damballah was her best lover. She felt secure, happy, rooted in an African tradition she sensed rather than knew. Damballah wanted to go to sea. She couldn't feel anything other than the desire to be immersed" (305). The power and erotic nature of the spirit world lay claim to other famous conjure women as well.

In *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (trans. 1992), the Tituba of Maryse Condé's imagination also experiences the sensations of the flesh and the intoxication of Spirit mounting her almost simultaneously. While still residing in her native Barbados, Tituba's sexuality is piqued when she realizes that John Indian admires the young woman she has become. She admits to herself, "Up until now, I had never thought about my body" (Condé 15). She explores her ripening, adolescent body and discovers the gratification of intimate contact: "I took off my clothes, lay down, and let my hand stray over my body. It seemed to me that these curves and protuberances were harmonious. As I neared my pudenda, it seemed that it was no longer me but John Indian who was caressing me. Out of the depths of my body gushed a pungent tidal wave that flooded my thighs. I could hear myself moan in the night" (15). With her exploration and the experience of her first climax, Tituba taps into a spiritual energy that previously laid dormant right next to her libido. In a moment of mounting excitement while dancing with John Indian, Tituba is possessed by Damballah: "Wings grew on my ankles and heels. My hips and waist became supple. A mysterious serpent entered me. Was it the primordial snake that Mama Yaya talked about so much, in the form of god the creator of all things on the surface of the earth?" (17). The proximity these two events have to each other in the text suggests that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between them. For Tituba, her discovery of corporeal pleasures ushers in a deeper connection to the invisible world. Only after experiencing the ecstasy of sexual orgasm can she know what it is to be ridden by the loa.

For Eve, Marie Laveau, and Tituba, spirituality does not inhibit their development of healthy sexual lives the way that Christian rhetoric does for its converts, especially women, by suggesting that one must resist the temptations of the flesh.[26] Rather, their connection to the otherworldly encourages an intimacy with their bodies. Georgene Bess Montgomery, a practicing Ifá priestess, notes that during sexual climax a human being is closest to Spirit than perhaps at any other time.[27] During lovemaking, Montgomery insists, humans are most susceptible to Spirit, as their bodies are "open" to the invisible world through the act of (potentially) creating a life. In opposition to the Eurocentric idea of *la petit mort* (the little death)—a metaphor for orgasm that relates the experience to death because it was believed that part of one's life force was released during sexual climax—African epistemology suggests that during orgasm a person is enraptured in the process of creating life, sharing and experiencing, in that moment, a power that is divine, which brings them as close to Spirit (*the* creator) as earthly possible. While one might say death is being cheated by the potential life that could be created during the sex act, it figures negatively into the equation. The ecstasy associated with the ritual communion with a deity is not, coincidentally, far removed from that of an intense orgasm; both tap into spiritual energy that can only be retrieved through the physical body. Eve, Marie, and Tituba enhance their connection to the divine by being in touch with their sexuality. This, however, is not always the case.

Just as a healthy sexual identity enhances the conjure woman's relationship with the divine, a lack of spiritual fervor can adversely affect the libido. In the case of Tina McElroy Ansa's character, Lena McPherson, her refusal to confront her obvious and usually potent link to the supernatural wreaks all kinds of havoc on her sex life. Her inability to become the master of her head directly correlates with the troubles she has in the bedroom. As Ansa informs the reader, "Lena felt more than she saw"; her divinity is unquestionably of the body (*Hand* 47). Not only is Lena blessed with a sixth sense, but her other sensory faculties are also *exceptionally* sensitive to the movements of the spirit world. Lena is so rich with divinity that even her body parts invoke divine blessings. As a child, Lena "put the magic" on inanimate objects (Ansa, *Baby* 118). A simple touch from Lena could produce miraculous results: "[S]he could fix a broken milk shake blender or get the family car to start in the morning when Nellie would be rushing to drop her children off at school before heading downtown to The Place or even take the lines out of the television screen when the family was trying to get a channel from Atlanta. She could do it by just touching the thing" (119). Her best friend and fellow conjurer, Sister, even recognizes the spiritual energy in Lena's black body: " 'Girl, as long as I have a piece of your hair or one of your fingernail clippings and your picture with me in the bag . . . I can get anything I want through any customs in the world. They just wave me on through" (Ansa, *Hand* 105). Without balancing the chaos of her physical senses, it is not surprising that Lena fails to intimately connect to the opposite sex.

Lena reaches middle age before she finally comes to terms with her extrasensory perception and the void in her sex life; however, she does not deal with it of her own volition. The spirit world, impatient with Lena's reluctance to embrace her fate, intervenes so that she *must* pay attention. Using Herman—the lean, dark, and muscled spirit from the nineteenth century—as the messenger, Spirit solicits Lena's attention by enticing her sexual sensibilities: the very thing of which her life has been devoid. Herman first manifests himself as a cool breeze on the nape of Lena's neck but quickly moves on to more erogenous zones:

> She was trying to decide whether or not to convince herself it was nothing when she felt the touch again, this time down the front of her body and between her legs. For a second, she thought she saw a quick flash of light like a spark on one of the flat Ocawatchee River rocks embedded around the sides of her pool. Then she felt it again, this soft seductive swirl around her legs like a waterspout, and she was reminded of the wind on her neck. This sensation was a great deal more insistent than the breeze that had been teasing her all week. It was a lot more determined than even the breeze down her neck that morning on the highway. This thing in the pool with her was not playing! She felt herself pressed to the side of the pool with *something* beginning to separate the folds of her vagina. (*Hand* 119)

Ironically, once Lena experiences the erotic pleasure that Spirit can provide, she makes herself more available to learning about the gifts the divine has bestowed upon her. She cannot embrace her sexuality without first acknowledging her spirituality—they are inextricably intertwined.

In a similar vein, Toni Cade Bambara enforces the symbiotic relationship between the erotic and the spiritual in her debut novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980). Velma Henry, a suicidal woman in desperate need of physical, mental, and spiritual healing, has been sucked dry of both her spiritual and sexual passion. When legendary conjure woman Minnie Ransom is called forth to usher Velma back into the world of the living, her assessment of "the Henry gal" points immediately to the problem of disconnectedness from an African-centered way of knowing. Minnie confides to her spirit guide, Old Wife, that the women of Velma's time are flawed and ignorant of the old ways:

> Lord have mercy. What is wrong with the women? If they ain't sticking their head in ovens and opening up their veins like this gal, or jumping off roofs, drinking charcoal lighter, pumping rat poisons in their arms, and ramming cars into walls, they looking for some man to tear his head off. What is wrong, Old Wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers of the deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore. Tell me, how do I welcome this daughter home to the world, when they all getting to acting more and more like—. (Bambara 43–44)

On a closer look at Velma, Minnie discovers that where there is a disconnection from Spirit, there is also a disconnection from sexual urges: "A dormant nerve in the clitoris. No wonder she restless and jumpy with back pains and her legs aching. And no wonder, no mating fuel there at all" (44). Velma's case is so severe that she is visited by the divine temptress herself to assist with getting her mojo back. Velma, in a trance-like state, is still hesitant to reclaim the ancient wisdom she has forsaken and even more timid in acknowledging Erzulie's presence and what it means. Velma would only "steal a glance sideways at the woman next to her and study the elegant shoes, the red and gold and white sequined ruffles at the hem of the extravagant gown, the hands clasped with three wedding bands shining on the ring finger—before she wrenched her eyes back to the safety of her swollen feet" (259). By the novel's end, it is apparent that Velma comes out of her stupor—healed by the power and sacrifice of Minnie Ransom—but it is uncertain if this healing extends to the far reaches of her marital bed.

African American writers, through affirming an intrinsic bond between divinity and the black body, construct a more endearing, enlightening approach to black female sexuality that does not cast it as deviant or licentious. This new approach to sexuality moves outside of white, patriarchal traditions that have "taught [women] to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society" (Lorde 49). This new concept of sexuality extends beyond Freudian notions of penis envy or a child's unfulfilled desire for his or her parents. Rather, contemporary writers are projecting an image and thus initiating a discourse on black women's eroticism that has only to do with her body and its creator. Within the texts examined here, black female sexuality is no longer confined by what Evelynn Hammonds calls a "politic of silence" but is reclaimed and celebrated within an episteme that is black-woman-centric (383).[28] Within such an episteme "deviant" sexuality is freed from white, Western systems of oppression and explored within a specific cultural/spiritual context in which it is understood as an expression of something bigger than a simple sex act. In a society where "everyone has spoken for Black women, making it difficult for [them] to speak for [them]selves," Ansa, Condé, Naylor, Rhodes, and Bambara have expressed their own ideas concerning the sexuality of black women (Collins 124). Through their fiction, the black female body and its expressions of emotion, pain, and pleasure are elevated to the realm of divinity, contesting all notions that the bodily acts of dance, trance possession, conception, and intercourse are ungodly.

A QUESTION OF AFRICANA SPIRITUAL ETHICS

With the absorption of African and European worldviews into conjure activities, the question of moral responsibility and accountability frequently arises. Very early connotations of African spiritual traditions focused on "black magic" or witchcraft, which was never viewed in a positive light in Eurocentric circles. As Anderson suggests, "[t]o most white slave holders, Voodoo and conjure were at best offensive relics of paganism and at worst possible rallying points for slave rebellions" (51). Morality and ethics are complex notions within the world of African American religious experiences. This is due, Raboteau argues, to the contradictory messages of morality and Christian values that were exhibited by slaveholders. On one hand, slaves were told it was un-Christian to steal; yet they were wholly cognizant that they had been stolen from Africa by their masters.[29] It was also necessary to a slave's survival to lie, deceive, and pilfer from their masters what food could be had, and many were undernourished. Raboteau notes that "[w]hite missionaries to slaves and freedmen before and immediately after the [Civil War] observed that the disregard slaves held for the morality preached by slaveholding Christians amounted to antinomianism . . . What seemed antinomianism to white clergymen was in the slave's own system of moral judgment a primary value—to protect one another by not revealing the 'sins' of ones fellow slaves" (298–99). This culturally specific way of understanding piety, morality, and ethical behavior was further complicated by the retention of African religious beliefs. Conjure and hoodoo, by their very nature, appealed to a much broader sense of well-being and balance in the community. This often meant that "bad" things were done in the name of good.

To be sure, conjure was not always utilized to better the emotional, physical, and spiritual health of those who sought its council. Rather, in accordance with traditional West African beliefs, conjure developed in the mind of a culture that did not draw a hard line between good and evil. What Western culture has articulated as good and evil is conceived as dual parts of a single entity in precolonial West African cultures.[30] This concept accompanied African captives to the New World and is reflected most clearly in the Haitian proverb that informs "there are no good and bad spirits in Vodou—only powerful sprits" (Williams 4). Conjure, then, was understood by those most closely associated with it as being a double-edged sword with which one could prosper or perish. Theophus Smith discusses the duplicitous nature of conjure in *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (1994), asserting that conjure culture "designates a world capable of hosting myriad performances of healing and harming" (44). As Christianity spread and was embraced among the enslaved, the dual nature of conjure and other African-derived practices was challenged by those who did draw a hard line between good and evil. Particularly in the nineteenth century, African American spirituality "drew more heavily on Christianity than it had in the past," but as Sharla Fett surmises, "This is not to argue that enslaved communities were of one mind about the morality of conjuring"(42). Chireau uncovers examples of black clergy preaching to their flocks on Sunday morning and performing tricks as conjure men on Sunday evening.[31]

Conjure practices may be invoked to cure an ailing child or determine if one's affection will be returned while also serving a vengeful servant's desire to sabotage his or her master's crops or being used to abort an unwanted fetus—an action whose morality is still under debate. As it concerns literary conjure women, Western notions of what is right or wrong are not always a primary consideration. For instance, in Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, Aunt Peggy's priority appears to be her economic status. Aunt Peggy, who owns herself, has no qualms about serving master and/or slave so long as the customer can provide payment. As Sharla Fett argues in *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantation* (2002), the remuneration of conjurers was an integral part of the slave economy: "Conjure doctors also shared the material world of their clients and became important points of exchange within internal slave economies. While studies of the domestic slave economy tend to focus on livestock, crops, and garden produce, healing transactions also contributed to building local economies among slaves. Payment for services was required and perhaps even ritually necessary" (98). In "The Goophered Grapevine," Aunt Peggy receives "a basket er chick'n en poun'-cake, en a bottle er scuppernon' wine" in addition to the ten dollars Mars Dugal' McAdoo pays her to conjure his scuppernong vineyard against his scuppernong-loving slave hands (Chesnutt 36). Just a few tales later in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny," Aunt Peggy is negotiating her compensation with Aunt Nancy for granting a momentary reunion between slave mother and child:

> [Aun' Nancy] gathered a mess er green peas, and tuk de peas en de baby, en went ter see ole Aun' Peggy, de cunjuh 'oman down by Wim'l'ton Road . . . "Dat is a monst'us small mess er peas you is fotch' me" sez Aun' Peggy, sez she. "Yas, I knows," 'lowed Aun' Nancy, "but dis yere is a monst'us small pickaninny." "You'll hafter fetch me sump'n mo'," sez Aun' Peggy, "fer you can't 'spec' me ter was'e my time diggin' roots en wukkin' cunj'ation fer nuffin.' " (87)

It appears that Aunt Peggy performs her magic for both good and ill intent for her community with neither a Christian nor any other ideology of behavior guiding her; however, Fett indicates that there is a different type of moral code being made in such exchanges: "The expectation of payment revealed a distinct moral economy surrounding the conjurer's healing and harming work. Payment was not only necessary to a conjurer's livelihood but to the sufferer's cure" (99). That is, Aunt Peggy is morally bound to produce the end results of the client's request once she accepts payment for her services, though the conjure woman may try to convince her client to choose another route of action if she feels the request may cause undue harm. Elzora (Diahann Caroll), the elder conjure woman in Kasi Lemmons's 1997 film *Eve's Bayou*, tries to convince young Eve that death is not a spell she can reverse and that the "pineapple thief" must be sure it is the result she wants. Elzora ultimately accepts the money and thus, to keep her credibility, she must oblige Eve's death wish. While Aunt Peggy does not commit any particularly heinous acts in the scope of Chesnutt's fiction, there are markedly other conjure women who do.

In Rainelle Burton's 2001 novel *The Root Worker*, the anonymous conjurer is also motivated by the prospect of material gain. Set in 1960s Detroit, the economic and social standing of the conjurer has changed substantially. With the demand for and reputation of conjurers in decline, Burton's Root Worker is less inclined to abide by unspoken conventions. Unlike Aunt Peggy, however, she accepts lewd sexual acts as in-kind payment from 11-year-old Ellen, daughter of her most loyal client:

> The Woman stays busy cursing about the Girlfriend, talking on the phone about her, or going to the Root Worker's. She takes me with her sometimes, says she needs me there. I still hate going, especially now because I

> have to let her husband feel on me when the Woman doesn't have enough money to pay her. When he first felt on me it made the Woman mad, but the Root Worker told her it's natural for spirits to move through young girls and stir up the spirits inside some men to do things. She said that they should just let what happens take its course. (Burton 77)

The Root Worker maliciously preys on her client and Ellen's belief in the power of Spirit, manipulating them to believe that her husband's sexual desire is provoked by the raging ghostly energy that she insists resides in the 11-year-old child. The Root Worker's behavior is reprehensible and corrupt regardless of whose worldview she privileges. Ruby, the conjuring fool in love in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), also viciously performs her hoodoo. Jealous of the attention her husband, Junior, is paying to Cocoa during a return trip to Willow Springs, Ruby inconspicuously poisons the "baby girl" out of mere spite: "A soft hypnotic voice with firm fingers messaging that warm solution into my scalp. It's gonna make this pretty hair of yours prettier—[Ruby] kept rubbing and rubbing—and these braids, she'd make sure these braids would hold good" (246).

Far more common among conjure women, I argue, is a balance of healing and harming that "blended a Christian ethic of turning the other cheek with a right to self-defense" (Fett 106). Miranda "Mama" Day is quite aware of Ruby's mounting shenanigans concerning her grandniece but continues to turn the other cheek, believing that Ruby is not "fool enough over some man to even think of messing with what was hers" (Naylor, *Mama Day* 173). As Fett informs, when "in search of a cure, both the sick person and the conjurer faced a potential ethical dilemma. Many hoodoo practitioners with healing and harming powers gave the sick person the opportunity to turn the hoodoo back against the individual who originated it" (105). Miranda does consider the ramifications of her actions in God's sight, but Ruby's hoodoo is deadly. Only when Cocoa's life hangs in the balance and she cannot act for herself does Miranda reveal the true extent of her healing/harming capabilities:

> Are you in there, Ruby? Well, three times is all that she's required. That'll be her defense at Judgment: Lord, I called out three times. She don't say another word as she brings that cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house. The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. Miranda stands there, out of breath, with little beads of sweat on her temples. (Naylor, *Mama Day* 270)

The result of Miranda's climactic action is revealed just a few pages later as the ubiquitous narrator informs the reader that "[lightning] hits Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes" (273). This particular conjuring moment demonstrates Fett's assertions that the moral behavior of some practitioners is a reflection of Christian influence, while others fall outside of it. Anderson corroborates this point by declaring that many "hoodooists . . . called on the Christian God for aid in conjuring, thus violating the biblical teachings of orthodox Christianity, which is clear in its condemnation of the practice of divination and magic" (35). On the contrary, Miranda justifies her actions against Ruby as an act of self-defense on behalf of the incapacitated Cocoa and even suggests that the Christian God will understand her rationalization. For her, there is no other course of action in this particular situation.

Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) also exemplifies how a powerful healing woman is pushed not just to harm but to fatally attack an individual who seeks to do her harm. Anyanwu, an ancient, shape-shifting, "wild seed" woman, has the uncanny ability to heal herself and others by producing remedies for a countless number of ailments in her own body. Having lived for centuries among her African descendants, she has had ample time to perfect her methods of healing and is known in her village as a great and powerful healer—she was "a priestess who spoke with the voice of god and was feared and obeyed" (Butler 9). Her healing is very methodical:

> It had taken her much practice—and much pain—to learn such ease and control. Every change she made in her body had to be understood and visualized. If she was sick or injured, she could not simply wish to be well. She could be killed as easily as anyone else if her body was damaged in some way she could not understand quickly enough to repair. Thus, she spent much of her long life learning the diseases, disorders, and injuries that she could suffer—learning them often by inflicting mild versions of them on herself, then slowly, painfully, by trial and error, coming to understand exactly what was wrong and how to impress healing. Thus, when her enemies came to kill her, she knew more about surviving than they did about killing. (54)

When Anyanwu comes upon the *ogbanje* Doro, who convinces her to marry and breed with him to create other "wild seeds," she finds herself revealing her true nature to him.[32] As an ogbanje, Doro remains in the world of the living by residing in human flesh. Rather than simply mounting a body temporarily, Doro's descent into another's body is fatal, displacing the human soul permanently. Doro's spirit dwells in the bodies of humans; however, the human form he takes is still susceptible to the vulnerabilities of the earth. When his present form is damaged during his travels with Anyanwu across the African plains, Anyanwu allows Doro to witness her healing power for himself: "She bit his hand . . . She spat three times, each time returning to his hand, then she seemed to caress the wound with her tongue. Her saliva burned like fire" (29). She explains to the ogbanje what she has done: "There were things in your hand that should not have been there . . . living things too small to see. I have no name for them, but I can feel them and know them when I take them into my body. As soon as I know them, I can kill them within myself. I gave you a little of my body's weapon against them" (29).

As with many other healers in African American fiction, Anyanwu possesses the ability to harm as well. She is uncommonly strong, able to crush rocks with her bare hands—a consequence of her genetic disposition—yet she conceals her strength and other abilities from those who are unlike her: "A lifetime of concealment, of commanding herself never to play with her abilities before others, never show them off as mere tricks, never to let her people or any people know the full extent of her power unless she were fighting for her life" (11). Doro persuades Anyanwu to travel to one of his seed villages, which lies across the Atlantic Ocean, and the shape-shifter suspects that she is in unsafe territory. She is provoked and attacked by Lale Sachs, one of Doro's hybrid sons, who infiltrates her private thoughts with the telekinetic power he inherits from his father. After being manhandled by Anyanwu, who only seeks to remove him from her presence, Lale pursues another mode of attack, to which Anyanwu responds fatally: "A thing stood before her—a being more terrible than any spirit she could imagine . . . In terror, Anyanwu transformed herself . . . She had become a leopard, lithe and strong, fast and razor-clawed. She sprang. The spirit screamed, collapsed and became a man again . . . He was a vicious, deadly being. It seemed wrong to kill a helpless man, but if this man came to, he might well kill her . . . With a snarl, she tore out the throat of the being under her feet" (73).

Rather than acting out of fear or revenge for a loved one, as Mama Day and Anyanwu do, Melvira Dupree exhibits a keen sense of moral obligation and responsibility in Arthur Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993). While Melvira is not above seeking retribution for those who cannot protect themselves, she learns to search inside and allow her conscience to guide her in matters of morality. Flowers reveals early in the text that Melvira is influenced by both her conjuring background and the widespread presence of Christianity. Melvira, and perhaps Mama Day, is more like the typical conjurer found in the historical record. Anderson's scholarship reveals that "while most nineteenth-century black Americans considered themselves Christians, conjure nevertheless remained an important part of their understanding of the supernatural. The reason for this was that hoodoo filled a separate niche in their spiritual world. Unlike Christian ministers, conjurers performed rituals for the sake of controlling or manipulating supernatural powers, not for worship purposes. Thus, conjure was a form of utilitarian, pragmatic spirituality" (79). Melvira learns this as her power matures and she is faced with some difficult decisions. In early twentieth-century Memphis, Tennessee, Melvira finds herself wandering into town with her traveling bluesman Lucas "Sweet Luke" Bodeen. After a long night of sightseeing and revelry on Beale Street, Melvira rises early, much to Luke's surprise:

> Arms braced to either side of him, Melvira was looking down on him, thick mane of hair brushed back and tamed under a floppy hat. She was washed and dressed in her Sunday best and he raised a questioning eyebrow. "Church," she said. Melvira had been a regular churchgoing woman back in Sweetwater. Bodeen didn't understand why a hoodoo went to church in the first place.
>
> "Church? What kinda hoodoo are you anyway?"
>
> "Many road to God Lucas Bodeen." (Flowers 61)

As Melvira matures as a conjurer, learning the work from Hootowl, an elder practitioner, she allows her conscience to lead her through the ethical dilemmas that often arise in her profession. She is well aware that there is more than one path toward power; "although Christian theology typically depicts the devil as the opposite of God, pragmatic conjurers believed that either could be relied on for aid" (Anderson 95). Melvira is tempted several times to follow a less righteous path. Her first test is revealed when she discovers that her feelings for Lucas run deeper than even she wants to admit. A common folk belief instructs women to create a love potion, a meal of soup or spaghetti with the special ingredient of menstrual blood added, that will ensure the fidelity of the men folk if it is ingested. Melvira, hesitant to cast the spell, prepares the meal with ambivalence: "She stirred a steaming pot of chicken soup, dropping in onions and peppers, liberally spicing it up just like he liked it and trying to convince herself that what she was doing was right. She didn't mind doing it for other folks; why such trouble doing it for herself?"(Flowers 48). She struggles with the dual nature of conjure, believing that it is far more important to use her gift responsibly than taint her reputation by practicing with her left hand. According to folklore surrounding conjuration, a practitioner who only uses his or her power to harm is said to practice with his or her left hand, and "consequently, [Melvira] was partial to her right hand over her left—folks that wanted to put a trick on somebody went to Hoodoo Maggie. They come to Miz Melvira to have tricks took off" (28). Hoodoo Maggie is among the hoodoo folk whose "spells included ones intended to win male clients the sexual favors of women, give rivals bad luck, and kill women who had ensnared lovers by magic, all of which violated biblical teachings" (Anderson 36). Her emotional attachment to Bodeen, however, complicates the matter for Melvira, who is eager to share the companionship of the bluesman. She decides to ignore her intuition and move forward with the spell: "She tasted a spoonful. Good, it was ready. From the folds of her dress she took a small stoppered jar of thick dark liquid. She poured it into the pot but the power wasn't there, her heart wasn't in it. The only bond she wanted to use on her man was a far older magic. She took the pot to the door and poured it out. If he left, he left" (Flowers 48).

Though she wants Bodeen to remain both faithful and by her side, Melvira's conscience will not allow her integrity as a woman *or* a practitioner to be compromised. She recognizes that each person is blessed with the gift of free will and that for her to interfere with God's work, even for love, could cause an imbalance in the universe. Conjurers also understand that the "welfare of the community and of each individual within it derived from the close relationship of man to the gods, the ancestors, and the unseen spirits. The harmony of that relationship was the ground of good; its disruption the source of evil" (Raboteau 16). While this is an easy lesson for Melvira to learn when dealing with her own pride, she continues to debate her authority to interrupt what a power much stronger than her own has set in motion. When she is asked to intervene on behalf of a young girl who has fallen prey to St. Louie Slick, a local pimp, she is initially less concerned about the repercussions of using her left hand. After the child's parents plead to the conjure woman to "hurt him before he hurt our baby," Melvira seeks out the "slickhaired fancy man" at a Beale Street barbershop and commences with her work (Flowers 148):

> He was sitting in a barber's chair getting his head conked, white barbers apron tied around his neck . . . A cultured veteran of Storyville, he watched Melvira approach him with a smooth professional interest.
>
> "St. Louie Slick?" Slick stared impassively from behind silvered shades. He saw a good looking woman with an opennecked jar in one hand and a cork in the other. He smiled his professional approval.
>
> "Yeah baby, thats me, what can I do for a fine young thing like you?" Melvira corked the jar as soon as he answered her and walked out of the barbershop. (149)

Slick's soul is stolen from him with the one breath it took him to respond to Melvira's inquiry. The conjure woman has plans to punish Slick for his business practices, and once night falls, she begins her incantation. As she stares at the "curiously stained and murky jar" that contains Slick's essence, however, she discovers that "she lacked balance . . . and the spell suffered" (149). During her time in Memphis, Melvira has been in training with Hootowl, the eldest conjurer of the community, and her practice slowly evolves under his influence. She not only becomes more powerful, but her work also begins to function as a tool of communal balance. It is this very notion of balance and service to the community that hinders Melvira's intentions for Slick: "She was bothered by what she did . . . yet to cut out the tribal poisons was her job. How many other healthy young souls had fallen into Slick's web? This enemy of the tribe? A justified hurting had never bothered her before the Hootowl filled her head with all this talk of her responsibility" (150).

She ultimately allows her anger and disgust with Slick to prevail, deciding that she "would accept the stain on her soul," and "she did him in" (150). St. Louie Slick suffers considerably from the trick that Melvira puts on him, but this does not give Melvira the peace of mind she thought it would. Realizing that she has not solved the ills of the Beale Street world, she decides "it would be far more rewarding here . . . to feed souls rather than destroy one" (151). She sets Slick's soul free, also clearing her own conscience and reestablishing the balance she had disrupted. She understands that she is not omnipotent and that she, too, must answer to a higher power for the deeds she commits. More important, she realizes that healing her community is not a matter of harming someone else. For Melvira, "seeking a conjure doctor for healing was entirely consistent with one's faith; seeking revenge was not" (Fett 106).

The work of Shange, Flowers, Bambara, Rhodes, Naylor, Ansa, and other contemporary novelists demonstrates the power and place that alternate spiritualities occupy in the African American literary tradition. Rather than simply negating or replacing Western religious paradigms, African American writers transfer the religious experience of their characters into a dimension with ample room for the divine—in all its realized and unrealized manifestations—to lay claim to and anoint black women with wisdom much too vast to be contained in any single metanarrative of faith. These conjuring women make "no distinction between secular and religious spheres but, instead, [merge] African cultural legacies with Christianity to create a world wholly imbued with sacred meaning" (Fett 39). Marie, Lena, Melvira, and Indigo, among many other conjure women figures, disrupt spiritual divides that have too long been considered static and expose the limitations and exclusionary implications of such. The authors cited in this chapter take Shug's notion of recreating God to task as the reader witnesses Sistah Conjurer practice "a mixture of Catholicism, Voodoo, hoodoo, New Age mysticism, goddess worship, and black Southern Baptist/Protestant/Holiness" (Ansa, *Hand* 266). These women healers transcend religion, eventually fitting into any and every manifestation of the divine that they conceive.

Focusing on holistic living and a deep-rooted humanity, these writers and many others incorporate a revision of divinity that seeks to serve the needs of African American conjure women by providing sanctuary in a society that wishes to render them invisible, creating a space that speaks in the language of their experience and encourages them to search for the God Shug insists is inside of us all. In privileging African epistemologies, especially the conjuring tradition, authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are suggesting that Christianity alone is not potent enough to calm the troubled lives of Africa's displaced children. Chireau explains this point poignantly: "In the theological schema of Christianity, salvation and morality were given priority—perhaps more so than individual security. In contrast to the way that faith issues were conceived in Christianity, Conjure beliefs applied to an individual's most pressing and immediate conditions, such as physical well-being. Spiritually pragmatic, black Americans were able to move between Conjure and Christianity because both were perceived as viable systems for accessing the supernatural world, and each met needs that the other did not" (*Black Magic* 25). While acknowledging its influence, these writers push forward the idea that only through acknowledging the faith of their ancestors—in whatever accessible form it can be found—can African Americans heal the wounds of their past and break out of the stifling box in which centuries of Western, patriarchal hegemony has placed them. To invoke the very powerful and poignant words of Shange in another context, African American writers are empowering their conjuring women protagonists to find God in themselves and love her fiercely.

CHAPTER 4

OF BLUES NARRATIVES AND CONJURE MAGIC

A SYMBIOTIC DIALECTIC

> You may tip now, sweet papa, while tipping is grand
> But your tipping will be over, when mama gets her mojo hand
> —Ida Cox, "Mojo Hand Blues"

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC HAS A HISTORY OF offering social commentary on the experiences of those who create it. The spirituals, for instance, expressed "the desire for social and political freedom," while the work songs and field hollers evinced the innovation and resistance of the enslaved in often coded messages (Cone 14). The experience of slavery inspired—for better or worse—the creative musical endeavors of enslaved Africans. As James Cone reflects in *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), "[t]he social mind of the slave was a reflection of their African background, their life on southern plantations, and their encounter with slave masters, overseers, auctioneers, and buyers. The [work] songs were a reflection of this existence and of the measures used to deal with the dehumanization inherent in it" (14). The same may be said of blues music, which "bore witness to African American thought *after* emancipation" (Chireau, *Black Magic* 145). Amiri Baraka emphasizes in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) that marked changes in the postemancipation era contributed to the creation of blues music. He explains that "the emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery . . . the limited social and emotional alternatives of the work song could no longer contain the growing experience of this country that [African Americans] began to respond to" (62).

With emancipation, African Americans' social realities changed to an unprecedented degree. Angela Davis articulates three distinct ways freedom impacted African Americans: "There was no longer a proscription on free individual travel; education was now a realizable goal for individual men and women; sexuality could be explored freely by individuals who now could enter into autonomously chosen personal relationships" (8). These new social and personal freedoms gave rise to a musical genre that focused more often on individual rather than collective expression. Blues music reflected the psychological complexities of self-reliance and the ever-present adversity of second-class citizenry. Blues also expressed the continuity and growth of a black diasporic material culture that was no longer stifled by slavery. Just as folktales, musical traditions, foodways, and other ways of life followed African Americans into freedom, so too did their syncretic African spiritualism continue to thrive once unleashed from slavery's grip of disdain. Conjure, hoodoo, root work, and Voodoo remained fixtures in African American culture, subsequently being acknowledged among "concrete events of everyday existence" (Cone 16).

This chapter endeavors to articulate what I contend is a symbiotic relationship between conjure and blues music that originated in postemancipation cultural production. This relationship, I will prove, has traversed into the literary production of late twentieth-century African descendants as well. Blues music, as "an artistic affirmation of the meaningfulness of black existence," often made explicit reference to conjure and hoodoo, testifying to the common knowledge and practice of such among black folks—particularly in the American South (16). From its earliest, rudimentary forms, blues music has often been paired with conjuring. Mimi Clar notes that "various charms and amulets used for the purpose of hoodoo, such as the mojo hand, make frequent appearance[s]" in blues lyrics (177). Ida Cox's "Mojo Hand Blues" and Junior Wells's "Hoodoo Man Blues" are two such examples. Clar cites Muddy Waters's "Louisiana Blues" as another:

> I'm goin' down in New Orleans, mmm, get me a mojo hand
> I'm gonna show all you good-lookin' women just how to treat your man[1]

Blues music in many ways immortalizes not only conjure practice but also the hoodoo doctors and conjure women who were famously recognized for their power. Like legendary Railroad Bill, Stagolee, and John Henry, conjurers were also viewed as folk heroes among African American communities before and after emancipation. During slavery, many enslaved Africans "enshrined conjurers as folk heroes not because they viewed their actions as a direct threat to the master's physical power, but because their spiritual attributes and behaviors reflected values that they accepted as the most advantageous to their survival and well-being in a rigid hierarchical structure in which communal welfare had precedence over individual need" (J. Roberts 95). Such a status was often confirmed through song, as in the case of Aunt Caroline Dye:

Well, I'm going to Newport just to see Aun' Caroline Dye
She's a fortune teller, hooo Lord, she sure don't tell no lie[2]

Caroline Dye was a real conjure woman and fortune teller from Newport, Arkansas, whose name appears in other blues songs, such as "Aunt Caroline Dyer Blues," recorded in 1923 by the Memphis Jug Band, as well as W. C. Handy's "Sun Down Blues" (1923) and "St. Louis Blues" (1922) according to Chireau.[3] Chireau also notes that J. T. "Funny Papa" Smith's 1930s recording "Seven Sister Blues" is an ode to the New Orleans conjure woman known as Seven Sisters.[4] Marie Laveau can also boast of having her name and legacy celebrated in song:

I knew a conjure lady not long ago
In New Orleans, Louisiana, named Marie Laveau
Believe it or not, strange as it seems
She made fortunes selling voodoo and interpreting dreams
She was known throughout the nation as the Voodoo Queen
Folks came to her from miles and miles around
She'd show them how to put that voodoo down[5]

Blues are also well known for exposing conjuring tricks, spells, and other ways of putting a fix on someone—most notably in response to an unfaithful lover:

Take some of your hair, boil it in a pot
Take some of your clothes, tie them in a knot
Put them in a snuff can, bury them under the step
Then you wouldn't want, baby, nobody else[6]

There are countless early blues songs that take up the themes of conjure and hoodoo. As Jeffery Anderson remarks, "[a]mong the well-known artists who referred to conjure were Cripple Clarence Lofton, Champion Jack Dupree, Muddy Waters, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Louis Jordan, and W. C. Handy" (14). Interestingly, Anderson cites mostly male artists, though blues songstresses also had a great deal to do with infusing conjure and hoodoo knowledge into their work. Conjuring or putting "roots" on a lover was an often-repeated theme in songs written from a female perspective: "For blues women, charms, Conjure, and Hoodoo practices provided last-resort antidotes for loneliness, despair, or betrayal. Chireau acknowledges female blues singers insisted that magic had the power to 'bring that man home' and 'treat me right'" (Chireau, *Black Magic* 147). Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's 1925 recording "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues" reveals, as one example, how to make use of the coveted black cat bone to keep other women at a safe distance:

The Hoodoo told me to get a black cat bone
And shake it over their heads, they'll leave your man alone[7]

With a similar goal in mind, Bessie Brown uses several different hoodoo techniques to retrieve her lover from the arms of another woman in "Hoodoo Blues":

Gonna sprinkle ding 'em dust all around her door
Gonna sprinkle ding 'em dust all around her door
Put a spider in her dumplin', make her crawl all over the floor
Goin' 'neath her window, gonna lay a black cat bone
Goin' 'neath her window, gonna lay a black cat bone
Burn a candle on her picture, she won't let my good man alone
Got myself some gris-gris, tote it up in a sack
Got myself some gris-gris, tote it up in a sack
Gonna keep on wearin' it till I get my good man back[8]

Angela Davis emphasizes the relationship among blues, conjure, and women in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998). Pertaining to Bessie Smith, Davis suggests that she consciously included the ways of the folk in her music: "Bessie Smith maintained unashamed bonds with her own southern upbringing, preserving in her music African American folk experiences that many black intellectuals associated with the racist-inspired stereotypes they were trying to transcend" (154). Davis goes on to argue that Smith and renowned folklorist Zora Neale Hurston used conjure and hoodoo as a means to shape the burgeoning black aesthetic of the early twentieth century: "In retrospect, we can now see that Bessie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston were probing the heart of the problem of forging an African-American aesthetic. Smith sang about the experiences and sensibilities of the masses of black women and men—emanating in part, from an African past, seasoned by slavery, and transformed by emancipation and migration . . . The spiritual power of hoodoo . . . together with the blues, hold the key to an understanding of the foundations of African-American popular culture" (155). The folkways, musical traditions, and reliance on conjure after emancipation were tangible reminders—especially in blues music—for African Americans to "keep alive [an African] heritage that might otherwise have receded into the collective unconscious" with the widespread migration of the twentieth century (155).

The freedom of choice and mobility realized during Reconstruction evolved into a wave of migration in the 1920s and 1930s in which African Americans and their new musical genre moved northward toward industry and the city. Places like Chicago's South Side and St. Louis became well-known bastions of the blues. This movement also had a lasting effect on the material culture of the new migrants, as Chireau explains: "[N]ot only did the migration of the blues parallel the progression of black cultural traditions from rural to city contexts, but the content of the blues themselves—as lyrical expressions of supernatural belief—articulated a profound kinship between conjure and this distinct form of African American music" (*Black Magic* 144). With migration and the popularity of "race records," conjure practices and beliefs also appeared in urban areas such as Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis. Anderson's research reveals that in the widely read *Chicago Defender* "only one page carried advertisements for conjure goods and services on 1 March 1919," but by "July 1928 . . . twelve pages had such advertisements" (14). The blues acted as a conduit through which conjure and hoodoo would continue to play a significant role in the musings of black folk as they moved across the country. As African Americans spread their hoodoo-blues roots around, conjure also permeated the dominant culture as blues began to inundate the music industry.

BLUES AS A CULTURAL VALVE

In the early twentieth century, the blues rose to an unheard of status as prominent recording companies such as Columbia and Paramount began to disseminate the musical form to a national audience with their race records. With the spread of blues music inevitably came the further cross-pollination of conjure and hoodoo and white America: "[T]he blues were the first commercially produced music to explicitly embrace the culture from which conjuring traditions emerged" (Chireau, *Black Magic* 144). This is not to suggest that conjure and hoodoo were unheard of prior to the recording of blues music. The dominant culture was very much aware of the "black magic" African Americans practiced. Early slave insurrections were linked to the practice of conjure, hoodoo, and the like.[9] Both the Hampton Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society published articles on Voodoo and conjure in the 1890s.[10] Thomas Nelson Page (*Red Rock*, 1899) and Helen Pitkin (*An Angel by Brevet*, 1904) released creative works that included conjurers. The popularity of Chesnutt's conjure tales is indicative of more than a passing fascination with the conjure tradition on the part of white Americans. Anderson elaborates on how white Americans, ever the gatekeepers, finagled the omnipresent black folk belief to their advantage in the Jim Crow era: "Whites had long considered blacks a primitive and superstitious people. With African Americans safely cut off from political and economic power, their folk beliefs could now be used to bolster white superiority and regional distinctiveness. To white authors, the hoodoo doctor became a powerful image of the southern past, conjuring up images of aristocratic planters and their happy, but dependent 'servants.' Moreover, by describing blacks as backward people, whites defined what their race was not" (4). When famed voodooiennes Marie Laveau and Dr. John died, their obituaries ran in *The New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*, respectively.[11] With the onslaught of blues recordings, however, mainstream culture was able to experience conjure from an African American perspective rather than receiving a sensationalized, white rendering of it. Blues music transported conjure far beyond the boundaries of the newly developed urban ghettos of the North and the juke joints of the South; it made hoodoo a reality with which mainstream white America would finally have to seriously contend. It was not the irrational superstition of blacks in blues music but a lively spiritual framework with which many African Americans negotiated the world. That it is a prominent feature of blues ideology is a testament to its lasting influence on a culture. Conjure and hoodoo are retained in both the sacred and secular practices of African Americans. Like music and dance, they are hallmarks of the culture.

With conjure in the popular realm, it garnered attention from various directions in the twentieth century. Scholars such as Newell Niles Puckett, Harry Middleton Hyatt, and later Melville Herskovits began to document and publish groundbreaking texts on African American folk beliefs and customs, with conjure and hoodoo being prominent examples.[12] Zora Neale Hurston, long a participant and observer in such traditions, found both intellectual and financial support for her scholarship on "Hoodoo in America," which is still largely in use today.[13] In her research, Hurston documents how conjure and hoodoo were intrinsic to African American identity; she believed they were among the defining elements in African American culture that reflected an African past. Unwilling to acknowledge this possibility, her contemporaries paid little attention to her claims.[14] As Anderson points out, "[m]iddle-class black America, who made up the majority of her reading public, were not yet willing to abandon the scientific outlook that drove them to seek 'progress' over an identity influenced by 'superstition'" (13). Conjuration was so deeply embedded in the daily routines of many Southern African Americans that it was hard to leave behind, though many did believe that distancing themselves from such "superstitious" beliefs would ease the transition into the white, mainstream way of life. Some African Americans who aspired to middle-class status "tended to view hoodoo as a negative feature of their society. Its practice, they thought, would have to be stamped out before they could hope to achieve equality" (2). Scholars have since recognized the genius of Hurston's work and, more specifically, the importance of conjure and hoodoo to African American identity formation. Davis fully accepts conjure's impact on African American cultural identity and encourages others to do the same: "As African American literary, visual, and performing artists—and critics as well—would later realize, African American religious practices based in the West African and especially Yoruba religion permeate the culture as a whole. The articulation of a specifically black aesthetic . . . cannot locate itself in the living traditions of African American culture without taking serious the practices variously called conjure, voodoo, and hoodoo" (159).

While blues lyrics infused with references to goopher dust, black cat bones, mojo hands, charms, and magical roots may not have directly influenced Hurston or her work, the movement of conjure and hoodoo into popular culture by way of blues music certainly had an indirect influence on the perception of Hurston's work by piquing the curiosity of white historians, folklorists, scholars, and philanthropists, who then opened the door for wider study of such subject matter. Blues music, then, has worked as a cultural valve of sorts—a space through which the cultural production of one group is filtered into larger, heterosocial landscape. The blues not only kept conjure and hoodoo alive in the minds of African Americans, whether city or country bound but also spread knowledge, albeit secondhand, of such traditions to every corner of the United States. Yet the kinship between blues music and conjure, to say the least, extends beyond that of dissemination. Rather, conjure and the blues share a more reciprocal relationship, one extending a hand to help the other (pun intended). Blues music is one vessel through which conjure has reached a broad audience. What role, then, has conjure played for the blues? I suggest that one function conjure serves for the blues is that of a curative for the blues condition, an idea I explore in further detail in the next section.

“[CONJURE] WOMEN DON’T WEAR NO BLUES”

“For those who had the blues, for those who lived the blues, for those who lived *with* the blues, the blues had meaning. But for those who lived outside the blues, the meaning of the blues [is] elusive”: blues as a concept must be addressed before proceeding with the exploration of the relationship between blues and hoodoo (Oliver qtd. in Spencer xix). *The blues* describes a feeling, a mood, and a lifestyle, as well as the circumstances of a particular moment in African American history. Cone describes the blues as “a sad feeling and also a joyous mood. They are bitter, but also sweet. They are funny and not so funny. The blues are not evil per se; rather they represent that sad feeling when a woman’s man leaves or joy when he returns” (109). I add that the blues are the expression of a range of human emotions for which no words exist to articulate fully. The blues reveal the anguish of a mother who has lost a child or the humiliation of a father who just lost his job. The blues express the rough-and-tumble attitude of a young woman who has grown up with too many men in her home or, just as easily, the effeminate gestures of a man who had too many women in his. The blues are the inescapable hardships of life coupled with the sweet tastes of good loving and laughter. The blues are real but not always tangible; “the blues are true because they combine art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real” (103). The blues may be succinctly described as “an artistic response to the chaos of life”—an expression of surviving that chaos and sometimes succumbing to it (103).

The blues are typically forward and direct in exposing the reality of working-class life. Such directness, Davis argues, is part of the blues condition: “The blues idiom requires absolute honesty in the portrayal of black life. It is an idiom that does not recognize taboos: whatever figures into the larger picture of working-class African American realities—however morally repugnant it may be to the dominant culture or to the black bourgeoisie—is an appropriate subject of blues discourse” (107). The recurrent themes of economic instability, alcoholism, domestic violence, and travel in blues music are a direct reflection of the working-class existence from which many of the performers sprang. “Washwoman Blues” is no ditty on the wonders of domestic servitude, to be sure, but not everything about the blues is pessimistic.[15] There were always good times and good loving to be had:

Papa likes his bourbon, mama likes her gin
Papa like his outside women, mama likes her outside men[16]

It must also be stated that the blues—the music, the mood, and the condition—are/were in many ways a communal affair. Working long hours to sustain a meager livelihood created a common bond among African Americans so that a song like "Washwoman Blues" or "Poor Man's Blues" resonated almost universally.[17] As such, blues songs belonged to the community at large; they "were never considered the personal property of their composers or the performers. They were the collective property of the black community, disseminated, like folktales, in accordance with the community's oral tradition. A blues sung by one person and heard, remembered, revised, and resung by another belonged as much to the second performer as to the first" (Davis 136). Such "worrying of the line," as it is called, is responsible for several variations on one blues as follows:

I'm going to Louisiana, get me a mojo hand
Just to see when my woman got another man[18]

and

I say, I'm going to Louisiana, I'll get me a hoodoo hand
I'm gonna stop my woman an' fix her so she can't have another man[19]

Here, Texas Alexander and Little Hat Jones record blues songs with similar themes and lyrics but invariably personalize their renditions by altering the pitch or word order or by inserting exclamatory ad-libs. Rather than belonging to one artist, these particular blues have been reshaped and revised by a long list of performers. Ida Cox's and Muddy Waters's versions are referenced earlier in this chapter. With the reality and unpredictability of African American life suffused into the definition of the blues, how does conjure fit into the blues cosmology? Bessie Smith's "Gin House Blues" offers this in way of an answer:

I've got to see the conjure man soon
I've got to see the conjure man soon
Because these gin house blues is campin' round my door
I want him to drive them off so they won't come back no more[20]

In this instance, Smith is seeking the conjure man to help cure her of her brokenhearted blues, which are driving her to alcoholism. Her blues adequately demonstrate how hoodoo can function as a remedy for the blues. Only through the work of some powerful mojo can the blueswoman relieve herself of the love-struck nature that has descended upon her so heavily that gin has become her only reprieve. Smith seeks similar council in "Please Help Me Get Him off My Mind" when she seeks a gypsy (a likely synonym for conjure woman) to ease her troubles:

> I've come to you, gypsy, beggin' on my bended knees
> That man put something on me, oh, take it off of me please[21]

It is not surprising that with conjure being invoked as a cure for the blues, the ailment in question had mostly to do with men and women's relationships. As Sharla M. Fett reveals in *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (2002), "[b]y far the most common source of conflict leading to affliction [by conjuration] involved discord between men and women in the arena of love, sexuality, and marriage" (91). Whatever the trouble was in a romantic relationship that could cause the blues to come down—infidelity, lack of sexual fulfillment, abandonment, jealousy, or an injured suitor—conjure was a sure fix, according to folk belief: "Although it carried its own risks, the use of conjuration offered a way to injure, drive off, or kill someone without assaulting him or her in person. Conjuration represented an arena in which men and women attempted to defend their sense of worth and protect what they regarded as their own, regardless of their physical strength" (91).

As "Please Help Me Get Him off My Mind" implies, conjure and hoodoo can work as both the cause and cure for the blues—part of the healing and harming duality of the tradition. Chireau elaborates on the complexities of conjuring the blues: "Supernatural healing and harming were also thematic constants in the blues, as they were in conjuring traditions. However, blues healing was primarily focused on the fixing of relationships that had gone awry, and the resolution of oppressive romantic entanglements . . . Hoodoo was both a punishment and cure, the supernatural force that ignited the passions of desperate suitors and frustrated paramours . . . in their pursuit of satisfying outcomes" (*Black Magic* 147). The notion of conjure as a remedy for the blues not only pertains to women; the blues themselves are not gender specific and do not have the profundity to show mercy to anyone. John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson expresses the same desperation and drive to procure an authentic Louisiana mojo hand with which to conjure a woman's affection as Ida Cox or Ma Rainey:

> One night I'm going down into Louisiana and buy me another mojo hand
> All because I got to break up my baby from lovin' this other man[22]

Cripple Clarence Lofton, on the other hand, uses conjure to rid himself of the lover who continues to mistreat him and bring the blues to his doorstep—a cure nonetheless. He warns his lover in "Strut That Thang,"

Getting sick and tired the way you do
Kind mama, going to poison you,
Sprinkle goofer dust around your bed
Wake some morning, find your own self dead[23]

The reciprocal nature of conjure and the blues is not limited, however, to blues lyrics. Since conjure, hoodoo, and the blues are also an undeniable part of African Americans' lives, all are bound to appear in places where they leave their mark. It is logical, then, that conjure and blues—in their symbiotic forms—are often recurrent themes in the literary production of African Americans. J. J. Phillips's 1966 debut novel, aptly titled *Mojo Hand: An Orphic Tale*, takes on the ever-popular quest for a powerful hoodoo charm from Louisiana to exact revenge on a lover. Clearly signifying on such classic blues anthems as Ma Rainey's "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues" and Ida Cox's "Mojo Hand Blues," Phillips's novel follows the rocky love affair between Eunice Prideaux—a traveling "quadroon" blues aficionado—and the bluesman Blacksnake Brown, whose music has worked her over better than any goopher dust ever could. Phillips opens the novel with a classic-style blues song that alludes to the overall theme of the narrative. Phillips's blueswoman, like Rainey, Cox, and others before her, intends to retrieve a powerful mojo hand to fix her man "like [he] fixed me"(J. Phillips x). She is certain by the end of her little blues ditty that when she returns with her mojo hand, "that man going to do everything I say" (x). Pointedly, the motif of conjure and blues is made apparent early in the text.

The majority of the novel is set in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the early 1960s. Eunice, however, sojourns from San Francisco on the eve of her debutante ball in search of the Orphic composer of "Bakershop Blues." Upon first discovering the record, Eunice and the society women attending the debutante tea easily fall under Blacksnake's spell. He croons, "I want to know if your jelly roll's fresh, or is it stale? I want to know if your jelly roll's fresh, or is it stale? Well, woman, I'm going to buy me some jelly roll if I have got to go to jail" (32). At the mention of "jelly roll," a euphemism for either sexual performance or sex organs, the women hosting the tea forget to mind their behavior, preferring instead to let Blacksnake's blues conjure them: "Everyone had relaxed. Some women were unbuckling their stockings, others were loosening the belts around their waists. Someone had gotten out the brandy and was pouring it into the teacups" (33). Acting as an incantation of sorts, Blacksnake's blues put his women listeners under a spell—a spell to which Eunice was not granted immunity. She, too, is intoxicated by his voice and words so much so that she treks across the country hoping to capture the essence of those blues by having Blacksnake for herself: "Eunice sat down. The record ground on and on, and it was then that she knew that she had to go find the source for herself, this music that moved her and the others, however much they tried to deny it" (33).

Eunice is consumed, obsessed with Blacksnake Brown, a man she has never seen or met. In the spirit of blues music, which is so often suffused with sexual aggression, misplaced affections, adultery, and alcoholism, Eunice pursues her bluesman with what appears to be one goal in mind. Grabbing her guitar, she performs her own blues for Blacksnake and reveals her intentions:

> Well, I come to Raleigh 'cause I been told,
> Well, I come to Raleigh 'cause I been told
> Those Raleigh men got a sweet jelly roll
> And I be so glad when the sun go down,
> I ain't all that sleepy, but I want to lie down. (64)

In accordance with the Orpheus myth, Eunice descends into the blues underworld of travel, fast living, and multiple sexual liaisons. The affair is short lived, however, as Eunice—with her middle-class, debutante sensibility—fails to adjust to the new life she has chosen for herself. As she is immersed deeper and deeper into Blacksnake's world and the empty relationship he offers, she realizes that her impulsive action is premature, as she is much more a stranger to the blues and its environment than she assumed: "It was a disgusting but necessary avulsion for Eunice from easily being concerned about things of no real consequence to her, for now there were too many things to say, and not enough words to express. A song and a touch were the only means to combat the harrowing lack of communication that became a faked and enforced privacy, making one scream . . . And slowly she came to taste more of the marrow of what made blues than she had ever imagined to be contained in such a thin, rigid fiber of expression" (87).

Eunice's indifference toward her "easy-riding man" ignites a jealous streak in Blacksnake (121). He suspects Eunice of being unfaithful, and the love affair begins to sour at a rapid pace. The domestic violence that Davis argues is at the heart of women's blues is certainly accounted for in the world in which Eunice finds herself. In a late-night spat with Blacksnake, a pregnant Eunice dismisses his accusation of infidelity, fueling his rage: "[H]e grabbed her other arm. 'You *lie*, woman.' She struggled to protest but before she could say anything he slapped her across the mouth" (114). The blues hang heavily over Eunice's head; if she does nothing to remedy the situation, she "[will] soon become merely another acid-lipped woman of Raleigh, filling the days with aimless actions and hurling her body blindly through the night" (102). Contrary to what many blues songs confess about what women do when they have the blues, Eunice does not hang her head and cry when Blacksnake mistreats her. As Davis discusses, a woman with the blues most often does something about it: "The preponderant emotional stance of the singer-protagonist . . . is far from resignation and despair. On the contrary, the most frequent stance assumed by the women . . . is independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance—bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence" (21). Apparently Eunice picks up more than a penchant for alcohol and guitar licks while enmeshed in Blacksnake's blues milieu. Somewhere along the way, she also learned the tricks of the conjuring trade. She literally goes down to Louisiana to get a mojo hand. During a layover in Lake Charles, Louisiana, en route to Raleigh, Eunice seeks the wisdom of Madame Karplus, who gives her instructions on how to conjure fatally bad luck on someone. Madame Karplus also gives Eunice a lucky mojo hand for her own protection.

She knows "it must be ended" with Blacksnake, and in true blues fashion, young Eunice invokes the power of conjure to wash away her Blacksnake blues (Phillips 102). She goes in search of a crossroads to perform her conjuring moment after bribing the neighborhood schoolboys to catch a live rattlesnake for her: "Eunice pushed her way through the vines and ivy that dropped from the trees until she came to a junction with another path" (117). The crossroads is indeed a powerful locale for practicing conjure. Derived from Kongolese concepts of the universe, the crossroads represents the intersection of two worlds—that of the living and that of the dead.[24] The crossroads is a liminal space existing between these two worlds, making it ripe for otherworldly happenings.

Finding a suitable site for her hoodoo, Eunice kills the snake and writes Blacksnake's name and a Latin prayer on a scrap of paper, which sets the conjuring moment into action: "She cut off the rattles and put them in her pocket. With her fingers she pried the mouth open, stuffed the paper and black bag in, and wrapped it shut with the string. Then she made a hole in the skin just below the bloody stump where the rattles had been, drew the string through it, and secured it to a limb of the tree" (118). Although Eunice's ability as a conjurer is unstated in the novel, her detailed ritual turns out to be quite potent. Just as Madame Karplus instructed, "soon as that snake wither up to bone" the targeted person would also "wither up and die" (130). Gratified upon hearing of Blacksnake's untimely death by the hands of one of his other lady friends, Eunice's blues are—at least momentarily—replaced with a feeling of better days to come: "Miss Mary began to moan and Eunice slipped out of the room. She walked into the back room, flung open the closet door grabbed her clothes, and threw them on the bed. Then she rolled them up and stuffed them into her bag . . . Eunice smiled and walked out" (176–77). As she begins her new journey in preparation for motherhood, Eunice plays a most telling blues:

> They say when a man gets the blues, he catch a train and rides
> And when a woman gets the blues, she hang her head and cries,
> But when this woman gets the blues, she puts on her black wings and flies.
> (177)

Cementing Davis's supposition that women with the blues are neither helpless nor overly emotional, Phillips's novel provides continuity within the literary realm of the reciprocal relationship established between conjure and the blues. Eunice finds a cure most potent for her Blacksnake blues through the power of conjuration. Building on a classic story line from numerous blues songs, *Mojo Hand* exemplifies just one of the ways African American authors transfer that relationship into literary works.

Arthur Flowers's novel *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993) tells the improbable tale of bluesman Lucas "Sweet Luke" Bodeen, who falls deeply in love with Melvira Dupree, conjurer extraordinaire. It is no coincidence that conjure and blues are paired in this narrative, as it purposely seeks to emphasize their relationship to one another. As Patricia Schroeder attests, "it is significant that both Melvira and Lucas practice arts designed to heal the spiritual malaise of the African American community, and that both are based partly on African traditions," a point I will return to in the next section (267). Here, blues and hoodoo are much more dependent on each other. The consummate blues player, settling down with one woman is not in Luke Bodeen's nature: "Bodeen 37 and in his prime. Known to be a silver-tongued delta bluesman, Luke Bodeen had left more good women grieving in more towns than he cared to count" (Flowers 2). That a black man did not remain in one location long in the early twentieth century, the time the novel takes place, was not unheard of. The traveling disposition of black men was a carryover from the new realities freedom afforded them. A love relationship was never enough to keep a man rooted in one area if he knew he could see the world if he so desired. Davis corroborates this point, arguing that "however smoothly a personal relationship may have been progressing, a recently emancipated black man was compelled to find work, and even if he found a job near the neighborhood where he and his partner had settled, he nevertheless might be seduced by new possibilities of travel" (19).

Bodeen's wandering nature is an unlikely fit for any woman seeking a committed relationship, but even more so for Melvira, who "was known to have a temper and any fool know that courting a conjure woman with a temper is a chancy thing" (Flowers 5). Melvira Dupree is powerful enough to send an unfaithful lover "hopping round like a toadfrog or wiggling on his belly like a snake," which does not complement Luke's wanderlust (5). The two, however, do pair up, metaphorically representing the union between conjure and blues music. Their relationship follows the path of all Bodeen's previous affairs. "The two of them bickered and fought about as much as they laughed and loved, always mad at each other about something," but just like the traditions they represent, Melvira and Bodeen are good for each other (5). Bodeen's companionship provides a sense of worth and fulfillment for Melvira, whose childhood abandonment issues have left her emotionally scarred. He has touched her, made her stoic emotions stir: "[N]ot only did she feel him, he moved her. Resonated deep within her. Her bluesman, her good-for-nothing-but-the-blues bluesman. One of the few things in this world that made her really feel, be really alive" (43). The narrator informs the reader that a "woman like Dupree need a man like Bodeen. Strong woman like that don't come alive unless she got a man of her own caliber to grow against," suggesting that perhaps blues and conjure are equal in power, if not in craft (43). Conjure and hoodoo are not the only means of curing the blues, particularly if one's troubles fall outside the realm of romantic and sexual relations. Melvira's blues are deeply rooted; her mother Effie Dupree abandoned her at birth to be raised by Hoodoo Maggie. It appears that simple love and affection might also do the trick.

The relationship with Bodeen appears to grant Melvira the clarity of mind and heart to confront her past: "When Melvira Dupree went back to Hoodoo Maggie, she was calm, the signs were good, the decision made. She would go, if only to spit in the woman's one good eye" (46). Melvira embarks on her journey, her "hoodoo agenda," with her bluesman in tow (46). Her inability—or rather, reluctance—to conjure Bodeen in order to secure his fidelity, however, belies the codependency and symbiotic treatise between blues and hoodoo. As they travel from Sweetwater, Arkansas, to Memphis—the first leg of Melvira's search for her mother—the music starts getting good to Bodeen: so good, in fact, that Melvira becomes a second thought. Bodeen packs his bags after a year and makes good on the disclaimer he offered Melvira the day they met: "Warn you up front that I ain't never tossed my shoes under no woman's bed for long. When the blues call I'm liable to answer" (3). Not fully comprehending the itinerant nature of the blues singer, Melvira begins to experience a new type of blues: the kind that only lonely hearts call forth. Even her magic cannot stop these blues from coming down: "Inside Melvira leaned weakly against the door, hurting in spite of herself, trying desperately to step back and put the hoodoo distance on the emotions threatening to overwhelm her" (86). With a stubborn heart, she lets Bodeen go. All the work done to pry open Melvira's spirit is reversed as she quickly rebuilds the wall around her heart: "She had known this day would come. First her mamma, now her man. A cold place in her heart that she had long prepared said Never Again" (85). Meanwhile, Bodeen goes chasing after his precious blues, believing that he "didn't really need her. Didn't need anybody in his life" (79).

Flowers's novel surely does not intend to suggest that Bodeen's influence on Melvira is limited to invoking the raw emotion and emptiness of broken-heart blues. What both characters fail to realize is that blues and hoodoo are intrinsically linked: the "novel insists that it is vital for the characters to understand their cultural heritage in order to form connections with their current community—with the time, the place, and the people who surround them"—including each other (Schroeder 264). Bodeen and Melvira must learn to recognize the cultural connection between *themselves* in order to best serve their community. Born out of the same oppressive environment of US slavery and used to resist such oppression, both conjure and blues share an undeniable kinship. As two of the most prominent and lasting expressions of an enslaved cultural past in the United States, blues and conjure have long cultivated each other and partnered in serving the needs of many an African American community. Bodeen learns this lesson the hard way.

Life gets complicated when Bodeen's blues do not have hoodoo. Bodeen falls deeply into the blues life of hard and fast living, an escape mechanism from being confronted with the reality of his own lonely heart blues. The narrator shares this: "When he finally did give up he gave up on everything. Life without her just wasn't worth the struggle. He filled his days with bad whiskey, hard drugs, long hours, and fast women. And he filled his nights with hard and bitter blues" (Flowers 97). Bodeen's music consequently begins to suffer as a result of his leaving Melvira: "Bodeen just sitting there at his piano. Supposed to be a rehearsal, but Bodeen wasn't into it. He was in his own little world and the other guys had just let him sit there while they practiced" (98). The blues can survive without any reference to conjure and hoodoo, but according to blues legend Muddy Waters, sooner or later the blues always return to conjure: "But you know, when you're writin' them songs that are coming from down [South] way, you can't leave out somethin' about that mojo thing. Because this is what black people really believed in at that time . . . But even today, when you play the old blues like me, you can't get from around that. I'd get so many requests, I could play 'Goin' to Louisiana' every night if I would do it" (qtd. in Palmer 97–98).

Bodeen is forced to give up the blues after hitting the rock bottom of his whiskey bottle and cocaine addiction. He returns to his birth home to lick his salty wounds, and years pass before he is asked to play some of those Memphis blues. He freezes, unsure of himself: "[T]ruth be known, he was scared. Hadn't played the blues since he quit drinking, and was half afraid of what he'd hear when he sat down and tried to play straight. Been high since he learned how to play" (Flowers 142). As far as he knew, he had lost his blues; but as Bodeen thinks about Melvira one evening, she becomes the muse who inspires some of the best blues he had ever played:

> Deep in a bitter sweet melancholy, Bodeen let his hands wander over the keyboard, waiting for the spirit to move him. He had been thinking about Melvira, missing her for the first time in a while now, thinking about life without her. He was half pissed cause he had thought he was over her. Wished he had never met her. He had been self-sufficient before, didn't need nothing or nobody. Now he knew something was missing in his life. A hole even the blues didn't fill. O, Melvira. O, baby, I miss you so. He let missing her flow through his fingers. You could hear it in his every note. O baby, I miss you so. His music became more mood than melody, and he felt all the pain he'd been carrying swelling in him. A piece about Melvira began to grow. A meditation on love. Lucas Bodeen let the music say all the things he wanted to say to her. O baby, I love you so. I don't understand why or nothing, I just love you. Lucas Bodeen played his heart out, another man hurting cause my baby's gone and O the loving sure was good blues. (155)

Bodeen begins to reach new heights as a bluesman following his "blues for Melvira" performance because for the first time "Sweet Luke" converges with the blues. As the narrator explains, "[i]f you want to sing about life, you got to know what you talking about. Everybody know you got to get all down in there if you wanna do the blues" (99). Until this point in the novel, Bodeen only *thought* he knew the blues but he had never experienced the discomfort of regrettable loss.

He owes his transformation—and that of his music—to the conjure woman Melvira Dupree. Her love, or rather the lack thereof, guides Bodeen into the depths of despair, which in turn provide more authenticity to the blues he is playing. Her entrance into his life sets him on the path to betterment and to play a much better blues. Bodeen acknowledges as much: "For all the pain it cost him, he had to say he was glad she had come into his life. Don't do for a man to live and die without having known at least one great love in his life. He would have hated to have died without having ever felt like she made him feel" (156). While his career as a blues singer is up and running, Bodeen still has not reconciled with his conjure woman—a factor that must resolve itself, as the nature of the blues/hoodoo continuum relies on it.

Melvira is just as much in need of Bodeen as he is in need of her, though she, too, is unaware of this fact. During his absence, Melvira blossoms under the wing of Hootowl, the Memphis hoodoo elder, becoming an even more powerful conjurer. After five years in Memphis, she is mentally and spiritually prepared to take the next step in her quest to confront her mother. All the signs point to Taproot, Mississippi, as the place where Melvira will find the elusive Effie Dupree—a place that neither she nor the ticket booth attendant at the train station knows how to find. Because Melvira doesn't have much experience with travel, her journey is almost halted before it begins. Bodeen finds her confused but obstinate. He rolls alongside of her in his Model T Ford and asks, " 'What you gon do, walk to Taproot? Do you realize how far it is? Long way to Taproot Mississippi, girl, specially seeing as you don't even know where it is' " (66). Melvira reluctantly accepts his offer to escort her to Taproot, realizing that without him her journey would be much more arduous. Bodeen navigates Melvira through the oppressive Southern terrain to the obscure town of Taproot. In a passage that can easily be described as a tribute to Hurston's Janie and Teacake, Melvira and Luke also find themselves at nature's mercy when the Mississippi River floods it banks during their travels. Like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1934), Melvira finds herself nursing Bodeen back to health after succumbing to the filth and disease of the river water. Fortunately for Bodeen and Melvira, this is not where their story comes to a tragic close. After curing Bodeen of his swamp fever, the ornery couple arrives just prior to the Baron Samedi's summons for Effie Dupree.[25] Bodeen's role is more than that of a simple chaperon; he is Melvira's emotional support when her mother perishes with few words spoken between them and brings Melvira's journey to an unsatisfying end: "The dam loosened and, burrowing into his chest, she broke down in deep tormented sobs that finally released a lifetime of pain" (209).

One person recognizes the need Melvira and Bodeen have for each other—even when they refuse to do so. Hootowl intervenes to make sure the bluesman and conjurer cross paths again. The seventh son of a seventh son, he has traveled to Angola, Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, and numerous other places where slavery displaced Africans. Trained and initiated in the

African-based religions of those regions, Hootowl acts as a guardian of diluted African heritage, making sure that the relationship between blues and conjure is as it should be. Situating Melvira and Bodeen's relationship as one of call and response, Schroeder argues, "[T]he story that they share involves not only their individuation and their love for each other, but their connections with and service to the African American community" (266–67). Without appeasing one another, neither Melvira nor Luke can successfully fulfill their commitment to the people who depend on them. The bluesman cannot seize his power to play an "immortal blues" from the crossroads without his conjure woman (Flowers 43). He cannot give voice to the weariness and oppressed lives of the black working class. The conjure woman can only truly heal the "tribal soul" after learning and living the blues reality in the early twentieth-century American South; like the blues, she must master "the power to extract strength from adversity and pleasure from struggle" (120, 151). It is not surprising that Hootowl, who represents African diasporic cultures, is the figure who reunites Luke and Melvira—two manifestations of an African cultural past.

Melvira and Bodeen as conjure and blues representatives, respectively, develop a codependency over the course of the novel. Bodeen suffers the most when Melvira is not in his life, and without her love and hoodoo personage as an inspiration, his blues remains at a subpar level. Nor is it by chance that Melvira must apprentice with Hootowl in a bluesy, hoodoo town like Memphis to hone her spiritual awareness. With Bodeen out of her life, Melvira is left on her own to navigate Memphis, a place where "the blues were a part of the air she breathed" (54). Melvira sees firsthand how the community suffers, and she ascertains the power of blues and hoodoo to heal: "She had been hit with the Hoodoo Curse, the vision to see what must be done and the knowledge that you are capable of doing it" (152). Four years pass before she recognizes her own power, with Hootowl's guidance, and has the strength of mind to reinitiate the mission of answering her mother's summons. The physical strain of the quest, however, is another matter. Without Bodeen's cunning and Model T Ford, perhaps Melvira would have only known her mother through Spirit. Flowers's novel artfully transfers the intricate cultural coupling of blues and hoodoo to the page, revealing not only how conjure is a curative for the blues condition but also how Bodeen's "twentieth-century blues and the twentieth-century form of conjure that Melvira practices thus overlap in heritage and function: both blend Western and African influences to nourish the people's spirit" (Schroeder 268). The novel ends with the marriage of blues and hoodoo and the commencing their new journey to heal the "tribal soul" together.

Keeping in line with the idea that blues are often focused on "man-woman business," Ntozake Shange engages the kinship between conjure and blues from a different perspective. In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Sassafrass, the eldest of the Charleston triumvirate, finds herself burdened with a blues that costs her more than just her happiness. Rather than conjure being a means to rid oneself of the troubles of this life, Shange's character must rely on the blues to open the path to conjure magic and the rank of priestess to which she so badly wants to ascend. A weaver by inheritance and an aspiring writer, Sassafrass desires to add one other vocation to her name. In a moment of spontaneity, she declares, "I'ma be a cunjuh," thus beginning a journey to reclaim her African religion (Shange 109). Her suffocating relationship with Mitch, a heroin-addicted, out-of-work blues musician, is the source of much displeasure and the dissolution of self for Sassafrass. The first glimpse of Mitch in the novel, in which he bullies Sassafrass for not working diligently on her writing, reveals her fear of him and that she is consumed more with fitting into a certain mold to please him than with her own well-being: "Sassafrass was holding her lips so tight between her teeth she could barely stand the pain, and she was making moves to get up and away from Mitch's harangue when he pushed her back on the bed . . . The man she loved was not happy with her charade of homebodiness" (79). Mitch easily convinces her that weaving is not her true craft during his tirade, and Sassafrass immediately internalizes Mitch's criticism as a slight against her character and thus a threat to their relationship. She quickly begins to refashion herself after Mitch's model of what she should be: "[A]ll this weaving, and crocheting, and macrameing she'd been doing all her life, and Sassafrass was supposed to be a writer" (79). The blues that surround Sassafrass stem in part from allowing someone else to define her identity. Obviously in denial about the oppressive nature of her relationship and the lack of agency to determine her own worth, the Ancestors send someone who speaks the language of the blues to visit Sassafrass and help her find the path to self-actualization: Billie Holiday, Lady Day, herself. She explains to Sassafrass the root of her problem: "*It's the blues, Sassafrass, that's keepin' you from your writing, and the spirits sent me because I know all about the blues*" (81). As Sassafrass sits and visits with Holiday, Sassafrass reveals her latent ability to commune with the supernatural world. Sassafrass possesses the disposition to become a powerful conjurer, but she must prove herself to Spirit before she can be initiated in the realm of sacred knowledge, or *konnaissance*. Holiday endeavors to help her along that path, teaching Sassafrass the secret of balance: "*Don't ya know we is all sad ladies because we got the blues, and joyful women because we got our* *songs? Make you a song Sassafrass, and bring it out so high all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune*" (81).

For Holiday and the litany of other blues singers that she names, having their blues songs helps them to relieve the pain and sorrow that is so often associated with the blues condition. Sassafrass lacks an outlet for her pain and frustration, one that is all her own and for only herself. Her weaving creations eventually find themselves on the bodies of others; her writing has not yet culminated in the expression of any emotion or logic and has proven an unreliable outlet. Sassafrass has to learn how to sing the blues, metaphorically, and give voice to the welled-up emotions, exploration of identity, and desire that threaten to consume her. She must learn to strike a balance when life's miseries begin to outweigh the joys. This idea of release, via a blues song or simple verbalization, is exalted in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* as Eve, the owner of the boardinghouse in which women overtaken by the blues find safety, is adamant about allowing the women who seek her shelter to have an uninterrupted moment to tell their stories. While narrating their tales, or singing their blues, is not a cure for their oppression, Eve's visitors find solace and vindication by being able to verbalize the pain and wrongdoing that has occurred in their lives.

Whether in song or narrative, voicing the hardships of life is critical for black women. For many women in life and in fiction "the blues provided a space where [they] could express themselves in new ways, a space in which they sometimes affirmed the dominant middle-class ideology but also could deviate from it" (Davis 47). Sassafrass must sing her blues in order to realize that she has the ability to exist outside of Mitch's dominant ideology, which is unhealthy for her spirit *and* spirituality. Holiday strives to convince Sassafrass that her life and her womanhood do not have to be determined by Western, patriarchal values. Rather, Sassafrass can and should blossom into womanhood according to her own aesthetic and not depend on others to define her reality. The Lady Day's last words before slipping back into the invisible world reify this point for Sassafrass: "*We need you to be Sassafrass 'til you can't hardly stand it . . . 'til you can't recognize yourself, and you sing all the time*" (Shange 82).

However, despite Holiday's poignant words, Sassafrass is still unable to lift her voice. As the intimacy of her and Mitch's relationship become clear to the reader, it is questionable whether she will ever get the courage to sing. She does, however, have a moment of clarity in which she fiercely attacks Mitch and his misogynist cronies for "celebrat[ing her] inherited right to be raped" through the poem "Ebony Cunt" (89). Her reward for refusing to act the part of the black woman who unquestionably accepts the verbal abuse and sexual objectification of her lover and his friends is her first taste of *physical* abuse: "He struck her across the face with the tube . . . Sassafrass was stunned. She did not move, she didn't speak. Mitch tossed the tube in the air and it curled up like the toy snakes kids have at circuses; Sassafrass ran to pick it up, and Mitch shoved her to the side. Once he had the tube in his hands again, he twirled it—and he struck again, again, and again" (97). Fleeing the scene of her humiliation and dehumanization, Sassafrass retreats to the ocean, where she spends the night in contemplation. As the cycle of domestic violence dictates, Sassafrass blames herself for the abuse, lamenting the fact that "she'd been too headstrong, too sure she needed no man," and begins to reshape her constitution so that she does not "have to leave Mitch whom she adored" (98, 97). Searching for cosmic signs where there are none, Sassafrass's blues are so thick that she no longer has the clarity to discern the divine meaning in nature: "[S]he was tight, and the ocean nibbling her ankles in another dawn did not arouse her spirit. Instead, the monotonous coming back, coming back of the waves reminded her that she, too, would return to her own rubble-strewn shores. She was going to go back to Mitch; she could not leave . . . not now" (98). She does return, but not long thereafter, the spirit of Mamie Smith descends to try to convince Sassafrass to give singing the blues another try:

> *I'm forsaken—ya know it—don't bring me no kind words, bring me a full shot o' gin, and let me roll a lil truth on ya. Honey, just look at yourself, all innocent and soft . . . I'm a hard mama and can't nobody take it from me, less'n I want to give it up. I bet ya work a lot with your hands and make pretty things and don't have no chirren either . . . well, I had me a bunch o' chirren and as many men, and I still went on singin' in taverns or the street . . . honey, I didn't care, not like folks expect a mama to care. I gotta whole world fulla chirren, and tell 'em what's a blues about . . . then I let 'em be. Yeah then I let 'em be.* [italics in the original] (127)

Mamie is much more direct with Sassafrass than perhaps Holiday, and she issues a reprimand from the spirit world. Should Sassafrass decide not to sing now, Spirit, too, will let her be. Sassafrass hardly pays attention to Mamie's admonition, but she discovers quickly that the gods do not take kindly to their chosen ones's failure to heed a clear warning.

Sassafrass comes closest to her calling to be a "woman with a moon falling from her mouth" at the very moment that her refusal to sing the blues—indeed, to invoke the power of self-determination and seek out an identity outside of her tumultuous relationship—becomes a liability (3). She and Mitch relocate from Los Angeles to a New Afrikan village in the backwoods of southern Louisiana. Even though "Sassafrass had tried everything to be a decent *Ibejii*, a santera," because "she desperately wanted to make *Ochá[,]* to wear white with her *èlékes*[,] to keep the company of the priests and priestesses," she quickly realizes that Elegba, the guardian of the crossroads and the divine messenger, has seen fit to block her entrance into the secrets of the invisible world (213). Her spiritual advisors warn her that she has been chosen but must first rid herself of the blues—the lover she has taken who "is unfit for the blessings of the spirits"—before she can receive her spiritual gift:

> Mama Mbewe begged her to end this relationship. She threw the cowry shells to see what the spirits saw in the future. She marked Sassafrass with *cacario*, the white chalk, that cleaned evil from the soul. Again & again, Mama Mbewe shook her head slowly, sadly . . . Only two days before the Padrino, Oba Babafumé, had sent her for a live white chicken, which he'd held over her head, before he sent her with 5 fresh oranges & the chicken to throw in moving waters, that Oshun & Shango might come to her aid. Come to her aid, to remove the influence of Mitch. (214)

Learning to sing the blues for herself and reach self-actualization, according to Holiday's advice, would set the would-be priestess on the road toward fulfilling her own dreams rather than those of Mitch, who has no regard for Sassafrass's desires. Singing a blues song would also help Sassafrass to build a community of support, like the women in Eve's boarding house, around which she could repair her damaged self-esteem. As Davis argues, "women's blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working-class black women" (44). Though Sassafrass is immersed in a community of New World African spiritualism, by not allowing herself to voice the negativity of her relationship and lean on those around her for emotional support, she has failed to cement the bonds of community and sisterhood. Instead, Sassafrass remains committed to Mitch and does not allow herself to take advantage of the nurturing and healing community of New Afrikans around her. Even as she is blessed with divine favor by Shangó during a ritual and discovers that the spiritual well-being of her unborn child hangs in the balance, Sassafrass is simply unwilling—or perhaps at this point unable—to separate herself from Mitch's grasp: "Sassafrass prayed that she might have a child. You leave your palms open that the gifts of the gods might have a place in your life. When Sassafrass could finally move, Mama Mbewe & Mama Sumara assured her that her wish has been granted, but that she'd fall from grace very soon, if she didn't abandon Mitch. 'The new one shall be cursed, if you don't renounce the father' " (Shange 217). Sassafrass is very close to her goal of becoming a priestess, "to bring healing, to bring love and beauty wherever she went," but as her advisors warned, her unhealthy connection to Mitch causes her to fall from grace and sacrifice the chance to become a powerful healer like her Geechee ancestors (215).

Focusing on the issue of balance, Shange's text puts forth the idea that, again, blues and conjure magic—or more specifically, African-based spirituality—are symbiotically linked. Sassafrass's rise to power relies on her ability to embrace blues ideology as a survival mechanism. Without achieving the balance of bringing blues and conjure together on the same plane, she is rejected from the invisible world. Not only does the reader witness how these two cultural epistemologies are dependent on each other in *Sassafrass, Cypress& Indigo*, but there is also strong evidence that blues and conjure are vested in each other's ability to heal and to provide emotional, spiritual, and mental anesthesia to the African American community at large.

BOOKS, BLUES, AND HOODOO: TOWARD A TRIPTYCH LITERARY TROPE

Phillips's and Shange's respective novels innovatively explore the blues and conjure tropes in African American literature. Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues* reveals the various avenues African American authors travel to reify the kinship between blues and hoodoo. This new holy trinity—blues, hoodoo, and literature—articulated throughout Flowers's text, exposes a much deeper-rooted association between blues, "literature and hoodoo . . . tools for shaping the soul" (Flowers 119). It is for this reason that I return to Flowers's novel, briefly, to fully expose the multiple layers of engagement this particular text has with the blues and hoodoo theme. The association between conjure and blues in literature takes on a more allegorical interpretation in Flowers's novel as two of the most prolific black folk characters come to dubious battle in the text: the bluesman and the conjure woman. The literariness Flowers invokes in pairing these two allegorical characters opens up new realms of possibility for critical analysis.[26] Strictly focusing on the parallels between Melvira Dupree and Lucas Bodeen, Flowers's intent in bringing the relationship between blues and hoodoo into the literary world is evident. The characterizations of Melvira and Bodeen should not be overlooked. The commonalities drawn between the twin protagonists in the novel is where I argue Flowers begins his articulation of the relevance of conjure and blues in literature. Both bluesman and conjure woman are rigorously trained in their respective crafts. Melvira recalls her childhood, when "days were spent squirming as Hoodoo Maggie drilled her with the lore of herbs and the powers of earth, air, fire, water and the mojo. Had dragged her in tow to her daily consultations. Taught her how to read signs, how to see, to know, to command the spirits. Taught her how to conjure reality from secrets, words and dreams, taught her the true names of gods and things. Taught her the magics of love and hate and the human passions" (15–16). Taking a bit more of an unconventional approach, Lucas Bodeen learned his skill via imitation: "[H]e'd haunt the places that they were playing [blues] and watch the old guys' fingering. Then he'd go try to play the same thing on a log or a fence railing" (57).

By the nature of their art, both Melvira and Bodeen rely on the oral and aural nature of their professions. During the conjuring moment that saves Mary Ellen's dying child, Melvira insists that the only intervention to death is for Mary Ellen to "call someone [she] know[s]" from beyond the grave (31). Likewise, Bodeen acknowledges that "back on the delta, long before books and poems, it was the blues that kept the record" (39). As a conjurer and a bluesman, both Melvira and Bodeen belong to their respective communities; their "professions afford them individual identity, status within the African American communities of the Delta" because they serve a vital function: providing resistance and a safe space where there is none (Schroeder 265). Melvira soothes souls with her root work while Bodeen brings "the little jukejoint at the crossroads . . . thoroughly alive with folks sweating off a long hard week in the fields and farms of Sweetwater, Arkansas" (Flowers 22). Neither character appears to be more powerful than the other; conjure and blues are on an equal plane in the novel. Just as Melvira reads the conjure signs and recognizes the rooster's crow, Bodeen is equally able to read the signs of his own blues cosmology: "Bodeen was almost home when off in the distance a passing freight train wailed at the morning. He stopped to listen . . . Hated to hurt her, but in the final analysis he was longrail delta bluesman and one day it would be time to go. That's just the way it is. He had to be where the blues was" (26–27).

Their relationship, like that of blues and hoodoo, is a natural coupling of like elements; derived from a common African past and a New World adaptability, they share attributes of each other. Bodeen, implying that the blues cosmology is on equal standing with conjure magic, warns Melvira early in the text about "trying to hoodoo a man the blues already claim" (12). Bodeen's power as a blues musician is heightened at the literal and figurative crossroads. The reader witnesses how the power of the blues so naturally infuses itself with its symbiotic pair that even Melvira's conjuring incantations take on the repetitious form of a classic blues song:

Oshun does he love me? Oshun will he stay?
Oshun does he love me? Oshun will he stay?
Oshun make him love me. Oshun make him stay. (47–48)

What these common aspects of characterization emphasize for the reader is the similarity in function and community standing and the mutual level of respect conjure and blues ideally have for one another. Flowers is encouraging his readers to understand that "bluessingers bout as interesting as conjurors" and that there is much more depth to this relationship (41). If one interrogates the standard or classic form of the blues and what Sharla M. Fett identifies as "narratives of conjuration," the symbiotic dialectic I endeavor to theorize moves across several parallels worthy of note (84).[27]

Much like the standard 12-bar blues, the oral conjure narrative assumes a formulaic structure to which storytellers, interviewees, and, later, literary artists have all conformed. I return to Fett, who offers a specific framework for understanding the structure of such narratives. Fett's model offers a four-part deconstruction of the conjure narrative:

1. A conflict, usually social in nature, is identified as the source of the initial conjure action.
2. The affliction and/or physical ailment incurred by way of conjure magic is described.
3. The afflicted person seeks out a conjure figure.
4. The narrator recalls the steps toward healing (conjuring moment) or turning the trick on its originator.

The tale is concluded by recounting the end result of the conjure episode, but this is not always part of the narrative. Fett also notes that such narratives are usually told by the afflicted person rather than by the conjure figure.[28] She cites several oral narratives to sustain her narrative formula; I would like to point to several fictional examples to project how Fett's model is embodied within the African American literary tradition and to explore how blues and conjure are structurally similar in addition to the other various ways I believe they are intertwined.

A close examination of Charles W. Chesnutt's conjure tales hints at just such a reliance on past cultural and folk forms in the context, contents, and delivery of his work. Chesnutt readily admits how his experiences in North Carolina, listening to stories of conjuration, permeate his writing:

> In writing a few years ago, the volume entitled *The Conjure Woman*, I suspect that I was more influenced by the literary value of the material than by its sociological bearing, and therefore took, or thought I did, considerable liberty with my subject. Imagination, however, can only act upon data—one must have somewhere in his consciousness the ideas which he puts together to form a connected whole. Creative talent, of whatever grade,

> is, in the last analysis, only the power of rearrangement—there is nothing new under the sun. I was the more firmly impressed with this thought after I had interviewed half a dozen old women, and a genuine "conjure doctor"; for I discovered that the brilliant touches, due, I thought, to my own imagination, were after all but dormant ideas, lodged in my childish mind by old Aunt This and old Uncle That, and awaiting only the spur of imagination to bring them again to the surface. (*Superstitions* 865)

It is no strange happenstance, then, that the written conjure tales of Chesnutt's creation take on a striking similarity to those recorded orally. In his introduction to *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1993), Richard Brodhead suggests that Chesnutt conformed to the well-established Western literary traditions of local color writing and "old uncle" tales. "He displays no resistance to these conventions, makes no visible effort to revise them or struggle against their sway: all is compliance, so far as the surface appearance of [his] stories goes," writes Brodhead, which begs the question of what, then, is below the surface (6). A second look reveals that Chesnutt's writing is engaged in more than one narrative tradition. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," for instance, the conjure tale follows several of the movements that Fett has identified. The conflict between Mars Jeems McLean and his slave hand Solomon arises when Solomon's love interest is sold to another plantation despite the budding romance between the two slaves. Solomon, true to the conjure tale form, seeks out the help of Aunt Peggy, the local conjure woman: "Now, atter Solomon's gal had be'n sont away, he kep' feelin' mo' en mo' bad erbout it, 'tel fin'lly he 'lowed he wuz gwine ter see ef dey could n' be sump'n done fer ter git 'er back, en ter make Mars Jeems treat de darkies bettah. So he tuk a peck er co'n out'n de ba'n one night, en went ober ter see ole Aun' Peggy, de free-nigger cunjuh 'oman down by de Wim'l'ton Road" (Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman* 59). As Uncle Julius continues to tell the story, Mars Jeems's "physical ailment" at the hands of Aunt Peggy's "monst'us pow'ful kin' er gopher" is revealed, though not until the story's end. In this particular story, Aunt Peggy's conjuring relies on community involvement, but Chesnutt is still careful to catalog her methodology: "You take dis home, en gin it ter de cook, ef you kin trus' her, en tell her fer ter put it in yo' marster's soup de fus' cloudy day he hab okra soup fer dinnah. Min' you follers de d'rections" (60). Aunt Peggy's conjure turns Mars Jeems into a slave hand. Finally, Uncle Julius, the teller of this tale, concludes by informing his audience that "Aunt Peggy's goopher had made a noo man un [Mars Jeems] enti'ely," and as a result of his ordeal, he treats his slaves with more humanity (67).

Hurston's story "Black Death" presents another example of how the African American literary tradition evolved from the initial oral transmission of narratives, histories, and other lore.[29] Complete with a social conflict, a consultation with a conjure person, a conjuring moment, and the lasting effects of the work, Hurston's story typifies how the storytelling tradition of former slaves moved from being told around the campfire to being published in print sources without sacrificing much of the integrity of the tale—or the teller, for that matter. Hurston's narrator incites such comparisons with the oral histories of conjure by deliberately addressing the audience: "And the white folks never knew and would have laughed had anyone told them—so why mention it?" (Hurston 208). The narrator of "Black Death" also makes it clear from the opening lines that his tale is not meant for all ears to hear; rather, it is for a specific group of folk who know and believe in the power of conjure: "The Negroes of Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of. He is a materialist with little ears for overtones . . . if a white person were halted on the streets of Orlando and told that Old Man Morgan, the excessively black Negro hoodoo man, can kill a person indicated and paid for, without ever leaving his house or even seeing his victim, he'd laugh in your face and walk away, wondering how long the Negro will continue to wallow in ignorance and superstition" (202). The exclusivity of the conjure tale within the black community that Hurston imposes on her written stories is no far cry from how the preliterate tales were exchanged. Used to bolster cultural belief and a means of survival in the harsh reality of slavery, conjure tales were expressed as an in-group activity, just as Hurston's narrator implies. This functionality of the tales is a characteristic that John W. Roberts verbalizes in his own assessment of the art form:

> These brief, often first person accounts served as an ideal expressive vehicle for transmitting a conception of conjurers as folk heroes. In these narratives, narrators recalled a specific instance in which a conjurer utilized his/her extraordinary spiritual powers to overcome a threat to the physical, social, or psychological well-being of an individual known by or connected in some way to the performer and/or audience . . . Enslaved Africans used these accounts of personal experience of an extraordinary nature to demonstrate in concrete and specific terms that the conjurer's actions reflected a conception of behaviors adaptable to their situation in ways that could be advantageous in securing their interests in a physical and socially healthy community. (97)

Flowers's novel also incorporates Fett's model within the larger story of Melvira and Luke. The story of intervention Melvira provides for the Larsens, whose daughter has been seduced by the pimp St. Louie Slick, reverts back to the oral formula that Fett so poignantly articulates. Flowers, however, adds another critical moment to his story. The reader is privy to the internal thoughts and actions of the conjure woman. One learns that after snatching St. Louie Slick's soul, Melvira decides "it would be far more rewarding . . . to feed souls rather than destroy one" after some soul-searching of her own (Flowers 151). Alice Walker's "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and J. J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* (1966) render several variations but rely on the same fundamental elements of Fett's paradigm.

While there is considerable adaptation among the examples I have offered, each of the stories incorporates enough of Fett's vision to argue that even contemporary conjure fiction is bound by structural and narrative format, just as blues music and lyrics conform to an ideal standard developed in the slave communities of the American South. And concurrent with blues ideology, which dictates a strong element of improvisation and communal ownership, as the conjure narrative has evolved from oral to written form, improvisation has become part of the craft. In keeping with the criteria of indentifying the social conflict, describing the affliction, seeking out the conjure figure, and recounting the conjuring moment and the conjure resolution, Chesnutt, Hurston, Flowers, and a host of others invoke creative license to shift and reshape conjuring fiction into what it is today. Some of the revisions of these authors encourage additional critical investigation of how conjure functions in the literary world—dare I say, creating a new trope within twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American fiction. Hurston creates the professional rivalry when she pits two very powerful conjurers against each other in "Uncle Monday" (1934)—an idea repeatedly treated in later fiction and even in film.[30] Ntozake Shange's most powerful healer is a child of 12.[31] Tina McElroy Ansa follows that lead with the spiritually inclined Lena McPherson in *Baby of the Family* (1989) and then moves on to explore the erotic sides of women and spirit work in *The Hand I Fan With* (1996).

A more deeply ingrained improvisation, personal to each author, is evidenced in the conjuring moments spread throughout a given text. The detailed accounts of actual incantations, moments of healing, mixing of herbs, or other spiritual magic operate like a musician's riff in a blues song. Each manifestation of spiritual prowess is usually unique to one conjurer or line of conjurers and reflects his or her own personal preferences, school of thought or training, and allegiances. Conjuring moments are considerably improvised and revised by the conjure figure or the author. They are often unrecorded, unwritten, and shared—and therefore hard to trace to a specific origin, much like many of the early blues songs. Like the blues riff, each author or conjurer makes his or her own revisions to each spell, ritual, and ingredients, sometimes signifying on a much older conjuring or spiritual tradition. For instance, Ansa's caul tea ritual in *Baby of the Family* is taken from her research of slave narratives and oral histories and then later corroborated by an elder neighbor who spoke to the author about her own child being born with a caul.[32] In "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," Walker gives homage to Hurston's pioneering research on African American folk culture—conjure in particular—by using the "curse prayer" Hurston collected for *Mules and Men* (1935).

Yet each conjuring moment becomes simultaneously communal in its broad appeal and proprietary; much like a recipe, each conjurer makes a spell or remedy authentically his or her own by adding personal touches and preferences to a well-established tradition of healing. In this regard, one can comprehend why Mama Day uses egg yolks rather than cowry shells or kola nuts as her system of divining the conception of Bernice's child: "Real careful, she breaks a fresh egg so that the yolk stays whole. Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bloated yellow swims in the thick mucus—not this month. She breaks another—nor the next. The third yolk is slipped into the sugar and butter—nor the next" (Naylor 44). The significance of the materials used in Naylor's conjuring moments is not lost on the reader, either. As Carolyn Morrow Long informs about early conjuring, "ingredients were chosen for symbolic and linguistic reasons" and did not always have pharmacological effects, though there are certain exceptions (7). Ruby, another conjuring figure in *Mama Day*, authenticates the mojo hand targeted for Cocoa as her very own by using verbena, also "called by some folks: herb of grace" (Naylor 172). The mojo hand is nothing more than a typical charm, according to Long's study:[33] "[A] flannel bag . . . about a table spoon of dirt mixed up with a few white specks of something, little purplish flowers and a dried sprig" (Naylor 171). But as the narrator quips about the verbena, "what better concoction to use if you've singled out the child of Grace?" (Naylor 172). Melvira Dupree also improvises one of the most well-known folk remedies for keeping a man faithful to his woman: infusing menstrual blood into the food of your lover. Early versions of this spell indicate spaghetti as the dish of choice, but Melvira uses chicken soup as her medium. Other variations call for chili, vegetable stew, and a myriad of other options.

Though the scenario may be similar among conjure narratives and blues songs, the riffing provided by the conjuring moment or blues musician, respectively, is what makes any particular tale or song original and specific to its performer. There is beauty in the formula and structure of both genres, but the real magnificence is in the way an individual artist masters his or her craft while paying tribute to the ways of the recent past. The stories imparted in conjure narratives and blues music are the stories of a community's survival. They are stories of the folk—stories of how blues and conjure are a way of life and not simply cultural production. The relationship that blues music shares with the conjuring tradition is one that finds itself expressed in a number of ways. The classic blues lyrics of Muddy Waters and Bessie Smith indicate that conjure was not only a real phenomenon among African Americans but also an element of black folk culture that was necessary to maintain the cultural specificity of the music once race records made blues music available to all who would indulge it. The novels of Shange, Flowers, and Phillips deal with the traditional pairing of conjure and blues in different ways, but all three works recall the inseparable heritage of African Americans and their spiritual and musical past. *Mojo Hand* brings the classic theme of so many blues songs to the page, exploring the nuances of a relationship so dysfunctional that one can only seek retribution through the death of the other. Bodeen and Melvira sustain each other, even during their separation, in a way similar to how, I argue, blues and hoodoo reciprocate each other. Without the other, neither Bodeen nor Melvira would have matured in their respective crafts. Shange's novel continues to exalt the connection between conjuration and blues music in a unique way. The importance of women's blues in Shange's work takes on a particularly womanist stance in the way that Sassafrass, like so many women in the world, disappears in the shadow of her mate. For Sassafrass, the ability to conjure is contingent on her ability to sing the blues. She cannot gain one without first having the experience of the other. Unlike the conclusions in the other works, this would-be conjure woman *does* wear the blues—almost too well—a point Shange makes in order to call critical attention to the problem of gender oppression.

It becomes clear, then, with these texts, that the relationship between blues and conjure is not simply an oddity worthy of note in literature. Encasing this relationship in the literature of African Americans offers new critical perspectives of two very old traditions. The texts examined in this chapter not only outline the symbiosis, similarity in composition, and communal aspects of blues and hoodoo but also reveal an emerging trend within the African American literary tradition. The reliance of African American literature on blues and hoodoo suggests a type of conjure/blues trope that has yet to be fully exploded by critics and scholars.

More important, the blues/hoodoo dialectic is a cultural phenomenon in which African Americans clearly and purposely linked the two, calling attention to a worldview that reflected both their African heritage and their historical circumstances in the United States. That it appears in the literary output of that ethnic group is a natural progression.

CHAPTER 5

CODA

"LITERATURE AND HOODOO . . . TOOLS FOR SHAPING THE SOUL"

THE SEEDS OF THIS PROJECT WERE PLANTED during my undergraduate tenure as an English major at Georgia Southern University. I enrolled in a course on African and Caribbean spirituality in literature taught by Georgene Bess Montgomery and was introduced to the religions of the African diaspora. There I first met precocious little Indigo, learned of obeah in the work of Elizabeth Nunez, and was captivated by the conjure woman in Arthur Flowers's *Another Good Loving Blues*. I was enamored of the black magic women I was encountering—their magic, knowledge of dream lore, and independence consumed my thoughts. Through that course's reading list, I became intimately connected to a spirituality that acknowledged black women's dreams, visions, and an occasional visitation of spirits. I sought out other texts that reflected such a dynamic persona and these other ways of knowing that had been apparent to me since childhood yet for which I had no context. My fascination, in fact, fueled my desire to pursue higher education.

As I studied African American literature and was introduced to black feminist criticism, I adamantly felt that scholars, professors, and fellow graduate students were overlooking a vital force in their discussions of black female experience and representation. While the stereotypes of the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and hypersexualized black women were part of a lively academic discourse, the conjure woman rarely made an appearance in such debates on black female characterization in literature, film, and popular culture. I considered this quite an injustice considering the rampant portrayal of healing women in the works of Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Arthur Flowers, Octavia Butler, Ellease Southerland, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, Charles Chesnutt, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Tina McElroy Ansa, Ntozake Shange, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Gloria Naylor, Maryse Condé, Rainelle Burton, Elizabeth Nunez, Mercedes Gilbert—the list could go on and on and on. I could not comprehend how contemporary critics were hardly engaging such a refreshing and innovative character. I made it my business to focus my work on exploring this figure.

The topic also began to have personal relevance for me. As I read about Melvira Dupree, Indigo, and Lena McPherson's otherworldly troubles, their stories seemed strangely familiar. I grew up listening to the women in my New Orleans–bred family tell stories of their own supernatural encounters, prophetic dreams, birthing rituals, healing regiments, and other folk remedies. A hunger was ignited, and I found myself committed to mastering conjure, Voodoo, and other African-based religions and retentions as an academic specialty. The history of African American folk culture in the United States became clearer, and I began to "see" my history in a whole new light. I investigated my New Orleans family's extended history of Catholic parishioners who have resided in Algiers—a site where conjure and Voodoo activities flourished despite government injunctions—for at least seven generations. Later genealogical research revealed that I was indeed seeing with keen vision. That I chose to pursue the history of conjure women in folklore and literature was perhaps no choice at all, but rather a path that was already determined for me.

I am descended from the same healing women that I seek in literature and the historical record. This revelation has made my research project both a lesson in my spiritual lineage as well as an exercise in scholarly activity—my very own personal *ritual of rememory*, if you will. Literature and hoodoo have shaped my soul in untold ways. This project has taken me on a spiritual and professional journey in which I find myself more conscious of how tenuous the line is between the personal and the political. By bringing more critical attention to conjure women in the literary world and the written record, I hope to somehow vindicate those conjuring ancestors whose names and spirit healing deeds are impossible to recover in a Western, historically documented sense.

Spirit led me to do something about the lack of attention the conjure woman was receiving—or at least to make an honest attempt. I envisioned an in-depth interrogation of the conjure woman as a literary archetype that would lay the foundation for a fresh direction for the discourse on black female representation. *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* is the manifestation of that vision. My research offers a historiography of the conjure woman primarily in twentieth-century African American literature but also moves beyond the surface to critically engage the peculiarities that make the conjure woman so important to literary studies in general and black feminist criticism in particular. *Conjuring Moments* moves beyond the presence of feminine spirit work to critically engage the role of the conjure woman within the African American literary tradition. Recalling Deborah McDowell's insistence in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" that critics must evidence consistency across black women's writing when applying black feminist criticism, my analysis pulls from a range of authors, time periods, and texts to fully explore the significance of the conjure woman.

This project does take as its subtext the advancement of black feminist criticism by way of creating a discourse, vocabulary, and a paradigm with which critics, students and scholars can interrogate the conjure woman as a separate entity from the more common, often problematic figures—tragic mulatto, mammy, jezebel—that have already found a place in the conversation about black female representation. Such a framework should assist critics in their continued efforts to engage how the conjure woman functions in literature and to understand the other nuances and idiosyncrasies of her characterization that will enrich our analyses. The conjure woman has a separate history from the other troubling images of black womanhood. Though there is often a great deal of overlap, hers is history that has roots in black folk culture. The connection of the conjure woman to a real, tangible cultural expression raises her to the status of a revered icon, a standing of which neither the mammy nor the tragic mulatto can boast. As such, the conjure woman's prominence in African American literature reflects the genealogy of a folk hero who actually lived among the people rather than an imagined, falsely characterized archetype created by whites and for white consumption.

African American healing women often possess a great amount of agency, mobility, and power that stems from a source unrelated to gender oppression or having to emasculate their male counterparts—an important distinction from other images of strong women. The issues of gender roles and the negotiation of power in a patriarchal society, then, become more complex as the likes of Sapphira Wade are elevated to the status of deities and thus move outside of male/female dichotomies. With the accumulation of such power, conjure women employ more agency when considering childbearing, romantic relationships, and their personal desires, not because they have to, but rather because the power of their craft allows them to do so. In terms of black feminist discourse, this shift in mobility should largely modify our reading of this black female character. The conjure woman, I believe, is unique in this sense, which makes comprehending her impact on the African American literary tradition even more urgent.

I position the conjure woman as a multidimensional character that offers an additional perspective on black womanhood. African American authors have not contained her in a simplistic physical image but have allowed her to take the shape of any and every type of Africana woman imaginable. Rather than being limited to the subordinate and oppressive world of the dominant, patriarchal culture, conjure women disrupt ideologies of gender, religion, sexuality, and power. In societies in which race and class are defining attributes of one's life, the conjure woman's spiritual disposition affords her the flexibility and prerogative to manipulate such confining spaces. The conjure woman's existence challenges Western hegemonic thought, casting misogynist, racist conventions to the wind and allowing her to create safe, protective spaces for other people of color. The conjure woman is able to affect Western cultural supremacy in a way that few other black female representations have been able to. Within literary and subaltern histories that often defy the Eurocentric constraints of traditional form and convention, the conjure woman becomes an invaluable weapon of cultural survival and rituals of rememory. Her presence in literature assists us in remembering and perhaps even healing from past cultural traumas.

Contemporary authors are increasingly invoking conjure women as well-developed characters in their work. Understanding the nuances and complexities of the conjure woman and having a framework with which to analytically evaluate her presence will open new avenues of criticism and interpretation. *Conjuring Moments* is by no means exhaustive, but it offers what I think are fundamental observations about how African American writers are implementing the conjure woman in their fiction. My intent is to offer one perspective that the scholarly community might use to approach the study of the conjure woman and conjuring itself as a viable trope within African American literary studies. While my inquiry can certainly be read as black feminist criticism, and I encourage such a reading, I hope that the importance of the conjure woman and the conjuring tradition in American material culture is not simply limited to African American fiction. Conjurers and African-based spiritual practices move far beyond these walls, appearing in the works of Kathryn Ann Porter, Romare Bearden, Tennessee Williams, Scott Joplin, Kara Walker, and even Marvel Comics and Disney films. Even as I bring this project to a close, I anticipate the questions and critical angles I have left unexplored. For instance, how might I discuss the gendered distinctions in depictions of conjure *men* in the African diaspora, who are folk heroes in the own right? How might my framework of *conjuring moments* and *nonbelievers* be applicable to the fiction of Caribbean and African writers who are working from a related but culturally different frame of reference? Are the techniques and approaches of literary studies applicable to evaluating the conjure figure in popular visual culture, such as HBO's original series *True Blood* or the graphic novel *Voodoo*? What new critical perspectives on Africana women and spirit work can I offer to the emerging scholarship on Afro-futurism? These are just a few of the possible directions for future study and investigation for such an underexplored topic.

Rather than relegating such characters to preconceived categories that belie the diversity and multifaceted reality of African American women, the conjure woman offers an image that more truthfully exhibits the intricacies of black womanhood and folk culture. The discussion and language I have initiated here assist in broadening an understanding of how conjure women occupy literature. At the end of an incredibly enriching journey to discover who and what the conjure woman is to the African diaspora, my hope is to deepen our analyses of African American conjuring literature—past and present. The conjure woman, obeah woman, mambo, santera, priestess—she survives in the twenty-first century through our remembrances and resilience in preserving what our ancestors bequeathed to us generations ago. This work honors them. In the same spirit that other scholars have offered the literary world a cultural and historical foundation with which to study black female domestic workers, the strong black woman, and the blues singer, I hope that this project, too, provides a springboard for a necessary discourse surrounding black women and spirit work in the academic community and in our personal lives.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Thanks to the invention of Youtube.com, this commercial can be accessed via the Internet at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4paUNGshJQ or using the search term "2003 American Express Jamal Mashburn."
2. The varied spelling here is significant. The term *Voudon* or *Vodún* is used to recognize the most untainted religious practices that are indigenous to West Africa. *Vodou*, then, is a specific reference to the syncretized practices of Haiti. *Voodoo* refers the Americanized practice of African-based spirituality, most often associated with Louisiana.
3. In Equiano's narrative, he makes reference to a conjure woman figure beckoning to him in his dream. Within days, he goes to see the very same "fortune teller," to use his term for her (111).
4. I construct this term from Audre Lorde's concept of biomythography, as discussed in Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work* (115).
5. Farah Jasmine Griffin creates the Ancestor/stranger paradigm in her study of the African American migration narrative, *Who Set you Flowin'?:The African American Migration Narrative*. Griffin builds her idea from Morrison's discussion of the Ancestor in the essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation."
6. Elizabeth McHenry discusses the rise of the New Negro and literary societies and how both affected black folk culture. See especially chapters 1 and 2.
7. I borrow the concept of "literary archaeologies" from Toni Morrison's 1987 essay "The Site of Memory." Feng articulates her idea of *rituals of rememory*, in which she also builds on one of Morrison's concepts. I address how these ideas work in conjunction with my scholarship in the final subheading of Chapter 1. See Feng for a more detailed description of her concept.
8. See Montgomery's chapter "Ifá Paradigm" in her *The Spirit and the Word* for a complete description and application of the Ifá Paradigm as a literary theory for Africana literature.
9. Turner makes a clear distinction between his messianic visions and the trivialness he associates with conjure (Greenburg 46), and Equiano gives a very short narrative about his own skepticism toward the supernatural via African traditions until experience teaches him otherwise (111).
10. I am referring to Tucker's article "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," from which I borrow my language.
11. In his introduction to Chesnutt's tales, Richard Brodhead discusses how conjure worked against the total domination of enslaved Africans by proving that

there was a limitation to the power of the master. He argues that Chesnutt's stories exemplify such limitations and that this, perhaps, was one of the intentional themes of Chesnutt's collection.

12. Theophus Smith argues in the introduction to *Conjuring Culture* that conjure should not be conceptualized in the limiting view of binary oppositions such as good and evil. Rather, conjure has the capacity to both heal and harm. This is not seen as a contradiction, as an African cosmology does not recognize such concepts of good and evil in the same way as Christian doctrine dictates.
13. *Loa* is a term used to describe the spiritual entities or deities practitioners of Vodou communicate with, give offerings to, and serve in the practice of their religion.

CHAPTER 1

1. This definition is taken from the *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th edition (934). The *Oxford English Dictionary* online (2009) was also referenced in determining the history, definitions, and etymology of the word "witch."
2. Deren 75, 156–58.
3. Inquisitors of the Catholic Church Bernard Gui, Jacques de Morerio, and Nicholas Eymeric were granted the power to define and act against heretical acts involving occult arts. Gui and Eymeric each wrote highly influential handbooks on their experience that shaped how medieval Europe defined witchcraft. See Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft" 967–77.
4. These include astronomy, alchemy, spiritual and demonic magic, and necromancy.
5. Bailey discusses the differences between witchcraft and the learned occult arts, to which the Catholic Church turned a blind eye. See "From Sorcery to Witchcraft" 964.
6. See 183–246 in *Mules and Men* for Hurston's discussion of her hoodoo training.
7. Bailey suggests that *Formicarius* was reprinted until 1692; ironically, this is the year the Salem Village witch craze began. See "From Sorcery to Witchcraft" 977.
8. See Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft" 987. He also notes that the males who were executed for witchcraft had some association with a female who was believed to be a witch, usually a wife, mother, or other family member.
9. Carolyn Morrow Long discusses the changes to and modifications of European paganism and folk religion after the Protestant Reformation declared sacramental objects unholy. See *Spiritual Merchants* 11.
10. See Raboteau's discussion of the exception to this commonly accepted idea (27–31).
11. Giles Corey was the only male to be accused, tried, and executed for being a witch during the Salem witch trials (Breslaw, *Reluctant* 183).
12. Here I am referencing the "Curse of Ham," or Hamitic myth, which has historically been used to justify the enslavement of people of African descent based on a particular interpretation of biblical scripture (Genesis 9:18–27). For a full discussion of the myth and its racist implications, see Mbiafu and Mitsch 9–33.

Also see excerpts from Benjamin Moseley's *A Treatise on Sugar* (1799; 159–68); *House of Commons Sessions Papers* (1789; 168–80); and Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Journal of a West India Proprietor, Kept during a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (1834; 181–93) in Srinivas Aravamudan's critical edition of William Earle's *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* (2005).

13. See Long (*Spiritual Merchants*, ch. 1) for a considerable comparison of African-based and European folk religion and the commonalities between them.
14. *Code Noire*, or the Black Codes were a body of legislation which dictated how enslaved Africans would be treated under the law of Caribbean colonies. These laws were not intended to protect slaves, but rather to provide organization and structure to slave colonies. See Long's *Spiritual Merchants*, 18 and Barbara Bush's *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, 26–66.
15. Barbara Bush provides a lengthy discussion of women using African-based practices of healing and harming to influence slave insurrection (74–77).
16. See Sharpe's chapter "The Rebels Old Obeah Woman" and Karla Gottlieb's monograph.
17. *Marronage* refers to the act of running away from one's slave master, usually to a Maroon colony hidden in the deepest part of the island or in the mountains. The term is most often used in reference to slavery in the Caribbean.
18. *Mambo* is a term in the Haitian Vodou religion for a female priestess. Maya Deren poetically retells the mythic history of the Haitian Revolution and specifically points to a mambo who appears before the insurgents to initiate a ritual sacrifice for protection and courage (see Deren 62 and subsequent notes).
19. Obeah practices were outlawed in Jamaica in 1792.
20. See Bush 78.
21. *Rememory* is the term Toni Morrison coins in the novel *Beloved* to signify the process of recalling an experience from a traumatic past or the ability to share the memory of unspeakable acts across generations as a type of cultural memory.
22. Trudier Harris discusses "folklore in literature" as a creative process in which African American authors (Morrison specifically) produce original folk characters, sayings, stories, and other lore that are completely fictional while often signifying on older, well-established folk traditions (see Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, introduction).
23. See Ashford.
24. See Chesnutt "Superstitions."
25. Lorde discusses her notion of *biomythography* in Tate (115). She describes it as fiction that is built from biography, dreams, history, and myth.
26. Breslaw, *Reluctant* 85–87.
27. Ibid. 175.
28. Rosenthal references Erikson (141) and Boyer and Nissenbaum (181). (Rosenthal, "Dark Eve" 77–79).
29. Rosenthal, "Dark Eve" 77–79.
30. This line is taken from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask."

31. There are several sources that document Tituba's deposition. See Breslaw, "Confession" 542–49 and *Reluctant* 127–32; V. Tucker, "Purloined Identity" 627; and "Salem Witch Trial Papers."
32. Tituba is referred to as such within the judicial records of the Salem witch trials. See "Salem Witch Trial Papers."
33. See Breslaw, *Reluctant* 21.
34. For a discussion of water-gazing, see White 90.
35. Joseph Bin-bin Mauvant is the African-born ancestor of Alourdes "Mama Lola" Kolwaski—the central figure in Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnographic study *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.
36. Here I purposely change the spelling from *Vodou*, which signifies the Haitian religion, to *Voodoo*—an Americanized spelling that specifically refers to the practice as it was retained in New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana.
37. Ward 23; Long, *New Orleans* 22–23; Fandrich, "Mysterious" 152–53 all document the speculation about Charles Laveaux's racial identity as a French planter but point to evidence in the historical records that suggests that he was indeed a free person of color.
38. There is speculation that Paris deserted Laveau, died of the yellow fever epidemic, or possibly returned to his home, Saint Domingue. None of this has been corroborated in the historical record. See Ward 38; Long, *New Orleans* 49–50; Fandrich, "Mysterious" 155–56.
39. See Fandrich, "Mysterious" 166; Long, *New Orleans* 151–64.
40. The execution of Jean Adam and Anthony Delille in the summer of 1852 for robbery and the murder of a slave woman is the incident in question. Both Ward and Long address the execution and how it has become part of the Laveau legacy. See Ward 123–25; Long, *New Orleans* 151–54.
41. Long also documents the birth of two daughters to Jacques Paris and Marie Laveau. These two children disappear from the historical record, and Long assumes both children died in their youth (*New Orleans* 49).
42. There is no supporting evidence that either of the Laveau women worked as a hairdresser, but the belief is still being disseminated through popular culture, oral histories, and some scholarly studies. Ward believes that this myth is more likely part of the younger Marie's history (73).
43. See Long, *New Orleans* 191–205, where she compares the lives of the other Laveau-Glapion relatives who might have been mistaken for the daughter of the Widow Paris in the late nineteenth century.
44. Long, *New Orleans* 197; and Fandrich, "Mysterious" 163.
45. Local journalists, desiring to photograph and otherwise exploit the exclusive Voodoo celebration, made careers out of trying to reliably locate and attend the annual festivities. See Fandrich, "Mysterious" 146–47.
46. Long, *New Orleans* 66.
47. Ward 149–53.
48. Ward 164; Fandrich, *Mysterious* 178–79; and Long, *New Orleans* 200.
49. Long, *New Orleans* 194–95.

50. Here I am referring specifically to the 1822 revolt planned by Denmark Vesey and Gullah Jack Pritchard in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, both of which involved elements of the supernatural. See Rucker chs. 5 and 6.
51. Ward 45–47.
52. Long, *New Orleans* 72–78.
53. Hurston relates this tale as heard from Luke Turner in *Mules and Men* (192–93). Ward's study also makes mention of the cashmere shawl (169).
54. Flowers includes cameo appearances by Laveau and Hurston in *Another Good Loving Blues*. I discuss the details in Chapter 4.
55. Lee uses the term *granny midwives* where I have substituted *conjure woman*. While Lee is speaking particularly about the midwife figure in African American literature, the conjure woman often crosses into the realm of childbirth and healing practices associated with birth and mothering and vice versa. I believe Lee and I are, however, theorizing on the same phenomena in post-1965 publications by African American writers. For this reason, I substitute my term to maintain a continuity of language and terminology.

CHAPTER 2

1. Walter Rucker also mentions this incident (35–37).
2. Rucker describes the use of obeah, which he argues is derived from Akan antecedents, in the British Caribbean as recourse against slavery (39–45).
3. Rucker dedicates entire chapters to the role of syncretic African spiritual magic in the New York slave conspiracy (ch. 2) and in South Carolina (ch. 3).
4. Folklore and oral histories surrounding the Haitian Revolution dictate that prior to the first maroon attack a Vodou ceremony was held at Bois Caiman in which a sacrifice to Ogun, the loa of war, was made in order to invoke his protection and goodwill.
5. See Rucker, ch. 3.
6. Rucker, ch. 6.
7. See D. Brown for a brief discussion of the history of the terms conjure and hoodoo. Also see Chireau, *Black Magic* 55.
8. Rucker suggests that Turner's mother was African-born, though he also indicates that this point has yet to be verified by historical evidence (190).
9. Douglass gives more attention to his encounter with Jenkins in "My Bondage and My Freedom" (1855) than he did in his first narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845).
10. William Wells Brown is credited with publishing the first American novel written by an African American author. He published *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter* in 1851. His play, *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*, published in 1858, is credited as the first play written by an African American.
11. For a discussion of published folklore studies that took as their primary focus the topics of conjure, hoodoo, Voodoo, and other African retentions in the American South, see Anderson 5–11.

12. See Chesnutt's "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South" for his candid discussion about from where the inspiration for his conjure stories came.
13. See Anderson 56, 62, 78, and 140 for discussions of whites who participated in conjure activity or served as practitioners. Concerning Dr. Buzzard, see 14, 124–25, and 129–31.
14. Hogue develops the white/black binary, a "system of structured racial discrimination that forms the essence of the internal colonial relationship," as a discourse to critically engage American race relations that "extend into political institutions, educational systems, social practices, and all [other] forms of social structures" (23).
15. This particular story was not published in the 1899 edition and reprints of Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*. "The Marked Tree" was an unpublished story until it appeared in *The Crisis* (Dec. 1924–Jan. 1925). It is included in Duke University Press's *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, which published all Chesnutt's conjure stories as a collection.
16. Rucker references the 1740 Slave Act of South Carolina, "which made the administering of poison a felony punishable by torture and execution" (111).
17. Chireau, *Black Magic* 21; and Anderson 109. Note the physical appearance of conjurers.
18. I am using "controlling images" within the framework of Collins 72–84.
19. J. Roberts 96.
20. Fett 85–92.
21. See Long's chapter "African Origins and European Influences" (*Spiritual Merchants*) 3–26.
22. See Walker "Looking."
23. See B. Smith and McDowell.
24. Long, *Spiritual Merchants* 1–8.
25. Chireau, *Black Magic* 22.
26. Collins, ch. 4.
27. Karen McCarthy Brown discusses her initiation process in chapter 11, "Plenty Confidence" 311–28.
28. According to folk belief, if a child is born with a veil or caul over his or her face, which is the unbroken membrane of the amniotic sac, that child is believed to have the ability to see ghosts and spirits and communicate with the dead.
29. Hurston details the Jamaican belief in duppies in *Tell My Horse* (see "Part I: Jamaica").
30. See Bush 137–42; Moitt 89–100; and Fett 65, 176–77 for discussions of enslaved women's use of abortion and infanticide as resistance.

CHAPTER 3

1. See Fett 41; and especially Anderson 35 for discussions of Christianity in pre-middle passage Africa.
2. See Raboteau 25–33 and 44–75 for a specific comparison between African religious retentions and Christian practices in the New World.

3. Raboteau 43–92; and Anderson 35–36.
4. By conjuring fiction, I am referring to fiction by African American writers that positions the conjure tradition or conjure figures as prominent foci of the story line. The texts I refer to throughout this chapter are examples of such fiction.
5. The spiritual practices of the Fon, Yoruba, and Bakongo are considered to have the highest retention levels in the New World. African-based religion in the Americas (Vodou, Santería, Condomblé, etc.) are syncretized forms of the religious traditions from these particular groups. The Fon are linked to the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, which is known today as Benin and Togo. The Yoruba are located in present-day Nigeria, and the Bakongo are located in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For more details on the specific traditions of each group see Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, particularly chapter 1.
6. See my analysis in Chapter 2, where I go into more detail about Douglass's account of the root.
7. See Long, *Spiritual Merchants* 17–36. Also see Raboteau for his discussion of Afro-Protestant cults in the Caribbean (27).
8. The titles to which I am referring include *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974).
9. See Wheatley's poems "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and "Thoughts on the Works of Providence." Also see J. Lee (27–48) and Marrant (47–75).
10. Creel goes on to detail the ritual of grave ornamentation by the Gullah. Tracing this ritual to the Bakongo, Creel describes how "personal belongings, broken pottery, and porcelain, playthings, lighting utensils, objects pertaining to medicine, food, and water" were often left on fresh graves (88). The belief among the Gullah was that death was not the end of one's journey. They believed in an afterlife in which the deceased's spirit would linger near the place of burial. Each living person had an obligation to "appease the spirits of the dead so they will not trouble the living," which many did by leaving objects associated with the deceased on the grave site (86). Creel argues that the notion of an afterlife is strongly connected to Christian belief.
11. Considered "the highest and most powerful of all [Voodoo] gods," Damballah represents life, creation, and all that is good, according to Zora Neale Hurston (*Tell My Horse* 118). He is often depicted as an African python or serpent; the other loa, or Voodoo deities, look to Damballah for power and wisdom.
12. *Mambo* is a commonly used term in the Caribbean that designates the rank of priestess to a female Vodou practitioner.
13. In 2006 Congress designated the coastal region and outlaying Sea Islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida a National Heritage Area under the National Heritage Area Act. This area is now recognized as the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Due to the distance from the mainland, slaves brought to work on the Sea Island plantations along the Corridor were often left in isolation, which allowed them and their descendants to retain much more of their African customs and traditions without the larger influence of the dominant culture. Much of the retained African language and culture is still being preserved by slave descendants in the twenty-first century.

For more details, see Creel's article and the official website of the The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, http://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org/.

14. Raboteau 22–23; Long, Spiritual Merchants17–36.
15. Long, Spiritual Merchants 10–11.
16. Hamington 9–29; Andolesen 207–18; Athens 103–8.
17. Hamington cites the Gospel of Matthew (1:18–24); the Gospel of Luke (1:26–38); the Protevangelium of James (19:18–20:4); and the writings of St. Jerome as his evidence. See Hamington 57–65.
18. The perpetual virginity of Mary was established in the Protevangelium of James around 4 BCE, though this is not accepted by biblical scholars. The Protevangelium of James pushes forth the idea that Mary was virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Hamington notes that even though the text is noncanonical, "it caught the imagination of Christians and helped spread the legendary virginity of Mary . . . At the Lateran Council of 469, Mary's perpetual virginity was officially declared a part of Church teaching" (62). See 60–63 for more discussion on the perpetual virginity of Mary, mother of Jesus.
19. I am specifically referring to the requirement of "true women" to be "pure" when they approached the marriage bed. See Welter's essay.
20. See Walvin and Kitson.
21. The story of Haagar is found in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Briefly, Sarah, the barren wife of Abraham, gives her husband a slave, Haager, to be her sexual surrogate. When Haagar gives birth to a son, Ishmael, Sarah becomes jealous and casts Haagar and her child out into the desert without food or other provisions.
22. See Collins (ch. 4) for a discussion of the Jezebel myth as a controlling image of African American womanhood.
23. Daly 162; Reuther 144.
24. Hamington 53–55.
25. See the monographs Norris and John A. Phillips for a comprehensive look at how narratives of Eve have evolved across culture and time.
26. Hamington 76 and 85.
27. Montgomery interview.
28. According to Hammonds, black women have been socialized to remain silent about the harsh realities surrounding the history or black female sexuality. This silence and shunning of sexuality were meant to combat the rampant stereotypes and misconceptions concerning the promiscuity and overzealous sexual appetites of black women. See Hammonds's article for a more detailed discussion.
29. Raboteau 295.
30. Ibid. 50.
31. Chireau, *Black Magic* 27–33.
32. A reincarnation belief among the Igbo of Nigeria, the ogbanje is a spirit—usually of a young child tragically killed before its time—who returns from the world of the dead to haunt and torment the living (see Ogunyemi).

CHAPTER 4

1. Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield), "Louisiana Blues." Excerpted lyrics taken from Clar 177.

2. Johnnie Temple, “Hoodoo Woman” (Decca 7385, Oct. 1937, Reissue Document DOCD-5238). For the full text of this song, see Yronwode.
3. The 1910 United States Census for Newport Ward 2, Jackson County, Arkansas, lists a Caroline Dye, age 67, as head of the household. There is, mysteriously, no occupation listed (Roll *T624_53*; Page: *29B*; Enumeration District: *73*). For a discussion of these particular songs, also see Chireau, *Black Magic* 146.
4. Anderson 99–100.
5. “Marie Laveau” is a popular folk song in Louisiana. The song is performed by amateurs and professionals alike. Fandrich cites the complete lyrics in her dissertation and transcribed the lyrics from Dejan’s Olympia Brass Band’s 1989 album *New Orleans Jazz!* For complete lyrics, see Fandrich, “Mysterious” 237.
6. The Sly Fox (Eugene Fox), “Hoodoo Say” (Sparks 108 [78 RPM], 1954). Excerpted lyrics taken from Clar 178.
7. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “Louisiana Hoodoo Blues” (Paramount 12290, May 1925, Reissue VJM 82, Biograph 12001). Complete lyrics transcribed by Davis 229.
8. Bessie Brown, “Hoodoo Blues” (Columbia 14029, July 1924, Reissue Document DOCD-5527; composed by Spencer Williams). For complete lyrics please see Yronwode.
9. The Haitian Revolution is said to have been partly inspired by the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caiman in 1791. See Deren 62. Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy to revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, was assisted by Gullah Jack Pritchard, a well-known conjure man. See chs. 3, 5, and 6 of Rucker’s work.
10. For specific article references, see Anderson 3–5 and the edited collection of original articles by D. Waters.
11. Laveau’s obituary was published in the June 26, 1881, edition of *The New York Times*; Lafcadio Hearn wrote the obituary for Dr. John (*Harper’s Weekly Magazine* 29 [1885]: 726–27).
12. Puckett published *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* in 1926, while Hyatt and Herskovits published *Folklore from Adams County* and *Myth of the Negro Past*, respectively, in 1935 and 1941.
13. Hurston’s article, “Hoodoo in America” eventually became the book length study *Mules and Men*. It is under this title that most readers continue to make use of her early folklore collections.
14. According to Charles Joyner in the introduction to *Drums and Shadows*, many of the leading scholars of the early twentieth century disavowed any correlation between African cultural survival in African American culture and folklore. Hurston was among the few researchers of her time (along with Herskovits) who supported the idea of African cultural continuities in the Americas. See Savannah Unit Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows* xvi–xx.
15. Bessie Smith, “Washwoman Blues” (Columbia 14375-D, Aug. 1928). Lyrics by Spencer Williams. See Davis 349 for complete lyrics.
16. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “Barrel House Blues” (Paramount 12082, Dec. 1923, Reissue *Queen of the Blues*, Biograph BLP-12032, n.d.). Excerpted lyrics taken from Davis 22.
17. Bessie Smith, “Poor Man’s Blues” (Columbia 14399-D Aug. 1928). See Davis 327–28 for complete lyrics.

18. Texas Alexander, "Tell Me Woman Blues" (Okeh 8673, Nov. 1928). See Yronwode for complete lyrics.
19. Little Hat Jones, "Two Strings Blues" (Okeh 8712, June 1929). See Yronwode for complete lyrics.
20. Bessie Smith, "Gin House Blues" (Columbia 14158-D, March 1926). The complete lyrics are transcribed in Davis 283.
21. Bessie Smith, "Please Get Him Off My Mind." (Columbia 14375, Aug. 1928). Lyrics found in Davis 327.
22. John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson (I), "Hoodoo Hoodoo" (Bluebird Records, Aug. 6, 1946). See Yronwode for complete lyrics.
23. Cripple Clarence Lofton, "Strut That Thang" (Vocalion 02951, April 1935). Excerpted lyrics taken from Clar 180.
24. See Thompson 108; Fennell 31.
25. Baron Samedi is the loa of death and in this particular instance serves as the spirit who will usher Effie Dupree's spirit to the invisible world. See Deren 112–13 and 117–18 where she discusses the Ghedé spirits, of which Baron Samedi is an integral part.
26. By *literariness* I mean the use of classic narrative and literary techniques such as characterization, allegory, narrative structure, point of view, and other genre-specific methods used in the rendering of a story. I am not privileging Western literary conventions here but referring also to specific norms such as vernacular language, orality/aurality, rhythm, authorial/narrator intrusion, call and response, and other elements found in nonwritten forms of narrative.
27. In chapter 4 of her monograph, Fett discusses the literary structure of oral histories of conjuration that were recorded between 1870 and 1940. The examples of orally recorded conjure tales she cites are documented in Southern black oral histories and folklore collections (84–108).
28. Ibid., 84–108.
29. The story "Black Death" by Zora Neale Hurston was part of an unpublished collection of work until the 1995 publication of *The Complete Stories* by Harper Perennial.
30. The recurring image of the professional rivalry between conjuring figures appears between Naylor's Ruby, Dr. Smithfield, and Miranda "Mama" Day and between Jewell Parker Rhodes's John, Nettie, and Marie Laveau. Kasi Lemmons's film *Eve's Bayou* (1997) also includes a professional rivalry between Mozelle Batiste (Debbie Morgan) and Elzora (Dihann Carroll).
31. Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) features a magical child healer in training in her character Indigo.
32. See Carroll's chapter on Tina McElroy Ansa (17–26).
33. For a detailed description of the various kinds of charms used in traditional African religions and their Americanized counterparts, see Long, *Spiritual Merchants* 6–9.

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